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Two Images of Ibn Saba in the Historical and Heresiographical Literature

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Abstract

It seems that the nascent Shi‘ite movements exerted a deep impact upon Sayf Ibn ‘Umar in his description of the catastrophic events that took place during the caliphate of ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī. His narrations reveal his strong aversion to the idea that the companions of the Prophet Muhammad might have erred in political issues. However, a careful historical investigation and an objective political analysis of the events of that period reveal the irrationality to seek out such a conspirator as ‘Abdollāh Ibn Saba to explain these calamities.

The historians such as Ṭabarī, Ibn al-Athīr, and Ibn Kathīr ground their descriptions of the events in the reports of Sayf, presenting Ibn Saba as a leading actor. Looking at the same figure from the perspective of the Muslim heresiographers, however, we get a quite different picture. In other words, while the historians tend to describe Ibn Saba as a dominantly political character who acted around ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, the heresiographers incline to picture him as a religious and sectarian personality who masterminded and espoused extreme ideas. These two conflicting tendencies lead one to think that both groups of the scholars portray this fictitious figure as they wish.

Key words: Sayf bin ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī, the advent (raj‘ah) and executorship (waṣāyah) of ‘Alī, Extremism, Anachronism.
Introduction

Every Islamic sect tends to perceive and interpret the fitnah events, which took place in the early years of Islam, and their far-reaching consequences in accordance with its own viewpoint. Due to the prevailing conviction that the companions of the Prophet could not have committed sinful acts, such catastrophic events were narrated and accounted as the works of imaginary figures, as in the case of ‘Abdullāh Ibn Saba. Therefore, studies that investigate Ibn Saba and the role he played in Islamic history need to shift the focus from the contradictory nature of the reports about his career to the discovery of a distinctive perception of Islamic history.

In what follows, I will try to analyze the reasons why Sayf bin ‘Umar, being the first narrator of the reports about Ibn Saba, which appear to be in defense of the companions, felt the need for such narrations. Also, an attempt will be made to examine the approach which Muslim historians and heresiographers adopted with respect to the narrations of Sayf bin ‘Umar.

Possible Reasons for Sayf bin ‘Umar’s Narration of the Reports About Ibn Saba

The reports in which Sayf bin ‘Umar speaks of the fitnah events differ from what his other contemporary historians tell regarding Ibn Saba’s role. Viewing the events from the perspective of Sayf might seem more relieving to a Muslim who naturally have love and respect for the Prophet as well as for his companions. Nevertheless, the reports of Sayf agree neither with the social and political conditions of the age, nor with the event-doctrine relationship, and nor with the reports of his colleagues. This forces us to seek for the reasons Sayf narrated as he did. So, it will be helpful to begin with examining what is known of the life of Sayf himself.

The sources provide no detailed information on the career of Sayf, who is one of the major sources of Ṭabarî. All we know about him is that he was from Kufa, settled and became famous in Baghdad, and died between the years 170/786 and 200/815, a period which coincides with the caliphate of Hārūn al-Rashīd. Therefore, perhaps the only way to understand him better is to investigate the social, political and religious settings in which he lived.

One can observe that Sayf adopts a strict apologist attitude when narrating the events that took place during the caliphate of ‘Umar, ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, making thereby a great effort to ward off any possible criticism that might be leveled against the dear companions of the Prophet. He might also have thought it safer to interpret such events as the assassination of the Caliph ‘Uthmān, the political conflicts among ‘Aisha, wife of the Prophet, Ţalḥa, Zubayr, and ‘Alī as a conspiracy of the Jews, who had been notorious for treasons and instigations during the lifetime of the Prophet, instead of
describing them as the consequences of the errors made by such respected companions as Abū Dharr and ‘Ammār bin Yāsir. The fact that Sayf, although not much liked by the hadith scholars⁴, was the only narrator who reported the hadith “May Allah damn those who curse at my companions!” corroborates this claim of ours.⁵ I think that one of his goals in narrating these reports was to explain, or more accurately, to justify the political slips of the above-mentioned companions by ascribing the blame to the activities of Ibn Saba.

