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THE "PROBLEM" OF 'ABD-ALLAH IBN-SABA'

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In this article, we will attempt to make a radical critique of the accounts concerning 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' and the Saba'iyya.

According to the widely held views, 'Abd-Allah İbn-Saba' is not only the chief and active participant in the spread of dissatisfaction which arose against the caliph 'Uthmān during the second period of his caliphate, but also the only agent of the manifestation of the first civil-war and *tashayyu'* in Islam. Until recently, he is also reputed as the founder of the Shi'a.

'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba', who is also called Ibn-al-Sawdā', "Ibn Sabā, Ibn Wahb ibn-Sabā, Ibn-as-Sawdā-as-Saba'i, Ibn-Saba'-al-Himyari"¹ and "Ibn-Saba' ar-Rāşibi"² in the sources, is accepted as the founder of the Saba'iyya, Sabā'iyya or Sā'iba,³ a sub-sect of the more-extreme wing of the Shi'a (sc. ghulāt).

Our primary source for 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' is Sayf ibn-'Umar. His narration transmitted by at-Ṭabarī are as follows:⁴

'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' was a Jew from Şan'a with a negro mother. He was converted to Islam during the caliphate of 'Uthmān. After becoming muslim he began to propagate some extreme and messianic ideas in the Islamic cities. First he was in the Ḥejāz and later went to Başra⁵, Kūfa and Damascus. In the latter he was not able to convince anybody of his ideas. When the people of Damascus expelled him from their city, he went to Egypt, and settled down there. In Egypt he spoke to the Egyptians in such manner: "It is surprizing that though the

1 al-Maqrizī, *al-Khūṭa'* (Qāhira 1326), IV. 146, 175, 182, 191.

2 Abu Khalaf al-Qummī, *K. al-Maqālāt* (Tahran 1963), p. 55.

3 Ibn-Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa'n-Nihāya* (Beirut 1966), VII. 240.

4 at-Ṭabarī, I. 2942-44.

5 According to al-Maqrizī, he came to Başra in 33/653, cf. IV. 175.

people believe in the returning of Jesus Christ, they deny one who speaks of the returning of the Prophet Muḥammad. Yet Allah, the Mighty and the Powerful orders that: **Verily He Who ordained the Qur'ān for thee, will bring thee back to the Place of Return...** (XXVIII. Qaṣaṣ, 85). So (Holy Prophet) Muḥammad has more right to be brought back than Jesus Christ. This view of his was accepted. And thus he put forward the doctrine of return (*raj'a*) and people began to talk about *raj'a*. Later on he maintained that "There is one thousand prophets and every prophet has a legatee (*waṣī*) and 'Alī is the legatee of Muḥammad". Then he added to this idea that "Muḥammad is the last of the prophets and 'Alī is the last of legatees." Later on, he asserted whether there was anybody more cruel than the one who did not obey the Will of the Messenger of Allah (p.o.h.) and seized power unjustly. Then he said that: "Uthmān was unjustly acclaimed caliph, and this was contrary to the Will of the Holy Prophet Muḥammad (p.o.h.). For this reason, O People, take action to consider this matter, and urge your governors strongly, because you ought to manifest the obligation of 'commanding the right and prohibiting the wrong' (*al-amr bi'l-ma'rūf wa'n-nahy 'anī'l-munkar*) and call upon the people to carry out it." Thus he spreaded his ideas and got in touch with those who were following the same vicious line through personal correspondance. So they manifested the task of 'commanding the right and prohibiting the wrong'. People from all cities began to correspond with each other about their governors and the administrative faults... At last the caliph 'Uthmān sent Muḥammad ibn-Maslama to Kūfa and Uthāma Ibn-Zayd to Baṣra and 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir to Egypt and 'Abd-Allah ibn-'Umar to Damascus in order to investigate the social and administrative situations. All of them went and returned before 'Ammār... The people thought that 'Ammār was late and even he might have been assassinated. Meanwhile 'Abd-Allah ibn-Sa'd ibn-Abī Sarkh's letter has been received, in which he was informing that a group of people in Egypt had gathered around 'Ammār, and that among the people who had formed this group were 'Abd-Allah ibn-as-Sawdā', Khālid ibn-Muljam, Sūdān Ibn-Ḥumrān and Kināna Ibn-Bishr.

