

The Imam Husayn: His Role As Paradigm

The Imam Husayn: His Role As Paradigm



Azim Nanji

Al-Islam.org

Al-Serat Vol. 12 - 1986

[1] [1]

SHARES

[Get PDF](#) [2] [Get EPUB](#) [3] [Get MOBI](#) [4]

Authors(s):

[Azim Nanji](#) [5]

Publisher(s):

[Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain and Northern Ireland](#) [6]

Topic Tags:

[Muharram](#) [7]

[Ashura](#) [8]

Person Tags:

[Imam Husayn](#) [9]

The Imam Husayn: His Role As Paradigm

Azim Nanji

Oklahoma State University

Al-Serat Vol 12, Spring & Autumn 1986

Introduction

This article seeks to summarize the role of the Imam Husayn as 'model' or alternatively as 'paradigm', a choice of terminology that I shall clarify below.

As is well known, the Shi'a integrate the *ahadith* or sayings of the Imams into the concept of *Sunna*, together with the ahadith of the Prophet. Thus *al-hadith*, *al-nabawi*, and *al-hadith al-walawi* go hand in hand, both representing the indivisibility as well as continuity inherent in their concept of *Sunna*.¹ This concept reflects two aspects: one that the conduct of the Prophet and the Imams exemplify an ideal, and secondly that such an ideal represents a paradigm according to which Muslims guide their own lives.

If *tanzil*, or revelation, can be said to represent the vertical dimension by which the Divine Will is revealed, then the Prophet and the Imams represent through their model lives the unfolding at the horizontal level, that is to say in the world, of that Will. This particular dimension of the *Sunna* embodies the enactment of a paradigmatic role rather than its juridical complement where the concern is expressed in terms of conformity to a normative pattern as developed in the sharia.

Among certain Western scholars the analysis of the 'prophetic paradigm' has been focused essentially on the stages through which a 'prophet's' life may pass, and such phases, regarded as prototypical, have come to be applied to the lives of individuals as far apart in time and purpose as Zoroaster, the prophets of the Bible, the Prophet Muhammad, Martin Luther, Joseph Smith, and many pretenders to the title in our time.²

Such generalization and consequent superficialization can best be avoided by rooting the idea of paradigm in an Islamic context and defining it in terms of the concept of *Sunna* that is found in the established sources on the lives of the Prophet and the Imams. The Imams, as heirs, *awsiya*, to the prophets, and as those who communicate the esoteric meaning and guard the exoteric aspects of the Divine Message, incorporate in their exemplary lives the *Sunna* of all the prophets. This has come to have special significance in the case of the Imam Husayn. As Professor Mahmud Ayoub has shown in his extensive study, each of the great prophetic figures, from Adam to Noah to Abraham and Jesus, participates at the level of Shi'i sacred history in the suffering of the Imam Husayn.³

Within the perspective of the Shi'i tradition, the relationship between the Imam Husayn and the ancient prophets is linked to the key events in their lives, which in turn depict a common pattern of participation and sharing in the tragedy at Karbala'. In this way the paradigm reflected in the *Sunna* of the prophets is projected into the life of the Imam Husayn. At the esoteric level, this is a sacred conception of history in which each of the prophetic cycles has provided a *Sunna*, a pattern of life as an example for those to whom the revelation is directed, and which has as its ultimate goal the creation of an ideal set of values for human kind. This process reaches its consummation in the Qur'anic verse:

"Today, I have perfected your Din for you and called it Islam" (5:4).

The Imams, as an integral part of this sacred history, have a key role in the attainment of the ideal, and the specific participation of the ancient prophets, as well as the relationship between the Prophet Muhammad, the other members of the Holy Family, and the Imam Husayn, affirm the continuity of this paradigmatic role in their lives.

In reviewing the use of the term *paradigm* and rooting it within the conception of the *Sunna*, I hope the original sense of T. S. Kuhn's use of the term '*paradigm*'⁴ has been clarified as representing the universally accepted set of presuppositions concerning the nature of the world with the implication that the world is to be perceived according to certain metaphysical assumptions.

As the Sayyid al-Shuhada', the Imam Husayn's life in Shi'i tradition embodies in a vivid and dramatic

manner the unfolding of the true sense of history and its significance for believers, and, as a mirror of the ideal present in the lives of the great prophets, he is seen as 'the living perfection or concretization of this ideal'.⁵

With this background in mind, we can focus on three different but inter-related contexts to illustrate the significance of this paradigmatic role:

(i) the Paradigm of Leadership (*Imamah*),

(ii) the Paradigm of Polity (*Umma*),

(iii) the Paradigm of Moral Order (*Din*).

It can be argued in each case that the Qur'anic basis and prophetic example applicable to the respective context had undergone an erosion, and that the life of the Imam Husayn seen through the traditional sources and symbolized by its repeated commemoration reflected a challenge to such erosion.

