

Conclusion

In this dissertation, I have attempted bring to light the legacy of the Fatimah– Rashidun conflict as depicted in the formative Muslim historiographical and Shiite hadith sources. As demonstrated in chapter one, historians such as Ibn Sa’d, al– Baladhuri, and al–Tabari, as well as the moderate Shiite al–Mas’udi, were primarily concerned with presenting an organic narrative of the Muslim community. Thus they focused primarily on events related to Muslim political life which unfolded in the public sphere. In the historical texts, Fatimah plays the role of a contentious, controversial woman at the centre of the turmoil that resulted from the power vacuum following Muhammad’s death. Sunnite–influenced historians attempted to portray events in ways that suggested that those who rejected Fatimah’s claims did so unwillingly, acting only because they were compelled to protect a fragile Muslim community reeling after the death of its Prophet and founder, Muhammad.

Moreover, the historians and their informants crafted their presentations of the F–R conflict so as to avoid repudiating either Fatimah or Abu Bakr and his supporters. While some historians such as Pseudo–Ibn Qutaybah did include dramatic details of an attack on the home of Fatimah, such reports were counteracted by placing emphasis on the regret and sense of helplessness felt by the caliph. Therefore, while Pseudo–Ibn Qutaybah may be described as having Sunnite tendencies, those were moderate enough to allow him to chronicle the F–R conflict in a somewhat neutral fashion. Thus a careful study of the F–R conflict in the historical sources allows us to trace the development of sectarian positions regarding various personalities. The histories also make use of Fatimah’s femaleness by highlighting Abu Bakr’s wisdom and forbearance – outstanding characteristics of the masculinity of the time – and Fatimah’s lack of wisdom and immaturity. Portrayal of Fatimah as emotional and irrational – in short, an ordinary woman – is used to suggest that the conflict is a mere misunderstanding largely occasioned by Fatimah’s emotional state. The historical reports as presented by Ibn Sa’d also portray Abu Bakr as a paternal figure who responds to Fatimah’s emotional harangues with calm, measured words.

Shiite tradition – the pietistic texts of the hadiths – cast Fatimah, her family, and their small band of supporters as heroes facing hypocrisy and corruption. This dualistic approach to the F–R conflict is a product of the “private eye” which developed intensely dogmatic views of the companions in the context

of the rise of Shiite sectarian particularism in the second century A.H. (eight century C.E.). Shiite particularism entailed the development of an electionism defining itself against the majority of the companions of the Prophet, who Shiites believe betrayed Muhammad's legacy and were open enemies of Fatimah, Ali and their children. As a result, the Shiite hadith makes no attempt to digest or negotiate the conflict between Muhammad's daughter and his closest associates. Rather, Abu Bakr, Umar and their supporters are presented as tyrants who not only usurped the leadership of the community from Fatimah's husband Ali and denied her claim to the garden of Fadak, but were guilty of physically assaulting the daughter of the Prophet and murdering her unborn son. These scandalous accusations leveled at those who formed Muhammad's inner circle of companions (ashab) constitutes a sweeping repudiation of the foundations of Sunnite Islam.

It should also be emphasized that belief in the suffering of Fatimah and her violent conflict with the companions cannot be dismissed as being limited to the fringes of popular Shiism, since many accounts are found in mainstream Shiite hadith tradition, with complete chains of transmission testifying to their 'authenticity', an important matter for the scholars of hadith who vest authority in such chains. In addition, unlike the historical sources, the Shiite corpus of hadith, despite its vastness and inconsistency, has attained a sacral status¹. The extraordinary details of Fatimah's quest for justice, suffering and eventual lonely death reflect a thoroughly sober Shiite world view in which God's friends are few and His enemies many.

Similar to the historical material, the Shiite hadith presents a highly gendered Fatimah. Gender themes are at play in both tellings, although, of course, in different ways, so that Shiite treatment of Fatimah's femaleness has little in common with that of the historical sources. In the Shiite hadith, Fatimah is portrayed as a forceful woman able to command the attention and even awe of grown men, including the venerable Abu Bakr. Her towering presence as communicated in the Speech of Fatimah suggests, however, that her influence is unique for a woman, something not entirely of her own doing but a result of her drawing on the charisma of her father.

The intellectually powerful Fatimah of Shiite tradition also stands helpless as she is physically assaulted and miscarries her child. Fatimah functions as the Shiite matriarch of suffering. But she is also courageous and resistant, as one would expect a male to be. She is a staunch and fearless upholder of rights and truth. She is perhaps forced, like her daughter Zaynab after her, to play a conventionally masculine role because no male can come forward to do so. She seems, that is, to stand in for Ali, who cannot be made to play the active role because it is historically too well known that, Ali as a contender to the caliphate would have been treated as a political threat by the regime and thus did not content the caliphates of Abu Bakr and Umar in the way Fatimah has been shown to do so. Finally, Fatimah is portrayed as a woman who wished to campaign for her own cause; as the prophet's daughter, she wished to lay claim to what she believed was rightfully hers.

A study of any early prominent Muslim personality raises the question of historicity. In the case of

Fatimah, the question is complicated by the fact that both Sunnites and Shiites have contributed to constructing her image. It is also evident that statements or actions have been ascribed to Fatimah in order legitimate dogmatic positions that only crystallized a hundred to two hundred years after her death².

With this in mind, I made the choice to treat the Fatimah material not as history, but construction; this is the approach I have taken not only for the hadith (a literature of piety), but also Muslim historiography. This should not be misconstrued as suggesting that the entire Sunnite and Shiite memory of the past is devoid of historical value. Rather, the project at hand has focused on Fatimah as a motif of contention and suffering from the perspective of one aspect of the sources that is Islamic intellectual history, particularly as it pertains to the development of Sunnism, Shiism, and controversies between the two. The Fatimah figure is at the heart of competing sectarian constructions of a sacralized past³; I have argued, in fact, that Fatimah is used to powerfully mark and develop the sectarian divide. She is not, as some Western scholars have imaged, an incidental figure either for Shiites or Sunnites.

¹. I have used the wording of A. Al-Azemeh applied to the Sunnite tradition. See: A. Al-Azmeh, "The Muslim Canon" in Canonization and Decanonization ed. A Van Der Kooji and K Van Der Toorn (Leiden: Brill Publications, 1998), 204.

². The inspiration for this description of the pitfalls in a historical study of early Muslim figures originates in my reading of Suleiman Ali Mourad's work on al-Hasan al-Basri (d.110/728). See: Suleiman Ali Mourad, Early Islam Between Myth and History al-Hasan al-Basri and His Legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship (Leiden: Brill Publications, 2006), 4-16.

³. The inspiration for this line of thought came from Rainer Brunner's highly arcane article on Shiite hadith. See: Brunner, 329.

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