

Chapter 1: Background

Introduction

The primary Islamic religious sources – the Qur'an and *hadith* – provide a complex but occasionally contradictory picture of the events leading up to the end of the world. One of the most controversial topics is the *raj'ah* (also known as the *karrah*), or the return to life of some of the deceased before the actual Resurrection. While Sunni sources have typically dismissed the *raj'ah* as a cross between reincarnation and self-vindication (Muzaffar, 2003), early Shi'a sources suggest that the Imams did prophesise a partial resurrection; this view has persisted until today as a fairly normative Shi'a belief, although not without exception¹.

While it seems clear that the Imams did mention the *raj'ah*, it is less clear what they actually said. Even Shaykh al-Mufeed (d. 1022 AD) complained about contradictory interpretations of the *raj'ah*:

The Imamites agree on the necessity of the raj'a on earth of a great number of the dead before the day of resurrection. But there is a difference of opinion among them concerning the meaning of raj'a.
(Sachedina quoting Shakyh al-Mufeed, 1981, p. 67)

The intervening millennium has hardly improved that situation, and these uncertainties are compounded by the fact that, historically, many *ghulat* (extremist to the point of unorthodoxy) Shi'a sects preached the imminent return (*raj'ah*) of various deceased historical personages and also adopted pre-Islamic beliefs (such as reincarnation) under the umbrella of *raj'ah*.

From a normative Shi'a perspective, the *raj'ah* is typically understood as the return of the most faithful and most despicable of humanity. While some authors debate whether this includes the best and the worst of all humanity, or only those who lived after the Prophet Muhammad (Kohlberg, 1999)², *hadith* clearly predict that pre-Islamic individuals will return. (Although both Shi'a and Sunni Muslims agree that Jesus will return, since he is not considered dead, his return would not fall under the category of *raj'ah*) Generally, it is assumed that the good will be revived to fight for the Mahdi, and the evil will be revived to receive their just due. One or more of the Shi'a Imams – in particular, Imam al-Husayn – is also prophesised to rise from the dead to rule after the Mahdi passes on.

However, the weaknesses and discrepancies in *hadith* literature suggest that the popular understanding of the *raj'ah* was just as influenced by socio-political factors as it was by the teachings of the Imams. The dire political repression that the Shi'a were living under must have fomented tales of vengeance, perhaps along the lines of what the historian Ibn Abi al-Hadeed (d. 1258) relates:

They [the Shi'a] believe that certain people from the Umayyads and others will be brought back with their very physiques when their awaited Imam comes and that he will amputate hands and feet of many men, gouge out eyes of many, crucify many more, and will take revenge from the enemies of the House of Muhammad ... both enemies of the past and enemies who will come in the future. (Al-Majlisi quoting Ibn Abi al-Hadeed, 2003, p. 190)

Since the surviving *raj'ah hadith* mention neither amputation nor crucifixion, it is hard to say whether Ibn Abi al-Hadeed was relating the words of learned religious scholars or simply what he heard on the street.

In either case, such violence does strike some as incongruous, for, during their lifetimes, the Prophet and Imams were renowned for their compassion and generosity.³ According to the Qur'an, whenever a people disobeyed God, it was God who destroyed them, not His prophets. It seems beneath the dignity of an emissary of God to return to life for the sole purpose of carrying out something akin to a lynching. Furthermore, if God has already promised to dispense justice in the Hereafter, it seems superfluous for Him to resurrect His enemies beforehand – especially only some of them – to meet an earthly punishment which, no matter how chastising, pales before eternal Hellfire. Specific punishments foretold for figures venerated in the Sunni tradition have also raised inter-sectarian ire. Finally, to some, it seems odd that God would return the Mahdi after over a thousand years of hiding for him to rule but briefly and then cede to a previously deceased Imam (Algar, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

Almost certainly, at least some of the extant *hadith* were misrelated – either intentionally or unintentionally, but probably both – and do not represent the verbatim teachings of the Imams. Therefore, uncovering what the Imams might actually have said requires a careful sifting of the extant *hadith*, as well as attention to who might have derailed these teachings, and why.

