

‘ALĪ IBN ABĪ ṬĀLIB: AN INVESTIGATORY READING IN THE EMPLOYMENT OF HIS CHILDHOOD IN THE MECCAN PERIOD IN THE SOURCES OF THE SHĪ‘ITE HERITAGE

Sāleḥ ‘Abbūd

Emek Yezreel College

ABSTRACT: *The classical Shī‘ite sources employed ‘Alī bin Abī Ṭālib's childhood to the benefit of the Imāmiyya Shī‘ite doctrine that depends on Ali's character to a great extent and looks at him as a focal imam with incomparable centrality and states that no one is equal to him except Prophet Moḥammad. The Shī‘ite sources tried on several occasions to highlight certain events that are related to the personality of Alī bin Abī Ṭālib when he was still a child in Mecca in order to raise his position and status and distinction from other Moslems by attributing to him outstanding traits and virtues that justify their view about his being the legitimate Caliph and the most important imam in the series of the twelve imams in the Shī‘ite doctrine. The Shī‘a exploited some events that are related to Ali's childhood in order to concentrate on his intimate relationship with Prophet Moḥammad and his proximity to him, which was intended to prepare for talking about his right to be the caliph after the Prophet's death.*

KEYWORDS: Meccan stage, Shī‘a heritage, imāmiyyah, caliph, Prophet, centrality, traits.

INTRODUCTION

The pages of Islamic history and the great heritage that Moslem scholars and classical classifiers left during the first five centuries of Hegira deal with lots of Islamic outstanding personalities who left prominent marks on the history of the Islamic world. For various reasons, some of those personalities gained special features that raised them to high degrees that are not easy to reach. A review of the pages of the classical Islamic and Arab heritage contributes to some extent to understanding the essence of the growing Islamic personality whose forms were shaped primarily according to specific narrow doctrinal considerations that imposed on a crowd of Moslems a limited defined understanding of the entity of the unique matchless Islamic personality. Despite the large number of outstanding Islamic personalities and the multiplicity of the streams that create greatness and holiness around them, few personalities reached such a rank of increasing complication and intertwinement as the personality of ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib did in the course of the accumulation of years and multiplicity of trends and writers.

This study is based on an investigative reading of the presence of the personality of ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40 H /660 AD) in the historical sources that have Sunni tendencies and the sources of Ahl al-Sunna on the one hand, and the sources of the Imāmiyya Shī‘ite, on the other. The study depends in its context on observing certain scenes that are related to the biography of ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib during the Meccan period. In general, the study reflects the extent of contributions of the classical Shī‘ite heritage to the crystallization of Ali's Shī‘ite personality, which differs from his biography in the non-Shī‘ite sources.

‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib in the Sunni and Shī‘ite Sources

The texts that are distributed between the historical and Sunni approach on the one hand, and the Imāmiyya Shī‘a on the other, confirm that it is impossible to recognize Ali's personality from one biography only because it enjoys abundance of data that once seem to be in harmony and once seem to be contradictory that combine in one personality that carries one common name but discrepant details. In fact, Ali's historical personality differs in its presence in many instances and details from those instances and details of his Shī‘ite personality.

Actually, the Shī‘ite employed in their heritage and literature the texts that come from Sunni historians but then interpreted them in such a way that suits their beliefs and concepts regarding Ali's personality, his position, status and their religious doctrine. The purpose of this approach is to emphasize the importance of their doctrine in the early Islamic history on the one hand, and on the other, to lend the desired religious holiness that confirms the Shiite opinions and beliefs regarding all the imams, mainly, their first and most important Imām, ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib.

The classical Shī‘ite methodology in dealing with the personality of Imām ‘Alī as a Shī‘ite ‘Alī, who differs a lot in the details of his biography from the historical ‘Alī. It also produced a rich literature that observes its virtues and good traits in the Islamic heritage in general and the Imāmī Shī‘ite heritage in specific. It has become known now that the farther Ali's personality goes from its classical time and place reality, the further features it gains and consequently, the more it goes out of the borders of the historical reality into the space of imagination and the employed historical and religious myth.

