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Abdullah Ibn Saba Part 5

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَاٰنِ الرَّحِيمِ

The Opinion Of The Historians

I have already provided the opinion of 15 famous Sunni scholars about the weakness of the reports of Sayf Ibn Umar in of this article.

Beside them, many Sunni historians have also denied the existence of Abdullah Ibn Saba and and/or the forged stories attributed to him. Among them are Dr. Taha Husayn, who has analyzed these stories and rejected them.

He wrote in "al-Fitnah al-Kubra"that:

In my opinion, those who have tried to emphasize on the story of Abdullah Ibn Saba, have committed a crime in the history and hurt themselves too. The first thing that is observed is that in the important collections the name of Ibn Saba does not appear when they discuss the agitation against Uthman.

Ibn Sa'd does not mention the name of Abdullah Ibn Saba when he discusses the Caliphate of Uthman and the revolt against him. Also the book by al-Baladhuri, "Ansab al-Ashraf", which I think the most important and the most detailed book about the revolt against Uthman, the name of Abdullah Ibn Saba has never been mentioned. It appears that al-Tabari was the first who reported the story of Ibn Saba from Sayf, and then other historians quoted al-Tabari in this regard.

In his other book "'Ali wa Banuh", he also mentioned:

The story of Ibn Saba is nothing but myth, and is the invention of some historians, since it contradicts other historical documents. ...

The fact is that the friction between Shi'a and Sunni have had many shapes, and each group was advocating itself and denouncing the other by any means possible. This requires a historian to be much

more cautious when analyzing the controversial reports related to seditions and revolts.

In , we briefly mentioned the masterpiece of Allamah al-Askari which was released in 1955 AD. Before that time, no analytical research had been done on the character of Abdullah Ibn Saba to investigate if he really existed in physical world and/or if the stories around this man had any single truth in it.

Although Sayf's heresy was well-known for a number of centuries, no research had been done about the origin of the tale of Abdullah Ibn Saba. In his research, al-Askari proved that Sayf's narration attributed to Abdullah Ibn Saba and many other things are sheer lie since they contradict all other Sunni documents in content, timing of the events, names of cities and companions, imaginary chain of narrators, and miraculous records by Sayf (like talking cows with humans and so on). If there was any Abdullah Ibn Saba at that time, his story was much different than what Sayf manipulated.

Here is the response of a Sunni learned man, Dr. Hamid Dawud, the professor of Cairo University, after reading al-Askari's book (I just give only a part of his letter):

The 1300th birthday of Islam has been celebrated. During this time, some of our learned writers have accused Shi'a of having un–Islamic views. Those writers influenced public opinion against Shi'a and created big gaps between Muslims. In spite of wisdom and learning, the enemies of Shi'a followed their own chosen beliefs and partiality, covering the truth, and accusing the Shi'a of being superstitious etc.

Hence Islamic science suffered much, as Shi'a views were suppressed.

As a result of these accusations, the loss to Islamic science was greater than the loss suffered by Shi'a themselves, because the source of this jurisprudence, though rich and fruitful, was neglected, resulting in limited knowledge. Also, in the past, our learned men were prejudiced, otherwise we would have benefited from many Shi'a views. Anyone who wishes to do research in Islamic Jurisprudence must consider Shi'a sources as well as those of Sunni.

Was not the Shi'a leader, Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (d. 148 AH), the teacher of two Sunni Imams? i.e., Abu Hanifa al-Nu'man (d. 150 AH), and Malik Ibn Anas (d. 179 AH). Imam Abu Hanifa said: "Except for the two years Nu'man would have starved," referring to the two years he had benefited from the knowledge of Imam Jafar al-Sadiq. Imam Malik also confessed straightforwardly that he had not met anyone learned in Islamic Jurisprudence better than Imam Jafar al-Sadiq.

Yet, some of our so-called learned men, unfortunately disregard the rules for research to suit their own ends. Hence knowledge is not fully disclosed to them and thus they create a wider gap between Muslims.