Literature Review

Literature on the *raj'ah* in the English language is relatively scant. Although some works mention *hadith* on the *raj'ah*, they do so quite uncritically. For instance, in his article on the *raj'ah* in the *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Amir-Moezzi (2005) accompanies several *hadith* with the premise that there is no such thing as a *ghulat* belief because, at one time or another, all *ghulat* beliefs were acceptable. While this thesis could be defended for other doctrinal issues, it is problematic when applied to the *raj'ah* due to the *ghulat* interpolation of local religious beliefs. Similarly, both Turner (2000) and Sachedina (1981) devote

considerable attention to a gigantic *hadith* from *Bihar al-Anwar* called the Hadith of Mufaddal even though the narrators of that *hadith* enjoyed such stellar reputations as ‘liar’ and ‘corrupter of the faith’ (Najjashi, 2004). Of course, for David Cook, the author of *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic*, authenticity of *hadith* is less of an issue as he considers all *hadith* to be inauthentic, and so he quotes copious eschatological *hadith* without concern over their sources (Cook, 2002). While these citations aid in understanding what the Shi‘a said about the *raj‘ah*, they do not address the basic question of what the Imams themselves actually said. This is a major gap in the scholarship on this issue in the English language that this dissertation will attempt to fill.

Historical sources suggest that the Shi‘a were sufficiently identified with the concept of the *raj‘ah* – both by themselves and their opponents – for it to be safely seen as an early aspect of Shi‘a belief. For instance, they were often disparagingly referred to as ‘*ahl al-raj‘ah*’ (Amir-Moezzi, 2005). An oft-quoted *hadith* from Imam al-Sadiq excludes those who do not believe in the *mut‘ah* or the *raj‘ah* from being true followers of the Imams⁴; unfortunately, this *hadith* cannot be authenticated by the general standards of Islamic scholarship since it lacks a chain of narration. Even if it were authenticated, it still does not pinpoint exactly what is meant by the *raj‘ah*.

Kohlberg (1999) proffers five answers to that question. First, he defines *raj‘ah* as reincarnation (in the Hindu sense). Adopted by a few early *ghulat* sects – such as the Mansuriyyah who held that souls would be returned to other bodies to be punished (Nawbakhti, 2007) – belief in reincarnation persists today in only a handful of Islamic offshoots. Since both early and modern Shi‘a scholars have adamantly and unequivocally rejected this belief (Qummi, 1999), it might not even appear worth mentioning, except for the fact that the Shi‘a are still accused of stealthily promoting reincarnation under the guise of the *raj‘ah* (Sobhani & Kazemi, 2001).

Second, he describes the *raj‘ah* as the transfer of a spirit of holiness from Imam to Imam. This belief (again, often associated with the *ghulat*) is more commonly known as *tanasukh* and is a separate doctrinal issue.

Third, he mentions the idea postulated by some early Shi‘as who, attempting to appease Mu‘tazilite objections, claimed that the *raj‘ah* referred to the return of power to the Shi‘a, not the actual return of the dead. This view may be of human interest as it proves that ancient peoples were just as apologetic as modern peoples. However, al-Sharif al-Murtadha (11th century AD) rejected that view rather vehemently. Since the article itself says that scholars of that time explicitly rejected this view, and it has no basis in *hadith*, it will not be considered further.

Fourth, he refers to the *raj‘ah* as the expectation of the imminent return of deceased personages. This interpretation of the *raj‘ah* is often presented as the original belief which later transmuted into the idea of a partial resurrection. While some see a ‘proto-*raj‘ah*’ in ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab’s assertion that the Prophet had not died and would soon return, the actual doctrine of the *raj‘ah* is often attributed not to the Imams but to the Kaysaniyyah who, in the spirit of denial, maintained that Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah

had not died but had simply gone into concealment on Mount Radhwa, where he was being nourished by a kindly she-goat. (Of course, the Kaysaniyyah could have just as easily taken this idea from the Imams.) Although this expectation died away when he failed to materialise in a timely fashion, similar beliefs resurged throughout the all Shi'a Imamates and can be attributed to the severe political oppression the Shi'a were living under that, at times, impeded them from identifying the actual Imam (Jafri, 2000). That being said, Twelver Shi'ism does hold that the twelfth Imam – the Mahdi – did go into hiding and will return. However, his return is generally referred to as the *zuhur* (appearance) rather than the *raj'ah* (return) since it involves the return of the living, not the dead.

