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THE MARTYR OF ARDIHĀL

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of Alī ibn Muḥammad al-Bāqir

Majid Zujā'ī

Translated by Cyrus Ali Zargar



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The Martyr of Ardihāl

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Fatima al-Zahra (peace be upon her)

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Translator's Introduction

The book you hold before you narrates the life, history, mission, and legacy of one of Islam's lesser-remembered saints. One does not find much said of Sultān 'Alī, the son of Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir, among Muslim believers or in hagiographies, nor do great numbers of pilgrims set out with the intention to pay him respects. This is both astonishing and disappointing when one learns the role he played in promoting Islamic spirituality and law in Iran, despite the dangers involved, dangers that led to his murder at the hands of those who governed the area to which his father—the fifth Imām to both Twelver and Ismaili Shi'i Muslims—sent him.

Sultān 'Alī's presence in the area near Kashan and Qum at such an early point in Iran's Islamic history helps us paint a picture of the mechanisms by which a religious movement centered in Medina began to secure the allegiances of those further from the geographical axis of power. That movement, the school of learning and piety affiliated with Muḥammad al-Bāqir that we now call "Shi'i Islam," relied on representatives sent to communities to teach, mentor, and preach. Sultān 'Alī was not only one such representative, but an eminent one, reappointed for the position by his brother, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, after his father's martyrdom.

His three-year stay in the area, which has become part of the collective memory of Kashan and Ardiḥāl (the mountain-village near where he was cornered and killed), was effective enough to alarm the Umayyad rulers in the area and in Qazvin. His followers, moreover, were significant enough in number to exact vengeance on the military forces that murdered him; bury him and his followers; and establish both a site of remembrance and a rug-washing ritual that have lasted to this day. Those in the area still revere him, making vows to honor him and his shrine, and report numerous saintly-miraculous events (*karāmāt*) that they attribute to him. In Iran more generally, Sulṭān ‘Alī has received the designation of being “owed [the believers’] reverence” (*wājib al-ta‘zīm*). It is uncommon for an “imānzāda” (son or daughter of Imāms) in Iran to be a direct descendent of the Imām. It is even more uncommon for that son or daughter to have represented the Imām directly and to have been murdered in that cause.

The author of this book, Dr. Majīd Zujājī, has taken great pains to present a narrative that strikes a balance between respecting Sulṭān ‘Alī’s legacy, including the stories told about him, and respecting the need for historical verification. In that regard, it should be mentioned that there are historians who have doubted the identity of the “Martyr of Ardiḥāl” as being the direct offspring of the fifth Shi‘i Imām. Articles on that topic can be found in journals pertaining to Iranian history, Shi‘i history, or more specifically the history of Kashan. Dr. Zujājī’s perspective, therefore, must be seen not as a statement of historical fact, but as an argument. That argument is supported by a lengthy catalogue of sources that begins the book, but also by notes that will appear throughout. It is left to the reader to assess this argument.

Nevertheless, from the perspective of sacred history—what is called “sacred narrative” or “myth” in religious studies—the story of Sulṭān ‘Alī, a son of the Imām of his age who risked certain death to preach the truth revealed to his great-grandfather, remains of doubtless consequence. All students of Iranian Shi‘i religiosity, or of Kashan and its surrounding areas, must know this narrative and the cultural geography and sacred rituals that it has engendered. For that, Dr. Zujājī’s book has great worth and has occasioned this translation.

Concerning translation, I have favored here a flowing, easy-to-read style, sometimes opting to drop repeated and juxtaposed synonyms, in accordance with the standards of English composition. At other times, I have rendered certain phrases in a style more familiar to English-language readers, favoring lucidity over literalness. While I have done my best to aim for accuracy, mistakes have surely crept in, for which I beg the reader's indulgence. My gratitude goes to the author for writing such a useful and comprehensive study of this important person and the site erected in his remembrance, as well as to the many friends who accompanied me on trips I had the honor of taking to Ardihāl.

Cyrus Ali Zargar

Al-Ghazali Distinguished Professor of Islamic Studies

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Author's Note of Permission to Recount Ḥadīth

A note of permission, allowing the author to recount narrations from the Prophet and his holy family, granted by Ayatollah Sayyid ‘Azīzallāh Ḥusaynī Imāmat-Kāshānī, the son of the Grand Ayatollah Imāmat-Kāshānī and a grandchild of the Grand Ayatollah Mullā Ḥabīballāh Sharīf-Kāshānī:

In the name of God, the All-Merciful, the Compassionate,
Whose assistance we seek.

Praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds; may blessings and peace be upon the most eminent of prophets and messengers, Muḥammad, and upon his family, the ones who guide and are guided; and may eternal curses be upon all their enemies. The respected scholar and treasure of his age, Majīd Zujājī, may his successes continue to shine forth, the author of this delightful book concerning the biography of our liege and master ‘Alī son of Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir, may peace be upon them both, has sought permission from me to narrate ḥadīths with a connected chain of narrations from me, the most trivial and wretched of God’s creatures, for the sake of blessings. I have given him permission to narrate from me that which he deems appropriate from our Shī‘ī-Imāmī companions, using my own chain traced back to my distinguished masters, who are many in number—exceeding fifty—going back to the Prophet and his noble family, upon whom I pray descend the blessings of God, the King, the Absolutely Knowledgeable One. I advise him to be scrupulous in religious affairs, to be cautious in doubtful matters, and to remember me unfailingly in his prayers, during my life and after my death, especially in his moments of solitude. Finally, praise be to God, in all states.