The fact that Sayf spent most of his life under the Abbasid rule does not necessarily, at least for now, suggest that his socio-cultural milieu had a political impact on his reports. Instead, it seems wiser to focus on his socio-cultural settings. Uncovering this point will reveal another aspect of his reports. His lifespan coincides with a very vivid period of the gestation of the Shi’ah, covering numerous religious currents. Within this chaotic period of the second century of Islam that covers the collapse of the Umayyads and the rise of the Abbasids, the extreme views of the Shi’ite groups known by different appellations must have troubled his mind⁶. One can observe that such groups adopted some beliefs that broke away from the mainstream formulation of Islamic creed and were disapproved of by the main body of Muslim community, and that the name of ‘Alī was involved in way or another. Sayf most likely knew a great deal of them. Of these, the views Mughīrah bin Sa’īd and his friends set forth about Abū Bakr and ‘Umar must have raised his hackles.⁷ These views, which can be taken as the first manifestation of the practice of cursing at the companions, by nature caused abhorrence among the mainstream Muslim community. For instance, Mughīrah maintained that Muhammad, who was created by Mughīrah’s god, offered the mission of protecting ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib to ‘Umar and Abū Bakr, exhorting both not to deceive him in this world. To his mind, this trust was like the coming true of the verse “We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains...”⁸ He holds that this promise must have been broken so that ‘Umar could say to Abū Bakr, “I would help you against ‘Alī on the condition that you pronounce me as caliph after you,” which Abū Bakr accepted. He also claims that this is the coming true of the Qur’anic verse, “Their allies deceived them, like Satan when he says to man, “Disbelieve”, but when (man) disbelieves, Satan says, “I am free of thee.”⁹ This interpretation likens ‘Umar to Satan, putting him along with Abū Bakr among the blameworthy.

Abū Maṣūr al-Ijlī (d. 123/741?) and his friends were among those of whose views Sayf were also possibly aware. Pronouncing similar extreme opinions about the companions, Abū Maṣūr believed that Paradise and Hell were none other than the human beings. For him, while Paradise stands for the Imam of the age whom the Shi’ah should serve and support, Hell signifies
the person against whom God commanded the Muslims to show enmity, i.e., the enemy of the Imam. As a ramification of this perception, Abu Manṣūr explained the religious injunctions away in a similar way. In other words, the obligatory acts are the name of the Imams whereas the impermissible acts are the name of those whom God forbade to support\(^{10}\). Such blasphemous words about the companions of the Prophet must have deeply disturbed Sayf who held the companions of the Prophet in high esteem. These examples are far from drawing an exhaustive picture of the settings he lived in. As a matter of fact, the replacement of the Umayyads by the Abbasids introduced a different character to the cultural domain, setting the stage for the rise of such figures and views.

For example, one can mention the surroundings of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). During that period, a number of people attended Ja‘far’s public teaching sessions, and many of them contributed much to the formation of the Shi‘ah. Of them, one can cite Hishām bin Ḥakam, the author of Kitāb al-Radd ‘alā al-Mu’tazila fī Amri Ṭalha wa al-Zubair\(^{11}\), ‘Alī bin Ismā‘īl bin Mīsam al-Tammār, who accused those who fought ‘Alī of infidelity\(^{12}\), and Muhammad bin ‘Alī bin Nu‘mān al-Ahwal, the author of Kitāb al-Jamal fī Amri Ṭalḥa wa al-Zubair\(^{13}\). Alas, the writings of these people have not come down to us. Taking into consideration their other views, the titles of their writings, and the implications of the titles, one can estimate that Sayf strove to respond to their claims. He even endeavored to inflict a severe criticism upon them by associating them with Judaism.

Considering the settings and conditions he lived in, it seems that Sayf’s intention is not merely to justify and acquit Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. As a matter of fact, his narrations do not mention any activities of Ibn Saba concerning the terms of their caliphate. The reason for his taking a different attitude from that of his colleagues and narrating different reports must have been the fitnah events along with the above-mentioned factors. It is in the course of these events that Muslims, for the first time in the history of Islam clashed with each other and shed each other’s blood. In addition to the aforementioned motivations on the part of Sayf, the movements which interpreted the contemporary issues anachronistically while attributing superhuman features to ‘Alī must also have agitated him. In order to justify and glorify ‘Alī, these sects did not shy away from detracting and condemning all the companions save ‘Alī. Sayf attempted at linking such groups with the speeches Ibn Saba had allegedly delivered in Egypt. In doing so, he aimed to subject the Shi‘ah to a partial criticism on the basis of the early period. In this case, one should take the narrations of Sayf as a response to what has been defined as the extreme groups. The fact that he put such key Shiite terms as the advent (raj’ah) and executorship (waṣāyah) of ‘Alī on the lips of Ibn Saba reveals his abhorrence for such groups.
These are the probable reasons for the emergence of the reports about Ibn Saba on which Tabarî, who was followed by the later Sunnite historians depended when telling of the events of the early period. For the above-mentioned reasons, Sayf tends to think that the companions did not err in political issues and most of the events that took place during this period were the results of political and religious conspiracies. In doing so, he implies that most of the events of the Shiite character that went on around him were hatched up by the Jews.