Ahmed Amin is one of those deprived of the light of knowledge, remaining in darkness. History has recorded this stain on the robe of Ahmed Amin and his friends, who blindly followed one special Madhab. Of many mistakes made by him, the biggest is told in the story of Abdullah Ibn Saba. This is

one of the tales told in order to accuse Shi'a of heresy and foregoing events.

The great contemporary researcher, al-Askari, in his book, has proved with substantial evidence, that Abdullah Ibn Saba was fictitious, and it is therefore a greater lie to say that he was the founder of Shi'ism.

God has decreed that some learned men disclose the truth regardless of blame they may get. The pioneer in this subject is this man who has made the Sunni learned men of research revise the history book of Tabari (History of Nations and Kings), and to sift out the authentic stories from the false. The stories which have been preserved as God's revelations.

The honorable writer, with much evidence, has stripped the veil or ambiguity from those historical events, and disclosed the truth, to some extent that some facts seem frightful. But we have to obey the truth no matter how difficult they appear. The truth is the best to be followed.

Dr. Hamid Hafni Dawud Oct. 12, 1961 Cairo, Egypt.

We just heard from a Sunni Muslim. Now let us see what a third party has to say about Sayf and his character, Abdullah Ibn Saba. The following is the comment of Dr. R. Stephen Humpherys, from the University of Wisconsin at Madison, who has translated the Vol. 15 of the History of al–Tabari into English. This comment is written in the foreword of Vol. 15 of the History of al–Tabari. (again, I just give some parts of it. Please refer to Vol. 15 for details):

For events in Iraq and Arabia (the real key to the crises of Uthman's caliphate) Tabari relies chiefly on Muhammad Ibn Umar al– Waqidi (d. 823) and the mysterious Sayf ibn Umar. Both of these authorities raise real problems ... It is Sayf Ibn Umar who is most troubling, however.

Tabari shows a unique fondness for him, in two senses. First, Sayf is the source most heavily used by Tabari for the whole period from the Riddah wars to the battle of Siffin (11–37 AH). Second, no one beside Tabari appears to use Sayf at all. There is no obvious way to explain Tabari's preference.

It is certainly not explained by the formal characteristics of Sayf's narratives, for he relies on informants who are usually obscure and often very recent. likewise, he makes heavy use of the collective report, which blends together in unspecified ways the accounts of several transmitters.

I would suggest that Sayf appealed to Tabari for two reasons. First, Sayf presents a "Sunday school"interpretation of Uthman's caliphate.

In his presentation, one sees a profound unity and harmony within the core community of Muslims, a unity and harmony founded on strict fidelity to the legacy of Muhammad. It is unthinkable that men such as those portrayed by Sayf could have been moved by worldly ambition and greed.

On the contrary, in Sayf's presentation most conflicts are illusory, a reflection of malicious misinterpretations by later commentators. Where real conflicts did arise among sincere Muslims, they were instigated by outsiders like the notorious Abdullah Ibn Saba, a converted Jew from Yemen.

On this level, at least, Sayf's version of events is obviously a very naive one, and no doubt Tabari perceived that as clearly as we do.

Even so, it served a very useful function for Tabari: By making Sayf's reports the visible frame work of his narrative, he could slip in the much less flattering interpretations of early Islamic history presented by his other sources. Ordinary readers would dismiss this dissident testimony as irrelevant, and only few critical readers would catch his hint and pursue the issues raised by such secondary accounts.

In this way, Tabari could say what needed to be said while avoiding accusations of sectarianism. Accusations of this kind were of course no small matter in view of the enormous social and religious tensions in Baghdad during the late 9th and early 10th centuries.