Completed by this wrongdoer on 4 Rabī‘ al-Awwal 1419 [29 June 1998]

The Most Wretched, ‘Azīzallāh al-Ḥusaynī Imāmat [official seal]

Dedication and Acknowledgements

This is dedicated to the mother of the Imāms, the intercessor of those gathered on the Last Day, the daughter of Islam's noble prophet, the wife of the one possessing divine protective friendship (*walāya*), Fāṭima al-Zahrā, peace be upon her, who, in support of *walāya*, achieved martyrdom. It is also dedicated to the Imāms of guidance, specifically to the living Imām, God's proof, the son of Imām Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, and to all the saints, and all the children of the Imāms, and the other great scholars, religious leaders, and martyrs.

I also consider it my duty to recognize the contributions of my mother and father—and especially my wife, whose support allowed me to have the opportunity to study and research, and whose prayers for the success of this book were a great source of encouragement.

Introduction

Since around eleven years ago, or perhaps more, I have wanted to write a book about the important event—important both historically and religiously—that occurred centuries ago at the site of martyrdom in Ardihāl [near the city of Kashan in present-day Iran], but something always seemed to stand in my way. Nevertheless, this project never ceased to linger in my mind and, every once in a while, like a bolt of lightning, would flash before me, illuminating my imagination and occupying my thoughts. The project would be delayed, from one day to the next, and indeed from one year to the next. As time passed, I would pursue my research further, meditating on the pertinent historical events more and more. I would continually place the circumstances and happenings surrounding the martyrdom at Ardihāl in context, contemplating more profoundly the relationship between those events and the order in which they occurred.

The Objective in Writing This Book

While no one can doubt that ʿAlī ibn al-Imām Muḥammad al-Bāqir, peace be upon him, is the son—directly and without any intervening generations—of the fifth Shiʿi Imām, and no one can question the fact that he is buried in Ardihāl, still, historians until now have not looked carefully into the historical conditions surrounding his martyrdom, deeming it sufficient to record

this great figure's name, to cite the location of his tomb, and to mention some of the marvels performed by him.¹

In my humble opinion, if one undertakes the study of the history of Islam from a fresh perspective, as our scholars have been doing recently, innumerable veils of ambiguity will be lifted from many of its important events. Concerning this moment in history, I have exerted my utmost in reviewing and comparing events and circumstances, from this saint's having been called to the area, to his setting out from Medina, his residence for three years in Kashan, his martyrdom and its particulars, and his being remembered in the traditional rug-washing ritual of *Ardihāl*.

In sum, my goal in writing this book is to use recent research to make the lovers of this exalted *imāmzāda* more familiar with his life.² This is because the most effective resistance against oppression and the current cultural onslaught lies in the inerrant and pure *Ahl al-Bayt*, and in following their example, peace be upon them. The more love for Islam, the Prophet, and his family increases in people's hearts, especially the hearts of the youth, the more we guard ourselves against this onslaught.

At this time, it is our duty to understand and help our youth. One of the best ways to realize this aim is to show them proper models of imitation, and among the finest places to find such models of imitation is among those whose status as sons and daughters of our *Imāms* has been historically verified.

1. Twelver Shi'i Muslims, as apparent from the name given to them, recognize twelve inerrant "*Imāms*" or divinely-appointed leaders, who embody the Prophet Muḥammad's exemplary manner of living, interpret the revealed knowledge left by the Prophet, and guide the Muslim community as the Prophet would have wished. Each of them is a direct descendant of the Prophet Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima. Muḥammad al-Bāqir—the father of the subject of this study—is the fifth in this line of *Imāms* and thus the great-great grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad.

2. The Persian term "*imāmzāda*" will be used henceforth to refer to the son or daughter of one of the twelve *Imāms*.

Sources Used for This Book

In composing this book, I have used multiple reliable sources, which have been outlined in the bibliography in detail. One source, however, that increases the value and beauty of this project is an old, handwritten manuscript on the life of Sulṭān ‘Alī that is in my possession. This hagiographical account—written by Āqā Muḥammad Tājir Kāshānī in the year 1305 AH (1887-8 CE)—was made available to me both by the grace of God and by a seminary student from the village of ‘Alawī to whom I am grateful, Sayyid Aḥmad Hāshimī.³ The writer of this account says that he copied this manuscript from an older manuscript dated 1128/1715-6. The writer of this account is Āqā ‘Alī-Akbar Rawḍa-khwān.

Lastly, I express thanks to all those who have helped me or encouraged me in the composition of this book, especially Ḥājj Ibrāhīm Tafrishī. I hope that all of us stand in the presence of the Munificent worthy of the intercession of the holy Sulṭān ‘Alī, that martyr who was beheaded and remains beloved.

May God bless Muḥammad and his pure household.

Majīd Zujājī Mujarrad
Kashan, Iran

3 Ṣafar 1419 / 8 Khurdād 1377 / May 29, 1998

3. When two dates are given, the first is *hijrī-qamarī*, and the second is Gregorian.