

IMAGES OF

Muhammad

Narratives of the Prophet in
Islam Across the Centuries

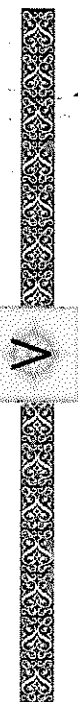
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sized the integrity of the ruler as the sole guarantor of government.² This integrity was the foundation of the Shiite theory of the imamate. But this is not the place to discuss at any length the genesis and evolution of Islam's great schism; let us be content to assert that the nexus of Shiite sensibility was a widespread devotion to 'Ali, cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad, that was further deepened by the tragic death of several of his descendants. This devotion found its earliest expression in grief-stricken poetry wherein devotion shaded into adoration.³ I will turn to this poetry later, but we begin with a sketch of the early building blocks of Shiite biography.

One central point of departure of the Shiite biographical tradition was undoubtedly the Qur'anic verse Qur'an 33:33—there were others—that down the ages served as a theological foundation for the Shiite mood: {God merely wishes to ward off abomination from you, O members of the house [*Ahl al-Bayt*] and purify you, purify you completely.} The Qur'anic context is, at least in some interpretations, an address to the wives of the Prophet. But the phrase *Ahl al-Bayt* was taken by early Shiite speculative thought to mean the immediate family of Muhammad, and especially his daughter Fatima, her husband 'Ali, and their children, al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and their direct descendants. The verse was further interpreted to mean that this family was divinely endowed with sinlessness [*ima*] as a result of God's desire to "purify" them "completely." A semidivine halo was rapidly drawn around various figures of this "Holy Family," a phrase nearest in meaning to *Ahl al-Bayt* in Shiite sensibility. But a semidivine halo will often need to partake of eternity if it is to serve as a cosmological principle and a historical consciousness. This transformation from private devotion to cosmic/historical justification was energized by the concept of "Muhammadan Light" [*Nur Muhammadi*], which goes back to a symbolic reading of Qur'an 24:35, the context here being an ex-



The Light of the World

MUHAMMAD IN SHIITE BIOGRAPHIES

Shiite biographies of Muhammad were fashioned by a certain sensibility, mood, and interpretation of Islam that broadly speaking may be called Shiite to distinguish it from Sunni sensibility, mood, and interpretation. Whatever the complex reasons that incline religions in general to fissure, in the case of Islam one important element that led to the emergence of its two major wings, Sunnism and Shiism, was disagreement over the historical significance of certain episodes in the life of Muhammad and of his earliest successors. In fact and up to the present day, the differences between the two groups' perceptions of 'Ali and his two sons are an example of what a recent writer has called "the persistence, indeed the perils, of memory."¹

From this disagreement sprang further disagreement concerning the role and function of political leadership in the Muslim community. If pressed to suggest a quick and readymade distinction between these two attitudes to leadership, one might argue that whereas the Sunni mood emphasized the unity (*jama'a*) of the community as the highest political value, the Shiite mood empha-

tended parable of the light of God. This concept is crystallized in the tenth century in the celebrated Shiite historian al-Mas'udi (d. 956):

[From 'Ali:] When God was about to create the world, he set up the images of all humanity like fine dust, before He had leveled out the earth or raised the heavens . . . He caused a light to issue from His light and to be concentrated amidst these images which then formed as the image of Muhammad. To him God said, [You are the chosen, the elect . . . for your sake I will level the earth and raise heaven . . . I will set up your family as guides and grant them of My knowledge, making them My proofs to creation.] God then received [from mankind] the confession of divinity . . . Then He mixed in with the reason of mankind the election [*inikhbab*] of Muhammad and his progeny and showed them that guidance and light are with him and the imamate is with his family . . . Muhammad's prophecy was first proclaimed in heaven. This light continued hidden until made manifest by Muhammad . . . then the light shone in our Guides [imams]. We are the lights of heaven and earth. Through us comes salvation and true knowledge. Our *Mabdi* [a messianic figure] is the savior of the community and the ultimate object of the light.⁴

Here then, in capsule, is a divine history of the world according to which God cast His light from eternity upon Muhammad and his descendants, making them both the cause and the salvation of creation itself. The Shiite historian adduces this report directly from 'Ali, without recourse to a chain of transmitters [*isnad*]. It is thus meant to be understood as much as a meta-historical credo as a historical report. It sets the stage for an eternal pedigree spanning the course of human history, and within which the life of Muhammad is to be understood.

Given this divine pedigree of light, it was out of the question

for the Shiite biographical tradition as a whole to admit any moral stain, not only among Muhammad's family past, present, and future, but among all earlier prophets as well.⁵ Accordingly, Shiite biographies of Muhammad had by the tenth century at the latest their own historical consciousness, their own parameters of biographical interpretation, their own sites of memory. The ambiguities we have seen above among the Sunni founding fathers of the *Sira* regarding such issues as Muhammad's faith before his mission or his "lapses" simply do not exist in Shiite biography or else are contentiously denied. Muhammad, his ancestors, and his descendants are all by theological necessity immaculate.

