

# Shaykh Ahmad

*For the Indian Naqshbandi Sufi scholar, see Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi.*

**Shaykh Ahmad ibn Zayn al-Dín ibn Ibráhím al-Ahsá'í** (Arabic: **شيخ أحمد بن زين إبراهيم الأحسائي**) (1753–1826) was the founder of a 19th-century Shi`i school in the Persian and Ottoman empires, whose followers are known as Shaykhís.

He was a native of the Al-Ahsa region (Eastern Arabian Peninsula), educated in Bahrain and the theological centers of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq.<sup>[1]</sup> Spending the last twenty years of his life in Iran, he received the protection and patronage of princes of the Qajar dynasty.<sup>[2]</sup>



Shaykh Ahmad

## Contents

### History

Early life

Education and Mission

Founding the Shaykhi School

### Successor

### Published works

### See also

### Notes

### Scholarly European language sources

### External links

## History

### Early life

Little is documented about the early life of Shaykh Ahmad, except that he was born in Ahsa, in the northeast of the Arabian peninsula, to a Shi'i family of Sunni origin in either the year 1166 AH (1753 CE), or 1157 AH (1744 CE). Nabíl-i-A`zam, a Baha'i historian, documents his spiritual awakening in his book *The Dawn-Breakers* as follows:

He observed how those who professed the Faith of Islam had shattered its unity, sapped its force, perverted its purpose, and degraded its holy name. His soul was filled with anguish at the sight of the corruption and strife which characterised the Shí'ah sect of Islam.... Forsaking his home and kindred, on one of the islands of Bahrayn, to the south of the Persian Gulf, he set out,... to unravel the mysteries of those verses of Islamic Scriptures which foreshadowed the advent of a new Manifestation [revelation].... There burned in his soul the conviction that no reform, however drastic, within the Faith of Islam, could achieve the regeneration of this perverse people. He knew,... that nothing short of a new and independent Revelation, as attested and foreshadowed by the sacred Scriptures of Islam, could revive the fortunes and restore the purity of that decadent Faith.

While it is unclear how much of Nabil's interpretation is consistent with Shaykh Ahmad's true feelings, the underlying motivations for reform, and ultimately for messianic expectation, become somewhat clearer

## Education and Mission

Shaykh Ahmad, at about age forty (1784 or 1794 - circa), began to study in earnest in the Shi'i centres of religious scholarship such as Karbala and Najaf. He attained sufficient recognition in such circles to be declared a mujtahid, an interpreter of Islamic Law. He contended with Sufi and Neo-Platonist scholars, and attained a positive reputation among their detractors. He declared that all knowledge and sciences were contained (in essential form) within the Quran, and that to excel in the sciences, all knowledge must be gleaned from the Quran. To this end he developed systems of interpretation of the Quran and sought to inform himself of all the sciences current in the Muslim world.

He also evinced a veneration of the Imams, even beyond the extent of his pious contemporaries and espoused heterodox views on the afterlife, the resurrection and end-times, as well as medicine and cosmology. His views on the soul posited a "subtle body" separate from, and associated with the physical body. It was this body that ascended into Heaven, he posited, when Muhammad was said to have bodily ascended, and this also altered his views on the occultation of the Imam Muhammad al-Mahdi. His views resulted in his denunciation by several learned clerics, and he engaged in many debates before moving on to Persia where he settled for a time in the province of Yazd. It was in Yazd that much of his books and letters were written.

## Founding the Shaykhi School

Juan Cole summarizes the situation at the advent of the Shaykhi School, and the questions that were unfolding as his views crystallized and he acquired an early following:

When Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i wrote, there was no Shaykhi school, which only crystallized after his death. He saw himself as a mainstream Shi'ite, not as a sectarian leader. Yet he clearly innovated in Shi'i thought in ways that, toward the end of his life, sparked great controversy. Among the contentious arenas he entered was that of the nature of religious authority. He lived at a time when his branch of Islam was deeply divided on the role of the Muslim learned man. Was he an exemplar to be emulated by the laity without fail, or merely the first among equals, bound by a literal interpretation of the sacred text just as was everyone else? Or was he, as the Sufis maintained, a pole channeling the grace of God to those less enlightened than himself? How may we situate Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i with regard to these contending visions of Shi'i Islam?<sup>[3]</sup>

