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MUSHA'SHA'IYĀN
A FIFTEENTH CENTURY SHĪ'Ī MOVEMENT
IN KHŪZISTĀN AND SOUTHERN IRAQ

The lowlands of Khūzistān in the southwestern corner of Iran, as well as the neighboring marshlands of southern Iraq, were a center of Shī'ī activity during the first half of the fifteenth century under the short-lived dynasty of the Musha'sha's or Musha'sha'iyān. Shī'ism¹ in this region was growing almost at the same time as the Ṣūfī order of Ardabīl in the northwest (Āzarbayjān) was fast being transformed into a militant Shī'ī movement which, towards the end of the century, led to the establishment in the whole of Iran of the new dynasty of the Ṣafavids. The two movements, growing in either corner of western Iran, finally clashed. Victory was with Shāh Ismā'īl and the Ṣafavids².

On the Iranian side, this is the area watered by the Kārūn river which originates in the highlands of Irāq-i Ajam or Jibāl and flows southwards until it empties in Shaṭṭ al-'Arab at Khorramshahr (Moḥammarah). Along the northern Kārūn and its tributaries lie Dizfūl and Shūshtar (Tustar), and in the vicinity are the ruins of Shūsh or Susa, the ancient Achaemenid capital. The major Iranian city of Ahvāz lies on the Kārūn river in the center of this region, and sometimes lends its name to the whole province of Khūzistān. About forty miles to the west of Ahvāz is located the small village of Huwayzā' (Hoveyzēh), at one time the center of Musha'sha' activity. Ten more miles to the west is the modern Iraqi boundary line³.

On the Iraqi side are the marshlands of the lower Tigris and Euphrates rivers which meet at a place known as al-Qumrah, a few miles west of the Iran-Iraq border. From there to the head of the Persian Gulf, about a hundred miles to the south, is the waterway known as Shaṭṭ al-'Arab (or Arvand Rūd as the Iranians referred to it in recent times). Baṣrah, the old Moslem garrison town, lies on the Iraqi side halfway down the Shaṭṭ. Due to the swampy character of the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley, the area has often been called al-Jazā'ir (literally the islands). The geographical inaccessibility of the terrain to armies coming from the north played an important role in the early successes of the Musha'sha' movement⁴.

In pre-Islamic times, Khūzistān was an important province first of the Achaemenid and later of the Sāsānid empires. By the year 640, the region was conquered by Moslem Arab armies and was one of the few areas of Iran that was almost totally colonized by Arab settlers, hence sometimes assuming the name of 'Arabistān. During the high Caliphate period the province was the center of the Zanj rebellion (861-883), and was subsequently under the control of whichever regime was in power in Baghdad (Būyids, Seljūks, Ilkhānids)⁵.

Religiously, Khūzistān and lower Iraq appear to have been under Shī'ī influences originating in Ḥillah (and the neighboring centers of Kūfah, Najaf and Karbalā) to the northwest, and in the Ḥasā-Qaṭīf-Baḥrayn area to the south. Economically, the region has been known for its agricultural produce since ancient times. The tenth century Persian geographical handbook, Ḥudūd al-'ālam, says,

This province is more prosperous than any province adjoining it. Great rivers and running waters are found in it. Its countryside is flourishing and its mountains are full of utility⁶.

The settlement of the Near Eastern question by Tīmūr may be said to have ended in failure with his death in 1405-06. His

successors, the Tīmūrīds, were more interested in establishing their power in Māvarā'annahr, although they did maintain a shaky control over Iran and Iraq. Khūzistān and southern Iraq were ruled by local governors appointed by Tīmūrīd princes in Shiraz. The real emerging power in Iran and Iraq (including eastern Anatolia) during the post-Tīmūr period was that of the Turkmān tribal federations of the Qarā-qoyunlū and the Āq-qoyunlū. While these Turkmāns originated elsewhere, it was only after they controlled the great metropolitan centers of Baghdad and Tabriz that they became recognized established states⁷.

The Musha'sha' movement began during the first decades of the fifteenth century when Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāh, the founder of the "dynasty" declared himself to be the Mahdi.

I

It is not possible yet to outline in detail the history of the Musha'sha' movement in Khūzistān and southern Iraq. To begin with, no sufficient research has yet been done on this movement, and the information on it is scattered throughout the contemporary and later chronicles. No single chronicle exists that is devoted solely to the history of this dynasty - if indeed we can call it so. However, many works that deal with the general history of Iran and Iraq during the fifteenth century and later, and in particular those chronicles that cover the era of the Ṣafavids, ordinarily include a section on the Musha'sha's. Khunji's Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-yi Amīni, for example, devotes several pages to Musha'sha' affairs, but his information, although of considerable importance, is only incidental to his chief interest in late Āq-qoyunlū history⁸. The same may be said about contemporary and later Persian chronicles.

A major source on the Musha'sha' movement, however, is the yet unedited and unpublished work by the lesser known Iraqi chronicler 'Abd Allāh ibn Faṭḥ Allāh al-Baghdādī, author of at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi⁹. Baghdādī, like Khunji, is a contem-

porary of the events he chronicles, and is perhaps our earliest and most trustworthy source on the subject. In fact, it appears that Baghdādī's account of the Musha'ṣha' movement was for a long time the only source of information on the dynasty and its early history. This account was made use of by the celebrated Shī'ī biographer of the early seventeenth century, Qādi Nūr Allāh Shūshtari in his work Majālis al-Mu'minīn where the author of at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi is quoted directly¹⁰.

One of the earliest modern scholars who was first to deal with the Musha'ṣha' movement was the late Werner Caskel, who devoted two articles to this subject which appeared in the now defunct journal Islamica¹¹. One of these articles deals with the origin of the movement and the affairs of its founder Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ and his immediate successors. The other deals with the dynasty when, after its subjugation by Shāh Ismā'īl, the Musha'ṣha' sultans became governors of Arabistān (Khūzistān) under the Ṣafavids. A short section of this second article brings the account of the dynasty to the present.

In dealing with the origins and early history of the Musha'ṣha's, Caskel bases his information on the available accounts of the chronicles such as Khwāndamīr's Habīb as-siyar, Munshī's Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-yi Abbāsī, and other geographical and biographical works like Hājji Khalīfah's Jihān-numā and Shūshtari's Majālis al-Mu'minīn.

