

The Excellences of the Imam Hussein (A.S) in Sunni Hadith Tradition

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HUMAN history may be seen as a record of the eternal struggle between right and wrong, virtue and vice, good and evil, and righteousness and wickedness. This struggle was decreed by God when Adam, an earthly creature, was sent to earth to engage in this eternal battle. It is through this struggle that human beings can earn their eternal bliss in the Gardens of Paradise, or their eternal punishment in the Fire. In the history of nations this struggle often attains universal significance as that moment of the struggle can speak to all subsequent times and situations. Thus the Qur'an urges us over and over again to ponder the end of those who were before us, and how God dealt with them. In every case, moreover, a prophet or messenger of God was rejected by his people and killed or driven out. In this sense, therefore, the struggle is in the end between God and humankind, between truth and falsehood, and between right guidance and manifest error.

Nowhere is this struggle placed in sharper relief than in the life of the Prophet Muhammad, and the lives of the people of his House. The life and witness of the Imam Hussein in particular, has acquired special significance in Muslim piety. This is because he has provided a model for all martyrs in the way of God, for all time.

The purpose of this paper is to emphasize the universal significance of the Imam in Muslim tradition. It is important to observe that all the traditions cited in this essay are found in both Shiite and Sunni hadith literature. But while in the Sunni community such traditions remain purely pietistic, Shiite tradition has made them the basis of a complex theological system. However, to appreciate the place of Hussein, **"the prince of martyrs"**, in Muslim history, a word must be said about the place of the Prophet's family in Muslim piety. At the same time the people of the House of the Prophet Muhammad are not unique in the prophetic history of human societies. A word is, therefore, necessary concerning the families of other prophets, if we are to appreciate fully the devotion which Muslims throughout their long history have accorded the people of the House of Muhammad, the seal of the prophets. Prophetic history begins, according to the Qur'an, with **Adam**, called **safwat Allah** (the elect of God). He was followed by **Noah, the first of the prophets of power or resolve** (*ulu al-'azm*). Noah was sent as a messenger by God to his people who rebelled against God's message, and were thus destroyed by the flood. Then came **Abraham, the father of prophets**. With his son

Ishmael he built the Ka"ba, the first house for the worship of God. **Ishmael** was also a prophet, and the ancestor of the prophets **Shu"ayb, Salih, Hud,** and finally **Muhammad**, the last messenger of God to humankind.

Isaac, Abraham"s second son, was also a prophet and the father of prophets. Among his descendants was the family of "Imran, the father of **Moses**, and **Jesus**, as well as other earlier prophets who were sent by God to the Children of Israel. The Qur"an declares that God has elected Adam, Noah, the family of Abraham and the family of "Imran. It further states that they were a single progeny, one from the other". All the prophets and their families are therefore of one physical and spiritual lineage. They and their households are the elect of God, purified and honored over the rest of humankind.

The people of the House of the Prophet Muhammad were likewise chosen by God and purified from all evil and sin. The Muslim community did not, however, infer the status of the family of Muhammad from that of earlier prophets and their families. Rather they too were chosen by God and purified from all evil and sin. Yet because Muhammad was the last prophet sent to guide humanity to God and the good, his descendants could not assume his prophetic role.

Their mission was to be the Imams, or guides, of the Muslim community. Their task is to safeguard the message vouchsafed to Muhammad by God for humankind. Like many prophets, the Imams had to endure rejection by their people and much suffering at their hands; martyrdom in the cause of God was often their lot. Yet the greater the suffering, the greater is the reward and honor which God promises His prophets, friends (awliya"), and righteous servants.

Thus the Prophet was asked: "Who among men are those afflicted with the greatest calamity?" He replied: "The prophets, then the pious, everyone according to the degree of his piety. A man is afflicted according to his faith (din); if his faith is durable, his affliction is accordingly increased, and if his faith is weak, his affliction is made lighter. Afflictions continue to oppress the worshipful servant until they leave him walking on the face of the earth without any sin cleaving to him."

