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Editorial	7
<b>Articles and Essays</b>	
An Analytical Summary of the Second and Third Qabas of Mir Dāmād's <i>Kitābu āl-Qabasāt</i> <i>Keven Brown</i>	11
The Origins of the Crown Prince System in Muslim History <i>Abbas Ahmadvand</i>	75
Alevis, Nusayris and Bektashis: A Bibliography <i>Ramin Khanbagi</i>	103
<b>Notes and Reviews</b>	
<i>The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam</i> , by Mahmoud M. Ayoub <i>Idris Samawi Hamid</i>	221



## NOTES AND REVIEWS

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### Book Review

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

*The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam*, 2003. By Mahmoud M. Ayoub. Oneworld Publications, Oxford. 179 pp., plus Preface and other front matter. Contains two appendices, bibliography, and index.

No period of Muslim history is as controversial as the immediate years following the passing of the Prophet of Islām. Although there is no shortage of traditional Muslim scholarship on the issue, much-to-most of it polemical, Western scholarship on the matter, objective or not, has been sorely lacking, at least until the publication of Wilferd Madelung's *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* in 1997. Covering the period of the first four political leaders of the Muslim community after the Prophet, Mahmoud M. Ayoub, in his *The Crisis of Muslim History: Religion and Politics in Early Islam*, gives a fresh perspective on the turbulent yet formative years of early, post-Prophetic, Muslim history.

Like Madelung, Ayoub claims that his approach is to largely let the Muslim sources speak for themselves. Ayoub's own analyses of the selected sources tend to be brief and to the point. On the other hand Ayoub uses a quite limited subset of sources and does not explicitly justify his selection of this subset, which appears to be the usual subset of mainly Sunnī sources relied upon or cited by the orientalist.

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## 222 IDRIS SAMAWI HAMID

Further, he mostly ignores Shī'ī sources altogether, as well as many Sunnī sources. Yet a fair historical assessment requires a somber consideration and analysis of sources from all sides of the relevant issues, be they Sunnī, Shī'ī, or other. This lack of inclusivity, without even a clear justification for the subset of sources cited, clouds some of the author's claims as we shall see.

The immediate picture that emerges from Ayoub's analysis is that, whatever the polemical issues, the dynamic that largely drives events surrounding the political succession to the Prophet of Islām is polarization about the person of Imām °Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (A). One detects a real fear on the part of many of the elders of the community of the consequences of giving the leadership of the community to Imām °Alī, despite at the least the grudging acknowledgement of his worthiness and deservedness.

One interesting, indeed, astonishing, claim that Ayoub makes is that the famous tradition of *Ġadīr Ḥumm*, despite its fame and authenticity, is not *reported* to have been used by Imām °Alī in his debates with the first two rulers of the community after the Prophet, with the implicit implication that the Imām himself possibly did not consider it to be so important to his claim to rule. Even further, according to Ayoub, the tradition is only first "cited" by the early and very important Companion °Ammār ibn Yāsir in what Ayoub terms an "alleged" debate with °Amr ibn al-°Aās during the rule of Imām °Alī (pp. 113–114).

Yet Ayoub fails to mention the famous *Ḥadītu āl-Raḥbah*, attested to by no less a personage than the proto-Sunnī figure Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (whose role in establishing the Sunnī consensus in theology and history can hardly be exaggerated). In this event, occurring before °Ammār's debate with ibn al-°Aās, Imām °Alī administered an oath to the people

## REVIEW: THE CRISIS OF MUSLIM HISTORY 223

of Kūfah and insisted that only those who had heard the Prophet speak at Ġadir should stand up; 30–32 surviving companions of the Prophet did so. Hence it appears that the Imām himself did accord this event much importance as the basis for his rule and the allegiance paid to him (versions of this tradition also mention that a small number of companions pretended to forget the event, and came under the curse of the Imām as a result).

There are other, earlier, reported incidents where the event of Ġadir has been cited by Imām ʿAlī and others in conjunction with his claim to the leadership of the community, prior to the *terminus* claimed by Ayoub. The Imām himself attests to it, for example,

- in the mosque of the Prophet soon after his passing (*Book of Sulaym ibn Qays*; also Ḥuṭbaṭu āl-Wasīlah of Imām ʿAlī, recorded by the writer Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Juʿfī (d. 128 or 132) in the late Umayyad period);
- at the *šūrā* after the death of ʿUmar (various);
- during the days of ʿUtmān (*Sulaym*; Jābir also wrote a treatise containing the details of this encounter called *Kitābu Ḥadīṭi āl-Šūrā*);
- on the day of āl-Raḥbaḥ upon his arrival in Kufa (mentioned earlier and attested by numerous sources);
- during the Battle of the Camel (various).

