

Meaning And Origins Of Shi'ism

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The author presents a brief but complete research on Shi'ism. Proof from Qur'an, Hadith and History is presented starting with the name Shi'a, its first followers and the subsequent popularity of Shi'ism. The author establishes that the word Shi'a and Shi'ism exists in Qur'an prior to the advent of Islam. Following the departure of Prophet Muhammad (S), the word Shi'a and Shi'ism became popular to the followers and lovers of Imam 'Ali (as).

In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

The Meaning of Shi'a

The word "Shi'a – شِيعَة" is derived from Arabic word at-tashayyu' (التشييع) which means "to follow". According to major dictionaries like *al-Qâmûs* and *Lisânu 'l-'Arab*, the friends and followers of a person are his Shi'a. According to *Taju 'l-'urus*, a group of persons showing unanimity over an issue may be called "Shi'a". This word is equally used for singular and plural as well as for masculine and feminine genders.

In the Qur'ân it has been used for the followers of the Prophets of Allâh:

In the story of Musa (a.s) it says:–

هَذَا مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ وَهَذَا مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ ۖ فَاسْتَعَاثَهُ الَّذِي مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ عَلَى الَّذِي مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ

This was from his (i.e. Musa's) followers (Shi'a) and that from his enemies ('aduww). And he who was of his Shi'a asked him for his help against him who was of his enemies ('aduww).[1](#)

In the story of Nuh (a.s) it says:

وَإِنَّ مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ لِإِبْرَاهِيمَ

And, verily, of his Shi'a is Ibrahim. [2](#)

Arabic dictionaries, after giving the literal meaning of the word, Shi'a, usually add: "This name is generally used for those who love and follow 'Ali and the people of his house, and it has become their proper name".[3](#)

Shaykh al-Mufid (d 413 A.H./1022 C.E.) has explained that when the word Shi'a is used with the definite article "al" (*al-Shi'a* = the Shi'a) it only means "the group which follows 'Ali (blessings of Allâh be upon him) with love and the belief that he was the Imam after the Prophet (s.a.w.w) without any gap..."[4](#)

In short, the Shi'a got this name because they follow 'Ali and his sinless progeny, and reject the claims of others to the office of Imamate (leadership after the Prophet). As will be explained later, it was the Prophet himself who gave this name to the followers of 'Ali.

The Origin of Shi'ism

The origin of Shi'ism is the same as that of Islam.

The main difference between the Sunnis and the Shi'as is about the successor ship of the Prophet of Islam. The Sunnis believe that Abu Bakr was the first successor; the Shi'as believe that 'Ali was the first rightful successor. When a non-biased scholar studies the declarations of the Prophet (s.a.w.w) as recorded by the Sunni scholars in their commentaries of the Qur'ân (*tafsir*), and traditions of the Prophet (*ahadith*), biographies and history, he has to admit that it was the Prophet (s.a.w.w) himself who was the originator of Shi'ism.

The first open declaration of the prophethood was the very occasion when the first declaration of the caliphate of 'Ali (a.s) was made. The occasion is known as the "Feast of the Clan". The relevant paragraphs are quoted here from the *Ta'rikh* of at-Tabari:

'Ali said: "When the verse '*And warn thy clan of near kindred*'[5](#) was revealed to the Messenger of Allâh (s.a.w.w), he called me and ordered me to prepare one *sa'* (about 3 kg.) of food and invite the descendants of 'Abdu 'l-Muttalib, so that he could talk to them. They were about forty persons, among them his uncles Abu Talib, Hamzah, 'Abbâs and Abu Lahab. Then the Messenger of Allâh delivered a lecture saying:

'O Sons of 'Abdu 'l-Muttalib! I know no man in all Arabia who ever brought to his people anything better than which I have brought to you. I have brought to you the good of this world and the hereafter. And Allâh (may He be exalted) has commanded me to call you to it. Who, therefore, among you will help me in this matter, on the condition that he would be my brother, my *Wasiy* (heir) and my *Khalifah* (successor) among you?"

