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Three Times Karbala: Early Accounts of the Killing of al-Ḥusayn

Introduction

The story of the killing of al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī at Karbala in 61/680 has reached us in several versions, but, as previously mentioned, it has been subjected to little investigation despite its importance throughout history.¹ Two important studies have compared the various early versions of the Karbala story. In his survey of early Arabic accounts of the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn in 1984, I. K. A. Howard claims to list all early ‘monographs or lengthy accounts on the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn which we have some record of or which we can surmise’ – nine accounts in all.² Howard did an important job in tracing, collecting and describing early versions of the Karbala tradition, and the present study is deeply indebted to his article, in spite of my frequent disagreements with his conclusions. Howard’s purpose, even if not explicitly stated, is clearly to assess the value of the various early versions of the story as historical sources; I will argue below that, on this point, his study is often problematic.

I have also benefited greatly from a more recent comparative study of 2015 of the Karbala narrative by Antoine Borrut, who has investigated two Muslim, as well as the extant Syriac Christian, versions of the story.

¹ See Hussain, ‘Developmental Analysis’, 1–8.

² Howard, ‘Husayn the Martyr’, 124. A notable omission in Howard’s study is the version of Ibn Sa’d (*Ṭabaqāt*, vol. VI, 421–60). Sachau’s edition from 1904–40, which was the only one available to Howard when he worked on his article, does not include the biography of al-Ḥusayn (see Lucas, ‘Ibn Sa’d’). Ibn Sa’d’s account largely depends on Abū Mikhnaḥ, though he has some interesting additional material. I was made aware of the new edition of *Ṭabaqāt* late in my work, so I will only occasionally refer to it.

He discusses the problem of the almost total absence of the story from Umayyad historiography, and its return in Abbasid times. Borrut concludes that the two Muslim versions on which he focuses were 'local and familial memories'.³ Thus, the 'long version' by Abū Mikhnaḥ is written from a Kufan perspective, to preserve the memory of the Karbala event from the perspective of his own family, as his ancestors were active adherents of Shi'ism. The 'short version', on the other hand, was transmitted by al-Ḥusayn's grandson, the fifth imam, Abū Ja'far al-Bāqir, who lived in Medina. Hence, according to Borrut, this version preserved the memory of the event from the perspective of the 'Alid family in Medina.

This chapter will analyse and compare the three earliest complete recensions of the Karbala story that are available to us. I will explain below what I mean by 'complete' versions; although some earlier accounts seem to have existed, only fragments of these are still extant.⁴ The three versions studied here are ascribed to or were compiled by the fifth Shi'ite imam, Abū Ja'far al-Bāqir (d. 114/732–3), the Kufan traditionist al-Ḥusayn b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 136/753–4),⁵ and the Kufan historian Abū Mikhnaḥ (d. before 170/786–7).⁶ All three versions are reproduced in the *Ta'riḫ al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*⁷ of al-Ṭabarī (d. 311/923), and I will use his rendering as my point of departure, although I will make comparisons with other sources when necessary.⁸

An important question is, of course, whether the three versions analysed here are interdependent in any way. Did any of these authors, in other words, use one of the other accounts as a source, and abbreviate it, expand it, or in other ways use parts of it when composing a new version? In what follows, I will argue that, although there are several close similarities between the three versions, the differences are far too significant to hypothesise the direct

³ Borrut, 'Remembering Karbalā', 271.

⁴ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 124–7.

⁵ In order not to confuse him with al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, I will henceforth use his patronymic Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān, though it is a bit clumsy.

⁶ On Abū Mikhnaḥ's death date, see Chapter 2.

⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, II, 216–390; English translation by Howard in al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. XIX, 1–183.

⁸ According to Ali J. Hussain there is a source on the Karbala story by a certain al-Faḍil b. al-Zubayr (d. 110–145/728–62), which has not been available to me. This seems to be more a list of names of the people killed with al-Ḥusayn than a narrative of the battle, however ('Developmental Analysis', 17–18).

dependence of one of the texts upon the other. Apart from certain differences in structure and content which will be discussed below, the wording and phrasing of the three texts are divergent enough to preclude one of the versions having been used as a model for the others. When various compilers base their accounts on, for example, Abū Mikhnaf's version – as, in part, did al-Balādhurī, al-Ṭabarī and al-Ya'qūbī – long passages are almost word for word identical. When a section is abbreviated in one version, often what remains is not just summarised in the compiler's own words, but, even when parts have been left out, the very phrasing of the original is frequently used. To take only one example: when al-Balādhurī's and al-Ṭabarī's rendering of the first meeting between al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr and their followers are compared, we see that, although al-Balādhurī's version is much shorter and structured somewhat differently from al-Ṭabarī's, the words and phrases used are almost the same.⁹ Though al-Balādhurī does not give an *isnād* at this point in his account, it is clear that both historians base their accounts of this episode on the same text. According to al-Ṭabarī, this is Abū Mikhnaf.¹⁰ When the three versions discussed in the present study are compared, on the other hand, we see very few verbatim correspondences of this kind. Only in a few places, where the words of a person or a poem are quoted, is such an agreement in words and phrasing to be seen in the versions of al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaf. In Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's version, there are no such close resemblances with the other two. This paucity of correspondence, in my opinion, clearly argues against any one version being dependent on any of the others. Rather, I believe that the three versions emerged independently of one another. Where there are close correspondences between two versions, these are based on common reports and earlier traditions.

I stated above that the three versions of the Karbala story that I will study here are the earliest complete versions available to us. By complete, I mean that they include all or most of the following sections:¹¹

⁹ Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. III, 380; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 295–6.

¹⁰ Al-Balādhurī gives an *isnād* reaching back to Abū Mikhnaf at the beginning of his account, while al-Ṭabarī provides *isnāds* for each *khbar*.

¹¹ Comprehensive and readable, though uncritical summaries of the story, based mainly on Abū Mikhnaf's version, are found in Jafri, *Origins*, 174–221 and Vecchia Vaglieri, 'Ḥusayn'.

Section 1. The Succession to Mu'āwiya

At the death of the caliph Mu'āwiya in Damascus, al-Ḥusayn, who has been living in Medina, is commanded to give his pledge of allegiance, his *bay'a*, to Mu'āwiya's son Yazīd in the presence of the governor in Medina. Al-Ḥusayn manages to leave for Mecca without giving his *bay'a*.

Section 2. The Call of the Kufans, Muslim b. 'Aqīl's Journey to Kufa and the Appointment of Ibn Ziyād as New Governor

While in Mecca, al-Ḥusayn receives letters from the Shi'ites in Kufa, asking him to come and lead them in an insurrection against the governor there, the lenient al-Nu'mān b. Bashīr. Al-Ḥusayn sends his cousin, Muslim b. 'Aqīl, to Kufa to gather information. On his way through the desert, Muslim gets lost and almost dies of thirst. When he arrives, a large number of Shi'ites secretly pledge their alliance to al-Ḥusayn. The new caliph Yazīd learns of this and replaces al-Nu'mān with the ruthless 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād as governor.

Section 3. Muslim's Mission in Kufa and his Death

Muslim stays with Hānī' b. 'Urwa, and Ibn Ziyād learns of this. He arrests Hānī' and tries to force him to hand Muslim over, but Hānī' refuses. On hearing this, Muslim gathers the Shi'ites and marches on the governor's palace with several thousand men. However, the people desert him little by little, and eventually Muslim is left alone. He is captured at the house of a woman, where he is trying to hide. He and Hānī' are executed.

Section 4. Al-Ḥusayn's Journey to Iraq, his Interception and Negotiations with 'Umar b. Sa'd

Ignorant of the latest developments, al-Ḥusayn sets out from Mecca towards Kufa. On the way he is told of the killing of Muslim, but decides to continue. He is intercepted by a vanguard of the governor's army and forced to stop in the desert. When the main army arrives, al-Ḥusayn tries to negotiate with the commander, 'Umar b. Sa'd, but to no avail.

Section 5. The Battle and the Killing of al-Ḥusayn

The Kufan army engages in battle with al-Ḥusayn and his followers. Al-Ḥusayn's baby son is killed, together with almost all male relatives in his group. Finally, al-Ḥusayn himself is killed and decapitated.

Section 6. The Aftermath of the Battle

The survivors of al-Ḥusayn's family are brought before the governor Ibn Ziyād, then sent to Yazīd in Damascus. From there, Yazīd allows them to return to Medina.

This outline is what Najam Haider calls the 'core structure' of the story, the elements shared by all or most of the versions.¹² This core has been fleshed out by the development and addition of 'narrative elements' which are 'crafted by historians in a process of rhetorical elaboration and embellishment'.¹³ Historians may have different motives for transmitting a story, and may thus use various rhetorical devices to make sense of a core structure in the context in which they are active. This context Haider calls the 'narrative framework' of the historian. He proposes a three-step method for analysis of stories in Islamic historiography. The first step is to identify the core structure, the second to compare and categorise the various narrative elements, and the third to establish the narrative framework.¹⁴ Although I began working on the present study before reading Haider's book, I realise that this is more or less the same method as the one I use, though in a less detailed and systematic manner than he employs it.

Of the three versions, that composed by Abū Mikhnaḥ is definitely the longest and most detailed. It takes up around 80 to 85 per cent of al-Ṭabarī's compilation of sources for the Karbala drama, while al-Bāqir's version represents about 5 per cent of the text, and that of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān is even shorter. Abū Mikhnaḥ's account deals with each of the sections at length; al-Bāqir's account has something on each of the sections, but at times as little

¹² Haider, *Rebel*, 6–7, 15–16.

¹³ Haider, *Rebel*, 7.

¹⁴ Haider, *Rebel*, 6–9.

as a sentence or two. Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān omits Section 1 completely, but has material on all the other sections.

