SHĪʿĪ ISLAM

An Introduction

The initial centuries after the Prophet Muḥammad's death witnessed the proliferation of diverse ideas and beliefs. It was during this period of roughly three centuries that two dominant intellectual traditions emerged, Sunnism and Shi‘ism. Sunni Muslims endorsed the historical caliphate, whereas Shi‘ī Muslims lent their support to ‘Ali, cousin of the Prophet and the fourth caliph. The Shi‘a also articulated a distinctive set of theological doctrines concerning the nature of God and legitimate political and religious authority. This book examines the development of Shi‘ī Islam through the lenses of belief, narrative, and memory. In an accessible yet nuanced manner, it conceives of Shi‘ism as a historical project undertaken by a segment of the early Muslim community that felt dispossessed. It also covers, for the first time in English, a wide range of Shi‘ī communities from the demographically predominant Twelvers to the transnational Ismā‘īlis to the scholar-activist Zaydīs. The resulting portrait of Shi‘ism reveals a distinctive and vibrant Muslim community with a remarkable capacity for reinvention and adaptation, grounded in a unique theological interpretation of Islam.

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Two historical narratives are shared by all Shi‘ī groups. The first focuses on the succession to the Prophet and, specifically, the community’s elevation of Abu Bakr to the caliphate over the superior claims of ‘Ali. The second centers on the death of Ḥusayn (the Prophet’s grandson) and a small contingent of his family and followers at the hands of an Umayyad army in 680. The discussion that follows explores the importance of each of these narratives in the construction of a distinct Shi‘ī identity.

I. THE SUCCESSION TO MUḤAMMAD

According to the Shi‘a, the Muslim community’s rejection of ‘Ali marked a fundamental departure from Muḥammad’s desires and represented a loss of legitimate political and religious leadership. As mentioned previously, this event is often cited as the starting point for the Sunnī-Shi‘a division. In reality, however, its significance emerged gradually through its incorporation into a growing corpus of polemical arguments. The most important of these arguments combined (i) events and statements from the Prophet’s life with (ii) general expectations for succession embedded in the Qur‘ān. The Twelvers and Ismā‘īlīs were particularly interested in historical episodes that suggested that the Prophet had explicitly appointed ‘Ali as his successor. This was a product of their requirement that an Imām be formally designated (nāṣ) by his predecessor (see Chapter 2). The Zaydis were bound by no such requirement and offered a more subtle case for ‘Ali’s claims grounded primarily in Qur‘ānic expectations. Each of these arguments is discussed in this section.¹

¹ Bear in mind that Shi‘ī groups often offer a single cohesive justification for ‘Ali’s succession that combines elements from both the historical and the Qur‘ānic arguments.
Before proceeding, it should be mentioned that the field of early Islamic history has experienced a fundamental transformation in the last fifty years. New methodological developments have called into question basic assumptions about the Muslim historical sources. As many revisionist studies have shown, the reliability of these sources is suspect and must be tested on a case-by-case basis. The historical narrative presented here, however, is not the product of a close source-critical reading of the earliest layer of surviving historical evidence. Rather, it represents the Muslim community's collective memory of its formative years.²

A. The Prophet-Historical Case for Succession

Muḥammad was born around 570 in the town of Mecca near the western coast of the Arabian Peninsula. Mecca was a center for trade in the region and home to the Ka'ba, a particularly venerated local shrine that consisted of a square structure with a black meteorite embedded in one corner. Muslim sources claimed that the Ka'ba was originally built by the Prophet Ibrāhim (Abraham)³ and his son Ismā'īl (Ishmael).⁴ By the sixth century, however, it anchored a shrine complex that held a collection of idols representing local deities. Mecca was dominated by Quraysh, a tribe that had begun to expand its regional power through a nexus of military alliances, economic dominance, and religious influence. Muḥammad was a member of the Banū Hāshim, a highly respected and well-positioned clan of the Quraysh, but one that had been weakened by the premature deaths of some of its leading male figures. Muḥammad was orphaned at an early age and eventually raised in the household of his paternal uncle, Abū Ṭālib. He began his career as a merchant, working for Khadija, a rich widow many years older than he. She was impressed with his business acumen and honesty, and the two eventually married.

Muḥammad spent a great deal of time meditating in the mountains outside of Mecca. On one such occasion, nearing the age of forty (around 610), he had a religious experience during which an angel spoke to him on behalf of God. This was the first of many similar experiences over the

² Those readers interested in revisionist understandings of the earliest period should consult the reading list at the end of the chapter.
³ Here and in all subsequent references, I utilize the Muslim version of names for Biblical figures. In the interests of clarity, I include the Biblical names in parentheses.
⁴ This origin account was coupled with claims that the Arabs were the descendants of Ibrāhim through Ismā'īl.
Community

next twenty-two years of his life. The resulting revelations were ultimately compiled into a single book known today as the Qurʾān. Muḥammad did not initially publicize his encounters with God. He divulged the revelations only to Khadija (who supported and encouraged him) and a limited circle of friends and family. In 613, Muḥammad was instructed to spread his message to the larger Meccan community. From 613 through 619, he gathered a small but significant following that increasingly provoked the ire of the leadership of the Quraysh. It is possible that they saw the new movement as a direct challenge to their political power. According to the norms of Arab tribal society, however, they could not attack Muḥammad without the consent of his uncle, Abū Ṭalib. When such consent was not forthcoming, the Meccan leadership targeted those Muslims who lacked clan protection, such as slaves and social outcasts.

With the deaths of Abū Ṭalib and Khadija in 619, Muḥammad lost both his protection and his two biggest supporters. He was now in a vulnerable position subject to physical assault and even death at the hands of his enemies. The next three years were spent finding a new home for the nascent Muslim community. The ideal opportunity arose in Yathrib (now called Medina), which was plagued by tribal violence and factionalism. The exact reasons for the town’s receptivity to Muḥammad are unclear, but it appears that he accepted the role of a mediator in exchange for (i) recognition of the Muslim community (umma) as a legitimate social actor and (ii) a guarantee of military support in case of hostilities with outside forces. In 622, Muḥammad and a large number of his followers migrated to Yathrib, an event that marks the start of the Muslim calendar.

Over the next ten years, the Muslim community carved out an independent identity through the elaboration of distinctive laws and rituals. The times, structure, and direction of the daily prayer were established. The basic parameters of criminal and family law were articulated. Overall, a tribal identity rooted in polytheism was gradually challenged by a religious identity grounded in the belief in a single God. The same period witnessed an escalation in hostilities between the Muslims in Yathrib (Medina) and the Quraysh in Mecca. A series of important battles in 624 (the Battle of Badr), 625 (the Battle of Uḥud), and 627 (the Battle of Khandaq) resulted in a decisive shift of power in favor of the Muslims. By 630, Mecca was no longer a threat, and the city fell to the Muslims almost without a fight. Most of the remaining Quraysh converted to Islam and were smoothly integrated into the Muslim community. The Prophet died two years later in 632 in Yathrib (Medina) at the approximate age of sixty-two.
The biographical narrative presented here is accepted by all Muslims. However, Sunnī and Shi‘ī historical works extend and elaborate this template to produce larger polemical narratives. These narratives were subsequently incorporated into the earliest layers of the Muslim historical tradition. The discussion that follows focuses on the Shi‘ī version of history. Specifically, it documents the historical proofs that the Shi‘a use to establish ‘Ali’s political and religious claims.

The Shi‘ī narrative begins with ‘Ali’s birth. Shi‘ī and (many) Sunnī sources agree that ‘Ali was born around 598 inside the Ka‘ba (the House of God in Mecca toward which Muslims pray) when his mother (Fatīma bt. Asad) went into labor during a trip to the shrine. The Shi‘ī account includes a number of additional details, such as a report that the structure split open to provide her refuge. She emerged from the Ka‘ba three days later with a baby in her hands. The baby’s eyes remained closed until the Prophet arrived and performed a traditional ceremony in which he placed a partially chewed date in its mouth. Upon opening his eyes, the first face that the baby saw was that of Muḥammad, who then named him ‘Ali. In addition to the obvious miraculous connotations of the narrative, the Shi‘a interpret the date ritual as a symbolic transfer of knowledge and authority from the Prophet to ‘Ali.

A second mark of distinction for ‘Ali involves his upbringing in the household of the Prophet. Ibn Ishāq ascribes this to a famine that struck Mecca during ‘Ali’s childhood. Muḥammad and his paternal uncle, ‘Abbās, offered to alleviate the financial burden on Abū Ṣāliḥ (‘Ali’s father) by each providing for one of his sons. The Prophet took ‘Ali and raised him in accordance with the teachings of Islam. Ibn Ishāq notes that “‘Ali was the first male to believe in the apostle of God, to pray with him and then believe in his divine message, when he was a boy of ten.” ‘Ali’s status as the first male adherent to Islam (after the Prophet), however, was not uncontested as competing accounts accorded the honor to Abū Bakr. The polemical dimensions of this disagreement are obvious. The Shi‘a eventually argued

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5 I exclude charismatic elements including miraculous accounts of angels washing Muḥammad’s heart as a child or of Syrian monks identifying him as a new prophet. For these, see Guillaume’s translation of Ibn Ishāq’s (d. 767) biography of the Prophet, one of the first extant sources in the Arabic historical tradition, which was redacted and preserved by Ibn Hishām (d. 833).

6 Both Sunnī and Shi‘ī views of the succession are detectable in Ibn Ishāq’s biography.

7 There are admittedly some (Ismā‘īli and Twelver) accounts of the lives of ‘Ali and his descendants that begin before creation. The current discussion, however, is primarily interested in a broader consensus Shi‘ī narrative.

8 Guillaume, Life, ii.4.

9 Some Sunnī sources offer a compromise position by making ‘Ali the first child and Abū Bakr the first man to accept Islam.
that ‘Ali was not only the first convert but that he had never practiced any form of idolatry, having been raised by the Prophet from a young age. This clearly placed him above Abū Bakr, who was a middle-aged man at the time of his conversion.

The first example of an unambiguous designation of ‘Ali as Muhammad’s successor dates to 613, during the early stages of the Prophet’s public preaching. The account (known as Yaum al-Dār or “the day of the home”) begins with the revelation of Q26:214–15, which reads, “And warn your tribe of near kindred, And lower your wing to those believers who follow you.” In response to this divine command, Muhammad ordered a feast for members of his extended clan. After overcoming the intransient hostility of one of his uncles, he addressed the gathering in the following passage (recounted by ‘Ali) that is worth quoting in its entirety:

The prophet said, “O Sons of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib [his extended clan], I know of no Arab who has come to his people with a nobler message than mine. I have brought you the best of this world and the next. God has ordered me to call you to him. So which of you will cooperate with me in this matter [and be] my brother, my executor (wāṣī), and my successor (khulīfa)?” The men remained silent and I [‘Ali], though the youngest, most rheumy-eyed, fattest in body, and thinnest in legs, said, “O Prophet of God, I will be your helper in this matter.” He laid his hand on the back of my neck and said, “This is my brother, my executor, and my successor among you. Hearken to him and obey him.” The men got up laughing and said to Abū Ṭalib, “He has ordered you to listen to your son and obey him!”

This explicit identification of ‘Ali as successor is recorded by Ibn Ishāq and serves as one of the cornerstones of the Shi‘i argument for formal designation. The episode occurred at the start of Muḥammad’s mission, further reinforcing ‘Ali’s leadership credentials from an early age. It is important to note that the passage does not mention Abū Bakr or any other prominent Companion.

The next twenty years saw a series of incidents that the Shi‘a consider indicative of ‘Ali’s special standing. On the night of the Prophet’s flight to Yathrib (Medina) in 622, ‘Ali slept in his bed to fool a team of assassins sent by the Meccan leadership to kill Muḥammad. As the Prophet worked toward building a cohesive community in Medina, he decided to pair each of his Meccan followers with a Medinan local as brothers. According to the Shi‘i tradition, the only exception to this rule was ‘Ali, whom the Prophet chose for himself. In 624, ‘Ali asked the Prophet for permission to marry his daughter Fāṭima. Shi‘i and (some) Sunnī accounts note that the

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10 Guillaume, Life, 117–18 (with some changes).
Prophet had previously refused similar requests by Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. The Prophet immediately agreed and put the matter to his daughter, who expressed her acceptance. The Shi‘ī narrative emphasizes that the marriage was contracted through the will of God, who chose ‘Alī to be the forebear of all the Prophet’s descendants.\(^{11}\)

‘Alī’s credentials were also established on the battlefield. ‘Alī was the standard-bearer for the Muslim army in every major military engagement, an honor bestowed on him by the Prophet and a clear marker (according to the Shi‘a) of his special status. He played a prominent role in the Battle of Badr (624), where he was one of three Muslims to engage in single combat with the enemy before full-scale hostilities. He similarly distinguished himself in the Battles of Uhud (625), Khandaq (627), and Ḥunayn (630). The most famous of ‘Alī’s military exploits, however, occurred during the Battle of Khaybar (629), which pitted the Muslims against the rich Jews of the oasis town of that name. According to the Shi‘ī and Sunni accounts, ‘Alī was not initially expected to participate because of an illness in his eyes that hampered his vision. In the first few days of the battle, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar held the standard of the army but proved incapable of overcoming the enemy. Muhammad then declared that the next morning, he would bestow the standard on one who “does not run away from the battlefield and will not return until God grants him victory.” The next day, the Prophet called for ‘Alī and cured his blindness by applying some of his saliva directly on ‘Alī’s eyes. In the Shi‘ī narrative, ‘Alī subsequently led the Muslim army to victory through a series of almost superhuman feats.

