‘Āšūra, the Martyrdom of Imām Ḥuseyn

A Crisis of Succession

After the death of the Prophet Muḥammad (13/632) Muslims faced a major problem in relation to leadership of their community. The Sunnis, who are today the majority group, trace their tradition to those who denied the importance of a blood relationship between the elected Imām and the Prophet. They believed that the Imām, in the sense of the leader of the Muslims, could be chosen by consensus (ejmā’) or acknowledged by the community. The Shiites trace their tradition to those who believed that the Prophet had chosen ‘Ali Ibn Abī Ṭālib as his successor, at Ġadir Khumm, and that ‘Ali also had a superior claim, being the cousin of the Prophet and the husband of his daughter, Fāṭima.

Those of the first group, who had majority support among the powerful men of the Muslim community, appointed Abū Bakr. He was one of the first companions of the Prophet to be called the ‘Vicar of the Messenger of God’ (khalīfa rasūl Allāh). After Abū Bakr two other companions of the Prophet, ‘Umar and ‘Uthmān, were selected to lead the Muslim community. Only after them did ‘Ali assume the leadership, as the fourth caliph. He led the Muslim community for just five years. When he was murdered (in 41/661), the Sunnite community accepted the leadership of Mu‘āwiya, even though he was not among the first companions of the Prophet. He was accepted for the sake of unity. Mu‘āwiya died in 680 but, before his death, he took the oath of allegiance from several tribes to choose his son Yazid as the caliph. Few refused to give the oath of allegiance to Yazid. According to the Shiites, Yazid drank wine and behaved immorally. Sunnites make a distinction between the first four caliphs, known as the rightly guided caliphs (rāṣidūn), who completely followed the Sunna, and whose just acts and decisions have guided the community ever since, and the later caliphs such as Mu‘āwiya and Yazid who are considered mere worldly rulers. Ob-
dience to them is justified by the importance of maintaining the internal peace of the Muslim community.

The Shiites, however, believed in the leadership of the Muslim community by the descendents of Imám 'Ali. After his death, his two sons, first Ḥasan and then Ḥuseyn, were the Shiite Imãms, and the Imãmate was then handed down from father to son. The elder son Hasan was deprived of the caliphate by Mu‘āwiya and seems to have been politically inactive. It is the life and tragic death of the second son, and third Imâm, Ḥuseyn, which is the subject of ta‘ziya.

The Martyrdom of Imâm Ḥuseyn

After the death of Mu‘āwiya in Damascus, the Shiites of Kūfa wrote several letters to Imâm Ḥuseyn, inviting him to their city to lead them. Imâm Ḥuseyn sent his uncle Muslim Ibn al-‘Aqil Ibn Abi Ṭālib to investigate the situation in Kūfa. Muslim Ibn al-‘Aqil took the oath of allegiance from the people of Kūfa. Then he sent a letter to Imâm Ḥuseyn confirming what the Kufians had written. When Ibn Ziyād, the governor of Kūfa, found out about the revolt of the people of Kūfa, he arrested Muslim Ibn al-‘Aqil and executed him. When Imâm Ḥuseyn received Muslim Ibn al-‘Aqil’s letter (almost 17 days after his death), he set out from Medina to Kūfa with a small group of followers and his household, but he never reached Kūfa. The army of Yazid surrounded them on the plain of Karbalâ near the Euphrates, but blocked their access to water. ‘Umar Ibn al-Sa’d, ‘Ubaydullah’s commander, offered two options to Imâm Ḥuseyn: to give an oath of allegiance to Yazid, or to fight Yazid’s army. The negotiation between Imâm Ḥuseyn and the Yazid’s commanders lasted nine days, during which Ḥuseyn and his followers suffered from thirst and hunger. Abu al-Faḍl al-‘Abbâs, the half brother of Imâm Ḥuseyn, could not tolerate the crying of the children, and galloped to the Euphrates several times to bring some water for them, but he was killed. 3 On the tenth day of the month of Muḥarram in 60/680, the battle started: it lasted one day. Imâm Ḥuseyn and his men were killed while suffering from thirst and hunger. In ta‘ziya performances, the thirst of Ḥuseyn and his family is elaborated to fan the audience’s emotions. To give one example, ‘Ali Asgâr was Ḥuseyn’s six-month old child, who died of thirst. When Imâm Ḥuseyn asked for a sip of water for him, a man from the tribe of Banû ‘Asad shot an arrow at the throat of the infant and killed him.
During the war, several warriors from Yazid’s army joined Imām Ḥuseyn and fought to the death. One famous ta’ziya episode is the story of Hurr Ibn al-Riyāhi, who was Ibn al-Ziyād’s commander. He joined Imām Ḥuseyn during the fight.