I shall now narrow the discussion by turning to two biographies of Muhammad embedded in the general histories of two prominent Shiite historians, al-Ya'qubi (d. ca. 897) and al-Mas'udi. They are both pivotal historical sources for early Islam, and one place in which their Shiism can be glimpsed is in their narration of Muhammad's life. In the days of al-Ya'qubi, one prominent wing of Shiism, later called Imami or Twelver Shiism, was about to take shape. Imami Shiism gradually focused its devotion and its salvation upon twelve imams or divinely appointed guides: 'Ali, his two sons al-Hasan and al-Husayn, followed by nine others, making a total of twelve. Both historians were Imami Shi'ites, with well-conceived strategies of interpretation.

Al-Ya'qubi takes the sixth imam in the Twelver line, Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765), as his authority on the essential facts and dates of Muhammad's life, for example, the marriage of his parents, his date of birth, the death of his father, the date of his earliest revelations, and so forth. It will be recalled that other biographers gave conflicting dates for several of these notable events. But al-Ya'qubi tolerates no ambiguity in such matters: how can it be otherwise if the story is outlined by God? So when al-Ya'qubi comes to narrate the lives of Muhammad's grandfather, uncle, and father, their sinless natures and purity of faith are in full view. For example, the

grandfather, 'Abd al-Muttalib, is an undoubted monotheist, indeed a precursor of the Qur'an in some of the laws and regulations he instituted:

He rejected the worship of idols and embraced the unity of God . . . He fulfilled his vows and established laws and customs most of which were later revealed by the Qur'an. The Quraysh would say, " 'Abd al-Muttalib is the second Abraham."⁶

All his progeny enjoyed honor, prestige, and glory. He would pray for rain and his prayers would be answered. Muhammad eventually pronounced him to be a glorified figure on the Day of Resurrection:

[God shall resurrect my grandfather 'Abd al-Muttalib as a single religious community by himself, decked out in the shape of prophets and the robes of kings.]⁷

Not a hint remains here of the uncertainty surrounding 'Abd al-Muttalib's ultimate fate in the biographies of the founding fathers or in Sunni Hadith. When al-Ya'qubi comes to the other central male figure in the family, Muhammad's uncle Abu Talib, the first of his qualities is his worldly prestige:

[From 'Ali:] My father was a lord [of Quraysh] though poor, and no poor man before him was ever a lord.⁸

Abu Talib's wife Fatima, mother of 'Ali, about whom we hear little or nothing from the founding fathers, is portrayed as a virtuous Muslim woman who brought up the orphan Muhammad and was a surrogate mother for him.⁹ In al-Ya'qubi's biography Abu Talib himself is far more cognizant of the merits of Muhammad's religion than he is in other biographical traditions. Why is this cog-

nizance not made public? It may be recalled that in non-Shiite biographies, several explanations are offered as to why Abu Talib refused to embrace the faith of his nephew. In al-Ya'qubi the answer is unambiguous: Abu Talib recognizes Muhammad's prophetic calling from the very beginning but wishes this fact to remain hidden because of the enmity of the unbelievers. To dispel all doubt regarding Abu Talib's ultimate fate, al-Ya'qubi quotes a hadith from Muhammad that four people were to be saved from Hell as per a promise from God Himself:

[God promised me [salvation] for four people: My father, my mother, my uncle [Abu Talib] and a close friend I had in the *Jabiltiyya*.]¹⁰

'Ali's role in the *Sira* is, as to be expected, pivotal. He is beyond doubt the first male believer. He is divinely elected and aided to protect Muhammad on the night of his *Hijra* to Medina. His marriage to Fatima, daughter of Muhammad, is ordained by God. In the military expeditions [*Maghazi*] of Muhammad, the spotlight is on 'Ali's heroism and his steadfastness. He repeatedly wards off danger from Muhammad at crucial battles such as Uhud, Hunayn, and Khaibar. At Hunayn, only 'Ali and nine other Hashimites stand fast, all other Muslims having fled the field. This last incident is meant to cover with glory both 'Ali and the other descendants of Abu Talib (the Talibids).¹¹ The Holy Family is thus at the very heart of the military drama as they had been at the heart of the divine message itself.

Finally, at the death of Muhammad, a voice was heard proclaiming the following message:

"Peace be upon you, members of the house . . . [God merely wishes to ward off abomination from you, oh members of the house, and purify you, purify you completely] . . . You shall be

severely tested in your property and persons and shall hear much harmful talk from those who possessed the Book before you and from the polytheists. It is more resolute for you to be patient and pious. God is the best consolation for anyone who dies or is afflicted." I [narrator] asked Ja'far al-Sadiq, "Who did you take that voice to be?" He answered, "Gabriel."¹²

This is a projection into the future of the trials and tribulations of the family of Muhammad and what they were destined to suffer at the hands of believers and nonbelievers alike. These lives of sorrow are an axial element in all Shiite historiography of Muhammad and his descendants, and of course of all Shiite sensibility, recalling in this instance the phrase of Virgil: "There are tears in the nature of things" (*Sunt lacrimae rerum*). From a Shiite perspective, the *Sira* is haunted by the specter of the tears to come, and to read the *Sira* with true understanding is to bewail the ingratitude and indifference of other non-Shiite Muslims toward Muhammad's progeny. Here is the Shiite poet Di'b'il (d. 860) mourning the martyrdom of al-Husayn (d. 680):

The head of the son of the daughter of Muhammad and of his heir

(*wasiyy*)

—O men, listen!—is raised upon a spear.

