

Imam al-Husayn's Personality

Imam al-Husayn (as) in Sunni Books

With recourse to Sunni books of tradition [*hadith*] and biography, it can be seen that most Sunni scholars hold Imam al-Husayn (as) in great esteem and high respect.

We will now refer to certain parts of Imam al-Husayn's (as) history according to narratives which have been recorded in Sunni books of *hadith*.

Imam al-Husayn's (as) birth

1. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr writes, "Al-Husayn (as) is the son of 'Ali ibn Abu Talib (as) and Fatimah (as), the Prophet's (S) daughter. His nickname is Aba 'Abd Allah. He was born on the 5th of Sha'ban in either the third or fourth year of the Islamic calendar [*hijrah*]. This is the popular opinion which is held by a majority of his companions."¹

2. It is thus recounted in the book entitled, "*Akhbar al-Duwal*", "When al-Husayn was born, the Prophet (S) was informed about this happy occasion. He came to al-Zahra's (as) house, requested to see al-Husayn (as) and held him in his arms.

The Prophet (S) recited first the *adhan* (the call to prayer) in the newborn's right ear and next the *iqamah* (the prelude to prayer) in his left ear. The Archangel Gabriel [*Jibra'il*] appeared to the Noble Prophet (S) and brought Allah's orders that the newborn child should be named al-Husayn (as). This was an exact repetition of what had earlier taken place when al-Hasan (as) was born."²

3. Sibawaihi ibn al-Jawzi says, "His nickname is Aba 'Abd Allah. He was also endowed with the titles Sayyid Wafiyy, Waliyy, Sibawaihi, and the Martyr [*shahid*] of Karbala."³

Imam al-Husayn's (as) acts of worship

1. Ibn 'Abd Rabbih recounts that it was asked of 'Ali ibn al-Husayn (as), "Why are your father's progeny few?" The Imam (as) answered, "I am surprised at how he managed to sire children at all because he was constantly engaged in prayer every day and night. He used to perform a thousand units [*rak'ahs*] of prayer per day. How could he find free time for women?"⁴

2. Ibn 'Abbadh Maliki narrates, "Whenever al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (as) was in a state of prayer, his color would turn pale." They asked him, "What is this state which arises in you whenever you stand in prayer?" The Imam (as) replied, "You do not comprehend He whom I stand before."⁵

3. Zamakhshari recounts that some people saw al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (as) performing the circumambulation of the Ka'bah [*tawaf*]. When he came to the station of Ishmael [*Ismā'il*], he said his prayers. After praying, he put his face on the station of Ishmael and began weeping and said, "Your humble slave is at the doorstep of your house! Your humble servant is at your doorstep! A destitute is at your doorstep!"

For a long time, he kept repeating these statements. After a while, as he was leaving that place, his sight fell upon some poor people eating crumbs and pieces of bread. Imam al-Husayn (as) went over to them and greeted them with the ceremonial Islamic greeting of '*salam*'. They answered his greeting and invited him to their meal. He sat with them but did not partake of their food. He said, "If your food had not been from charity [*sadaqah*], I would have partaken of it." He said to them, "Arise and come with me to my house." When they arrived at his house, Imam al-Husayn (as) provided them with food and clothes.⁶

4. It has been narrated that 'Abd Allah ibn 'Ubayd ibn 'Umayr said, "Al-Husayn ibn 'Ali (as) performed the *hajj* twenty five times on foot, despite being accompanied by his fine and noble horses."⁷

6. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr says, "Al-Husayn (as) was a highly scholarly and religious man. He performed prayer, fasting and *hajj* a lot."⁸

8. On his own chain of transmission [*sanad*], Tabari narrates that 'Abd Allah Mashriqi said, "When darkness fell at Karbala, al-Husayn (as) and his companions spent the whole night praying, seeking forgiveness, supplicating and entreating Allah..."⁹

Imam al-Husayn's (as) forbearance

1. It has been recounted that Imam 'Ali ibn al-Husayn (as) said, "Al-Husayn used to say, 'If someone vilifies me in my right ear and then apologizes for it in my left ear, I will surely accept his apology because I heard Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) narrate a *hadith* from my grandfather the Prophet of Allah (S) that,¹⁰

لا یرد الحوض من لم یقبل العذر من محقّ او مبطل.

