

## CONSTRUCTING A WORLDVIEW

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# Constructing a Worldview

## Al-Barqī's Role in the Making of Early Shī'ī Faith

Roy VILOZNY

BREPOLS

Cover illustration: Day of Judgement according to a 1550s Fāl-Nāma illustration, commonly attributed to Qazvin, Iran. SLUB Dresden / Digital Collections / Mscr.Dresd.Eb.445. I thank Raya Shani for directing me to this specific image.

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*To my parents*



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## Abbreviations

|                 |  |
|-----------------|--|
| BSOAS           | <i>Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies</i>                      |
| EI <sup>2</sup> | <i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 2 <sup>nd</sup> edition (Leiden: Brill, 1960–2002) |
| EI <sup>3</sup> | <i>Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> , 3 <sup>rd</sup> edition, online                    |
| EIR             | <i>Encyclopaedia Iranica</i>   |
| GAS             | <i>Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums</i>                                       |
| IJMES           | <i>International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies</i>                             |
| IOS             | <i>Israel Oriental Studies</i>   |
| JA              | <i>Journal asiatique</i>   |
| JAOS            | <i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>                                    |
| JSAI            | <i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>                                       |
| REI             | <i>Revue des Etudes Islamiques</i>   |
| RIMA            | <i>Revue de l'institut des manuscrits arabes</i>                                   |
| SI              | <i>Studia Islamica</i>   |
| ZDMG            | <i>Zeitschrift der morgenländischen Gesellschaft</i>                               |



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My first encounter with Shiʿī literature in general and with al-Barqī, the protagonist of the present study, in particular took place towards the end of the previous millennium. I was at the time an undergraduate at the department of Arabic Language and Literature at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem and as part of my curriculum I attended the course ‘Readings in Early Shiʿī Sources’. One of the first sources from which we read was Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī’s *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*. Professor Etan Kohlberg, who taught the course, later became the advisor of my MA thesis and a member of my PhD dissertation committee. I am deeply grateful to Etan for this first encounter with al-Barqī as well as for his inspiration, guidance and encouragement ever since.

As my interest in the Shiʿa and particularly in their early worldview grew, *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn* and the role it played in the formation of the Shiʿī doctrine became the primary object of examination in both my MA thesis and PhD dissertation that formed the basis of the present book. During these significant stages of my studies, I was fortunate to study with Professors Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi at the Ecole Pratique de Hautes Etudes in Paris (2005–2006) and Meir M. Bar-Asher who was the advisor of my PhD thesis at the Hebrew University (2007–2012). I am greatly indebted to Meir for his continuous support, advice and reassurance along the challenging years of working on this project. Had it not been for the help and support of these three distinguished academics, each in his particular way and all in the most unassuming and generous manner, this book would not have seen the light. Etan has also read various drafts of the present book and made insightful comments for which I am most thankful. The responsibility for any errors or inaccuracies that may still be found in the book is entirely mine.

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## Preface

This book delineates several fundamental characteristics of the Shīʿī faith in its formative period, towards the end of the third/ninth century and about half a century prior to the beginning of the crystallization of Twelver Shīʿī dogma. This formative period is still shrouded in obscurity due to the scarcity of early Shīʿī works. Moreover, the crystallization process, as well as the formation of a canonical body of Shīʿī literature, which took place following the occultation of the twelfth Imam (328/940) and mainly during the Buwayhid period (334/945–447/1055 CE), inevitably involved modifications in and adaptations of the Shīʿa's early corpus. The terms Shīʿī and Imāmī are thus used interchangeably throughout the present study to denote this early, proto-Twelver manifestation of Shīʿism.

The book focuses on the contribution of the Qummi scholar and traditionist, Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī (d. 274/888 or 280/894), to the shaping of the Shīʿī doctrine. Al-Barqī's main work, *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*, is one of the earliest, if not the earliest of the Shīʿī texts available to us today and is a rare example of *ḥadīth* literature before the canonical texts were established. The significance of this work was such that the prominent Shīʿī scholar Qāḍī Nūr Allāh al-Tustarī (d. 1019/1610) argued that it should be included in the Twelver Shīʿī canon.

