

The Rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyya in 145/762 Ṭālibīs and Early ‘Abbāsīs in Conflict, by Amikam Elad (Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts, 118) (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2016), xi+527 pp., ISBN: 978-90-04-22989-1 (hb) & 978-90-04-29622-0 (e-book), €176.00 / \$245.00 (hb)

The history of the revolutionary movement of the ‘Alid Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan ibn al-Ḥasan with his messianic claim of Mahdīship has long attracted the interest of Amikam Elad, and he has published a number of scholarly studies on aspects of it. In the present book, he presents a comprehensive and wide-ranging examination of what he portrays as a rebellion of one branch of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Hāshimī kinship, the ‘Alids, against another branch, the ‘Abbāsids, who had recently established their rule of the Muslim world as caliphs by overthrowing the Umayyad caliphate. Elad bases his history on a collection of the vast amount of relevant Muslim historical reports of both backers and opponents of the rebellion and meticulous analysis of their chains of transmission as well as their contents. Although he rejects many of them as outright forgery or tendentious invention, he accepts some as reliable source material that can be used to reconstruct the course of the events leading up to the bloody conflict and failure of the rebellion.

From the perspective of Elad and many western historians, rebellion against established government, in the case of Islam the caliphate, is inevitably reprehensible. The justice of government, ruler, or caliph, must not be questioned. Power, military might, establishes right that all subjects should unconditionally support and foster, not oppose. Only superior might can justify resistance and challenge to the established state. While a century ago most western scholarship condemned the overthrow of the Umayyad caliphate, the first dynastic caliphate that was viewed as the golden age of Islam, by the ‘Abbāsids, now most western historians rather admire the ‘Abbāsīd revolutionary movement’s success in destroying the Umayyad caliphate by the superior military power of their Khurāsānīan army. The proclaimed goal of the revolution had been revenge for ‘Alī, the fourth caliph overthrown by the Umayyad

Mu‘āwiyah, and ‘Alī’s descendants killed by the Umayyads. Yet the ‘Abbāsid caliph al-Manṣūr was to kill the descendants of ‘Alī on a much larger scale than the Umayyads had done. Elad portrays the caliph al-Manṣūr with much sympathy as a capable and responsible ruler faced by an incompetent, conceited ‘Alid rebel with Messianic dreams. Al-Manṣūr himself acknowledged that the goal of the ‘Abbasid revolution was to avenge ‘Alī, not his own ancestors al-‘Abbās and his son ‘Abd Allāh, the cousin of the Prophet who, after having vigorously supported the caliphate of ‘Alī and his son al-Ḥasan, had eventually recognized the caliphate of the Umayyad ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān without ever claiming any right to rule in succession to the Prophet. Surely the evidence is strong and credible that al-Manṣūr did swear allegiance to the ‘Alid Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh before the success of the ‘Abbāsid revolution and later dishonestly denied having done so. Yet Elad rejects reports to that effect as outright lies with the aim “to undermine the Caliph’s credibility and besmirch him.” (p. 75)

The Mahdī, according to the most widely accepted *ḥadīth*, was to be a descendant and a namesake of the Prophet, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh, who would appear before the end of time to restore the justice and equity that had prevailed in the age of the Prophet and to put an end to the injustice and oppression that have prevailed thereafter. Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan was a perfect namesake of the Prophet and descendant of his through his daughter Fāṭimah and his elder grandson al-Ḥasan. It is crucial to realize that according to the Qur’ānic law of succession the Prophet’s only surviving daughter Fāṭimah was his primary heir and should have succeeded him as a queen of the Muslim Community. This was prevented by the military *coup d’état* staged by ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Ever since his conversion to Islam, before which he had been a fierce opponent of Muḥammad, ‘Umar had been determined to succeed the Prophet in order to promote his own concept of Islam that differed profoundly from Muḥammad’s. It was ‘Umar who first persuaded Muḥammad not to name his cousin ‘Alī executor of his will (*waṣī*) and then threatened to burn the house of Fāṭimah with her and her children inside in order to establish the caliphate of Abū Bakr. He was obviously restrained from carrying out his threat, perhaps by Abū Bakr, but he was powerful enough to force Abū Bakr to declare that the Prophet had disinherited his own daughter and had indeed asserted that prophets in general have no heirs, against the clear

statements of the Qurʾān to the contrary. A great majority of early Muslims appreciated his decisive actions and called him the Fārūq, the Savior of Islam from the potential danger of the rule of a woman. Yet they did not accept his claim that Muḥammad had no descendants since only male descent was legally effective descent. Later Muslims, Sunnis as well as Shīʿis, commonly greeted descendants of Fāṭimah as *Yā Ibn Rasūl Allāh*, Son of the Messenger of God.

Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Ḥasan lost his credibility of potentially becoming the expected Mahdī only when he, instead of remaining in hiding, rose in rebellion and distributed two camel-loads of swords he had stored to his followers for them fight and kill his opponents.

He now became al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah, the Pure Soul killed at Ahjār al-zayt. The true Mahdī, as later Shīʿis have generally realized, must remain forever in hiding until humankind is prepared for him and longing for his advent to bring peace and non-violence to earth as the one Blessed who comes in the name of the Lord.

Elad's new book is to be welcomed as an exhaustive collection and thorough analysis of the relevant literary sources for the history of the rebellion of Muḥammad al-Nafs al-Zakiyyah. The soundness of his judgment on the reliability or distortion and fictitiousness of these sources must at times be questioned.

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