The one who does not accept apologies, whether the apology is true or not, will not pass the pond [hawd] of al-Kawthar’.”

2. It has been recounted that one of Imam al-Husayn’s (as) slaves had committed an offence that required discipline. The Imam (as) ordered that the slave should be punished for the offence. The slave implored Imam al-Husayn’s forgiveness. He appealed to the Imam (as) by quoting verses of the Holy Qur’an. He said, “O my master! God, the Exalted, has revealed: *‘And those who restrain their anger.’*”¹¹

Imam al-Husayn (as) replied, “Let him go. I have restrained my anger.” The slave continued, “*And pardon men.*” The Imam (as) said, “I have pardoned you.” The slave further implored, “*And Allah loves the doers of good.*” The Imam (as) said, “You are freed in the way of Allah.” After this, Imam al-Husayn (as) gave orders that a gracious and handsome gift should be given to the freed slave.¹²

Imam al-Husayn’s (as) virtues in the words of the Prophet (S)

1. On his own chain of transmission [sanad], Bukhari quotes Na‘im saying, “Ibn Umar was asked, ‘What is the verdict of a *mu‘irim* (a person visiting the holy and inviolable House of Allah) who kills a fly?’ Ibn ‘Umar answered, ‘The people of Iraq are more concerned to ask about killing flies ignoring the fact that they killed the son of the Prophet’s daughter (as).’ Then he added, ‘The Noble Prophet (S) has said, ‘Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are my sweet smelling flowers in this world.’”¹³

2. On his own chain of transmission, al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi recounts that, “Salman Farsi said, ‘Allah’s Prophet (S) used to say,

الحسن والحسين إبنائي، من أحبهما أحبني، ومن أحبني أحبّه الله، ومن أحبّه الله أدخله الجنة، ومن أبغضهما
«أبغضني، ومن أبغضني أبغضه الله، ومن أبغضه الله أدخله النار»

‘Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are my two children. Whoever loves them has in fact loved me. Whoever loves me is loved by Allah and whoever is loved by Allah will enter Paradise. Anyone who hates these two has in fact hated me. Anyone who hates me is hated by Allah, and whoever is hated by Allah will be cast into the hell fire.’”¹⁴

3. Also on his own chain of transmission, al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi has narrated that, “Ibn ‘Umar said, ‘The Prophet of Allah (S) said,

«الحسن والحسين سيدا شباب أهل الجنة وأبوهما خيرٌ منهما»

‘Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are the chiefs of the youths of Paradise, and their father is better than these two.’”¹⁵

4. On his own chain of transmission, al-Tirmidhi quotes from Yusuf ibn Ibrahim from Anas ibn Malik, “The Prophet (S) was asked about whom among the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) was more beloved to him. He answered, ‘Al-Hasan and al-Husayn.’ The Prophet (S) always used to tell Fatimah (as), ‘Bring my two children to me.’ He would then press them against his chest and smell their sweet scent.”¹⁶

5. Ya‘la ibn Marrah says, “The Holy Prophet (S) and I left the house to attend a social gathering we had been invited to. Along the way, the Prophet (S) caught sight of al-Husayn (as). He was busy playing. Allah’s Prophet (S) quickly went to al-Husayn (as) and spread his arms wide open in order to embrace him, but al-Husayn (as) teasingly kept running from side to side in a playful manner. Both of them started laughing. Finally, the Prophet (S) managed to catch al-Husayn (as). He put one of his hands under al-Husayn’s (as) chin and the other one on his head. Finally, they embraced and kissed each other. The Prophet (S) then said,

حسين مّتي وأنا منه، أحبّ الله من أحبّه، الحسن والحسين سبطان من الأسباط.

