

1

Introduction: The Karbala Story and Shi'ite Identity

Muḥarram Celebration in Pakistan

The taxi stops at Hathi Chowk, the Elephant Crossing, in Saddar Bazaar, Rawalpindi. At this place three narrow streets meet, and a small open place has been made between the houses. In the centre of the crossing, there is a small traffic island with a roof. I have always imagined that it was once made for a policeman to stand there and direct the traffic, but I have never seen it used. Now, a microphone is placed there, and loudspeakers are put on the roof. I step out of the car, and immediately see my friends who have placed their stand just where one of the streets opens up to the square. They greet me and offer me a chair to sit on. There is an atmosphere of expectancy, even tension, among the people gathered. A number of policemen, some of them heavily armed, are posted around the square, prepared to take action to uphold order.

I ask my friend Noman why he and his family, who are Sunni Muslims, have put up their stand to distribute drinks during the principal Shi'ite festival. He replies by telling me the story of imam al-Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet Muḥammad, who was attacked and besieged by the forces of the caliph Yazīd in the desert at Karbala in Iraq. No one gave them water. It is sunna, a sacred tradition to follow, to make up for that sin by giving water to those who want to commemorate the death of al-Ḥusayn and his followers. Later I learnt that, especially in South Asia, al-Ḥusayn is highly revered also among Sunnis.

Today is 9 Muḥarram, and for the first time I am about to see this Shi'ite ritual that I have read about so many times during my studies in Uppsala. Some one hundred metres away, by the Shi'ite mosque, we see black and red standards raised, and behind them a procession is formed. We hear a rhythmic pounding sound, and Noman and I go towards it to find out what is going on. The sound comes from a large group of men who are beating their bare chests, following the rhythm of other men's chanting. Nearby a circle of people forms. The people around the circle are rhythmically shouting: 'Ya Ḥusayn! Ya Ḥusayn!' In the middle of the circle, we see two young boys – they cannot be more than ten to twelve years old – who are facing each other, holding whips made of chains that end with sharp blades in their hands. They wear no shirts. As the shouts from the people surrounding them increase in intensity, they begin to flagellate themselves with the chains, making the blood run on their backs. After half a minute or so they cannot endure it any longer, and cease while the shouts become less intense. After a little while the shouts, 'Ya Ḥusayn! Ya Ḥusayn!', grow stronger again, and the boys begin whipping themselves once again. They constantly keep mutual eye contact, as if to detect if the other one will give up first. Noman and I leave the place and return to the stand, where my friends are distributing water and lemonade in small bowls of clay to thirsty people passing by.

After a while the procession draws closer. At Hathi Chowk it stops. Many people sit down, and others come to our stand to get a drink. I see a number of men whose backs are nothing but blood from the whipping. Two or three have fainted from pain and loss of blood and are taken to a nearby hospital. Someone begins to speak in the microphone at the traffic island. After that, another person sings a song about the tragedy at Karbala, and then a mullah begins to preach. I don't understand what he is saying, but every now and then the whole crowd replies 'Ya 'Alī!', or 'Ya Ḥusayn!'. At the periphery the women cry. The atmosphere is tense.

I can understand how easy it would be to mobilise people through the powerful symbolism that is found in this story. That was exactly what happened during the revolution in Iran in 1979–80, when the Shah was given the role of the evil caliph, Yazīd, with the people taking the role of

al-Ḥusayn, so that martyrdom became a legitimate means in the struggle against the evil regime.

About half an hour later the sermon is over, and the crowd begins to dissolve. A part of the procession continues, but most of the people return to their homes. Suddenly I see, at the end of the procession, a beautifully adorned white horse. My friends explain to me that it symbolises Dhū al-Jināḥ, the horse that al-Ḥusayn was riding during the battle of Karbala. Many people, mostly women, gather around it. The horse is covered with a bloodstained white sheet and adorned with garlands and flowers. On the saddle a long stick is raised, at the top of which there is a metal hand. The five fingers of the hand symbolise the five members of the *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet: Muḥammad himself, ‘Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. The women who crowd around the horse pray and cry, and many give money to the functionaries who stand around the horse. I am told that prayers uttered close to Dhū al-Jināḥ are answered by God more often than not. The procession and the horse move on, and we return to the stand, which is now disassembled for the night. Next day it will be put up there again, to cater for the people of the new, even larger processions to be held on the day of al-Ḥusayn’s death.

This event, which I witnessed in Rawalpindi, Pakistan, in June 1993, made a strong impression on me. I was both fascinated by the frenzy and the devotion the people displayed and ill at ease at the blood and the pain.¹ What I experienced then in Pakistan, and even more so after the celebration of Muḥarram in 1993,² made me realise how deeply the story of al-Ḥusayn and his death at Karbala is rooted in the world-view of Shi‘ite Islam and in the consciousness of Shi‘ites. It constitutes the centre of a ‘paradigm’ that Shi‘ites carry within themselves; a paradigm of symbols, stories, rituals, attitudes and values that relate not only to al-Ḥusayn and his martyrdom, but to

¹ The conclusion I drew when watching the flagellated bodies was that the ritual must be very painful. Actually, participants in the flagellation rituals often say that it is physically painless (Schubel, *Religious Performance*, 146).