The Image of Ibn Saba in the Literature of Islamic History

It is likely that the conditions which we have described above in association with Sayf bin Umar influenced his historiography. We have also pointed out that in his explaining the fitnah events on the basis of the reports about Ibn Saba, he was relied upon by the historians who came after him. But the problem one should call attention to is that the historians who found their thesis upon the actions of Ibn Saba present this figure as acting largely around Uthmân and ‘Alî. Though they also describe him as an active figure in the events that took place during the caliphate of ‘Alî, they do not mention the views that heresiographical books attribute to him relying on Sayf bin Umar. Therefore, it is impossible to take the figure of Ibn Saba, about whom the sources talk, as a single personality.

One notices some chronological contradictions in the claim of such historians as Tabarî, Ibn al-Athîr and Ibn Kathîr, who rely on the reports of Sayf regarding Ibn Saba converting to Islam during the caliphate of Uthmân. Allegedly he later traveled to Damascus, Basra, Kufa, and Egypt and made propaganda against Uthmân. Finally, he reportedly went to Madina and took part in the assassination of the Caliph. In this course of activities, the only speeches by Ibn Saba which Sayf claimed had propagated and disseminated the extreme Shiite views are those which he made in Egypt. Except for these views, no other religious or sectarian views are attributed to him.

The concepts of the executorship and advent of ‘Alî, which were included in the propaganda activities of Ibn Saba in Egypt, are of great importance to the Shi‘ah. One should also bear in mind that while the person whose advent Ibn Saba talks of in the heresiographical books is ‘Alî, but the person whose advent he speaks of in Egypt is the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, these Shiite views arose in the late first century of Islam in the course of the gestation of Shiism. In other words, they were publicized after the year 82/701 when Muhammad bin al-Hanafiyyah passed away. The greatest error of Sayf is that he associates these views with the period of the Caliph ‘Uthmân in his reports. Nevertheless, we do not come across any extremist
view of Ibn Saba except what is found the reports about his activities in Egypt. Rather, we have an Ibn Saba character who takes part in political events. This issue is very important and deserves an in-depth discussion because, though Egypt is the best place for Ibn Saba to express the views that are attributed to him in the sources, books on Islamic history remain silent in relation to the role of Ibn Saba.

It is known that Sayf associates the reports on Ibn Saba with the term of ‘Ali’s caliphate in order to shift the blame for the clash between the parties on the Battle of Jamal. According to the historians who tended to overlook this first war that burst out among the Muslims, there was a treaty to be put in effect. However, a skirmish took place. The only narrator who provides a detailed description of why this treaty was not implemented is Sayf, who holds that the actualization of this treaty meant a severe punishment or the capital penalty for Ibn Saba and his followers, who were among the ranks of ‘Ali,. In other words, if the treaty was to be put in effect, they would lose. Therefore, they stealthily moved to break the treaty and instigated the war.

So they were able to pit the two parties against each other and set them to kill each other though the parties had reached an agreement before the war. It is possible that these reports of Sayf were produced by his apologist mind in order to mislead people into thinking that ‘Ali, who came to power with a legitimate public election, fought to quell the revolts against him by the aforementioned treaty. Although the heresiographers made Ibn Saba say a great deal about ‘Ali, including the claims that ‘Ali is a messenger and even a god, the historians do not make mention of this figure any longer in describing the events after the Battle of Jamal. This very fact suggests that the historians left this figure aside after they were done with him.

One of the contexts where Sayf could have something to say in relation to the reports of Ibn Saba is the rivalry between ‘Ali and Mu‘awiya. Considering the stratagem of Mu‘awiya against ‘Ali as in the episode of the ring trick, the Battle of Ṣiffīn is a more fertile field compared to the Battle of Jamal. However, the fact that Sayf’s reports do not include the events of this period and Mu‘awiya’s political practices might have stemmed from the fact that he considered them too evident to be covered up. Nevertheless, the conflict between ‘Ali and Mu‘awiya is outside the scope of this study.

Considering the perspective from which the historical sources look at the reports of Ibn Saba, we can say that they tend to draw the picture of a political character. Though they talk of a series of events he was involved in, they do not ascribe to Ibn Saba, who was alleged to have founded the sect of Sabaitiya, the extreme views at issue. It is quite interesting that history books fail to include the allegedly extreme views of the sect which assassinated the Caliph ‘Uthmān and installed ‘Ali in his place. One has great difficulty in
bridging the gap between the figure of Ibn Saba in the history books and the character of Ibn Saba in the heresiographical literature.