Later on at-Ṭabarī, while he speaks of the battle of Baṣra (or, the so-called battle of Camel) occurred in the year 36 (c.e. 656), gives new

informations about Ibn-as-Sawdā', which again have been narrated by Sayf ibn- 'Umar.⁶

To sum up this narration, Ibn-as-Sawdā' and his friends, namely Ilbā' ibn-al-Haysam, 'Adiyy ibn-Khātem, Sālim ibn-Tha'labā-al-'Absī, Shurayḥ ibn-Awfā and the others who were later going to be the several leaders of Khārijites, when they realized that on the eve of the battle of Baṣra, 'Alī and 'Ā'isha, the wife of the Holy Prophet, were achieving an agreement about the discord between them, held a secret meeting. In this secret meeting, they thought that if both sides would arrive at a peaceful settlement, this would mean their destruction, so they decided to start the war the following day whatever the conditions would be. And in that meeting Ibn-as-Sawdā' played the most important role.

This is all the information that we have about 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba', which was narrated by Sayf ibn-'Umar in aṭ-Ṭabarī. He was no longer mentioned anywhere in aṭ-Ṭabarī. It is very curious that such an important man, whose significance was emphasized greatly in the above-mentioned narration, has completely disappeared after the battle of Basra. It seems to be very incredible that Sayf ibn-'Umar, our only narrator, failed to remember 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba', whom he had labelled as the extreme-follower of 'Alī, after the battle of Baṣra. However, this narration of Sayf has been transmitted in the same way by later historians and even by heresiographers. As a matter of fact, Ṭa-Ḥā Ḥusayn, who has a serious suspicion about the historical personality of Ibn-Saba', felt obliged to say this about those historians who accused Ibn-Saba' of being the chief agent in the battle of Baṣra: "It is very strange that these historians have completely forgotten or totally neglected the Saba'iyya when they gave an account of the battle of Ṣiffīn."⁷

As for the heresiographers, they mention Ibn-Saba' when they write about the Saba'iyya and say that the following views have also been claimed by him in addition to the ones narrated by Sayf: (1) 'Alī did not die and he never dies. He will return before the day of Resurrection to chastise 'Arabs with his rod and will fulfill the earth with justice;(2) For imamate the only valid way is *naṣṣ* (designation or appointment);(3) *Taqiyya* (concealing one's true opinion, or, prudent

⁶ aṭ-Ṭabarī, I. 3163-65.

⁷ *al-Fitnat-al-Kubrā* (Qāhira 1966), II. 90.

fear) is neither allowable nor lawful;(4) It is necessary to slander (*ta'an*) Abū Bakr, 'Utmān, and to whithdraw (*tabarrī*) from them.

According to those heresiographers, Ibn-Saba' was the first person who invented *ghuluw* (extremism) in Islām. As a matter of fact, 'Alī attempted to burn Ibn-Saba' because of his deification of him; but later on he abandoned this project and exiled him to Madā'in, because he feared that a conflict might arise.⁸

The report of Sa'd ibn-'Abd-Allah Abū Khalaf al-Qummī (d. 301 / 913), a Shi'ite heresiographer of the early period, about Ibn-Saba' is worth quoting here.⁹

On the death of 'Alī, differences of opinion appeared among the people who believed that 'Alī's imamate had been secured by Allah and His Messenger as an obligatiory act. Then they were divided into three sects:(1) This sect maintained that 'Alī was neither killed nor died and will never die until he chastise 'Arabs with his rod and fulfill the earth with justice and goodness, which is already being fulfilled with injustice and wrongfulness. This is the first sect in Islām that invented after the Holy Prophet the view of *tawaqquf* (standing aloof) and of *ghuluw* (extremism). This sect is called the Saba'iyya in the sense of the followers of 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba'. Ibn-Saba' was 'Abd-Allah ibn-Wahb ar-Rāṣibī al-Hamdānī. In this movement, 'Abd-Allah ibn-Ḥars¹⁰ and Ibn Aswad helped him, and both of them were his intimate friends.

