

Lecture 11: Husayn (as) and Psalm 74

The word Hoosen is found in Exodus 25:7; 28:4,15,22,23,24,26,28,29,30; 29:5; 35:9,27; 39:8,9,15,16,17,19,21; and Leviticus 8:8. In every case it refers to the article of clothing worn by the ministering high priest on his chest, and containing twelve stones engraved with the names of the twelve tribes and the Urim and Thummim, oracular stones used to ascertain the divine will. No other word is used in the Hebrew Scriptures from the same root at all.

The word is therefore quite different from Hamda and Ali, the former of which appears clearly as the name of an awaited prophet in Hebrew Scripture, and the latter of which can also best be translated as sometimes referring to a divinely appointed human figure.

The use of the word to refer to a symbol of the priest's bearing the names of the people before God is of course tempting. The feelings it may evoke in relationship to the grandson of the prophet, the Imam Husayn (as), are deep, but hardly convincing to the researcher or skeptic.

One must admit the total lack of linguistic evidence for the names Hasan and Husayn (both of the same root) in the Hebrew Scriptures. Furthermore, the many references that speak to the Muslim mind about Husayn (as) are already co-opted by Christians in reference to Jesus (as), or by Jews in reference to the awaited Messiah (as). Among these are the famous Isaiah 53 so often used by Christians as a prophecy of the crucifixion, but which seems so clearly to parallel the experiences of the martyred Husayn (as).

There are other texts, less often noted by non-Muslims, that by their content lend themselves to application to the Imam (as). Among the best-known of these is Jeremiah 46:6,10. "Let not the swift flee away, nor the mighty man escape; they shall stumble, and fall toward the north by the river Euphrates....

For this is the day of the Lord GOD of hosts, a day of vengeance, that he may avenge him of his adversaries: and the sword shall devour, and it shall be satiate and made drunk with their blood: for the Lord GOD of hosts hath a sacrifice in the north country by the river Euphrates."

The implication, from the Islamic point of view, is that this is a promise that God will avenge the attack on

His beloved Husayn (as) and his companions at Karbala', on the Euphrates River. Despite the striking parallel of such passages to the events, there are many barriers to their acceptance as evidence of Biblical support for Islam. The liberal denial of prophecy altogether aside, the psychological resistance to such an interpretation is prodigious.

The purpose of this study is to investigate the possibilities of more objective evidence. The weakness of linguistic evidence does not mitigate structural evidence. Obviously structural evidence in itself is insufficient, but it provides a schema that greatly strengthens the objectivity of the evidence of content and context.

What must be examined is the many series of twelve that exist in the Bible for evidence of characteristics for each of the twelve slots in the series, and whether or not those characteristics parallel those of the twelve Shi'ite Imams (as) and correspondingly of Imam Husayn (as) in particular.

These series are specifically the twelve reigning patriarchs of the Book of Genesis, the twelve sons of Ishmael (as), the twelve sons of Jacob (as), the twelve judges of the Book of Judges, the twelve righteous kings of Judah, and the twelve apostles of Jesus (as). Aside from series of human figures, there are many series of twelve to be found in the Bible.

Among these are passages containing twelve sections, and passages containing twelve references to a particular word. The former type is particularly fruitful. There are a number of such passages in the Book of Psalms, including many Psalms of twelve verses each, and most notably the series of twelve Psalms entitled Psalms of Asaph.

A careful comparison of the twelve Psalms of Asaph to the names of the twelve sons of Ishmael, which give the clues to the characteristics of each of the twelve slots, shows that these Psalms reflect the character of each of the twelve Imams.

We shall focus specifically on Psalm 74, which is, within this schema, prophetic of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (as). It is the third of the Psalms of Asaph.

1 ¶ <> O God, why hast thou cast us off for ever? why doth thine anger smoke against the sheep of thy pasture?

The maschil is a didactic Psalm, one for instruction. The instruction is not necessarily in the wisdom genre, nor even law. It can be instruction in prophecy in the sense of future events. The content of this Psalm appears strange as a subject of instruction, since it is couched in words of appeal to God to intervene in a difficult situation. In fact, this appeal to intervene is the anguish the Psalmist feels as he contemplates the future event about which he is instructing.

The word Asaph means a convener or collector, and is probably a title conferred on the one who convened the liturgical choir established by David (as), noted in 1 Chronicles 6:39. This may have been

taken as a personal name, or having been born to the post may have been given a name appropriate to his activity.