The Three Versions Compared

The story falls naturally into two parts, the first relating the events up to the execution of Muslim b. 'Aqīl in Kufa (Sections 1–3), and the second recounting al-Ḥusayn's journey from Mecca, the battle at Karbala, and its aftermath (Sections 4–6). The analysis that follows will point to some of the most significant differences and similarities between the three versions by, first, comparing Sections 1–3 in Abū Mikhnaḥ and al-Bāqir section by section, then going on to compare these with the same sections in the version of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān. I will then proceed in the same way with Sections 3–6 in Abū Mikhnaḥ's and al-Bāqir's versions, before comparing these with Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's.

Section 1. The Succession to Mu'āwiya

Al-Bāqir's version has a few sentences about Mu'āwiya's death, al-Ḥusayn's refusal to give his pledge of allegiance to Yazīd, and his escape by night to Mecca.¹⁵ Abū Mikhnaḥ's account of these events is several pages long, and thus much more detailed. He relates how not only al-Ḥusayn but also 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr refuse to give their *bay'a* to Yazīd and take refuge in Mecca.¹⁶

Section 2. The Call of the Kufans, Muslim b. 'Aqīl's Journey and the Appointment of Ibn Ziyād as New Governor

Al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaḥ's versions follow the same basic structure:

1. The Kufans send messages to al-Ḥusayn, telling him that they support him and reject the Umayyad governor al-Nu'mān b. Bashīr. They ask him to come.
2. Al-Ḥusayn sends Muslim b. 'Aqīl to Kufa. Muslim gets lost in the desert and almost dies of thirst.

¹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 227–8

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 216–23.

3. Muslim stays with one of the inhabitants of Kufa for a while (the two versions differ as to whom), and the Shi'ites of Kufa begin to visit him in large numbers.
4. Al-Nu'mān b. Bashīr is accused of taking too lenient an attitude towards the Shi'ites, and messages are sent to Yazīd.
5. Yazīd appoints 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād as governor of Kufa (for this passage in Abū Mikhnaḥ, see discussion below, and note 24).
6. Ibn Ziyād travels from Basra to Kufa and enters the city veiled. The people think it is al-Ḥusayn who has arrived.

Although the narrative structure of the two versions is similar, there are considerable differences in detail. Abū Mikhnaḥ's version is of course much longer and more detailed than al-Bāqir's.¹⁷ In addition to elements that are not extant in al-Bāqir's text (such as dialogues in direct speech and names of persons involved), Abū Mikhnaḥ's text also includes several longer passages that are not found in al-Bāqir's account. The most obvious of these are a letter sent by al-Ḥusayn in reply to the Kufans,¹⁸ a passage about the Basran Shi'ites recounting how one of them decides to go to join al-Ḥusayn,¹⁹ and a letter written by al-Ḥusayn to the Basrans asking them to join him.²⁰

The two versions disagree on where Muslim first stayed when he arrived in Kufa. Whereas al-Bāqir says that he stayed with Muslim b. 'Awsaja, who later fought and died with al-Ḥusayn at Karbala,²¹ Abū Mikhnaḥ has it that he stayed with al-Mukhtār b. Abī 'Ubayd, known as the leader of a Shi'ite insurrection in Kufa a few years later.²² Al-Bāqir also relates an episode not mentioned by Abū Mikhnaḥ. He writes that, when the caliph Yazīd is informed about the governor Ibn Bashīr's mildness towards the Shi'ites in Kufa, he asks for the counsel of his *mawla* Sarjūn, who advises Yazīd to make Ibn Ziyād the new governor in Kufa.²³ This event is not related by Abū Mikhnaḥ, although a report with this

¹⁷ In the Leiden edition, al-Bāqir's account is only about one page long (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 228–9), whereas Abū Mikhnaḥ's covers almost nine pages (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 233–9, 240–2).

¹⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 235.

¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 235–6.

²⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 240–1.

²¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 228.

²² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 237. On al-Mukhtār, see Chapter 9.

²³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 228.

content from another authority, 'Awāna b. al-Ḥakam al-Kalbī, is inserted into Abū Mikhnaḥ's account as transmitted by Ṭabarī.²⁴

Finally, as mentioned above, the phrasing of the texts is mostly divergent enough to preclude a close interdependence. Only one sentence in this section is almost word for word the same: the answer by al-Nu'mān b. Bashīr to those who accuse him of being too lenient towards Muslim and the Shi'ites. In both versions, he replies almost verbatim, 'I would prefer to be weak in obedience to God than strong in disobedience of God.'²⁵

Section 3. Muslim's Mission in Kufa and his Death

As in the previous sections, al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaḥ's accounts are structurally similar:

1. Muslim moves to live in the house of Hānī' b. 'Urwa (in al-Bāqir's account this is narrated after the event, at a later stage in the narrative).
2. Ibn Ziyād sends a spy with 3,000 dirhams to infiltrate the Shi'ites. One of the leading Shi'ites takes the spy to Muslim. The infiltrator reports Muslim's location to Ibn Ziyād.
3. Ibn Ziyād asks his nobles why Hānī' has not come to visit him. The governor sends Ibn al-Ash'ath, a Kufan nobleman, and some other men to go and fetch him.
4. Ibn Ziyād asks Hānī' where Muslim is, and reveals the spy.
5. Hānī' refuses to hand Muslim over. Ibn Ziyād strikes Hānī' on his forehead, wounding him, and orders his execution.
6. Muslim learns of Hānī's death sentence and raises the battle cry. Four thousand men gather with him. They march on the governor's palace.

²⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 239. It looks as though 'Awāna's report continues beyond the episode of Sarjūn, relating how Yazīd commands Muslim b. 'Amr al-Bāhilī to go to Basra and hand over the letter of appointment to Ibn Ziyād. I do not think this is so, however. Al-Balādhurī – who apparently follows Abū Mikhnaḥ when relating this section – talks about Muslim b. 'Amr's mission to Ibn Ziyād, but does not mention the episode with Sarjūn (al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. II, 335). This makes me inclined to think that, in al-Ṭabarī's account, the first part of the report (about Sarjūn) is from 'Awāna according to the *isnād*, whereas the second part (the one about Muslim b. 'Amr) actually comes from Abū Mikhnaḥ, even though no *isnād* is provided.

²⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 228, 239.

7. Ibn Ziyād gathers the nobles of the town. They observe Muslim and his men from the palace and induce them to leave. Muslim's men gradually desert him.
8. Muslim wanders through the streets alone and reaches the house of a woman who gives him water to drink and takes him into her house.
9. Her son discloses Muslim's hiding place to Ibn al-Ash'ath, who informs Ibn Ziyād. The governor sends a group of men commanded by 'Amr b. Ḥurayth to get Muslim. Muslim fights them. Finally, he gets a guarantee of safe conduct, and surrenders himself.
10. Muslim is brought to Ibn Ziyād, who has him executed on the palace roof, and his body thrown down. Hānī' too is executed.
11. A poem is quoted (al-Bāqir cites three of the eight verses quoted by Abū Mikhnaf).

The general structure of this section is very similar in both versions. Even many of the details, such as the names of some of the persons involved, the sum of money given to the spy, Hānī''s beating and injury at Ibn Ziyād's command, the number of people responding to Muslim's battle cry, the woman giving shelter to Muslim and her son revealing his whereabouts, as well as the final poem quoted, are the same in both accounts.

On the other hand, there are significant differences. Once again, al-Bāqir's text is considerably shorter than Abū Mikhnaf's.²⁶ As in Section 2, this is because Abū Mikhnaf not only elaborates on the events described, but also includes a couple of episodes that al-Bāqir does not narrate. Thus, Abū Mikhnaf relates how Hānī' and Sharīk b. A'war fall ill, and that there is a plot to murder Ibn Ziyād when he pays the sick men visits.²⁷ Another event found in Abū Mikhnaf's version but not in that of al-Bāqir is Ibn Ziyād's gathering of his loyal supporters in the mosque after Muslim and his men have left the palace.²⁸

Again, the divergent wordings and phrasings of the two versions rule out a direct dependence. In this section, literal correspondences are to be found in

²⁶ Al-Bāqir has about one and a half pages on this section (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 230–2), compared to the twenty-five pages of Abū Mikhnaf's version (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 246–71).

²⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 247–9.

²⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 259–61.

two places only. The first is a short proverb uttered by Ibn Ziyād to the *qāḍī* Shurayḥ when Hānī' arrives at the palace. He says, 'His own legs have brought you one who will be destroyed.'²⁹ The second is a poem quoted at the end of the section, lamenting the deaths of Hānī' and Muslim.³⁰ Abū Mikhnaḥ cites eight verses, al-Bāqir three.

Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān on Sections 1–3

I will now examine Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account of what befalls Hānī' and Muslim in Kufa in relation to al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaḥ's versions, before moving on to the second part of the story. The three sections studied so far are even briefer in the version by Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān than in that of al-Bāqir, and in some respects this account differs significantly from both the others. Thus, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān mentions nothing about the succession to Mu'āwiya, and the first part of Sections 2 and 3, up to the capture of Hānī', is very short.³¹ He does not account for such important events as the change of governor in Kufa. Nor does he mention Muslim's perilous journey to Kufa, during which he nearly dies of thirst, nor that he stays with someone else first before moving on to Hānī' on his arrival in Kufa; nor does he mention the spy sent by Ibn Ziyād to infiltrate the Shi'ites. All of these details, as we have seen, are to be found in al-Bāqir's slightly longer account, and of course in even more extended and detailed form in that of Abū Mikhnaḥ. Still, thus far, the three versions are structurally similar in the sense that the events are related in the same order. It is also interesting to note that, while Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān consequently uses the patronymic Ibn Ziyād when referring to the governor, al-Bāqir refers to him by his given name, 'Ubaydallāh, throughout his entire narrative. The only exception in al-Bāqir's account is the first two times the (future) governor is mentioned, when his full name is given.³² In Abū Mikhnaḥ's account,

²⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 229, 251. In Arabic, this proverb contains only three words: '*Atatka bi-bā'inin rijlāhu*'.

³⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 232, 269–70.

³¹ It is only about seven lines long in the Leiden edition (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 284), as compared to just over two pages in al-Bāqir's version (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 228–30), not counting the *isnāds*. Nor have I counted the two lines, which are added to Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account from a report of al-Ḥusayn b. Naṣr, containing a sharp exchange of words between Hānī' and Ibn Yazīd. These lines are not found in al-Balādhurī's version (*Ansāb*, Vol. III, 422).

³² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 228.

the full name of the governor, his patronymic and his first name are used interchangeably.

In Section 3, however, the sequence of events in Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s version differs in important respects from the sequence in the other two.³³ Like al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaḥ, Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān tells us that Muslim’s followers are already beginning to desert him as they make their way to the governor’s palace; but in contrast to the other two versions, in Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s account the remaining core of Muslim’s people – about fifty men – enter the mosque when they reach the centre,³⁴ as does Ibn Ziyād (and, presumably, his companions). Some of the governor’s people attack Muslim and his followers: they wound Muslim severely, but he manages to get away and reaches a house of the tribe of Kinda, where a woman kindles a fire for him. Later, he is captured at that house as he washes the blood from himself; no fight is mentioned at this stage. What is significant here, then, is that Muslim encounters the governor’s men, and that the fight at which he is wounded is located at a different time and place than in al-Bāqir’s and Abū Mikhnaḥ’s versions. This, in fact, seems to be in line with a report from the traditionist ‘Īsā b. Yazīd al-Kinānī (d. c. 134/750),³⁵ and the account of Ibn Sa’d.³⁶ Thus, it appears that two versions of what happened during the insurrection led by Muslim were in circulation: one – transmitted by Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, ‘Īsā b. Yazīd and Ibn Sa’d – in which the battle between Muslim and Ibn Ziyād’s men takes place in the main mosque, before Muslim’s solitary wanderings along the lanes of Kufa, and the other – related by al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaḥ – in which the fight occurs later, at the house of the widow who takes him in.

Section 4. Al-Ḥusayn’s Journey to Iraq, his Interception and Negotiations with ‘Umar

Returning now to al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaḥ, we notice that, with one notable exception, al-Ḥusayn’s journey from Mecca to Iraq and the immediate prelude

³³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, II, 284–5. This seems to be in line with a report from Hārūn b. Muslim (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, II, 272) or more probably ‘Umar b. Shabba (see al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. XIX, 65, n. 224).

³⁴ Al-Balādhurī does not mention the mosque (*Ansāb*, vol. III, 422–3).

³⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, II, 272. According to al-Dhahabī (*Mīzān*, vol. V, 395), ‘Īsā b. Yazīd died before Mālīk b. Anas (d. 179/796). See also Ladewig Petersen, *‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya*, 28.

³⁶ Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. VI, 433.

to the battle at Karbala follow the same basic pattern. The exception is their accounts of the meeting between al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Yarbū'ī, and of the role of al-Ḥurr in the Karbala tragedy. We will return to this below. The basic narrative of this section goes as follows:

1. Al-Ḥusayn sets out from Mecca.
2. He meets people who warn him against going to Kufa.
3. The brothers of Muslim b. 'Aqīl refuse to give up quietly, as they want vengeance for their brother,³⁷ and al-Ḥusayn moves on.
4. The vanguard of Ibn Ziyād's troops confront al-Ḥusayn and his followers, who turn aside to a location where they have their back to the reeds so that they can be attacked from one direction only. Al-Ḥusayn has his tents set up.
5. 'Umar b. Sa'd, previously appointed governor of Rayy by Ibn Ziyād, is now commanded to lead the army against al-Ḥusayn. 'Umar at first hesitates and then, the following day, accepts.
6. When 'Umar arrives at the place where al-Ḥusayn has encamped, the latter asks for permission to return to Mecca, to go to Yazīd and pledge his loyalty directly to him, or to go into exile at one of the frontier posts. 'Umar accepts, but Ibn Ziyād refuses and demands that al-Ḥusayn submit to him personally. Al-Ḥusayn refuses that option.

Despite the similarities, the differences here between the two versions are more substantial than in previous sections. First, while in the previous sections Abū Mikhnaḥ's version was longer than that of al-Bāqir, the difference in length between the two versions is much more pronounced here.³⁸ As before, Abū Mikhnaḥ has elaborated on the events described by both authors, and he furthermore includes a number of events not found in al-Bāqir's version. Among these are Qays b. Mushir's mission to Kufa and his killing there,³⁹ the long

³⁷ While in Abū Mikhnaḥ's version it is explicitly stated that al-Ḥusayn and his company have been informed about Muslim's death (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 292), in al-Bāqir's version this is only implied (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 281).

³⁸ More than fifty pages in Abū Mikhnaḥ's version (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 272–81, 288–309, 311–35), compared to about one page by al-Bāqir (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 281–2).

³⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 288–9.

episode in which al-Ḥurr intercepts al-Ḥusayn at Dhū Ḥusum and al-Ḥusayn gives several speeches,⁴⁰ and various preparations and negotiations before the battle.⁴¹

As mentioned above, one of the main divergences between the two versions is in their descriptions of the meeting between al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr and the role and function of the latter in the story. According to al-Bāqir, al-Ḥusayn met al-Ḥurr, and him alone, outside Qādisiyya on his way to Kufa. Al-Ḥurr warned al-Ḥusayn against going to Kufa, but the latter decided to continue.⁴² This is all we hear of al-Ḥurr in al-Bāqir's version – just a couple of lines. Abū Mikhnaf, on the other hand, has al-Ḥurr play a much more significant role.⁴³ There, we read nothing of the meeting at Qādisiyya. Instead, al-Ḥurr is depicted as commander of the Kufan vanguard that intercepts al-Ḥusayn and his followers. Abū Mikhnaf reports that al-Ḥurr was clearly uneasy about his task of arresting the grandson of the Prophet, and that he tried to get al-Ḥusayn to surrender peacefully and come with him to Kufa. Later, when the battle is about to begin, he deserts the Kufan army and joins with al-Ḥusayn. To Abū Mikhnaf, then, al-Ḥurr is one of the main protagonists of the Karbala story. Another difference between the two versions, although a much smaller detail, is that al-Bāqir mentions the number of al-Ḥusayn's followers: 45 horsemen and 100 foot soldiers.⁴⁴

Section 5. The Battle and the Killing of al-Ḥusayn

The description of the battle itself is the part of the story where al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaf's versions differ the most. The basic structure is similar in both accounts:

1. The fighting takes place.
2. Al-Ḥusayn's baby boy is killed in his lap.
3. Al-Ḥusayn is killed and his head is cut off.

⁴⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 295–302. These speeches are analysed in Chapter 4.

⁴¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 316–35.

⁴² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 281.

⁴³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 295–303, 332–5.

⁴⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 281.

Although the order of events is similar in both versions, al-Bāqir dedicates no more than five lines to this entire section,⁴⁵ whereas Abū Mikhnaḥ spends almost thirty pages elaborating on the details of the battle up to the death of al-Ḥusayn.⁴⁶ For example, in relating the actual killing of al-Ḥusayn, Abū Mikhnaḥ describes the fighting, the various blows and stabs he receives, the names of the people involved in killing him, how he is put to death, an abortive attempt to cut off his head before it is actually severed, and so forth.⁴⁷ Al-Bāqir's account of the same episode is extremely laconic: 'He fought until he was killed. A man of the tribe of Madhḥij killed him and cut off his head.'⁴⁸

Both versions give an account of the killing of al-Ḥusayn's baby boy.⁴⁹ According to the *isnāds* this is, in fact, the only report in Abū Mikhnaḥ's entire account that he derives from al-Bāqir. Again, Abū Mikhnaḥ's version is slightly more elaborated, and the prayer that al-Ḥusayn utters when his son is killed is somewhat different. I will return to this incident below.

Section 6. The Aftermath of the Battle

Both versions narrate the events after the battle in more or less the same order:

1. Al-Ḥusayn's head is brought to Ibn Ziyād, who forwards it to Yazīd. According to al-Bāqir, Yazīd pokes his cane into the mouth of the severed head of al-Ḥusayn; according to Abū Mikhnaḥ, both Ibn Ziyād and Yazīd do so.
2. The survivors from al-Ḥusayn's family are brought before Ibn Ziyād.
3. A boy or young man⁵⁰ from among them, who was ill during the battle, is the only male survivor from al-Ḥusayn's family. Ibn Ziyād threatens to kill him, but al-Ḥusayn's sister Zaynab pleads for him, and the governor relents.

⁴⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 282.

⁴⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 335–60, 362–6.

⁴⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 365–6.

⁴⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 282.

⁴⁹ Al-Bāqir's version is found in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 282, and that of Abū Mikhnaḥ in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 360.

⁵⁰ On this, see the discussion below.

4. The family is taken to Yazīd in Damascus. There, a man from Syria asks the caliph to give him one of the women, but Yazīd turns down the request.
5. Yazīd takes them into his own family and equips them for the journey to Medina.
6. When the family arrives in Medina, a woman recites a poem of lamentation (slightly shorter in Abū Mikhnaḥ's version).

Again, the two accounts differ greatly in length.⁵¹ Most of the differences are due to Abū Mikhnaḥ's more detailed rendering. Both versions, however, relate the incident of the young boy who had been too ill to fight during the battle and had thus survived. Ibn Ziyād wants to kill him, but when Zaynab pleads for his life, the governor relents and allows him to live. According to Abū Mikhnaḥ and all later tradition, this lad was 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (the fourth Shi'ite imam, Zayn al-Ābidīn).⁵² In the account given by al-Bāqir, however, his name is not mentioned: it is merely stated that 'the only male member of the family of al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī who had survived was a young lad who had been sick and had rested with the women'.⁵³ It is curious that al-Bāqir (if the text originates from him or his milieu) does not mention the name of the person who is to become next imam, al-Bāqir's own father. I will discuss the possible implications of this omission below. Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān does not mention this incident at all.

Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān on Sections 4–6

Sections 4–6 in the version by Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān are slightly shorter than in that of al-Bāqir. The account of the battle itself is as terse as in that of al-Bāqir, and in fact, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān only implies the killing of al-Ḥusayn: 'On his horse, ['Umar b. Sa'd] ordered the people to attack them, and they fought them. The head of al-Ḥusayn was taken to Ibn Ziyād.'⁵⁴ In other words, although they phrase their reports of the battle and the killing of al-Ḥusayn differently,

⁵¹ In al-Bāqir's version, this section fills a little more than one page (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 282–3), and Abū Mikhnaḥ uses almost fifteen pages (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 366–9, 370–4, 376–9, 382–3, 384–5, 385).