Reference: History of al-Tabari, v15, pp xv-xvii

Also in the foreword of Volume 11 of the English version of the History of al-Tabari, the translator writes:

Although Tabari scrupulously cited his sources and can be shown to have often quoted from them almost verbatim, these source themselves can be traced with certainty only to an earlier stage in the collection of Islamic history, represented by the writers Ibn Is'haq (d. 151/767), Ibn al-Kalbi (d. 204/819), al-Waqidi (d. 207/822), and Sayf Ibn Umar (d. ~170/786).

From the first three, all of whom are cited in this volume, there are works extant that enable us to assess their tendencies to some extent, as well as to verify their use of their own sources. For an assessment of the value of their transmission, the reader is referred to the relevant articles in the Encyclopedia of Islam and other secondary literature.

It is the fourth writer extensively quoted by al-Tabari, Sayf ibn Umar, with whom we are mainly concerned here. As his work survives principally in the transmission of al-Tabari and those who took from him and is found nowhere in independent form, he has unfortunately been rather ignored in modern criticism. Yet it is Sayf's lengthy reports that fill most of the pages of this and several other volumes.

The historical evaluation of this volume therefore depends to a large extent on our assessment of the nature of Sayf's reports and al– Tabari's use of them, and it is to these problems that we must turn our attention.

Abu Abdillah Sayf Ibn Umar al-Usayyidi al-Tamimi was a Kufan traditionist who died in the reign of Harun al-Rashid (170–93/786– 809). Other than the possibility that he was accused of MANICHAEISM (Zandaqah) in the inquisition (Mihnah) that began under al-Mahdi in 166/783 and continued into the time of al-Rashid, nothing is known of his life, except what can be determined from his tradition. (On Mihnah

itself, see History of al-Tabari, v3, pp 517, 522, 548-551, 604, 645; and the book called "Zindiqs" by Vajda, pp 173-229. On accusations against Sayf, see Majruheen, by Ibn Hibban, v1, pp 345-346; Mizan, by al-Dhahabi, v2, pp 255-256; Tahdhib, by Ibn Hajar, v4, p296).

As he is alleged to have transmitted from at least nine traditionists who died in 140–146/757–763, and even from two who died in 126–128/744– 746, he may have been elderly when he died. This is also suggested by the possibility that Abu Mikhnaf, who died considerably earlier than Sayf in 157/774, may have quoted from him. Sayf's work was originally recorded in two books which are now lost but survived for a number of centuries after Sayf's own lifetime.

They made an enormous impact on the Islamic historical tradition, especially because al-Tabari chose to rely mainly on them for the events of 11–36/632–656, a period that spanned the reigns of the first three caliphs and included all the early conquests of Iraq, Syria, Egypt, and Iran.

Although al–Tabari also quoted other sources in this volume, as we have indicated, the overwhelming bulk of his material for this period is from Sayf. In deed, it is also probable, though not certain, that he has reproduced the vast majority of Sayf's work. Sayf is only rarely cited by other writers independently of al–Tabari

Generally, Sayf's description of the conquests transmitted in this and other volumes of al-Tabari emphasizes the heroism of the Muslim warriors, the hardships they endured, and the toughness of their opponents, features that seem plausible enough and are also found in other conquest narratives beside those of Sayf.

However, Sayf's narratives differ in the extent to which he introduces traditions not found elsewhere, often reporting them from transmitters not otherwise known. These UNIQUE narratives frequently contain fantastic or legendary motifs to an extent far greater than is found in the versions of other historians. Although the fantastic and tendentious nature of Sayf's reports has often been noted, for example, by Julius Wellhausen (see skizzen, pp 3–7), the exact value of his corpus as a primary source has never been assessed in detail.

...Although he hailed from Kufa, the crucible of early Shi'ism, Sayf belonged to a completely anti–Shi'i undercurrent, representing the Kufan faction that had earlier opposed the rebellions of al–Husayn Ibn 'Ali and Zayd Ibn 'Ali. (This is also indicated by his quotation from sources who were involved in the killing of al–Husayn. See for instance v11, pp 204, 206, 216, 222)...

