One of the most distinctive features in the history of Twelver Shi’ism is its steady development, after the occultation of the 12th Imam, of a theory of *ijtihād*. The early Shi’īs had refused this claim to independent reasoning and insisted instead on the normative force of the Imams’ traditions (*akhbār*). By contrast, later scholars such as al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī (d. 1325) and his successors increasingly questioned the unrestricted reliance on those traditions which, more often than not, were contradictory, and they developed a kind of source criticism that finally transferred many prerogatives of the hidden Imam onto the jurists themselves. In the long run, this not only led to a thorough stratification of society, where the ordinary lay believers were obliged to follow the mujtahidūn in all religious and legal matters, but also laid the foundations for a politicisation of Shi’ism which today is one of its most important hallmarks.

Yet this evolution did not go undisputed. Particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, the Akhbārī school efficiently contested the Uṣūlīs’ claim to *ijtihād*. For 200 years, a sort of traditionalism prevailed, entirely centred around the corpus of the *akhbār* which were more or less taken at face value, whereas reason, analogy and other hermeneutic tools used by the Uṣūlīs were strongly rejected. This conflict between the two schools of thought, which was resolved only in the 19th century in favour of the Uṣūlīs, has already been described in previous scholarship. Robert Gleave’s book, however, is the first attempt to provide a comprehensive description of the history and doctrines of the Akhbāriyya. His point of departure and main thesis on which he elaborates in the first chapter is that—contrary to established opinion—the Akhbāriyya started only with Muḥammad Amin al-Astarābādī (d. 1623 or 1626) and his famous book *al-Fawāʾid al-madaniyya*. Although he concedes that the term “*akhbārī*” existed before, it had hardly anything to do with what he defines as “later Akhbārī legal scripturalism” (p. 14), as Astarābādī’s critique of the theory of *ijtihād* was largely unprecedented. However, Gleave does not seem fully to trust his own thesis, as he is not always consistent in defending it; in a misleading way he speaks of a “later Akhbārī movement inspired by Astarābādī” (p. xix), describes Astarābādī as the one who “revived” Akhbārī thought (p. 33), and throughout chapter four refers to Astarābādī’s “conversion to Akhbarism [which] produced a new (or perhaps, revived an old) juristic method” (p. 103).

After this introductory chapter, the book divides roughly into three parts. Chapters two to four (pp. 31-139) are devoted to Astarābādī and his place in Shi’ī scholarship (including some highly illuminating remarks on the character of Shi’ī biographical dictionaries and the *tabaqāt* genre, pp. 40-60), his legal ideas (with a detailed analysis of his main work, *al-Fawāʾid al-madaniyya*) as well as his theological and philosophical thought. Chapters five and six are historical in character: Gleave traces (pp. 140-76) the spread of the Akhbārī school of thought, within some sixty years after its founder’s death, through the network of Astarābādī and his pupils, but also through a second
line originating with ʿAbdallāh al-Tustarī (d. 1612/13). A substantial and thorough discussion (pp. 177-215) is allocated to the intellectual competition with the Uṣūlīs as expressed in various lists of differences that were included in Akhbārī writings as a form of self-definition. The last three chapters deal with core issues of Akhbārī thought: the interpretation of the Qurʾān (pp. 216-44), the role, authenticity and significance of the akhībār going back to the Imams (pp. 245-67), and Akhbārī methods of hermeneutics (pp. 268-96).

All in all, Gleave’s account of the development and background is balanced, well-informed and grounded in a great number of sources. In addition, he stresses a number of important points. In particular, he shows convincingly that the Akhbārī approach both to the sources and to hermeneutics in general was far from egalitarian in the sense that every believer would be allowed and competent to interpret the akhībār and deduce lawful conduct from them. On the contrary: Astarābādī’s founding theory initially had a decidedly elitist streak and stipulated that only the muḥaddithūn, i.e. the specialists in the akhībār, should become judges and muftīs (pp. 79, 87); indeed Gleave even goes so far as to state that “while Astarābādī may have formally denied taqlīd, he actually recommended its use, and merely employed different terms to describe it” (p. 101). Later scholars followed this path, and Gleave is certainly correct in concluding that “[t]he dispute between the two schools, then, revolved around technical aspects of the epistemology of scholarly opinion, not around the level of authority accorded to the scholarly elite” (p. 296). Resolving the problem of contradictory akhībār, finding the seemingly unambiguous meaning of traditions, defining the relation between the Qurʾān and the akhībār—all these pursuits left a sufficient number of hermeneutic challenges for Akhbārī scholars who could thereby establish their own scholarly authority over the believers just as Uṣūlīs did.

A few critical remarks are in order. First, Gleave describes the Akhbārī point of view as a permanent reaction to, and rejection of, the Uṣūlīs, without, however, giving any specific references with regard to the Uṣūlīs. Generally, he treats them as a more or less anonymous mass, lacking any internal differentiation, with the result that the struggle conveys the impression of shadow-boxing, as not even the names of the most prominent opponents of the Akhbārīs are given, let alone their writings. Second, his scholarly discussion seems detached, for it is seldom framed in the political background of the epoch; this also holds true for the final decline of the Akhbārīs in the 19th century, for which Gleave offers only scant speculation at the very end (pp. 302-05). Third, he fails to acknowledge the significance of a highly sensitive discussion that willy-nilly was revived in the course of the dispute between Akhbārīs and Uṣūlīs, namely the dispute about the integrity of the text of the Qurʾān. Gleave brushes this issue aside by saying “[t]here is, however, little evidence that this ‘extremist’ doctrine was an element within Astarābādī’s own argumentation, and the hackneyed Shīʿī debate about the integrity of the Qurʾānic text is clearly peripheral to post-Astarābādī Akhbārī discussions of the sources of law” (p. 218). While it is true that Astarābādī did not pay much attention to this question, the subsequent revival of the older reproach of tahrīf and the debates about its consequences certainly were not peripheral—and they were