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Lesson 3: "Shi'ah" in the Lexicon and the Qur'an

The word "Shi'ah" in the lexicon is derived from the root-word **شيع** {*shaya'a*} which means escorting {*mushayi'ah*}, victory and bravery {*shuja'ah*}.1 It is equally applied to the followers and supporters as it is usually applied to the followers and supporters of 'Ali ('*a*).2 As Azhari has said, "Shi'ah refers to a group that loves the progeny {*'itrah*} and descendants of the Prophet (S)."3

Ibn al-Khaldun says:

Be aware that 'Shi'ah' in the lexicon means 'followers' and 'supporters', and in the parlance of the past and present jurists {*fiqh*} and scholastic theologians {*mutakallimun*}, it is applied to the followers of 'Ali and his descendants.4

But Shahristani limits the definitional scope of the word 'Shi'ah', saying:

'Shi'ah' is referring to those who follow 'Ali alone and believe in his Imamate {*imamah*} and caliphate {*khilafah*} to be based on revelation {*nass*}, and they say: 'Imamate shall not bypass him except {that it is done} through injustice {*zulm*}'.5

There are also many cases in the Qur'an in which "Shi'ah" connotes "followers" and "supporters" such as:

﴿ وَإِنَّ مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ لإِبْرَاهِيمَ ﴾

"Indeed Abraham was among his followers {shi'ah}"6

and the verse,

﴿ فَاسْتَغَاثَهُ الَّذِي مِنْ شِيعَتِهِ عَلَى الَّذِي مِنْ عَدُوِّهِ ﴾

"The one who was from his (Moses') followers {shi'ah} sought his help against him who was from his enemies."[7]

The word "Shi'ah" has also been mentioned in the Prophetic traditions to mean "followers and friends of 'Ali (*'a*)".[8]

"Shi'ah" in the Shi'ah references does not have more than one meaning and conception and that is belief in the succession of 'Ali (*'a*) and his eleven descendants in which no change has ever taken place since the demise of the Prophet (S) up to the minor occultation {*ghaybah as-sughra*}. Just as the Shi'ah of the second half of the third century *hijri* believed in all the twelve Imams (*'a*), the pioneering Shi'ah among the Companions of the Prophet (S) also believed in this affair because they had been informed of the names of these Imams from the Prophetic traditions.[9]

Although many of the Shi'ah had no access to these traditions due to the atmosphere of strangulation maintained by the tyrant rulers, what was obligatory (for them) was to recognize the Imam of their respective times. As the Holy Prophet (S) said, "He who will die without recognizing the Imam of his time dies in a state of ignorance {*jahiliyyah*}."[10]

As such, we can see that when Imam as-Sadiq (*'a*) attained martyrdom, Zurarah who was an old man sent his son, 'Ubayd, to inquire about the successor of Imam as-Sadiq (*'a*). But before 'Ubayd was able to return to Kufah, Zurarah, who was about to die, took hold of a copy of the Qur'an and said: "O God! Be my witness that I testify to the Imamate {*imamah*} of the one who has been designated in this Qur'an."[11]

Of course, with the passage of time, the meaning and concept of *Shi'ah* assumes an explicit form and its scope is determined. Thus, the infallible Imams (*'a*) have regarded those who are identified with the false sects and faiths as outside Shi'ah circles, as Shaykh at-Tusi narrates from Hamran ibn A'in:

I asked Imam al-Baqir (*'a*): "Am I really among your Shi'ah?" The Imam (*'a*) replied: "Yes, you are among our Shi'ah in this world and in the hereafter, and the names of the Shi'ah and their fathers are written for us. Why, are there those who turn their back to us?" I replied: "May I be your ransom! Is it possible for somebody to be your Shi'ah and to have knowledge of your being in truth, and then to turn his back from you?" The Imam (*'a*) said: "Yes, O Hamran! You will not perceive them."

Hamzah az-Zayyat, who is one of the narrators of this *hadith*, thus says:

Concerning this *hadith* we made a discussion and we were not able to understand the purport of the Imam (*'a*). As such, I wrote a letter to Imam ar-Rida (*'a*) and I asked him (*'a*) (about this). The Imam (*'a*) said: "Imam as-Sadiq (*'a*) was referring to the Waqifiyyah (a deviant sect)."[12]

It is for this reason that in the parlance of the Shi'ah *rijal* writers, the title *Shi'ah* is only applied to the Shi'ah believing in the twelve Imams (*'a*) and in the language of the jurists {*fuqaha*}, they are sometimes

described as “our companions” {*ashabuna*} or “our Imami companions” {*ashabuna al-imamiyyah*}.

