

An Historiographical Re-examination of the Appointment and Death of 'Alī al-Riḍā

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One of the most intriguing episodes in 'Abbāsīd annals is al-Ma'mūn's appointment of the Shī'ī Imām 'Alī al-Riḍā as his heir and successor to the caliphate. This brief episode, following in the wake of the bloody and protracted civil war between al-Ma'mūn and his brother al-Amīn, lasted less than two years; in 203/818, responding to reports of the 'Abbāsīd rebellion in Baghdad against his 'Alid policy, al-Ma'mūn and his court began their leisurely journey to 'Irāq. This journey was punctuated first by the murder of al-Ma'mūn's vizier (who had allegedly been hiding the gravity of the situation in 'Irāq from him) and then by the sudden death of the heir apparent himself, after a few days' illness.

Shī'ite scholars from Ibn Bābawayhī onward (we shall see that this is not necessarily so for earlier periods) have, in keeping with their premise that all the Imāms were martyred, viewed the death of 'Alī al-Riḍā as an incontrovertible case of murder on the part of al-Ma'mūn.¹⁾ Many later Sunnī historians, too, have accepted this judgment, or at least felt compelled to mention it, even if only to discount it.²⁾ The attitude of modern

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¹⁾ AL-SHAYKH AL-ṢADŪQ ABŪ JA'FAR MUḤAMMAD B. 'ALĪ B. ḤUSAYN B. MŪSĀ IBN BĀBĀWAYHĪ, *'Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā*, al-Najaf: Maṭba'at al-Ḥaydariyya 1390/1970, "knows" not only why Ma'mūn murdered 'Alī (although he gives the reader a range of reasons to choose amongst – pp. 239–241), but also minute details regarding the actual commission of the dastardly deed (pp. 242–253). The belief about the unnatural death of both the Imāms in general and 'Alī al-Riḍā in particular is neatly illustrated by MUḤAMMAD BĀQIR AL-MAJLISĪ, *Biḥār al-anwār*, vol. 44, p. 372, who has 'Alī al-Riḍā state: *mā minnā illā maqtūl, wa-anā wa-llāhi la-maqtūl bi'l-samm ...*

²⁾ IBN AL-ATHĪR, *al-Kāmil fi'l-ta'rīkh*, vol. VI, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1402/1982, p. 351: "and they say that Ma'mūn poisoned him ... but I consider this improbable [*ba'id*]."

historians is more nuanced; there are those who accept unquestioningly 'Alī al-Riḍā's poisoning, while others feel that there is too much ambiguity in the sources to make an unconditional judgment one way or the other.³⁾

But there arises another, equally pressing question from this episode, one intimately connected with the whole question of Imām al-Riḍā's death: Why did al-Ma'mūn appoint him in the first place? Interpretations of al-Ma'mūn's motives range from pure political cynicism,⁴⁾ to a desire to reconcile Shī'ī and Sunnī,⁵⁾ to the ascendancy of the vizier Faḍl ibn Sahl,

³⁾ Thus ḤASAN IBRĀHĪM ḤASAN, "Al-Ma'mūn wa 'Alī al-Riḍā," *Majallat Kuliyat al-Adab*, al-Azhar 1933, p. 93) asserts unhesitatingly that 'Alī was murdered by al-Ma'mūn; PATRICIA CRONE writes that "Ma'mun ... ruefully liquidat[ed] his Iranian minister and 'Alid heir on the journey back [to Baghdad]" (*Slaves on Horses*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980, p. 77). WILFERD MADE-LUNG deems al-Ma'mūn's guilt probable ("Alī al-Rezā," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. EHSAN YARSHATER, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985, vol. I., p. 879), writing: "The sudden demise of both the vizier and the heir apparent, whose presence would have made any reconciliation with the powerful 'Abbāsīd opposition in Baghdad virtually impossible, must indeed arouse the strong suspicion that Ma'mūn had had a hand in the deaths." MOTTAHEDEH, too, notes of the vizier and heir that they "conveniently died on the way" ("The Abbāsīd Caliphate in Iran," *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 6, ed. R.N. FRYE, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p. 74); SOURDEL takes for granted that 'Alī was poisoned but does not necessarily impute the deed to al-Ma'mūn's instigation (DOMINIQUE SOURDEL, "La politique religieuse du calife 'abbaside al-Ma'mūn," *Revue des Études Islamiques* 30 (1962), p. 38; and *idem*, *The Cambridge History of Islam*, vol. 1a, ed. P.M. HOLT et al. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, p. 122); the "Murji'ites" among the historians include BERNARD LEWIS, "'Alī al-Riḍā," *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, ed. H.A.R. GIBB et al, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960, p. 400; DONALDSON, *The Shi'ite Religion: A History of Islam in Persia and Irak*, London: Luzac and Company, 1933, p. 169; BERTOLD SPULER, *The Age of the Caliphs*, Princeton: Markus Wiener Publishers, 1995, p. 65.

⁴⁾ ḤASAN IBRĀHĪM ḤASAN, *ibid.*

⁵⁾ SOURDEL, "La politique religieuse," *op. cit.*, p. 34, writes that "c'était donc à une sorte de compromis entre sunnisme et shī'isme qu'al-Ma'mūn était résolu ..." MADELUNG, in "New Documents Concerning al-Ma'mūn, al-Faḍl b. Sahl and 'Alī al-Riḍā," *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Iḥsān 'Abbās on his Sixtieth Birthday*, ed. WADĀD AL-QĀDĪ, Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1981, p. 346, writes of Ma'mūn's "wish to bring about a reconciliation between the two branches of the Family of the Prophet;" F. GABRIELI, *al-Ma'mūn e gli 'Alidi*, Leipzig: Eduard Pfeiffer Verlag, 1930, p. 5, calls this an "attempted solution" to the "Alid problem."

who was supposedly of Shī'ī⁶) (or even Zoroastrian) tendencies, to apocalyptic influences⁷) – or even Shī'ī ones⁸) – on the caliph al-Ma'mūn. Indeed, so disparate are the interpretations to which the varying accounts can give rise that one leading scholar has even espoused two different interpretations of al-Ma'mūn's motivations: a search for a new legitimizing force⁹) or “a restoration of the Umayyad concept of the caliphate,” that is, a return to an older form of religious authority that the first caliphs had once possessed.¹⁰)

This confusion arises in part from the great disparities in our earliest sources.¹¹) A comparison of the various sources exposes inconsistencies, both among the different works and even within the very same account. A close historiographical examination reveals sundry apparent motivational factors, either of background or political or religious conviction, affecting the medieval historians writing these works. What they in-

⁶) SOURDEL, *ibid.*

⁷) MADELUNG *op. cit.*, *loc. cit.*

⁸) SOURDEL, “La politique religieuse,” *op. cit.*, p. 47, speaks of al-Ma'mūn's “sympathies shī'ites,” concluding that “Les actes d'al-Ma'mūn attestent en fait l'influence qu'exerçaient ... les doctrines mu'tazilite et zaydite ...”

⁹) PATRICIA CRONE, *Slaves on Horses*, p. 76 “In common with his predecessors [al-Ma'mūn] based his title to power on membership of the Hashimite lineage, but the *dawla* having lost its legitimacy force, he gave up the 'Abbasid claim to have excluded the 'Alids by their deeds: he was thus free to invert the testament of Abū Hāshim and designate an 'Alid as his heir on the ground of personal merit.”

¹⁰) PATRICIA CRONE and MARTIN HINDS, *God's Caliph*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 96.

