

# **'Ashura - Misrepresentations and Distortions, Part 1**

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This is the first part of a translation of a series of four sermons delivered by the author during the month of Muharram of 1389 H. (March 1969) on the topic of the meaning and significance of 'Ashura and the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (a) at Karbala. The Persian appeared under the title Hamaseh-ye Husayni (Tehran: Intisharat-e Sadra, 2nd impression, 1362 H). Link to the second part, sermons three and four: <http://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol13-no4/ashura-misrepresentations-di...> [4]

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# First Sermon: 'Ashura – History and Popular Legend

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

All Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the worlds and the Maker of all creation, and may Peace and benedictions be upon His servant and messenger, His beloved and elect, our master, our prophet, and our sire, Abul Qasim Muhammad, may Allah bless him and his pure, immaculate, and infallible Progeny.

I seek the refuge of Allah from the accursed Satan

**“So for their breaking their compact We cursed them and made their hearts hard; they would pervert the words from their meanings. And they forgot a portion of what they were reminded of.”**

(5:13)

Our discussion here concerns the misrepresentations (*tahrifat*) relating to the historic event of *Karbala*<sup>1</sup>. There have occurred various kinds of distortions in recounting the details of this great event. We shall carry out this discussion in four parts.

The first will deal with the meaning of *tahrif* and its various existing forms, while pointing out that such misrepresentations have occurred in the [popular] accounts of the historic episode of '*Ashura*'.

The second part deals with the general factors responsible for *tahrif*, that is, the causes which commonly lead to the distortion of events and issues in the world. Why do men misrepresent and distort events, issues, and, occasionally, personalities?

In particular, what factors have played a distorting role in the narrative of the episode of *Karbala*'? The third part consists of an explanation concerning the distortions that have crept into the narratives of this historic event. The fourth part deals with ours and our scholars' duty and the Muslim masses, in this regard.

The first part of this discussion is about the meaning of *tahrif*: What does *tahrif* mean? The Arabic word *tahrif* is derived from *harrafa* meaning, to slant, incline, alter, distort, misconstrue which means to make something depart from its original or proper course and position. In other words, *tahrif* is a kind of change and alteration, though it includes a sense not possessed by mere change and alteration.

If you do something that prevents a sentence, message, verse, or passage from conveying the meaning that it ought to convey and gives it some other sense, you have subjected it to *tahrif*. For instance, you make a statement before someone. Elsewhere he quotes you, and later on you are told that so-and-so has reported that you have made such a statement.

You find out that what you had said was very different from what he has reported. He has interpolated your statement, deleting words which conveyed your intent and adding others on his own account, with the result that your statements have been distorted and totally altered. Then you would say that this person has misrepresented your statements especially, if someone tampers with an official document, he is said to be guilty of causing *tahrif* in it.

These examples were meant to elucidate the meaning of the term *tahrif*, and it does not need any further explanation or clarification. Now we shall take up the different forms of *tahrif*.

There are various kinds of *tahrif*, the most important of which are *tahrif* in words and *tahrif* of meaning. *Tahrif* of wording occurs when the literal form of a statement is changed. For instance, when words and phrases are deleted or added to a statement or the sequence of sentences is altered in such a manner

as to change its meaning. In this case *tahrif* occurs in the outward form and wording of a statement

*Tahrif* of meaning occurs when one does not change the words, which remain in their original form, but the statement is interpreted in a manner that is contrary to the intent of its speaker. It is interpreted in such a manner as to express one's own intent, not that of its author.

The Noble Qur'an employs the term *tahrif* specifically in relation to the Jews. A study of history shows that they have been the champions of *tahrif* throughout the course of history. I don't know what kind of race this is that has such an amazing penchant for misrepresenting facts! Accordingly they always take up professions in which they can distort and misrepresent events.

From what I have heard, the world's well-known news agencies, which are perpetually quoted by the radios and newspapers, are exclusively in the hands of the Jews. Why? Because they can report the events as they wish. How amazing is the Qur'an's statement about them! This characteristic of the Jews, the tendency for *tahrif*, is considered a racial trait by the Qur'an. In one of the verses of the Sura al-baqarah, the Qur'an declares:

***“Are you then eager that they (i.e. the Jews) should believe in you, while a party of them had heard Allah's word, and then consciously misinterpreted it, after they had understood it, and did that knowingly?”*** (2:75) [1](#)

This means, 'O Muslims, have you pinned your hopes on their telling you the truth? They are the same people who would go along with Moses, and hear God's pronouncements. But by the time they returned to their people's midst to recount what they had heard, they would twist it out of shape.' The *tahrif* that they would carry out was not for the reason that they did not understand and so altered what they reported.

No! They are an intelligent people and they understand matters the issues very well. But despite the fact that they understand what they have heard they would recount them in a distorted manner for the people. This is what *tahrif* is, that is, distorting and twisting things out of their original shape—and they carried out *tahrif* even in Divine scriptures!

In this context, in most of the cases the Qur'an uses the very term *tahrif* or expresses the matter in some other manner. However, the exegetes have pointed out that the Qur'anic reference to *tahrif* in this context includes *tahrif* in wording as well as in meaning.

That is, some of the instances of corruption that have occurred [in the scriptures at the hands of the Jews] relating to the wording and some of them relate to the meanings and interpretation. As this involves a digression from my main topic, I do not wish to discuss this matter any further.

There is a story which would not out of place here. One of the scholars used to recount that once during the day of his youth a *maddah*[2](#) from Tehran was visiting Mashhad. During the day he would stand in the

Gawharshad Mosque or in the courtyard of the shrine and recite verses and eulogies. Among things that he recited was the famous ghazal ascribed to Hafiz:

O heart! Be slave of the world's King and rejoice!

Forever dwell in the shelter of God's grace!

Embrace the tomb of Rida, the Eighth Imam,

From the heart's depth, and cling to the threshold of his shrine (*bargah*).

This gentleman, in order to have some fun with him, had approached him and said to him, "Why do you recite this verse wrongly? It should be read like this, which means; as soon as you reach the shrine you must throw yourself down in the manner a bundle of straw (*barekah*) is rolled off the back of an ass. Thereafter, whenever the poor *maddah* recited these verses, he would say bar-e kah instead of bargah and at the same time throw himself down on the ground! This is what *tahrif* does!

Here I must point out that *tahrif* also differs in respect of the subject involved. There is a time when *tahrif* occurs in an ordinary speech, as when two persons misrepresent each other's words. But there are times when *tahrif* takes place in a matter of great significance to society, such as when there is misrepresentation of eminent personalities.

There are personalities whose words and deeds represent a sacred authority for the people and whose character and conduct is a model for mankind. For instance, if someone were to ascribe to Imam 'Ali (a) a statement that he did not make or something that he had not meant to say, that is very dangerous.

The same is true if a characteristic or trait is ascribed to the Prophet (S) or one of the Imams (a) when in fact they had some other qualities, or when *tahrif* occurs in a great historic event which serves as a moral and religious authority and as a momentous document from the viewpoint of society's norms and is a criterion in matters of morality and education. It is a matter of incalculable importance and entails a crucial danger when *tahrif*—whether in respect of words or meaning—occurs in subjects which are not of the ordinary kind.

There is a time when someone tampers with a verse of Hafiz or makes interpolations in an animal fable. This is not so important, though, of course one should not tamper with books of literary value.

One professor wrote a paper about *Mush-o gorbeh* ("The Cat and the Mouse"), which is a book of considerable literary value. He had found that it had been victim of so many interpolations, changes of wording, addition and deletion of verses, as to be beyond reckoning. There, he remarks that in his opinion no nation in the whole world is so untrustworthy as the Iranians who have made such extensive unauthorized interpolations in works belonging to their literary heritage.

The same is true of *Rumi's Mathnavi*. God knows how many verses have been appended to the

*Mathnawi*! For instance, there is a fine couplet in the original versions of the *Mathnawi* about the power of love. It says:

Love sweetens matters bitter,

Love turns bronzes into gold.

That is a sensible thing to say: love is something that turns even the bitter aspects of life into ones that are sweet and pleasant. Love, like an elixir, transforms the bronze of man's being into gold. Then others came and added verses to this one, without bothering for pertinence or aptness in respect of analogy. For instance, they said: 'Love turns a serpent into an ant,' or that 'love turns the roof into a wall,' or 'love turns a musk-melon into a water-melon!'

These analogies have no relation at all to the theme. Of course such a thing should not happen, but these interpolations do not harm a society's life and felicity and do not cause deviance in its course. But when *tahrif* occurs in things that relate to the people's morality and religion, it is dangerous, and this danger is incalculable when it occurs in documents and matters that constitute the foundations of human life.

The event of *Karbala*' is, inevitably, an event possessing great social meaning for us, and it has a direct impact on our morality and character.

It is an event that prompts our people, without anyone compelling them, to devote millions of man-hours to listening to the related episodes and to spend millions of dollars for this purpose. This event must be retold exactly as it occurred and without the least amount of interpolation. For if the smallest amount of interpolation takes place at our hands in this event, that would distort it, and instead of benefiting from it we would definitely suffer harm.

Now my point is that we have introduced thousands of distortions in retelling the narrative of *Ashura*, both in its outward form, that is, in respect of the very episodes and issues relating to the major events and the minor details, as well as in respect of their interpretation and meaning. Most regrettably, this event has been distorted both in its form and content.