Walther Hinz, in an article on the sources for Tīmūrid history, included a short section on Musha'ṣha' bibliography which added little to what was then written about this dynasty¹².

At about the same time, the late great Iranologist Vladimir Minorsky published a short but comprehensive article on the Musha'ṣha's in the Supplement to the first edition of The Encyclopaedia of Islām (1934). Minorsky depended primarily on Caskel's work, but for the religious views of the movement he also utilized Aḥmad Kasravi's Persian work on Khūzistān, Tārīkh-i panṣad sālah-yi Khūzistān, in which the celebrated Ira-

nian scholar had devoted a fairly large section on the Musha'ṣha' movement¹³. The importance of Kasravi's work lies chiefly in his use of the so-called Kalām al-Mahdi, a work done in imitation of the Qur'ān and ascribed to the founder of the Musha'ṣha' dynasty, Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ himself. Kasravi also uses at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi, apparently only in the recension of Shūshtari's Majālis, and utilizes a number of other important materials¹⁴.

The only author who appears to have used at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi in its original form is the modern Iraqi scholar, the late 'Abbās al-'Azzāwī, who was writing, a few years later, his multi-volume work Tārīkh al-'Irāq bayn ihtilālayn¹⁵. 'Azzāwī was using the manuscript of the said at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi which a leading Iraqi scholar, Fr. Antoine-Marie al-Karmili, had purchased at Najaf in 1917¹⁶. This appears to be only manuscript of this work known to exist.

But in spite of the fact that four scholars (Caskel, Minorsky, Kasravi, and 'Azzāwī) have dealt with the question of the Musha'ṣha' movement with varying degrees of interest and attention, there is much yet to be known. A closer look at the available sources, and a thorough examination of certain other material either neglected or unavailable at the time to these scholars, will yield significant information on one of several such socio-religious movements that rocked the Moslem world during the fifteenth century¹⁷.

II

Like the Ṣafavids, the Musha'ṣha's claimed descent from the Seventh Shī'ī Imām Mūsā al-Kāẓim. According to the genealogy of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ, he was fourteen generations removed from Imām al-Kāẓim¹⁸. The Ṣafavid family's claim was in the twentieth generation; but a section of that genealogy has been proven wrong¹⁹. Caskel does question the veracity of Musha'ṣha' genealogy²⁰, and although he makes some at-

tempts at reconstruction in the various names by a comparison of the sources, he leaves the matter unresolved.

Sayyid Muhammad was born at Wāsiṭ in the lower Tigris-Euphrates valley halfway between Baṣrah and Kūfah²¹. He studied at the great Shī'ī center of Ḥillah under Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Fahd al-Ḥilli²².

The first facts recorded in the sources about Sayyid Muhammad deal with relations between him and his teacher. We are told that,

Shaykh Aḥmad had written a book on the strange sciences (al-ʿulūm al-gharībah, i. e. magic); and when he was about to die he gave the book to his servant to throw away in the Euphrates. By means of a trick Sayyid Muḥammad... was able to get hold of that book...²³.

It is also stated that Sayyid Muḥammad's father died when his son was still an infant, and that Shaykh Aḥmad married his mother and subsequently gave Sayyid Muḥammad his own daughter in marriage²⁴.

This paternal-filial relation between master and student did not seem to give Sayyid Muḥammad a special position with his Shaykh; for we are told that, when Shaykh Aḥmad learned that his student had by trickery obtained possession of his book of miracles and magic, he sent a messenger after him demanding the book back. "Sayyid Muḥammad denied (that he was in possession of the book) and claimed that the Shaykh had become senile from illness and that he was a Sunni while Sayyid Muḥammad was an Imāmi (i. e., Shī'ī-ithnā'ashari)... He ran away in the darkness of the night and became eager to read the book... He went to Ḥuwayzā,²⁵ and began performing many miracles²⁶". Later when Shaykh Aḥmad learned that his former student was beginning to assume the role of a "Mahdi" he issued a fatwā against him²⁷. He also tried to have him killed and wrote to the Amir of Wāsiṭ accusing Sayyid Muḥammad of kufr²⁸. Muḥammad managed to escape²⁹.

Baghdādī's at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi speaks of a zuhūr (i. e., manifestation/epiphany) of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ in the year 820/1417³⁰. Other authorities speak of a zuhūr in 828/1424, and even later in 840/1436³¹. According to at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi, our most trustworthy authority,

At that time (820/1417) Sayyid Muḥammad often used to say, 'I will make myself manifest; I am the expected Mahdi.' These words were communicated to the Shaykh (Aḥmad ibn Fahd) who condemned Sayyid Muḥammad and forbade him to utter such words since they are contrary to the beliefs of the ithnā'ashari Shī'a³².

Earlier in his life, it appears that Sayyid Muḥammad was involved with long-established centers of Ismā'īlī teaching in eastern Iran (Qūhistān). He is said to have paid a visit to that region and to have "acted in accordance with the views of philosophers and Ismā'īlis"³³.

At-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi gives more details about the theological training and religious practices of Sayyid Muḥammad: "This Sayyid had specialized in both the rational and traditional sciences (al-ma'qūl wa al-manqūl). He was also a Ṣūfī with devotional, inspirational, and exemplary powers. When he was in an inspirational state he would announce his zuhūr... Among his devotional practices was the time when he lived in seclusion for a whole year in the mosque at Kūfah eating nothing but some barley flour. At the beginning of his zuhūr he manifested some delirium... so that his master (Shaykh Aḥmad ibn Fahd) ordered him to be killed"³⁴.

Sayyid Muḥammad began to spread his teachings among the Arab tribes in and around Wāsiṭ in the lower marshy lands of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. Among the tribes mentioned in the sources were the Banū Salāmah, Ṭayy, and the Nays (a clan of the Ma'ādi tribe³⁵). In certain cases there was some opposition to these new ideas particularly by learned scholars in the area³⁶. However, we are told that at one time Sayyid Muḥammad

was able to convince one of the tribes to sell their cows and oxen and buy weapons. "Each cow was sold for a sword and ten dirhams"³⁷.

