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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*'. 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 albaqarah, 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 Hajji Shaykh 'Abbas Qummi, *marhum* Haji Shaykh 'Ali Akbar Nehawandi and *marhum* Hajji 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 <u>a</u> – 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 requirement for a speaker, orator, sermonizer, and *rawdeh-khwan*4 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 form 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 waiz; 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 wai'z 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 (\dot{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*'. 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 is 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 (\dot{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*' 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.6

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*' she would sow basil (*rayhan*) all along the way from *Karbala*' 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*' 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*'.

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' 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*⁷ 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 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 agohas 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 communiques 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 poetry8 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',9 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 sweater to me than honey!"

That is, "I haven't a desire that should be dearer and sweater 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 Qasims 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! 12

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.

1. 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.]

- 2. The professional maddah, himself somewhat of a rawdeh khwan, though mostly without a clerics 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.]
- <u>3.</u> 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.]
- 4. 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 Ahlal Bayt, the Prophet's family. Wa'iz, Dhakir, Minbari, etc. are other names for the professional rawdeh-khwan.
- 5. 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
- 6. Ibn Tawus, al-Luhuf, p. 47
- 7. 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.]
- 8. 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.]
- 9. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 44 p. 392, A'lam al-Wara, p. 234, al-Shaykh al-Mufid, Kitab al-Irshad, p. 231, al-Muqarrim, Maqtal 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 Maqtal 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 Maqtal al-Husayn, p. 332; and al-Tabari's Ta'rikh, vi, p. 257.

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