

Representing Shi‘ism in the Leiden Encyclopaedia of Islam: A Critical Analysis of “Shī‘a,” “Imāma,” and “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya”

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Abstract

This article examines the representation of Shi‘ism in three interrelated entries—“Shī‘a,” “Imāma,” and “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya”—in the second edition of the Leiden Encyclopaedia of Islam. Wilferd Madelung authored the first two entries, while Seyyed Hossein Nasr wrote the third. The central question is whether their thematic proximity and cross-references produce a coherent account of Shi‘ism or whether each entry follows a distinct epistemic logic. Using comparative textual analysis and source criticism, the study evaluates the entries according to seven criteria: definition, periodisation, evaluative language, the relationship between political and religious authority, citation practices, treatment of intra-Shi‘i diversity, and historical and legal accuracy. The findings identify three different explanatory regimes: “Shī‘a” offers a genealogical-political history of Shi‘i formation; “Imāma” organises Muslim theories of leadership within a historical-comparative framework; and “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya” presents a largely Traditionalist, philosophical, and esoteric self-representation of Twelver Shi‘ism. These approaches are partly complementary but diverge over the origins of esoteric Imamology, the relative weight of law and hadith, and the relationship between history and theology. The article also corrects specific errors concerning qiyās, Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī’s death date, and the alleged beginning of systematic Shi‘i theology with the Tajrīd al-i‘tiqād. It concludes that encyclopaedic authority should not obscure authorial situatedness, diachronic discontinuity, or methodological plurality.

Keywords: : Encyclopaedia of Islam; Shi‘ism; imamate; Wilferd Madelung; Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

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1. Introduction

The *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, especially its second edition, has served for nearly a century as one of the first academic reference points for the history and civilisation of Islam. Peri Bearman, who worked both at Brill and on the editorial board of the second edition, describes the work as the unrivalled reference source of twentieth-century Islamic studies. At the same time, she demonstrates that its production was inseparable from editorial decisions, financial constraints, linguistic and national rivalries, and generational change among scholars (Bearman 2018, xi–xiii, 247–49). An encyclopaedia entry, therefore, is not a neutral container in which facts simply accumulate. The selection of headwords, delimitation of an entry, choice of contributor, allocation of space, and system of cross-references all participate in constructing a particular image of the subject.

This problem is especially important in the case of Shi‘ism. Shi‘ism may be studied as a set of early political allegiances to the Prophet’s family, as a family of religious traditions, or as a series of distinctive theological, legal, ritual, and mystical systems. Each definition foregrounds some layers and marginalises others. The second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* distributes the subject among numerous entries, but three occupy a pivotal position: “Shī‘a” addresses the movement’s historical formation; “Imāma” compares Muslim theories of leadership; and “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya” introduces the history and doctrines of the largest Shi‘i branch. Madelung wrote the first two, and Nasr the third (Madelung 1971, 1163–69; Nasr 1978, 277–79; Madelung 1997a, 420–24).

The principal question of this study is: what image of Shi‘ism do these three entries produce when read together, and how do the authors’ methods, source bases, and intellectual locations shape that image? Four subsidiary questions follow. First, how does each entry organise the relationship between political history and Shi‘i doctrine? Second, where does descriptive language become normative or evaluative? Third, which claims require correction or qualification in light of subsequent scholarship? Fourth, to what extent do cross-references integrate distinct epistemic logics into a coherent account?

The article argues that the three entries do not constitute a single representation. Instead, they juxtapose three “explanatory regimes” within one reference work: genealogical-political historiography in “Shī‘a,” historical-theological comparison in “Imāma,” and philosophical-esoteric self-representation in “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya.” Such plurality is not inherently defective, for a multilayered subject such as Shi‘ism requires more than one perspective. The difficulty arises when the encyclopaedia’s architecture leaves these differences in analytical level unstated and gives formally equivalent authority to heterogeneous propositions, ranging from historical reconstruction to confessional exposition.

The contribution of this article is threefold. First, instead of assessing each entry in isolation, it analyses their intertextual relations and tensions. Second, it separates criticism from general judgements about “Orientalism” or the religious identity of individual authors and concentrates on testable evidence: definitions, narrative sequence, bibliographies, and identifiable errors. Third, it distinguishes print chronology from digital chronology. Brill’s online platform lists 2012 as the date of first online publication for all three entries, but historical analysis must retain the print dates of their respective volumes—1971, 1978, and 1997. Treating them as simultaneous erases almost three decades of change in the academic study of Shiʿism.

