

How Did Shi'a Islam Begin?

Syed-Mohsin Naquvi

Excerpt from the forthcoming book: *Exploring Shi'a Islam: A Review Of Reliable Sources*.

Islam and Shi'a Islam are not two different things. They are one and the same.

When a new movement begins, be it social, political or religious, the founder as well as the early adherents of the movement make efforts to define the movement. However, as the movement gathers momentum, it takes on new adherents. And as they cover diverse geographical areas, every sub-group develops its own leaders. These leaders and reformers apparently do follow the original line of thinking and the basic foundation of the movement. One thing is certain though, every person has his own understanding, intellectual level, and specific way of interpreting things. That gives rise to subgroups within the movement who re-interpret the basic tenets and the original ideologies. This can be seen across world history. Islam is not an exception to that rule. However, there is one difference between Islam and all other similar movements. Islam is a revealed religion. That means all guidance comes from Allah through the line of Prophethood. The question arises as to the line of that guidance after the Prophet of Islam. That is the crux of the matter. We initiate this study in search of that line of guidance.

In the beginning, there was the city of Medina, where the Prophet of Islam elaborated the basic elements of the Law of Islam. The holy Qur'an was revealed over a period of 23 years of the mission of the Prophethood in the twin cities of Mecca and Medina. That formed the basis of all theology, principles of faith and the general ideological framework of Islam. While the Prophet of Islam lived, all questions about law and principles were answered by him. That created the basic canonical corpus of hadith. After the passing away of the Prophet, all that had been left for the Muslims to follow were the holy Qur'an and the life history and the sayings of the Prophet.

In the middle of the second century after hijra, a movement to document the law of Islam began. While that effort was underway, the Muslim governments of the time also exerted influence in that process. Over a period of ninety years, four great scholars published their works. These four works form the basic corpus of Islamic Law (*fiqh*) that is accepted universally by the majority of Muslims, even though the actual total number of adherents to each one of those schools of thought is very diverse. These four schools, namely, *Hanafi*, *Shafi'i*, *Maliki* and *Hanbali*, are also different in their contents in a great majority of places. The followers of these four schools are all known as Sunni Muslims. The natural question at this point is: why were they called Sunni Muslims? We will answer that question presently.

The work of the above-mentioned four schools was based on the precedents set by the successive governments specifically, and by the ruling class in general. In other words, that work is based on the principle of what has happened. Because of the choice of that methodology, all that work is based on the interpretation of the holy Qur'an and the hadith by the companions of the Prophet and the followers of the companions after them, who were the people either in government or, those who formed the elite of the society.

Going back to the middle of the second century after Hijra: it was very apparent that there was a group of Muslims who were dissatisfied with the general course of events in the Islamic world. They looked at what ought to be as opposed to what has happened.

They found that there was a great ideological difference between the two methodologies. That is the origin of Shi'a Islam, as the outside world has seen it. This methodology traces itself back to a number of sayings of the Prophet of Islam which form the basis of all Shi'a ideology. We quote from a learned Shi'a scholar:

As a doctrinal system, Shi'ism represents a particular tendency of Islam shaped by a chain of theologico-historical analyses. The *Hadith al-Thaqalayn*, a tradition which

was handed down by both Shi'as and Sunnis from the Prophet, according to which the prophet called on Muslims to follow the Qur'an and his own family after him, was, along with a number of other traditions, the root and original source of this tendency which was later strengthened by further theologico-philosophical and historical reasonings. (Modarressi Tabataba'i)

So, what is the methodology for acquiring Shi'a teachings? Once again, quoting from Modarressi:

In religious matters, Shi'ism has generally based its views on the instructions of prominent members (*Imams*) of the Prophet's family. The main difference between Sunni and Shi'a legal schools is the manner in which they received the Prophet's Tradition and in their legal sources. Whereas Sunnis received the Prophet's Tradition as transmitted by the Prophet's companions, Shi'is received it through his family. In another respect, whereas Sunni legal schools follow the juridical opinions of some jurisconsults of Medina and Iraq, Shi'is follow the opinions of their Imams, who were descendants of the Prophet. The Twelver Shi'a which is now the prevalent Shi'i school, follow the opinions of their twelve Imams, especially the sixth, Abu Abd Allah Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Sadiq, and for this reason their legal school is also known as *ja'fari*. (Modarressi.)

Having said all that, one has to note the fact that the majority of writers both Muslim as well as non-Muslim have identified the Shi'a as a political faction within the *umma*. The question arises as to how the Shi'a have been labelled as a political group among Muslims as opposed to a religious group like the four Sunni sects of Islam? After all, the Shi'a are just another sect within the larger Muslim body like the four Sunni sects.

