4

Karbala and Covenant according to Abū Mikhnaf

Introduction

In previous chapters I have shown that modern scholars have varied in their attempts to assign a specific religious affiliation to Abū Mikhnaf. Some state that he did not identify as a Shiʿite, but was a historian primarily interested in writing the history of Iraq, his own family, and his tribe, al-Azd;[1] others see him as a 'soft' Shiʿite who thought that ʿAlī had been the rightful successor of the Prophet, but accepted the first caliphs as sinful, yet legitimate rulers.[2] Against this background, the analysis in this chapter will establish not only that Abū Mikhnaf's version of the Karbala story is thoroughly theological, but that it is the earliest theological framing that has survived intact right through until today. While, as we saw in Chapter 3, al-Bāqir and Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān relate it in a quite straightforward manner, I will argue in this chapter that Abū Mikhnaf has a clear theological – if perhaps not necessarily Shiʿite – agenda in that he situates the tragedy at Karbala in the context of the divine covenant with humankind at large, and particularly with the Muslims.[3]

[1] Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr', 133; Bahramian et al., 'Abū Mikhnaf'; Athamina, 'Abū Mikhnaf'.
[2] van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. I, 311; Crone, *Political Thought*, 117–18.
[3] The present chapter is a development of my earlier study 'Hand of God', where I emphasised al-Ṭabarī as advocate of a covenant approach to the Karbala event. Here, I want to focus on Abū Mikhnaf, who was, as we have seen, al-Ṭabarī's main source. This by no means detracts from al-Ṭabarī's interest in the covenant ideology, as Mårtensson and others have argued (see e.g. Mårtensson, 'Discourse'; *Tabari*; Humphreys, 'Qur'ānic Myth', but cf. Shoshan, *Poetics*, 85–107). I am particularly grateful to Marianna Klar, editor of the issue of *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* in

Abū Mikhnaf's approach to this story apparently did not catch on among Shiʿites in the centuries to follow, however, even though the idea of the divine covenant was important in early Imami Shiʿite theology, as we will see. In the earliest purely Shiʿite biographies of al-Ḥusayn there is very little – if anything – of the covenant vocabulary and formulae that are so prevalent in Abū Mikhnaf. In spite of the enormous popularity and influence of his rendering,[4] Abū Mikhnaf's theological framing of the story has no early Shiʿite parallels. In a sense, it thus became a theological dead end. The analysis presented in this chapter, in other words, probably says more about Abū Mikhnaf and his view of the Karbala story (and perhaps of history at large) than about the reception of the story among Shiʿites.

In the following pages, I will argue that the notion of the divine covenant, which permeates the Qur'an, constitutes the framework through which Abū Mikhnaf views this event. The Qur'anic idea of the covenant will be traced in Abū Mikhnaf's account in structural/thematic continuity with the Hebrew Bible's account of the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people – which has, in turn, been traced back in its basic form to Late Bronze Era treaties between rulers and their vassals.

I will focus on four speeches ascribed by Abū Mikhnaf to al-Ḥusayn when he encounters the vanguard of the Kufan army led by al-Ḥurr. I will analyse the use of Qur'anic covenant formulae and vocabulary in the four texts, and will also categorise them within the broader framework of the eight standard characteristics of Ancient West Asian (AWA)[5] and biblical covenants as presented by George Mendenhall and Gary Herion,[6] and further developed in a Qur'anic context by Rosalind Ward Gwynne.[7] I hope to show that Abū

which the article was originally published. Her pertinent remarks and numerous literature proposals greatly improved this study.

[4] Bahramian et al., 'Abū Mikhnaf'; Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 4.

[5] The empires I discuss below span a huge time frame, from the late Bronze Age to the early Iron Age, and a vast geographical area including Anatolia and Mesopotamia (and at times also Egypt). Appellations like 'the Near East' or 'the Middle East' are colonial in origin. Thus, in the present context they are anachronistic (and of course filled with Eurocentric connotations). Although they might be convenient to use for modern times, I prefer the term 'West Asia' when talking about eras far back in history.

[6] Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant'.

[7] Gwynne, *Logic*. In her article 'Ancient Near East', Patricia Crone demonstrated that not only the notion of the covenant, but also other ideas and practices in Islam, have their roots in Ancient West Asia.

Mikhnaf's Karbala narrative presents the pact of loyalty (*bayʿa*) to al-Ḥusayn as an extension of the divine covenant.

The Covenant in the Qur'an ...

