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LINDSAY JONES
EDITOR IN CHIEF

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Encyclopedia of Religion, Second Edition

Lindsay Jones, Editor in Chief

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COLETTE CAILLAT (1987 AND 2005)

AHL AL-BAYT. The conception of the *ahl al-bayt*, “people of the house,” “family,” or “household” of the prophet Muḥammad plays a vital role in Islamic thought and piety. In the *tashahhud* portion of the ritual prayers, Muslims of all persuasions supplicate daily, “O God! Bless Muḥammad and his family (*āḥ*), as you blessed Abraham and his family.”

Qurʾanic prophetology is pregnant with the notion of a hallowed lineage. God's chosen messengers among the Israelites are believed to have been descended from one another, as the Qurʾān states: “Truly, God chose Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham, and the family of ʿImrān above all the worlds, offspring, one after the other” (III:33–34). The Qurʾān portrays the chosen among the families and descendants (*āḥ*, *ahl*, *qurbā*, and *dhurriyya*) of the prophets as supportive of the messengers during their missions and included in God's merciful protection. They are often the prophets' material and spiritual legatees, heirs with respect to kingship (*mulk*), rule (*ḥukm*), wisdom (*ḥikma*), the book (*kitāb*) and the imamate (IV:54, VI:84–91, XXIX:27, XXXVII:76–77, LVII:26).

As with the families of the previous prophets, Muḥammad's family is accorded a special status in the Qurʾān, the prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth*), and the schools of religious law. At the outset of Muḥammad's mission, God commands him: “Warn your nearest kin (*al-aqrabīn*), and lower your wing to the faithful who follow you” (XXVI:214–215). The Qurʾān also makes certain monetary considerations for the Prophet's relations (*dhī'l-qurbā*) (VIII:41, LIX:7), and on account of the sanctified status of the prophetic family, Muslim legal practice dictates that Muḥammad and his clan not touch the alms of the community, lest such defilements (*awsākh*) pollute them. The purity of the family is most famously attested to in the verse known as *tathīr* (purification): “God desires only to remove impurity from you, O People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*), and to purify you completely” (XXXIII:33).

Muslim tradition, in accordance with the widely reported *ḥadīth al-kisā'* or *al-'abā'*, generally identifies Muḥammad himself; his daughter, Fāṭima; her husband and the cousin of the Prophet, ʿAlī; and the Prophet's two grandsons by this marriage, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, as the nucle-

us of the “house.” Shiism also allows for the *imāms* and, in a looser sense, other righteous progeny descended from ʿAlī and Fāṭima to be accounted as part of the family, while some Sunnī reports expand the term to include the Prophet's wives or the collateral branches of his relations, such as, the ʿAbbāsids or even the Umayyads. Al-Nabhānī provides a survey of reports on who is included among the *ahl al-bayt* (*al-Sharaf al-mu'abbad li-āl Muḥammad*, Cairo, 1381/1961, pp. 10–34). It is, however, in light of the *ḥadīth al-kisā'* or *al-'abā'*, the “tradition of the mantle,” that both Shī'ī and Sunnī commentators overwhelmingly interpret the verse of *tathīr*. According to this account, the Prophet wrapped himself and the other four members of his family in his mantle, solemnly declaring, “O God, these are the People of my House (*ahl baytī*)!” He then recited the Qurʾanic verse of purification. Frequently this incident is connected with the episode of *mubāhala* (mutual imprecation), which relates to the visit of a delegation of Christians from Najrān in the year 631–632. The accounts relate that there was a dispute regarding Christology and it was decided to resort to the ritual of “mutual imprecation” to decide which party was in the right, that of Muḥammad or that of the Christian delegation. Thus Muḥammad is commanded in the Qurʾān III:61: “If anyone dispute with you in this matter [concerning Jesus] after the knowledge that has come to you, say: Come, let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, ourselves and yourselves, then let us swear an oath and place the curse of God on those who lie.” Accordingly, the five members of the *ahl al-bayt* gathered for the ritual. However, the *mubāhala* is said to have been averted when the Christian side reached a conciliation with the Prophet.

In traditions recorded in both Shī'ī and Sunnī sources, the Prophet likens his family to Noah's ark, saying: “Among you, my *ahl al-bayt* is like the Ark of Noah. Whoso embarks therein is saved and whoso lags behind is drowned.” In the well-known report known as the *ḥadīth al-shaqalayn* (the tradition of the two weighty things), likewise found in both Shī'ī and Sunnī sources, he is reported to have said: “Verily, I am leaving with you two weighty things, the Book of God and my progeny, my *ahl al-bayt*. So long as you cling to these two, you will never go astray. Truly, they will not be parted from each other until they join me at the fountain [in paradise].”