Fifth, he identifies the *raj'ah* in the normative Shi'a sense – namely, the partial resurrection; this belief seems most concordant with *hadith* and the writings of the early Shi'a scholars. Definitely, early Shi'a scholars upheld belief in a partial resurrection. A vociferous debate was recorded between Shaykh al-Mufeed and a Mu'tazilite opponent who objected that the *raj'ah* was unnecessary (since God had already promised to enact justice) and unpredictable (since the evil could always repent, thereby removing any grounds for punishment) (Al-Mufeed in Sachedina, 1981; McDermott, 1986). Similarly, Shaykh al-Saduq amply defended the idea via *hadith* and the Qur'anic precedent of prior peoples who were raised before.

Numerous *hadith* supporting that fifth definition have been preserved; however, as Shaykh al-Mufeed mentioned, the *hadith* themselves are unreliable and disparate. While some *hadith* predict the return of Imam al-Husayn and his seventy-two companions, others predict the return of the Prophet Muhammad and the remaining Shi'ite Imams – or even twelve more Mahdis who will rule one after another. *Hadith* alternatively predict the *raj'ah* occurring before, during, and after the *zuhur* – or even more than one *raj'ah* (Kohlberg, 1999). While Sachedina ascribes some of these differences in *hadith* to *bada'*, or the change in God's will (Sachedina, 1981), it is more likely that these differences actually stem from misunderstandings or fabrications of *hadith*.

Rather than focusing on *hadith*, contemporary works often present the *raj'ah* as an outgrowth of socio-historical circumstances, with or without the blessing of the Imams. Some attribute this belief to contemporaneous Near Eastern religious traditions. Cook traces much of Islamic eschatology back to Jewish sources, which he speculates that popular preachers of the time – both Sunni and Shi'a – copied to embellish eschatological tales, and these embellishments were later canonised (Cook, 2002).

In contrast, Anne-Marie Schimmel equates the *raj'ah* with the pagan Arab myth of the 'return of the hero' (Schimmel, 1994, p. 195), as does Lane (Sachedina, 1981, n. 32). The idea of the *raj'ah* has also been attributed to 'Abdullah ibn Saba, the legendary (and probably fictional) founder of the heterodox sect of the Saba'iyyah. On the other hand, Amir-Moezzi leaves no stone unturned and proposes roots of the *raj'ah* (and the *zuhur* in general) in Jewish, Christian, gnostic, Mazdaean, Manichean, and pagan beliefs (Amir-Moezzi, 1995). However, unlike the above authors, he does not deny that the *raj'ah* could also have been an original teaching of the Imams.

Others see it as a later development of Shi'a belief. Since the *zuhur* and *raj'ah* were sometimes blurred, Sachedina concludes that belief in the *raj'ah* was a gradual outgrowth of messianic beliefs rather than an endemic teaching of the Imams. He cites the dire circumstances of the Shi'a as fostering messianic hopes (Sachedina, 1981)⁵. While Turner also pegs the *raj'ah* as a second or third century *hijri* development, he speculates that 'Allamah Majlesi, the compiler of *Bihar al-Anwar*, propagated this idea to 'externalise' Islamic belief and make it 'imamocentric' by de-emphasizing universal justice in favour of justice for the Shi'a (Turner, 2000). Although he does not accuse 'Allamah Majlesi of fabricating this 'external imamocentrism', he does suggest that 'Allamah Majlesi took extra care to find *hadith* about the *raj'ah* to bolster the legitimacy of the Safavid Shi'a state.

Unlike the other authors cited above, Turner does broach the subject of whether or not the *hadith* are reliable and suggests that many of them are not. However, he does not pursue this line of inquiry and, in fact, credits a Shi'a cleric with helping him understand that Shi'a ulama do not investigate the sources of belief in the *raj'ah* because, were it disproved, it would interfere with belief in the Mahdi or with modern religio-political sentiments (Turner, 2006). This theory, however, does not make sense since the return of the Mahdi does not depend on the return of the dead.

