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Did Imam al-Husayn (as) have Prior Information about his Martyrdom?

One of the doubts often raised by skeptics in connection with the event of Karbala is about the Shi'ah belief that every *imam* is prescient so has knowledge of things that are hidden from most human beings.

They believe that the Imams are able to foresee and know exactly what is going to happen in the future. Skeptics dispute that if this Shi'ah assertion is true, then how can they justify Imam al-Husayn's (as) uprising against Yazid, the son of Mu'awiyah, when he knew very well that he was going to be martyred in the end? If Imam al-Husayn (as) had prior knowledge about his death, then why did he undertake the uprising?

The reality is that the above-raised question is not confined to Imam al-Husayn (as) alone. This question is valid about the martyrdom of all the Imams, because they all knew by what means they would be martyred but still proceeded towards their own martyrdoms willingly.

We will now discuss this topic in detail because it is an important one.

Evidence that the Imams knew of their martyrdoms

The topic of Imam al-Husayn's (as) knowledge about his own martyrdom is something that is not hidden to any researcher of history and can be proven in a variety of ways:

1. In general, all Shi'ahs believe that Imam al-Husayn (as) and all the other Imams had and have prior knowledge of events and knowledge about what would and will happen in the future. They acquire this knowledge from the Holy Prophet's (S) teachings and divine inspiration. One of the issues they have prior information about is their own martyrdoms. Although this topic has been a subject of exhaustive debate and dispute among Islamic scholars, we have shown the truth of this matter in a separate article entitled, "*Ilm-e Ghayb-e Imam*" (Hidden Knowledge of the Imam). 1

2. There are a lot of *hadiths* (traditions) recounted in books by the various sects of Islam which prove that the Holy Prophet (S) knew everything about the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (as) and the place and manner of the tragic event of Karbala. These traditions have been traced and seen in the words of Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali (as), Imam al-Hasan (as), Imam al-Husayn (as) himself, Umma Salmah, 'A'ishah, and others. There is no doubt that Imam al-Husayn (as) had heard these traditions and knew about them well.

Asma' bint 'Umays says, "I was Fatimah al-Zahra's attendant after the birth of Imam al-Husayn (as). One day the Holy Prophet (S) came and said, 'O Asma! Bring my child to me.' I wrapped a piece of cloth around al-Husayn (as) and took him to the Noble Prophet (S). The Prophet put him on his lap and started reciting the call to prayer [*adhan*] in his right ear and the prelude to prayer [*iqamah*] in his left ear."

She adds, "Then, the Noble Prophet started crying and said, 'Verily, soon it must be that a horrible event must come to pass for you. O Lord! Curse his killer!' Then, the Prophet turned to me and said, 'Do not inform Fatimah about this'."

Asma' recounts, "On the seventh day after the birth of Imam al-Husayn, the Holy Prophet (S) came and sacrificed a sheep for the blessed newborn.

He performed all the Islamic ceremonial acts according to Allah's laws such as naming the child and reciting supplications that are supposed to be recited for newborns on the seventh day. Then the Noble Prophet (S) put the newborn on his lap and said, 'O Aba 'Abd Allah! It is very hard and unbearable for me.'

Then, he cried. I said, 'My father and mother be your ransom! Why are you crying on this first important day of celebration after the birth of a child?' He answered, 'I am crying for this child of mine because a group of oppressors from the tribe of Bani Umayyah and other unbelievers [*kuffar*] will kill him. Allah will not permit me to intercede for these people on the Day of Resurrection'."²

Ibn 'Abbas says, "One day, Imam al-Husayn (as) was on the Prophet's lap. The Archangel Gabriel said, 'Do you love him?' The Noble Prophet (S) said, 'How can I not love him when he is the fruit of my heart?' Gabriel said, 'Verily, your *ummah* (nation) will kill him. Do you want me to show you the site of his martyrdom and grave?' Then, Gabriel brought out a fist full of soil full of blood and showed it to the Holy Prophet."³

3. It has been directly reported in various *hadiths* that Imam al-Husayn (as) knew about his martyrdom at Karbala. Although the chains of transmission for some of these *hadiths* have problems, some sections of these chains are authentic.

We will now refer to some of these *hadiths*:

Imam al-Husayn (as) said, "There is no believer who sheds tears for my martyrdom unless it serves as a lesson."⁴

One day, when Imam al-Husayn (as) was leaving the Ka'bah, 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr came to escort Imam al-Husayn (as) and see him off. 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr said, "O Aba 'Abd Allah! It is time for the *hajj*. Are you abandoning the *hajj* and going to Iraq?" Imam al-Husayn (as) replied, "O son of Zubayr! It is better for me to be buried next to the River Euphrates than next to the Ka'bah."⁵

In a letter to Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah, Imam al-Husayn (as) wrote, "*In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful*, from al-Husayn ibn 'Ali to Muhammad ibn 'Ali and before him Bani Hashim. Verily, whoever does not join me will not attain victory; *wa salam*."⁶

When Imam al-Husayn (as) reached the pass of Batan, he told his companions, "I do not see myself in a situation other than that I should be killed." They said, "How is that, O Aba 'Abd Allah?" He answered, "I saw a dream a while ago." His companions asked, "What did you dream?" He answered, "I saw dogs attacking me viciously..."⁷

4. When we refer to history, we come to know that some people tried to stop Imam al-Husayn (as) from going to Iraq. They reminded the Imam that if he undertook this journey, he would certainly be killed.

