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Introduction

Numerous women of the Rashidun period (the period of the rightly guided caliphs) have important stature in the primary Arabic sources of Islamic thought. The women who figure prominently in these sources tend to have either been married to the prophet Muhammad or related biologically to him. These women include Khadijah bint al-Khuwaylid (first wife of Muhammad, d. circa 619 C.E.), ‘Aishah bint Abi Bakr (teenage wife of Muhammad in Madina and daughter of Abu Bakr, d.678 C.E.), Hafsa bint ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (wife of Muhammad and the daughter of Umar, d. 666 C.E.), Umm Salamah (wife of Muhammad, d.680 C.E.), Mariya the Copt (slave wife of Muhammad, d. 671 or 681 C.E.) and lastly Fatimah, the daughter of Muhammad (d.632 C.E.).¹

Amongst these prominent early Muslim women, ‘Aishah and Fatimah have been given extraordinary attention in the sources. One reason for this is that both of these women have been the focus of immense sectarian strife and debate amongst scholars. The figure of ‘Aishah as a motif of contention has been dealt with extensively by scholars such as Denise Spellberg². Little work, however, exists on the contentious and divisive figure of Fatimah. Notwithstanding, there are two notable studies on Fatimah. The first is Mahmoud Ayoub’s classic *Redemptive Suffering*, in which he briefly treats the suffering of Fatimah on the basis of a limited number of later Shiite sources, and largely in a descriptive manner. The second is a brief book chapter dealing with Fatimah in Sunnite and Shiite sources by Verena Klemm which is largely limited to analysis of one or two excerpts from the works of the proto-Sunnite prophetic biographer and traditionist, Muhammad ibn Sa’d (d.230/845) and the Twelver Shiite traditionist (muhaddith), al-Shaykh al-Saduq (d.381/991). Lastly, Christopher Clohessy’s recent monograph, *Fatimah, Daughter of Muhammad*, devotes a chapter to Fatimah’s suffering, but lacks any substantial contextual or literary analysis.

It is the intention of this study to examine the figure of Fatimah as a motif of contention and suffering. This will be accomplished through an analysis of a representative sample of early Islamic sources in which Fatimah became a figure of profound sectarian strife due to her conflict with the revered Prophetic companions Abu Bakr (d.634 C.E.), ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (d.644 C.E.) and, according to some sources, much of the early Muslim community of Madina following the death of her father the Prophet Muhammad

in 632 C.E. Mainstream Sunni tradition describes Fatimah as a pious, exemplary Muslim woman, in a manner similar to the description of Muhammad's wives. At the same time, Fatimah was for many Shiites not only a pious woman, but one of the *ma'sumun* (those immune from sin), in addition to being a physiologically exceptional female of heavenly substance not subject to the impurity (*najasah*) of menstrual cycles. This basic discrepancy (crystallized between the 3–4th/9– 10th centuries) between Sunni and Shiite traditional perceptions of Fatimah's spiritual and existential being cannot be overstated. For Shi'is Fatimah is the universal model of womanhood and an existentially exceptional being, while for Sunnis she is simply one renowned female among others.

At this juncture, I must pause to note that I often use the term "proto-Sunni" or "proto-Shiite" to express my discomfort with identifying a particular compilation, tradition, or author as being explicitly Sunni or Shiite despite lack of information regarding their precise religious tendencies. Furthermore, some sources consulted such as Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat* predate the crystallization of Sunnism; although they do in hindsight appear to be very Sunni-friendly and could thus be correctly characterized as a part of the Sunni-influenced historical tradition or what would become full-fledged Sunnism by the fourth century A.H (tenth century C.E.)³.

In any case, in view of the very different views of Fatimah described above, any conflict between her and prominent *ashab* (companions) of Muhammad would be a potential subject of Shiite–Sunni polemics. The conflict also caused Sunni scholars who refused to judge between Fatimah and the early companions to engage in apologetics and other negotiation, for instance by characterizing the conflict as a misunderstanding in an effort to save the reputation of all parties concerned. This study aims to examine how diverse intellectual and sectarian persuasions shaped the Islamic literature in which the Fatimah–Rashidun conflict was presented, resulting in a spectrum of responses ranging from Sunni apologetics to Shiite malediction of the first two caliphs, which continues well into the contemporary period⁴. Therefore, while the subject of this study is an examination of Fatimah as a motif of contention and suffering, my intention is not to simply trace and reproduce this image through presenting English translations of texts, as has been largely done in the past, but to delineate the various sectarian and intellectual currents at work which constructed and gave shape to this motif in the sources.

