

“Reading Stories of the Imāms”

Matthew Pierce

Mizan Texts and Translations 02

This exploration of two short Shi'i stories is designed to give students an example of how they might approach their readings of primary texts. By laying out a simple format of questions, students are provided a rubric they can follow for subsequent low-stakes writing assignments.

It may be tempting to skip over fanciful or implausible stories that seem to be ubiquitous in many medieval texts. But this narrative material can often give us unique insight into critical moments in history. The comparative nature of hagiographical narratives is particularly interesting, because in the process of elevating a saintly person, biographers must contrast their subjects' lives with those of other human beings.

Hagiographers in Islamic traditions do this in diverse ways, even when repeating stories told and re-told across the history and literature of their communities. Careful readings of individual renditions of stories reveal differences in tone, emphasis, and other narrative elements that shed light on the authors' perspectives, as well as on views and concerns that were widely shared. The ways in which stories are told change over time and place, but there are also continuities. Identifying those trends can give us important glimpses of the continual development of religious thought.

In my work on medieval Twelver Shi'i biographies of the imāms, I explore what these rich collections of stories have to teach us about Shi'i communities of memory. The following is a translation and discussion of two vignettes from Ibn Shahrāshūb's *Virtues of the Descendants of Abū Ṭālib (Manāqib āl Abī Ṭālib)*, a twelfth-century collective biography of the fourteen infallibles (Muḥammad, Fāṭimah, and the Twelve Imāms). For this branch of Shi'ism, the imāms were the rightful inheritors of the Prophet Muḥammad's authority. Although the imāms rarely had political power in their days, they were the true guides whom the community should follow. Stories about their lives and deaths have been immensely influential in shaping and expressing Shi'i piety through the centuries.

I have intentionally chosen a couple of rather unremarkable passages, both from the early portion of Ibn Shahrāshūb's biography of the eleventh imām, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī (d. 873). Imām al-'Askarī lived most of his life under house arrest, a precautionary measure adopted by several Abbasid caliphs against people seen as potential threats to power.

Account One:

In this first narrative, we have a story of a philosopher whose writing on the Qur'ān has deviated into dangerous errors by suggesting there are contradictions therein. Imām al-'Askarī instructs a student on how to expose the philosopher's lack of understanding.

Abū'l-Qāsim al-Kūfī¹ [wrote] in his *Kitāb al-tabdīl* that [Ibn] Ishāq al-Kindī was a philosopher in Iraq who began writing *Tanāqud al-Qur'ān (Contradictions of the Qur'an)* during [al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī's] time. [Al-Kindī] busied himself with this task and devoted himself to it in his house.

One of [al-Kindī's] students came to Imām al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī one day, and Abū Muḥammad (peace be upon him) said to him, "Is there not a rightly guided (*rashīd*)² man among you preventing your teacher, al-Kindī, from the kind of work he has begun on the Qur'ān?"

The student replied, "We are his students, so how is it possible for us to oppose him in this or in anything else?"

So Abū Muḥammad said, "Will you do what I propose to you?"

"Yes," he said.

[Abū Muḥammad] said, "Go to him and be respectful while in his presence, and help him with whatever comes his way. When you have developed some rapport with him, say, 'You have prompted me to ask you a question.' Then he will invite you to share it.

Say to him, 'Were a certain theologian to bring you the Qur'ān, would it be possible that he intended to convey a different meaning with it in his disputation than what you supposed you took away from it? Then he will say that it is possible, for he is a man that understands when he listens. And when he answers you this way, say, 'But how would you know? Perhaps he intended something other than what you took away from his words by devising them with another meaning in mind [on purpose].'"³

¹ This Abū'l-Qāsim is 'Alī b. Aḥmad b. Mūsā al-Kūfī (d. 963). See Aḥmad b. 'Alī al-Najāshī, *Rijāl al-Najāshī* (Qom: Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1424/2003), 265-266.

² I have chosen "rightly guided" for *rashīd*, though "righteous" is another option that sounds better in English. I believe the contrast, however, between the imām who is giving the guidance and the philosopher is an important aspect of this story.

³ The wording of this portion could be read in multiple ways, with slightly different meanings. None, however, change the overall point. Thanks to Sean Anthony for his helpful suggestions on this portion.

So the man went to al-Kindī and interacted with him politely, and after a time he posed the question to him. Then [al-Kindī] said to him, “Repeat that to me.” So he repeated it, and [al-Kindī] pondered it in his mind and considered what was linguistically probable and theoretically possible. Then he said, “I implore you to tell how this came to you?”

[The student] said, “It was something that occurred to me, and so I brought it up to you.”

