

## The Scholarly Jihad of the Imams– 95 – 148 A.H.

The period under discussion (95–148 A.H /712–765 A.D.) began and ended in the times of the Vth and VIth Imams. The persecutions of the Shi'is continued unabated from Mu'awiya's time to almost the very last days of the Umayyads, although this dynasty in its latter days was considerably weakened by internal strife. Zayd, the grandson of Husayn, rose up to establish the rule of religion and justice in 122/740, but he was felled by an arrow in his forehead, and his army of 15,000 fled.

His body was exhumed by order of the Umayyad caliph, Hisham, was mutilated, beheaded and crucified in Kufa and left there for years on the cross. Then Hisham's successor, al-Walid, ordered the body to be burned, and the ashes scattered on the banks of the Euphrates. Zayd's son, Yahya, rose up in Khorasan; coincidentally he also was killed by an arrow which pierced his brain. He was beheaded; the head was sent to al-Walid and the body crucified. This was in 125/743. The body remained on the cross till Abu Muslim al-Khurasani rose in Khorasan and the call rose up against the Umayyads “to please the progeny of Muhammad”, and Umayyad rule ended.

But the persecution in itself was a major cause of the spread of the persecuted Shi'a faith. Muhammad Jawad al-Mughniya writes: “The Shi'is offered arguments from the Qur'an and the traditions of the Prophet and advanced intellectual reasons to the effect that the love of the Prophet's family-members was obligatory, and that it was essential to follow them and to hold fast to their rope; that it was obligatory to keep aloof from their enemies.

They wrote many books about their superiority and virtues. But none of these books or arguments proved as effective in strengthening and spreading the Shi'a faith as did the policy of Mu'awiya and his Umayyad successors. Surely the persecution carried out by the Umayyads was more effective than a thousand and one books or than a thousand and one proofs in proving the status of 'Ali and confirming his divine right to the Caliphate<sup>1</sup>. “ Dr. Taha Husain says: “So far as propagating beliefs and attracting people to follow them is concerned, nothing is more effective than persecution.

It creates sympathy for those who undergo suffering, and are engulfed by tragedies, and who are subjected to pressure by the ruler. To the same degree it creates revulsion against this ruler who resorts

to injustice, carries his tyrannies to the furthest limit and overburdens the population with hardships. For this reason, the Shi'a cause became great during the last decade of Mu'awiya's reign, and their call spread –and what a spread it was–in the eastern Islamic countries and southern Arabia. And by the time Mu'awiya had died, many people, and especially the general public in Iraq, believed that hate of Umayyads and love of the *Ahl al Bayt* was their religion<sup>2</sup>. Wellhausen writes: “All the people of Iraq during Mu'awiya's reign, and especially the Kufites were Shi'i and this was not only among individuals but among whole tribes and chiefs of the tribes<sup>3</sup>.”

Arabia, Iraq and Khorasan, together with the Yemen and Bahrain were in turmoil; hatred of the Umayyads became an established factor of the body politic, and to the same degree people gravitated towards the descendants of 'Ali. Several factors led to this result:

1. They were the *Ahl al-Bayt*; Allah had chosen that house for His Prophethood; it was appropriate that the people should choose them for their guidance.
2. They were the first to rise against the Umayyads and their tyrannies; they were the first to speak for the oppressed masses and to sacrifice their lives for this cause.
3. Not only the *Ahl al-Bayt*, but even their Shi'is, right from the beginning of Umayyad rule, worked openly and secretly against those tyrants; and they faced all the consequences: massacres, banishments, imprisonments, crucifixions, and all types of torture<sup>4</sup>.

Ibn al-Athir confirms that when the 'Abbasids joined this campaign towards the end, “they were using the slogan that they wanted to avenge the murders of Husayn, Zayd and Yahya.”<sup>5</sup>

Wellhausen writes: “The 'Abbasids tried their utmost to keep secret from the people their intention that they wanted to replace the descendants of Fatima; instead, they pretended that they were doing whatever they were doing for the sake of the Fatimids. They rose in Khorasan and other places claiming that they wanted to avenge the martyrs of the children of Fatima<sup>6</sup>.”

“The 'Abbasids rose in the name of the 'Alawites, and on the shoulders of their Shi'is. (After the success) they changed their attitude towards them, and their oppression of the Shi'is increased in magnitude and intensity<sup>7</sup>.”

