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*The Term "Rāfiḍa" in Imāmi Shīʿī Usage*

The term "Rāfiḍa," originally used as a pejorative appellation, was quite early interpreted by the Imāms (against whom it was primarily directed) as an honorific signifying "Those who rejected evil." This interpretation rests largely on the parallel drawn between the Shīʿa and the "proto-Rāfiḍa," who rejected evil in the form of Pharaoh and joined Moses instead.

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

The various senses of the term "Rāfiḍa" were the subject of a thorough investigation by I. Friedlaender some seventy years ago.<sup>1</sup> Friedlaender points out that "[Rāfiḍa] is obviously meant as a nickname, more exactly, an abusive nickname, a *nomen odiosum*."<sup>2</sup> In this he is correct. But when he adds that the Shīʿīs "never designate themselves as Rawāfiḍ"<sup>3</sup> he is on much less certain ground. Though this statement seems to have often gone unchallenged,<sup>4</sup> an examination of some Imāmi Shīʿī sources reveals that it is not true. Of these sources, the earliest available is probably the *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn* of Abū Jaʿfar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Khālīd al-Barqī (d. 274/887 or 280/893).<sup>5</sup> The fourth section of that book, entitled *Kitāb al-ṣafwa wa l-nūr wa l-raḥma*, contains some revealing utterances on the Rāfiḍa, which are ascribed to Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 114/732 or 117/735) and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), the fifth and sixth Imams. In one story, ʿUyayna (or ʿUtayba), a sugarcane vendor,<sup>6</sup> complains to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq that someone has warned him against turning into a Rāfiḍ; Jaʿfar replies: "By God, this name which God has granted you is excellent, as long as you follow our teachings and do not attribute lies to us."<sup>7</sup> In a similar situation, Muḥammad al-Bāqir is said to have pointed at himself, declaring, "I am one of the Rāfiḍa."<sup>8</sup>

In addition to such general statements which aim at investing the term "Rāfiḍa" with respectability, attempts

are also made to retroject it into a different historical setting. The early Shīʿī traditionist Sulaymān b. Mihrān al-Aʿmash (d. 148/765)<sup>9</sup> quotes Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq as explaining that "Rāfiḍa," far from being an abusive nickname invented by anti-Shīʿīs, is in fact an honorific given to the Shīʿīs by God and preserved in both the Old and the New Testaments. According to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, there were seventy men among the people of Pharaoh who rejected (*rafaḍū*) their master and chose to join Moses instead. God therefore called them "Rāfiḍa," i.e., those who rejected evil, and ordered Moses to inscribe this word in the Torah in the original Arabic. After Muḥammad's death, when most of the early adherents of Islam began to stray away from the path of truth, only the Shīʿīs rejected evil and thus became the successors of the original Rāfiḍa.<sup>10</sup>

This tradition is apparently based on Quranic passages (*Qurʾān* 7:120-126, 20:70-75) which describe a group of Pharaoh's magicians who were so impressed by the miracles wrought by Moses that they declared their loyalty to God and remained undaunted by Pharaoh's threats of punishment. According to some commentators, their number was 72.<sup>11</sup> The term "Rāfiḍa" does not appear in the Quranic version of this story (nor anywhere else in the Qurʾān, for that matter). The Shīʿī Imams could not, therefore, point to the Qurʾān and so turned to the Bible as the source of the term. In point of fact, the story of the magicians who rejected Pharaoh appears in neither the Old nor the New Testament;<sup>12</sup> this is not unusual, since the practice of citing real or—as in this case—spurious Biblical passages to prove the validity of a particular doctrine was well-established among Sunnis and Shīʿīs alike.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, it might well have been argued that a "Rāfiḍa-passage" existed in the original Biblical text, but that it was later deleted by the enemies of Shīʿism or of Islam.<sup>14</sup>

The similarity between those who rejected Pharaoh and the Imāmi Shīʿīs extends to interesting details. In one variant of the above-mentioned Shīʿī tradition, for example, Muḥammad al-Bāqir declares: "Seventy men from Pharaoh's camp rejected (*rafaḍū*) Pharaoh and came to Moses; there was no one among the people of Moses whose dedication and love for Aaron exceeded theirs."<sup>15</sup> The emphasis on Aaron rather than Moses seems deliberate; for according to one of the best-known Imāmi Shīʿī traditions, ʿAlī holds the same rank with respect to Muḥammad as does Aaron with respect to Moses (except that ʿAlī is not a

prophet); both Aaron and ʿAlī are legatees and successors.<sup>16</sup> By stressing the allegiance to Aaron of what may be called the “proto-Rāfiḍa,” the parallel with Muḥammad and ʿAlī becomes immediately obvious.

