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# ‘ĀSHŪRĀ

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## 1. Introduction:

### Secular, Sacred, and Philosophical Histories

The martyrdom of the third Shi‘ite Imam, grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad (ﷺ), and son of Imam ‘Alī and the daughter of the Prophet, Fāṭimah, is an historical event. As such, it may be subject to historical research aimed at providing a consistent account of the events leading up to and following the slaughter that took place at Karbala, in present day Iraq, in the beginning of A.H. 61 (680 C.E.).

Telling the story of the events of Karbala, however, is not a mere rehearsal of historical facts. The martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn is commemorated annually as a drama of mythic proportions that is enacted in passion plays (*ta‘zia*), told in eulogies (*rawḍah khānī*), and mourned in processions that take place during the first month of the Islamic lunar calendar, Muḥaram, throughout the world wherever there are Shi‘ite communities.<sup>2</sup> The mourning ceremonies reach a peak on the day of the tenth of Muḥaram, *Āshūrā*, which means “tenth” in Arabic, and are commemorated again forty days later, on *‘Arba‘īn* (literally, *fortieth*).

In addition to the popular commemorations of ‘Āshūrā, Shi‘ite scholars have produced a huge body of literature describing and analyzing the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn. A difficult part of the work of the scholars consists in attempting to advise the public about what stories about Imam Ḥusayn are to be considered fables, and what is supported by appropriate documentation.<sup>3</sup> This scholarly

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<sup>1</sup> A nearly identical version of this paper was published in *Islamochristiana: ‘Āshūrā’ and Christ’s Passion*, 36, Rome: Pontificio Instituto di Studi Arabi e D’Islamistica, 2010, 23-45.

<sup>2</sup> See Chelkowski (2009).

<sup>3</sup> See Mutahhari (1969).

literature does not adhere to any naturalistic method, but has its own criteria for evaluating the reliability of reports.

So, we find two sorts of narratives about what happened at Karbala to Imam Ḥusayn, naturalistic historical narratives and religious narratives. Historians, whether secular or religious, freely admit the inadequacy of their accounts. The historical record is incomplete and mixed with spurious material introduced by later supporters or detractors. Those enthralled by popular accounts, on the other hand, often display a tendency toward exaggeration. Nevertheless, folk religion is not to be dismissed as nothing but the fanatic belief in fables, for much of the best art pertaining to ‘Āshūrā comes out of the folk tradition, and there is much truth to be found in this art.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, we have secular and sacred histories, and the sacred or religious histories may be scholarly or fabulous. Philosophical reflection and speculation may be introduced as a commentary on any of the sorts of history mentioned. The aim of philosophical history is not to add to the data on which an historical account is to be based; and it is not to evaluate the disagreements among historians about what really happened. Philosophical history is an attempt to draw out the morals, philosophical themes, and ideas that can be elucidated through the study of history. Hegel alludes to this when he writes, “[T]he Philosophy of History means nothing but *the thoughtful consideration of it*.”<sup>5</sup> It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that the only thoughtful consideration of history is the philosophical, for there can also be theological, jurisprudential, political, and other kinds of thoughtful reflections on the course of history, which are not uncommonly found in combination with one another.

Although my ultimate aim is philosophical; a review of some of the historical issues is unavoidable, for, as we will see, one’s view of what actually happened is at least as much a result of one’s philosophical and theological orientations as these are based on a historical narrative.

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<sup>4</sup> See Hyder (2006), ch. 4.

<sup>5</sup> Hegel (1991), 8.

## 2. 'ĀSHŪRĀ AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY:

### Narrations of Negotiations

The first historical questions to ask with respect to the politics of Karbala are: Who killed Imam Ḥusayn and why? What was the political motivation for killing Ḥusayn? In many of the histories of Islam, the answer given is that there was a disagreement over who should be caliph. Even in as sympathetic a history as that of Marshall Hodgson, the events are described briefly and dryly.

'Alī's second son and (through his mother, Fāṭimah) Muḥammad's grandson, Ḥusayn, was invited to raise a rebellion in Kūfah; but then the Kūfans were cowed by the Syrian governor before he arrived. Ḥusayn and his tiny force refused to surrender; they were isolated in the desert at nearby Karbalā and killed (680). Then the Ḥijāz itself rose in revolt...<sup>6</sup>

This is misleading, because it suggests that Ḥusayn heeded the invitation of the Kufans to lead a rebellion, so that the events of Karbala are to be seen as the outcome of a struggle for power. If he did not intend to lead a rebellion, and if he did not intend to take power by force from the hands of Yazīd, then why did he set out for Kufa? In a prayer attributed to him, Imam Ḥusayn ( 'a) says:

O Allah! Surely You know that what we have done was not from aspirations for power and not to acquire luxurious vanities, but to show the characteristics of Your religion, to make manifest reform in your cities and security for the oppressed of Your servants, and so that the duties You have set would be carried out and so that Your ways and precepts would be put into practice.<sup>7</sup>

Here Imam Ḥusayn insists that his intentions were not what we would call "political", i.e., not for the sake of power, but "religious", i.e., "to show the characteristics of [God's] religion," although the religious motivation has political implications, namely, reform in the cities.

As S. M. H. Jafri observes, because of the circumstances of the divine revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (s), "Islam has been since its very birth both a religious discipline and, so to speak, a socio-political movement."<sup>8</sup> But it is not merely a phenomenon with two faces, religious and political. Loyalty to the Prophet by his followers meant that they accorded authority to him in

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<sup>6</sup> Hodgson (1974), 219; for a more recent statement similar purport, see Abou El Fadl (2001), 68.

<sup>7</sup> al-Ḥaranī (2001), 280. It is worth noting that the word for reform (*islāḥ*) is literally a bringing about of peace (*sulḥ*).

<sup>8</sup> Jafri (1979), 1.

dimensions that were only divided later, so that we can now say that he exercised both religious and political authority. At the time, the two would not have been distinguished as such.

When the early Imamite corpus is examined, the phenomenological view that the reader is left with shows that the case of the third imam is doctrinally more complex than it might appear when the imam is looked at as no more than an insurgent against Umayyad power. In fact, according to the teachings of the imams, their corpus constitutes an indissoluble whole; when taken together, unified and coherent, each “present” (*lāhiq*) imam is the exegete of his predecessors (*ṣābiq*), unveiling the true meaning and the true intentions of their acts and words. As far as al-Ḥusayn’s case is concerned, to our knowledge none of his successors interpreted his presence in Karbalā as being a “political” act aimed at upsetting the powers that be. According to his own successors, the act of the imam was that of a Friend of God (*walī*) fulfilling his destiny according to the will of the Beloved (*mawlā*).<sup>9</sup>

The authority given to both the prophets and Imams to guide the people and which requires obedience is called *wilāyah*. *Wilāyah* is a special friendship with God,<sup>10</sup> which is usually translated into English as sainthood, but the *walī* in Shi‘ism is not understood as the saint in Catholicism, not as a miracle worker of outstanding piety, but as a spiritual leader graced with *‘ismah*, divine protection against error (yet without compromising freedom of volition). Sometimes *wilāyah* and *walāyah* are distinguished,<sup>11</sup> so that the former means the guardianship and right to obedience that characterizes the relation of the *mawlā* over his followers, while the latter is used to characterize the special friendship and devotion to God of the *walī* Allah, as well as the love and devotion of the people toward him.

