

The “Son of the Slave-girl”: The apocalyptic significance of *Jawārī* in the Shīʿī faith

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Introduction

The vicissitudes of the life of enslaved women have been of great appeal for medieval and contemporary scholars alike. The legal standing of the slave girls, their quest for social mobility, their artistic and intellectual abilities, and the suffering they endured, are but some of the major aspects of female slavery, perused in classical and modern literature. Ubiquitous in the medieval Muslim community, the slave-girls (*Jawārī*) played a multitude of roles and those being of greater ambitions and fortune would have managed to burst on the political stage in which they emerged as influential historical actors, Gordon and Hain (2017); Urban (2020).

The significance of the *Jawārī* in the Shīʿī faith was, nonetheless, of an utterly distinctive type. According to a well-attested tradition, the Shīʿī salvific character, the Mahdī, is believed to be the son of the slave girl (*ibn al-sabiyyah*). Furthermore, the last six Imāms were born from slave girls whom the Shīʿī tradition casts in an enormously favourable light, al-Nuʿmānī (*al-Ghaybah*); Pierce (2016).

Modern Approach to *Jawārī* as the Imams’ mothers

The last Imams having been mothered by women of slave origin is commonly linked in modern scholarship with the mere fact of the post-conquest influx of female captives into the Islamic lands. The Imams, according to this view, were not separate in this respect from the rest of the Muslim society, including the Abbasids themselves, who, on account of the socio-political condition of the time, were quite frequently mothered by the *Jawārī*, Dann (2017).

According to the modern interpretation, therefore, the veneration of the *Jawāri* in the Shīʿī tradition, along with the notion of the Mahdi being *Ibn al-sabiyyah*, are later productions of the Imami traditionists who, having been cognizant of the Imams' matrilineal descent, painted a picture of the Shīʿī messianism in which the slave mothers have been bestowed a high standing, *Elad (2010); Dann (2017)*.

The extant historical testimonies argue nevertheless in favour of the archaic status of *the Ibn al-sabiyyah* tradition. To grasp this point, one needs to set this tradition in the wider context of the politico-confessional feuds of the late-Umayyad and early-Abbasid period, when differing tools deployed by various factions to bolster their claim for legitimacy.

This policy was pursued, more often than not, through invocation by the rivaling parties of the traditions attributed to the Prophet or other esteemed authorities, the Companions in particular. Of special prominence was the messianic nature of the insurrections of the time which made it incumbent upon the adherents of each movement to promote their cause through disseminating the apocalyptically charged Prophetic traditions. The turn of the first Islamic century was then of decidedly messianic fervor, *Lewis (1968); Lassner (1980); Elad (2010); Tor (2019)*.

Instances of the *ḥadīths*' legitimizing function For Rivaling Sects:

Among the legitimizing materials circulated at the time are the following, to mention but a few examples:

The Prophet supposedly said: "The name of the Mahdī is like my name and the name of his father is like the name of my father", which is to say that the Mahdī's name is Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh. At first sight, the redeemer referred to by the tradition seems identifiable both with the Hasanid rebel, Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Nafs al-Zakiyya as well as the third Abbasid caliph al-Mahdī, *Elad (2010)*, but the isnād analysis would disclose that in all probability the ḥadīth was promulgated to bolster al-Nafs al-Zakiyya's claim of Mahdiship, *Görke (2005)*.

The Prophet purportedly said: "Al-Saffāḥ, al-Manṣūr and al-Mahdī, will belong to us (that is, the family of the Prophet)". This tradition is of an undisguised pro-Abbasid tenor. An alternative

version of it reads: “It is from you [the progeny of Abbās, the Prophet’s uncle] that al al-Saffāḥ,

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al-Manṣūr and al- Mahdī will be; the caliphate will exist among their descendants until their last one who will pray before the Messiah, ‘Isā b. Maryam”, *al-Bastawī (1999), Elad (2010)*.

