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The Jewish Convert as *Ghulāt* Architect: Abd Allah ibn Saba and the Construction of Heterodoxy in Early Shiism

This paper examines the figure of Abd Allah ibn Saba within the broader context of *ghulāt* movements in formative Shiism, analyzing how his alleged Jewish origins became central to both Sunni and later mainstream Shia narratives that constructed early esoteric Shia currents as foreign infiltrations threatening Islamic orthodoxy and unity. Drawing on heresiographical literature, early historical sources, and sectarian polemics, this study investigates how the figure of Ibn Saba functioned as a foundational trope linking Jewish conspiracy theories to the emergence of *ghulāt* theological positions. The research explores how allegations of Ibn Saba's Jewish background served multiple polemical functions: legitimizing Sunni critiques of Shiism as a whole, providing later mainstream Twelver scholars with a means to distance themselves from earlier esoteric currents, and establishing a narrative framework that attributed innovative theological positions to external manipulation rather than internal doctrinal development. The paper examines how this construction positioned Jewish converts as archetypal figures of religious subversion, capable of introducing alien concepts into Islamic discourse through claims to authentic religious authority. Through analysis of heresiographical accounts from al-Ash'ari, al-Baghdadi, al-Shahrastani, and later Shia *rijāl* literature, this study traces how the Ibn Saba narrative evolved to encompass broader anxieties about religious boundaries, conversion authenticity, and the vulnerability of religious communities to internal corruption. The research demonstrates how allegations of Jewish origins became a standard polemical tool for discrediting *ghulāt* movements, regardless of historical accuracy, reflecting deeper structural concerns about maintaining doctrinal purity against pluralistic theological experimentation. The paper argues that the persistent focus on Ibn Saba's alleged Jewish identity reveals the intersection of anti-Jewish sentiment, sectarian boundary-making, and the retrospective construction of orthodoxy in early Islamic historiography. By examining this figure within the context of other alleged Jewish influences on *ghulāt* thought, the study illuminates how interfaith identity became weaponized in intra-Islamic theological disputes, ultimately contributing to the marginalization of esoteric currents in favor of legal-theological approaches that emphasized communal unity and doctrinal conformity.

Keywords: Abd Allah ibn Saba, *ghulāt* movements, Jewish converts, heresiography, Shia orthodoxy, sectarian polemics.



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Iqbal Akhtar is an Associate Professor with joint appointments in Religious Studies and Politics & International Relations at Florida International University, where he directs the Western Indian Ocean Studies Program. His scholarship spans Shi'i intellectual history, sectarian boundary-making, and the interreligious dynamics of the Islamicate world, drawing on competency in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Gujarati, Swahili, and Sanskrit. His monograph *The Khoja of Tanzania* (Brill, 2015), based on his doctoral work at the University of Edinburgh, examines the formation of a transregional Shi'i community across the Western Indian Ocean and reflects his sustained interest in how communal identities are constructed, contested, and inscribed within and against orthodoxy. Alongside his work on Shi'i traditions, he writes extensively on Jewish-Muslim relations and interreligious thought, with a forthcoming monograph entitled *Covenantal Pluralism* (Springer, 2026).