The historical tradition also contains numerous statements of ‘Alī’s merit ascribed to the Prophet but not situated in any specific moment. With the exception of the first, these general affirmations are often severed from historical context. Some were mentioned in Chapter 2 and cover not just ‘Alī but the family of the Prophet as a whole. The most important such traditions include the following:

(i) The tradition of \(\text{al-thaqalayn}\):

“I am leaving you with two safeguards (thaqalayn), the Book of God and the members of my household (ahl al-bayt). As long as you cling to these two, you will not go astray.”

(ii) The tradition of \(\text{al-kisā’}\):

This detailed account refers to the gathering of Muhammad, ‘Alī, Fāṭima, Ḥasan, and Ḥusayn under the cloak (kisā’) of the Prophet and their subsequent blessing by God.

\(^{11}\) Note that Fāṭima was the only offspring of the Prophet with children that survived to adulthood.
(iii) The tradition of *al-safina*:

“The likeness of my family is Nūḥ’s [Noah’s] Ark (*safina*); whoever takes refuge therein is saved and whoever opposes it is drowned.”

(iv) The tradition of *amān al-umma*:

“Just as the stars are a means of securing (*amān*) the people (*umma*) of the earth against drowning, my family is a means of securing my people from division.”

(v) The tradition of *al-manzila*:

“All, your rank (*manzila*) in relation to me is that of Hārūn [Aaron] in relation to Mūsā [Moses].”

(vi) The tradition of the Bāb:

“I am the city of knowledge and ‘Ali is its gate (*bāb*).”

The first four traditions provide proof of ‘Ali’s successorship by emphasizing the elevated status of the Prophet’s family (*ahl al-bayt*). ‘Ali is placed at the head of a household that provides exclusive refuge from divine punishment and the sole means of salvation. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Shi‘i scholars drew on these traditions to extend the concept of *walāya* (a charismatic loyalty initially associated with ‘Ali) to his family and descendants. The fifth tradition implicitly suggests ‘Ali’s role as successor by drawing parallels to Hārūn (Aaron). Shi‘i scholars note that Hārūn was designated a prophet in the Qur’ān and helped Mūsā in administration, playing a part similar to that of a minister. Although the office of prophethood is closed (i.e., Muḥammad is the final prophet), this does not curtail ‘Ali’s rights to Hārūn’s remaining powers, which, they argue, include those of temporal and spiritual succession. The sixth tradition is more ambiguous because there is no mention of successorship. It does, however, legitimize ‘Ali’s knowledge credentials through a direct association with the Prophet. This tradition is particularly prevalent in Ismā‘ili and Twelver sources, which place great emphasis on the knowledge duties of the Imām.

The historical events and traditions detailed here are rarely forwarded as definitive proof that ‘Ali was the rightful successor to the Prophet. Rather, they are used by Shi‘i scholars to build anticipation for an impending formal announcement. Each incident adds to ‘Ali’s credentials in a logical fashion. He is the first male to respond to the Prophet’s message. He is raised by the Prophet. He supports the Prophet publicly as a child. He marries the Prophet’s daughter. He represents the Prophet in battle and leads the Muslims to victory. He is the subject of the Prophet’s love and adulation. Becoming the Prophet’s successor, however, requires a public declaration. For the Shi‘a, this declaration occurred during the Prophet’s final pilgrimage in 632 at a location outside Mecca known as Ghadir Khumm.
The most elaborate early Shi‘ī account of the events of Ghadir Khumm is found in the Kitāb al-Irshād (The Book of Guidance) of the seminal tenth-century Twelver scholar al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d. 1022). The narrative begins with the Prophet dispatching ‘Ali at the head of a delegation to collect tribute from Yemen. When ‘Ali returns, he joins Muḥammad, who is in the process of performing the pilgrimage to Mecca. The Prophet takes ‘Ali as his partner and they complete the rites together. Interspersed in the narrative are incidents that highlight ‘Ali’s superiority over other Companions. In one instance, the men in the delegation to Yemen approach the Prophet to complain of ‘Ali’s overly strict adherence to God’s law. In another, the Prophet rebukes ‘Umar for his refusal to follow a command related to ritual purity. By contrast, Muḥammad repeatedly praises ‘Ali for his exemplary and faultless behavior.

Al-Shaykh al-Mufid’s narrative culminates with the Prophet ordering the large convoy of pilgrims to stop at Ghadir Khumm, a marshy area located between Mecca and Medina. The Shi‘ī sources emphasize the direness of the location to lend the occasion a sense of urgency. It is as if the Prophet is intent on performing a task (or making an announcement) that cannot wait for the caravan to reach a more pleasant stopping point. Shi‘ī scholars offer a number of additional reasons for this decision. Perhaps the notoriously hot and uncomfortable conditions were meant to brand the moment in the memory of the pilgrims? Perhaps the pilgrims would soon part ways and the Prophet wanted many witnesses?

Al-Shaykh al-Mufid ascribes the decision to the revelation of Q5:67, which reads:

O Messenger, deliver that which has been sent down to you from your Lord; for if you do not, you will not have delivered His Message. God will protect you from men. God guides not the unbelievers.

The Prophet interpreted the verse as a divine command to proclaim ‘Ali as his successor. He immediately stopped the caravan, erected a platform, and arranged for his words to be broadcast by word of mouth through the large gathering. The account of the subsequent speech is worth quoting at length:

He [the Prophet] then began to address the people. He praised and glorified God, and praised most eloquently. He gave the community news of his own death, saying, “I have been summoned, and it is nearly the moment for me to answer. The time has come for me to depart from you. I leave behind me among you two things: if you cleave to them, you will never go astray – that
is, the Book of God and my offspring from my family (ahl al-bayt). They will never scatter until they lead you to me at the waters (Hjawd).”

Then he called out at the top of his voice: “Am I not more appropriate [to rule] you than yourselves?”

“By God, yes!” they answered.

He went on speaking continuously without any interruption and, taking both arms of the Commander of the Faithful [‘Ali] and raising them so that the white of his armpits could be seen, said, “Of whomever I am the master (ma[w]lā), this man, ‘Ali, is his master (ma[w]lā). O God, befriend whoever befriends him, be hostile to whoever opposes him, support whoever supports him, and desert whoever deserts him.”

Then [the Prophet] came down... He led them in the midday prayer. Then he sat in his tent and ordered ‘Ali to sit opposite him. He [the Prophet] ordered the Muslims to go in group after group to congratulate him [‘Ali] on his position and to acknowledge his command over the faithful. They did that.15

The first part of the Prophet’s speech incorporates the tradition of al-thaqalayn that was mentioned earlier in this chapter and in Chapter 2. Although it honors the family of the Prophet, it does so without definitively affirming ‘Ali’s claim to succession. The second part (also mentioned in Chapter 2) equates ‘Ali’s authority over the community to that of the Prophet. This reading turns on the meaning of the term ma[w]lā, which the Shi’a understand here as “master” (with political and religious connotations) and the Sunnis simply as “friend” (with no connotations of distinction or authority). The Shi’a imbue the word with an almost cosmic significance by linking it to the theological doctrine of walāya, which (as shown in Chapter 2) denotes a charismatic bond of loyalty between the Shi’a and the entirety of the Prophet’s family, including ‘Ali.

Al-Shaykh al-Mufid works to dispel any lingering doubts or ambiguities about the meaning of the Prophet’s words. He relates that after ‘Ali had received congratulations, Ḥassān b. Thābit (a famous poet and Companion) stood on elevated ground before the Prophet and recounted the day’s events. His rendition included the following line not found in the original account: “He [the Prophet] said to him [‘Ali], ‘Arise, ‘Ali, I am content that you should be Imam and guide after me.’” Rather than object to

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13 According to the Muslim tradition, the term Hjawd refers to a basin of water at which Muhammad will meet his community on the day of resurrection. See Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. “Hjawd” (Wensinck).
this addition, the Prophet praised Hāssān and, in doing so, embraced this interpretation of his words. The implication of the event was thus made clear: the declaration of Ghadir Khumūm explicitly appointed ‘Alī as both the Prophet’s successor and the first Imām.

The historical narrative presented here was influenced by Shi‘i theological concerns, particularly the Ismā‘īlī/Twelver belief in an inerrant Imām. Recall the argument (in Chapter 2) that the community required access to a correct interpretation of the religious source texts to avoid the deviations and mistakes of previous monotheistic communities (i.e., the Jews and the Christians). It was impossible, however, for an imperfect Muslim community to recognize the perfect Imām. In fact, the Imām’s identity could be determined only through a formal designation (nāṣıḥ) by the Prophet, acting on the orders of God. It was unthinkable that God or His Prophet would conceal this critical information. Consequently, Ismā‘īlī and Twelver historical sources constructed the life of the Prophet in a manner that continually emphasized ‘Alī’s superiority. Every honor was framed as proof of ‘Alī’s excellence and indicative of his right to the succession. Still, a formal declaration was necessary to dispel any lingering doubts and to quell potential controversy.

It is the events at Ghadir Khumūm that firmly and unambiguously establish ‘Alī’s claim to political and religious authority for the Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers. Remembrance of the Ghadir Khumūm pronouncement serves as one of the distinctive celebrations that demarcate the Shi‘a from the Sunnīs. The events are collectively known as the ‘Id (festival) of al-Ghādir, and they are commemorated on the eighteenth day of the final month of the Muslim calendar (Dhū al-Ḥijja). Historically, rulers who claimed a Shi‘i pedigree utilized ‘Id al-Ghādir to further their political legitimacy. In 964, the Būyids Mu‘izz al-Dawla instituted the first public celebration of ‘Id al-Ghādir in Baghdad despite protests from large segments of the urban population.14 In 973, the Ismā‘īlī Fāṭimid ruler al-Mu‘izz institutionalized the commemoration of ‘Id al-Ghādir in Cairo, where it remained one of the most important religious festivals into the thirteenth century. Over time, the festival became a flashpoint for Sunni-Shi‘i tensions, occasionally leading to street violence. Some non-Shi‘i groups in Baghdad even developed competing festivals to extol Abū Bakr’s close relationship with the Prophet. Although these non-Shi‘i celebrations have not survived into the modern period, ‘Id al-Ghādir retains a seminal importance for the contemporary

14 The Būyids, mentioned in Chapter 2, were a Zaydi Shi‘i dynasty, originating in the Daylam region of the southern Caspian Sea, who ruled Baghdad from 934 to 1055.
Shi‘i community. Individual elements of the festivities often vary by region, but they generally share a Shi‘i tone.

B. The Qur’anic Expectation Case for Succession

The foregoing historical argument uses the Prophet’s biography to create a narrative culminating in ‘Ali’s designation as successor at Ghadir Khumm. For the Ismā‘ilis and Twelvers, such a designation is a necessary consequence of their belief in the Imām as an indispensable and inerrant interpreter of revelation and a source of religious guidance. Given their emphasis on the political duties of the Imām, the Zaydis are not as invested in establishing ‘Ali’s formal appointment. In fact, a significant portion of early Zaydis argued that the proofs for ‘Ali’s political and religious authority were implicit. A careful consideration of the facts after Muḥammad’s death pointed to ‘Ali’s succession, but this conclusion was far from self-evident. Thus, the decision of most Companions to support Abū Bakr over ‘Ali was a mistake in judgment and reasoning. It did not, however, reach the level of apostasy. Although Zaydi scholars certainly cited some of the historical proofs mentioned previously, they felt that the strongest evidence for ‘Ali’s succession was embedded in the text of the Qur’ān itself.

The Qur’ānic case for ‘Ali’s succession incorporates many of the verses mentioned here and in Chapter 2 but weaves them together in an innovative manner. It begins with an affirmation of the general importance of familial relations in the Qur’ān. Specifically, the Qur’ān entitles family members to a share of the religious poor-tax (zakāt) of their kin (Q2:177, Q2:215) and recommends their inclusion in the settlement of inheritance (Q4:7–8). It also stipulates the kind treatment of blood relatives in its rendering of God’s covenant with the Israelites (Q2:83). This familial preference is contingent on faith: the refusal of Ibrāhīm’s (Abraham’s) father (Q9:113) and Nūḥ’s (Noah’s) son (Q11:45–6) to believe in God’s message effectively severed their bonds of kinship. Overall, the Qur’ān elevates family ties above those of friendship or alliance (Q33:6, Q8:75), emphasizing their persistence through personal grudges or petty arguments (Q24:22).