It is also my objective to demonstrate the fluidity and rich heterogeneity of the ways the conflict has been presented. Consequently, I shall not treat the various accounts as historical truths, but rather reflections of an eclectic Muslim religious imagination in which various myths are produced, interpreted and contested within the milieu of Islamic intellectual history⁵.

I focus principally on two aspects of the image of Fatimah and controversy related to her as case studies: the saga of her dispute with the newly-elected caliph, Abu Bakr, over her claim to the garden of Fadak and her father's estate; and the presentations, carefully crafted by all sides, of Fatimah's altercation with Abu Bakr and Umar following the incident of the Saqifah or "Portico" in which Abu Bakr rather than Ali was chosen first caliph after the death of the Prophet. Treated thus, the Fatimah motif

reveals competing soteriologies and visions of the past.

Outline And Sources

The first chapter deals with the highly contentious figure of Fatimah in the Muslim historical sources. John Walbridge describes the historical works originating in the second to third centuries of the Islamic era (8–9th century C.E.) as comprising “the largest sustained biographical enterprise in human history.⁶” Fatimah is included in this “enterprise” of historical data collection and writing (tarikh) due to her relation to the Prophet and the political role she played in the crisis of succession after Muhammad. This political role unfolded in the “public eye” before the Muslim community, prompting the early Muslim historians or reporters to record it.

I say “reporters” because the material of the Islamic histories begins or is represented as beginning in oral reports in which each report is attributed to a specific authority, and these authorities often had competing views, many of which were preserved in the major chronicles such as the universal history compiled by al-Tabari. These various reporters included mention of Fatimah in their accounts⁷. The first chapter will explore how Muslims historians have constructed an image of Fatimah as historians while grappling with their proto-Sunni or moderate Shiite dispositions.

Laura Veccia Vaglieri in her Encyclopedia of Islam entry describes Fatimah as a figure of minimal importance in Islamic history; according to Veccia Vaglieri, her biographical details and life exist on the fringes of the historical sources. Put differently, the various reports and historical anecdotes involving Fatimah pale in comparison to the legendary figure of ‘Aishah, for the primary reason that Fatimah, at least in Veccia Vaglieri’s estimation, played little or no role in the major events of Islamic history aside from minor instances to be found in the biography of the Prophet Muhammad and a minimal function in the events following Muhammad’s death. This supposed ‘minimal’ role may also be due to Fatimah’s unexpected death in her late teens or early twenties just weeks following the death of Muhammad in 10. A.H./632 C.E. Historians differ even over Fatimah’s date of birth. For instance, al-Tabari places her birth in the year 605 C.E., five years prior to the first revelations, while other historians claim she was born in the year 611 or 615, following Muhammad’s first revelation⁸. Furthermore, there is disagreement as to where Fatimah fits in the birth sequence of Muhammad’s four daughters or if any other siblings survived her father’s death⁹.

Despite the perception of Veccia Vaglieri and others that Fatimah stands on the ‘periphery’ of the historical sources, it is agreed that the following are the three highlights in her life:

- 1) Her marriage to Ali and the circumstances surrounding it.
- 2) Her presence at the mubahalah (mutual malediction) in which Muhammad faced off with the Christians of Najran, as alluded to in Qur’an 3:64.

3) Her confrontation with Abu Bakr and Umar following the death of Muhammad.

It is this third and final flashpoint in the historical career of Fatimah with which Chapter One is concerned. It will be demonstrated that the image of Fatimah crafted and presented by the formative historians is that of a divisive and polarizing female figure at the very onset of a formative political landscape in the post-Muhammadan era. Thus, contrary to Veccia Vaglieri's assessment of Fatimah as being of little note in Islamic history, we see that she is, in fact, of great importance in marking a crucial sectarian divide, and we can learn much about that development through the roles she is made to play and the ways in which her image is developed. For instance, we see that proto-Sunni historians were compelled to negotiate between respect for the daughter of the Prophet and reverence for Abu Bakr and Umar, resulting in far from idealized portrayals of the two caliphs.

Also, in the historical sources Fatimah is gendered as an emotionally unstable and weak woman who is unable to contend with Abu Bakr's 'superior' wisdom and intellectual prowess. Gender themes are clearly present in proto-Sunni historical sources such as Ibn Sa'd's *Tabaqat* which depicts Fatimah as being unable to convince Abu Bakr of the validity of her claim to the land of Fadak which she believed had been left as an inheritance to her by her father. The overarching proto-Sunni image of Fatimah in her conflict with the Rashidun is that of an ordinary woman who is constantly being reminded of Islamic norms by the elder and intellectually superior male, Abu Bakr.