**Associating Ibn Saba with ‘Alī and Extremist Shi’ite Groups**

The heresiographers’ descriptions of Ibn Saba’s views on ‘Alī associate him with the Shi’ah. The ascription of ‘Alī with superhuman features on the part of the Shi’ite and its sub-branches led to the rise of many false claims about ‘Alī. Their glorification of ‘Alī and his descendants set the stage for the later sects to create their own myth of ‘Alī. One can assert that the heresiographers are inclined to endorse the thesis that such beliefs came to the surface in this chaotic period and Ibn Saba played an active part in the formation of the early Shi’ite doctrines and movements. One also needs to bear in mind that the heresiographical literature no longer mentions the Sayf-originated reports which had been cited in the books of history.

According to the reports narrated by the heresiographers, the version of Ibn Saba, which history books excluded, spoke mostly of ‘Alī. Though the descriptions of the heresiographers sometimes overlap, they often take a different route. In other words, the point is not the existence of such a figure around ‘Alī and ‘Alī’s reactions to him; instead, the question is that the writers who add to the existing reports about Ibn Saba, give vent to their disapproval and dislike for the extremist Shi’ite groups in their age through this figure. This part of my study shall focus on the aspects of the relationships between ‘Alī and Ibn Saba, which have diversified and transformed over time. These heresiographers’ descriptions of Ibn Saba can be summarized over the next few pages as follows:

Ibn Saba and his supporters claimed that ‘Alī is their god. In response, ‘Alī either burned or sent him into exile, saying that “When I see an evil action, I light a fire and call Qanbar.”

To associate Ibn Saba with the Rafiḍite, the heresiographers alleged that he had said that the current copy of the Qur’ān was one-ninth less than Ali’s copy. Likewise, he responded to the person who conveyed to him the news of ‘Alī’s death by saying: “By God, we do not accept his death even if you bring his brain bundled in seventy wrappers because we do know that he will not die until he drives the Arabs together with his staff.”

The adherents of Ibn Saba believed in the *Imāmah* as a tenet of belief after ‘Alī had passed away. They introduced the notion of dissociation (*tabarrt*) from Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, ‘Uthmân and other companions, and believed neither in the permissibility nor the lawfulness of the doctrine of dissimulation (*taqiyyah*). Ibn Saba was such an extremist that ‘Alī wanted to kill him but the people held him back.
Ibn Saba befriended ‘Alî and claimed that he was the executor of the Prophet (waṣť). In addition to the doctrine of the necessity of Imamah, he put forward the notion of dissociation, and declared his enemies to be infidel.  

According to the belief of Ibn Saba’s supporters, ‘Alî is in the clouds; thunders are his voice; lightning is his whip. By these views, he contributed to the birth of other sects. He is the first person to have talked of the stop of imāmah (waqf) and extreme beliefs (ghuluww). ‘Alî’s turban was called “cloud” by the Prophet, but the followers of Ibn Saba interpreted this word in a way that would fit into their doctrine. 

Ibn Saba and his followers are categorized as the fourteenth branch of the Ghaliyyah (Extremist Shi’ites). They believed that ‘Alî did not die, would return to the world before the Doomsday, and fill the world with justice. 

Ibn Saba claimed that ‘Alî is a god and he is ‘Alî’s messenger. In response to this claim, ‘Alî summoned and asked him to repent. When he refused, ‘Alî imprisoned him for three days, burned, or damned him. 

In association with Ibn Saba, it is narrated that after the battle that ‘Alî had fought against the people of Basra, he spoke to seventy people of al-Zuţt. who came from India, in their own native language. They greeted and conversed with ‘Alî. He replied to them in their language and said that he was not a superhuman being as they claimed. He called on them to repent, but they refused. Then, ‘Alî got angry with them, ordered wells to be dug and imprisoned them in the wells. Afterwards, he ordered the top of the wells to be covered and set the wells afire, and so they were suffocated to death. 

Constituting the first faction of the Ghulāt, Ibn Saba and his followers are the founders of the Shiite and the Rafidah, which consists in fifteen factions. For him, ‘Alî partakes of Muhammad’s mission of prophethood and would be superior to the Prophet if he were to survive. After the death of the Prophet, ‘Alî inherited the office of the prophets who had received revelation, and again it was Gabriel who brought him the divine message. 