Ibn-Saba', in the meantime, was the first person who invented the idea of slandering (*ta'an*) Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān and the Companions and of withdrawal (*tabarrī*) from them. Moreover, he claimed that he acted in this manner on the command of 'Alī himself. According to him, *taqiyya* was neither allowable nor lawful. Having been informed of this news, 'Alī asked his people to bring Ibn-Saba' to his presence, because he wanted to know if he said those views. On his confessing the truth, 'Alī ordered to have him killed. Thereupon the people from every corner shouted at 'Alī as strongly as pos-

8 According to al-Malaṭī, he was exiled to Sabāt, cf. *at-Tanbīh* (Beirut 1388), 156.

9 K. *al-Maqālāt*, 19-20; cf. an-Nawbakhtī, *Fīraq ash-Shi'a* (Neccef 1355), 21-23.

10 This name may be 'Abd-Allah ibn-'Amr ibn-al-Ḥarb-al-Kindī, the founder of al-Ḥarbiyya, which is the sub-sect of Kaysāniyya from the Ghulāt of Shi'a; cf. al-Qummī, K. *al-Maqālāt*, 162.

sible and said this: "O! The Prince of the Believers! Are you going to kill the one who promulgates the love of you, Ahl-al-Bayt (Family of the House) and the faithfulness towards you and the withdrawal from your enemies?" Up this, 'Ali exiled him to Madā'in.

Now it is so remarkable that in this report Ibn-Saba' has been identified as 'Abd-Allah ibn-Wahb ar-Rāṣībī al-Hamdānī, for we certainly know that 'Abd-Allah ibn-Wahb ar-Rāṣībī was the leader of the Khārijites in Ḥarūrā. These Khārijites withdrew from 'Ali's camp after the Ṣiffīn and agreed on the idea of going to Madā'in and decided to come together in Nahrāwān by using different routes. And it is also recorded that ar-Rāṣībī had been in correspondance with 'Ali.¹¹

When the narration of Sayf is taken into account, Abū Khalaf al-Qummī's identification of Ibn Saba' with ar-Rāṣībī seems to confirm the uncertainty about the historical identity of Ibn-Saba' or Ibn-as-Sawdā'.

On the other hand, 'Abd-al-Qāhir al-Baghdādī (d. 429 / 1037) has utterly confused the matter. First of all he says that the Saba'iyya are the followers of 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' who maintains the most extreme views about 'Ali; then he adds the following sentences:¹²

Ash-Sha'bi tells that 'Abd-Allah ibn-as-Sawdā' supported the doctrine of the Saba'iyya. In fact Ibn-as-Sawdā' was originally a Jew from Hira...

So, in these statements, he identifies 'Abd-Allah ibn-as-Sawdā' and 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' as two separate persons. This view is shared by al-Isfarā'inī (d.471 / 1078) as well. We find almost the same view in Abū Khalaf al-Qummī. He mentions a person, named Ibn-Aswad, as the assistant of Ibn-Saba'. It is probable that this name may be another version, or even mistaken version, of the name Ibn-as-Sawdā'.

Now are Ibn-Saba', to whom so many different patronymic and *nisba* are ascribed, and Ibn-as-Sawdā' the same person or two separate men? Or, is Ibn-Saba' a nickname for 'Abd-Allah ibn-Wahb ar-Rāṣībī, as Abū Khalaf al-Qummī writes? Or again, is the name Ibn-Saba', though he may be a historical person, a "symbol" or a "nickname"? Under available accounts, to answer these questions decisively is,

¹¹ at-Ṭabarī, I. 3365 ff.; cf. Ibn-al-Athīr, II. 339.