And the Muslims see and bear;

Filled neither with anguish nor with pious fear.¹³

Crucial to the Shiite case, political as well as religious, is the incident at Ghadir Khumm, a station on the road from Mecca to Medina. At Ghadir Khumm, Muhammad, while making his way back to Medina after completing his last, or "Farewell" pilgrimage, is said to have made a public statement delegating his authority to 'Ali. In al-Ya'qubi, the incident is reported as follows:

The Prophet set off at night for Medina, and reached a place near al-Juhfa called Ghadir Khumm. This incident took place on the 18th of the month of Dhu al-Hijja. He stood up to speak in public, took 'Ali's hand in his own and said {Am I not closer [*alastu awla*] to the Muslims than they are to themselves?} Indeed, O Prophet of God, they replied. He continued, {Whoso among you considers me as his lord [*manwala*] 'Ali is his lord. O God, befriend whoever takes him as his friend and show enmity to whoever shows him enmity.}¹⁴

The Prophet adds that he will appraise his community on the Last Day by how well they put the Qur'an into practice and how well they treated his family.

A lot of ink (and blood) has been spilt over this incident in Muslim historiography and intra-polemical scholarship. Did Muhammad mean by this declaration an explicit delegation of political authority to 'Ali (the Shiite view) or was it a mere expression of esteem and amity toward him (the Sunni view)? The founding fathers, it should be noted, say not a word about this incident, although it was widely known in their times. Thus the celebrated essayist al-Jahiz (d. 868), a staunch anti-Shiite, alludes to this incident and argues roughly as follows: If true, how is it that 'Ali himself never cited this incident as an argument against his innumerable opponents?¹⁵ But perhaps I am drawing the line too sharply between the two interpretations of Ghadir Khumm. Thus, the great Sunni Hadith master Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), not exactly a friend of the Shiites, nevertheless includes the incident in his Hadith collection, but without comment, as do a few other Sunni traditionalists. But where the founding fathers are concerned, the fact that they ignored the whole incident may stem, *inter alia*, from thinking that it was without substance, or else from their desire to avoid arousing the passions of sectarianism.

Let us now turn to the other celebrated Shiite historian, al-Mas'udi, for his treatment of the Prophet's life in his two surviving works of history.¹⁶ We have already encountered al-Mas'udi and his account of the creation and of the "Light of Muhammad." Given this account of the genesis and evolution of human history, it was first of all necessary to rearrange the whole history of prophecy in order to substantiate the relationship between Muhammad and 'Ali. If 'Ali was Muhammad's heir and delegate (*wasily*) through an explicit delegation (*nass*), the case for this would be greatly strengthened if it could be shown that all previous prophets also had their own explicitly designated delegates. This interest in the history of prophecy, common among Sunni historians, was intense and more theological in Shiite historiography of all hues. Al-Mas'udi was one of the earliest Shiite historians to pay sustained attention to this dual, Prophet/Delegate, manifestation of the prophetic phenomenon. He tells us that this interpretation of prophetic history was in fact a bone of contention among Muslims:

This is a point of contention among the people of our religion between those who argue for explicit delegation (*nass*) and others who argue for choice. Those who argue for an explicit delegation are the party of the Imamate from among the followers of 'Ali and the pure among his progeny. They argue that God *did not leave any age free from the presence of a figure who calls for God in truth, whether he be a prophet or a delegate*, whose names and exact identities are explicitly designated by God and His Messenger. (Italics mine)¹⁷

Down the ages prophets are shadowed by "delegates" who at times accompany major prophets as the truest interpreters of their messages and at other times act as divine guides (imams) who ensure God's continuing concern and benevolence for His creation.¹⁸

The prime example of the interpretative role played by these "delegates" is the relationship between Moses and Aaron, or between Jesus and Peter, where Aaron and Peter act as the truest guides to the prophet's mission. It is finally and most illuminatingly exemplified in the relationship between Muhammad and 'Ali. The prime example of the second role of these delegates is the line of imams issuing from Muhammad through the line of 'Ali and Muhammad's daughter, Fatima. The "Light of Muhammad" shines constantly upon the foreheads of this processional of prophets, delegates, and imams.

This religious history of the world is one wherein the divine truth is accessible but where its full dimensions are not always visible. But as Muhammad's time draws near, God's plan becomes clearer. In pre-Islamic Arabia, destined to be the final home of revelation, religious perception is more acute than anywhere on earth. A quickening in the process of revelation through prophets is discernible as the divine plan unfolds toward its final disclosure. Naturally, many of the eleventh-hour prophets are Arabian. They await Muhammad's coming and sing his praises.

But when we come at last to al-Mas'udi's biographical treatment of Muhammad, its form and presentation are seen to be nearer to the catalog style than to a polished literary narrative. Arranged chronologically are the bare facts of the Prophet's birth, mission, expeditions, and so forth, without further elaboration, although the dates he accepts are always those "current among the family of Muhammad and their party (*Shi'a*)."¹⁹ Immediately afterward, he tells us that he purposely chose to present Muhammad's life in the form of an epitome (*jawami'*) to make it user-friendly to scholars and students. This was not an uncommon form for other biographies of Muhammad to take, before and after al-Mas'udi's time.