The Moslems in general attributed to ‘Alī a critical role in history. For the Sunni Moslem, he was a daring and courageous hero and one of the brave men of Islam; one of the Rāshidūn Caliphs (the Rightly-Guided Caliphs) who represents the typical Islamic society and the elite of "al-Salaf al-Ṣāliḥ" (the pious predecessors). The Sūfī Sunni sees him as a genius in ‘Ilm al-Ḥaqīqa (Knowledge of Truth), a source of the chains of Sūfī Ṭarīqa (Path) in most eras, and a dignified spiritual inspirer. In many instances, the Sunni Sūfī also attributes to him the establishment of the first rules of the Arabic grammar. It does not escape the Sunni's mind at all that ‘Alī represents the extension of the Sharīf (noble highborn) dynasty of the Prophet.

However, for the Shī‘ite Moslem, what has been mentioned represents a narrow space from the position and status that the Shiites give to ‘Alī. They consider him equal to Prophet Muhammad to whom he became related by marriage. He married the Prophet's daughter and is the undisputable Imām after the Prophet. For them, he is the most deserving person to Imāmiyya and he has the right to it by text and mind, by preference and legality. In addition to all that, he is the origin of the Imāmiyya chain, which branched into the infallible virtuous imams, and thus, he is the Father of all imams and their grandfather from both sides of the father and the mother. The Shī‘ite also emphasize Ali's right of the caliphate because he has the legitimate right and all the required spiritual and elevated features that do not exist in anyone except in him, especially that he is in every Shī‘ite believer a lantern that glows with holy luminous spiritual qualities.

Ali's image was drifted into the currents of history and their waves tossed it up and down, creating a mosaic of contradictory details. The two heritages, the Sunni and the Shī‘ite together confirmed Ali's divided personality between the whims of those who love him and those who hate him. The traditions of both sides tell that Prophet Muḥammad said to him:

"You have the example of Jesus; the Christians loved him so much that they unbelievers in their love; and the Jews hated him till they became unbelievers in their hatred".¹

‘Alī in the Cradle Stage

‘Alī was born to a family from Quraysh that belongs to the tribe of Banī Hāshem, who enjoyed comfortable economic local and political conditions within Mecca for specific periods. His father, Abū Tālib, was one of the chiefs of Mecca and the decision among Banī Hāshem and Banī ‘Abdul Muṭṭalib, and throughout the period of the Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl (League of the Virtuous) till his death, three years before Hegira.² However, the circumstances that were prevalent in Ali's clan and his family in Mecca had undergone negative economic changes and serious deterioration in its status and commercial, social and political influence, which pulled the clan down from the forefront position to a lower one, especially after other rich clans had the commercial control and took the leadership in the Meccan society which was ruled by the tribal rules and norms.³ There is no doubt that the social background in which ‘Alī grew up played an important role in his growth and the formulation of his character that had a distinctive Qurayshī imprint.

The period of early childhood that ‘Alī lived in Mecca was an ambiguous one to a great extent like other distinguished Islamic personalities, whose early childhood and circumstances are unknown. The reason is probably because the Moslems in general disregard details about the life of their eminent men that are connected to the Jāhiliyya period, which preceded Islam, and all the events and details that it includes, especially those pagan rites and traditions that require reservation and caution regarding prominent Islamic personalities.

Information about Ali's early childhood in the sources of the classical history of Islam is very rare. It is strange also that the classical Shī‘ite heritage did not shed any light on Ali's early childhood. The classical Shī‘ite heritage does not give a unified image of Ali's childhood despite the scarcity of what has been passed down about it. However, there are classical narratives that represent the Shī‘ite opinion about Ali's childhood. Each has a role in building up the Shī‘ite personality and its characteristics. The first version points out clearly a hard austere childhood that ‘Alī lived under the protection of his father and small family. Al-Sheikh al-Ṣadūq (d. 381 H. /992 AD) mentioned that in the course of his speech about the

¹ This ḥadīth is mentioned in: Muḥammad Ibn Bābawaiyh al-Qummī al-Sadūq, *‘Uyūn Akhbār al-Riḍa* (Beirut: Mu‘asasat al-A‘lamī lil-Maṭbū‘āt, 1984), 1: 63. It is also mentioned in the Sunni sources but with some difference in the text. See in: Ahmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Faḍā‘il al-Ṣaḥābah* (Jadda: Dār al-‘Ilm, 1983), 2: 662-663.

² Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl (League of the Virtuous): It is an alliance and a league that Quraish tribe created in Mecca in Pre-Islamic period (Jāhiliyya). It was created at a meeting which was hosted at the house of ‘Abdullāh Bin Jud‘ān, one of the chiefs of Mecca at that time. The alliance joined several tribes from Quraysh, the most prominent of whom were: Banū Hāshem, Banū Zohrah, Banū ‘Asad and Banū Tamīm. That was after one of the chiefs of Quraysh, called al-‘Aṣṣ Bin Wā‘el al-Sahmiyy, attacked one of the Arab merchants outside Mecca, from whom he bought some goods but did not pay him the full price. The non-paid merchant asked for help from the people of Mecca and its chiefs to support him. Those tribes convened to help him and give him justice from al-‘Aṣṣ Bin Wā‘el. They agreed to support every oppressed and maltreated person in Mecca and returned the right payment to the man. For more information about Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl, see: al-Fākihī, Muḥammad Bin ‘Ishāq (1994), *Akhbār Mecca*, edited by ‘Abdul Mālik ‘Abdullāh Dahesh (Beirut: Dār Khadher), 5: 191; Al-Nuwayrī, Aḥmad Bin ‘Abd al-Wahhāb (2004), *Nihāyat al-‘Arab fī Funūn al-‘Adab*, Edited by: Mufid Qmīha (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah), 6: 225. About Ḥilf al-Fuḍūl in the context of the phenomenon of alliances and leagues (Ahlāf) in Pre-Islamic Mecca in: Ibrāhīm, M. (1982), "Social and Economic Conditions in Pre-Islamic Mecca", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 14, (1982), 355.

³ For more information about the local situation in Mecca before Islam and the nature of the tribal conflict between the families, the clans and tribes in the local political and commercial fields and the role of Banī Hāshem in them, see: Montgomery, Watt (2002), *Muhammad in Mecca* (Cairo: al-Haya‘a al-Miṣriyyah al-‘Āmmah lil-Kitāb), p. 53-70.

reason (‘Illah) why prophets and guardians suffer and exposed to tests. In a certain story that is related from Imam Ja‘far al-Sādiq (d. 148 H /765 AD), he quotes what is mentioned in Ali's book the following saying: "The most afflicted people are the prophets and guardians".⁴

This version plays a serious role in its constant emphasis on the oppression of the Imāms in general and ‘Alī in particular. They were all exposed to lots of affliction and suffering and injustice and did not get their legitimate rights, especially in Imāmiyya and the Caliphate.

In light of the First Version, Ali's childhood was an opening type of oppression that accompanied him for a long time till his murder. This is confirmed by al-Sheikh al-Ṣadūq (d. 381 H/ 992 AD) in his book *Ilal al-Sharāi‘*, when he attributed to ‘Alī a statement that he says about himself: "I have been oppressed since my mother gave birth to me. Even when ‘Aqīl had trachoma in his eye, he would say: don't throw anything into my eyes before you throw it into Ali's eyes, though I did have trachoma".⁵ It seems that this early Shī‘ite conception does not necessarily reflect the reality of the childhood that ‘Alī lived as much as it reflects a Shī‘ite point of view that was crystallized during the fourth century of Hegira (10th century AD) or before that in order to reinforce the value of the authoritative Imām (al-Imām al-Ḥujja) depending on the great suffering and affliction that he had undergone in his life and on the patience, faith and piety that he showed towards his deprivation of his legitimate rights.