When the dispatch of ‘Alî’s death reached Madain, some of Ibn Saba’s followers did not accept the news. The claim that ‘Alî did not die was criticized with the following reactions: “If so, why have we shared his properties out and married his wives off?” Afterwards, Ibn Saba’s followers were divided into four groups, holding out such doctrines as God’s changing of His opinion (badā), the advent (raj’at), and the pre-eternity (qidam) of ‘Alî. 

Ibn Saba objected to ‘Alî’s advice to extend the hands up during the supplication following the ritual prayer by saying, “O commander of the faithful! Is God not everywhere?” In response, ‘Alî recited the Qur’ānic
verses which inform that both maintenance and torment lie in the heavens. On the other hand, a descendent of Ibn Saba affiliated himself to the Mufawwidah which claimed that Muhammad and ‘Alî created the world, distributed maintenance, and killed and resurrected people.

Abdullah Ibn Saba and Abdullah Ibn Sawdā are two different persons. Being originally a Jewish of Hîrah, the latter is a follower of the former and pretended to have converted to Islam to acquire prestige among the people of Kufa. He applied to ‘Alî the Toraic notion that “every prophet has an executor.” For him, while Muhammad is the best of prophets, ‘Alî is the best of executors. Hearing these words, ‘Alî and his followers came to set value on him. However, ‘Alî wanted to kill him upon having heard of Ibn Saba’s extreme words about him. Yet, Ibn ‘Abbâs dissuaded ‘Alî from this idea because such an action could create a split among his troops during the war he would wage on the people of Damascus. Thus, ‘Alî banished both Ibn Saba and Ibn Sawdâ to Madain.

Ibn Saba claimed that two springs would gush out of Kufa Mosque, one of them flowing honey and the other flowing butter, and ‘Alî’s followers would feed on these two springs until satiated. Ibn Saba took up the doctrine of metempsychosis by ascribing divinity to other than God. For Ibn Saba’s followers, the notion that ‘Alî is a god was known even during the age of the companions. For instance, when ‘Umar learned that someone’s eye was gauged, he said, “What can I say of the hand of God who gauged an eye in the precincts of God?” In this case, the person who gauged the eye was said to be ‘Alî. Furthermore, ‘Umar is claimed to refer to ‘Alî by “the hand of God.” So, this description of ‘Alî with divinity was the first time it was put on the lips of ‘Umar.

‘Alî spoke to a skull at a place where he had stopped off while returning from Mada’in, and the people around him witnessed this episode. Based on this episode, Ibn Saba and his followers claimed that ‘Alî was a god who resurrects the dead. Yet ‘Alî called on them to repent. When they refused, he burned some of them and forgave some others.

‘Alî came upon Ibn Saba and his followers eating food in the month of Ramadan, asking them why they did not fast. They replied: “You are You!” ‘Alî noticed that they viewed him as a god and called on them to return to Islam. When they refused, he had them burned. However, he forgave Ibn Saba on the condition that he would leave Kufa, banishing him to Mada’in. Such figures as ‘Abdullâh bin Ṣabrah al-Hamadânî and ‘Abdullah bin ‘Amr bin Ḥarb al-Kindî are among the followers of Ibn Saba in Madain. Ibn Saba comes from a Jewish or Christian ancestry.
Ibn Saba and his adherents believed that Ja'far al-Šâdiq possessed all the rational and religious knowledge, imitating him on every issue without seeking any proof.53

Ibn Saba claimed that ‘Alī was not assassinated by Ibn Muljam, rather by Satan who assumed his form.54

Ibn Saba is in fact ‘Abdullāh bin Wahb bin Saba. He spoke of ‘Alī’s executorship and advent, adding the advent of the Prophet. The views set forth about son of Ja'far al-Šâdiq by the Ismailites are the same as the belief of the stop of imāmah. The belief of the Fatimites in Egypt is the same as the claims of Ibn Saba. The origin of the Ismailites and the Qaramites is the Sabaiyya.55

These are the reports on Ibn Saba that we have gathered from the Islamic heresiographical literature, which have grown in diversity and contradiction over time. It is meaningful that the reports occurring in these books are included in the Shi‘ite sources. Therefore, this subject remains unexhausted and demands more research. Some contemporary Shiite writers have made great efforts to demonstrate that no figure like Ibn Saba lived in the early period of Islam. They believe that the reports on Ibn Saba are aimed at calumniating the Shi‘ah which they claimed existed during the lifetime of the Prophet. They endeavor to trace such reports back to the early period through Ibn Saba in order to edify a past for themselves in the early period and find an immaculate past. However, these claims are sheer anachronism since Shiism did not exist at the age of the Prophet and ‘Alī, nor can its doctrines be dated as far back as the last quarter of the first century of Islam.