The importance of family also features in Qur’ānic narratives of the lives of past prophets. The familial unit is, in fact, the central conduit for

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15 Notably, later Zaydis moved away from this view and argued (in line with the Ismā‘ilis and the Twelvers) that ‘Ali’s designation was clear and unambiguous.
16 The Qur’ānic argument that follows is indebted to Madelung, Succession, 6–18. For translations of relevant Qur’ānic passages, see the Appendix.
the perpetuation of prophecy. The Qur’an traces prophethood through
a single familial chain that begins with Ādām (Adam), passes through
Nūḥ (Noah), and then resides primarily with the descendants of Ibrāhīm
(Abraham) (Q6:84–87, Q3:33–34). On a more general level, the familial
unit plays a key role in sacred history, with individual prophets
explicitly asking God to affirm their kin as spiritual and material heirs.
The most prominent example is that of Ibrāhīm, who is granted two
heirs in the form of Ishāq (Isaac) and Ya‘qūb (Jacob), the patriarchs
of the Israelites (Q19:49–50, Q29:27). The story of Mūsā (Moses) provides
another example of the importance of kin in the Qur’ānic understand-
ing of prophethood. Specifically, Mūsā implores God to grant him the
support of his brother Hārūn (Aaron) (Q20:29–30). God responds by ele-
vating Hārūn to the position of assistant (Q25:35) and allowing him a role
in the reception of revelation (Q21:48). A similar dynamic informs the
Qur’ānic accounts of Dāwūd (David) (Q38:30) and Zakariyyā (Zachariah)
(Q19:5–7).

These examples suggest a general Qur’ānic bias in favor of familial
succession. In fact, the entire Qur’ān forwards a historical sensibility rooted
in prophets and their families. According to the Shi’a, the position of the
Prophet’s family (ahl al-bayt) must be understood in the context of this
Qur’ānic framework. Thus, they interpret a number of verses (e.g., Q33:33,
Q3:61, and Q42:23) as clear proof for the elevated status of the Prophet’s
household.\(^{17}\) The resulting argument for ‘Ali’s succession combines (i) the
general centrality of familial units in the Qur’ānic text with (ii) the special
status of Muḥammad’s family in Shi’ī exegesis. Madelung summarizes this
position as follows:

Insofar as the Qur’ān expresses the thoughts of Muḥammad, it is evident that he
could not have considered Abū Bakr his natural successor or have been pleased
by his succession. The Qur’ān certainly does not fully reflect Muḥammad’s
views about the men and women surrounding him and his attitude towards
them. Yet he could not have seen his succession essentially other than in the light
of narrations of the Qur’ān about the succession of the earlier prophets, just as
he saw his own mission as a prophet, the resistance of his people with which he
met, and his ultimate success by divine grace in the light of the experience of
the former prophets as related in the Qur’ān. These earlier prophets considered
it a supreme divine favour to be succeeded by their offspring or close kin for
this they implored their Lord.\(^ {18}\)

\(^{17}\) Such an interpretation is not specific to the Shi’a alone. Sunnī exegetical works offer similar glosses.
In other words, the Qur’ān established a basic expectation for ‘Ali’s succession based on his kinship with the Prophet. Even if the Prophet did not formally designate ‘Ali, the proof for his right to succession is embedded in Qur’ānic narratives about past prophets and their clear parallels with Muḥammad and his family.

C. Summary

The arguments for ‘Ali’s succession presented in this section are found in the polemical works of all Shī‘ī groups. For every Shī‘ī claim, however, there is a Sunnī counterclaim based on a radically different interpretation of the same historical episode. The Shī‘ī view of the declaration at Ghadir Khumm is countered by a Sunnī claim that the event was intended to improve ‘Ali’s standing at a time when he was particularly unpopular. The Shī‘ī argument of Qur’ānic expectations is met by a Sunnī argument that Muḥammad was the final prophet and thus had no lineal heirs. Most Shī‘ī scholars creatively supplement historical proofs with Qur’ānic verses to produce polemical narratives that utilize aspects of both arguments. The choice to highlight one line of reasoning and dismiss another reflects the distinctive theological positions of individual Shī‘ī groups.

The Ismā‘īlī and the Twelver Shī‘a are partial to the argument drawn from the Prophet’s biography.39 This is because of their emphasis on the Imām’s role as the exclusive source of proper religious guidance. As noted earlier (and in Chapter 2), the Ismā‘īlī/Twelver Shī‘a hold to an understanding of God’s justice that requires the presence of an Imām to provide inerrant interpretations of the final revelation. Formal designation is the only way for a flawed community to be certain of the identity of the Imām. Consequently, the Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers highlight biographical accounts of ‘Ali’s interactions with the Prophet, especially the episode at Ghadir Khumm. The importance of this declaration is such that it is annually celebrated in Ismā‘īlī and Twelver communities.

By contrast, the argument drawn from Qur’ānic expectations is particularly resonant with the Zaydi Shī‘a. Recall that the Zaydis reject the Imām’s inerrancy (‘isma), which means that the Imām is identified not on the basis of his perfect knowledge but on his scholarly credentials, military skills, and establishment of justice. Because the Zaydis do not, in general, require formal designation, they are not as heavily invested in the events of

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39 This is not to say that the Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers completely neglect Qur’ānic evidence. They certainly cite Qur’ānic passages, but their arguments often center on events from the Prophet’s life.
Ghadir Khumm. Instead, Zaydī scholars tend to rely on Qur’ānic evidence to establish ‘Ali’s right to succession. This argument has the benefit of a Qur’ānic foundation, but it also allows for the possibility of human error in the selection process. It is not surprising, then, to find many Zaydī scholars who accept the uprightness of early Companions despite their support for Abū Bakr over ‘Ali. The Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers, by contrast, are more willing to declare figures such as Abū Bakr apostates for their dismissal of the Prophet’s clear and unambiguous designation of ‘Ali as successor.\(^{20}\)

II. THE TRAGEDY AT KARBALA

In 680, Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali (the Prophet’s grandson) and a small contingent of his family and followers were killed by an Umayyad army at a site occupied by the present-day town of Karbala in southern Iraq. Shi‘ī reports of the massacre are graphic and highlight Umayyad oppression and greed. These accounts vary in form and content, reflecting the differing theological concerns of individual Shi‘ī groups. The Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers frame Husayn’s death in almost apocalyptic terms, while the Zaydis consider it the first in a series of failed ‘Alid rebellions. The Twelvers, in particular, forward a Karbala narrative that is epic in scope and infused with myriad supernatural features. For all three Shi‘ī groups, the commemoration of Karbala is an important focal point for piety and a central component of communal identity.

A. The Base Narrative

The first period of civil strife in the Muslim community began with the murder of ‘Uthmān in 656 and the election of ‘Ali as the new caliph.\(^{21}\) ‘Ali’s authority was immediately contested by a group of prominent early Companions led by Ṭalḥa b. ‘Ubayd Allāh (d. 656), al-Zubayr b. al-Awwām (d. 656), and ‘Ā’isha (one of the Prophet’s widows and the daughter of Abū Bakr). The two sides met in 656 at the Battle of the Camel outside Basra (Iraq), with ‘Ali winning a decisive victory. After consolidating control over Mecca and Medina, ‘Ali settled in Kufa (in southern Iraq), moving

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\(^{20}\) Although not explicitly mentioned in this section, Ismā‘īli and Twelver accounts routinely portray Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and the Companions who followed them as motivated by material ambitions that outweighed their commitment to Islam.

\(^{21}\) Bear in mind that the Shi‘a consider ‘Ali the sole legitimate political and religious authority immediately following the Prophet’s death and believe that his rights were usurped by Abū Bakr, ‘Umar, and ‘Uthmān.
the capital of the nascent Muslim state out of the Arabian peninsula. ‘Ali continued to face opposition from Syria in the figure of Mu‘awiya b. Abi Sufyān, the long-standing governor of the region and a cousin of ‘Uthmān, who refused to pledge allegiance until ‘Uthmān’s murderers were brought to justice. The two sides were locked in a stalemate until 661 when ‘Ali was assassinated, clearing the way for Mu‘awiya to seize sole possession of the caliphate.

Mu‘awiya’s reign marked a clear transition from an elective model of leadership based on religious standing to one of hereditary rule. He was the first caliph of the Umayyad dynasty and ruled for nineteen years (661–80) from Damascus with little organized opposition. Mu‘awiya was unable, however, to secure the oath of allegiance for his son Yazid, who was viewed by many Companions as unworthy of the office and morally deficient. When Mu‘awiya died in 680, the Muslim world was plunged into a second prolonged period of civil strife. The fiercest opposition to Yazid’s succession came from prominent figures in Medina who had their own claims to the caliphate. The most significant of these was ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr (d. 692), who declared himself caliph in 681 and won the support of many (if not most) parts of the Muslim world. Over the next ten years, Marwān b. al-Hakam (d. 685) and his sons managed to rally the Umayyads and slowly reasserted military control over Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and (finally) Arabia. Ibn al-Zubayr was killed after an extended Umayyad siege of Mecca in 692.

For the Shi‘a, the most significant episode in the second civil war involved the 680 killing of Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali by an Umayyad army near Karbala (see Table 3.1). The consensus narrative (preserved in both Sunni and Shi‘a sources) attributes the tragedy to Mu‘awiya’s attempts at securing Yazid’s succession. Husayn had inherited the leadership of the family of the Prophet after the death of his brother Ḥasan in 670 and adopted a quietist political stand during most of Mu‘awiya’s reign. He was adamant, however, in his refusal to take the oath of allegiance to Yazid. According to many sources, this was due to concerns about Yazid’s moral character, as he was said to indulge in wine and music. After Mu‘awiya’s death, Ḥusayn began receiving letters from Kufa asking him to lead a rebellion against the Umayyads. Recall that Kufa was the seat of ‘Ali’s caliphate and home to his most enthusiastic supporters. Ḥusayn sent his cousin Muslim b. ‘Aqil to investigate the political situation. Muslim initially deemed the conditions in Kufa encouraging for a potential revolt and reported as much to Ḥusayn. The situation took a turn for the worse, however, when Yazid heard of Muslim’s intrigues and appointed ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād
Table 3.1 *The Main Characters of the Karbala Narrative*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personality (in alphabetical order)</th>
<th>Brief Description/Background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'Abd Allāh b. Hūsain (d. 680) (known as 'Ali al-Asghar)</td>
<td>An infant son of Hūsain. Died from an arrow wound on the day of the battle.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ali b. Hūsain (d. 712 or 713) (known as Zayn al-‘Abidin)</td>
<td>The eldest son of Hūsain. He was ill and did not take part in fighting. He survived and came to be considered the fourth Imam by the Ismā‘ili/Twelve Shi‘a.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hūsain b. 'Ali b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 680)</td>
<td>The son of 'Ali and Fāṭima. The primary protagonist in the narrative. Revered as an Imam by every Shi‘i group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muslim b. 'Aqil (d. 680)</td>
<td>Hūsain’s cousin who was sent to Kufa to investigate the situation and to ascertain the level of support for an uprising. He was killed by Ibn Ziyād.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shamir b. Dhi al-Jawshan (d. 686) (known as Shimr)</td>
<td>One of the commanders of the Umayyad army and a confidant of Ibn Ziyād. Invariably depicted as the most vicious of Hūsain’s adversaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād (d. 686) (known as Ibn Ziyād)</td>
<td>Yazid’s governor over Basra and Kufa. The primary antagonist in the narrative.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'Umar b. Sa‘d (d. 686) (known as Ibn Sa‘d)</td>
<td>In charge of the Umayyad army that fought Hūsain at Karbala. His forces consisted mostly of Kufans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yazid b. Mu‘awiya (d. 683)</td>
<td>Umayyad caliph in Damascus. Seen as ultimately responsible for Hūsain’s death.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(known as Ibn Ziyād) (d. 686) governor of the region. Ibn Ziyād quelled Kufan opposition through a combination of threats and bribes, ultimately arresting and executing Muslim.

Hūsain was unaware of these developments and set off for Kufa, accompanied by most of his family and a small group of supporters. The entire
party numbered in the low hundreds. The narrative of Ḥusayn’s jour-
ney is replete with foreboding about the unreliability of the Kufans and
rumors that the Umayyads had solidified their control of the region. Even
after Ḥusayn received confirmation of Muslim b. ‘Aqīl’s death, he decided
against returning to Medina and continued on the road to Iraq. Ḥusayn’s
caravan was eventually intercepted by a squadron of cavalry and forced to
make camp at Karbala, fifty miles to the northeast of Kufa. This occurred
on the second day of Muḥarram, the first month of the Islamic calendar.
The next few days witnessed a steady buildup of Umayyad forces under
the command of ‘Umar b. Sa’d (known as Ibn Sa’d) (d. 686) and a growing
stalemate between the two sides. Ibn Ziyād demanded that Ḥusayn and
his men take the oath of allegiance to Yazīd; Ḥusayn categorically refused
to do so. Some Sunnī sources report that Ḥusayn proposed a number of
alternatives but to no avail.