In the versions discussed so far, the proto-Rāfiḍa are Egyptians who commanded sufficient courage to renounce Pharaoh when they discovered the truth. But according to another version, these men were not Egyptians but Israelites who had adopted (or perhaps been born into) Pharaoh’s religion; having later become aware of their error, they rejoined their erstwhile co-religionists and proved to be the most devoted of God’s servants.<sup>17</sup>

The people of Pharaoh, then, are the enemies of all Rāfiḍīs, past and present. And just as the Quranic Moses and Aaron are prefigurations of Muḥammad and ʿAlī, so the Quranic Pharaoh and Haman are representations of the worst foes of Shiʿism. This idea is expressed clearly in an anonymous work transmitted by al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfi (d. after 180/796),<sup>18</sup> in which al-Mufaḍḍal asks Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq various questions concerning the return (*raʿa*) of the Imam as Mahdī. In answer to one question, Jaʿfar declares that when the Mahdī appears there will be fulfilled the promise in the following passage: “We intend to bestow favor on those who have been repressed in the land, to turn them into leaders and inheritors, to give them power in the land, and to let Pharaoh, Haman, and their army experience through them the very thing which they had feared” (*Qurʾān* 28:5-6). The expression “those who have been repressed” refers to the Shiʿa, while “Pharaoh” and “Haman” are interpreted by Jaʿfar as referring to Abū Bakr and ʿUmar.<sup>19</sup> The same idea occurs—albeit in a somewhat less explicit form—in the *Tafsīr* of ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummi (d. 307/919), where “Pharaoh, Haman and their army” are said to refer to “those who forcibly deprived Muḥammad’s family of their rights (*alladhīna ghaṣabū ʿal Muḥammad haqqahum*).”<sup>20</sup> According to this *Tafsīr*, the Quranic story should be understood as a parable (*mathal*): in the same way that Pharaoh perpetrated crimes against the Israelites until he was finally punished by Moses, acting as God’s instrument, so the *ahl al-bayt* too were wronged and murdered by their enemies, but will be avenged when men and returned to this world at the time of the *raʿa*.<sup>21</sup> In other words: Israelites and Imāms, Rāfiḍīs all, rejected evil in the form of Pharaoh/Abū Bakr and Haman/ʿUmar, suffered persecution and death, and have either gained victory already or can look forward to a decisive future triumph.

A retrojection of the “Rāfiḍa” theme into an even earlier, prediluvian period occurs in an Imāmi Shiʿi account about Idrīs, who is identified with both Hermes and Akhnūkh (Enoch).<sup>22</sup> According to this account, Idrīs lived during the reign of the infidel tyrant (*jabbār*) Biwarāsb,<sup>23</sup> who belonged to the progeny of Cain;<sup>24</sup> those who rejected the

tyrant and counted themselves among the followers (*shīʿa*) of Idrīs were called Rāfiḍa.<sup>25</sup> When one of these Rāfiḍīs refused to comply with the tyrant’s demand to hand over his flourishing garden, the tyrant, following his wife’s suggestion, had false witnesses testify that the Rāfiḍī had dissociated himself from both the tyrant and his religion. The Rāfiḍī was subsequently put to death and his garden seized by the ruler. In one version of the story, both the wife and the witnesses are said to have belonged to the Azāriqa (i.e., fanatically anti-ʿAlid Khārijīs), “who deemed it proper to kill believing Rāfiḍīs.”<sup>26</sup> The account (which goes on to describe the confrontation between the tyrant and Idrīs) bears a strong resemblance to the Biblical stories about Elijah and Elisha.<sup>27</sup>

The few examples discussed here are sufficient to show how “Rāfiḍa” was transformed within the Shiʿi world from an abusive nickname into a by-name signifying special praise. That this should have occurred is entirely natural; once the Shiʿi leaders realized that they could not rid themselves of the term, they sought to turn it to their advantage. If—as seems probable—the appellation originated in Zayd’s revolt, then al-Baqir (who died either five or eight years before the uprising) cannot have known it, and utterances about the Rāfiḍa which are attributed to him must belong to a later date. For the same reason, it is quite conceivable that Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, who died about 25 years after his uncle Zayd, was already familiar with the term; pro-Rāfiḍa utterances ascribed to him may therefore have indeed emanated from his circle, if not from his own mouth.

