In Defence of *Bada’*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Bada’,* which may be loosely translated as ‘the ability of God to change His decree’, is a characteristically Shi’a doctrine that, historically, has been subject to severe critique outside Shi’a circles. Here, I would like to respond to these criticisms by explaining how the Twelve Imams derived the doctrine of *bada’* from Qur’anic verses. I would also like to clarify misconceptions about *bada’* which commonly recur in polemical discussions. Finally, in response to the claim that, psychologically, belief in *bada’* would weaken an individual’s faith and is therefore religiously undesirable, I would like to outline a view to the contrary showing how belief in *bada’* can, in principle, strengthen individual and collective well-being.

**KEY TERMS:** Islam, Shi’ism, theology, destiny, predetermination, Qur’an, *bada’*

**Introduction**

*Bada’* is a characteristic doctrine of Twelver Shi’ism which is not found in Sunnism. As such, it has been a subject of Sunni-Shi’a polemical debate for many centuries. While narrations from the Shi’a Imams justify *bada’* through Qur’an 13:39 and 5:64, Sunni theologians have historically rejected these interpretations and vehemently opposed the concept of *bada’*. In turn, Shi’a theologians have given a variety of responses, depending on their own theological orientations. In this paper, I will examine the opposition to *bada’* and explain why, despite this opposition, Shi’a theologians insist on the validity of *bada’*. I will also respond to the objection that, on a human level, *bada’* is harmful for the human being.
Defining bada’

Before embarking on this discussion, it is necessary to explain what bada’ is. This is not a simple task since, although Shi’a scholars concur on the validity of bada’, they diverge in defining it. Shaykh Mufid (d. 1022 CE) held the view that bada’ is a change in how a phenomenon appears to be, rather than an actual change in God’s decree. People say that bada’ has occurred when something happens contrary to what people expect. In this sense, attributing bada’ to God is merely figurative, not something that happens in the divine reality. Shaykh Mufid maintains that bada’ cannot be proven by logical argumentation alone, and so its main source of justification is authentic hadith (that is, naql instead of ‘aql).² Shaykh Tusi (d. 1067 CE) supported this view, as did a number of other prominent Shi’a scholars.³

Later, a number of Islamic mystical philosophers, such as Mulla Sadra and Mir Damad, put forward the view that bada’ refers to how phenomena appear to the angels and spirits of the celestial spheres (nufus falakiyyah). As is common in their works, they deduce this view from philosophical principles.⁴ Still another view is that bada’ is indicative of how God manifests things.⁵ Finally, bada’ is also described as ‘the emergence of a new opinion (ra‘i takwini or ra‘i tashri‘i)’. Those who subscribe to this definition diverge as to its precise articulation. Three different articulations of this definition are listed below.

1. Bada’ is the elimination of one thing and the creation of another thing in its stead. That is, bada’ occurs when God eliminates a phenomenon after having created it, and supplants it with another phenomenon. Or, bada’ occurs when He prescribes an action as incumbent only to later proscribe it as prohibited.⁶ According to this view, bada’ applies to ontological phenomena as well as religious and canonical matters.

2. Karajaki explains that bada’ describes a situation in which God orders a certain course of action but then, before its designated time arrives, contradicts it so as to clarify for people the hidden truth that is at issue, which would not have been known were it not for bada’. A clear instance of bada’ is God’s order to Abraham to slay Ishmael, which He later repealed, thus sparing Ishmael’s life.⁷

3. Sayyid Murtada is of the opinion that identifying God as the subject of bada’ involves no theological problem. His elucidation of the meaning of bada’ is as follows:
Since we say of one to whom things were disclosed after being hidden from him – so that this disclosure leads him to give an order concerning something he had formerly forbidden or issue a ban concerning something he had formally ordered – that he has changed his mind (bada’), it is not wrong to refer to an order that follows a ban, or a ban that follows an order, as bada’ (which is what we mean when we ascribe bada’ to God), for it is true to say that that which was hidden was made manifest and that which was not clear was made clear, and that is the meaning of bada’.

The last and, in my view, correct definition of bada’, which is based on the reports from the Prophet and the Imams (especially those reports bearing on the verses of the Qur’an that pertain to bada’) is that bada’ signifies the alteration that affects the transcendent stages – such as the stage of Divine Allotment and Ordainment (qada’ and qadar) – that are said to precede and determine the occurrence of a phenomenon.