Despite Turner's intriguing theory of intentional clerical blindsightedness, modern Shi'a scholars hailing from the seminary tradition generally have taken a more source-based approach. Many scholars, such as the late Ayatollah Gulpaygani (2000) and Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani (Sobhani & Kazemi, 2001), present the *raj'ah* as a basic tenet of the Shi'a faith; a more liberal view is presented by Muzaffar (2003), who considers it authentic but not compulsory. Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Fadhlullah, whose views often differ from the traditional, has declared it unknowable on the grounds of the unreliability of the *hadith* and has left the matter to be determined at the end of the world⁶. However, some modern Shi'a thinkers have opposed it on philosophical or logical grounds (Amir-Moezzi, 2005).

Otherwise, modern Shi'a religious scholarship resembles early Shi'a religious scholarship on this issue. For instance, in the anonymous book *Al-Raj'ah aw al-'Awdatu ba'd al-Hayat al-Dunya* (n.d.), the author presents the traditional justification of the *raj'ah* from Qur'anic precedent, *hadith*, and so on. Commonly recited religious texts – such as *Du'a al-'Ahd* and *Ziyarat al-Jami'ah al-Kabeerah* – which refer to the *raj'ah* are also cited as evidence of this belief. Although transmitted and evaluated similarly to *hadith*, these texts enjoy a different status since, unlike arcane works of *hadith*, they are commonly read on a popular basis and can be said to have had more of a grassroots impact.

Research Questions

As evinced by the above, the main uncertainties regarding the *raj'ah* centre on the reliability of *hadith*. Therefore, this dissertation will focus on analysing the surviving *hadith* in order to suggest the actual teachings of the Imams on the *raj'ah*, sans socio-historic or pre-Islamic influences. This main question introduces the following subquestions:

- 1) What does the Shi'a *hadith* corpus say about the *raj'ah*?
- 2) Of the above, what concepts and details can reliably be traced back to the Imams? Which appear to be forgeries?
- 3) Are there any particular individuals, sects, socio-political trends, or contemporaneous religious beliefs that could explain discrepancies between (1) and (2)?

Methodology

The first step to understanding the *raj'ah* according to the Imams is to gather the surviving *hadith*. Fortunately, 'Allamah Majlesi enthusiastically carried out that task when he compiled *Kitab al-Raj'ah* (the *Book of the Raj'ah*) in his encyclopaedic *hadith* work, *Bihar al-Anwar*. This section of *Bihar al-Anwar* contains almost 200 *hadith* pertaining to the *raj'ah*, including *tafsir hadith* and quotations from *ziyarat*.⁷ It is reasonable to assume that he collected the strongest surviving Shi'a *hadith* on the *raj'ah* since all the literature surveyed cited *Kitab al-Raj'ah* (or the sources listed in *Kitab al-Raj'ah*) almost exclusively. Therefore, *Kitab al-Raj'ah* will be assumed to contain most of the reliable *raj'ah hadith*, and other sources will not be consulted.

The *hadith* will then be analysed in terms of narrator⁸. The greatest challenge here is to identify the narrators properly since many names are given in abbreviated forms which are commonly shared, such as 'Ibrahim' or 'Abu Ali'; narrators with the same name will be distinguished based on whom they were known to have narrated from and who was known to have narrated from them as listed in *Mu'jam al-Rijal* by Ayatollah Khomeini. They will also be distinguished based on the time periods they were known to have been alive. Then, traditional Shi'a books on *hadith* narrators will be used to categorise them according to the following scheme⁹:

Praised: Praised by all biographers who mention them. May include narrators who were criticised in *hadith* which Ayatollah Khomeini determined as weak.

Mostly praised: Praised by most biographers but criticised by Ibn al-Ghadha'iri, or heavily praised by most biographers but criticised by a biographer other than Ibn al-Ghadha'iri¹⁰. This category also includes narrators who were considered to be reliable but known to be not Imami¹¹. (Although many narrators who are not Imami are still accepted, the *raj'ah* was viewed differently by different sects and, as such, is more sensitive to variations in belief than, say, how the Imam performed his ablutions. Therefore, although non-Imami narrators will not be rejected, their sectarian affiliations will be noted.)