At times a distorted version has at least some resemblance to the original. But there are times when distortion is so thorough that the corrupted version has not the least resemblance to the original: the matter is not only distorted, but it is inverted and turned into its antithesis.

Again I must say with utmost regret that the misrepresentations that have been carried out by us have all been in the direction of degrading and distorting the event and making it ineffective and inert in our lives. In this regard both the orators and scholars of the *ummah* as well as the people have been guilty, and, God willing, we will elucidate all these matters.

Here I will cite examples of some of the distortions that have occurred in the outer form of this event and

the concoctions that have grown around it. The topic is so vast as to be beyond expression. It is so vast that should we attempt to collect all the unfounded narratives it will perhaps take several volumes of 500 pages each.

*Marhum* Hajji Mirza Husayn Nuri, may God elevate his station, was the teacher of such figures as marhum Hajj Shaykh 'Abbas Qummi, *marhum* Haji Shaykh 'Ali Akbar Nehawandi and *marhum* Hajj Shaykh Muhammad Baqir Birjandi. He was a very extraordinary man and a *muhaddith* (scholar of *hadith*) with an unparalleled command of his field and a prodigious memory. He was a man of fine spirituality with a highly fervent and passionate faith.

Although some of the books that he wrote were not worthy of his station<sup>3</sup> –and for this reason he earned the reproach of his contemporary scholars – but in general his books are good, especially the one that he wrote on the topic of the *minbar* (pulpit), entitled *Lu'lu' wa marjan*. Though a small book, it is an excellent work in which he speaks about the duties of those who deliver sermons and recount for the mourners the narrative of *Karbala'* from the minbar. The entire book consists of two parts.

One part is about the sincerity of intention and purpose, as one of the requirements for a speaker, orator, sermonizer, and *rawdah-khwan*<sup>4</sup> is that the motive of someone who relates the narrative of '*Ashura'* should not be greed or attainment of pecuniary gain. How well he has discussed this topic!

The second requirement is honesty and truthfulness. Here, he elaborates on the topic of false and true narration, discussing various forms of lying in such a thorough-going manner that I do not think there is any other book which deals with lying and its various forms in the way that it does, and perhaps there is no such other book in the whole world. In it he exhibits a marvelous learning and scholarship.

In this book, that great man mentions several examples of falsehoods that have become prevalent in narratives of the historic event of *Karbala'*. Those which I will mention are all or mostly the same things that the marhum haji Nuri has lamented about.

This great man even says explicitly, “Today too we must mourn Husayn, but there are tragedies which have befallen Husayn in our era which did not occur in the past, and they are all these falsehoods that are said regarding the event of *Karbala'* and which no one opposes!

One must shed tears for the sufferings of Husayn ibn 'Ali, not for the sake of the swords and spears that struck his noble body on that day, but on account of these falsehoods.” In the book's introduction he writes that an eminent scholar from India had written him a letter complaining about the false narratives that are recited in India, and asking him to do something or to write a book to stop the fictitious narratives that were current there.

Then he remarks: “This Indian scholar has imagined that the *rawdakhwans* tell false stories when they go to India. He does not know that the stream is polluted from its very source. The centre of false *rawdahs* are *Karbala'*, *Najaf* and *Iran*, that is, the very centre of Shi'ism.”

Now as a sample, I will cite some instances of *tahrif*, of which a few relate to the events that occurred before 'Ashura', some that occurred during the Imam's way, some during the days of his final halt at *Karbala'* in the month of Muharram.

I will also mention some of them that relate to the days of his family's captivity and some about the Imams who lived after the event of *Karbala'*. However, most of them will relate to the day of 'Ashura' itself. Now I will give two examples of each of them.

It is essential to mention a point at first, and that is that the people are responsible in all these cases. You folks who attend the majalis sessions imagine that you have no responsibility in this regard, and think that it is only the speakers who are responsible. The people have two major responsibilities.

The first is that of *nahy 'anil-munkar* (forbidding what is wrong) which is obligatory for all. When they find out and know—and most of the time they do know!—that a narrative is untrue, they should not sit in that gathering. It is forbidden to sit in such gatherings and one must protest against them.

Secondly, they must try to get rid of the eagerness and expectation which the hosts as well as the audience attending the majalis have for the majlis to become fervid, that there should be impassioned mourning and the majlis should get feverish with cries of the mourners. The poor speaker knows that if he were to say only things that are true and authentic, the majlis would not get into a frenzy and the same people will not invite him again. Hence he is compelled to add something.

The people should get this expectation out of their heads and refrain from encouraging the kind of fictitious narratives which kill the soul of *Karbala* but work up the mourners into a frenzy. The people should hear the true narrative so that their understanding and level of thinking is elevated.

They should know that if a sentence creates a tremor in one's souls and attunes it with the spirit of Husayn ibn 'Ali and, as a result, one small tear were to come out of one's eyes, it is really a precious station. But tears drawn by the scenes of mere butchery, even if a deluge, are worthless.

They say that in one of the towns there was an eminent scholar who had some concern for the faith and who protested against these falsehoods which are uttered from the minbar. He would say, "What are these abominable things that they say on the minbar?" One wa'iz said to him, "If we don't say these things we will have to shut down our shops right away!" That gentleman replied, "These are mendacities and one must not utter them."

By chance, some days later this gentleman himself happened to host a majlis in his mosque and he invited the same wa'iz; to make the rawdah. But before his taking his seat on the minbar the host said to the wa'iz, "I want to hold a model majlis in which nothing is said except the true narrative. Make it a point not to recount any episode except out of the reliable books.

You shouldn't touch any of that abominable stuff!" The wa'iz replied, "The majlis is hosted by you. Your

will, will be done.” On the first night, the gentleman himself sat there facing the qiblah in the prayer niche, close to the minbar. The wai'z; began his sermon, and when the time came to recite the tragic narrative, as he had committed himself to recite nothing but the true accounts, the majlis remained unmoved and frozen as he spoke on.

The gentleman was now upset. He was the host of the majlis and he thought about what the people would say behind his back. The women would certainly say, “To be sure, the Aqa's intent was not sincere, and so the majlis was a fiasco.

Had his intentions been good and were his motives sincere the majlis would have been rocked with the howls and-groans of mourners crying their eyes out. He saw that it would all end up in a loss of face. What should he do? Quietly, he signaled to the wai'z, “Get a bit of that abominable stuff!”

The expectation of the people that the majlis should go wild with mourning is itself a source of falsehoods. Accordingly, most of the fabrications that have occurred have been for the purpose of drawing tears, nothing else.

I have heard this story repeatedly, and you too must have heard it. Hajji Nuri also mentions it. They say that one day 'Ali, the Commander of the Faithful, may Peace be upon him, was delivering a sermon from the *minbar*. Suddenly Imam Husayn (‘a) said, 'I am thirsty, Imam 'Ali said, 'Let someone bring water for my son.' The first person to get up was a little boy, Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas (‘a). He went out and got a jar of water from his mother.

When he returned carrying the jar on his head, his head was drenched in water as it spilled from the sides. This story is narrated in its elaborate detail. Then, when the Commander of the Faithful's eyes fell on this scene, tears flowed from his eyes. He was asked why he was crying. He told them that the ordeals that this young son of his would face had come to his mind.

You know the rest of the story, which serves the purpose of a point of departure for switching to the tragic scenes of *Karbala*<sup>1</sup>. Hajji Nuri has an excellent discussion at this point. He writes, “Now that you say that 'Ali was delivering a sermon from the *minbar*, you should know that 'Ali spoke from the *minbar* and delivered sermons only during the period of his caliphate.

Hence, the episode must have occurred in Kufah. At that time Imam Husayn was a man of about thirty-three years.” Then he remarks, “Is it at all a sensible thing for a man of thirty-three years to say all of a sudden, in a formal gathering while his father is delivering a sermon, 'I am thirsty!' 'I want water!’”

If an ordinary man does such a thing, it would be considered ill-mannered of him. Moreover, Hadrat Abu al-Fadl, too, was not a child at that time but a young man of at least fifteen years.” You see how they have fabricated the story! Is such a story worthy of Imam Husayn? Aside from its fictitious character, what value does it have?

Does it elevate the station of Imam Husayn or does it detract from it? It is definitely detracting to the dignity of the Imam, as it ascribes a false act to the Imam and detracts from his station by bringing the Imam down to the level of a most ill-mannered person who, at a time when his father – a man like 'Ali – is delivering a sermon, feels thirsty and instead of waiting for the session to be over, suddenly interrupts his father's sermon to ask for water.'

Another example of such fabrications is the story of a messenger who has brought a letter for Abu 'Abd Allah (a) and he awaits a reply. The Imam tells him to come after three days and collect the reply. After three days on inquiring he is told that the Imam was departing the same day.

He says to himself, "Now that he is setting out, let us go and watch the majesty and glamour of the prince of the Hijaz. He goes and there he sees the Imam, together with other Hashimis among men, seated on splendid chairs. Then the camels are brought bearing the litters draped in silk and brocade.

Then the ladies emerge and with much honor and ceremony they are escorted into these litters. This description continues in this vein until they make the digression to switch to the scene of the eleventh day of Muharram, to compare the glamour and honor of this day with the sorry state of the womenfolk on the latter day. Haji Nuri calls such descriptions into question. He says, "It is history which says that when Imam Husayn left Madinah he recited this Qur'anic verse:

***"He left it in the state of fear and concern".*** (28:21)

That is, he likened his own departure to that of Moses, son of 'Imran, when he fled for the fear of the Pharaoh.