2. Scholarship, Analytical Framework, and Method

2.1. The Encyclopaedia as a Historical Product

The history of the second edition is indispensable to understanding the three entries. Conceived in the post-Second World War expansion of academic Islamic studies, the project was initially expected to remain comparatively limited but eventually grew into twelve volumes produced over several decades. This prolonged publication history meant that entries at different points of the alphabet emerged from markedly different scholarly contexts. Bearman observes that historical and philological scholarship remained the backbone of the second edition, while social-scientific approaches, the study of the modern world, and many theoretical developments in the field received limited attention (Bearman 2018, 247–49). “Shīʿa,” published in volume 9 in 1997, cannot therefore be treated as a seamless continuation of “Imāma,” which appeared in volume 3 in 1971; “Ithnā ʿAshariyya,” published between them in volume 4 in 1978, belongs to yet another moment.

The historiography of Shiʿism also changed substantially during this interval. Etan Kohlberg’s study of the transition “from Imāmiyya to Ithnā ʿAshariyya” demonstrated that Twelver identity consolidated through a historical process rather than existing as a ready-made label from the age of the imams (Kohlberg 1976, 521–34). Hossein Modarressi placed the succession crisis after the eleventh imam and the intellectual labour of theologians during the Minor Occultation at the centre of Imami formation (Modarressi 1993). Andrew Newman’s analysis of the interaction and rivalry between the hadith traditions of Qum and Baghdad, and Najam Haider’s work on identity, ritual, and sacred space in Kufa, moved beyond narratives that were exclusively political or doctrinal (Newman 2000; Haider 2011). Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, by examining early Imami reports, challenged any undifferentiated late dating of esoteric Imamology (Amir-Moezzi 1994). Haider’s synthetic introduction and the multidisciplinary volume edited by Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda further display the breadth

of the field, from history and theology to law (Haider 2014; Daftary and Miskinzoda 2014). These works provide useful criteria for assessing the limits of the encyclopaedia entries, although none alone can be considered the final word on early Shi'ism.

2.2. Representation and the Avoidance of Identitarian Critique

In this article, "representation" does not mean deliberate fabrication or distortion. It denotes the process by which an author, working under the constraints of the encyclopaedic genre, selects evidence, establishes relationships among data, and assigns a beginning, centre, and margins to the subject. Accordingly, the attribution of an entry to a Muslim or non-Muslim, Shi'i or non-Shi'i author provides neither automatic epistemic privilege nor a sufficient ground for dismissal. The relevant criteria are the relationship between claim and evidence, internal coherence, the coverage of diversity, and historical and conceptual accuracy.

The author's intellectual location nevertheless remains relevant. Madelung is a historian whose work repeatedly re-examines Arabic sources and gives sustained attention to Alid and Hashimite claims, thereby challenging settled narratives of caliphal history. His study of the succession to Muḥammad exemplifies this approach (Madelung 1997b). Nasr, by contrast, writes as a philosopher and Traditionalist interpreter for whom the relationship between exoteric and esoteric meaning, *walāya*, wisdom, and the spiritual continuation of prophecy is central. His editing and introduction of the English translation of Ṭabāṭabā'ī's *Shi'ite Islam* reflect the same horizon (Ṭabāṭabā'ī 1975). These differences should not be reduced to authorial psychology; they must be demonstrated through textual structure and the selection of sources.

2.3. Method and Criteria

The method combines comparative textual analysis with source criticism. The primary corpus consists of the printed versions of the three entries; the online versions are used to establish stable identifiers and DOIs. Page references follow volumes 3, 4, and 9 of the printed second edition. Each entry is assessed according to seven criteria: (1) its opening definition and delimitation of the subject; (2) periodisation and narrative logic; (3) the relationship among political, legal, ritual, and esoteric dimensions; (4) the type and balance of sources; (5) descriptive language and evaluative formulations; (6) the representation of intra-Shi'i diversity; and (7) the accuracy of historical and legal claims.

The critique proceeds at two levels. Intratextually, it examines the coherence of claims, the relationship between title and content, and the implications of particular terms. Intertextually, it compares claims in the entries with relevant primary sources and with authoritative later scholarship. The aim is not to try older scholarship before the tribunal of every subsequent development. Encyclopaedia

entries must first be situated in their own time. Yet historical context does not prevent the identification of a statement that was erroneous even by contemporary standards or that should not be repeated today without qualification.

3. “Shiʿa”: A Genealogical-Political Historiography

3.1. Definition and Point of Departure

Madelung begins “Shiʿa” with an inclusive definition: a movement that accords the Prophet’s family a privileged position in the political and religious leadership of the community. He then connects the term to the use of *shīʿat ʿAlī* during the civil war of ʿAlī’s caliphate, in opposition to *shīʿat ʿUthmān* (Madelung 1997a, 420). This definition has two principal strengths: it does not project a fully formed sect, complete with later doctrines, onto the beginning of Shiʿi history, and it preserves the connection between political conflict and the religious authority of the *ahl al-bayt*. The reader can consequently perceive a spectrum that begins with political loyalty to ʿAlī and develops in later generations into differentiated communities and doctrines.

