

Book Review: Twelve Infallible  
Men: The Imams and the Making  
of Shi'ism

BY MEHREEN ZAHRA JIWAN



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## Book Review: *Twelve Infallible Men: The Imams and the Making of Shi'ism*

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Imāmate, al-Mufīd, al-Ṣadūq, Imāms, Shī'i, al-Ḥusayn, Tashīḥ al-'Itiqādāt, Twelve Infallible Men, Matthew Pierce

**Article:** *Twelve Infallible Men: The Imams and the Making of Shi'ism* by Matthew Pierce (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2016), ix + 254pp.

Matthew Pierce traces the development of the 'Imām' in sacred biographies as a marker for Twelver Shī'i collective memory between the tenth and twelfth centuries. In his short and accessible monograph, Pierce demonstrates how composing biographies of the Imāms articulates a past that enables the Shī'i community to gradually harness a more crystallized identity.

Pierce employs the genre of collective biographies as a framework through which he weaves five sources, namely; al-Mas'ūdi's (d. 345/956) *Establishment of the Inheritance*, Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabari's (d. 310/923) *Proofs of the Imāmate*, al-Mufīd's (d.413/1022) *The Book of Guidance*, Al-Ṭabrisi's (d. 548/1154) *Informing Humanity*, and Ibn Shahr Āshūb's (588/1192) *Virtues of the Descendants of Abū Ṭālib*. He relies on literary theory and gender studies to guide the narrative threads of these sources through the genre, which together produce a rich tapestry of motifs and themes relating to the Imāms that reflect the community's theological and devotional concerns. The book creatively engages with primary sources in a way that broadens their ability to inform our understanding of early Twelver Shī'ism, beyond determining the historical facticity of their contents.

Notwithstanding his innovative approach to these understudied works, Pierce's use of the texts has implications that require some consideration. In arguing for the eventual treatment of Imāms as a typology through the theme of martyrdom, Pierce relies heavily upon what appears to be al-Mufīd's doubts about the martyrdom of the ninth Imām, al-Jawād (d. 220/835). He considers the fact that subsequent medieval biographies never mention the existence of such a doubt to indicate that the act of intentionally 'forgetting' is implicit in the memory-making process. (p. 50) Referring to what Etan Kohlberg describes as Ṣadūq's 'martyrdom theory'<sup>1</sup>, Pierce argues that the narrative of the Imām as 'necessarily a martyr' emerged from the gradual development of the 'Imām' category. As such, he posits

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<sup>1</sup> Etan Kohlberg, review of *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*, by Moojan Momen, *Asian and African Studies* 21 (1967).

that al-Mufid's supposed rejection of the all of the Imāms' was possibly a widely held opinion by his contemporaries and predecessors.

Peirce states that in the *Book of Guidance*, al-Mufid argues that only five of the first eleven Imāms (the twelfth al-Mahdi, is believed to be alive in occultation) were killed. (p.45) However, this statement does not appear in *the Book of Guidance*<sup>2</sup> but rather in *Taṣḥīḥ al-'Itiqādāt*, which al-Mufid wrote as a response to Ibn Bābawayh's (al-Ṣadūq) theological work, *al-'Itiqādāt*. The five Imāms are named in al-Mufid's response as; 'Ali (d.40/661), al-Ḥasan (d.50/670), al-Ḥusayn (d.61/680), Mūsā al-Kāẓim (d.183/799), and 'Ali al-Riḍā (203/819).<sup>3</sup> However, in the *Book of Guidance*, al-Mufid also mentions the poisoning and death of al-Bāqir (the fifth Imām, d. 114/733) who is not mentioned among the five named in his *Taṣḥīḥ*.<sup>4</sup> The seeming contradiction between these statements in fact points towards an alternative reading of al-Mufid. In other words, the inclusion of al-Bāqir's martyrdom narrative might provide us with further, albeit internal, context to suggest that al-Mufid does not reject the event of the martyrdom of all the Imāms, but rather the way in which the events are proven. In *Taṣḥīḥ*, al-Mufid is perhaps making a technical point regarding the nature of the reports al-Ṣadūq relies on as part of his wider critique of al-Ṣadūq's methodology and use of narrations. It is within this broader framework that al-Mufid considers the *nature of the transmission* of narrations of the poisoning of al-Jawād, and not the *fact* of the poisoning itself, to be subject to doubt.<sup>5</sup>

