

***The Origins of the Shīʿa Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kūfa***, by Najam Haider, (Cambridge, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011), xvii + 276 pp., ISBN: 978-1-107-01071-0, £67.00 / \$108.00 (hb)

Studying the early history of Islam has been largely problematic due to scarcity of reliable data and appropriate methods to assess them. The Muslim *ḥadīth* (report) corpus has been the main source of information for the study of early Islam, but the reliability of Muslim reports has come under scrutiny due to deficiencies outlined mainly in the works of Goldziher and Schacht. Consequently, Islamicists have grown increasingly suspicious of studies that rely on Muslim reports. However, recent methodological developments seem to be overcoming this general lack of trust in Muslim sources. One of the most significant breakthroughs was achieved in 1996 by Harald Motzki and Gregor Schoeler who, independently from each other, developed the *isnād-cum-matn* method into a robust method for dating and analysing Muslim reports. Since then, both scholars have shown in numerous studies that through the use of *isnād-cum-matn*, it is indeed possible to extract reliable historical data from Muslim reports.

The invaluable methodological contributions of the two scholars have propelled the studies of early Islam and encouraged others to explore new methodologies in the study of early Islamic sources. Najam Haider's work is a promising representative of such a trend.

The book aims to address two chief questions regarding the origins of the Imāmī and Zaydī communities. In terms of the Imāmīs the central question of book is “at which point did the Imāmīs constitute an insular community with distinctive practices that set them apart from a vague overarching Kūfan Shīʿism?” (p. 16). In terms of the Zaydīs, the book questions the historical accounts in heresiographical sources that indicate Zaydism came into existence by merging the Jārūdiyyah and the Batriyyah. In other words, Haider is testing both Imāmī and Zaydī narratives regarding their origins. According to these narratives, the Imāmī scholars trace the existence of the Imāmī community as a distinct sectarian group to around the fifth and sixth Imāms al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq in the early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century.

There is also a consensus that Zaydism came into existence “by merging two streams of Kūfan Shī‘ism – the Jārūdiyyah and the Batriyyah – around the revolt of Zayd ibn ‘Alī in 122/740” (p. 17).

The author tries to find an answer to these questions through a comparative study of the internal structure and form of a number of selected Sunnī, Imāmī, and Zaydī legal traditions. Before examining the relevant traditions, Haider reviews recent developments in the study of *ḥadīth* and focuses particularly on the works of Motzki, Schoeler, Modarresi, Kohlberg, and Lucas, and concludes that “it is possible to assert with considerable confidence that ritual law traditions were recorded without wholesale fabrication in the early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century” (p. 34). In footnote 58 that appears at the end of this sentence, the author elaborates his position regarding the authenticity of the early Muslim sources. He accepts that some forgeries could have occurred “but the burden of proof with respect to these texts falls on those who claim the fabrication” (p. 34). Consequently, he maintains that because his study relies on a large number of traditions, they should be considered authentic.

It needs to be noted that Motzki also made a strong case for such an argument in his “Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey”<sup>257</sup> and “The Qur’ān: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Development.”<sup>258</sup> Motzki maintained that there are indeed some *ahādīth* that were fabricated but there are also many authentic traditions in the Muslim *ḥadīth* corpus, which are of vital importance for recovering the history of Islam and the Qur’ān.<sup>259</sup> Therefore, it is safe to assert that Haider takes the same approach as Motzki (and Scholer, Modarresi, Kohlberg, and Lucas) to Muslim traditions and sets out to work with a group of traditions without establishing their authenticity.

Haider gathers these traditions from canonical and non-canonical Sunnī, Imāmī, and Zaydī *ḥadīth* collections and analyzes them in the second part of the book, chapters 3, 4, and 5. The selected traditions

---

<sup>257</sup> Harald Motzki, “Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey,” *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005), 235, doi:10.1163/1570058053640349.

<sup>258</sup> Motzki, “The Collection of the Qur’ān. A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments,” *Der Islam* 78, no. 1 (2001), 1-34, doi:10.1515/islam.2001.78.1.1.

<sup>259</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5.

cover three important legal issues: The recitation of the *basmalah* in the prayers (Chapter 3), the recitation of *qunūt* in ritual prayers (Chapter 4), and prohibition of alcoholic drinks (Chapter 5).

The author implements time and place restrictions on the gathered traditions in order to increase the reliability of his study. He filters Kūfan traditions and focuses on transmitters who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. Haider is to investigate the origins of the Shī'ī identity, thus focusing on the traditions that were circulated in al-Kūfah, the most important centre for the development of early Shī'ism, makes sense. Further, considering that there has been more speculation about the traditions from the 1<sup>st</sup>/7<sup>th</sup> century, the author focuses on the transmitters who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. Such a filtering also has another benefit for the study; the research already has to deal with a large number of traditions and implementing these restrictions reduces the number to a more manageable amount.