**Arguments against bada’**

Opponents to bada’ have speculated why, in their view, the Shi’a ‘fabricated’ the notion of bada’. One of the main arguments against bada’ comes from the often-asserted claim that Shi’ism was ‘infiltrated’ by Judaism. According to this view, bada’ was craftily invented by Jews and inserted into Shi’ism. The argument for this is that the Jewish conception of God allows for Him to be deficient and ignorant of something, and, similarly, bada’ also allows for God to be deficient and ignorant. Therefore, Shi’ism is akin to Judaism.

Setting aside the underlying oversimplifications in this argument and the question of the nuances of Jewish belief, it is curious that traditional Islamic scholars upheld this view since their perceptions of Judaism were largely informed by the Qur’an, and the Qur’an portrays the Jews as being opposed to bada’. For instance, Qur’an 5:64 says ‘The Jews would say, “God’s Hand is fettered”’ and ‘God withdrew from this matter’. This demonstrates that, in the Islamic tradition, Jews were not perceived of as believing in bada’. In fact, Shi’a texts cite precisely this verse to assert that the Jews did not believe in bada’. Furthermore, believing in bada’ does not
necessitate believing that God is deficient or ignorant. On the contrary, the doctrine of bada’ emphasises that Divine Activity stems from Divine Omniscience and Omnipotence. God possesses unrestrained power, and as such He may add to or eliminate from creation as He deems necessary. This is why the Shi‘a view is that the doctrine of bada’ upholds God’s omnipotence in keeping with the Qur’anic verse ‘God effaces and confirms that which He wishes’ (13:39). Therefore, this argument has neither a historical nor a logical basis.

Another view, which is common among anti-Shi‘a polemicists, is that the doctrine of bada’ was invented by the Kaysaniyyah sect, and, specifically, by Mukhtar al-Thaqafi. The proponents of this view cite the story of one of Mukhtar’s battles in which he purportedly predicted their victory. To his chagrin, however, Mukhtar’s army was defeated, and so in order to repair his army’s morale he invented the concept of bada’, claiming that God had changed His mind. This is despite the fact that, in Twelver theology, the Kaysaniyyah are rejected as heterodox, and Mukhtar is not granted any theological authority to outline Shi‘a doctrine.

Similarly, the allegation was also made that the doctrine of bada’ was invented to whitewash prophesies made by the Twelve Imams that later failed to materialize; this is on the basis of the view that the Imams claimed to know the unseen and to be able to predict the future. One example that is cited is in al-Kafi, where Imam Baqir says:

If we say something to you and it unfolds according as we said, then say, ‘God spoke the truth,’ and if we say something to you and it unfolds contrary to what we said, then say, ‘God spoke the truth,’ for you will be rewarded twice.

Citing this, ‘Ali Ahmad al-Salus offers the following criticism of the doctrine of bada’:

Even if accepting bada’ does not negate God’s knowledge, it is nevertheless a means of promoting the falsehood that the Imams possessed knowledge of the unseen. Thus [the Shi‘as hold that] if events unfold contrary to what the Imams foretold, it is due to a change of destiny on God’s part. Consequently, one who believes in this falsehood is rewarded twice.
These critics charge that the Shi‘a have been ordered to be complaisant in the face of contradictory and false statements they hear from their Imams.\textsuperscript{16} These critics maintain that Shi‘ism will flounder if it is divested of this doctrine, for the false predictions their Imams offered were never fulfilled, and this is the reason why Shi‘a scholars exaggerate the role of bada’ and defend it so fiercely.\textsuperscript{17}

In order to address this critique, it is necessary that we first treat of the topic of the Imams’ knowledge of the unseen. With respect to this, we must take note of the verses of the Qur’an that reserve knowledge of the unseen for God. The following are two examples of such verses:

\begin{quote}
Say, ‘No one in the heavens or the earth knows the unseen except God’. (27:65)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
Indeed God knows the unseen of the heavens and the earth. (49:18)
\end{quote}

There are, however, other verses that express the idea that God teaches certain truths and mysteries to some of His slaves:

\begin{quote}
God will not inform you of the unseen, but God chooses out of His messengers whom He wishes. (3:179)
\end{quote}

\begin{quote}
[God is] Knower of the Unseen. He discloses not His unseen to anyone save to one He chooses as a messenger. (72:26-27)
\end{quote}

In addition to the verses two cited above, numerous other verses in the Qur’an show that God favours certain people with knowledge of the unseen.\textsuperscript{18} And since it is rationally acceptable that God should bestow knowledge of the unseen onto individuals whom He sees adequately fit to bear it, there is no reason that we should abandon the literal meaning of these verses.