Disagreed over: Significant disagreement over reliability of narrator by biographers.

Unreliable: Condemned by all biographers who mention the narrator. Also includes those narrators who were praised by some but significantly condemned by Najjashi, or those whom Ayatollah Khomeini deemed unreliable.

Unknown: No biographical information available about the narrator.

It will also be recorded whether a particular narrator was said to be of the Imami, Waqifi, Fathi, Khattabi, Zaydi, Nawusi, or non-Shi'a persuasions¹²; whether or not the narrator had any particular merits; and – most importantly for this work – whether the narrator was considered to have had any particular demerits, such as being a liar, extremist (*ghali*), forgetful, or inclined to relate from weak (*dha'eef*) narrators¹³.

After that has been completed, the *hadith* will be categorised into the following categories based on their chains of narration:

Very strong: All narrators are known and praised and recorded to have reported from each other. No gaps in the chain of narration. *Hadith in this category will be considered to have been traced very reliably to the Imams.*

Strong: Almost all narrators are known. Known narrators are praised or mostly praised, and almost all narrators are recorded to have reported from each other. No known weak or suspicious narrators. No gaps in the chain of narration. *Hadith in this category will be considered to have been traced reliably to the Imams.*

Average: No narrators have been identified as unreliable or disagreed over; however, concerns have been raised about certain narrators. Many narrators may be unknown. May contain minor gaps in an otherwise acceptable chain of narration¹⁴. *Hadith in this category will be considered to be potentially reliable.*

Suspect: Presence of narrators whom scholars disagree over. May also contain gaps. Includes *hadith* where only the primary narrator is mentioned, and he is disagreed upon. *Hadith in this category will be considered unproven, but with a greater possibility of being authentic than the 'unreliable' hadith.*

Unreliable: Presence of at least one narrator who has been condemned by all biographers who have mentioned him. May also have gaps. Includes *hadith* where only the primary narrator has been mentioned, and he has been universally condemned. Also includes *hadith* with other issues of concern (such as the improbability of the primary narrator having had contact with the person he was narrating from). *Hadith in this category will be considered to be unproven. Some may be considered as potential forgeries.*

Very unreliable: Presence of at least two narrators who have been condemned by all biographers who have discussed them, particularly those condemned for lying or extremism. May also have gaps. *All hadith in this category will be considered to be unproven and will be considered as potential forgeries.*

Indeterminate: No chain of narration, or *hadith* with an insufficient number of narrators listed to categorise it into any of the above categories. *No immediate judgment will be made about hadith in this*

category.

Hadith which have been related by particularly renowned narrators (such as Ibn Abi 'Umayr, al-Bazanti, and Safwan ibn Yahya)¹⁵ or which have been related from particularly reliable sources (such as *Man La Yahduruhu al-Faqih*) may be moved up to higher categories, but not into 'very strong'. *Hadith* which have been related by narrators known as the 'People of Consensus (*ashab al-ijma'*) may also be moved up into higher categories, but not into 'very strong'. *Hadith* which contain multiple issues of concern may be moved down to lower categories, but not into 'very unreliable'. *Hadith* with suspect content but without flaws in their chain of narration will be noted.

Just because a *hadith* was related by unreliable narrators does not automatically mean it is a fabrication. However, unreliable *hadith* will be examined by their narrators and content and compared against the more reliable *hadith* to suggest which prophecies might be forgeries.

Hadith which have been identified as 'average' and better will then be used to propose teachings about the *raj'ah* that appear, from the perspective of the reliability of *hadith* narrators, to be traceable to the Imams; this is the primary goal of this thesis. Patterns regarding the narrators or sources will be noted.

A list of narrators considered unreliable and the reasons why can be found in Appendix C. A list of *hadith* and their categorizations can be found in Appendix D.