We believe that the answer to this question lies mainly in the fact that Shi'a Islam was introduced in the modern western world via the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Obviously, a revolution like that is political in nature. It was a member of the Shi'a clergy, Ayatullah Khomeini, under whose leadership the people of Iran were able to get rid of a dictator and form a popular government in Iran. The association of the Shi'a with a

political process appears so strong that the popular understanding about it had to develop that way.

However, that is not the only reason for that association. Historians belonging to the majority Muslim group have always maintained that the early Shi'ism was based on political schism in the community. We will explain this further by quoting from another modern scholar:

The division of the community of Islam into Sunni and Shi'i branches has commonly been explained in terms of purely political differences. Its origins have been attributed to basically political partisanship with regard to the leadership of the *umma*, a partisanship which exploded into conflict in the civil war between Ali and Muawiyya. This war not only established the Umayyads in power, but also supposedly marked the advent of Shi'ism as a religious movement divergent from the main body of believers. Such an interpretation grossly oversimplifies a very complex situation. Those who emphasize the political nature of Shi'ism are perhaps too eager to project the modern Western notion of the separation of church and state back into seventh century Arabian society, where such a notion would be not only foreign, but completely unintelligible. Such an approach also implies the spontaneous appearance of Shi'ism rather than its gradual emergence and development within Islamic society. The recent occidental conception of a 'purely spiritual movement' is exceptional. Throughout most of human history religion has been intimately involved in the whole life of man in society, and not least in his politics. Even the purely religious teaching of Jesus --- as it is commonly regarded ---- is not without its political relevance. (Jafri)

(Note: Jafri's book is based on his Ph.D. thesis in which he explores the early

development of Shi'a Islam. He has shown the purely spiritual and religious origins of the Shi'a movement in his work by quoting from the earliest and oldest Arabic sources, mainly of the Sunni school.)

In this context, Jafri goes on to explain that Islam began as a socio-political movement based on the divine message brought by the Prophet of Islam. It is therefore impossible to separate politics from spirituality in Islam.

Just as the Prophet was basically a religious and spiritual teacher and messenger and, at the same time, due to the circumstances, a temporal ruler and statesman, Islam has been since its very birth both a religious discipline and, so to speak, a socio-political movement. It is basically religious because of the status Muhammad attained as the Apostle of God appointed and sent by Him to deliver His message to mankind, and political because of the environment and circumstances in which it arose and grew. (Jafri)

Jafri completes his reasoning by concluding the argument about Shi'ism. He argues that it is very difficult to separate at any one point in time, the political Shi'a from the religious Shi'a. We shall see presently that the true Shi'a are the ones who supported Ali bin Talib in particular and the family of the Prophet in general both politically as well as religiously.

Likewise, Shi'ism, in its inherent nature, has always been both religious and political, and those co-existing aspects are found side by side throughout its history. It is therefore difficult to speak, at any stage of its existence, about the 'political' Shi'a as distinct from the 'religious' one. Throughout the first three or four centuries of Islamic religious and institutional development, one cannot fail to see that all religious discussions among Muslims had both political and social relevance. When we analyze different possible relations which the religious beliefs and the political constitution in Islam bear to one another, we find the claims and the doctrinal trends of the supporters of Ali more inclined towards the religious aspects than the political ones; thus it seems paradoxical that the party whose claims were based chiefly on spiritual and religious

considerations, as we shall examine in detail presently, should be traditionally labelled as political in origin. (Jafri)

Jafri has analysed the early history of Islam in his work with great depth and insight. He has traced the roots of Shi'a Islam back to the time of the Prophet of Islam, in fact to the time of the early days of his 23 year long mission. He has looked at a number of specific events during the period immediately after the passing away of the Prophet and explored the leitmotiv of those events. Let us first review briefly the origins of the Shi'a in early Islam.

Early Use of the Term Shi'a

The word Shi'a is mentioned in the holy Qur'an in a number of places. Some of them are examples of good; e.g., 37:83, (...” Ibraheem was also among his Shi'a”....), some are examples of evil dissension, e.g., 6:65, 6:159, and 28:4. Still other usage is of a neutral nature, like that in 19:69 and 28:15.

Words carry varying meanings. There are plenty of words in the holy Qur'an which have been used with differing meanings at different occasions. The term Shi'a is one such word.

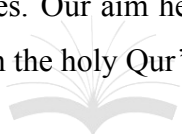
The only meaning that relates to our discussion is used in verse numbers 28:15 and 37:83. In verse 28:15, the story of the prophet Musa is being told. He saw two people fighting, one of them was his friend (Shi'a) the other was his enemy. In verse 37:83 prophet Ibraheem is being described as a friend (Shi'a) of prophet Nuh, when he came to Allah with an obedient/peaceful heart.

The first post-Qur'anic reference to this term is found in a hadith of the Prophet of Islam. This hadith has been reported in a number of different versions by various historians and collectors of hadith. In these various reports the timings and occasions of the event may appear different, even the original narrator may be different, but the basic

content of the hadith is the same. The hadith is popularly known as *hadith al-kisa*, or, the ‘event of the cloak.’