Among the legitimizing traditions prevalent at this period were ones identifying the mother of the true saviour of the Muslim society. Each individual *ḥadīth* belonging to this category has received occasional treatment in the previous studies, though their function as a group of *ḥadīths*, which we may designate the “*umm al-Mahdī* traditions”, has yet to be clarified. Put another way, it is beneficial to see all the *ḥadīths* concerning the maternal ancestry of the Mahdī as a cluster of legitimizing materials, and to assess it against the wider backdrop of the politico religious movements of the time.

Umm al-Mahdī Traditions

The supporters of Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Nafs al-Zakiyya circulated the tradition that “The name of the mother of the Mahdi consists of three letters, the first being *hā’* and the last *dāl*”, Abū al-Faraj (*Maqātil*); Elad (2002). The Hasanid provenance of the tradition sounds beyond doubt, given the fact that the name of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya’s mother was Hind.

The mother of the first Abbasid caliph was from the famous tribe of al-Ḥārith b. Ka’b, the point giving rise to the circulation of the traditions highlighting his mother’s identity. Al-Saffāḥ, who is given the epithet *Ibn al-Ḥārithiyya* (“the son of the Ḥārithī woman”), is construed by the pro Abbasid tradents as the fulfillment of an apocalyptic Qur’ānic verse, to wit, Q 28: 5: “And We wished to be Gracious to those who were being depressed in the land, to make them leaders (in faith) and make them heirs”, al-Balādhurī (*Ansāb al-ashraf*); Sharon (1983); Elad (2005). According to another account, A Christian oracle who was attended in the presence of the “pious” Umayyad caliph, ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, is said to have anticipated that the rule would pass from the Umayyads to *Ibn al-Ḥārithiyya*, al-Fasawī (*al-Ma’rifa wa al-ta’rīkh*).

It is by no means surprising that the most renowned messianic contender of the Abbasids, namely the third caliph al-Mahdī, would have likewise been allotted an *umm al-Mahdī* tradition

of his own. The Prophet allegedly said, “al-Mahdī is from our family (*minnā*), Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh and his mother is not from our family (*min ghayrinā*); he will fill the world with justice in the same

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measure that it was filled with injustice.” Abū al-Faraj (*al-Aghānī*). This tradition was publicly declaimed by al-Manṣūr’s propagandists in an assembly held for the proclamation of his son’s Mahdship.

It appears highly probable that the traditions concerning the mother of the messianic contenders of the early Abbasids were put into circulation in emulation of, and to nullify, an earlier *ḥadīth* of the *umm al-Mahdī* type, to wit, the aforementioned *Ibn al-sabiyyah* tradition which was invoked, as far as the sources allow us to trace, as early as the time of Zayd b. ‘Alī’s rebellion.

Zayd b. ‘Alī’s revolt, *The terminus ante quem* for the *Ibn al-sabiyyah* Tradition

According to a report preserved, *inter alia*, by al-Nu‘mānī, the Shī‘ī circles rested their messianic hopes on Zayd on the grounds that he was *Ibn al-sabiyyah*, and hence, a promising candidate for the identification with the awaited one whom they believed to be the “son of the best amidst the slave-girls” (*Ibn khiyarat al-imā’*), al-Nu‘mānī (*al-Ghayba*).

That *Ibn al-sabiyyah* tradition was deeply-seated in the Shī‘ī faith is evident from an account recounting a conversation of Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq with his disciple. The latter, having debated with an adherent of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, informs Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq of the Hasanids’ propaganda, that the name of the Mahdī corresponds to that of the Prophet’s name and the name of the Mahdī’s father is equal to that of the Prophet’s father. Refuting this claim, Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq censures those who endorse this notion, saying, “Didn’t you know that the expected Mahdī is the son of a slave woman”), an assertion that makes al-Nafs al-Zakiyya unidentifiable with the true Mahdī, al Nu‘mānī (*al-Ghayba*)

The conviction of the Mahdī being *Ibn al-sabiyyah* seems to be so firm amongst the Shī‘īs that the Umayyad caliph Marwān b. Muḥammad reportedly paid no heed to the insurrectionary activities of al-Nafs al-Zakiyya, on account of the latter’s not having a slave-girl mother, Abū al

Faraj (*Maqātil*). While this account may sound apocryphal for the literary features it contains, Elad (2015), it vividly reflects the archaic value of the *Ibn al-sabiyyah* tradition which the account of Marwān takes for granted.