On the seventh day of Muḥarram, Ibn Ziyād ordered Ibn Sa’d to deny
Ḥusayn and his followers access to water. This accelerated the crisis and
caused significant suffering in Ḥusayn’s camp, especially among the numer-
ous young children. According to some accounts, negotiations broke down
on the ninth of Muḥarram due to the intrigues of some Kufans (notably
Shamir b. Dhi al-Jawshan) who were intent on provoking hostilities. Ḥusayn
asked for and was granted a final night of respite and prayer, which features prominently in many Shi‘ī accounts of Karbala. The tents
were brought together in anticipation of the next day’s fighting, and per-
mission was granted to anyone who chose to depart before battle. Zaynab,
Ḥusayn’s sister, is a major figure in the (later) Shi‘ī accounts as she antici-
pates the events of the next day and prepares for her brother’s impending
death.

There are conflicting reports about the sequence of events on the tenth
of Muḥarram (known as ‘Āshūrā’). There appear to have been a series
of individual one-on-one encounters between the two sides throughout
the morning. The real fighting began after the noon time prayer, as the
Umayyad army slowly encircled the camp. The first skirmishes involved
supporters not affiliated with the household of the Prophet, but, as the
afternoon progressed, Ḥusayn’s relatives engaged the enemy. It is difficult
to parse legend from fact in these accounts. Some of the (non-Shi‘ī) sources
suggest that the entirety of the battle lasted only an hour, whereas other
(Shi‘ī) sources depict a drawn-out affair consisting primarily of single
combat. The deaths of important ‘Alids are mentioned in striking and
vivid detail, notably those of Ḥusayn’s two sons ‘Ali al-Akbar and ‘Ali
al-Asghar and his half-brother al-‘Abbās b. ‘Alī. Ḥusayn was the last to
fall. His body and the bodies of his supporters were then decapitated, and the camp was pillaged by Umayyad forces. The final death toll on the side of Ḥusayn was reported as seventy-two. The only surviving adult male from Ḥusayn’s household was his son ‘Ali (Zayn al-‘Abidin), who was reportedly bedridden with an illness and therefore unable to take part in the battle.

The narrative of Karbala does not end with Ḥusayn’s death. Most accounts chronicle the fate of his family members (mostly women and children), who were taken to Kufa and then sent with the heads of the dead to Yazid in Damascus. There are significant contradictions in the sources regarding the initial encounter between the caliph and the prisoners. The Shi‘i sources depict a defiant Zaynab and an eloquent Zayn al-‘Abidin confronting Yazid at his court, followed by a prolonged imprisonment. The Sunni sources, by contrast, note Yazid’s remorse, his financial compensation for the property plundered by Umayyad forces, and his designation of an escort to accompany the family back to Medina.

B. The Shi‘i Narrative(s)

The base narrative described in the previous section includes many of the details common to Sunni and Shi‘i historical sources. There is little dispute over the basic chronology that begins with Mu‘awiya’s death and ends with Zaynab’s encounter with Yazid in Damascus. Sunni accounts treat the death of Ḥusayn as part of a larger civil war in which multiple prominent Companions vied for political power. The fact that the struggle claimed the life of the Prophet’s grandson is certainly tragic, but it carries no larger significance. In political terms, a number of Sunni scholars include Ḥusayn in lists of legitimate successors to the Prophet and identify his death as inaugurating dynastic rule in the Muslim world.

By contrast, the tragedy at Karbala united the nascent Shi‘i community and became a rallying cry for most (if not all) of the Shi‘i rebellions that erupted over the next century, including, most famously, the ‘Abbāsid Revolution in 750. Many Shi‘a lamented their failure to support Ḥusayn, who became a symbol of martyrdom and highlighted the illegitimacy of the Umayyad state. Shi‘i remembrances of Karbala featured distinctive poetic forms and imagery, including extensive citations of conversations between key figures and elaborate vignettes intended to demonstrate a theological point or to elicit sympathy. Shi‘i groups differed in their use of these structural and literary devices depending on their particular conceptions of the Imāmate.
The Zaydi Narrative

The Zaydi narrative of Karbala has remained fairly consistent over the centuries. The earliest surviving Zaydi accounts are those of Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī (d. 967) and al-Nāṭiq bi-l-Haqq Yahyā b. Ḥusayn (d. 1033). Both authors adhere to the chronology of the base narrative, from Ḥusayn’s decision to leave for Kufa to the eventual collapse of his support, before placing his rebellion in the broader continuum of Shi‘i rebellions.

According to al-Iṣbahānī, the brunt of the responsibility for the tragedy falls on the shoulders of two men: Ibn Ziyād (the governor of Kufa) and Shamir b. Dhi al-Jawshan (an important deputy in the army). The former intimidates and kills Husayn’s supporters in Kufa and then staunchly rejects any compromise that might defuse the crisis. The latter incites Ibn Ziyād against Husayn and rallies the army at times when soldiers hesitate to take up arms against the Prophet’s family. Ibn Sa‘d, the commander of the army, garners some sympathy as he tries to broker an agreement between the two sides. Yazid is implicated in Husayn’s death, but his culpability is diminished by his distance from the battlefield. He does not directly order Husayn’s execution and later expresses regret at the turn of events. At the same time, his attitude toward the survivors in Damascus is hardly sympathetic. They are ultimately released but only after a series of pointed exchanges between Yazid on one side, and Zaynab and Zayn al-‘Abidin on the other.

The Zaydi tenor of al-Iṣbahānī’s account is most evident in its focus on Husayn’s extended household. Specifically, al-Iṣbahānī interrupts the chronology of his account to list the twenty members of Husayn’s family who perished in the events leading up to and including the battle. Detailed genealogies are provided along with brief vignettes of their deaths. More elaborate descriptions are later presented for particularly important figures such as Husayn’s sons and nephews. This familial focus reflects the central Zaydi theological belief that ultimate religious and political authority rests with the Prophet’s family and descendants. Consequently, the death of any figure from this select group carries special significance. Al-Iṣbahānī’s account thus conveys a deeply tragic yet heroic ethos. Although he intimates that the outcome was predictable, there are no indications that Husayn’s death was necessary or inevitable. The account lacks elaborate descriptive language and does not frame the tragedy as part of a cosmic or eschatological struggle between good and evil.

The narrative preserved by al-Nāṭiq is even more bereft of supernatural imagery than that of al-Iṣbahānī, but it shares an interest in lineage.
It begins with a short discussion of Ḥusayn’s parents followed by a physical description that likens him to the Prophet. The next two sections are devoted to verifying that Ḥusayn had received the oath of allegiance from his followers and had actively launched an uprising against Yazid. Al-Naṭiq highlights this point in a passage that reads as follows:

When the oath of allegiance of the people of Kufa reached him, he left from Mecca on the eighth day of Dhū al-Ḥijja. . . He — prayers of God upon him — was killed on Friday the tenth of Muharram of the year 61. The duration of his uprising (zuhūr) and the establishment of his rule was one month and two days. 22

The affirmation of an actual uprising and Husayn’s efforts at constructing a rival political order are necessary proof of his status as an Imām. Al-Naṭiq’s account of the battle and Husayn’s death is brief and dismissive, noting only that Ibn Ziyād ordered Ibn Sa’d to kill Ḥusayn. A number of figures are ascribed the death blow (including the aforementioned Shamir), and the narrative ends with a short description of the wounds on the Imām’s body and its burial. Husayn is thus placed in a continuum of Zaydī Imāms who died in the pursuit of justice with the odds stacked severely against them.

In line with al-Īṣbahānī’s emphasis on genealogy, nearly half of al-Naṭiq’s entry on Husayn is devoted to his children. This section contains some emotional and graphic episodes (most notably an account of the killing of Husayn’s infant son ‘Alī al-Asghar), but the general purpose here is to identify lines of descent. The Zaydis, after all, believe that these descendants are the primary conduits for religious authority and the sole repository for future Imāms.

As opposed to the Ismā‘īli/Twelver conception of an inerrant religious authority appointed by God, the Zaydi Imām is a pious scholar standing up to tyranny. He is not imbued with supernatural powers but rather functions as a symbol of justice in the face of an oppressive state. The Zaydi portrait of Husayn aligns with this conception of the Imām. Both al-Īṣbahānī and al-Naṭiq highlight the importance of lineage, focusing on those members of the Prophet’s family who died at Karbala. These deaths are sometimes presented in lurid detail, but they do not carry a deeper, cosmological significance. Husayn is a common man of uncommon virtues whose rebellion, although tragic, is the first in a series of similar ‘Alid uprisings. Some of these rebellions succeed, but the vast majority fail. The Zaydis certainly honor and remember Husayn each year, but these

22 Al-Naṭiq, Iṣḥāda, 57.
commemorations are simple affairs and differ sharply from the elaborate mourning rituals of the Twelver Shi'a.

The Ismā'ili Narrative

There is no single definitive Ismā'ili narrative of the events of Karbala. Recall that contemporary Ismā'ilism is divided between two main branches, the Musta'lis (today mainly consisting of the Ṭayyibis) and the Nizāris (who follow the Aga Khan as their Imām). Both groups share the Twelver belief that the Imām possesses a special authority delegated directly by God. This suggests that the Ismā'ili narrative of Ḥusayn should align more closely with that of the Twelvers (see below) than that of the Zaydis (see above). The Ismā'ili treatment of Karbala, however, is closely intertwined with the issue of ritual commemoration. The Bohras (a branch of the Ṭayyibis) take part in Twelver ceremonies that reenact and mourn the deaths of Ḥusayn and his companions. Consequently, they affirm the more elaborate renditions of Karbala and often attend annual Twelver 'Aṣḥūrā' services (discussed subsequently).

By contrast, the Nizāris (a majority of the Ismā'ilis) hold to less emotive forms of remembrance. They gather in mosques to mourn or recount the tragedy in speeches, but these gestures are far less intricate than those of the Twelvers. Most significantly, the Nizāris do not partake in emotional commemorations of Karbala featuring poetry or dramatic reenactments; rather, they are partial to the base narrative stripped of any greater theological significance. Such a preference stems perhaps from the presence of a ruling Nizāri Imām who bears the spiritual mantle of Ḥusayn. Although the death of the grandson of the Prophet was tragic, the Imāmate persevered and passed (in the form of a divine light) to his descendants. It is the current ruling Imām who commands the immediate and complete emotional allegiance of the Nizāri community.

The Twelver Narrative

The narrative of the tragedy of Karbala achieves its most detailed and refined form with the Twelvers. In fact, it could be argued that the narrative of Ḥusayn's death lies at the very heart of Twelver identity and worship. The following section traces the evolution of the Karbala narrative from its initial manifestations in the lifetimes of the Twelver Imāms to its use in complex annual rituals in the modern period.23

23 The best study of the evolution of 'Aṣḥūrā' commemorations among the Twelvers is Kamran Aghaie's The Martyrs of Karbala. Much of this section is indebted to Aghaie's work.
The earliest remembrances of Karbala are ascribed to the survivors of the ordeal, particularly Ḥusayn’s eldest son Zayn al-ʿĀbidin (the fourth Twelver Imām) and daughter Sukayna, who reportedly organized annual lamentations that featured the recitation of elegies for the fallen. Shiʿī poets competed in composing these elaborate poems, which served as the primary means for commemorating Karbala through the Umayyad and early ‘Abbāsid periods. Such poetic gatherings were not limited to the Twelver Shiʿa alone; rather, they included a range of Shiʿī groups with quite disparate theological views. Karbala became a standard rallying cry for Shiʿī uprisings of this period (including that of the ‘Abbāsids), with rebels promising to exact revenge for the blood of Ḥusayn and his family.

Within a few generations, the tombs of Ḥusayn and his companions became focal points of pilgrimage for the Shiʿī community. This development, which predates the split between the Ismāʿīlīs and the Twelvers, is mentioned in a number of traditions ascribed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir (the fifth Imām, d. 735) and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (the sixth Imām, d. 765) in the Twelver sources. In one representative example, al-Ṣādiq states:

If one of you performs the hajj [the greater pilgrimage] in the course of your lifetime and does not visit Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī, then you have departed from one of the claims of God and the Messenger of God, because the claim of Ḥusayn is a mandatory duty from God, Exalted and Mighty, and obligatory upon every Muslim.²⁴

A multitude of similar traditions quote the Imāms ordering the Shiʿa to visit Karbala to foster their love for the family of the Prophet. There is also evidence of organized annual processions to Karbala that served as important public affirmations of a communal Shiʿī identity. Pilgrimage to the grave of Ḥusayn (and those of the other Imāms) remains one of the distinctive ritual features of Twelver Shiʿism.

Given the financial difficulties posed by a lengthy trip to Karbala, many Twelver Shiʿa communities held Muḥarram processions on ‘Ashūra’ within their own cities and towns. The most prominent of these took place in Baghdad beginning in the tenth century when the region was controlled by the Būyids, a military family from Daylam with Shiʿī inclinations. The procession was initiated by the same Būyid ruler, Muʿizz al-Dawla (mentioned earlier), who instituted the celebration of Ghador Khumm. Historical accounts of these processions document a number of distinctive practices, including (i) the closing of markets, (ii) the wearing of coarse

²⁴ Haider, Origins, 246.
woolen clothing, (iii) the beating of one’s face, and (iv) wailing accompanied by the recitation of elegies such as the following:

The blood of the friends of the Prophet Muhammad is flowing; our tears rain plentifully. Let there be infinite curses and blame upon his enemies in the past and the future. Distress yourself about what befell the children. Now listen to the story of the martyrdom and how they deprived Husayn of water; and when he was fighting on the plain of Karbala, how they behaved meanly and unjustly. They cut off the head of a descendant of the Prophet.  

