

The Heirs of the Prophet: Charisma and Religious Authority in Shi`ite Islam

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This substantially revised version of a dissertation completed at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 1990 focuses on the disciples (*rijal*) of the Imams in the Twelver Shiite tradition, arguing that they developed, through the routinization of charisma, a distinct type of religious authority in the eighth and ninth centuries based on their special relationship with the Imams, but to some extent independent of them. It investigates an important chapter in Twelver Shiite religious history while touching on questions of religious authority and orthodoxy in Islam that remain poorly described in scholarship to date.

The work includes two chapters on aspects of religious authority in classical Islam, two on the Imams' disciples and the roles they played, and one on how these disciples were portrayed in later biographical texts. Chapter 1, "The Scholars Are Heirs of the Prophets," points out that various groups in Islamic history have used this famous hadith to justify their claim to religious authority: Sunni ulama against the authority of the Umayyad and Abbasid caliphs, as well as Shiite ulama who filled a vacuum created by the Imams' compromised political position. Takim rightly emphasizes the field of law here, though he recognizes the ulema's differentiated specialization in many fields. However, he refers to the jurists (*fuqaha'*) by the odd term *shari` men*, which recalls Marshall Hodgson's term *shari`ah-minded* but makes little sense in Arabic.

Chapter 2, "The Holy Man in Islam," discusses the Imams and Sufi masters as examples of the holy man who wields charismatic authority. Chapter 3, "Routinization of Charismatic Authority: The Shi`i Case," suggests that the Imams' charismatic authority was routinized as they delegated

authority to their disciples as their deputed agents. These agents enjoyed epistemic authority as experts in particular fields who could be consulted by lay Shiites and engaged in preserving and interpreting the tradition, particularly when the Imam was not accessible. Chapter 4, “The Office of Charismatic Authority: The Functions of the *Rijal*,” focuses on the disciples’ roles: identifying the legitimate Imams and acclaiming their successors, transmitting their traditions, authoring Shiite doctrinal works, engaging in polemics with rivals and detractors, and setting legal precedents. Chapter 5, “Textual Authority and the Struggle for Legitimacy in Biographical Texts,” focuses on such Shiite biographical works as al-Shaykh al-Tusi’s *Fihrist Kutub al-Shi`ah* and al-Najashi’s *Kitab al-Rijal*, stressing their role in idealizing the Imams’ disciples and establishing their authority by explaining away unfavorable accounts and depicting them as reliable transmitters of the Imams’ reports and adherents to orthodox Shiite doctrine.

The Heirs of the Prophet provides an intelligent introduction to the Imams’ disciples during this stage in Twelver salvation history, offering a coherent overview of their activities and relationship with the Imams. In its approach to questions of religious authority and orthodoxy in Islam, the study stands out as exceptional for its recognition that religious authority in classical Islam was not monolithic, but rather changed over time, and that various societal groups promoted competing claims to religious authority often using the same scriptural texts as justification.

However, its discussion of several points could be stronger, and some glaring questions are left unanswered. For example, the author claims that the disciples’ functions in the Shiite community enhanced their authority. But such a claim risks circularity, since their authority may have been what allowed them to fulfill these functions in the first place. Takim’s discussion of the biographical sources’ construction of the disciples’ image is valuable, but this is evidence for their perceived status in the eleventh century (when the biographies were written) and not in the eighth or ninth centuries (when they were active). Perhaps most importantly, his presentation suggests that the disciples *inevitably* had to step in to fulfill some of the Imams’ roles because of the difficult political circumstances the latter faced while under constant Abbasid surveillance. This perceived inevitability is a problem, particularly as one need not look far in Islamic religious history for alternative scenarios. In the Zaydi and Khariji traditions, a compromised Imam would lose his status and be replaced by another who revolted against the authorities; the Isma`ili *da`wah* was often led in the name of an Imam whose identity remained secret; the Imam’s line was “rediscovered” at key junctures, notably in the Nizari tradition. Claims of occultation were frequent in Shiite

history, and an intermediary figure represented the Imam during the Lesser Occultation of the Twelver Shiites and in the Bohra tradition. All of these may be seen as possible reactions to such difficult circumstances. The particular historical process through which Twelver Shiism evolved was not simply inevitable, and therefore a causal explanation must be more carefully constructed. Apt comparisons with other Islamic systems of authority or with the medieval Catholic Church, addressing the authority of bishops vis-à-vis the Pope, for example, might have provided some insight into the particular developments of Twelver Shiism and why they occurred.

The Heirs of the Prophet begs the question of how the disciples' authority is related to Shiite religious authority during the Lesser Occultation and afterward. At first glance, one suspects that the book will argue along the lines of Sachedina's *The Just Ruler in Shiite Islam* (Oxford: 1988), which connects the comprehensive authority of leading modern Twelver jurists as the Hidden Imam's general representatives with the "particular representatives" designated by the Imams during the pre-Occultation period, essentially taking modern theological doctrine as historical fact. Perhaps because of Modarressi's scathing critique of *The Just Ruler* in a 1991 review, Takim avoids this. Nevertheless, one still expects some cautious speculation. What happened to the authority of the disciples following the Lesser Occultation in 874 or the Greater Occultation in 941? Did the Hidden Imam's representative (*bab*, *wakil*, or *safir*) wield the same or a different type of authority? *The Heirs of the Prophet* leads up to a conclusion, it seems, that the authority of Shiite jurists after the Greater Occultation was a natural and inevitable extension of the authority of the Imams' disciples, but stops short of saying so outright.

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