Unlike accounts that reduce the origins of Shiʿism to the intervention of an external individual such as ʿAbd Allāh ibn Sabaʿ, the entry locates Shiʿi formation within genuine conflicts of the early Muslim community. Madelung regards Ibn Sabaʿ, at least in his alleged role as the founder of Shiʿism, as a product of Sunni polemical historiography, while leaving open the possibility that some beliefs attributed to him, such as return, may preserve a historical core (Madelung 1997a, 421). This movement from a personal conspiracy to a social and political process is among the entry’s most important achievements and accords with the broader direction of subsequent scholarship.

3.2. The Status of the Prophet’s Family and the Genealogy of Alid Loyalty

At the centre of Madelung’s explanation is the status of the Prophet’s relatives in the Qurʾan, prophetic practice, and the distribution of public revenues. He treats the exclusion of the Prophet’s family from certain rights and privileges, together with the extension of Qurashi privilege after the Prophet’s death, as a fundamental background to Hashimite and Alid protest. He even describes the family’s displacement from its privileged position as the “ultimate incentive” for the rise of Shiʿism (Madelung 1997a, 420). Unlike models that treat the succession conflict as a merely personal rivalry, this explanation connects political economy, lineage status, and religious authority. The same orientation appears in *The Succession to Muḥammad*, where Madelung combines Qurʾanic evidence with historical reports in reconstructing expectations concerning the *ahl al-bayt* (Madelung 1997b).

The entry then proceeds from Kufa under ʿUthmān through the caliphate of ʿAlī, the title *waṣī*, the event of Ghadīr Khumm, al-Ḥasan’s peace agreement, al-

Ḥusayn's death, the Tawwābūn, and al-Mukhtār. It subsequently turns to the Kaysāniyya, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, and the doctrines of *raj'a* and *badā'*, before treating the Abbasids and the Hāshimiyya, the revolt of Zayd, the teachings of Muḥammad al-Bāqir and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, and the differentiation of Zaydi and Imami trajectories (Madelung 1997a, 420–24). A major strength of this narrative is that it does not equate Alid loyalty with later Twelver Shi'ism. Support for the Prophet's family could initially be Hashimite, Hasanid, Husaynid, Kaysanid, or Abbasid; sectarian boundaries hardened only gradually. This processual perspective accords with Kohlberg's account of the consolidation of the Twelver designation and Modarressi's analysis of the crisis of the occultation (Kohlberg 1976, 521–34; Modarressi 1993).

The entry also assigns 'Alī an active role in articulating distinctive Shi'i elements, describing him to this extent as the movement's founder and first teacher (Madelung 1997a, 421). On the one hand, this judgement moves the relationship between 'Alī and Shi'ism beyond a purely retrospective attribution. On the other hand, it does not adequately distinguish among 'Alī's own teachings, subsequent Shi'i memory of him, and the later doctrinal system. Most sources reporting his statements and positions were compiled in later periods, and their historical use requires attention to textual strata and routes of transmission. A historical connection between 'Alī and his partisans is defensible; the term "founder," however, risks implying a more direct institutional and doctrinal continuity unless the precise level and meaning of foundation are specified.

3.3. Methodological Strengths and Limitations

The principal methodological strength of "Shī'a" is its integration of political and intellectual history. Madelung does not present doctrines such as *waṣāya*, *raj'a*, *badā'*, and *naṣṣ* as a list detached from events; he attempts to explain their emergence and function within succession crises and political defeats. His attention to the broader spectrum of Hashimite and Alid affiliations also prevents the retrojection of later Imamism onto the entire history of Shi'ism. Although brief, the entry's bibliography includes influential works by Julius Wellhausen, Marshall Hodgson, W. Montgomery Watt, S. Husain M. Jafri, and Kohlberg.

The narrative nevertheless remains excessively political and leader-centred. Subsequent scholarship has shown that Shi'i identity was not defined solely through relations with the caliphate and rebellion. Ritual, networks of transmitters, sacred space, master-disciple relationships, and collective memory also helped constitute the community. Haider's study of second/eighth-century Kufa demonstrates how ritual distinctions and the appropriation of urban space could produce and stabilise communal boundaries (Haider 2011). Dakake similarly

stresses the continuing interaction between spiritual ideals and practical processes of community formation (Dakake 2007). Madelung's succession-centred narrative is therefore necessary but insufficient to explain how Alid loyalty became a religious identity.

A second limitation is the decisiveness of its causal language. Describing the economic and political displacement of the Prophet's family as the "ultimate incentive" elevates one factor into the final cause of a multicausal phenomenon. The status of the *ahl al-bayt*, succession, distributive inequalities, and Umayyad policy were all crucial. Historical Shi'ism, however, arose through their interaction with the experience of Karbala, hadith culture, messianic expectation, urban rivalries, and theological formulation. Madelung's claim is more defensible when reformulated as "one fundamental background" rather than an ultimate cause.

