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The Eternal Meaning Of Imam Husayn's Martyrdom

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The purpose behind studying the historical events that led to the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn in the year 61/680 is, primarily, to try to articulate intelligibly the humanly most significant questions, which have since altered the context of routine human life in Islamic history. As such, what happened in that year cannot remain just private concern with the past, because the events at Karbala, Iraq, were in some sense or other outstanding in the context of humankind generally, and not just in relation to the Prophet's family or their adherents. The Day of Ashura has proven to be an event with obvious religious and moral implications whose significance is universally perceived and whose religious and moral challenges cannot be ignored by anyone who claims to be a Muslim.

The religious and moral deeds that took place on this day have remained unrepeatable ones that have an everlasting claim to our respect. After having known those deeds, the Muslim community can never remain indifferent to the Islamic challenges posed by the event of Karbala: not because of the tragic nature of those deeds, but because those deeds cause spiritual and moral awareness and motivation in us and add to our understanding of who we are and of what we are committed to both as human beings and Muslims. Furthermore, the events at Karbala generate in us a sense of what is worthy of our wonder and our tears.

Hence, the study of the events at Karbala ought to revive in us the great commitment and loyalty that we, as Muslims, have borne towards the Islamic revelation – the commitment and loyalty that were made explicit by the events on the Day of Ashura, when the male and female, the old and young members and supporters of the Prophet's family, demonstrated the excellence of their human endeavour. In the final analysis, it is the relevance of Karbala to humanity that continues to challenge our conceptions of standards of human respect and recognition for as long as there remain conscientious beings on earth.

However, Imam Husayn's struggle to uphold the spiritual and moral values of Islam becomes comprehensible when seen in light of the entire struggle of Abrahamic traditions to assert the oneness of God (*Tawhid*). In other words, the assertion of monotheism, which is pre–eminently attributed to Abraham in the Qur'an[1] , calls for the act of submitting to God (*Islam*), which means accepting a spiritual and moral responsibility to uphold the standards of action held to have God's authority.

Hence, accepting Islam and its challenge meant that Muslims opened themselves to vast new considerations of what life might mean when a person 'submits' to God. So construed, their act of 'submission' could be defined as commitment to the Abrahamic faith enunciated by the Prophet, Muhammad, which required to establish an intensely creative person as committed to the social and juridical consequences of being a Muslim. Consequently, adherence to Islam presented an opportunity to build a new order of social life, such as the Islamic vision had more and more obviously demanded.

The 'submission' to God demanded, in the first place, a personal devotion to spiritual and moral purity, but personal piety and purity implied a just social behaviour. Sooner or later, this challenge of Abrahamic faith was bound to require the creation of a just social order as the natural outgrowth and context of the personal piety and purity (*Taqwa*) it required, because Islam is never satisfied with mere exposition of its ideals but constantly seeks the means to implement them. Obviously, when no Muslim could have remained neutral to this challenge of Islam, how could Imam Husayn have tolerated a movement spearheaded by the Umayyads, which attacked the ideals and principles of Islamic social order and suggested an alternative sort of sanction for their behaviour, and especially for social leadership.

It is therefore pertinent to understand Imam Husayn's revolution within the historical context created by the individual's relationship to God and maintained by the aspirations for the creation of a just public order prevalent in the Muslim community as a whole and given form in their corporate life. By regarding the events of Karbala as subordinate, some Muslim scholars, and following them, some Westerners,

have tried to reduce the exceptional significance of the struggle of Imam Husayn and its impact upon the course of subsequent Islamic history.

Undoubtedly, without full reference to the general socio–political milieu that developed following the death of the Prophet in the year 632 and that culminated in the events of Karbala, the Day of Ashura appears to be a mere tragedy without any meaning and significance for posterity. Imam Husayn's revolution cannot be isolated from the general historical context of the Islamic challenge within which the Imam and his followers acted to make the purpose of the revolution explicit. In other words, it is impossible to appreciate the purpose behind Imam Husayn and his followers' martyrdoms without first understanding the historical circumstances that called upon him to defend the spiritual and moral heritage of Islam.

This is indeed a difficult task, because it is usually considered an impossible undertaking to separate two consecutive events in the history of human society. The explanation of this difficulty lies in the gradual nature of the change of factors that demarcate one historical period from another. Moreover, it is even more difficult to demarcate the end of one period of a society and the beginning of another when two consecutive periods are required to be examined in order to determine the subsequent changes. It is this difficulty adumbrated in sensitive consequences to one's cherished notions about a particular period in Islamic history, especially the early days following the death of the Prophet, that has caused Muslim scholars in general to deviate from the responsibility of preserving their scholarly integrity in treating the history of the Imam Husayn.