Once the Prophet of Islam collected Ali, Fatima and their two children, Hasan and Husayn, under a cloak (*kisa*), looked up to heaven and prayed: “My Lord! These are my Ahlul-Bayt, the People of the House of Prophethood, keep away all evil from them. I am a friend to those who takes them as their friend and I am at war with those who show enmity to them.” Ali asked about the significance of that assembly under the cloak. The Prophet replied: “Whenever our followers and devotees assemble together and relate this story, they will get blessings and their prayers and supplications will be accepted by the Almighty Allah.” Then Ali said: “We and our Shi’a have indeed been successful in this world and in the Hereafter.”

As we said, this is a shortened version of the story as related in the books of sources. Our aim here was to bring out the first historical usage of the term ‘Shi’a’ after that in the holy Qur’an.



Mohsena Memorial Foundation
Connecting Communities Through Education

Let us give a brief overview of the various versions of this story, at this point.

1. According to the collector Tirmidhi in his Jami, this event took place in the house of Umm Salama, one of the wives of the Prophet. According to Umm Salama, she wanted to join the assembly under the cloak with the Prophet, but he stopped her by saying: *anti ‘ala makaniki wa anti ‘alal khayr* (you are in your (right) place, you are on the good side).
2. According to the report in the Sahih of Muslim, this event took place just before the event of Mubahala. When the Christians of Najran challenged the verses of the holy Qur’an about Jesus and Mary, they were invited to Mubahala. On the morning of the Mubahala, the Prophet appeared with Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Husayn. But, before going out, he collected them under the cloak and prayed as above.
3. In another version, Muslim has recorded this event from A’isha, another wife of the Prophet. Once again, the wife was not allowed by the prophet to join the assembly.

4. Ibn Hajar Makki, a die-hard Sunni scholar of the tenth century of Hijra, wrote a book denouncing the beliefs and practices of those sects with whom he disagreed, including those of the Shi'a. The name of the book is *Sawa'iq Muhriqah* (firing thunder bolts). In that work, Ibn Hajar has quoted the Event of the Cloak. However, when he comes to the statement of Imam Ali where he says: We and our Shi'a are successful in this world and in the Hereafter, Ibn Hajar explains that by the term "Shi'a" it's meant "Us, the Sunni Muslims, not those despised Rafidis." (*Rafidi* is a derogatory term used by Sunni scholars for the Shi'a.)
5. Ahmad bin Hanbal also records this story. Ibn Hanbal adds that after this event, it was the custom of the Prophet of Islam to come to the door of Ali and Fatima after the morning prayers and recite the verse of *tatheer* (cleansing), Q.33:33. Tirmidhi has also recorded this additional piece.
6. In the most widely accepted Shi'a version of this story, the event has been related by Fatima Zahra herself. She narrates thus:

One day my father entered my house and asked for a cloak (in Arabic, '*kisa*', in Farsi and Urdu, '*chadar*') and wanted me to tuck him in, which I did. Moments later my children Hasan and Husayn arrived one after the other and approached my father resting under the cloak. They asked him if they could join him under the cloak, he allowed them. Then my husband, Ali, came in and similarly joined my father under the cloak. At that moment, I myself approached my father and asked him if I could join the assembly. He allowed me in. At this point my father declared the assembly under the cloak to be the *ahl-e-bayt-e-nubuwwa* (Family of the Prophethood) and prayed to Allah for our safety and security. The Prophet also prayed for all evil being kept away from the members of the assembly. At this point the Archangel Gabriel asked Allah the Almighty about us, those under the cloak. Allah said: Those are the five for whom this whole world has been

created. They are: Fatima, her father, her husband and her children. Gabriel then joined us under the cloak on Allah's command and presented the verse of *tatheer*¹ to my father as a gift from Allah. Then my husband asked my father about the assembly. He replied that if at any time his followers and his Shi'a would assemble and relate this story, they will be blessed by Allah and their prayers and supplications will be granted. My husband, Ali, said: "Indeed by the Lord of Kaaba we and our Shi'a are successful in this world and in the Hereafter."

Our conclusion from this diversity of reporting is that this event may have taken place more than once at different times. One thing is very clear from the texts; the term 'Shi'a' has consistently been used in the text. Ibn Hajar's insistence on including himself and the entire Sunni Muslim community in that term, shows that even those who disagree with the Shi'a community as it exists today, felt it significant one way or the other.



Mohsena Memorial Foundation
Connecting Communities Through Education

Citations

Jafri, Hussain M. The Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam. Oxford University Press, 2011.

Modarressi Tabataba'i, Hossein. An Introduction to Shī'ī Law: A Bibliographical Study. Ithaca Press, 1984.

¹ وَرَسُولُهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا ٣٣: ٣٣