‘Al-Husayn is from me and I am from al-Husayn. Allah loves whoever loves al-Husayn. Al-Hasan and al-Husayn are two of my grandchildren’.”¹⁷

We interpret the sentence ‘Al-Husayn is from me and I am from al-Husayn,’ as follows:

a) The first part of the *hadith* which says, ‘Al-Husayn is from me,’ means that al-Husayn (as) descends from and is a product of the Prophet of Allah (S). Although his biological father is ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (as), the explicit wording of the Qur’anic Verse of *Mubahilah* clearly states that Imam ‘Ali (as) is a part of the soul of Allah’s Prophet. For this reason, Imam al-Husayn (as) is rightly considered as the Prophet’s (S) child.

b) Commenting on the second part of the *hadith* which says, ‘And I am from al-Husayn,’ it can be said, after proclaiming his prophetic mission, the Noble Prophet (S) cannot be regarded as an ordinary person anymore. On the contrary, he is looked upon as a man with a divine mission. Allah’s Prophet (S) is the epitome of the prophetic mission. His life is his prophetic mission and his prophetic mission is his life.

c) Also, we all know that every father makes an effort to have a child who will succeed him, defend his father’s character, and protect and revive his mission. The child is the one who is charged with the duty of continuing his father’s way. Regarding Imam al-Husayn (as), the reason why the Holy Prophet (S) says, ‘I am from al-Husayn,’ is that al-Husayn’s (as) uprising and martyrdom kept alive the mission of the Holy Prophet (S).

For this reason, the Holy Prophet (S) conferred the dignity of ‘I am from al-Husayn,’ on him. This implies that the continuity of the prophetic mission depends on al-Husayn (as). It is for this reason that it has been said, “Islam transpired through Muhammad (S) and survived through al-Husayn (as).”

6. Yazid ibn Abi Yazid says, “Fatimah’s (as) house was located along the Prophet’s way from ‘A’ishah’s house. One day, as the Prophet (S) was leaving ‘A’ishah’s house, he heard al–Husayn (as) crying. The Noble Prophet (S) said, ‘O Fatimah! Do you not know that I am bothered and pained when I hear him crying?’”[18](#)

7. Al–Hakim al–Neyshaburi recounts that he personally heard Abu Hurairah saying, “I saw Allah’s Prophet embracing al–Husayn. He kept saying, ‘O my Allah! I love him. Love him too!’”[19](#)

Al–Husayn (as) as described by the Prophet’s (S) companions

1. Anas ibn Malik recounts, “After the martyrdom of al–Husayn ibn ‘Ali (as), they brought his severed head to ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad. Ibn Ziyad started hitting Imam al–Husayn’s (as) teeth with a piece of wood. I was thinking to myself, ‘What an ugly and distasteful act he is doing! I saw with my own eyes Allah’s Prophet (S) kissing that same place which he is now hitting’.”[20](#)

2. Zayd ibn Arqam says, “I was sitting in the presence of ‘Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad when they brought Imam al–Husayn’s (as) head for him. Ibn Ziyad lifted his staff and hit between the lips of Imam al–Husayn (as). I said to him, ‘You are hitting your staff at a place that was constantly kissed by Allah’s Prophet (S).’ Ibn Ziyad said to me, ‘Arise and leave! You are just an old man who has lost his mind’.”[21](#)

3. Isma‘il ibn Raja’ narrates that his father said, “I was sitting in the Prophet’s (S) Mosque together with a number of people. Among them were Abu Sa‘id al–Khudri and ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar. Al–Husayn ibn ‘Ali (as) passed and greeted all of us gathered there. Everyone responded to his greeting except ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar. He remained quiet for some time waiting for everyone to finish responding and become silent.

After everyone became quiet, and there was no longer any noise to interrupt him, ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar raised his voice very high and said, ‘May God’s peace and blessings be upon you!’ [*wa ‘alayka salam wa rahmatullah wa barakatuh!*] After that, he turned towards the people and asked, ‘Do you want me to inform you about a man from among the inhabitants of the earth who is the most beloved of the inhabitants of the heavens?’