Thus, the imperative need to properly demarcate the period when the Muslim community began to witness their leaders' obvious deviation from the fundamental teachings of Islam, in order to fully discuss Imam Husayn's response, has been ignored by many Muslim historians. It is only through objective evaluation of the early period of Islamic history that it becomes possible to understand the stance Imam Husayn took in the year 60–61/679–680. However, for a number of Muslim historians, who have generally failed to point out the obvious deviations from the Islamic revelation in the period that followed the Prophet's death, the challenge lies in revising their tendentious historical presentation of that early period, which has been slow in coming forth[2]. Nevertheless, a consensus among all historians belonging to various schools of Muslim thought has emerged that it is possible, at least, to fix the period of these deviations from Islamic norms, if not earlier, then from the beginning of the second half of the period of 'Uthman's caliphate (644–656 AD).

'Uthman's caliphate typifies a period that caused general political and religious patterns to drift away from the standards that were provided by Islam. Indeed, it became apparent that the new currents in the Muslim community around this period, which went towards creating new forms in the realm of public order, were the result of these currents interacting with the mentality of the group that held power in the society – namely, the Umayyads, who had very little concern for the ideals of Islam. As a result, it is not sufficient merely to discuss these new forms at that time by limiting ourselves to the evaluation of the

external forms only; rather, it is necessary to embark upon a serious discussion of the factors that created these forms and the way they affected the society and the personages who moulded the history of this period.

Such inquiry remains a legitimate public concern, which puts the event of Ashura in its proper perspective. The main question, then, that we intend to treat in this paper is: What had happened to Islam during this period that Imam Husayn felt it necessary to take it upon himself to undo the harm the Umayyads were causing to it?

Islam conceives of human nature in terms of both its spiritual and physical needs, and as such it is never content with mere exposition of its ideals but constantly seeks the means to implement them. The Qur'an gave Muslims every reason to wish for a government and a society that would be based on the 'noble paradigm' set by the political and the ideological sides of the Prophet's mission on earth. However, major political undertakings of the early Muslim leaders inevitably demonstrated a lack of commitment to the 'noble paradigm.'

Since 'Uthman's time, the ruling class had used Islam more or less as a badge of identity. Whereas Islamic ideals carried a responsible and egalitarian social commitment, these rulers were engaged in creating a privileged class of a small elite tied together by common Arab heritage. The implications of such a deviation from the Islamic ideal became discernible to those Muslims who were most serious about the moral and political responsibilities that an acceptance of the Islamic faith entailed.

This most obvious implication of reference to the Arabic heritage in ordering public and private life meant that Islam became the envied badge of a favoured ruling class of Arabs who happened to be bound together by Islam. As such, that would have made Islam an Ishmaelism (as the Arabs were the descendants of Ishmael, the son of Abraham), analogous to the Israelism of the Jews, in which converts could enter as members of the community only on the basis of their having descended from Abraham. Despite the comprehensiveness of the Islamic ideal and its universalistic direction, the exalting of the Arabs as being of the line of Ishmael and producing an ethnically bound community became part of the political program of the Umayyads from the second half of 'Uthman's caliphate.

The most important consequence of this political mission, which gradually became clearer, was that Muslims were not treated on an equal basis as prescribed by the Qur'anic dictum regarding the 'brotherhood of all believers' and the Prophet's recommendation to the Muslims to renounce all conflict based on genealogy3. On the contrary, the great families of Medina who descended from the Prophet's close associates were accorded 'social priority' (*tafdil*), and the sense of the inviolability of the Arab tribesmen was reinforced against the Qur'anic requirement that a Muslim, regardless of his ethnic affiliation, had to be accorded that personal liberty and dignity4.

Consistent with this anti-egalitarian attitude of the early Muslim leaders was the development of elaborate forms of urban luxury and social distinction. The fruits of conquest, in the form of the booty and

the revenue from the conquered lands, had created an unequal distribution of wealth among all Arab Muslims. Consequently, the wealth was concentrated among the conquering families, affording them privileges based on arbitrary distinctions of rank. According to al–Dhahabi, during 'Uthman's reign there was so much wealth in Medina that a horse would sell for one hundred thousand dirhams, while a garden would fetch four hundred thousand. The Umayyads, says al–Dhahabi, had, during this period, acted indiscriminately in amassing wealth to the extent that they had discredited the caliphate as the guarantor of the equality of all Muslims in sharing the wealth acquired through the spoils and the taxes from the conquered lands5.