The book takes on a comparative analysis of the filtered traditions in three stages: "(1) use of legal authorities, (2) chains of transmission, (3) narrative style/literary form" (p. 42). In the first stage, Haider identifies authority figures in each group of traditions, namely Sunnī, Imāmī, and Zaydī traditions. By doing so, he tries to determine the timeframe in which each community began to use different authority figures in their traditions. Haider considers the use of independent authority figures an indication for developing an independent identity. In the second stage, his aim is to find out if there are shared transmitters in Sunnī, Imāmī, and Zaydī traditions. In other words, he investigates to what extent they have relied on independent transmitters. This investigation is based on the premises that "the point after which a sectarian group begins relying on completely unique sets of transmitters and distinct chains of transmission (roughly) intimates the development of an independent group identity" (p. 44). In the third stage, Haider proposes that there should be a correlation between the emergence of an independent sectarian identity and stylistic peculiarities in each group's traditions, thus he searches for stylistic peculiarities to determine when these peculiarities came into existence.

In the first case study, he examines traditions pertaining to the recitation of the *basmala* in the prayers. He locates 233 traditions in Sunnī, Imāmī, and Zaydī sources but only 102 of them were circulated in al-Kūfah in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, thus he only focuses on

102 traditions. In the analysis of the authorities Haider finds that there is no notable overlap between the Imāmīs and Sunnīs. Imāmī traditions rely on the opinions of the fourth Imām al-Sajjād, the fifth Imām al-Bāqir, and the sixth Imām al-Şādiq who lived in the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. On the other hand, Sunnī traditions rely on the opinions of non-‘Alīds including ‘Alī’s purported rivals Abū Bakr and ‘Umar.

The study also concludes that there is “a small but significant intersection between the Imāmīs and Zaydīs” (p. 84). While Imāmīs revere only their Imāms, the Zaydīs revere ‘Alīds in general including al-Bāqir and al-Şādiq. Further, interestingly, the study finds that there is significant overlap between Sunnī and Zaydī traditions prior to 127/745 and equally significant divergence after 127/745. The study of chains and transmitters, and narrative style of these traditions also provide a similar result. Consequently, the analysis of the traditions on the issue of the recitation of the *basmalah* in the prayers returns with the conclusion that Imāmī narratives regarding the origins of their identity are attestable. Analysis of the Imāmī traditions demonstrates that they have relied on the opinions of independent authorities, narrated through distinctive *isnāds* and narrative styles. Thus, Imāmīs had an independent communal identity in the early 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century. The remaining two case studies on the issues of the recitation of *qunūt* in ritual prayers (in total he locates 469 traditions but uses 242 Kūfan traditions) and prohibition of alcoholic drinks (in total he locates 695 traditions but uses 363 traditions) concur with this finding.

On the other hand, the study contradicts the classical Zaydī narrative on the origins of Zaydism. According to the Zaydī narrations, an independent Zaydī identity came into existence through the merging of Batrī and Jārūdī Shī‘ism, after the revolt of Zayd ibn ‘Alī in 122/740. However, Haider’s study shows that “while it is clear some type of change occurred within Zaydism in the mid 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, there is little evidence for the merging of Batrīs and Jārūdīs” (p. 86). Rather, the study finds that Zaydism transformed from Batrism to Jārūdism through the 2<sup>nd</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century.

This study provides a significant contribution to the fields of Shī‘i studies, Islamic law and early history of Islam, but perhaps mostly to *ḥadīth* studies. Haider successfully implements a new method on Muslim traditions and reaches ground-breaking conclusions regarding the origins of early Shī‘ism. It appears that Haider’s method

is considerably influenced by Motzki and Schoeler's *isnād-cum-matn* method but he is certainly not implementing the *isnād-cum-matn* method as he would have. His method seems to be a modified version of the *isnād-cum-matn* method; the author provides *isnād* and *matn* analysis of the traditions but this analysis does not come near the complexity and sophistication of the *isnād-cum-matn* method. In addition, unlike the *isnād-cum-matn* method, the main objective of the method is not to date the early traditions. Instead, it makes general and brief observations about the traditions and points out a few distinct peculiarities in both *isnād* and *matn* analysis, in order to extract information about the identities of the sectarian groups to whom these traditions are attributed.

The reason for such a less complex study is not difficult to comprehend. The vast numbers of traditions used in this study make it impractical to implement *isnād-cum-matn*. In total the work analyzes 707 traditions and if one were ambitious (or senseless) enough to examine these traditions according to the *isnād-cum-matn* method, it would have taken significantly longer to conclude the research and the outcome would have been published in many volumes instead of a single work. In this regard, Haider's method is well suited to examine traditions that exist in vast numbers and he skilfully demonstrates that it is possible to extract reliable information from early Islamic sources without going to too much trouble.

## REFERENCES

- Motzki, Harald. "Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey." *Arabica* 52, no. 2 (2005): 204-253. doi:10.1163/1570058053640349.
- . "The Collection of the Qur'an: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments." *Der Islam* 78, no. 1 (2001): 1-34. doi:10.1515/islam.2001.78.1.1.

**Seyfeddin Kara**

*Durham University, Durham-UK*

Email: kara.seyfeddin@gmail.com