"EXCELLENCES OF THE "AHL AL BAYT"

1. In both Sunni and Shiite Muslim tradition, one important event symbolizes the status of the ahl al-bayt and the human as well as spiritual dimensions of their relation to the Prophet. This is the tradition or episode of al-kisa" (the mantle, or cloak) which the Prophet spread over himself and Fatima his daughter, Ali, and their two sons Hassan and Hussein. This tradition

has come down to us in a number of versions, each stressing one or another aspect of the excellences of the family of the Prophet and his love for them. Ahmad bin Hanbal relates on the authority of Umm Salama, the Prophet's wife, that he said to Fatima one day: "Bring me your husband and two sons." When they had all come together he spread over them a mantle, and laying his hand over them, he said: "O God, these are the people of the House of Muhammad! Let therefore your prayers and blessings descend upon Muhammad and the people of the House of Muhammad; for you are worthy of all praise and glory." Umm Salama continued: "I then lifted the mantle to enter in with them, but he pulled it away from my hand saying, "You too shall come to a good end".

The point which this version of the kisa" tradition emphasizes is that the ahl al-bayt are only the five:

Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, and their two sons Hassan and Hussein. Umm Salama, one of the most highly venerated of the Prophet's wives, was denied this special status. We shall have more to say about this point, as it is emphasized in almost every version of this tradition.

2. In another highly interesting version of the kisa" tradition, related on the authority of "Abd Allah b. Jafar b. Abi Talib, we read:

As the Apostle of God saw mercy descending, he demanded: "Call them for me, call them for me!" Safiyya asked: "Who should we call, O Messenger of God?" He answered: "Call the people of my household: Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Hussein." When they were brought, he spread a mantle over them; then lifting his hands to heaven said: "O God, these are the people of my House; bless, O God, Muhammad and the people of the House of Muhammad!" God then sent down the verse: Surely God wishes to remove all abomination from you, O People of the House, and purify you with a thorough purification.

This version of the tradition provides **the meaning of the kisa" and the basis of its significance.**

The mantle is a symbol of divine mercy and blessing covering the Prophet and his holy family. It is, moreover, a source or haven of consolation and serenity in the face of the great sufferings and martyrdom which the Prophet's family had to endure after him. In this infinite source of divine mercy, the pious also share in times of sufferings and afflictions. The kisa" finally sets apart the **"holy five"** from the rest of the faithful, and distinguishes them from the rest of the Prophet's family.

The event of the kisa" provides the occasion for the revelation of the verse of purification just cited. Before the sectarian conflicts which split the Muslim community set in, classical tradition was almost unanimous in interpreting this verse as referring to the Prophet, his daughter Fatima al-Zahra (the Radiant), her husband and cousin, Ali, and their two sons Hassan and

Hussein.

3. In still another version of the kisa" tradition, the continuity of the Prophet's family with those of earlier prophets is clearly indicated. Wathila b. al-Asqa", on whose authority this tradition in most of its variants is related, reports the following prayer uttered by the Prophet: "O God, as you have bestowed your blessings, mercy, forgiveness, and pleasure upon Abraham and the family of Abraham, so they [Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein] are of me and I am of them! Bestow, therefore, your blessings, mercy, forgiveness and pleasure upon me and them."

This prayer echoes a prayer which Muslims repeat daily:

O God, bless Muhammad and the people of the House of Muhammad, as you have blessed Abraham and the people of the House of Abraham among all beings.

The House of Muhammad is, therefore, for all Muslims, **"the household of prophet-hood and the frequenting place of angels"**. The famous Qur'an commentator al-Suyuti quotes a tradition attributed to Umm Salama in interpretation of the verse of purification:

This verse was sent down in my house ... There were in the house then, seven: Gabriel and Michael, and Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Hussein, and I stood at the door of the house. I asked: "O Messenger of God, am I not of the People of the House?" He said: "You shall indeed come to a good end! You are, however, one of the wives of the Prophet."

The close friendship between the Prophet and the holy family, a relationship which went far beyond the bond of blood relation, may be seen in the incident of the **mubahala**, or prayer ordeal, with which the Prophet challenged the Christians of Najran. In the mubahala verse of the Qur'an, God orders the Prophet and his opponents to **"Call together our sons and your sons, our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves."** In the view of most Qur'an commentators and traditionists, the Prophet's sons are Hassan and Hussein, "his women" refers to Fatima, and "his self" refers, apart from himself, to Ali. When the people of Najran saw them, they recognized their high status with God, and with great trepidation they declined the mubahala and opted instead for peace.

Tradition asserts that the Prophet sensed the hostility which his community was to show to the People of his House after him. He is said to have often declared, "I am at war against him who fights against you, and will show peace toward him who shows peace to you."