Shaykh Saduq tells us that one of the most important narrations on which the authority of Imam ‘Alī is based is that of Ghadīr, according to which the Prophet appointed ‘Alī as his successor after the farewell pilgrimage. It is reported that he brought ‘Alī before the people, raised ‘Alī’s hand in his own and

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<sup>9</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994), 66. Amir-Moezzi laments that many “specialists” have defined Imamism as an essentially political and subversive ideology, “as a result of insufficient examination of the basic texts.” Amir-Moezzi (1994), 67.

<sup>10</sup> This is not to say that *walī* is to be interpreted as *friend*, as some have suggested in order to deprive the notion of any authority. For a further explanation of this point, see Abbas (2001), Ch. 3, part ii.

<sup>11</sup> See Qummi (1982), 149-150.

said: “For whomever I am *mawlā*, this (‘Alī) is his *walī*. O Allah, befriend those who befriend him and have enmity for those who have enmity toward him.”<sup>12</sup>

After the death of the Prophet, there was disagreement over the leadership of the community, the *ummah*. This is where the first step was taken to separate spiritual favor from political authority, and ‘Alī was prevented from assuming political leadership until after the first three caliphs had died. Imam ‘Alī did not seek political power out of self-interest, but claimed the right of leadership because this was his appointment. During the reign of the first three caliphs, ‘Alī did not mount any rebellion, but sought to maintain unity and peace for the *ummah*.

An early claim to authority that invokes the concept of *wilāyah* (even if the term is not especially prominent) may be found in a hadith according to which Imam Ḥusayn is reported to have written the following in a letter to the Shi‘ah of Basra:

God has chosen Muhammad from among his people, graced him with His prophethood and selected him for His message. After he admonished the people and conveyed His message to them, God took him back unto Himself. We, being his family (*ahl*), his loyalists (*awliyā*), his trustees, heirs, and legatees, are the most deserving among all the people to take his place.<sup>13</sup>

In this statement it is clear that the sort of authority understood by the Imam to have been given through the appointment of the Prophet includes the authority to lead the community, and in this there is no recognition of any division between “political” and “religious” leadership.

We should conclude that the argument over whether the early Shi‘ite movement was primarily political or religious is somewhat anachronistic. The movement was a charismatic one in which political dissatisfactions and spiritual yearnings were expressed, and often fused together in such a manner that what might be considered religious and political elements were indistinguishable for the participants in this movement.

The charismatic aspect of the Imams has also been a topic of scholarly controversy. A widespread view is that the movement of the Shi‘ah was based

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<sup>12</sup> This narration is found in various Shi‘ite as well as Sunni collections of hadiths. See Mudarrisi Yazdi (2003), 52; for further discussion see Dakake (2007), 104-113.

<sup>13</sup> This narration is reported in Ṭabarī, cited Jafri (1979), 179-180. It should be noted, however, that the language of *wilāyah* was not prominent in the reports pertaining to the rising of Imam Ḥusayn or the support offered him by the Kufans. See Dakake (2007), 82-84.

on the idea that leadership of the Muslim community should be hereditary. The issue is clarified by Maria Massi Dakake, who emphasizes the religious nature of the political loyalty of the Shi‘ah with reference to the concept of *walāyah*.

If we are not convinced that the Karbala event marked the sudden introduction of a newly religious sentiment into the Shi‘ite movement, we also do not entirely accept the related implication that in order to be “religious,” Shi‘ite sentiment had to be centered on the genealogically transmitted charisma of the Prophet, as opposed to the charisma of ‘Alī—often assumed to be more “political” in nature. Rather, we would argue that there was a discernible “religious” aspect to the early Shi‘ite movement, but that it was oriented toward and based upon the charisma of ‘Alī personally, which was undoubtedly founded upon his close relationship with—but not descent from—the Prophet Muḥammad. There is considerable evidence for the fact that at least some of ‘Alī’s early followers—and especially those who remained loyal to him to the end—viewed their support for him in religious rather than exclusively political terms. Most of this evidence comes from the speeches of ‘Alī’s close companions as reported in both Sunni and Shi‘ite historical sources. The declarations of allegiance to ‘Alī by his most loyal supporters recorded in these sources tend to be expressed in terms of their unshakeable bond of *walāyah* (allegiance) to him. In fact, it seemed to us that the most effective way to avoid the problematic dichotomies between the political and the religious in early Shi‘ite thought, and between ‘Alid and Prophetic descent as a basis of charisma or spiritual authority in Shi‘ism, would be through a closer examination of the somewhat ambiguous and elusive notion of *walāyah*—....<sup>14</sup>

The recognition of authority was made since pre-Islamic times through *bay‘ah*, which literally means “sale”, whereby one “sells” one’s loyalty and support in exchange for the protection of the *walī*, or guardian. After the Prophet’s announcement of the *wilāyah* of Imam ‘Alī at Ghadīr, people came to him to offer their hands in the gesture signifying *bay‘ah*.<sup>15</sup>

The issue of *bay‘ah* is central to the events leading up to ‘Āshūrā. Abū Sufiyān refused to recognize the prophetic authority of Muḥammad (ﷺ) and fought against him. Facing defeat, he converted to Islam and was forgiven. His son, Mu‘āwiyah, became the governor of Syria, and after the killing of the Caliph Uthmān, he refused to recognize the authority of Imam ‘Alī and fought against him. Facing defeat, he called for arbitration, which Imam ‘Alī accepted. Imam ‘Alī’s agreement to negotiate rather than fight outraged a party of those who

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<sup>14</sup> Dakake (2007), 6.

<sup>15</sup> For more on *bay‘ah* and its relation to *wilāyah*, see Dakake (2007), 60-62, where the renewal of the *bay‘ah* with ‘Alī is discussed.

had fought with him against Mu‘āwiyah, and so, they fought against both Mu‘āwiyah and ‘Alī. ‘Alī was finally murdered by one of these Kharijites (*Khawārij*), as they came to be known. Imam Ḥasan continued the policy of his father, and when Mu‘āwiyah requested a peace treaty with him, he complied. According to the treaty, Imam Ḥasan agreed not to oppose Mu‘āwiyah’s rule, but he stipulated that upon Mu‘āwiyah’s demise, the rule should return to Ḥasan or to Ḥusayn.<sup>16</sup>

The recognition of Mu‘āwiyah’s rule given by Imam Ḥasan in the peace treaty constitutes a kind of *bay‘ah*, but this does not mean that Imam Ḥasan or his followers accepted the *right* of Mu‘āwiyah to leadership. They explicitly rejected this right, and with it any claim to *wilayah* in the sense in which this concept was developing among the Shi‘ah.