As such, to believe that God’s prophets possessed knowledge of the unseen does not imply that their knowledge rivals God’s. God’s knowledge of the unseen is absolute and essential, whereas the prophets’ is limited and accidental and is given to them by God. Therefore, it is logically acceptable to say that God would impart knowledge of the unseen to His prophets and angels as He sees fit.\textsuperscript{19}
Now, it should go without saying that prophets, by definition, are in need of the knowledge of the unseen in order to proceed with their divine ministries. (Otherwise, they would be considered reformers, or visionaries, but not necessarily prophets.) As the office of imamate is viewed as the continuation of the ministry of the prophets, it stands to reason that the Imams too should be in need of knowledge of the unseen. It was explained above that prophets receive their knowledge of the unseen from God, and the Shi'a hold that the Imams receive their knowledge of the unseen from the Prophet. (According to Shi'a doctrine, the first Imam receives knowledge of the unseen directly from the Prophet, and he in turn transfers it to the Imam after him. In some cases, the Imam may also receive inspiration directly from God, but not in the same form of the revelation granted to the Prophet, and not in matters pertaining to shari'ah.)

And just as it is incorrect to say that it is blasphemous to say that the prophets had some knowledge of the unseen, on the basis that this would set them up as equals to God, so too it is wrong to draw the same inference in relation to the Imams’ knowledge of the unseen. For, there is an unmistakable and fundamental disparity between God’s knowledge and that of others: His is intrinsic, absolute, and eternal, but theirs is limited and contingent on what God permits.

Furthermore, the knowledge of the unseen possessed by the prophets and the Imams is of two distinct types. One type consists of the revelations that are subject to change and bada’ (for instance, abrogation). The second type of knowledge is that which is impervious to change and alteration. These two types of divine knowledge are clearly delineated in the words of the Infallible Imams. Thus, if the Imams disclosed prophecies that were of the first type of knowledge, they would make this known by including a clear qualification in these prophecies – such as ‘This event is subject to God’s decree’ or ‘God willing’ – in order to emphasize that these prophecies were tentative. But when their prophecies were based on the second type of knowledge of the unseen, they would present them without attaching any qualification. The critics have not presented any reports of this latter type of prophecy being contradicted. Therefore, it is not correct to claim that the doctrine of bada’ is a false attempt to glorify the Imams, nor is it correct for them to accuse the Imams of making false prophecies.

Let us now turn to an examination of the report cited in al-Kaфи. A few points are in order. First, with regards to its chain of transmission, the
The report is of dubious authenticity. ‘Allamah Majlisi states that the report is generally regarded as inauthentic.  

The second point that we ought to consider in relation to the said report is that some of the prophesies related by the Imams were, on account of the source from which they were derived (as explained above), subject to modification and alteration. That prophesies could be contradicted is corroborated by the account of Moses’ tryst with God recounted in the Qur’an. Thus, the Imams, citing this Qur’anic account, explained that some of what they would say was obtained from the Tablet of Effacement and Confirmation and was, therefore, alterable. As such, the Imams instructed the Shi’a to say, if they encountered events that were contrary to their prophesies, ‘God spoke the truth,’ and to refrain from renouncing the Imams. For, prophesies of this type originate in the Tablet of Effacement and Confirmation, wherein they are understood to hinge on particular conditions and circumstances, which may or may not take place.