This invective is strongly put in a tradition related on the authority of Abu Bakr, the Prophet's famous Companion and the first caliph. He said: "I saw the Messenger of God pitch a tent in which he placed Ali, Fatima, Hassan, and Hussein. He then declared: "O Muslims, I am at war against anyone who wars against the people of this

tent, and am at peace with those who show peace toward them. I am a friend to those who befriend them. He who shows love toward them shall be one of a happy ancestry and good birth. Nor would anyone hate them except that he be of miserable ancestry and evil birth."

Love for the Prophet's family is enjoined by God in the Qur'an, where He says: Say, "I ask no other reward of you save love of my next of kin" (42:23). Qur'an commentators have generally agreed that "

the **next of kin**" here intended are the ahl al-bayt.

The People of the House of the Prophet Muhammad have been for the pious an example of generosity, steadfastness in the face of hardship, and a source of solace in time of trials and afflictions. After days of fasting and prayers for the health of the two sick children Hassan and Hussein, the family fed the few morsels of dry bread and dates for which Ali had labored so hard to the needy. On the first evening, we are told, a beggar came. On the second, it was an orphan, and on the third, a captive. To each in turn, they gave the loaf of barley bread and few dates which Fatima had prepared for the family to break their fast. Thus God sent down the verse: They give food to eat, even though they cherish it, to the needy, the orphan and the captive.

Yet, in the end, God sent down a celestial table to feed His friends.

Early tradition shows a tension in the relationship of the Prophet to the community and in the relationship of the latter to the holy family. Much of the literature reflecting this tension was most likely the product of a later age, but projected back to the time of the Prophet and his Companions. Here love for the Prophet's family is not simply recommended as a pious act, but is presented as a challenge, and in a harsh reproaching tone. Furthermore, it is on this love to the ahl al-bayt that rewards and punishments on the Last Day are predicated.

Thus we are told that the Prophet said: "

"He, who desires the pleasure to live my life, die my death and dwell in a Garden of Eden which my Lord has planted, let him be a friend to Ali after me. Let him also be a friend to his friends. Let him finally be guided by the Imams after me, for they are my progeny. They were created of my clay, and have been vouchsafed knowledge and understanding. Woe to those of my community who deny their superiority, and those who violate the demands of kindness to my next of kin. May God not grant them my intercession."

In another tradition, the Prophet promises his intercession to those who honor his descendants, provide them with whatever needs they may have, and those who love them with their heart and profess this love with their tongues.

It has already been stressed that the ahl al-bayt share with the prophets of old and their descendants a high status and divine favor, but not the office of prophet-hood. They share, moreover, with the Prophet Muhammad the prerogative of intercession. This is expressed in hagiographical language, a language common to both Sunni and Shiite tradition. One such common example may suffice to demonstrate the devotion in the piety of both traditions to the

Prophet and the people of his household.

The Qur'an tells us that Adam received certain words of God which earned him God's forgiveness and mercy:

Adam received words from his Lord, and He turned towards him; for He is relenting, compassionate (2:37).

Suyuti reports that Ibn Abbas, the famous traditionist and authority on the Qur'an, asked the Prophet about the words which Adam received. The Prophet answered: "He prayed saying, "O God, for the sake of Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hassan and Hussein, do turn toward me", and He turned toward him." In another highly dramatic version of this tradition, Adam is taught the words as the only means by which God would accept his repentance and forgive him. Ali, we are told, enquired of the Prophet concerning the verse under discussion.

The Prophet told him that when Adam and his wife were expelled from Paradise, Adam wept bitterly over his sin for a hundred years. Finally, Gabriel came to him and spoke thus on God's behalf:

"O Adam, did I not create you with my own hand? Did I not breathe into you of my spirit? Did I not command my angels to bow down before you? Did I not provide you with Eve my servant?" "Yes", Adam answered. Gabriel asked: "What then is the cause of this weeping?" Adam replied, "Why should I not weep when I have been expelled from the proximity of the All-Merciful?" The angel then said: "You must pray fervently with these words, and God will accept your repentance and forgive your sin. Say: "O God, I beseech you for the sake of Muhammad and the people of the household of Muhammad; nor is there any god but you. I have done evil, and have wronged my soul. Turn towards me for you are relenting, compassionate."