Mu'awiya, who symbolizes the prevailing tendencies of the Arab aristocracy in the first century of Islam, clearly formed his policies as the Arab chief, concerned perhaps less with the directives of the Qur'an or the Prophetic 'pattern of moral behaviour' – the *Sunna*. It can be maintained with much documentation that the Umayyad rulers did the minimum for the consolidation of Islamic matters. The Umayyad rulers and their governors – who were by and large neither pious nor committed to Islam – were not the people to promote a religious and social life corresponding to the *Sunna* of the Prophet. As a matter of fact, reference to the *Sunna* was not necessarily a reference to the *Sunna* of the Prophet; rather, Mu'awiya made frequent references to the *Sunna* of 'Umar in setting the fiscal policies of the state6. There was little concern about the religious life of the population. As true Arabs, they paid little attention to religion, either in their own conduct or in that of their subjects. If a man was observant of his religious obligation and was seen to be devoutly worshipping in the mosque, it was assumed that he was not a follower of the Umayyad dynasty but an ardent supporter of 'Ali7.

Individual examples cited by several authoritative traditionists indicate the state of affairs in regard to the ignorance prevailing among the Umayyads about the ritual performances and religious precepts in the first century. In Syria, where the Umayyads had the staunchest support, it was not generally known that there were only five canonical daily prayers, and in order to make certain of this fact, it was decided that an associate of the Prophet who was still alive should be asked about it8.

It is impossible to fully comprehend the state of affairs that prevailed under the Umayyads when the rulers of the people who lived under them showed very little concern for the understanding of the laws and rules of Islam. Indeed, such a period was alluded to in the Prophetic tradition, which predicted the critical religious future of the Muslim community:

"There will come rulers after me who will destroy the canonical prayers (*salat*) but continue to perform the prayers at the fixed times all the same9."

Moreover, the Umayyad hatred of the Hashemites, especially the Prophet's family, which was evident under Mu'awiya and his successors, gave rise to controversies among Muslims on issues of Islam, whether political or doctrinal. The Umayyad spirit of fabrication, dissemination, and suppression of Prophetic traditions is evident in the instruction [that] Mu'awiya gave to his governor al–Mughira on defaming 'Ali and his companions:

"Do not tire of abusing and insulting ʿAli and calling for God's mercifulness for ʿUthman, defaming the companions of ʿAli, removing them, and refusing to listen to them, praising, in contrast, the clan of ʿUthman, drawing them near to you, and listening to them[10]."

This instruction is in the form of official encouragement to fabricate lies directed against ʿAli and to hold back and suppress those reports that favoured him. Evidently the Umayyads and their political followers had no scruples in promoting tendentious lies in the form of Prophetic traditions, and they were prepared to cover such falsifications with their undoubted authority.

One such "pious" authority was al–Zuhri, who could not resist pressure from the governing authorities and was willing to promote the interests of the Umayyad dynasty by religious means. Al–Zuhri belonged to the circle of those Muslims who believed that a *modus vivendi* with the Umayyad government was desirable. However, even he could not cover up the report that Anas b. Malik had related regarding the critical religious situation under the Umayyads. The report is preserved in al–Bukhari in his *Sahih*, in a section entitled "Not offering the prayer at its stated time":

Al–Zuhri relates that he visited Anas b. Malik at Damascus and found him weeping and asked him the reason for his weeping. He replied, "I do not know anything which I used to know during the lifetime of the Messenger of God. [Everything is lost] except this prayer (*Salat*), which [too] is being lost [that is, not being offered as it should be]." [11]

That the manner in which this well–established Prophetic practice of prayer had been altered, either out of ignorance or due to the anti–*Sunna* and anti–ʿAli attitude of the Umayyads, is further demonstrated by another tradition in *al–Bukhari*, in the section entitled "To end the *takbir* [the saying of ʿGod is greaterʿ] on prostrating." The tradition is narrated on the authority of Mutarrif b. ʿAbd Allah, who said:

"Imran b. Husayn and I offered the prayer behind ʿAli b. Abi Talib (in Basra). When ʿAli prostrated, he said the *takbir*; when he raised his head, he said the takbir, and when he stood up for the third unit (*rakʿa*), he said the takbir. On the completion of the prayer, Imran took my hand and said: 'He [ʿAli] made me remember the prayer of Muhammad, peace be upon him.' Or, he said [something to the effect that], ʿHe led us in a prayer like that of Muhammad, peace be upon him[12]."

The above facts show sufficiently the prevailing trend in the Umayyad state, where Islam was above all a badge of united Arab aristocracy, the code and discipline of a conquering elite. As became apparent in subsequent periods, the traditions of Arab aristocracy had relatively little inherent connection with Islam itself. In fact, under the Umayyads, a responsible and egalitarian spirit of Islam was ignored in favour of power politics. Under such circumstances, the faithful had to deal with a crucial moral and religious question: To what extent could the Muslims consent to obey the rulers, who were completely opposed to the basic teachings of Islam?