In a letter to Imam al-Husayn (as), 'Abd Allah ibn Ja'far said, "I request that you change your mind about going on this journey, because I fear that it will result in your death..."⁸

Ibn 'Abbas, Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah and Abu Bakr Makhzumi also tried to prevent Imam al-Husayn (as) from undertaking this dangerous journey, and warned him about the disloyalty of the people of Iraq.

5. Political and military analysis also confirms this issue because events which testify to this subject all prove that the way which Imam al-Husayn followed would end in his martyrdom. After hearing that Muslim ibn 'Aqil had been martyred, and also after Hurr ibn Yazid Riyahi had informed Imam al-Husayn (as) about 'Umar ibn Sa'd's intention, it was very clear for Imam al-Husayn (as) that his action could have no other conclusion other than martyrdom.

He did not require supernatural powers or inspiration to perceive this—common knowledge was enough for him to understand this issue.

Examination of the Qur'anic verse regarding self-destruction

We have gathered from the proofs previously presented that Imam al-Husayn (as) had knowledge about his impending martyrdom. But the question is: Does Islam allow a person to take measures which are sure to result in his own death? Wouldn't this be considered self-destruction [*tahlukah*] which is forbidden by the divine law [*shari'ah*] of Islam according to explicit texts of the Holy Qur'an?

Now, it is important to examine and analyze the following Qur'anic verse that talks about self-destruction, well-known as "the Verse of Self-destruction" [*ayah al-tahlukah*].

Allah, the Exalted says,

وَأَنْفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ وَأَحْسِنُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ
الْمُحْسِنِينَ

"And spend in the way of Allah and cast not yourselves into perdition by your own hands, and do good to others, surely Allah loves the doers of good."⁹

Response

Responding to this objection, we say,

Firstly, this verse cited as evidence pertains to charity (and spend in the way of Allah), and the intended meaning is that a person is not supposed to bring about his own perdition as a result of giving charity.

The aim of this verse is to say that man should not give charity to the extent that he himself becomes helpless and needy. Therefore, this Qur'anic verse is not relevant to the subject of martyrdom and being killed in the way of Allah.

Secondly, if the meaning of the above-mentioned verse could be extended to donating and pledging one's soul in the way of Allah, it would only forbid man from committing acts that are unfruitful and purposeless. This means that man should not commit acts which result in wasting and ruining his life without reason.

However, if exposing oneself to the danger of death leads to martyrdom which will in turn lead to the awakening of the society from indifference and apathy and the result is that a better society should be built from the radiance of this action, this kind of 'self-destruction' will never be considered as throwing oneself into perdition.

It is for this reason that Allah, the Exalted, in the Holy Qur'an interprets the death of martyrs not as death, but as 'spiritual life'.

Martyrs never die because with their apparent death in the form of a body without a soul, the blood of a martyr injects new life into society. Can it be said that a self-sacrificing man who dies fighting at the war front has thrown himself to perdition and destruction?

Were all those companions of the Holy Prophet (S) who were invited to *jihad* in the way of Allah cast into

perdition and destruction? Such an idea cannot be accepted.

Thirdly, what is the intent of “perdition by your own hands” as mentioned in the above quoted verse? If the purpose is worldly perdition and destruction, then the intended meaning of the verse is: do not let the corrupt and unbelieving people gain predominance over you.

If the purpose is about the hereafter (in the sense that, man does not respond positively to divine call and duty), then the meaning is that the one who abandons self-sacrifice and charity should be wary about his hereafter.

He should not throw himself into perdition and self-destruction because of not responding positively to the divine call.

The judgement of reason

This issue can also be approached from the viewpoint of reason and logic. Some say, “Reason judges that man should protect his life from every kind of danger and calamity. He should not go out looking for trouble exposing himself into self-destruction.”

As has been mentioned earlier, logic and reason reproach taking measures that will lead to self-destruction and perdition when the result is not beneficial. However, if the dead man is in essence alive, his spirit remains in the society, and he has spiritual life which goes with receiving sustenance directly from Allah, common sense and logic cannot consider such a death to be ‘self-destruction’.

On the contrary, refraining from such a death would be an unwise or foolish thing opposed to reason.