¹¹) A methodological note is in order here. This paper deliberately focuses upon the earliest accounts of the events here under consideration – i.e. those written within the first hundred and fifty years after 'Alī al-Riḍā's death – in the belief that they are not only the closest in time but also the least distorted by later accretions. Although later sources may sometimes faithfully repeat what lost earlier ones wrote, they have the disadvantage of having already been exposed to the plentiful hagiographical and other embroideries that proliferated in the wake of every Imām. In an affair such as that of 'Alī al-Riḍā's appointment and death, which is both highly ambiguous and ideologically charged, one has no sure way of determining which material found in later sources is authentic and which fabricated. Moreover, the later sources which seem to most closely reproduce earlier material tend to be either mere replications of the sources analysed here, or else as laconically uninformative as those earlier works from which they are borrowing (a good case in point is IBN 'ASĀKIR's unenlightening account of the affair, found in the entry under Ma'mūn, *Mukhtaṣar ta'rīkh dimashq*, Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1984, vol. 14, pp. 92–121).

clude – and perhaps more importantly, what they leave out – lends itself to a plethora of varying interpretations. Let us, then, examine some of these earliest sources and see what account they give of this evanescent near-rapprochement between the Sunna and the Shī'a.¹²⁾

The great historian al-Ṭabarī [d. 311/923] offers the fullest account of these events. Above all, Ṭabarī presents very full and detailed information about a series of revolts which took place in the years prior to al-Ma'mūn's surprising appointment of the man whom he dubbed al-Riḍā. These revolts first began in 195 (c. 810), at the very start of the civil war between al-Amīn and al-Ma'mūn. At this time a messianic figure calling himself by the apocalyptic name of the Sufyānī appeared in Syria, where he led an uprising which succeeded in seizing control of the country for a few months.¹³⁾

In 198 (c. 813), after al-Ma'mūn's defeat of his brother, a man named al-Ḥasan al-Hirsh revolted in central 'Irāq, "summoning [*yad'ū*] to *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad*."¹⁴⁾ This revolt was not quelled until the following year. Almost concurrently with its suppression in 199 (c. 814), another 'Alid revolt broke out in Kūfa, led by the Ḥasanid Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm, known as Ibn Ṭabā'ṭabā'. Once again, the leader claimed to be "summoning to the agreed-upon one from the house of Muḥammad and to act according to the Qur'ān and the Sunna" [*yad'ū li'l-riḍā min āl Muḥammad wa'l-'amal bi'l-kitāb wa'l-sunna*]. The military leader of this revolt was one Abū'l-Sarāyā, who appears to have been the true motivating force behind it. Ṭabarī enters into a lengthy analysis of the various imputed

¹²⁾ Two very early sources which fall within the purview of this paper, the *Akhbār al-ṭiwāl* of Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad b. Dā'ūd al-Dīnawārī (d.283/c.895) and the one surviving volume of the *Kitāb Baghdād* of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr (who predeceased al-Dīnawārī by two years), contain no mention at all of the 'Alī al-Riḍā episode; indeed, al-Dīnawārī has only one paragraph on the entire reign of al-Ma'mūn, *Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, Baghdād: al-Maktaba al-'Arabiyya, no date, p. 337. The fragmentary nature of Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr's work is particularly frustrating, since what we have of it is a highly detailed account of Ma'mūn's reign – which begins, though, only after the termination of the events with which we are here concerned.

¹³⁾ MUḤAMMAD B. JARĪR AL-ṬABARĪ, *Ta'rīkh al-Ṭabarī* vol. VIII, Beirut: Rawā'i' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d., p. 415. On the apocalyptic significance of the Sufyānī see W. MADELUNG, "The Sufyānī: Between Legend and History," *Studia Islamica* 63 (1986), pp. 5–48; DAVID COOK, "The Apocalyptic year 200 and the events leading up to it," *Apocalyptic Time*, A. Baumgarten, ed., Leiden: Brill, 2000, pp. 41–67.

¹⁴⁾ ṬABARĪ, *ibid.*, p. 527. We shall presently discuss the significance of these terms.

causes of this rebellion, among them being dissatisfaction with al-Ḥasan b. Sahl and his brother al-Faḍl's supposed complete mastery over al-Ma'mūn; or, alternatively, the claim that Abū'l-Sarāyā had served as a soldier under al-Ma'mūn's general Harthama but had not received his pay, and had therefore fomented this revolt out of pique.¹⁵⁾ Abū'l-Sarāyā successfully defeated two large armies sent against him,¹⁶⁾ then occupied Baṣra and Wāsiṭ. Only Harthama was finally able to defeat Abū'l-Sarāyā; the 'Alid party then retreated to Kūfa, where they engaged in a vindictive outburst against the 'Abbāsids and their supporters, whose possessions they pillaged and whom they expelled from the city. Abū'l-Sarāyā at this point also sent two 'Alids, one to Mecca and one to Medina; they were both welcomed and took control of the cities without any fighting.¹⁷⁾

In the year 200/815–16 Abū'l-Sarāyā was finally captured and executed; yet the 'Alid turmoil was by no means ended. 'Alī al-Riḍā's brother rebelled in Yemen (as in the case of Mecca, the 'Abbāsīd governor fled without any fight). Most spectacularly, Muḥammad b. Ja'far ('Alī al-Riḍā's uncle) was declared Caliph in Mecca.¹⁸⁾

Even amongst the traditional 'Abbāsīd supporters, strife was rampant. The Baghdadis had expelled al-Ma'mūn's governor, al-Ḥasan b. Sahl, and the city was in a state of anarchy. Al-Ma'mūn's general Harthama consequently set off on a journey to inform al-Ma'mūn of al-Ḥasan b. Sahl's misrule, and of the fact that the latter's brother al-Faḍl was concealing information from the caliph. Al-Faḍl, however, managed to impugn Harthama beforehand in al-Ma'mūn's judgement, and Harthama was put to death instead of given a hearing.¹⁹⁾ In his own court, al-Ma'mūn was called *amīr al-kāfirīn*;²⁰⁾ although he had the man²¹⁾ executed, it would certainly appear that 'Abbāsīd rule had never been in lower repute, at least in 'Irāq, Arabia and Syria. At this low point in 'Abbāsīd fortunes, al-Ma'mūn summoned 'Alī b. Mūsā²²⁾ to Marv,²³⁾ declared

¹⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 528–529.

¹⁶⁾ After the first battle he eliminated his 'Alid figurehead, who was not sufficiently compliant, and set up a different 'Alid youth (ṬABARĪ, p. 529).

¹⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 531–533.

¹⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

¹⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 542–543.

²⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

²¹⁾ According to al-Ya'qūbī he was an associate of Harthama's; see *infra*, p. 11.

²²⁾ Subsequently recognized as the eighth Imām by the Twelver Shī'ites. He was a seventh-generation descendant of the Prophet.

²³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

the latter to be “*al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad*,” and named him as his heir.²⁴⁾ He furthermore decreed that henceforth the ‘Abbāsīd color would no longer be black but green.²⁵⁾

Let us pause a moment and examine the implications of Ṭabarī’s account.

The Da‘wa²⁶⁾ summoning the faithful to rally around *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad*²⁷⁾ is of course the original slogan of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution.²⁸⁾

²⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 554.

²⁵⁾ On the ‘Abbāsīd meaning attached to the color black see KHALIL ‘ATHA-MINA, “The Black Banners and the Socio-Political Significance of Banners and Slogans in Medieval Islam,” *Arabica* 36 (1989), pp. 307–326. The choice of the color green is somewhat more surprising since the color of the ‘Alīds was white (SOURDEL, “The ‘Abbasid Caliphate,” *op. cit.*, p. 122; B. LEWIS, “‘Alī al-Riḍā,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, vol. 1, p. 400; W. MADELUNG, “‘Alī al-Rezā,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. 1, p. 878). Note that in Jahshiyārī’s account, Nu‘aym b. Khāzim states that green was the color of the Khusroes, and attributes the choice of green to al-Faḍl’s Zoroastrian tendencies (*infra*). According to Ṭabarī, Mukhtār carried a green flag during the revolt of al-Ḥusayn (cited in MADELUNG, “‘Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdī,” reprinted in WILFERD MADELUNG, *Religious and Ethnic Movements in Medieval Islam*, Aldershot: Variorum 1992, art. I). However, this author thinks the most likely explanation was that al-Ma’mūn wanted a connection with those Shī‘ī revolts, such as Mukhtār’s, which the ‘Abbāsīds had always claimed to be the heirs of. Al-Ma’mūn and his advisers wished to avoid, though, the overtly anti-‘Abbāsīd (as well as purely ‘Alīd) connotations of the color white (One should keep in mind that al-Ma’mūn was probably touting a return to the original revolution’s somewhat Zaydī-sounding claim that it would choose among all qualified candidates of the House of Hāshim). As FAROUK OMAR has noted, “white was a symbol of resentment and defiance to the authority of the *Musawwida*,” (“The Significance of the Colours of Banners in the Early ‘Abbassid [*sic*] Period,” *‘Abbasiyyat: Studies in the History of the Early ‘Abbasids*, Baghdad: The University of Baghdad, 1976, p. 149) rather than a specifically ‘Alīd color. OMAR points out that among those who “adopted white to symbolize their dissatisfaction with the new regime, there were ... the pro-Umayyad rebels ... the ‘Alīds ... [and] Persian heterodox rebels.”

²⁶⁾ For an explanation of the term see MOSHE SHARON, *Black Banners from the East; The Establishment of the ‘Abbasid State-Incubation of a Revolt*, Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1983, chapter one.

²⁷⁾ SHARON, *ibid.*, p. 147; PATRICIA CRONE, “On the Meaning of the ‘Abbāsīd call to *al-Riḍā*,” in *Essays in Honor of Bernard Lewis: The Islamic World from Classical to Modern Times*, ed. C.E. BOSWORTH et al, Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1989, pp. 95–112.

²⁸⁾ MOTTAHEDEH, *op. cit.*, p. 73, notes that this “throne title ... evoked the intellectual climate of the ‘Abbāsīd revolution.”