⁵² Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 372–3.

⁵³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 283. I discuss alternatives to Howard's translation below.

⁵⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 286.

al-Bāqir and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān have in common that their descriptions are as brief as can be, in stark contrast to the elaborated account of Abū Mikhnaḥ. A further shared characteristic is that they mention Karbala as the name of the site of the battle.⁵⁵ Abū Mikhnaḥ, by contrast, mentions this toponym only once in a scene at the very end of the story, when a certain 'Ubaydallāh b. al-Ḥurr visits the grave regretting that he did not join al-Ḥusayn.⁵⁶

Although the general sequence of the elements in the story is the same, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's version has some details exclusively in common with Abū Mikhnaḥ. As mentioned above, al-Ḥurr is given very different roles in al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaḥ's accounts. Though Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account is much briefer than that of Abū Mikhnaḥ, it relates that al-Ḥurr is commander of some cavalry and recounts how he deserts the Kufan army and joins al-Ḥusayn, fights for him, and kills two of the governor's followers.⁵⁷ Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān does not mention that al-Ḥurr was the commander of the vanguard and intercepted al-Ḥusayn before the main army arrived, nor does he say anything either about al-Ḥusayn's speeches or al-Ḥurr's attempts to persuade him to surrender without a fight and follow him to Kufa. Still, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān and Abū Mikhnaḥ have much more in common regarding al-Ḥurr than either of these two has with al-Bāqir on this matter.

There are also other details preceding the battle that are shared in the accounts of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān and Abū Mikhnaḥ. Both, for instance, mention Zuhayr b. al-Qayn, one of al-Ḥusayn's most ardent followers. Both also mention a speech delivered by al-Ḥusayn (although Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān says nothing about its content), and both also mention that the governor has to explicitly command 'Umar b. Sa'd to attack al-Ḥusayn before he does so.⁵⁸ Al-Bāqir, by contrast, mentions none of these details. Furthermore, the authors' different appellations of the governor mentioned above continue throughout these sections.

⁵⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 281 and 285 respectively.

⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 388–9. I will come back to Ibn al-Ḥurr's visit at Karbala in Chapter 11.

⁵⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 285–6.

⁵⁸ For all these details in Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 286; in Abū Mikhnaḥ's account, Zuhayr b. al-Qayn is mentioned in several places, such as al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 290–1, 301, 323, 331–2; al-Ḥusayn's speech al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 328–30; and Ibn Ziyād's command to 'Umar to attack, in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 315–17.

An element of the story which Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān alone relates is a scene of a group of old men from Kufa standing on a hill (presumably overlooking the battlefield⁵⁹), weeping and asking God to send His help. The narrator Sa’d b. ‘Ubayda tells them to go down and help ‘him’ (the pronoun apparently refers to al-Ḥusayn, although this is not made explicit).⁶⁰

The incident of the ruler poking his cane into the mouth of the severed head of al-Ḥusayn is related in all three versions, but the perpetrator is variously given as the caliph Yazīd and/or his governor in Kufa, Ibn Ziyād.⁶¹ A comparison between the versions may reveal who it is that the author of each account ultimately blames for the atrocities committed against the grandson of the Prophet. In al-Bāqir’s account, it is the caliph who pokes inside the mouth of the severed head; according to Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, it is Ibn Ziyād. Abū Mikhnaf gives two versions, one with each of the two desecrating the head.

In my view the four versions clearly stem from a single tradition which has been adapted to suit the needs of the originators of the three accounts. Although there are certainly differences between the four versions, the structural similarities are too numerous to allow for two similar incidents, one at Ibn Ziyād’s palace in Kufa and another with Yazīd in Damascus (see Table 3.1).

The Interrelationship of the Three Versions

To summarise the analysis so far, I conclude that none of the three versions of the Karbala story is dependent on any of the others. While the narrative structure is similar (although not identical), the differences between them, as regards both phrasing and content, show clear signs of independent development. The wording of each of the three narratives diverges too far from the other two to allow hypothesising a common original text. A similar conclusion follows from the variations in content: each of the three versions lacks certain elements of the narrative found in the other two, while all three relate details unique only to them. Thus, although we have three versions of a story that

⁵⁹ So it is interpreted by Howard (al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. XIX, 80), and I see no reason to think otherwise.

⁶⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*, II, 286.

⁶¹ The four versions of the incident are found in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rikh*, II, 282–3, 286, 370–1, 382–3.

Table 3.1 The head of al-Ḥusayn before the ruler

	Al-Baqir	Ibn ‘Abd al-Rahmān	Abū Mikhnaf I	Abū Mikhnaf II
Ruler	Yazīd	Ibn Ziyād	Ibn Ziyād	Yazīd
Al-Ḥusayn’s head is placed in front of the ruler, who pokes the head with his cane.	X	X	X	X
The ruler insults al-Ḥusayn verbally.	Poem: ‘[Swords] split the skulls ...’	‘Abū ‘Abdallāh’s hair has grown grey’		Poem: ‘[Swords] split the skulls ...’
A companion of the Prophet rebukes the ruler, saying that the Prophet kissed those lips.	Abū Barza		Zayd b. Arqam	Abū Barza

closely resemble one another, none of the versions appears to have functioned as a source or model for the others.

Nevertheless, we may be able to draw tentative conclusions about the origins of the accounts. An overarching structural feature is discernible in the analysis above regarding each of the two main parts of the story: from the succession to Mu'āwiya to the killing of Muslim b 'Aqīl (Sections 1–3), and from al-Ḥusayn's journey from Mecca to the return of the survivors of the family to Medina (Sections 4–6). Al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaf narrate the elements of the first part in the same order, and both cover many of the same elements; in Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account, on the other hand, many elements are absent or related in a different order. Thus, there is no mention here of Mu'āwiya's death or of al-Ḥusayn's refusal to give his *bay'a* to Yazīd, nor of Muslim's journey to Kufa, the change of governor in the town, nor is Ibn Ziyād's infiltration of the Shī'ites recounted. Furthermore, the uprising of Muslim and the Shī'ites against Ibn Ziyād is related in a very different way. A similar pattern of structural variation is found in the second part of the Karbala story, but here it is the versions of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān and Abū Mikhnaf that share a number of elements which are absent from or retold in a different way by al-Bāqir. Most obvious is the minor role given to al-Ḥurr in al-Bāqir's account, but there are also the details of the prelude to the battle mentioned above.

Although many of the omissions just described can be explained by the brevity of the shorter versions, the more salient variations – such as Muslim's insurrection in Kufa and al-Ḥurr's differing positions with regard to al-Ḥusayn – indicate that the two parts of the story might originally have been transmitted separately and related in different ways. Thus, it is not impossible that the story of Muslim b. 'Aqīl and that of the battle at Karbala were initially two separate traditions. In fact, as Ursula Sezgin has shown, an indication in al-Ṭabarī may suggest this.⁶² After relating al-Bāqir's account of Muslim in Kufa, al-Ṭabarī writes:

As for Abū Mikhnaf, he gives a fuller and more complete account of the story of Muslim b. 'Aqīl's visit to al-Kūfah and his death [*qisṣat Muslim*

⁶² Sezgin, *Abū Mikhnaf*, 83–4.

b. *'Aqīl wa-shukhūṣībi ilā al-Kūfa wa-maqtalīhi*] than the report of 'Ammār al-Duhnī from al-Bāqir, which we have just mentioned.⁶³

Sezgin says that we cannot be sure what the word *qisṣa* means in this context: is it just the coherent account concerning Muslim included in Abū Mikhnaf's 'book' *Maqtal al-Ḥusayn*, or is it a separate story that was later inserted into the appropriate point in the timeline in the story of the killing of al-Ḥusayn?⁶⁴ In my opinion, the latter is the more compelling alternative.

The Relative Dates of the Three Versions

The discussion that follows of the origins and dates of the three versions takes al-Bāqir's account as the point of departure, because the purported origin of this version is the only one that has been challenged in a published study. Howard rejects authorship by the fifth imam of the account ascribed to him by arguing that the account contradicts basic Shi'ite tenets about al-Ḥusayn. To support this hypothesis, Howard compares al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaf's accounts of two events in the story. The first is when al-Ḥusayn, on his way to Kufa, is told of the death of Muslim b. 'Aqīl. According to al-Bāqir, when al-Ḥusayn hears of this, he is prepared to return to Mecca, but decides against it at the urging of Muslim's brothers.⁶⁵ In Abū Mikhnaf's version, however, nothing is said about al-Ḥusayn's wish to return.⁶⁶ The second event Howard discusses is al-Ḥusayn's negotiations with 'Umar b. Sa'd just before the battle. Both al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaf relate that al-Ḥusayn asks 'Umar to allow him to return to Mecca, or to hand himself over directly to the caliph Yazīd, or to go to one of the frontier posts (in other words, to go into exile on the periphery of the empire).⁶⁷ In Abū Mikhnaf's account, this report is countered by another, according to which a certain 'Uqba b. Sim'an says that he followed al-Ḥusayn everywhere and heard every word he spoke from Medina to his death in Iraq. 'Uqba furthermore states that he never heard al-Ḥusayn either surrender to Yazīd or promise to go to the frontier.⁶⁸ In al-Bāqir's version,

⁶³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 232.

⁶⁴ Sezgin, *Abū Mikhnaf*, 84.

⁶⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 281.

⁶⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 292–3.

⁶⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 282, 314.

⁶⁸ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 314.

there is no such counter-tradition. Thus, according to al-Bāqir, al-Ḥusayn is prepared to compromise in both these situations. He is prepared to go back to Mecca, to go into exile, or even to hand himself over to the caliph (though not to Ibn Ziyād, the governor of Kufa).

