

Review and Critique of the Book “Sayyid Taj al-Din Husayni Awi”

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Abstract

The book *Sayyid Taj al-Din Husayni Awi* by the Iranian historian Muhammad Saeed Najati is, to our knowledge, the only work in the Arab and Islamic worlds that addresses in some detail the lineage, life, and martyrdom of Sayyid Taj al-Din. Like other books, it contains many points that merit comment, which we indicate in this modest critical article. And God grant success.

Keywords: Sayyid Taj al-Din, Shi'i scholars

1. Introduction

The book *Sayyid Taj al-Din Husayni Awi* by Professor Muhammad Saeed Najati, the official responsible for pilgrimage and visitation affairs in the Islamic Republic of Iran, was first printed and published in Tehran in 2014. It is an important work that acquaints readers with a Muslim scholar whose lineage traces back to the blessed Prophetic Household. Because it is, to our knowledge, the only book in the Arab and Islamic worlds that treats the life of the venerable Sayyid Taj al-Din, the two researchers resolved to review and critique it to make it more accessible to readers in our region. As the book is written in Persian, we extend our thanks to Dr. Hadi Sahib Idan al-Badrawi for translating it into Arabic, which made this review and critique possible.

2. Results and Discussion

Review and Critique of the Book

The author, Professor Muhammad Saeed Najati, opens with an introduction stating his aim to acquaint readers with the lineage and life of Sayyid Taj al-Din Awi and to set out the injustices suffered by a descendant of Imam 'Ali. What may be noted against the author is that he did not divide the book in the table of contents into chapters and sections. He settled instead on selecting main headings, each of which contains its own subheadings.

Najati begins with a first section defining Sayyid Taj al-Din and his lineage. He states that Taj al-Din is Sayyid Muhammad Awi [1] or Awji [2], kunya Abu al-Fadl, the son of Majd al-Din Husayn ibn 'Ali, a descendant of Imam 'Ali al-Sajjad ('a). He gives the full lineage as follows: Sayyid Taj al-Din, Abu al-Fadl Muhammad ibn Majd al-Din al-Husayn ibn 'Ali ibn Zayd ibn al-Da'i ibn Zayd ibn 'Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn al-Hasan al-Taj ibn Abu al-Hasan 'Ali ibn Abu Muhammad al-Hasan al-Naqib al-Ra'i's ibn 'Ali ibn Muhammad ibn 'Ali ibn 'Ali ibn al-Hasan

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al-Faṣṣ ibn ‘Ali al-Asghar ibn Imam Zayn al-‘Abidin The author does well to draw on a number of reliable historical sources that affirm Taj al-Din's affiliation with the ‘Alid sayyids [3].

among them ‘Ubayd Allah al-Wasiti (d. 787 AH) [4]. He also notes the claims of some historians, such as Waṣṣaf al-Shirazi, author of *Tarikh-i Waṣṣaf*, who denied Taj al-Din's ‘Alid descent. He then returns to Ibn ‘Inaba (d. 828 AH), who refuted those claims and confirmed Taj al-Din's ‘Alid lineage [5]. According to some historians, Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah, the physician, falsified Taj al-Din's genealogy to persuade the Ilkhanid ruler Oljeitu to shed his blood [6]. Some historians counted this episode as the reason certain sources later cast doubt on Taj al-Din's lineage [7].

The author then turns back and sets a side heading to introduce Taj al-Din's forefathers. Over roughly twenty pages of the book's total eighty-four, he details the lives of Hasan Aftas, then his son ‘Ali, then Radi al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad Awi. He also devotes further sections to the city of Awa and to the Awi clan to which Taj al-Din belongs.

