

The Shi'i Islamic Martyrdom Narratives of Imam al-Ḥusayn

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The topic of the movement and martyrdom of Imam Husayn is central to the doctrine of Shi'ism. There are many works devoted to this subject, especially in the context of mourning events held annually on this occasion. Thus, an enormous amount of literature has been written on the uprising of Imam Husayn. Here, Muhammad-Reza Fakhr-Rohani has analyzed the major outlines of typical martyrdom narratives (maqtals) of Imam al-Husayn and his martyred companions.

This book was intended for both the academic reader and the reader with no background knowledge of the subject. Fakhr-Rohani begins with a summary of the basics of Shi'ism and a detailed account of the events of Ashura and the historical events that preceded it. 'Part One: Background' consists of an introduction and a chapter 'Leadership: Quranic-cum-Prophetic Perspective'. In the introduction, the author briefly describes key historical events starting from the life of the Prophet Muhammad. In his narration, he appeals mainly to Shi'i sources, which is why the predominantly Shi'i point of view is presented in the book. Thus, Fakhr-Rohani mainly refers to those events and/or personalities that are of particular importance mainly to Shi'ites. He points out that Abu Talib

was a Muslim (p. 6) when most Sunnis are of the opposite opinion; that Ali was selected by Allah as the immediate successor to the Prophet Muhammad, and his nomination was publicly announced several years later on the day of Ghadir Khumm (p. 7); during the Saqifa Abu Bakr was illegitimately elected as caliph (p. 12); Abu Bakr was wrong in denying Fatimah her share of the inheritance during the Fadak dispute (p. 12); the attack on the house of Ali and Fatima under Umar's command (p. 12), etc. If this can be seen as some kind of flaw, Fakhr-Rohani pointed out in the preface of his book that he deliberately refused to delve into some issues and disputes that are irrelevant to the subject of the book, and that the dominant point of view outlined in his book reflects that shared by 'typical' (meaning Twelver) Shi'ites (p. vii).

The chapter 'Leadership: Quranic-cum-Prophetic Perspective' presents the foundations of the Imamate based on Shi'i theology. Thus, the author mentions the story of Ibrahim, who was both a prophet and an imam (p. 31-32); the hadith of Status/hadith al-Manzilah (p. 32); and the Shi'i Islamic conception of infallibility, according to which, in addition to prophets, imams are also infallible (p. 33). According to Divine tradition, the prophets had vicegerents: Joshua (Yusha b. Nun) was the vicegerent of Moses, Jesus had twelve disciples who spread his faith among the people, and in the same way Imam Ali was the vicegerent of the Prophet Muhammad (p. 32).

Having introduced the reader to the basics of Shi'ism and the significance of Imam Husayn (as an infallible Imam, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, son of Imam Ali, and brother of Imam Hassan), the author proceeds to a detailed description of the movement of Imam Husayn, highlighting the Medina and Meccan phases, the path from Mecca to Karbala, the arrival to the place of Karbala and the events of the day of Ashura itself. When describing the latter, he also divided the martyrs into non-Hashimids, Hashimids (relatives of Imam Husayn, members of the Prophetic family), and the history of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. Describing these events, Fakhr-Rohani often referred to the statements of Imam Husayn, collected in the book of Muhammad Sadiq Najmi *From Medina to Karbala in the words of Imam al-Husayn* (Fakhr-Rohani was the author of the English translation of this book). Also, apart from other

historical sources, Fakhr-Rohani referred to personal research interviews conducted with Shi'i scholars in Iran and Iraq. Observations concerning little-studied events are especially valuable. For example, one of the reasons why Imam Husayn went to Kufa, which was the capital during the reign of his father Imam Ali and, accordingly, was because there should have been a large number of their followers there (the author indicated a number of other reasons as well). According to historian Dr. Sayyid Hasan Isa al-Hakim, the same reasoning applies to the case of the four special delegates and deputies of the 12th Imam al-Mahdi, located precisely in Baghdad where large populations of Shi'ites lived at that time (p. 69).

The fourth part of the book is devoted to the study of maqtals. The Arabic word 'maqtal' refers to the literary genre of lamentation. The author writes that although this genre is barely mentioned as such in several Arabic-English dictionaries, it is in fact a well-established genre (p. 128). Maqtal does not focus on all aspects of the life and times of the figure, but concentrates on writing and depicts the tragic fate of the martyr. It tries to give a vivid description of the martyrdom of a high-ranking person or group of nobles. The maqtal thus provides a kind of martyrdom-oriented (and mostly religiously charged) historiography. The literary and socio-cultural roots of the development of the maqtals can be traced back to the zeal and enthusiasm of the ancient Arabs to constantly remember their own people, who were killed in the name of, or in support of, a high goal.

In addition to maqtals, there are other similar genres such as marsiya (marthiya), ritha, nowhah, etc. (p. 182-183). These have less historical accuracy and are popular in different regions. For example, marsiyas are very popular in non-Arab Muslim, Iranian, or Indian subcontinental contexts and are the poetic counterpart of maqtal.