***"He said, "It might be that my Lord will guide me to the right path.""***(28:22)

The Imam had departed with a most simple caravan. Does the greatness of Imam Husayn lie in his sitting, for instance, on golden chairs? Or does the greatness of his family and womenfolk lie in their using litters draped in silk and brocade, or their possessing fine horses and camels and a retinue of lackeys and servants?!

Another example of *tahrif* in the accounts of 'Ashura' is the famous story of Layla, the mother of Hadrat 'Ali' Akbar, a story that is not supported even by a single work of history. Of course, 'Ali' Akbar had a mother whose name was Layla, but not a single historical work has stated that Layla was present at *Karbala'*. But you see how many pathetic tales there are about Layla and 'Ali' Akbar, including the story of Layla's arrival at 'Ali Akbar's side at the time of his martyrdom.

I have heard this story even in Qum, in a majlis that had been held on behalf of Ayatullah Burujerdi, though he himself was not attending. In this tale, as 'Ali Akbar leaves for the battlefield the Imam says to Layla, "I have heard from my grandfather that God answers a mother's prayer for the sake of her child. Go into a solitary tent, unfurl your locks and pray for your son. It may be that God will bring our son safe

back to us.”

First of all, there was no Layla in *Karbala*<sup>1</sup> to have done that. Secondly, this was not Husayn's logic and way of thinking. Husayn's logic on the day of 'Ashara' was the logic of self-sacrifice. All historians have written that whenever anyone asked the Imam for the leave to go to battlefield, the Imam would at first try to restrain him with some excuse or another that he could think of, excepting the case of 'Ali' Akbar about whom they write:

Thereat he asked his father's permission to go forth to fight, and he gave him the permission.<sup>6</sup>

That is, as soon as 'Ali Akbar asked for permission, the Imam told him to depart. Nevertheless, there is no dearth of verses which depict the episode in quite a different light, including this one:

Rise, O father, let us leave this wilderness,

Let us go now to Layla's tent.

Another case relating to the same story, which is also very amazing, is the one that I heard in Tehran. It was in the house of one of the eminent scholars of this city where one of the speakers narrated the story of Layla. It was something which I had never heard in my life.

According to his narrative, after Layla went into the tent, she opened the locks of her hair and vowed that if God were to bring 'Ali Akbar back safely to her and should he not be killed in *Karbala*<sup>1</sup> she would sow basil (*rayhan*) all along the way from *Karbala*<sup>1</sup> to Madinah, a distance of 300 parasangs. Having said this, he began to sing out this couplet:

I have made a vow, were they to return

I will sow basil all the way to Taft!

This Arabic couplet caused me greater surprise as to where it came from. On investigating I found that the Taft mentioned in it is not *Karbala*<sup>1</sup> but a place related to the famous love legend of Layla and Majnun. Taft was the place where the legendary Layla live. This couplet was composed by Majnun al-'Amiri and sung for the love of Layla, and here this man was reciting it while attributing it to Layla, the mother of 'Ali Akbar, conjuring a fictitious connection with *Karbala*<sup>1</sup>.

Just imagine, were a Christian or a Jew, or for that matter some person with no religious affiliation, were to be there and hear these things, will he not say what a nonsensical hagiography these people have? He would not know that this tale has been fabricated by that man, but he would say, *na'udubillah*, how senseless were the women saints of this people to vow sowing basil from *Karbala*<sup>1</sup> to Madinah!

A worse fabrication is the one mentioned by Hajji Nuri. As you know, in the heat of the battle on the day of 'Ashura', the Imam offered his prayers hurriedly in the form of *salat al-khawf*<sup>7</sup> and there was no

respite even to offer full prayers. In fact, two of the companions of the Imam came to stand in front of him to shield the Imam (against the arrows) so that he may offer two rak'ahs of the *salat al-khawf*.

The two of them fell from the injuries inflicted under the shower of the arrows. The enemy would not even give respite for offering prayers. Nevertheless, they have concocted a story that the Imam called for a wedding ceremony on this day, declaring, 'It is my wish to see one of my daughter wedded to Qasim.' Obviously, one cannot take one's wishes to one's grave.

By God, see what kind of things they have attributed to a man like Husayn ibn 'Ali, things the like of which we sometimes hear from persons of a very mediocre character, who express a wish to see the wedding of their son or daughter in their life. And this is said to have occurred at a time when there was hardly any respite even for offering prayers.

They say that the Hadrat said, 'I want to wed my daughter to my nephew here and now, even if it is just an appearance of a wedding.' One of the things that was an inseparable part of our traditional *ta'ziyahs* was the wedding of Qasim, the boy bridegroom.

Such an episode is not mentioned in any reliable book of history. According to Hajji Nuri, Mulla Husayn Kashifi was the first man to write this story in a book named *Rawdat al-shuhada'* and it is totally fictitious. The case here is similar to the one about which the poet says:

Many are the appendages that they have clapped upon it,

You will hardly recognize it when you see it again.

Were the Sayyid al-Shuhada' to come and observe these things (and, of course, he does from the world of the spirit, but were he come into the world of appearance) he will find that we have carved out for him companions that he never had.

For instance, in the book *Muhriq al-qulub* – whose author was, incidentally, an eminent scholar and jurist, but who had no knowledge of these matters – that one of the companions to appear out of nowhere on the day of 'Ashura' was Hashim Mirqal, who came bearing an eighteen cubits long spear in his hand.

(After all someone had claimed that Sinan ibn Anas – who according to some reports severed the head of Imam Husayn – had a spear sixty cubits long. He was told that a spear could not be sixty cubits. He replied that God had sent it for him from the heaven!) *Muhriq al-qulub* writes that Hashim ibn 'Utbah Mirqal appeared with a spear sixteen cubits long, whereas this Hashim ibn 'Utbah was a companion of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali and had been killed twenty years earlier.

We have attributed several companions to Husayn ibn 'Ali that he did not have, such as the Za'far the Jinn. Similarly, there are some names among the enemies that did not exist. It is mentioned in the book *Asrar al-shahadah* that 'Umar ibn Sa'd's army in *Karbala'* consisted of one million and sixty thousand

men. One may ask, where did they come from? Were they all Kufans? Is such a thing possible?

It is also written in that book that Imam Husayn himself personally killed three hundred thousand men in combat. The bomb that destroyed Hiroshima killed sixty thousand people. I calculated that if we assume that a swordsman kills one man every second, it would take eighty-three hours and twenty minutes to massacre a force of three hundred thousand.

Later, when they saw that this number of those felled by the Imam did not fit with a day's duration, they said that the day of *'Ashura* was also seventy-two hours long!

Similar things are said concerning Hadrat Abu al-Fadl, that he killed twenty-five thousand men. I calculated that if one man were killed per second, it would require six days and fifty and odd hours to kill that many.

Therefore, we have to admit what Hajji Nuri, this great man, says, that if one wanted to mourn the Imam today and narrate the ordeals of Abu 'Abd Allah, may Peace be upon him, one should lament over these new tragedies, over these falsehoods, which have been incorporated in the accounts of his martyrdom.

Another example relates to the day of *'Arba'in*. At the time of *'Arba'in* everyone relates the narrative that leads the people to imagine that the captives of the Imam's family arrived at *Karbala'* on the day of *'Arba'in*, and that Imam Zayn al-'Abidin met Jabir (ibn 'Abd Allah al-Ansari) there. However, excepting the *Luhuf*, whose author is Sayyid ibn Tawus and who has denied it in his other books, or at least has not confirmed it, such an episode is not mentioned in any other book, nor does it seem very reasonable to believe it.

But is it possible to expunge these stories, which are repeated every year, from the people's minds? Jabir was the first visitor to Imam Husayn's grave, and the significance of *'Arba'in* is also nothing except that it is the occasion for the *ziyarah* of Imam Husayn's tomb.

It is not for the renewal of mourning for the Ahl al-Bayt, nor on account of their arrival in *Karbala'*. Basically, the road to Madinah from Syria is not through *Karbala'* and the two ways diverge from Syria itself.

What is more painful is that, incidentally, there are few events in history that are as rich as the event of *Karbala'* from the viewpoint of reliable sources. Formerly I used to imagine that the basic reason for the proliferation of legends in this field is that the actual events are not known to anybody. But when I studied I found that no event of remote past—for instance of a period thirteen or fourteen centuries ago—has as reliable an history as the event of *Karbala'*.

Reliable Muslim historians have reported the pertinent episodes with trustworthy chains of transmission from the first/seventh and the second/eighth centuries, and their narrations are close and corroborate one another.

There were certain reasons which were responsible for the preservation of these details in history. One of them, which caused the details of this event to be preserved and its objectives to remain clear, were the many speeches (*khutbahs*) that were delivered during its course. In those days, an oration was what communiqués and press releases are in our era.

In the same way that official communiqués issued during wartime are the best historical source, so were orations in these days. Accordingly, there were many of them before the event of *Karbala'*, during, and after it. Individuals from among the Prophet's household made orations in Kufah, Damascus and other places.

Basically, their aim by delivering these orations was to inform the people about the episodes as well as to declare the truth of the matter and to spell out the goals. This was itself one of the reason for the events to be reported.