During the battle of Karbalā, all the men were killed except ‘Ali Ibn al-Ḥuseyn, later called Imām Zeyn al-Ābedin. It is said that he was extremely ill and could not join the fight, or that he had to live in order to guarantee the line of the Shiīte Imāms. After the battle, the survivors from Imām Huseyn’s household were arrested and taken to Yazid’s court in Damascus (a distance of some 180 kilometres), along with the severed heads of the martyrs mounted on lances. According to the Shiites, Yazid treated the prisoners harshly, not even sparing the severed heads. He humiliated the prisoners and even struck the lips of the severed head of Imām Ḥuseyn with his staff. Zeynab protested and saved the life of Zeyn al-Ābedin. After several days, during which the four-year-old daughter of Imām Ḥuseyn died, the prisoners were released and returned to Medina.

The Concept of Imāma in Shiīte Tradition

Imāmi theologians taught that there must always be an Imām, designated by the Prophet (in the case of ‘Ali) or the previous Imām. Under the leadership of Imām Ja’far al-Ṣādiq (d.148/765), the Shiīte doctrine of the Imāmate crystallized. The Imām’s station was raised almost to the level of prophethood, except that the Imām did not have a Holy Book. The Shiites later divided into several branches. Among these are the Zaydiyya, the Imāmiyya or ‘twelver’ Shiites, and the Ismā’iliyya. The Imāmiyya, the majority Shiīte sect in Iran today, believe that the twelfth Imām, a child, was supernaturally concealed after the death of the eleventh Imām: he is still alive today and is expected to return before the end of the world. One of the fundamental doctrines of the Imāmiyya is that the Imām is protected from sin and error (ma’sūm). If the Imām fears for his own safety or for that of his community, he has to practice dissimulation (taqqiya).

According to Shiīte readings, the Qur’ān addresses the Imām as ‘the light of God,’ and his ‘witness’ (šāhed) among mankind. The Imāms are the ‘vicegerents’ (khulafā’) of God on earth. They have the knowledge of the Qur’ān, and of the past and present. Indeed, their knowledge is the same as the knowledge of the Prophet. The Imāms are inspired by angels, although
unlike the Prophet they cannot see the angels. For the community, disobeying the Imām is equal to disobeying the prophet.

In the ta’ziya texts, the Imām Ḥuseyn has the same characteristics as the Prophet. He advises Šemr, Yazid’s commander, that it would be better for him to join Imām Ḥuseyn. He claims to be one who reveals the secrets of the Torah to Jewish priests; who showed Moses the path, because he sees the manifestation of the light. Then he warns Šemr of the punishment (ʿazāb) that he will receive in the grave (gūr) and on the day of Resurrection (10). In the above episode, Imām Ḥuseyn shows that his knowledge is equal to the knowledge of the prophets. In the ta’ziya texts, even Imām Ḥuseyn’s enemies regret his death. For instance, Šemr says that they have shot with an arrow a person whose heart derives inspiration from the divine source (sandūq-e ʿelm-e vahi-ye khudā) (171).

Several other characteristics are attributed to Imām Ḥuseyn. For instance, he is the locus of the lights of divine guidance (magzhar-e anvār-e hedāyat) (200), an intermediary between God and the people, and he guides Shiite Muslims. Similarly, in some passages, Zeynab (25) and Batūl (the title of Fāṭima) (16, 34, 241) are shown as able to intercede on behalf of the Shiite Muslims on the Day of Judgement. In the following examples we see that Imām Ḥuseyn sacrificed himself for the salvation of the Shiites. In other words, he accepted that he would see his family and followers killed and would himself be drowned in blood, for the sake of the Shiite community. Šemr, the archetype of a heartless enemy and the murderer of Imām Ḥuseyn, reports that when he was about to kill Imām Ḥuseyn, the Imām prayed to God that he would forgive the sins of the Muslims. Šemr says,

\[
be\ zulmhā\ ke\ be\ jānam\ resid\ khursandam \\
be\ piš-e\ dida\ buridand\ sar\ ze\ farzandam \\
režā\ šudam\ ke\ be\ khūn\ ġūtavar\ šavad\ qaddam \\
be\ šart-e\ ḍān\ ke\ bebakhši\ be\ ʿummat-e\ jaddam\ (174).
\]

The tyranny I have suffered, I accept:
They severed the heads of my children before my eyes.
I am content, that my body should be drowned in blood,
On condition, that you forgive the followers of my grandfather (Muḥammad) (174).