The Arab ethnicity of the tribes in southwest Iran and in southern Iraq, and the whole question of their "conversion" by the Musha'sha' movement, poses many interesting problems for the general consideration of religious questions during this period. For whereas, in tracing Shī'ī developments in the fifteenth century, we are met nearly always by people of either native Persian stock or of wandering Turks and Turkmāns who were in the process of settlement (and who later were mobilized into the Ṣafavid movement), it is curious to note that in the southwest similar Shī'ī developments were touching people of Arab stock. In other words, the Ṣafavids in the northwest and the Musha'sha's in the southwest appear to have been moving along similar religious lines.

It is difficult to attempt to trace the spread and expansion of the Musha'sha' movement during the period of its founder Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāh. The sources do not make this matter clear. On the contrary, the whole picture is confused and disorderly. Baghdādi in *at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi* gives many details, but they are of a disorganized nature. It is perhaps best to paraphrase him as follows:

He (Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāh) withdrew to a place inhabited by al-Ma'ādi tribes. They are the group that gathered around him and joined his movement... Other groups (tawā'if) from among the Arabs came to him and settled down in that area and congregated around him... At that time he claimed to be the Mahdi and performed certain miracles (khawāriq). Subsequently he left this area and came to a place called Shawqah... When the ruler of this place heard this he set out to fight them killing many of the Musha'sha's and capturing prisoners... After that they returned to their original dwelling places (mawāṭin)... After some time they left for ad-Dawb, an area where al-Ma'ādi tribes usu-

ally stay somewhere between the Tigris river and Ḥuwayzā'. The Musha'sha's settled down there...

After sometime he (Sayyid Muḥammad) discovered that hardship and drought had befallen his people (qawm). Thus he led his armies (juyūsh) towards Wāsiṭ and the neighboring region. There he fought and killed forty Mongols and fled. Then he turned against the nomadic tribes, attacked them, and seized their produce and property to compensate for the hunger and hardships that had befallen his followers ('ashā'ir).

Suddenly, he led about three thousand fighters (sign. muḥārib) against Wāsiṭ and defeated its ruler at first. The latter counterattacked and was victorious killing as many as eight hundred Musha'sha's. Many others perished as they withdrew. This campaign caused lassitude in the ranks of the Musha'sha's and sapped their strength since most of the fighting men were decimated. Sayyid Muḥammad later moved from al-Jazā'ir (i.e. southern Iraq) to Ḥuwayzā' destroying the villages on this way and killing everyone he met...³⁸.

This early period of Musha'sha' activity appears to have benefited greatly from the unsettled political situation in Khūzistān and southern Iraq at this time. It will be recalled that in the early decades of the fifteenth century western Iran and the adjoining parts of Iraq were being contested by the Tīmūrids and the rising power of the Qarā-qoyunlū. Tīmūr's successors in Māvarā'annahr were trying to preserve their hegemony in the west through their governors in the various provinces. The Qarā-qoyunlū meanwhile had put an end to the Jalāyir dynasty and were, again through governors of their own dynasty, trying to impose their sway over the whole of Iraq and Iran³⁹. One of the early struggles of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāh, which appears to have been of considerable magnitude, was his attempt to seize Ḥuwayzā' from Shaykh Jalāl ad Dīn Abū al Khayr ibn Muḥammad al-Jazari, its governor appointed by Sulṭān 'Abd Allāh ibn Mīrzā Ibrāhīm ibn Shāh the Tīmūrid prince of Shīrāz⁴⁰. In order to allay the fears of the Qarā-qoyunlū Amīr

Ispand ibn Qarā-Yūsūf, the governor of Baghdad from 836/1433 to 848/1445, who appeared at this time bent to march south and settle the situation, Sayyid Muḥammad sent him presents which he had seized from Shaykh Abū al-Khayr. Baghdādī's at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi gives the following details about this military-diplomatic effort of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ:

Sayyid Muḥammad sent an emissary to Amīr Asbān (Arabized from of Ispand/Isfand) and presented to him gifts and treasures which he had seized from Shaykh Abū al-Khayr. He apologized for his actions and wrote to him many times beseeching him to accept his presents... Amīr Asbān was satisfied and ordered that the boats be filled with rice and sent (down the river) in the direction of Sayyid Muḥammad⁴¹...

Thus Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ reaped some benefit from Tīmūrid-Qarā-qoyunlū political rivalry, and the Qarā-qoyunlū too realized the usefulness of a possible "ally". The ties between Sayyid Muḥammad and Ispand Mīrzā appear to have gone a step further; for, we are told, that when the qirān (propitious conjunction of the stars) occurred signalling the zuhūr of Sayyid Muḥammad, Ispand invited Shī'ī and Sunni scholars to argue about the faith and elected the Shī'ī religious views (madhhab) and struck coinage in the name of the Twelve Imāms⁴².

This honeymoon between the Musha'sha's and the Qarā-qoyunlū did not last long. The Qarā-qoyunlū crushed Tīmūrid power in Iraq and Iran, while the Musha'sha's were growing stronger in their area and were beginning to interfere in regional and inter-Islamic affairs.

III

One curious development during the lifetime of Sayyid Muḥammad was the simultaneous assumption of power by his son Mawlā 'Alī. This strange dual authority is quite confused in the sources, and it is very difficult to determine whether the father

and the son had a co-ordinated plan of action, or whether Mawlā 'Alī was working independently and cashing in on his father's popularity and reputation.

In any case, Mawlā 'Alī certainly appears to have been the more able fighter and organizer of the movement; and it is perhaps more due to his aggressive policy that the Musha'sha's were able to control almost the whole of southern Iraq and Khūzistān. This placed them astride the important pilgrimage routes to both the Shī'ī centers at Najaf, Ḥillah and Karbalā', and the routes leading to the southwest, i.e., to the Ḥijāz. Interference with the flow of traffic along these routes brought the Musha'sha' movement to the attention of contemporary Egyptian historians who left us very significant, though short, references to the movement as a whole.