There were also many exchanges, questions and answers, in the event of *Karbala'* and these are recorded in history. They too disclose for us the nature of the occurrences.

*Rajaz* poetry<sup>8</sup> was also recited a lot during *Karbala'*, and, in particular Abu 'Abd Allah ('*a*) himself recited much *rajaz*, and these *rajaz* verses also reveal the character of the confrontation.

There were many letters that were exchanged before and after the episode of *Karbala'*, letters that were exchanged between the Imam and the people of Kufah, between the Imam and the people of Basrah, the letters that the Imam wrote earlier to Mu'awiyah (which indicate that the Imam was preparing for an uprising after Mu'awiyah's death), the letters that the enemies wrote to one another, Yazid to Ibn Ziyad, Ibn Ziyad to Yazid, Ibn Ziyad to 'Umar ibn Sa'd, 'Umar ibn Sa'd to Ibn Ziyad, whose texts are all recorded in the history of Islam.

Hence the developments relating to *Karbala'* are quite clear and all of them are throughout a matter of great honor and pride. But we have disfigured this shining historic event to such an extent and have committed such a monstrous treachery towards Imam Husayn ('*a*) that if he were to come and see, he will say, 'You have changed the entire face of the event.

I am not the Imam Husayn that you have sketched out in your own imagination. The Qasim ibn Hasan that you have painted in your fancy is not my nephew. The 'Ali Akbar that you have faked in your imagination is not my aware and intelligent son. The companions that you have carved out are not my companions.”

We have fabricated a Qasim whose only desire is to become a bridegroom and whose uncle's wish, too, is to have him wedded. Contrast this one with the historical Qasim. Reliable histories report that on the night of '*Ashura'* the Imam ('*a*) gathered his companions in a tent whose location, as described by the phrase '*inda qurbil-ma'*,<sup>9</sup> was the place where water used to be kept, or near it.

There he delivered that very well-known sermon of the night preceding '*Ashura*'. I do not want to mention its details here, but, to put it briefly, in this sermon the Imam told them that every one of them was free to depart and leave him to confront the enemy alone.

The Imam did not want anybody to stay just for considerations of courtesy or to remain out of compulsion, or even to think that they were obliged to do so by virtue of the allegiance (*bay'ah*) they had given him.

Hence he tells them, "You are all free, my companions, members of my family, my sons, and my nephews—everyone—to leave without being liable to anything. They [i.e. the enemy's forces] have nothing against anyone except me. The night is dark.

Take advantage of the darkness of the night and depart. They will definitely not stop you." At first, he expresses his appreciation for them and tells them, I am most pleased with you. I do not know of any companions better than mine, and no better relatives than the members of my family."

But all of them tell him, in unison, that such a thing was impossible. What answer will they give to the Prophet on the Day of Resurrection? What will happen to loyalty, to humanity, to love and attachment? Their ardent responses and their words said on that occasion melt a heart of stone and are most moving.

One of them says, "Is one life worth enough to be sacrificed for someone like you? I wish that I were brought to life seventy times to die seventy times for your sake." Another says, "I would lay down a thousand lives for your sake if I had them." Another says, "If I were to sacrifice my life for you and my body were burnt to ashes and the ashes were cast to wind, and were this done a hundred times, I would still love to die for your sake."

The first to speak was his brother Abu al-Fadl, and then the Imam changed the subject and told them about the events of the next day, informing them that they all would be killed. All of them receive it as great good news.

Now this young man – to whom we are so unjust and think that all that he cherished in his heart was the wish to become a bridegroom – puts a question to the Imam. In reality he expresses his real wish. When a group of elderly men gather in an assembly, a boy of thirteen does not sit in their midst, but reverently stays behind them.

It appears that this youth was sitting behind the Imam's elderly companions and was keen to hear what others said. When the Imam told them that they would all be killed on the next day, this child wondered if he too would be one of them. He thought to himself, after all I am only a boy. Perhaps the Imam means that only the elderly would be martyred. I am just a minor." Therefore, he turned to the Imam and asked him:

Will I be among those who will be killed?

Look! See what his wish and aspiration are! The Imam says to him, “Qasim, first let me ask you a question. I will reply after you have answered me.” I think the Imam purposefully put this question. With this question he wanted to show to posterity that they shouldn't think that this youth gave his life without awareness and understanding, that they should not imagine that what he cherished was a wish to become bridegroom, that they should not conjure up a wedding for him and be guilty of the crime of distorting his fine character. So the Imam said, “First, I will ask you a question”:

That is, “My child, my nephew, tell me, how do you regard death and what do you think about getting killed?’ He promptly answered.

“It is sweeter to me than honey!”

That is, “I haven't a desire that should be dearer and sweeter to me!” This is an astounding scene. These are the things that have made this a great and historic event – and we should keep it alive! For there will not be another Husayn, nor another Qasim ibn Hasan.

These are the things that make us give so much value to this event, and if after fourteen centuries we build such a *husayniyyah* as this [10](#) in their memory and in their name, we have done nothing. Or else the wish to become bridegroom does not oblige one to put in one's time and money, to build *husayniyyahs* or to deliver sermons. But they were the very essence of humanity, the very concrete instances of the Divine purpose as stated in the verse:

**“Surely I will make a vicegerent in the earth” (2:30)**

And they stood above the angels.

After getting this answer, the Imam said to him, “My nephew, you too will be killed. But your death will be different from that of others

*And (it will be) after you have faced a great ordeal.*

Accordingly, when Qasim, after much insistence, received the permission to leave for the battlefield, being very young, there was no armour that was fit for his years, nor a helmet nor shoes, nor arms. It is written that he wore a turban (*ammamah*) and this description is given of his appearance:

He appeared like a piece of the moon. [11](#)

This boy was so handsome that when the enemies saw him they described him as a piece of the moon:

‘Where does the wind carry this petal of red rose?’ said whoever that saw you on your fleeting mount.

The narrator says: “I saw that the strap of one of his sandals was untied, and I do not forget that it was

his left foot” This shows that he was not wearing boots. They write that the Imam stood near the tents as he held his horse's reins. Evidently he was alert and ready. At once he heard a cry. It was Qasim: “*Ya 'ammah!*” (O Uncle!).

They write that the Imam flew on the horse like a hunting falcon. As he arrived by the side of this youth, about two hundred men had surrounded this child. They fled as the Imam attacked, and one of the enemy's men who had dismounted to sever Qasim's head was himself trampled under the hoofs of the horses of his fleeing comrades.

The one who is said to have been trampled to death under the hoofs of the horses was one of the enemy's men, not Hadrat Qasim. In any case, when the Imam arrived at Qasim's side, there was so much dust and confusion that nobody could see what was happening; when the dust settled down, they saw the Imam sitting at Qasim's side with his head in his arms. They heard the Imam utter this sentence:

My nephew! By God, it is very hard on your uncle that you should call him and he should not be able to respond, or that he should respond without being able to do anything for you!<sup>12</sup>

It was at this moment that a cry came from this youth and his spirit departed towards its Creator.

O God, may our ultimate end be one that is of felicity. Make us aware of the realities of Islam! Remove from us our ignorance and nescience with Your grace and munificence. Give all of us the ability to act with sincere intentions. Fulfill our legitimate needs and forgive all our dead and pardon them.

<sup>1</sup> J. M Rodwell in his translation of the Qur'an (London: Everyman's Library, p 345) makes in a footnote the following remark under this verse:

“This is one of the passages which shows great familiarity with the habit of the Jews on the part of Muhammad.” [Tr.]

<sup>2</sup> The professional maddah, himself somewhat of a rawdeh khwan, though mostly without a cleric's training, is someone who recites elegies, verses and even delivers a rawdah in the majalis, the gatherings that are held for the sake of ceremonial mourning, before the rawdeh e khawn takes to the minbar.[Tr.]

<sup>3</sup> This is a reference to his controversial book *Fasl al-Khitab* in which he, contrary to the general belief of Shi'i Imami scholars through the course of history, raised doubts concerning the occurrence of tahrif (mainly the occurrence of deletions) in the Qur'an.[Tr.]

<sup>4</sup> The rawdeh-khawn, often a cleric is someone who delivers the rawdah, consisting of narratives relating in particular to the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, his family and companions, and in general to the ordeals of Ahl al-Bayt, the Prophet's family. *Wa'iz*, *Dhakhir*, *Minbari*, etc. are other names for the professional rawdeh-khwan.

<sup>5</sup> The verse pertains to the story of Moses at the time of his flight from Egypt: So he departed therefrom, fearful and vigilant; he said, 'My Lord, deliver me from the wrongdoers.' And when he turned his face towards Midian, he said, 'It may be that my Lord will guide me on the right way.' Quran, 28:21-22

<sup>6</sup> Ibn Tawus, *al-Luhuf*, p. 47

<sup>7</sup> The Shari'ah stipulates certain modifications in the obligatory salat, the daily ritual prayers, when offered in conditions of war and danger of the enemy's attack. The salat thus offered is referred to as *salat al-khawf*; (see the Quran, 4:101). [Tr.]

<sup>8</sup> It was a tradition among the Arab warriors to recite verses during combat and encounter with the enemy on the battlefield. *Rajaz* is the form of poetry composed of such purposes and occasions. [Tr.]