The Paradigm Of Leadership

Historians, and in particular modern Western historians of early Islamic history, who address the issue of leadership as it is reflected in biographical details on the life of the prophets and the Imams, have tended to be sceptical about the value of such details.⁶ Though the general controversy between those who see leadership primarily as an individual attribute and those who prefer to view it as being determined by the situation still continues, it assumes a critical significance in the case of early Islam. The scepticism has often lead to an over-emphasis on the historical situation to explain events and a subsequent minimization of the historic influence exerted by the individual examples of the prophets and the Imams. In the case of the Imam Husayn, this tendency has led to a virtual exclusion of most details and a discounting of the majority of traditions that depict the events in the life of the Imam.⁷

As a result, much of the complexity and significance of the role of leadership exemplified by his life has been missed. The primary factor in this significance is the pattern of communication that came to exist between the individual life and the response of the group of followers who saw an intense, cosmic dimension unfolding in those events. As a paradigm in the context of Islam, the role of leadership of the Imam Husayn represents a continuing pattern of communication as well as a learning process between the followers and the model. The testimony of Shi'i tradition is the testimony of participants for whom 'history' and 'biography' are repeated and renewed, transcending the specific conditions that may have created it. The life of the Imam Husayn thus understood as a paradigm of leadership becomes a model by embodying those qualities that, in all times and stages of human history, can be regarded as the true themes of the human quest for meaning.

The historical circumstances that precipitated the events of Karbala' are too well known to be recounted here, but the specific actions of the Imam Husayn in challenging the authority of Yazid is explained by

the traditional sources in its particular context. They point out the circumstances under which the *bay'a* or allegiance was demanded by Yazid and rejected by the Imam Husayn, where Islamic norms, which previously had at least been adhered to nominally, were now being discarded.⁸

In a sermon, preserved in Tabari and delivered before reaching Karbala', the Imam Husayn sets out the basis for assuming the position of leadership and putting his life in jeopardy.

O people, the Messenger of God said during his life, 'He who sees an oppressive ruler violating the sanctions (*halal*) of God, revoking the covenant of God, opposing the *Sunna* of the Apostle of God... and does not show zeal against him in word or deed, God would surely cause him to enter his abode in the fire.'⁹

It is important to note that such a definition of *Sunna* and the assumption of the responsibility of standing fast to it implies that the leadership of the prophets and the Imams draws its inspiration and strength from its awareness of a role envisaged for them by its very transcendent and cosmic origin. This role cannot be a merely passive one; it is dynamic, because linked to the transcendent, it imparts its example not just by word but also by deed.

The Paradigm Of Polity: The Model Umma

The organization of the *Umma* at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, as in other realms, was based on Islam's rejection of a dichotomous view of order. True sovereignty in the *Umma*, which was the expression of the Divine Will through the revelation of the Qur'an, rested ultimately with Allah, and was effected through His messenger the Holy Prophet. Islam, in addressing the totality of life, thus included within its vision the realm of political life.

According to the Shi'a, the continuity of this principle and paradigm lay in the acceptance of the divinely instituted leadership of the Imam 'Ali after the Prophet. For them, the issue of leadership was inseparably bound to the concept of *Walaya* and the esoteric role of the Imams in interpreting the Qur'an and the *Sunna*. As is well known, the position of the Imam 'Ali and his followers, in response to events leading to the establishment of the first three *Khulafa ar-Rashidun*, was to safeguard the well-being of the *Umma*, while retaining the Shi'i perspective on the role of the Imam.

The onset of the Umayyad dynasty, and particularly the nomination by Mu'awiya of his son Yazid to the position of ruler, altered the overall context quite dramatically. It is within this particular context that the role of the Imam Husayn represents the affirmation of the paradigm of polity and of the model based on the perceived danger that the unity of members of the *Umma*, as well as the very basis of its ethos, was being threatened by a complete bifurcation.

In relationship to the question of sovereignty, the historical events raised the question of whether the political life of Muslims was to draw its source of values from the paradigm of the *Umma* established by

the Prophet, or whether the operation of military power was to be permitted full sway.

Whatever political and other causes are adduced for the eventual problems that beset Muslims during this period, our sources spend considerable time highlighting the Imam Husayn's resistance to the idea of the pursuit of power for its own sake. The affirmation that, in the organization of the *Umma*, the principle of the sovereignty of Allah should not be disestablished by the mere operation of power, constitutes a second paradigm established through the Imam Husayn's life.