Third, relations among successive stages are sometimes narrated too smoothly. The movement from *shī'at 'Alī* to Kufan groups, from them to the Kaysāniyya, and thence to the Imāmiyya appears as a continuous line, whereas more recent scholarship emphasises rupture, competition, and the reconstruction of memory. The consolidation of a list of twelve imams, for example, was a process following the crisis of 260/874 and should not be presupposed for every earlier stage (Kohlberg 1976, 521–34; Modarressi 1993). The entry is careful in identifying branches, but its narrative structure retains a tendency towards seamless genealogy.

Finally, the entry's seven-item bibliography is too limited for a subject of this breadth. Even allowing for the date and constraints of publication, the absence of Modarressi's work on the occultation and Amir-Moezzi's study of early Imamology matters. The problem is not merely numerical: the political axis is not adequately balanced by hadith-institutional and esoteric-epistemological perspectives.

4. "Imāma": A Historical-Comparative Model

4.1. The Entry's Comparative Architecture

"Imāma" differs in scope from the other two entries. Madelung defines the subject as the supreme leadership of the Muslim community after the Prophet and immediately separates its theological and legal dimensions from the institutional history of the caliphate, directing the reader to the entry "Khilāfa" for the latter (Madelung 1971, 1163). He then surveys, in sequence, the positions of the 'Uthmāniyya, Shi'is, Kharijites, and Murji'ites in the first civil wars; Sunni, Mu'tazili, Zaydi, Imami, Isma'ili, and Kharijite theories; and finally later developments in Sunni and Imami thought (Madelung 1971, 1163–69).

This architecture does not treat the imamate as an exclusively Shi'i doctrine. Sunni scholars developed theories concerning the necessity and qualifications of

the imam, the procedures by which his office became binding, and the duty of obedience. Mu'tazilis debated reason, revealed obligation, and the welfare of the community; Zaydis and Imamis formulated different criteria concerning the *ahl al-bayt* and designation; Kharijites rejected the requirement of Qurashi lineage; and Isma'ilis elaborated the imamate within cosmological and pedagogical systems. The comparison prevents a simplistic opposition between a political Sunni caliphate and a religious Shi'i imamate.

Madelung explains Sunni theory in relation to the experience of civil war and the imperative of communal unity. He moves from the distinction between the Rightly Guided Caliphate and kingship to Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal's acceptance of rule established by domination, the juridical formulations of al-Shāfi'ī, al-Ash'arī, and al-Māwardī, and the theory's later accommodation to the realities of sultanic power. In this account, al-Ghazālī manages the distance between a formally legitimate caliph and an effective sultan, while Ibn Taymiyya places greater emphasis on the community and the implementation of the sharia than on the caliphate's legal form (Madelung 1971, 1164–66, 1168–69). The merit of this section lies in treating political theory as a response to history rather than as a static system completed once and for all.

4.2. The Representation of Imamism

In the Imami section, the entry concentrates on designation (*naṣṣ*), divinely bestowed knowledge, infallibility (*ʿiṣma*), and the necessary presence of God's proof (*ḥujja*). The imam is not merely a political ruler but the authoritative interpreter of religion and inheritor of the Prophet's knowledge. Madelung associates the coherent formation of this doctrine principally with the time of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq and then discusses hadith, miracles, inspired communication (*taḥdīth*), and occultation (Madelung 1971, 1166–67). For a comparative entry, the explanation is concise and broadly accurate. It distinguishes Twelver Imamism from Zaydism through designation and infallibility, and from Isma'ilism through the historical sequence of imams and the distinctive form of occultation.

A claim near the end of the entry, however, requires particular attention. Madelung suggests that from the seventh/thirteenth century onwards the esoteric and philosophical dimensions of Imami Imamology expanded partly under Sufi and Isma'ili influence, while *walāya* received fuller elaboration as the inner dimension of prophecy (Madelung 1971, 1169). This is defensible as an account of post-Mongol Shi'i philosophy and its intellectual convergences. If interpreted as dating the very substance of esoteric Imamology to this later period, however, it conflicts with pre-occultation reports and later research. Drawing on a broad body of early Imami traditions, Amir-Moezzi shows that the imam's supranormal knowledge, cosmic function, and relationship to exoteric and esoteric meaning

appear in early strata of the tradition (Amir-Moezzi 1994). Newman likewise presents the history of Imami hadith as an exchange between Qum and Baghdad, not as a linear transition from simple rationalism to late mysticism (Newman 2000). A distinction is therefore necessary between the early presence of esoteric themes and their later philosophical systematisation—a distinction the entry does not explicitly make.