<sup>9</sup> *Bihar al-Anwar*, vol. 44 p. 392, *A'lam al-Wara*, p. 234, *al-Shaykh al-Mufid*, *Kitab al-Irshad*, p. 231, *al-Muqarrim*, *Maqatal*

al-Husayn, p. 257. Apparently, there was a tent where water-skins used to be kept and stored from the first days of the caravan's halt at Karbala'.

[10.](#) This is a reference to the Husayniyyeh-ye Irshad, in Tehran. Husayniyyah is a building which is at times also used as a mosque but is built mainly with the purpose of holding mourning ceremonies during the months of Muharram and Safar as well as other occasions relating to anniversaries of the martyrdom of the figures of the Ahl al-Bayt.

[11.](#) Ibn Shahr Ashub, al-Manaqib, iii, p. 106, see also A'lam al-Wara, p.242; al-Luhuf, 48; Bihar al-Anwar, vol 45 p. 35, al-Mufid's Kitab al Irshad, p. 239, al-Muqarrim's Maqatal al-Husayn, p. 331; and al-Tabari's Ta'rikh, vi, p. 256.

[12.](#) Ibn Shahr Ashub, al-Manaqib, iv, p. 107, A'lam al-Wara, p. 243; al-Luhuf, 38; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 45 p. 35, al-Mufid's Kitab al Irshad, p. 239, al-Muqarrim's Maqatal al-Husayn, p. 332; and al-Tabari's Ta'rikh, vi, p. 257.

## Second Sermon: 'Ashura - History and Popular Legend

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

All Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the worlds and the Maker of all creation, and may Peace and benedictions be upon His servant and messenger, His beloved and elect, our master, our prophet, and our sire, Abu al-Qasim Muhammad, may Allah bless him and his pure, immaculate, and infallible Progeny.

I seek the refuge of Allah from the accursed Satan:

***“So for their breaking their compact We cursed them and made their hearts hard; they would pervert the words from their meanings, and they forgot a portion of what they were reminded of.”***

(5:13)

We said that the event of 'Ashura' has been subject to *tahrif* and it has occurred both in its outward form as well as its inner content. A consequence of these distortions has been that this great historic document and this great educative source has become ineffectual or less potent, in our lives, leaving, at times, even an opposite effect.

All of us have the duty to purge it of the distortions that have polluted this sacred document. Tonight we will discuss the general factors responsible for *tahrif*. Thereafter our discussion will focus on *tahrif* in the content and significance of this event.

### The Factors of Tahrif

These factors are of two kinds, one of which is of a general nature. That is, there are in general certain factors that lead to the corruption of histories and these are not limited to the event of 'Ashura' alone. For instance, the enemy's motives are themselves a factor that distort an event. In order to achieve their

purposes, the enemies bring about alterations in historical texts or misinterpret them. There are many examples of it which I do not wish to mention here.

All that I would say is that this kind of *tahrif* did play a role in distorting the facts of *Karbala'*, and the enemies did take resort in misrepresenting the uprising of Imam Husayn. As usually happens, the enemies accuse sacred movements of causing conflict and division and of disrupting social harmony and peace. The Umayyad regime also made much effort to give such a hue to the Husayni uprising.

Such propaganda began from the very first day. When Muslim arrived in Kufah, Yazid, while sending an order appointing Ibn Ziyad to the governorship of Kufah, wrote: "Muslim, son of 'Aqil, has gone to Kufah and his aim is to disrupt peace and to create social discord and disunity in the Muslim community. Go and suppress him."

When Muslim was captured and brought to the *dar al-imarah*, the governor's residency, Ibn Ziyad said to Muslim: "Son of 'Aqil! What was it that brought you to this city? The people here lived in satisfaction and peace.

You came and disrupted their peace, causing disunity and conflict amongst Muslims." Muslim answered in a manly manner and said: "Firstly, I did not come to this city on my own account. It was the people of this city who invited us.

They wrote a great number of letters, which are in our possession. In those letters they wrote that your father, Ziyad, who ruled this city for years, had killed its virtuous men and imposed its scoundrels over the virtuous, subjecting them to various forms of tyranny and injustice. They appealed to us to help them establish justice. We have come to establish justice!"

The Umayyad regime did wage much propaganda of this kind, but their misrepresentations did not affect the history of Islam. You will not find a single competent historian in the world who might have said that Husayn ibn 'Ali, *naudhubillah*, made an unlawful uprising that he rose to cause conflict and disunity among the people. No.

The enemy could not bring about any misrepresentation in [the history of] the event of *Karbala'*. Most regrettably, whatever *tahrif* has occurred in the event of *Karbala'* has been at the hands of the friends.

## The Second Factor

The second factor is the human tendency towards myth-making and for turning facts into legends. This tendency has been at work in all the world's historical traditions. There is a tendency in men for hero worship which induces the people to fabricate myths and legends about national and religious heroes. [1](#)

The best evidence of it are the legends that the people have invented around the figures of some geniuses such as Ibn Sina and Shaykh Baha'i. Ibn Sina, undoubtedly, was a genius and was gifted with

extraordinary physical and intellectual powers. But these very gifts have led the people to weave out legends about him.

For instance, it is said that once Ibn Sina saw a man from a distance of one parasang and remarked that the man was eating bread made with oil. They asked him how he could know that the man was eating bread and that it was made with oil.

He replied that he saw flies circling the bread, which had made him conclude that there was oil in the bread. Obviously, this is a legend. Someone who can see flies from the distance of one parasang will see bread made with oil much sooner than he would see flies!

Or it is said that once during the time that Ibn Sina was studying at Isfahan he complained that when he gets up in the middle of the night to study, he was disturbed by the noise of the hammering of the coppersmiths of Kashan.

They went and made a test. One night they told the coppersmiths of Kashan not to use their hammers. That night, said Ibn Sina, he had slept peacefully and was undisturbed in his study. Obviously this is a legend.

Many such legends have been made about Shaykh Bahi'i as well. Such things are not confined to the event of *'Ashura*. However, let the people say what they would about Ibn Sina. What harm does it do?

None! But in respect of individuals who are guides of mankind and whose words and deeds and whose stands and uprisings serve as a model and authority, there should not be any *tahrif* whatsoever in their statements, in their personality, and history.

How many legends have been fabricated by us Shi'is about Amir al Mu'minin 'Ali, many Peace be upon him! There is no doubt that 'Ali (*'a*) was an extraordinary man. No one has doubts about 'Ali's courage which was superior to that of any ordinary human being. 'Ali did not encounter any contestant in battle without felling him to the ground.

But does that satisfy the myth makers? Never! For instance, there is the legend about 'Ali's encounter with Marhab in the battle of Khaybar with all the curious details about the physique of Marhab. The historians have also written that 'Ali's sword cut him into two from the middle (I don't know whether the two halves were perfectly equal!).

But here they found the opportunity to weave out fables which are harmful for the faith. It is said that God commanded Gabriel to go immediately to the earth lest 'Ali's sword when it comes down on Marhab should cut the earth into two halves, reaching right down to the Cow and the Fish.

Gabriel was told to shield the blow with his wings. Gabriel went and when 'Ali struck the blow with his sword, it slashed Marhab into two halves which had they been put in a balance would have turned out to be exactly equal.

However, one of Gabriel's wings suffered injury and he could not ascend to the heaven for forty days. When at last he arrived in heaven, God asked him as to where he had been all these days. He replied, "O Lord! I was on the earth. You had given me an assignment to go there." He was asked why he had taken so much time to return.

Gabriel said, "O God, the blow of 'Ali's sword wounded my wings and I was busy bandaging and healing them all these forty days!" According to another legend 'Ali's sword flew so swiftly and slickly through Marhab's forehead cutting all the way to the saddle that when 'Ali pulled away his sword Marhab himself did not know what had happened (he thought the blow had gone amiss).

He jeered at 'Ali, "Was that all of your swordsmanship?!" 'Ali' said to him, "Just move yourself a bit and see." As soon as Marhab made a movement, one half of his body fell on one side of the horse and the other on the other side!

Hajji Nuri, this great man, in his book *Lu'lu wa marjan*, while condemning the practice of fabricating of such legends, writes about legends that some people have put into circulation concerning the valor of Hadrat Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas.

According to one of them, in the Battle of *Siffin* (in which, basically, it is not known whether he had participated, and even if he did he must have been a boy of fifteen years) he threw a man into the air, then another, and so on up to eighty men, and by the time the last one was thrown up the first one had not yet reached the ground. Then when the first one came down, he cut him into two halves, then the second and so on to the last man!

A part of the interpolations in the narratives of the event of Karbala have resulted from the myth-making tendency. The Europeans assert that one finds many exaggerations in accounts pertaining to the history of the East, and there is some truth in what they say.

Mulla Darbandi writes in his book *Asrar al-shahadah* that the cavalry of the army of 'Umar ibn Sa'd consisted of six hundred thousand horsemen and twenty million infantrymen – in all a force of one million and six hundred thousand plus all the people of Kufah! Now how large was Kufah?

Kufah was a recently founded city and not more than thirty-five years old, as it was built during the time of 'Umar ibn Khattab. It was built at 'Umar's orders as a military outpost for Muslim warriors near the borders of Iran. It is not certain whether the entire population of Kufah during that time was even a hundred thousand.

That a force of one million and six hundred thousand could have been assembled on that day and that Husayn ibn 'Ali' should have killed three hundred thousand of them is not at all reasonable. Such figures cast a shadow on the whole event.