One could therefore view this entire episode as an attempt by al-Ma'mūn to acknowledge and remedy the widespread discontent with 'Abbāsīd rule by returning to – or at least claiming a return to – the original principles of the 'Abbāsīd *Da'wa*, both politically and religiously.²⁹⁾ Alternatively, scholars such as SOURDEL have interpreted al-Ma'mūn's act, in view of the preceding revolts, as “a sort of compromise between Sunnism and Shi'ism upon which al-Ma'mūn had decided, in order to put an end to the incessant revolts and in order to establish the Caliphate on a more solid foundation.”³⁰⁾

Ṭabarī's chronicle of events has, however, given rise to a very different interpretation. MADELUNG utilizes Ṭabarī's account, together with an extraordinary letter³¹⁾ in Majlisī which puts unambiguously apocalyptic statements in al-Ma'mūn's mouth,³²⁾ to emphasize the “messianic character of the 'Abbāsīd *dawlah*” also stressed by SHARON.³³⁾ MADELUNG draws attention to the feverishly eschatological temper of the times, corroborated by the nature of the risings recounted in Ṭabarī, and the multitude of traditions predicting the imminent end of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate:

The startling announcement of the letter that al-Ma'mūn appointed 'Alī al-Riḍā in the belief that the 'Abbāsīd caliphate was about to come to an end after him and would be followed by the apocalyptic age of tribulation and the coming of the Mahdī must be seen in the light of the evidence that such expectations were very strong and widespread at the time.³⁴⁾

²⁹⁾ A. ARAZI and A. ELAD, “L'Épître à armée' al-Ma'mūn et la seconde *da'wa*,” *Studia Islamica* 66 (1987), pp. 27–70, and 67 (1988), pp. 29–74; M. REKAYA, “al-Ma'mūn,” *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd edition, ed. C.E. Bosworth *et al*, Vol. 6, p. 331, speaks of “this return to the principles of the first *da'wa hāshimiyya*.”

³⁰⁾ SOURDEL, “La politique religieuse,” *op. cit.*, p. 34.

³¹⁾ WILFERD MADELUNG, “New Documents,” *op. cit.*, pp. 340–344. Note that Majlisī states he found this text in a book of the apocalypticist Rādī al-Dīn b. Ṭāwūs (d. c. 644/1266). For an excellent treatment of Ibn Ṭāwūs, see ETAN KOHLBERG, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭāwūs and his Library*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992.

³²⁾ For example, saying to the 'Abbāsīds of Baghdad “But alas, there will be nothing for you but the sword. The Ḥasanī, the avenger and destroyer, will come to you and mow you down, and the Sufyānī, the subduer. But your blood will be spared at the advent of the Qā'im, the Mahdī, except for just claim.” MADELUNG, “New Documents,” p. 343.

³³⁾ SHARON, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 345.

A new study has shown exhaustively that countdown apocalypses to the year 200 were indeed ubiquitous; they have survived not only in eschatological collections such as that of Nu'aym b. Ḥammād (d. circa 229/844), but can be found throughout the general literature.³⁵⁾ MADELUNG, too, believes that "al-Ma'mūn must certainly have been aware of such predictions and expectations when he invited 'Alī al-Riḍā from Medina in the year 200 A.H."³⁶⁾ In fact, MADELUNG concludes that al-Ma'mūn adhered to apocalyptic beliefs regarding the imminent end of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate until the close of his life. He thus regards al-Ma'mūn's religious motives in appointing al-Riḍā as genuine, although in a later article of his he appears to backtrack from this position.³⁷⁾

If al-Ma'mūn intended his act to secure him widespread support as the unifier of Muslim political life, he sadly miscalculated. According to Ṭabarī, one of the more immediate consequences of the appointment of al-Riḍā was the success of the 'Abbāsīd faction in Baghdad in having the town declare the deposition of al-Ma'mūn and the raising of Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī to the position of Caliph, bearing the regnal title of "al-Mubārak."³⁸⁾ In Kūfa (traditionally the strongest center of pro-'Alid feeling), al-Ma'mūn also failed to reap any rewards from his policy, in spite of the appointment of 'Alī al-Riḍā's brother al-'Abbās as governor there; most of the Shī'a refused to support al-'Abbās because they would not accept al-Ma'mūn along with 'Alī al-Riḍā.³⁹⁾ In fact, the citizens of Kūfa actually asked the 'Alid governor to leave the city. Judging from their previous words to al-'Abbās, as far as the Shī'ites were concerned, Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī, the anti-caliph, could just as well have the city as the 'Abbāsīd al-

³⁵⁾ DAVID COOK, *op. cit.*

³⁶⁾ MADELUNG, "New Documents," *op. cit.*, p. 346.

³⁷⁾ See *supra*, n. 1. There is of course also the possibility that al-Ma'mūn merely reacted to and manipulated these eschatological beliefs, although, strangely enough, no historian seems to have discussed this possibility.

³⁸⁾ ṬABARĪ, *op. cit.*, pp. 555, 557. One could, of course, argue that this seemed to have served merely as a pretext for the Baghhdadians; the city was anyway in a state of uproar at this time and only nominally under al-Ma'mūn's authority. It is interesting to note in this context that the Baghdad soldiers who refuse to take the oath of allegiance attribute the entire affair to a conspiracy on the part of Ibn Sahl. (p. 554) However, in light of their hatred and mistrust of the entire Sahlid family, (e.g. p. 549, where they scorn al-Ḥasan b. Sahl as "*al-majūsī ibn al-majūsī*"), their assertion here may be simply an expression of their continuing hostility toward the Sahlids. Note the significant regnal title Ya'qūbī assigns Ibrāhīm (*infra*).

³⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 559–560.

Ma'mūn – they clearly did not regard his nomination of 'Alī al-Riḍā as his successor with any great faith.

Ṭabarī's account of al-Riḍā's death is equally detailed. He begins by recounting how 'Alī al-Riḍā reveals to al-Ma'mūn the serious nature of the *fitna* in 'Irāq, as well as the deceptions the vizier al-Faḍl had been practising on him:

'Alī ... told al-Ma'mūn about the *fitna* and the fighting ... and the news that al-Faḍl ibn Sahl had been hiding from him, and that the people of his house and the general populace were considerably hostile towards him, and that they were saying that he [al-Ma'mūn] is bewitched [or] crazy, and that they ... had sworn the *bay'a* to his uncle Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī as Caliph ... [here al-Ma'mūn repeats al-Faḍl's misinformation], so he ['Alī] informed him that al-Faḍl had been lying to him ... and that there was war between Ibrāhīm and al-Ḥasan b. Sahl, and that "the people hate you because of him and his brother, and because of me and your oath of allegiance to me after you ..." ⁴⁰⁾

Ṭabarī then relates how, after ascertaining from 'Alī who among his soldiers knows of the true state of affairs, al-Ma'mūn has these men summoned in order to confirm what 'Alī has said. However, "these men refused to tell him until he had granted them protection from al-Faḍl b. Sahl ... so he granted this to them, and he wrote to every one of them a letter with his signature, and gave it to them, so they told him ..." ⁴¹⁾ Al-Ma'mūn then orders the departure to 'Irāq. Al-Faḍl, suspecting that these soldiers must have revealed his own machinations, has them brutalized and mistreated. ⁴²⁾

One is immediately struck by the powerlessness of al-Ma'mūn according to Ṭabarī's account. The fact that he was so unaware of what so many others apparently knew, together with the fact that al-Faḍl went apparently unpunished for his deceptions and then even dared violate the Caliph's written order of protection, do indeed give one the impression that al-Faḍl was entirely in control. Al-Faḍl's subsequent murder by a group of men from the Caliph's own entourage, coupled with the assassins' assertion that al-Ma'mūn himself had commissioned the deed, tends to convey the impression that the weak caliph chose this method of freeing himself from a dangerous tutelage. ⁴³⁾ Of course, there must have been numerous others who were hostile to Ibn Sahl's ascendancy as well as in a position to

⁴⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 564.

⁴¹⁾ *Ibid.*

⁴²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 565.

⁴³⁾ Al-Ma'mūn immediately – and most conveniently for himself if he was the instigator and these were the only witnesses to that fact – has their heads chopped off.

have had him murdered; al-Ma'mūn is by no means the only candidate for having instigated the crime.

