

THE CAUSE OF THE ASHURA UPRISING: A QUR'ANIC PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT: The Battle of Karbala in which Imam Husayn rose up against the Umayyad caliph Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah is replete with moral lessons laid out in the Qur'an. Imam Husayn's actions revealed his profound understanding of the Qur'an as taught by his parents and grandfather, the Prophet of Islam. This article demonstrates the actions on the Day of Ashura as a reflection of several Qur'anic principles, namely obedience and submission only to God, being free, using the Prophet's way of life as a paradigm for all, commanding right and forbidding wrong, resisting against oppression, rejecting a life of humiliation, and establishing justice. The Imam's accomplishments on that day provided a set of guidelines for all future generations to follow.

There is much literature available about the role of Imam Husayn's revolution, but an independent work on his motives for doing so from a Qur'anic perspective can hardly be found. The aim of this article is not only to give an account of a historical event, a report of the Imam's life, or a study about his characteristics; rather, it is a small effort to explain that Imam Husayn's life, actions, flesh, and blood echoed the morals taught in the Qur'an. Imam Husayn – with his profound understanding of the Qur'an attained during his childhood as taught by the Prophet and under the upbringing of his parents Imam Ali and Lady Fatima – showed that

the higher values of the Qur'an are practical lessons. In this article, we will investigate the uprising of Imam Husayn to discover and illustrate the principles of the Husayni revolution.

With this outlook, we will examine the sayings of Imam Husayn in which he addressed both friends and foes during his journey from Medina to Mecca, and from Mecca to Karbala to understand the Imam's courage, spirituality, and his humane character. In addition, this course will be able to recognize the Qur'anic principles and foundations that formed the basis of several motives behind the Imam's eternal uprising, thus striving to achieve what is known in the Qur'an as *insight*, or *basirat*.

The lessons behind the Imam's uprising are backed by Qur'anic teachings, some of which are mentioned below:

- His refusal to pay allegiance to Yazid ibn Muawiyeh
- The relationship between the concept of freedom in the Qur'an and Imam Husayn's uprising
- Protecting the Sunnah and preventing heresy
- Following in the footsteps of the Prophet and Ali ibn Abi Taleb
- Enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong
- Resistance and defense
- Protecting one's honour and rejecting lowliness
- Establishing justice

A brief description of the above-mentioned points and their background from the Qur'an, hadith, and historical texts is offered below.

Refusal to pay allegiance

After Mu'awiyah's death, forcing the Imam to pay allegiance to Yazid and the Imam's refusal to do so triggered the revolution. Two forms of allegiance have been mentioned in the Qur'an: 1) to obey and submit to God and his Prophet, which is an affirmative form of allegiance. This has

been mentioned in verses 10 and 18 of Chapter *Fat'h* in the form of paying allegiance to the Prophet, and 2) refusing to pay allegiance to the unbelievers or the hypocrites. Therefore, Imam Husayn's refusal in paying allegiance to Yazid was based on the following command from God:

And do not obey the faithless and the hypocrites, and disregard their torments, and put your trust in Allah, and Allah suffices as trustee. (Ahzab 33:48)

There are many reasons and witnesses that prove Yazid to be a disbeliever, and it was based on the above reasons that Imam Husayn did not pay allegiance to him. The Imam said, "If the Islamic nation were to be caught up by the leadership and control of someone like Yazid, then we must bid farewell to Islam."

Freedom

Liberation of the people was one of the principles of the Prophet's agenda, as mentioned in the following verse:

—those who follow the Apostle, the uninstructed prophet, whose mention they find written with them in the Torah and the Evangel, who bids them to do what is right and forbids them from what is wrong, makes lawful to them all the good things and forbids them from all vicious things, and relieves them of their burdens and the shackles that were upon them —those who believe in him, honour him, and help him and follow the light that has been sent down with him, they are the felicitous. (A'raf 7:157)

Indeed, it was mission of all the prophets and messengers of God to assist people in attaining true freedom, and to guide them towards serving none other than Him. As a result, there is a proportional relationship between being a servant of God and freedom: a person's freedom increases depending on the intensity of his servitude to God. Our lusts prevent us from reaching internal freedom; they tie us up, resulting in our inability to

taste the external or social freedom. Imam Ali warns, “Do not be the slave of any other; indeed, God has made you free.”