Ibn Iyās (1448-1524), for example, in Badā'i' az-zuhūr makes the first entry on the Musha'sha' movement in Dhū al-Ḥijjah of the year 857/1454:

In this month news came that a person called Ibn al-Falāḥ al-Musha'sha' appeared (zahāra). The utmost corruption was caused by him, and he killed innumerable people. He plundered the Iraqi pilgrimage caravan (rakb), and his affair troubled the viceroy of Syria (nā'ib ash-Shām). The news was disturbing to the (Mamlūk) Sulṭān⁴³.

In a second entry, Muḥarram 860, Egyptian pilgrims returning to Cairo confirm the plight of the Iraqi caravan⁴⁴; and a third entry, Dhū al-Qa'dah 861, relates that "the rebel (al-khārijī) who is called al-Musha'sha'" had been defeated and the pilgrimage route from Iraq re-established⁴⁵. The holy places in the Ḥijāz, under Mamlūk suzerainty at this time, gave the Egyptians certain economic advantages as well as prestige which the Mamlūk Sulṭāns were keen to preserve. In addition, the undefined borders between the Mamlūks and the Qarā-qoyunlū along the upper Euphrates caused continuous friction between the two powers.

Ibn Taghri-Birdi (1411-1470), on the other hand, gives more specific information about the Musha'sha' movement. In his Hawā-dith ad-duhūr he refers to Muḥammad ibn Falāh as "a rebel (khā-rījī), called Sha'shā', who claims to be the Mahdi somewhere in Iraq"⁴⁶. In a subsequent entry he adds that this Sha'shā' "has been leading his movement for more than twenty years calling the people to follow him. He claims to be a sharīf and that he is the Mahdi. Many people followed him, and the kings of the East have been unable to put down his rebellion since whenever they send troops after him he escapes in barges and disappears in al-Jazā'ir (the marshlands of the lower Tigris - Euphrates valley). This has been his practice, in addition to cutting off the roads, frightening the travelers, and killing any Sunnis he captures. He is an old man, a wicked rāfidī (the pejorative term which Sunnis use in general to describe Shī'is), indeed a godless atheist (kā-fir) who does not follow any religion. It is said that he had died, and that the matter now is in the hands of his successor..."⁴⁷.

This Egyptian historian (whose closeness to the Mamlūk court makes his information quite reliable⁴⁸) next reports the defeat of the Musha'sha's by "the governor of Baghdad, Bīr Budā' (i. e., Pīr Budāq) ibn Jahān-shāh ibn Qarā Yūsuf" whose emissaries arrived in Cairo in Dhū al-Qa'dah 861 to report the good news⁴⁹. At this point in his chronicle, Ibn Taghri-Birdi, supplies background information about the Musha'sha' movement. After commenting on the name itself (which he renders Shi'shā')⁵⁰, he adds that the founder

had come out in the old days from the vicinity of Wādī at-Taym, claimed to be a sharīf and became a zindīq. He then proceeded to Iraq, committed abominations (literally, allowed illicit relations with women and defiled sacrosanctities), and gathered large crowds whom he duped with magic. He then claimed prophecy, and misled the people in that region. His movement became great, and the kings of those countries were unable to defeat him not so much because

of his strength but rather because when the kings went to fight him he would escape from them and disappear in the Islands (al-Jazā'ir) and keep the barges with him. He had more than a thousand barges, and some say even ten thousands. The kings were powerless in confronting this movement which grew as a result of the supernatural and magical performances of this man, and the license by which he allowed his men to do whatever they liked. He lived to an old age until God destroyed him...⁵¹.

Such information from contemporary Egyptian historians, coming as it does from fairly reliable and independent sources, adds considerably to the little we know about the Musha'sha' movement and in particular about its religious excesses. These will be discussed in some detail below.

The growth of the movement and its interference with the pilgrimage routes caused the Qarā-qoyunlū (who by now were firmly established in Baghdād and Tabriz) to take more serious measures against the Musha'sha's. Pīr Budāq, son of Jahān-shāh Qarā-qoyunlū, led the campaign against Mawlā 'Alī and defeated him in 861/1456-57⁵².

With Mawlā 'Alī's death, his father Sayyid Muḥammad assumed full authority again for a few more years until his death in 870/1465 (or a few years earlier).

Relations between father and son were never made clear in the sources. Shūshtari in Majālis al-Mu'minīn, for example, says that Sayyid Muḥammad was not able to control the activities of his son. "He (Sayyid Muḥammad) was unable to improve the ways of his son (Mawlā 'Alī), and wrote to the outlying areas (atrāf) that he had no power over him. In one of his writings (Mawlā 'Alī's?) he described himself to the people as the Mahdi, and did not even stop at this claim. Indeed he claimed to be a god (ulūhiyah)"⁵³. Shūshtari also mentions a son of Mawlā 'Alī, Ibrāhīm by name, whose activity, curiously enough, had extended to the Tīmūrid court of Sulṭān Ḥusayn Bāyqarā at Herāt, and

recounts an altercation between him and Sayyid Qāsim Nūr-bakhsh (son of Muḥammad Nūr-bakhsh, another important figure in fifteenth century socio-religious movements)⁵⁴.

IV

The religious ideas of the Musha'sha's can best be understood and explained within the context of social and religious unrest during the fifteenth century in Iraq, Iran, and Anatolia. In fact, this unrest can be traced back in certain cases to the confused political conditions that followed the Mongol conquest of Moslem lands in the thirteenth century and, to some extent, to the disruptive campaigns of Tīmūr towards the end of the fourteenth.

In the absence of strong centralized government, this social and religious unrest manifested itself in various "popular" movements the exact nature of which is not yet properly understood⁵⁵. It appears, however, that most of these movements, if not all of them, were grounded in Ṣūfī teachings or in extreme Shī'ī beliefs of the type generally known as ghulāt Shī'ism (although developments in Sunni Islam during the post-Mongol period have not been sufficiently studied). Only the Ṣafavid movement, which began as a Ṣūfī order in Ardabīl in the 13th century, succeeded, after passing through the ghulāt stage, in establishing itself as a state in Iran in 1501 under Shāh Ismā'īl.