But the most significant theological issue in the career of Muhammad is clearly his relationship to 'Ali. 'Ali stalks Muhammad

like no other Companion. Such questions as 'Ali's "sinlessness" (*ʿiṣma*), that is, whether he was an unbeliever before his conversion or followed Muhammad at all stages of his religious development, are salient issues of the biography. Then again, whether 'Ali was the first male Muslim, and how old he was when he converted are questions that seem to have deeper theological connotations for Muhammad's mission itself. Only Shiʿite views are given credibility. 'Ali was emphatically sinless, emphatically the first male Muslim, and definitely a discerning young lad rather than a gullible child at the time of his conversion, as suggested by many Sunni *Sīras*.

It should be added here that al-Mas'ūdī's Shiism was not narrow-minded or imitative.²⁰ He set out to portray a world order in which the elevation of a certain family to the status of recipients of divine inspiration, the 'Alid imams, was a necessary, indeed rational component. That God was not solely a Creator-Judge but also a constant Guardian of His universe was to al-Mas'ūdī self-evident. Muhammad's revelations consummated divine revelations in a prophetic sense but introduced divine guidance in a messianic sense. Mankind, always in need of political and religious guidance, could not change its nature even after the advent of Muhammad, the "Seal" of Prophecy. It was an important aspect of the justice of God that mankind would always stand in need of a just ruler or guide, and it was precisely the absence of such a ruler or guide that signaled the onset of social chaos and political disorder.



By and large, Shiʿite scholars did not enter the field of prophetic *Sīra* in any substantial manner, preferring to concentrate their biographical attention on 'Ali and his progeny.²¹ But there were a few notable exceptions. One of them was the famous Shiʿite Qur'an commentator al-Tabrisi (d. 1154), whose work *ʾIlām al-ʾWara bi*

ʾʾlām al-Hudā (Acquainting Mankind with the Great Figures of Right Guidance), devoted mainly to the biographies of the twelve imams of Shiism, begins with a Muhammadan *Sīra*. This is a *Sīra* that, on the face of it, contains a large number of biographical items in common with the work of the founding fathers. Read with care, however, the *Sīra* of Muhammad as told here is not complete and self-sufficient but constantly looks forward to the story of 'Ali and his progeny who, in an esoteric or gnostic fashion, complete or complement or fulfill or make fully clear the message of Muhammad.

In explanation of the two terms "esoteric" and "gnostic" let us recall once again the "Light of Muhammad" passage cited above.²² This light that God cast from the beginning of creation upon Muhammad *and* his progeny was seen by Shiʿite scholars of the ninth century—or perhaps earlier—as the light of a special, God-given knowledge, by reason of which the Prophet's progeny, the 'Alid imams, could act as divinely inspired guides to the community. For a Shiʿite biographer, it was important to show that this divinely selected line of imams had been referred to in earlier scriptures or revelations. In other words the imams needed to be reinscribed in prophetic history as firmly as Muhammad himself. In a typical passage, a quote in Hebrew attributed to "Moses in the Torah" is translated as follows:

"I [God] have accepted the prayer of Isma'il, I have blessed him, made him grow in strength, and multiplied his number through a descendant of his called Muhammad, whose number is 92. *I shall cause twelve imams, kings, to issue from his progeny and grant him a nation of great multitude.*" (Italics mine)²³

This special knowledge was communicated *in secret*; it is a privileged and supernatural knowledge that undergirds the prophetic message, making the imams masters of all the sciences of creation,

including all earlier revelations and all the languages of the world.²⁴ It follows that the Muhammadan message has two aspects, one esoteric and the other esoteric. The first is the message in its outward or literal dimension.²⁵ But the Prophet also taught a more secret or esoteric message, to which only the privileged have access through contact with its purveyors, the Shiite imams. The process of handing over this supernatural knowledge from the Prophet to 'Ali took place when Muhammad was on his deathbed:

As the Prophet lay on his death-bed, he said, [Summon my brother and companion] and was then overcome with weakness. [Abu Bakr and 'Umar were summoned in succession but the Prophet turned his face away from them.] Umm Salama [wife of the Prophet] said, "Summon 'Ali. He wants no one else." When 'Ali was called, he drew near until his face was close to the Prophet's. The Prophet spoke in private to him for a long time. 'Ali then rose and sat to the side until the Prophet became unconscious. He then left. People said to him, "O Abu'l Hasan, what did the Prophet intimate to you?" 'Ali replied, "The Prophet taught me a thousand chapters [gates] of knowledge, each chapter opening a further thousand. He bequeathed to me knowledge of what I shall do, God willing."²⁶

This scene sets the stage for the transmission of the testament (*was'iyah*) from the Prophet to 'Ali and his line. But we do not need to wait for the deathbed scene to detect this divinely instituted bond between the Prophet and his *Was'iyah*, the heir and guardian of the message. Throughout the *Sirah* of Tabrisi, 'Ali enjoys total and unchallenged prominence. He is by the Prophet's side at every single major event of his life. Even when the Prophet emigrated from Mecca to Medina (*Hijrah*), which most other accounts agree he did with only Abu Bakr and two others for companions, the event is narrated in such a way that Muhammad waits outside

Medina for fifteen days until 'Ali can join him for the triumphal entry into the city:

The Prophet of God waited [outside Medina] for fifteen days. Abu Bakr came to him and said, "Prophet of God, I wish you would enter the city for its people are most anxious to receive you among them." The Prophet answered [I shall not move from this spot until my brother 'Ali joins me.] The Prophet had sent 'Ali a message to join him with his family. Abu Bakr said, "I doubt whether 'Ali will join you soon." The Prophet replied (Indeed he will. He will speed here, God willing.) After fifteen days, 'Ali arrived with his family.²⁷

When the mosque of Medina was being built, the Prophet laid out plots of land for himself and his companions round about where they could build their chambers and where their doors abutted onto the mosque. But God willed otherwise:

The angel Gabriel descended upon the Prophet and said to him, "God commands you to order all those whose doors abut onto the mosque to close them. No door will abut onto the mosque except your door and that of 'Ali, and 'Ali can use it the same way you do." His companions were angered as was Hamza who said, "I am his [Muhammad's] uncle and he orders me to close my door but leaves open my nephew's door, who is younger than me?!" The Prophet came to him and said [O uncle, do not be angry because of the closure of your door while 'Ali's door remains open. I swear to God, it was not me who issued the order but God. It was God who commanded your door closed and leaving open the door of 'Ali.]²⁸

This image of 'Ali as a "gate" to knowledge and true religious devotions echoes a well-known Shiite hadith of Muhammad: [I am

the city of knowledge and 'Ali is its gate.) This "keeper of the gate" image confers upon 'Ali a position of ultimate authority on all matters Islamic: he is literally the key to understanding the message of Muhammad.

In conformity with the gnostic role assigned to 'Ali and his line, there occurs what one might describe as a rearrangement of the salience of the chief characters of the *Sira*. Towering figures such as Abu Bakr, 'Umar, and 'A'isha recede into the background, becoming either minor actors of no great significance or else characters whose motives, deeds, and words are shrouded in obscurity and no small measure of bad faith. To appreciate the full extent of this Shi'ite rearrangement of roles, one might recall that in an influential Sunni *Sira* like that of al-Baladhuri, for instance, Abu Bakr and 'Umar are everywhere, advising, supporting, and faithfully following their Prophet. When al-Baladhuri reaches the end of his *Sira*, he reproduces Muhammad's verdicts on these two figures: (1) A woman came to the Prophet to ask him for something. He said to her {Come back later.} She said, "Suppose I do not find you when I return?"—alluding to the possibility of his death. He replied {If you return and do not find me, go and see Abu Bakr.} (2) The Prophet said {I do not know how long I shall remain with you. Emulate those who come after me}—and he pointed to Abu Bakr and 'Umar.²⁹

Further Sunni hadiths of Muhammad specifically designate Abu Bakr as the successor of the Prophet, as in the following report from 'A'isha:

When the Prophet was in his last illness, he said to me {Summon your father and brother so that I may write a document (*kitāban*) in favor of Abu Bakr for I fear the loose talk and ambitions of some people, but God and the believers will accept none other than Abu Bakr.}³⁰

In Shi'ite *Siras*, on the other hand, the animus against these two figures appears, if anything, to have increased with the passage of time as between al-Mas'udi and al-Tabrisi. Abu Bakr and 'Umar are not only consumed with jealousy of 'Ali but are even made to witness the delegation of authority made at Ghadir Khumm and to renege on their oath of fealty to 'Ali when the Prophet passed away. There are strong hints of their treachery, or at least hypocrisy, in this regard:

Among those who praised him highly on that occasion [at Ghadir Khumm] was 'Umar ibn al-Khattab who said to him, "Bravo, 'Ali! You have become my master [*malik*] and the master of every believer, male and female."³¹

In the Shi'ite *Siras* 'A'isha, daughter of Abu Bakr, and Hafsa, daughter of 'Umar, both being preeminent wives of Muhammad in the Sunni tradition, are castigated by the Prophet in his last hours and compared by him to the ladies who attempted to seduce Joseph in the Qur'an:

When the Prophet was in his last illness, Bilal came at the time of morning prayers and announced, "It is prayer time, God's mercy upon you." The Prophet said {Let someone lead the prayers.} 'A'isha said, "Let Abu Bakr lead the prayers," while Hafsa said, "Let 'Umar do so." The Prophet said {Desist. You are like the lady friends of Joseph} [who tried to seduce him in Qur'an 12:33ff].³²

In the Shi'ite version of these crucial events there exists what might be described as an atmosphere of conspiracy with the aim of deliberately excluding 'Ali from succession despite the clear mandate issued by the Prophet, and so to retell the story as to cast