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To sum up, the conviction of the redeemer being the son of a slave-girl is an ancient one in the Shīʿī faith, reaching back at least to the turn of the first Islamic century. It stands to reason to assume that the traditions concerning the status of the *Jawārī* as the mothers of the last Shīʿī Imams are likewise of historical basis, and, unlike what is sometimes supposed, are not the later retrojection of the Imami traditionists. In view of the fervent Shīʿī belief of the Mahdī being *Ibn al-sabiyyah*, it is hardly untenable that the *Jawārī* would have enjoyed great esteem for Shīʿī Imams, as these women were the very ones who were to give birth to “the best amidst the people of the earth” (*khayru ahl al-arḍ*), viz. the Mahdī. This was, so to speak, the apocalyptic significance of the *Jawārī* in Shīʿī faith.

The Theological Implications of The Imam’s Maternal Lineage

The maternal descent of the last Imams, or, their socio-religious ties with the nations to which their mother, the “holy” *jawārī* belonged, left a profound impact on the Shīʿī messianism. Having been of differing ethnic and religious backgrounds, these *jawārī*’s ancestry and erstwhile religion are central in the Shiʿī belief to the “matrilineal nobility” of both the Imāms and the Mahdī, Pierce (2016); Taghavi (2019).

The mothers of the seventh and eighth Imāms are reported to have been from “the nobles of the non-Arabs” (*ashrāf al-ʿajam*), while the ninth Imām is said to have been mothered by a Nubian slave girl from the progeny of Maria the Copt, the Prophet Muḥammad’s *jārīya*. The slave-girl (*jārīya*) of the eleventh Shiʿī Imām, Hasan al-Askarī, is said to have been the descendant of Jesus’ executor (*waṣī*) and the granddaughter of a Roman Caesar. These *jawārī*, according to an oft repeated statement in each of these women’s biographical traditions, were to give birth to “the best amidst the people of the earth” (*khayru ahl al-arḍ*). Whereas their immediate sons are meant by *khayru ahli l-arḍ* in certain accounts, others unequivocally identify the owner of this title as the expected Mahdī. Taghavi (2019); Taghavi et al. (2020).

By virtue of his maternal pedigree, the Shīʿī Mahdī would possess strong cultural ties with other confessional and ethnic entities. This, in turn, brought about a relatively pacifying view towards the other nations and their messianic convictions. We see, hence, that the Mahdi's Roman (Byzantine) descent causes no difficulty in the Shi'i faith, unlike the official Sunni view, according

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to which the chasm of deep-rooted antagonisms between the Byzantines and the Arabs sounds entirely unsurmountable. The same can be said for the Nubian or Iranian provenance of the saviour which is alluded to in the Shīʿī heritage.

Conclusion

To recapitulate the results: Setting the *Ibn al-sabiyya* tradition within the broader context of the late Umayyad and early Abbasid messianic movements not only substantiates this *ḥadīth*'s archaic value, but further denotes that the apocalyptic significance of the *jawāri* for the Imams may well be of historical basis, a point hitherto supposed in the modern literature to be of spurious nature.

Moreover, the Shīʿī Mahdī's common ethnic and religious roots with other politic-religious entities have rendered the Shīʿī messianism more lenient and tolerant towards the other religions, particularly in comparison with the official Sunni position for which the Christians, the Byzantines *par excellence*, are the implacable apocalyptic foes of Islam.