[al-Kindī] said, “No, it is not like you to have thought of this or to have reached this level of insight. So tell me, where did you get this?”

[The student] said, “Abū Muḥammad instructed me.”

[al-Kindī] said, “Now you have revealed it. It could have come from nowhere but that house.”

Then [al-Kindī] called for a flame and burned all that he had written.⁴

Account Two:

We have a more dramatic scene depicted in this second narrative. Amidst a local drought, the Christians are able to bring rain through their prayers while the Muslims are not. Some in the community are beginning to lose faith and the caliph is unsure what to do. So he brings Imām al-‘Askarī to help him solve the problem.

‘Alī al-Ḥasan b. Sābūr said:

Once in the time of the latter al-Ḥasan [al-‘Askarī] (peace be upon him), there was a famine. For three days the people went out to perform the prayer for rain (*li’l-istisqā’*), but it did not rain. When they went out on the fourth day, the Christians’ patriarch accompanied them, and it rained. Then the Muslims went out on the fifth day, and it didn’t rain, and so they began to doubt their religion.

So al-Mutawakkil⁵ took al-Ḥasan (peace be upon him) out of prison and said, “Did you see how the religion of your grandfather looked, Abū Muḥammad, when the Christians went out and the monk raised his hand to the sky?”

⁴ Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib āl Abī Ṭālib*, ed. Yūsuf al-Biqā’ī (5 vols.; [Qom:] Dhawī al-Qurbā, 1421 [2000]), 4.457-458.

⁵ Some accounts of this story name the caliph here as al-Mu‘tamid b. al-Mutawakkil: see editor’s note in Quṭb al-Dīn al-Rawāndī, *Kharā’ij wa’l-jarāyih* (Qom: Mu’assasah Imām al-Mahdī, 1411/1991), 1.441. Al-Mutawakkil reigned from 847 to 861, his son al-Mu‘tamid from 870 to 892.

Abū Muḥammad said to some of his servants, “Take from [the monk’s] right hand what is in it.”

They took it, and it was a dark bone. Then [Abū Muḥammad] said, “Now pray for rain.” So [the monk] prayed for rain, but it didn’t rain, and the sky cleared.

Then al-Mutawakkil asked about the bone, and [al-ʿAskarī] said, “It must have been taken from the grave of a prophet, for you cannot uncover the bone of a prophet without it raining.”⁶

Analysis

What is the contemporary reader to do with tales like these? Historians may be tempted to bypass them entirely due to problems of historical accuracy. The question of facticity, however, is much less interesting to me than what these stories tell us about the authors and communities that told and retold narratives of the imāms’ lives. Moving beyond what John Renard has called “the tyranny of bland facticity”⁷ allows us to broaden our understanding of the people to whom these stories were important.

A useful starting point with narratives like these is Peter Burke’s question: “**Who** wants **whom** to remember **what**, and **why**?”⁸ This approach focuses on how and for whom a story is constructed, as well as the concerns that drive the narrative. Burke’s question can be broken down into four distinct but interconnected queries that give us insight into the translated passages above:

Who? The Author

Ibn Shahrāshūb was one of the most important Shi’i scholars of the twelfth century. He was a skilled preacher, deeply committed to Twelver Shi’ism and personally devoted to the Twelve Imāms. *Virtues of the Descendants of Abū Tālib* is his most famous and widely read work. I have argued elsewhere that it was an important contribution to a genre of hagiography that developed among Shi’i scholars of the tenth to twelfth centuries which we can call collective biographies of the imāms.⁹ *Virtues* was the most expansive contribution of this genre at the time, distinct for its inclusion of many elegies and other poetic

⁶ Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, 4.458.

⁷ John Renard, *Friends of God: Islamic Images of Piety, Commitment, and Servanthood* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 257.

⁸ Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 56.

⁹ Matthew Pierce, *Twelve Infallible Men: the Imams and the Making of Shi’ism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

praises of the imāms. Numerous subsequent collective biographies of the imāms were influenced by Ibn Shahrāshūb's work.¹⁰

The stories translated above did not originate with Ibn Shahrāshūb, who explicitly referenced other sources from which he transmits these tales. This, however, does not detract from his authorship; *Virtues* is a unique and original work. The content was often drawn from earlier sources, but Ibn Shahrāshūb's concerns and goals informed the selection, editing, paraphrasing, and arrangement of the material he used. *Virtues* is a wonderful example of the constant repurposing of stories in Islamic tradition, and it is a fascinating collage of narratives from a range of sources that extends far beyond conventional Shi'i communal boundaries.