HASSAN AND HUSSEIN

Islamic tradition has preserved numerous anecdotes depicting the tender care and love which the Prophet showed Hassan and Hussein. They were both born in Medina, and thus knew the Prophet only as children. It is therefore with the intimacy and love of a grandfather that the early life of the two Imams is colored. Once more, these family anecdotes also reflect clearly

the theological and political tension within the community, a tension which largely centered on

Hassan and Hussein. One such anecdote is the following:

One day, Hassan and Hussein were lost, and their mother Fatima came to the Prophet greatly alarmed. The angel Gabriel, however, came down and told the Prophet that the two youths were asleep in an animal fold some distance away. God, the angel reassured the anxious family, had charged an angel to keep watch over them. The Prophet went to the spot and found the angel had spread his two wings: one under them and the other over them as cover. The

Prophet stooped over the two children and began to kiss them until they awoke. He then carried them on his shoulders back to the city. A large crowd of Muslims followed the Prophet and his two grandsons to the mosque. The Prophet then addressed the assembled people and said: "O Muslims, shall I inform you of those who have the best grandfather and grandmother of humankind?"

"Yes, O Apostle of God", they all replied.

"They are Hassan and Hussein", he said. "Their grandfather is the Apostle of God, the seal of the Messengers, and their grandmother is Khadija, daughter of Khuwaylid, mistress of the women of Paradise."

The Prophet then declared Hassan and Hussein to have the best maternal uncle and aunt: Jafar and Umm Hani", son and daughter of Abu Talib. Their maternal uncle and aunt were likewise the best of all uncles and aunts: they were al-Qasim, son of the Messenger of God, and Zaynab, daughter of the Apostle of God. The Prophet concluded: "O God, you know that Hassan and Hussein shall be in Paradise, their uncles and aunt shall be in Paradise, and those who love them shall be in Paradise, while those who hate them shall be in the Fire."

Abu Hurayra, the famous hadith transmitter, related that often when they prayed behind the Messenger of God Hassan and Hussein would jump on his back while he was prostrate in prayer. When he lifted his head, he would move them gently and place them beside him. One evening, after prayers, Abu Hurayra offered to take the two youths home, but the Prophet wished them to stay. Soon, however, a flash of lightning illuminated the sky, and they thus walked in its light until they entered their home.

The friends (awliya") of God, like the prophets, are favored with miracles. These are not miracles proper (mu"jizat), but rather karamat (divine favours). The lightning incident was one such divine favor by means of which the Prophet wished to inform the community of the special status with which God had favored the two Imams.

There is a unity between the Prophet and the ahl al-bayt, a unity not simply of blood, but also of the spirit. It is a unity symbolized by the kisa" event. It is, therefore, a unity of love, as the

following statement of the Prophet clearly indicates. He said, as related on the authority of Salman the Persian: "Whoever loves Hassan and Hussein, I love him, and whomsoever I love, God also loves, and whomsoever God loves, He shall cause him to enter into the gardens of bliss." Likewise he who hates Hassan and Hussein shall be consigned to the Fire, because both God and his Messenger will hate him, "and a terrible punishment awaits him". Muslim hagiographical piety extended this unity and intimacy between the Prophet and his two grandchildren to include the angels of heaven. Thus Hudhayfa, a well known companion and traditionist, reported that the Prophet said: "An angel is here who never came down to earth before this night. He sought permission from his Lord to come down and greet me, and to bring me the glad tidings that Fatima is the **mistress of the women of Paradise**, and that Hassan and Hussein are the **masters of the youths of Paradise**."

There is no doubt that the special status of the Imam Hussein in Muslim piety and devotion has in large measure been due to the Imam's great **sacrifice of family, wealth, and life itself in the way of God**. Hussein's martyrdom - his courage, steadfastness, dignity, and true devotion in times of great crisis - have inspired Muslims of all walks of life. Hussein has inspired the best poetry in all Islamic languages; even non-Muslim poets celebrated his great virtue and valor.

Above all, however, the Imam Hussein's martyrdom became a source of strength and endurance for Muslims in times of suffering, persecution and oppression. He has stood with every wronged man or woman before oppressive rulers, reproaching wrongdoers and encouraging the oppressed to persist in their struggle for freedom and dignity. The following encounter between Zayd bin Arqam, a venerable companion of the Prophet, and "Ubayd Allah bin Ziyad is a living testimony to the struggle between illegitimate authority and the power of right.

When the head of the Imam Hussein was brought before him, Ibn Ziyad began to poke its teeth and lips with a stick.