Ḥasan is believed to have been poisoned on orders from Mu‘āwiyah, who later announced that he would be succeeded as Caliph by his son, Yazīd. When Mu‘āwiyah died, Imam Ḥusayn refused to offer *bay‘ah* to Yazīd. When Yazīd’s agents sought to coerce recognition from Ḥusayn, he sought refuge in Mecca. There he received word that the people of Kufa were ready to offer him *bay‘ah*, and that they would not accept the authority of Yazīd’s governor, ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, who brutally murdered Ḥusayn’s emissary there, and other supporters.<sup>17</sup> The Kufan Shi‘ah wrote to Imam Ḥusayn, “We have no leader (*imām*), so come and perhaps God will lead us, with you, to the truth.”<sup>18</sup> In response, Imam Ḥusayn writes to them: “... on my life, the *imām* is none other than the one who acts according to the Book and who undertakes justice, and the one who follows the religion of Truth, and who devotes his soul to the cause of God.”<sup>19</sup> One who does not have these qualities will not have the right to exercise authority over the community of Muslims, regardless as to whether such authority is to be considered religious or political.

In the meantime, Yazīd’s agents had arrived in Mecca, and if Ḥusayn had stayed there, a battle might have broken out between his supporters and those of Yazīd, or he might have been taken captive. So, Ḥusayn headed toward Kufa.

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<sup>16</sup> Āl-Yāsīn (1998), 236-237; 244-259.

<sup>17</sup> Naqvi (1986), 78-79; 90; Ayati (1985), ch. 5.

<sup>18</sup> Dakake (2007), 86. As Dakake points out, the sense of “*imām*” here is not the special Shi‘i sense of the meaning, but a more general sense that has religious and political connotations.

<sup>19</sup> Dakake (2007), 87; Abū Mikhnaḥ (2001), 27.

At this point in the narration of the events leading up to ‘Ashūrā, the commentators emphasize that Imam Ḥusayn did not leave Mecca because he was afraid of being killed, not because such fears would have been groundless, but because of the Imam’s fearlessness and his determination to meet his fate at Karbala, by means of which, and only by means of which, he would be able to achieve the purpose of commanding the good and forbidding wrongdoing.<sup>20</sup>

What was his purpose? Was it to gather an army to defeat Yazīd by force of arms? In his will to his brother Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanifiyyah, Imam Ḥusayn stated his purpose explicitly:

Indeed I have not arisen arrogantly or pridefully, and not corruptly or oppressively; and indeed I have arisen to seek reform (*iṣlāḥ*) in the community (*ummah*) of my grandfather, Muḥammad, peace and blessings to him and to his progeny. I wanted to command the good and forbid wrongdoing, and to follow the way of my grandfather and the way of my father, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, peace be with him.<sup>21</sup>

Imam Ḥusayn does not set out to seize power, but to assert his right to leadership, to accept the recognition of his authority from those who had pleaded for deliverance from the injustices of Yazīd and his governor, and by commanding the right and forbidding the wrongdoing of the Caliphate, to distinguish the way of Islam from that of the empire established in its name.<sup>22</sup>

Imam Ḥusayn’s stance against Yazīd was not an armed insurrection, but neither was it a peaceful protest. He did not set out to seize power, but he did come armed and ready to defend himself. In his study of early Shi’ism, Amir-Moezzi writes: “From a historical point of view, nothing suggests that al-

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<sup>20</sup> Naqvi (1986), 80; Ayati (1985), ch. 12.

<sup>21</sup> Tehrani (1416/1995), 16, citing Majlisī’s *Bahār al-Anwār*, Qummī’s *Nafs al-Mahmūm*, and Khwārazmī’s *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn*.

<sup>22</sup> According to Sachedina: “...Sunni Muslim jurists regarded *jihād* essentially in the sense of expansion of the Islamic state conceived as the sphere where the Islamic norms prescribed in the Shari‘a were paramount. This conception of *jihād* was scrutinized by the Shī‘ī jurists in the light of their Imams’ statements that did not regard the wars of expansion as being motivated by the Qur’anic injunction. It is this scrutiny of the purpose of *jihad* that has given rise to the question of the authority that can declare *jihād* in Imamite jurisprudence.

“...the Shī‘ī Imams did not regard the various *jihāds* undertaken by the caliphs as motivated by the Qur’anic demand to strive to make God’s cause succeed....

“The original purpose of *jihād*, then, according to the Imamites, was not preserved under the caliphate. What had caused the *jihād* to drift away from the Qur’anic purpose was the coming to power of unjust and unrighteous authority claiming to undertake *jihād* in the name of God.” Sachedina (1988), 109-110.



Ḥusayn planned an armed combat with the Iraqi Umayyad authorities.”<sup>23</sup>

‘Allāmah Naqvi likewise writes:

Al-Ḥusayn never intended to wage a war against Yazīd with material strength to win worldly power for himself. He aimed only to arouse the Muslims from apathy and indifference to the injunction of the Qur’an, and the teachings and practices of the Prophet, and to bring about a spiritual revolution so as to enable them to see the grave threat which Yazīd’s accession to the Caliphate held to Islam.<sup>24</sup>

One could even argue that according to the terms of the treaty between Imam Ḥasan and Mu‘āwiyah, since Yazīd’s accession to the caliphate was illegitimate, it was Yazīd who was rebelling against the authority of Imam Ḥusayn!

Of course, Imam Ḥusayn knew that the Umayyads would oppose his acceptance of leadership of the people in Kufa. However, his actions show that he would seek to avoid armed conflict and to negotiate a settlement. If attacked, he would defend himself; but his defense is not the exercise of a natural right to preserve his life—rather, the defense itself constitutes a part of the protest and rejection of Ummayyad authority. There are indications, aside from appeal to supernatural inspiration, that he was aware that he would be attacked by Yazīd’s forces, and that his defenses would not be sufficient to repel them.<sup>25</sup>

In the course of events leading up to the slaughter at Karbalā, Imam Ḥusayn repeatedly sues for peace. When he came to a tributary of the Euphrates running through the plain of Karbala (about 75 km. from Kufa), he was stopped by Ḥurr ibn Yazīd al-Tamīmī, who led an Umayyad force of a thousand horsemen.<sup>26</sup> There are conflicting reports about the size of Ḥusayn’s party. According to a report attributed to Imam Bāqir, Imam Ḥusayn had forty-five horsemen and a hundred men on foot.<sup>27</sup> Ḥurr had orders to bring Ḥusayn before Ibn Ziyād. Imam Ḥusayn protests that the people of Kufa asked him to come, and has the letters brought for Ḥurr to inspect. Ḥurr responds that he did not write the letters and does not know those who did. Imam Ḥusayn asked to be allowed to pass, or to return to Madina, but Ḥurr would not permit Ḥusayn’s band to advance on their own to Kufa, nor to turn back. As a

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<sup>23</sup> Amir-Moezzi (1994), 66.