¹² *Mezhepler Arasındaki Farklar (al-Farq bain al-Fraq)*, tr. E. Ruhi Fiğlah (İstanbul 1979), 212-14.

unfortunately, impossible, since the only source of our information about Ibn-Saba' is Sayf ibn- 'Umar. According to the great majority of biographers, Sayf is a man with the following qualities:¹³

He is weak (*ḍa'if*) ; He is of no use (*lā-khayra lahu*) ; He is the one abandoned (*matrūk*) ; He has been accused of heresy (*ẓindīq*) ; Though some of his reports are widespread, most of them are discredited and unreliable records; He transmits the Traditions that he himself invented by ascribing them to the reliable (*thiqa*) persons; He invents Traditions; His reports are nonsense.

On the other hand, this very report of Sayf ibn- 'Umar whose nature and results were very important, is in no way found in two important Sunnite scholars, i.e., Ibn-Sa'd (d. 230 / 845) and al-Balāzurī (d. 279 / 892), the latter of whom is a careful searcher of the contemporary events, and two reputed Shi'ite historians, that is Naṣr ibn-Muzāhim al-Minqarī (d. 212 / 827) and Ya'qūbī (d. 292 / 904). So it may be possible to say that this fact, too, seems to confirm the doubts and suspicions felt for the correctness of the reports of Sayf and the historical identity of Ibn-Saba'.

But despite all the contradictory reports on this subject and the unanswered questions, the information narrated by Sayf ibn-'Umar about Ibn-Saba' has been accepted not only by Muslim scholars but also by the Occidental ones. Therefore, throughout the long centuries no attempt has been made to criticize this subject, let alone raising doubt about it.

At the beginning of this century, the first radical critique of the problem of Ibn-Saba' was made by Israel Friedlaender in a long article entitled "Abdallah b. Sabā, der Begründer der Si'a, und sein jüdischer Ursprung".¹⁴ He pointed out the contradictions and inconsistencies of the material given by aṭ-Ṭabarī, ash-Shahrastānī and al-Baghdādī, and also argued that the form of messianic ideas put forward by Ibn-Saba' was similar to that of Jews in the Yemen and the Falashas of Abyssinia.

Since the time Friedlaender wrote his article, so many sources preserved as manuscripts have been edited and published, and this

¹³ ad-Dhahabī, *Mizān-al-I'tidāl* (Qāhira 1382), II. 255-56; Ibn-Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb at-Tahdhīb* (Khaydarabad 1325), IV. 295-96.

¹⁴ *ZA*, XXIII (1909), 296-327, XXIV (1910), 1-46.

valuable activity has enabled the modern scholars to revise this subject. As a matter of fact in the Islamic world, after Ṭā-Hā Ḥusayn, some Sunnite and Shi'ite scholars have made remarkable contribution to the problem of Ibn-Saba'.

According to the view which has been put forward first by 'Alī Husayn al-Wardī whose opinions were shared by many scholars, 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' is a false and an imaginary person. Although aṭ-Ṭabarī does not give any precise date for Ibn-Saba's conversion to Islam during the caliphate of 'Uthmān, al-Ash'arī and an-Nawbakhtī say that the Saba'iyya has come into existence after the murder of 'Alī. Aṭ-Ṭabarī and the historians who rely on him say that the Saba'iyya has come into existence during the second period ((i.e. the period of dissatisfaction) of the caliphate of 'Uthmān. According to aṭ-Ṭabarī, the beginning of this period is 32 / 653 or 33 / 654. This means that this date is at the same time must be the date of the appearance of Ibn-Saba'. Again to aṭ-Ṭabarī, Ibn-Saba' was in Baṣra in those days; then he went to Kūfa and then to Dāmascus where he met Abū Dharr with whom he discussed the question whether "property" (*al-māl*) belongs to Allah or to Muslims. This discussion might have taken place at about 33 / 653-54, since we know that he went to Kūfa from Baṣra and from Kūfa to Dāmascus - a journey that takes at least six months. In fact al-Maqrīzī says that he came to Baṣra at 33 / 653-54.¹⁵ Whereas aṭ-Ṭabarī, in spite of his recording the quarrel between Mu'āwiya, the governor of Dāmascus, and Abū Dharr about "property" amongst the events that occurred in 30 / 650-51, while he speaks of Ibn-Saba' says that when Ibn-as-Sawdā' came to Dāmascus, he met Abū Dharr and said to him:

O Abū Dharr! Are you not surprized at Mu'āwiya's contention that "property" belongs to Allah?¹⁶

When we follow aṭ-Ṭabarī's account of this event, we see that after the quarrel, Mu'āwiya wrote to 'Uthmān a letter informing him of the fact that Abū Dharr was trying to cause an intrigue. Thereupon 'Uthmān ordered Mu'āwiya to send Abū Dharr to Medina. In the same year Abū Dharr was exiled to Rabadha where he died in 31 / 651 or 32 / 652. According to these reports all these events took place before the years of 32-33 / 653-54 which were accepted as the period of the appearance of Ibn-Saba'. Now how is it possible for Ibn-Saba' and

¹⁵ *al-Khiṭaṭ*, IV. 175.

¹⁶ aṭ-Ṭabarī, I. 2858-59.

Abū Dharr to meet each other in Damascus and to exchange views? In this position, is it possible to say that Ibn-Saba' was not a historical person at all and thus Abū Dharr never met him?

'Alī Husayn al-Wardī states further that Ibn Saba', an invented personage, is in fact 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir. It is a strange coincidence that most of the claims ascribed to Ibn-Saba' are also found in the life of 'Ammār. These may be summed up as following:¹⁷

1. Ibn-Saba' was known as Ibn-as-Sawdā'. 'Ammār's patronymic (*kunya*) was also Ibn-as-Sawdā'.¹⁸

2. 'Ammār was belonged to the family of Yemān. This means that he was a descendant of Saba'. For this reason, it is correct to use the name Ibn-Saba' for every Yemenite. All of the Yemenites belong to Saba' ibn-Yashjub ibn-Qaḥṭān. There are two verses in the Qur'ān concerning this point: "... And I have come to thee from Saba' with tidings true." (XXVII. Naml, 22); "There was, for Saba', aforetime, a Sign in their home-land..." (XXXIV. Saba', 15).

3. 'Ammār was a man who always called people to pay their allegiance to 'Alī.

4. During the caliphate of 'Uthmān, 'Ammār went to Egypt and provoked the people there against him... This record also seems to be very much the same as the records which indicate that Ibn-Saba' settled down in Egypt.

5. To Ibn-Saba' is ascribed the view that 'Uthmān seized power unjustly; the real caliph is 'Alī. These are also the sayings of 'Ammār himself.

6. It is said that during the battle of Baṣra, Ibn-Saba' was very active. If this fact is to be examined in a subtle manner, it will be seen that 'Ammār, too, was active in those days, and that even he went to Kūfa with al-Ḥasan and Mālik al-Ashtar to encourage people to join 'Alī's army.

7. As for the reports that say that Ibn-Saba' had provoked Abū Dharr into quarrelling with Mu'āwiya about "property", it is surely known that 'Ammār and Abū Dharr were intimate friends and both were brought up in the school of 'Alī. All of

¹⁷ 'Alī Ḥusayn al-Wardī, *Wu'az-as-Salāṭīn* (Baghdād 1954), 274-78.

¹⁸ Cf. Ibn-Sa'd, III. 246 (Beirut 1957).

them used to come together and consult each other and help one another.

The corollary consequence of all above-mentioned arguments is that Ibn-Saba' is but 'Ammār. Moreover, the tribe of Quraysh was regarding 'Ammār as the leader of the rebellion against 'Uthmān; but at the beginning his name was not mentioned and as a symbol Ibn-Saba' or Ibn-as-Sawdā' was used. So the narrators transmitted these events as they had heard them without realizing who was the real man behind the scene.