The people answered, ‘Yes!’ ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar said, ‘In the heavens, the most beloved man is that Hashimite man who just passed by us. He has not talked to me since the Battle of Siffin. If he forgives me, it is far better for me than a host of fine red camels’.”[22](#)

4. Jabir ibn ‘Abd Allah Ansari says, “Whoever wants to catch a glimpse of the dwellers of paradise should look at al–Husayn (as), because I heard that the Holy Prophet (S) used to inform people to do this.”[23](#)

In his book entitled “*Majma‘ al–Zawa‘id*”, Haythami has also narrated this same *hadith*. At the end he adds, “The narrators of this *hadith* are all classified and categorized among the truthful reporters of *hadith*, except Rabi‘ ibn Sa‘d, who is classified among the very trustworthy and reliable.”[24](#)

5. ‘Umar ibn Khattab addressed Imam al–Husayn (as) in this way, “That which has sprung up and grown over our heads (i.e. Islam) was done through you the people of the Prophet’s (S) Household (i.e. the *Ahl al–Bayt*).”[25](#)

6. It has been recounted that, “‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Abbas held the straps of Imam al–Hasan’s and Imam al–Husayn’s (as) horse. Some people rebuked him for doing so. They said, ‘You are older than these two. It is not befitting of you to hold the straps of their horse.’ Ibn ‘Abbas answered, ‘These two are the Holy Prophet’s (S) children. Is it not equal to prosperity for me to hold the straps of their horse?’”[26](#)

Imam al–Husayn (as) in the words of the tabi‘in

Imam al–Husayn (as) in the words of the tabi‘in[27](#)

1. Mu‘awiyah said to ‘Abd Allah ibn Ja‘far, “You are the chief of Bani Hashim!” ‘Abd Allah replied, “The chiefs of Bani Hashim are al–Hasan and al–Husayn (as).”[28](#)

2. When Marwan ibn Hakam suggested killing Imam al–Husayn (as) to the general governor of Medina, Walid ibn ‘Utbah ibn Abi Sufyan, he answered, “I swear to Allah, O Marwan! I would not desire to own the world and all its possessions as long as my conscience knows that I bear the responsibility of killing al–Husayn (as). Praise Allah! Should I kill al–Husayn (as) just because he has refused to swear the oath of allegiance to Yazid ibn Mu‘awiyah? I am certain that on the Day of Judgement, the bad works of the person that kills al–Husayn (as) will outweigh his good works.”[29](#)

3. Ibrahim Nakha‘i says, “If I were one of al–Husayn’s (as) killers and still managed to enter Paradise in one way or another, I would be ashamed and embarrassed to look upon the face of Allah’s Prophet (S).”[30](#)

Imam al–Husayn (as) from the viewpoint of Sunni scholars

Upon referral to Sunni books of history and biography, we can see that Imam al–Husayn (as) is held in high esteem and praise by a number of Sunni scholars including:

1. Ibn Hajar al–‘Asqalani

“Al–Husayn ibn ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (as) is a Hashimite, popularly known as Abu ‘Abd Allah, a native of Medina, and the grandson of Allah’s Prophet (S). He was the Holy Prophet’s flower in this world and one of the two chiefs of the youths of Paradise.”[31](#)

2. Zarandi Hanafi

“Al–Husayn (as) prayed, fasted, went on pilgrimage to Mecca and performed other acts of worship a great deal. He was a very generous and noble man. He went to the *hajj* twenty five times on foot.”[32](#)

3. Yafi'i

“Abu ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Ali (as) was the Holy Prophet’s (S) flower and grandchild. He was the epitome of the prophetic mission, the summation of high moral values and the venue of noble virtues...”³³

4. Ibn Sirin

“The sky has never wept again since the martyrdom of Yahya ibn Zakariyya (John the Baptist), save when it wept for al-Husayn (as). When al-Husayn (as) was killed, the sky turned black and the stars came out. The stars could be seen shining during the day to such an extent that the Gemini Star (the Twins) appeared in the sky at noontime! Red soil fell from the sky and the sky looked like congealed red blood for seven days.”³⁴

5. ‘Abbas Mahmud ‘Aqqad

“Courage is a characteristic that is not alien to al-Husayn (as). It is a quality that arises from the source of all virtues (the Noble Prophet). Al-Husayn (as) inherited this perfect attribute from his ancestors and later passed it on to his progeny. In the entire history of humankind, no one has been found to be braver than al-Husayn (as).