Before focusing on the Karbala story, however, it is necessary to discuss the notion of the divine covenant in early Islam at large, and especially in the Qur'an. It is commonly accepted by scholars of Islam that the notion of the divine covenant with humankind is very important in the Qur'an.[8] Indeed, Andrew Marsham goes so far as to argue that 'as with the Bible, "covenant" is the "thematic centre" – *die Mitte* – of the Qur'ān'.[9] The two most common terms used in the Qur'an to denote the divine covenant are *mīthāq* (occurring 25 times; see for example Qur. 2:84; 3:187; 5:7; 57:8) and *ʿahd* (occurring 29 times, for example Qur. 3:77; 6:152; 13:25; 20:115).[10] The same words are also used at times to signify pacts and alliances between human individuals and groups (for *mīthāq* see Qur. 4:21, 90, 92 and 8:72, and for *ʿahd* see Qur. 23:8 and 70:32).[11] In the Qur'an, the two words appear to be used interchangeably. In spite of the importance of the theme, however, it is never dealt with at length in the Qur'an, nor in later exegesis or theology. Gwynne maintains that it is precisely because it is so fundamental to the Qur'an 'that the Covenant *as a discrete concept* does not have a clear profile in Islamic scholarship'.[12] One of the most important covenantal passages in the Qur'an is 7:172:

> (Remember) when your Lord took from the sons of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them bear witness about themselves: 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes indeed! We bear witness.' (We did

[8] To my knowledge the most comprehensive study (though by now a bit dated in many of its premises) of the Qur'anic notion of covenant is Darnell, 'Divine Covenant'. See also Böwering, 'Covenant', 1–24; Gwynne, *Logic*; Weiss, 'Covenant'. Recent discussions of the notion of the covenant in the Qur'an and its exegesis are Lumbard, 'Covenant'; 'Humanity in Covenant'; Jaffer, 'Covenant Theology'.

[9] Marsham, *Rituals*, 41. See also Weiss, 'Covenant', 54.

[10] The numbers of occurrences of these words mentioned here include only their forms as noun and verbal noun (*maṣdar*) respectively. In addition to these, both roots occur several times in verbal and other forms. For a good overview of the uses of these and other words with the meaning of 'covenant' in the Qur'an, see Böwering, 'Covenant'; Lumbard, 'Covenant', 2–4.

[11] Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 9; Böwering, 'Covenant', 464b.

[12] Gwynne, *Logic*, 1–5. The quotation is from p. 4. Italics in original.

> that) so that you would not say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Surely we were oblivious of this.'

Gwynne calls this 'the pivotal covenant-passage',[13] and Ebstein writes that it 'served as the focal point of later speculations on the primordial covenant between God and mankind'.[14] Though none of the words for 'covenant' occurs in this verse, it is often held by commentators of the Qur'an to relate the establishment of the primordial pact between God and humankind.[15] Other verses which describe covenants between God and the prophets, rather than with humankind as a whole, are Qur. 3:81 and 33:7.[16]

The emergence of Islam took place in an environment where Judaism and Christianity were already established and influential. Themes and concepts from these (as well as from other religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism and Manicheism) formed a pool of latent traditions from which the adherents of early Islam drew. They did not passively appropriate these ideas, however, but remoulded and adapted them in order to formulate a religious identity of their own.[17] It is also well-known that the Qur'an itself is replete with biblical motifs and notions. Thus, Reuven Firestone writes: 'in fact, [the Qur'ān] contains so many parallels with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament that it could not possibly exist without its scriptural predecessors as subtexts. The Qur'ān itself recognizes this in its extremely referential nature.'[18] One of the most important of these parallels is the idea of the divine covenant.[19]

[13] Gwynne, *Logic*, 2.

[14] Ebstein, 'Covenant'.

[15] For other, rationalist interpretations, see Ebstein, 'Covenant'; Jaffer, 'The Muʿtazila'.

[16] On all these verses and on the idea of 'covenantal pluralism' in the Qur'an, see Lumbard, 'Covenant'.

[17] Rippin, 'Literary Analysis', 157, referring to the ideas of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*. The literature on this subject is overwhelming. Besides all specialised studies, almost every introduction to Islam and its formative period begins with a section on the influence of Judaism, Christianity and other Late Antique religious traditions on the Arabian Peninsula. For a recent, very thorough overview, see Amir-Moezzi and Dye (eds), *Le Coran des historiens*, vol. I, Ch. 5–14.

[18] For an overview of some studies of such motifs, see Firestone, 'The Qur'ān and the Bible'; the quotation is from pp. 2–3. Indeed, the entire volume (Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur'ān*) of which Firestone's article is a contribution deals with this issue.

[19] For the adaptation and use of the biblical notion of the divine covenant in the Qur'an, see esp. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 1–12; Böwering, 'Covenant'; Gwynne, *Logic*, 1–24; Firestone, 'Divine Election'.

Just as the notion of the divine covenant in the Qur'an did not emerge in a vacuum, neither did that of the Bible. At least since the mid-twentieth century it has generally been recognised that the idea of the covenant of the Hebrew Bible, as well as its textual forms, were clearly influenced by suzerainty treaties from the Hittite empire (c. 1500–1200 BCE) and from the Mesopotamian and, especially, the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires (tenth to sixth centuries BCE), even if the implications of the similarities have been much discussed.[20] The idea of a covenant between God and a chosen people continued, of course, into early Christianity.