Zayd protested: "Take away your stick! For, by God, I saw the Apostle of God often kiss these lips." Saying this, Zayd began to weep. Ibn Ziyad reprimanded him, saying: "May God cause your eyes to weep! Had it not been that you are an old and senile man, I would have cut off your head." Zayd then walked away, exclaiming:

"O men, you are slaves after this day. For you have slain the son of Fatima and set as amir over you the son of Marjana [i.e., Ibn Ziyad]. By God, he shall kill the best of you and enslave the most wicked among you. Perish those who accept humiliation and shame." Zayd then said, "O Ibn Ziyad, I shall tell you something that will enrage you even more. I saw the Apostle of God

seating Hassan on his left leg and Hussein on his right, and say, "O God, I commend them and the most righteous of the people of faith to your trust." How have you dealt with the trust of the Prophet, O Ibn Ziyad?"

Divine wisdom in creation can be best discerned, according to the Qur'an, in the order of nature, and in the human individual and his society. Muslim hagiography has recorded the dramatic effect the death of Hussein had on nature. Thus the famous traditionist al-Bayhaqi reported that when Hussein bin Ali was killed, the sun was so deeply eclipsed that **stars were seen at midday**. People feared that it was the Day of Resurrection. Nadra al-Azdiya, a woman who was contemporary with the Imam Hussein, is said to have reported: **"When Hussein bin Ali was killed, the sky rained down blood, so that next morning we found our wells and water jugs filled with it."**

The memory of the martyred Imam has been kept alive and nourished by the tears of the faithful who vicariously share in the tragedy of the Imam Hussein and his loved ones and friends. Here again, tradition has extended the grief displayed by the pious for the tragedy of Karbala to the cosmic order. Thus al-Suyuti reports in his commentary on the verse describing God's compassion towards the ancient martyr John son of Zachariah that **"The heavens did not weep for the death of anyone except John son of Zachariah and Hussein bin Ali. Its redness [at sunset] is the sign of its weeping."**

CONCLUSION

It has already been argued that there is an existential and all-inclusive unity between the Prophet and his daughter Fatima, her husband, Ali, and their two sons. This unity makes it impossible to discuss one without discussing all the others. We have, therefore, been concerned throughout this study with the Imam Hussein in the context of this essential unity. It must be added, however, that the Imam Hussein was especially close to the heart of his grandfather, the Prophet Muhammad. It is of Hussein alone that he declared: "Hussein is of me and I am of Hussein. May God love those who love Hussein." When sura 108 (al-Kawthar) was revealed, the Prophet announced this great favor to his close companion Anas bin Malik, on whose authority this tradition is reported.

Anas asked: "What is al-Kawthar?"

He answered: "It is a river in Paradise, but neither those who violate my covenant (dhimma), nor those who shall kill the people of my House will be allowed to drink of it."

Finally, Shiite tradition has always insisted on the great merit the faithful earn in making pilgrimage (ziyara) to the tomb of the Imam Hussein and the tombs of the men who were

martyred with him.

Yet Sunni tradition has likewise seen great merit in this pious act. The ziyara to the tomb of the martyred Imam has acquired this great significance in all Muslim tradition because the Imam and his fellow martyrs are seen as models of jihad in the way of God. It is related that the father of the Imams, Ali bin Abi Talib, passed by Karbala after the battle of Siffin. He took a handful of its soil and exclaimed: "Ah, ah, on this spot some men will be slain, and will enter Paradise without reckoning!"

The spiritual unity of the ahl al-bayt, symbolized by the kisa", is in turn a symbol of the unity of all Muslims. It is for the sake of this unity in faith and commitment (Islam) to God and the truth that the Imam Hussein sacrificed his life. He refused a partisan Islam when he refused to legitimize Umayyad rule. Because he refused humiliation, wrongdoing and deviation from the ideals of Islamic leadership as exemplified by the Prophet and his own father Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, the Imam Hussein drew once and for all the distinction between a true khalifa (representative) of the Apostle of God and the kings of this world. But above all, the Imam Hussein and his fellow martyrs accepted God's bargain with the people of faith to exchange their lives and wealth for the eternal bliss of Paradise. This divine challenge is no less relevant to the Muslim community today than it was fourteen hundred years ago. It invites us still to "a garden whose breadth is greater than the heavens and earth, prepared for those . "who fear God