



ABŪ ʿĪSĀ EŞFAHĀNĪ

ABŪ ʿĪSĀ EŞFAHĀNĪ, founder of the ʿĪsāwīya, an obscure Jewish sect in Islamic times. The sources dealing with Abū ʿĪsā and his movement are scanty and often fragmentary. No mention is made of him in the medieval chronicles, an indication that the movement which he led was of little political consequence. There are, however, slight references to the ʿĪsāwīya in the heresiographical literature, particularly in Šahrestānī (d. 548/1153) and in the Karaite writer Qerqesānī's *Ketāb al-anwār wa'l-marāqeb* (ca. 329/939). Neither of these authors nor the authorities they quote were contemporary with the origins of the sect, and it is likely that the account of the ʿĪsāwīya was embellished by the time it saw light.

Abū ʿĪsā (some authors give his first name as Obadiah) is reported to have revolted against the Islamic authorities in Isfahan. The date of the event is disputed. The Karaite source indicates that he revolted in the days of the Omayyad caliph ʿAbd-al-Malek b. Marwān (65-86/685-705). On the other hand, Šahrestānī specifies that he lived in the time of Manšūr (136-58/754-75), although his mission began during the reign of Marwān II (126-32/744-50). The sparse details of the revolt seem to indicate a Jewish development parallel to the appearance of numerous pro-Shīʿite sects with messianic overtones during the final years of the Omayyad caliphate.

The final defeat of the Omayyads brought to power the dynasty of the ʿAbbasids, whose revolutionary propaganda also stressed the coming of a new age. Following the murder of [Abū Moslem](#) by the caliph Manšūr, local insurrections broke out. The details of these revolts are also badly known, but



they seem to be relatively insignificant affairs tied to local concerns. Against this background the affair of Abū ʿĪsā and the ʿĪsāwīya seems plausible. Šahrestānī's date thus is to be preferred over Qerqesānī's.

The military campaign is dramatically described by Šahrestānī, though various details refer to miraculous events and thus seem questionable. Abū ʿĪsā allegedly gathered 10,000 partisans whom he commanded in battle as the forerunner of the Messiah. He was ultimately killed along with his men by the caliph Maṣūʿ near Ray. His followers believed that his death was an illusion and that in reality he had miraculously disappeared, an escape characteristic of other messianic pretenders whose return was eagerly awaited.

The ʿĪsāwīya were apparently but one of many Jewish sectarian groups of this sort originating in Iran. This can be determined by *nesbas* of their leaders which clearly indicate eastern origins, e.g., Qūmesī, Zaʿfarānī, Dāmḡānī, and by their proper names: Yodḡān, Šādakān, Šārakān. The relations between these groups and the established rabbinical authorities, and their place within the wider Jewish society of the times, are in question. No firm answers can be given here. A schematic presentation of Abū ʿĪsā's religious views is found in Qerqesānī, who views the development of these groups in relation to his own Karaite leanings.

Abū ʿĪsā pretended to be a prophet. The miraculous sign of his prophecy was the fact that, although illiterate, he managed to produce books. He prohibited divorce and increased the daily prayers from three to seven based on Psalm 119:164 ("Seven times daily I praise you"). His prophetic inspiration caused him to declare certain ascetic practices, such as a ban on meat and intoxicating beverages otherwise permitted by normative Judaism. However, in other practices he was considered a follower of the Rabbanites, and his following, which continued as a group for several centuries, was considered to be within the fold of normative Judaism. This is clear, since they married within the fold. However, Qerqesānī indicates that Abū ʿĪsā believed in the prophecy of Jesus and Moḡammad. He held that both of them were sent by God to minister to the needs of their people and to encourage the reading of their holy scriptures. The Karaite authority ascribes these last views to political cynicism on the part of Abū ʿĪsā.

It would seem that the ʿĪsāwīya and other related Jewish sects to the east generally consisted of local groups whose contacts with traditional Jewish learning were minimal. They are described as bereft of intellect (*ʿaql*) and



knowledge (*ma'āref*). No doubt they were susceptible to, and did in part assimilate, various notions current among non-Jewish groups in the area. It is, however, too soon to declare Iran the cradle of Jewish sectarianism in early Islamic times.

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