Muhammad Ahmad al-Buraq says: “The call really was for the 'Alawites, because the Khurasanis were attached to the descendants of 'Ali, not to the descendants of Abbas. That is why as Saffah and his successors always kept their eyes open and tried to prevent Shi'ism from spreading further in Khorasan

They encouraged the poets to praise them (i.e., the 'Abbasids) and gave them rewards, and those poets used to cast aspersions against the descendants of 'Ali<sup>8</sup>.”

“This led the 'Abbasid 'caliphs' to renounce the faith of *Ahl al-Bayt* (which they had followed up to the beginning of their period of rule) and accept Sunnism, because they were afraid that if Shi'ism spread,

the rule would go to the 'Alawites. Thus the 'Abbasids faithfully followed the Umayyads in policy, belief and practice<sup>9</sup>.”

Be that as it may, the Umayyads in their last days and the 'Abbasids in their first days could not give much attention to the Shi'is. Thus the fifth Imam started teaching his faith in Madina openly. People came to him from far and wide to learn from him explanations of the Qur'an, the traditions, rules of the *sharia*, theology, etc. It was not a formal *madrasa* (university, school); yet, for want of a better word, we shall call it the *madrasa* of the Imam. The fifth Imam Muhammad Al-Baqir (95–114/712–732) died before the *madrasa* had reached its point of perfection, but his son, the sixth Imam, Ja'far As-Sadiq developed it to such an extent that the number of his disciples exceeded four thousand.

This continued up to 132/750 when the 'Abbasids came to power. Although as-Saffah, the first 'Abbasid caliph, ruled for only four years, and that time was mostly taken up in consolidating his power, he found time to call the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq to his capital, Hira, where he was held incommunicado. One man who wanted to see him had to disguise himself as a hawker of cucumber to reach the Imam<sup>10</sup>.<sup>1</sup> But later he came back to Madina.

Then came al-Mansur (135/754–775) whose only aim in life, it seems, was to kill every descendant of 'Ali. The Shi'is in general, and the 'Alawites in particular, were persecuted more brutally than they were during the reign of the Umayyads. He put even more hindrance in the way of the Imam. “He forbade the people to go to the Imam, and forbade the Imam to sit (outside) to receive the people, and put the utmost pressure on him. So much so that if a problem appeared in a Shi'is life concerning, for example, marriage, divorce or some other matter, and he had no knowledge of the rule of the *sharia* about it, he could not reach the Imam, and, as a result, the man and the wife had to separate<sup>11</sup>. “

After a long period, al-Mansur allowed the Imam to benefit the people with his divine knowledge<sup>12</sup>, but there were always spies to report his words and answers. Therefore, the Imam had to be cautious in his discourses. In short, the period of freedom had gone, so far as the Shi'is were concerned.

Anyhow, this period coincided with the movement of free thinking which had started in the Muslim world. Arabs came in contact with the older civilizations of Iran, Syria and Egypt, and became acquainted with Zoroastrian and Manichean beliefs and Greek philosophy. Some books had already been translated from Greek and other languages. Many scholars adopted strange beliefs and foreign ideas and spread them among the common people.

One finds a bewildering plethora of new sects mushrooming. Atheism was openly advocated even in the great mosque of the Ka'ba; the Murji'ites, by saying that faith is not affected by deeds, supported the tyrannies of the rulers; the “exaggerators” (*ghulat*) claimed divinity for this or that human being (even the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq was believed to be God by Abul Khattab).

The Kharijites declared that all Muslims who were opposed to them were infidels; The *sufis* adopted some ideas from Christian monks and Hindu ascetics, and led people away from Islamic monotheism;

the traditionalists flooded the Muslim world with forged traditions. In short, there was a deluge of anti-Islamic ideals and ideas which inundated true Islam. Amidst this all, these two Imams guided to the truth.

These Imams and their faithful disciples were the first to see this danger, and they were ready to fight it with their logical evidence. They defended the true faith, repulsed its enemies, and raised the standards of the *shari'a*. They launched an unremitting *jihad* (academic, of course) against the *ghulat* and showed them in their true colours. They argued with the Muttazilites, the Murji'ites, and the Kharijites in public and proved the weakness of their standpoints. They exposed the *sufis* and refuted their arguments. They corrected what was wrong in the theological ideas of many Muslim scholars, and showed them where they had gone wrong in jurisprudence<sup>13</sup>.