And those who had inclined toward the deviant sects and drifted away from the course of Shi‘ism have described with such labels as Fathi, Waqifi, Nawusi, etc. and if ever the names of some of them are mentioned in the Shi‘ah books on *rijal*, the reason is that they had narrated these traditions prior to their deviation, just as the names of a number of Sunni narrators who have narrated from the infallible Imams (*‘a*) have been mentioned in these books.

The Sunni scholars and *rijal* writers, however, have used the word *Shi‘ah* in broader sense and they have applied it to all the sects that have separated from the body of Shi‘ism and even to the *ghulat* as well.

In addition, they also refer to those who love and admire the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*‘a*) as “Shi‘ah”. This is while some of these people do not have any sort of belief in the infallibility {*‘ismah*} and Imamate {*imamah*} of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (*‘a*), such as Sufyan ath-Thawri, a rector {*mufti*} in Iraq who issued edicts {*fatawa*} based on the Ahl as-Sunnah, but Ibn al-Qutaybah has enlisted him along with the Shi‘ah.[13] Regarding ash-Shafi‘i, who is the founder of one of the four Sunni schools of thought {*madhahib*}, Ibn Nadim thus says:

كَانَ الشَّافِعِي شَدِيْداً في التَّشَيُّع.

“Ash-Shafi‘i had extreme Shi‘ism {*tashayyu‘*}.”[14]

Of course, during the second and third centuries *hijri*, besides the Shi‘ah Imami, the Zaydis constituted the greatest number of Shi‘ah. They were “Shi‘ah” more in the political sense than in ideology because, in terms of jurisprudence {*fiqh*}, they were not followers of the Ja‘fari *fiqh*; rather they were followers of the Hanafi *fiqh*.[15]

From the viewpoint of the ideological principles also, as narrated by Shahristani, “For sometime, Zayd was a student of Wasil ibn ‘Ata’, the founder of the Mu‘tazilah (Mu‘tazilite) *madhhab* and has learned from him the principles of the Mu‘tazilah *madhhab*.”

Therefore, the Zaydis are Mu‘tazilites in principles {*usul*}. It is for this reason that they used to regard as permissible {*jayiz*} the Imamate {*imamah*} of a deserving person {*mafdhul*} in the existence of the more deserving person {*afdhal*} and in that they do not disrespect the two sheikhs {*shaykhayn*} (Abubakr and ‘Umar).[16] And in terms of beliefs, they are closer to the Ahl as-Sunnah, as Ibn al-Qutaybah thus says: “Among the *rafidhi* (Shi‘ah) sects, the Zaydis have the least extremism {*ghulu*}.”[17]

It was for this reason that the uprising of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah—one of the Zaydi leaders—was praised by some jurists {*fuqaha*} of the Ahl as-Sunnah, and as narrated by Waqidi, Abubakr ibn Sirah,[18] Ibn ‘Ajlan,[19] and ‘Abd Allah ibn Ja‘far[20]—who were among the great *hadith* scholars {*muhaddithun*} of

the Medina school {*maktab*} and from whom Waqidi himself has narrated *hadith*—were involved in the uprising of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah. Also, Shahristani says: "Abu Hanifah was among the followers of Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah."[21]

The Mu'tazilites of Basrah also agreed with the uprising of Muhammad and based on Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani's narration, "A group of the Mu'tazilites in Basrah such as Wasil ibn 'Ata' and 'Amru ibn 'Ubayd have paid allegiance to him."[22]

As such, the Zaydis can be regarded as Shi'ah only from the political viewpoint although they believe in the superiority of the descendants of Fatimah (*'a*).

Lesson 3: Summary

Shi'ah, according to the lexicon, refers to the followers and supporters of 'Ali (*'a*). In the Shi'ah references, "Shi'ah" does not have more than one meaning and that is belief in the succession of 'Ali (*'a*) and his eleven descendants.