suspicion on the motives of those who denied 'Ali's right to rule or attempted to thwart his succession. In the *Sira* of Tabrisi, however, this is done with care, innuendo being more common than outright condemnation. Thus, an incident like the *I/k*, wherein 'A'isha's virtue was impugned and later vindicated by revelation, and during which 'Ali in the Sunni tradition advised the Prophet to divorce her, is passed over in almost complete silence by Tabrisi. In other words, there was a limit to the lengths that Shiite *Siras* could go in redrawing the portraits of the central figures of Muhammad's life, that limit being the explicit censure of the venerable figures who surrounded Muhammad. Yes, one could get away with downgrading them, with pulling them down a peg or two or three on the ladder of esteem while upgrading Muhammad's immediate family, for example, his daughter Fatima, a somewhat distant figure in Sunni *Siras*, and of course 'Ali and his progeny.³³ The Shiite *Sira* writer would on the whole resort to allusion and innuendo in this regard in an attempt to win the argument of history but would exercise care not to inflame communal passions. In this respect, the Shiite scholar was not very different in strategy from someone like the great Sunni historian al-Tabari (d. 923), who tells his readers on a number of occasions that he refrained from narrating the full details of certain controversial incidents in early Islam because of their "repugnant nature."³⁴ The *Sira* was a battlefield but the battle had its rules and the "weapons" needed to be deployed with care. The potential cost of inciting communal strife was enormous. Given the horror inspired in the hearts and minds of scholars, both Sunni and Shiite, by the specter of civil unrest (*fitna*), it was important whenever possible to avoid inflammatory opinions and to put the spin on the message with subtlety and caution.



Shiism of all varieties produced a great deal of poetry in its first four or five centuries, and modern scholarship has not paid any sustained attention to it as a historical, biographical, or theological source.³⁵ I attempt a survey here of a few Shiite poets in order to round out the various Shiite images of Muhammad sketched above. The poets range from about the seventh to about the thirteenth centuries and although they do not by any means exhaust the poetic corpus, they have always been highly regarded by Arabic/Islamic literary critics. It is by and large a poetry of passionate veneration of Muhammad as a luminous figure who passed on his legacy to an equally luminous line of descendants and is thus quite distinct in sentiment from the poetry, already examined, which celebrates him as a glorified Arabian hero.

If the poetry attributed to him is genuine, Abu'l Aswad al-Du'ali (d. 688) would clearly be one of the earliest poets to proclaim the love of 'Ali and his family as essential to faith and salvation:

I love Muhammad with a passionate love
as I do 'Abbas, Hamza and the *Wasiqy*.
I love them through love of God so that
I present myself, when resurrected, impeccable.
A love I was bequeathed ever since
the windmills of Islam turned, a love unequalled.
The sarcastic men of the tribe of Qushayr say to me
"Do not ever forget 'Ali!"
Sons of the Prophet's uncle and his kin
these are of all mankind my greatest loves.
If love of them is rational, I hit the mark,
if irrational, I do not thereby sin.³⁶

If genuine, these verses, while extolling 'Ali, also seem to include in the poet's circle of love a wider love for Muhammad's pa-

ternal uncles. This is not untypical of some very early Shiite sentiments, although one cannot use these sentiments to argue for the authenticity of the verse. Notable here is a common Shiite creed that love of the Holy Family is a prerequisite for salvation.

Far better authenticated is the verse of Kuthayyir 'Azza (d. 723), an Umayyad poet often favorably compared by critics to the most illustrious poets of the Umayyad age. Kuthayyir's Shiism is said to have been fanatical, his loyalty being apparently directed at Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyya (d. ca. 700), a son of 'Ali by a woman other than Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad. It seems that Kuthayyir believed that Ibn al-Hanafiyya was not dead, only invisible, and that he would reappear as a conquering hero:

Truly the imams from Quraysh

the just rulers, are fully four in number:

'Ali and three of his sons

these are the grandsons, no biding the fact.

One grandson is a grandson of faith and virtue

and one grandson was buried at Karbala.

One grandson the eye sees not until

he leads the chargers, the pennant at their head.

He is concealed, invisible to them awhile

at Mount Radwa, feeding on honey and water.²⁶

The legend of the "Sleeping Hero," well known in many cultures, serves in this instance to comfort the sorrowing faithful that a "grandson" of Muhammad will eventually reappear to put matters right and avenge the ghastly persecutions of the Holy Family. That Ibn al-Hanafiyya was not a grandson of Muhammad but only a stepbrother of the two who were (al-Hasan and al-Husayn), suggests that in the eyes of some devotees membership in the Holy Family extended laterally to cousins of Muhammad and their is-

sue. In other verses praising Ibn al-Hanafiyya, Kuthayyir describes him thus:

*He bears the name of the Chosen [Muhammad] and is his cousin
ever unlocking fetters, ever relieving those in debt.*

*Great of spirit, does not barter falsehood for right guidance,
in his devotion to God cares not for any reprimand.*

We, God be thanked, recite his book

here in Khayf, Khayf of sacred spaces,

Where pigeons are free from danger, at peace,

where an enemy is like an ally and friend.²⁷

Ibn al-Hanafiyya is the Prophet redivivus, who reestablished the sanctuary, revived the moral order and received revelations. This is confirmed in stories related of Kuthayyir that he would pass by children of the 'Alid family and exclaim, "By my father, these are the little prophets!"

Kuthayyir's contemporary al-Kumayt (d. 743) ranged more widely in his celebrations of Muhammad's family. The Holy Family now springs from the seed of Hashim, great-grandfather of Muhammad, greatly extending its scope. The amatory prelude, common in the poetry of the age and directed at some beloved, named or unnamed, is scorned in favor of the true love of the poet, the members of the house of Hashim. It is they who "entrench the foundations of Islam," who are the champions of justice, who protect the weak, and whose knowledge is a gift from God. The poet writes:

They are the family of the man of true speech

Abu'l Qasim [Muhammad], the branch of the highest of lords.