² In South Asia, the processions commemorating the killing of al-Ḥusayn are often called Muḥarram after the month in which it takes place. In other parts of the Shi‘ite world, other names are used, for example ‘Āshūrā’, after the day on which it occurred, or Ta’ziya, connoting ‘mourning’.

the whole of the family of the Prophet and their suffering. Thus, the celebrations described above have their background in the decades after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 11/632.³ The Karbala story has been continually retold ever since among Muslims of different religious affiliation, though especially among Shi'ites, and it is written down in countless versions from the early centuries of Islam to today. In the following section, I will first give a brief historical background to the Karbala tragedy, then summarise the story and its immediate consequences as they are retold by the Muslim historian al-Ṭabarī, the main source of this study.

The Karbala Story and its Context

The Setting

Shi'ism is not, and has never been, a uniform movement. What eventually coalesced into the three main branches of Shi'ism, Zaydism, Ismailism and Twelver Shi'ism, was from the earliest years an amorphous movement consisting of numerous groups with varying religious and political agendas. The issue that united all who called themselves Shi'ites was the idea that 'Alī b. Abi Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muḥammad, was the rightful successor, the legatee (*waṣī*) of the Prophet. They were known as adherents of *shī'at 'Alī*, 'the party of 'Alī', one of several religio-political groups that emerged after the death of the Prophet.⁴ The Shi'ites were in unceasing opposition to other contestants for political power. The first rulers, who were regarded as usurpers, were the three caliphs who followed the death of Muḥammad: Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthmān, who ruled from Medina. 'Alī became the fourth caliph, but his rule was contested by several non-Shi'ite groups, among them the Umayyad family, who after the murder of 'Alī in 40/661 gained the upper hand in the struggle and set up their rule in Damascus.⁵

³ The year of the Prophet's death has been contested in some modern research. See Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*.

⁴ Crone, *Political Thought*, 20; Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Shi'i Islam*, 11. On the use of this name for the sprawling and amorphous movement, see below in this chapter.

⁵ Other groups such as the Kharijites were also fierce enemies of the Shi'ites, and, as we are told, it was in fact a Kharijite who killed 'Alī. On the Kharijites, see Hagemann, *The Kharijites*.

It seems that ‘Alī was very early – probably already in his lifetime – held in considerably higher esteem than as a mere political leader by some Shi‘ite groups, in that they regarded him as ‘a semilegendary figure of heroic and even sacred dimensions’.⁶ This veneration of ‘Alī was often referred to as *dīn ‘Alī*, ‘the religion of ‘Alī’.⁷ Furthermore, immediately after his murder, some Shi‘ites, in particular the group that came to be called the Saba’iyya, either denied that he had died or expected him to return from death to set things right in the world.⁸ In fact, the preaching of the Prophet Muḥammad was already eschatological in character, and up to the beginning of the eighth century apocalyptic ideas flourished in this part of the world.⁹ In some groups, notably those that held ‘Alī in high regard, such ideas were very prominent. So, for example, Sean Anthony has demonstrated that among the Saba’iyya, the idea of ‘Alī’s return from death – his *raj‘a* – had obvious messianic overtones.¹⁰ Many of these apocalyptic ideas were also common in Jewish, Christian and other apocalyptic thought at the time, and had been appropriated and adapted by the Saba’iyya movement. Anthony maintains that several themes can be historically verified as belonging to this group: the denial of the death of ‘Alī and the belief in his return, his messianic victory over the enemies of God while carrying the lost staff of Moses, and the identification of him with the apocalyptic beast (*dābba min al-ard*) mentioned in Qur. 27:82.¹¹ But, Anthony further argues,

⁶ Amir-Moezzi, ‘*Dīn ‘Alī*’, 44.

⁷ Amir-Moezzi, ‘*Dīn ‘Alī*’. See also Madelung, *Succession*, 178–9. The view that ‘Alī had a special position in the minds of many of his followers from a very early stage is advanced by several scholars; see e.g. al-Qadi, ‘The Term *Ghulāt*’, 295–301; Kohlberg, ‘*Ṣaḥāba*’, 145–6; Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 33–69; Anthony, *The Caliph*, *passim*.

⁸ Al-Qadi, ‘The Term *Ghulāt*’, 300–1; Anthony, *The Caliph*, 313–17; Amir-Moezzi, ‘Muḥammad le paraclet’, 44–5.

⁹ See e.g. Arjomand, ‘Apocalypticism’, 238–57; Crone, *Political Thought*, 75–80; Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 78–82; Anthony, *The Caliph*, 224–5; Shoemaker, *Death of a Prophet*, 118–96. By ‘apocalyptic’ I mean ideas about the imminent end of the world and the signs preceding it.

¹⁰ Anthony, *The Caliph*, 195–225. Throughout this book, I use the terms ‘Messiah’ and ‘messianic’ in an eschatological sense for the redeemer who will return in the end times to set the world right. I do not include Judaeo-Christian notions of an anointed king.