In the ta’ziya texts, the Imām is respected by the angels. For instance, Imām Ḥuseyn in his childhood had such dignity that the angels around the throne
of God salute him (79). In the scene set in the Damascus bazaar, the young Imām Zeyn al-ʿĀbedin boasts about the dignity of his family before Yazid. He says that a carpet spread in their portico is the most exalted throne, that all who breathe (lit., all who eat) are their guests, that natural forces such as clouds, rain and wind obey their orders. He is the heir of the King of Religion [Imām Ḥuseyn] (127).

During her imprisonment in the ruins in Damascus, Zeynab says:

jalāl-o rafʿat-e mā rā khudā-ye'ālamīyān
nemūda yād be 'ezzat be sūra-ye Qurʿān (144).

For honour’s sake, the Lord of the Worlds,
Has recalled our glory and dignity in a chapter in the Qurʿān (144).

In the taʿziya, Yazid too calls Imām Ḥuseyn the beloved of the Lord of the two worlds (ʿazīz-e khāṣ-e rabb-o al-ʿālameyn) (162).

Another important feature relating to the Shiite concept of leadership (Imāma) is that Shiites have to obey their Imām. When the Imām Ḥuseyn’s family are freed, they return to Medina. Bašir is the leader of their caravan.

When they arrive near Medina, Bašir says to Imām Zeyn al-ʿĀbedin,

dardhā-ye hama darmān az tu
ḥukm hukm-e tu-vo farmān az tu (182).

You are the cure for all people’s pains,
It is yours to judge, and yours to give orders (182).

Such passages remind the audience that they have to obey the Imām, and turn to him because he heals their grief.

**Martyrdom (Šahādat)**

The term martyr (šahid) literally means ‘a witness,’ referring to a person who is slain in the path of God. Šahid is a Qurʿānic term and a divine name. Several verses, such as 3/140 and 4/69, emphasize the rank and dignity of martyrs in the eyes of God. According to the Qurʿānic statements, the šuhadā are alive (ahyā). The term šahādat (the station of a martyr) summons images of the rewards that a šahid receives in paradise. For instance, he is among the
blessed, his intercession for 70 members of his family will be accepted, and he does not suffer the torments of the grave.8

According to both Sunnite and Shiite traditions, the body of a šahid does not have to be ritually washed (ġusl) before burial, because his martyrdom itself has cleansed the ritual impurity of dead things. He is buried in his own clothes, because the blood on them is a testimony to his martyrdom.9 Death in battle against infidels guarantees forgiveness and rewards from God in the Hereafter. The martyr has sacrificed his life, but receives a higher rank after death. In the early Islamic period, mothers whose children had been martyred in the battlefield did not mourn and did not organize a mourning service for them. This was also practised during the Islamic Revolution of 1979 and during the war between Iran and Iraq (1980-88).10

Imām Ḥuseyn is called the master of the martyrs (seyed al-šuhadā’): he was killed in the battle of Karbalā, fighting to preserve the religion of God. In paradise, he is the host for the other martyrs, who are called his guests. A person who fights in the path of God hopes to see his master after death. In the ta’ziya texts, when Zeynab sends her two sons to the battlefield, she states: ‘So that you may both be the guests of my Ḥuseyn (ke hastid har du mehmān-e Ḥuseynam’)’ (24).

In the ta’ziya texts, the concept of martyrdom is central, and is vividly depicted. The darkness of death is turned into the bright start of a new life beside the blessed saints in paradise. Death in the path of God is a medium through which the martyr receives grace (fayẓ) emanating from God. After the death of her brother, Zeynab tells Ibn-e Ziyād that God has given an emanation of His grace to Ḥuseyn through the cup of martyrdom (fayẓ az jâm-e šahādat be Ḥuseyn dād khudā) (84). Martyrdom is likened to a cup of wine: by drinking it the martyr imbibes an effusion (fayẓ) of grace from God.

The eminent medieval mystic Šihāb al-Din Suhrawardi (d.587/1191) presents a descending hierarchy of emanation from God, in which each entity receives the emanation from its superior entity, which is created by God. The lower entities are subordinate to the higher ones. The first medium of grace is universal intellect and the lowest is man. Love connects the entities together and it is love for the Creator that motives man to seek union with God, who is the origin of emanation.11 The Most Holy Emanation (al-fayẓ al-aqdas) is a reference to those entities that were in the presence of God before they entered the world. The Holy Emanation (al-fayẓ al-muqaddas) is the manifestation of divine qualities in the world, in the form of a creature.12 These creatures act as a medium between God and mankind; they
receive the emanation of grace from God and bestow it to other creatures. However, death in the path of God allows the martyr to receive the grace emanating from God directly.

