

Chapter 6: Divine Knowledge Possessed By the Prophet and the Imams

Imam Al-Husain's Foreknowledge that he would be Killed

Question

When Imam al-Husayn left Medina on his last and fateful journey, did he know that it would end in his martyrdom? In other words, did he set out on this journey with the intention to be killed or with the intention to establish a just Islamic state?

Answer

According to Shi'ah doctrine, the Master of Martyrs, Imam al-Husayn, was the third Imam and the Prophet's successor to Universal Authority [*al-wilayah al-kulliyah*]. It is an article of Shi'ah faith—supported by doctrinal and rational reasoning—that the Imam possesses divine knowledge, which God reveals to him. Below I will examine how this knowledge affects the Imam's actions, especially with respect to Imam al-Husayn.

The Imam possesses knowledge of all that takes place in the world. This knowledge is granted by God to the Imam as His vicegerent. This knowledge transcends time and the sensible: the Imam knows the supersensible as well as the sensible, past and future as well as present. Numerous *hadiths* in the Shi'ah corpus support this doctrine, and so from a doctrinal point of view, it is indubitable.

One may object that a number of Qur'anic verses affirm that knowledge of the Unseen is exclusively God's. But the Qur'an also furnishes the answer to this question:

عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَىٰ غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا

إِلَّا مَنْ أَرْتَضَىٰ مِنْ رَسُولٍ....

“[God] is the Knower of the Unseen; He does not disclose His Unseen to anyone, except to an apostle He approves of...”¹

This verse indicates that the other verses in question mean that God has this knowledge by His Essence and without the mediation of any other agent, whereas the Prophet, the Imams, and whoever else may possess this knowledge do so by God’s command.² God bestowed it to the Prophet and thereafter to his rightful successors, the Imams.

There are a number of *hadiths* to the effect that the Prophet conveyed this knowledge to Imam ‘Ali, and Imam ‘Ali in turn conveyed it to his successors. But this is a truth that rational reasoning also corroborates. The Imam, as the most perfect creature, is the highest manifestation of all Divine Names and Attributes.

This means that, like God, he possesses an all-inclusive knowledge. By his elemental essence [*al-wujud al-‘unsurī*], he can know whatever he wishes. (This complex doctrinal question is obviously beyond the scope of this book. I have provided a thorough elucidation of it elsewhere.)

Based on what was said above, the Imam’s knowledge is perfect; it is not affected by error. The source of this knowledge is the Secure Tablet³, in which God’s definite will as to the destiny of all things is recorded. Thus, the *Imam* knows all things as they are willed by God, and so he cannot in any way manipulate events using this knowledge.

As such, this knowledge transcends the domain of religious obligation.⁴ (Obligation is relevant only when one has a choice as to perform or not to perform a certain action. When, however, one knows that a certain event is inevitable, there is nothing he can do about it: the event will take place as determined by God’s existential will.⁵)⁶

The Imam knows the Divine decree but acts as his apparent duties—in so far as they are determined by apparent and external factors—require, while he is pleased at heart with what God’s will has in store for him. This is evident in the last words Imam al-Husayn uttered before he was slain; lying in his own blood, he said, “I am pleased with Your decree, obedient to Your command. There is no one worthy of worship but You.”⁷ Also, in the sermon he delivered before leaving Mecca, he declared “We, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, are pleased with what pleases God.”⁸

Imam al-Husayn acted in accordance with what the circumstances required, but this does not mean that he was unaware of his fate.⁹ One may ask why Imam al-Husayn sent Muslim ibn ‘Aqil to Kufah in spite of his knowledge that Muslim would be slain? Why did he leave Mecca? If in fact he knew that his fate was death, he should not have embarked on that journey, for the Qur’an says,

وَلَا تُلْقُوا بِأَيْدِيكُمْ إِلَى التَّهْلُكَةِ.....

“...do not cast yourselves with your own hands into destruction...”¹⁰

But the answer to all these questions is clear once the above explanation is understood.

The Qur’an states that the Prophet (and so by extension the Imams) led their life in this world, for the most part, as others do. They, as all other human beings, are possessed of freewill and perform their actions, normally; based on the knowledge they obtain through common means.

Thus, the Imam, like any other individual, assesses the harm and benefit in a course of action based on normal human knowledge, and once he is decided, he acts. If the circumstances are right, the Imam will succeed, and if not, he will, at least apparently, fail. This is because he is also bound by religious obligation. And as the leader, both spiritually and politically, of the Islamic nation, he is duty-bound to strive to spread the truth and uphold the cause of Islam.

A Historical Background on Imam Al-Husayn’s Uprising

One of the darkest and harshest periods for the *Ahl al-Bayt* and the Shi‘ah was Mu‘awiyah’s reign, which spanned two decades. After securing his absolute rule over the entire Islamic empire through deceitful stratagems, he turned his attention to consolidating his power and destroying the prominent status of the *Ahl al-Bayt* among Muslims. His intention, however, was not merely to destroy their prominence. He wished to erase their name completely. For achieving his purpose, Mu‘awiyah was willing to utilize every possible measure—bribery, intimidation, torture, etc.

