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Reciting Elegies in the Form of Prose

Some people ask: Why do the Shi'ahs recite elegies when mourning over the *awliya'* of Allah? Were these practices prevalent among the people who came before? Did the Prophet of Allah (S) and his *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) participate in these practices when mourning for great people? Did the Holy Prophet's (S) companions and those generations that came immediately after them take part in mourning practices or not?

With attention to history, we come to the conclusion that reciting prose was a common practice when mourning over the *awliya'* of Allah during the early days of Islam. We will now refer to some examples:

A. Reciting mournful songs for the *awliya'* of Allah

Upon study of the history of Islam, one can see that the Prophet of Allah (S) and his companions used to recite elegies. We will now refer to some examples:

1. The Holy Prophet (S) recited elegies in the form of prose

Halabli narrates from Ibn Mas'ud, "We did not see the Prophet of Allah weep for someone as much as he did for Hamzah. He put Hamzah's corpse in the direction of the *Qiblah* and stood over his deathbed. After that, he cried loudly and nearly passed out.

He recited, 'O uncle of the Prophet of Allah! O lion of Allah! O Hamzah! O doer of good works! O Hamzah! O repeller of sorrows! O supporter! O protector of the Prophet of Allah!'"¹

2. Fatimah al-Zahra (as) recited elegies in the form of prose

Anas ibn Malik recounts, "When I was returning from burying the Prophet of Allah, Fatimah looked at me and said, 'O Anas! How did you manage to drop clay on the head of Allah's Prophet?' Then, she started crying, and called out, 'O my father! You who accepted call of Allah! O my father! You who have gone to

the presence of Allah! O my father! You who answered call of Allah!”²

3. A'ishah recited elegies in the form of prose

Ibn 'Abd Rabbih says, “A'ishah stood beside the tomb of Abu Bakr and said, ‘The biggest affliction for me, after the loss of the Holy Prophet, is the loss of you’.”³

4. Imam al-Hasan (as) recited elegies in the form of prose

On his own chain of transmission, Tabari narrates that Khalid ibn Jabir quotes Imam al-Hasan (as), while reading out a sermon after the martyrdom of Imam 'Ali (as), saying,

«لقد قتلتم الليلة رجلاً في ليلة فيها نزل القرآن، وفيها رفع عيسى بن مريم عليه السلام وفيها قتل يوشع بن نون فتى موسى عليهما السلام، والله ما سبقه أحد كان قبله، ولا يدركه أحد يكون بعده. والله إن كان رسول الله صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وآله ليبعثه في السرية، وجبرئيل عن يمينه وميكائيل عن يساره، والله ما ترك صفراء ولا بيضاء إلا ثمانمائة أو سبعمائة أرصدها لخادمه.»

“You have killed a man on the night the Holy Qur'an was revealed, on a night that Jesus, the son of Mary, was taken to the skies, and Yusha' (Joshua) was killed. I swear upon Allah! No one outran him before him and no one can comprehend him after him. I swear upon Allah! The Prophet of Allah used to send the man you have killed tonight to lead wars, while the Archangel (Jibra'il) Gabriel was on his right hand side and the Angel Mika'il (Michael) was on his left hand side. I swear upon Allah! He did not leave behind any silver or gold, except seven or eight hundred *dinars* that he had put aside for his servant.”⁴

5. Women recited elegies mourning for Imam al-Hasan (as)

On his chain of transmission, al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi recounts that Umm Bakr ibn Muswir said, “When al-Hasan ibn 'Ali passed away, the women of Bani Hashim recited elegies while mourning over him for a period of one month.”⁵

B. Reciting elegies when mourning for Imam al-Husayn (as)

With reference to sources of Islamic *hadiths* (traditions) and history, we draw the inference that the Holy Prophet (S), the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as), the Prophet's companions, and even the generation which came after the Prophet used to recite elegies when mourning over Imam al-Husayn (as) during the days of their lives. We will refer to a few examples:

1. The Holy Prophet (S) recited elegies in the form of prose for Imam al-Husayn (as) even before the birth of Imam al-Husayn (as)

On his authentic chain of transmission, al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi quotes Umm al-Fadl saying, “One day, I came to the Prophet and said, ‘I dreamt a bad dream last night.’ The Noble Prophet (S) asked, ‘What did you dream?’

