

Husayn the Imam: His Birth and Early Life

Husayn, the son of Ali and Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet, was born at the beginning, perhaps on the 3rd, of Sha'ban in the fourth year of the Hijrah. Only he and Jesus, son of Mary, we are told, were in the womb for only six months. Thus we can see that his birth was not an ordinary event since he is regarded by the Shi'i community as the third Imam after 'Ali, his father and al-Hasan his brother. His birth and indeed, his entire life cannot be regarded as belonging to the normal flow of human history. This fact must be clearly kept in mind as we are not dealing here with history as such but rather with a special man who is in reality outside the realm of natural human history; he provides one of the focal points of history itself.

Prophets, beginning with Adam, and after him Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Solomon and Jesus all were told about his birth and martyrdom at the spot of Karbala and each in turn shared his grief and wept for his death. Zachariah was also told of the "five people of the Kisa'" (cover) and of the death of Husayn. This was revealed to him as the five letters that precede Surah 19 of the Qur'an. These are *Kaf*, meaning Karbala; *Ha*, meaning the green crescent (*Hilal*); *Ya*, meaning Yazid; *'Ain*, meaning his thirst (*'Atashuhu*); and *Sad*, meaning his patience (*Sabruhu*)¹.

Then Zachariah begs God to give him, old as he was, a son who would also be **wrongly** martyred so that he could fully share in the tragedy of Karbala and in the grief of the Prophet and his family for the death of the saint. So the martyrdom of Husayn is often compared with that of John the Baptist (Yahya): "As God for the head of Yahya killed seventy thousand men, so He will for the head of Husayn and **seventy** thousand men by the Mahdi will come"².

The heavens cried, we are told, for the death of only these two men.

In such stories, we see an attempt at integrating Husayn into the history of humanity linking his death with the beginning as well as all with the important landmarks of history. God, our sources suggest, opened the history of martyrdom with Abel and closed it with Husayn³.

The grief of the holy family for Husayn is compared by many devotional traditions to that of Jacob for his son, Joseph. It is even greater, for Jacob was a Prophet who knew that his son was alive and yet lost his sight through weeping in longing for him. How then, it is asked by the only surviving son of Husayn,

could he not weep when he himself saw the cruel massacres of his father and his friends and family, his father who was the Imam and "master of the youths of paradise"[4](#).

Before the birth of Husayn, Gabriel (Jibril) came to the Prophet to announce the good news and to offer his condolences for the child's coming martyrdom. God, through the angel, gave the two Imams at their birth names similar to those of the children of Aaron (Harun). As Aaron was the legate (*Wasi*) of Moses, so 'Ali was the legate of Muhammad and the names of the children of the two legates must be similar.

On this realationship between a prophet and his legate (*wasi*) Ibn Shahrashub in *al-Manaqib* bases his proof of the Imamate of the sons of Ali after him and of Husayn and his children in particular. As Moses was greater than Aaron and yet God willed that the prophethood should continue in the progeny of the latter, so he also willed that the immamate be in the progeny of Husayn and not in that of his brother Hasan.

It is not possible, or even necessary, to enumerate here all the miracles and special favours that attended the birth of Husayn. A Huri of paradise, we are told, came and acted as midwife, and an angel reluctantly told Muhammad that his son and the son of his daughter, who was like the Virgin Mary in purity (*batul*) and favour with God, will be martyred. Such prophesies were told by the Prophet to his daughter who wept bitterly and wished that her son were not born. Thus in Husayn the Qura'nic verse

"his mother bore him painfully, and painfully she gave birth to him", (Quran XLVI : 14)

was fulfilled. Other angels came to seek intercession from the Prophet for the sake of the newborn child for a wrong they had done in Heaven. One of them became henceforth known in Paradise as the "*Mawla* (client) of Husayn". Both the names of these angels and the conflicting accounts regarding them suggest the artificiality of such tales. Nevertheless, such tales are quite common of the lives of saints and prophets everywhere.

Gabriel showed Muhammad the spot in which Husayn was to be martyred, and gave him a handful of its soil, and told him all the details of the tragedy. The handful of soil was kept in a bottle with Um Salamah (the Shi'i counterpart of A'isha, the wife of the Prophet) until the death of Husayn when the soil turned into blood. We shall often return to this interesting and rather important blood motif in this discussion.

The history of mankind, according to the Islamic view, is in essence the history of Divine Revelation. Hence, it begins with a prophet as Adam, the Father of mankind, is regarded. Its culmination was reached with the last of the prophets, Muhammad who is the "Seal of the 'Messengers of God'".

After him, the guideline of history, so to speak, is provided by the Qur'an, the eternal Word of God. Yet, the world cannot be left without an Imam who is the rightful interpreter of the revealed text, legislator and proof of God among His creatures. So before the birth of Hasan, the Prophet instructed his daughter Fatimah not to nurse him until he had returned from his journey. But as he was long in coming, the mother anxiously nursed the child who by this act lost the inheritance of the Imamate.