4.3. Comparative Capacity and Analytical Costs

The principal strength of “Imāma” is its breadth and its ability to disclose the interrelationship of doctrines. The reader sees that no theory developed in isolation: acceptance or rejection of Qurashi descent, election or designation, the possibility of deposing an unjust imam, infallibility and knowledge, and even the necessity of the imamate itself were divergent answers to a shared problem of authority. The entry also preserves neglected positions, including the view attributed to the followers of the Kharijite Shabīb ibn Yazīd that women could hold the imamate (Madelung 1971, 1168). This brief notice reveals a history of Islamic political thought more diverse than its dominant Sunni and Imami models.

The cost of this architecture is excessive compression. Positions preserved in different genres and periods—heresiographical reports, theological treatises, works of political jurisprudence, and governmental experience—are arranged along a single chronological line. Some compression is inevitable in an encyclopaedia, but it can make “the position of a sect” appear more uniform than it was. Disagreements between Imami theologians in Qum and Baghdad, or changes within Muʿtazili and Zaydi thought, recede behind large typological categories. Modarressi’s study of Ibn Qiba and the occultation crisis demonstrates how Imami arguments about designation and the necessity of an imam were reconstructed both in debate with Muʿtazilis and in response to internal crisis (Modarressi 1993). This level of intra-communal disagreement remains largely invisible.

Comparison also stays primarily at the level of elite theory. In practice, the imamate was constituted through pilgrimage, the institution of the agents (*wikāla*), financial networks, the authority of transmitters, and the memory of martyrdom. Separating doctrine from the caliphate’s institutional development is organisationally useful at the beginning of the entry, but it carries an analytical cost in the Imami section. The reader learns which attributes an imam possesses but sees much less clearly how that authority was lived within a community and transferred to other institutions after the occultation. Research on ritual identity and the institution of occultation makes this absence more visible (Haider 2011; Arjomand 1996).

5. “Ithnā ʿAshariyya”: A Philosophical-Esoteric Self-Representation

5.1. *Language and Periodisation*

Nasr’s entry begins with a definition that is simultaneously descriptive and evaluative. The Twelvers are identified as the largest branch of Shi‘ism and, theologically, as its most “balanced” branch in the relationship between exoteric and esoteric elements (Nasr 1978, 277). The first proposition is demographic; the second is a judgement internal to a Traditionalist framework. “Balance” is not a historically measurable criterion and implicitly privileges Imamism over Zaydism and Isma‘ilism. From its opening sentence, therefore, the entry is not written by a wholly external observer but offers a meaningful and normative account of the tradition’s integrity.

Nasr divides Imami history into four periods: (1) the age of the imams to the beginning of the Major Occultation in 329/940; (2) from the Major Occultation to the Mongol invasions and the emergence of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī; (3) from al-Ṭūsī to the Safavid revival; and (4) from the Safavids to the contemporary period (Nasr 1978, 277–78). The logic is fundamentally intellectual-historical. The turning points are not demographic, geographical, or institutional transformations, but the transfer of authority from the imams to the scholars, the incorporation of philosophy into theology, the convergence of Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism with Shi‘i thought, and the flourishing of the School of Isfahan.

This choice has a clear advantage. Unlike many political summaries, the entry does not reduce Shi‘ism to a history of protest and Shi‘i states. Hadith, theology, philosophy, mysticism, and exegesis occupy the centre. Ibn Bābawayh, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī, Ibn Ṭāwūs, al-‘Allāma al-Ḥillī, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, Mīr Dāmād, Mullā Ṣadrā, Fayḍ Kāshānī, and al-Majlisī all appear. The doctrinal section explains the imamate through prophecy and *walāya*, exoteric and esoteric meaning, and the imam’s human and cosmic functions (Nasr 1978, 278–79). For understanding why the imam, in the religious self-consciousness of an important part of the Imami tradition, is not only an absent ruler but an inner guide and the bearer of revelation’s continuing meaning, Nasr provides a language richer than Madelung’s predominantly political account.

5.2. *Elite Intellectual History and the Privileging of Iranian Philosophy*

This advantage also becomes the entry’s central limitation. The third period culminates in a “synthesis” of Avicennan philosophy, Illuminationism, Ibn ‘Arabī’s Sufism, and Shi‘i theology, while the Safavid period is described through the culmination of philosophy and mysticism (Nasr 1978, 278). Imami history is consequently narrated to a disproportionate extent through Iran and a succession of philosophers and mystics. The scholarly worlds of Iraq and Jabal ‘Āmil, the development of *ijtihād*, the organisation of the learned class, public ritual, lamentation

literature, endowment networks, women's experiences, Arab and South Asian communities, and the social diversity of Imamism receive far less space.