‘Ali continues the narration: “Nobody came forward; so I said (though I was the youngest in age): ‘I, O Prophet of Allâh! shall be your helper in this (task).’ So the Prophet put his hand on my neck and said: ‘Verily, he is my brother, my *Wasiy* (heir) and my *Khalifah* (successor) among you. Listen to him and obey him.’ The assembly stood up laughing and telling Abu Tâlib that Muhammad has ordered him to listen to his son and obey him”.⁶

This was in the beginning.

In the last months of his life, the Prophet (s.a.w.w) declared at a place called Khumm, between Mecca and Medinah, that ‘Ali was his successor and master of the Muslims. This event has been recorded by numerous Sunni scholars. Imam Ahmad bin Shu‘ayb an-Nasâ’i (d. 303 A.H./915–16 CE.) has narrated this event through several chains of narrators in his *al-Khasâ’is*, one of which is as follows:

Abu’t-Tufayl said that Zayd bin Aqram said, “When the Prophet returned from the last pilgrimage, and stayed at the pond (*Ghadir*) of Khumm, he ordered the place to be swept. Then he said: ‘It is as though I have been called (back by God, meaning that death is soon approaching) and I have accepted that call. And I am leaving among you two weighty, precious things, one of them is greater than the other: the Book of Allâh and my descendants, my family-members. So look out how you deal with them after me because they will not separate from each other until they come to me at the fountain (of *kawthar*, on the Day of Judgement). I am the master (*wali*) of every believer’. Saying this, he took the hand of ‘Ali (Allâh be pleased with him) and said, ‘Whomsoever’s master I am, this (‘Ali) is his master. O Allâh! Love the person who loves ‘Ali, and be the enemy of one who has enmity towards him”.

Abu’t-Tufayl says, “I asked Zayd, ‘Did you hear it from the Messenger of Allâh (s.a.w.w)?’ He said, ‘There was no one in the oasis but saw him with his eyes and heard him with his ears,’”.⁷ This tradition is known as “the tradition of two precious things”.

In the same book, Imam an-Nasâ’i quotes another similar *hadith* from Zayd bin Aqram which contains these words from the Prophet: “Don’t I have more authority on every believer than his own self?” They replied, “Surely, we bear witness that thou hast more authority upon every believer than his own self”. The Prophet then said, “So, verily, he whose master (*mawla*) I am, this is his Master (*mawla*).” Saying this he took the hand of ‘Ali.⁸ This tradition is known as “the tradition of mastership”.

The traditions of “two precious things” and “mastership” are jointly and severally narrated by hundreds of traditionalists. The famous Wahabi scholar,

Nawwâb Siddiq Hasan Khân of Bhopal, says:

“Hâkim Abu Sa’id says that the traditions of ‘two precious things’ and ‘whose master I am, ‘Ali is his master’ are *Mutawâtir*⁹ because a great number of companions of the Prophet have narrated them. So much so that Muhammad bin Jarir has written these two traditions by seventy-five different chains of narrators (*asnâd*).”¹⁰

‘Abdu ‘l-Husayn Ahmad al-Amini has classified the narrators of this tradition and has found that among them are one hundred and twenty *sahâbah* (companions of the Prophet) and eighty-four *tabi‘in* (disciples of the companions). The number of Sunni *muhaddithin* (traditionalists) who have narrated it reaches upto three hundred and sixty. Two hundred and sixty special books (several of them in many volumes) have been compiled by Shi‘a and Sunni scholars on this tradition only. [11](#)

The Origin of the Name

When we see that between these two events, the Prophet repeatedly referred to the followers of ‘Ali as “Shi‘a”, we have to admit that not only the faith of Shi‘ism, but even the name was originated by the Prophet himself. The following ahadith are quoted from Sunni sources:

Ibn ‘Asâkir narrates from Jâbir bin ‘Abdullah that he said: “We were with the Prophet (s.a.w.w) when ‘Ali came (to us). The Prophet (s.a.w.w) said, ‘I swear by Him in whose hand is my soul, verily this (‘Ali) and his Shi‘a are successful on the Day of Resurrection’. Then the following verse was revealed,