<sup>24</sup> Naqvi (1986), 88.

<sup>25</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 72-73, 82.

<sup>26</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 90.

<sup>27</sup> See Manavi’s footnote 54 in Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 148.

compromise, Ḥusayn was permitted to take a third route, accompanied by Ḥurr and his forces. Ḥurr warned Imam Ḥusayn that if it came to a fight, Ḥusayn would certainly be killed. Ḥusayn responded that he had no fear of death. The next day, the third of Muḥarram, Ḥurr's forces were joined by four thousand sent by Ibn Ziyād under the command of 'Umar ibn Sa'd.<sup>28</sup> Imam Ḥusayn responded to an emissary from Ibn Sa'd that he had come at the invitation of the people of Kufa, "If they are now averse to my presence, I'll leave them and go away."<sup>29</sup> When Ibn Sa'd conveyed this message to Ibn Ziyād, the latter misunderstood Ḥusayn's desire to avoid bloodshed for fear. How often those who have sought to avoid violence have been falsely accused of cowardice!<sup>30</sup> Ibn Ziyād responded that Ibn Sa'd should make Ḥusayn offer *bay'ah* to Yazīd.

At this point, there is some dispute about the historical record. The perplexity is clearly stated by the translator of Shaykh Mufīd's *Kitāb al-Irshād* and the volume of Ṭabarī's history about Yazīd, I. K. A. Howard. Howard reports that Ḥusayn offered Ibn Sa'd three options: "(a) he would go back; (b) he would go to a frontier post; or (c) he would go to Yazid and put his hand in his and see what his view was."<sup>31</sup> Howard continues with incredulity:

If these were really offered, then 'Ubaydallah's [i.e., Ibn Ziyād's] task was over. All he had to do was send al-Husayn to Yazid. However, 'Ubaydallah insisted that al-Husayn must submit to him; this was too much for al-Husayn. He, his followers, and his family accepted death. The blame for al-Husayn's death according to this is clearly the responsibility of 'Ubaydallah, and not Yazid. The purpose of this version originally may have been merely intended to transfer the blame for al-Husayn's death from Yazid to 'Ubaydallah. However, it also had implications for those who believed in the Imamate of al-Husayn, for he was, in fact, agreeing to accept Yazid as Caliph; he was willing to renounce his whole mission, which was the rejection of Yazid's caliphate. Abu Mikhnaf admits that there is a tradition that maintains that all al-Husayn offered was to go back to Medina or go anywhere else in God's broad land. Despite this view, which would agree with the Shi'ite version, we have the Shi'ite Imam Muhammad

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<sup>28</sup> Higher figures have also been reported. See Mavani's footnote 42 in Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 107; also see Naqvi (1986), 92.

<sup>29</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 108.

<sup>30</sup> In the fifth sermon of *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Imam 'Alī is reported to have said: "If I speak out they would call me greedy towards power but if I keep quiet they would say I was afraid of death." Rāḍī (1971), Vol. 1., 76.

<sup>31</sup> See Howard's introduction in Ṭabarī (1990), xiii.

al-Baqir endorsing again the attitude that does not agree with the views of the Shi‘ah.<sup>32</sup>

According to Abū Mikhnaf, the second letter that ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d sent to Ibn Ziyād is as follows:

God has wiped out mutual enmity. He has united us and reformed the affairs of our community. This Husayn has undertaken to return to where he came from; or we can send him to one of the border areas where he will be treated like any other Muslim with the same rights and obligations; or we send him to Yazid, the Commander of the faithful, to offer his pledge of allegiance [*bay‘ah*] to him and resolve their differences. This approach will be satisfactory to you—it will be for the betterment of the community.<sup>33</sup>

The tradition mentioned by Howard that disputes the allegation that Husayn offered to give his hand (in *bay‘ah*) to Yazid is omitted by Shaykh Mufid and from the version of Abū Mikhnaf derived from Hisham ibn al-Kalbī. In Ṭabarī, however, we find the following:

According to Abu Mikhnaf, ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Jundab ‘Uqbah b. Sim‘an: I accompanied Husayn [all the time]. I left Medina for Mecca with him, and Mecca for Iraq. I did not leave him until he died. There was no one who addressed a word to him, either in Medina, in Mecca, on the road, in Iraq, or in the camp, until the day of his death, without my hearing the conversation. By God! He neither gave the promise, which the people claim to recall when they allege that he would put his hand in the hand of Yazid b. Mu‘awiyah or that they should send him to any one of the Muslims' border stations. Rather he said, “Leave me, and I will travel this broad land so that we may see how the people’s affair develops.”<sup>34</sup>

This leaves us with several possibilities:

1. According to the letter of Ibn Sa‘d to Ibn Ziyād, Imam Ḥusayn offered three alternatives, including the offer to recognize Yazid through *bay‘ah*. If this is correct, then Ibn Sim‘an was mistaken, or the report attributed to him is mistaken.
2. Howard’s “Shi‘ite view” is that Ibn Sim‘an is entirely correct, and that Imam Ḥusayn did not make any offer to make peace or recognize Yazid’s authority in any way, shape or form, because to do so would

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<sup>32</sup> Ṭabarī (1990), xiii-xiv. Howard indicates that one of the sources used by Ṭabarī, ‘Ammar ibn Mu‘awiyah al-Duhni (d. 133/750-1), reported narrations from Imam Bāqir about these events. Pīshvānī claims that Duhni is not a reliable transmitter of narrations: Pīshvānī (1389/2010), 713.

<sup>33</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 111-112; Ṭabarī (1990), 109; Mufid (1981), 343.

<sup>34</sup> Ṭabarī (1990), 109.

have been to abandon his mission. Ibn Sa'd invented the offer of three alternatives from Imam Ḥusayn, or exaggerated them; and Ibn Sim'an correctly states that Ḥusayn did not give any promise to recognize Yazīd's authority.

3. Shimr's view seems to have been that Ḥusayn really did offer the three alternatives; but that the offer to go to Damascus was just a trick through which he planned to escape.

The first view is currently considered anathema. Consider, for example, how it is treated by Pīshvāī:

Among the reports, what can never be overlooked is the report of 'Uqbah ibn Sim'an, who was an eye witness to the affair, and accompanied the Imam everywhere; while other reports rely on speculation and guess work....

Even if we did not have the report of 'Uqbah ibn Sim'an, the slightest acquaintance with the course of the life of Imam Ḥusayn and his decisive positions would not leave the slightest room for doubt about the incorrectness of any sort of report according to which Imam Ḥusayn would surrender to Yazīd or go to him. If Imam Ḥusayn ( 'a) had been ready to make *bay'at* with Yazīd or to go to him, he would not have gone to Mecca and then to Iraq.... Imam Ḥusayn ( 'a) had refused for years to offer *bay'at* with Yazīd as successor to the caliphate, whom he considered to be a corrupt individual lacking the conditions for the caliphate. Now that Mu'āwiyah had died and Yazīd was claiming the caliphate, Imam Ḥusayn would never be prepared to offer him *bay'at*.<sup>35</sup>

As for the report of Ibn Sim'an, the claim that he makes that he was privy to all of Ḥusayn's dealings conflicts with the reports that Ibn Sa'd spoke with Imam Ḥusayn privately.