On the place of Taj al-Din's birth and his studies, the author limits himself to two general reports: first, that he was born in the city of Awa or Abe near the city of Saveh [8]; second, that he was born in Kufa [9]. Najati overlooks the views of other researchers, such as Haidar al-Jadd and ‘Amer Hadi al-Dhārb, who suggested that Taj al-Din may have been born and raised in the city of Dhi al-Kifl [7]. As for his education, the author states very briefly that in his youth Taj al-Din studied the religious sciences in the Najaf seminary and later became one of the leading scholars and preachers of his time [10]. On his family life, the author notes that Taj al-Din married Lady Malik Sharaf, daughter of Radi al-Din Muhammad Awi [10], who bore him three children: Shams al-Din Husayn, Sharaf al-Din ‘Ali al-Murtada, and Nusrat Malik [11].

Another section, “The Role of Taj al-Din in the Conversion of Muhammad Khudabanda (Oljeitu),” opens with general information on the early Mongol rulers: Ghazan Khan's conversion to Islam in 694 AH, the succession of his son Oljeitu, and Oljeitu's own conversion in 709 AH. It relates that he then convened debates between Shafi‘i and Hanafi scholars, after which he deemed both schools invalid and became hesitant about his conviction in Islam. He therefore decided to convene further debates among other Islamic schools. In this context Taj al-Din Awi prepared the ground for ‘Allama al-Hilli to appear before Oljeitu and played a significant role in convincing him to adopt the Shi‘i madhhab [12]. Other historians also state that Taj al-Din, together with many leading Shi‘i scholars, had an important role in persuading Oljeitu to embrace the Shi‘i school [13].

The author then sets a main heading, “Naqib al-Nuqaba.” He reports that after Oljeitu's adoption of the Shi‘i school, he appointed Taj al-Din as *Naqib Nuqaba’ al-Mamalik al-Islamiyya* in the Ilkhanid state [14]. In that period, the title *naqib* was given to anyone commissioned by the government to lead and administer the affairs of his group and discipline them, in addition to overseeing matters of adjudication, *ḥisba*, endowments, and the registration of their genealogies [15]. The title *Naqib al-Nuqaba’* denoted the official supervising all the *nuqaba’* of the ‘Abbasid and Talibid families within the Ilkhanid realm [15]. On this basis, Taj al-Din's duties while serving as *Naqib al-Nuqaba’* included verifying the lineage claims of those who asserted descent from Imam ‘Ali (‘a), administering endowments, and safeguarding the interests and rights of the Shi‘i community before state institutions [16]. Najati then briefly lists Taj al-Din's chief achievements in office. First, he confiscated the cemetery and shrine of Dhu al-Kifl from the Jews in 710 AH and barred them from approaching it, establishing there a mosque where the congregational and Friday prayers were held [17]. Second, he ordered the digging of the Tajiyya Canal to bring water to the city of Najaf [18].

The author then turns to another issue that occupies a large part of the book: the martyrdom of Taj al-Din. He treats it in some detail and sets out four factors that led to his killing:

A. Confiscation of the Dhu al-Kifl cemetery and shrine

Najati relates that Taj al-Din's confiscation of the site from the Jews aroused their resentment and anger, and that this prepared the ground for his killing by the Jewish minority present at the Mongol court since the time of Arghun. He writes: “Rashid al-Din

Fadl Allah, the physician of Jewish origin and lineage, played a role in inciting the Mongol ruler to kill Taj al-Din,” noting that some historical reports say he embraced Islam late in life and rose in Oljeitu’s court due to his medical skill [19]. The author also cites historians who believed Rashid al-Din’s Islam was only outward and that he in fact remained attached to Judaism [20], while others held that he was truly Muslim and set aside his Jewish origin [21]. For our part, we think Rashid al-Din may have embraced Islam, yet continued to feel an attachment to his origins.

B. The standing of Taj al-Din

Najati writes: “Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah envied Taj al-Din for the high standing he enjoyed with the Mongol ruler.” Rashid al-Din therefore tried by every means to persuade Oljeitu to adopt the Shafi‘i school, but failed utterly, because the ruler was under the influence of Shi‘i figures, especially Taj al-Din, who was respected at court and among the people [22].