As we have explained above, the major part of this work was done by the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq. As a result of his untiring defence of Islam, the Muslim world came to see in him the only hope for the salvation of Islam. Eyes turned towards him, thinkers accepted the Imam as their "great-teacher"; people used to come into his presence with pen and paper ready, and his words were recorded on the spot.

Thousands of such notebooks were filled, and the words of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq attained the same prestige as those of the Messenger of God. Not only the Shi'is, Sunnis, Mu'tazilites and atheists, but also the Hindus and Christians came to him and benefited from his discourses. The Sunni Imam, Malik b. Anas, the founder of the Maliki school of law, said: "No eye ever saw, no ear ever heard, and no heart ever imagined anyone superior to Ja'far b. Muhammad in virtue, knowledge, worship and piety<sup>14</sup>.

Ibn Shahr ashub writes: "So much knowledge has been narrated from as-Sadiq that has never been narrated from anyone else; and the scholars of traditions have collected the names of his trustworthy narrators of various beliefs and views, and they were four thousand men." Abu Na'im writes in *Hilyatu l-Awliya*: "Malik b. Anas, Shutba b. Hajjaj, Sufyan at-Thawri, Ibn Jarir, 'Abdullah b. 'Amr, Rawh, b. Qasim, Sufyan b. 'Uyayna, Sulayman b. Bilal, Isma'il b. Ja'far, Hakim b. Isma'il, 'Abdu l-'Aziz b. Mukhtar, Wuhayb b. Khalid, Ibrahim b. Tahman, among others ..., narrated from Ja'far as-Sadiq, peace be upon him<sup>15</sup>."

Quoting from others, Ibn Shahr 'ashub has added the names of the Sunni Imams Malik, ash-Shat and Ahmad b. Hanbal, and al-Hasan b. as-Salih, Abu Ayyub as-Sajistani and 'Umar b. Dinar<sup>16</sup>.

Hasan b. Ziyad says that Imam Abu Hanifa (founder of the Hanafi school of Sunni law) was asked about the most learned man he had seen. He replied: "Ja'far b. Muhammad<sup>17</sup>."

Nuh b. Darraj asked Ibn Abi Layla: "Would you leave (i.e. change) an opinion you have expressed or a judgment you have delivered for any other person's words?" He said: "No. Except one man." Nuh asked: "And who is he?" He said: "Ja'far b. Muhammad<sup>18</sup>."

The above is only a partial list of Sunni scholars and Imams who came to the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq and benefited from his teachings. Add to it the names of the *sufis*, atheists, Hindus and Kharijites who

flocked to his *madrasa*, and one can appreciate what a treasure of knowledge was given to people by the Imam.

When others benefitted so much, how much more must have been gathered by the Shi'is. One of his well-known disciples, Aban b. Taghlib, narrated from him thirty thousand traditions. Hasan b. Ali al-Washsha' said: "I found in the mosque of Kufa nine hundred *shaykhs*, every one of them saying 'Ja'far b. Muhammad told me ...<sup>19</sup>"

In *al-Munjid* we find: "His (Ja'far as-Sadiq's) *madrasa* was the continuation of his father's (al-Baqir's) *madrasa*, and was extremely successful in spreading Islamic culture; the number of its students in Madina was at least 4,000, and they came from all Muslim countries. There was a large branch-school in Kufa. One of the greatest achievements of as-Sadiq was his call to write and edit; before that little writing was done. The number of the books written by his students was at least four hundred by four hundred writers<sup>20</sup>."

The Shaykh Muhammad Husayn al-Muzaffar writes: "The best days for the Shi'is were the transition period, the last years of the Umayyads and the early years of the Abbasids ... The Shi'is took advantage of this breathing space to drink from the stream of the knowledge of the Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq; they traveled to him to receive from him the commands of religion and its reality. His disciples narrated from him in every branch of knowledge, as is seen in the Shi'is books. His disciples were not only from the Shi'a community, but all the sects narrated from him, as is clearly mentioned in the books of, *hadith* and *rijal*.

Ibn 'Uqdah, the Shaykh at-Tusi and the Muhaqqiq enumerated his narrators, and the total came to four thousand<sup>21</sup>."