Given this background of violence, deception and intrigue, it is therefore interesting to note that Ṭabarī nowhere states that 'Alī al-Riḍā died anything other than a natural death. Rather, he attributes 'Alī's death to his having eaten too many grapes.⁴⁴⁾ One of al-Ma'mūn's first actions after having buried the late heir apparent is to write to the rebellious people of Baghdad, informing them of 'Alī's death and inviting them to return to his, al-Ma'mūn's, allegiance (which they decline to do in a nasty return letter⁴⁵⁾). Now, although Ṭabarī's statement regarding the cause of 'Alī's untimely demise does strike the reader as being a somewhat medically implausible cause of death,⁴⁶⁾ and although al-Ma'mūn's haste in writing to the 'Iraqīs to inform them of the removal of the cause(s) of their discontent does seem a bit precipitous, one cannot definitely conclude from Ṭabarī's account that 'Alī was indeed murdered, nor that, in the event of foul play, al-Ma'mūn was the necessary author of it. For one thing, we have already seen that al-Ma'mūn was not fully in control or even aware of events at his own court (to say the least). In addition, Ṭabarī has not hesitated before to show al-Ma'mūn being accused of murder; if he does not report such a thing in this context, then in all likelihood 'Alī's death was widely regarded at the time as a natural one.⁴⁷⁾

⁴⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 568.

⁴⁵⁾ See MADELUNG, "New Documents," *op. cit.*

⁴⁶⁾ Although, given the state of hygiene and medicine in the medieval world, one cannot discount the possibility that 'Alī al-Riḍā could have contracted a disease such as dysentery or food poisoning and succumbed to it within a short time. MICHAEL LECKER has noted another case in which a mortally ill person attributed his own impending demise to having eaten too many bananas (M. LECKER, "Biographical Notes on Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar b. al-Muthannā," *Studia Islamica* 81 [1995], p. 108), but since the figure in question was a nonagenarian, and was in any case not a doctor, one need not take this self-diagnosis too seriously. The author is indebted to Professor Lecker for this reference.

⁴⁷⁾ Even the 'Alids apparently held this view. Note the excellent relations Ya'qūbī shows the 'Alids as maintaining with al-Ma'mūn after 'Alī's death (Aḥmad b. Abī Ya'qūb b. Ja'far al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rīkh al-Ya'qūbī*, Vol. II, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1960/1379, p. 469); would they really come to Ma'mūn to redress their wrongs if they supposed him to be the murderer of one of their family? One can, however, possibly explain the friendliness of these 'Alids by the fact that the 'Alid family was quite large and that the ones in question may therefore have been from a rival camp and consequently hostile or indifferent to 'Alī al-Riḍā. I am indebted to Michael Cook for this point. See also SOURDEL, "La Politique religieuse," *op. cit.*, p. 41.

It is interesting to note that the earliest of the historians from whom we have an account of these events, Khalīfa b. Khayyāt (d. 240/854/5), also seems to imply that 'Alī died a natural death.⁴⁸⁾ Unfortunately, Khalīfa's history is far more terse than Ṭabarī's; it is more of a skeleton of the general outline of events than a real account of them, and therefore affords few new insights. Like Ṭabarī, he reviews the almost immediate, widespread outbreak of the 'Alid revolts upon al-Ma'mūn's assumption of the undivided caliphate in 199: Abū'l-Sarāyā's revolt in Kūfa in the name of Ibn Ṭabāṭabā'; al-Riḍā's uncles in Baṣra, the Ḥijāz and Yemen. Perhaps most important, Khalīfa, in agreement with Ṭabarī, states specifically that all of these cities went over to the 'Alids voluntarily, "without a fight" [*bi-ghayr qitāl*],⁴⁹⁾ thereby intimating that there must have been a substantial amount of popular support for the 'Alid cause. The apocalyptic dimension of these revolts, on the other hand, is de-emphasized by his omission of both the Sufyānī revolt of 195/810, as well as the messianic references to *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad* on the part of the rebels – although, again, his account is overall so sparse that it is difficult to build a case on his omissions. Most intriguing is Khalīfa's specific inclusion of the fact that the 'Alid pretender leading the revolt in Mecca wore the traditional 'Alid (and general anti-'Abbāsīd) color – white.

Also in accordance with Ṭabarī, Khalīfa has al-Ma'mūn's son defeat the 'Alid rebels in the year 200, *before* his appointment of 'Alī al-Riḍā to the heir apparenecy. The appointment itself and the resultant turmoil in Baghdād is given the briefest of treatments:

And in [this year] al-Ma'mūn made the *bay'a* to 'Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja'far for the Caliphate after him, and pushed aside [from the succession] al-Qāsim b. Hārūn the Commander of the Faithful, and ordered that the black [clothing] be cast aside, and that green be worn. And [in that year] al-Ḥasan b. Sahl was expelled from Baghdād, and the *bay'a* was sworn to Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī ... in Baghdād, and al-Kūfa and most of the Sawād were taken for him.⁵⁰⁾

The really interesting item in Khalīfa is his apparent glossing over of the killing of Harthama by the caliph; he appears to purposefully imply that Harthama died a natural death. In mentioning the people who died in the year 201, he deliberately writes that the death (*mawt*) of Harthama took place. This choice of words is given particular emphasis by being

⁴⁸⁾ KHALĪFA B. KHAYYĀṬ, *Ta'rikh*, Najaf: Maṭba'at al-Ādāb, 1967, vol. 2, p. 509. We shall see shortly why the present author has qualified that statement.

⁴⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 506–507.

⁵⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 508.

placed immediately after the mention of someone whose killing (*qatl*) occurred.⁵¹⁾

This anomalous version of Harthama's death, which contradicts the detailed accounts of all the other historians, suggests that Khalīfa may be interested in whitewashing al-Ma'mūn, and therefore renders suspect much of his subsequent testimony. His version of the events of the crucial year 202 is sparse; given his preceding unreliability, the reader is left wondering if this is not another attempt to hide unpleasant incidents:

And in [this year] the Commander of the Faithful set off from Khurāsān for Baghdād. And in it [i.e. this year] al-Faḍl b. Sahl was killed in Sarakhs, in Sha'bān, and the Commander of the Faithful killed 'Alī b. Abī Sa'īd and Mūsā b. 'Imrān and 'Abd al-'Azīz b. 'Imrān, accusing them of the death of al-Faḍl b. Sahl [*{it}tahamahum bi-qatli al-Faḍl b. Sahl*].⁵²⁾

We have here no explanation of why the Caliph decided to suddenly abandon Khurāsān for Baghdād; no hint of the deception that al-Faḍl had been successfully practicing upon the Caliph; and, above all, no imputation that the vizier's murderers claimed in their confessions to be the Caliph's emissaries. Khalīfa is even briefer regarding the year 203: "And in [this year] 'Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja'far died [*māta*], on Saturday the last day of Ṣafar, and al-Ma'mūn advanced to Baghdād the first day of the month of Ramaḍān."⁵³⁾ Again, we see that Khalīfa has stated that 'Alī died a natural death; the reliability of his report is, however, somewhat vitiated by his cover-up of the brutal death of Harthama. If ever a Sunnī historian were open to the Shī'ī charge of whitewashing 'Abbāsīd behaviour, surely it is he.

However, the earliest Shī'ī historian, as well, from whom we have an account of these events, al-Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897),⁵⁴⁾ does not accuse al-Ma'mūn of murder either. In many respects his account agrees closely with Ṭabarī's. After informing us of al-Ma'mūn's rise to undivided caliphal power in 198/813, al-Ya'qūbī, like Khalīfa, reviews the taking of Baṣra, Wāsiṭ, Yemen, and the Ḥijāz by various other 'Alids.⁵⁵⁾ As in Khalīfa's ac-

⁵¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 509.

⁵²⁾ *Ibid.*

⁵³⁾ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁾ A.A. DURI, in "The Iraq School of History to the Ninth Century – A Sketch," in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. B. LEWIS and P.M. HOLT, London: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. 53, states: "Al-Ya'qūbī wrote a universal history with a Shī'īte (Ja'farī) touch ..." but notes that he is "critical of his sources."

⁵⁵⁾ YA'QUBĪ, p. 445. Others seem to have taken this widespread 'Alid unrest as the signal for further revolts of their own; Naṣībīn, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Mayyafāriqīn, and various other places all saw non-'Alid uprisings at this time.

count, the apocalyptic references to the Sufyānī and *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad* are absent.

