

Asma Afsaruddin. *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership.* Leiden: Brill, 2002. xii + 313 pp. \$124.00, cloth, ISBN 978-90-04-12043-3.



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The common conception among both specialists and non-specialists in Islamic Studies is that the earliest pro-'Alid line of argument focused on 'Ali's kinship to Muhammad. Asma Afsaruddin, associate professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Notre Dame University, contends differently. She argues that the initial criteria for legitimate leadership in Islam were based, in fact, on two key Qur'anic concepts: *fadila* (excellence) and *sabiqa* (precedence in rendering service to Islam), and that supporters of Abu Bakr and 'Ali sought to show that their respective candidates possessed these attributes in greater measure. The dominant role of these two qualities are reflected in the title of her book: *Excellence and Precedence: Medieval Islamic Discourse on Legitimate Leadership*.

Afsaruddin wastes no time in getting to her task; she states her theory within the first two pages of her introduction, explaining that the aspect of kinship was a gradual development that, by the second/eighth century, became the cornerstone of Shi'i doctrine. This approach grabs the reader's attention, for certainly, a researcher who so boldly challenges what has become a tenet of

the Shi'i creed and of Sunni perception must in the course of her work demonstrate a convincing methodology and presentation of argument. Afsaruddin is aware that modern research has established that the reports by early Muslims about Islamic history do not fulfill the requirements of academic reliability (she refers to such works throughout her book). This awareness raises two important questions: what are her primary sources? How does she defend their epistemological integrity?

Her principal references are *Kitab (or Risalat) al-'Uthmaniyya* of 'Amr b. Bahr al-Jahiz (d. 255/868-69), the famed Sunni-Mutazili belletrist, and the *Bina al-Maqala al-Fatimiyya (or al-'Alawiyya) fi Naqd al-Risala al-'Uthmaniyya* of the Imami Shi'i theologian Jamal al-Din Ahmad b. Tawus (d. 673/1274-5). Both works are extremely significant: the first was of such importance that four centuries after its compilation, although several Shi'i polemicists had attempted refutations, Ibn Tawus still deemed it important enough to warrant his attention. The second work is the only refutation to *Kitab al-'Uthmaniyya* to have re-

mained intact, and it draws on the preceding centuries of arguments, using both Sunni and Shi'i sources, and often providing material from works no longer extant.

Both authors make extensive use of the *manaqib/fada'il* (traditions that extol the virtues of Companions) material from the hadith literature in order to support their positions. Since the first crisis in Islam, after Muhammad's death, was on the nature of leadership, it seems logical that the earliest and most authentically Islamic discourse on legitimate leadership--and so Afsaruddin propounds (p. 4)--focused on qualifications of the contenders for the caliphate. The use of a common genre of literature (wherein excellence of service and precedence of conversion were stressed) forced each side to "accommodate, revise, and reify its position in response to the other's" (p. 4).

Indeed, several Qur'anic verses buttress the merit of early conversion and outstanding service, linking success of a nation to its righteousness, and its destruction to its depravity. Examples are Qur'an 10:13-14; 7:74; 24:55; 7:69, 169; 17:38; 57:7; 6:133; 4:133; 14:19; 28:5-6; and 35:16. Such verses, along with the early Muslim understanding, are what in fact seem to have spurred Umar 1 to promulgate the *diwan*, awarding pensions based on earliness of conversion and distinction of service to Islam.

On the issue of epistemic integrity, Afsaruddin argues that, although the *manaqib/fada'il* collections are compiled later than the period of the people whose merits they purport to document, such material did not spring up spontaneously, nor was it manufactured immediately before being committed to writing. The common vocabulary, over several centuries of such literature, evidences a long period of both oral and written transmissions, and Afsaruddin draws on the findings of several scholars to support her thesis (pp. 31-32). While there is evidence of reworking of traditions, there is also evidence that "the kernel,

if not more, of the older form, is often discernible in the later incarnations" (p. 32). Her approach then is, by a critical and close reading of al-Jahiz and Ibn Tawus, to tease out a reliable reconstruction of the arguments about leadership in early Islam. (In defending her position, Afsaruddin cites one of the most critical writers, Hayden White, but for some reason, while the bibliographical reference is provided in footnote 134 on page 33, it is omitted in the bibliography.)

Having laid out her thesis and methodology in the extremely informative introduction, Afsaruddin provides elucidation in seven chapters, all with self-explanatory titles. The debate in chapter 1, "The Excellence of Precedence," revolves around two issues: who was the first male to convert to Islam, and whose conversion was of greatest significance to early Islam (p. 52)? Al-Jahiz, while reporting hadith that show Abu Bakr as the earlier convert, has to deal with traditions that give this honor to 'Ali. He therefore argues that the issue must be considered in terms of the significance of such conversion: 'Ali was by all reports only seven years old when he accepted Islam, and the conversion of such an inexperienced minor cannot be compared with that of a middle-aged, wealthy, and influential Abu Bakr. Ibn Tawus relies on Sunni reports that put 'Ali's age at conversion between eight and sixteen, but also points out that 'Ali's assumed minority is meaningless in the light of his well-known precocity.