This is not an exhaustive list.

The event of āl-Raḥbaḥ, especially given its virtual consecutive transmission in Sunnī sources, is one of supreme importance. Even if one takes the approach that, e.g.,

## 224 IDRIS SAMAWI HAMID

*Sulaym* is a Shiʿī source and therefore biased,<sup>1</sup> the emphasis that Imām ʿAlī placed on Ġadīr at aī-Raḥbañ, the oath that he administered, and the public nature of this undeniable event, adds weight to the reports, ignored by Ayoub, that the Imām had referred to it on various earlier occasions. Ayoub also leaves out other examples, such as the speech of Fāṭimañ (A) after the passing of the Prophet where she reminds the people about Ġadīr.

Given the theme of Ayoub’s work, the relation of religion and politics during this turbulent period, one wishes that more attention were paid to the role of this tradition. In addition to its *explicit* mention, the *implicit* role played by the Tradition of Ġadīr in the circumstances surrounding the passing of the Prophet, as well as the events following his passing, cannot be left out of the analysis. Both Madelung and Ayoub fall short on this score.

In his analysis Ayoub appears to embrace the view that Imām ʿAlī was idealistic and morally irreproachable, but that he “lacked the Prophet’s far-sighted political flexibility” (p. 91), which resulted in the Imām’s downfall.

<sup>1</sup> *Note:* Modarressi (2003, pp.82–86) suggests that Sulaym ibn Qays never existed, though he agrees that the core book itself dates to Umayyad times. Whether or not ‘Sulaym’ was, in fact, a pseudonym has little-to-no bearing *per se* on the authenticity of the accounts given therein, especially as many of these are confirmed in other sources. In any case, Ayoub continually and consistently relies upon the *Taʿrīḥ* of Ibn Qutaybañ, a figure who died 200 years later than the author of *Sulaym*. Ayoub agrees that this book was in all likelihood written yet later in the tenth century and falsely attributed to Ibn Qutaybañ (p. 8). In the case of Ibn Qutaybañ Ayoub, implicitly and correctly, distinguishes the issue of authorship from the issue of authenticity of content. Given his apparent methodology one wonders why Ayoub left out the aforementioned and other reports. Either he was not aware of them or he has some criteria for selection which he has not shared with his reader.

## REVIEW: THE CRISIS OF MUSLIM HISTORY 225

Of course, such a view is not unique to Ayoub; it is a standard position taken by many orientalists and modernist Muslim scholars alike. It is, however, a matter which deserves further analysis. Again, Ayoub keeps his analyses brief and to the point, but they leave the reader longing for more. For example: Can one truly find a decision of the Imām where it is clear and demonstrable that the Prophet himself would have advised a more “politically flexible” course of action?<sup>2</sup>

An important point that Ayoub makes is the insight that the Imām was plagued by the “radical individualism” (p. 111) that characterized Arab tribal politics. The tendency of the Arabs towards an anarchic political system, plus the pious simple-mindedness of so many of his followers, contrasted with the Byzantine discipline of Mu‘āwiyāh’s Syrian army. I would add that it was this same spirit that played a major, perhaps decisive, role in causing the elders of the community to reject the arrangements the Prophet had made regarding his succession in the first place. Indeed, one may argue that the idol of *‘aṣabiyyah* (*prejudice*) and *ḥamiyyah* (*zealotry*) of the Arabs was perhaps the one idol the Prophet could not break in his lifetime. Imām ‘Ali himself is reported to have said that *‘aṣabiyyah* is the

<sup>2</sup> Sayyid Qutb, a modern Sunnī scholar, while not shy of being critical of ‘Utmān and even ‘Umar on occasion, answers this question in the negative. He rejects the criticism of Imām ‘Ali as “politically inflexible” and provides an analysis to show that any compromise on the Imām’s part would have been folly. Rather, the rot that had set in due to the mistaken economic policies of ‘Umar, followed by the corruption of the administration of ‘Utmān, had reached a point of no return. If one adds to this Ayoub’s point about the “radical individualism” (p. 111) of the Arab tribes (see the next paragraph of this review), we have the ingredients for a more profound and objective analysis of the period and of the decisions made by the Imām.