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<sup>1</sup> Friedlaender, “The heterodoxies of the Shiites in the presentation of Ibn Ḥazm,” *JAOS*, 29, 1908, pp. 137-159.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 137.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138, n. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. W. Montgomery Watt’s observation that “The term ‘Rāfiḍite’ was always a nickname, not used by the people themselves” (“The Rāfiḍites: A preliminary study,” *Oriens*, 16, 1963, pp. 110-121, at p. 119). But contrast J. Calmard, “Le chiisme imamite en Iran à l’époque seldjoukide, d’après le *Kitāb al-Naqq*,” in *Le monde iranien et l’Islam*, I, Geneva and Paris, 1971, pp. 43-67, at p. 51.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Barqī, *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr al-ʿUlūm, Najaf, 1964.

<sup>6</sup> I.e., ʿUyayna (or ʿUtayba) b. Maymūn, a *mawlā* of the Bajila and a disciple of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. See Aḥmad b. ʿAlī al-Najjāshī, *Kitāb al-rijāl*, Bombay, 1317, p. 214; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-rijāl*, ed. Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr

al-ʿUlūm, Najaf, 1961, p. 262. On the question of his first name see al-Māmaqānī, *Tanqīh al-maqāl*, Najaf, 1350, II, pp. 243-244.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Barqī, op. cit., p. 119, cit. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Bihār al-anwār* [= *Bihār*], [Persia], 1305-15, XV/i, p. 127.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. Cf. also the verses quoted in Muḥammad b. Abi l-Qāsim al-Ṭabarī, *Bishārat al-muṣṭafā*, Najaf, 1963, p. 276. And see Murtaḍā Rāzī, *Tabṣīrat al-ʿawāmm*, ed. ʿA. Iqbāl, Tehran, 1313 Sh./1934, pp. 32-33.

<sup>9</sup> See Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭūsī, op. cit., p. 206; Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-ḥuffāz*, I, Hayderabad, 1956, p. 154; Sharaf al-Dīn al-Mūsawī, *Kitāb al-murājaʿat*, Najaf, 1963, pp. 99-101; EI, new edition, s.v. "al-Aʿmash" (C. Brockelmann, Ch. Pellat).

<sup>10</sup> Furāt b. Ibrāhīm al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr*, Najaf, 1354, p. 139, cit. *Bihār*, XV/i, p. 127.

<sup>11</sup> Al-Thaʿlabī, *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, Beirut, n.d., p. 165. Much larger numbers are also given. Al-Ṭabarī, for one, mentions 900, 15,000, over 30,000, and even 70,000 magicians. See his *Tafsīr*, Cairo, 1954, XI, p. 24; XVI, pp. 184-186.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. H. Speyer, *Die biblischen Erzählungen im Qoran*, Gräfenhainichen, 1931, repr. Hildesheim, 1961, pp. 266-267.

<sup>13</sup> See F. Rosenthal, "The influence of the Biblical tradition on Muslim historiography," in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. B. Lewis and P. M. Holt, London, 1962, pp. 35-45; M. J. Kister, "Ḥaddithū ʿan banī isrāʾīla wa-lā ḥaraja," *Israel Oriental Studies*, 2, 1972, pp. 215-239. Abū Ḥatīm al-Rāzī (d. ca. 322/934), possibly the first heresiographer to note the laudatory signification given the term "Rāfiḍa" by its bearers, observes that since the Mosaic *sharīʿa* was written in Hebrew it could not conceivably have referred to the Israelites by an Arabic word such as "Rāfiḍa." See the section on the sects from his *Kitāb al-zīna*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh S. al-Sāmarrāʾī, in the appendix to *Al-ghulū wa l-fīraq al-ghāliya fī l-ḥaqāra l-islāmiyya*, Baghdad, 1392/1972, p. 271.

<sup>14</sup> Though I have not come across this argument with reference to the Rāfiḍīs, the line of thought which it represents is common enough in polemical literature.

<sup>15</sup> Al-Barqī, op. cit., p. 119; cit. *Bihār*, XV/i, p. 127.

