

The Scholarly Jihad of the Imams – 95 – 148 A.H

Authors(s):

Allamah Sayyid Sa'eed Akhtar Rizvi [3]

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The period of the 5th and 6th Imams (a), the rise of the Abbasids, the prominence of the school of the Imam Ja'far as- Sadiq in the religious sciences, and its contributions to other branches of knowledge.

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The Scholarly Jihad of the Imams– 95 – 148 A.H.

The period under discussion (95–148 A.H /712–765 A.D.) began and ended in the times of the Vth and VIth Imams. The persecutions of the Shi'is continued unabated from Mu'awiya's time to almost the very last days of the Umayyads, although this dynasty in its latter days was considerably weakened by internal strife. Zayd, the grandson of Husayn, rose up to establish the rule of religion and justice in 122/740, but he was felled by an arrow in his forehead, and his army of 15,000 fled.

His body was exhumed by order of the Umayyad caliph, Hisham, was mutilated, beheaded and crucified in Kufa and left there for years on the cross. Then Hisham's successor, al-Walid, ordered the body to be burned, and the ashes scattered on the banks of the Euphrates. Zayd's son, Yahya, rose up in Khorasan; coincidentally he also was killed by an arrow which pierced his brain. He was beheaded; the head was sent to al-Walid and the body crucified. This was in 125/743. The body remained on the cross till Abu Muslim al-Khurasani rose in Khorasan and the call rose up against the Umayyads "to please the progeny of Muhammad", and Umayyad rule ended.

But the persecution in itself was a major cause of the spread of the persecuted Shi'a faith. Muhammad Jawad al-Mughniya writes: "The Shi'is offered arguments from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and advanced intellectual reasons to the effect that the love of the Prophet's family-members was obligatory, and that it was essential to follow them and to hold fast to their rope; that it was obligatory to keep aloof from their enemies.

They wrote many books about their superiority and virtues. But none of these books or arguments proved as effective in strengthening and spreading the Shi'a faith as did the policy of Mu'awiya and his Umayyad successors. Surely the persecution carried out by the Umayyads was more effective than a thousand and one books or than a thousand and one proofs in proving the status of 'Ali and confirming his divine right to the Caliphate¹. " Dr. Taha Husain says: "So far as propagating beliefs and attracting people to follow them is concerned, nothing is more effective than persecution.

It creates sympathy for those who undergo suffering, and are engulfed by tragedies, and who are subjected to pressure by the ruler. To the same degree it creates revulsion against this ruler who resorts to injustice, carries his tyrannies to the furthest limit and overburdens the population with hardships. For this reason, the Shi' a cause became great during the last decade of Mu'awiya's reign, and their call spread –and what a spread it was–in the eastern Islamic countries and southern Arabia. And by the time Mu'awiya had died, many people, and especially the general public in Iraq, believed that hate of Umayyads and love of the *Ahl al Bayt* was their religion². Wellhausen writes: "All the people of Iraq during Mu'awiya's reign, and especially the Kufites were Shi'i and this was not only among individuals but among whole tribes and chiefs of the tribes³."

Arabia, Iraq and Khorasan, together with the Yemen and Bahrain were in turmoil; hatred of the Umayyads became an established factor of the body politic, and to the same degree people gravitated towards the descendants of 'Ali. Several factors led to this result:

1. They were the *Ahl al-Bayt*; Allah had chosen that house for His Prophethood; it was appropriate that the people should choose them for their guidance.
2. They were the first to rise against the Umayyads and their tyrannies; they were the first to speak for the oppressed masses and to sacrifice their lives for this cause.
3. Not only the *Ahl al-Bayt*, but even their Shi'is, right from the beginning of Umayyad rule, worked

openly and secretly against those tyrants; and they faced all the consequences: massacres, banishments, imprisonments, crucifixions, and all types of torture⁴.

Ibn al-Athir confirms that when the 'Abbasids joined this campaign towards the end, "they were using the slogan that they wanted to avenge the murders of Husayn, Zayd and Yahya."⁵

Wellhausen writes: "The 'Abbasids tried their utmost to keep secret from the people their intention that they wanted to replace the descendants of Fatima; instead, they pretended that they were doing whatever they were doing for the sake of the Fatimids. They rose in Khorasan and other places claiming that they wanted to avenge the martyrs of the children of Fatima⁶."