Among all the children of Adam, no one has undertaken a braver action than the measure al-Husayn (as) undertook at Karbala. I will not go into all the details but suffice it to say that the honor of being a martyr, the son of a martyr and the father of martyrs is reserved only for him in the entire history of mankind, and will remain so for hundreds of years to come...”³⁵

6. Doctor Muhammad ‘Abduh Yamani

“Al-Husayn (as) was a devoted and humble man. People always witnessed him fasting. He used to stay awake at night worshipping and always took precedence in helping and granting favors to others...”³⁶

7. ‘Umar Rida Kahalah

“Al-Husayn ibn ‘Ali (as) was the greatest among the people of Iraq in Islamic law, spiritual states, generosity and munificence.”³⁷

1. Al-Isti‘ab, vol. 1, p. 143.

2. Akhbar al-Duwal wa Athar al-Awwal, p. 107.

3. Tadhkirah al-Khawass, p. 232.

4. Al-‘Aqd al-Farid, vol. 2, p. 220.

5. Al-Fusul al-Muhimmah, p. 183.

6. Rabi‘ al-Abrar, p. 210.

7. Sifat al-Safwah, vol. 1, p. 321; Usd al-Ghabah, vol. 3, p. 20, Egyptian print.

8. Al-Isti‘ab, vol. 1, p. 393.

9. Tarikh al-‘Abari, vol. 5, p. 421.

- [10.](#) Zarandi, Na'im Durar al-Sam'ayn, p. 209.
- [11.](#) Surat Al 'Imran 3:134.
- [12.](#) Ha'irami, Wasilah al-Ma'al, p. 183.
- [13.](#) [اَبُو](#) Bukhari, vol. 5, p. 33, the Book [kitab] on Fada'il al-Sahabah (Virtues of the Companions, the Section [bab] on Manaqib al-Hasan wa al-Husayn (The Virtues of al-Hasan and al-Husayn).
- [14.](#) Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, p. 166.
- [15.](#) Ibid., p. 167.
- [16.](#) Al-Tirmidhi, Sunan, vol. 5, p. 323, no. 3861.
- [17.](#) Al-Tabarani, Al-Mu'jam al-Kabir, vol. 22, p. 274; Al-Hindi, Kanz al-'Ummal, vol. 13, p. 662; Ibn 'Asakir, Mukhtasar Tarikh Damishq, vol. 14, p. 150.
- [18.](#) Majma' al-Zawa'id, vol. 9, p. 201.
- [19.](#) Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, p. 177.
- [20.](#) Dhakha'ir al-'Uqba, p. 126.
- [21.](#) Kanz al-'Ummal, vol. 7, p. 110; Usd al-Ghabah, vol. 2, p. 21.
- [22.](#) Usd al-Ghabah, vol. 3, p. 5.
- [23.](#) Zarandi, Na'im Durar al-Sam'ayn, p. 208; Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah, vol. 8, p. 225.
- [24.](#) Majma' al-Zawa'id, vol. 9, p. 187.
- [25.](#) Al-Isabah, vol. 1, p. 333.
- [26.](#) Al-Isabah, vol. 1, p. 333.
- [27.](#) After the death of the Holy Prophet (s), there came a generation called the tabi'in. This generation did not personally meet or see the Holy Prophet (s), but they met his companions.
- [28.](#) Al-Hasan ibn 'Ali (as), Kamil Sulayman, p. 173.
- [29.](#) Ibid., p. 147.
- [30.](#) Al-Isabah, vol. 1, p. 335.
- [31.](#) Tahdhib al-Tahdhib, vol. 2, p. 299.
- [32.](#) Nazm Durar al-Samtayn, p. 208.
- [33.](#) Mir'at al-Jinan, vol 1, p. 131.
- [34.](#) Ibn 'Asakir, Mukhtasar Tarikh Damishq, vol. 4, p. 339.
- [35.](#) Abu al-Shuhada', p. 195.
- [36.](#) 'Allimu Awladakum Mahabbata Al-i Bayt-i al-Nabi (as), p. 133.
- [37.](#) A'lam al-Nisa', vol. 1, p. 28.

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