Howard's main argument is that al-Bāqir's rendering of these two events, while making it clear that the death of al-Ḥusayn was a tragedy, still 'diminishes the stature of the Imam'.⁶⁹ Howard does not explicitly say why this is so, but presumably he is implying that the account contradicts the Shi'ite idea that al-Ḥusayn had foreknowledge of the fatal end of the affair and submitted willingly to his divinely ordained destiny. The assumption is that this image of al-Ḥusayn had always been consistent and unchanging among Shi'ites, and that for this reason the version of the story ascribed to al-Bāqir, al-Ḥusayn's grandson and himself the fifth Shi'ite imam, could not have originated with him.

Howard also gives a second argument for his rejection of al-Bāqir as the originator of this version. Thus, he maintains that the account's brevity and its omission of a number of details of the actual battle and the killing of al-Ḥusayn mean that it could not have been the version related by one of his close descendants. Commenting on al-Bāqir's terse description of the battle, he writes:

This is supposed to be a vivid account of the death of the Imam al-Ḥusayn, as told by the Imam al-Bāqir to a Shī'ī adherent, 'Ammār. It is clearly unacceptable. He does not know the exact number of the members of the Imam al-Ḥusayn' family who were killed.⁷⁰

The purpose of this fabricated ascription, Howard surmises, is

to confirm to those who oppose the Imamate the weakness of individual Imams and to do so by putting the interpretation into the mouth of the Imam ... It almost certainly did not come from the Imam al-Bāqir and seems unlikely to be the work of a Shī'ī such as 'Ammār.⁷¹

⁶⁹ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 129.

⁷⁰ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 130.

⁷¹ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 129–31.

Antoine Borrut, unlike Howard, accepts the ascription of this version to al-Bāqir – or rather, perhaps, to the milieu around the Shi'ite imams in Medina.⁷² He finds Howard's arguments 'unconvincing' and regards the brevity of the account as support for its early date. In stark contrast to Howard, he writes that 'it is, in fact, quite likely that this was an original "official version" of the episode, a memory of the imams not yet transformed into some kind of epic'.⁷³

While I agree with Borrut about the early date of the version ascribed to al-Bāqir's account, it is necessary to distinguish the problem of the date of origin – or, rather, the relative order of origin of the versions – from that of authorship, although the two questions are of course interlaced. Howard does not address the date of al-Bāqir's version *per se*, but just argues that it could not have been authored by the grandson of al-Ḥusayn. His focus is of course quite logical, given his view that the Shi'ite conception of the Karbala event did not develop. Thus, Borrut, who focuses his argument on the early date of the text rather than on the authorship, slightly misses his goal when arguing against Howard; it could of course be that the *isnād* given is false, and that the text is early without originating from al-Bāqir or his environment. In the following, I will try to keep these two questions separate, beginning by concentrating on the question of the order of origin of the three versions.

The main problem with Howard's argument is his basic presupposition that Shi'ism, including the image of al-Ḥusayn, has developed little over time but has always been more or less the same as it is today. An extensive amount of scholarship on early Islam has demonstrated this to be an untenable approach.⁷⁴ It is nowadays taken as axiomatic that Shi'ism, like all religious movements, will have developed over time. It is thus necessary to employ methods for analysis of the Karbala story, as well as for analysing other narratives from the history of Islam, which take this fact into consideration. One such method is

⁷² Borrut, 'Remembering Karbalā', 264.

⁷³ Borrut, 'Remembering Karbalā', 265.

⁷⁴ Although much research has been published in the last few decades, ample evidence for such a process had been brought to light before Howard's article became available in 1986, although scholars' opinions have always varied as to the extent and speed of this development. A few examples of studies published before Howard's article where such a development in Shiism is demonstrated will suffice: Buhl, 'Alidernes stilling'; Hodgson, 'Early Shī'a'; Watt, 'Shi'ism'.

that developed by Haider, as described above; Borrut's approach, which takes the development of the memory of the event into consideration, is another.

When such a perspective is applied to al-Bāqir's version of the Karbala story, the facts behind Howard's arguments against the alleged authorship can be viewed differently. Thus, the passages about al-Ḥusayn's wish to go back to Mecca and his negotiations with 'Umar do not argue for the non-Shi'ite origin of the text, as Howard supposed, but for its relatively early date, and consequently the possibility that it originated with al-Bāqir or the milieu in which he was active. In Chapter 2, I discussed the so-called 'criterion of embarrassment' used in historical studies. This criterion, to recapitulate, says that if an incident is likely to have caused embarrassment for the later community, it is unlikely to have been created by later tradition, but is probably very early or even authentic. Applied to both these episodes, the criterion of embarrassment would seem to indicate that al-Bāqir's version emerged before the image of al-Ḥusayn was refined to the point at which he was prescient of his own end, but consciously and bravely advanced into the hands of the enemy. Abū Mikhnaḥ's version, by contrast, shows clear traces of a development in such a direction. In particular, I am inclined to interpret his version of the negotiations between al-Ḥusayn and 'Umar b. Sa'd, and the counter-report from 'Uqba b. Sim'ān, in this way. In my view, this is an obvious case where the criterion of embarrassment must be applied. The idea that an imam was prepared to capitulate to the Umayyads was unbearable to later Shi'ites. Yet, the story about the negotiations was widespread (it is found in all three versions studied here), so could not be neglected. 'Uqba's tradition is therefore likely to have been created to undermine the credibility of the negotiation report. To put it differently, the report from 'Uqba suggests that the negotiation tradition is very early and was so well-known that it could not simply be ignored, but had to be neutralised by a counter-tradition.

From these arguments we might draw two conclusions at which I have previously hinted. First, the embarrassment associated with the negotiation tradition is an indication of its early date, perhaps even its historical veracity: the talks between al-Ḥusayn and 'Umar might very well have occurred, and something like the suggestions ascribed to al-Ḥusayn in the tradition may have been discussed. Second, the absence of 'Uqba's counter-tradition in al-Bāqir's version is a clear indication that it was compiled at a point preceding

the formation of the idea of al-Ḥusayn as an imam elevated above ordinary humanity. By the time of Abū Mikhnaḥ, however, this development was already under way.

Howard's second argument, then, is that the version ascribed to al-Bāqir is too brief and too terse to have originated from him. On this point, I agree with Borrut's contention that the brevity of the version ascribed to al-Bāqir indicates, rather, an early date. Generally, longer and more detailed accounts of a historical event tend to be elaborated on the basis of earlier, more concise versions. Of course, the opposite could also be the case: that a shorter version can be a distillation of a longer one, and thus post-date it. But, as my analysis above of the three versions has demonstrated, there are good reasons to think that all three of these versions developed independently of one another. In particular, the laconic account of the battle, with hardly any description of the fighting, no dialogue, and no display of bravery on the part of the heroes so abundant in later versions of the Karbala story (and in much of Islamic historiography at large), points to al-Bāqir's account as not having been abbreviated from a longer version, and thus argues for its early date. The same can, of course, be said of the version of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān.

Abū Mikhnaḥ's account, on the other hand, is much more elaborate. This is not to say that every part of it is a later embellishment or rhetorical device. Many reports are of course very old, such as that of al-Ḥusayn's nocturnal negotiation with 'Umar b. Sa'd. The narrative as a whole, however, must be considered later than those of al-Bāqir and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān. It shows clear marks of development towards an epic in which bravery and cowardliness, the emotions of despair and triumph and expressions of piety and unbelief figure prominently. Boaz Shoshan has demonstrated that even al-Bāqir's short version does not lack features of *mimesis*,⁷⁵ but in comparison with Abū Mikhnaḥ's account, it is dull and poor in detail, as Howard correctly maintains. What Shoshan and later Haider demonstrate, however, is that such details are often rhetorical devices, elements designed to make the story livelier and more reliable and to convey the perspective of the author/compiler.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Shoshan, *Poetics*, 6–7.

⁷⁶ Shoshan, *Poetics*, 1–60, see also his analysis of the Karbala story, 233–52; Haider, *Rebel*, 10–13. In Chapter 4, I will give an example of such a 'rhetorical elaboration' (the expression is Haider's). There, I argue that Abū Mikhnaḥ's rendering of the Karbala tragedy is meant to show that, when

Table 3.2 The killing of al-Ḥusayn's baby boy according to al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaf

Al-Bāqir	Abū Mikhnaf
An arrow came and struck his son while he had him on his lap.	Al-Ḥusayn was brought his young child; he was on his lap. Then one of you, Banū Asad, shot an arrow that slaughtered the child.
He began to wipe the blood from him, saying,	Al-Husayn caught the blood. When the palm of his hand was full, he poured the blood onto the ground and said,
'O God! Judge between us and a people who summoned us so that they might help us and then killed us.'	'O Lord, if it be that You have kept the help of heaven from us, then let it be because Your purpose is better than [immediate] help. Take vengeance for us on these oppressors.'

This point is further illustrated when we compare the episode of the killing of al-Ḥusayn's baby boy in the versions of al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaf.⁷⁷ That this is the only *khbar* in the entire account of Abū Mikhnaf that is transmitted from al-Bāqir adds to its interest and significance. Here, as in many other places, al-Bāqir's version is short and terse, whereas that of Abū Mikhnaf is more elaborate, although the content is basically the same (see Table 3.2). What is so striking is the difference in the content of the supplication al-Ḥusayn offers to God. Whereas in Abū Mikhnaf's account this is similar to many utterances by al-Ḥusayn as given by him, and is in fact what one might expect from a pious Muslim, al-Bāqir's rendering is more focused on the guilt of the Kufans, who at first beg al-Ḥusayn to come, only to betray him as he approaches their town. As we will see in Part II, this notion of guilt parallels that expressed in the story of the Tawwābūn. In the analysis of that story below, I will argue that this is a very early theme which goes back at least to the beginning of the second/eighth century, if not earlier. I am inclined to think that the feelings of guilt for the failure to support al-Ḥusayn

the Kufans broke the truce with al-Ḥusayn, they broke the covenant that God has established with humanity.