"The 'Abbasids rose in the name of the 'Alawites, and on the shoulders of their Shi'is. (After the success) they changed their attitude towards them, and their oppression of the Shi'is increased in magnitude and intensity⁷."

Muhammad Ahmad al-Buraq says: "The call really was for the 'Alawites, because the Khurasanis were attached to the descendants of 'Ali, not to the descendants of Abbas. That is why as Saffah and his successors always kept their eyes open and tried to prevent Shi'ism from spreading further in Khorasan

They encouraged the poets to praise them (i.e., the 'Abbasids) and gave them rewards, and those poets used to cast aspersions against the descendants of 'Ali⁸."

"This led the 'Abbasid 'caliphs' to renounce the faith of *Ahl al-Bayt* (which they had followed up to the beginning of their period of rule) and accept Sunnism, because they were afraid that if Shi'ism spread, the rule would go to the 'Alawites. Thus the 'Abbasids faithfully followed the Umayyads in policy, belief and practice⁹."

Be that as it may, the Umayyads in their last days and the 'Abbasids in their first days could not give much attention to the Shi'is. Thus the fifth Imam started teaching his faith in Madina openly. People came to him from far and wide to learn from him explanations of the Qur'an, the traditions, rules of the *sharia*, theology, etc. It was not a formal *madrasa* (university, school); yet, for want of a better word, we shall call it the *madrasa* of the Imam. The fifth Imam Muhammad Al-Baqir (95–114/712–732) died before the *madrasa* had reached its point of perfection, but his son, the sixth Imam, Ja'far As-Sadiq developed it to such an extent that the number of his disciples exceeded four thousand.

This continued up to 132/750 when the 'Abbasids came to power. Although as-Saffah, the first 'Abbasid caliph, ruled for only four years, and that time was mostly taken up in consolidating his power, he found time to call the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq to his capital, Hira, where he was held incommunicado. One man who wanted to see him had to disguise himself as a hawker of cucumber to reach the Imam¹⁰.¹ But later he came back to Madina.

Then came al-Mansur (135/754–775) whose only aim in life, it seems, was to kill every descendant

of 'Ali. The Shi'is in general, and the 'Alawites in particular, were persecuted more brutally than they were during the reign of the Umayyads. He put even more hindrance in the way of the Imam. "He forbade the people to go to the Imam, and forbade the Imam to sit (outside) to receive the people, and put the utmost pressure on him. So much so that if a problem appeared in a Shi'is life concerning, for example, marriage, divorce or some other matter, and he had no knowledge of the rule of the *sharia* about it, he could not reach the Imam, and, as a result, the man and the wife had to separate¹¹. "

After a long period, al-Mansur allowed the Imam to benefit the people with his divine knowledge¹², but there were always spies to report his words and answers. Therefore, the Imam had to be cautious in his discourses. In short, the period of freedom had gone, so far as the Shi'is were concerned.

Anyhow, this period coincided with the movement of free thinking which had started in the Muslim world. Arabs came in contact with the older civilizations of Iran, Syria and Egypt, and became acquainted with Zoroastrian and Manichean beliefs and Greek philosophy. Some books had already been translated from Greek and other languages. Many scholars adopted strange beliefs and foreign ideas and spread them among the common people.

One finds a bewildering plethora of new sects mushrooming. Atheism was openly advocated even in the great mosque of the Ka'ba; the Murji'ites, by saying that faith is not affected by deeds, supported the tyrannies of the rulers; the "exaggerators" (*ghulat*) claimed divinity for this or that human being (even the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq was believed to be God by Abul Khattab).

The Kharijites declared that all Muslims who were opposed to them were infidels; The *sufis* adopted some ideas from Christian monks and Hindu ascetics, and led people away from Islamic monotheism; the traditionalists flooded the Muslim world with forged traditions. In short, there was a deluge of anti-Islamic ideals and ideas which inundated true Islam. Amidst this all, these two Imams guided to the truth.