It is possible to surmise from various sources on this period of Islamic history that the Umayyads presented a dilemma for the committed Muslims as to how they were to order their religious life under

such rulers. Of course, there were some, like al-Zuhri, who did not consider the deviation from the religious obligations by the Umayyads a sufficient reason to refuse obedience to them and declare them as unjust. These were the Marja'ites, who believed that to acknowledge the Umayyads as true believers, it was sufficient that they professed Islam outwardly and that it was not necessary to pry into their un-Islamic behaviour. Accordingly, these people did not raise any objection to the cruel measures adopted by the Umayyads and their governors against those pious individuals, like Hujr b. 'Adi and later on, Imam Husayn, who refused them their allegiance on the basis of their conviction that as an essential consequence of their religious responsibility, they could not do so. On the contrary, the Marja'ites even defended the massacre that the Umayyads caused among their most pious opponents on the grounds that these individuals were disrupting the unity of the community by challenging the authority that represented the Muslim community as a whole13.

There were others among the pious persons who, although acknowledging the unworthiness of the Umayyads to rule the community on religious grounds, maintained that the *de facto* rule of the Umayyads was in the interest of the state and of Islamic unity14. They thereby contributed towards the acceptance of the rulers, and the people, following their lead, tolerated and paid allegiance to the un-Islamic regime. Furthermore, the accommodating outlook of this group laid the groundwork for the acceptance of any claim to legitimacy by a Muslim authority that managed to successfully seize power through upheaval or revolution.

On the other hand, we have persons like the Imam Husayn, who refused to acknowledge these corrupt leaders and their representatives at all and met them with resistance. As such, Imam Husayn and his followers provide a clear contrast to accommodation to Umayyad policies. Imam Husayn's unbending religious attitude stems from his conviction about the political responsibilities that an acceptance of Islamic revelation entailed. In his letter to the people of Kufa, who had urged him to come to Iraq to assume the responsibilities of an *Imam*, he reaffirms his penetrating awareness of the religio-political responsibilities of the *Imam*. He says:

"I solemnly declare that a person is not the *Imam* if he does not act in accordance with the Book [of God], and does not follow justice [in dealing with the people], and is not subject to the Truth, and does not devote himself entirely to God15."

Undoubtedly, one can discern the implication of the above statement in Imam Husayn's declaration, made in a speech to the army of Hurr, who had come to intercept him on his way to Iraq. This declaration shows the disgust of the pious with the life lived under the ungodly Umayyads:

"Do you not see that truth is not followed anymore and that falsehood is not being interdicted [by anyone]? Indeed, it is within the rights of a believer to desire to meet God. Verily, I do not see death except [in the form of] martyrdom, and I do not see life with the unjust as anything but loathsome16."

It is evident that Imam Husayn was reacting to the general condition of deterioration in the upholding of

the Islamic teaching brought about by the anti-religious Umayyads and the prevailing outlook of accommodation among the Muslims encouraged by those theologians who supported the existing order and wanted to prevent civil strife at the expense of the Qur'anic principle of justice.

Thus, the events of the year 61/680 become comprehensible when seen in light of the Qur'anic insistence on the establishment of a just social order under the guidance provided by God in the form of the Book and the 'noble paradigm' of the Prophet, and the manner in which the representatives of the Muslim community deviated from this goal following the death of the Prophet. Moreover, it was the commitment to the ideals of Islam that finally decided the course adopted by Imam Husayn and his followers in Karbala on the Day of Ashura – a day [that] continues and will continue to challenge our conceptions of standards of human respect and recognition for as long as there remains a conscientious being on earth.

It is, I believe, the message of Truth and Justice – the Islamic revelation in its entirety – that makes the study and the commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom deserving of our wonder and our tears. In Islamic history there is no other occasion [that] can generate the total responsibility that a Muslim has towards God and his fellow men. Furthermore, there is no other 'paradigm' that equals the paradigm provided by all the members of the Prophet's family in creating an egalitarian social commitment, which Islam obviously demands from its adherents. It is this paradigmatic nature of Imam Husayn's life that gives it an eternal meaning, promised in the Qur'an, to all those who struggle and sacrifice their lives in the cause of God:

"Count not those who are slain in God's way as dead, but rather as living with their Lord, by Him provided" (*3:169*).

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1. Refer to the verses of the Holy Qur'an 12:37–40.