⁷⁷ For al-Bāqir's version, see al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 282, and for that of Abū Mikhnaf, al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 360.

are indeed the most ancient motif in his developing image.⁷⁸ The same idea is also expressed several times in Abū Mikhnaḥ's version of the Karbala story, though not in connection with the killing of al-Ḥusayn's baby son. While it is not made explicit in the particular passage discussed here, al-Ḥusayn's prayer as related by al-Bāqir is uttered against that backdrop. As mentioned in the chapters about the Tawwābūn below, the motif of guilt is quite unusual in other strands of Islam, and less common in later Shi'ism than in the earliest decades. Although feelings of guilt are certainly to be found in later Shi'ism, the idea of trust in God's higher purposes fits much better with the general image of God in the later development. It is thus more likely, in my opinion, that the idea of the betrayal of al-Ḥusayn is the earlier motif (as expressed in the version of al-Bāqir), and the idea of God's omniscience and best purposes (as found in Abū Mikhnaḥ's version) is later.

A further argument in favour of an early date for the two shorter versions of the story is a detail previously touched on above in the analysis of al-Bāqir's text, to which I now return. It will be recalled that after the battle, when the surviving relatives of al-Ḥusayn are brought before the governor Ibn Ziyād, the name of the only surviving male descendant is not mentioned;⁷⁹ yet, according to all later tradition, this is al-Ḥusayn's son 'Alī, the fourth imam, Zayn al-Ābidīn. But this is not the only relative of al-Ḥusayn's who goes unnamed. In fact, both al-Bāqir's and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's accounts mention very few of al-Ḥusayn's family members by name. Both, of course, use the name of the main protagonists, al-Ḥusayn and Muslim b. 'Aqīl, but the only other relative of al-Ḥusayn's whose name al-Bāqir reveals is Zaynab, his sister, who is active in protecting her family at the court of Ibn Ziyād and Yazīd after the battle. Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān mentions only al-Ḥusayn and Muslim by name (though he writes that 'five sons of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib' were among al-Ḥusayn's men⁸⁰). As has often been pointed out, there is a general tendency for later tradition to provide unnamed personalities with names in order to personalise them and make the accounts livelier.⁸¹ This feature is very clear in the Karbala story. Thus, in contrast to the versions of al-Bāqir

⁷⁸ See also Halm, *Shi'a Islam*, 16–20.

⁷⁹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 283.

⁸⁰ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 286.

⁸¹ For examples from the Christian tradition, see e.g. Metzger, 'Names'.

and Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, Abū Mikhnaf’s account is replete with names of family members of al-Ḥusayn. The only close relative of his whose name is not given is his baby boy, who was killed. Later tradition names the baby ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn,⁸² however, and in the much later version by al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) – a verbatim rendering of the report in Abū Mikhnaf – the baby’s name is added.⁸³

A final argument in favour of an early date for the two short versions is the scarcity of quotations from the Qur’an, whereas in Abū Mikhnaf’s text passages from or allusions to the Qur’an are found on almost every page. A development towards a more general use of the sacred text in the second/eighth century is in line with what many other studies have argued, that the Qur’an as we know it was increasingly referred to and used from the beginning of that century.⁸⁴

To conclude the discussion so far about the relative order of origin of the three versions of the Karbala story: without taking into regard the attributions in the *isnāds*, I am convinced that the accounts of al-Bāqir and Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān are earlier than that of Abū Mikhnaf. I do not, though, think it is possible to determine the order of origin of the two short versions. As I will argue below, they probably emerged at the turn of the second/first quarter of the eighth century, one in Medina and the other in Kufa. This may seem rather a meagre finding for an extended discussion, as some scholars might regard it as quite evident, but to my knowledge this view has never been supported by argument. At this stage in the analysis, it is, however, possible to say something about the proposed origins of the three accounts. This will also help us towards placing their approximate time of origin in absolute, rather than merely relative, terms.

The Question of Origins

I argued above that the two short versions ascribed to al-Bāqir and Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān are older than Abū Mikhnaf’s long account. It is much more

⁸² Al-Isfahānī, *Maqātil*, 94–5.

⁸³ Al-Mufīd, *Book of Guidance*, 359. According to Howard, al-Mufīd has most probably used al-Ṭabarī’s account (*Book of Guidance*, 558, n. 12).

⁸⁴ See e.g. Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 21–30; Lindstedt, ‘Who is In?’. Cf. also Görke and Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte*, 264.

difficult to reach a conclusion about their dates in absolute terms, and any such attempt depends on the scholar's evaluation of the alleged originators given in the *isnāds*. None of the three texts exhibits characteristics that might reveal the identity of the originator. However, in my opinion there is hardly any reason to doubt the origins assumed in the chains of authority. If my arguments against Howard's doubts are valid, there is little that seems to contradict the information given in the *isnāds*, and moreover, there is external evidence that supports it.

The Account Ascribed to al-Bāqir

Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, the fifth imam according to the Twelver Shi'ite tradition, is held by both Shi'ite and Sunni traditions to have been one of the most prominent scholars of his time both in hadith and in Islamic law; his erudition caused him to be called *Bāqir al-ilm* ('the one who splits knowledge open'), or just *al-Bāqir*. He and his son Ja'far al-Ṣādiq laid the foundation for what developed into Shi'i law and doctrine, and modern scholars therefore regard him as one of the persons who was greatly instrumental in the forming of an early Shi'ite identity.⁸⁵

Al-Ṭabarī is not the only historian who relates the version ascribed to al-Bāqir. It was also used by al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956) in his *Murūj al-dhahab*.⁸⁶ I agree with Howard's unsubstantiated statement that al-Mas'ūdī took his version from al-Ṭabarī.⁸⁷ Though al-Mas'ūdī does not reveal his source, his use of al-Ṭabarī is clear from the fact that he not only follows al-Bāqir's text as given by al-Ṭabarī in certain passages, but also reproduces various other traditions about the Karbala event that are also related by al-Ṭabarī. Since this is the only known source outside of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* that relates parts of al-Bāqir's account, we have no independently transmitted version of his text with which to compare that given by al-Ṭabarī. On the other hand, Abū al-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī (d. after 360/971)⁸⁸ seems to be aware of al-Bāqir's version independently of al-Ṭabarī. In his *Maqātil al-Ṭālibiyyīn*, Abū al-Faraj introduces the Karbala

⁸⁵ On him, see e.g. Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Le shī'isme*, 61–3; Buckley, 'Muḥammad al-Bāqir'; Lalani, *Early Shi'i Thought*.

⁸⁶ Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, vol. V, 127–47.

⁸⁷ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 128.

⁸⁸ Günther, 'Abū l-Faraj'.

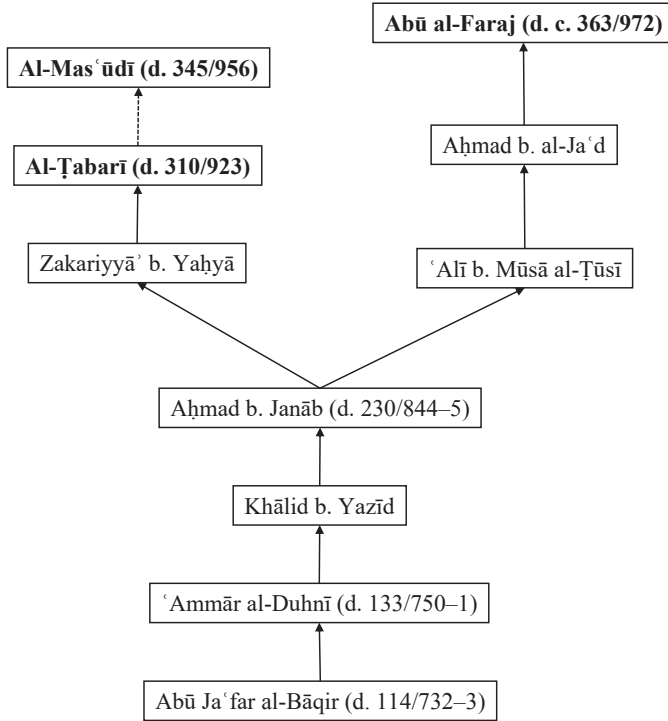


Figure 3.1 Tradition history of al-Bāqir's account. Names in bold indicate extant texts. Years of death are given whenever known. Dotted arrow signifies inferred transmission.

story with a collective *isnād* to sources for his account, saying that all these people relate more or less the same story about the killing of al-Ḥusayn.⁸⁹ One of these sources is al-Bāqir, by way of 'Ammār al-Duhnī and two more intermediaries also found in al-Ṭabarī's rendering. Instead of the fifth and most recent transmitter in al-Ṭabarī's *isnād*, however, Abū al-Faraj gives two different authorities (see Figure 3.1).⁹⁰ It is thus probable that he received this account independently of al-Ṭabarī, though he does not reproduce it. This indicates that the purported origin of al-Bāqir's version was accepted as such

⁸⁹ On al-Bāqir's use of collective *isnāds*, see Günther, "... nor have I learned it ...", 142-5.

⁹⁰ Al-Ṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 99; cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 227. Howard has also noted this ('Husayn the Martyr', 128).

among Shi'ites as late as Abū al-Faraj, two and a half centuries after the death of the fifth imam.⁹¹

According to the *isnād*, it was the Kufan traditionist 'Ammār b. Mu'āwiya al-Duhnī (d. 133/750–1) who transmitted the story from al-Bāqir, who resided in Medina.⁹² Of course, there is no way to check whether 'Ammār actually heard al-Bāqir relate the story to him, but, as Borrut maintains, it is by no means impossible to imagine that 'Ammār received the story from the Shi'ite milieu in Medina, whether directly from al-Bāqir or not.⁹³ Furthermore, the minuscule role played here by al-Ḥurr in comparison to the versions of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān and Abū Mikhnaḥ (see the analysis of Section 4 above) might indicate a Medinan rather than a Kufan provenance. If it is true that al-Ḥurr commanded a substantial part of the army, he must have belonged to the Kufan nobility.⁹⁴ As a nobleman, he would have been well known and remembered, and his character elaborated on in Kufa, especially if he had acted in a way that cost his own life in favour of al-Ḥusayn. In Medina, by contrast, he might have been less well-known, and his function in the Karbala drama not remembered correctly. Alternatively, of course, the account told by al-Bāqir could be correct, and the Kufan version entirely fictional. I consider this less likely, given that we have two mutually independent versions relating al-Ḥurr's active role in the battle. Furthermore, as we will see below, the Kufan Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān seems to have been an adolescent at the time of the Karbala event and thus would have been quite well-informed about the nobility of the town. Finally, I am not convinced by Howard's attempt to harmonise the two versions, whereby he claims that al-Ḥurr first met al-Ḥusayn and then led the army out against al-Ḥusayn.⁹⁵

There is one detail, however, that may speak against a Shi'ite origin of the version ascribed to al-Bāqir, an argument that Howard does not adduce even

⁹¹ Abū al-Faraj, however, was a Zaydi, or at least a non-Imami Shi'ite (see Günther, 'Abū l-Faraj'; but cf. Su, *The Shi'i Past*, 60–93), and thus probably did not regard the imams (al-Ḥusayn included) as infallible. For that reason, he might have been more prone to accept a description of al-Ḥusayn that was slightly less hagiographical than if he had belonged to the Twelver branch.