## 226 IDRIS SAMAWI HAMID

affliction of the Arabs. The relationship of this issue to the matter of Imām ʿAlī’s alleged lack of “political flexibility” requires further examination.

At this juncture we will mention one more event, reported by Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and others, one which ties the above observations together: In Kufa, a year or so after the event of aḷ-Raḥbaḥ, a band of riders, led by the Companion Abū Ayyūb Anṣārī, entered the courtyard of the main mosque. Upon seeing the Imām they greeted him and addressed him as “our *mawlā* (*master, guardian, locus of walāyah*)”. The Imām, half jokingly, replied, “How can I be your *mawlā*? After all, you’re Arabs!” They replied,

We heard the Messenger of Allāh (S) say, on the Day of Ġadīr, “For whoso I am his *mawlā*, then ʿAlī is his *mawlā*!”

Then the Imām laughed so hard his back teeth showed, after which, more seriously, he made the men testify to what they said. Thus in the view of the Imām the Arabs, even many of those under his command, had not fully accepted the implications of his *walāyah* and *mawlā*-ship.

Through his joke, followed by the serious command to testify, the Imām was making an important point to all those around him, including both his followers as well as his adversaries. With respect to Ayoub’s insight on the “radical individualism” of the Arabs, the relationship of this point to the role of the event of Ġadīr in Muslim history and its analysis must play a critical role, as the Event of the Riders shows.

In summary: Ayoub appears to miss the deeper *historical* significance (as opposed to the *theological* significance which, of course, is not the author’s point of emphasis in this book)

## REVIEW: THE CRISIS OF MUSLIM HISTORY 227

of the event of Ġadīr with respect to the events of the generation following the passing of the Prophet (the same is true of Madelung as well). Put another way: Historians need not overly concern themselves, or even agree, with the theological implications of the event of Ġadīr for Shī'ī Islām. On the other hand an appreciation of that event is critical for doing good history. The event of Ġadīr is full of political, economic, and social ramifications for the early Muslim community: the importance of Ġadīr for the historical understanding of the post-Prophetic generation can hardly be overemphasized.



It is beyond the scope of this review to thoroughly examine more of the author's controversial claims, especially the many made in the conclusion. For example, according to Ayoub,

- *The Prophet of Islām expected the world to end within his lifetime (p. 145).*

From this claim the author draws the following implications:

- The issues of successorship and administrative planning were not very important to the Prophet;
- Therefore the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth are silent on the matter of succession.

Both the main claim and the implications drawn from it are not proven by Ayoub in the earlier part of the book; they are hardly more than merely asserted. The meaning of the *ḥadīth* cited as evidence for the main claim (to the effect that between the Prophetic mission and “the hour” of Judgement there lies no more space than that between two



## 228 IDRIS SAMAWI HAMID

fingers of the hand) is so rich in plausible meanings so as to be quite far from supporting Ayoub's thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Ayoub completely ignores the virtually innumerable traditions and *āyāt* that imply that the Prophet was quite aware of the long-term nature of his mission beyond his own lifetime. The Prophet's undeniable and universally agreed upon emphasis to his Companions on leaving a will is a case in point. And of course there are numerous *āyāt* and *aḥādīth* that bear on the matter of succession. Again, either Ayoub is unaware of them (highly unlikely) or he has reasons for rejecting the sources that mention them. In the latter case, he owes his readers an explanation for why he rejects them.

- *The key problem facing the post-Prophetic community was, not who should be successor, but how the successor should be chosen (p. 146).*

Yet Ayoub acknowledges in the very next paragraph Imām ʿAlī's "insistence on his undisputable right" to the leadership.

From this second claim Ayoub draws the implication that Imām ʿAlī finally received the oath of allegiance, not so much on the basis of kinship – which he thinks lies at the heart of the Imām's claims –, but on the basis of his membership in ʿUmar's consultative assembly! Again, Ayoub completely ignores the historical significance of Ġadīr, and the emphasis Imām ʿAlī placed on that. It is Ġadīr that was the essential pivot of the Imām's claim; kinship was an important but accidental matter from the Imām's point of view. This point can hardly be emphasized enough. The Imām only used the point of kinship to point

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the entire philosophy of *time* in the Qurʾān and the Ḥadīth requires much research.