These annual processions combined the poetic sensibilities of the earliest period with the physicality of a formal pilgrimage to Karbala. The Twelver Shi'a were now free to commemorate 'Ashūra' in their hometowns as a public expression of their love for the family of the Prophet.

The base Karbala narrative described earlier, drawn from the earliest layers of the Muslim historical works, is sympathetic to Husayn and informed by a general tragic ethos stemming from the death of so many members of the Prophet’s family. Beginning in the tenth century, Twelver scholars began appropriating and recasting this narrative in a manner that legitimized their doctrine of the Imāmate. The earliest example of such a transformation is attributed to al-Shaykh al-Mufid (mentioned above), whose narrative begins with an unambiguous affirmation of Husayn’s designation (nass) as Imām:

The Messenger of God, may God bless him and his family, had made clear his [Husayn’s] Imāmate and the Imāmate of his brother [Hasan] before him through designation (nass) when he said, “These two sons of mine are Imāms who will experience difficulties.”

This statement is followed by other proofs of Husayn’s credentials, such as the testamentary bequest (wasiyya) of the office from his brother Hasan. The account then explains the reasons for which neither Hasan nor Husayn rose up in rebellion against Mu'awiyah. In the case of Hasan, a lack of support meant that an uprising would not be successful, so the only prudent course of action was to practice precautionary dissimulation (taqiyya) and to conclude a truce with Mu'awiyah. When Husayn became Imām, he faced the same basic situation. Al-Mufid writes:

The Imāmate of Husayn, peace be upon him, was confirmed after the death of his brother Hasan, peace be upon him. The obedience of all creatures to him was binding, although he did not summon them because of precautionary

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25 Aghaie, Martyrs, 11.
26 Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, Irsād, 298.
dissimulation and because of his need to fulfill the truce that existed between him [Ḥasan] and Muʿawiya b. Abī Ṣufyān.27

This passage both affirms Ḥusayn’s right to the Imāmate and explains his political quietism prior to Karbala within the framework of Twelver theology.

Al-Mufīd’s account includes all of the chronological elements found in the base narrative, from the initial letters of the Kufans to the siege of Ḥusayn’s camp in Karbala and the denial of water. His narration, however, also quotes a significant amount of elaborate dialogue. Although these conversations are found in the base narrative (and in a number of Sunnī sources), al-Mufīd uses them to reiterate important theological points. Take Ḥusayn’s speech to his companions the night before the battle:

I glorify God with the most perfect glorification and I praise Him in happiness and misfortune. O God, I praise You for blessing us with prophethood, teaching us the Qur’ān, and making us understand religion. You have given us hearing, sight, and hearts and have made us among those who give thanks. I know of no followers more loyal and more virtuous than my followers, nor of any House more pious and more close-knit than my House. May God reward you well on my behalf. Indeed, I do not think that there will be [any further] days [left] to us by these men. I permit you to leave me. All [of you], go away with the absolution of your oath, for there will be no obligation on you from me. This is a night that will give cover to you. Use it as a camel [i.e., ride away in it].28

Some Sunnī accounts include this speech, but its centrality to the Twelver narrative is unique. There is a clear emphasis on the loyalty bonds (waṭlāya—see Chapter 2) between Ḥusayn and his followers, which provide a model for the subsequent Twelver community. Ḥusayn’s supporters respond by passionately reiterating their commitment to Ḥusayn and refusing to abandon him on the battlefield.

In addition, the status of the family of the Prophet (ahl al-bayt) is elevated through both its connection to the Prophet and its possession of a special religious knowledge. This aligns with the Twelver belief in the Imāmate as a continuation of the office of prophethood in the postrevelation world and the Imām as an inerrant interpreter of religious sources. Ḥusayn even expands the scope of the Imām’s theoretical knowledge beyond mere interpretation. When confronted by a tribesman on the road to Kufa who warns of impending danger, he states:

27 Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, Irshād, 298.
28 Al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, Irshād, 346.
Servant of God . . . wise decisions are not hidden from me. Yet the commands of God, the Exalted, cannot be resisted. By God, [my enemies] will not leave me till they have torn the very heart from the depths of my gut. If they do that, God will cause them to be dominated and humiliated until they become the most humiliated of factions among nations.29

In other words, Ḥusayn is aware of the broader context of the situation through divine knowledge but remains determined to carry out his mission.30 Moreover, he even predicts the ultimate downfall of his opponents, alluding to the overthrow (and near-extinction) of the Umayyad dynasty seventy years later.

On a purely literary level, al-Mufid’s narrative is full of melodramatic exchanges. In one passage, Ḥusayn approaches his dying son ʿAlī al-Akbar:

Ḥusayn, peace be upon him, went out until he stood over him [ʿAlī al-Akbar] and said, “May God kill [the] people who killed you, my son. How foolishly they are against the Merciful and in violating the family of the Messenger, may God bless him and his family.” His [Ḥusayn’s] eyes filled with tears, and he said, “There will be [only] dust on the world after you.” Zaynab, the sister of Ḥusayn, peace be upon him, came hurrying out, crying, “My brother, my nephew!” She came up and threw herself on [her dead nephew]. Ḥusayn raised her head and then led her back to the tent. He told his young [sons]: “Carry your brother back.”31

This level of detail is designed to elicit a powerful emotional response. The production of such a narrative that emphasizes the position of the Imām and his family as well as the loyalty of his true followers was a new development. It was perhaps a counterpart to the growth of processions and poetic remembrances among the Twelver Shiʿa in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The next important development in the narrative of Ḥusayn occurred in the sixteenth century with the rise of the Safavid dynasty in Iran. As discussed in Chapter 7, the Safavids were responsible for the wholesale conversion of Iran to Twelver Shiʿism and (sometimes) predicated their legitimacy on their role as representatives of the hidden Imām. As patrons of Twelver Shiʿism, the Safavids provided state sponsorship for ʿAshūrā commemorations. Specifically, they encouraged (and financed) the raʿīzāt khānī (subsequently abbreviated as raʿīzeh) which was a “ritual sermon

29 Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, Isrāʾīl, 334.
30 The sources allow for a second possibility – namely, that the Imām was informed of these events directly by the Prophet.
31 Al-Shaykh al-Mufid, Isrāʾīl, 358.
recounting and mourning the tragedy of Karbala." These sermons were highly literary compositions imbued with overtly theatrical and supernatural elements (see, for example, excerpt 1).

**Passages from the Post-Safavid Karbala Narrative**

Excerpt 1\(^{33}\)

When he read this [a letter from Kufa], Husayn wept again, but there was no more doubt in his heart; he could now go and take power from the tyrant without fear of accusations that he acted for his own glory. He set out from Mecca with only seventy-seven[\(sic\)] followers, across the desert in the direction of Kufa. On the way they were suddenly confronted by a large army of animals of prey, with sharp claws and mighty jaws, under the command of a huge lion, king of the beasts. The lion bowed his big head down to the ground before the feet of Daldal, Husayn's horse, begging to be allowed to help him in his battle against the oppressor of the faithful, and to restore the rule of God’s laws among the sons of Adam. Husayn thanked him, but sent him away, saying: “Nothing happens on earth that He does not will. If it is His will that I shall win, God will strike down His enemies before my face.” They rode on, until suddenly the sky became dark. Many hundred of birds of prey hovered over the modest army, headed by a large eagle who likewise offered to tear Husayn's enemies to shreds for him, but again Husayn, knowing that God was only testing him, declined, saying: “Thank you, my winged friends, go back to your mountains, God has already decided who will live and who will die, nor can we alter His decision.” The final vision of temptation in the desert was an army of jinn, whose king, a monstrously big ogre with long teeth like sabers, threw himself at Husayn’s feet, saying: “Not since king Solomon has any man subdued us, but you Prince Husayn, may command, and we will obey. Please order us to destroy your enemies and none will survive.” Even though Husayn knew that he might not live to see the day after the battle, he sent the jinn away, thanking them courteously for their offer to help him. They disappeared at once.

Excerpt 2\(^{34}\)

Then Husayn saw how his youngest son, Ali Asghar, suffered from thirst, because his mother’s milk had dried up in her bosom. The women sat there in their hastily erected tent, praying and praising God.

When Husayn saw the patience of the women, [start of poetic stanzas] He took the child which had not yet been weaned, / And carried it to where the river flowed, / Calling the enemies who lay in ambush / “Do not shoot now! This child is sick with thirst! / Have pity on this babe who cannot speak / And soon will be an orphan, when I die….” / Before he finished speaking, all the Arabs / Had shot their arrows at the little child. / One arrow pierced his ear.

\(^{32}\) Aghaie, *Martyrs*, 12.

\(^{33}\) Rippen and Knappert, *Textual Sources*, 140.

\(^{34}\) Rippen and Knappert, *Textual Sources*, 141.
He screamed with pain / until the shadows sank over his eyes. / The women wept and all the men wept with them. / Husayn interred the little child near-by, / Praying the prayers that suit a proper service.

Excerpt 35
When Husayn rode out, the army of the Syrians ran away, but he pursued them, for he knew this was his last day. He mowed down his enemies like a fire raging through the tall grass of the savannah. The earth grew bloodied and the sky grew dark as if the Day of Judgement had begun. Dark clouds veiled the sun even in Mecca so that its people wondered what caused this gloom which covered Arabia, Syria, and Egypt, reaching as far as Iran and Khurasan.

The angels prayed to God with the women that He might rescue Husayn. [Start of poetic stanzas] But God’s intentions are unknown to man / Not even angels understand his plan. / . . . / He [Husayn] turned his horse and hurried back to camp. / There in the shrubs the enemy were waiting. / They shot at him without their faces showing / Hundreds of arrows flew into his face / Seventy arrows hit his tender body / and pierced his skin and spilled his precious blood. / He knew that he did not have long to live, / Just enough time to say: There is no god / but God and Muhammad is His prophet. / His soul flew up into the cloudless sky / Where it was met by those who loved him most: / His parents and his brother and his sons. / His body meanwhile fell from the strong horse. / . . . / Here ends the sad account of Prince Husayn / Who lived and died a witness for the faith / A ransom for his people, for Mankind.

In addition to the inclusion of fantastical elements, the rawžeh promoted a fatalism that made the impending disaster a sacrificial act ordained by God. It presented a highly polarized vision of the conflict, with figures clearly designated as good or evil. The reasons for these changes are explored in Chapter 7. At this point, it suffices to note that the Safavids were invested in creating a strong and insular Twelver identity to distinguish themselves from their main rivals, the Sunnī Ottomans. The rise of the Qajar dynasty in the eighteenth century saw a continuation of this trend as commemorations became even more elaborate. The state began sponsoring full-scale reenactments of Karbala based on a script taken from the rawžeh. These passion plays, referred to as shabih khānī or (more popularly) taʿziyat khānī (subsequently abbreviated as taʿziyeh), persist into the modern period in parts of southern Iraq and Iran.

The emergence of rawžeh narratives and taʿziyeh reenactments involved a radical restructuring of the historical account of Karbala. The chronology of the base narrative remained consistent, but it was now primarily geared to elicit an emotional response. This shift is evident in any modern rendition of the events at Karbala (see excerpts 2 and 3). Poetry is inserted at key

35 Rippen and Knappert, Textual Sources, 142.
moments, transforming the narrative into a performative devotional piece that evokes sadness and weeping. The crowd participates in a collective act of ritual mourning that reinforces its loyalty to the Imām and, by extension, the state.

The retelling of the Karbala narrative remains a universal element in contemporary Twelver commemorations of ‘Ashūrā’. Speakers will often break into a poetic rhythm to signal a particularly tragic moment or to emphasize a dramatic point. They also divide the story into discrete narrative units and relate a different incident or death on each of the first nine days of the month, culminating on the tenth with the killing of Ḥusayn. The narrative is usually followed (or preceded) by the beating of chests (in Arabic laṭm, in Persian or Urdu mātām). In many places, this beating is a symbolic gesture performed with the hand or a minor implement to represent intense mourning. Although this bloodless practice is encouraged by most Twelver scholars, the use of knives or blades for the purposes of ritual self-mutilation is common in parts of Iraq, Pakistan, and India. Chest beating is also often accompanied by either attestations of loyalty to the Imām or mournful laments (in Urdu noha) recited to the rhythm of hands striking bodies.