The present book is situated in the ongoing process of increasing our familiarity with and understanding of the Shīʿī religion in its early stages of development. Despite the importance of al-Barqī's contribution, the originality of his work and its centrality in Shīʿī *ḥadīth* literature, it has not hitherto received sufficient scholarly attention. Apart from Paul Sander, who in his book *Zwischen Charisma und Ratio* attempts to describe some theological principles through an examination of several early Shīʿī sources, including *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*; and Andrew Newman, who in the fourth chapter of *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism* provides an account of al-Barqī's biography and briefly describes the contents of his *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*, no western scholar has

focused on this book as his main object of research.<sup>1</sup> In her *Early Shī'ī Thought*, Arzina R. Lalani refers briefly to *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn* as an early work which has a section on jurisprudence, overlooking the text's other dimensions.<sup>2</sup> Besides the scholars mentioned above, the supplement of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition) includes a short entry on al-Barqī by Charles Pellat.<sup>3</sup> Pellat provides information about al-Barqī's life, remarks briefly on the contents of *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn* and comments on the text's presumed goal.

An interesting exception is a dissertation titled *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn by Aḥmad al-Barqī (d. 274/887 or 280/893) as a Source for the History of Shī'ī Islam* written in Russian by Ara G. Margaryan under the supervision of Professor Stanislav M. Prozorov and submitted to the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in Saint Petersburg in 2013. I learned about the existence of this dissertation only in February 2017, while I was already in the process of preparing the present book for press and therefore could not incorporate a thorough examination of this dissertation, a task to which I hope to devote a separate study in the near future.<sup>4</sup>

In his comprehensive book on the Shī'ī faith, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism*,<sup>5</sup> Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi explains why *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn* was not one of the main sources on which he based his research. He notes that it lacks the Imamological and esoteric aspects which are his two main concerns in his study. Nevertheless, an in-depth analysis of this text and occasionally reading between its lines provided me with most of the conclusions presented here regarding these two aspects. This was successfully undertaken also by Maria Massi Dakake, who in her *The Charismatic Community* managed to explore fundamental notions of the faith by making considerable use of *Kitāb*

1. See P. Sander, *Zwischen Charisma und Ratio. Entwicklungen in der frühen imāmītischen Theologie* (Berlin, 1994) and A. J. Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism: Hadith as Discourse between Qum and Baghdad* (Richmond, 2000).

2. A. R. Lalani, *Early Shī'ī Thought. The Teachings of Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir* (London and New York, 2000).

3. Ch. Pellat "al-Barqī," *Et*<sup>2</sup> (supplement).

4. Маргарян, Ара Григорьевич, "Китаб ал-махасин Ахмада ал-Барки (ум. в 274/887 или 280/893 г.) как источник по истории шиитского ислама," PhD dissertation, Saint Petersburg, 2013. I am grateful to Professor Prozorov for bringing to my attention the existence of this study as well as for his time and hospitality during my visit at the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in Saint Petersburg in February 2017.

5. M. A. Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam* (English translation by D. Streight, originally published under the title *Le guide divin dans le shi'isme originel*) (Albany, 1994).

*al-maḥāsin*.<sup>6</sup> However, *Kitāb al-maḥāsin* does not contain any clear credo, nor does it present a system of belief to the reader. Anyone attempting to describe Shīʿī doctrine according to this text has to put together the scattered pieces of this complex puzzle on his own. Furthermore, in *The Divine Guide* Amir-Moezzi examines the Shīʿī faith while focusing on the role of the Imam as the main axis around which the faith developed and as a necessary condition for its existence. In this study, particularly in the second part, which is devoted to doctrinal questions, it is argued that ordinary believers and — at least to some extent — non-believers too, are no less central to the Shīʿī worldview as derived from the analysis of *Kitāb al-maḥāsin*.