Whom? The Audience

Virtues appears to have been aimed at a relatively wide audience. It was intended first and foremost for the broader Twelver Shi'i community, within which it served not only as a compendium for the scholarly elite, but as a source of encouragement and assurance to the Shi'i faithful. Ibn Shahrāshūb was also staking claims about the correct parameters of Shi'ism, and drawing Muslims of all types into a conversation about the legitimacy of the Twelve Imāms. His use of sources from non-Twelver groups and from scholarly circles we may consider Sunni can be seen as part of a strategy to prove his claims to those outside Twelver circles.

The question of audience brings up issues of reception history. *Virtues* was known and used by most major Shi'i scholars in the centuries after it was written, and the contemporary period has seen renewed interest in Ibn Shahrāshūb's work. Noting which stories in *Virtues* were recycled in subsequent biographies of the imāms and which were not is an interesting exercise. Of the two stories translated above, the one concerning the monk's prayer proved to have much more staying power than the tale of al-Kindī's student. The latter appears in Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī's (d. 1699) near-exhaustive catalog of stories of the imams in *Bihār al-anwār*, but otherwise few premodern Shi'i biographers repeated the story of al-Kindī. Interestingly enough, the story has come back in vogue in modern Shi'i biographies of the

¹⁰ For more on Ibn Shahrashub and his approach, see Matthew Pierce, "[Ibn Shahrashub and Shi'i Rhetorical Strategies in the 6th/12th Century.](#)" *Journal for Shi'a Islamic Studies* 5 (2012): 441-454.

imāms.¹¹ By contrast, a greater number of premodern and modern Shi'i biographers chose to include the story of the monk in their accounts of the eleventh imām.¹²

What? The Content

The content of the stories above is relatively straightforward. Each tale demonstrates the imām's superiority by contrasting him with another influential man, in the first case a philosopher, and in the second, a Christian monk. These types of men appear regularly in stories that elevate the imāms. Even more common in the biographies are contrasts between the imāms and the caliphs. Political leaders from Abū Bakr down through the Abbasid line parade through the narratives as the ultimate anti-imāms and enemies of the Shi'ah (my work in *Twelve Infallible Men* speaks to this point). The two stories here, however, remind us that the biographers' interests went beyond discrediting the caliphs. The second account mentions the caliph in passing, but the main thrust of both narratives is that the imāms are superior to all other human beings, that they are the best of men.

In the first account, the imām gives guidance to a philosopher mired in theological error. The philosopher in question is presumably the famed Muslim thinker Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb b. Ishāq al-Kindī (d. 866), said here to be working on a book about contradictions in the Qur'ān.¹³ Imām al-'Askarī instructs his student to expose the shortcomings in al-Kindī's thinking on this topic. The student succeeds, and the philosopher acknowledges the wisdom of the imām and destroys his own treatise. The imām's rhetorical question to the student ("Is there not a rightly guided [*rashīd*] man among you?") functions as a proclamation that right guidance comes from the imām, not from philosophers. Here, in story form, is a critical theological claim about the imamate held by Shi'i scholars for centuries.

In the second account, the imām is sought in time of crisis. The Muslim community is distraught over a Christian monk's success in praying for rain in time of drought. The Muslims' lack of success in the same regard causes some to doubt the faith. The imām saves the day by revealing that the monk's prayer was efficacious not because of his religious identity, but because he held the bone of a prophet in his hand. This story also demonstrates the author's assumptions about the relationship between the body, the spirit, and human authority. Prophets' bodies are assumed to have tangible power that impacts the physical world in supernatural ways. This power is accessible even to those who are not followers of the imāms, as

¹¹ See, for example, 'Abbās al-Qummī's *Muntahā al-āmāl* (Qom: Intishārāt-i Nigāh-i Āshnā, 1388/2009-2010), 749-750; Bāqir Sharīf Qurashī's *The Fourteen Infallibles in the History of Islam* (14 vols.; Qom: Ansariyan, 1999-2010), 13.162-163.

¹² See editor's note in al-Rawāndī, *Kharā'ij wa'l-jarāyih*, 1.441 for a list of sources. See also 'Alī b. 'Īsā al-Irbilī, *Kashf al-ghummah fī ma'rifat al-a'imma*, ed. 'Alī al-Fāḍilī (4 vols.; [Iran]: Markaz al-Ṭibā'ah wa'l-Nashr, 1426/2005-2006), 4.104-105; Qurashī, *Fourteen Infallibles*, 13.163-164.

¹³ The work named in the story is not among al-Kindī's known works.

demonstrated by the Christian's success in using the prophet's bone to bring rain. Ibn Shahrāshūb emphasizes the connection between the imāms and the prophets, a connection that has a physical element as well as a spiritual one.