The structure of ‘Ashūrā’ mourning rituals varies from region to region under the influence of local cultural expectations. In Iraq, for example, millions of pilgrims walk to Karbala (sometimes over weeks or months) every Muḥarram as a sign of their devotion to and grief for Ḥusayn. In recent years, Iraq has witnessed the revival of the taʿziyeh reenactments and an upsurge in more extreme forms of self-flagellation. Mourning in the other Gulf states centers primarily on the retelling of the narrative, followed by symbolic chest beating to the accompaniment of laments. Iran is home to multiple forms of remembrance, with the taʿziyeh still prominent in many locations. In India and Pakistan, gatherings for Muḥarram are known as majālis (sing. majlis) and begin with an elegy (in Arabic marrīya, in Urdu marsīyya) followed by a sermon that includes a rendition of some part of the Karbala narrative. The majlis concludes with a ritual beating of chests to the recitation of laments. South Asian, Southeast Asian, and Turkish Shiʿī communities also often integrate local rituals (of non-Islamic origins) into their ‘Ashūrā’ commemorations.

C. Summary

The narrative of Karbala serves as one of the building blocks of Shiʿī identity. The deaths of Ḥusayn and his companions symbolize the abandonment and betrayal of the Prophet’s family by the larger Muslim community.
They also represent an inspirational example of defiance in the face of oppression or injustice. The structure and form of the narrative, however, vary significantly among different Shi‘i groups as a consequence of their distinctive theological doctrines.

For the Zaydi Shi‘a, the events at Karbala are archetypical. Ḥusayn is qualified to be Imām based on his lineage and his scholarly credentials. He then rises up in rebellion against the oppressive Umayyads. His defeat and death are tragedies, but they also represent the culmination of the proper course of action for any candidate aspiring to the Imāmāte. The Zaydis include Ḥusayn in a line of Imāms who represent this ideal. His rebellion is part of a continuum of similar rebellions, distinguished only by his direct association with the Prophet (his grandfather) and ʿAlī (his father).

The Ismā‘ilī Shi‘a are divided on their interpretation and use of the Karbala narrative. The episode is accorded importance by the two most important branches of the Ismā‘ilīs – namely, the Musta‘lis and the Nizāris. The Musta‘li Ismā‘ilīs (primarily the Ṭayyibis) take part in the ritual commemorations of the Twelver Shi‘a as full participants. They have also developed a large corpus of elegies that link Ḥusayn to the leadership of the community and emphasize the cosmological implications of his death. The Nizāri Ismā‘ilīs, by contrast, eschew the more public mourning rituals, given the presence of a living and visible Imām who wields the religious authority of Ḥusayn.

The Twelver Shi‘a present a particularly elaborate and emotional version of the Karbala narrative. Their commemorations are tied to public rituals that originated in the eighth century. The story of Ḥusayn is not just a historical narrative but rather a reenactment of the struggle between good and evil that dominates the Twelver Shi‘i ritual calendar. The modern form of Twelver mourning is indebted to the Safavid transformation of Karbala into an elaborate public spectacle that combines early poetic laments with local cultural practices.

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR FURTHER STUDY

The following works provide an overview of political developments during the seventh and eighth centuries:


The following works discuss revisionist interpretations of early Islamic history:

The earliest extant biography of the Prophet is Alfred Guillaume’s translation of the Sīra of Ibn Ḩishām (d. 768) entitled The Life of Muḥammad (London: Oxford University Press, 1955).

The following works examine the succession crisis after Muḥammad’s death:
Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. “Mubāhala” (Schmucker).
Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. “Ṣaḥīfa” (Lecomte).

The following works recount the events at Karbala:
Encyclopaedia of Islam, 2nd ed., s.v. “(al-)Ḥusayn b. Abī Ṭālib” (Vecchia Vaglieri). This article presents a clear Sunnī perspective.

The Zaydi sources on Karbala are available only in Arabic:

The following works provide examples of passion plays and poetic expressions surrounding Karbala:
Andrew Rippen and Jan Knappert, Textual Sources for the Study of Islam (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 135–44.
Muḥammad Taqī Bahr al-ʿUlūm, Tale of the Martyrdom of Imam Hussain (London: AB Cultural Institute for Arabic and Islamic Research, 1997).

In Chapter 3, we examined two narratives that hold a special place in the historical memory of the larger Shi‘ī community, the rejection of ‘Ali’s authority after the Prophet’s death in 632 and the killing of ʿĪsa b. ʿAbbās b. Ṣāliḥ in 662. Both events generated ritual commemorations in Shi‘ī communities, most notably the celebration of ‘Īd al-Ghādir and the mourning of ‘Āšūrā’. However, Shi‘ī groups differ regarding the implications of these events. The Zaydis participate in the festivities surrounding ‘Ali’s reported appointment at Ghadir Khumm despite not requiring the explicit designation of an Imām. They also lament Ḥusayn’s death without ascribing to it any broad cosmic significance. The Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers affirm ‘Ali’s formal designation as the Prophet’s rightful successor through their celebrations of ‘Īd al-Ghādir. As for ‘Āšūrā’, the Ismā‘īlīs (Nizāris) grieve for Ḥusayn, but their mourning is mitigated by the presence of a ruling Imām. This differs from the Twelvers, for whom the remembrance of ‘Āšūrā’ is a central pillar of ritual practice and an embodiment of piety.

In contrast to historical episodes that unite the Shi‘a community, a number of events provide the basis for its fragmentation. In terms of chronology, the first involves the failed revolt of Zayd b. ‘Ali b. Ḥusayn b. ‘Ali b. Abī Ṭālib against the Umayyads in 740. This uprising is routinely interpreted as marking the split between the Zaydis (on one side) and the Ismā‘īlīs/Twelvers (on the other side). The second centers on the controversial succession to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (the sixth Imām and great-grandson of Ḥusayn) in 765. Although this dispute precipitated a break between the Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers, variant accounts of the episode suggest a common Ismā‘īlī/Twelve conception of the scope and powers of the Imām. Finally, the disappearance of Muḥammad al-Mahdī (the twelfth Imām) in 874 compelled the Twelvers to reimagine the Imāmāte as they struggled to explain the apparent succession of a newborn who was inaccessible to the larger community. In the process, Twelver scholars
fashioned a communal identity grounded in a distinctive set of theological beliefs.

I. THE REVOLT OF ZAYD B. ‘ALĪ

A. Background Narrative

The social tensions that contributed to the first (involving ‘Alī and Mu‘awiya) and second (including Husayn’s killing) civil wars remained potent in the mid-eighth century. The Umayyad dynasty was seen as a restoration of the power of tribal elites at the cost of early converts. The policies of the Umayyad caliphs fueled this perception, as tribal leaders were favored with money and appointed to positions of authority. Conversion was also discouraged: it cut into state revenues because of discrepancies in the tax rate between Muslims and non-Muslims. It was simply more profitable to rule over a large non-Muslim population than over one composed primarily of Muslims. These factors cultivated a “pious opposition” devoted to the universalist implications of Islam. Marshall Hodgson refers to this late seventh- and early eighth-century tendency as “the movement of the piety-minded” and argues for its decisive importance in the creation of a cosmopolitan Muslim religious identity.

The agenda of the piety-minded involved the construction of an egalitarian social order predicated on Islamic values. The movement was also united in its opposition to the Umayyad dynasty. Beyond this, however, there were clear divisions. The pious opposition initially fragmented during the first civil war when a contingent criticized ‘Alī’s actions during and after the Battle of Šīffin (657). The dissenters became known as the Khārijites (“those who rebelled”), a sect whose successors survive today in areas of North Africa and Oman. The remainder of the movement continued to support ‘Alī and his descendants as the primary alternatives to Umayyad rule. It is important to note that not all of the piety-minded who favored ‘Alī’s political claims were Shi‘a. As mentioned in Chapters 2 and 3, the Shi‘a were distinguished by their affirmation of a bond of personal charismatic loyalty to ‘Alī (wulāyda) that was eventually transferred to his family (narrowly defined as the descendants of ‘Alī and Fāṭima). By contrast, many of the piety-minded backed the political claims of ‘Alī’s without according them any special religious authority.

1 The following narrative that centers on “the pious opposition” is indebted to Hodgson, Venture, vol. 1 241–72.
The massacre of Ḥusayn and his family had significant fallout in the broader Muslim community. In 686, five years after the events at Karbala, a revolt broke out in Kufa led by al-Mukhtār b. Abī ‘Ubayd Allāh al-Thaqāfī (d. 687), who affirmed the Imāmate of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (a son of ‘Alī but not from his marriage to Fāṭima) and demanded revenge for Ḥusayn’s killing. His supporters, who included a significant number of the piety-minded (particularly those of Iranian origin) and a contingent of the Shi‘a, came to be known as the Kaysānīs. The uprising was crushed within a year, but it heralded more than a century of similar rebellions that (predominantly) championed ‘Alid political causes through a broad coalition of Shi‘ī and non-Shi‘ī groups. In such an environment, the authorities came to view all ‘Alids as potential rivals.

In late 738 or early 739, Zayd b. ‘Ali, a grandson of Ḥusayn, was summoned to the court of the Umayyad caliph Hishām b. ‘Abd al-Malik (r. 724-43) in Damascus to answer charges of sedition. He testified to his own innocence and was ultimately sent to Kufa to confront his accuser. After his release from custody, Zayd lingered in the area for a few months. This worried Hishām, who saw the potential danger of Zayd’s presence in a city that remained a hotbed of opposition to Umayyad rule. The caliph urged his governor in Iraq, Yūṣuf b. ‘Umar al-Thaqāfī (d. 745), to pressure Zayd to return to Medina. When Zayd finally left for the Hijāz, he was bombarded by letters and a number of Kufan envoys urged him to return and lead an uprising. The letters included explicit pledges of armed support and confessions of guilt and remorse for the city’s past failure to aid Hasan and Husayn. Zayd was convinced to return (over the skepticism of his closest advisors) and spent the next year organizing his Kufan followers and soliciting the oath of allegiance from other cities and regions. Much of his backing came from the nascent Shi‘a community, but he was also supported by piety-minded scholars, including many later associated with Sunni Islam (e.g., the famous jurist Abī Ḥanīfa). The actual substance of Zayd’s beliefs is discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

According to most reports, Umayyad pressure forced Zayd to rebel in 740 before he was able to muster his full strength. On the brink of the uprising, Yūṣuf b. ‘Umar al-Thaqāfī gathered Zayd’s supporters in the central mosque of Kufa and threatened to kill anyone who left the premises. These intimidation tactics provided a justification for many to abandon their oaths and undercut much of Zayd’s strength. He was also hurt by the withdrawal of Shi‘ī followers who either (i) criticized his refusal to condemn Abū Bakr and ‘Umar or (ii) preferred the Shi‘ī credentials of
Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. Zayd was left with between two hundred and three hundred supporters, who fought a daylong battle against a superior Umayyad army. After his death, Zayd’s body was exposed to the public, and his head was sent to the caliph in Damascus.

B. Implications

Zayd’s rebellion marks the historical starting point of a distinct Zaydi Shi'ism. The episode is notably absent from Ismā‘ili and Twelver historical sources. The Ismā‘ili/Twelver belief in formal designation (naš) as the primary criterion for identifying the Imām significantly reduces Zayd’s stature as a religious figure. For the Ismā‘ilis and the Twelvers, the Imāmate passed from ʿĀli to Ḥasan and then Ḥusayn (his sons with Fāṭima). These two sons held a special rank based on their relationship to the Prophet and their status as “people of the cloak” (see Chapter 2). After Ḥusayn, the Imāmate was restricted to his descendants in a singular chain from father to son. In Zayd’s lifetime, the Shi‘a who would eventually be known as the Ismā‘ilis and the Twelvers favored the claims of his half-brother Muḥammad al-Bāqir, followed by Zayd’s nephew (and al-Bāqir’s son) Ja’far al-Ṣādiq. They viewed Zayd’s uprising as little more than a tragic attempt by an ‘Alid upstart to seize political power.

The Zaydi narrative of Zayd’s rebellion is informed by a number of key theological beliefs. The most important of these involve his credentials as a legitimate Imām. In contrast to the Ismā‘ilis and the Twelvers, the Zaydis hold that the Imām achieves his position only by virtue of organizing an armed rebellion against an oppressive state.² Biographies of Zayd often begin with a discussion of lineage to verify his descent from ʿĀli and Fāṭima. This is followed by a physical description that affirms his physical integrity (a necessary condition of leadership). At this point, we sometimes find anecdotes about the Imām’s childhood and upbringing. More often, however, the discussion shifts to his solicitation of the oath of allegiance because the ability to win supporters provides evidence of political skills. In fact, the Zaydis hold that a contender may not lead an uprising until he has garnered a minimum threshold of support.³ The narrative then recounts Zayd’s public declaration of rebellion (khurūj), which serves as

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² The discussion that follows draws primarily on al-Nā‘īq’s Isda and, to a lesser extent, on al-Iṣbahānī’s Maqātil.
³ There are disagreements as to the minimum number of supporters necessary for an Imām to declare a rebellion.
his formal claim to the Imāmat. When describing unsuccessful rebellions, Zaydi biographical works also analyze the reasons for their failure. In the case of Zayd, he was betrayed by the cowardly indecisiveness of supporters who refused to honor their oaths. On the whole, Zaydi biographers fit the lives of their Imāms into a narrative structure that provides a virtual checklist of lineal and political qualifications.

