

*“The Divine Imam”: Constructing
a Heresiographical Model
in Shi’ite Islam*

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وضع صورة لمقالات الغلاة من الشيعة

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Hierarchy of Sources

Primary Sources

Works like *Umm al-Kitab*, *Kitab al-Majmu'*, treatises from the Alawite Heritage Series, *Kitab al-Ashbah wa al-Azilla*

Twelver Hadith Sources

al-Kafi, Uyun Akhbar al-Rida, etc.

Traditional Heresiographies

Nawbakhti, Shahrastani, al-Ashari, al-Balkhi, al-Baghdadi, many more

Do these claimed positions reflect historical reality?

- Verbatim as narratively presented? A matter of faith.
- There are certain positions articulated by primary Ghulat sources (only recently available) and the extant ghulat sect, the Nusayris/Alawis of Latakia.
- From the modern Nusayri corpus – can we expect some degree of ‘madhabisation’ like Ibadism underwent, potentially occluding historically held positions?
- Perhaps we can triangulate or weigh a historical truth by looking at these in tandem with the primary sources, the Shi’a hadith, and heresiography (weighed in that order).

Why use Twelver Hadith at all?

- They *respond* to a position. There is an orthodoxy that is being attempted to be articulated here against a non-orthodoxy.
- This does not necessarily mean that ‘heterodox’ views presented in al-Kafi, etc., are fairly represented or even representative of the “ghulat” sects.
- Still, there is an articulation being made, even if it is polemic.

How Are Ghulat positions approached in the Shi'ite hadith corpus?

- Imams repudiate positions associated with “ghuluw” sects.
- Occasionally sect leaders and interlocutors are named specifically, other times “ghuluw” positions are attacked instead.
- Therefore the Imam’s authority is used to rectify these positions; it is not a matter of debate/opinion for theologians and jurists.
- It is the Imam himself that shuts down or condemns individual ghuluw sect leaders when they appear.
- Many of these specific condemnations are related by al-Kashi

Case Study #1: ڪَاطَّابِيَا

- According to Moezzi, the Kattabiya were the most important Ghulat sect, operating from Kufa.
- Abu al-Khattab was a representative of Abu Abdullah and, according to the heresiographical narrative, was a designated successor.
- Traditional heresiography gives starkly different accounts; al-Ashari and Nawbakhti agree on very little.
- The sect, according to heresiographical works, split up into several successor sects. These factions variously attribute prophethood, angelhood, or divinity to Ja'far al-Sadiq.
- Very notably, they attribute a gnostic-adjacent “divine light” to Imam al-Sadiq. This is compatible with with general Imami thought; Abu al-Khattab is viewed positively by the Nusayri offshoot and the principle of the Imam’s divine nature (and light-based imagery) is much more present there.

Case Study #1

قال خرج إلينا أبو عبد الله (عليه السلام) وهو مغضب فقال إني خرجت إنفا في حاجة فتعرض لي بعض سودان المدينة فهتف بي ليك يا جعفر بن محمد ليك فرجعت عودي على بدئي إلى منزلي خائفا ذعرا مما قال حتى سجدت في مسجدى لربى وعفرت له وجهي وذللت له نفسي وبرت إليه مما هتف بي ولو أن عيسى ابن مريم عدا ما قال الله فيه إذا صم صم لا يسمع بعده أبدا وعمه عمى لا يبصر بعده أبدا وخرس خرسا لا يتكلم بعده أبدا ثم قال لعن الله أبا الخطاب وقلته بالحديد.

Some of the companions of Abu Abdullah has reported that Abu Abdullah came out to us and he was angry. He said: 'I went out for some need, so some black people of Al-Medina presented themselves to me . They shouted at me, 'Here I am (Labbaik) O Ja'far Bin Muhammad , here I am (Labbaik)!' So I returned back to my house, in a fearful panic from what they had said, until I prostrated to my Lord (azwj) and rubbed my face to Him (azwj), and humbled myself to Him (azwj), and distanced myself (from them) to Him (azwj) from what they had shouted to me. And if Isa Ibn Maryam had added anything to what Allah (azwj) had said regarding him , then he would have become deaf and would not have been able to hear anything after that ever, and become blinded and would not have been able to visualise anything after that ever, and would have become dumb and would not have been able to speak anything after that ever'. Then he said: 'May Allah (azwj) Curse Abu Al-Khattaab and kill him with the iron'

Case Study #1 Analysis

- Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq explicitly and harshly condemns Abu al-Khattab in Medina.
- If we take this at face value, we must ask the question: if the Imam's authority was divine in nature, why did the Khatabiyya persist despite an outright repudiation?
- Fourth century AH consolidation: Concept of "divine light" is accreted to Imami orthodoxy but more intense forms of exaltation/deification is considered "ghuluw"
- The fact that the Nusayris *still* have a positive opinion of Abu al-Khattab while affirming the "orthodox" canon of Twelve Imams reinforces the idea that this was a later consolidation and repudiation against Abu al-Khattab.
- Orthodox Imami "balancing act" of ghuluw and gnostic ideas, especially if the Khatabiyya were as influential as Moezzi describes