It is said that someone once made exaggerated claims about the largeness of the city of Herat in former

days. He said, 'Herat was a very big city at one time.' 'How big?' he was asked. He said, 'At one time there were in Herat twenty thousand one-eyed cooks named Ahmad selling head and totters stew. Now imagine how many men there must be in a city, and how many named Ahmad, and how many one-eyed Ahmads, to have twenty-one thousand one-eyed Ahmads selling head and totters stew!

This myth-making tendency has always been very active; but we must not leave a sacred document to the mercy of myth-makers.

There is amongst us, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, in every generation reformers who purge the faith of the perversions of the extremists, of the false beliefs of the falsifiers, and of the misinterpretations of the ignorant.<sup>2</sup>

We have a duty here. Now let anyone say anything he likes about Herat. But is it right that such legends as these should find way into the history of the event of *Ashura'*, an event concerning which our duty is to keep it alive and revive its memory every year?

## The Third Factor

The third factor is of a particular nature. The two factors that we have discussed above, that is, the hostile ends of the enemies and the human tendency for conjuring legends and myths, apply to all histories of the world, but there is also a factor which is specific to the event of *Ashura'* that has led to fabrication of stories.

The leaders of the faith, from the time of the Noble Messenger and the Pure Imams, have commanded in clear and emphatic terms that the memory of Husayn ibn 'Ali must be kept alive and that his martyrdom and ordeals should be commemorated every year. Why? What is the reason underlying this Islamic ordinance? Why is there so much encouragement for and emphasis on visiting the shrine of Husayn ibn 'Ali?

We should reflect over these questions. Some might say that it is for the sake of condoling with Hadrat Zahra' and offering her consolation! But is it not ridiculous to imagine that Hadrat Zahra' should still need consolation after fourteen hundred years, whereas, in accordance with the explicit statements of Imam Husayn and according to our creed, since his martyrdom Imam Husayn and Hadrat Zahra have been together in heaven?

What a thing to say! Is it correct to think of Hadrat Zahra as a little child that goes on weeping, even after fourteen centuries, and whom we have to go and console? Such kind of belief is destructive for religion. Imam Husayn (a) established the practical ideology of Islam and he is the practical model for Islamic movements.

They (that is the Prophet and Imams) wanted Imam Husayn's ideology to be kept alive. They wanted Husayn should reappear every year with those sweet, sublime and heroic summons of his and declare”

Don't you see that what is right and true is not acted upon, and what is wrong and false is not forbidden?  
[In such conditions] the man of faith should long to meet his true Lord![3](#)

They wanted the words:

Death is better than a life saddled with indignity,[4](#)

To be kept alive forever, and so also the words:

To me death is nothing but felicity, and life with oppressors is nothing but disgrace,[5](#)

They wanted such other saying of Imam Husayn to be kept alive:

The children of Adam carry the mark of death like necklaces that adorn the neck of damsels![6](#)

Far from us is disgrace and indignity![7](#)

They wanted to keep alive the memory of such scenes as that of Imam Husayn's confronting a force of thirty thousand men, in a state when he and his family are faced with a great ordeal and declaring in a manly manner – and the world has never seen such a manly personage!

Indeed, that baseborn son of a baseborn father has left me only two alternatives to choose from: the sword or disgrace. And far from us is disgrace! It is disdainful to God, His Messenger and the faithful that we should yield to anything of that kind, and those born of chaste mothers and high-minded fathers and possessing a lofty sense of honor disdain that submission to vile men should be preferred to honorable death![8](#)

They wanted to keep alive the formative school of Imam Husayn so that the rays of the Husayni spirit may breathe life into this community. Its objective is quite clear.

Do not allow the event of 'Ashura' to be consigned to oblivion! Your life, your humanity, and your dignity depend on this event!

You can keep Islam alive only by its means! That is why they have encouraged us to keep alive the tradition of mourning Imam Husayn, and very rightly! The institution of mourning Husayn ibn 'Ali has a correct philosophy underlying it, a philosophy which is also extremely sublime.

It is fitting that we should do all that we can to endeavor for the sake of this cause, provided we understand its purpose and goal. Unfortunately some people have not understood it.

Without making the people understand the philosophy of Imam Husayn's uprising and without making them understand the station of Imam Husayn, they imagine that if they just came and sat in mourning assemblies and shed tears, without knowledge and understanding, it would atone their sins.

Marhum Hajji Nuri mentions a point in the book, *Lu'lu' wa marjan*. That point is the belief of some people that the reward (*thawab*) for mourning Imam Husayn is so great that it is justifiable to employ any means whatsoever for this end. Nowadays a group which subscribes to the views of Machiavilli in political thought says that ends justify the means. If the end is a good one, it does not matter what means are used to achieve it.

Now these people also say that we have a sacred and exalted goal, which is mourning Imam Husayn and it does not matter what means are used for this end. As the end is a sacred one, it does not matter what the means are: Is it correct to perform *ta'ziyahs* – even *ta'ziyahs* which are vulgar – for this purpose? They ask, 'Do they make the people cry?'

If they do, there is so problem with such *ta'ziyahs*.<sup>1</sup> So also there is no problem if we blow trumpets, beat drums, commit sinful acts, make men dress as women, conjure a wedding for Qasim, or fabricate and forge episodes. Such things do not matter in the tradition of mourning Imam Husayn, which is something exclusive.

Here lying is forgiven, forgery and fabrication are forgivable, making pictures, and dressing men as women is pardonable. Here any kind of sinful conduct is forgivable as the end is most sacred! As a consequence of such thinking, some persons have resorted to such *tahrif* and misrepresentation that are stunning.

About ten or fifteen years ago when I was on a visit to Isfahan, I met a great man, marhum Hajj Shaykh Muhammad Hasan Najafabadi, may God elevate his station. I recounted to him a *rawdah* that I had heard recently somewhere. It was something which I had never heard until that time. Incidentally, this man who had delivered that *rawdah*, an opium addict, had made the people weep profusely with that *rawdah* of his.

In it he recounted the story of an old woman during the reign of Mutawakkil (the 'Abbasid caliph who persecuted the Shi'ah). The woman had set out with the purpose of making a pilgrimage to the tomb of Imam Husayn, which was forbidden at that time and they would cut off the hands of the pilgrims. He went on with the narrative until the point when the old woman is taken and thrown into the river. In that state she cries out for help, calling out, "O Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas!"

As she is about to drown a horseman appears and tells her to catch hold of his stirrup. The woman takes hold of the stirrups but she says, "Why don't you give me your hand?" The horseman says, "I haven't any hands!" At this point the people wept a lot.

Marhum Hajj Shaykh Muhammad Hasan recounted for me the history of this legend. In a place near the bazaar, in the near abouts of Madrasah Sadr, there used to be held a *majlis* which was one of the major *majalis* of Isfahan and which even the *marhum* Hajj Mulla Isma'il Khwaju'i used to attend. One day there had occurred there an incident.

(It had taken place earlier and he had heard its account from reliable persons.) It involved a well-known *wa'iz*; who himself had recounted it in these words: "One day mine was the last turn to speak from the minbar.

Other speakers had come and each one of them had exerted his skills to make the people weep. Everyone that came would try to surpass his predecessor and having delivered his *rawdah* would descend from the minbar to sit among the audience and watch the art of the succeeding *rawdah-khwan*. This continued until the time of noon.

I saw that everyone had tried his prowess and together they had drawn out all the tears that the people could shed. What should I do? I thought for a while, and then and there I made up this story.

When my turn came, I went up and related the story, leaving all of them behind. In the afternoon, the same day, while attending another *majlis* in the Char-suq locality, I saw that the one who took to the minbar before me related this same story. Gradually it came to be written in books and appeared in print."

The false and wrong notion that the tradition of mourning Imam Husayn is an exception to all norms, that it is justified to use any means to make the people weep, has been a major factor leading to fabrication of legends and *tahrif*.

*Marhum* Hajji Nuri, that saintly man and teacher of *marhum* Hajj Shaykh 'Abbas Qummi, who as confessed by Hajj Shaykh 'Abbas himself as well as others was superior to his pupils, was an extraordinarily learned and pious man. In his book he makes the point that if it is a correct notion that the end justifies the means, then one may also justify the following line of reasoning.

One of the Islamic precepts is that bringing delight to the heart of a believer and to do something to make him happy is a greatly commendable act. Such being the case, according to this reasoning, it is justifiable to do backbiting in his presence, as he loves listening to backbiting. And should someone say that it is sinful to do so, the answer will be," No! The purpose is a sacred one and the backbiting is being done to make a believer pleased and happy!"

*Marhum* Hajji Nuri gives another example. A man embraces a non-mahram woman, which is an unlawful act. We ask him why did you do that? He replies, "I have done it for a believer's delight." The same reasoning can be applied to such unlawful acts as adultery, drinking wine, and sodomy. Isn't this an absurd reasoning?

Wouldn't such a notion destroy the Shari'ah? By God, to think that it is permissible to use any kind of means for making people cry in mourning Imam Husayn is a notion that contradicts everything that Imam Husayn stands for. Imam Husayn was martyred to uplift Islam, as we confess while reciting his *ziyarah*:

I bear witness that you established the prayer, gave *zakat* commanded what is right and forbade what is

wrong, and did such *jihad* in the way of God as ought to be done.<sup>9</sup>

Imam Husayn was killed in order to revive Islamic traditions, Islamic laws and regulations, not in order to create an excuse for the violation of Islamic norms. *Na'udhubillah*, we have changed Imam Husayn into a destroyer of Islam: the Imam Husayn that we have conjured in our imagination is a destroyer of Islam.