His report of ‘Abbāsīd attempts to counter these revolts closely parallels Ṭabarī’s (although with far less detail), with one highly significant divergence: according to Ya‘qūbī, ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s brother Ibrāhīm had succeeded in taking control of Mecca,⁵⁶⁾ and was installed there at the time al-Ma’mūn sent for ‘Alī al-Riḍā to be brought to Khurāsān and declared the latter heir apparent in Ramaḍān of 201/817.⁵⁷⁾ This, then, could be interpreted as having given al-Ma’mūn a pressing political motive for ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s appointment; it was the quickest and most expedient way to end this rebellion.⁵⁸⁾

Another significant difference between Ṭabarī’s and Yā‘qūbī’s account is that Ya‘qūbī joins Khalifa in placing both Harthama’s journey to Marv and the Baghdādī rebellion against al-Ḥasan b. Sahl *after* the appointment of ‘Alī al-Riḍā. In both these incidents, complaints about the Sahl brothers and their alleged Zoroastrian tendencies figure prominently. It is in this context that Harthama’s friend salutes al-Ma’mūn as *Amīr al-Kāfirīn* and that Harthama accuses al-Ma’mūn: “You have advanced these Magians over your friends and helpers.”⁵⁹⁾ The Baghdād rebels who approach Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ b. al-Manšūr, asking him to be caliph, are in this account objecting not to al-Ḥasan b. Sahl personally, but to the appointment of ‘Alī al-Riḍā, which they attribute to the initiative of al-Faḍl (thus confirming Ṭabarī’s picture of a subordinate al-Ma’mūn). They state the following:

We are the supporters of your dynasty [*dawlatikum*], and we have feared that this state will be destroyed by the plans of the Zoroastrians which have come to pass [*bi mā ḥadatha fihā min tadbīr al-majūs*], for al-Ma’mūn has already taken the oath of allegiance to ‘Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, so let us therefore make the oath of allegiance to you, for we fear that this matter [i.e. the caliphate] will depart from you.⁶⁰⁾

⁵⁶⁾ ṬABARĪ, *ibid.*, p. 541, on the contrary, neither places Ibrāhīm there personally, nor depicts him as having been successful in his attempt to have the city conquered on his behalf.

⁵⁷⁾ AL-YA‘QŪBĪ, *op. cit.*, p. 448.

⁵⁸⁾ If this was al-Ma’mūn’s intention, then it was successful; Ibrāhīm immediately began to cooperate with al-Ma’mūn’s agents (*ibid.*, p. 449).

⁵⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 450.

⁶⁰⁾ *Ibid.* This is a classic example of the caution one must exert regarding the authenticity of quoted dialogue in these texts; both Ṭabarī and al-Ya‘qūbī bring “quotations” of what the rebels said – and at least one of those two accounts must be spurious.

Equally significant is the regnal title Ya'qūbī reports Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī as having assumed when he accepts the position of Caliph (Muhammad declined): al-Murḍī, the pleasing one.⁶¹⁾

Al-Ya'qūbī also relates that al-Ma'mūn wrote for al-Faḍl a most intriguing document,

... the Letter of Stipulation and Gift [*kitāb al-shart wa'l-hiba*] praising in it his obedience, and his good advice, and his admonition, and his concern, and his going from the world in his soul, [i.e. his spiritual detachment from worldly things] and his withholding himself from what he was given of money and estates and jewels and land; and stipulating for him personally [i.e. al-Ma'mūn] everything that he may ask for or seek, not refusing it to him, and not denying it to him, and signed by him personally [i.e. al-Ma'mūn]⁶²⁾

MADLUNG accepts the full version of this letter given in Ibn Bābawayhī, and believes that "it confirms the assumption of GABRIELI and D. SOURDEL that al-Faḍl b. Sahl was initially opposed to the step of al-Ma'mūn ..." ⁶³⁾ If MADLUNG is correct, then the portrait painted by Ṭabarī (as well as by Ya'qūbī previously), of a weak Caliph, totally under Sahlid domination, must be inaccurate. In this context, it is interesting to note that Ya'qūbī never hints that the vizier's assassination was attributed to al-Ma'mūn's initiative.⁶⁴⁾

Ya'qūbī is also the first to attribute 'Alī's death to unnatural causes, although without blaming al-Ma'mūn, stating merely, "and it is said that 'Alī b. Hishām fed him a pomegranate containing poison. And al-Ma'mūn manifested strong grief over him."⁶⁵⁾ Furthermore, as SOURDEL has noted,⁶⁶⁾ Ya'qūbī – in contrast to Ṭabarī – places the marriage of al-Ma'mūn's daughter and 'Alī al-Riḍā's son after the death of the latter's

⁶¹⁾ *Ibid.* This name would certainly make more sense as a counterbalance to al-Riḍā's claims than the one given by Ṭabarī (*supra*).

⁶²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 451. Ibn Bābawayhī gives the full text of this letter, which MADLUNG, "New Documents," *op. cit.*, pp. 334–338) has translated.

⁶³⁾ MADLUNG, p. 338. GABRIELI'S error, in the present author's view, which MADLUNG has followed, is in placing too much reliance on much later texts. GABRIELI'S conclusions, for example, that "al-Faḍl disapprova energicamente il progetto di rinunzia al Califfato ..." [*op. cit.*, p. 34] is based largely upon later works such as the *Kitāb al-fakhrī*, *Ta'rīkh-e guzīde*, and *Rawḍat al-shafā'*.

⁶⁴⁾ YA'QUBĪ, *op. cit.*, p. 452.

⁶⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 453.

⁶⁶⁾ "La Politique religieuse," *op. cit.*, p. 38.

father, attributing this to al-Ma'mūn's desire to be the grandfather of a descendant of the Prophet and of 'Alī b. Abī Tālib.⁶⁷⁾

One more interesting item reported by Ya'qūbī is that of al-Ma'mūn's appointments to governorships after 'Alī's death. Not only does the caliph put his closest relatives (i.e. those 'Abbāsids most nearly related to Hārūn al-Rashīd) in power, particularly in the trouble spots of Kūfa and Baṣra; he removes 'Alī al-Riḍā's brother from his governorship of Mecca and has him sent to Baghdād (to keep an eye on him?). All of this could corroborate the theory that al-Ma'mūn was acting all along from expediency, merely in order to put down the 'Alid risings; then, when the danger was past, he quietly laid his 'Alid leanings (not to mention his 'Alids!) aside.

The *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*⁶⁸⁾ [written 313/923] of Abū'l Faraj al-Iṣbahānī [d. 356/967] is a significant departure from the earlier chronicles of Ṭabarī and Ya'qūbī. There is, for example, no mention of the political context in which 'Alī al-Riḍā's appointment took place. There is also much more of an emphasis on the religious aspects of the story; al-Iṣbahānī presents an anecdote which, if true, would make al-Ma'mūn the holder of certain Shī'ī beliefs; relating that al-Ma'mūn differentiated between "our Abū Bakr" [i.e. 'Alī] and the "common" one [*al-āmma*; i.e. the first of the Rāshidūn].⁶⁹⁾ However, this very same al-Ma'mūn then goes on to gratuitously poison the Imām; "and al-Ma'mūn made him his heir apparent, then surreptitiously administered to him poison ... and he died of it." [*kāna al-Ma'mūn 'aqada lahu 'alā al-'ahd min ba'dihi, thumma dassa ilayhi ... samman fa-māta minhu*]⁷⁰⁾ This would seem to indicate either extreme ambivalence or even fickle impulsiveness on the part of al-Ma'mūn,⁷¹⁾ or else a historically inaccurate, partisan Shī'ī attribution to him of certain statements or beliefs which would tend to glorify the Imam at the cost of narrative consistency and coherence.⁷²⁾

⁶⁷⁾ YA'QŪBĪ, *op. cit.*, p. 454.

⁶⁸⁾ ABU'L FARAJ AL-IṢFAHĀNĪ, *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyīn*, al-Najaf: al-Maktaba al-Haydariya, 1385/1965.

⁶⁹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 374.

⁷⁰⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

⁷¹⁾ This is not an unlikely possibility; one should keep in mind that this is the son of Hārūn of the many governors.

⁷²⁾ A third option is that, as in the case of King Henry IV, "They love not poison that do poison need;/... Though I did wish him dead,/I hate the murderer, love him murdered." (*Richard II* V:6)

In this same Shī'ī vein, al-Iṣbahānī relates that al-Ma'mūn sent for a group of 'Alids and had them brought from Medina, among them 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Riḍā, presumably in order to choose from amongst them the most perfect candidate.⁷³) Al-Ma'mūn then informs al-Faḍl b. Sahl that he is going to make 'Alī his political heir, and has the vizier convey the Caliph's intentions to the former's brother al-Ḥasan, who opposes the plan. Al-Ma'mūn then reveals that he had made a vow before God that if successful in the war against al-Amīn, he would hand over power to the best of the family of Abū Ṭālib, and that he "know[s] no one better than this man." After the Sahlid brothers finally agree to the plan Ma'mūn sends them to broach the idea to 'Alī al-Riḍā, who declines the honor, whereupon the Sahlids then threaten him with decapitation if he persists in his refusal to cooperate.