This open teaching and unrestricted preaching increased the number of the Shi'is in every region throughout the Muslim world. It is not possible to give a list of well-known Shi'is scholars and missionaries of that time, as it would be too lengthy. The teachings and explanations of the Imams removed the veils of ambiguity from the Shi'i faith and showed its teachings in clear terms.

Theology, explanation of the Qur'an, morality, jurisprudence, in short every branch of religious knowledge, was explained in a clear perspective. The faith had not changed an iota, nor the Qur'anic explanations, nor the traditions; but the discussions and arguments with the newly-appeared sects clarified many fine points and gave Shi'i theology its distinct shape. Also, Shi'i *fiqh* (law) was so developed at this time that people started calling it the Ja'fari school of law. The Shaykh Mustafa 'Abdur Razzaq of al-Azhar University says: "The eagerness to codify law came to the Shi'is earlier than to other Muslims<sup>22</sup>."

Some of the factors which helped in this development were:

1. The intellectual advancement of the Muslims;

2. The fortuitousness of the transitional period between the Umayyads and the 'Abbasids;
3. The gatherings of thousands of eager disciples.

Such favourable factors never came together before or after this period, and that is why other Imams could not do as much, although all of them possessed the same divine knowledge.

That knowledge was not confined to religious subjects only, and we shall mention in the next part of this article two examples of the contributions of this *madrassa* to other branches of knowledge.

- [1.](#) Muhammad Jawad al Mughniya, *ash Shia wal Hakimun*, al Maktab al Ahliya, Beirut, 1st edition 1961, p. 75
- [2.](#) Taha Husain, *Ali wa Banuh* as quoted in *ash Shia*, p. 80
- [3.](#) J. Wellhausen, *al Khawarij wa shia* (trans into Arabic of his *The Kharijites and the Shi'ites* ed. 1985 p. 499) quoted by M. J. al Mughniya in his *ash Shia wat Tashayyu*, Maktaba al Madrasa wa Dar al Kitab al Libnani, Beirut, note 8 p. 68
- [4.](#) M. J. al Mughniya, *as shia wat Tashayyu*, pp. 134–5
- [5.](#) Ibn al Athir, *al Kamil fi t Tarikh*, Beirut, 1975, vol. 4 pp 330–2
- [6.](#) J. Wellhausen, *Tarikh ad Dawlati l Arabiya* (trans into Arabic of his *History of the Arabs*), p. 489, quoted by M. J. al Mughniya in his *ash Shia wa l Hakimun*, p. 135
- [7.](#) M. J. al Mughniya, *op cit* pp 135–6
- [8.](#) Muhammad Ahmad al Buraq, *Abu l Abbas as Saffah*, as quoted in *ash Shia wal Hakimun*, p. 134
- [9.](#) M. J. al Mughniya, *op cit* p. 139
- [10.](#) Muhammad Baqir al Majlisi, *Bihar al Anwar*, new edition, Tehran, 1385 A.H, vol. 47, p. 171 quoting Qutb al Din ar Rawandi, *al Kharaj wa l Jaraih*, p. 234
- [11.](#) Ibn Shahr ashub, *Manaqib*, vol. 4 al Matba al Alimiya, Qum, p. 238
- [12.](#) *ibid*, many similar reports are given in Fadl b. Hasan at Tabarsi, *al Ihtijaj*, and al Majlisi, *op cit*
- [13.](#) *ibid*
- [14.](#) Ibn Hajar al Asqalani, *Tadhib al Tadhib*, Hyderabad, 1325 A.H, vol. 2, p. 104
- [15.](#) Ibn Shahr ashub, *Manaqab*, vol. 4 p 247–8
- [16.](#) Ibn Shahr ashub, *op cit*, p. 248
- [17.](#) *ibid*, p. 254
- [18.](#) *ibid*, p. 249
- [19.](#) Muhsin al Amin, *Ayan ash Shia*, vol. 4 Part II, *Mathah al Imaf*, Ebirut, ed. 1380/1920
- [20.](#) *Al Munjid fi l Alam*, Beirut (21st ed.) 1973
- [21.](#) Muhammad Husayn al Muzaffar, *Tarikh ash Shia*, Dar az Zahra, Beirut, 3rd edition 1402/1982 pp. 53, 55
- [22.](#) M. Abdur Razzaq, *Tahmid li Tarikh al Falsafat al Islamiy*, Cairo, 1959, p. 202

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