On the other hand, the Second Version provides us with indicators and information that confirm the role of the Prophet in the early stages of Ali's life. Al-Karājikī (d. 449 H/ 1057 AD) in his book *Kanz al-Fawā‘id* comments on Ali's birth and his childhood. He points out the Prophet's pleasure at Ali's birth and confirms that his delight was so intense that he asked Fātimah Bint ‘Asad, Ali's mother, to put his cradle next to his bed during his stay at his uncle's home.⁶ In the same context, al- Karājikī points out the Prophet's educational role in Ali's childhood. He says: "The Prophet gave more care to his education and took into account his sleep and awakening. He also held him on his chest and shoulder and endowed him with his kindness and gifts and would say; "This is my brother and sword and supporter and guardian".⁷

We notice that al- Karājikī's attempts to create a different conception of Ali's childhood, which seems to be happier and more delighted⁸ than al-Sadūq's previous version. According to al- Karājikī's version, the Prophet- before his call and mission- did not hesitate to spoil ‘Alī the baby and take care of him as if he were his son. Despite the weakness of the story that al- Karājikī gives singularly, without being supported by other Imāmiyya ‘ulamā’/ scholars, clearly indicates the desire of the classical Shī‘ite heritage to invest Ali's childhood and employ it in the service of the Shī‘ite doctrine and interests. However, subjugating Ali's childhood to be in harmony with the faith at that time was limited if it is compared to other later stages.

It is possible to say that the image of Ali's early childhood in the Shī‘ite heritage differs in its quality from one Shī‘ite source and the other. This difference between two contradictory images of a short period of minor significance in Ali's biography reveals classical Shiite

⁴ Ibn Bābawaihi, Muḥammad al-Qummī al-Ṣadūq (1963), *‘Ilal al-Sharāi‘* (Najaf: al-Maktaba al-Ḥaydariyyah), p. 44.

⁵ Ibid., p. 45.

⁶ Al-Karājikī, Muḥammad Bin ‘Alī (1985), *Kanz al-Fawā‘id* (Beirūt: Dār al-‘Adwā’), 1: 255.

⁷ Ibid., 1 :255.

⁸ Ibid., 1: 255. Al-Karājikī mentions the Prophet's intensity of emotion and affection to ‘Alī after his marriage to his first wife Khadijah Bint Khuwailid, who took care of him by herself and granted him different gifts generously.

attempts to exploit certain neglected gaps in Ali's biography and subjugate them to new reformulation by filling them with materials that fit completely in the Shī'ite perspective and its conceptions of Ali's personality. In other words, the classical Shī'ite heritage confirms its focal role in reformulation of Ali's personality and his biography in a deliberate selected manner. The Shī'ite contributions to the treatment of Ali's early children is a traditional sample that somewhat reflects the availability of the unruly desire to reformulate his biography according to a doctrinal conception.

The Shī'ite conception clashes with the historical sources in many scenes of Ali's biography because the classical historical sources focused on Ali's post-childhood period. This focus appears in many historical sources and Sunni sources, on the one hand, and in the Shī'ite sources, on the other. Both agree in principle that 'Alī was given a gift when he moved in his youth to live in the lap of the Prophet and his house after the Prophet's wedding, which took place before the Prophetic call⁹ Due to the circumstances of poverty that surrounded Abū Ṭālib and his family, the Prophet took the initiative to take one of his children ('Alī) to live with him and take care of him till he grows up and becomes a youth¹⁰ No doubt, the deteriorated economic conditions from which Abū Ṭālib suffered are partly attributed to the deterioration of his clan's conditions and the retreat of their commercial influence in Mecca.

The news of Ali's movement to the Prophet's house is of great significance in the Islamic heritage in general. This gift was offered to him rather than anyone of his brothers, which granted him the opportunity to come closer to the Prophet and accompany the Prophetic Call in its cradle. It also gave him priority and prepared the way in front of him to the early Islam. The Shī'ite heritage, however, requested this stage and considered it a breakthrough to the qualifications that characterized 'Alī. The Shī'ite found in this qualitative move in Ali's early biography and his movement from his father's home to the Prophet's home a lively field to justify the doctrine of Imāmah as Ali's stay at the Prophet's home provided him with the possibility to start getting the necessary knowledge and expertise that the Guardian Imam needs from the Prophet himself towards his declaration as a chosen Imam by God and prepared by the Prophet.