Al-Ma'mūn subsequently summons 'Alī and threatens him in turn, reminding him of 'Umar's instructions regarding the *Shūrā*⁷⁴) – i.e. that any who disagreed with the decision of the others was to have his head chopped off. Faced with such a persuasive argument, 'Alī agrees to assume the position of heir apparent. Once again, we see new, Shī'ī elements introduced which were absent from the earlier chronicles; namely, al-Ma'mūn's recognition of some kind of religious merit or necessity in handing power over to the 'Alids, as well as the portrayal of 'Alī al-Riḍā as having been singled out for his sterling qualities (as opposed to his being simply the means to neutralize a troublesome rebel, as Ya'qūbī's account seems to imply). Al-Iṣbahānī's account innovates, too, in asserting that 'Alī al-Riḍā was not a willing partner to this scheme; indeed; that he was so opposed to the entire idea that only death threats could make him cooperate.

Al-Iṣbahānī then relates that al-Ma'mūn held a public audience to which all the people were summoned and informed as to al-Ma'mūn's intentions regarding 'Alī (whose title is now to be al-Riḍā), as well as the change in official color from black to green.⁷⁵) 'Alī promptly demonstrates his religious superiority by correcting everyone's manner of swearing the

⁷³) *Ibid.*

⁷⁴) This is, of course, the traditional Muslim view of events surrounding 'Umar's death. On both the institution in general and 'Umar's *shūrā* specifically see EMILE TYAN, *Institutions du droit publique musulman*, Paris: Recueil Sirey, 1954, vol. 1, pp. 184–185.

⁷⁵) One new element added here is the dramatic touch of making Ma'mūn's eldest son, al-'Abbās, the first to swear allegiance to the new heir apparent (AL-IṢBAHĀNĪ, *op. cit.*, p. 376).

oath of allegiance and revealing to them the true way Muḥammad used to perform the ceremony. Al-Ma'mūn then asks 'Alī to speak; after opening with a few words in praise of God, 'Alī's entire speech consists of the following: "We have a claim on you because of the Messenger of God ... and you have a claim on us [also] because of him; if you fulfill this [claim] towards us, then your claim upon us will be obligatory." [*inna lanā 'alaykum ḥaqqun bi rasūl Allāh ... wa lakum 'alaynā ḥaqqun bihi, fa-idhā addaytum ilaynā dhālika wajaba 'alaynā al-ḥaqq lakum.*]

Once again, the purpose of this narration seems to be to demonstrate Shī'ī ideology. This is accomplished first of all by backing the previous assertion of 'Alī's superiority with a demonstration of his privileged knowledge of true Islam, handed down through the family from their progenitor, the Prophet. Second, 'Alī's acceptance speech is a bald iteration of the Shī'ī position regarding the right of the Prophet's direct descendants to rule the Muslim polity.

Al-Iṣbahānī gives further example of 'Alī's moral and religious superiority, particularly over the 'Abbāsīd caliph, in relating an incident between the two men. 'Alī supposedly saw al-Ma'mūn preparing for prayer by having a slave pour the ritual ablution over his hands, whereupon 'Alī rebuked the caliph, stating: "O Commander of the Faithful, do not share your worship of your God with anyone."⁷⁶)

Another account of 'Alī's uncompromising principles already leads us into the events surrounding his demise: "And al-Riḍā fell ill from the sickness from which he died, and before this he had mentioned the two sons of Sahl to al-Ma'mūn and had upbraided them, and he informed al-Ma'mūn about them, and related their evil deeds to him." Al-Iṣbahānī then relates that 'Alī and al-Ma'mūn both became sick from something bad that they ate, but that 'Alī remained sick until he died. Then the reader is brought up short as the author continues "There is disagreement regarding the matter of his death, and what the circumstances were surrounding the poison which he was made to drink." Al-Iṣbahānī here launches into a rather incredible story, according to which al-Ma'mūn made a certain courtier, 'Abd Allāh b. Bushayr, grow his nails and knead an unidentified (and presumably poisonous) fruit, then squeeze pomegranate juice for 'Alī al-Riḍā and give it to him to drink – and this was what killed him.⁷⁷) In addition, 'Alī (as an omniscient Imām) knows both beforehand that he is

⁷⁶) *Ibid.*, p. 377.

⁷⁷) *Ibid.*

about to be poisoned and immediately afterwards, when he announces that this has in fact just occurred.⁷⁸⁾

Al-Ma'mūn hides 'Alī's death for a day and a night, after which time he summons 'Alī's relatives and shows them that there are no signs of violence on the body. Al-Ma'mūn then weeps and bemoans his deceased heir, addressing him as "my brother" [*akhī*] and exclaiming that he had hoped to die before him; "and he showed great anguish and much grief." [*wa-aẓ-hara jazā'an shadīdan wa ḥuznan kathīran*]

There seem to be here two different accounts cobbled together into one: in one version, both 'Alī and the Caliph become ill, and this was the sickness of which 'Alī died. Suddenly and startlingly, the narrative switches gears, and we are in the midst of a classic (and historically suspect) Shī'ī account of the secret (or not so secret) poisoning of the Imām. No hint is given of any possible political reason for 'Alī's appointment (i.e. the preceding years of political trouble and rebellion in the name of *al-riḍā min āl Muḥammad*), al-Iṣbahānī apparently regarding it as self-evident that even al-Ma'mūn finally recognized his own religious duty and 'Alī's moral superiority.⁷⁹⁾ Likewise, no possible motive is given for 'Alī's dastardly murder; it functions in the true hagiographical tradition simply as a foil to show the arbitrary wickedness of the usurping 'Abbāsīd. Al-Ma'mūn apparently could not even plead political expediency; we have here an Iago-like, motiveless crime.⁸⁰⁾ Al-Iṣbahānī therefore never resolves the question of why a caliph who had appointed a successor out of pure religious conviction would or could then kill him in such a deliberate and cold-blooded fashion. Even al-Ma'mūn's great manifestations of grief become simply a cynical, hypocritical ruse on his part in order to deflect suspicion.

⁷⁸⁾ Prescience regarding and control over one's own death are of course one of the hallmarks of the Imāms; ABŪ JA'FAR MUḤAMMAD B. YA'QŪB AL-KULĪNĪ, *Al-Uṣūl min al-kāfī*, Teheran: Maktabat al-Ṣadūq, 1381/1960, vol. I, p. 258, has a section in his *Kitāb al-Ḥujja* entitled: "*anna al-a'imma 'alayhim al-salām ya'lamūna matā yamūtūna, wa-annahum lā yamūtūna illā bi-ikhtiyār minhum*." Al-Iṣbahānī also supplies an alternate, less dramatic story of 'Alī's being given poisoned grapes (p. 378). However, in view of the relative space he accords these two accounts, he clearly favors the former one of the pomegranate juice.

⁷⁹⁾ It seems he wished to convey the moral that all Sunnis in their innermost hearts, even the greedy usurpers of 'Alid rights, know who the real Imams are.

⁸⁰⁾ Unless, of course, the reader is meant to infer that Ma'mūn and his close associates grew tired of 'Alī's constant corrections of their behavior and his smugly superior attitude.

The reluctance of ‘Alī to assume temporal power (a reluctance found in neither Ṭabarī nor Ya‘qūbī) also strikes one as being tailored to resolve certain Shī‘ī doctrinal difficulties – for example, the problem of how ‘Alī could accept power from (and thereby tacitly recognize) an ‘Abbāsīd usurper, particularly one so evil as to murder him. It also resolves the problem of how an omniscient Imām could consent to a proposition he knew beforehand must surely be meant to lure him to his death. The account also fits the Muslim ideal of the ultra-pious man who shies from all worldly power.⁸¹⁾ On the other hand, if this story of ‘Alī’s reluctance is historically true, it could indicate ‘Alī’s lack of faith in al-Ma’mūn’s sincerity and good intentions.

While the roughly contemporary account of Kulīnī [d. c. 328/939–40] also contains many obvious Shī‘ī literary topoi, there is no hint in it whatsoever that ‘Alī died anything but a natural death.⁸²⁾ After relating various hagiographical stories (miracles, unparalleled piety, and the like), Kulīnī, uniquely, suggests that al-Ma’mūn offered ‘Alī immediate assumption of the Caliphate [*fa-‘araḍa ‘alayhi al-Ma’mūn an yataqallada al-amr wa’l-khilāfa*], but that ‘Alī refused. Al-Ma’mūn then proposes the heirship, and ‘Alī agrees only on the following conditions: “that I shall not command, and shall neither prohibit nor give legal opinions [*lā uftī*], nor judge nor appoint, and I shall not remove [people] from office nor alter any of the existing [arrangements], and you will excuse me from all these.” Although al-Ma’mūn agrees to these conditions, he subsequently pressures ‘Alī on the occasion of ‘Īd al-Fiṭr to make a speech and lead the public prayers. Although ‘Alī reminds him of their bargain, al-Ma’mūn presses him in order to “reassure the hearts of the people and so that they will recognize your superiority,” ‘Alī then threatens to depart “as the Prophet and *amīr al-mu’minīn* departed.”⁸³⁾ [referring to the Hijra] This story not only reinforces once again the theme of ‘Alī’s otherworldliness and disdain for temporal power, but also makes even more explicit the comparison between him and his illustrious forbears.