1. This paper will focus on Twelver (Imami) Shi'ism, not other branches of Shi'ism.
2. For instance, in his article in the Encyclopedia of Islam, Kohlberg says that there is 'agreement that the *raj'a*... will involve believers and unbelievers only from Muhammad's community' (Kohlberg, 1999).
3. While a *hadith* in Bihar al-Anwar (Vol. 53, *Hadith* #122) does acknowledge this discrepancy, saying that Imam al-Husayn will return and kill so many people that people will say he could not be a descendant of the prophets, this *hadith* is extremely unreliable, as it lacks a full chain of narration, and the final narrator who is mentioned, 'Amr ibn Thabit, was condemned by Ibn al-Ghadha'iri as being 'extremely weak'.
4. 'Allamah Muhammad Baqir Majlesi, Bihar al-Anwar, Vol. 53, *Hadith* #92. While many take that *hadith* at face value and interpret *mut'ah* as 'temporary marriage,' in his exposition on the *raj'ah*, Vahid Majd postulates that '*lam yastahill mat'atana*' refers to the enjoyment of the rule of Ahl al-Bayt, not interpersonal relations, as that would make more contextual sense. (Vahid Majd, 2000) However, the *hadith* itself is found in the section pertaining to temporary marriage in *Wasa'il al-Shi'ah*, and so that probably is the intended meaning, both the *mut'ah* and the *raj'ah* being exclusively Shi'a teachings.
5. For more information regarding the conditions of the Shi'a at that time, see *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam* (Hussain, 1982).
6. The views of Ayatollah Fadhlullah can be found at <http://www.bayyinat.org.lb> [1].
7. Although *Kitab al-Raj'ah* only has 163 listings, entry #138 contains 22 *hadith*. Additionally, some listings contain more than one distinct *hadith* or more than one chain of narration for the same *hadith*, and so, for the purposes of this study, they have been treated as more than separate *hadith*. Multiple *hadith* under one listing have been identified as #1a, #1b, etc. The *hadith* composing entry #138 have been identified as #138-1, #138-2, etc. All in all, this leads to a total of 192 *hadith*.
8. Database technology will be used to facilitate this analysis. Using Microsoft Access, database cards will be made for each *hadith*, with fields for each narrator as well as the content. Check boxes will be provided for common themes (such as the length of the rule of the Mahdi or the rise of the Beast) to aid in sorting *hadith* by topic.
9. Including the *Rijal* of Najjashi, the *Rijal* of Tusi, the *Rijal* of Ibn al-Ghadha'iri, *Al-Khulasah* by 'Allamah al-Hilli, and *Mu'jam Rijal al-Hadith* by Ayatollah Khoei; the *Dirayah al-Noor* software, which contains searchable electronic versions of all these books, will be used where appropriate.

[10.](#) Since Ibn al-Ghadha'iri is very critical, his opinion is being treated separately.

[11.](#) That is to say, they were not members of the Twelver Shi'a sect. However, it would be erroneous to refer to them as Twelver Shi'as here, since not all twelve Imams had been born yet.

[12.](#) The Waqifis held that the final Imam was Imam Musa al-Kadhim and that, rather than dying, he had been raised to heaven and would be returned when it was time to lead an uprising. The Fathis held that 'Abdullah ibn Ja'far al-Sadiq (instead of Imam Musa al-Kadhim) was the Imam after Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq. The Khattabis held that Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq had appointed a man name Abu al-Khattab as the next Imam. The Zaydis fell into a number of subsects and held that the Imamate belonged to whichever of Imam Ali's descendants actively sought rule. The Nawusis held that Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq did not die and would not die until he revolted (Nawbakhi, 2007).

[13.](#) Throughout this work, 'weak' has been used in its technical sense to denote a narrator who was unreliable in relating hadith. Similarly, 'extremist' has been used in its technical sense to refer to a member of the ghulat sects.

[14.](#) Although, traditionally, hadith with gaps in their chain of narration are considered weak, for the purposes of this analysis, hadith with gaps in their chain of narration but no known unreliable narrators will be distinguished from hadith with gaps in their chain of narration and with known unreliable narrators in order to facilitate identification of possible falsifications.

[15.](#) These three narrators are considered reliable when narrating hadith without full chains of narration (Al-Fadli, 2002).

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[1] <http://www.bayynat.org.lb>