The Qur’anic verse ‘and with Him is the Mother Book’ (13:39) suggests that the Secure Tablet (al-lawh al-mahfuz), which transcends change and is thus unalterable, is known solely to God, whereas the Tablet of Effacement and Confirmation is accessible to certain angels, prophets, and friends of God. The events recorded in the latter tablet are subject to change. For this reason, there are reports in the corpus of Shi’a hadith that describe how the prophets were required to acknowledge bada’ as a testament to their perpetual need of Divine Succour, despite being possessed of divine knowledge, and to God’s omnipotence and supreme sovereignty, which enables Him to change at will whatever He wishes. Moreover, these reports emphasize that the faithful must also acknowledge that God grants divine knowledge to a select group of people. This concurs with the Qur’an, since the Qur’an quotes the prophets telling their peoples things such as: ‘We are mortals like you, but God favours whomever of His servants that He wishes’ (14:11).

If, still unconvinced, the detractors contend that what the Imams prophesied and predicted never materialized, we must remark that the corpus of Sunni traditions relates numerous reports of prophesies from the Commander of the Faithful (‘Ali ibn Abi Talib) that were believed to be accurate. Firuzabadi has collected some of these prophesies from the Sunni corpus in his Fada’il al-Khamsah fi Sibah al-Sittah. Therefore, it is not outside the realm of doctrinal possibility for the Imams to accurately
foretell future events, even in Sunni thought. One example is the following account, which Firuzabadi relates from Mustadrak al-Sahihayn. It is reported that Imam ‘Ali once told Hajr al-Madari, ‘You will outlive me and will be ordered to curse me. Beware! Curse me but renounce me not.’ He then relates that this prophecy was fulfilled. Once as he was sitting in the mosque, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, the Umayyad ruler, ordered him to curse the Commander of the Faithful. Feigning compliance, Hajr stood up and said, ‘My Master, Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, orders me to curse ‘Ali; so curse him; may God curse him.’ (By ‘him,’ Hajr actually intended Ahmad ibn Ibrahim, not Imam ‘Ali. The narrator of this report adds, ‘And God blinded their hearts, as no one understood his true intention.’) This report also appears in Sawa’iq, wherein it is followed by this note by the author (Ibn Hajr): ‘This is only one instance of ‘Ali’s miraculous powers and prophesies.’

Ibn Abi al-Hadid, the renowned commentator of Nahj al-Balagha, also specifies a number of Imam ‘Ali’s prophesies, all of which were vindicated by the passage of time. He, for instance, foretold the death of Juwayrah and Maytham Tammar; and, as regards the latter, explained how he would be persecuted and put to death, all of which happened exactly as he had predicted. The Imam also foretold the death of Rashid Hijri and the view that the Mu‘tazilis would espouse as regards the contentious question of the Prophet’s succession. These examples should suffice to show that reports in the Sunni sources are compatible with the view that the Imams did in fact possess knowledge of the unseen.

Another allegation that some anti-bada’ theologians voice is that the Shi‘a forged this doctrine solely out of their animus toward the Sunni school. However, no evidence has been offered to show who fabricated the doctrine or when.

The positive impact of believing in bada’

As explained above, the doctrine of bada’ presupposes the belief that phenomena must be decreed and ratified on a number of transcendent levels prior to actually assuming objective existence. One of these transcendent levels is that of Divine Allotment and Ordainment (qada’ wa qadar ilahi). When God wills to create the world and its components, He first registers His Will in the Tablet of Allotment (lawh qadar),
including therein the specific qualifications and characteristics of phenomena. Once registered there, He then ordains and decrees that His Will should take place accordingly. It is only after traversing a multiplicity of transcendent stages that the world emerges in accordance with the qualities and characteristics preordained by the Divine Will.28

According to the doctrine of bada’, every one of these antecedent, transcendent levels is subject to change and alteration. One’s life, for instance, may be preordained to span sixty years, but it is possible, based on the doctrine of bada’, to extend one’s preordained lifespan to eighty years as a result of prayer, maintaining and honouring the ties of kinship (silat rahim), and giving charity to the poor (sadaqah).