## REVIEW: THE CRISIS OF MUSLIM HISTORY 229

out the sophistry of the first two *ḥalīfahs* in trying to use the argument from kinship for their own claim to the *ḥilāfah*.

- *The Shīʿī doctrine of the Imāmah* was formulated by a “persecuted minority” (p. 147).

Yet, as Jafri (1979) argues and as the overwhelming weight of evidence proves conclusively, the doctrine of the Imāmah was, from the perspective of secular history, developed by Imāms al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq (both of whom, of course, claimed to only be elaborating what the Prophet himself taught). Independent of *theological* concerns, the *historical* nature of the role of these two Imāms is undeniable.

There are many other unsubstantiated claims as well; it would require much more space than we have allotted here to address them all. Just two more examples:

- While it is true that Sufism draws upon Shīʿī thought, I strongly disagree that it was in any sense a “protest” movement (pp. 149–150). Rather, Sufism cultivated the spiritual heart of what was to become Sunnī Islām, with full and unquestioning acquiescence to the *de-facto* post-Prophetic political order and to the normative implications of that order for the later community as drawn by Sunnī Islām.
- The translation of the term ‘*walāyah*’ by ‘sainthood’ (p. 150) is especially unacceptable. Although it may have acquired some such connotation in a Sufi context, in its original meaning, as used by the Imāms of the Prophet’s family, it refers to the activity<sup>4</sup> of *dynamic loving* as manifested in the

<sup>4</sup> ‘*Walāyah*’ is a gerund, after all.

## 230 IDRIS SAMAWI HAMID

mutual poles of loyalty-allegiance–cherishing-comfort based on love of Allāh and the chosen of Allāh. It is an activity that all participate in, both the sinner and the “saint”, or, more properly, the Imām.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, Ayoub (pp. 151–152) recognizes and reiterates Imām ‘Alī’s passionate insistence on his right to leadership of the community, and even seems to acknowledge that he has such a right. Yet Ayoub denies that the Imām’s arguments “provide a framework” for a theory of succession. Once again, Ayoub misses the point because here, as he does often, he leaves Ġadīr out of the picture. For it is Ġadīr that provides the lynchpin, the very axis of the Imām’s claim. As for a “framework” or “theory” of succession, it also lies in Ġadīr, in the meaning of ‘*mawlā*’ and the relation of that to ‘*walāyah*’. For *ḥilāfaḥ* was never the issue to begin with, according to the Prophet and the Imām: it was a matter of *mawlā-ship*, not *ḥilāfaḥ*. Once this point is grasped, then the entire discussion of post-Prophetic events can be understood at a much more profound level, as we alluded to earlier in this review.



Throughout the book the author makes brief and tantalizing connections between events of the early period and various trends and patterns that have either enriched or plagued Muslim civilization throughout the centuries (e.g., p. 140: “Although this movement [the Ḥārījīs] was finally crushed, the pattern it set continues to plague Muslim society to the

<sup>5</sup> To be fair, this mistranslation of ‘*walāyah*’ by ‘sainthood’ or ‘sanctity’ goes back at least to Henry Corbin, who has been uncritically imitated in this respect by later writers.

## REVIEW: THE CRISIS OF MUSLIM HISTORY 231

present”). For better and/or worse, this early period proved to be “normative” for Muslim civilization. A critical analysis of it is thus crucial to Muslim society’s understanding of itself and of its strengths and flaws. In that respect, when reading *The Crisis of Muslim History* one can’t help but be reminded of earlier works like Sayyid Quṭb’s historical analysis of this period in his *Social Justice in Islām*.

Ayoub points out that this work was prepared in part as background for his upcoming biography of Imām Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (A). At the same time, the issues raised by *The Crisis of Muslim History* implicitly reiterate the pressing need for a serious, critical biography of Imām ʿAlī as well.

The above points are only morsels from the table. A complete review of *The Crisis of Muslim History* would require much more space, perhaps another book altogether. Despite the author’s insights in some places, this work fails to break the orientalist mold in a number of ways, leaving some very important issues and events without an adequate mention or analysis. In particular, many of the author’s final claims are not well-argued. For the lay reader, the book is confusing and misleading in some respects. The work does summarize Ayoub’s views on the matter of post-Prophetic succession; perhaps it should be considered as more of an essay than a scholarly research piece. On the other hand, as a concise introductory text, it is a place from which researchers on this topic in English may begin and from which to delve further.

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