⁹² On 'Ammār al-Duhnī, see al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, vol. XXI, 208–10.

⁹³ Borrut, 'Remembering Karbalā', 265.

⁹⁴ This is how Howard describes him, though without adducing any sources or other arguments (al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. XIX, 74, n. 252).

⁹⁵ Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. XIX, 74, n. 252.

though it supports his hypothesis. This is the omission of the name of the male relative of al-Ḥusayn who had been ill and had thus survived the battle (see the analysis of Section 6 above). According to other information, from Abū Mikhnaḥ and onwards, this was al-Ḥusayn's son 'Alī, who, according to the Twelver tradition, later became the fourth imam, Zayn al-Ābidīn, and who was the father of al-Bāqir. Why, then, is his name not mentioned in the version ascribed to the son of the fifth imam – or at least derived from the Shi'ite milieu of Medina of his time? As we have seen, the text does not even state that this person was the son of al-Ḥusayn, just that he was the only male survivor of the family.⁹⁶

According to Abū Mikhnaḥ, who identifies him as 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn, the boy had just reached puberty; in fact, he was so young that Ibn Ziyād had his men uncover the boy's private parts, presumably to see whether his pubic hair had grown. The attendants confirmed that he had reached manhood, and Ibn Ziyād ordered him killed. At this threat, 'Alī's aunt Zaynab intervened and pleaded for his life, and the governor let him live.⁹⁷ However, the age of 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn given by Abū Mikhnaḥ is not consistent with that given in other sources. According to most sources for his life, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn was in his early twenties when his father was killed.⁹⁸ According to Ibn Sa'd, for example, 'Alī was 23 at the time of the Karbala tragedy, and in his rendering of the confrontation with Ibn Ziyād, nothing is mentioned about 'Alī having just reached puberty.⁹⁹ This is supported by a tradition related by the Shi'ite historian al-Ya'qūbī, where 'Alī's son al-Bāqir says that he was four years old when al-Ḥusayn was killed, and that he remembered the occasion.¹⁰⁰ If this is correct, 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn could hardly have just attained puberty at this time.

Al-Bāqir not only omits the boy's name but is also vague about his age. He uses the word *ghulām*, which often means 'a young boy' but can also

⁹⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 283.

⁹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 372–3.

⁹⁸ See e.g. Kohlberg, 'Zayn al-Ābidīn'; Madelung, 'Alī b. Ḥusayn b. 'Alī b. Abī Ṭaleb' and the references in these studies.

⁹⁹ Ibn Sa'd, *Ṭabaqāt*, vol. VII, 210.

¹⁰⁰ Al-Ya'qūbī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. II, 384. Contrary to what Lalani states, however (*Early Shi'ī Thought*, 196 n. 4), al-Bāqir does not say that he was present at the Karbala tragedy, only that he remembers it. There is a slight problem with al-Ya'qūbī's chronology (*Works*, vol. III, 1,038 and n. 2,452), but it is hardly serious enough to challenge the information about al-Bāqir's age.

signify a young or even a middle-aged man.¹⁰¹ Howard has translated this word as 'a young lad',¹⁰² a translation which is perfectly all right in itself but does not convey the vagueness of the Arabic word. Here it seems that Howard was influenced by Abū Mikhnaḥ's rendering, and did not consider sources according to which 'Alī was older at the time.

Thus, there are several problems with this tradition. In the version ascribed to al-Bāqir, it is the omission of the name of the person who, according to all later tradition, is his own father, as well as the (possibly intentional) vagueness about this person's age; in Abū Mikhnaḥ's version, it is 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn's young age, an age which contradicts other sources about him. The only explanation I can think of for these omissions, ambiguities and contradictions is that later Shi'ites were uneasy about the fact that the son of al-Ḥusayn, the fourth imam, now grown to adulthood, had survived without showing any resistance to the governor. Being imprecise about his identity and age – or alternatively, being clear about his identity but reducing his age by ten years or so – might represent attempts to evade this embarrassment.

To conclude. If its purported origin is accepted, al-Bāqir's version might well be what Sebastian Günther describes as one of the very early collections of reports on the death of al-Ḥusayn, collections that 'contributed to a considerable degree, to the development of a Shi'ite "self-awareness"', being 'recounted or recited as poems during mourning-assemblies, which were held in the houses of Kufan Shi'ites and at Karbala soon after this event'.¹⁰³ As related in al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*, the story was transmitted orally to 'Ammār al-Duhnī by al-Bāqir.¹⁰⁴ Whether it was 'Ammār himself or one of those who forwarded it after him who put it into writing we cannot know. Günther dates these earliest *maqātil* works to the end of the first/seventh or the first half of the second/eighth century,¹⁰⁵ and that is in line with the date of al-Bāqir's death in 114/732–3 or 117/735. In summary, I would place the origin of the version ascribed to al-Bāqir in Medina at the turn of the second/the first decades of the eighth century.

¹⁰¹ Kazimirski, *Dictionnaire arabe-français*, s.v. ghulām; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, s.v. ghulām.

¹⁰² Al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. XIX, 76.

¹⁰³ Günther, 'Maqātil Literature', 194.

¹⁰⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 227, 281.

¹⁰⁵ Günther, 'Maqātil Literature'.

Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's Version

In the introduction to this chapter, I mentioned that Howard claims to list 'all the early works [on the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn] which we know at present'.¹⁰⁶ For that reason, it is all the more remarkable that he almost totally disregards the account given by al-Ḥusayn b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān. This is one of the three complete versions of the story related by al-Ṭabarī,¹⁰⁷ and is also given in full by al-Balādhurī.¹⁰⁸ Howard does not mention this in the list of accounts he gives at the beginning of his article,¹⁰⁹ and he brings it up only in passing in a discussion of the sources used by al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī. In relation to al-Balādhurī, he says that Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account 'is brief and adds nothing to our knowledge of the historical tradition'.¹¹⁰ As is clear from the discussion above, however, that version at times gives details that diverge from both al-Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaf's accounts. Whether Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān helps us know better what actually happened at Karbala is of course difficult, if not impossible, to say; but as we have seen, his account certainly helps us to trace the tradition history of the story.

According to al-Mizzī, al-Ḥusayn b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān was a famous traditionist living in Kufa, and was considered trustworthy as transmitter of hadiths.¹¹¹ He died in 136/753–4 at the great age of ninety-three. More or less in passing, in a discussion of his age, al-Mizzī relates that Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān transmitted material on the killing of al-Ḥusayn, and that he was married when the Karbala tragedy occurred, while Ibn Ḥajar tells us that he was an adolescent at the time,¹¹² in other words, that he would have been something like seventeen to eighteen when the Karbala tragedy occurred. Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān does not seem to have had any particularly Shi'ite sympathies; at least, these cannot be inferred from al-Mizzī's entry about him, or from

¹⁰⁶ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 125.

¹⁰⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 283–7.

¹⁰⁸ Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. III, 382–4, 422–5. Ibn A'tham also includes him in a collective *isnad* to the Karbala story; the *isnad* in which Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān is included differs considerably from those given by al-Balādhurī and al-Ṭabarī, however (*Futūḥ*, vol IV, 209).

¹⁰⁹ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 124–5.

¹¹⁰ Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 138. Wellhausen (*Religio-Political Factions*, 112) has a similar statement.

¹¹¹ Al-Mizzī, *Tabdhīb*, vol. VI, 519–23.

¹¹² Al-Mizzī, *Tabdhīb*, vol. VI, 523; Ibn Ḥajar, *Tabdhīb*, vol. II, 382.

the authorities in his *isnāds*. Details in the text furthermore indicate that he was not a Shi'ite. Thus, according to Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account, when al-Ḥusayn learnt about the situation in Kufa, he 'began to move toward the road to Syria, toward Yazīd'.¹¹³ Furthermore, in his negotiations with 'Umar b. Sa'd (and two of his associates), al-Ḥusayn asks only to be allowed to surrender to Yazīd; the other alternatives mentioned by al-Bāqir and Abū Mikhnaf are not recounted.¹¹⁴ Finally, by making Ibn Ziyād in Kufa the ruler who desecrates the severed head of al-Ḥusayn by poking at it with his cane, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān diminishes the caliph's responsibility for the whole affair. Thus, his account is more sympathetic to the Umayyads than either al-Bāqir's or Abū Mikhnaf's, a fact which corroborates the impression that he was not a Shi'ite.

As mentioned above, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's version is preserved in al-Balādhurī's *Ansāb al-Ashraf* and in al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*. Both have more or less the same material; often the wording is exactly the same. One difference is that al-Balādhurī has split Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's account and inserted it in two locations. The bulk of his material is given separately after his main account of the Karbala tragedy, which is chiefly based on Abū Mikhnaf.¹¹⁵ However, the part where Ibn Ziyād's forces intercept al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥurr decides to desert the governor's troops and join him is detached from the rest of the account and inserted in the middle of the main account immediately before al-Ḥusayn's meeting with the poet 'Ubaydallāh b. al-Ḥurr al-Ju'fī.¹¹⁶ The reason for this is unclear. It might be that al-Balādhurī wanted to contrast the behaviour of two men with similar names: al-Ḥurr who joined al-Ḥusayn, and Ibn al-Ḥurr who did not. Furthermore, the *isnād* seems to be corrupt, as the main authority for this particular report is written not as Ḥusayn, but Ḥuḍayn,¹¹⁷ and al-Balādhurī could have thought that this referred to another transmitter. Whatever the reason for al-Balādhurī's placing of portions of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān's version in two different sites in the

¹¹³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 285.