The infallible Imams used to consider those who were identified with the deviant sects as outside the circle of Shi'ism, but the Sunni scholars and *rijal* writers have used the word *Shi'ah* in broader sense and they have applied it to all the sects that have separated from the body of Shi'ism as well as to the admirers of the descendants of the Prophet (S). Of course, during the second and third centuries *hijri*, next to the Shi'ah Imami, the Zaydis had been regarded by them to have constituted the greatest number of Shi'ah.

Lesson 3: Questions

1. In the lexicon, what does the word "Shi'ah" mean? Explain.

2. What is the meaning and connotation of the word "Shi'ah" in the Shi'ah references?

3. Were those who were identified with the deviant sects regarded as "Shi'ah" by the infallible Imams (*'a*)? Explain.

4. How the Sunni scholars have been defining the word "Shi'ah"?

5. Which of the sects is more akin to the Shi'ah in the political perspective? Why?

1. For example, this poem:
والخزرجی قلبه مشیع لیس من الامر الجلیل یفزع
Indeed, the Khazraji man has a brave heart and is not afraid of performing a great task.
Al-Khalil ibn Ahmad al-Farahidi, Tartib Kitab al-'Ayn (Tehran: Instisharat-e Asweh, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 960.
2. Firuz-Abadi, Qamus al-Lughah (Lithography), p. 332.
3. Abu Faydh as-Sayyid Murtada al-Husayni al-Wasiti az-Zaydi al-Hanafi, Taj al-'Arus, vol. 11, p. 257.
4. 'Abd ar-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn al-Khaldun, Al-Muqaddimah (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, 1408 AH), p.

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5. Shahristani, Kitab al-Milal wa'n-Nihal (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1364 AHS), vol. 1, p. 131.

6. Surah as-Saffat 37:83.

7. Surah al-Qasas 28:15.

8. We shall quote these traditions in the next chapter.

9. Ibn Hajar al-Haythami, one of the Sunni scholars, mentions the hadith on the twelve Imams, and with respect to its authenticity, he claims to have consensus of opinion as it has been narrated through various chains. Then, he embarks on interpreting the hadith quoting contradictory statements from Ahl as-Sunnah scholars and 'ulama', ultimately failing to reach a decisive conclusion. For example, Qadhi 'Iyad al-Yahsubi has said: "Perhaps, it means the twelve caliphs who were rulers during the glorified period of caliphate and grandeur of Islam, i.e. up to Walid ibn Yazid's reign." Others have said: "It refers to the twelve caliphs in truth who shall rule till the Day of Resurrection, some of whose reigns have already passed, such as the Righteous Caliphs {khulafa' ar-rashidun}, Imam al-Hasan, Mu'awiyah, 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr, 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Aziz, and Mahdi al-'Abbas. Two more shall come, one of whom is the Awaited Mahdi {mahdi al-muntazar} from the Ahl al-Bayt ('a)." Some 'ulama' have also interpreted the hadith on the twelve Imams to refer to the twelve Imams, in which after Mahdi ('a), accordingly, six shall come from the descendants of Imam al-Hasan ('a) while the other five shall come from the descendants of Imam al-Husayn ('s). As-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, 2nd edition (Cairo: Maktabah al-Qahirah, 1385 AH), pp. 20-21.

10. Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, 5th printing (Tehran: Dar al-Kutub al-Islamiyyah, 1363 AH), vol. 1, p. 377.

11. Shaykh at-Tusi, Ikhtiyar Ma'rifah ar-Rijal (Qum: Mu'assasah Al al-Bayt Li Ahya' at-Turath, 1404 AH), vol. 1, p. 371.

12. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 763.

13. Ibn al-Qutaybah, Al-Ma'arif, 1st edition (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1410 AH), p. 624.

14. Ibn an-Nadim, Al-Fihrist (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah Li'l-Matbu'at wa'n-Nashr, n.d.), p. 295.

15. Shahristani, Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1364 AHS), vol. 1, p. 143.

16. Ibid., p. 138.

17. Ibn al-Qutaybah, Al-Ma'arif, p. 623.

18. Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, Maqatil at-Talibiyyin, 2nd edition (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1416 AH/1374 AHS), p. 251.

19. Ibid., p. 254.

20. Ibid., p. 256.

21. Shahristani, Al-Milal wa'n-Nihal (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1364 AHS), vol. 1, p. 140.

22. Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, Maqatil at-Talibiyyin, p. 258.

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