

Introduction

The importance of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn can be seen in the great attention paid to it by the early Muslim historians whose works have survived to the present day. Most of these historical works are of a general kind but the amount of space which they devote to this event indicates the momentous impact it had on Muslims.

The early historians whose works are my main concern all lived in the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic era. They based their works, in the main, on earlier monographs devoted entirely to the subject which only survived in these later works. Fortunately the bibliographical works of Ibn Nadim, al-Tusi and al-Najashi provide us with evidence of many of these earlier monographs.

We can also deduce them from the writings of later historians. In attempting to describe this historical tradition, I have divided the account into ten phases. In these phases, I will point out what survives from earlier writers and analyze the different presentations.

It will be necessary, first, to give a list of the monographs or lengthy accounts on the martyrdom of al-Husayn which we have some record of or which we can summarize:

- al-Asbagh b. Nubata¹ (d. second half of 1st cent. AH),
- Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju`fi² (d. 128),
- Ammar b. Mu`awiya³ (d. 133),
- `Awana b. al-Hakam⁴ (d. 147),
- Abu Mikhnaf⁵ (d. 157),
- Hisham b. al-Kalbi⁶ (d. 204),
- Al-Waqidi⁷ (d. 207),
- Nasr b. Muzahim⁸ (d. 212),

- Al-Mada'ini9 (d. 215)

These are all the early works which we know at present but there were certainly many more. We also know of monographs written later, but in the third and fourth centuries more general historical writing flourished and most historians preserved some account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn.

The main works which will provide the material for the investigation of this historical tradition are those of Khalifa b. Khayyat (d. 246), al-Baladhuri (d. 279), al-Dinawari (d. 282), al-Ya'qubi (d. 292), al-Tabari (d. 311), Ibn A'tham (d. 314), al-Mas'udi (d. 346), Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 356), and al-Mufid (d. 413).

In an attempt to reconstruct the tradition of historical writing about the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn, it seems appropriate to divide the narrative into distinct sections. Naturally differences between different writers may concern only some of these sections and reports if only some of these occur in early writings. I have adopted the following divisions:

- (i) the situation prior to the death of Mu`awiya after the death of the Imam al-Husayn;
- (ii) Yazid's succession and his attempt to get the Imam al-Husayn to pay homage to him, followed by the latter's retreat to Mecca;
- (iii) the letters to the Imam al-Husayn from Knfa;
- (iv) the mission of Muslim b. `Aqil to Kufa and the appointment and activities of Ibn Ziyad as governor of Kufa;
- (v) the Imam al-Husayn's journey to Karbala';
- (vi) negotiations with `Umar b. Sa'd and the Kufan army;
- (vii) the battle and the death of the Imam al-Husayn;
- (viii) the desecration of his head and the treatment of his family.

1. Al-Tusi, *Fihrist* (Mashhad, 1348sh), p. 63.

2. Al-Najashi, *Rijal* (Teheran, n.d.), p. 100.

3. This account was probably not a monograph but it represents a substantial, continuous piece. It is recorded in al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-al-Muluk* (Leiden 1881-3), 11, 227-32, 281-3.

4. That he had an account can be assumed from the extracts used by Ibn al-Kalbi in al-Tabari's version.

5. On Abu Mikhnaf, see U. Sezkin, *Abu Mikhnaf* (Leiden, 1971).

6. Most of his account is preserved by al-Tabari.

7. Ibn Nadim, *Fihrist*, tr. Bayard Dodge (New York, 1970), I, 215.

8. Al-Tusi, *op. cit.*, p. 347.

9. Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, tr. I. K. A. Howard (London, 1981), p. 300.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-serat/vol-12-no-1-spring-1986/arabic-accounts-al-husayns-martyrdom-dr-i-k-howard/introduction>