In the Qurʾān XLII:23, Muḥammad is commanded to address his disciples as follows, “Say: I do not ask you for any recompense for this [the apostleship] save love for the kinsfolk (*al-qurbā*).” Here, “kinsfolk” is largely understood to be the Prophet's kinsfolk, though divergent interpretations exist as well. The general attitude is well represented in a statement of al-Shāfi'ī (d. 820), the eponymous founder of one of the four predominant Sunnī schools of jurisprudence, who is quoted as saying: “O members of the House of the Prophet, love for you is a duty to God that He has revealed in the Qurʾān. With respect to your great magnificence, it suffices to say that anyone who does not invoke blessings for

you has not performed the daily prayer" (al-Nabhānī, p. 184). Along the same lines, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 765), a descendant of the Prophet and one of the Shī'ī *imāms*, declares: "Everything has a foundation, and the foundation of Islam is loving us, the Prophet's family" (Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī, *Kitāb al-maḥāsīn*, Najaf, 1964, p. 113). Certainly primarily Shī'ī, traditions also assign a numinous role to the family. The five family members are envisioned as beings of light, existing in pre-creation, whose names are derived from God's most beautiful names (see, for example, Furāt b. Ibrāhīm b. Furāt al-Kūfī, *Tafsīr Furāt al-Kūfī*, Najaf: al-Maṭba'a al-Ḥaidariyya, n.d., p. 11). Such reports provided fecund material for mystical speculation. In his Gujarati composition *Muman Chitvenī*, for example, the fourteenth-century Ismailī sage Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn interprets this idea by describing how the Almighty placed the pole star (*quṭb*), luminous by the light of the five holy ones, in the firmament at the time of creation. Its brilliance was so overwhelming, however, that the heavens began to tremble uncontrollably. Only when the name 'Alī was written on the corners of the universe was stability restored (*To munīvar moṭī*, Mumbai: Dhī Khojā Sindhī Chhāpākhānūm, 1905, p. 3).

A number of designations, roughly synonymous with the term *ahl al-bayt*, became popular in the Muslim world. In the more restrictive sense, terms such as *ahl* (or *āl*) *al-kisā* (or *al-'abā*), "the people of the mantle," or in Persian-speaking and Persian-influenced areas, *panj tan-i pāk*, "the five pure ones," are prevalent, while in the more general sense of the descendants of the Prophet, epithets such as *āl al-nabī*, *āl al-rasūl* or *āl yāsīn* are widespread.

Throughout Islamic history, the descendants of the Prophet, often styled as *sayyids* or *sharīfs*, have been the focus of particular respect. Shī'ī *imāms*, along with many Ṣūfī *shaykhs*, Sunnī political leaders and Muslim religious scholars of various persuasions, have often drawn tremendous legitimacy and authority from their illustrious descent from the Prophet. In modern times one may cite the *imām* of the Ismailīs, Prince Karim Aga Khan, and the ruling families of Morocco and Jordan as cases in point. The descendants of the *ahl al-bayt* have frequently formed a distinct social class in Muslim societies, sometimes even recognizable by distinguishing forms of dress, the green turban being particularly noteworthy. At the same time, a conception exists of a spiritual *ahl al-bayt*, sometimes referred to as the *bayt al-wahy*, "the house of prophecy," into which the devotees of the prophetic family may be initiated, while unrighteous blood relations may be excluded. Thus one has the Prophet's celebrated dictum about his Persian disciple: "Salmān is one of us, the *ahl al-bayt*."

The theme of devotion to the members of the family has touched many aspects of Islamic piety, literature, architecture, iconography, and mystical thought through the ages. For example, the great poet 'Abd al-Raḥmān Jāmī (d. 1492), an initiate of the Naqshbandī Ṣūfī order, declares

that praise of the *ahl al-bayt* ennobles the encomiast (*Mathnawīhā-yi Haft Awrang*, Tehran, 1351 S/1972, p. 145), while Sanā'ī (d. 1121), in a section of his *Ḥadīqa*, pleads for divine pardon in the name of his love for the Prophet's kinsfolk (*Ḥadīqat al-ḥaqīqa wa shari'at al-ṭarīqa*, ed. Mudarris Raḍawī, Tehran, 1329 S/1950, pp. 642–643). Remarkably, domestic architecture in parts of Tajikistan and Xinjiang is centered on five columns, interpreted by the inhabitants as representative of the five purified ones of the Prophet's family. In the early twenty-first century the members of the Prophet's household continue to be celebrated in songs and invoked in prayers and are even the subjects of numerous web pages on the internet.

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