



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

**“Muhammad al-Baqir”
Arzina R Lalani**

Abu Ja‘far Muhammad b. ‘Ali was one of the most learned Muslims of his age. He played a pivotal role in the history of early Islam as an authority on the exegesis of the Qur’an, the Traditions of the Prophet (*Hadith*), and on all matters relating to the rites, rituals, and practices of the faith. Born in 57 AH/677 CE in Medina, Imam al Baqir had an especially prestigious genealogy as the maternal and paternal grandchild of al-Hasan and al-Husayn, the Prophet’s grandsons. He was popularly known as *al-Baqir*, which is short for *baqir al ‘ilm*, meaning “one who splits knowledge open”; this signifies his erudition in bringing knowledge to light, a function that he did indeed perform. There are considerable variations in reports regarding the year of his death, ranging from 114 AH/732 CE to 126 AH/744 CE. However, the dates given by al-Waqidi (117 AH/735 CE) and Ibn al-Khayyat (118 AH/736 CE) appear to be more realistic, considering reports about his death in al-Tabari during the uprising of his half-brother, Zayd b. ‘Ali.

Sunni and Shi‘i sources describe Imam al-Baqir as an eminent scholar. He is well known among the early *fuqaha* (jurists). His traditions appear in major works of *hadith*, and he is an authority for al-Tabari’s historical and exegetical works. In Sufi circles, too, Imam al-Baqir’s sayings are quoted. In Shi‘i tradition (both Ithna‘ashari and Ismaili), Imam al-Baqir is seen as the inaugurator of the legal and religious teachings that were further developed under his son and successor, Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq. Zaydi tradition, too, relied heavily on Imam al-Baqir through his disciple, Abu’l-Jarrud.

Imam al-Baqir lived at a time in history when religious doctrine was at the centre of both the intellectual and political life of the community. The late first and early second centuries of Islam were crucial times for establishing the foundation of the studies connected with the Qur’an; this involved interpretation of the Qur’an that relied, in turn, on the recollected actions and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad. Medina, where Imam al-Baqir resided, continued to be the centre of religious learning after the time of the Prophet, and it was in this cusp of history that Imam al-Baqir played a remarkably significant role.

Only a few decades before the birth of Imam al-Baqir, his grandfather Imam Husayn b. ‘Ali, together with his entourage, were afflicted by the tragedy of Karbala. However, by the end of his lifetime, Imam al-Baqir had given his Shi‘is not only a distinct identity with a coherent theory of imamate, but he had also founded a separate legal school, the *madhhab ahl al-bayt*, that had well-defined views on several aspects of *fiqh* (jurisprudence). This was the time when the early discussions and differences in the community surrounded the question of who has the right to rule. There were serious theological discussions about aspects of leadership and the imamate, such as those related to concepts of imam, Islam, *‘ilm*, *‘amal*, and *qada wa qadar*; many had political undertones. The religious and philosophical movements and communities of the Khawarij, the

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Murji'a, the Qadariyya, the Kaysaniyya, and the Zaydiyya sought their own answers to problematic questions. The Imami Shi'is, under Imam al-Baqir, did not shy away from these issues but rather proposed their own solutions.

Contending with several competing groups, Imam al-Baqir put forward a coherent doctrine of the imamate supported by the Qur'an and *hadith* (Prophetic traditions). His emphasis on hereditary imamate proved to be timely, because many regarded the imamate as an exclusively political matter that was based either on the *ijma'* (consensus) of the people or on the rising of the imam. A stronger argument in favour of Imam al-Baqir's school was its conviction that the Prophet had expressly designated and appointed Imam 'Ali as his successor by *nass al-jali* (explicit designation); this meant that the Imam's authority did not depend on either human electors or the allegiance (*bayy'a*) of the people. The hereditary character of the *nass* was thus the crucial point in Imam al-Baqir's doctrine; it served as a restriction for many who considered claiming the *nass* as a license to leadership.

In addition, in Imam al-Baqir's view, the imam was endowed with the hereditary '*ilm* as a result of the *nass* bestowed on him. Therefore, true knowledge was ultimately confined only to the imam in the Prophet's family and not to every member of the Prophet's family, and certainly not to the whole community. The whole tradition of the community was thus not valid as a source for law; only traditions of the Imams or those of the Prophet confirmed by the Imams were allowed. This approach of Imam al-Baqir's school toward the majority of the Prophet's companions changed the legal pattern of the Shi'is, and, in so doing, laid the foundation of a distinct school of jurisprudence: the *madhhab ahl al-bayt*. The basis of Shi'i law and theology emerged and developed itself within the circle of Imam al-Baqir's adherents. In addition to transmitting this formal kind of knowledge, Imam al-Baqir also played the role of a spiritual guide initiating his followers in experiential knowledge. This is represented in the concept of light in his theory of the imamate, embodying the numinous aspect of the imam's knowledge that sets the inner wisdom in motion.

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