One of the most beautiful features in the event of Karbala is the spirit of freedom and its outcomes as revealed by Imam Husayn. The Imam’s understanding of freedom reaches such a peak that he no longer feared death. In his sermon in Mina, Imam Husayn likened death to the necklace for young girls and said that he was eager to see the Prophet and his father and ancestors in the same way that Jacob was eager to see Joseph.¹

On the day of Ashura when the severely injured Imam Husayn witnessed the enemy’s attacks his family’s tents, while barely managing to get up, said: “O followers of the family of Sufyan!² If you do not have a religion or if you do not fear the Day of Resurrection then at least be free (*ahrar*) in your world[ly life].” This message was said from the place where he was martyred; he addressed all people of all times by implying that freedom and nobleness are crucial in having a religion. Nonetheless, to be free is essential for all people whether they have a religion or not.

Protecting the Sunnah

Imam Husayn’s uprising protected the Sunnah and prevented deviation. In the Qur’an, God reveals the Prophet’s high status by introducing him as a role model for people to use his way of life and traditions as a paradigm for their own lives:

In the Apostle of Allah there is certainly for you a good exemplar, for those who look forward to Allah and the Last Day, and remember Allah greatly. (33:21)

In one of his letters to the tribal leaders of Basra, Imam Husayn wrote: “I invite you to the book of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet. Indeed the Sunnah of the Prophet has been left to perish and heresy has come to life.”

¹ *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 44, p. 366

² Sufyan: Yazid’s grandfather

In his first sermon on the plains of Karbala, Imam Husayn announced that his uprising was to defend the truth and uproot falsehood. He said, “Do you not see that the truth is no longer acted upon and falsehood is not refrained from?”

In relation to the escalation of heresy in society, the Prophet had said, “When heresy becomes prevalent in my nation, the knowledgeable must make his knowledge known and whosoever does not do this, God’s curse would be upon him.” According to this saying, Imam Husayn felt responsible to protect the religion and the Islamic nation from destruction.

During Muawiyah’s era, heretical ideas and manners penetrated into various institutions, such as government, economy, social life, and religious thinking. For example, he changed the caliphate system into a monarchy and introduced the act of cursing Imam Ali in the mosques and from the pulpits; those who refused to curse Imam Ali were sentenced to death. In order to change the people’s mindset, Muawiyah tried to influence the opinion makers of his time, and as a result two groups appeared from amongst the *Murji’ah*³ and those who believed in predestination (*jabriyun*). The beliefs of these two groups enabled the Bani Umayyah to justify their actions. It was in such a situation that Imam Husayn expressed his deep concern. To break the condition and to cut off the trend, there was no other method but to rise up to fight against deviation and accept martyrdom. This was to revive the Sunnah and combat heresies.

Following in the footsteps of the Prophet

In his will, Imam Husayn wrote, “I am moving along the path of my grandfather and father.” Imam Husayn’s moral conduct revolved around the conduct of his grandfather, the Prophet, and his father, Imam Ali.

³ Murji’ah (Arabic المرجئة) is an early Islamic school, whose followers are known in English language as Murjites or Murji’ites. Murjites advocated the idea of deferred judgement of peoples’ belief. They also put little emphasis on actions, compared to faith and this practically led to some kind of carelessness about avoiding sins and performing obligations.

Consequently, one of the ways to understand the Imam's personality is to know the Prophet's conduct.

Enjoining what is good and forbidding what is wrong

In his will, Imam Husayn stated, "I intend to instruct people to do right and forbid them from wrongdoing." These two obligations are of the most significant instructions of Islam, emphasized both in the Qur'an and hadiths: "*There has to be a nation among you summoning to the good, bidding what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. It is they who are the felicitous.*" (Ale Imran, 104) The word 'nation' in this verse does not refer to the entire Islamic society; rather, it refers to the group of elite scholars from amongst the Islamic nation who must oversee the affairs of the society as their responsibility. One interpretation of "goodness" in the abovementioned verse refers to Muslim unity and harmony amongst them. Society must have a group who invites Muslims towards unity and alliance at all times, and stand up against any form of disunity. These two orders stand as the spirit of society, and if they were to ever disappear, all moral principles would lose its value.