‘Verily those who believe and do good deeds, it is they who are the best of creatures[Qur‘ân 96:7]’. [12](#)

At-Tabarani says that the Prophet told ‘Ali: “O ‘Ali, verily you will come before Allâh, you and your Shi‘as well-pleased (with Allâh) and well-pleasing (to Him).” [13](#)

There are so many *ahâdith* from so many narrators that Sunni scholars could not reject them. So they tried to fit these *ahâdith* on their own group. After quoting these traditions, Ibn Hajar al-Makki writes, “And the Shi‘a of Ahlu ‘l-Bayt are Ahlu ‘s-Sunnah wa ‘l-Jamâ‘ah (i.e, the Sunnis), because it is they who loved the Ahlu ‘l-Bayt as was ordered by Allâh and His Messenger. So far as others are concerned, they are in fact the enemies (of Ahlu ‘l-Bayt).” [14](#)

This claim was repeated by Shah ‘Abdu ‘l-Aziz Dehlawi who says, “It should be known that the first Shi‘as (who are the Sunnis and the Tafdiliyyah) in old days were known as Shi‘as. When the *Ghulât* and the *Rawâfid Zaydiyyah* and *Ismâ‘iliyyah* took the name for themselves..... the Sunnis and Tafdiliyyah did not like this name for themselves and so they took the name of Ahlu ‘s- Sunnah wa ‘l-Jamâ‘ah.” [15](#)

Such claims should not be dignified by reply. But seeing that an abridged Arabic translation of *Tuhfah* has recently been published in Egypt, I quote here the comment of another Sunni scholar, ‘Ubaydullâh Amritsari, who after quoting the above claim in his book *Arjahu ‘l-Matâlib*, says: “To say that Sunnis in the beginning were known as Shi‘as is merely a claim for which no proof can be found. Had the Sunnis been called Shi‘a, then at least some of the Sunni elders should have been known by this name before the event of Zaydiyyah (in 120 A.H.). Moreover, had the Sunnis been known by this name, the Zaydiyyah and Ismâ‘iliyyah would have not tolerated this name for themselves (because of the enmity) and would have selected some other name for themselves.” [16](#)

The First Shi'as

During the life-time of the Prophet (s.a.w.w) the word, Shi'a, was used as a name first of all for four highly respected companions of the Prophet: Salmân al-Fârsi, Abu Dharr Jundab bin Junâdah al-Ghifâri, Miqdâd bin Aswad al-Kindi and 'Ammâr bin Yâsir.

Kashfu 'z-Zunun, Vol.III, quotes from *Kitabu 'z-Zinah* of Abu Hatim Sahal (sic) bin Muhammad Sajastâni (sic), (d.205 A.H.):

“In the days of the Holy Prophet (may peace be upon him) the word Shi'a was mentioned with reference to four persons: Salmân al-Fârsi, Abu Dharr Ghaffâri (sic), Miqdâd bin Aswad al-Kindi and 'Ammâr bin Yâsir.”¹⁷

Those were the first Shi'as and that was the beginning of the Shi'a faith under the kind guidance and patronage of the Prophet of Islam himself.

Courtesy: The Light (Dar-es-Salaam) vol. 11 (Oct, 1977) no. 5

1. Qur'ân 28: 15

2. Qur'ân 37:83

3. Al-Qâmûs, vol. 2; at-Turayhi, Majma'ul 'l-Bahrayn, vol. 2, p. 539; Ibn al-Athir al-Jazari, an-Nihâyah, Egypt ed., [1383/1963], vol. 2, pp. 519-520.

4. al-Mufid, Shaykh, Awâ'ilu 'l-Maqâlât (Qum: 2nd ed., 1370 A.H.) pp.2-3.

