

Introduction

Some scholars who study Shi'ism describe it as a phenomenon that is incidental to Islamic society. They observe the Shi segment within the body of the Islamic community precisely in its quality of a segment, one that first came into being, through the passage of time, as a result of specific societal events and developments, leading to the intellectual and doctrinal formation of one part only within the larger body; a part which gradually broadened later.¹ Beyond this assumption, these scholars differ as to the particular events and developments that led to the rise of such a phenomenon.

Some assume that `Abd Allah b. Saba<sup>2</sup> and his alleged political activity were at the origin of the rise of the Shi'ite bloc. Others trace the phenomenon of Shi'ism back to the era of Imam `Ali's Caliphate and whatever political and social circumstances had taken shape within the pale of events of the time. Still others claim that, within the historical sequence of the Islamic community, the appearance of the Shi'ites occurred through still later events than these.³

As far as I can tell, what has prompted many of these scholars to believe that Shi'ism was a phenomenon merely incidental to Islamic society is precisely that the Shiites of early Islam represented but a tiny portion of the *Ummah*. This fact may have inspired the feeling that what was not Shi'i must have then been the predominant pattern in Islamic society, and that Shi'ism was the exception, an accidental phenomenon whose causes can be discovered through developments relating to the opposition to the dominant order.

But to consider either numerical majority or relative minority as grounds enough for distinguishing the dominant order from the exception, or the original root from the schism, lacks logical rigour. It is incorrect to describe "non-Shi'ism" as dominant simply on the basis of a numerical majority; and, based on numerical inferiority, to relegate "Shi'ism" to an incidental phenomenon and the idea of schism.

That would not agree with the nature of creedal divisions, since many divisions can remain within the fold of a single message and arise only through the differences attending the process of defining certain of the message's features. No two credal divisions ever have numerical equivalence, although both sides may at bottom be seeking to express the same message on whose nature they disagree.

Hence, under no circumstances can we build our conception upon a creedal division between Shi'ism and other currents within the Islamic Mission⁴ based on numbers alone; just as we may not link the birth of the Shi'i thesis, as it occurs within the framework of the Islamic Mission, with the advent of the word "Shi'ites" or "Shi'ism" taken as a technical term or proper noun for a clearly defined group among the Muslims. This is because the advent of names and technical terms is one thing, and the development of the content, the actual current and the thesis are another. If we cannot find the word "Shiites"⁵ in current usage at the time of God's Messenger, or immediately following his death, this does not mean that the Shiite current and thesis did not exist.

With this frame of mind, then, let us turn to the issue of "Shi'ism" and "Shi'ites" in order to answer the following two questions:

What is the origin of Shi'ism?

How did the Shi'ites emerge?

¹. See Dr. Kamil Mustafa al-Shaybi, *al-Silah bayna al-tasawwuf wal-tashayyu*; I: 11–14, where he presents the views of many ancient and contemporary investigators into the origin and evolution of Shi'ism. He also states that some of them differentiate between political and spiritual (i.e. doctrinal) Shi'ism. See Dr. Mustafa al-Shak'ah, *Islam bila madhahib*, p. 153; and Dr. Diya' al-Din al-Rayyis, *al-Nazariyyat al-siyasiyyah al islamiyyah*, p. 69.

². See Dr. Mahmud Jabir 'Abd al-'Al, *Harakat al-Shi'ah al-mutatarrafin ma atharuhum fi al-hayat al-ijtimaiyyah*, p. 19. This claim is ascribed to some Muslim historians. However, al-'Al points out that this was rejected by Bernard Lewis, the well-known Orientalist. Wellhausen and Friedlander, two of the biggest scholars in the field, are quoted as saying, "Ibn Saba' was fabricated by those who came later in time." Dr. Taha Husayn, in his *al-Fitnah al-kubra*, II:327, says: "The Shiites' opponents exaggerated the issue of Ibn Saba' in order to defame Ali and his followers." He added that "We find no mention of Ibn Saba' in any of the important sources ... He is not mentioned in Baladhuri's *Ansab al-ashraf*, but is in Tabari's *Tarikh*, as reported by Sayf b. 'Umar al-Tamimi. About this Sayf, though, Ibn Hayyan said that "He related forgeries and was said to fabricate hadiths himself." Al-Hakim stated that he was accused of heresy, and that his hadiths were omitted. See Ibn Hajar, *Tadhhib al-tadhhib* IV:260. Concerning the legend of 'Abd Allah b. Saba, see 'Allamah Murtadha al-'Askari's book, 'Abd Allah b. Saba'.

³. See al-Shaybi *al-Silah bayna al-tasawwuf wal-tashayyu*; Dr. 'Abd Allah Fayyad, *Ta'rikh al-Imamiyyah wa aslafihim min al-Shi'ah*; Dr. Mustafa al-Shak'ah, *Islam bila madhahib*, p. 152ff; Dr. Diya' al-Din al-Rayyis, *al-Nazariyyat al-siyasiyyah al-islamiyyah*, p. 72ff.

⁴. Indeed, it is consistent neither with ordinary logic nor with the logic of the Holy Qur'an. In numerous places, the Qur'an mostly, if not always, censures the majority, and praises the few in as many places. For instance, God says: "And yet most are not wont to be thankful..." (Qur'an 27:73 "al-Naml"). God also says: "... but a few of my servants are grateful" (34:13 "al-Saba"); "...and many people are sinful" (5:52 "al-Maidah")... Those are they who are brought near in the Gardens of Delight, a party from those of old and a few from those who have come later" (56:11–4 "al-waqiah"). This is one aspect. The other is that the Holy Qur'an informs us in many places that those who adhere to Truth and to God's Messengers, and are directed by Divine teachings, are always fewer in comparison to those who headstrongly resist the truth. God says: "Most of them dislike the truth..." (23:70 "al-Mu'minun"); "Yet no faith will the greater part of mankind have, however ardently thou dost desire it" (12:103 "Yusuf"). In every case, there is allusion to the invalidity of relying on the standards of the majority in order to evaluate the correctness of a trend or an opinion. See Muhammad Fuad 'Abd al-Baqi, *al-Mujam al-mufahris li-alfaz al-Qur'an*, p. 597ff.

⁵. It appears that the Imam is proffering this by way of humbleness and tolerance; otherwise there are prophetic hadiths which utter the word "Shi'ism" in connection with 'Ali. It is said in Ibn Manzur's *Mukhtasar Tarikh Ibn Asaki'r* (XVII:384) that 'Ali uttered: "The Prophet told me [May God bless him and his Household [you and your followers [shiatuka] are in the

Garden of Paradise.” But there is another account by Jabir (XVIII: 14). Cf. Ibn al-Athir, al-Nihayah IV: 106 (“Madat qamh”):
“You and your followers [shiatuka] will be pleased and pleasing...” – addressed to `Ali.

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