Several scholars of the Qur'an have argued that there are close parallels between the biblical notion of the covenant and that found in the Qur'an. Thus, John Wansbrough writes, 'The source of the covenant imagery [in the Qur'an] was clearly Biblical, and predominantly Pentateuchal',[21] whereas Reuven Firestone holds that, although there are significant differences, 'the Qur'ānic references to covenant ... demonstrate both direct and indirect parallels with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament'.[22] While most scholars confine themselves to indicating similarities in the use of concepts and terms, Gwynne has taken a step further and attempts to find structural similarities as well, between the AWA and biblical notions of the covenant on the one hand and those in the Qur'an on the other. She finds that no single covenant-making event is related in the Qur'an which is 'equivalent to the Mosaic Covenant-event on Sinai'. 'On the contrary', she continues, '*the paradigmatic Covenant* is not set out in one place, even though its elements are integral to the Qur'ānic idiom.'[23] By 'the paradigmatic Covenant', Gwynne means a covenant-making occasion that includes several of the eight characteristics identified by Mendenhall and Herion in AWA covenants, as clearly manifest, for example, in the Sinai covenant (see below). Thus Gwynne maintains that,

[20] Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant'; Cross, 'Kinship', 17–19. For a good survey of studies on the biblical notion(s) of covenant, see Hahn, 'Covenant'. As Hahn and many of the scholars he surveys in his article show, there is not one single covenant related in the Hebrew Bible, but several (see esp. p. 286). Lumbard ('Covenant') argues that also in the Qur'an several covenants between God and humankind are mentioned.

[21] Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 10.

[22] Firestone, 'Divine Election', 398. See also Böwering, 'Covenant'; Gwynne, *Logic*. Each of these gives further references.

[23] Gwynne, *Logic*, 6, emphasis mine.

although no such obvious event is described in the Qur'an, the many references and allusions to these features demonstrate a certain continuity between the Qur'anic understanding of covenant and the AWA covenants as mediated through the Hebrew Bible. When discussing the Sinai covenant in relation to older covenant formulae, Mendenhall and Herion make it clear that cultural forms are bound to be adjusted when transferred from one context to another and that, for that reason, the Sinai covenant had changed both in form and content to suit the new circumstances, despite keeping many of the traits of older covenants in the surrounding world.[24] The same should presumably be said about any adaptation of the concept to the context of late antique Arabia.

Here follows the list of the formal characteristics of covenantal texts as identified by Mendenhall and Herion. Some of the examples cited from the Qur'an are given by Gwynne, others are added by me.[25] At some points I also refer directly to Mendenhall and Herion's study and make comparisons with the ancient covenants, especially with the biblical texts relating the foundation of the Sinai covenant.[26]

1. The covenant-giver is identified
   Qur. 7:172 ('Am I not your Lord?'); 96:1 ('your Lord who created').

2. The historical relations are described reciprocally, setting out the benefits and the resulting obligations
   In the Qur'an there are many references to what God has done for humankind in the past. A short passage of this kind is Qur. 42:13:

   > He has instituted for you from the religion what He charged Noah with, and that which We have inspired you (with), and what We charged Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus with: 'Observe the religion, and do not become divided in it.'

[24] Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1183b.

[25] The headings below are quoted verbatim from Gwynne, *Logic*, 7–20. Not all her references to the Qur'an are given.

[26] Mendenhall's and Herion's list is a model, that is, an abstraction of reality made from numerous covenantal documents from different historical contexts throughout the area and historical period that I have chosen to call Ancient West Asia. Thus, no single document or description of a covenant manifests all these characteristics, and the features can be given different relative weight in various documents (Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1180b).

Mendenhall and Herion argue that in older covenants, traits (1) and (2) as listed above are often established separately and at length. At the giving of the covenant at Sinai, however, God identifies Himself through His acts in history much more succinctly: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.'[27]

3. The stipulations of behaviour are given, often in an 'if ... then' format

   In Arabic, conditional clauses can be formulated in many ways, and words like 'if' (*in*) or 'when' (*idhā*) in the first part of the clause express various nuances. One of many examples is Qur. 58:11:

   > You who believe! When (*idhā*) it is said to you 'Make room in the assemblies', make room! God will make room for you. And when (*idhā*) it is said 'Rise up', rise up! God will raise in rank those of you who have believed and those who have been given knowledge. God is aware of what you do.

4. Provision is made for safekeeping of the document and its public reading

   Some examples are Qur. 2:78 ('Book'); 56:77–8 ('a hidden Book'); 85:21–2 ('a guarded Tablet'); 87:19 ('pages'); 96:1 ('Recite, in the name of your Lord!').