These Imams and their faithful disciples were the first to see this danger, and they were ready to fight it with their logical evidence. They defended the true faith, repulsed its enemies, and raised the standards of the *shari'a*. They launched an unremitting *jihad* (academic, of course) against the *ghulat* and showed them in their true colours. They argued with the Muttazilites, the Murji'ites, and the Kharijites in public and proved the weakness of their standpoints. They exposed the *sufis* and refuted their arguments. They corrected what was wrong in the theological ideas of many Muslim scholars, and showed them where they had gone wrong in jurisprudence¹³.

As we have explained above, the major part of this work was done by the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq. As a result of his untiring defence of Islam, the Muslim world came to see in him the only hope for the salvation of Islam. Eyes turned towards him, thinkers accepted the Imam as their "great-teacher"; people used to come into his presence with pen and paper ready, and his words were recorded on the spot.

Thousands of such notebooks were filled, and the words of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq attained the same

prestige as those of the Messenger of God. Not only the Shi'is, Sunnis, Mu'tazilites and atheists, but also the Hindus and Christians came to him and benefited from his discourses. The Sunni Imam, Malik b. Anas, the founder of the Maliki school of law, said: "No eye ever saw, no ear ever heard, and no heart ever imagined anyone superior to Ja'far b. Muhammad in virtue, knowledge, worship and piety¹⁴.

Ibn Shahr ashub writes: "So much knowledge has been narrated from as-Sadiq that has never been narrated from anyone else; and the scholars of traditions have collected the names of his trustworthy narrators of various beliefs and views, and they were four thousand men." Abu Na'im writes in *Hilyatu l-Awliya*: "Malik b. Anas, Shutba b. Hajjaj, Sufyan at-Thawri, Ibn Jarir, 'Abdullah b. 'Amr, Rawh, b. Qasim, Sufyan b. 'Uyayna, Sulayman b. Bilal, Isma'il b. Ja'far, Hakim b. Isma'il, 'Abdu l-'Aziz b. Mukhtar, Wuhayb b. Khalid, Ibrahim b. Tahman, among others ..., narrated from Ja'far as-Sadiq, peace be upon him¹⁵."

Quoting from others, Ibn Shahr 'ashub has added the names of the Sunni Imams Malik, ash-Shat and Ahmad b. Hanbal, and al-Hasan b. as-Salih, Abu Ayyub as-Sajistani and 'Umar b. Dinar¹⁶.

Hasan b. Ziyad says that Imam Abu Hanifa (founder of the Hanafi school of Sunni law) was asked about the most learned man he had seen. He replied: "Ja'far b. Muhammad¹⁷."

Nuh b. Darraj asked Ibn Abi Layla: "Would you leave (i.e. change) an opinion you have expressed or a judgment you have delivered for any other person's words?" He said: "No. Except one man." Nuh asked: "And who is he?" He said: "Ja'far b. Muhammad¹⁸."

The above is only a partial list of Sunni scholars and Imams who came to the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq and benefited from his teachings. Add to it the names of the *sufis*, atheists, Hindus and Kharijites who flocked to his *madrasa*, and one can appreciate what a treasure of knowledge was given to people by the Imam.

When others benefitted so much, how much more must have been gathered by the Shi'is. One of his well-known disciples, Aban b. Taghlib, narrated from him thirty thousand traditions. Hasan b. Ali al-Washsha' said: "I found in the mosque of Kufa nine hundred *shaykhs*, every one of them saying 'Ja'far b. Muhammad told me ...¹⁹ "

In *al-Munjid* we find: "His (Ja'far as-Sadiq's) *madrasa* was the continuation of his father's (al-Baqir's) *madrasa*, and was extremely successful in spreading Islamic culture; the number of its students in Madina was at least 4,000, and they came from all Muslim countries. There was a large branch-school in Kufa. One of the greatest achievements of as-Sadiq was his call to write and edit; before that little writing was done. The number of the books written by his students was at least four hundred by four hundred writers²⁰."

The Shaykh Muhammad Husayn al-Muzaffar writes: "The best days for the Shi'is were the transition period, the last years of the Umayyads and the early years of the 'Abbasids ... The Shi'is took advantage of this breathing space to drink from the stream of the knowledge of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq; they

traveled to him to receive from him the commands of religion and its reality. His disciples narrated from him in every branch of knowledge, as is seen in the Shi'is books. His disciples were not only from the Shi'a community, but all the sects narrated from him, as is clearly mentioned in the books of, *hadith* and *rijal*.