With this in mind, Pierce's evidence hardly supports the claim that the martyrdom of all the Imāms was a later established notion resulting from the homogenization of the 'Imām' as a 'type'. We see few if any, examples from al-Mufid's contemporaries to establish that early Shi'i or Imāmī scholars ever doubted the belief and assertions that all of the historical Imāms (with the exception of the last) were martyred.

Pierce's reading of this source sheds light on the implications of treating these scholars as biographers for the purpose of his study. He views al-Mufid as a biographer because he composed a book, which fits into Pierce's category of what constitutes a collective biography, but effectively separates him from the rest of his literary productions. While recognizing al-Mufid's theological expertise and legacy in his introductory chapters, Pierce might consider how framing these individuals as biographers immediately transposes on both them and their work, a set of assumptions that can lead to potential misinterpretations and consequently, misrepresentations. In accordance with the title of the first chapter, it is surprising that Pierce's efforts to 'set the stage' by teasing out the writers' backgrounds

<sup>2</sup> Pierce erroneously attributes this to al-Mufid's *The Book of Guidance*, however this does not appear anywhere within text. It is rather mentioned in I.K.A Howard's introduction to the English translation of the book, which also fails to cite *Taṣḥīḥ*. Howard also concludes that al-Mufid rejects al-Jawād's killing.

*Al-Irshād*: Al-Mufid, *Book of Guidance*, trans. I. K. A. Howard, pref. S. H. Nasr (London: Muhammadi Trust, 1981, xv.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Mufid, Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. Nu'man Abī 'Abdillāh al-'Ukbarī al Baghdādī, *Taṣḥīḥ al-'Itiqādāt al-Imāmiyyah*, ed. Ḥusayn Dargāhī (Qum: Mahr Publishers, 1992), pp. 131-2.

<sup>4</sup> *Al-Irshād*, 1:3-4 (English: 379).

<sup>5</sup> Al-Majlisī makes the point of clarifying this in Biḥār al-Anwār, see al-Majlisī, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-Anwār Al-Jāmi'ah li Durar Akhbār al-'A'imma al-Aṭḥār*, 110 vols. Ed. Dār al-Aḥyā' liturāth al-'Arabī (Beirut: Dār al-Aḥyā' liturāth al-'Arabī, 1403/1983), XXVII, 216.

rarely surface and come about in his general analysis of their work.

Reading al-Mufid's works in conversation with each other can prove to be fruitful, especially when attempting to determine authorial intent. His legal work *al-Muqni'a fi al-Fiqh*, his theological works such as *Taṣḥīḥ*, and his refutations among others, are not written in isolation; many of them comment on the killing of the Imāms for different purposes.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the advantages of reading his sources as collective biographies, the boundaries that Pierce imagines to maintain the genre, might have not necessarily been imagined in the same way by these 'biographers'. Examining how these scholars' dispositions to certain methodologies influenced the way their work both defined and responded to the needs of the community in its nascent stages would be a valuable consideration.

Further to this point, it is equally worth asking how the authors of these primary sources are remembered. How did later biographers' assumptions and views of these authors shape how they engaged with the material of their predecessors? If al-Mufid is remembered from the eleventh century onward for his theological works in particular, might later biographers read his *Book of Guidance* with this image of its author in mind?<sup>7</sup>

Chapters 2, 3, and 4 best illustrate Pierce's gendered approach to his sources. As is the case with most analyses that turn to gender studies in their examination of the medieval world, this approach risks reading into texts rather than reading out of them. While Pierce must be lauded for his engagement with a vast number of theoretical interventions from both within and outside the field of Islamic Studies, similar conclusions may be drawn without gendering his analysis. Extracting gendered tropes from the sources, such as the feminizing quality of deception or the idealized woman as more masculine by virtue of her heightened spirituality, achieves Pierce's goal of establishing the continuity of the genre and the stability of the 'Imām' category. However, his approach would benefit from more explicitly considering the place of personhood in the way the sources articulate a moral community.