5. A list of witnesses is given

   Mendenhall and Herion speak of third-party witnesses. In the Qur'an, however, God is sufficient as witness: Qur. 2:84 ('And when We made a covenant with you ... then you agreed (to it) and bore witness'); 3:81 ('[God] said, "Bear witness, and I shall be with you among the witnesses"'); 4:166 ('But God bears witness to what He has sent down to you ... and the angels (also) bear witness. Yet God is sufficient as a witness'); 73:15 ('Surely We have sent to you a messenger as a witness over you').

[27] Ex. 20:2. I have used the translation of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

6. Blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience are described

This feature is common in the Qur'an, in many different forms. A brief example is Qur. 5:1–11, which talks about God's blessing on those who believe and follow His precepts, and the punishment of unbelievers. An excerpt from this lengthy passage reads:

> Remember the blessing of God on you, and his covenant (*mīthāq*) with which He bound you, when you said, 'We hear and obey.'... God has promised those who believe and do righteous deeds (that there is) forgiveness for them and a great reward. But those who disbelieve and call Our signs a lie – those are the companions of the Furnace. You who believe! Remember the blessing of God on you.[28]

7. The covenant is ceremonially ratified, often by sacrifice of an animal

Several roots with the meaning of sacrifice occur in the Qur'an. The one which is used in explicit covenantal contexts, Gwynne argues, is *n-s-k*, 'the first meaning of which appears to be "worship", which includes the secondary meaning of sacrifice'.[29] It is in this sense, Gwynne maintains, that it is used, among other places, in Qur. 2:128 ('And show us our rituals [*manāsikanā*], and turn to us (in forgiveness)'), and in 6:162 ('Say: "Surely my prayer and my sacrifice [*nusukī*], and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds"').

According to Mendenhall and Herion, in the AWA covenants, the killing of an animal symbolises the fate of the vassal if he were to break the covenant. They write that 'the sacrificed animal represented, and was identified with, the vassal who was being placed under oath; just as the animal was slaughtered, so would the vassal and his dependents be slaughtered if he violated his oath'.[30]

They show that this element is present in the sealing of the covenant at Sinai between Yahweh and the Hebrews, where a verbal statement

[28] Qur. 5:7–11.
[29] Gwynne, *Logic*, 14–15. For a longer discussion of this word, see Ådna, 'O Son', 308–10.
[30] Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1182a.

('Everything that the Lord has spoken we will do') is combined with a blood sacrifice.[31] Gwynne, despite showing that various words for sacrifice are used in covenantal contexts in the Qur'an, fails to demonstrate that sacrifices in the Qur'an were used to ratify the covenant in the way Mendenhall and Herion indicate. The use of derivatives of *n-s-k*, as well as other words for sacrifice in the Qur'an, in my view seems to connote communion with God rather than a ratification of the covenant through blood.

Mendenhall and Herion furthermore argue that oaths seldom replace sacrifices in the ratification of covenants. Oaths in this context are what they describe as 'a conditional self-cursing: i.e. an appeal to the gods to bring certain penalties upon the oath taker if he violates the promise that he is swearing to keep. The sacrifice is thus the *enactment* of the oath.'[32] Although oaths are very prominent in the Qur'an, most conspicuously in the introductions to several suras,[33] they are uttered by God, and function not as self-cursings, but as 'solemn, unshakable undertakings by God that the relations between God and man, virtue and reward, sin and punishment, are the truth upon which all reasoning – indeed, all action – must be based'.[34] Thus, they are not ratifications of the covenant.

There are, however, passages in the Qur'an in which humankind verbally responds to God's invitation to seal a covenant. The verse about 'the primeval covenant' (Qur. 7:172) includes an oral ratification from the people when they answer God in the affirmative: '"Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Yes indeed! We bear witness."'

Similarly, when God makes a covenant with the prophets in Qur. 3:81, they respond:

> (Remember) when God made a covenant with the prophets: 'Whatever indeed I have given you of the Book and wisdom, when a messenger comes to you confirming what is with you, you are to believe in him and

[31] Ex. 19:8; 24:3. Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1185a.
[32] Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1182a, italics in the original.
[33] See the first verses of Qur. 51, 52, 77, 85, 92, 100, to give just a few examples.
[34] Gwynne, *Logic*, 21–2, quotation from 22.

> you are to help him.' He said, 'Do you agree and accept my burden on that (condition)?' They said, 'We agree.'

These affirmations of God's sovereignty and acceptance of His covenant, however, are not accompanied by sacrifices or oaths. Hence, it must be concluded that ratification ceremonies in the sense described in Mendenhall and Herion's list are not found in the Qur'an.