When Husayn was born the Prophet came to him, again after a long absence during which the child was not nursed, nursed him himself and whispered secret words in his ears that nobody could understand. Thus the child was initiated into the role of Imam. The Prophet nursed him for forty days by putting his tongue into his mouth, thus the flesh of the child grew out of the flesh of the Prophet as he was nourished not by his mother's milk but by the prophetic blood. In this we see the link, or rather continuity, between the apostolic cycle and the Imamatic cycle in its physical and most concrete form. We are told that the Prophet was once seen kissing the mouth of Husayn and saying:

"Thou art a Sayyid (lord or master), son of a Sayyid and father of Sayyids. Thou art an Imam son of an Imam and father of Imams. Thou art a Hujjah (divine proof), son of a Hujjah and father of Hujjahs." [5](#)

According to Twelver Shi'i doctrine, an Imam is designated not by human choice but rather by a revealed text (*nass*). Therefore in proof of the Imamate of 'Ali and his children many Qur'anic verses are believed to have been revealed and fulfilled. Among the many verses cited by our sources, perhaps the most famous are those of Surah LXXVI (Man). There we read

"they give food, for the love of Him, to the needy; the orphan, the captive: "We feed you only for the Face of God; we desire no recompense from you, no thankfulness." (LXXVI: 8,9).

This verse was fulfilled as on three successive days a poor man, an orphan and a captive came and begged them for alms. Each time they ate their few morsels of bread and left them hungry. These we are told were angels who came to try them and substantiate their Imamate. God then sent them heavenly food of which they ate for many days without it diminishing.

But of the Imamate of Husayn in particular and that of his descendants after him, we read that the Prophet said, after being the first to nurse him,

"God had willed it (that is the Imamate) to be in your descendants until the last day" [6](#).

In time of need, on the 'Id, when the holy family had nothing for the two young boys, Ridwan, the keeper of the gates of Paradise, brought them Paradisical clothes. Of Husayn himself, we are told that he performed many miracles: healing a sick man of a fatal fever, foretelling future events, and making the infant of an adulterous woman confess his mother's adultery. A group of men came to him to hear of the mysteries of the holy family (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and the secret knowledge of the Imams. He asked to speak to each man alone to see if they could bear such esoteric knowledge. The first man he spoke to for a short time lost his mind and went around as a madman, for the knowledge hidden from men could not be born by the uninitiated. The Imams indeed have the knowledge of all things and "with them is the knowledge of the Book" (*Ilm al-Kitab*).

Husayn was a paragon of courage, wisdom and magnanimity. He often gave all he had to the poor considering the poor to be more deserving of his own wealth than he himself. But he always gave to

those deserving both as to need and knowledge. This is illustrated by several stories where he and a needy man engage in edifying discourse intended to test the man's knowledge and piety saying that the Prophet declared that an act of good work (*Ma'ruf*) must be matched with knowledge (*Ma'rifah*)⁷. He is said to have made twenty-five pilgrimages on foot and prayed incessantly day and night. His ascetic life, patience and clemency, generosity and firmness of heart were proverbial. In knowledge, character and physical appearance, he was most like the messenger of God.

Another tradition in proof of his Imamate, and quite illustrative of later Shi'i doctrinal developments, is the following which I shall quote at some length. On the night of the heavenly journey (*Mi'raj*) the Prophet was told by God that the people of the Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*) are the best among men. Then God continued:

"Oh Muhammad, I directed at the earth a great gaze and from it I took one of my own names for thou; thus I shall not be mentioned in any place except that thou be mentioned with me. I am Mahmud and thou art Muhammad. I gazed once more at the earth and from that gaze I took another of my names for 'Ali; I am the most exalted ('Ala) and he is 'Ali (the exalted one)."⁸

Then God told Muhammad that He created him and the five and their progeny of Imams from a conventional of His own light. God then asked if Muhammad wished to see them and was told to look to the right of the throne where He saw similitudes of the twelve Imams standing in prayer. Among them the twelfth, the Mahdi, was like a great star in his splendour. God spoke again and said;

"Oh Muhammad these are the proofs (Hujaj) of mine in the world, and the Mahdi is the necessary (wajib) proof. He is the proof for their (the Imams') friends (*awlia*) and their avenger from their enemies"⁹

¹. Ibn Shahrashub, *Manaqib Ali Abi Talib*, 224.

². Ibn Shahrashub, *Manaqib Ali Abi Talib*, 224.

³. Turayht, *al-Muntakhab*, 32.

⁴. Al-Khawarizmi, *Maqtal al-Husayn* Vol, 1, 165–167 and Ibn Sharashub *op.cit.*, Vol, III, 43.

⁵. Al-Khawarizmi, *op. cit.*, 145

⁶. Ibn Sharashub, *op. cit.*, 151. For the discussion of the Qur'anic verse just quoted see also 215

⁷. Al-Khawarizmi, *op.cit.*, 146

⁸. Turayht, *op. cit.*, 106.

⁹. Turayht, *op. cit.*, 106.

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