I said, ‘It was a bad dream.’ The Holy Prophet (S) insisted, ‘What did you dream?’ I said, ‘In my dream, I saw a part of your body being separated from you and being placed in my lap.’ The Prophet of Allah said, ‘You dreamt a good dream. If Allah so wills, Fatimah my daughter will give birth to a son who will be brought up in your lap.’

“Umm al-Fadl recounts, ‘Fatimah gave birth to al-Husayn, and just like the Noble Prophet had predicted, he was always on my lap. One day, I went to see the Prophet of Allah and placed al-Husayn in his lap. I looked at the Prophet (S) and I suddenly noticed that he was shedding tears.

I said, ‘O Prophet of Allah! May my father and mother be your ransom! What makes you cry?’ The Holy Prophet (S) answered, ‘The Archangel Gabriel came to me and informed me that my *ummah* will soon martyr him.’

I asked, ‘They will martyr this child?’ The Prophet (S) answered, ‘Yes!’ Then, he gave me a bit of the bloody soil of Imam al-Husayn which Gabriel had brought from the holy site of Imam al-Husayn’s (as) martyrdom’.”

This *hadith* has been recorded and recounted by a number of Sunni scholars, among them: al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Khatib Khwarazmi, Ibn al-Sabbagh al-Maliki, Ibn Hajar al-Hayaṡhathi al-Makki, al-Bayhaqi, Muttaqi Hindi.⁶

2. The Holy Prophet (S) recited elegies in the form of prose for Imam al-Husayn (as) in the Mosque after the birth of Imam al-Husayn (as)

Khwarazmi Hanafi narrates, “One complete year after the birth of Imam al-Husayn, twelve angels came to see the Noble Prophet while their faces were red and their wings were spread wide, and addressed him thus, ‘O Muhammad!

Soon it shall pass that which befell Habil (Abel) from the hands of Qabil (Cain) for this child of yours, and soon it shall pass that the reward which Abel was awarded will be awarded to him. Also, soon it shall pass that the same kind of punishment which was accorded to Cain be accorded to the one who kills him.

On that day, all the angels in the heavens descended upon the Prophet (S) and consoled him over the sufferings and martyrdom of al-Husayn (as). They also informed the Noble Prophet about the favors

which would be granted to al-Husayn (as). They gave him the holy clay which they had taken from the site of Imam al-Husayn's martyrdom.'

The Holy Prophet (S) said, 'O Lord! Make abject any person who abuses al-Husayn, and kill the one who kills al-Husayn. Do not let him live to enjoy the pleasures he seeks in his actions.'

When two complete years elapsed after the birth of Imam al-Husayn (as), the Holy Prophet (S) went on a journey. Along the way, he stopped and recited the Qur'anic verse,

﴿ إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ ﴾

'We are from Allah and to Him is our return.' 7

And his eyes filled with tears. I asked him, 'Why are you shedding tears?' He answered, 'The Archangel Gabriel was here. He was informing me about a place called Karbala near the river Euphrates where my child al-Husayn ibn Fatimah will be martyred.' It was asked, 'Who will martyr him?'

He (S) answered, 'A man by the name of Yazid, may Allah withdraw all blessings from him, and it seems as though I see his burial place in Karbala although they take his head as a gift to someone.' The Prophet cut his journey short and returned in a state of sorrow. He got on the pulpit and gave a sermon. He advised the people to fear Allah.

Then he said, 'O Lord! I have been informed by the Archangel Gabriel that my child will be made abject and killed...' 8

3. The Holy Prophet (S) recited elegies in the form of prose for Imam al-Husayn (as) in the house of Umm Salamah

On his authentic chain of transmission, Ahmad ibn Hanbal narrates from Anas ibn Malik saying, "The Angel of Rain got permission from Allah to descend upon the Prophet. Allah granted it permission. The Noble Prophet told Umm Salamah to take care not to let anyone come in. Umm Salamah recounts, 'Al-Husayn came and wanted to go in.