Why? The Purpose

Asking why these stories were told is essential even when it is impossible to answer with certainty. Such inquiries will always remain speculative to some degree, but the more we know about the author, his writing, and his context, the better our chances of assessing objectives accurately. Moreover, the act of openly debating authorial intent helps us avoid some of the pitfalls involved with allowing unspoken (and sometimes unrealized) assumptions to shape our readings and conclusions.

The question of why Ibn Shahrāshūb recorded these accounts goes beyond the obvious and superficial response that he was writing a biography of Imām al-'Askarī. *Virtues* is not merely a compilation; Ibn Shahrāshūb had access to many stories that he did not include in his work. What, then, shaped his editorial choices? The stories he included must have communicated things about the imāms that Ibn Shahrāshūb felt were important. In the tales above, the imām is revealed as a source of guidance and a unique font of knowledge and intuition. But what is the significance of outsmarting a philosopher or revealing the source of a monk's power? What assumptions about power, knowledge, authority, and the body lie within these stories?

It is worth noting that Ibn Shahrāshūb's accounts are respectful to the philosopher and the monk. Neither character is disparaged or cast as evil or ill-intentioned. Granted, both are portrayed as having the potential to lead people astray from the truth, but each is affirmed in his ability to some degree. The story of the philosopher has enigmatic elements and the crucial line that stumps the philosopher can be understood in various ways. While the implicit argument is left unclarified, in my reading of the account, the imām is not attempting to clearly rebut what the philosopher is teaching. Instead, he offers an epistemological paradox that stumps the philosopher and renders his work on the Qur'ān futile. But more importantly, in doing so, the imām acts as a philosopher himself, outwitting al-Kindī at his own game.

In the second story, the imām does not condemn the monk's use of the prophet's bone. Instead, he explains that the efficacy of the prayer lies not in the monk's Christianity, but in the prophetic relic to which the monk has access. The popularity of this story suggests that Muslims in Ibn Shahrāshūb's time and in subsequent centuries were sometimes troubled by the claims of Christian communities that lived alongside them. Ibn Shahrāshūb's story navigates this unease by allowing for the possibility of miracles performed by Christians, while situating that miraculous power squarely within the prophetic tradition to which the imāms were uniquely connected.

As mentioned above, the second account contains a slight jab at the reigning caliph. As is common in many Shi'i biographies of the imāms, the caliph is a foil and a bit of a fool. Instead of acting as a

competent *amīr al-mu'minīn* ("leader of the faithful"), the caliph seems as confused and ready to doubt his religion as the common folk. He is forced to call on the imām to solve the dilemma. Once again the biographers illustrate that the true leader is held captive by a false leader whose impotence stands in stark contrast to the reliable guidance of the imām.

Conclusion

Our understanding of the meaning and purpose of texts like *Virtues* is shaped by our understanding of the author and the author's context. There is an inescapable circularity to this methodology, however, because the author is known to us primarily through the text. While less than ideal, this highlights the importance of refining our understanding of texts, because in many cases this is the only way of ascertaining what the author is doing, which in turn sheds light on his context. Ibn Shahrāshūb lived in a critical time when Ḥanbalī teachings were undergoing a resurgence, particularly in Baghdad. Leaders of other schools of thought were gradually making their peace with Ḥanbalī teachings. These scholarly alliances enabled a broader conception of *ahl al-sunnah wa'l-jamā'ah*, or Sunni Islam, to emerge as the clearly dominant orthodoxy. But against that very trend, concrete formulations of Twelver Shi'ism were also being articulated by the faithful followers of the imāms. These Shi'i scholars had gradually moved away from overtly revolutionary political claims, turning their focus toward the universal religious significance of the imāms and their teachings. As a part of this Shi'i resistance, Ibn Shahrāshūb portrayed the imāms as enduring, relevant, reliable guides for all of humanity, not as irrelevant leaders of failed political movements.

Ibn Shahrāshūb was an evangelist in this regard, and he was willing and able to make his claims in a manner accessible to those who did not share his perspectives. He was dogmatic in his convictions, but not self-segregating in his lifestyle. Indeed, he seems to have followed the advice given by the imām to al-Kindī's student: to be respectful and helpful to those in error in order to build rapport with them. The ultimate goal, however, was to teach people the truth about the imāms. The similarities between this story and Ibn Shahrāshūb's scholarly approach may tell us a great deal about why this story resonated with him.

[MATTHEW PIERCE](#) (Ph.D., Boston University) is an Assistant Professor of Religion at Centre College. His new book, *Twelve Infallible Men: the Imams and the Making of Shi'ism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), explores the themes and motifs of medieval Shi'i biographies of the imāms.

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