Case Study #2: Implicit Responses to Known Ghuluw Positions

قُلْتُ لِأبي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ (عَلَيْهِ السَّلَامُ) إِنَّ قَوْمًا يَزْعُمُونَ أَنَّكُمْ
أَهْلَةُ يَتْلُونَ بِذَلِكَ عَلَيْنَا قِرَانًا وَهُوَ الَّذِي فِي السَّمَاءِ إِلَهُ وَفِي
الْأَرْضِ إِلَهُ فَقَالَ يَا سَدِيرٌ سَمِعِي وَبَصْرِي وَبَشْرِي وَلِحْمِي
وَدَمِي وَشَعْرِي مِنْ هَؤُلَاءِ بَرَاءٌ وَبِرِّي اللَّهُ مِنْهُمْ مَا هَؤُلَاءِ عَلَى
دِينِي وَلَا عَلَى دِينِ آبَائِي وَاللَّهِ لَا يَجْمَعُنِي اللَّهُ وَإِيَاهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِلَّا وَهُوَ
سَاخِطٌ عَلَيْهِمْ قَالَ قُلْتُ وَعِنْدَنَا قَوْمٌ يَزْعُمُونَ
أَنَّكُمْ رُسُلٌ يَقْرءُونَ عَلَيْنَا بِذَلِكَ قِرَانًا يَا أَيُّهَا الرَّسُولُ كُلُوا مِنَ
الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَاعْمَلُوا صَالِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ فَقَالَ يَا سَدِيرٌ
سَمِعِي وَبَصْرِي وَبَشْرِي وَشَعْرِي وَلِحْمِي وَدَمِي مِنْ هَؤُلَاءِ بَرَاءٌ
وَبِرِّي اللَّهُ مِنْهُمْ وَرَسُولُهُ مَا هَؤُلَاءِ عَلَى دِينِي وَلَا عَلَى دِينِ
أَبَائِي وَاللَّهِ لَا يَجْمَعُنِي اللَّهُ وَإِيَاهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ إِلَّا وَهُوَ
سَاخِطٌ عَلَيْهِمْ قَالَ قُلْتُ فَمَا أَنْتُمْ قَالَ نَحْنُ خِزَانَةُ عِلْمِ اللَّهِ نَحْنُ
تَرَاجِمَةُ أَمْرِ اللَّهِ نَحْنُ قَوْمٌ مَعْصُومُونَ أَمْرُ اللَّهِ تَبَارَكَ وَتَعَالَى
بَطَاعَتُنَا وَنَهْيٌ عَنْ مَعْصِيَتِنَا نَحْنُ الْحُجَّةُ الْبَالِغَةُ عَلَى مَنْ دُونَ
السَّمَاءِ وَفَوْقَ الْأَرْضِ.

“A certain group of people believe that you are gods. They read to us from the Quran about it. And it is He Who in heaven is God and in earth is God.” (43:84). The Imam (a.s) said, “O Sadir, my hearing, my sight, my skin, my flesh, my blood and my hair are (all) disdain such people, and Allah also disdains them. They do not follow my religion and the religion of my forefathers. I swear by Allah, Allah will not place me with them on the Day of Resurrection. The only thing from Allah to them will be His anger.” The narrator has said that he said, “Among us there is a group of people who believe that you are messenger and read to from the Holy Quran. “O Messengers, eat of the good things and do righteousness; surely I know the things you do (23:51). The Imam (a.s) said, “O Sadir, my hearing, my sight, my skin, my flesh, my blood and my hair are (all) disdain such people, and Allah and His Messenger also disdains them. They do not follow my religion and the religion of my forefathers. Allah will not place me with them on the Day of Judgment. The only thing from Allah towards them will be His anger.” The narrator has said that he then asked, “What are you then?” the Imam (a.s) said, “We are the treasuries of the knowledge of Allah. We are the translators of the commands of Allah. We are infallible people. Allah, the Most Holy, the Most High, has commanded people to obey us and prohibited them to disobey us. We are the complete Divine authority over all that is below the heavens and above the earth.”

Case Study #2 Analysis

- Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq explicitly distances himself away from both a prophetic and divine role.
- He instead reaffirms that he does have a divine appointment, however.
- “Some people” believe in the divinity or prophetic nature of the Imamate; consistent with the essence of heresiographical depictions of major Ghulat divisions
- **Takeway: Divine appointment affirmed, prophethood and divinity distanced from. There is a dialectic here.**

Circumstantial Evidence: Ismailis and the Druze

- The Druze, an 11th century offshoot of the Ismai'li line of Shi'ite Imams, believe in the divinity of the Imam al-Hakim, designating him to be an incarnation of God.
- Consistent with slightly earlier Ghulat beliefs of Imams as aspects of God and reincarnation
- Hints at a folk or popular perception in the nascent Shi'ite community (both Ismai'li and proto-Imami) of the Imam as a divine aspect, perhaps textually underrepresented as “low culture” Shi'ism
- What is the relation to later “orthodoxy”?



Shi'ite Imams: A Spectrum



Zaydi Shi'ism

- The leader of the community must be descended from the Prophet and the Umayyads are dumb
- There is nothing inherently primogenituristic, divine, or infallible about the Imamate.



Khatabiyya Shi'ism, Proto-Nusayriyah Shi'ism

- The Imams are infallible
- The line follows al-Hussein b. Ali's descendants from father to son
- The Imams are divine aspects or divine reincarnations

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Imami Shi'ism

- The Imams are infallible
- The line follows al-Hussein b. Ali's descendants from father to son
- The Imams are mortal individuals that *represent* divine authority

Key Takeaway

- Al-Kafi responds to genuine heterodox positions in the proto-Imami community
 - Al-Kafi affirms some degree of *ghulat* thought and institutionalised it into Imami orthodoxy; what is left behind becomes heresy
 - Ja'far al-Sadiq narratives are deployed to explicitly condemn Imami-adjacent “exaggerators”, deferring to the same principle of the Imam’s authority that heterodox movements centre
 - Traditional heresiography can be used to help contextualise issues, but should definitely be used with the seriousness of hearsay to corroborate more definitive sources
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