I stopped him from doing so. He ran away from me and went into the room where the Holy Prophet (S) was meeting the angel. He climbed on the shoulders and head of Allah's Prophet. The angel said to the Prophet, 'Do you love him?' The Noble Prophet (S) said, 'Yes, I do.' The angel said, 'Beware! Verily your *ummah* (community) will soon kill him.

If you wish, I will show you the place where he will be killed.' The angel clapped his hands and in the split of a second brought red clay from the site of Imam al-Husayn's martyrdom. Umm Salamah got

some of that clay and hid it. Thabit said that news reached them that this soil was from Karbala’.”⁹

4. The Holy Prophet (S) recited elegies in the form of prose in the house of ‘A’ishah

On his authentic chain of transmission, Ibn ‘Asakir narrates that ‘A’ishah recounted, “One day when the Prophet of Allah was asleep, al-Husayn suddenly entered and went towards him. I tried to keep him away from the Prophet (S). Afterwards, I got busy doing my own work and took no notice of al-Husayn. He went near the Prophet (S). The Holy Prophet (S) suddenly woke up from sleep in a tearful state.

I asked him, ‘Why are you crying?’ He (S) answered, ‘The Archangel Gabriel has just shown me the holy land where al-Husayn will be martyred. The wrath of Allah will be very intense on the person who sheds his blood.’ Then, the Holy Prophet (S) put out his hand and showed a handful of dirt and said, ‘O ‘A’ishah! I swear upon Him in whose Hands is my life (Allah), this affair makes me mournful. Who is this person from my *ummah* that will kill al-Husayn after I have gone?’”¹⁰

5. The Holy Prophet (S) recited elegies in the form of prose after the death of Imam al-Husayn (as)

On his authentic chain of transmission, Ahmad ibn Hanbal narrates that Ibn ‘Abbas said, “I saw the Prophet in a dream. He was standing in a sad and distressed way. He was soiled and was holding a glass full of blood in his hands.

I said, ‘May my father and mother be your ransom! What is this in your hands, O Prophet of Allah?’ He answered, ‘This is the blood of al-Husayn and his companions. I got it today.’ Ibn ‘Abbas says, ‘We calculated when that day was, and found out that it was the same day when al-Husayn (as) was martyred.’”¹¹

On their authentic chain of transmission, al-Tirmidhi and al-Hakim quote Salmi recounting, “One day, I saw Umm Salamah crying. I asked her, ‘Why are you crying?’ She said, ‘In my dreams, I saw the Noble Prophet (S) with clay on his head and beard. I asked, ‘What is this clay, O Prophet of Allah?’ He (S) answered, ‘A while ago I was witnessing the martyrdom of my al-Husayn.’”¹²

6. Imam ‘Ali (as) recited elegies for Imam al-Husayn (as)

a. On his authentic chain of transmission, Ahmad ibn Hanbal quotes Najja recounting that he and ‘Ali made a journey to Siffin. When they reached the valley of Niynawa, Imam ‘Ali (as) yelled and cried out aloud, “When you come next to the Euphrates River, bear patiently O Aba ‘Abd Allah!” I asked him, “What is the matter?”

Imam ‘Ali (as) answered, “One day, I went to see the Holy Prophet (S) while he was shedding tears. I asked, ‘O Prophet of Allah! Has anyone annoyed you? Why are your eyes tearful?’ The Prophet (S) answered, ‘Yes, a while before you came, the Archangel Gabriel left me. He came to inform me that al-

Husayn will be killed near the Euphrates River.’