I see the Sunnite reiteration of the narrations involved in the Shiite sources as efforts to defame the Shiite. Some modern Salafi researchers have striven to defend the information extant in the classic sources without an accurate reading of them, endeavoring in vain to censure the Shiite through the first century.56 Sometimes, the same researchers slipped to supporting what they intended to criticize. Furthermore, I see their studies of this type as no more than collections of narrations.

To sum up, the heresiographers attached almost no importance to the historical part Abdullah Ibn Saba played in the events that took place during the caliphate of ‘Uthmān, and instead drew a picture of the figure who lived during the caliphate of ‘Alī. Moreover, their descriptions of the personality and identity of Ibn Saba often contradict each other.

**Conclusion**

It seems that Sayf bin ‘Umar in his narrations drew a subjective and unrealistic picture of the events that occurred during the caliphate of ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī because of his aversion to the idea that the companions
might have erred in political issues. He implied that the Jews who had been notorious for their plots and stratagem had a hand in the catastrophic events that took place during the lifetime of the distinguished companions of the Prophet. In the same manner, he invokes Ibn Saba as a scapegoat, suggesting the Shiites as his possible followers by associating him with the Shiite views. In doing so, he tries to defame the Shiites by placing them on a par with the Jews. Nevertheless, his narrations do not draw the same picture of Ibn Saba who is the source of many later extremist views as portrayed by the later heresiographers.

In conclusion, the personality of Ibn Saba, which figures in the books of history and heresiography, suggests that there are different and more than one Ibn Saba. The figure of Ibn Saba as portrayed in the history books acts mostly around ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī, taking an active part especially in political events while the personality of Ibn Saba as pictured in the heresiographical literature has no involvement in the events of ‘Uthmān’s caliphate. In the latter version, he figures as an extremist Shiite who utters and displays outright extreme views and behaviors around ‘Alī. Above all, he is depicted as the representative of all the foreign views and thoughts that infiltrated Islam later. It seems that both groups of the writers made use of this character as they wished, ascribing what they perceived of as evil, to this imaginary personality.

DİPNOTLAR

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2 Literally meaning seduction and tumult, this Arabic term is used to refer to the series of political and factional events in the early years of Islam during the period of Caliph ‘Uthmān and ‘Alī.
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The Surah Ahzāb, 33/72.

The Surah Hashr, 59/16.


Ibn Sayf claims that Ibn Sādāb said in Egypt the following: "Though people believe in the advent of Jesus, they fail to believe in the advent of Muḥammad. As a matter of fact, Muḥammad deserves to come back more than does Jesus... There are one thousand prophets and all of them have an executor. 'Alī is the executor of Muḥammad. 'Uthmān usurped caliphate unjustly, which is against the testament of the Messenger of Allah. So, o people! Get up and move, and condemn your rulers!" Cf. Sayf, al-Fīthah, p. 48–50; al-Ta'bārī, Tārīkh, IV/340–341.


We disregard the term "Sabā'īyya" used to refer to the rebels who revolted during the election of caliph. Consult Sayf, al-Fīthah, pp. 96–97; al-Ta'bārī, Tārīkh, IV/340–341, 494 and on; Ibn al-Athīrī, al-Kāmil, III/126 and on.
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20 See Sayf, *al-Fitnah*, pp. 48–50; al-Tabari, *Tāʾrīkh*, IV/340–341 and on. Maqrīzī’s different description of the events of this period catches attention. However, he also mentions Ibn Saba with different names, depriving us of the possibility to take him as a single personality. When speaking of the sectarian and factional movements in Egypt, he refers to the role of Ibn Saba in the assassination of the Caliph ‘Uthmān as the founder of Shi‘a. He describes the course of the assassination relying upon the reports of Sayf as occurred in Tabari. However, in his quotation of Sayf’s reports, he does not mention Ibn Saba’s journey to Damascus, nor does he quote the reports on the advent of ‘Alī. See al-Maqrīzī, Taqiyuddīn Abū al-‘Abbās Ahmad bin ‘Alī (d. 845/1441), *Kitāb al-Mawā‘iz wa al-ʾIthbār bi-Dhikr al-Khitāb wa al-Āthār*, no date, Cairo, IV/146–147.

21 These groups turned away from the obligation of following the Sunnah of the Prophet and forged an excuse to justify their extreme actions as well. With the accusation of “being the enemy of ‘Alī or the household of the Prophet”, they disregarded a great majority of the companions. By doing so, they evaded the responsibility of conforming to the exemplary practices that trace back to the early years of Islam.