The egregious tendentiousness of Sayf's corpus comes out most plainly in other volumes of al-Tabari, in such episodes as Saqifah Bani Sa'idah (Tabari, v1, pp 1844–50), the burial of Uthman (3049–50), and the tale of ABDULLAH IBN SABA (2858–59,2922,2928,2942–44,2954,3027, 3163–65,3180). In each of these instances, other versions that do not confirm Sayf's own are available for comparison and reveal the impudence of his daring constructions.

... Beside exaggerating the roles of certain Companions in the early conquests, Sayf also embellished his work with the exploits of other, IMAGINARY COMPANIONS and with heroes whom he invented, especially to represent his own tribal group. The most outstanding of these fabrications is al–Qa'qa Ibn Amr, a hero and alleged Companion of the Prophet, who is, not surprisingly, said to be a member of Sayf's own subtribe, the Usayyidi (in this volume, pp 8,24,36,40,42–43,45,48,60–63,65,90,95,166,168).

His being an Usayyidi suggests that his fabrication is owing to Sayf himself and not to any of Sayf's alleged sources, as none of the latter is identified as an Usayyidi. In addition, many other persons supposedly belonging to the Tamim tribal group appear to be fabrication, some of them having stereotypical names that suggest almost playful invention, like "Wrap, the son of Skirt", "Spring Herbage, the son of Rain, the son of Snow", and "Sea, the son of Euphrates". The reader will find dozens of persons who are named only in Sayf's traditions recorded in this volume. ...

Beside having fabricated many of the personages who appear in his transmissions, it also appear that Sayf fabricated the names of many, perhaps most, of his alleged authorities. ...

Frequently it seems that these invented "authorities" served as intermediate links between Sayf and earlier genuine traditionists whose authority Sayf wished to use to bolster his own inventions.

This assessment of Sayf in no way undermines the authority of other early Muslim writers whose works may have an entirely different character, just as the Late Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus is in no way affected by the fraud of the Historia Augusta.

On the contrary, it is greatly to the credit of the medieval Sunni Muslims who assessed the quality of traditions in the Rijal books that they unanimously rejected Sayf's authority in the most absolute way possible. They did so despite the fact that his traditions could have been used to back their emerging Sunni consensus on early Islamic history.

This suggests that their condemnation of Sayf's traditions was motivated by a concern for the truth, rather than by a wish to gain advantage in the partisan arena of the time. They realized that his transmissions were exaggerated and fraudulent, and they said so.

In fact, the condemnation of Sayf by the medieval Muslim Ulama ought to serve as a reminder to modern scholars that ancient and medieval texts were not always dictated by the prevailing political or religious climate and that the search for truth had its place in earlier times as well as in our own. ...

In describing the conquests generally al–Tabari scarcely deviated from Sayf's reports. This brings us to the second attraction that Sayf may have had for al–Tabari: DETAIL. Sayf's transmissions are almost always far more verbose than parallel reports of more sober traditionists.

This characteristic probably not only made them preferable to al- Tabari but may have seemed a

guarantee of their accuracy. Living in medieval times, al-Tabari did not, in the majority of instances, have available to him the modern tools that would have enabled him to discover Sayf's tendentiousness. And, after all, Sayf's reports have continued to receive the approbation of a minority of scholars even up to the present.

Reference: History of al-Tabari, v11, pp xv-xxix

Also Professor James Robinson, (D.Litt., D.D.Glasgow, U.K.) wrote:

I would like to make a remark about Tabari who had no hesitation in quoting from Sayf. His history is not a historical work in the manner of modern writing, for his main purpose seems to have been to record all the information in his possession without necessarily expressing an opinion on its value. One is, therefore, prepared to find that some of his material is less reliable than others. So, perhaps we can excuse him for using a method not approved nowadays. He has at least provided a mass of information. It remains for acute scholars to distinguish between the genuine and the false.