In many verses of the Qur'an and Prophetic hadith⁴ fighting in the face of oppression, corruption, and aggression (*jihad*) is deemed necessary because it guarantees Islam's continuation and the establishment of security. It is for this that Imam Husayn rose up according to God's command and the instructions of the Prophet:

And wage jihād for the sake of Allah, a jihād which is worthy of Him. He has chosen you and has not placed for you any obstacle in the religion, the faith of your father, Abraham. He named you 'muslims' before, and in this,¹ so that the Apostle may be a witness to you, and that you may be witnesses to mankind. So maintain the prayer, give the zakāt, and hold fast to Allah. He is your

⁴ Traditions narrated from the Prophet

master — an excellent master and an excellent helper.
(22:78)

Resistance and defense

In the Qur'an, *jihad* (fighting in the way of God), has been ordained to fight against deviation, and not as a means to gain power. In fact, jihad is to resist against oppression: “*And fight in the Way of Allah [against] those who fight you, but do not Exceed the limits; for verily, Allah Does not like the transgressors.*”⁵

In the Qur'an, the barriers in causing jihad have been mentioned in verse 24 of the chapter *al-Tawbah*:

Say, ‘If your fathers and your sons, your brethren, your spouses, and your kinsfolk, the possessions that you have acquired, the business you fear may suffer, and the dwellings you are fond of, are dearer to you than Allah and His Apostle and to waging jihād in His way, then wait until Allah issues His edict, and Allah does not guide the transgressing lot.

Imam Husayn was cut off from all worldly attachments, and his jihad was purely for the sake of God. The result of this jihad as mentioned in the Qur'an is ‘*a great victory.*’

Protecting one's honour and rejecting lowliness

Honour is one of the most fundamental values in Islam. It is a person's honour that makes him strong and unbreakable. If a person becomes honourable by means of God's honour, then he would be impenetrable when facing falsehood and sins, and strong and unwavering on his journey to the truth. Imam Husayn is the founder of a school of thought that instructs a person to struggle until death when striving for Godly aims; on this path, death is an honour and the means for a successful everlasting

⁵ Baqarah 2:190

life. Before the event of Karbala, the Imam said, “To die with honour is better than to live with inferiority.” On the day of Ashura, he said, “This immoral man (‘Ubaydallah ibn Ziyad) has forced me to choose either losing my life or losing my honour. It is impossible for us to accept losing our honour (هيهات منا الذله).” Indeed, this uprising was an example of fighting for the truth and for freedom.

Establishment of the truth

Another aim behind the uprising of Ashura was to improve the social situation of the Muslims and to establish justice and equality. In some verses, the establishment of these two notions has been presented as the aim of sending prophets:

*Indeed We sent Our Messengers with Signs and Miracles and revealed to them Books of Religion and gave them The Criterion for establishing justice among the people. And We provided Iron wherein is strength to be used in Making arms for the war and also there Are other benefits in it for the people. And Allah makes known those who help Allah, the Unseen and also His Messengers in the Path of the Truth. Verily, Allah is the Invincible Supreme power.*⁶

Carrying out justice in society is so important that the Prophet said, “A kingdom can remain with disbelief but it will not remain with oppression.” Therefore, a society under a just government will remain. The Prophet also said, “The lowest of people in the eyes of God is the one who reaches the position of ruling over the Muslims but does not establish justice in them.”

At the end of Imam Husayn’s letter to the people of Kufa, he explains the characteristics of a leader and guide:

⁶ Hadeed 57:25

An Imam is someone who acts according to the Qur'an. He stands up to ensure that everyone receives his or her due right, that racism is non-existent, and that every individual should have his own position and responsibility in society. He should not deviate from the right path, and this should all be done for the pleasure of God.

Overall, Imam Husayn's take on justice is in fact a reflection of Qur'anic teachings; justice is the soul of a society and a nation can only stand firm if justice flows in its every corner. The mission of separating the truth from falsehood and justice from oppression has always been a great undertaking, and Imam Husayn's uprising was a complete manifestation of this crucial Godly mission.

