

In Praise of the Few

Studies in Shi'i Thought and History

By
Etan Kohlberg

Edited by
Amin Ehteshami

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CHAPTER 21

al-Uşūl al-arba'umī'a

To M. J. Kister
On the occasion of his seventieth birthday

Kütüb-i Erişim
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When Imāmī scholars describe the beginnings of their literary tradition, they point to two early genres out of which it grew. The first are works by the Imams themselves, such as the celebrated *Nahj al-balāgha* and *al-Şahīfa al-sajjādīyya*, attributed respectively to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn, and various writings ascribed to Ja'far al-Şādiq and 'Alī al-Riḍā.¹ The problem of the authenticity of these works is an issue that has still to be examined. The second genre consists of collections of Imāmī ḥadīth aptly known as *uṣūl* (sing. *aṣl*, "source"), and it is their nature and significance which it is proposed to examine in what follows.²

1

An *aṣl* is a collection of a particular kind: in contrast to other collections of ḥadīth, it consists exclusively of utterances of an Imam which are committed to writing for the first time. In some cases, the author of an *aṣl* reports traditions which he himself heard directly from the Imam,³ in others he relies on

- ¹ *GALS*, I, 705; *GAS*, I, 526–31, 535f. See also Mir Dāmād, *al-Rawāshih al-sanāwīyya* (Tehran, 1311/1893–4), p. 99.
- ² For a discussion of the *uṣūl* consult *Dharī'a*, II, 125–67, XXIV, 147f, 315–8; A. Falaturi, "Die Zwölfer-Schia aus der Sicht eines Schiiten: Probleme ihrer Untersuchung", *Festschrift Werner Caskel*, ed. E. Gräf (Leiden, 1968), pp. 62–95, at pp. 64f, and the literature cited there; Ḥusayn al-Jalālī, *Dirāsa ḥawli al-uṣūl al-arba'umī'a* (Tehran, 1394/1974), mentioned in *Dharī'a*, XXIV, 148 (see the Addenda); B. Scarcia Amoretti, "L'introduzione al Qāmūs ar-riḡāl di Tustarī: per una guida alla lettura dei testi prosopografici imamiti", *Cahiers donomastique arabe* (Paris, 1979), pp. 37–49, at pp. 40f.
- ³ This is similar to the *amālī*. For an analysis of the connection between the two genres see Muḥammad Mahdī al-Kharsān's introduction to Ibn Bābawayh's *Amālī* (Najaf, 1389/1970), 13f, 18f, 28.

403-438