8. If the covenant is actually broken, curses are imposed and punishment follows

   Mendenhall and Herion argue that, although they are not found in the covenantal texts themselves, there must have been occasions on which the suzerain declared the covenant to be broken, and executed the punishments described in the text.[35] The Qur'an, according to Gwynne, is replete with actual cursings from God – not just threats of curses as in point (6) above. The first instance where the root *l-ʿ-n* ('curse') occurs is in Qur. 2:88 ('God has cursed them for their disbelief'), and Gwynne comments: 'Ṭabarī explains its meaning as "distancing" (*b-ʿ-d*) from God and His mercy, "expulsion" (*ṭ-r-d*), "humiliation" (*kh-z-y*), and "ruin" (*h-l-k*).'[36] Another case is Qur. 5:13 ('For their breaking of their covenant [*mīthāqahum*], We cursed them and made their hearts hard'). But in particular, there are the many so-called punishment narratives in the Quran, stories of peoples in history that have been punished for their disobedience.[37]

... and in Early Islamic Political Thought

Several passages in the Qur'an indicate a close relationship between believers' adherence to the divine covenant and their belief in the prophets sent by God (also, of course, Muḥammad) and their message (Qur. 2:40–1; 4:155; 5:12). This includes the expression of loyalty to Muḥammad as political authority (Qur. 33:15). He is described as a 'good example' (*uswa ḥasana*, Qur. 33:21); in several places believers are admonished to 'obey God and the messenger' (Qur. 3:32, 132; 4:59 and *passim*); and in Qur. 4:80 it is said that 'whoever

[35] Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1182a–b.
[36] Gwynne, *Logic*, 16–17. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, vol. I, 574.
[37] For discussions of these, see e.g. Marshall, 'Punishment Stories'; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, 2–5.

obeys the messenger has obeyed God'. In Qur. 9:111; 48:10, 18 and 60:12 the making of a pledge of loyalty to Muḥammad is expressed through the verb *bāyaʿa*, a word which, together with the cognate noun *bayʿa*, had strong commercial connotations and often referred to the making of a contract between seller and buyer. The close relationship between the commercial and the spiritual senses of the word is particularly clear in Qur. 9:111:[38]

> Surely God has purchased [*ishtarā*] from the believers their lives and their wealth with (the price of) the Garden (in store) for them. They fight in the way of God, and they kill and are killed. (That is) a promise binding on Him in the Torah, the Gospel and the Qur'an. Who fulfils his covenant [*ʿahdihi*] better than God? So welcome the good news of the bargain [*bayʿ*] you have made with Him [*bāyaʿtum bihi*]. That is the great triumph!

The *bayʿa* was a reciprocal relationship in which both parties had obligations and rights towards one another; it was manifested through a public ritual in which the parties involved clasped hands. In the Qur'anic verses referred to above, the connection between the pledge of loyalty to Muḥammad and a similar pledge to God is made apparent. The pledge of loyalty to Muḥammad is therefore presented as a natural extension of the divine covenant.[39]

After the death of Muḥammad, this loyalty was directed towards the perceived ruler who was supposed to be following in the footsteps of the Prophet.[40] As the conflicts in the early history of Islam show, ideas about what this meant in practice differed. Thus, ideas about who was the legitimate ruler, the imam of the community, came to vary significantly.[41] This was a matter not only of politics as it is understood in the secular West today, but ultimately of salvation. It was crucial to belong to the right group – the true believers – in order to be able to do God's will, since divine guidance was to be found within that group. Patricia Crone suggested that the role of the imam was like that of the leader of a caravan in the desert. He had two fundamental tasks. He gave the

[38] For a discussion of the commercial and covenantal aspects of this verse, see Marsham, *Rituals*, 44–9.

[39] Tyan, 'Bayʿa'; Marsham, *Rituals*, 40–2; Landau-Tasseron, *Religious Foundations*, 5–6.

[40] Kister, 'Concepts of Authority'; Landau-Tasseron, *Religious Foundations*, 21–5.

[41] Here, the word *imām* does not specifically refer to the Shiʿite notion of the supreme leader. The concept was (and still is) used in a much wider sense for a leader by Sunni as well as Shiʿite Muslims. See e.g. Madelung, 'Imāma'. For the special case of Shiʿism, see below, Chapter 10.

community existence – without the leader, no caravan, only scattered travellers in the desert; and he guided it to its destination, because a true imam was, himself, guided by God:

> He knew better than anyone else because he was the best person of his time: it was his superior merit that made people follow him. His guidance was seen as primarily legal, or in other words he declared what was right and wrong, for it was by living in accordance with God's law that people travelled to salvation. The coercion he might use to prevent people from straying from his caravan, or sowing dissension in it, was part of his guidance too, for anyone who strayed from the right path was lost and everyone would perish if the caravan broke up ... Everyone who travelled with him would be saved, everyone else was lost.[42]

The earliest centuries of Islam, especially, were categorised by intense periods in which different groups vied with one another for political power in an attempt to make their specific forms of religion and polity the norm. As we have seen, it is around one of these contests about legitimate leadership that the Karbala event revolves.