¹¹ Anthony, *The Caliph*, 218. The notion of the beast is probably an influence from apocalyptic texts in the Bible (Dan. 7:1–8; Rev. 13). Unlike the beast in Christian tradition, however, the Islamic *dābba* is often regarded as benevolent; see Arjomand, ‘Apocalypticism’, 239–40. Hence it was possible to identify it with ‘Alī.

the full extent of Jewish influence (or Christian, Zoroastrian and Manichaean for that matter) on early Islam cannot be localized or limited within the confines of a singular sectarian trend ... These sorts of influences were, rather, pervasive and much more mutual and dialectic than has, until very recently, been appreciated ... These symbols, mythemes, prophesies, etc. were 'in the wind' and somehow – the fog of historical distance hinders our ability to find these intermediaries – they came to be attached to the person of 'Alī and the hopes and ambitions of his partisans.¹²

Thus, ideas that can be called 'messianic' were associated with 'Alī from a very early period, and although many Shi'ites objected to them, at least in their more extreme forms, as can be seen from the sources, they were quite widespread.¹³

After the murder of 'Alī, many Shi'ites regarded his eldest son, al-Ḥasan, as the new leader of the community, the imam. The political power, however, at this time belonged to the Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya, who made a deal with al-Ḥasan that he would not meddle in politics. On the death of al-Ḥasan (around 49/669–70), 'Alī's second son, al-Ḥusayn, at first stuck to his brother's treaty with Mu'āwiya.

The Karbala Story

Following the death of Mu'āwiya in 60/680, al-Ḥusayn, who resided in Medina at the time, refused to pledge his allegiance to Mu'āwiya's son Yazīd and slipped away to Mecca. While he was in Mecca, the people of Kufa sent him letters and envoys, imploring him to come and lead them in an insurrection against the governor. Al-Ḥusayn replied by sending his cousin Muslim b. 'Aqīl as his representative to find out if the situation was as they described. When Muslim arrived in Kufa, a great number of people declared their allegiance to al-Ḥusayn. Muslim informed al-Ḥusayn that he had massive support and that it was safe for him to come to Kufa.

In the meantime, the ruthless 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād was installed as the new governor in Kufa. He infiltrated the Shi'ite community and was informed about Muslim's whereabouts. He caught and threatened to kill Hānī' b. 'Urwa,

¹² Anthony, *The Caliph*, 224–5. But cf. Cameron, 'Late Antique Apocalyptic', for a more cautious approach to the phenomenon of apocalypticism in Late Antiquity.

¹³ On this issue, see now also Amir-Moezzi, 'Muḥammad le paraclet'.

Muslim's host in Kufa. Upon hearing this, Muslim gathered his supporters and marched on the governor's palace in an attempt to release Hānī', but his supporters gradually leached away. Muslim was arrested; both he and Hānī' were executed by Ibn Ziyād. Those who had pledged their allegiance to al-Ḥusayn were bribed or intimidated into withholding their support from him.

Al-Ḥusayn, however, had already left for Kufa, unaware of developments there. Since the people of the town were notorious for abruptly switching allegiance, he was warned several times against going to Kufa, both before his departure and on the journey; but al-Ḥusayn went on. Even when information about the true situation in Kufa and the death of Muslim reached him, he decided to continue.

As al-Ḥusayn and his group (perhaps a hundred persons, including men, women and children) approached Kufa, they were stopped by a vanguard of the governor's army, about one thousand men.¹⁴ The commander of the force was al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Tamīmī. Al-Ḥurr asked al-Ḥusayn to come with him to Kufa and submit to the governor, but al-Ḥusayn refused. The two groups faced off against each other, but occasionally gathered and prayed together, with al-Ḥusayn leading the prayer. Al-Ḥusayn also gave several speeches to the people of the Kufan army and to his own followers. Finally, al-Ḥusayn began to move with his group, and al-Ḥurr and his force followed them closely. Al-Ḥurr was clearly distressed at the situation he was in, since his esteem for al-Ḥusayn as the grandson of the Prophet was very high. Al-Ḥurr then received a letter from the governor, commanding him to stop al-Ḥusayn's group and cut them off from all access to water. They were brought to a halt at Karbala close to the Euphrates, but were prevented from reaching the water.

Eventually, the main army of 4,000 men, headed by 'Umar b. Sa'd, joined al-Ḥurr's force. Al-Ḥusayn tried to negotiate with 'Umar to settle the matter peacefully. The latter was prepared to accept al-Ḥusayn's offer to pledge his allegiance to the caliph Yazīd in Damascus, to return to Mecca, or to go somewhere else, but the governor, Ibn Ziyād, demanded that al-Ḥusayn must come to Kufa and give his pledge of allegiance to Yazīd there, before

¹⁴ Numbers of participants in armies or other groups are impossible to verify and must be regarded with suspicion. Very often they were greatly exaggerated. The point here is to show that al-Ḥusayn's group was greatly outnumbered by the enemy.

the governor. When al-Ḥusayn refused to do that, 'Umar was forced to fight him. As the army was set in motion against al-Ḥusayn, al-Ḥurr deserted and joined al-Ḥusayn.

The battle began. At first it proceeded through several duels, which are related in great detail, but the Kufan commanders realised that al-Ḥusayn's fighters were killing at least as many as were killed of their own group, and prohibited any further single combat. The Kufans then attacked on a larger scale. The bravery of al-Ḥusayn and his relatives and followers, their fierce defence, their thirst and desperation, but also their faith and determination to do God's will, are vividly described. Likewise, the cowardliness and wickedness of the enemy, who did not refrain from attacking and killing the family of the Prophet – including al-Ḥusayn's infant son – and their followers is related in great detail. Finally, al-Ḥusayn himself was killed, and his head was cut off. The head, together with the survivors from the family, was brought before Ibn Ziyād in Kufa and then sent to the caliph in Damascus. Finally, al-Ḥusayn's family were released and allowed to return to Medina.