It is shown that Sayf often quotes men who are unknown. This raises the question why none of them should have been quoted by other transmitters, and leads one further to suggest that Sayf has invented them. This serious accusation is a reasonable assumption by comparing Sayf with others.

It is pointed out that Sayf has stories miraculous of happenings which are difficult to believe, such as desert sands becoming water for Muslim armies, seas becoming sand, cattle speaking and informing the Muslim army where they were hidden, etc. In Sayf's time it was possible for him to succeed in passing off such stories as history, but nowadays the critical student naturally finds such stories quite impossible. Effective arguments are also used to show how Sayf's information about Ibn Saba and the Saba'iyya is quite unreliable.

Sayf who lived in the first quarter of the second century belonged to Tamim, one of the Mudar tribes who live in Kufa. This helps one to study his tendencies and the influences leading to this legends. There is discussion of Zindeeq and of Manichaeism. Party spirit is said to have continued from the Prophet's time, till that of the Abbasids.

Sayf upholds the northern tribes, inventing heroes, poets praising the tribe's heroes, companions of the Prophet from Tamim, wars and battles which had no reality, millions killed and large numbers of prisoners with the purpose glorifying the heroes he invented, Poems attributed to imaginary heroes were in praise of Mudar, then Tamim, then Ibn Amr, the subtribe to which Sayf traced his origin. Sayf mentioned men of Mudar as leaders of battles which were led by men of other tribes, his fictitious leaders sometimes being real people, sometimes names produced by his imagination. It is argued that the falseness of his information was partly to upset the faith of many and partly to give non–Muslims a wrong conception. He was so skillful in his forgeries that they were accepted as genuine history.

There is a big difference between a Hadith work, such as Sahih al-Bukhari, and a history work such as

the History al-Tabari. al-Bukhari was selective toward the traditions and might have recorded 1/10 of traditions that was conveyed to him, since he dropped all traditions which might have been weak in his point of view. However al-Tabari, though he was selective in his other works, but for his History he recorded 9/10 of what he had heard, and this is due to the nature of historical documentations which are not necessarily as accurate as the Hadith collections.

As a result, al-Bukhari did not transmit even one single tradition about Abdullah Ibn Saba in his nine-volume Sahih. But historians who favored heavy documentations more than the authenticity of narrators, recorded heavily about Abdullah Ibn Saba through Sayf.

The Shi'a historians are not exempt from the above reasoning. They have also recorded most of the things they have got. This includes those reports that they were not sure about. The final research by Shi'a related to Abdullah Ibn Saba was released only in 1955 AD, and it was not so clear before that time that the stories related to Abdullah Ibn Saba have been the total manipulation of Sayf with political motives.

The two Shi'a historian who mentioned the name of Abdullah Ibn Saba, lived 10 centuries before the publication extensive research about Abdullah Ibn Saba. A person is called expert in the history of Islam, if s/he has read all the early history books. As a matter of fact, many early history books were written by theSunni authors under the direct fund of Umayad and later Abbasid rulers.

A Shi'a historian does not ban Sunni sources, and consequently his work is affected, one way or another, by previous works. This is clear when one observes that the two Shi'a historians who mentioned the name of Abdullah Ibn Saba, did not give any chain of transmitters for their report meaning that they got it from rumor the mouth people which the result of Sayf's mass propaganda.

As for those few traditions which have the chain of narrators (independent of Sayf), they provide a much different story which do not support any of the allegations of Sayf. These traditions picture an accursed man whom Ahlul–Bayt have declared their innocence from what he attributed to Imam 'Ali (declaring 'Ali as God). The Shi'a, their Imams and their scholars declare the curse of Allah to that man (if ever existed) he was lost, misguided and cursed. There is nothing in common between us and his name except our curse on him and all other extremists who believed in deity of Ahlul–Bayt.