⁹ Ibn 'Ishāq, Muḥammad (1978), *al-Siyar wal-Maghāzī* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikir), p. 137; Ibn Hishām, *Al-Sīrah*, 1: 184; Ibn Ḥarb, Aḥmad Bin Abī Khaythamah (2004), *Tārīkh Ibn Abī Khaythama* (Cairo: al-Fārūq al-Hadītha lil-Ṭibā'a wal-Nashir), 1: 162.

¹⁰ Ibn Hishām (d. 218 h/ 833 AD), quoted Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 h/ 768 AD), who quoted others, says: "Among the gifts of God to 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib and what He did to him and the good that He wanted for him is that Quraysh was hit by a severe crisis, and Abū Ṭālib had a large family. The Messenger of God, God's blessings and peace be upon him, said to his uncle, al-'Abbās, who was one of the richest of Banī Hāshem; O 'Abbās! Your brother, Abū Ṭālib has a lot of children and the people were hit with this crisis, as you see; let's go to him and relieve him from some of his children; I take one of his sons, and you take one, and we take care of them. Al-'Abbās said: Yes. They set out till they arrived at Abū Ṭālib's home and both said: we want to relieve you from some of your children till the crisis moves. Abū Ṭālib said: If you leave 'Aqīl for me, do whatever you like- Ibn Hishām said: Some people say: 'Aqīl and Ṭālib- The Messenger of God, God's blessings and peace be upon him, took 'Alī, and hugged him, and Al-'Abbās took Ja'far and hugged him. 'Alī stayed with the Messenger of God, God' blessings and peace be upon him, till God, blessed and High be He, sent him a prophet; 'Alī, may God be pleased with him, believed him as true, and followed him". Abdul Malīk Bin Hishām al-Ma'āfirī, (2001), *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyyah* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Aṣriyyah), 1: 184-5. This version was confirmed in other historical sources such as: al-Maqdisī, Mutahhar Bin Ṭāhir (1960), *Al-Badi' wal-Tārīkh* (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Muthanna), 5: 71-72. Some Shī'ite sources adopted this story but they were strict as they insisted on the Prophet's choice of 'Alī and his dependence on him in all his open and secret affairs and by that, 'Alī was the Prophet's assistant from the beginning of his relation with him, and this is one of the ways of preparing for his future role. To review this Shī'ite point of view, see in: al-Sheikh al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād*, 1: 6; al-Karajikī, *Kanz al-Fawā'id*, 1: 255-256. Al-Ṣāhib Bin 'Abbād, the Shī'ite (Zaidī) says praises in one of his poems Ahl al-Bayt (People of the House/ the Family of Prophet Muḥammad) and mentions Ali's virtue being brought up by the Prophet: "Didn't you see that Muḥammad sympathized him, Cared for him and brought him up, Distinguished him, preferred him as a youth, chose him as faithful on his money and treated him as a brother?". See: Al-Ṣāhib Bin 'Abbād (1974), *Dīwān al-Ṣāhib Bin 'Abbād* (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam), p. 64.

Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān al-'Ismā'īlī (d. 363 h/ 974 AD), from whom the Imāmiyya Shī'ite take so many stories that he appeared in his heritage as an Imāmi rather than an Ismā'īlī. This substitutes the version of the suffocating financial crisis that hit Abū Ṭālib with a different version that refutes the historical version that was accepted by the Imāmiyya Shī'ite sources.¹¹ He refers to the truth of Abū Ṭālib's pushing of 'Alī to the Prophet's house to be brought up and educated upon the manners of the noblemen of Quraysh and the Arabs. If the Arabs had a young man and they wanted to educate and rectify him, they would send him to one of the Ashrāf (noblemen) to undertake that upon himself and correct the young man. Thus, Abū Ṭālib sent 'Alī when he grew up to the Prophet to take upon himself the task of guaranteeing and preparing him".¹²