At first sight, although these statements seem to be so convincing and logical, in fact they are so daring and they carry many unanswerable questions with them.

In the light of the contemporary political conditions, it is quite likely that Ibn-Saba' or Ibn-as-Sawdā' may well be a "symbol" or a "nickname" for 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir. As a matter of fact, the Umayyads, at the beginning of their wars against 'Alī, said that they were fighting against *Abū Turāb* and *Turābiyyūn*. As it is known well *Abū Turāb* is one of the *nisba* of 'Alī. And according to 'Alī Sāmī an-Nashshār:¹⁹

It is probable that 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' may well be a mere shield for the name of 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir, since, in particular, we come across in the letter written by Ziyād ibn-Abīhi to Mu'āwiya in which he labels Ḥujr ibn-'Adiyy and his companions as *Saba'iyyūn*. But as it is unthinkable that the great Companion as Ḥujr ibn-'Adiyy can be a follower of the Jew who brought confusion to the minds of faithful Muslims. All of these are quite probable. The Umayyads may have hidden the name of the great Companion, 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir, under the coverage of the name Ibn-Saba', since they feared of a probable revolt which might have come from the people of Damascus as soon as they realize that 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir and his men were on the side of 'Alī.

Nevertheless despite all these statements, it seems to be quite difficult to find out the origins of the extravagant views found in the *Saba'iyya*. Although Kāmil Muṣṭafa ash-Shaybī argues for all these matters²⁰ and 'Alī Sāmī an-Nashshār points out that all these extra-

¹⁹ *Nash'at-at-Tashayyūc* (Qāhira 1969), 28.

²⁰ *aṣ-Ṣila bayn-at-Taṣawwuf wa't-Tashayyūc* (Qāhira 1969), 41-92.

vagant views well have been ascribed to 'Ammār by the opponents of 'Alī, and that in fact, 'Ammār may not have been aware of what has been ascribed to him.²¹ they faile to establish the so-called fact that Ibn-Saba' is or may be 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir. If Ibn-Saba' is 'Ammār, as it is maintained, so how the spoils of Ibn-Saba' in Kūfa, Başra and Egypt, are to be explained? It is true that 'Ammār was sent to Egypt to investigate the situation and, according to the report of Sayf, he was convinced by Ibn-Saba'; nevertheless he returned, although with some delay, to Medina and offered his "report" about Egypt to 'Uthmān. In addition to this, he was present in Medina, when the rebels, including Ibn-Saba', from Kūfa, Başra and Egypt came there. On the other hand, Ibn-Saba', who was present, according to Sayf, in the secret meeting held on the eve of the battle of Başra, could not certainly be 'Ammār. Again Ibn-Saba', who is said to be exiled to Madā'in due to his extravagant ideas, could not possibly be 'Ammār, since 'Ammār, after the battle of Başra, was present at Şiffin on the side of 'Alī and killed there in 37 / 657. So before any attempt is made to explain the source of the extravagant views found in the Saba'iyya and to absolve 'Ammār from these imputations, one has to reconcile the reports of Sayf and those of the heresiographers with the above-mentioned claims. In fact, the reports of Sayf and heresiographers concerning Ibn-Saba' did not only confuse the whole issue but they also raised a situation which is itself was very doubtful and irksome.

According to the report of Sayf, Ibn-Saba' has met the Companions such as Abū Dharr, 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir and Abū-ad-Dardā' in different places and has made them believe in his extravagant and heretical views. It is, no doubt, necessary to reject this point as soon as we take into consideration the strong characters of these Companions. Although some of the leading Companions such as Abū Dharr, 'Ammār ibn-Yāsir, and Abū-ad-Dardā' and some other muslims did not approve of the affairs of 'Uthmān and of some Umayyad governors, and thus tended towards a different policy, they can never be the sort of people who are so weak and dazzled to be convinced of the correctness of the heretical views of a converted Jew. Even this last fact is enough to doubt about the soundness of Sayf's report. We cannot accept this account as reasonable even if we think that it tries to excuse the behaviours of some leading Companions who are supposed to be involved in the affairs during the time of 'Uthmān, and wants to establish the fact that