Finally, it is of note that although details regarding al-Barqī and *Kitāb al-maḥāsin* are recorded both by Fuat Sezgin<sup>7</sup> and Agha Bozorg al-Ṭīhrānī,<sup>8</sup> two of the main introductory books in the field<sup>9</sup> contain no reference to al-Barqī nor to his *al-Maḥāsin*. This is surprising, especially in light of *al-Maḥāsin*'s centrality in al-Majlisī's (d. 1111/1700) *Biḥār al-anwār*, with which both authors must have been familiar. In al-Majlisī's list of abbreviations of the sources he used, 'sn' (سن) stands for *al-maḥāsin*.

*Kitāb al-Maḥāsin*, it will be demonstrated, continued to play a central role in the later Shīʿī tradition, a role that has so far gone unrecognized and calls for a reassessment of this source. Ironically, the great importance ascribed to the text by Shīʿī scholars of later eras resulted in an insufficient interest on the part of scholars of Shīʿī Islam, who focused instead on canonical works that quote extensively from *Kitāb al-maḥāsin* and neglected the examination of this source as a primary object of research. The present book, taking *Kitāb al-maḥāsin* as its main object and repositioning it as a central source for the study of early Shīʿism, aims to fill this gap.

Like most works stemming from early Islam, *Kitāb al-maḥāsin* is not an explicit doctrinal or theological treatise. Rather, it is a collection of 2609 traditions ascribed to one of the Shīʿī Imams or to the Prophet Muḥammad. These traditions constitute the only part of the text that has survived; there is indisputable evidence that the original work was far more substantial. As the

6. M. M. Dakake, *The Charismatic Community: Shi'ite Identity in Early Islam* (Albany, 2007), see in particular Part II, chapters 7–8, “Predestination and the mythological origins of Shi'ite Identity” and “The charismatic nature and spiritual distinction of the Shi'ites.”

7. F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (Leiden, 1967–1986), vol. 1, p. 538.

8. A. B. al-Ṭīhrānī, *Al-Dharrī'a ilā taṣānīf al-shī'a*, vol. 20, p. 123.

9. I refer here to M. Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'ī Islam* (New Haven and London, 1985) and H. Halm, *Shi'ism* (English translation by J. Watson and M. Hill) (New York, 2004).

title of the present book suggests, al-Barqī's compilation was a fundamental building block in the process of constructing the Shī'ī worldview during the third/ninth century. It is only by piecing together various parts of the extant text and subjecting them to an in-depth analysis that this worldview can be comprehended.

Part I of the book opens with an introduction to the life and work of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī. In the main part of the book (part II) I will present and discuss three prominent notions that arise from the analysis of *Kitāb al-maḥasin* and characterize the early Shī'ī faith: election, determinism and dualism. The three are embedded throughout al-Barqī's work and the relevance of each is traceable in all aspects of the faith. In addition, the book offers a unique window into the content and stylistic characteristics of the Shī'ī *ḥadīth* literature before it became canonical (part III).



## Table of the 12 Imams

The Prophet Muḥammad (d. 11/632)

Fāṭima (d. 40/661)

∞

(1) ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661)

(2) al-Ḥasan (d. c. 50/670)

(3) al-Ḥusayn (d. 61/680)

(4) ʿAlī Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn (d. c. 95/714)

(5) Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. c. 114/732)

(6) Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765)

(7) Mūsā al-Kāzim (d. 183/799)

(8) ʿAlī al-Riḍā (d. 203/818)

(9) Muḥammad al-Jawād (or al-Taqī) (d. 220/835)

(10) ʿAlī al-Hādī (d. 254/868)

(11) al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī (d. 260/873–4)

(12) Muḥammad al-Mahdī (disappeared 260/873–4)

