

## Shi'i Literature in the Late Ninth Century

Ishāq al-Aḥmar al-Nakha'i (d. 286/899) and His Writings

Mushegh Asatryan

Nusayrili: MADDE YAYIMLANDIKTAN SONRA GELEN DOKÜMAN  
140611

### 1 Introduction

This essay is about the writings and teachings of a Shi'i author active in Iraq in the second half of the third/ninth century. The author's name is Ishāq b. Muḥammad Abū Ya'qūb al-Nakha'i al-Baṣrī, known by the nickname al-Aḥmar. He is important because, on the one hand, the extant fragments of several of the writings attributed to him constitute some of the very few texts produced in the Shi'i milieu from that period that survive to this day. Most of the extant Shi'i writings from that era survive in fragments in later texts.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, and more intriguingly, Ishāq's writings constitute part of the newly discovered corpus of texts written by a group of early Shi'is called by other Muslims "extremists" (Ar. *ghulāt*; henceforth, Ghulat), for their "extreme" adoration of members of the Prophet's family and for some other "incorrect" beliefs.<sup>2</sup> And whereas most of the texts of this corpus can be dated with great difficulty and rarely attributed with certainty, the works ascribed to Ishāq, are, as I will argue, some of the very few parts of this corpus whose authorship raises little doubt and whose dating is certain.

The pages that follow contain a close reading of the information about Ishāq found in the writings of some Muslim authorities, against a number of fragments alleged to belong to his lost works, which are cited in the books of several Nusayrī authors of the fourth/tenth-fifth/eleventh centuries. Through a detailed cross-examination of these two types of sources, I will argue that the fragments in question can be attributed with a great degree of certainty to Ishāq al-Aḥmar.

In the first section I will present what is known about Ishāq and his writings from the works of several Muslim historians and bibliographers, ones that were not part of the Ghulat or the Nusayrīs. (I refer to them as "external sources.") The

information supplied by these authors is rather brief, but it contains several key points that are helpful in testing the authorship of the fragments attributed to Ishāq. In the second section, I will discuss these fragments in light of the information supplied in the abovementioned sources. Because the passages of the works attributed to Ishāq are themselves often fragmentary, to fully understand them, I will read them in light of other Ghulat texts of similar content.

### 2 Ishāq's Image in "External" Sources

The longest account about Ishāq al-Nakha'i is found in *Ta'rikh madīnat al-salām* by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071). Several short notes are supplied in *Murūj al-dhahab* by al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956); in *Rijāl* by the Imami bibliographer Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Najāshī (d. 450/1058–1059); in *Rijāl* by another Imami author, Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Kashshī (early fourth/tenth century); and in *Kitāb al-fiṣal* by the Zāhirī theologian Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1067). Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), along with many other authors, copies al-Baghdādī's and al-Mas'ūdī's accounts, while adding some minor details.<sup>3</sup>

Ishāq al-Nakha'i was active in Iraq<sup>4</sup> and died in 286/899,<sup>5</sup> and al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067–1068) lists him among the contemporaries of the tenth and eleventh Shi'i Imams, 'Alī al-Hādī (d. 254/868) and Ḥasan al-'Askarī (d. 260/874).<sup>6</sup> Let us begin by examining al-Baghdādī's account, as it supplies most of the information about Ishāq al-Nakha'i. Al-Baghdādī's entry on Ishāq opens with a rehashing of some of the negative stereotypes attributed to authors accused of "extremism," namely, that Ishāq al-Nakha'i was "evil of belief" (*khabūth al-madhhab*) and "wicked of faith" (*radī al-i'tiqād*). Perhaps to add a negative detail about him, and to explain the moniker "al-Aḥmar" (the red one), al-Baghdādī tells us that Ishāq had a disease that caused the discoloration of his skin (*baraṣ*, probably referring to leprosy<sup>7</sup>). In order to conceal it, he rubbed himself with something that caused his color to change, presumably giving

3 For a summary of the main sources on Ishāq al-Nakha'i, see al-Amīn, *A'yān al-shī'a* iii, 277–279.

4 In some sources his *nisba* is al-Baṣrī and in others al-Kūfī, and there are reports that he was seen in Baghdad; al-Kashshī, *Ikhtiyār* 440; al-'Asqalānī, *Lisān* ii, 74.

5 The date is supplied by al-'Asqalānī, *Lisān* ii, 75, referring to al-Ṭūsī's *Rijāl al-shī'a*, but in the currently available *Rijāl* by this author no date is provided.

6 al-Ṭūsī, *Rijāl* 384 and 397.

7 cf. Dols, *Djudhām*.

1 For a study of early Shi'i literature surviving in later fragments, see Ansari, *Imamat*; Modarressi's *Tradition* is another useful guide to early Shi'i literature.

2 See Asatryan, *Controversies*; Gerami, *Nakhusūn*; Modarressi, *Crisis* 19–51.

164-181