The Immediate Aftermath

Immediately after the death of al-Ḥusayn, many of those who had pledged to support him but had failed to come to his aid felt a deep sense of guilt for their betrayal. One of the first expressions of this guilt is seen in the movement of the Tawwābūn, 'the Penitents'. Some of the men who had failed to support him gathered and decided that they would take up arms and go against the Umayyad army: to kill those who had killed al-Ḥusayn, or to be killed themselves in the attempt to avenge him. The Tawwābūn were well aware that this act would in all probability lead to their own deaths, but they regarded it as an act of martyrdom in the cause of loyalty to the Prophet and his family, and believed it would cleanse them of their sin. They set out in 65/684 and made a short stop at al-Ḥusayn's grave at Karbala. Eventually they met the Umayyad forces at 'Ayn al-Warda in northern Iraq, and were defeated. Among the few survivors, some felt great shame that they had not died in the campaign.

On the wider political arena, things became increasingly disturbed at this time. Soon after the death of the Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya in 64/683, the Meccan aristocrat 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr conquered all of the

Hijāz, Southern Iraq and the Western areas of Iran. From Mecca he claimed the caliphate for himself and installed governors in the important towns of his empire, including Kufa. Thus, for about a decade (64–73/683–692), there were two caliphates competing for power over the entire region: one in the south with Ibn al-Zubayr as caliph in Mecca, and one in the north where members of the Umayyad family in Damascus claimed the authority for themselves.¹⁵

At this time, the Shi'ite leader al-Mukhtār b. Abī 'Ubayd rose up and set off a rebellion against Ibn al-Zubayr's governor in Kufa. He claimed to act on behalf of a third son of 'Alī, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya (see figure, 'Genealogy of the imams'). Al-Mukhtār and his followers exacted a terrible revenge on those Kufans who had taken part in the Karbala battle against al-Ḥusayn, even managing to kill the former Umayyad governor of Kufa, 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, who had been responsible for the campaign against al-Ḥusayn. The rebellion was thus directed against both the competing caliphates: that in Mecca and that in Damascus. Finally, in 67/687, Ibn al-Zubayr's troops were able to quench the insurrection, kill al-Mukhtār and regain Kufa. The vengeance of al-Mukhtār has often been regarded as a kind of conclusion to the whole Karbala affair. As we will see, however, the story about Karbala continued to live and grow.

Previous Research on Early Shi'ism and the Karbala Story

The development of early Shi'ism has been the subject of a large number of studies, and I therefore confine the brief survey that follows to a few important works in order to display the variation in approaches to this fascinating subject and to position the present book in relation to previous scholarship. The footnotes throughout the book as well as the bibliography, however, reveal that I am also indebted to many other scholars and their studies.

On a general level, the relevant parts of Patricia Crone's *Medieval Islamic Political Thought* are very useful regarding the development of Shi'ism in the setting of emerging Islam. As the title of her book indicates, its emphasis is on the religio-political ideas that were formed in the early centuries, and thus discussion of the role and function of the imam in relation to non-Shi'ite

¹⁵ Hawting, *First Dynasty*, pp. 46–57; Robinson, *Abd al-Malik*, pp. 35–39.

political ideas is in the foreground. More focused on Shi'ism in particular are Hossein Modarressi's *Crisis and Consolidation*, Andrew Newman's *Twelver Shiism* and Najam Haider's *Shi'ī Islam*. Though large parts of their books discuss the emergence of Shi'ism up to the fourth/tenth century, the authors treat this subject from slightly different angles. Modarressi and Newman are mainly interested in the emergence of Twelver Shi'ism, but while Modarressi focuses on the development of the rational imamology up to the 'consolidation' of Twelver Shi'ism in the fourth/tenth century, Newman's description is formed by political and legal aspects of the same era and extends further forward in time. Haider's book is unique in that he discusses the three main branches of Shi'ism that have survived until today – Zaydism, Ismailism and Twelver Shi'ism – including, but not confined to, their interlaced beginnings.

The earliest forms of Shi'ism in the first/seventh century are discussed by Wilferd Madelung, Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Sean Anthony from quite different perspectives. Madelung's *The Succession to Muḥammad* is a reinterpretation of relevant texts in the Qur'an and in the historiography from about the time of the Prophet and the first four caliphs. Madelung discusses the early caliphate and the questions of succession much in line with the Shi'ite view, namely that the family of the Prophet should have inherited his political authority and his right to give spiritual guidance. Amir-Moezzi in some articles focuses on the cult of 'Alī in early Shi'ism. Sean Anthony's book, *The Caliph and the Heretic*, deals with the 'extreme' Shi'ite group, the Saba'iyya. My description of early Shi'ism in the previous section is largely based on these two scholars' works. Anthony furthermore shows that many of the beliefs of the Saba'iyya continued to thrive and develop in the ensuing movement of the Kaysāniyya, beliefs which later came to influence various other Shi'ite groups including the Imamiyya. Some of these ideas can also be found in the slightly later texts studied by Mushegh Asatryan in *Controversies in Formative Shi'ism*, a study of the theology and cosmology expressed in early texts from *ghulāt* ('extremist') groups. Maria Massi Dakake's book, *The Charismatic Community*, is a penetrating study on the concept of *walāya*, an important and semantically rich concept in Shi'ite theology that can be translated as 'loyalty and love' for the Prophet and his family. Other works on early Shi'ite theology mainly discuss its rational aspects, for example the relevant parts of

Josef van Ess's magisterial *Theologie und Gesellschaft*,¹⁶ as well as articles by Tamima Bayhom-Daou,¹⁷ besides the already mentioned work of Modarressi.