Measures taken by the Imams regarding the means of their martyrdoms

In a previous discussion, although we considered the topic of Imam al-Husayn’s (as) divine knowledge about his martyrdom, it is possible that this question has not been fully answered as regards the other Imams.

The question which remains is, “Why did the Imams take measures which they knew would finally lead to their own deaths? For example, if they knew that the food they were taking contained deadly poison which was meant to kill them, why then did they eat that food?”

Do their actions, just like the uprising of Imam al-Husayn (as), result in blessings and graces which persuaded them to undertake such action? Considering that he knew that Ibn Muljam was lying in ambush for him in the Mosque of Kufah, why did Imam ‘Ali (as) go to the mosque? And why did Imam al-Hasan (as) and Imam al-Rida (as) eat the food they were given although they knew that the food they were taking was poisonous? Is this not suicide? Does this not amount to self-destruction?

Response

There are a number of ways to respond to the above question:

1. Regarding the nature of the knowledge of the Imams, there is debate about whether their knowledge is intuitive [*huduri*] or acquired [*husuli*]. In addition, there is a question of whether the knowledge of an *imam* depends upon his will or whether it is always present with him without requiring him to use his will or exert any effort to get it? That is to say, do the Imams know things whenever they wish to know them, especially in external issues?

According to the opinions of some religious scholars and on the authority of *hadiths*, the knowledge of the Imams about the hidden [*ghayb*] is dependent upon their own wills [*mashiyyah*].

2. Even if the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) have complete awareness about events that will come to pass, and supposing their understanding about the reality of things and events is intuitive knowledge, not dependent on their own free will, they still cannot trespass or violate the destiny of Allah because they depend on Allah and follow His divine will and decree in all matters.

Shaykh Yusuf Bahrani, in the book "*Al-Durrah al-Najafiyyah*", says, "The reason the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) were pleased to be killed either by poison or by the sword, or by means of any other hardship imposed upon them by the oppressors, even when they had the power to repel these events, is that they knew that their actions were pleasing to Allah, the Exalted.

Therefore, their actions do not amount to self-destruction and perdition. The mentioned verse is about an instance where Allah has forbidden undertaking a certain action. On the contrary, we know that the measures undertaken by the *Ahl al-Bayt* (as) were all a source of Allah's satisfaction."

3. Because the martyrdoms of none of the Shi'ah Imams was futile or fruitless, and because their martyrdoms all had significant social benefits, we can therefore compare their martyrdoms with the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (as).

Their martyrdoms: a) helped people recognize their enemies better; that is why some of their martyrdoms resulted in uprisings and revolts against usurper governments; b) were causes of social awareness in the *ummah* during their time and awoke the people from indifference and apathy; c) caused people gather together to commemorate their death anniversaries, and in this way helped people get to know and understand their virtues and spiritual perfections better. Gathering to commemorate the death anniversaries of the Infallible Imams (as), in itself, has a lot of blessings and graces for the awareness of the Muslim World in any age or time.

Because the origin of their martyrdoms is in itself a great blow against the body of Islam and the Muslims and is a cause of deprivation of the favors and graces resulting from their presence in the *ummah*, it is therefore appropriate to hold ceremonies to commemorate them and participate in mourning

ceremonies.

4. ‘Allamah Hilli, commenting on the action Imam ‘Ali (as) took by going to the Mosque of Kufah where he would become martyred on the nineteenth of the holy month of Ramadan, says, “It is possible for me to say that Imam ‘Ali (as) knew about his martyrdom on that night. He knew where he was going to be killed.

But his duty cannot be compared to our duty; there is a difference between what measures he is charged with undertaking and the measures we are charged with undertaking. It is possible that giving the blood of his heart generously in the way of Allah is incumbent for him, in the same way that steadfastness is incumbent upon the holy soldier who is fighting in Allah’s way, even though his steadfastness may lead to his death.”¹⁰

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1. ‘Ali Asghar Ridwani, *Shi‘ah–shenasi va Pasokh be Shubahat (To Know the Shi‘ahs and Responses to Doubts)*.
 2. *Hayat al–Imam al–Husayn (as)*, vol. 1, p. 98; *Al–Hakim al–Neyshaburi, Al–Mustadrak ‘ala al–Sahihayn*, vol. 3, p. 176; *Ibn ‘Asakir, Mukhtasar Tarikh Damishq*, vol. 13, p. 62.
 3. *Majma‘ al–Zawa‘id*, vol. 9, p. 62.
 4. *Saduq, Al–Amali*, majlis 28, hadith 7.
 5. *Kamil al–Ziyarat*, section [bab] 23, hadith 5.
 6. *Ibid.*, hadith 15.
 7. *Ibid.*, hadith 14.
 8. *Hayat al–Imam al–Husayn (as)*, vol. 3, p. 24.
 9. *Surat al–Baqarah* 2: 195.
 10. *Mir‘at al–‘Uqul*, vol. 3, p. 126, as narrated by ‘Allamah Hilli.

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