In his book Hajji Nuri mentions a story that was related to him by one of the students in Najaf, who originally came from Yazd. "One day," he said, "in my youth I made a journey on foot to Khorasan, going by the road that passes through the desert (*kawr*). In one of the villages of Nayshabur I went to a mosque, as I did not have any place to stay.

The imam of the mosque came and led the prayers. Afterwards he went on the *minbar* to make a *rawdah* I was amazed to see the mosque attendant bring a pile of stones which he handed over to the imam. When the *rawdah* started, he ordered the lamps to be put out. When the lamps had been put out, he pelted the stones at the audience and there arose cries from the people. When the lamps were lighted, I saw bleeding heads.

Their eyes were tearful as they walked out of the mosque. I approached the imam and asked him why he had done such a thing. He said, 'I have tested these people. There is no *rawdah* in the world that will make them weep. As weeping for the sake of Imam Husayn has a great reward and *thawab*, I have found that the only way to make them cry is to throw stones on their heads.

This is how I make them weep.' " He believed that the end justifies the means. The end was to mourn Imam Husayn though it should involve emptying a pile of stones on the people's heads.

Accordingly, this is a particular factor which is specific to this historic event and it has led to much fabrication and *tahrif*.

When one studies history one finds what they have done to this event. By God, Hajji Nuri is right when he says that if we were to weep for Imam Husayn today, we should mourn for him on account of these falsehoods, fabrications and *tahrif*!

There is a well-known book called *Rawdat al-shuhada'* whose author was Mulla Husayn Kashifi. According to Hajji Nuri, he was the first to write in his book the stories of Za'far the Jinn and the one about Qasim's wedding. I have read this book.

I used to imagine that it contained only one or two of such cases. But afterwards when I read it I saw that the matter was very much different. This book, which is in Persian, was compiled about five-hundred years ago.

Mulla Husayn Kashifi was a scholar and learned man. He has authored several books including the *Anwar suhayli*. His biographical accounts do not indicate whether he was a Shi'i or a Sunni. Basically he was a Chameleon: among the Shi'ah he would pose as an outright Shi'i, while amongst the Sunnis he

would pass as a Hanafi.

He was a native of Sabzawar, a Shi'i centre whose people were staunch Shi'is. In Sabzawar he would act as an out and out Shi'i, and at times when he would go to Herat ('Abd al-Rahman Jami was the husband of his sister or sister-in-law) he would give sermons for the Sunnis in the Sunni style. But in Sabzawar he narrated the tragedies of Karbala'.

His death occurred around 910/1504, that is, either at the end of the 9th or the beginning of the 10th century. This was the first book, compiled about five hundred years ago, to be written as an elegiac narrative (*marthiyah*).

Earlier the people used to refer to the primary sources. Shaykh Mufid, may God be pleased with him, wrote the *Irshad* and how sound is his narration! If we were to refer to the *Irshad* of Shaykh Mufid we would not stand in need of any other source.

Tabari, among Sunni authors, has also written about it. Ya'qubi, Ibn 'Asakir and Khwarazmi have also written. I don't know what this unjust man has done! When I read this book I saw that even the names are spurious. He mentions names among Imam Husayn's companions that never existed. He mentions names of the enemy's men which are also spurious. He has turned the factual accounts of the event into fables.

As this was the first book to be written in Persian, the orators in mourning assemblies, who were mostly illiterate and could not use the Arabic texts, would take this book and read from it in the mourning sessions.

That is why the gatherings that are held nowadays to mourn Imam Husayn are called *rawdeh-khwani*. *Rawdeh-khwani* was not in vogue during the time of Imam Sadiq or Imam Hasan 'Askari, nor it was prevalent during the times of Sayyid Murtada [d 436/1044] or even Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi [d. 672/1273].

*Rawdeh-khwani* came into vogue since the last five hundred years and it came to be called as such. *Rawdeh-khwani* meant reading from the book *Rawdat al-shuhada'*, a pack of lies. From the time that this book fell into the hands of the people, no one has bothered to study the actual history of Imam Husayn.

Then, about sixty or seventy years ago, there appeared another man, the *marhum* Mulla Darbandi. He took all the contents of the *Rawdat al-shahuda'* and compiled them together with other material, collecting it all in a book called *Asrar al-shahadah*. The contents of this book make one lament for the fate of Islam.

Hajji Nuri writes, "We used to attend the lectures of Hajj Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn Tehrani (who was a very saintly man) and benefited from his teaching. A sayyid from Hillah, who was a *rawdeh-khwan*,

came to meet him and he showed him a book written about the events of Imam Husayn's martyrdom (*maqatal*, plural: *maqatil*) to see whether its contents were reliable.

This book did not have any beginning or end. Only at one place in it was mentioned the name of a certain mulla of Jabl al-'Amil who was among the pupils of the author of the *Ma'alim al-usul*. Marhum Hajj Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn took the book to examine it.

First he studied the biographical accounts of that scholar and found that such a book had not been attributed to him. Then he read the book itself and found it to be full of falsehoods. He said to that sayyid, 'This book is a pack of lies.

Don't circulate this book and don't quote anything from it, for it is unlawful to do so. Basically this book has not been written by that scholar and its contents are spurious.' " Hajji Nuri says that the same book fell into the hands of the author of *Asrar al-shahadah* and he copied all its contents into his book, from the beginning to the end!"

Hajji Nuri relates another episode, which is rather touching. Once a man came to author of the *Maqami*<sup>10</sup> and said to him, "Last night I saw a horrible dream." "What was it?" he asked him. He said, "I saw that I am biting away flesh from the body of Imam Husayn." The scholar trembled on hearing these words.

He lowered his head and thought for a while. Then he said, "Perhaps you are a *marthiyeh-khwan*?" "Yes, I am," he replied. He said, "Hereafter, either abandon *marthiyeh-khwani* altogether or draw your material from reliable books. You are tearing away the flesh Imam Husayn, with these lies of yours. It was God's grace that He showed this to you in a dream."

If one studies the history of 'Ashura' one will find that it is the most vivid and well-documented of histories with plenty of sources. The marhum Akhund Khurasani used to say, "Those who are ever after 'new' *rawdahs* should go and read the true accounts, for no one has ever heard them"

One should study the addresses of Imam Husayn ('a) delivered in Makkah – in the Hijaz as a whole – at Karbala', during his journey, as well as the sermons addressed to his companions, the questions and answers that took place between him and others, the letters that were exchanged between him and other people, the letters that were exchanged between the enemies themselves, in addition to the accounts of those (from among the friends as well the enemies) who were present on the occasion of 'Ashura'.

There were three or four persons from among Imam Husayn's companions who survived, including a slave named 'Uqbah ibn Sam'an, who had accompanied the Imam from Makkah and lived to write the accounts pertaining to the Imam's troops.

He was captured on the day of 'Ashura' but was released when he told them that he was a slave.

Humayd ibn Muslim was another chronicler who accompanied the army of 'Umar ibn Sa'd. Of those present on the occasion was Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a) himself who has recounted all the events. There is no blind spot in the history of Imam Husayn (a).

Hajji Nuri refers to a spurious story that relates to Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a). According to it when there remained no companion with Hadrat Abu 'Abd Allah (a), the Hadrat went into the tent of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a) to bid him good-bye. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a) asked him, "Father! How did things come about between you and these people? (that is, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin was unaware of what was happening until that time).

The Imam said to him, "Son, this matter has ultimately led to a battle." "What happened to Habib ibn Mazahir?", asked Imam Zayn al-'Abidin. "He was killed," replied the Imam. "How about Zuhayr ibn Qayn?"

"He was also killed," replied the Imam. "What happened to Burayr ibn Hudayr?" "He was killed," said Imam Husayn (a). Imam Zayn al-'Abidin continued naming each of his father's companions one after another and the Imam's reply was the same.

Then he asked concerning the men of Banu Hashim. "What happened to Qasim ibn Hasan?" "What happened to my brother 'Ali Akbar?" "What happened to my uncle Abu al-Fadl The answer was the same: "He has been killed." This is a fabrication and a lie. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin, *na'udhubillah*, was not so sick and unconscious as not to know what was going on.

Historians have written that even in that state of illness he rose from his bed and said to Zaynab, "Aunt, bring me my staff and give me a sword." In any case, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (a) was one of those who were present on the scene and related the accounts of events.

Truly, we should be penitent for these crimes and treacheries that we are guilty of in respect of Abu 'Abd Allah al-Husayn (a), his companions, comrades and members of his family, and for effacing all their achievements. He should do penance and then make effort to derive benefit from this most educative source.

Is there any inadequacy in the life of 'Abbas ibn 'Ali as recounted in the reliable *maqatil* (accounts of martyrdom)? The single point that there was no danger to his own life is enough to be a matter of pride for him. Imam Husayn had also told him, "They are only after me, and if they kill me, they will not have anything against anyone else."

At Kufah, when Shimr ibn Dhi al-Jawshan was departing for Karbala', one of those who were present said to Ibn Ziyad that some of his relatives on the mother's side were with Husayn ibn 'Ali. He requested Ibn Ziyad to write a letter granting them amnesty, and Ibn Ziyad wrote it. Shimr belonged to a clan that had remote ties with the tribe of Umm al-Banin (the mother of Abu al-Fadl). Shimr personally brought this letter of amnesty on the night following the ninth day of Muharram.