The entry's bibliography confirms this orientation. Alongside two classical doctrinal texts and Ṭabāṭabā'ī's modern exposition, it gives a prominent place to several works by Henry Corbin, Nasr's own writings, and publications by Frithjof Schuon, while historical studies of occultation, hadith, theology, and law remain marginal (Nasr 1978, 279). Even by the standards of 1978, Kohlberg's article on the transition from the Imāmiyya to the Ithnā 'Ashariyya, published two years earlier, is absent. The predominance of Corbin permits a philosophical and Iranian Shi'ism to appear as the natural representative of Twelver tradition as a whole. Yet Twelver Imamism was transregional and encompassed sometimes competing Akhbari, Usuli, traditionist, theological, philosophical, and mystical tendencies.

The term "self-representation" as used here refers to this textual structure; it does not imply that Nasr speaks for all Shi'is. He formulates many concepts affirmatively: the imam is the axis of the cosmos, the pole of spiritual guidance, and the guarantor of the sharia; the imam's occultation is a living reality, and his return will realise divine justice (Nasr 1978, 279). An entry on doctrine must explain a belief's internal logic. In portions of the text, however, the grammatical distinction between "the Imamiyya hold that the imam is" and "the imam is" becomes blurred. The result enhances sympathetic understanding but reduces analytical distance.

5.3. The Error Concerning the Sources of Imami Law

The entry's most serious problem occurs in its treatment of jurisprudence. Nasr describes the sources of Imami law as virtually the same as those of Sunni law—the Qur'an, hadith, consensus, and analogy—and then states that Shi'ism accords greater freedom to analogy (Nasr 1978, 278). This is not a subtle matter of interpretive disagreement but the reversal of one of the best-known distinctions in Imami legal theory. Imamism rejected *qiyās* as an independent source of law and, in later Usuli formulation, placed reason (*'aql*) alongside the Qur'an, sunna, and consensus. Consensus itself possesses no freestanding authority but derives its evidentiary value from revealing the position of an infallible imam. In his independent discussion of *qiyās*, al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī rejects its use in the sharia and refutes the arguments advanced for its probative force (al-Ṭūsī 1417 AH, 2:650–73). Gleave's specialised study traces the history and arguments of the Imami rejection of *qiyās* from early texts to Usuli jurists (Gleave 2001, 267–93), while his monograph on two theories of Shi'i jurisprudence demonstrates that the Akhbari-Usuli dispute cannot be explained by granting Shi'is greater latitude in analogy (Gleave 2000).

The likely source of the error is a conflation of reason with analogy, or an indiscriminate extension of *ijtihād* to analogical reasoning. These concepts are not synonymous in Imami legal theory. *Qiyās* extends a ruling from a textual case to a new case on the basis of an inferred effective cause; rational proof in Usuli theory may instead rest on necessary rational implications or rational good and evil. The boundaries of reason's legal use were disputed, and some arguments may look functionally analogous to *qiyās* from an external perspective. Technical terms nevertheless carry school-specific meanings. An encyclopaedia entry must first report the school's explicitly articulated position accurately and only then, if necessary, discuss functional similarities.

The significance of this error extends beyond a single term. The entry devotes considerable space to the Akhbari-Usuli controversy and states that Usulis employ reason within the framework of revelation, yet it simultaneously includes *qiyās* among the sources of law. The internal inconsistency indicates that the legal section was not written with the same care as the philosophical and Imamological sections. The predominance of philosophy and mysticism has thus produced not only topical omissions but also a substantively inaccurate account of law.

5.4. Other Historical Errors and Overgeneralisation

The entry gives Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī's death date as 632/1273 (Nasr 1978, 278), whereas the correct date is 672/1274. The Hijri date may be a typographical or copying error, but a discrepancy of forty lunar years is unmistakable and requires correction. More significantly, Nasr presents the *Tajrīd al-i'tiqād* as marking the "beginning of systematic Shi'i theology." The *Tajrīd* was undoubtedly a turning point in the integration of theology with philosophical language, but systematic Imami theology had developed centuries earlier in the writings of Ibn Qiba, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd, al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā, and al-Shaykh al-Ṭūsī. The entry itself had already stated that the principal Shi'i sciences and doctrines were consolidated by Ibn Bābawayh, al-Mufīd, and al-Ṭūsī; its claim about a "beginning" is therefore inconsistent with its own narrative. A more accurate formulation would identify the *Tajrīd* as inaugurating a new phase in the philosophical systematisation of Imami theology, not systematic theology itself (Modarressi 1993; Ansari and Schmidtke 2014).