²¹ *Nash'at-at-Tashayyuf*, 28.

these Companions are innocent and that the whole blame goes to Ibn-as-Sawdā'. In the light of these two points, although it is possible to accept the existence of an obscure sect called the Saba'iyya – a sect which put forward many extravagant views about 'Alī, the idea of ascribing the whole fault to one person or a group of people ought to be rejected together with the narration of Sayf ibn- 'Umar or at least one has to approach the matter with great care.

The word "obscure" has been used for the Saba'iyya. As a matter of fact, it is suspicious that:

... no one is named as belonging to the sect except 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba', an Ibn-Sawdā' (who may be the same) and an obscure Companion, Rushayd al-Hajari.²² Because of this, too, no continuity can be shown between the Saba'iyya and other proto-Shi'ite and later Shi'ite phenomena. It follows that the Saba'iyya cannot be considered the beginning of Shi'ism... On general grounds the views ascribed to the Saba'iyya might be dated as having been first propounded about 700. The report in Ibn-Sa' d (VI. 192) that Ibrāhīm an-Nakha'ī (96 / 714) said he was neither a Saba'i nor a Murji'i shows the name must have been in use by about 710. Another point linking the name with the early eighth century is that az-Zuhri (125 / 742) said that Abū-Hāshim (97 / 716), son of Ibn-al-Hanafīyya, made a collection of *ahādīth as-saba'iyya*.²³

Yet it is obscure and doubtful whether the name indicates a real sect or a nickname for those, who have some extreme views about 'Alī and who, by rejecting his death, regard him as *mahdī*. In fact, when al-Malaṭī speaks of Ghāliyya, he refers to the four sub-sects of the Saba'iyya as holding almost the same views as the sects like Kaysāniyya and Ḥarbiyya. These statements of al-Malaṭī seem to confirm the obscurity and doubtfulness of the name, as well.

Under the light of all these explanations, to sum up, it is quite doubtful that the name 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' and the Saba'iyya are derived from a historical person. In fact, it is not necessary that the name should come from a real person. We see the similar obscurity

²² an-Nāshī, *Uṣūl*, ed. by J. van Ess (Beirut 1971), 23. Although Ziyād ibn-Abīhi says that Ḥujr ibn-'Adīy is from the Saba'iyyūn, it is obvious that this is a political contempt.

²³ Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* (Edinburgh 1973), 60 (Turkish tr.: *İslām Düşüncesinin Teşekkül Devri*, Çev. E. Ruhi Fırlalı (Ankara 1981), 73); cf. *Tahdhīb*, VI. 16.

about the origin of the name Kaysāniyya. The Saba'iyya might have derived from the name of a tribe called Saba'. Yāqūt says that this tribe had become proverbial for going in different ways²⁴. It might even be a nickname which is invented to leave the real names into oblivion.

In the light of these points, as Prof. W.M. Watt thinks so, the following hypothesis may be put forward:

a) The name is a nickname and may well overlap other names. It could be derived from the tribe, perhaps with reference to the proverb, or to indicate someone with extreme views. In this case the individual could have been invented to make the name less unpleasant. It is also possible that some element of truth underlies the names of the sect and the individual.

b) The story of the punishment of Ibn-Saba' by 'Alī was probably invented later by followers of 'Alī who wanted to discredit extreme Shi'ite ideas. The Shi'ites constantly project later claims back into the past...²⁵

In short the names 'Abd-Allah ibn-Saba' and the Saba'iyya might be a nick name or an insulting label used, in those social and political circumstances, for any sort of opponents or, for those who ascribed many extravagant and messianic ideas to 'Alī and Ahl-al-Bayt.

²⁴ *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, III. 27.

²⁵ Watt, *Ibid*, 60-61 (Tr. 73-74).