The Speeches of al-Ḥusayn

I mentioned above that in early Islam, the relationship between the ruler and his subjects was seen in covenantal terms as an extension of the divine covenant. In the following, I will argue that the story of the death of al-Ḥusayn as a consequence of his efforts to gain religious and political power describes the battle at Karbala as a struggle to fulfil the covenant. This idea, often expressed through giving or refusing to give the *bayʿa*, but also through other covenantal language and symbols, is essential in the account. We have seen in previous chapters that the whole story begins with al-Ḥusayn's refusal to give his pledge of allegiance to the new Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya in 60/680.[43] As the loyalty of the people of Kufa vacillates, al-Ḥusayn attempts through his words and actions to gain their support. This becomes particularly clear in the passage describing al-Ḥusayn and his group's encounter with the vanguard of the Kufan army,

[42] Crone, *Political Thought*, 22.
[43] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 217–23.

led by al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Yarbūʿī. In that context, Abū Mikhnaf relates four speeches ascribed to al-Ḥusayn: the first three directed to the Kufans, and the fourth to his own followers. The first three speeches emphasise, each more emphatically than the previous one, the grave consequences to be faced in the hereafter of choosing not to pledge allegiance to al-Ḥusayn. The last speech portrays a gloomy vision of this world and al-Ḥusayn's longing for death and the meeting with God. My analysis of the four speeches below will demonstrate that they are filled with allusions and references to the divine covenant. I will not, however, discuss them in the order in which they appear in Abū Mikhnaf's account. Since the covenantal features are most clearly manifested in the third speech, I will begin with that before tracing the foreshadowing of its motifs in the second and then the first speech. Finally, I will say a few words about the fourth speech, which differs from the previous three in several respects. After each speech except the fourth, I will make a comparison with Mendenhall's and Herion's list of characteristics of AWA covenants related above.

The Third Speech

In the third speech ascribed to al-Ḥusayn, he is very outspoken against the Umayyads and the capricious Kufans:

> People, the Apostle of God said: 'Whoever sees an authority who is acting tyrannically, making permissible what God has forbidden, violating God's covenant [*ʿahd Allāh*], and opposing the Sunna of the Apostle of God by acting against the servants of God sinfully and with hostility, and does not correct[44] them by deed or by word, it is God's decree that that person will know the consequences [of his neglect] [*kāna ḥaqqan ʿalā Allāhi an yudkhilahu mudkhalahu*].'[45] Indeed, the present [authorities] [*hāʾulāʾi*]

[44] The text here and a few lines further down has the word *yuʿayyir*, and a couple of lines further down, *ʿayyara*, which means 'upbraid' or 'reproach' (al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 300, lines 8 and 11). It is much weaker than *ghayyara* (lit. 'cause change', in contexts like these usually rendered 'put right'), which is normally used in similar contexts (Cook, *Commanding Right*, 34–5), and which is used by al-Balādhurī in the same place. Cook (*Commanding Right*, 231, n. 26) suggests that the word here should be read as *ghayyara*, and I have adopted this reading.

[45] I have not been able to find this hadith in any of the canonical collections. For the last two words (similar formulae are found in Qur. 4:31, 17:80, and 22:59), I have chosen this interpretation. The literal translation would be something like 'make him enter his entrance' (see Droge, *The Qurʾān*, on these passages).

> have cleaved to obedience to Satan and have abandoned obedience to the Merciful; they have made corruption visible; they have not administered the punishments laid down by God; they have appropriated the taxes exclusively to themselves; they have permitted what God has forbidden, and they have forbidden what He has permitted. I am more entitled than anyone else to put things right [*anā aḥaqqu man ghayyara*].[46]
>
> Your letters were brought to me, and your messengers came to me with your oath of allegiance [*bi-bayʿatikum*] that you would not hand me over or desert me. If you fulfil your pledge [*bayʿatikum*], you will attain your rectitude [*rushdakum*], for I am al-Ḥusayn, the son of ʿAlī, and the son of Fāṭima, daughter of the Apostle of God. My life is with your lives; my family is with your families. In me you have an example [*uswa*]. However, if you will not act, but you break your covenant [*ʿahdakum*] and lift off the pledge of allegiance to me [*bayʿatī*] from your necks, then, by my life, that is not a thing that is unknown of you. You have done that to my father, my brother, and my cousin Muslim. Anyone who was deceived by you would be gullible. Thus have you mistaken your fortune and lost your portion [in the hereafter].[47] For 'whoever breaks (his oath), only breaks it against himself' [Qur. 48:10]. God will enable me to do without you. Peace be with you, and the mercy and blessings of God.[48]

Here, the connection between the divine covenant and the pledge of loyalty to al-Ḥusayn is made obvious through their co-occurrence. In the speech, al-Ḥusayn benefits from his consanguineous relationship to the Prophet to legitimise his claims. First, the whole speech starts with a prophetical hadith, the implication of which is that al-Ḥusayn has the right to correct the present government; second, al-Ḥusayn calls attention to his position as the grandson

[46] See n. 36 above.

