

**The Origins of the Shi‘a: Identity, Ritual, and
Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kufa**

Najam Haider

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This book will be of interest to scholars in a variety of fields and disciplines: Islamic studies (history, thought, institutions, and modern developments), history, religion, anthropology, and sociology, to name a few that immediately come to mind. The book’s great virtue lies in its bringing together two heretofore somewhat antagonistic or apparently mutually exclusive scholarly temperaments to focus on a problem (or rather a cluster of problems) of the very

first importance, articulated as the title of a seminal article by one of the great minds of the last century engaged in the academic pursuit of Islamic history: *How did the early Shi'a become sectarian?*

Marshal Hodgson's interest and task in that complex and erudite study (published in 1955) has been admirably continued and, in a real sense, consummated in this excellent book. One of the many reasons the question as well as the answers it may generate are so important (even urgent, one might add) is because to ask how the early Shi'a became sectarian is also to ask how Sunni Islam eventually came to be configured in its classical and enduring form, how Sufism arose, and how Islam acquired its singular cosmopolitan profile frequently characterized by the perhaps spurious prophetic hadith: *ikhtilāf ummati rahmah* (Disagreement in my community is a divine mercy).

The attitudes toward the Islamic written tradition of the two above-mentioned mutually exclusive scholarly temperaments may be characterized as (1) overly uncritical and accepting of the great mass of lore and information said to be true because it is found in the great hadith collections treasured by variously identified Muslim communities and schools, and (2) the attitude of utter skepticism frequently identified with the "etic" approach and articulated in numerous books and articles deemed "Orientalist" by a faceless yet adamant audience. This latter attitude, whose heyday was contemporaneous with the great European colonialist and imperial adventures, can be dated from the eighteenth century, during which the Europeans and later the Americans orchestrated and brought to a highly unstable *modus vivendi* that has, since the postwar era, acquired great momentum and verve. In the last few years, however, it has reached something of a crescendo and unraveled under the world's anxious gaze. This skepticism taught that we do not have to believe anything we read in the Islamic tradition because it is obviously self-serving back-projection written and compiled at the very earliest in the late second/eighth century, when, according to some of the more "daring" exponents, even the Qur'an itself was cast in its final "pre-eternal" form.

Najam Haider, who studied at the feet of one who in the early days of the great skepticism was one of its more surgical minds (Michael Cook), has accomplished a great deal by protecting himself with a bit of the poison from both sides. His book is an admirable example of the kind of historical work we may now pursue without the dispiriting pall of epistemic despair haunting our every attempted insight. Greatly emboldened by truly revolutionary advances in the methodological sophistication of the study of traditional Islamic sources, he has isolated a place (Kufa), a time (the eighth century), a series

of islamicate problems (e.g., the form of the Qur'an [viz., the *basmala*], prayer [viz., the *qunūt* as cursing and praise], and finally the consumption of alcohol), and a library of source material (the above-mentioned traditions) with which to organize, codify, categorize, and manipulate in ways that ultimately issue in seriously important insights about the identity (and identity building) of various Muslim groups and alliances during a particularly crucial period in Islamic history. We come away from the book with a much clearer and indeed quite feasible picture of the ways in which the Imami Shi'i, the proto-Sunni, and the Zaydi Shi'i communities came to assume their form in history and actual community life, as well as the role played in this by a variety of historical, social, and cultural factors and remarkable, powerful people. He names names. We must congratulate him heartily and thank him for the herculean effort he has expended in this highly successful venture.

The book consists of three parts. The first one lays out the traditional account of how these three communities became who they are and then summarizes the way in which the new tools in hadith scholarship may be brought to bear on such old questions. The second part is the study of the three problems mentioned above, in which thousands of hadith and their narrative styles, provenance, compilation, and other factors too numerous to list are brought under control and analyzed. The third part is where the author applies his study and analysis to bring forth a fresh version of the rise of Zaydi Islam, a fresh appreciation of the role of ritual in early Islam among various groups, and a fresh appreciation for the importance of urban geography for the understanding of islamicate communalism. Again, it is a thrilling tour de force.

A few questions arise: Why does the author use the term *ghulāt* as a scientific measure of anything (p. 15)? Why is there hardly any mention of the idea of covenant? The Jarudiya, it is said, identified the early Companions as "non-believers" (presumably *kāfirūn*) (e.g., p. 18). But would it not be more accurate to consider them breakers of the covenant (*nāqidīn*), in some ways a much more dire state than mere unbelief? "Criterion" (p. 28) should be "criteria." Why is Muhsin Fayd Kashani's hadith collection not included in the list of Twelver Shi'i sources (p. 36), and why is it asserted that Imamis do not consider any collection "canonical"? There is an apparent ellipse in this sentence: "It is argued that a sectarian group's reliance on insular and distinct personalities and literary styles reflects the potential emergence of an independent identity" (p. 52). The "cane" of Moses (p. 239) is better called a "staff." The index seems a bit erratic.

These small, random cavils do not in the least detract from the shining achievement of the author, who has demonstrated the alchemical importance of place – here exemplified and celebrated in the institutions of pilgrimage and *ziyārah* – in the growth and formation of those equally mystifying and human preoccupations called religion. As Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq said: “I do not think anyone drinks the water of the Euphrates without developing love for us, the family of the Prophet” (p. 244).

Todd Lawson
Associate Professor, Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations
University of Toronto, ON, Canada