5. Qur'ân 26:214

6. At-Tabari, Muhammad bin Jarir, Ta'rikh, vol. 3 (Laden: EJ Brill, 1882-1885) p.1171-1173. It is interesting to note that in the Cario 1939 edition of at-Tabari's Ta'rikh (which claims to have been checked by the Laden edition), the important words “wasiyyi wa Khalifati” (my heir and successor) have been changed to “kadha wa kadha” (so and so)! How sad it is to see the academic world sacrificing its integrity on the altar of political expediency. It should be mentioned here that this tradition with the crucial words has been narrated by at least thirty Sunni scholars, historians, traditionalists and commentators of the Qur'ân. Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal has narrated this in his Musnad (vol.1, P.111) with the following sanad:

(a) Aswad bin 'Amir from (b) Sharik from (c) al-A'mash from (d) al-Minhâl from

(e) 'Ibâd bin 'Abdullah al-Asadi from (f) 'Ali. Now (a), (c) and (e) are among the narrators of both al-Bukhari and al-Muslim, while (b) is among the narrators of al-Muslim and (d) among those of al-Bukhari

Also, Ahmad b. Shu'ayb an-Nasâ'i, whose Sunan is one of the six authentic sources of Sunni hadith, has narrated this hadith from Ibn 'Abbas in his al-Khasâ'is, p.6.

For other references of this hadith, see al-Murâja'at of 'Abdu 'l-Husayn Sharfu 'd-Din (letters 20 to 23). This is one of the most important Shi'a works of recent times; It has been printed scores of times in Iraq, Iran, Lebanon and Kuwait. Its Urdu translation entitled as Din-e-Haqq was published in Kujhwa (Saran) India, which in its turn was translated into English as The Right Path by Mohammad Amir Haider Khan and was recently published by Peermohamed Ibrahim Trust, Karachi. (The English translation has since been reprinted several times in Iran, U.K. and U.S.A)

[7.](#) An-Nasâ'i, al-Khasâ'is, p. 15

[8.](#) Ibid. p. 16

[9.](#) Mutawâtir means a hadith narrated by so many people that no doubt can be entertained about its authenticity.

[10.](#) Siddiq Hasan Khân, Minhâju 'L-wus'ul, p. 13

[11.](#) See volume 1 of al-Ghadir, which deals exclusively with this subject. This is another important Shi'a book of recent times. Eleven volumes were published before al-Amini died in 1969. It has been published many times in Iraq, Iran and Lebanon. I have seen its Persian translation. Late Shaikh Muhammad Mustafa Jawhar, of Karachi, had translated the first volume in Urdu but it was lost from the press. Now another Urdu translation of the first volume has been printed in India

[12.](#) As-Suyuti, Jalâ'ud 'd-Din (d. 910/1504-5), ad-Durru 'l Manthur, vol.6 p.379. He narrates a similar ahâdith from Ibn 'Abbas and 'Ali also in the same place; Al- Khuwarizmi (d.569/1173-4) in al-Manâqib.

Other ahadith of the Prophet declaring that the Shi'ahs of 'Ali will succeed in the hereafter are narrated from Abdullah, Abu Râfi', Jâbir bin Abdullah, Ibn 'Abbâs and 'Ali by Sunni authorities including at-Tabarâni in his al-Mu'jam al-Kabir, Ahmad bin Hanbal in his al-Manâqib, Ibn Marduwayh al-Kanji ash-Shâfi'i (d.658/1260) in his Kifâyatu 't-Tâlib and many others.

[13.](#) Ibn Athir in an-Nihâyah; Ibn Hajar al-Haythami al-Makki in his as-Sawâ'iqu 'l-Muhriqah (Cairo, n.d) p. 92. He narrates many ahadith to this effect.

[14.](#) as-Sawâ'iqu 'l-Muhriqah

[15.](#) Shah 'Abdu 'l-Aziz Dehlawi, Tuhfah-e-lthnâ-'ashariyyah, Nawalkishor Press, Lucknow, n.d; pp. 4, 11, 59

[16.](#) 'Ubaydullah Amritsari, Arjahu 'l-Matalib, 2nd ed. Lahore, p. 608 (which is wrongly printed as 164.)

[17.](#) As quoted by Hasan al-Amin, Islamic Shi'ite Encyclopaedia, Vol. 1, Beirut, 1968, pp.12-13

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