The Paradigm Of Moral Order

Related to the issue of sovereignty in the *Umma* was the question of the moral order and of the values by which life in the *Umma* would be governed. One significant aspect of the conflict that came to a head at Karbala' as depicted in Shi'i literature was between those who wished to maintain a totalizing Islamic vision, and those who based their behaviour on a frame of reference outside the Qur'an and *Sunna*. the Imam Husayn's message to those who wished to support his struggle as reflected in the letters he wrote, according to tradition, illuminate the nature of conflict:

For behold the *Sunna* has been rendered dead and innovations are made alive. Thus if you listen to my words and obey my commands I shall guide you to the right path.¹⁰

In order to help define the elements in this conflict, I wish to borrow a contemporary term to identify how corrosion of the *Sunna* can be perceived. The term is 'secularity'. The process of secularization implies that there is no sacred centre, no defined and accepted authority originating from a Divine Mandate, and that mere historical actuality can determine what values predominate in life.

This absence of faith and its primacy reflects the secularization of values. Our sources, when they refer to the events, make it evident that this was indeed the threat that the Imam Husayn perceived, as the *Umma* was forced to come to terms and adapt to the given conditions of the time. The model that emerges from the nature of his response is that the source of values and identity, regardless of how grim the historical conditions may have been, cannot be made subject to the weight of circumstances; it must always remain constant.

The other element of 'secularity' that has some relevance for the situation at the time has to do with how the Imam Husayn's very presence represented a threat. In as much as he symbolized the *Sunna* and was the focus of those whose hopes and aspirations were based on the restoration of the primacy of Islam, his presence and role acted as a deterrent. For secularity to triumph, tradition, since it is regarded as static, must be broken through. On the other hand, as heir to the Prophetic Tradition, the Imam Husayn's role was to safeguard and affirm the integrity of Tradition and to lend his prestige and authority to its defence. Secularization necessitates the disengagement of religious values and institutions from the sphere of public and political life. The events of Karbala', in their own time and by their historic commemoration, were a resounding rejection of such a disjunction.

As I indicated earlier, the study of great figures also involves an analysis of the aspirations of those who respond to them and the continuing interaction between the 'model' and the followers. Thus, in examining the life of the Imam Husayn, we are conscious of his own personal and moral example but also of its immediate and long-term social and historical impact. In this way we can hope to do justice to the life-long themes mirrored by his life, that have been absorbed into the consciousness of Muslims. These themes, which survive the historical moment and the limitations of time, represent a continuing source of inspiration in the universal search for transcendence.

-
- [1.](#) See for example Shaykh al-Mufid's *Kitabh al-Irshad*, trans. 1. K. Howard (London, 1981), pp. 1–5, and al-Qadi al-Nu'man's *Da'aim al-Islam*, ed. A. A. A. Fyzee (Cairo, 1951), 1, ch. 1.
 - [2.](#) See for example the reference in M. R. Waldman, "The Popular Appeal of the Prophetic Paradigm in West Africa", *Contributions to Asian Studies* 17 (1982), 110. See also I. M. Lewis, *Ecstatic Religion* (London, 1971), for the background to such general notions of prophets.
 - [3.](#) Mahmoud Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague, 1978), pp. 27ff. in particular. This paper has benefited greatly from Professor Ayoub's work. Where possible I have also drawn on the historical background from the work of Prof. S. H. M. Jafari, *Origins and Early Development of Shia Islam* (London, 1979).
 - [4.](#) T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1962).
 - [5.](#) Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague, 1978), op. cit., p. 68.
 - [6.](#) As a recent example see the remarks in M. A. Cook, *Muhammad* (London, 1983), pp. 61 ff.
 - [7.](#) See for example the reference made by Laura Veccia Vaglieri, regarding the scepticism of other historians in her article: "(al-)Husayn b. Ali b. Abi Talib" (1971). In Lewis, B.; Ménage, V. L.; Pellat, Ch. & Schacht, J. (eds.). *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Second Edition. Volume III: H–Iram, p.614. Leiden: E. J. Brill. OCLC 495469525.
 - [8.](#) See in this connection the remarks of Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabataba'i in *Shi'ite Islam*, trans, S. H. Nasr (New York, 1975), p. 200.
 - [9.](#) Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague, 1978), op. cit. p. 107, where this passage is quoted.
 - [10.](#) Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering in Islam* (The Hague, 1978), op. cit. p. 101.

[1] [1]

SHARES

Source URL: <https://al-islam.org/al-serat/vol-12-1986/imam-husayn-his-role-paradigm-azim-nanji>

Links

- [1] <https://www.addtoany.com/share>
- [2] <https://al-islam.org/printpdf/book/export/html/200092>
- [3] <https://al-islam.org/printepub/book/export/html/200092>
- [4] <https://al-islam.org/printmobi/book/export/html/200092>
- [5] <https://al-islam.org/person/azim-nanji>
- [6] <https://al-islam.org/organization/muhammadi-trust-great-britain-and-northern-ireland>

[7] <https://al-islam.org/tags/muharram>

[8] <https://al-islam.org/tags/ashura>

[9] <https://al-islam.org/person/imam-husayn>