The treatment of ritual is also imprecise. The statement that Shi'is add "two phrases" to the call to prayer neither names them nor explains the legal status of the third testimony (*al-shahāda al-thālitha*) (Nasr 1978, 278). Encyclopaedic accuracy requires distinguishing *ḥayya 'alā khayr al-'amal* from the testimony to 'Alī's *walāya*, and explaining the debate over whether the latter is an original component of the call or a recommended devotional formula. Similarly, the assertion that "every Shi'i" must follow a living *mujtahid* generalises a particular form of

later Usuli authority across all periods and all legally responsible persons. Imami jurisprudence recognises the possibility of acting through precaution and debates the conditions under which adherence to a deceased jurist may continue; the institution of the *marjaʿiyya* in its present form is historically recent. One must distinguish the principle that non-specialists consult jurists, the legal doctrine of *taqlīd*, and the social institution of the *marjaʿiyya*.

These problems do not cancel the entry's value. Within a very limited space, Nasr succeeds in connecting Imamology, philosophy, mysticism, ritual, and intellectual history. Yet compression and intellectual orientation render the legal and social claims less reliable than the esoteric sections. A scholarly assessment must preserve both sides of this judgement: the entry excels at elucidating the internal meaning of the imamate but is unbalanced as a comprehensive account of Twelver Shiʿism.

6. Comparing the Three Entries: Complementarity, Tension, and Disjunction

6.1. Three Different Centres

All three entries organise their subjects around the imam, but "imam" does not signify the same analytical object in each. In "Shīʿa," the imam or claimant to leadership belongs to a genealogy of succession conflicts and familial loyalties. In "Imāma," the imam is a theological-juridical concept through which the answers of different Muslim groups to the problem of authority can be compared. In "Ithnā ʿAshariyya," the imam bears the exoteric and esoteric meanings of revelation, serves as the axis of the cosmos, and remains a living guide even in occultation. Lexical unity thus conceals differences of analytical level.

"Shīʿa" asks how movements supporting the Prophet's family emerged and divided. "Imāma" asks what conditions Muslim theologians and jurists established for legitimate leadership. "Ithnā ʿAshariyya" asks how the spiritual and intellectual totality of Twelver Imamism is to be understood. The first answer is genetic, the second classificatory, and the third essentialising. None is sufficient alone, but the *Encyclopaedia* does not alert readers that following its cross-references requires movement among three different kinds of question.

6.2. Tension between Politics and Esotericism

The most important tension concerns politics and esotericism. In "Shīʿa," Madlung seeks the origins of the movement in the status of the Prophet's family, succession, political economy, and the crisis of the caliphate. In "Ithnā ʿAshariyya," Nasr locates Shiʿism's distinctive truth in *walāya* and the esoteric meaning of revelation. These perspectives can be complementary: the political and spiritual were not separate in Shiʿi history. Dakake's work similarly stresses the interaction between spiritual ideals and historical community formation (Dakake 2007).

The sequence and weight of material in the two entries nevertheless direct the reader towards different conclusions. For Madelung, doctrine is formed to a considerable degree through responses to historical defeats and crises; for Nasr, history becomes the arena in which an esoteric truth already present in the imamate unfolds.

The divergence becomes more explicit when “Imāma” is included. Madelung emphasises that the philosophical and esoteric system of the imamate expanded in later centuries under Sufi and Isma‘ili influence (Madelung 1971, 1169); Nasr presents these same elements as the heart of Twelver identity (Nasr 1978, 279). Later scholarship permits a double judgement: systematic philosophical formulation did grow in later periods, but its narrative and Imamological materials were already present in the early tradition (Amir-Moezzi 1994; Newman 2000). The apparent contradiction can therefore be resolved by distinguishing doctrinal material from philosophical form—a distinction that the *Encyclopaedia* itself does not articulate.

6.3. Diachronic Bibliographies and the Uniform Authority of Form

The entries appeared in different years and contain strikingly uneven bibliographies. “Imāma” offers a relatively broad list of classical theological and legal sources and older scholarship; “Shī‘a” provides a short historical bibliography; and “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya” relies heavily on Corbin and philosophical-esoteric literature. The disparity does not arise solely from individual preference; it also reflects the encyclopaedia’s division of labour. Each author was expected to cover only part of the subject and avoid repetition through cross-reference. Cross-reference, however, cannot substitute for bibliographical balance. A reader who consults “Ithnā ‘Ashariyya” alone receives an inadequate picture of the historiography of occultation, the formation of hadith, and the development of Imami law.

At the same time, a uniform encyclopaedic form—headword, compressed exposition, cross-references, and bibliography—gives the three entries an appearance of equivalent authority. A statement derived from critical source reconstruction, a doctrinal claim voiced from within the tradition, and an inaccurate proposition about law are all delivered in an assertive register. The authority of the form can efface differences in evidential certainty. Critical reading does not consequently mean discrediting the *Encyclopaedia*. It means recovering the chronology of composition, the contributor’s intellectual position, and the type of evidence behind each assertion.