According to the first view, there is nothing unexplainable about the fact that Imam Ḥusayn was unwilling to offer *bay'ah* to Yazīd until his meeting with Ibn Sa'd, and his leaving Medina and then Mecca because of this. Until this point, the policy of refusing *bay'ah* could be pursued without bloodshed.

The fact that Imam Ḥusayn considered Yazīd unfit for the caliphate should go without saying, since none were fit for the caliphate without authorization from the Prophet or Imams (s). It is true that Yazīd was reported to have been openly sinful in a manner that was not found in Mu'āwiyah. But neither Yazīd

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<sup>35</sup> Pīshvāī (1389/2010), 713.

nor Mu'āwiyah, nor any of the previous caliphs except for Imams 'Alī and Ḥasan were considered to have the conditions necessary for the caliphate.

No doubt, going to Yazīd and coming to some agreement in which his rule would be recognized would have been repulsive to Imam Ḥusayn, but the suggestion is not quite so farfetched as Pīshvāī claims. The Imams before and after Ḥusayn had come to terms with caliphs they considered to have unjustly taken power in order to prevent civil war and to avoid bloodshed. So, if we try to be objective and base our views solely on the historical record, we cannot dismiss with certainty the suggestion that Imam Ḥusayn offered the three alternatives mentioned: to return to Madina, to go to a frontier town, or to go to Yazīd.

As for Howard's claim that by agreeing to make peace with Yazīd, Imam Ḥusayn would be abandoning his entire mission, this assumes that he could not reject the legitimacy of Yazīd's caliphate while making a peace agreement, although this is exactly what Imam Ḥasan did with regard to Mu'āwiyah.

None of this is to say that Imam Ḥusayn really did offer the three alternatives reported by Ibn Sa'd in his letter to Ibn Ziyād. The historical record does not provide sufficient information to make any definitive statement in this regard. Surely, Ibn Sa'd had enough reason to attempt to finesse a solution to the situation by attributing to Imam Ḥusayn more than what he explicitly agreed to. So, the second alternative should also be considered, namely, that Ibn Sa'd invented or exaggerated the idea that Imam Ḥusayn was prepared to offer *bay'ah* to Yazīd.

I am not going to recount the rest of the events pertaining to 'Āshūrā or the controversies surrounding them, except as they pertain to the issues raised above. For example, a problem with the first alternative is that if Imam Ḥusayn was prepared to offer terms of peace with Yazīd, why not do the same for Ibn Ziyād when he demanded this? Ibn Ziyād's response to Ibn Sa'd's letter was reportedly that he was inclined to allow Ḥusayn to go to Damascus. At this point, Shimr, who finally killed the Imam, is said to have warned Ibn Ziyād not to fall for a trick.<sup>36</sup> After all, in Madina, Ḥusayn had twice asked for time until the next day when Yazīd's agents demanded that he offer *bay'ah*, and then

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<sup>36</sup> Abū Mikhnaḥ (2001), 112; Muḥīd (1981), 343-344; Ṭabarī (1990), 110.

under the cover of night he left for Mecca.<sup>37</sup> Ibn Ziyād responds that Ḥusayn and his followers should be forced to submit to his authority or be killed. If Ḥusayn had offered to submit to the authority of Yazīd, why not submit to Ibn Ziyād, as well? Perhaps Ibn Ziyād could not be trusted to keep his word. Perhaps his murder of Ḥusayn’s followers made it impossible for the Imam to accept his authority. Furthermore, the demand and response to recognize Ummayyad authority on the morning of ‘Āshūrā is reported (identically in Abū Mikhnaf, Mufīd and Ṭabarī) as follows:

Qays b. al-Ash‘ath asked, “Won't you submit to the authority of your kinsmen? They will always treat you as you would like. Nothing hateful will ever come to you from them.” Al-Husayn replied, “You are your brother’s brother. Do you want the Bane Hashim to seek vengeance from you for more than the blood of Muslim b. ‘Aqil? No, by God! I will neither give them my hand like a man who has been humiliated, nor will I flee like a slave. Servants of God, ‘I take refuge in my Lord and your Lord, from your stoning.’ ‘I take refuge in my Lord and your Lord, from every haughty man who does not believe in the Day of Reckoning.” He made his mount kneel and ordered ‘Uqbah b. Sim‘an to tie its reins. The Kufans began to advance toward him.<sup>38</sup>

Yazīd, but not Ibn Ziyād, was considered one of Ḥusayn’s kinsmen; so, this report has Ḥusayn insisting that he will not offer *bay‘ah* to Yazīd.

Shortly after this point in the narrations, Ḥurr repents, is forgiven by Ḥusayn, and becomes one of the first martyrs of the day. Here there are slight differences in the words attributed to Ḥurr. It is reported that when Ibn Sa‘d advanced on Ḥusayn, Ḥurr asked him whether he really intended to kill him, and, according to Ṭabarī, asked, “Aren't you satisfied with one of the three proposals that he offered you?” ‘Umar b. Sa‘d answered, “If the matter rested with me, I would accept, but your governor has refused.”<sup>39</sup> In other narrations Ḥurr merely asks if there isn’t any other way.<sup>40</sup>

So, on the issue of whether Imam Ḥusayn agreed to go to Yazīd, the reports that we find in the earliest narrations are contradictory. No matter which of the interpretations of the reports one gives, however, there are several conclusions

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<sup>37</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 16-17; Mufīd (1981), 300-301; Ṭabarī (1990), 5-7.

<sup>38</sup> Ṭabarī (1990), 125.

<sup>39</sup> Ṭabarī (1990), 127.

<sup>40</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 135; Mufīd (1981), 352.

that one can reach with regard to the political theology of Imam Ḥusayn, peace be with him.

### 3. 'ĀSHŪRĀ AND POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY:

#### Imam Ḥusayn's Political Theology

According to Shi'ite theology, authority is by divine appointment, and hence, the caliphates of those other than the Imams are illegitimate. The illegitimacy of the caliphate, however, is not sufficient to justify a refusal to recognize its authority, let alone to rebel against it. Imam 'Alī advised Abū Bakr and 'Umar, for example, despite the fact that he considered them to have illegitimately taken the position of caliph, and Imam Ḥasan made peace with Mu'āwiyah. Although lack of divine appointment would have been sufficient to invalidate claims to the caliphate, the arguments of the Imams went further and accused the caliphs of injustice (including the misappropriation of funds and the appointment of unsuitable governors).