In the *ta’ziya* texts there is an episode in which ‘Abd al-Allāh Ibn al-‘Afif, a follower of Imām ‘Ali who had lost his eyes in the battles of Jamal and Seffin, protests against Ibn al-Ziyād. ‘Abd al-Allāh is present at the court of Ibn al-Ziyād when the survivors of Imām Ḥuseyn’s household are brought in. When Ibn al-Ziyād strikes the lips and teeth of Imām Ḥuseyn’s severed head, ‘Abd al-Allāh condemns him and Ibn al-Ziyād orders the executioner to kill him. ‘Abd al-Allāh is happy and says, ‘Why should I be frightened, because I am to be a martyr in the path of God’ (*če tarsi bāšadam zirā šahid-e rāh-e āqq gardam*) (92). ‘Abd al-Allāh prays to God: ‘Martyrdom is to be my part, at the hand of the worst enemy’ (*šahādat šud našib-e man be dast-e badtarin dušman*) (92). Belief in the concept of martyrdom eliminates the fear of death, and one killed by the enemy of religion will be rewarded in the Hereafter.

Another image, one which covers the fear of death with an attractive worldly desire, is the comparison of the martyr to a bridegroom. Marriage is associated with joy. The ‘marriage’ of a martyr will be on the Day of Judgment when he receives his reward. In the *ta’ziya*, when Zeynab sends her sons (Muḥammad and ‘Awn) to the battlefield to help her brother, she says to Muḥammad, ‘I wish I could see your wedding’ (*delam mikhāst tā gardī tu dāmād*) (17). He answers, ‘My wedding will be on the Day of Judgement’ (*arūsiyam buvad dar rūz-e maḥšar*) (17). When Zeynab asks her son what she should say to his father about their impending martyrdom, Muḥammad says, ‘Tell him that they were married at Karbalā’ (*begū dar Karbalā gaştand dāmād*) (18). Another example is the death of Qāsem, a young bridegroom who never consummated his marriage, and who is referred to as the martyr-groom. During the tragic events of Karbalā he married Fāṭima, the daughter of Imām Ḥuseyn, at the latter’s suggestion. After the battle, Zeynab goes to the battlefield, and when she recognizes Qāsem’s dead body, she says, ‘May his marriage be blessed’ (*buvad dāmādi-ye Qāsem mubārak*) (22). Imām Zeyn al-ʿĀbedin responds, ‘May his festive clothes be blessed’ (*lebās-e šādiy-e Qāsem mubārak*) (22), likening his bloodstained shroud to the fine clothes put on for a festive occasion. Qāsem’s wife, Fāṭima, in her loneliness and helplessness, talks with her husband as a bridegroom just married (*tāza dāmād*): ‘I greet you, my sorrowful new groom, O! I greet you’ (*as-salām ey tāza-dāmād-e ġaminam as-salām*) (103).
The shroud (kafan) is compared to the groom's wedding clothes (lebās-e dāmādi). When Zeynab sends her two sons to the battlefield, she first prepares their shrouds, saying:

\[
\text{kafan az bahr-e ṭeflānam buridam} \\
\text{vali rakhāt-e 'arūsi būd inhā} \\
\text{kafan rakhāt-e 'arūsī gašt hālā (15).}
\]

I am making shrouds for my children, but these were to be their wedding clothes:
Now the shroud is a wedding dress (15).

Another image of the martyr is as a ‘rose all in petals’ (gul-e parpar), referring to a rose that has been torn apart, petal by petal. When Zeynab recognizes her brother in the battlefield among the dead bodies, she says, 'I guess this scattered rose is Ḥuseyn' (gamānam in gul-e par par Ḥuseyn ast) (22). The metaphor of a rose whose petals are torn apart is a fitting image, emphasizing how the bodies of Huseyn and his followers were cut to pieces. The image was widely used for soldiers killed in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-88). For instance, this exclamation was used, 'From where is this torn rose coming? / It is returning from Karb-o-bala' (in gul-e par par ze kujā āmada/az safar-e karb-o balā āmada). War cemeteries were named the flower gardens of the martyrs (gulzār-e šuhadā).

Notes

2 When the Prophet Muhammad returned from his farewell pilgrimage (ḥajat al-vedā) he stopped at Gādir Khumm and said to his companions, 'He for whom I am the mawlā (the patron), for him 'Ali is also the mawlā (man kuntu mawlāhu fa-'Ali mawlāhu). For further information see L. Vecchia Valieri, in The Encyclopaedia of Islam (second edition), under Gādir Khumm.
3 For information on Abu al-Fazl al-Abbās see J. Calmard, in Encyclopaedia Iranica, under Abbas ibn B. 'Ali ibn Abū Ṭāleb.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 E. Kohlberg, in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam* (second edition), under *Shahid*.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.