In the case of the Musha'sha's, we have seen (in section II above) how the founder of the movement, Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ, began his career as a student of Shī'ī (ithnā'ashari) learning under Aḥmad ibn Fahd al-Ḥilli, the leading Shī'ī divine of the early fifteenth century. Early on, however, Ibn Falāḥ began to show interest in magic and the performance of miracles, based, it is said, on some of the writings of his master Ibn Fahd⁵⁶. When he was reproached concerning these activities, unbecoming of a student of Shī'ī thought, he withdrew to his native region in southern Iraq (Jazā'ir). There he declared himself to be the Mahdī, the incarnation of the Twelfth Imām⁵⁷.

In addition to his political and social activities, Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ began to issue "inspired" statements, in imitation of the Koran, describing his religious transformation in highly obscure and mystical language, which came to be known as Kalām al-Mahdī (the words of the Mahdī). The late Persian scholar Aḥmad Kasravi (died in the 1940's) appears to be the only person who studied Ibn Falāḥ's words and attempted to examine his religious views⁵⁸. However, Kasravi's approach is highly colored by his own anti-Shī'ī stance.

Nevertheless, when Kasravi is not dwelling on what he calls the "nādāni-hā" (ignorance) of Sayyid Muḥammad⁵⁹, (without attempting to explain, or explain away, this "ignorance" especially since - one can safely assume - Sayyid Muḥammad did have a thorough groundwork in the Islamic sciences), he does make one or two interesting observations regarding Musha'sha' religious views. In one case he notices a curious similarity between the ideas of the Musha'sha' leader and those of the eighteenth-nineteenth century Shī'ī thinker, Shaykh Aḥmad-i Aḥsā'ī (1753-1826)⁶⁰, leading him to suspect that Aḥsā'ī could have had access to Kalām al-Mahdī⁶¹. This cannot be taken seriously; for Aḥsā'ī's complex religious views, especially those dealing with his concept of the shī'ah-yi kāmīl, never led or misled him into the ways of extreme Shī'ism of the ghulāt type.

Kasravi does, in another point, attempt to place the Musha'sha' movement in a religio-historical perspective when he discusses Musha'sha'ism in terms of 'Alī-Ilāhism⁶², an extremist movement which equates Ḥaẓrat-i 'Alī, the fountainhead of Shī'ism, with God-Allāh, and which (together with the Ahl-i Ḥaqq movement) probably had its origins at about this time. In this respect, Kasravi seems to agree with 'Azzāwī who, after chronicling the events of Musha'sha' history during Sayyid Muḥammad and his son Mawlā 'Alī, concludes that "it appears that they believed in the divinity of Imām 'Alī, and accepted metempsychosis or transmigration of souls. This was apparent already in utterances made

by the son, Mawlā 'Alī". 'Azzāwī goes on to quote from Tadhkirat al-Mu'minīn certain observations about the 'Alī-Ilāhī ghulāt⁶³, and states on the authority of Munajjim-bāshī's (unpublished) Jāmi' ad-Duwal that "He [Mawlā 'Alī] believed in incarnation (hu-lūl) and used to say that the soul of Imām 'Alī was re-incarnated in his body"⁶⁴.

Many of these extremist ideas are expressed rather strongly, albeit obscurely, in Ibn Falāḥ's own words in his "Book" Kalām al-Mahdī:

True belief is that 'Alī, who was (always?) by the side of the Prophet, is the Secret turning in the sky and on the earth; and Muḥammad is the Veil covering the true message. The Eleven Imāms are the angels, related to him ('Alī), and he to them. Salmān is a member of the House of the Prophet (Ahl al-Bayt); and the House is the Way (ṭarīqah), and it is knowledge. Every one who is able to attain gnos- is ('irfān, as opposed to ma'rīfah, knowledge) is the Salmān of his time. As for this Sayyid (Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ) who has appeared (ẓahara), he is of the rank of every Nabi (prophet) and every Wali (guardian). This is so through (his) apparent type and the weakness of mankind and not through overpowering force; for truth is not transferred - only the Veil is transferred. As for the body, it assumes different forms, like Gabriel, who although he assumed dif- ferent forms, the truth remained unchanged...⁶⁵.

Thus, couched in these mysterious and mystifying words, Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ places himself among the prophets and guardians of the faith (Muḥammad and 'Alī). And although the exact meaning of the words used in the original Arabic text is nowhere clear, the assumption of power by him from them ap- pears to have taken place through a process of transference (intiḡāl).

In another section of Kalām al-Mahdī, Sayyid Muḥammad urges his followers to rise and prepare themselves to fight his

enemies: "The time has come to take revenge by the command of God, the Strong, the Powerful. It is incumbent upon all those who have seen (the truth) to rally forth and enter the ranks of the supporters (anṣār: the same word used for the people of Medina who "supported" the Prophet Muḥammad). Those who do not carry out God's revealed orders will have committed a grave sin. Listen to the one who is calling you to obey God, and be- lieve in him; your sins will be forgiven and you will be spared everlasting punishment". He then offers a prayer to God in which are spelt out some of his own characteristic and ambitions: "As- sist, O God, your guardian (wali), who is carrying out your command, obeying your orders, and performing the task you have entrusted him with, so that he will take revenge for you and for the best of your creation and the noblest of your wor- shippers. As a recompense, you will make him rule over the earth, east and west, land and sea, the plains and the mount- ains; and in this way you will make him achieve the end of his intentions, and elevate him to your highest and most praiseworthy position..."⁶⁶.

The language of these sections from Kalām al-Mahdī is con- sciously made to sound like that of the Koran. Each part, like a Koranic sūrah, begins with the formula, Bism Allāh ar-Rahmān ar-Rahīm, and saj' (rhymed prose) is often used. However, the tone of the diction lacks the intrinsic nobility of the Koranic scripture; and in fact at times the style is marred by curious colloquialism.

At one point, Sayyid Muḥammad presents reasons for his manifestation (zuhūr) at that time. "Had it not been for the zu- hūr of this Sayyid as a deputy for the Hidden Imām, God would have been accused of error. This is so from two points of view: one, the age of the Hidden Imām is now more than six hundred years; and the Shī'ī supporters according to the accepted view are the fulamā and the eminent persons in society, but these have gone and no one is left except the hypocrites. Two, the

belief is that the occultation of the Hidden Imām is not from God, nor is it from himself, but because of the large number of enemies and the small number of supporters"⁶⁷. But, although the text here again is not clear, this partially mathematical justification for the re-appearance of the Hidden Imām seems to miss the eschatological point developed by the early scholars of the Shī'ī school whereby the occultation of the Twelfth Imām was intended to extend this central dogma of the Shī'ī madh'hab to the absolute end of Time. The Hidden Imām will have to be "the expected one" for ever; otherwise the whole system will fall apart.