We are then made to see how beloved ‘Alī was by all the people; first in an account of how young and old, men and women, would throng to his door, next in a highly significant episode which also reveals ‘Alī’s super-

⁸¹⁾ On this theme, see M. J. KISTER, “Concepts of Authority,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 18 (1994), pp. 116–119; K. ‘ATHAMINA, “The ‘Ulamā in the Opposition: The Carrot and the Stick Policy in Early Islam,” *Islamic Quarterly* 36 (1992), pp. 22–50.

⁸²⁾ al-Kulīnī, *op. cit.*, p. 486.

⁸³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 489.

natural powers. Kulīnī then relates that while the court was journeying from Khurāsān toward Baghdād, al-Ḥasan b. Sahl wrote a letter to his brother stating that he saw in the stars that on a certain day al-Ma'mūn, 'Alī and al-Faḍl would be attacked in the baths. Al-Faḍl immediately wrote to al-Ma'mūn, asking him to question 'Alī about this; 'Alī then revealed to them that the Prophet had appeared to him in his sleep⁸⁴) and warned him against going to the bath the next day. Al-Faḍl recklessly ignores the warnings and is indeed murdered. All of al-Faḍl's soldiers subsequently gather at al-Ma'mūn's door and accuse him of responsibility for the murder, intending to lynch him (they even bring fire to burn down the doors). Al-Ma'mūn begs 'Alī to go out and disperse them, which 'Alī successfully does, singlehanded.⁸⁵)

'Alī's death, however, is mentioned only briefly and perfunctorily; Kulīnī's interest lies more in praising him in his life than engaging in dramatic deathbed narratives. Both Kulīnī and al-Iṣbahānī are obviously removed from the historical tradition of Ṭabarī and Ya'qūbī, and have moved in the direction of Shī'ī hagiography. It is curious to note that, whereas the latter two authors to a large extent confirm one another's accounts, Kulīnī and al-Iṣbahānī differ greatly even from one another, in spite of their common reverence for the figure of al-Riḍā. Their stories find no corroboration in any other of the early sources.

The *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa'l-kuttāb* of Muḥammad b. 'Abdūs al-Jahshiyārī [d. 331/942] is in many ways unique. Written by an 'Abbāsīd bureaucrat, its contents reflect his very particular interest in 'Abbāsīd officialdom. Thus, while he tells us much about court promotions, and which official is sent to what district, there is no mention whatsoever of the revolts convulsing 'Irāq and other provinces.⁸⁶) In fact, almost the first half of his account of al-Ma'mūn's reign is spent discussing anecdotes relating to the vizier al-Faḍl and his brother al-Ḥasan.

Then, abruptly, with no preliminaries or explanations of any kind, we are informed that al-Ma'mūn decided upon the appointment of 'Alī al-Riḍā and the abrogation of the wearing of black: *wa jadda al-Ma'mūn fī*

⁸⁴) On the religious significance of the Imam's prophetic dreams see ETAN KOHLBERG, "The Term *Muḥaddath* in Twelver Shī'ism," *Studia Orientalia D.H. Baneth Dedicata*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1979), pp. 39–47.

⁸⁵) KULĪNĪ, *op. cit.*, pp. 490–491.

⁸⁶) ABŪ 'ABD ALLĀH MUḤAMMAD B. 'ABDŪS AL-JAHSHIYĀRĪ, *Kitāb al-wuzarā' wa'l-kuttāb*, Cairo: Maṭba'at 'Abd al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad Ḥanafī, 1357/1938, pp. 250–252.

*tajdīd al-‘ahd li-‘Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja‘far ... wa’l-kitāb ilā al-aqālīm fī ibtāl lubs al-sawād.*⁸⁷⁾

His focus immediately shifts back to the actions of courtiers and functionaries: al-Faḍl’s correspondence with al-Ḥasan and the various governors; ‘Īsā b. Abī Khālīd’s summoning the people of Baghdād in order to inform them of the momentous decision; and the machinations of the ‘Abbāsīd clique which declares the deposition of al-Ma’mūn and allegiance to Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī.⁸⁸⁾ Here, too, no background information of previous events in Baghdād, such as the unrest directed against al-Ḥasan and factional approaches to the previous alternate ‘Abbāsīd candidate, is provided.

Unsurprisingly, another courtier story the reader has previously encountered is given – that of the notable Nu‘aym b. Khāzim.⁸⁹⁾ However, in this version Nu‘aym, after he refuses to countenance the new order of succession and has been alternately threatened and cajoled by al-Faḍl, turns upon the latter. Nu‘aym accuses him of wanting power to pass to the descendants of ‘Alī;

Then you will use tricks upon them so that it will become the kingship of the Khusroes [*thumma taḥtālu ‘alayhim fa-taṣīru al-mulk kasrawiyan*]. Otherwise, why did you not direct the wearing of the ‘Alīd color, namely white, but rather green, the color of the Khusroes and the Zoroastrians? Then he approached al-Ma’mūn and said: “God, God, O Commander of the Faithful, may he not cheat you out of your religion and your kingship.”⁹⁰⁾

Al-Ma’mūn did not show his anger, but when Nu‘aym had departed the caliph asked his vizier if he should have the recalcitrant notable killed. Al-Faḍl responds that al-Ma’mūn has been executing too many prominent people lately, and that he should rather send Nu‘aym with inadequate means to fight the anti-caliph Ibrāhīm b. al-Mahdī while making certain to instruct his governors not to provide Nu‘aym with any aid. When Ma’mūn responds that he dislikes the idea of Nu‘aym’s going to Ibrāhīm, al-Faḍl responds: *dhālika ahwan ‘alayya fī amrihi*. [That is of little importance to me in his matter!]⁹¹⁾ We here find al-Ma’mūn clearly

⁸⁷⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 255.

⁸⁸⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 255–256.

⁸⁹⁾ His name is here given as Nu‘aym b. Hazim

⁹⁰⁾ JAḤSHIYĀRĪ, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

⁹¹⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 257. One could also translate the phrase as “This is easier for me *etcetera*,” but the meaning and implications of al-Faḍl’s response would remain equally impudent, and would still show that the vizier was blatantly disregarding caliphal wishes and preferences.

depicted as a pawn in the hands of his vizier. Not only is he incapable of taking any step without al-Faḍl's advice; it is the latter who seems to make all final decisions. Whether or not this is merely Jahshiyārī's glorification of the heights which officialdom's power can reach, we shall never know.⁹²⁾

Jahshiyārī then diverges from Ṭabarī's and Ya'qūbī's outline of events in order to interject a series of unflattering stories about the vizier, including depictions of his incredibly inflated sense of self-importance; for example, he has himself carried around in an elaborate throne borne by twelve sons of kings.⁹³⁾ Jahshiyārī temporarily interrupts his recounting of al-Faḍl's foibles in order to relate the Harthama story which we have previously encountered. Here, Harthama is depicted as having approached al-Ma'mūn in order to complain about two people unjustly imprisoned by "this Zoroastrian" [*hādhā al-majūsī*]. As in previous versions, Harthama is dragged out by the legs and then killed. Also as in previous versions, one of Harthama's friends then insults al-Ma'mūn, calling him, however, *amīr al-munāfiqīn*.⁹⁴⁾ He is killed on the spot by al-Faḍl.

All the rest of Jahshiyārī's account centers on anecdotes involving al-Faḍl (although, curiously, he makes no mention of his murder). There is not a word about the death of 'Alī al-Riḍā. In short, Jahshiyārī, in many respects, does not rise above the petty interests of an 'Abbāsīd bureaucrat. For him, the all-consuming interest is the vizier, his power and prestige, and his relations with various other courtiers and functionaries. The caliph is of minor importance in this account, and 'Alī al-Riḍā is virtually non-existent.

In conclusion, the differences among all these earliest accounts are striking. Each account points the historian to an entirely different interpretation of events, since the events themselves are presented in divergent fashions. Even after one has made suitable allowances for obviously programmatic items (e.g. Kulīnī's miracle stories, Iṣbahānī's prophetic episode, and so forth)⁹⁵⁾ there is no one unambiguous and authoritative ac-

⁹²⁾ One factor arguing in favor of a programmatic bias on Jahshiyārī's part is his complete and startling omission of any reference to the vizier's unfortunate end.

⁹³⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 257–259.

⁹⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–261. Cf. *supra*, where Ma'mūn is referred to as "Amīr al-Kāfirīn."