*He who was best among the living and among the dead
of Adam's brood, leaders or led.*

*When buried he was best among the dead
 ever to have been laid in a tomb.
 Best of infants, of sucklings, of babes in cradles
 best of infants weaned.
 Best of lads, then of young men, then of adult men
 best lad, best young man, best adult.
 God saved our skins from the precipice of hell
 through him, a bounty from the Bountiful.
 Not tempted by this world, his name is truth
 his glory abiding while rocks last.³⁹*

The ode goes on to praise other Hashimites such as Muhammad's paternal cousin Ja'far, and his uncles Hamza and al-'Abbas but reserves special love for 'Ali and his two sons, heroic in victory, tragic in defeat.

In what is probably the most famous ode of the poetic corpus, commonly referred to as the *Hashimiyyat* (poems in praise of the Hashimites), al-Kumayt begins by abjuring all love except the love of the "Family of Muhammad," expresses the view that many verses of the Qur'an point to the family's right to rule, and then tackles the question of the Prophet's inheritance. Who are his heirs? The ruling Umayyads claimed Muhammad died without heirs:

*They [the Umayyads] say: "We inherited it
 [the caliphate] from fathers and mothers"
 but no father or mother ever made you inherit it.
 They claim they have rights and duties due from people
 Nonsense! The rights of the Hashimites are more binding.
 It is through the legacies of the son of Amina [Muhammad]
 that men of east and west obey you.
 They say he [Muhammad] left no heirs.
 But were it not for his inheritance
 his heirs would be the tribes of Bakil and Arhab,*

*Ikht, Lakhm, Sakun and Himyar
 Kinda, Bakr and Taghlib.⁴⁰*

The poet's argument is that if indeed Muhammad died leaving no heirs, no single Arab tribe has a better right to rule than any other. Roughly the same gallery of Hashimite figures is paraded and praised, and the poem ends with a description of the poet, mounted on his camel, roaming the lands in search of them.

The figure of Muhammad is captured in a number of images: he is a "shining lantern," "purest in descent from Eve to Amina," "transmigrating from age to age," "the love of his kin is true faith," "glorious in this life and the next, like two water buckets ever full for those who drink from them." 'Ali on the other hand is "chosen" by Muhammad, indeed by God, at Ghadir Khumm. To restore the true order of politics and nature, a Hashimite will arise who will usher in a "new spring" and cleanse the land of its ills.

A half century later, Shiism produced yet another outstanding poet, al-Sayyid al-Himyari (d. ca. 793), who alleged that he received his poetic calling in a dream, and from no less a person than the Prophet himself. From then on, al-Sayyid takes his mission to be to praise the 'Alids and defame their enemies, in verse that was much admired but also much feared, and sometimes even selectively excised, for its "extremism." There is great audacity in al-Sayyid's verse, to the point that in one ode he appropriates the voice of the Prophet:

*Has it not reached you, and news does spread
 what Muhammad said, as related,
 To the possessor of his knowledge, the rightly guided 'Ali
 as Khawla, a little girl, pranced in the house?
 "Do you not see that Khawla will give birth to one
 whose fire will blaze, pure of character, dauntless?
 He shall bear my kunya [patronymic] and my name for*

I bestowed them on him and on the Mabdi, after me.

He shall be made invisible to them until they say

'A tomb enfolds him in Tiba' [Medina].

*For years and months he shall be seen in Radwa
in a mountain pass, with leopards and lions,*

Living among gazelles, oryx

and young ostrich, going and coming as friends.

The wild beasts protect them and from them

they meet with no harm.

Through him they are secure from death

grazing in peace at meadow or spring.¹¹⁴

The man in the mountain is of course the same Ibn al-Hanafiyya we have encountered above. Khawla is his mother; the wife of 'Ali. This image of his living in perfected nature is drawn by the Prophet himself, and in most of al-Sayyid's verse the Prophet is really little more than the holy ancestor who guarantees the holiness of the family. More telling are the verses celebrating an early Shi'ite hadith, but found also in some Sunni hadith, which relates how al-Hasan and al-Husayn as young children would climb upon their grandfather's back, now taken to hold symbolic meaning:

The Prophet came upon Hasan and Husayn

sitting and playing in a corner.

He said, "I offer my life for you!" and then greeted them

for they were very dear to him.

So they sprang up, his shoulders beneath them:

how glorious the mount and its two riders!

Two boys, their mother being virtuous

made chaste for the chaste man.

Their sire is Ibn Abi Talib ['Ali]:

how glorious the children and their parents!¹¹⁵

This is fairly typical of the way al-Sayyid builds his verse: Muhammad is introduced at the very beginning of an ode only to yield pride of place to the Holy Family whose excellence and right guidance is thereafter celebrated or defended. In his polemics with other Muslim groups al-Sayyid was frequently intemperate, going so far as to pronounce 'Ali a "prophet." This, when combined with some pronouncements by Kuthayyir, would suggest that in certain early Shi'ite circles, the Qur'anic description of Muhammad as the "Seal of Prophets" was not understood to mean that prophecy ended with him.

