

# In Praise of the Few

*Studies in Shi'i Thought and History*

By

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Edited by

Amin Ehteshami

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CHAPTER 8

## The Term "Rāfiḍa" in Imāmī Shi'i Usage

The term "Rāfiḍa" has accompanied the history of Shi'ism from a very early period. Its origins apparently go back to the abortive uprising of Zayd b. 'Alī against the Umayyads. The uprising, which took place in 122/740, foreshadowed the final collapse of the Umayyad dynasty a decade later; it also occasioned a serious split in the Shi'i ranks, between those who were ready to heed Zayd's call to arms (i.e., the proto-Zaydiyya) and those who did not believe in the efficacy of armed resistance (i.e., the proto-Imāmiyya). The latter were accused by their opponents of deserting and rejecting Zayd. It is said that before their desertion (*rafḍ*), they demanded unsuccessfully that Zayd publicly dissociate himself from Abū Bakr and 'Umar and pronounce them sinful usurpers. When, in subsequent generations, after having gone through several changes of meaning, the term "Rāfiḍa" became a popular pejorative appellation of the Imāmiyya, it was intended to recall two major sins: for the Zaydiyya, the sin of rejecting Zayd, and for the Sunnis, that of rejecting the first two caliphs.<sup>1</sup>

The various senses of the term "Rāfiḍa" were the subject of a thorough investigation by I. Friedlaender some seventy years ago.<sup>2</sup> Friedlaender points out that "[Rāfiḍa] is obviously meant as a nickname, more exactly, an abusive nickname, a *nomen odiosum*."<sup>3</sup> In this he is correct; but when he adds that the Shi'is

- <sup>1</sup> [According to al-Nawbakhtī (*K. fraq al-shi'a*, ed. H. Ritter (Istanbul, 1931), p. 54, trans. Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr, *An-Nawbakhtī: les sectes shiites* (Tehran, 1980), pp. 77f) and Sa'd b. 'Abd Allāh al-Qummī (*K. al-maqālāt wa 'l-fraq*, ed. Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr (Tehran, 1963), p. 77), it was al-Mughīra b. Sa'īd who first called the followers of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq by the name Rāfiḍa. This occurred after they had dissociated themselves from him. See the discussion in Steve Wasserstrom, "The moving finger writes: Mughīra b. Sa'īd's Islamic gnosis and the myths of its rejection", *History of Religions* 25 (1985), pp. 1-29, at pp. 22f. An entirely different explication of the meaning of "al-Rawāfiḍa" (for which form see J. van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere* (Berlin and New York, 2011), p. 431, n. 24, p. 450, n. 28) is that it refers to those whose excessive love for 'Alī led them to accept his authority alone and to reject the traditions and customs (*al-āthār wa 'l-sunan*) (sc. of the Prophet), just as the Christians rejected the customs and traditions of Jesus. See Abū Muṭī' Maḥḥūl al-Nasafī (d. 318/930), *K. al-radd 'alā ahl al-bida' wa 'l-ahwā'*, ed. M. Bernand, *Annales Islamologiques* 16 (1980), pp. 39-131, at p. 63. For this work see van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere*, pp. 428-446.]
- <sup>2</sup> I. Friedlaender, "The heterodoxies of the Shiites in the presentation of Ibn Ḥazm", *JAOS* 29 (1908), pp. 137-159. [Th. Nöldeke too regarded "Rāfiḍa" purely as a term of abuse; see his "Zur Ausbreitung des Schiitismus", *Der Islam* 13 (1923), pp. 70-81, at p. 74.]
- <sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

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## Some Imāmi Shi'i Views on the Companions

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"The Rāfiḍa are worse than the Jews and the Christians. The Jews were asked, 'Who are the best men?' they said, 'the companions of Moses'; the Christians were asked, 'Who are the best men?' they said, 'the companions of Jesus'; the Rāfiḍa were asked, 'Who are the worst men?' they said, 'the Companions of Muhammad'".<sup>1</sup> This statement is ascribed to the famous traditionist al-Sha'bī (d. between 103/721 and 110/728);<sup>2</sup> if it indeed issued from him, it constitutes one of the earliest condemnations of Rāfiḍī (and, eventually, Imāmi) Shi'ism for its alleged defamation of the Companions. Such condemnations abound in anti-Shi'i writings of subsequent generations. Thus Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) defines the Rāfiḍa as "those who dissociate themselves from the Companions of Muhammad the Messenger of God, insult and disparage them, and declare as unbelievers the four great leaders who are 'Alī, 'Ammār,

- <sup>1</sup> Umar b. Aḥmad Ibn Shāhīn, *K. al-laṭīf fi 'l-sunna*, in Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna al-nabawīyya*, ed. Muḥammad Rashād Salīm (Cairo, 1962), I, p. 17; Ibrāhīm b. 'Amīr al-'Ubaydī, *Umdat al-taḥqīq* (Cairo, 1315 H), p. 121 (on the margin of al-Yāfi'i's *Rawḍ al-rayāḥīn*); Aḥmad b. Zaynī Dahlān, *Risāla fi kayfiyyat al-munāzara ma'a 'l-shī'a wa 'l-radd 'alayhim* (Cairo, 1323 H), p. 35. Cf. also Abū Ya'ālā Ibn al-Farrā', *K. al-mu'tamad fi uṣūl al-dīn*, ed. Wādī Z. Haddād (Beirut, 1974), p. 260; Ibn al-Jawzī, *K. al-mawḍū'āt*, ed. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Uthmān (Medina, 1966–8), I, p. 339; id., *Tadhkirat uli 'l-baṣā'ir fi ma'rīfat al-kabā'ir*, MS Princeton, Garrett, 1896, fol. 166a; Ibn 'Abd al-'Izz(?), *Sharḥ al-'aqāida al-taḥawīyya* (Damascus, c. 1960), pp. 469–470.
- <sup>2</sup> On whom see EI<sup>1</sup>, art. "al-Sha'bī" (F. Krenkow); [EI<sup>2</sup>, art. "al-Sha'bī" (G. H. A. Juynboll)]; E. L. Petersen, *Alī and Mu'āwiya in Early Arabic Tradition* (Copenhagen, 1964), index. Al-Sha'bī is reported to have declared, "Love the family of Muhammad but do not be a Rāfiḍī" (Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *K. ṭabaqāt al-mu'tazila*, ed. S. Diwald-Wilzer (Wiesbaden, 1961), pp. 130, 139) and "I hate him who hates 'Uthmān and 'Alī" (al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-huffāz* (Hyderabad, 1955–8), I, pp. 82–83; Petersen (*Alī and Mu'āwiya in Early Arabic Tradition*, p. 31, n. 18) doubts whether al-Sha'bī really said these words). Al-Sha'bī is also reportedly the author of the scathing remark, "If the Shi'a were birds, they would be vultures; if [other] animals, asses" (Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, ed. E. Sachau a.o. (Leiden, 1905–40), VI, p. 173; see also Abū Muṭī' al-Nasafī, *K. al-radd 'alā ahl al-bida' wa 'l-atwā'*, ed. M. Bernand, *Annales islamologiques* 16 (1980), p. 63; Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna*, I, p. 17; Ibn al-Jawzī, *K. al-mawḍū'āt*, I, p. 338). According to Ibn Sa'd (*Ṭabaqāt*, VI, p. 173), al-Sha'bī was first a Shi'i but later turned against Shi'ism when he heard about some of their beliefs and exaggerations. This may explain why al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (in his *al-Shāfi fi 'l-imāma* (Tehran, 1884), p. 175) accuses al-Sha'bī of anti-Shi'i bias.

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