The most extreme idea in Kalām al-Mahdī is where Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ equates between 'Alī and God:

It has been made clear by evident proof that 'Alī who is Muḥammad's trustee (waṣī) is himself God veiled within his known body... He who does not believe that 'Alī is God, that Muḥammad is his (?) messenger, that Fāṭimah is his handmaiden, that the Eleven Imāms are his angels, the revealed books his words, and the existence itself his own creation, is a godless unbeliever. He shall be cursed and will be killed, God willing, on the victorious day that is near ⁶⁸.

V

After the death of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ and his son Mawlā 'Alī, the affairs of the Musha'sha' movement were conducted by Mawlā Muḥsin (or Sultān Muḥsin) another son of Sayyid Muḥammad. This coincided roughly first with the hegemony of the Āq-qoyunlū Turkmāns and then with the rise of the Ṣafavids.

Uzūn Ḥasan, the most important figure in Āq-qoyunlū history, had accepted the application of Mawlā Muḥsin for the rulership of Khūzistān "trusting in his rank as a descendant of the Prophet"⁶⁹. However, during the period of relative unrest which followed the death of Uzūn Ḥasan in 882/1477, Mawlā

Muḥsin raided the environs of Baghdād in 883, and after plundering the area he withdrew to the south⁷⁰. When a few years later the Āq-qoyunlū state was reorganized under Sultān Ya'qūb ibn Uzūn Ḥasan, a large army was despatched against Mawlā Muḥsin who was utterly defeated in 889/1484. Following this defeat, there were serious defections in the Musha'sha' lines and inter-family strife in the Musha'sha' leadership⁷¹.

The Musha'sha' succession after Sultān Muḥsin is not very clear either in the sources or in the authorities. The name Fayyād, who was either a brother or a son of Sultān Muḥsin, appears to have been the Musha'sha' leader who met Shāh Ismā'īl after the latter had conquered Baghdād in 914/1508-09 and was pressing southward against Khūzistān and Shīraz. Two other sons of Muḥsin, 'Alī and Ayyūb, are also given as the Musha'sha' leaders who attempted to make a stand against the Ṣafavid Shāh⁷². "The two movements [the Ṣafavids and the Musha'sha's] inevitably came into conflict...; besides [Shāh Ismā'īl] could hardly allow a rival Shī'a organization to persist"⁷³.

In any case, when Shāh Ismā'īl left the area, another son of Muḥsin (Falāḥ by name) assumed control in Ḥuwayzā', but his position was that of dependence on the Ṣafavid central government. With him the Musha'sha's as an independent "state" ceased to exist, and the era of the Wālis of Ḥuwayzā' (or the Wālis of Khuzistān) begins. Falāḥ ibn Muḥsin died in 920/1514.

However for a long time, and inasmuch as the boundaries between the Ottoman empire and the Ṣafavid state remained undefined, the Wālis of Ḥuwayzā' were torn between the two powers⁷⁴.

In Tadhkirat al-Mulūk (the "manual of Ṣafavid administration") we are told:

The wālis in the provinces of Īrān are four, whose names follow in the order of their importance and dignity. The first is the wāli of 'Arabistān (i. e., Khūzistān), who is higher and more honoured than his colleagues, on account of his belonging to a Sayyid family, his valour and the number of his tribes...⁷⁵.

A later governor, Sūltān Mubārak (ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib ibn Ḥaydar ibn Muḥsin ibn Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāh), d. 1025/1616, "introduced the teaching of the Twelver Shī'a to Ḥawīza"⁷⁶. This is the period in Ṣafavid Iranian history which corresponds to the reign of Shāh Abbās.

NOTES

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the term "Shī'ism" is here used to denote the Twelve-Imām, or *Ithnā'ashari*, sect of Islām.

² On the Ṣafavid movement see Michel M. Mazzaoui, *The Origins of the Ṣafawids* (Freiburger Islamstudien, III), Wiesbaden, Franz Steiner, 1972.

³ In addition to the standard geographical works, see Bahman Karīmi, *Jughrāfi-yi Muṭaṣṣal-i Tārīkhī-yi Gharb-i Irān*, 2 Tehran, 1317 sh.; and R. M. Savory, *Khūzistān* [in:] *E. I.*

⁴ On the geography of southern Iraq see G. Le Strange, *The Lands of the Eastern Caliphate*, 2nd ed., Cambridge 1930.

⁵ For a brief historical sketch of Khūzistān, see Savory, *op. cit.*

⁶ Quoted in Savory, *op. cit.*

⁷ On the history of Iran between Timūr and the Ṣafavids, see R. M. Savory, *The struggle for supremacy in Persia after the death of Timūr*, *Der Islam* 40 (1964), pp. 35-65.

⁸ Faḍl Allāh ibn Rūzbihān Khunji, *Persia in A. D. 1478-1490* (an abridged translation of his *Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-yi Amīnī*), by V. Minorsky, London 1957, pp. 46, 83, and 98.

⁹ On this manuscript see 'Abbās al-'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh al-'Irāq bayn iḥtilālāyn*, Baghdad 1935-39, II, 10-12; and his *Tārīkh al-adab al-'Arabī fi al-'Irāq*, Baghdad 1960, I, 277.

¹⁰ Qādi Nūr Allāh Shūshtari, *Majālis al-Mu'minīn*, Tehran, 1299 A. H., 403 ff.

¹¹ W. Caskel, *Ein Mahdi des 15. Jahrhunderts: Saḥīd Muḥammad ibn Falāh und seine Nachkommen*, *Islamica*, IV (1929-31), 48-93; and *Die Wāli's von Huwēzeh*, *Islamica* VI (1933-34), 415-434.

¹² W. Hinz, *Quellenstudien zur Geschichte der Timuriden*, *ZDMG* 90 (1936), 396-8.