The second chapter is the lengthiest of this dissertation. In this section, I focus on the Shiite hadith tradition. The voluminous literature of the hadith is the reflection of a Shiite cultural memory which was finally set down in the form of sacred statements believed to have originated from the Imams. Shiite hadith material is highly dogmatic and doctrinal in tone, so much so that in the view of Amir Moezzi, anyone accustomed to Sunni hadith literature would find themselves "disoriented" by it¹⁰. In Moezzi's view as well as my own, "disorientation" of the uninitiated is precisely what gives Shi'ism (both Twelver and Isma'ili) its distinctive flair, through a highly esoteric, electionist and one has to say bumptious dogmatic tenor vis-à-vis the "general and ordinary body" (al-'ammah) of Muslims who are non-Shiites¹¹. In contrast to the "public eye" of the historical sources utilized in Chapter One, Shiite hadith is concerned with the "private eye" in which scathing criticisms and condemnations of Muhammad's companions were produced with a very specific sectarian audience in mind. As a result, the Shiite presentation of the F-R conflict must be read in the context of the theology of the Imamate and Shiite identity as it developed in the 2-3/8-9th centuries.

The Shiite reports do not attempt to rehabilitate both parties in the manner of Sunnism or proto-Sunnism. Rather, they present a radically dualistic scenario which depicts Abu Bakr and his supporters as cowards and villains opposite a righteous and charismatic Fatimah. Also, in direct contrast to the proto-Sunni historical sources, Shiite tradition genders Fatimah as a highly intelligent, eloquent woman with a charismatic presence to which Abu Bakr is forced to yield. The commanding presence of Fatimah is especially emphasized in her scathing speech to Abu Bakr and the residents of Madinah. In stark

opposition to the proto-Sunni sources, according to Shiite tradition, Abu Bakr eventually succumbs to Fatimah and acquiesces to her demands regarding her father's estate. The Shiite tradition presents Fatimah as a courageous woman standing against the unrighteous majority even at the cost of her life. Fatimah occupies a paramount role in the development of an internal and "private" Shiite cultural memory of disenfranchisement and suffering.

- [1.](#) This list is by no means exhaustive but is a sample of women who figure prominently in the Islamic sources. Bint = "the daughter of".
- [2.](#) D.A. Spellberg, *Politics, Gender, and the Islamic Past: The legacy of 'Aishah bint Abi Bakr* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).
- [3.](#) The development of Sunnism and Shi'ism as sectarian movements has been discussed at length by Montgomery Watt. See: Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1998), 251–315.
- [4.](#) Abu Bakr and Umar are considered by Sunnites to be the first two of the four "rightly-guided" caliphs following the death of Muhammad. In this study, I employ the term Fatimah-Rashidun or "F-R" conflict to refer to Abu Bakr and Umar, and not the third and fourth caliphs, Uthman and Ali. Uthman ruled only after the death of Fatimah, and Ali, of course, had earlier been Fatimah's husband and is regarded as the first Imam of the Shiites.
- [5.](#) I am using the term myth as reflective of my etic or 'outsider's' approach to the primary Arabic-Islamic texts consulted in this dissertation. Furthermore, by describing the representations of Fatimah as myth I am merely indicating that these are stories which are understood by 'insiders' or 'believers' to constitute sacred realities which (to borrow an expression from Bronislaw Malinowski) at times form the "dogmatic backbone" of Shiite devotional life. See: Bronislaw Malinowski, "Myth in Primitive Psychology" in *A Reader in the Anthropology of Religion* ed. Micheal Lambek 2nd ed. (Malden: Blackwell Publications, 2008), 170.
- [6.](#) John Walbridge, *God and Logic in Islam the Caliphate of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 42.
- [7.](#) Maria Dakake's work has been key for me here; see *The Charismatic Community* (New York: SUNY Press, 2007), 4.
- [8.](#) Christopher Paul Clohessy, agreeing with Veccia Vaglieri, states that 605 C.E. seems to be the commonly accepted date of birth amongst the early historians Fatimah, Daughter of Muhammad (New Jersey: Georgia Press, 2009), 12–20. Also see L. Veccia Vaglieri, "Fatimah," Vaglieri, *Encyclopedia of Islam*. 2nd Ed. Brill Online, 2012. For instance, Ibn Sa'd states the following: "She (Khadija) gave birth to her and [at the same time] the Quraysh were rebuilding the house (the Ka'ba)", which was five years prior to the Muhammad's prophethood. See: Muhammad ibn Sa'd, *al-Tabaqat al-kubra* ed. Muhammad ibn Qari al-'Ata (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyah, 1997), 8:16.
- [9.](#) Vaglieri, *Encyclopedia of Islam*. 2nd Ed. Brill Online, 2012.
- [10.](#) Amir Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, tr. David Streight (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994), 23.
- [11.](#) See: Moezzi, 21–24.

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