So, why did Imam Ḥusayn refuse to offer *bay'ah* with Yazīd? Why not come to some sort of agreement through which his de facto power would be recognized? One reason that is often mentioned is the moral turpitude of Yazīd. Another reason is that Yazīd's caliphate violated part of the agreement that Ḥasan had concluded with Mu'āwiyah. Furthermore, there was the suffering of the people under Yazīd's rule, and eventually, the invitation to Ḥusayn by the people of Kufa.

At a deeper level, however, there was a need to reject the kind of rule that was found in the caliphate (with the exception of the rule of the Imams), in which Islam was made to serve the interests of worldly power and its expansion. According to the Shi'ah, Islam came to overturn the prevailing power structures and allegiances, and to replace them with a community whose structures were formed by the charisma of the divinely appointed guide.

If there were this need to reject the perversion of the Islamic community that made it into a mere empire, why did the previous Imams not refuse to cooperate, or rise up against the caliphate? We can interpret this as a matter of judgment. The situation in the case of Imams 'Alī and Ḥasan was such that if they had refused any sort of recognition of the caliphate, this would have been seen as nothing more than divisiveness and an attempt to win power for

themselves. Blatant moral corruption in the caliphate made it possible for Imam Ḥusayn to oppose Yazīd in such a manner that this could be properly understood as required by the Islamic duties of commanding the good and prohibiting evil.

The historical circumstances of Ḥusayn's position make possible a theology that underscores the requirement of justice in governance, and the rejection of government that scorns this requirement while it rules in the name of Islam. We may speculate that in the judgment of Imams 'Alī and Ḥasan, such a position could not have been sustained against any of the previous caliphs without leading to civil war and the suspicion that their intentions were mundane. In the case of Imam Ḥusayn, however, the opposition to the caliphate can be carried out in a manner in which it is relatively clear that the motivation for the opposition is the thorough violation of the ideals of Islamic political theology, according to which power is to be brought into accord with Islam, and Islam is not to be used in the service of power. Ḥusayn's stance against Yazīd is not because no peace can be brokered with such a corrupt individual, but because the corruption of the individual provides the opportunity in which a stand can be taken against the corruption of the political governance of the Muslim community.

The rejection of unjust governance, however, does not imply rebellion. Imam Ḥusayn never calls upon the people to rise up and fight their oppressors; he does not go to war against Yazīd. Instead, there are consistent and repeated efforts to prevent violence. These efforts are found on display in the works of the early narrators, Abū Mikhnaf, Mufīd, and Ṭabarī. For example, when one of his followers finds the opportunity to shoot an arrow at Shimr, before the fighting began, Imam Ḥusayn stops him with the explanation that he does not want to initiate hostilities, despite the fact that it is obvious that his enemies will attack. At the same time, the stance of Imam Ḥusayn is not one of an absolute refusal to fight or take up arms. He is willing to fight defensively, to repel attack only when attacked, and he is willing to act in such a manner that he knows that his enemy will attack him, when this is seen as required for the sake of achieving the goal of commanding the good and forbidding evil, and in this case, demonstrating that the caliphate is illegitimate, even if it is obvious



that he will not be able to fight off the attack and must face terrible suffering along with that of his supporters and family until he is martyred.

Whether or not Imam Ḥusayn offered the three alternatives to Ibn Sa'd reported in the historical sources, he repeatedly did offer to return from whence he came, and he repeatedly called upon his enemies to turn away from their plans to attack him.

It has been suggested that he left for Karbala with his family in order to make them a sacrifice to God that would be greater than Abraham's sacrifice of his son. In fact, however, once it was clear that there would be killing, Ḥusayn asked his friends and family to desert him, and explained that Yazīd's forces would not hunt them down because they only had orders to pursue and kill him.<sup>41</sup>

Others have suggested that Imam Ḥusayn left Mecca for Kufa with the express purpose of being martyred as a strategy to be used against the 'Umayyids. If he had wanted martyrdom, however, he could have remained in Medina, or advanced toward Damascus. Ali Shari'ati even claims that Imam Ḥusayn broke off his *hajj* in order to seek martyrdom because political activity is more important than worship!<sup>42</sup> Shari'ati is right to claim that Islam was in danger of coming to be seen as little more than a civil religion at the service of an empire; but he thinks that such a situation calls for revolutionary violence, and that since Imam Ḥusayn lacks the army needed to mount a war effort, he decides to have himself killed by his enemies, and thus to disgrace them as a political tactic to undermine 'Umayyid power. In order to make this story sound convincing, Shari'ati has to ignore the repeated attempts that Imam Ḥusayn made to avoid conflict, his pleas to be allowed to return from where he came (even if the dubious offer of other alternatives is ignored), his admonitions to his enemies that killing him would constitute a sacrilege, pleas and admonitions that were successful in motivating the repentance of Ḥurr. All of this must be removed from the narrative so that Ḥusayn can be presented as a revolutionary leader armed with the weapon of his own martyrdom.

Shari'ati places his own position on the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn as an alternative to two other views on the philosophy behind Ḥusayn's stance.

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<sup>41</sup> Abū Mikhnaf (2001), 120-121.

<sup>42</sup> Shari'ati (1986), 190. All the other commentators on this topic claim that Imam Ḥusayn performed *'umrah*, either by changing his intention from *hajj* to *'umrah* or by intending only to perform *'umrah* from the start. See, for example, Pīshvānī (1389/2010), 619-622.

According to what he considers to be a “Christian” view, Imam Ḥusayn suffered and died so that those who participate in his passion by weeping for him may be forgiven of their sins.<sup>43</sup> He contrasts this view with the view that Imam Ḥusayn rose up in order to establish a new government, a view that became widely debated with the publication of *Shahīd-e Jāvīd (Eternal Martyr)* by Ni‘matullāh Ṣālihi Najafābādī, an Iranian Shi‘ite cleric and historian.<sup>44</sup>

Najafābādī’s view is characterized by Shari‘ati as one according to which Imam Ḥusayn conducted a military operation to set up a new government but failed.<sup>45</sup> In contrast, Shari‘ati affirms, along with the majority of Shi‘i commentators, that the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn appeared on the surface to be a defeat, but it succeeded in undermining the ‘Umayyid dynasty.

Both Shari‘ati and Najafābādī share the view that Ḥusayn sought martyrdom, and that their motivations for acting were primarily political. They differ in that Shari‘ati held that from the moment when Ḥusayn set out from Mecca, his destination was really Karbala and not Kufa, that is, he knew that there was no hope for him in Kufa, but he intentionally chose the path to martyrdom. Najafābādī, on the other hand, held that Ḥusayn sought to establish a government in Kufa to rival that of Yazīd, and only when efforts in this direction failed, he decided to become a martyr.

Najafābādī’s book was written in Qom in 1968 and published in a new edition after the revolution. The book, *Shahīd-e Jāvīd* is an important one for anyone concerned with the philosophy behind the events of ‘Āshūrā because it challenges traditional views on this topic, and because of the controversy surrounding the work among Shi‘i scholars. A number of works were written to refute Najafābādī’s views, and the controversy even led to violence.