There is much in the poetry of al-Sayyid that throws considerable light on early Shi'ite belief and practice. But this does not concern us directly here except as it relates to the images of Muhammad. In al-Sayyid's verse, Muhammad is almost always mentioned in conjunction with his family: it is *Al-Muhammad* who are at center stage. It is *their* sufferings and *their* promise of salvation that grieve but eventually comfort the true believers.

One other early Shi'ite poet deserves consideration in order to round out our discussion of this particular poetic corpus: Di'bil ibn 'Ali al-Khuza'i (d. 860). We have met him above, bewailing the martyrdom of Husayn and the apathy of the Muslims. But in Di'bil's time much had changed since the days when al-Sayyid and Kuthayyir mourned their absent hero, living amidst perfected nature and waiting to descend in final victory. The Shi'ites, for reasons too numerous to go into here, were in the mid-ninth century in the process of focusing their devotions upon one particular line of the 'Alids, soon to become known as Imami or Twelver Shiism. Imam number eight of this line, 'Ali al-Rida (d. 818), had won this particular family line enormous public prestige through being nominated by the caliph al-Ma'mun (d. 833) as his successor.¹¹⁶ It looked for a brief while as if the Holy Family was finally coming into its own, but these hopes were soon dashed, putting what proved to be a final end to the political am-

bitions of this particular Shiite line. Thereafter, pacifism was to become entrenched in their theology of pious expectation, and Di'bil was a product of this new age of quietism, of long-suffering piety. Gone from his verse is any hope of *speedy* liberation from woe, although hope of eventual triumph is not gone. In the forefront is a poetry of deepest love for the Holy Family and deepest sorrow for the fate of its members and for the indifference of the Muslims. Di'bil's verse frequently captures in a poetic tableau certain incidents in the life of Muhammad, turned almost always to 'Ali's advantage:

'Ali mounted upon the shoulders of the Prophet Muhammad:

Has any but 'Ali ever broken idols?⁴⁴

Another such incident concerns the hadith that has Muhammad enfolding in his cloak 'Ali, Fatima, and his two grandchildren, thereafter referred to as "The People of the Cloak":

*By my father and mother! Five have I loved
for the sake of God, not of some gift received.*

*By my father! The Prophet Muhammad and his Wasiyy
the two pure beings, his daughter and her two sons.⁴⁵*

The incident at Ghadir Khumm is poeticized as follows, the verse functioning as drama:

*He ['Ali] is assuredly pure, chaste, purified
quick to virtuous and blessed deeds.*

*As a young man and as an adult, best of both,
most generous in times of distress.*

*Bravest in heart, truest of brothers
greatest in glory and kinship.*

*Brother of the Chosen One [Muhammad], nay son in law and Wasiyy
from among all mankind, ever drawing a veil over sin.*

*Like Aaron to Moses, and this I assert in defiance of a group
of despicable hypocrites, wrinkled of skin.*

*He [Muhammad] said: "Verily, of whoever among you I am master
this man here is master after my death.*

*He is my brother, my Wasiyy, my cousin, my heir
he shall settle my debts with all my enemies."⁴⁶*

Di'bil's most famous ode is an elegy on the disasters that befell the Holy Family, from which the following is a selection.⁴⁷ After beginning with a scene of desolation, quiet weeping, and memories recollected in sorrow, the poet continues:

*Do you not see the days, and what evil they brought
upon people, what ruin, what long exile!*

*How, then, and from where can one seek closeness
to God, following prayer and fasting,*

*Save through love for the sons of the Prophet and his companions
and hatred of Umayyad matriarchs?*

*It was their brood that renounced the Qur'an's covenant and its law
abrooding its clear verses in falsehood and doubt.*

*The men of the Saqifa gained rule
not through claiming inheritance, but through spite.⁴⁸*

*Had they offered the reins to the designated heir
matters would have been entrusted to one free of misdeeds,*

*Brother of the Seal of Prophets, purified of blamish
conqueror of heroes in battle.*

*If they deny his right, the Ghadir is his proof
as also Badr and Uhud, lofty of peaks.*

*O you who have inherited the knowledge of the Prophet, you his family
upon you peace, ever its breezes blowing!*

He proceeds with a song of lamentation, contrasting the fate of the women of the Holy Family with that of the women of their tormentors:

*The daughters of Yazid⁴⁰ in palaces, secluded in luxury
while the Family of the Prophet of God roam the deserts?
The Family of the Prophet of God with bloodied mounts
while the family of Ziyad are safe on their camels?
The women of the family of the Prophet of God
are driven into captivity while the women of the family of Ziyad are
decked out in wedding bowers?
The family of the Prophet of God are emaciated in body
while the family of Ziyad are thick in the neck?*

None who claim to love Muhammad can possibly fail to love his kin, and none who seek paradise can attain it save through love of that kin. Di'l'il finds it extraordinary that Jews and Christians enjoy safety and security through loving their own prophets, false as this belief may be, while those who love the family of Muhammad are persecuted.



Here then is a sample of the ways in which Shiite poetry adds to the tapestry of Muhammad's images. A sanctity attaches to him in this poetry, a radiance that emanates from him and encircles his family. But the tragedies of his descendants are also *his* tragedy, and if in other biographies he is a victorious prophet, in Shiite sensibility he is a prophet disowned and disinherited by his ungrateful community. Hence his memory could not be recollected in tranquility but would be forever suffused with the tears of his true devotees.