To this end, he persuaded a number of the respected companions (by various ways) to forge *hadiths* that praised the companions but damaged the status of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. By his command, the Master of the Faithful was dishonored from every pulpit, as if it were a religious rite. Mu‘awiyah’s agents—chief among them, Ziyad ibn Abih, Samarah ibn Jundab, Busr ibn Artat—were constantly on the lookout for *Ahl al-Bayt* sympathizers: when identified they were frequently killed.

These measures implanted in Muslims an aversion toward ‘Ali and the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and the true believers who cherished the love of the *Ahl al-Bayt* were forced to conceal their feelings. (The gravity of the situation can be grasped by noting that in the ten years of al-Husayn’s imamate—which to the exclusion of the last several months coincided with Mu‘awiyah’s rule—not a single *hadith* was narrated from him.¹¹)

Despite this repressive atmosphere, however, Imam al-Husayn avoided open conflict with Mu‘awiyah. For understanding why he chose to remain silent during Mu‘awiyah’s reign, one need only to consider the following reasons. First, Mu‘awiyah had made al-Husayn pledge to refrain from challenging his rule.

With this pledge in effect, he would have lacked public support to challenge Mu'awiyah.

Second, Mu'awiyah had established a respectable reputation for himself as a companion of the Prophet and a confidant of the three caliphs prior to 'Ali; so much so that he secured for himself the honorific title "Uncle of the Faithful" [*khal al-mu'minin*]. Third, considering Mu'awiyah's exceptional talent at deceit, it would have been very likely, if Imam al-Husayn had risen in open conflict, that he would contrive a plot to murder Imam al-Husayn through his agents then feign sympathy with the *Ahl al-Bayt* by killing the murderers.¹² (After all, it was Mu'awiyah who enticed Imam al-Hasan's wife into poisoning her husband.) It was for these reasons that Imam al-Husayn abstained from action during Mu'awiyah's reign.

Mu'awiyah's last blow to Islam was transforming caliphate rule into hereditary monarchy. He announced his son, Yazid, as the successor to the throne. But unlike his father, Yazid had no interest in even feigning a pious appearance. Yazid openly engaged in revelry: he brought musicians and dancers to his court, served wine, and made playing with monkeys a court game.¹³

Yazid knew that if Imam al-Husayn pledged allegiance to him, it would be the end of the *Ahl al-Bayt's* prominence. So he was intent on obtaining Imam al-Husayn's allegiance, no matter what it took. Imam al-Husayn, on the other hand, was aware of Yazid's intentions. As the true leader and guide of the community of Muslims, Imam al-Husayn had to resist pledging allegiance to Yazid, for that would have been a fatal blow to Islam. But this resistance would cost al-Husayn his life, for Yazid wished one of two things. Preferably he wanted al-Husayn to acquiesce. If, however, al-Husayn resisted, Yazid wanted him dead and out of the way.

Imam al-Husayn was aware that resistance would lead to his death. But the interests of Islam required that he defy Yazid's authority. And this was the course on which he decided. He had no fears and was determined to fulfill his obligation.¹⁴ Ensuing events vindicated Imam al-Husayn's decision.

The brutal and ruthless way in which Imam al-Husayn and his companions were killed proved their innocence and rightfulness. Twelve years of political unrest followed, causing bloodshed and shaking the foundations of the oppressive regime. It was in this way that Muslims came to know the *Ahl al-Bayt*.

When relative calm returned during the imamate of Imam al-Baqir and Imam al-Sadiq, Muslims, in general, and the Shi'ahs, in particular, flocked to Medina to quench their souls from the fountainhead of light and truth—the *Ahl al-Bayt*. By sacrificing himself, Imam al-Husayn nourished the hearts of the faithful of all time with the love of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, a love that has been consuming an ever-increasing number of hearts over the past 14 centuries.

(Interestingly, Mu'awiyah had foreseen this end. On his deathbed, Mu'awiyah advised Yazid to refrain from taking action against al-Husayn if he refrained from pledging allegiance to Yazid. Mu'awiyah's advice to Yazid was not out of sympathy for the *Ahl al-Bayt*; rather, he knew that by killing al-Husayn, Yazid would immortalize him as a martyr and strengthen the status of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, and that would

undermine the Umayyad rule.)

Thus we can conclude that Imam al-Husayn started his movement knowing that it would end in his martyrdom. He had realized that it was his duty to stand up against Yazid's corruption and tyranny, though at the expense of his life. His duty was to awake the Muslim community from its slumber, and for this end, he chose the most effective method.

It is, however, important to note that all through his journey, Imam al-Husayn acted with wisdom, not rashness. He would take such steps as the circumstances required, and it was for this reason that he changed tactics in the various stages of his movement.