Amir-Moezzi has also written several books and articles on the esoteric Imami Shi'ite theology, which developed in the second to fourth/eighth to tenth centuries. His sources for these studies are hadiths, the legal traditions that purportedly originate with the imams. His most important studies are *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism* and *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam*, the latter a collection of a number of previously published articles on the subject. In his *The Silent Qur'an and the Speaking Qur'an*, he studies early Shi'ite conceptions of the Qur'an and its interpretation. Another work on early Shi'ite Qur'anic exegesis is Meir Bar-Asher's *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmi Shiism*.

The legal development in second/eighth century Shi'ism has been discussed by Najam Haider in his *The Origins of the Shi'a*, where he analyses early hadiths and compares various groups' attitudes to some legal problems. The sources that he uses – the early hadiths – also show that at least by the turn of the second/eighth century, we can definitely speak of a Shi'ite identity. Roy Vilozy's *Constructing a Worldview* is a close study of the earliest extant collection of Shi'ite hadiths from the end of the third/ninth century. This and slightly later collections of hadiths have been investigated by Andrew Newman in *The Formative Period of Twelver Shi'ism*, where he traces the development of theological and legal matters in these collections according to changes in society in the fourth/tenth century. Like Newman, Edmund Hayes also works from a sociohistorical perspective in his book *Agents of the Hidden Imam*, in that he considers the institution of the middlemen between the Shi'ite believers and the increasingly inaccessible imams in the third/ninth and fourth/tenth centuries.

Some of the studies mentioned above contain sections on the Karbala event and its consequences,¹⁸ but very few lengthy studies of the Karbala story

¹⁶ van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. I, 233–403.

¹⁷ Bayhom-Daou, 'The imām's knowledge'; 'Hishām b. al-Ḥakam'.

¹⁸ So, for example, Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 81–90. Haider's introduction to Shi'ism is, to my knowledge, the only study which compares the attitude to and significance of the Karbala story in the three main branches of Shi'ism (*Shi'i Islam*, 66–81).

and the rituals associated with it could be added to the list.¹⁹ The majority of earlier studies give a more or less detailed, usually quite uncritical paraphrase of the story, and then go on to comment on it from the various perspectives of the authors. Thus, more than a hundred years ago, Julius Wellhausen wrote a chapter on al-Ḥusayn and the battle of Karbala in his book *The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam*.²⁰ After summarising Abū Mikhnaḥ's account in al-Ṭabarī's version, he went on to comment on Abū Mikhnaḥ's style and use of his sources, before discussing the personalities and sentiments of the characters involved. Here, Wellhausen's interest in hard power politics is clearly manifested. In his eyes, al-Ḥusayn was a selfish weakling, a dreamer who accomplished nothing through his futile attempt to grab the power: 'Like a child he stretches out his hands to the moon.'²¹ Wellhausen's sympathies were all with the Iraqi governor, 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād, the official who was immediately responsible for al-Ḥusayn's death. 'With few means but with clear intent and firm hand, [the governor] understands the solution to the difficult problem ... He did his duty and in no wise exceeded the limits.'²² In the meeting between these two antagonists, then, what happened was only to be expected: 'Like a clay pot [al-Ḥusayn] clashed against the iron 'Ubaydalla.'²³

This unsympathetic attitude towards al-Ḥusayn is unusual among later writers.²⁴ A comprehensive summary of the story is that written by Laura Veccia Vaglieri in her article on al-Ḥusayn in the second edition of the *Encyclopedia of Islam*.²⁵ Veccia Vaglieri first relates the story of the battle of Karbala, before discussing 'The legend of Ḥusayn', that is, the ascription of marvels and miracles to him.²⁶ At the end of the article the author repudiates the views of Wellhausen and others with similar views. Referring to the speeches of al-Ḥusayn reported by the sources, she concludes that he was 'a man impelled by an ideology (the institution of a régime which would fulfil

¹⁹ See also Hussain, 'Developmental Analysis', 1–6.

²⁰ Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 105–20.

²¹ Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 116.

²² Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 115.

²³ Wellhausen, *Religio-Political Factions*, 116.

²⁴ But see Lammens, 'Al-Husain', published slightly later than Wellhausen's work.

²⁵ Veccia Vaglieri, 'Ḥusayn'.

²⁶ Veccia Vaglieri, 'Ḥusayn', 612–14.

the demands of true Islam)', albeit 'stubbornly determined to achieve his ends, as in general are all religious fanatics'.²⁷

Mahmoud Ayoub's book, *Redemptive Suffering in Islām*, has become a classic and has probably been one of the most influential sources for a Western understanding of the Shi'ite sentiment. While the central purpose of Ayoub's book is to describe and discuss the devotional aspects of the 'Ashūrā' ritual (that is, the later interpretations of the Karbala drama), the author also deals with the 'historical' aspects of the person of al-Ḥusayn and the events at Karbala. Ayoub dismisses the less sympathetic interpretations of al-Ḥusayn and describes him as 'a man of piety, idealism, nobility of character and ascetic detachment from the world'.²⁸ He maintains that a careful study of the sources confirms the view that al-Ḥusayn had the right to rebel against 'the illegitimate usurpation of power by ... Yazīd' since it violated the ideals of Islam.²⁹ Although Ayoub is careful to state in his book that political factors were also involved in the event, he argues that these alone cannot explain the behaviour of al-Ḥusayn. In addition to these external factors, he identifies three internal motives for al-Ḥusayn's martyrdom: 'His idealism, the belief that his fate was predetermined and the certainty he seems to have had that he either had to submit or be killed'.³⁰ Here, like the previously mentioned scholars, Ayoub attempts to understand al-Ḥusayn as a person and his emotions, rather than regarding the sources as later generations' interpretations of an earlier event.³¹ In other parts of the book, however, Ayoub makes a masterly study of the later, devotional interpretations of the Karbala story.