2. Among modern scholars, the works of Taba Husayn, al-Fitna al-kubra and 'Ali wa banuh, and 'Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad, Abu al-shuhada Husayn b. 'Ali, mark a beginning in this direction of critical evaluation of early Islamic history. The important phase of 'revisionism' is also marked by Abu al-'Ala' Mawdudi's controversial (as far as Sunni Muslims are concerned) Khilafat va mulukiyyat. This work has been refuted again and again by several Sunni authors who do not agree with Mawdudi's objectivity in dealing with both 'Uthman and Mu'awiya's caliphates.
See, for instance: Muhammad Ishaq, Izhar-i haqiqat bi javab-i khilafat va mulukiyyat, and Mahmud Ahmad 'Abbasi, Haqiqat-i khilafat va mulukiyyat, and Hamid Enayat, Modern Islamic Political Thought (London, 1982), p. 181–194, which reviews modern literature written on Imam Husayn by Arab and Persian scholars. Unfortunately, Enayat did not read Urdu and was unable to take into account an important and rather controversial study by the learned scholar 'Ali Naqi Naqavi, Shahid-i insaniyat (1942), which precedes the Persian study of Ni'mat Allah Salihi Najafabadi, Shahid-i javid (1968), based on historical method.

3. See the Prophet's widely quoted speech on the occasion of his Farewell Pilgrimage in Ibn Hisham, Sirat al-Nabi, p. 821; and Ya'qubi, Ta'rikh, II, 123.

4. I have pointed out above that the seeds of this discrimination were sown earlier than 'Uthman's period. See, for instance, Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahj Al-Balagha, VIII, 11, where the author relates the principle of 'social priority' – al-tafdil –

introduced by 'Umar in the year 20/640, when he distributed the pensions on the basis of 'priority.' Thus, even the muhajirun were classified into Quraish and non-Quraish immigrants, where all muhajirun had priority over all the ansar, and all the Arabs were given priority over the non-Arab[s] (al-'ajam), and so on. Apparently, during the last years of his rule, 'Umar came to realize the errors of his social and political policies and regretted their implementation. This is evident in his reproach to one of his governors in the year 23/643 for having adopted class stratification and the etiquette of the aristocrats in his gatherings. See Tabari, Ta'rikh, IV, 25.

5. Dhahabi, Ta'rikh al-Islam, IV, 125f. The problem of the amassing of wealth and the unfair distribution of the fruits of conquest goes back to an earlier period when, according to Tabari, the Arab leaders changed their simple ways by settling down in the centres of wealth concentration in Syria. When 'Umar visited Mu'awiya in Syria, he was shocked to see the way Mu'awiya demonstrated his wealth to the caliph every time he came to see him (Tarikh, VI, 184.)

6. Yaqubi, Ta'rikh, II, 264

7. Dinawari, Akhbar al-tiwal. p. 249

8. Abu Dawud, Sunun, I, 142; Nasa'i, Sunan, I, 42; Darimi, Sunan, p. 195. The general ignorance of the Muslims about religious matters is further attested by the account [that] shows that when 'Utba b. al-Nahhas al-'Ijli cited a line of a poem by 'Adi b. Zayd and attributed it to God in his sermon, people thought that it actually was from the Qur'an until he was challenged by Hisham b. al-Kalbi. See Ibn Nadim, Fihrist, p. 91. In the Sunan of Nasa'i, p. 46-7, there are traditions [that] indicate that up to the time of al-Hajjaj and 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, people had no idea of the proper times for prayer, and the most pious Muslims were unsure of quite elementary rules.

9. Tirmidhi, Sunan, I, 37

10. Tabari, Ta'rikh, II, 112

11. Bukhari, Sahih, I, 3011, hadith no. 507. For al-Zuhri's relationship with the Umayyads, see Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, al 'Iqd al-Farid, II, 130.

12. Bukhari, Sahih, 1, 417f, hadith no. 753.

13. It is interesting to note that many early jurists belonged to the Murji'ite party and were willing to be used as tools by the Umayyads. Abu Hanifa, for example, was asked whether or not a wicked person could become the leader of the Muslim community; he is reported to have replied affirmatively, although some of the followers of the Hanafi school, understandably, in the later period, have denied this ascription to him. See Ahmad b. 'Umar al-Shaybani, Adab al-Qadi, p. 261.

14. Ibn Tiqtiqa, Ta'rikh al-Fakhri, p. 41f. Many relevant traditions can be seen in Tirmidhi, Sunan, II, 191, 15; Abu Dawud, Sunan, I, 252.

15. Tabari, Ta'rikh, V, 353.

16. Tabari, Ta'rikh, V, 404.

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