Chapter 2, "The Precedence of Excellence," examines how both al-Jahiz and Ibn Tawus sought to show their candidate as better fitting the criterion of excellence of character and service to Islam, in terms of their spending, valor, and praiseworthy abstemiousness. The subsequent chapter, "The Epistemology of Excellence," examines the development of how the possession of knowledge came to be emphasized by both sides as the criterion for justifying leadership. Yet the issue became more complicated, in that knowledge in and of itself is not the only issue; such knowledge

must also be examined in terms of its provenance. The knowledge derived from close association with the Prophet was the most superior, and the discourse of such closeness is the subject of chapter 4, "The Excellence of Propinquity to the Prophet: Kinship vs. Companionship." For the 'Alids, such propinquity focused on blood relationship, while their opponents emphasized closeness in spirit and deed to Muhammad.

In chapter 5, "Canon of Excellence 1: Hadith as Proof-Texts and the Principle of Nass," while the scholastic approaches of al-Jahiz and Ibn Tawus become evident, such differences may in fact reflect a chronological development in Islamic scholarship more than individual intellectuality. Al-Jahiz seems to harbor a more skeptical approach to the reliability of hadith, often preferring historical reports, biographical narratives, and sometimes, even poetry. One argument of al-Jahiz sounds extremely modern: here, he shows that contradictory reports on the respective merits of Abu Bakr and 'Ali could not logically be true, and that such reports therefore must have been concocted by transmitters (p. 199). This, however, brings to light another issue: the earlier scholars did not view *hadith* with the reverence of their later counterparts. By the time Ibn Tawus came on the scene, the doctrine of *hadith* as a fully accepted source of Islamic belief had become overwhelmingly dominant. Chapter 6, "Canon of Excellence 2: Qur'anic Verses as Proof-texts," evidences the vast exegetical divide in Sunni/Shi'i approaches to the Qur'an, although Ibn Tawus often uses Sunni exegeses, reconfiguring and focusing to suit his arguments, and not always relying on the more pervasive Shi'i allegorical interpretations.

In her conclusion, Afsaruddin revisits the issue of historical veracity and points out that, since the Shi'i concept of kinship had crystallized long before Ibn Tawus's work, had the arguments he reports been mere Shi'i reconstructions of earlier debates, one would have expected to see more of a focus on kinship. As is evident in her work, this

is not the case, and supports her theory for epistemic reliability. She also points out that the issue of kinship for the 'Alids became extremely powerful in response to the Umayyad recognition of kinship as "a natural right to rule and in the awarding of administrative appointments" (p. 281). While the works of al-Jahiz and Ibn Tawus form her principal source material, she supports her conclusions by referencing several other medieval works on history, exegesis, biography, *firaq* (books about the various sects), and apologetic material, resulting in excellent cross referencing, and a truly impressive bibliography section.

She concludes that in the early period, the lines of divide between Sunni and Shi'i were, unlike later rigid taxonomy, somewhat elastic. The changes in the connotation of *tashayyu'* as analyzed by Ibn Hajar (d. 856/1449) indicate this point. To earlier scholars, the term seemed to mean a preference for 'Ali over 'Uthman, and the acceptance of Abu Bakr and 'Umar as rightful caliphs in their time, due to their precedence. Later scholars saw the term as implying a rejection of the first three caliphs (p. 283). Further examination of the *manaqib* literature indicates that several early scholars who extolled the virtues of 'Ali did not necessarily hold that he was therefore the best to succeed the Prophet--as in the examples of Ibn 'Abdel Barr and others who wrote laudatory works about 'Ali, but remained Sunni. And when Ibn Tawus interprets the Qur'an to indicate that *walaya* (loyalty) to 'Ali is a Qur'anic injunction, he has to rely on later Shi'i works--thereby showing that the aspect of kinship was indeed a later creedal development.

Afsaruddin's work, based on her 1993 thesis, is truly seminal, written in a fluid, convincing style, and showing a command of primary source material as well as contemporary scholarship on her subject. While *Excellence and Precedence* is directed towards the specialist reader, and its hefty price tag ensures this, the book's epistemic value is immense. Faith-based readers may find

that which allows them to question sectarian reports with a discerning eye, and eschew the harsh polemic that has recently resurfaced between Sunni and Shi'i authors (e.g., the books of al-Tijani al-Samawi). In academe, the work should be a vital part of any reading list for graduate comprehensive examinations in Islamic studies.

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