After looking through the classical relevant sources, it appears that the historical image of Ali's early childhood does not add up significant things. Ali's personality in that stage is not different from other ones and the evidence to that is the absence of his childhood details in the sources and their appearance in his late age in the context of his movement from his family's home to the Prophet's home, which was a reaction to a favor that was done by Abū Ṭālib who took care of the Prophet, who had lived as an orphan and had been brought up by his eldest uncle who guaranteed him till he grew up and got married.¹³

From another perspective, Ali's childhood looks in the classical Shī'ite mirror more complicated as he appears through it as a person who suffers from a great oppression in his childhood on the one hand but enjoys a broad happiness in the shade of the Prophet, on the other. The Shī'ites focus in their classical sources on the complete relationship between the Prophet and 'Alī, which reached to the level of entrusting 'Alī to the Prophet to bring him up. He started his role in the Call after he grew up on the hands of the Prophet in his home, which constituted the first residence of Islam and its early call. 'Alī was closer to the Prophet than any other person.¹⁴ He knew about his conditions and the secrets of his life were revealed to him at an early stage of his life before the new call crossed the narrow borders of the house and set out to look for supporters.

The Shī'a exploited Ali's early life to reinforce Ali's Shī'ite image of his personality and magnify it till 'Alī became a child and a youth. Heaven prepared reasons for him to receive the special holy knowledge that he needs in order to start his mission and continue the Prophet's road when he proves his Imāmiyya and guardianship on Moslems.¹⁵

¹¹ See in al-Karajikī, *Kanz al-Fawā'id*, 1: 255-256.

¹² Al-Qāḍī Abū Ḥanīfa al-Nu'mān Ibn Muḥammad (1994), *Sharḥ al-Akhbār fī Faḍā'il al-A'imma al-Athār* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqalain), 1: 188.

¹³ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, 1: 184-185. Compare with: E. Kohlberg, "'Alī B. Abī Ṭāleb", *Encyclopaedia Iranica* I, (1985), 844.

¹⁴ The Sunnis agree with the Shī'ites on the warm and intimate relationship between the Prophet and 'Alī, and Ali's closeness of 'Alī and accompaniment to the Prophet in his stay or travel from Ali's childhood till the Prophet's death. This is confirmed by the dependence of the classifiers of the Prophet's life and his great biographies on Ali's accurate description of the Prophet in his physical traits that clearly indicate a close relationship and long accompaniment that joined them. More than one of the classical writers adopted Ali's description of the Prophet, and mainly: Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra*, 2: 44-45; Aḥmad Ibn al-Husein al-Bayhaqī, (1985), *Dalā'il al-Nubuwwah waMa'rifat Aḥwāl Šāḥib al-Sharī'a* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya), 1: 268-269.

¹⁵ There is a line of poetry by al-Sayyid al-Himyarī in which he opens a poem in which he praises the Prophet. He says: "*The guardian of the Messenger of God and the first*

Whom he appointed to the world of moral guidance when he grew up

The line of poetry proves that the Shī'ite connect between the Prophet's bringing up of 'Alī and his being Imāmiyya. For more information, see: al-Himyarī, *Ismā'īl Ibn Muḥammad* (1966), *Diwān al-Sayyid al-Himyarī* (Beirut: Maktabat al-Hayat), p. 286.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

It is impossible to depend on the classical news of the Shī‘a that observed details in Ali's life in the Meccan period in order to formulate Ali's complete and objective biography because lots of differences were noticed between what the Shī‘ites relate and what the Sunni news tellers relate in their sources and narratives regarding his role during that important historical era. It is necessary that we be alert to the fact that, according to the Sunni sources, Ali's personality throughout the Meccan period differs in many features from his personality in the Shī‘ite sources. This difference is not spontaneous. It is an intended difference that is employed in a general direction. It turned out that Ali's childhood, despite the shortage of news about it in the classical Islamic sources, is considered a preparatory period in which ‘Alī witnessed circumstances that prepare a special future for him that is connected to his being an Imam for the Shī‘a and a guardian for the prophet.

Finally, it is possible to sum up that the Shī‘ite employment of ‘Alī as a holy motif to the advantage and interest of the Ithnā ‘Ashariyyah doctrine through aspects that are connected to his childhood produced another ‘Alī, a Shī‘ites ‘Alī.