Treatises on the Salvation of Abu Talib
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Abstract
Abu Talib b. ‘Abd al-Muttalib was the paternal uncle of the Prophet Muhammad credited for both raising the orphaned child into adulthood and guaranteeing his protection throughout the earliest years of his preaching. According to sources of sira and hadith, Abu Talib's death was a great catastrophe for the Prophet that eventually caused him to emigrate from Mecca. Ironically, Abu Talib is popularly believed to be doomed to Hell for eternity despite a loving relationship with the Prophet and years of sacrifice for him. The source of this belief is Sunni hadith literature, which unequivocally asserts that Abu Talib never converted to Islam. Fred Donner has summarized and analyzed reports regarding Abu Talib's death as a pagan. Agreeing with Goldziher, Donner noted the role of pro-Abbasid and pro-Alid polemics regarding this issue (Fred Donner, “Death of Abū Ṭālib” Death and Love in the Near East (Guilford, Conn: 1987), p. 237-45; Ignaz Goldziher, Muslim Studies, (Chicago: 1971), 2:105). Donner further argued that narratives about Abu Talib's death were composite reports that synthesized various motifs from the Prophet's mission to portray Abu Talib's death as the cause of a number of Qur'anic verses (Qur'an, 9:113-4 and 28:56). While Donner's work largely reviewed reports about Abu Talib's death and damnation, this paper offers a thorough review of theological treatises and reports excluded from Donner's analysis that argue for the salvation of Abu Talib. The various methods by which pro-Alid Sunni and Shi'i writers challenged the hegemonic influence of canonical hadith in Sunni theology is understood through this case study.

The Sunni treatises by Sayyid Muhammad al-Barzanji (d.1103AH), Sayyid Ahmad Zayni Dahlan (d.1304), and the unidentified author of an unpublished manuscript discussed the salvation of individuals who did not convert to Islam and the minimum requirements needed for a valid conversion in the context of Abu Talib's religious affiliation. Evidence suggests the third author is Sayyid Sulayman al-Ladhiqi al-Azhari (flourished circa 1130s-60s AH). Barzanji utilized Ash'ari doctrines, linguistics, second-order interpretations of proof texts, reports excluded from canonical collections, exegesis, and rational proofs such as analogy in his attempt to decisively prove the salvation of the Prophet's parents, all of his ancestors, and in the final chapter, his uncle, Abu Talib. Azhari's manuscript is a very short abridgment of Barzanji's book, while Dahlan’s treatise primarily quotes and supplements Barzanji’s final chapter. The authors upheld the Sufi belief in the primordial “Muhammadan light,” which passed through the loins of his ancestors and finally reached the Prophet and his kin. The writers utilized the concept to argue for their collective purity in striking similarity to Shi'i writers.

The Shi'i authors, al-Shaykh al-Mufid (d.413) and Fikhar b. Ma'd al-Musawi (d.630), largely narrated Twelver Shi'i reports that indicated Abu Talib's faith in the Prophet's revelation and his salvation in the Hereafter. The Shi'i reports portrayed Abu Talib as a devout servant of God who never doubted the prophethood of his nephew. Abu Ṭālib only hid his faith to protect the Prophet from persecution, which he could only accomplish as a respected chief of Mecca, a social standing that would have been forfeited with a public conversion. ‘Abd al-Husayn al-Amini (d. 1392) dialectically restricted himself to the Sunni intellectual tradition to argue the Shi'i view of Abu Talib. While the Shi'i scholars possessed a methodology that permitted the dismissal of Sunni canonical hadith as false without any dilemmas, Sunni theologians were largely forced to acknowledge their authenticity and accommodate them in their arguments. This epistemic difference forced both groups to argue quite differently. The Shi'i authors believed Abu Talib was a believer who hid his faith and faced no divine punishment. They rejected Sunni reports about him in hell as anti-Alid fabrications. In contrast, Sunnis believed in the authenticity of reports about his punishment because they were included in the
canonical collections of Bukhari and Muslim. The sanctity of these two collections and the historicity of their reports are beyond question in popular Sunni culture. Thus, the premise that Abu Talib was going to hell could not be completely dismissed by our Sunni authors. They reasoned that Abu Talib would be temporarily punished due to some error on his part, but would eventually enter heaven.

Those who condemned Abu Talib to hell utilized seemingly irrefutable evidence (the Qur'an and canonical hadith) for a Muslim interlocutor. Transmitters of such hadith recognized the tension in believing that the loyal and beloved uncle of the Prophet was damned by relegating him to the highest place in hell with the least amount of punishment. However, the Sufi and Shi'i writers considered a world in which God would eternally recompense Abu Talib's services in this way to be too gloomy and unjust for their sensibilities. These authors carefully disassociated Qur'anic verses from exegetical traditions condemning Abu Talib and provided alternative interpretations. The hermeneutics of Qur'anic exegesis and hadith played an important role in deposing the authority of canonical hadith that contradict the theological beliefs and allegiances of these authors. Although the Sunni authors were unable to dismiss canonical hadith, they strove to demonstrate the limits of those texts in providing the clearest narratives about the past. Early sira literature included many verses of poetry attributed to Abu Talib in praise of the Prophet. In a number of anecdotes, Abu Talib implicitly appears to be Muslim.

Both the pro-Alid Sunni and the Shi'i tradition collectively quotes verses of poetry and anecdotes to establish Abu Talib's identity as a Muslim. The existence of such evidence in both Sunni canonical collections and early chronicles suggests an implicit, pre-Abbasid acknowledgement of Abu Talib's faith. All of the writers under review have overlooked an Umayyad-era source and an incident reported by both Waqidi and Mada’ini that indicate Abu Talib's identity as a Muslim. These hitherto neglected reports are important because their content suggests their circulation before the birth of polemics regarding Abu Talib's salvation.

Nearly all of the authors under review were descendants of the Prophet and Abu Talib. All of them affiliated with a group that believed in the piety and virtue of the Prophet's ancestors. The religious, social and political identities of hadith transmitters and later writers are significant in determining the method by which they argue Abu Talib's place in the Hereafter.