

Arba'een: Reflecting Upon the Imam's Stand

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The events surrounding the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) remain controversial among scholars, historians, and lovers of Imam Husayn.

Here, I will very briefly offer some philosophical reflections on the stand of the Imam. First, we need to understand the nature of philosophical history. It is not the business of philosophy to gather data and narrate events. Philosophy is an intellectual science (Aqli) rather than a narrative science (Naqli).

Nevertheless, in the Qur'an we are repeatedly advised to think about the events of history. Since Ashura is the event of the martyrdom of an Imam, a leader from whom we seek guidance, we need to understand the events leading up to and including Ashura in such a manner that reflection upon them will help to guide our own affairs.

When the philosophy of the stand of Imam Husayn is discussed, sometimes people say that he had some miraculous instructions from God that are completely hidden from us. In that case, it would be pointless to speculate on the philosophy behind his stance in a way that could help us in our lives that lack such divine inspiration. This is not to deny that Imam Husayn had any such inspiration, but we cannot appeal to it in order to understand the events of Ashura without undermining the function of the Imam's behavior in guiding us.

There are many issues pertaining to the stance of Imam Husayn that are controversial. His brother, Imam Hasan (peace be upon him), for example, made peace with the caliph. Why didn't Imam Husayn do the same with Yazid (may Allah remove His mercy from him)? One answer is that Yazid was much worse than Mu'awiya (may Allah remove His mercy from him). Still, both of them were pretty bad. Is the difference in morals enough to explain the difference in policies? Another reason is that Yazid's caliphate violated part of the agreement that Imam Hasan had concluded with Mu'awiya. Furthermore, there was the dire suffering of the people under Yazid's rule and, eventually, the invitation for Imam Husayn 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 Ali and Husayn (peace be upon them) – in which Islam was made to serve the interests of worldly power and its expansion. According to the Shi'a, 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, and based on reason and justice.

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 cases of Imams Ali and Hasan was such that if they had refused any sort of recognition of the caliphate, it 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 Husayn to oppose Yazid 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 Imam Husayn'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 Ali and Hasan, 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 Husayn, however, opposition to the caliphate could 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. Imam Husayn's stance against Yazid was not taken because no peace could be brokered with such a corrupt individual, but because the corruption of the individual provided the opportunity in which a stand could be taken against the corruption of the political governance of the Muslim community.

In the fifth sermon of Nahj al-Balagha, Imam Ali 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."¹ The rejection of unjust governance, however, does not imply rebellion. Imam Husayn never called upon the people to rise up and fight their oppressors; he did not go to war against Yazid. Instead, there are consistent and repeated efforts to prevent violence. These efforts are found on display in the works of the early narrators, Abu Mukhnaf, Mufid, and Tabari. For example, when one of his followers finds the opportunity to shoot an arrow at Shimr (may Allah remove His mercy from him) before the fighting began, Imam Husayn 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.

Others have suggested that Imam Husayn 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, he

could have remained in Medina, or advanced toward Damascus. Ali Shari'ati even claims that Imam Husayn broke off his Hajj in order to seek martyrdom because political activity is more important than worship!

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 Husayn lacked the army needed to mount a war effort, he decided 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 Husayn 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 Hurr. All of this must be removed from the narrative so that Imam Husayn can be presented as a revolutionary leader armed with the weapon of his own martyrdom.

In a new Maqatal written under the direction of Hujjatul Islam wal-Muslimeen Pishvahi and published by the Imam Khomeini Education and Research Institute in Qom, one finds the observation that if Imam Husayn's goal were to reject the sort of government based on raw power found in the caliphate as diametrically opposed to the political theology of Islam, he could not accomplish this by using the force of arms to impose his own government on the people. Shia political theology is based on the concept of Wilayat, which is 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 Shia.

At each stage in the course of events from the peace treaty of Imam Hasan to Imam Husayn's martyrdom, the Imams were faced with moral dilemmas which required the exercise of wisdom in judgment given to them by Allah. It is due to their divine guidance that the Shia Imams have the normative status of inerrancy.

When his offers of peace were refused, and the Imam cannot continue to oppose the corruption of religious understanding without drawing the attack of his enemies, he tried to find a way to avoid the killing of his friends and family members, and urged them to escape under the cover of night before Ashura – but they remained steadfast. He delivered speeches aimed at convincing his opponents that they should not attack and managed to convince one of them, Hurr, to repent and switch sides. He appealed to the humanity of his opponents and he appealed to their professed love of the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), his

grandfather. Even during the slaughter, he appealed to his enemies. Throughout all of the suffering he undergoes, Imam Husayn conducts himself most nobly. Oftentimes commentators disagree with political and Irfani interpretations of the stand taken by Imam Husayn. It may be better to view these kinds of interpretations as complementary rather than as competing. His actions need to be understood on a political level as a response to the invitation of the people of Kufa and in the face of corruption that threatened to obscure forever the mission of Islam. At the same time, by taking this stance, Imam Husayn is commanding the good and forbidding wrongdoing. In Christianity and in Islam, to face death in order to bear witness in defense of the faith is highly commended. 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 .Imam Husayn, Insha'Allah

Note

...1. <https://www.al-islam.org/nahjul-balagha-part-1-sermons/sermon-5-o-people>