Ibn ' Uqdah, the Shaykh at-Tusi and the Muhaqqiq enumerated his narrators, and the total came to four thousand²¹.”

This open teaching and unrestricted preaching increased the number of the Shi'is in every region throughout the Muslim world. It is not possible to give a list of well-known Shi's scholars and missionaries of that time, as it would be too lengthy. The teachings and explanations of the Imams removed the veils of ambiguity from the Shi'i faith and showed its teachings in clear terms.

Theology, explanation of the Qur'an, morality, jurisprudence, in short every branch of religious knowledge, was explained in a clear perspective. The faith had not changed an iota, nor the Qur'anic explanations, nor the traditions; but the discussions and arguments with the newly-appeared sects clarified many fine points and gave Shi'i theology its distinct shape. Also, Shi'i *fiqh* (law) was so developed at this time that people started calling it the Ja'fari school of law. The Shaykh Mustafa 'Abdur' Razzaq of al-Azhar University says: “The eagerness to codify law came to the Shi'is earlier than to other Muslims²².”

Some of the factors which helped in this development were:

1. The intellectual advancement of the Muslims;
2. The fortuitousness of the transitional period between the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids;
3. The gatherings of thousands of eager disciples.

Such favourable factors never came together before or after this period, and that is why other Imams could not do as much, although all of them possessed the same divine knowledge.

That knowledge was not confined to religious subjects only, and we shall mention in the next part of this article two examples of the contributions of this *madrassa* to other branches of knowledge.

1. Muhammad Jawad al Mughniya, *ash Shia wal Hakimun*, al Maktab al Ahliya, Beirut, 1st edition 1961, p. 75

2. Taha Husain, *Ali wa Banuh* as quoted in *ash Shia*, p. 80

3. J. Wellhausen, *al Khawarij wa shia* (trans into Arabic of his *The Kharijites and the Shi'ites* ed. 1985 p. 499) quoted by M. J. al Mughniya in his *ash Shia wat Tashayyu*, *Maktaba al Madrasa wa Dar al Kitab al Libnani*, Beirut, note 8 p. 68

4. M. J al Mughniya, *as shia wat Tashayyu*, pp. 134–5

5. Ibn al Athir, *al Kamil fi t Tarikh*, Beirut, 1975, vol. 4 pp 330–2

6. J. Wellhausen, *Tarikh ad Dawlati l Arabiya* (trans into Arabic of his *History of the Arabs*), p. 489, quoted by M. J. al Mughniya in his *ash Shia wa l Hakimun*, p. 135

7. M. J. al Mughniya, op cit pp 135–6
8. Muhammad Ahmad al Buraq, Abu I Abbas as Saffah, as quoted in as Shia wal Hakimun, p. 134
9. M. J. al Mughniya, op cit p. 139
10. Muhammad Baqir al Majlisi, Bihar al Anwar, new edition, Tehran, 1385 A.H, vol. 47, p. 171 quoting Qutb al Din ar Rawandi, al Kharaj wa I Jaraih, p. 234
11. Ibn Shahr ashub, Manaqib, vol. 4 al Matba al Alimiya, Qum, p. 238
12. ibid, many similar reports are given in Fadl b. Hasan at Tabarsi, al Ihtijaj, and al Majlisi, op cit
13. ibid
14. Ibn Hajar al Asqalani, Tadhhib al Tadhhib, Hyderabad, 1325 A.H, vol. 2, p. 104
15. Ibn Shahr ashub, Manaqab, vol. 4 p 247–8
16. Ibn Shahr ashub, op cit, p. 248
17. ibid, p. 254
18. ibid, p. 249
19. Muhsin al Amin, Ayan ash Shia, vol. 4 Part II, Mathah al Imaf, Ebirut, ed. 1380/1920
20. Al Munjid fi I Alam, Beirut (21st ed.) 1973
21. Muhammad Husayn al Muzaffar, Tarikh ash Shia, Dar az Zahra, Beirut, 3rd edition 1402/1982 pp. 53, 55
22. M. Abdur Razzaq, Tahmid li Tarikh al Falsafat al Islamiy, Cairo, 1959, p. 202

Part II

In part I we examined the prominence of the school of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq in the religious sciences, and discussed the reasons for its pre-eminence. Now we shall see how it also contributed to other branches of knowledge, those of the natural sciences.