[47] That the words of this sentence, '*fa-ḥaẓẓakum akhṭa'tum wa-naṣībakum ḍayya'tum*', refer to the hereafter is not entirely obvious. The word *ḥaẓẓ* can mean 'fortune', 'share' or 'lot'. Similarly, *naṣīb* means 'portion' or 'part of'. Both words are used in the Qur'an regarding matters of this world as well as of the next. To me it seems evident, however, that in the present context these words refer to the hereafter. For Qur'anic examples of this latter usage, see Qur. 3:176 for *ḥaẓẓ*; and Qur. 2:202, 7:37 and 42:20 for *naṣīb*.

[48] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 300. In this and in the following quotations from al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rīkh*, I have quoted, or relied heavily on, Howard's translation in *History*, vol. XIX. I have normally not provided page numbers for the translation, as the pagination of the Leiden edition is printed in the margins of the translation.

of Muḥammad – and thereby as the heir of the Prophet – who can provide guidance to rectitude (*rushd*) and be a model (*uswa*) just as the Prophet was (Qur. 33:21); and third, he refers to a passage from the Qur'an which, according to later exegesis, was originally directed to Muḥammad, and applies it to himself and his family:

> Surely, those who swear allegiance to you [*yubāyiʿūnaka*] swear allegiance to God [*yubāyiʿūna Allāh*] – the hand of God is over their hands. So whoever breaks [his oath], only breaks it against himself, but whoever fulfils what he has promised [*ʿāhada*] to God – He will give him a great reward.[49]

According to the mainstream of Islamic exegetical tradition, the context of the passage of which this verse forms a part is the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya, when Muḥammad was in a situation of distress and renewed the *bayʿa* with his followers by putting their hands together.[50] The argument in the verse quoted is that when Muḥammad and his followers clasped their hands, God held His hand over them and the pledge of loyalty was thus to God as well as to Muḥammad.[51] A few verses further on in the same sura, God's answer to this pledge is described:

> Certainly God was pleased [*raḍiya*] with the believers when they were swearing allegiance to you [*yubāyiʿūnaka*] under the tree, and He knew what was in their hearts. So, He sent down the Sakīna on them, and rewarded them with a near victory, and many spoils to take.[52]

The verb *raḍiya* (from the root *r-ḍ-y*), which is here translated 'was pleased', has given this event its name in Muslim tradition: *bayʿat al-riḍwān*, 'The pledge of [God's] pleasure'.[53] There is, then, a close connection between adhering to the covenant with God and being the object of His pleasure.[54]

[49] Qur. 48:10.

[50] For a discussion of this pledge and its relation to the divine covenant, as it is related in the Qur'an and the exegetical literature, see Darnell, 'Divine Covenant', 127–51.

[51] Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 749.

[52] Qur. 48:18–19.

[53] Darnell, 'Divine Covenant', 128.

[54] The root *r-ḍ-y* furthermore has connotations of divine election and can be regarded as a term included in the Islamic covenantal lexicon (Firestone, 'Divine Election', 402). For early Abbasid developments of the use of the term *riḍā* and its uses in connection to the *bayʿa* to the caliph and thereby to God, see Marsham, *Rituals*, 187–8, 295–9.

Another interesting word in this verse is *sakīna*, which is derived from the Hebrew word *shᵉkhinā* and has strong connotations of the presence of God. Qurʾanic exegetes often gloss it as a kind of peace of mind (*ṭumʾanīna*),[55] but as Darnell demonstrates, it has a wider meaning of 'an objective reality emanating from God', and is associated with God's presence and His assistance in gaining victory over the enemy.[56] Thus, the person to whom the pledge is given is Muḥammad, and in giving the oath of allegiance to Muḥammad, one is also giving the oath to God. The result is God's satisfaction, His sending down of His *sakīna*, and imminent victory over enemies. According to Marsham, at least from the 250s/860s, Qur. 48:10 became the *locus classicus* for the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliph and the *bayʿa* to him. But, he convincingly argues, the main idea of the verse was widespread long before that:

> The notion that the verse expresses – that blessings from God were the reward for loyalty to his representatives and violation of agreements with them led to material and spiritual destruction – was axiomatic in the late antique Near East and thus in early Islam.[57]

Thus, al-Ḥusayn tries to convince the people of Kufa that the divine covenant, which implies the acceptance of the authority of the Prophet, is extended to include the acceptance of *his own* authority. To submit to the religious and political authority of al-Ḥusayn is to submit to that of Muḥammad, which in turn means submitting to God.

In summary, the thrust of the argument in this speech is that it is the duty of all Muslims to correct a sinful ruler. Since al-Ḥusayn is the grandson of the Prophet and the son of ʿAlī, he has more right than anyone else to put bad conditions right. The people of Kufa have made a pact of allegiance with him (the two words *bayʿa* and *ʿahd* are used to denote this pact). By holding on to it and following his example, they will attain rectitude and, by implication,

[55] See e.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, vol. XIII, 114.
[56] Darnell, 'Divine Covenant', 138–44; the quotation is from p. 139. See also Droge, *Qurʾān*, 26, n. 323; Mortensen, 'Sourate 20', 774; Firestone, 'Shekhinah', 590.
[57] Marsham, *Rituals*, 303.

