

A Comparative Study of the Imamate Research Methodology of the Books *Mahasin* by Barqi and *Basa'ir al-Darajat* by Saffar

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ABSTRACT

The primary objective of this research is to conduct a comparative study of Imamate research (imāmat-pizhūhī) in two foundational Shī'ī hadith works from the third century AH: *Al-Mahāsin* by Ahmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khālīd al-Barqī and *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt* by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār. The central question of this research is: With what epistemological approach and through what narrative structure has each work elucidated the station of the Imam and the doctrine of Imamate, and what are the attitudinal differences between them in expounding Imamate? The research hypothesis posits that the theological concerns and intellectual backgrounds of each traditionist (muḥaddith) had a direct influence on their narrative style and the manner of organizing hadiths. The research methodology is descriptive-analytical, based on documentary study and textual analysis. Data were collected and analyzed through examining chapter structures, the arrangement of narratives, and the re-reading of doctrinal content. The findings indicate that both authors—traditionists from Qom in the third century AH—regarded Imamate as the axis of all religious affairs. The difference is that al-Barqī, in *Al-Mahāsin*, adopts a practical and educative (tarbiyī) approach to expounding the doctrine of Imamate, demonstrating the connection between belief in Imamate and the religious life of the believer in areas such as the reward for actions, the punishment for sins, and ethical values. In contrast, al-Ṣaffār, in *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt*, focuses on the stations (maqāmāt), virtues (faḍā'il), and existential levels (marātib-i wujūdī) of the Imams (AS), thereby highlighting the dimension of their knowledge ('ilm). The final synthesis of the research indicates that differences in the authors' goals and epistemic horizons led to two distinct models in Imamate research: one, al-Barqī's ethical-doctrinal (akhlāqī-i-tiqādī) model, which emphasizes the practical outcomes of faith; and the other, al-Ṣaffār's faith-based-epistemic (īmānī-ma'rifātī) model, which focuses on the unseen dimensions and existential stations of the Imams. Together, these present a comprehensive and two-dimensional picture of Imamate research among early Shī'ī traditionists.

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1. Introduction

With the decline of the Kufan hadith school and the transfer of the Imāmī scholarly heritage to Qom, a new phase in the history of Shī'ī hadith and theology unfolded. During this period, Imāmī scholarly literature was organized around the axis of hadith. The style of the Qom school was characterized by reliance on narration (*riwāya*), the exposition of religious knowledge (*ma'ārif*) within the linguistic framework of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), and an insistence on not deviating from hadithic language. Among the prominent works of this school, five books occupy a special place in the domain of Imamate: *Al-Maḥāsin* by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn Khālīd al-Barqī; *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt* by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī; *Al-Kāfī* by Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī; *Al-Imāma wa-l-Tabṣira min al-Ḥayra* by 'Alī ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī; and *Kamāl al-Dīn wa Itmām al-Ni'ma* by al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (Ibn Bābawayh).

These five works demonstrate the gradual development of Qomī hadithic thought—from a purely narration-centered approach in *Al-Maḥāsin* and *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt*, to the analytical and argumentative literature in *Al-Kāfī* and *Al-Imāma wa-l-Tabṣira*, and finally to *Kamāl al-Dīn*. Within this historical context, the question of Imamate became one of the most prominent topics of this school. Among the earliest Imāmī hadith compilations in Qom, two works—*Al-Maḥāsin* and *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt*—are among the most important sources that directly or indirectly address the exposition of the doctrine of Imamate. Although these two works were not compiled directly under the title "The Book of Imamate," the doctrinal foundations concerning Imamate permeate their entirety.

Al-Maḥāsin by al-Barqī is among the earliest Imāmī hadith collections that encompasses juridical (*fiqhī*), ethical (*akhlāqī*), and doctrinal (*i'tiqādī*) chapters. In this book, although Imamate does not have an independent chapter, teachings concerning Imamate are manifested throughout the work and under various topics. In contrast, *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt* by al-Ṣaffār focuses directly and extensively on the virtues (*faḍā'il*) and knowledge (*'ulūm*) of the Imams (AS). The primary objective of this research is to examine and analyze the difference between *Al-Maḥāsin* and *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt* as two foundational sources in the formation of the Imāmī intellectual system concerning the station of the Imam. By focusing on the structure of narration, the internal logic of deriving Imamate teachings, and the theoretical model governing Imamate research in these two works, this study seeks to compare Imamate research in these two works.

Despite both books sharing the objective of establishing the Imam's station as the divine proof (*ḥujjat Allāh*), the manner in which the traditions are presented and organized exhibits significant differences. Understanding these differences contributes to a more precise comprehension of the historical

process of the formation of different methods of Imamate research in theological schools. The comparative study of these two works reveals the trajectory of the evolution of attitudes in the exposition of the subject of Imamate—an endeavor of great scholarly value for hadith studies and the history of Imāmī thought.

2. Methodology

To date, no independent comparative studies have been conducted concerning the differences in Imamate research between these two authors. Existing works have largely focused on the chain-of-transmission (sanad) or content analysis of the hadiths, without attending to the epistemological approach of the authors. Therefore, the present research, employing a descriptive-analytical approach based on documentary study and intra-textual-comparative analysis, seeks to reveal the epistemological and attitudinal differences between the two works in order to fill the lacuna in previous studies.