To his credit, Najafābādī draws attention to the great efforts taken by Imam Ḥusayn to avoid violence and secure peace, efforts that Shari‘ati tends to overlook. Nevertheless, the movement towards Kufa is described as an uprising, although one that is essentially defensive. Najafābādī also praises accommodation with an oppressive government of overwhelmingly superior military strength as a reasonable strategy. So, contrary to its reputation for

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<sup>43</sup> The so-called Christian view is also condemned by Pīshvāī (1389/2010), 258-267.

<sup>44</sup> Najafābādī’s view is criticized in Pīshvāī (1389/2010), 275-281.

<sup>45</sup> Siegel (2001).

offering a revolutionary view of Imam Ḥusayn's uprising,<sup>46</sup> *Shahīd-e Jāvīd* has been criticized by some for not being sufficiently revolutionary.

Siegel collects a number of criticisms that have been raised against Najafābādī's position. One such criticism is that it would seem to justify suspicions of treachery against the Shi'ah, for if Najafābādī is right, the strategy of peace is only to be followed when one lacks sufficient military might. On the other hand, if Imam Ḥusayn was sincere in his offer to return to Mecca, if he had been permitted to return, because of his lack of military power, Najafābādī's view would imply that he would have had to make peace with Yazīd. The traditional view, to the contrary, is that Imam Ḥusayn would never have made a peace with Yazīd, and in any case, the offers to retreat were only made to emphasize his own reasonableness against his enemies' mercilessness. Here there is much room for speculation about whether the Imam really was duplicitous in his offers.

Pīshvāī makes the important observation that if Ḥusayn's goal were to reject the sort of government based on raw power as inconsistent with Islam, he could not accomplish this by using the force of arms to set up his own government.<sup>47</sup> Of course, opponents of this view could try to argue that taking power by force is not what corrupts the caliphate, but the misuse of the power seized, or the failure to implement Islamic law, or some other form of corruption. This tactic will not work, however, for a Shi'i political theology based on the concept of *wilāyah*, since this is supposed to be a mutual relation between the guardian and those he guides based on the divinely granted charisma that characterizes both the *Imam* and the community of his Shi'ah.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to the interpretations of the philosophy behind Ḥusayn's stance already mentioned, Pīshvāī also considers and criticizes three others: first, the "Sufi" interpretation, according to which Ḥusayn seeks martyrdom in order to achieve annihilation in God; second, a view that holds that Ḥusayn sought martyrdom because of its intrinsic religious value; and third, the view that Ḥusayn's stance was motivated entirely by a commitment to perform the duties God had placed upon him. With some qualifications, Pīshvāī accepts the idea

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<sup>46</sup> See Enayat (1982), 190-194.

<sup>47</sup> Pīshvāī (1389/2010), 277.

<sup>48</sup> See Dakake (2007), 73 ff.

of the intrinsic religious value of martyrdom, but he argues that the primary motivation was the commitment to doing his duties.<sup>49</sup>

While Pīshvāī tries to show what is wrong with the alternatives to the view he favors, one might also attempt an interpretation that seeks to combine more motivational elements than can be given in one or two of the views considered. Pīshvāī's own position draws heavily on reference to the occult knowledge given to the Imam by divine inspiration and his own dedication to act in accordance with this inspiration. Although this sort of approach has a long history in Shi'i thought, it harbors elements that undermine it from within. According to this interpretation, Ḥusayn is given divine direction to act as he did in order that he can serve as a model for others. Others, however, will not be able to follow the example of one whose actions are to be explained by divine inspirations. More specifically, if the question of whether to submit to an unjust ruler or to resist is to be determined only by divine inspiration, then in the absence of such inspiration the example of an Imam who enjoyed such divine commerce will not be able to guide actions. The guidance of actions requires us to be able to understand the reasons for making various decisions in such a way that we may also adhere to the guiding principles behind these decisions.

Given these considerations, we may, with caution, suggest the following motivating principles may have been behind the position taken by Imam Ḥusayn.

1. The imam responds to the needs of those who claim to be his followers. This principle derives from the nature of *wilāyah*.<sup>50</sup> Imam Zayn al-'Abidīn, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn includes the rights of leaders and of subjects in his treatise on rights.<sup>51</sup> The right of the subjects is that one with authority over them should behave kindly toward them, like a compassionate father.

2. Imam Ḥusayn consistently seeks to avoid harm being done or blood being spilled. Throughout his ordeal, he seeks to negotiate a way to avoid conflict, while maintaining the following principle.

3. Take a clear stand in favor of the cause of the good and against oppression and injustice.

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<sup>49</sup> An entire chapter (6) of this *maqṭal* is devoted to: "The Philosophy of the Uprising of Imam Ḥusayn ('a)", Pīshvāī (1389/2010), 245-320.

<sup>50</sup> For the social dimensions of *wilāyah*, see Shomali (1430/2009).

<sup>51</sup> Zayn al-'Abidīn (1987), 285-286.

4. Do not allow religion to be used as a vehicle by which to pursue selfish interests.

5. Command the good and prohibit evil.

6. Be slow to anger and quick to forgive.

7. Set an example of virtue through your behavior.

The list could be expanded indefinitely, but no matter how detailed it becomes, there remains room for judgment. Ḥusayn was confronted with a moral dilemma. He could have humiliated himself in front of Ibn Ziyād to avoid the battle of ‘Āshūrā; he could have remained in Madina. He could have made peace with Yazīd. Each of these would have conflicted with one or more of the principles mentioned, but at the same time would also have satisfied some of them. It is here that divine inspiration and guidance need to be recognized. It is due to their divine guidance that the Shi‘i Imams have the normative status of inerrancy.

Imam Ḥusayn refused to recognize Yazīd’s authority not merely because this is the duty that God imposed upon him, but because to do so would have compromised the understanding of Islam to the point of being a merely civil religion. He leaves Mecca because he would not be able to accomplish his mission there, where Yazīd’s agents would try to use force to procure his *bay‘ah*. He heads for Kufa because of the need for his leadership expressed in numerous letters from its inhabitants. He intends to assume religious/political leadership in Kufa as a means of demonstrating how to renounce the injustices of Yazīd, forbidding wrong, and to care for the needs of the people there, enjoining the good. It is because of his intention to assume leadership in Kufa that he takes his family with him. He does not mount an armed rebellion. He has only a small band of immediate family, relatives and friends, who, according to the reports given to them, expect to be welcomed in Kufa. He is prevented from reaching this goal, and he learns that his friends there have been murdered, and that death awaits him if he continues. He is not afraid of death; but since the proximate reason for going to Kufa has been removed, given that those who had invited him are no longer in a position to act on their invitation, and he can no longer carry out the plan of setting up a government in Kufa, he offers to return to the Hijāz. When all offers are refused (possibly, if improbably, even including the suggestion that he would make peace with Yazīd) and he cannot continue to

oppose the corruption of religious understanding without drawing the attack of his enemies, he tries to find a way to avoid the killing of his friends and family members, and urges them to escape under the cover of night before ‘Āshūrā, but they remain steadfast. He delivers speeches aimed at convincing his opponents that they should not attack, and manages to convince one of them, Ḥurr, to repent and switch sides. He appeals to the humanity of his opponents, and he appeals to their professed love of the Prophet, his grandfather (ṣ). Even during the slaughter, he appeals to his enemies. Throughout all of the suffering he undergoes, he conducts himself most nobly.