¹¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, II, 285.

¹¹⁵ Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. III, 422–5.

¹¹⁶ Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. III, 383–4.

¹¹⁷ In Arabic, the letters ṣ and ḍ are of course very similar, where the ḍ is distinguished only by a dot above the letter.

timeline, the separation signals that the account may not have been transmitted to him as a self-contained narrative. Thus, different versions of Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s rendering of the event could have been circulating in the time of al-Balādhurī.

Extensive passages of this version are not related at first hand by Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, as he in turn had received them from two earlier Kufan authorities: Hilāl b. Yasāf (written as Hilāl b. Isāf in al-Balādhurī) and Sa’d b. ‘Ubayda. These two authorities were traditionists who probably lived in Kufa at the time of the Karbala tragedy.¹¹⁸ This version is, thus, a collection of reports rather than a continuous narrative in the style of al-Bāqir’s account.

While the attribution of al-Bāqir’s version to the imam himself could have been an attempt to give it an ‘official’ seal of approval,¹¹⁹ Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s account does not suffer from such bias. Hence, I see no reason to question its provenance. Given the date of death of Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, this version probably stems from the turn of the second/the first decades of the eighth century, just like that of al-Bāqir.

Abū Mikhnaḥ’s Version

In Chapter 2, I have already mentioned the prolific historian Abū Mikhnaḥ and his motives for writing history. Ibn al-Nadīm, among others, attributes a ‘book’ with the title *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn* to Abū Mikhnaḥ.¹²⁰ This was probably his most influential work.¹²¹ Besides al-Ṭabarī, many authors of historical narratives use it as a source for the Karbala event;¹²² al-Ṭabarī himself does not quote directly from Abū Mikhnaḥ’s *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn*, but uses the work with the same title by Hishām b. al-Kalbī (d. 204/819–20). Modern scholars argue

¹¹⁸ Al-Mizzī describe them both as trustworthy. He says that Hilāl belonged to the class of Successors and met ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib. Thus, Hilāl probably died at the end of the first/seventh century (*Tabdhīb*, vol. XXX, 353–5). Sa’d died when ‘Umar b. Hubayra was governor in Iraq, i.e. between 101/720 and 105/724 (*Tabdhīb*, vol. X, 290–2).

¹¹⁹ See Howard, ‘Husayn the Martyr’, 127; Borrut, ‘Remembering Karbalā’, 265.

¹²⁰ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, vol. 1, 93. Others who mention this work are al-Tūsī and al-Najāshī; for references, see Günther, ‘*Maqātil* Literature’, 201, n. 40.

¹²¹ Bahramian et al., ‘Abū Mikhnaḥ’.

¹²² See e.g. al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. II, 334–43 (on Muslim b. ‘Aqil); *Ansāb*, vol. III, 368–426 (on al-Ḥusayn); Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*; al-Iṣfahānī, *Maqātil*, 98–9; Ibn A’tḥam al-Kūfī, *Futūḥ*, vol. IV, 209 – vol. V, 251, though Ibn A’tḥam has greatly embellished his account with the help of a number of sources.

that comparison of al-Ṭabarī's/Ibn al-Kalbī's rendering of Abū Mikhnaḥ's text with other versions reveals that he has transmitted it very faithfully.¹²³

Just like the rendering of Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān, that of Abū Mikhnaḥ is not an unbroken narrative, but consists of *khābars* that are concatenated to form a continuous account. As we have seen in Chapter 2, many scholars point to Abū Mikhnaḥ's great interest in his family and tribe, al-Azd. Although some of his ancestors seems to have been allied with 'Alī and to have supported the Shi'ites in Kufa up to the 60s/680s, it is uncertain whether Abū Mikhnaḥ considered himself a Shi'ite.¹²⁴ It seems clear that he takes the side of al-Ḥusayn and his family against the Kufan governor and the caliph, but this could be because of his aversion to the Umayyads, or a commitment to 'soft Shi'ite' ideas.¹²⁵ Still, his account of the Karbala event has functioned as model for many later versions. As Bahramian writes, 'it was the most important documentary source on the events of Karbala for later authors',¹²⁶ and, as Borrut maintains, 'it is difficult to overestimate Abū Mikhnaḥ's role in shaping Shi'ism's early image, to the point that it should be regarded as a major historiographical filter'.¹²⁷ That Abū Mikhnaḥ should be the author (or, more correctly perhaps, the compiler) of most of the long version in al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* no one has questioned, and this is also my position. Bahramian argues that Abū Mikhnaḥ compiled most of his works in early Abbasid times. Thus, it is likely that this text as a whole originated in the decades before his death, that is, in the third quarter of the second/eighth century.

Summary and Final Reflections

To summarise the preceding analysis, I conclude that the three accounts originated independently of one another. While all three versions relate the same story, very few passages are identically worded. Furthermore, there are significant differences between all three accounts. The two short versions by al-Bāqir and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān are clearly the earliest ones. I see no reason

¹²³ Bahramian et al., 'Abū Mikhnaḥ'; Vecchia Vaglieri, 'Ḥusayn', 608; Howard, 'Translator's Foreword', x. On Ibn al-Kalbī's use of Abū Mikhnaḥ's writings, see also Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaḥ*, 43–4.

¹²⁴ Athamina, 'Abū Mikhnaḥ'; Bahramian et al., 'Abū Mikhnaḥ'.

¹²⁵ Athamina, 'Abū Mikhnaḥ'; Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 133.

¹²⁶ Bahramian et al., 'Abū Mikhnaḥ'. See also Vecchia Vaglieri, 'Ḥusayn', 608.

¹²⁷ Borrut, 'Remembering Karbala', 264.

to doubt that the version ascribed to al-Bāqir actually originated with him or at least with the Shi'ite milieu in Medina where he lived. Likewise, Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān was probably the originator of the version that bears his name. This places both these versions in the decades following the turn of the second/beginning of the eighth century. While many of the traditions in Abū Mikhnaḥ's account are probably early, his version as it exists now was probably compiled and edited a few decades later, most likely in the third quarter of the second/eighth century. There are traces which suggest that the part of the narrative dealing with Muslim b. 'Aqil in Kufa on the one hand and al-Ḥusayn's journey through the desert and the battle at Karbala on the other were originally transmitted as two separate stories. Investigation furthermore suggests that the Karbala story was not yet a fixed narrative at the time of al-Bāqir and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān. Although the basic structure is the same, details differ, and at times even conflict. By the time of Abū Mikhnaḥ, the story had attained much of its final shape, and had become an outline for authors and storytellers to follow. This, of course, has not hindered later narrators from further embellishing it, but the basic pattern is determined with Abū Mikhnaḥ.

At times my students have asked me whether the battle at Karbala actually happened, or if it is all fictional. My reply has always been that there is no reason to think that at least the core of the story is not historically correct, though many details are obviously added later – at least in the version of Abū Mikhnaḥ – and that it is difficult to know exactly which elements are later embroideries. I have never encountered any historian who has denied the historical veracity of the battle and what led up to it. While it has perhaps never been necessary to argue for the historicity of the core of the story, the present study further strengthens the impression that it recounts a historical event. The three early versions, independently of each other, give the same basic accounts of the affair, and several details in the story conflict with later Shi'ite tradition. Thus, both the criterion of multiple independent sources and the criterion of embarrassment argue for the historicity of the core story.¹²⁸

In the account of Abū Mikhnaḥ, we see the first traces of the elevation of al-Ḥusayn to a figure of more than ordinary human capacities. Although

¹²⁸ As I will argue in Chapter 11, there is also some very early poetry which, although it does not narrate the story, testifies to the historicity of the event.

he does not have the miraculous powers or the semi-divine status given him (as well as the other imams) in the later Shi'ite tradition, he is described as very pious, totally trusting in God's mercy.¹²⁹ Thus, for example, he shows kindness to his enemies and gives them water when they are thirsty, and he refuses to initiate battle in spite of the martial advantages this would bring, and although he has dreams that predict what will happen he continues on the pre-ordained path. The inviolability of al-Ḥusayn owing to his relationship to the Prophet and his father 'Alī is furthermore emphasised by Abū Mikhnaḥ. We also see in this version how the divine punishments of al-Ḥusayn's enemies are miraculously enacted immediately when he curses them, a sign of God's support for his cause. Likewise, much is made of the bravery of al-Ḥusayn and his followers, in contrast to the cowardliness and wickedness of their adversaries.¹³⁰ In other words, in the version of Abū Mikhnaḥ we see indications that the battle and al-Ḥusayn himself are removed from human history, as McCutcheon expresses it, and are lifted somewhat above 'the realm of human doings'. None of such hagiographical features is to be found in the earlier versions of al-Bāqir and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān. Furthermore, Abū Mikhnaḥ's rendering of the Karbala story is set in a theological context not found in the two earlier versions. While al-Bāqir and Ibn 'Abd al-Raḥmān tell the story quite straightforwardly, Abū Mikhnaḥ gives the story and the death of al-Ḥusayn an ultimate significance by placing it in a covenantal structure. In the following chapter, we shall see how this is done.

¹²⁹ See Shoshan, *Poetics*, 245. However, I do not agree with Shoshan's interpretation that Abū Mikhnaḥ (or al-Ṭabarī) has parallel accounts 'which depict Ḥusayn as less determined' (Shoshan, *Poetics*). For a discussion about this, see Hylén, 'Ḥusayn, the Mediator', 186–8.

¹³⁰ For a more detailed discussion of these traits, see Hylén, 'Ḥusayn, the Mediator', 168–76.