Then, the Noble Prophet (S) asked me, ‘Do you want me to show you a part of the clay from the land where he will be killed?’ I said, ‘Yes I do.’ Then, he stretched his arm out and gave me a handful of soil. I could not stop my tears from flowing, and I broke down and cried.”¹³

b. On his chain of transmission, Nasr ibn Muzahim recounts that ‘Ali (as) reached the land of Karbala and temporarily stopped there. It was said to him, “O Amir al-Mu’minin! This place is Karbala.” The Imam (as) said, “This place has much pain and suffering.” Then, he pointed to a place and said, “That is where their blood will be shed.”¹⁴

c. On his authentic chain of transmission, Hafiz Tabarani narrates that Shayban said, “When ‘Ali reached Karbala, he got emotionally excited and said, ‘In this place lie martyrs comparable to none save the martyrs of Badr’.”¹⁵

7. Imam al-Sadiq (as) recited elegies in the form of prose

Ibn ‘Abd Rabbah narrates, “Imam al-Sadiq (as) stood by the tomb of his father and said,

«أشهد أنّك قد أقمّت الصلاة وآتيت الزكاة وأمرت بالمعروف ونهيت عن المنكر وأطعت الله ورسوله، وعبدته مخلصاً وجاهدت في سبيله صابراً محتسباً حتى أتاك اليقين، فلعن الله أمة قتلتك ولعن الله أمة ظلمتك، ولعن الله أمة سمعت بذلك فرضيت به.»

“I bear witness that verily you upheld the prayers, gave charity, and enjoined the lawful and forbade sinful acts. You obeyed Allah and his Prophet, and worshiped Him with sincerity of heart. You struggled in His way patiently with firm forbearance, and left everything to be judged by Allah. You reached the station of complete certainty. May Allah therefore curse the community which killed you, curse the people who oppressed you, and curse the nation who heard about your martyrdom and became pleased by it!”¹⁶

8. Umm al-Banin recited elegies in the form of prose

Abu al-Faraj Isfahani narrates, “Umm al-Banin was a mother of four sons who had all been killed. She used to go to the Baqi’ graveyard and recite heart-rending prose. The people would encircle her and listen to her heartbreaking lamentations. One of the people who used to come and listen to her was Marwan, and he used to cry upon listening to her sorrowful prose.”¹⁷

9. Zaynab (as) recited elegies in the form of prose

Abu al-Faraj Isfahani and other historians have quoted from Hamid saying, “When ‘Ali ibn al-Husayn Akbar made the intention to go on the battlefield, I saw a woman come out of a tent with such speed that it seemed as if the sun had just arisen. She repeated,

«يا حبيباه، يا بن اخاه!»

‘O my dear friend! O son of my brother!’

I asked people about her. They said, ‘She is Zaynab, the daughter of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib (as).’ Later, when ‘Ali Akbar was martyred, she came and threw herself on his corpse. Al-Husayn came and got her by the arm and returned her to the tent.”¹⁸

Tabari and other historians have recounted, “When the eleventh day of the month of Muharram came, Ibn Sa’d gave orders that the caravan of captives should leave Karbala. The wives of Imam al-Husayn (as), his children, his sisters and the daughters of the Imam were with Zaynab in the caravan.

They were moved around like Turkish and Roman captives. The women said, ‘By Allah, let us pass through the battle area of Imam al-Husayn (as).’ The captives were taken through the area where the bodies of Imam al-Husayn (as) and his companions had fallen. When the women saw the dead bodies, they cried out and wailed loudly and hit their faces.”

The narrator of this incident says, “I swear upon Allah! I cannot forget Zaynab who was lamenting with a broken heart and a desolate voice,

يا محمداه،! صلّي عليك مليك السماء، هذا حسينك مرمّل بالدماء، مقطّع
الاعضاء، وبناتك سبايا، الى الله المشتكى، والى محمد المصطفى والى علي
المرتضى والى فاطمة الزهراء، والى حمزة سيد الشهداء. يا محمداه،! هذا
حسين بالعرى، تسفي عليه ريح الصبا، قتيل اولاد البغايا،! واحزنه، واكرباه
عليك يا ابا عبد الله،! اليوم مات جدي رسول الله، يا أصحاب محمد! هولاء
ذرية المصطفى يساقون سوق السبايا.

