

Introduction

Human history may be regarded as a series of crises and revolutions, its most important stages written with the blood of martyrs. In the history of Islam, al-Husayn ibn 'Ali, the martyr of Karbala, wrote one of the most brilliant chapters; a chapter which still and after more than thirteen centuries, echoes in the minds and hearts of Muslims everywhere. It is remarked by a modern Muslim writer that with every Karbala Islam is renewed.

The martyrdom of Husayn is of great significance in Islamic history. This is because of the man himself; his character, piety, valour, magnanimity, patience, and perhaps most important of all, at least for Shi'is, his relationship to the Prophet Muhammad, and the latter's love for him. It is furthermore of great significance because of what this martyrdom itself meant for the religion of Islam in exposing the wrong and upholding the right through the sharp contrast between him and his followers on the one hand and his antagonists on the other. He rejected the rule of a man who was generally agreed not to have been fit to rule. In this sense he was a revolutionary, as indeed he is now regarded by contemporary writers¹.

The manner of his death, the cruelty of the massacre of his sons, relatives and small group of followers, gives him a high place among the martyrs. Finally, this act of sacrifice, patient suffering and agonised death, can be regarded as a redemptive act, as again it has been by Shi'i Muslims for centuries. A very good example of this is clearly illustrated in the Ta'ziya and the many suggestive themes and hagiographical myths and legends repeated over and over again in narrative stories (*Maqatil*) of Husayn's martyrdom. These, then, are the three main elements of the tragedy of Karbala: revolution, martyrdom and redemption; and this essay will focus mainly on the first two elements.

1. See for example "Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din", *Thawrat al-Husayn* and "Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad. Abu al-shohada Al-Husayn. Both works are highly analytical and must be read in full for a proper understanding of their views.

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