The question that this naturally gives rise to is God’s purpose in effecting such change: why would God not preordain 80 years in the Tablet of Allotment from the start? Why would God first register a certain decree only to alter it later? This alteration by God of what He has previously preordained finds explicit expression in the Qur’an: ‘God effaces and confirms what He wishes, and with Him is the Mother of the Book (umm al-kitab)’ (13:39). The reports in the Shi’a corpus of tradition interpret this verse as denoting the alterations and adjustments that God makes to what He has preordained. Imam Sadiq is reported to have said concerning the above-quoted verse, ‘Is aught effaced but that which was confirmed and aught confirmed but that which was not?’29 Another report reads, ‘He effaces the preordained times of death according to how He wishes, and extends life according to how He wishes.’30

In light of these reports, we may answer the questions posed above. The answer, in short, is that the doctrine of bada’ encourages people to do good works and to have hope. Believing in bada’ can produce a sense of optimism and hope for a better future that would encourage the believers to strive to improve their fate. To feel that one’s fate is unalterably sealed may affect one with a sense of passive and indolent apathy. Debilitated by this sense of apathy, one would naturally feel reluctant to do anything to improve one’s material or spiritual prospects. Furthermore, if we are convinced that our fates are irrevocably predestined, it would be absurd to engage in prayer and supplication. If God is incapable of changing the future, what would be our motivation in praying to Him?

Additionally, despite the claim to the opposite, bada’ can be a significant part of personal faith, since the most important feature of bada’ is that it demonstrates God’s absolute power, sovereignty, and
independence. To say that God is incapable of exercising His discretion in the form of bada’ and that it is impossible for Him to change the destiny and fate that He has formerly ordained is to circumscribe His independence, power, and sovereignty. For instance, in explanation of verse 5:64 (mentioned above), that the Jews say that God’s hand is tied or fettered, Imam Sadiq is narrated as having said,

T[he Jews] did not mean this [literally]. But they said God had ceased to create and so He did not supplement or subtract. Thus God – great is His Magnificence – denounced them saying, ‘Fettered are their hands….’

The third and final positive aspect of bada’ from the perspective of faith is that it requires acknowledgement that absolute and unalterable knowledge is exclusive to God. Based on this doctrine, the prophets know that the knowledge that God has imparted to them is subject to change, for He may decide to alter what He had previously ordained. It is for this reason that it is reported on numerous occasions that the Infallible Imams said,

By God, were it not for a single verse in the Qur’an, we would tell you of all that will take place until the advent of the Time: ‘God effaces and confirms what He wishes, and with Him is the Mother Book.’

It is in recognition of these positive aspects of bada’ – especially the final one – that Imam Rida says, ‘God has never appointed a prophet but that He has entrusted him with two injunctions: the prohibition of wine and the acknowledgement that God can exercise bada’.’

Conclusion

The above was a brief response to criticisms of bada’. Bada’ is an important secondary doctrine of Twelver Shi‘ism. While Shi‘a scholars have given varying explanations of bada’ over the centuries, they agree that bada’ refers to God’s right to change His decree. The doctrine of bada’ is supported in narrations ascribed to the Shi‘a Imams in the Shi‘a hadith
canon. In these narrations, the Imams cite Qur’anic verses in support of bada’. Detractors of bada’ accuse it of originating in Judaism. However, the Qur’anic portrayal of Judaism does not show the Jews as believing in bada’; in fact, Shi’a hadith observe that it was the opposite. Detractors of bada’ also accuse the Shi’a of promoting the doctrine of bada’ to cover up false prophecies attributed to the Shi’a Imams; however, a Shi’a hadith that is cited in this regard is considered inauthentic with respect to its chain of narration and does not suffice to prove this claim. Finally, in contrast to the criticisms of bada’, bada’ can be shown to be something which is both psychologically beneficial to the human being, and which reinforces rather than contradicts faith in an omniscient God.

Table of Key Transliterated Terms

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Notes

1 I am obliged to express my thanks to Ms. Makarim Tarjoman for helping me in gathering the views of the detractors of the Shi’a doctrine of bada’.


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11 Abu Nasr Muhammad ibn Mas’ud al-‘Ayyashi, Tafsir al-‘Ayyashi II (Qum: Markaz li al-Taba’ah wa al-Nashr fi Mu’assasah al-Bi’tbah, 1421 AH), 60, no. 1306.


14 Muhammad ibn Ya’qub al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi I, 368-369, no. 5.


17 Ibid., 943.


21 Ibid., 148 (no. 14).

22 Allamah Majlisi, Mir’ah al-‘Uqul IV, 175.

23 Ibid., 176.

24 Ibn Babawayh, al-Tawbid, 334.


28 Muhammad ibn Ya’qub al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi I, 149-150.