The maqtal is composed of several elements, namely: an eyewitness, a narrator or reporter, the victim, hence a martyr, the battlefield challenge reported, the audience, whether immediate or anticipated, and the intended effects exerted on the audience. From among the eyewitness reports, those of the Ashura survivors are of the highest reliability. Among them are the fourth Imam Zayn al-Abidin, or his son, the

fifth Imam al-Baqir. In a number of cases, the witness was also an enemy soldier or a commander who confessed to what he himself or a group of enemy soldiers had done on the battlefield against Imam Husayn (p. 142).

Maqtals usually begin with a brief account of the life and background of the martyr's personality, social status, and examples of the martyr's religious piety, followed by his/her intense struggle in the path of Allah and how he/she was martyred. The final stage of martyrdom is depicted vividly and graphically in order to evoke the emotions of the audience, notably to make them burst into tears. Often the mourner will sing a few mournful verses and the audience will repeat them as they beat their chests. Maqtals create and leave deep effects and, from this point of view, maqtals are not just historical records; they have other sublime and deeper meanings for the Shi'ites.

In this context, Fakhr-Rohani's connections with the work of non-Muslim scholars is interesting. He compared maqtals to 'Western tragedies', and unlike typical Western (and mostly Greek) tragedies, which are expected to be imitations, maqtals are mainly reports. In typical Western tragedies, the hero or protagonist is the victim of his own tragic flaw, which brings him or her to an unfavorable and notoriously fatal end. In the maqal, on the contrary, the protagonist appears as having no flaws and consciously goes to his martyrdom (p. 142). The author also writes that maqtals can be regarded as a kind of 'literature of commitment' (a term proposed by Jean-Paul Sartre), coupled with cognizance-giving effects. Literature of commitment is meant as a type of literature in which its author is committed to revealing the truth as well as raising the audience's level of cognizance of what had taken place in the past. Maqal writers are committed to revealing the truth about the heroism of Imam Husayn, raising the audience's awareness of what has happened in the past, and the truth about the historical movement of Imam Husayn (p. 139).

Based on the above characteristics, Fakhr-Rohani concludes that the maqal is a genre in its own right. This is due to the fact that there are other forms or varieties of maqtals, such as oral, written, illustrated. There are also reliable, unreliable sources (p. 156-158), non-existent or lost sources – for which original versions of texts are no longer available

(p. 159). The author draws attention to these groups, describing them and giving examples. The citation of unreliable sources by Shi'i scholars allows us to see self-criticism and the critical evaluation of its own sources in Shi'i thought.

Fakhr-Rohani also introduces the reader to the term Ashuragraphy. To distinguish it from the maqtals, he points out that maqtaal-writing presupposes several requirements: (a) the author's being a Muslim, whether Sunni or Shi'i; (b) the author's intention to raise a sense of feeling pity or sympathy in the audience, mainly for tackling their sentiments to make them shed tears; (c) maqtaal-writing cannot temporally be restricted to the Ashura heart-rending scenes, hence a maqtaal account can be developed for, hence in the case of, any non- or pre-Ashura martyr, e.g. Muslim b. Agil. Ashuragraphy, by contrast, is used for reporting and describing whatever pertains to the entire Ashura episode when the author is not a Muslim (p. 175). Fakhr-Rohani lists sources in chronological order on the events of Ashura in Arabic (starting from the first century AH), Persian, and English (from Edward Gibbon and Simon Ockley in the 18th century, but mostly after the times of British India). The author also provides a few examples of maqtals translated into English.

Given that the events of Ashura have been described in other sources, I believe that the main scientific value of the book under review is a deep analysis of maqtals as a specific literary genre. This topic is understudied and this book provides access to little-researched works, especially in Arabic and Persian. The author also appeals to other languages, indicating where one can find relevant literature (for example, on p. 185 he writes about the study of marsiya in the Balti language). He also constantly emphasizes the relevance of this topic and how maqtals and Ashura narratives were/are used in various historical contexts. For example, the technique 'goriz' is mainly used in Persian and by Iranian preachers when mourners connect a tragic scene to a tragic scene or aspect of the Battle of Karbala (p. 200). Fakhr-Rohani pointed to connections of Ashura commemorations with recent 'martyr' commemorations such as the death of Qasim Soleimani (p. 135), with the events of the Persian Constitutional Revolution (p. 172), the activities of Hezbollah (p. 175), the Iran-Iraq War and the association of Saddam Hussein with

Yazid (p. 200), the anti-religious policies of the Shah and the Islamic Revolution (pp. 172, 199). Thus, we see how commemoration narratives not only continue to exist but are also actively used for various purposes. This book will be useful for readers who are not familiar with Shi'ism to understand the events of Ashura, the significance of Imam Husayn and his martyrdom for Shi'ites, and literature related to this. In turn, academics will also find this book useful, especially in the fields of Islamic sciences, history, and linguistics, since the author has used (and respectively cited) a large amount of literature on Ashura in Arabic, Persian, and English.

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