This wretch approached the camp of Husayn ibn 'Ali and shouted, "Where are my nephews!" (*ayna banu ukhtina?!).*<sup>11</sup> Abu al-Fadl, along with his full brothers, was sitting with Hadrat Abu 'Abd Allah ('a). He remained silent and did not reply, until the Imam said to him, "Answer him, though he be an evil man (*ajibuhu in kana fasiqa*). At the Imam's leave, he answered Shimr, saying, "What do you want?" (*Ma taqul?*). Shimr said, "I have come with some good news for you.

I have brought a letter of amnesty for you from the emir, 'Ubayd Allah. You are now free, and you will be safe if you leave now." Abu al-Fadl said to him, "May God damn you and your emir, as well as the letter that you bring. Do you think we will abandon our Imam and brother for the sake of our own safety?"

On the night of 'Ashura', the first person to declare his loyalty towards Abu 'Abd Allah was his brother Abu al-Fadl. Aside from the foolish exaggerations that are often made, that which is confirmed by history is that Abu al-Fadl was a very wise person, valiant and courageous, tall and most handsome. He had been nicknamed 'The Moon of the *Hashimis*.'<sup>12</sup> These things are true. To be sure, he had inherited Ali's courage.

The story is also true regarding his mother, that Ali' had asked 'Aqil, his brother, to propose a woman born of a heroic descent (*waladatha al-fuhulah*)<sup>13</sup> who might give birth to son who would be a warrior and man of valour (*li-talidani farisan shuja'ah*).<sup>14</sup> 'Aqil had suggested Umm al-Banin. So much of it is true. 'Ali's wish was fulfilled in Abu al-Fadl.

According to one of two reports, on the day of 'Ashura' Abu al-Fadl came to the Imam and said, "Dear brother, now give me the permission. This breast of mine is suffocated and I can bear it no more. I want to sacrifice my life for your sake."

I don't know the reason why Imam responded to Hadrat Abu al-Fadl's request in the manner that he did. Abu 'Abd Allah himself knows better. He said, "Brother, now that you want to leave, try to get some water for these children."

Hadrat Abu al-Fadl had already come to receive the nickname *Saqqa* (water carrier), as earlier, on one or two occasions, at nights he had been able to pass through the enemy's ranks to fetch water for the children in Abu 'Abd Allah's camp. It was not the case that they had not drunk any water for three days and nights.

Access to water had been closed for three days and nights, but during this time they had been able to get some water on one or two occasions, including the night of 'Ashura', when they had taken bath and washed their bodies. Abu al-Fadl consented.

Now note this majestic scene! What greatness! What valour! What a spirit of understanding and self-sacrifice! A lone warrior, alone by himself, advances against a host. The number of men who guarded the river bank was four thousand. He descends along the river bank and leads his horse into the water (all historians have written this).

First, he fills the waterskin that he has brought and lays it on his shoulder. He is thirsty. The air is hot and has been fighting. But as he sits on the back of his horse and the horse stands in water reaching up to its belly, he lowers his hands into water, takes water into them and raises them somewhat towards his sacred lips.

Those who were watching from a distance report that he hesitated for a while. Then they saw that he threw the water back and came out of the river without drinking any. No one knew why Abu Al-Fadl did not drink water there. But when he came out he recited *rajaz* verses which were addressed to himself. Now from these verses they understood why he had not drunk water:

O soul of Abu al-Fadl!

My wish is that you live not after Husayn!

Will you have a drink of cold water,

While there stands Husayn, thirsty, near the tents,

And about to drink the cup of death!?

Such is not the way of my faith,

Nor that of one who abides in conviction and truth! [15](#)

What would become of manliness? Of honour? Of caring love? And of sharing in the hardship of one's dear ones? Isn't Husayn your Imam, and you his follower?

While Husayn is about to drink the cup of death,

Will you have a drink of cold water?

Never! My faith does not permit me to do that! My loyalty does not allow me to do such a thing! Abu al-Fadl changed his route while returning and now he came through the palm groves. Earlier, he had come by the direct way, but he knew that he now carried a precious trust with him.

So he changed his route and all his concern now was to get the water safely to the camp, for it was possible that a single arrow may pierce the waterskin and fail his task of bringing the water to its destination. In the mean while they heard that Abu al-Fadl had changed his *rajaz*. It appeared that something had happened. Now he cried out:

By God!

Even if you sever my right arm,

I will persist in defending my faith,

And the Imam, who is the true one, for certain,

the Prophet's grandson, pure and trustworthy! [16](#)

That is, by God even if you cut my right arm I will not flinch from defending Husayn. Not much time passed when his *rajaz* changed again:

O my soul, fear not the faithless,

And receive the good news of Almighty's mercy,

In the company of the Prophet, the Master and the Elect,

Though, insolently, they should slash my left arm! [17](#)

These *rajaz* verses signaled that his left arm too had been severed. They write that with characteristic dexterity he somehow turned the water-skin and bent himself over it. I will not say what happened thereafter as it is most heart rending.

It is a custom to recount the account of the ordeals of this great human being on the night of *Tasu'ah* (9th Muharram). Let me add that Umm al-Banin, the mother of Hadrat Abu al-Fadl was alive at the time of the event of Karbala', though she was in Madinah at the time. She was given the news that all her four sons were martyred at Karbala'.

This saintly woman would go to the Baqi' cemetery and mourn over her sons. They write that her elegies were so full of pathos that they brought tears to everyone who heard them, even Marwan ibn Hakam, who was the staunchest of the enemies of the Prophet's family.

Sometimes she would remember all her sons and, at times, especially Abu al-Fadl, the eldest of them, who was senior most of the brothers, both in respect of age as well as in respect of spiritual and bodily merits.

I remember one of her two elegies and I will recite them for you. These are the elegiac verses that this grieved mother recited in mourning for her sons (in general, the Arabs recite elegiac verses in a very touching style):

You, who have seen 'Abbas make repeated forays against the base hosts,

And following him were the Lion's sons, each a mighty lion!

I have been told, my son's head was struck when his arms were cut,

Alas for my Lion's cub! Did a club fall on his head?

O 'Abbas! None would have dared to approach it,

Were your sword in your hand! [18](#)

That is, 'O observant eye, tell me, you who have been in Karbala' and watched its scenes and observed the moment when Abu al-Fadl, my son of a lion, with my other lion's cubs following him, attacked that cowardly crowd – tell me is it true what I have been told?

They say that when they had cut my son's arms an iron club fell on my dear one's head. Is that true?' Then she says, "Abu al-Fadl! My dear! I know that if you had arms there wasn't a man in the whole world to have the guts to face you! They had the temerity to do that because your arms had been severed from your body.

- [1.](#) During the nights of the 'id of Ghadir, Dr. Shari'ati delivered an excellent lecture on this general human tendency for hero-worship and making of myths and legends, turning historic figures into legendary heroes with extraordinary and superhuman characteristics.
- [2.](#) Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, "kitab fadl al-'ilm", p. 32; al-Saffar, Basa'ir al-darajat, p. 10
- [3.](#) Bihar al-anwar, vol. 44, p. 381; Tuhaf al-'uqul, p. 176; al-Luhuf, 33; al-Khwarazmi's Maqatal al-Husayn, ii, p. 5.
- [4.](#) Ibn Shahr Ashub, al-Manaqib, iv, p. 110; al-Luhuf, p. 50, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 45, p. 50; al-Irbili, Kashf al-ghummah, ii, p. 32.
- [5.](#) Bihar al-anwar, vol. 44, p. 381; Tuhaf al-'uqul, p. 176; al-Luhuf, 33.
- [6.](#) Bihar al-anwar, vol. 44, p. 366; al-Luhuf, p. 25.
- [7.](#) Al-Luhuf, p. 41; Khwarazmi's Maqatal al-Husayn, ii, p. 7; Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh al-Sham, iv, p. 333; al-Muqarrim's Maqatal al-Husayn, p. 287; al-Harrani, Tuhaf al-'uqul, p. 176; Shaykh 'Abbas al-Qummi, Nafs al-mahmum, p. 149, Mulhaqat Ihqaq al-haqq, xi, pp. 624-625.
- [8.](#) Ibid.
- [9.](#) Mafatih al-janan, the ziyarah of Imam Husayn ('a) for the nights of 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha.
- [10.](#) Marhum Aqa Muhammad Ali was the son of marhum Wahid Behbahani and both of them were great men. Marhum Aqa Muhammad Ali migrated to Kirmanshah where he wielded great influence.
- [11.](#) al-Muqarrim's Maqatal al-Husayn, p. 252, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 44, p. 391, al-Luhuf, p. 37
- [12.](#) al-Muqarrim's al-Abbas, p. 81; Ibn Shahr Ashub, al-Manaqib, iv, p. 108
- [13.](#) al-Muqarrim's al-Abbas, p. 69
- [14.](#) Ibsar al-ayn fi ansar al-Husayn alayh al-salam, p. 26
- [15.](#) Yanabi al-mawaddah, ii, p. 165; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 45, p. 41
- [16.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 45, p. 40
- [17.](#) Ibid.
- [18.](#) Muntaha al-amal, I, p. 386.

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