Moojan Momen in his *Introduction to Shi'i Islam* (George Ronald, Oxford, 1985) states that many mujtahids were afraid that the Shaykh's preference for intuitive knowledge, which he claimed to obtain directly by inspiration from the Imams, would seriously undermine the authority of their position. Momen has some interesting and useful commentary on Shaykh Ahmad's doctrines and his succession during which the conflict with Shi'i orthodoxy intensified.<sup>[4]</sup>

## Successor

Shaykh Ahmad appointed Kazim Rashti as his successor,<sup>[5]</sup> who led the Shaykhí movement until his death. He taught his students how to recognize the Mahdi and the Masih (the returned Jesus). After his death in 1843, many of his students spread out around Iraq and Iran to search for a new leader

## Published works

- *Sharh al-Fawa'id* Lithographed. N.P. (Tabriz: 1856).
- *Jawami' al-Kalim* Lithographed. N.P. (Tabriz: 1856-59).
- *Sharh al-Masha'ir* Lithographed. N.P. (Tehran: 1861).
- *Sharh al-'Arshiyya* Lithographed. N.P. (Tehran: 1861).

- *Sharh al-Ziyara al-Jami'a al-Kabira Chapkhaneh Sa'adat*(Kirman: 1972), 4 Volumes.
- *Rasa'il al-Hikma. Al-Da'ira al-'Alamiyya*(Beirut: 1993).

## See also

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- [Bábism](#)
- [Bahá'í Faith](#)
- [Islam](#)

## Notes

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1. Nabíl-i-Zarandí (1932). Shoghi Effendi (Translator), ed. *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabí's Narrative* (<http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/nz/DB/db-20.html#pg2>)(Hardcover ed.). Wilmette, Illinois, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 2. ISBN 0-900125-22-5
2. Nabíl-i-Zarandí (1932). Shoghi Effendi (Translator), ed. *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabí's Narrative* (<http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/nz/DB/db-20.html#pg7>)(Hardcover ed.). Wilmette, Illinois, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust. p. 7. ISBN 0-900125-22-5
3. Shayh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i on Authority(<http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jrcole/ahsai1.htm>)
4. \*Momen, Moojan(1985). *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism*. Yale University Press. p. 229. ISBN 0-300-03499-7.
5. Corbin, Henry, *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth: From Mazdean Iran to Shi'ite Iran*, Tans. Nancy Pearson, Bollingen Series XCI:2, Princeton University Press

## Scholarly European language sources

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- A-L-M Nicolas. *Essai sur le cheikhisme* Paul Geuthner (Paris: 1910), 2 Volumes.
- Henry Corbin *L'ecole Shaykhie en Theologie Shi'ite Taban* (Tehran: 1967).
- Henry Corbin. *En islam iranien*. Galimard (Paris: 1972), vol. 4.
- Rafati, Vahid (1979). *The Development of Shaykhi Thought in Shi'i Islam*Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Los Angeles.
- Denis Maceoin. S.V. "**Ahsa'i, Shaikh Ahmad b. Zayn al-Din**" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 3 vols. - (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983 - ).
- Denis MacEoin *The Messiah of Shiraz* Brill (Leyden, 2008).
- Momen, Moojan(1991). *The Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i: A Bibliography*
- Juan Cole. "*The World as Text: Cosmologies of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i*" in *Studia Islamica*, No. 80. (1994), pp. 145–163.
- Idris Samawi Hamid. *The Metaphysics and Cosmology of Process According to Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'i*(Ph.D. dissertation: State University of New York at Buffalo, 1998).
- Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi. "*Une absence remplie de présences. Herméneutiques de l'occultation chez les Shaykhiyya (Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine VII)*" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* Vol. 64, No. 1. (2001), pp. 1–18.

## External links

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- *Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i* Iranica
- [alabar.com](#) for more information about Shaykhi teachings. (This site is in the Arabic language.)
- [Early Shaykhism](#)- Some biographical notes, translations and studies
- [Collected Works of Shaykh Ahmad al-Ahsa'iat H-Bahai Discussion Network](#)

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