So, there are certainly political considerations behind Ḥusayn’s actions. He announces that he intends to assume leadership over the people of Kufa who had invited him to do so. This means that he has set out for Kufa with the intention of establishing a government, an alternative government to that claimed by Yazīd. However, he does not mount an armed rebellion or go to war. He is armed and prepared to defend himself, but he will not initiate any fighting, and he does not choose martyrdom as a political tactic.

Ḥusayn clearly understands that his enemies intend to provide him with the death of a martyr, but he does not welcome martyrdom as a means to achieve political goals. At a physical level, he fights off his attackers. No one is permitted in Islam to cast themselves into destruction. As his son writes:

The right of the possessor of authority (*sulṭān*) is that you know that God has made you a trial (*fitna*) for him. God is testing him through the authority He has given him over you. You should not expose yourself to his displeasure, for thereby you cast yourself by your own hands into destruction<sup>52</sup> and become his partner in his sin when he brings evil down upon you.<sup>53</sup>

Is this not precisely what Imam Ḥusayn did, cast himself into destruction by exposing himself to the displeasure of the *sulṭān*? An answer to this objection may be given along three lines. First, Yazīd forfeited the rights mentioned because of special circumstances, at least because his authority violated the peace of Imam Ḥasan. Second, Imam Ḥusayn is free from the charge of courting the displeasure of the *sulṭān* because of the alternatives offered to Ḥurr and Ibn Sa’d. Third, one could appeal to the principle of double effect, namely, one could

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<sup>52</sup> Allusion to (2:195): ﴿Cast not yourselves by your own hands into destruction.﴾ [Chittick]

<sup>53</sup> Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s attitude of respect toward the Umayyad rulers was clearly based upon this principle. [Chittick]

argue that the displeasure of the *sultān*, in the case of Yazīd, was an unintended but foreseen consequence of Imam Ḥusayn's determination to enjoin the good and forbid wrongdoing, which in this case obliged him to respond as he did to the invitation of the Kufans, and to refuse the demands to offer *bay'ah* to Yazīd or Ibn Ziyād. The third line of argument could also be formulated as the claim that the obligation Imam Ḥusayn had as Imam overrides the obligation not to arouse the displeasure of those in authority (especially when the authority is illegitimate).

Does the fact that Imam Ḥusayn was motivated to take the stance he did because of his commitment to Islam and the responsibility he had to enjoin the good and forbid wrongdoing mean that his movements were not politically motivated, for example, that he did not go to Kufa to set up a government there? No. The positive response to the invitation to take up leadership in Kufa was a part of his carrying out his responsibility to obey the divine duty he was given. We can only say that his actions were not politically motivated in the mundane sense in which those who act solely for the sake of acquiring power are said to be politically motivated.

Do the explanations given here invalidate any comparison with Christian beliefs in redemptive suffering? The suffering of Imam Ḥusayn is redemptive only because attention to the sufferings of Imam Ḥusayn can make his testimony effective, show people that the corruption of Islam is contrary to what Islam teaches, and save people from falling into error in the future.<sup>54</sup>

Although the suffering of Imam Ḥusayn can have the effect of turning people from sin, and of transforming lives so that solidarity is found in the hearts of his mourners for all who suffer persecution, attention to innocent suffering also brings with it the danger of misdirected vengeance that may lead to cycles of violence. My colleague, Habibollah Babaei, explains that the tendency to violence can be removed only when the suffering of the perfect individuals is remembered in such a manner as to lead the one who remembers to identify with the moral ideals expressed in the life of the martyr, so that the focus is not merely on the fact of suffering, but on what the suffering was *for*.<sup>55</sup> Our sins will not be washed away by the blood of the martyrs except in the sense that through

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<sup>54</sup> Pīshvānī (1389/2010), 258-268.

<sup>55</sup> Babaei (2010).

their exemplary lives and through reflection on their testimony, we commit ourselves to the religious moral and spiritual principles they manifested in their own teachings and lives.

Do the explanations given here invalidate any *'irfānī* interpretation of Imam Ḥusayn's martyrdom? No. Because of his stature as *Imam*, he has the position of a *perfect human being*, one whose will is entirely in conformity with the divine will. He does not attempt to achieve martyrdom as a means of reaching annihilation in God (*fanā' fi Allah*)<sup>56</sup> because he has already achieved this state before his martyrdom. What many of the commentators seem to overlook, however, is that Imam Ḥusayn's act of martyrdom is an act of bearing witness, of testifying to his conviction of his own right and of the illegitimacy of the ruling powers, which testimony is itself an act of commanding the good and forbidding wrongdoing. As Siegel points out, this is not a new idea invented by Muslims: "In earliest Christianity, the believer was taught to follow Jesus' model and endure persecution in part to turn the persecutor or at least the onlookers, into a fellow believer; suffering was a form of witness."<sup>57</sup> Accepting martyrdom in the face of injustice has a certain missionary force. In Christianity and in Islam, to face death in order to bear witness in defense of the faith is highly commended.<sup>58</sup> When this is done by a perfect human being, it becomes a manifestation of divine love, and this love may then be reflected in our own remembrances of the passion of Ḥusayn, in sha' Allah.

#### The Flag of Karbala

My blood is red like  
the flag of Karbala,  
glistening in the sunlight.

My spine is the rod  
of the flag of Karbala,  
bent in the fast hot wind.

My breath blows through  
the flag of Karbala,  
snapping with the catch in my throat,  
A wind bearing dust and salt,  
the salt of torrid tears,  
tears lost on the wretched plain,

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<sup>56</sup> This view is referenced and criticized by Pishvānī (1389/2010), 257.

<sup>57</sup> Siegel (2001).

<sup>58</sup> Pishvānī (1389/2010), 273-274.



Over which his life was spilled.  
And I have grown from the clay  
Upon which he was slain.  
I am the flag of Karbala  
marking the grave of Husayn (‘a)!  
My breath the wind,  
My spine the rod,  
My blood the color red...

Husayn! The place you fell  
is where I plant my feet.  
Between heaven and hell  
Is where I wave to greet  
The pauper and the king  
Who placed me here to sing,  
To breathe a word  
In praise of God  
To stand up in the wind,  
Upon the earth  
stained with his blood  
To offer up this hymn:  
Allahu Akbar.  
Allahu Akbar.  
Allahu Akbar.  
Allahu Akbar.

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