22 We should note that we take Qummī’s reports about Ibn Saba as exception because he was not quoted by the following generations of heresiographers.

23 We observe that it is Jāhiz (255/868) who first time narrated the Madain-originated report, which shall be reported by most of the later sources, that ‘Alī would not die, in association with Ibn Saba and ‘Abdullāh bin Harb. In Jāhiz’s reports, Ibn Harb’s views are not similar to those of Ibn Saba which Sayf claimed he propagated in Egypt. One can observe that Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/844) provides some information partially similar to those provided by the heresiographers. See Ibn Sa’d, *Abdullāh bin Abū l-Muhājir*, Beirut 1388/1968, III/39, VII/512; al-Jāhiz, Abū ‘Uthmān ‘Amr bin Bahr, *al-Bayān wa al-Tabyīn*, Cairo 1948/1367, III/81. For the city of Madain which is located near Baghdad and once hosted the throne of Kisrā, see Fīrūzābādī, Muhammad bin Ya’qūb (817/1414), *al-Qāmaṣṣa al-Muḥīt*, no date and place, I/1592. Though Ibn Harb al-Kindī ascribes to Ibn Saba the notion of divinity and reincarnation, Sayf only ascribes him the advent and executorship of ‘Alī and political criticism of the companions. See Sayf, *al-Fitnah*, pp. 48–50; al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 21; al-Tabari, *Tāʾrīkh*, 4/340–341. However, we should note that Jāhiz’s work is not a heresiographical book, nor are Ibn Saba and Ibn Harb the same person.


25 We have limited information on Qanbar who is known as the slave of ‘Alī. Consult al-Ya’qūbī, Ahmad bin Abī Ya’qūb bin Jaʿfar bin Wahb (d. 292/905), *Tāʾrīkh al-Yaʾqūb*, no date, Beirut, II/214. Ibn Hajar informs that what is known of Qanbar’s ancestry is unclear and he reported no hadīth. However, he narrates the following report about Qanbar: “‘Uthmān bin Wāqīd says: When I was sitting with ‘Abdullāh bin Abī Sufyān bin al-Hārith, Qanbar came over and greeted us. But he did not reply to me. I said: Is this the way you are treating the slave of the son of your paternal uncle? He answered: He came to Kufa and condemned ‘Uthmān whereas I heard ‘Alī said: “I hope I sit opposite ‘Uthmān in Paradise.”’ Consult *Lisān al-Mīzān*, IV/475. I would like to take this report narrated by Ibn Hajar as an attempt to reconcile ‘Alī and ‘Uthmān.


29 Al-Qummī, Maqālāt, p. 20.

30 Consult al-Qummī, Maqālāt, p. 21; Nawhakhfī, Fīrāq, p. 33.


32 Al-Qummī, Maqālāt, p. 20.


34 Al-Asḥ‘ārī, Maqālāt, I/86–88.

35 Al-Asḥ‘ārī establishes a relationship between Sayyid Ḥimyārī and Ibn Saba by quoting the former’s poem that reads as “I swear by the day on which people come back to the world before the Day of Judgment.” However, any historical relationship between Ḥimyārī (d. 173/789–790) and Ibn Saba who must have lived at the lifetime of ‘Alī seems to be impossible. Consult Maqālāt, I/86–88. On the other hand, the work entitled Maqālāt that is attributed to Imām al-Māturīdī includes no direct reference to Ibn Saba. It talks merely of Sabībāiyya as a sub-branch of the Murji‘a. Consult Cairo University, The Section of Manuscripts, no 19495; Suddā Korkmaz, “‘Īmām ‘Abū Mansūr el-Māturīdī’nin Hayatı ve Eserleri (The Life and Works of Imām Abū Mansūr al-Māturīdī)”, Dinî Araştırmalar, 4/10, Ankara, 2001, p. 109–110. Consult al-Māturīdī, Abū Mansūr Muḥammad bin Muḥammad bin Mahmūd, (d. 333/944), Kitāb al-Maqālāt (?), Cairo University Library, mns no.: 19495.fol. 8’. Cf. al-Nasāfī, Abū Muḥī Makḥūl bin Fadl (d. 318/930), Kitāb al-Radd ‘alā al-Bida’, ed. Marie Bernard, Annales Islaomique, 16 (1980), pp. 39–126; al-Nasāfī, Kitāb al-Radd, p. 115. The same thought is voiced under the title al-Sābībiyya. Consult Amin, Sharīf Yahya, Mu‘jam al-Fīrāq al-Islāmiyya, Beirut, 1406/1986, p. 131.