6.4. What Remains Absent?

Even when the three entries are read together, several dimensions remain peripheral. The first is social history: family, gender, class, educational institutions,

and financial networks. The second is the geography beyond Iraq and Iran, particularly South Asia, the Arabian Peninsula, and migrant communities. The third is ritual as a mechanism for producing identity rather than a list of distinguishing practices. Material history and art form a fourth absence. The fifth is internal diversity within Imamism, including Akhbari, Usuli, Shaykhi, philosophical, mystical, and local tendencies. The entries occasionally mention some of these subjects, but none places them at the centre of explanation.

This absence corresponds to Bearman's assessment of the second edition's general scholarly philosophy: history and philology remained central, while the social sciences and the modern world had only a limited role (Bearman 2018, 247–49). The limitations should therefore not be attributed to Madelung or Nasr alone. They result from an intersection between authorial selection and the project's broader editorial structure. A fair critique must recognise both the author's responsibility for the accuracy of particular statements and the constraints of genre and editorial policy.

7. A Model for Rewriting Entries on Shiʿism

The analysis suggests several principles for revising these entries. First, each entry should identify the kind of question it asks: is it tracing the formation of a name, explaining a normative doctrine, or examining a community's social experience? Second, it should differentiate historically among *shīʿat* 'Alī, Alid, Imami, and Twelver identities and avoid projecting a consolidated Twelver identity onto the first/seventh century. Third, any account of the imamate should distinguish early hadith materials from later theological and philosophical systematisation.

Fourth, the bibliography should be multidisciplinary. Classical heresiographical, hadith, theological, and legal sources should stand alongside historiography, ritual studies, and historical sociology. Fifth, normative language should be controlled by explicit attribution: instead of "the imam is the axis of the cosmos," the entry should state that "in an important strand of Imami Imamology, the imam is regarded as the axis of the cosmos." Sixth, technical legal concepts such as *qiyās*, *ʿaql*, consensus, and *ijtihād* must be defined with attention to school-specific usage. Seventh, the original print date should accompany the date of online publication, enabling the reader to situate the entry in its own scholarly context.

Substantively, revised entries should preserve three achievements of the existing texts: Madelung's emphasis on the connection between the *ahl al-bayt* and succession conflict; his wide comparison of theories of the imamate; and Nasr's elucidation of *walāya* and the imam's cosmic function from within the tradition. At the same time, deterministic causal language, indiscriminate late dating of esotericism, Iran-centrism, and errors concerning law should be corrected. A successful entry would be neither a wholly external account that loses the lived

meaning of belief nor a normative self-interpretation that dissolves history and diversity into a single truth.

8. Conclusion

The representation of Shi'ism in the second edition of the Leiden *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is composed of three distinct epistemic logics. Madelung's "Shī'a" offers a historical account of the formation of Alid loyalties and Shi'i branches within the contexts of the *ahl al-bayt*'s status, the distribution of power and wealth, and succession crises. Its strengths lie in rejecting the legend that Ibn Saba' founded Shi'ism, attending to the broader Hashimite spectrum, and connecting ideas to political events. Its limits are an overly political explanation, emphatic causal language, and insufficient attention to ritual, networks, and discontinuities in identity.

"Imāma" offers one of the most comprehensive concise comparisons of Muslim theories of leadership. Madelung shows how election, designation, domination, Qurashi descent, infallibility, and the imam's knowledge formed different answers to the shared problem of authority. Its compression, however, obscures internal disagreement and the institutional enactment of authority. It also fails to distinguish sufficiently between the early presence of esoteric material and its later philosophical systematisation.

Nasr's "Ithnā 'Ashariyya" powerfully conveys the spiritual and philosophical richness of Imamism and, against a reduction of Shi'ism to political protest, places *walāya* and the relationship between exoteric and esoteric meaning at the centre. This achievement nevertheless has costs. Elite intellectual history and Iranian philosophy overshadow law, hadith, society, and the wider geography of Twelver communities; the language sometimes shifts from exposition to normative affirmation; and several historical and legal statements require correction. The inclusion of *qiyās* among the sources of Imami law is the most serious error. Al-Ṭūsī's death date and the claim that systematic Shi'i theology began with the *Tajrīd* must also be corrected or qualified.

The cross-references among the entries therefore produce thematic but not epistemic unity. The resulting image is neither wholly contradictory nor fully coherent; it is a mosaic assembled across different decades through different methods and bibliographies. The proper response is not to abandon the *Encyclopaedia* but to alter how it is used. An entry should serve as a point of departure rather than a final authority; its publication date, author, and source system must be read alongside its content; and every major claim, especially in technical fields, should be tested against specialised scholarship and primary texts. The *Encyclopaedia*'s scholarly authority is best preserved when its historicity and limitations remain visible.

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