(a) *CHEMISTRY*. Jabir b. Hayyan (the Geber of the Latins), who has been called one of the 'fathers of chemistry' and 'the most famous Arabic alchemist'¹, was one of the students of the Imam Ja'far, as-Sadiq. The quantity of Jabir's output is quite staggering: besides his writings in chemistry, he wrote 1,300 treatises on mechanics, 500 on medicine, and 500 against Greek philosophy, not to mention other subjects.

The number of his books which have been printed in Latin, French and German since the 17th century comes to thirty, if we count his '500 booklets' as one book. There are 36 known manuscripts of his works in the British Museum, the Biblioteque Nationale in Paris and in other libraries in Germany, Egypt, Iran and Turkey. The extent to which he is indebted to the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq in his research and teachings may be judged from the fact that in many of his books we find: 'My master and *mawla*. Ja'far. peace be upon him, told me that ...', and in his book, '*al Manfa'a*' he explicitly says: 'I acquired this knowledge from Ja'far b. Muhammad, the leader of the people in his time².'

George Sarton, referring to Jabir's untranslated work, writes: 'We find in them remarkably sound views on methods of chemical research; a theory on the geologic formation of metals; the so-called sulphur-

mercury theory of metals ...; preparation of various substances (e.g., basic lead carbonate; arsenic; and antimony from their sulphides).

Jabir deals also with various applications, e.g., refinement of metals, preparation of steel. dyeing of cloth and leather, varnishes to waterproof cloth and protect iron, use of manganese dioxide in glass making, use of iron pyrites for writing in gold, distillation of vinegar to concentrate acetic acid. He observed the imponderability of magnetic force³. He also discovered that each metal and material had a basic weight; he called this 'the knowledge of weights, *'ilm al-mawazin*⁴. He was, in the words of Sarton: 'a very great personality, one of the greatest in mediaeval science⁵.'

Several of his writings have been translated by scholars such as M. Berthelot, Octave Houdas, E. J. Holmyard, Ernst Darmstaedter and Max Mayerhoff. Berthelot wrote in his 'History of Chemistry': 'The name Jabir holds the same place in the history of chemistry which the name of Aristotle holds in the history of logic⁶.' Holmyard wrote: 'Jabir was the student and friend of Ja'far as-Sadiq; and he found in his incomparable Imam a supporter and helper, the trustworthy guide and helmsman whose direction is always needed. And Jabir wanted to free chemistry, through the direction of his teacher, from the myths of the ancients which had held it in shackles since Alexandria; and he succeeded to a great extent in this aim⁷.'

(b) *ANATOMY*. A Hindu physician attached to the court of al-Mansur once asked the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq if he wanted to learn something in this field from him. The Imam said: 'No. What I have is better than what you have.' Then began a very interesting discourse, in which the Imam asked the physician questions like these: Why is the head covered with hair? Why are there lines and wrinkles on the forehead? Why are the eyes shaped like almonds? Why has the nose been placed between the eyes? Why are the hair and the nails without life (sensation)? These questions moved from the head downwards, till he ended up by asking: Why do the knees fold backwards, and why is the foot hollow on one side?

To all these questions, the physician had only one reply: 'I do not know.' The Imam said: 'But I do know.' Then he explained all the questions, showing the wisdom and power of the Creator. The hair is created over the head so that oil may reach inside, and heat may go out through it, and so that it may protect the head from heat and cold. There are lines and wrinkles on the forehead so that sweat from the head does not reach the eyes. giving the person a chance to wipe it away.

The eyes are almond-shaped so as to make it easy to put medicine inside them and remove dirt from them. Had they been square or round, both would have been difficult. The nose is put between the eyes as it helps to divide the light equally towards both eyes. The hair and nails lack sensation to make it easier to cut and trim them. If there were life in them it would have hurt a person to cut them. The knees fold backwards because human beings walk forward, and the foot is hollow to make movement easier.¹ The physician became a convert to Islam⁸.