The followers of Ahlul Bayt never claimed that 'Ali is God, nor did they claim the rest of 12 Imams are God. This, in fact, shows that those who gave life to the stories attributed to Abdullah Ibn Saba had hatred toward Shi'a, and tried to misrepresent the Followers of the Members of the House of Prophet. If Shi'a were the followers of that mysterious Jew, they should have believed in deity of 'Ali and should also respect their mentor Abdullah Ibn Saba, instead of cursing him!

If Abdullah Ibn Saba is such an influential and important figure for the Shi'a, how come they never quote him like they do with the Imams of Ahlul Bayt? Surely, if Abdullah Ibn Saba was their Master Teacher, they must quote him and be proud to do so?

A religious student always quotes his teacher, why then would the Shi'a be any different? Why should they curse him instead? If one answers that the reason that the Shi'a do not quote from him is that he was a Jew who converted to Islam, then I would ask him what was the religion of the companions before converting to Islam? Was not Abu Huraira a Jew who killed a Muslim before converting to Islam? Was not that he converted to Islam just 2 years before the death Prophet? Then why do the bulk of traditions in the Sunni collections come from him? While the traditions reported by Imam 'Ali (who was the first male who embraced Islam) in the Sunni collections is less than 1% of what is reported by Abu Huraira? This is a sign for those who reflect.

Moreover, It is a custom of Shi'a that they celebrate the birthday of Prophet and 12 Imams and Lady Fatimah, peace be upon them all. They also mourn in the memory of their martyrdom. Why then they do not hold the same practice for Abdullah Ibn Saba if he was their master?

Besides, are the Shi'a so stupid and ignorant that after 1400 years, they have never figured out that their belief and faith are based on fabricated traditions and tales going back to Abdullah Ibn Saba? I doubt, then, how the Shi'a, if they were indeed so stupid as to believe a so-called hypocrite Jew in their theology, philosophy, jurisprudence, history, and interpretations of the Qur'an, have survived to this day?

Surely if the knowledge of the Shi'a was based on such a shaky foundation as Abdullah Ibn Saba, they would have perished a long time ago. It is more interesting when we see the Imams of the majority of the Sunnis were the students of the Imams of Shi'a (Imam Muhammad Baqir and Imam Ja'far Sadiq, peace be upon them). Then one would say the Sunni schools got the basics of their Fiqh from Shi'a, which means the Sunnis along with Shi'a were the followers of the very same person, the mysterious Abdullah Ibn Saba! Who is left then? Perhaps the followers of Muhammad Ibn Abdil Wahhab!

Moreover, if Abdullah Ibn Saba did in fact exist with such stories that Sayf attributed to him, then there is 150 years between his birth and the publication of the story of Sayf Ibn Umar al–Tamimi. During those 150 years, there lived an innumerous number of scholars, scribes, historians, and philosophers who contributed many books. Why didn't any of them EVER mention the name of Abdullah Ibn Saba? Surely, if he was such an influential figure for the Shi'a, you can bet that the Sunnis would have known him before Sayf Ibn Umar al–Tamimi! The fact that he was NEVER mentioned in ANY book before the book of Sayf Ibn Umar al–Tamimi is enough to cast doubt on the entire story attributed to him and even his existence.

Can you believe that in the 150 years or so between the so-called birth of Abdullah Ibn Saba and the publication of Sayf Ibn Umar al-Tamimi, no book ever mentioned Abdullah Ibn Saba? Yet some people still claim he with such stories existed!

More strange thing is that even in the next 160 years after the publication of Sayf Ibn Umar al-Tamimi not too many people knew the story of Abdullah Ibn Saba. It wasn't wide-spread until the story of Ibn Saba extensively showed up in the History of al-Tabari (160 years after Sayf's publication), and it was at

that time when some mercenaries started giving it weight as a means of defense against Shi'a.

Now, what do these mercenaries have to offer? Nothing!!! They still cling to their own-made version of history, thereby contradicting themselves and the above proofs as well as the documented Sunni history, simply to defend their ignorant statements about the Shi'a.

Wassalam.

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