The political qualifications of the Imām are minimized in Ismā'īlī and Twelver depictions of their Imāms. The Ismā'īlīs stress both the political and the religious authority of the Imām but express a clear preference for the latter. The Ismā'īlī Imām is the gateway to the inner meaning of religious texts and rituals. He certainly plays a political role, but the actual seizure of power is often delegated to agents who act on his behalf. The Imām is not required to directly organize an uprising or participate in battle. For the Twelvers, the Imām is even further removed from the political realm. He primarily serves as a channel for proper religious interpretation, and his political role is a function of circumstance. When the conditions for seizing power are not ideal, he practices dissimulation. The Ismā'īlīs and the Twelvers locate legitimate political authority in their Imāms, but unlike the Zaydis, they consider it an innate quality independent of the actual exercise of power.

In addition to offering a prototype for an Imām, biographies of Zayd provide insight into other facets of Zaydi theology. Many accounts discuss his education at the hands of the early Mu'tazili scholar Wāsil b. 'Aṭā' (d. 748). This reflects the Zaydi belief that an Imām's knowledge is acquired through study as opposed to being directly endowed by God (the view of the Ismā'īlīs and some Twelvers). The Imām is permitted to seek knowledge from non-Shī'ī and non-'Ālid sources, including those who might reject his political claims. Wāsil b. 'Aṭā', for example, allowed for the possibility that ‘Ali had made a mistake when he took up arms against his opponents in the first civil war. This very point became incendiary in Zayd's relations with al-Bāqir (his half-brother), who accused him of studying with a figure overly critical of ‘Ali's conduct.

Although Zayd's connection with Wāsil b. ‘Aṭā' is almost certainly fictitious, it is often cited to explain the almost wholesale integration of Mu'tazili ideas into Zaydi theological discourse. Heresiographical works

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4 Madelung, "Zaydiyya."

5 These works are primarily interested in the theological beliefs of different sects within Islam. They are suspect as historical sources. Although heresiographers often made use of earlier sources, they shaped this material to fit their own theological agendas.
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ascribe two of Zayd’s important theological positions to Wāṣīl’s influence. The first involves the acceptance of the Imāmate of the less worthy, according to which it was possible for a lesser candidate to be Imām despite the presence of a superior candidate. After the death of the Prophet, ‘Alī was clearly the best candidate for leadership, but the community chose Abū Bakr. This may have been a mistake, but it did not invalidate Abū Bakr’s caliphate. The second position concerns the status of those who rejected or ignored ‘Alī’s claims. Zayd did not consider this opposition an act of apostasy but rather a misreading of the strong (but implicit) evidence favoring ‘Alī. In some heresiographical works, Zayd summarizes his views as follows:

‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib — God be pleased with him — was the best of the Companions but the caliphate was delegated to Abū Bakr for the soundness of his judgment and the religious basis of his stewardship in quelling the fire of civil strife and easing the hearts of the general masses. The era of wars which raged in the days of prophethood was recent. The blood of the Qurashi polytheists and others on the sword of the Commander of the Faithful ‘Alī had not yet dried, and the rancor in their chests for revenge remained. Hearts would not incline towards him and necks would not submit to him. It was in the public interest (maslahah) that the leader in this situation should be someone known for being gentle, malleable, old, an early convert, and close to the Messenger of God, prayers of God and peace upon him. Consider the fact that when he [Abū Bakr] was stricken with the sickness from which he would die and appointed ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, the people cried, “You have appointed a coarse harshness over us!” They were not pleased with the Commander of the Faithful ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb for his strictness, his rigidity, his religious harshness, and his coarse stubbornness against enemies until Abū Bakr silenced them by saying, “If my Lord asks me, I will say, I appointed over them one better than me.” Therefore it is permitted for the less worthy (mashfūl) to be Imām and have recourse to the more worthy (aṣfal) in the implementation of legal judgments (ahkām).

Zayd’s refusal to condemn the first two caliphs reflected the early Zaydi stance on the succession to the Prophet. At the same time, it alienated those of his Shi‘i supporters who were partial to Ismā‘īli/Twelver views.

The Zaydis consistently emphasized the political duties of the Imām (enfrained in narratives about Zayd’s life) throughout their history. To the extent that there were disagreements, these generally concerned the definition of an uprising or the degree of success necessary to earn an ‘Alid the title of Imām. Zaydi theological beliefs, on the other hand, shifted dramatically in the course of the eighth, ninth, and tenth centuries. Religious knowledge was increasingly restricted to ‘Alids, the Imāmate of the

6 Translation taken from Haider, Origin, 194–95.
less worthy was abandoned, and there was a greater willingness to declare ‘Ali’s opponents (including Abū Bakr and ‘Umar) apostates. The early views (ascribed to Zayd) became associated with “Bātrī” Zaydism, whereas the later views (dominant in subsequent centuries) were identified with “Jārūdī” Zaydism. The shift from a Bātrī to a Jārūdī orientation is explored in greater detail in Chapter 5.

II. THE DISPUTED SUCCESSION TO JA‘FAR AL-ŠĀDIQ

A. Background Narrative

The ‘Abbāsids toppled the Umayyad dynasty in 750 on the strength of military support from northeast Iran and a propaganda apparatus infused with Shi‘i slogans and symbols. Most modern studies of the revolution emphasize the ‘Abbāsids’ reliance on a Kaysānī Shi‘i network that was originally loyal to the descendants of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (discussed earlier). The early ‘Abbāsids (descendants of the Prophet’s uncle ‘Abbās) claimed that the Imāmate had passed to them from Abū Ḥāshim (the son of Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya), who had died with no male heirs. The primary slogan of the revolution was an ambiguous call to empower the best-suited member of the family of the Prophet (al-rīḍā min ahl al-bayt), which many interpreted as referring to an ‘Alid rather than an ‘Abbāsī. The disappointment that followed the ‘Abbāsid victory left the pious opposition with two options. First, they could compromise and accept the political authority of the ‘Abbāsids while restricting the scope of their religious authority. This was the strategy employed by many of the piety-minded who came to be associated with Sunnī Islam. Alternatively, they could continue to struggle for an ‘Alid Imāmate. This was the stance of those who came to be known as the Shi‘a. Over the next few centuries, the ‘Abbāsids steadily moved from a Shi‘i to a Sunnī position.

In the aftermath of the revolution, the ‘Alids became symbols of opposition to ‘Abbāsid rule and were understandably viewed as threats by the ruling dynasty. The rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafī al-Zakīyya (d. 762) and his brother Ibrāhīm (d. 762), backed by a significant number of Zaydis, confirmed ‘Abbāsid suspicions and led to the close surveillance of prominent ‘Alids. The resulting political environment proved constrictive for Ja‘far al-Šādiq, the preferred candidate and Imām of the Iṣmā‘īlīs/Twelvers.

7 The following narrative of the ‘Abbāsid Revolution and its impact on the “pious opposition” is indebted to Hodgson, Venture, vol. 1 272–79.
The ‘Abbāsids curtailed al-Ṣādiq’s ability to speak in public and contributed perhaps to his quietist political inclinations. In such an atmosphere, he refrained from an unambiguous public designation of a successor, which many feared would unduly antagonize the ‘Abbāsids.

Al-Ṣādiq was held in high regard by both Shī‘ī and non-Shī‘ī scholars, many of whom traveled to Medina to study under his tutelage. Along with his father (al-Baqir), al-Ṣādiq is credited with laying the foundation for a distinct Shī‘ī system of law and establishing the basic parameters of Shī‘ī belief. This period also saw the proliferation of extremist theological doctrines, with some Shī‘ī groups going as far as to proclaim the divinity of the Imāms. There emerged a belief in the Qā‘im (“the one who rises up”), a figure from the family of the Prophet who was expected to overthrow the tyrannical government and to establish just rule. This idea was tied to the doctrine of occultation, which allowed the Qā‘im to go into hiding (when he might appear to have died) until a time when conditions were more favorable for his appearance. Although al-Ṣādiq downplayed these notions from his home in Medina, they enjoyed wide circulation in Kufan Shī‘ī circles.

Al-Ṣādiq’s death in 765 triggered a general crisis over the identity of his successor. His followers split into a number of groups, two of which – the Ismā‘īlis and the antecedents of the Twelvers – are of particular interest to this study. According to later Ismā‘īli sources, al-Ṣādiq formally designated his eldest son (Ismā‘īl) as his successor. Ismā‘īl (born around 725) was broadly considered his father’s favorite, possessed a sterling lineage (his mother was a granddaughter of Ḥasan), and was known for his political activism. The expectations of many Shī‘a were disappointed, however, when he predeceased his father by one or two years. Ismā‘īl’s funeral was widely attended, with al-Ṣādiq making a point of revealing his son’s face to eyewitnesses to dispel rumors that he was still alive.

The term “Ismā‘īli” encompasses two groups that shared a belief that al-Ṣādiq’s designation of Ismā‘īl remained valid. The first group, which did not have a lasting impact, held that Ismā‘īl was not dead and had gone into occultation to protect himself from the ‘Abbāsids. The second group, which represented a majority of Ismā‘īlis, acknowledged Ismā‘īl’s death but argued that the Imāmate had passed to his son Muḥammad through a formal designation. Soon after al-Ṣādiq’s death, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl left Medina and settled in Khūzistān in southwestern Iran, where he died around 795. His followers again split into two groups. The first argued that Muḥammad was alive and awaited his return as the Qā‘im; the second traced the Imāmate through Muḥammad’s
descendants. These two groups, the primary progenitors of Ismāʿīlī Shiʿīsm, were of marginal importance until their reemergence as a political force in the late ninth century (see Chapter 6).

A majority of al-Ṣādiq’s followers accepted the Imāmate of Ismāʿīl’s full brother ‘Abd Allāh al-Afḍāḥ. There were, however, problems with this choice because ‘Abd Allāh lacked the requisite scholarly qualifications and was rumored to have non-Shiʿī inclinations. He also did not have a male heir when he died just seventy days after his father. Many of those who had initially accepted ‘Abd Allāh then turned to al-Ṣādiq’s third son (from a different marriage), Mūsā. They joined a small group of Shiʿa who had accepted Mūsā as Imām immediately following al-Ṣādiq’s death. In time, most of these Shiʿa excised ‘Abd Allāh altogether and instead traced the Imāmate directly from Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (the sixth Imām) to Mūsā al-Kāẓim (the seventh Imām).

B. Implications

The disputed succession to al-Ṣādiq decisively influenced the development of Ismāʿīlī beliefs in subsequent centuries. First and foremost, the centrality of formal designation (nāṣṣ) was affirmed with claims that al-Ṣādiq had explicitly identified Ismāʿīl or Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl as his successor. This designation was not based on the personal prerogative of an Imām but rather was determined directly by God. It could not be reversed because such a reversal would imply a mistake on the part of a perfect God. Once al-Ṣādiq designated Ismāʿīl, the issue was decided once and for all. When Ismāʿīl died, the natural choice for Imām was Muḥammad, his only male heir. To dispel any doubt on this matter, the Ismāʿīlīs further argued that a transfer of the Imāmate from brother to brother was no longer possible. It had applied to Ḥasan and ʿUṯmān only because of the elevated standing of their mother, Fāṭima, and their status as “people of the cloak.” The principles of designation and father-to-son transfer were thereafter embedded in the Ismāʿīlī doctrine of the Imāmate.

Within a few years of the succession crisis, Ismāʿīlī Shiʿīsm had transitioned from a public to a clandestine movement. Those Ismāʿīlīs who believed that Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl would return as the Qāʾīm remained in a state of waiting, and those who followed his heirs lacked a direct channel of communication with their Imām. There is a clear gap in the historical

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8 There is a distinct lack of documentary evidence for the existence of this second group between 795 and 864. Its views, however, were eventually adopted by those later Ismāʿīlī communities that are responsible for much of the extant source material for early Ismāʿīlī history.
record beginning in the late eighth century, with even Ismā‘ili sources noting the extreme secrecy surrounding the identity of the Imām during this era of concealment (*dawr al-satr*). This period witnessed the proliferation of certain esoteric theological ideas that highlighted the Imām’s cosmic role in creation and his exclusive interpretive authority. He was hailed as the sole conduit for discovering the hidden meaning of revelation. The idea of a cyclical revelatory history also appeared with the identification of Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il as the seventh Imām and Qā‘im for the era heralded by the Prophet and ‘Alī (see Chapter 2). Although there were slight changes in this theory of “speaking” prophets and “interpreting” Imāms in subsequent centuries, it remained a central pillar of Ismā‘ili belief.

Most of the antecedents to the Twelver Shi‘a held a position identical to that of the Ismā‘ili on the issue of formal designation (*nāṣi‘*) and the transfer of the Imāmate from father to son. They differed, however, in their narratives of the events surrounding the disputed succession. The central problem for the Twelvers involved the general expectation of Ismā‘il’s succession among al-Šādiq’s followers. There were also indications in the Shi‘i sources that al-Šādiq had in fact publicly designated Ismā‘il as the next Imām. How could this expectation (or formal designation) be reconciled with the affirmation of Mūsā al-Kāzim as the seventh Imām? To answer this question, some early Shi‘a invoked the concept of *badā‘*, borrowed from Kaysānī Shi‘ism. In its earliest formulation, *badā‘* was understood as “a change in the divine decision” resulting from free will. It represented the idea that God had created a series of pathways among which human beings could choose. For example, if an individual recited a prayer for a longer life, God might grant that longer life. The result (i.e., a longer life) was contingent on an individual’s free choice to recite the prayer. If he/she chose not to recite the prayer, his/her life would follow a different (and presumably shorter) path.