Boaz Shoshan dedicates a chapter of his monograph, *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*, to the Karbala story.³² He investigates the story as an example of how the historian al-Ṭabarī (d. 301/923) used his material in his large historiographical compilation *Al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*. Shoshan's interest, then, is not so much the Karbala story as such, but al-Ṭabarī's rendering of it. To Shoshan, al-Ḥusayn's death in al-Ṭabarī's rendering is a tragedy through and through.

²⁷ Veccia Vaglieri, 'Ḥusayn', 614.

²⁸ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, 93.

²⁹ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, 93.

³⁰ Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*, 103.

³¹ This is no less true of Syed Husain Mohammad Jafri's depiction of Ḥusayn and the Karbala Drama in *Origins*, 174–221.

³² Shoshan, *Poetics*, 233–52.

It contains two different strands that, in a complex manner, work together to convey a tragic effect: on the one hand al-Ḥusayn's determination to follow God's will and go to Kufa against the advice of his friends, and on the other his attempt to escape his destiny when he realises that he is threatened by death.³³ In this way, Shoshan concludes, the Karbala story 'comes pretty close to the classical definition of tragedy, save for the element of *hubris*'.³⁴

My own PhD thesis was a structural analysis of the Karbala story, using a method inspired by the French structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss.³⁵ My conclusion was that al-Ḥusayn is portrayed as a mediator in the structuralist sense of the word. In his attempt to save the emerging movement of believers from destruction, he must have recourse to violence and rebellion. Thus on the one hand he sunders the community of believers, but on the other, he does so in order to save it. Like Shoshan, I work with al-Ṭabarī's rendering of the story without analysing its components.

A study that is closer to the one I present in this book is the doctoral thesis of Ali J. Hussain.³⁶ The intention of his thesis, he writes, is to

trace the development of depictions of the battle of Karbala' through the centuries, and to study through critical analysis of the earliest sources how later Shī'īs developed elaborate rituals commemorating Husayn's martyrdom and his final battle, and how the literate class of Shī'ī '*ulamā*' scholars added to and institutionalized these rituals as an integral part of Shī'ī cultural and religious identity.³⁷

Hussain's work is interesting in that it lists and uses a large number of sources for the Karbala story, it takes into consideration the emergence of rituals in the history of the Karbala story, and, unlike the present study, it also analyses the Umayyads' propaganda, which foregrounds their view of the matter. In my opinion, however, considering the nature of early Islamic historiography as it is preserved for us, there are two methodological problems

³³ Shoshan, *Poetics*, 235–6, 245.

³⁴ Shoshan, *Poetics*, 252.

³⁵ Hylén, 'Ḥusayn, the Mediator'.

³⁶ Hussain, 'Developmental Analysis'. Unfortunately, I became aware of this work too late to make much use of it in the present study.

³⁷ Hussain, 'Developmental Analysis', 3.

with Hussain's thesis. To simplify matters, this corpus consists of three 'levels' of historiography, which correspond to three phases of development (see Chapter 2): (1) short anecdotes, *khabars*, that were normally transmitted orally and were assembled and arranged into (2) 'monographs', coherent narratives on specific subjects (such as the Karbala event), which were in their turn compiled in (3) large historiographical works that are partly still extant.³⁸ The first problem with Hussain's thesis is that his analyses are based on the chains of authorities, *isnāds*, that precede the *khabars*, and he seems to generally accept the historicity of these chains of transmission.³⁹ As I will argue in Chapter 2, I find such a method untenable, at least without a much closer scrutiny of each of the elements of the *isnāds*.⁴⁰ Second, Hussain disregards the 'second level' of the corpus, the monographs, and goes straight to the large historiographical compilations by historians like Ibn Sa'd (d. 230/845) and al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). The monographs were certainly in a more or less edited state at the stage when they were incorporated in the larger works, but since the same monographs were used in several of the larger compilations, it is possible to compare the different versions and get a fairly good understanding of what the originals looked like.⁴¹ Therefore, in my view, Hussain is overlooking almost a century of development of the Karbala story in claiming that the earliest extant narrative of the Karbala event is Ibn Sa'd's *Kitāb al-Tabaqāt*, rather than going back about a century to the monographs analysed in Chapter 3 of this book.⁴²

In the analysis of the Karbala story in Chapter 3, two articles are of particular importance: I. K. A. Howard's 'Husayn the Martyr' and Antoine Borrut's 'Remembering Karbalā'. As I will discuss these studies thoroughly in that chapter, I leave them for now, as I also set aside discussion of the extremely few studies that exist about the movement of the Tawwābūn for analysis in Chapters 5–8.

³⁸ Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 18–38.

³⁹ An example of Hussain's method is found on pp. 46–56 of his thesis.

⁴⁰ As I will show in Chapter 2, Harald Motzki developed a method for analysing *isnāds* that has been used with some success, not least by Haider in his *Origins*. The method has been criticised, however, and if accepted, its application demands a much more detailed study of each *isnad* and *matn* than that given by Hussain.