As the prophet contemplates the tragedy of Karbala', he exclaims these words in anguish. It is possible that David (as) wrote this Psalm, although many researchers suggest that it was written by Asaph. It is also possible that David (as) was an ancestor of Imam Husayn (as) through a marriage contracted when he was a refugee among the Arab Kedarites, from whom the prophet Muhammad (as) is descended.

Whether or not the prophet sees Imam Husayn (as) as a son, his anguish is similar to that of those who are horrified in all generations by the suffering he went through. The Hebrew expression does not imply that God is the originator of the tragedy or that it is a punishment. Such expressions in Hebrew merely refer to God's sovereignty as a basis for making an appeal for help.

2 Remember thy congregation, which thou hast purchased of old; the rod of thine inheritance, which thou hast redeemed; this mount Zion, wherein thou hast dwelt.

Verses 2 and 3 begin by giving a pre-Islamic context. The appeal is for God, at the event of Karbala', to remember the great things He did in ancient times to save His faithful people. The text, being didactic, uses the supplication language to insist on the need for divine deliverance. The rod of inheritance suggests that Imam Husayn (as) is descended from David (as).

Redemption does not imply saving from sin, but that the person involved is especially beloved by God. The reference to Mount Zion is probably specific, although the word itself could refer to any fortress. However, it is more likely that we should see here the idea that the place of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn thereby gains the same sanctity, at least in some sense, as the house of God, which at the time of David was Quds or Jerusalem.

3 Lift up thy feet unto the perpetual desolations; even all that the enemy hath done wickedly in the sanctuary.

The expression "lift you your feet" is again an appeal to save, but as a didactic Psalm its main import is to describe the situation as hopeless without divine intervention. The expression "perpetual desolations" aptly describes the tragedy of Karbala'. The Psalmist draws the divine attention to what the enemy has done to the "holy ones," and by so doing draws the attention of the listener as well.

4 Thine enemies roar in the midst of thy congregations; they set up their ensigns for signs.

Verse four refers to the great tumult of enemies brought against the congregation of Husayn (as). It mentions the ensigns or banners that they raised against him.

5 A man was famous according as he had lifted up axes upon the thick trees.

6 But now they break down the carved work thereof at once with axes and hammers.

Verses five and six refer graphically to the mutilation of the bodies at Karbala'. It uses a continuation of the temple figures of the preceding verses. It is not unknown to compare people to trees, especially wooden embellishments in the temple. The sanctuary or temple or house of God is made up of the "people of the house." By defacing the people of the house, the enemy was effectively carving up the house of God itself.

7 They have cast fire into thy sanctuary, they have defiled by casting down the dwelling place of thy name to the ground.

Verse seven is a graphic description of the vandalizing of the camp of Husayn (as).

8 They said in their hearts, Let us destroy them together: they have burned up all the synagogues of God in the land.

Verse eight is a prophecy of the fact that the enemies of the Imam (as) had firmly decided to destroy him and his companions altogether. The prophecy continues by saying that in so doing they had effectively, from their own point of view, destroyed every place of prayer on earth. This is an extension of the figures in verse six.

9 We see not our signs: there is no more any prophet: neither is there among us any that knoweth how long.

Verse ten is a lament referring to three aspects of Karbala'. At that point the banners of the Imam (as) were not to be seen flying. Secondly, there was no prophet. Thirdly, there was none among us "that knoweth how long." That is, the man of knowledge, the Imam, had been martyred. The verse begins with the fact that the colors were not flying, and mournfully goes on to the fact that the prophet (as) was no longer. Furthermore, the last living one of the holy house that the prophet had gathered under his mantle was dead. There was no longer anyone to know how long.

10 O God, how long shall the adversary reproach? shall the enemy blaspheme thy name for ever?

Verses ten and eleven refer to the condition of enemy dominance over the imamate. This began effectively with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (as) and will end at the return of the Mahdi (as). The condition is one of blasphemy.

Usurper rule is blasphemous, since no matter what position a ruler takes on the matter of the oneness of God, if he takes power for himself without divine authority, his action is blasphemous. This is the condition of all rulership that does not acknowledge the imamate.

11 Why withdrawest thou thy hand, even thy right hand? pluck it out of thy bosom.

Verse eleven uses rhetorical question and an imperative appeal to continue the prophecy in this didactic Psalm. There are two possible implications in this context. For God to pluck His hand out of His bosom means the rectification of what happened in Karbala'. It may refer only to the return of the Mahdi. On the

other hand, it could well refer to the resurrection and reappearance of Imam Husayn.

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