¹³ Aḥmad Kasravi (Tabrizi), *Tārīkh-i pānṣad sālah-yi Khūzistān*, Tehran 1313 sh. See review by Minorsky in *BSOAS* 8 (1935-37), 1172 ff.

¹⁴ Kasravi, *Musha'sha'iyān, yā bakhshi az tārīkh-i Khūzistān*, pp. 6-8. These include such lesser known works as Sayyid Ali, *Kitāb*; Jawāhiri, *Muswaddah-hā*; Nāmi, *Takmilat al-akhbār*; and Ka'bi, *Zād al-musāfir*.

¹⁵ 'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh*, III, 108.

¹⁶ See notation on title-page of the manuscript in the hand of Fr. Karmili.

¹⁷ For a short account of the Musha'sha's, within the context of early Ṣafavid history, see Mazzaoui, *op. cit.*, 67-71.

¹⁸ 'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh*, III, 108; Shushtari's genealogical list in *Majālis*, 403, is essentially the same. 'Abd Allāh ibn Nūr ad-Dīn's *Tadhkirah-yi Shūshtar*, Calcutta 1924, is based on *Majālis*.

¹⁹ Work on this issue was done simultaneously by Kasravi and Zaki Valīdī Tōgān. For a summary with additional information see Mazzaoui, *op. cit.*, 46-51.

²⁰ Caskel, *Ein Mahdi...*, 63.

²¹ Hence its name ("middle point") according to Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, s.v. "Wāsiṭ".

²² Jamāl ad-Dīn Aḥmad... Ibn Fahd al-Ḥilli al-Asadi (757-841/1356-1437). For references on him see Mazzaoui, *op. cit.*, 67, n. 7. On Ibn Fahd's flourishing Shī'ī center at Ḥillah see Shūshtari, *Majālis*, 241, and *Nāmah-yi Dānish-varān-i Nāṣiri*, Qum 1960, I, 272-73.

²³ 'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh*, III, 108 (based on *at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi*); Cf. Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, Tehran 1947, 21.

²⁴ 'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh*, III, 109-110 (quoting from Ibn Shadqam's *Tuhfat al-azhār*, itself one of the sources for Jawāhiri's *Muswaddah-hā*. See above n. 14).

²⁵ On Ḥuwayzā' (Ḥuwayzah, Persian Ḥovēzeh) see Mazzaoui, *op. cit.*, 69, n. 1.

²⁶ 'Azzāwī, *Tārīkh*, III, 110 (based on Ibn Shadqam's *Tuhfat*).

²⁷ V. Minorsky, *Musha'sha' [in:] E. I.*, ¹, *Supplement*.

²⁸ Kasravi, *Musha'sha'iyān*, 9-10.

²⁹ The wanderings of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāh are graphically described in sections of his *Kalām al-Mahdi*. See Kasravi, *Tārīkh-i pānṣad sālah-yi Khūzistān*, 274-75, and his *Musha'sha'iyān*, 124-25. An example of this important work

is here paraphrased: "O people, may God have mercy on you. There is no one greater than this Sayyid, whom you see here in front of you, having been tested by God. For fifteen years the people cursed him and ordered his death and the death of his sons. He escaped from place to place, and the whole earth could not hold him. He finally went to the mountains, but even there the inhabitants wanted to kill him... After despairings from life he was saved and returned to Iraq. There the Mongols sought him, his friends turned to foes, and there was no place where he could find peace..."

³⁰ 'Azzāwī, Tārīkh, III, 109 (based on al-Ghiyāthi): "Mention of him began in 820 A. H. when he appeared (zahara) and claimed to be the Mahdī. In that year the propitious conjunction of the stars (qirān) took place which indicated his manifestation (zuhur)".

³¹ Minorsky, op. cit. (based on Caskel). At-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi is not specific either. 'Azzāwī (Tārīkh, III, 110-111) points to this discrepancy without offering a solution.

³² 'Azzāwī, Tārīkh, III, 110 (based on at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi).

³³ This appears to have taken place in 800/1397 before his zuhūr. See J. Aubin, Deux Sayyids de Bam au XV^e siècle, Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur, Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse 7 (1956), 380, n. 2.

³⁴ 'Azzāwī, Tārīkh, III, 110-111 (from al-Ghiyāthi).

³⁵ Minorsky, op. cit.; and 'Azzāwī, Ibid., 111-112.

³⁶ A poem critical of the Musha'sha' movement has been preserved in Muhammad ibn 'Abd ar-Rahmān as-Sakhāwī (1427-97), ad-Daw' al-lāmi', Cairo, 1934-36, V, 30 (No. 111). Sakhāwī (VIII, 280, No. 771) records Muhammad ibn Falāh's death in 866/1461-62, and gives no other details.

³⁷ 'Azzāwī, Tārīkh, III, 112 (from al-Ghiyāthi). On tribal relations of the Musha'sha's (or al-mawālī as he refers to them) see 'Azzāwī, Ashā'ir al-'Irāq, IV, 12, 25, 28, 37, 184, 194, 198, and 232. No historical discussion is included here.

³⁸ 'Azzāwī, op. cit., 111-113.

³⁹ On Iraq during the first half of the fifteenth century see Caskel, Ein Mahdī..., 51-57.

⁴⁰ 'Azzāwī, op. cit., 114. The incident occurred in Ramadān 845/February 1441. Minorsky's date, 1458 in Musha'sha', cf. E. I., Supplement, is a conversion error.

⁴¹ 'Azzāwī, Ibid. (based on at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi).

⁴² The "conversion" of Ispand Mīrzā to Shī'ism is more correctly ascribed to Shaykh Ahmad ibn Fahd. See Shūshtari,

Majālis, 241; Khwānsārī, Rawdāt al-jannāt, 20-21; and Nāmah-yi Dānishvarān-i Nāsiri, I, 274-75.

⁴³ Muhammad ibn Ahmad ibn Iyās, Badā'i' az-zuhūr, Cairo 1311/1893, II, 45.

⁴⁴ Ibid., II, 54.

⁴⁵ Ibid., II, 60.