⁴¹ On the problem of using the term 'original' in this context, see Chapter 2, n. 36.

⁴² Hussain, 'Developmental Analysis', 18.

Purpose and Outline of the Present Study

This book attempts to discuss how and why Shi'ites in the first centuries after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad came to perceive themselves as a community distinguished from others who also regarded themselves as believers.⁴³ As we have seen, this not only was a question of religious belief, but also involved various political, social and economic matters. While there are a number of studies on this process regarding the formation of Islam and its various sub-groupings, similar developments have been much more closely observed in other contexts, in particular Christianity. In a study of the emergence of Christian communities in the first centuries CE, the biblical scholar Burton Mack uses the concept *social formation* to refer to the behavioural aspects of the creation of group identities. Closely related to social formation, Mack suggests, is an intellectual process in which the group creates a discourse about its own position in society and the world at large. This intellectual process Mack calls *mythmaking*, and he continues:

Social formation and mythmaking are group activities that go together, each stimulating the other in a kind of dynamic feedback system. Both speed up when new groups form in times of social disintegration and cultural change ... Social formation and mythmaking fit together like hand and glove.⁴⁴

The above survey of previous scholarship shows that many other historians have discussed the social formation and mythmaking of Shi'ism in its many appearances from various angles (though none of them has used these terms). In this book, I will focus on a specific aspect of Imami/Twelve Shi'ite mythmaking which has hitherto been largely neglected: the Karbala story with its concomitant rituals. By focusing on this story, I do not mean to downplay other factors. Political, social and ideological issues other than the Karbala story are of course also crucial in the formation of Shi'ite identity. Yet the story did play an important role in the formation of Shi'ism, and its function in this process will be the main focus of this study.

⁴³ An earlier and now classical attempt in the same vein is Hodgson, 'Early Shī'a'.

⁴⁴ Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?*, 11; and see also Mack, 'Redescribing', 255. For a historical overview of the concept of social formation, see Mack, 'Social Formation', 283–8.

Modern historians have described the Karbala battle as little more than a skirmish. Gerald Hawting writes: 'It seems unlikely that at the time itself the affair had very much importance for the Umayyads. Husayn's force had been small and was suppressed with relative ease.'⁴⁵ According to Donner, 'the snuffing out of this little insurrection had been an easy task for 'Ubayd Allah's much larger force'.⁴⁶ M. A. Shaban even talks of the Karbala affair as 'a routine police operation'.⁴⁷ Yet, among Shi'ites, the Karbala story within a short time had developed into an account of a cosmic battle between the good and the evil powers of the universe. It was an important factor in giving the (Twelver) Shi'ites, in the midst of their social and political vicissitudes, a place not only in this temporal world, but in a divinely ordered cosmos, and thus legitimated the formation of their self-identity vis-à-vis other Muslims. How come, then, that the story of this particular battle, which was similar to innumerable battle stories from early Islam, developed into a myth of universal significance? This is the main problem on which I wish to concentrate in this book.

Social formation and mythmaking are never-ending processes. As circumstances change, so do the ways in which a group constitutes and regards itself: it may consolidate its borders, it may split or totally dissolve, it may emphasise different aspects of its mythology and thus vary in the way it thinks of itself in relation to the changing surroundings.⁴⁸ This is as true of Shi'ism as of any other religious or social movement, of course, and necessitates a short discussion of the use of the label 'Shi'ism' in the present work. Here, I will use Madelung's wide definition and use 'Shi'ism' and 'Shi'ite' to denote any group or individual that is 'upholding a privileged position of the Family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*)'.⁴⁹ The ideas of who were included in this family, and what 'a privileged position' involved, varied considerably in early times and gave rise to different, often mutually antagonistic groups within the larger community of Shi'ites. The name seems to stem from the phrase *shī'at 'Alī*, 'the party of 'Alī', which is apparently recorded for the first time in connection

⁴⁵ Hawting, *First Dynasty*, 50.

⁴⁶ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*, 179.

⁴⁷ Shaban, *Islamic History*, vol. I, 91.

⁴⁸ Assmann, *Cultural Memory*, 124–41.

⁴⁹ Madelung, 'Shī'a'.

with the battle of Şifīn in 37/657 to refer to the supporters of 'Alī, though the love and loyalty – the *walāya* – for the family of the Prophet and for 'Alī goes back to the lifetime of Muḥammad.⁵⁰ At Şifīn, the expression *shī'at 'Alī* was used to distinguish the adherents of 'Alī from their opponents, the *shī'at 'Uthmān*, that is the supporters of the murdered caliph 'Uthmān. The word *shī'a*, 'party' or 'sect', is thus neutral and does not in itself denote adherence to a certain doctrine or belief. In some of the early texts about the Tawwābūn or 'Penitents' that will be discussed in Part II of this book, the word is used without reference to 'Alī. In the speeches and letters analysed in Chapter 6, the Tawwābūn use the expression *shī'atunā* ('our party'), *hādha al-shī'a* ('this party') and *shī'at āl nabīyyukum* (the party of your prophet),⁵¹ without referring to 'Alī.