When the governor of Medina notified him that Yazid expected him to vow allegiance, he fled to Medina under cover of darkness. He took refuge in Mecca, God's sanctuary, remaining there until the *hajj* season, when he received information that Yazid had ordered his spies to kill al-Husayn during the *hajj*. By that time, people from Kufah had written thousands of letters to him, urging him to move to Kufah. Kufis vowed to remain faithful to him.

To assess Kufis' sincerity, Imam al-Husayn sent his cousin, Muslim ibn 'Aqil to Kufah. After testing the waters in Kufah, Muslim wrote to al-Husayn that the people of Kufah were ready to support him and that he should set out at once. It was with these preparations that Imam al-Husayn decided to leave Mecca for Kufah. (An additional reason was that al-Husayn wished to preserve the sanctity of the House of God, which had never been defiled by bloodshed.)

But en route to Kufah, news reached Imam al-Husayn that his cousin had been killed. Since the Kufis had betrayed him and, consequently, establishing a just rule was no longer possible, Imam al-Husayn realized that the only way left to revive Islamic values was by shedding his blood. With this determination, al-Husayn made it clear to those who had accompanied him that if they remained with him they would be killed. Thus, the Imam marched toward his blessed end, where he and his companions were to be slain and his family taken captive.

1. Surah al-Jinn 72:26-27.

2. It is important to note that this pertains to all aspects of existence, not just knowledge of the Unseen. God is the only Self-sufficient and Necessary Existent. As such, all other beings depend on Him for everything, and so even our sensory perception depends on Him. [trans.]

3. "Secure Tablet": An allusion to Qur'an 85:22. [trans.]

4. Religious precepts address the human being in so far as he is capable of fulfilling what it requires of him. It is unreasonable that a precept should obligate a task that the human being is incapable of executing. Now, with knowledge of the Unseen, the Imam knows what is going to happen, for instance, but he can do nothing to change it, for that is what God has willed. This is what 'Allamah means when he says that this knowledge transcends the domain of religious obligation. [trans.]

5. This does not imply determinism. To say that an event has been decided by God is not to submit to determinism. God's will is such that it also encompasses human being's free will. That is, God knows eternally what every individual will do of

his own accord. Thus, human volition also figures in.

6. Existential will contrasts with God's legislative will. The latter designates the precepts He ordains; the former designates His will as the Creator and Lord of the world. When God wills something existentially, it will happen. But when He wills something legislatively, it means that He commands the human being to comply voluntarily; the human being may comply or disobey. [trans.]

7. Ma'ali al-Sibtayn, vol. 2, p. 21.

8. Ibn Tawus, Maqtal al-Husayn, p. 38, Beirut: Mu'assisah al-A'lami li al-Matbu'at, 1993.

9. In fact, on a number of occasions, Imam al-Husayn alluded that his end and the end of those who remain faithful to him was martyrdom. See Ibn Tawus, Maqtal al-Husayn. [trans.]

10. Surah al-Baqarah 2:195.

11. There are hadiths narrated from him by the subsequent Imams but not by Muslims from without the Ahl al-Bayt. This historical fact demonstrates how isolated the Ahl al-Bayt were.

12. I think the reason why 'Allamah claims that this scenario would have been likely is that Mu'awiyah had executed a similar plot in the death of 'Uthman, the third caliph. Sensing the rising tension around him, 'Uthman asked Mu'awiyah for help. In a delayed reply to 'Uthman's request, Mu'awiyah sent an army toward Medina, the seat of caliphate, but ordered the general in charge of the army to set up camp in a certain location and wait for further orders. Despite 'Uthman's desperate entreaties, Mu'awiyah procrastinated until 'Uthman's death was announced. After getting news of 'Uthman's death, he called his army back and pledged to avenge 'Uthman's death. [trans.]

13. Of course, all this pointed to Yazid's lack of faith in Islam, which he shamelessly expressed after the incident of Karbala. As the prisoners of Karbala and the heads of the martyrs were being led into the city, Yazid reputedly heard a crow croak. As if inspired by the crow, he uttered this line of verse: "The crow croaked so I said, whether you are willing to say it or not, I settled my scores with the Prophet." And hours later when the prisoners were brought to his court, he sang the following line: "Hashim only played with power; otherwise there was no message [from the Unseen] and no revelation was revealed." [Hashim is the Prophet's great grandfather, after whom the Hashimite clan of Quraysh is named. The Hashimite clan of Quraysh, to which the Prophet belonged, and the Umayyad clan, to which Mu'awiyah and Yazid belonged, were enemies of old. [trans.]

14. A hadith reports that Imam al-Husayn saw the Prophet in a dream. The Prophet told him, "God wishes to see you slain." Another hadith reports that when some sympathizers tried to dissuade the Imam from challenging Yazid, the Imam said, "God wishes to see me slain." These hadiths should be construed in line with what was said above concerning the Imam's knowledge of the Unseen. Hence, "God wishes" in these hadiths refers not to God's existential will but to His legislative will. That is, the reason why the Master of Martyrs chose the path of martyrdom was that it was his duty and he wanted to fulfill his duty, not that he wanted to be killed because death was inevitable.

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