<sup>16</sup> See e.g., Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib al Abi Ṭālib*, ed. by a committee of Najaf scholars, Najaf, 1956, II, pp. 219ff, III, p. 46. This tradition appears in Sunnī sources as well, although the Sunnīs do not draw from it the same conclusions as the Shīʿa. For some of the polemics on this subject from an Imāmī point of view see al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, *Al-shāfiʿī l-imāma*, Tehran, 1301, pp. 148ff. For the Sunnī view consult e.g., al-Jāhīz, *Kitāb al-ḥuthmāniyya*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, Cairo, 1955, pp.

153-159; ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Al-mughnī*, XX/ii, ed. ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm and Sulaymān Dunyā, Cairo, c. 1966, p. 126; Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Al-ṣawāʿiq al-muḥriqa*, ed. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb ʿAbd al-Laṭīf, Cairo, 1385, pp. 49-50.

<sup>17</sup> Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulīnī (or Kulaynī), *Al-kāfi*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, Tehran, 1375-77, VIII, p. 34, cit. *Bihār*, XV/i, p. 115; al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, *Al-ikhtisāṣ*, Najaf, 1971, p. 101, cit. *Bihār*, XI, p. 223. For a comparison between Israelites and Rāfiḍīs see ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, *Tafsīr*, ed. Ṭayyib al-Mūsawī al-Jazāʾirī, Najaf, 1386-87, II, p. 134, cit. *Bihār*, XIII, pp. 213-214.

<sup>18</sup> See GAS, I, p. 534.

<sup>19</sup> *Bihār*, XIII, p. 204.

<sup>20</sup> ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī, op. cit., II, p. 133, cit. *Bihār*, XIII, p. 213.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Al-Masʿūdī(?), *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya li-l-imām ʿAlī b. Abi Ṭālib* [= *Ithbāt*], Najaf, 1955, p. 20; Idrīs wa-huwa *Hirmīs wa-huwa Akhnūkh* (cf. EI, new edition, s.v., "Idrīs" [G. Vajda]). The *Ithbāt* (pp. 23-24) features two persons called Akhnūkh. The first, who is also known as Idrīs, was the grandfather of the second, who in turn was the great-grandfather of Noah. For a possible explanation of this addition to the Biblical genealogy consult Ch. Pellat, "Masʿūdī et l'Imāmisme," in *Le Shiʿisme Imāmīte*, ed. R. Brunschvig and T. Fahd, Paris, 1970, [pp. 69-90], p. 80. Against Pellat's tendency to accept al-Masʿūdī's authorship of the *Ithbāt*, T. Khalidī (*Islamic historiography: The histories of Masʿūdī*, Albany, 1975, pp. 138, n. 2, 163-164) proffers a more skeptical view.

<sup>23</sup> In the printed edition of the *Ithbāt* (p. 21) the name is given erroneously as Yabūrāsb.

<sup>24</sup> In al-Masʿūdī's main extant works (*Al-tanbīh wal-ishrāf*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1893, p. 85; *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Ch. Pellat, I, Beirut, 1965, p. 264) Biwarāsb is correctly identified with the Zuhāk/Daḥḥāk of *Shāhnāme* fame (cf. Th. Nöldeke, *Das iranische Nationalepos*, Berlin & Leipzig, 1920, p. 19, n. 2).

<sup>25</sup> *Ithbāt*, p. 21, and the discussion by M. Molé, "Entre le mazdéisme et l'Islam; la bonne et la mauvaise religion," in *Mélanges Henri Massé*, Tehran, 1963, pp. 303-316, at pp. 314-315; Ch. Pellat, loc. cit. Cf. Ibn Bābawayhi, *Ikmāl al-dīn*, Tehran, 1378-79, I, p. 227, cit. *Bihār*, V, p. 74.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn Bābawayhi, op. cit., p. 228, cit. *Bihār*, V, p. 75.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. G. Vajda, "Deux 'histoires de Prophètes' selon la tradition des Shiʿites duodécimains," in REJ, 106, 1941-5, pp. 124-133. For another version, according to which the first Rāfiḍa were the seventy followers of Noah, consult ʿAbd al-Jalīl al-Qazwīnī, *K. al-naqd*, ed. Jalāl al-Dīn Ḥusaynī Urmawī, Tehran, 1952, pp. 585-586, trans. J. Calmard, loc. cit.