⁴⁶ Abū al-Mahāsīn ibn Taghri-Birdi, Hawādith ad-duhūr, ed. Wm. Popper, 1930-42, Pt. 2, p. 199.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 249-250. Cf. Khwānsārī, Rawdāt al-jannāt, 264-65, where it is further stated that the Musha'sha's attacked the Shī'i shrines of Najaf and Karbalā', killed many people and took prisoners.

⁴⁸ On Ibn Taghri-Birdi see Mustafā Ziyādah, al-Mu'arrikhūn fi Miṣr, Cairo 1954, 26-45. His father Taghri-Birdi was many times governor of Damascus, and had given his eldest daughter in marriage to the Mamlūk Sulṭān Faraj.

⁴⁹ Ibn Taghri-Birdi, Hawādith, Pt. 2, pp. 305-306.

⁵⁰ On the term "Musha'sha'" see also Caskel, Ein Mahdī..., 91-92, and n. 2 (p. 92); and the comment by Ahmad Taymūr, at-Tadhkirah at-Taymūriyah, Cairo 1953, 216, where the word "Shu'asha'iyah" is used.

⁵¹ Ibn Taghri-Birdi, op. cit., 305-306.

⁵² 'Azzāwī, Tārīkh, III, 149 ff.

⁵³ Ibid., III, 151 (based this time on Shūshtari, Majālis).

⁵⁴ Shūshtari, Majālis, 218.

⁵⁵ For a tentative list of these movements see Mazzaoui, op. cit., 84. In Les révoltes populaires en Egypte..., Revue des Etudes Islamiques VIII (1934), 255-56, A. N. Poliak refers to the Musha'sha' movement as the revolt of "le fils du fellah" wrongly reading the name of its founder as Ibn al-Fallāh (i.e. "son of the peasant")!

⁵⁶ There is a controversy among traditional Shī'i scholars about Ibn Fahd's Sūfi leanings. See M. B. Majlisi, Bi-hār al-anwār (new edition, Tehran 1956-), I, "Introduction", 200, note 1.

⁵⁷ See above, footnotes 30, 31, and 32.

⁵⁸ Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 19 ff.; and Tārīkh-i pānsad sālahyi Khūzistān, 20 ff.

⁵⁹ Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 33 ff.

⁶⁰ On him see A. Bausani, al-Ahsā'i [in:] E. I.²; and H. Algar, Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906, Un. of California, 1969, pp. 66-70.

- 61 Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 5.
62 Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 22-23.
63 'Azzāwi, Tārīkh, III, 153 ff.
64 Ibid., III, 152.
65 Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 124 (from Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ, Kalām al-Mahdī).
66 Ibid., 126-127.
67 Ibid., 127.
68 Ibid., 128.
69 Khunji, Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-vi Amīni (Minorsky, Persia in A. D. 1478-1490), 83.
70 'Azzāwi, Tārīkh, III, 258 and 261-62 (based on at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi. The events concerning Iraq in this manuscript end with this year, i. e., 883/1478-9). For a general evaluation of at-Tārīkh al-Ghiyāthi see 'Azzāwi, op. cit., III, 262-63.
71 Khunji/Minorsky, op. cit., 83-84, and 98-99.
72 Minorsky (Musha'sha' [in:] E. I. ¹, Supplement) makes Fayyāḍ the third son of Sayyid Muḥammad ibn Falāḥ; Caskel makes him the son of Muḥsin and has them both dying in the same year, 914 (for a family tree see his Ein Mahdi..., 75); Kasravi is for 'Alī and Ayyūb (Musha'sha'iyān, 38-39); Khwāndamīr (Habīb as-siyar, IV, 497) is for Fayyāḍ ibn Muḥsin, and describes a bloody battle between the Ṣafavids and the Musha'sha's; 'Azzāwi (Tārīkh, III, 345) accepts Khwāndamīr's story. Cf. Ḥasan-i Rūmlū, Aḥsan at-tavārīkh, I, 104 (English translation, II, 47, and see p. 237, n. 3); Qazvīnī, Lubb at-tavārīkh, 250; and Iskandar Munshi, Tārīkh-i ālam-ārā-vi Abbāsi, I, 35.
73 Minorsky, op. cit.
74 On this part of Musha'sha' history see Caskel's summary article Die Wāli's von Huwēzeh, Islamica VI (1933-34), 415-434; and Kasravi, Musha'sha'iyān, 42 ff.
75 Minorsky, Tadhkirat al-Mulūk, London 1943 (GMS, new ser., 16), p. 44. The others are the valis of Lūristān, Georgia, and Kurdistān, The ruler of the Bakhtiyāri tribe comes after them in importance.
76 Minorsky, Musha'sha', [in:] E. I. ¹, Supplement.

R. D. MCCHESENEY

THE LIFE AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT
OF AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY SHI'Ī SCHOLAR
SAYYID MUḤAMMAD MAHDĪ ṬABĀṬABĀ'Ī "BAḤR AL-ʿULŪM"

Part I
THE LIFE OF THE "BAḤR AL-ʿULŪM"

The life of Sayyid Muḥammad Mahdī b. Murtaẓā Ṭabāṭabā'ī, the "Baḥr al-ʿUlūm" (1742-1797) coincides with one of the most fertile periods of Iranian religious and social history. Twelver Shi'ism in all its popular and scholarly forms - mujtahidism, ṣūfism, akhbārism, uṣūlism, and shaykhism - was in revolutionary ferment during Muḥammad Mahdī's life. During the latter half of the 18th century, Twelver Shi'ites strove to re-interpret fundamental religious values and to arrive at some wider communal consensus on the duties and future directions of a Shi'ī society. It was a period of intellectual challenge, controversy, and occasionally violent confrontation between the various movements in Twelver Shi'ism each one claiming or being seen to claim precedence for its vision and therefore its right to the spiritual loyalties of the mu'minīn.

Muḥammad Mahdī Ṭabāṭabā'ī was born and raised in the center of these swirling currents and his own training, experiences, and intellectual development reflect the transformation of the society around him.

Details of his life and works are available in a number of works ¹. The biographical information the primary sources contain may be roughly classified thematically as follows: 1) his marvelous or marvel-attended birth, 2) his pious childhood in which various signs of holiness appear, 3) his education and