A booklet which was dictated by the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq in four sessions to his disciple Mufaddal b. 'Umar was widely narrated, and has been widely studied and copied to the present day; al-Majlisi copied the whole book into the second volume of his *'Bihar al Anwar'*⁹. In this book, the Imam explained the wonders of creation, showing at every stage how all of it is inter related and could not have come into being by chance. In the first session, he explained the creation of man, his organs of perception, the power of his mind, his gradual development. and all the functions of body and mind.

In the second session. he explained the animal world and its common features; then he divided animals into groups: carnivorous and herbivorous animals; birds and reptiles; and so forth, explaining every group's special characteristics. In the process of doing this he described the donkey. the dog, the elephant, the giraffe, the monkey, domestic mammals, reindeer, the fox, the dolphin, the python the ant, the spider, the chicken, the peacock the pheasant, the flamingo, the sparrow, the owl, the bat, the bee, the locust and fish.

The third session was devoted to geography. geology. astronomy (not astrology) and other related subjects, such as minerals, trees and medicine. In the last session the Imam dealt with the most common objection made by atheists: If there is a Creator, then why is there so much suffering in the world? The Imam answered this with the same attention to detail as he had shown in the previous sessions, with systematic arguments. This book is a treasure of knowledge, written to refute the ideas of atheists. Everywhere the Imam draws attention to the wisdom and power of the Creator.

Two examples will be given here at random. 'Allah created eyesight to perceive colours; had there been colour but no eye to see it, there would have been no use for colour. And He created hearing to perceive sounds: had there been sounds but no ear to hear them, there would have been no reason to have them. The same is true for all kinds of perception. and the same is true in the opposite sense: had there been eyesight but no colour to see, eyesight would have been useless; and if there had been ears, but no sounds to hear, ears would also have been useless.

Now, see how Allah has gauged everything to fit with everything else. For every organ of perception he made something for it to perceive, and for every sensory phenomenon something to perceive it. Not only that. but He created the medium between the organs of perception and their objects, without which perception could not take place; for example, light and air: if there were no light eyesight could not perceive colour; and if there were no air to carry sounds to the ear, it could not hear them. Can someone with a sound mind who observes all these interconnected phenomena fail to admit that they could not exist without the Will and Measuring of a Merciful, All-Knowing Creator?¹⁰

At one point Mufaddal said: 'O My Master! Some people think that all this was made by nature ' The Imam dictated: 'Ask them about this nature. Is it a thing which has the knowledge and power for such work? Or is it without knowledge and power? If they say that it has knowledge and power, then why should they disbelieve in a Creator, because these [i.e., knowledge and power] are His attributes. And if they think that nature does it without knowledge and will, and yet there is so much wisdom and

perfection in these works, they must admit that it could come only from a Wise Creator. [The fact is that] nature is only [a name for] the system in creation which operates as He has made it operate¹¹.

There is an interesting aside in the fourth day's session, where the Imam said: 'The name of the universe in Greek is *qusmus* (kosmos), and it means 'adornment'. This name was given to it by their philosophers and wise men. Could they have named it so except because of the order and system which they found there? They were not content to call it a system; they called it an 'adornment' to show that the order and system found therein has the highest degree of beauty and splendour.'

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1. G. Sarton. Introduction to the History of Science, vol. 1. Baltimore. 1927. p. 532
 2. 'Abdullah Nima. Falasifat ash Shi'a, Beirut, 1966. p. 196. This book is an excellent source for those who wish to examine the contribution of Shiah scholars to philosophy and science. The author discusses Jabir's life and contribution between pp. 184 and 231.
 3. G. Sarton. op. cit., p. 532. For the Imam Ja'far as Sadiq. see, ibid.. p. 508
 4. Quoted by 'Abdullah Ni'ma. op. cit., pp. 61. 187.
 5. G. Sarton. op. cit., p. 532
 6. Quoted by 'Abdullah Ni'ma. op. cit., p. 187
 7. Quoted by 'Abdullah Ni'ma. ibid., pp. 193-4
 8. ash-Shaykh as-Saduq, Ilal ash shari'a, n.p., 1311. p. 44
 9. al Majlisi, Bihar al Anwar. new ed.. vol. 111, pp. 57-151
 10. ibid., p.69.
 11. ibid., p. 67. 34. ibid., p. 146

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