As we will see throughout the book, this *walāya* came to be expressed in many very different and often contradictory and contentious ways, until they finally crystallised into the three branches of Shi'ism that are extant today. Though we often can see a continuation of tenets and ideas from earliest history – particularly of course the *walāya* for the family of the Prophet – early forms were thus very different from the Shi'ism that we see today. This has caused several scholars use the term 'proto-Shi'ism' for the early varieties of the movement.⁵² I prefer not to use this term, however, first because I want to emphasise the continuity in the development; second because the term *shī'a* and its derivatives are often employed in the sources as a name for the various groups claiming to be loyal to the family of the Prophet. I therefore advise the reader to remember that Shi'ism in the first centuries was normally very different from Shi'ism today.⁵³

As historians, we cannot freeze a moment when a group is supposed to have reached its 'true' potential and regard everything that follows as decline or deviation from its essence.⁵⁴ Even though the present work finishes with the 'consolidation' of Twelver Shi'ite identity in the fourth/tenth century, I do

⁵⁰ See n. 7 above.

⁵¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, II, 498–500.

⁵² So e.g. Marsham, *Rituals*, 186–7; Baker, *Sectarianism*, 6–12.

⁵³ The expression 'proto-Sunni' (e.g. Baker, *Sectarianism*, 7) is more apt, in my opinion, as it took several centuries before 'Sunni' was used as a label for a group with a specific identity. See also Chapter 10.

⁵⁴ Hylén, 'Closed and Open'.

not mean to say that the Karbala story (or Twelver Shi'ism at large) stopped evolving at this point. As many scholars have demonstrated – and as, indeed, the cover image of this book illustrates perfectly – the story and its interpretation grew in various directions depending on the material and social circumstances, in what Mack calls ‘the process of experimenting with better and less better ways to do things and think about them’.⁵⁵

In Chapter 2, I will further elaborate the concept of mythmaking and how it is used throughout this book. And since ritualisation is one of the most important ways of making a myth out of a story, I will also say something about how I regard the relationship between myth and ritual, arguing that it is through rituals that emotions become attached to a myth. I will furthermore discuss the sources for this study and their place in the context of early Islamic historiography, and I will say a few words about the methods I have used to analyse the sources.

Part I of the book is dedicated to studies of the three earliest versions of the Karbala story that are extant, all of which originated in the second/eighth century. In Chapter 3, I make a comparative analysis of these versions, demonstrating that in the few decades that passed between the two shorter accounts on the one hand – one of which was compiled by al-Ḥuṣayn b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, and the other of which is ascribed to Abū Ja‘far al-Bāqir (the fifth imam) – and the much longer version of Abū Mikhnaḥ on the other, the mythmaking process had already made significant progress. I also forward the hypothesis that what is now a single story may once have been transmitted as two separate narratives: one about the affair of Muslim b. ‘Aqil in Kufa, and the other about the battle of al-Ḥuṣayn at Karbala. Chapter 4 is a more detailed analysis of the version of Abū Mikhnaḥ. There, I argue that Abū Mikhnaḥ views the Karbala event from the perspective of the covenant of God with humanity. He argues, I claim, that loyalty to al-Ḥuṣayn means adhering to the divine covenant, and enmity towards him is breaking it.

The four chapters of Part II deal with the story of the Tawwābūn, the movement that arose among those Kufans who regretted not having

⁵⁵ Mack, ‘Social Formation’, 289. On later interpretations of the Karbala story, see Aghaie, *Martyrs of Karbala*.

supported al-Ḥusayn at Karbala and made a futile attempt to exact revenge for him by fighting the Umayyad army in 65/685. In these chapters, I argue that it is possible to identify several layers of the story: an early one, in which al-Ḥusayn's descent from the Prophet via his mother Fāṭima is more visible than his connection to his father 'Alī, and later additions, in which 'Alī is more prominent and in which we see, in embryonic form, Shi'ite ideas that later came to be noticeable. I argue that the earliest layer can be dated at least as early as the end of the first/beginning of the eighth century.

While the first two parts are primarily based on my own research, and at times consist of quite dense analyses of the texts in question, the chapters in Part III are more of an overview of the developments in the following centuries and largely build on previous research. In Chapter 9, I discuss the rebellion of al-Mukhtār in Kufa in 65–7/685–7. Unlike the Tawwābūn, al-Mukhtār and his movement, in the name of 'Alī's third son Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, were able to avenge the death of al-Ḥusayn by killing those responsible for it. Eventually, al-Mukhtār was defeated, but the intensely apocalyptic movement of the Kaysāniyya continued to revere Ibn al-Ḥanafīyya as the Mahdi. Several of the doctrines of this group later developed and were incorporated into the teaching of other Shi'ite communities, including the Twelvers. Chapter 10 is a survey of the development of Shi'ite religio-political and doctrinal disputes between the second/eighth and fourth/tenth centuries. This chapter, which builds entirely on previous scholarship, provides the context for Chapter 11, where the development of the Karbala story into a myth and the elevation of the image of al-Ḥusayn during these centuries are further discussed. I argue that two factors are particularly significant in this process: the placing of the Karbala event in a cosmological context, and the rituals that emerged to commemorate the event. Chapter 12 is a short summary of the results from the previous chapters of the book in the light of the theoretical framework.

I hope that the book will be read both by specialists on early Islam and by non-specialists, such as scholars or advanced students in other fields of religious studies or in history other than the Late Antique Middle East. Various categories of readers will undoubtedly find particular parts of the book more interesting than others. Thus, some of the analyses in Parts I and II are quite

technical, and readers not interested in the detailed arguments may skip the formal analyses without losing too much of the argument. Chapter 10, on the other hand, is an overview that is wholly based on the research of other scholars. Thus, readers acquainted with this scholarship are likely to find little that is new to them in that chapter.