

The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Saba' and the Origins of Sbī'ism, by Sean W. Anthony (Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts: 91), (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012), xiii + 352 pp., ISBN: 978-90-04-20930-5; €128.00 / \$175.00 (hb)

In this study, Sean Anthony explores a variety of sources in his quest to explain the influence of the enigmatic 'Abd Allāh ibn Saba', who appears in the historical narrative surrounding the murder of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān and subsequent events while also playing a role in the emergence of Shī'ism, or at least its radical apocalyptic strain. This is no easy task, given the scarcity and inconsistency of reports on Ibn Saba', as well as the problematic nature of the sources with which Anthony must grapple. His efforts have produced an important, though likely not definitive, treatment of a central figure in early Islamic sectarian history and the polemics surrounding the emergence of Shī'ism.

Anthony begins with the troublesome corpus of Sayf ibn 'Umar, upon whom al-Ṭabarī and others relied for material about Ibn Saba' (or Ibn al-Sawdā' as he is sometimes called). After discussing (but by no means solving) questions about Sayf's reliability, Anthony describes the image of Ibn Saba' presented by Sayf. He demonstrates that Sayf's Ibn Saba' is not dedicated to a specific religious doctrine, but is simply intent upon disrupting the community by sowing the seeds of *fitna*. For Sayf, Ibn Saba' is not so much a heretic as a saboteur. He serves a crucial purpose in Sayf's narrative which, while pro-'Uthmān, also tries to salvage the reputations of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and the other Companions. In Sayf's narrative, 'Alī, 'Ā'isha, Ṭalḥa, and al-Zubayr all want to resolve their differences peacefully and appear to be on the verge of doing so when Ibn Saba' and his minions sow discord and ultimately incite violence. In the process, Sayf manages to paint Ibn Saba' as the originator of several incompatible doctrines, making him the progenitor of both the Shī'ī *ghulāt* and the Khawārij. Anthony carefully navigates Sayf's corpus, noting contradictions and showing how Sayf's interpretations differed from others. He also explains frequent implicit references to Christian and Jewish lore to suggest that the construction of Sayf's Ibn Saba' took place in a multi-faith milieu.

Turning to the heresiographic sources, which center on doctrine rather than history, Anthony focuses largely on al-Nawbakhtī's *Firaq*

al-Shīʿa because it includes what Anthony identifies as the earliest extant accounts of Ibn Sabaʿ. Anthony identifies a number of doctrinal innovations attached to Ibn Sabaʿ, including the assertion that ʿAlī received the *waṣīyya* from Muḥammad, the claim that portions of the Qurʾān had been concealed and were known only to ʿAlī, the belief that ʿAlī either had not died or would be resurrected before the apocalypse, and the practice of cursing the first three caliphs. He focuses most of his attention on two archetypes attached to Ibn Sabaʿ. First, Anthony examines stories in which ʿAlī punishes Ibn Sabaʿ for his proclamation of ʿAlī’s divinity and/or his claim that ʿAlī was privy to hidden verses of the Qurʾān. The sources include contradictory accounts of ʿAlī’s condemnation of Ibn Sabaʿ. In some, ʿAlī orders that Ibn Sabaʿ and his followers be immolated for their crimes. In others, ʿAlī exiles Ibn Sabaʿ to al-Madāʿin.

Anthony explains that the exile accounts were crucial to solve the chronological problem inherent in the second archetype upon which he focuses, namely Ibn Sabaʿ’ s refusal to accept that ʿAlī had been killed. Anthony connects Ibn Sabaʿ’ s belief in the *raǰʿa*, or return, of ʿAlī to broader changes in Shīʿī apocalyptic doctrines associated with the occultation of the 12th Imām. He examines and largely dismisses parallels to Christian Docetist beliefs about Jesus. Instead, he focuses on similarities between predictions of ʿAlī’s return and late antique Jewish apocalyptic topoi. His discussion of the heresiographic portrayal of Ibn Sabaʿ focuses largely on al-Nawbakhtī’s account, but also draws from the broader apocalyptic tradition of the period. Unfortunately, he does not trace the evolution of Ibn Sabaʿ’ s image in later heresiographical writings.

Next, Anthony turns to the Umayyad period, where the Sabaʿiyya reappear in the midst of al-Mukhtār’s revolt in Kūfa. Here, Anthony tries to determine whether these are the same Sabaʿiyya associated with Ibn Sabaʿ, or whether the label had evolved to apply to the *ghulāt* or to the Shīʿa in general. He also considers whether in this context, the label might simply refer to a Yemeni tribal group. Much of Anthony’s discussion, and that in the sources, focuses on al-Mukhtār’s attempt to use what he purports to be ʿAlī’s chair as a talisman around which to rally his followers. Anthony finds a parallel in Jewish stories about the Ark of the Covenant and argues that al-Mukhtār used the chair to justify his religious status as its protector, casting himself in the role of King Saul. There were, of course, questions about what, if any, special powers the Sabaʿiyya thought the

chair conveyed and whether any of this had anything to do with Ibn Saba' himself.

Anthony also discusses the *Kitāb al-irja'*, ascribed to al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, which includes a denunciation of the Saba'iyya. The authenticity and content of this source have been much discussed in modern scholarship. Anthony offers no new answers to questions of its provenance, but does show that the beliefs ascribed to Ibn Saba' in both the historical and heresiographical narrative appear here as well. This suggests that there was a general consensus that the Saba'iya were excessively loyal to 'Alī, that they believed he had access to hidden portions of the Qur'ān, and that he would return prior to judgment day to bring justice, etc.

Ultimately, Anthony concludes that Ibn Saba' in all likelihood existed and that he may have been one of the first to assert that 'Alī had not died. The sectarian movement around him, however, appears to have developed later. Ibn Saba' served as a convenient figurehead, in part because his alleged Jewish lineage allowed later commentators to ascribe aberrant doctrines to outsiders. Both Sunnī and Shī'ī writers could use him to dissociate extreme views from orthodox Islam.

Anthony's work is a welcome addition to the corpus of scholarship on the emergence of sectarian divisions in early Islam. Its focus on doctrinal rather than political divisions is a welcome corrective to shortcomings in some scholarship on the topic. Anthony is thorough, but cautious in his conclusions. He grapples with difficult texts whose authenticity remains disputed without making provocative claims about their provenance. He does a service by contextualizing the emergence of Shī'ism in the larger late-antique apocalyptic milieu. While Anthony's efforts to uncover the earliest sources is admirable, readers would have benefited from a more complete discussion of how Ibn Saba's image evolved in later sources and how he was used in later Sunnī-Shī'ī polemics. Perhaps Anthony will consider this as a later project. The book's biggest failing is not its scholarship, but its editing. There are copious editing and typographical errors throughout. While these present a mere annoyance to native English readers, some may confound scholars with less proficiency in English usage and misuse. One hopes that these technical flaws do not distract too much from Anthony's important scholarly contribution.

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