In the succession crisis to al-Šādiq, some Shi‘a reinterpreted this concept as an “a change in the divine decision” resulting from historical circumstance. Specifically, they argued that the death of Ismā‘il and the selection of Mūsā as Imām resulted from a change in God’s decree. A similar logic, based on this new understanding of *badā‘*, informed explanations of the “unexpected” death of the eldest son (and presumed heir) of the tenth Imām, ‘Alī al-Hādī (d. 869). The later Twelver historical tradition (notably al-Shaykh al-Mufīd) expressly rejected the possibility of Ismā‘il’s

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9 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 58.
10 For an explanation of this change, see Modarressi, *Crisis*, 58.
appointment, offering instead myriad proofs for Mūsā al-Kāzīm’s Imāmīte, including anecdotes about his vast knowledge and his access to divine favor.

III. THE OCCULTATION OF MUḤAMMAD AL-MAHĪDĪ

A. Background Narrative

The identity of the Imām was a recurring problem for the Twelvers in the century following al-Ṣādiq’s succession. A figure such as Mūsā al-Kāzīm was perceived by the ‘Abbāsid as a direct threat at a time when ‘Alīid revolts (with Zaydi Shi’a backing) were occurring at regular intervals. It is not surprising, then, that Twelver Imāms were reluctant to make public statements out of fear of ‘Abbāsid persecution. Formal designations of succession, which generally took place when an Imām was approaching death and in the presence of a handful of companions, were difficult to verify. More problems arose when the eighth Imām, ‘Ali al-Riḍā (d. 818), and the ninth Imām, Muḥammad al-Jawād (d. 835), left single male heirs who were only seven years old. The impact of these changes on Twelver Shi‘ī theology is discussed in Chapter 7. For now, it is important to note that each of these disputed successions spawned groups that claimed that a particular Imām was not dead but in occultation (ghayba), waiting for the proper time to return and establish his rule as the Qā‘īm.

Although the Twelver Imāms generally adhered to a political quietism (sometimes to the consternation of their own supporters), the ‘Abbāsid caliphs remained suspicious of their motivations and wary of their
revolutionary potential. Through the late eighth and ninth centuries, the Twelver Imāms built a broad financial network that collected money (i.e., gifts, alms, charitable donations, and endowments) from their followers through authorized agents. These agents served as the primary conduits for correspondence between the Imāms and their Shī‘a. This period also witnessed the elaboration of a common body of legal literature and distinctive ritual practices including formal pilgrimages to the shrines in Najaf (‘Ali’s grave) and Karbala (Husayn’s grave).

In 848, the ʿAbbāsid caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 842–47) ordered the tenth Imām, ʿAli al-Hādī, to Samarra (his capital), where he was placed under close observation and strict confinement. The Imām was now accessible to only a handful of agents, and his direct link to the community was severed in an unprecedented manner. The Twelvers feared that the Imām’s isolation threatened the very institution of the Imāmite. Recall that the presence of the Imām was a theological necessity given his role as an inerrant source of religious knowledge. Furthermore, should an Imām die without an heir, this would provide definitive proof of the invalidity of his claims. This feeling of unease reached an apex in the mid and late ninth century, when al-Mutawakkil dramatically increased the persecution of the Shī‘a and even destroyed Husayn’s shrine in Karbala.

The Imām of the eleventh Imām, Ḥasan al-Askarī (d. 874), was particularly troublesome. He remained isolated from his followers and was criticized for actions that broke sharply with the precedent of previous Imāms. These included his financial policies, his active participation at the ʿAbbāsid court (like his father, he resided in Samarra), and his apparent reliance on the legal works of other scholars. The later Twelver tradition interpreted these actions as part of a larger agenda meant to prepare the community for the impending loss of direct contact with the Imām. He was also hampered by the competing claims of his brother Jaʿfar, which became especially divisive after al-Askarī’s sudden death in 874 with no apparent heir. Soon after al-Askarī’s burial, however, his primary financial agent ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-ʿAmrī announced the existence of a son named Muhammad who had gone into hiding out of fear of the government.

The announcement of the occultation (ghayba) of the twelfth Imām plunged the Twelver Shī‘ī community into full-blown crisis. The new Imām was an inaccessible infant whose existence could be verified by only a handful of people. Most of al-Askarī’s financial agents accepted the idea of an infant son in occultation and continued to collect funds on his behalf. The same cannot be said for the larger Twelver Shī‘ī community, which was left puzzled and confused by the new situation. As discussed subsequently,
many abandoned Twelver Shi‘ism for Ismā‘īlī Shi‘ism; others (perhaps a majority of the Kufan community) affirmed the Imāmate of Ja‘far (al-Askari’s brother). Those who remained within the Twelver fold adjusted to occultation through a fundamental reimagining of the doctrine of the Imāmate.

B. Implications

The immediate aftermath of the occultation saw a rise in Twelver claims that the twelfth Imām was both the Qā‘im and the Mahdī. The former term was discussed earlier in reference to a figure who rises up and overthrows an unjust state. The latter term (lit. the rightly guided one) was not specifically Shi‘i in origin and was often tied to an apocalyptic figure, descended from the Prophet, who would “fill the earth with justice to the extent that it was filled with oppression.” This conflation was not unprecedented; previous Shi‘i splinter groups had claimed that a given Imām had not died but would return as both the Qā‘im and the Mahdī. By the early tenth century, Twelver scholars were referring to the hidden Imām using both titles, and he was formally identified as Muḥammad al-Mahdī.

During the early occultation, the leadership of the Twelver community was exercised by the previously mentioned ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-‘Amrī, who claimed that he corresponded directly with the hidden Imām. According to Twelver sources, this was accepted, albeit with a degree of skepticism. At his death (c. 879), ‘Uthmān was succeeded by his son Muḥammad, another well-known companion of al-Askari. Although the situation remained relatively stable throughout Muḥammad’s tenure, there were increasing challenges to his authority from within the community. He was followed in 917 by Ḥusayn b. Ruh al-Nawbakhtī, who held the office until his death in 936. The fourth and final caretaker was ‘Alī b. Muḥammad al-Samarrī, who did not name a successor. His death in 941 marked the end of the office of caretaker (ṣafīr) of the Imām.

The four caretakers of the Imām managed the affairs of the community in a capacity similar to that of the Imām. They collected and managed finances and responded to inquiries. These responses were assumed to come from the Imām himself. As the period of occultation lengthened, the deputies increasingly instructed followers to address their legal questions to jurists. There was also a growing restlessness within the community as many expected the Imām to return by his fortieth birthday, which corresponded to the turn of the century in the Islamic calendar (approximately 913). The Imām’s failure to appear exacerbated doubts, for he was now more
than forty years old and the sources described the Qāʾim/Mahdī as a youthful, energetic man who would actively lead a revolution. Twelver scholars countered by explaining that God would make the Imām appear as a young man regardless of his actual age. The death of the final caretaker did nothing to ease concerns: it marked a decisive loss of any connection with the Imām. In theological terms, the community shifted from a period of minor occultation (where the Imām communicated through caretakers) to one of major occultation (where all conventional contact with the Imām was severed).

The early and middle decades of the tenth century witnessed the recasting of the Twelver notion of the Imāmate on the basis of the community’s historical experiences.11 The idea of a bipartite (minor and major) occultation was justified through preoccultation traditions and examples from the lives of past prophets.12 Another important element in this transformation involved the fixing of the total number of Imāms at twelve. Beginning in the tenth century, Twelver scholars began gathering reports (mostly from Sunnī collections predating the occultation) in which the Prophet predicted the coming of twelve leaders from his tribe followed by a period of anarchy. These accounts became the centerpiece of Twelver arguments for the validity of twelve – and only twelve – Imāms. Later, distinctly Twelver variations of these traditions went even further by depicting the Prophet as identifying each of the Imāms by name. In fact, they argued that every Imām had known the identity of all the Imāms but had practiced precautionary dissimulation (taqiyya) to prevent this information from falling into the wrong hands. By the middle of the tenth century, the idea of a preordained limit of twelve Imāms had become a central tenet of Twelver doctrine. The combination of (i) a limit to the number of Imāms and (ii) the necessity for an Imām at all times was then used to explain a prolonged occultation.13 The twelfth Imām would return as a messianic Qāʾim/Mahdī figure near the end of time to fill the earth with justice. This remains a seminal component of contemporary Twelver Shīʿī belief.

An important consequence of the crisis in the Twelver community over the disappeared Imām was the reinvigoration of other Shīʿī groups. Zaydī Shīʿī rebellions had continued throughout the eighth and ninth centuries

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11 In fact, it was this change that established the community as “Twelvers” by setting the number of Imāms at twelve. Up to this point, we have been referring to the community as Twelvers anachronistically in anticipation of this development.
12 Kohlberg discusses this point in “From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-Ashariyya,” 528–29.
13 The first claim was established by Twelver scholars of traditions; the second claim was developed by theologians. The two came together in the course of the tenth and eleventh centuries.
achieving some successes, notably in Yemen and in the regions surrounding the southern Caspian Sea. The Ismā‘īlīs appear to have been particularly bolstered by discontented Twelvers. After nearly a hundred years of seclusion, the Ismā‘īli movement reemerged as a religious and political force in the mid and late ninth century with agents in the Arabian Peninsula, Iran, and North Africa. It won numerous converts with promises of a visible Imām ready to seize the reins of leadership. The complicated history of the Ismā‘īlīs in this period is discussed at greater length in Chapter 6. At this point, it suffices to note that the Ismā‘īli movement experienced an unprecedented era of success through the late ninth and early tenth centuries. By 909, there was a ruling Imām at the head of a state (the Fāṭimid caliphate) in North Africa. By 969, the Fāṭimid Imām’s armies had conquered Egypt, begun the construction of a new capital (Cairo), and seemed poised to conquer Iraq and depose the ‘Abbāsids once and for all. This contrasted sharply with the situation of the Twelver Shī‘a, whose Imām remained in occultation.

IV. SUMMARY

The three episodes discussed in this chapter provided the impetus for the formation of distinctive Zaydī, Ismā‘īlī, and Twelver streams of Shi‘ism. The Zaydis drew on the revolt of Zayd b. ‘Alī to model the qualities of an ideal Imām. They emphasized the Imām’s political responsibilities, rooting legitimacy in a candidate’s ability to win supporters (da‘wa) and to lead an armed rebellion (khurūj). Accounts of Zayd’s revolt also betray tensions within Zaydism over the nature and origins of an Imām’s religious knowledge and the status of early Companions who had opposed ‘Alī. These tensions, which played out in subsequent centuries, are discussed in Chapter 5.

The Ismā‘īlīs and the Twelvers remained united on their basic theological understanding of the Imām. The succession to Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq, however, triggered a dispute over the most critical of issues – namely, the identity of the Imām. The Ismā‘īli sources predominantly identified Muhammad b. Ismā‘il b. Ja‘far as the legitimate Imām based on formal designation (nass). They then maintained that the Imām had taken the community into a period of concealment (dawr al-satr). Such an absence encouraged a proliferation of esoteric tendencies that highlighted the Imām’s role as an interpreter of the inner meaning of revelation. For the Twelvers, disputes over al-Ṣādiq’s successor resulted in a fundamental transformation of the doctrine of badī‘ (discussed earlier).
Fragmentation

The purported disappearance of the infant son of Ḥasan al-Askarī produced several of the most distinctive theological beliefs of the Twelvers. The community held that the disappeared Imām was both the Qāʾīm and the Mahdī, casting him in a millenarian light with expectations that he would lead a revolution to establish just rule and to restore the proper practice of Islam. When he did not return in the course of an average human lifetime, Twelver scholars drew on non-Shiʿī sources to cap the number of Imāms at twelve. Since the world required the presence of an Imām at all times (as the proof of God on earth and the source of proper guidance), they argued that the twelfth and final Imām would return from his occultation (ghayba) only near the end of time.

Suggested Readings for Further Study

The following works provide additional details of and context for Zayd’s revolt:

Biographical Dictionary of Islamic Civilization, s.v. “Zayd b. ‘Alī” (Haider) [forthcoming].
Abū al-Faraj al-ʿIṣbahānī, Maqāṭīl ʿAlī b. ʿĀshūr, ed. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd Allāh b. al-ʿĀlī (Beirut, 1987), 124–44. [Arabic]
Wilferd Madelung, Der Imam al-Qāsim ibn Ibrahīm und die Glaubenslehrer der Zaiditen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1965), particularly 53–61. [German]

The following works provide additional discussion of the succession crisis after the death of al-Ṣādiq:

Encyclopaedia Iranica, s.v. “Badāʾ” (Madelung).

The following works provide additional context regarding the occultation of the twelfth Imām:

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