C. The abuse of power by Taj al-Din’s sons

The author states: “Taj al-Din appointed his son Shams al-Din Husayn as naqib of the Ashraf of Iraq, and Shams al-Din abused his position, especially by stealing the funds of the sayyids of Iraq.” In other words, the injustice committed by Shams al-Din caused the sayyids of Iraq to resent him and his father [23]. As complaints increased, Rashid al-Din advised Oljeitu to hand Taj al-Din and his sons over to their opponents among the Iraqi sayyids so that he would face them directly. At the same time the vizier reassured Oljeitu that no harm would befall Taj al-Din. In reality, Rashid al-Din bore enmity toward him. As Ibn ‘Inaba reports: “Rashid al-Din promised a number of well-known sayyids of Iraq that he would grant them the office of naqib al-ashraf if they would kill Taj al-Din.” Many sayyids rejected this and even emigrated to avoid it, but in the end Sayyid Jalal al-Din Ibrahim ibn Mukhtar, son of the former naqib al-ashraf of Najaf, responded to Rashid al-Din’s wishes and declared his readiness to kill Taj al-Din and his sons [23].

D. Taj al-Din’s relationship with Sa‘d al-Din Savaji

The author writes: “Sa‘d al-Din Savaji was a prominent figure who made his way to the Mongol court in 697 AH and became one of its Shi‘i viziers. There was a kind of rivalry between him and Rashid al-Din” [24]. Sa‘d al-Din was executed in 711 AH on charges of conspiring against the ruler and of financial corruption. Najati relates that some historians saw the intense rivalry between Savaji and Rashid al-Din as a cause of the former’s death. He also cites other reports on Taj al-Din’s killing, including Hamd Allah Mustawfi’s view that “the original reason for killing Taj al-Din was his connection to Sa‘d al-Din Savaji, Rashid al-Din’s powerful rival” [18]. In the same vein he cites al-Safadi’s report that “Taj al-Din’s killing occurred after the Mongol ruler’s anger at Sa‘d al-Din Savaji” [25].

Najati then adds a subheading: “Avenging the Blood of Taj al-Din.” He presents several accounts, including Ibn ‘Inaba’s report that Sayyid ‘Izz al-Din Talib Aftasi Dalqandi, Taj al-Din’s cousin, secured an order from Amir Juyan to kill Rashid al-Din Fadl Allah on the charge of plotting against the Mongol khan [26]. Najati further states that Rashid al-Din’s son was killed before his father’s eyes, and he treats the episode as a lesson of history [27]. He then cites appraisals of Taj al-Din’s character: Ibn al-Tiqtaqa counted him among the leading sayyids of his time, describing him as eminent, pious, and respected among the people [28]; ‘Abd al-Husayn Amini counted him among the notable leaders of Shi‘i scholars and among the foremost scholarly and literary figures of his age [29].

The final section of the book discusses at length the shrine and tomb of Taj al-Din. It states that the tomb is located in the city of al-Hafriya, north of Wasit Province [22]. The site dates to 1890 CE and was established on the basis of a vision someone saw and a stone slab found there afterward inscribed: “al-Naqib Abu al-Fadl Taj al-Din al-Aftasi al-Husayni.” People then built a mud room over it that stood for forty years. Over the years the shrine saw renovations and rebuilding. In 1940 the mud structure was replaced with fired brick [30] and later restorations followed. In 2011 the shrine was renewed with a large courtyard and a great dome. The total area of the shrine complex is about 2,500 m², and the interior area is about 440 m² [22].

Overall, the book contains valuable and varied information and is written in an engaging manner that attracts readers interested in Islamic history and the heritage of Ahl al-Bayt. Nevertheless, several points merit note:

1. The book lacks chapters and sections; the author relied only on main and subheadings in the table of contents.
2. Although the title indicates a focus on the person of Taj al-Din Awi, the body of the work in fact treats other events and matters not directly related to the topic, such as detailed discussion of the early Mongol sultans and the conditions of Najaf in the eighteenth century.
3. Some sources used in the book are weak, and in places the footnotes are very sparse. This burdens the reader with expending extra time to verify and trace those sources.

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