The research proceeds through the following stages:

Stage One: Data Collection — The primary sources for this research are the two hadith works under examination: *Al-Maḥāsin* by Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Barqī and *Baṣā'ir al-Darajāt* by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār. Data were collected through careful examination of the structure of chapters (abwāb), the arrangement of narratives, and the re-reading of doctrinal content.

Stage Two: Structural Analysis — The two works are analyzed with attention to: (a) the overall organization and chapter divisions; (b) the selection and arrangement of hadiths; (c) the narrative strategies employed in presenting traditions concerning Imamate; (d) the thematic emphasis and recurrent motifs.

Stage Three: Epistemological Analysis — The study examines the epistemological assumptions underlying each work, including: (a) the conception of the nature and scope of Imamate; (b) the understanding of the Imam's station, authority, and knowledge; (c) the relationship between belief in Imamate and other dimensions of religious life.

Stage Four: Comparative Synthesis — The findings from the structural and epistemological analyses are synthesized through a comparative framework to identify the distinct models of Imamate research represented by each work.

3. Findings

The findings of this research demonstrate that both authors regarded Imamate as the axis of all religious affairs. However, the manner in which they approached this doctrine and its elaboration is markedly different:

3.1. Al-Barqī's Method in *Al-Maḥāsin* (The Educative-Vilāyī Approach)

Al-Barqī, in *Al-Maḥāsin*, presents Imamate not as an independent theological discussion but within an educative (tarbīṭī), ethical (akhlāqī), and faith-based (īmānī) context. *Al-Maḥāsin* is a vast collection of juridical and ethical

traditions, and al-Barqī organized the hadiths according to their content and practical function—beginning with topics of ritual purity (ṭahāra) and prayer and proceeding to ethical virtues and esoteric sciences (‘ulūm-i bāṭinī). Imamate in this book does not possess an "independent chapter"; rather, it constitutes the spirit and essence of all the chapters. His method is ethical and theological admonition (inzār-i akhlāqī wa kalāmī), similar to the style of works such as *Thawāb al-A‘māl wa ‘Iqāb al-A‘māl* (The Reward and Punishment of Actions).

He emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the Imam, the importance of affirming his wilāya (spiritual authority), the consequences of breaking the covenant concerning Imamate, and love for the Imam as the foundation of faith. He regards Imamate within the sphere of wilāya and obedience, and as the criterion for measuring actions and salvation in the hereafter. His objective is to cultivate a believing individual who is devout and adorned with divine ethics.

3.2. Al-Ṣaffār's Method in *Baṣā’ir al-Darajāt* (The Epistemic-Faith-Based Approach)

Through a careful examination of the chapters and structure of the book, we arrive at the conclusion that *Baṣā’ir al-Darajāt* is an entirely "Imāmī" book. It appears that al-Ṣaffār's objective in this work is to elucidate the levels and stations of individuals in relation to Imamate. In other words, the book seeks to introduce the hierarchical system (nizām-i ṭabaqātī) of human beings and the station of each based on their proximity to Imamate. The title of the book is somewhat similar to the title of *Al-Ṣafwa* (The Elite), which has a longer history predating al-Ṣaffār. Through the composition of *Baṣā’ir al-Darajāt*, al-Ṣaffār seeks to demonstrate how the rank and value of human beings are determined on the basis of the category of Imamate. Accordingly, the value of human beings commences with the Imam, extends to those who submit to him and his followers, and ultimately concludes with those who are outside this circle.

In this book, the term "knowledge" (‘ilm) plays a key role in introducing Imamate. Al-Ṣaffār, in *Baṣā’ir al-Darajāt*, focusing on the existential stations and inner dimensions of Imamate, emphasizes its scientific and epistemological aspects. The main axis of the book is based on the "knowledge of Imamate" (‘ilm al-imāma) and the relationship between the community and the Imam. The principal sections (Parts 1 through 9) are devoted to topics such as the obligation of seeking knowledge, the reward of the scholar, the superiority of the scholar over the worshipper, and the necessity of acquiring knowledge from its source (the Imams).

Although the emphasis is on knowledge, the tenth part of the book moves toward establishing the absolute authority (ḥujjiyat-i muṭlaqa) of the Imam. Topics such as "the earth is never devoid of a proof" (lan takhluwa al-arḍ min ḥujja) and "if only two people remain, one of them is the proof" demonstrate that al-Ṣaffār, after establishing the scientific station of the Imam, ultimately places his objective in elucidating "the Imam as the divine proof" and "the sole guide to guidance."

4. Conclusion

The difference in the authors' objectives and epistemic horizons has led to the development of two distinct models in Imamate studies: the "ethical-doctrinal model" (alghū-yi akhlāqī-i 'tiqādī)—which views Imamate in its practical and ethical function in the life of the believer; and in contrast, al-Ṣaffār's "epistemic-faith-based model" (alghū-yi ma'rifatī-īmānī)—which defines Imamate in terms of its scientific station and absolute authority. These two models clearly demonstrate the difference in Imamate research among the great figures of early Imāmī thought, with one path focusing on practical cultivation and the other on the elucidation of epistemological and existential foundations.

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