⁹⁵⁾ GABRIELI, *op. cit.*, p. 57, correctly, in our view, characterized these stories as "leggende, particolari drammatici e fantastici dalla fantasia tendenziosa degli epigoni."

count even of the mere dry facts – let alone of the motivating forces behind those events.

While one can to a certain extent sort out the incredible from that which falls into the range of reasonable unknowns, thus concluding, for example, that Ṭabarī sounds more reliable or convincing than al-Iṣḥāhānī, the actual facts one can unimpeachably assert are quite limited. Due to the radically differing nature of the sources, it is very difficult to ascertain historical truth through scholarly methods of proof. Just about the only facts one can maintain as unassailable are that ‘Alī al-Riḍā was designated heir-apparent, al-Ma’mūn ordered the wearing of green, and both the vizier and ‘Alī died on the way to ‘Irāq. One cannot in the end make a definitive statement as to how or why ‘Alī al-Riḍā died, nor as to why he was appointed.

It seems as though we are left in the end with two possibilities: one, which has perhaps gained common credence, is that al-Ma’mūn murdered ‘Alī. The other, which SOURDEL touched upon, is that someone else murdered the Imām. What SOURDEL did not touch upon is the implications of that possibility in conjunction with Ṭabarī’s depiction: namely, that al-Ma’mūn was not in very firm control of his court. This is supported, first of all, by Ṭabarī’s consistent description of al-Ma’mūn’s weakness of character even before the Fitna. Throughout the years 193 and 194 Ṭabarī shows al-Faḍl b. Sahl as being the sole decision-maker and mastermind behind al-Ma’mūn’s bid for the caliphate. Indeed, at one point al-Ma’mūn is so timorous and despondent that he plans to flee to the Khāqān of the Turks, and only after much persuasion by al-Faḍl does he allow the latter to go on fighting his war for him, saying, “Do as you think best in this and all other affairs of mine.”⁹⁶⁾

Throughout Ṭabarī’s account, there are repeated suggestions both that al-Ma’mūn is not in control and that others are aware of this fact. Ibn Ṭabāṭabā’s rebellion, for example, was supposedly in reaction to the Sahlid’s control of the caliph.⁹⁷⁾ Then there is al-Ma’mūn’s striking unawareness of even the most vital interests of state, things of which even the common soldiers are aware, until ‘Alī al-Riḍā informs him. Most damning, perhaps, is al-Ma’mūn’s apparent fear of antagonizing al-Faḍl even after the latter had flagrantly disobeyed caliphal orders by persecuting the soldiers who had confirmed ‘Alī al-Riḍā’s reports.⁹⁸⁾ Further

⁹⁶⁾ ṬABARĪ, pp. 403–404; *“ʿImāl fī ḥādhihi al-umūr wa ḡhayrihi min umūri bi-mā tarā.”*

⁹⁷⁾ See *supra*, p. 5.

⁹⁸⁾ *Supra*, p. 9.

confirmation of the apparent weakness and indecisiveness of the caliph's character can be found in Jahshiyārī's account of al-Ma'mūn's doglike obedience to al-Faḍl's dictates, even when these are delivered in a decidedly disrespectful – even downright rude – fashion.⁹⁹) All of these incidents would suggest that al-Ma'mūn was firmly under al-Faḍl's thumb.

It is perhaps significant that out of the six earliest historians who are attempting to write history and not hagiography,¹⁰⁰) these two, Jahshiyārī and Ṭabarī, are the only authors of detailed accounts¹⁰¹) who are not identified with a strongly Shī'ī line. This fact would suggest that perhaps the more ardent Shī'ī authors (who, as we have already seen, also injected certain blatantly mythological elements into the narrative of al-Riḍā's life and death) were ideologically interested in placing the blame squarely on the shoulders of what they saw as the 'Abbāsīd usurper. A similar religious motive exists in, for example, the deeply Shī'ī sources in which MADELUNG found what he believed to be his proof of al-Ma'mūn's supposed apocalyptic tendencies. It has already been pointed out that "if the caliph thought that he could only avert the wholesale massacre of his kinsmen on the day of judgement by handing over to an 'Alid, then he had

⁹⁹) *Supra*, p. 22.

¹⁰⁰) This is the reason why IBN BĀBĀWAYHI's entirely hagiographical work *'Uyūn akhbār al-Riḍā*, *op. cit.*, does not fall within the compass of this paper. He sets forth the classic Shī'ī paradigm when relating to 'Alī al-Riḍā: First and foremost, that it was not Ma'mūn who gave al-Riḍā his title, but rather God himself (p. 11). Next, he continues the tradition that 'Alī al-Riḍā accepted the heir apparency only with great reluctance. Obviously dealing with critical responses to al-Iṣbahānī's story that the Imam accepted the heir apparency only on pain of death, Ibn Bābawayhi refutes the view that the Imam should have chosen death over association with al-Ma'mūn. He cites here various hadiths in which the Imam himself is confronted with this question but cites the examples of Joseph, who served Pharaoh in an official capacity (pp. 137–138); 'Alī b. 'Abī Ṭālib, who accepted the Shūrā (pp. 139–140), and so forth. After some 40 further pages of "proofs" of 'Alī's Imamhood and omniscience (pp. 200–238), he is unequivocally killed off by the envious al-Ma'mūn. Apparently unable to choose among the various poisoning scenarios, Ibn Bābawayhi gives his readers various options: first the al-Iṣbahānī version of the elaborately poisoned pomegranate (pp. 242–243), then that of the poisoned grapes (244–248); and, finally, a wholly original version utilizing both poisoned grapes and the poisoned pomegranate together. (pp. 248–253) This work is indisputably of severely limited value as a history of 9th century events, valuable as it may be in documenting the development of 10th century Shī'ism.

¹⁰¹) Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ does not give enough detail to be really useful on this point.

evidently stopped believing that the 'Abbāsids had a right to rule."¹⁰²) This would fit in very nicely with the moral message of al-Iṣbahānī (namely, that everyone, even the 'Abbāsids themselves, really knows that the 'Alids should be on the throne), but for that very reason should make any critical scholar chary of those sources' historical authenticity.

The view here advocated – namely, that al-Ma'mūn was consistently dominated by others – finds additional confirmation in other, later contexts. His caliphate has been primarily remembered for its two great religious events: 'Alī al-Riḍā at the beginning of his rule, and the Miḥna towards the end. In this latter context, of the Miḥna, it has already been noted that "The orthodox historians say that his companions at Court were wholly responsible for al-Ma'mūn's heterodoxy in theology, and for the consequent persecution of the stricter theologians on which he entered."¹⁰³) Apparently al-Ma'mūn was easily swayed and dominated throughout his life, in both of the great religious questions with which his name is so inextricably entwined.¹⁰⁴)

In this scenario, even if al-Ma'mūn did murder al-Faḍl (because he realized he could not control him and was alarmed at his brazen behaviour toward himself), he was not necessarily the murderer of 'Alī. Other elements at his court (perhaps representing Baghdādī 'Abbāsīd influences) could equally well have brought it about, particularly if al-Ma'mūn was, at least at this point in his career, a mere cipher.¹⁰⁵)

In short, the tale of 'Alī al-Riḍā's passing glory may be crucial for an understanding of al-Ma'mūn's character. While it has long been customary to regard 'Abbāsīd weakness as having truly begun with – or even after – al-Mu'taṣim, the picture that emerges from Ṭabarī's account, confirmed by Jahshiyārī, may suggest that a revision is in order. Rather than

¹⁰²) CRONE and HINDS, *God's Caliph*, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹⁰³) W.M. PATTON, *Aḥmad Ibn Hanbal and the Miḥna*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1897, pp. 51–52.

¹⁰⁴) GABRIELI, too, notes the "straordinaria influenza che [al-Faḍl] aveva acquisito sull' animo del Califfo;" *op. cit.*, p. 52, unfortunately, he does not examine the far-reaching implications of his own conclusion.

¹⁰⁵) He would not be the first medieval ruler who, for one reason or another, never managed to wrest control of affairs from unruly court factions. Virtually all of the later Merovingians and post-Louis the Pious Carolingians (particularly the ones of Western Francia) spring to mind in this context. Alternatively, he could have been a ruler more on the model of James II of Aragon, who started out as a pawn, eventually managed to impose his will upon his fractious nobles, but then lost control over them once again towards the end of his reign.

viewing al-Ma'mūn's reign as that of a strong leader basically stemming the forces of dissolution which had begun manifesting themselves under his erratic father Hārūn and had accelerated during the civil war, one should perhaps regard al-Ma'mūn's period as being more of a continuity with what came before and after. By the time al-Mu'taṣim took over the reins of government, it was too late to shore up 'Abbāsid power; in that sense the 'Alī al-Riḍā episode did indeed mark the final attempt at a unitary, legitimate Islamic state.