‘O Muhammad! Upon whom the angels send blessings, this is your al-Husayn who is immersed in blood. His body parts have been torn to pieces and his daughters have been taken into captivity. I complain to Allah, to Muhammad al-Mustafa (the Chosen One of Allah), ‘Ali al-Murtada, Fatimah al-

Zahra and Hamzah, the Doyen of Martyrs! O Muhammad! This is al-Husayn left forlorn in this desert and wilderness while the wind blows over him. He has been killed by children born out of adultery. I seek safety from your sorrow and suffering, O Aba 'Abd Allah! Today, my grandfather, the Prophet of Allah, passed away. O companions of Muhammad! These are the progeny of al-Mustafa who are being taken as captives'."

Then, the narrator says, "I swear upon Allah! At that very moment, Zaynab caused everyone to cry, friend and foe alike."¹⁹

10. Ibn 'Abbas recited elegies in the form of prose

While addressing Yazid, Ibn 'Abbas said, "You want me to help you and you compel me to become friends with you while it is you who killed al-Husayn and the youths of 'Abd al-Muttalib. These people were the lights and bright stars of guidance.

The armies, acting under your direct orders, shed their blood and plundered their bodies. Their heads were separated from their bodies while they were thirsty."²⁰

11. Zayd ibn Arqam recited elegies in the form of prose

Ibn Hajar and others have narrated that, "When they brought the head of Imam al-Husayn before Ibn Ziyad in Kufah, he started hitting the teeth of Imam al-Husayn with a wooden stick. Zayd ibn Arqam was also present and said to Ibn Ziyad, 'Remove that wooden stick from your hand, I swear upon Allah! For a long period of time I saw the Prophet of Allah kiss between those two lips.' Then, he started crying."²¹

12. Hasan Basri recited elegies in the form of prose

Sibt ibn Jawzi narrates from Zuhri, "When the news about al-Husayn's death reached Hasan Basri, he cried so much that both his cheeks became wet. Then, he said, 'May the *ummah* (community) which killed the son of the daughter of the Prophet be despised. I swear upon Allah! The head of al-Husayn will return to his grandfather, and his grandfather and father will exact vengeance upon the son of Marjanah'."²²

1. Al-Sirah al-Halbiyyah, vol. 1, p. 461.

2. Al-'Aqd al-Farid, vol. 2, p. 31; Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 3, p. 197.

3. Al-'Aqd al-Farid, vol. 2, p. 37.

4. Tarikh Tabari, vol. 5, p. 157.

5. Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, p. 173.

6. Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 3, p. 176; Khwarazmi, Maqatal al-Imam al-Husayn (as), vol. 1, pp. 158-159; Al-Fusul al-Muhimmah, p. 154; Al-Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, p. 115; Al-Khasa'is al-Kubra, vol. 2, p. 125; Kanz al-'Ummal, vol. 6, p. 223.

7. Surat Al-Baqarah 2:156.

8. Khwarazmi, Maqatal al-Imam al-Husayn (as), vol. 1, p. 163.
9. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 3, pp. 242, 265.
10. Ibn 'Asakir, Mukhtasar Tarikh Damishq, trans. Imam 'Ali, hadith 229.
11. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 1, p. 283; Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 4, p. 397.
12. Al-Hakim al-Neyshaburi, Al-Mustadrak 'ala al-Sahihayn, vol. 4, p. 19; Mukhtasar Tarikh Damishq, vol. 4, p. 340.
13. Ahmad ibn Hanbal, Al-Musnad, vol. 2, pp. 60-61.
14. Waq'atu Siffin, p. 158; Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 1, p. 278.
15. Khwarazmi, Maqatal al-Imam al-Husayn (as), p. 162, as narrated by Tabrani.
16. Al-'Aqd al-Farid, vol. 2, p. 8.
17. Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 85.
18. Ibid., p. 115; Ibn Athir, Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh, vol. 4, p. 33; Tarikh Tabari, vol. 6, p. 256.
19. Tarikh Tabari, vol. 5, p. 465; Ibn Athir, Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh, vol. 4, p. 32; Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah, vol. 8, p. 189.
20. Ibn Athir, Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh, vol. 4, p. 50; Majma' al-Zawa'id, vol. 7, p. 25; Ansab al-Ashraf, vol. 4, p. 18.
21. Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, p. 118; Tadhkirah al-Khawass, p. 231; Tarikh Tabari, vol. 4, p. 349.
22. Tadhkirah al-Khawass, p. 240.

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