In his last chapter, Pierce examines how signs surrounding the births of the Imāms, especially those that connect the Imāms to the Prophet Muḥammad and pre-Islamic prophets, emphasize their cosmic significance and justify loyalty towards them. (p.145) The narratives Pierce uses to discuss the mother of the twelfth Imām describe her to be *umm walad* (a slave who bears her master's child) named Narjis who was herself born to a slave of Ḥakīma, the daughter of the ninth Imām, al-Jawād. (p.136-7) While we see this narrative in some of the sources Pierce is working with, he does not mention an additional

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<sup>6</sup> I am grateful to Bilal Muhammad for calling to my attention that al-Ṭūsī's *Kitāb al-Ghayba* cites al-Mufid among the narrators of a *ḥadīth* in support of the 'martyrdom theory.' The *ḥadīth* is attributed to Ḥusayn b. Rūḥ who describes the poisoning of the seventh Imām, Mūsā b. Ja'far after which he says that the Prophet and the Imāms only die by the sword or by poison. These findings highlight the benefit and necessity of reading authors across their sources as well those of their peers. See Abi Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭā'ifa al-Ṭūsī, *Kitāb al-Ghayba*, ed. Dār al-Ḥidāya/Alī Aḥmad Nāṣiḥ (Beirut: Dār al-Ḥidāya, 1411/1991), 408-9.

<sup>7</sup> In Ibn Shahr Āshūb's *Rijāl* work *Ma'ālim al-'Ulamā'*, his entry for al-Mufid mentions *The Book of Guidance* in passing, listed after his polemic work titled *Putting Abū Ḥanīfa to Shame* and before one of his legal treatises. Ibn Shahr Āshūb, *Ma'ālim al-'Ulamā' Fī Fahrist Kutub al-Shī'ah wa Asmā' al-Muṣannafīn minhum Qadīman wa Ḥadīthan tutammah Kitāb al-Fihrist li-l-Shaykh Abī Ja'far al-Ṭūsī*, ed. Al-'Allāmah al-Sayyid Muḥammad Ṣādiq Āl Baḥr al-'Ulūm (Najaf: Maṭba'ah al-Ḥaydariyyah, 1961) pp. 113.

story in *The Virtues*<sup>8</sup> and *The Proofs*<sup>9</sup> which suggests that his mother was the daughter of a Roman cesar and a descendant of Simon on her maternal side. She sees Muḥammad, ‘Ali, Jesus, and Simon in a dream that prophesizes her marriage to the eleventh Imām, Ḥasan b. ‘Ali al-‘Askarī (d.260/874) who would be the father of the twelfth Imām. According to the narrative, her name is Malīka, but she hides her identity using the name Narjis.

This extensive plot offers strong potential as a source of evidence that connects the mothers and births of the Imāms to the previous prophets and frames their capacity to legitimize the authority of the Imām. It is surprising that Pierce does not engage even slightly with this narrative despite their presence in the biographies he selected. He does not consider what these distinct narratives indicate about the way the community remembers the Imāms in relation to their mothers. One wonders if including a closer textual analysis of his sources would help bring to light the themes that Pierce seeks to identify.

Overall, *Twelve Infallible Men* provides an alternative approach to reading widely ignored sources through the lens of a collective memory. Although the development of Shī‘ism between the tenth and twelfth centuries has received some attention in recent scholarship, Pierce offers new insights into the value of approaching the same historical period with new theoretical frameworks. His engagement with these literary productions as material evidence speaks to a larger conversation of method and theory thus making it an important contribution to the field of Shī‘i Studies in the West.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibn Shahr Āshūb, *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib* Vol. 4, ed. Yūsuf al-Baqā‘ī (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā’, 1991), 482-4.

<sup>9</sup> Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Rustam al-Ṭabarī al-Ṣaghīr, *Dalā’il al-Imāma*, (Qum: Mu’assasa al-Ba‘tha, 1992), pp. 490.