36 We can cite al-Kašshī for different definitions in the Shi‘ah. His description is in a sense the summary of what Qummī says. He only adds the chains of transmitters most of which were possibly forged later. See Muḥammad bin ‘Amr (d. around 340/951), Rījāl al-Kašshī, Mashhad, 1348/1929, p. 107.


38 Al-Kašshī, Rījāl, p. 109. However, there is no reports which inform that ‘Alī knows any language other than Arabic. The claims that ‘Alī burned or suffocated these people have no historical accuracy whatsoever.

39 Al-Malāfī, al-Tanbīḥ, pp. 18–19, 156. This means that the Raḍīdites and the Shi‘ites stemmed from the Ghālāth.

40 Al-Malāfī, al-Tanbīḥ, p. 158. Such claims that can be taken as a picture of the claims of some Shi‘ite factions about ‘Alī disagree with the historical personality of ‘Alī. In addition, the views those were associated with ‘Alī through Ibn Saba have more similarity to the
Nusayrīte doctrines. Though we have no much information on this sect, it must have formed by the time.


42 As of these sects, al-Maṣāfī says what follows: ‘These sects all believe in the doctrine of bādā. The notion of bādā which I do not like to speak of is that which denotes God’s changing His opinion. These are all the sects of infidelity and ignorance. So long as they fail to profess to the death of Muhammad and ‘Alī, they should be considered to be the committers of grave sin because they have no proof as to what they claim. As with their doctrine that ‘Alī is a pre-eternal deity, they converge with the Christian view of Jesus. We have already refuted the Nāṣṭūrī doctrine that that which has quality and corporeal body cannot be God. Their doctrine of the advent of ‘Alī is the same.’ Consult al-Tanbīḥ, p. 19.


45 Baghdādī (d. 429/1037) holds that Ibn Sāba is the source of almost all the non-Islamic doctrines and sects. Choosing the term Rāfīḍah to criticize the Shi‘ites in his al-Farq bayn al-Firaq, he reiterates all the narrations occurring in the earlier books by associating all the extremist views with Ibn Sāba and ‘Alī. He complements the present factions with the following ones: Bayāniyya named after Bayān bin Ṣam‘ān al-‘Ijī (d. 119/737), Mughirīyya named after Mughirā bin Sa’d al-‘Ijī (d. 126/743), Mansūriyya named after Abī Mansūr al-‘Ijī (d. 123/741), Khattābiyya named after Abū al-Khaṭṭāb al-‘Iṣāfī (d. 145/147/762–764), the Ḥulāliyya who believe in the divinity of ‘Abdullāh bin ‘Mu‘āwiyah bin ‘Abdullāh bin Ja’far, Ḥulmāniyya named after Abī Ḥulmān al-Dimashqī, the Muqannāmiyya or the ‘Azāfīra who believe in the divinity of Ibn Abī ‘Azāfīr who was killed in Baghdad, the Ḥishāmīyya named after Hīshām bin Ḥakam al-Rāfīḍī, the Hishāmīyya named Hīshām bin Sālim al-Jawālīqī, the Yūnūsiyya named after Yūnūs bin ‘Abdūrraḥmān al-Qumnī, the Mushābbihah founded by Dāwūd al-Jawārībī, the Ibrāhīmiyya named after Ibrāhīm bin Yahyā al-Aslāmī (d. 184/800), the Habitiyya named after Ahmad bin Hābīr or Hārī, and the Karrāmīyya. Consult al-Farq, pp. 21, 61, 225.


49 Though his reports still hold importance among the classical reference books, they incurred the criticism of the Shi‘ite researchers of the late period. Consult al-‘Askarī, Saba, II/186 and on.

50 Consult al-Qumnī, Shażān bin Jibrīl (d. around 600/1203), al-Maḥāl, Qum, 1363/1943, pp. 71–72. Cf. al-Maṣāfī, Bihār, IV/213–215; al-Tabarī, Muḥammad bin Taqīyyuddīn Nūrī (d. 1319/1901), Mustadrak al-Wasāil, no date and place, XVIII/168. Nevertheless, Fakhraddīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1209), Saksākī (d. 682/1283) and his contemporary ‘Irāqī, and Dhahabī (d. 748/1347) also describe Ibn Sāba as an extremist personality who acts around ‘Alī. Consult al-Rāzī, Fakhraddīn Muḥammad bin ‘Umar (d. 606/1209), ʾI’tiqādāt al-
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