God's pleasure and His presence.[58] Breaking the agreement means that they will be eternally lost, since a pact with al-Ḥusayn is equal to a pact with the Prophet, which, in turn, is a pact with God. Thus, it is of the utmost importance that the believer makes the correct decision, as it leads to a 'great reward' from God, whereas the wrong choice means eternal damnation.

Applying Mendenhall's and Herion's list of criteria to this speech, the following seem relevant:

1. AND 2. IDENTIFICATION OF THE COVENANT-GIVER AND HISTORICAL PROLOGUE

   Although al-Ḥusayn is not strictly the covenant-giver, he is the representative of God who instituted the covenant, and he is identified as such here: 'I am al-Ḥusayn, the son of ʿAlī and the son of Fāṭima, daughter of the Apostle of God.' Thus, al-Ḥusayn refers to his genealogy rather than directly to deeds that his family has performed in the past. As everyone knew the deeds of his ancestors, the Prophet and ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, in the past, reference to genealogy must be regarded as equal to reference to deeds in history. Because of this, he can also say about himself: 'I am more entitled than anyone else to put things right.'

3. STIPULATIONS

   The people of Kufa have pledged through letters and messengers that they will not hand al-Ḥusayn over or desert him, and al-Ḥusayn in his turn promises, 'If you fulfil your pledge, you will attain your rectitude ... My life is with your lives; my family is with your families. In me you have an example.'

4. DEPOSITS AND PUBLIC READINGS

   I regard the letters sent by the Kufans to al-Ḥusayn with their pledges to support him as the text of the covenant here being referred to. I will have more to say about this below.

6. BLESSINGS AND CURSES

   These are very clear in the speech: respectively, the attainment of rectitude and, by implication, God's pleasure, and punishment in the hereafter.

[58] For the connection between different forms of the root *r-sh-d* and guidance in the Qur'an, see Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 194–5.

Items (5), (7) and (8) in Mendenhall's and Herion's list are not applicable to this speech.

The Second Speech

Al-Ḥusayn's second address to the Kufan army has a very tight structure. I have arranged the sentences so as to make the structure clear:

> O people,
> if you fear [God] [*in tataqqū*] and recognise the rights of those to whom they are due, this will be more satisfying to God [*arḍā li-Allāh*].
> We are the family of the house [*wa-naḥnu ahl al-bayt*],[59] more entitled to the authority of this government over you than [*min*] these who claim what does not belong to them, who bring tyranny and aggression among you.
> If you dislike us and are ignorant of our rights, and your view is different from what came to me in your letters and what your messengers brought to me, I will leave you.[60]

Excluding the vocative *Ayyuhā al-nās*, 'O people', the speech consists of three sentences. The first and the last are conditional (see Table 4.1), and commence with the Arabic conjunction *in*, 'if'; they deal with what will happen if the Kufans accept or reject al-Ḥusayn. Between these two is a statement in which al-Ḥusayn declares the merits of his own family, the *ahl al-bayt*, and the demerits of 'these who claim what does not belong to them', the present government, the Umayyads. The parallel structure of the speech is very clear. The Arabic preposition *min*, here translated 'than', in the middle of the sentence acts like a pivot for the whole speech. All the text before this word deals with the advantages of taking al-Ḥusayn as leader; everything after it gives the consequences of taking the Umayyads as leaders. Thus, the speech contrasts the *ahl al-bayt*, here represented by al-Ḥusayn, with the Umayyads. It furthermore states that the former are entitled to authority, whereas the latter are pretenders who bring tyranny and aggression. A closer look at the conditional sentences reveals an obvious antithetical parallelism, as can be seen in Table 4.1.

[59] For discussions of the phrase *ahl al-bayt*, see Sharon, 'Ahl al-Bayt'.
[60] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 298.

Table 4.1 Parallelism of conditional sentences in al-Ḥusayn's second speech

If you fear [God]	and recognise the rights of those to whom they are due	this will be more satisfying to God
If you dislike us	and your view is different from what came to me in your letters and what your messengers brought to me	I will leave you

When they are tabulated in this way, it becomes clear that the sentences make up three important oppositions, arranged in columns in the table. In Column 1, the fear of God (*taqwā*) is opposed to the dislike of the *ahl al-bayt*. Column 2 opposes the acceptance of the authority of the *ahl al-bayt* to the breaking of the promises made to al-Ḥusayn. In Column 3, the outcomes of the choice facing the Kufans are opposed: God's satisfaction, against al-Ḥusayn leaving. Essential to al-Ḥusayn's message in this speech are the two words in the first conditional sentence: 'fear (of God)' and 'satisfying (to God)'. These words are so common in the Qur'an that it is easy to forget the covenantal implications they have. The former, from the root *w-q-y* (or possibly *t-q-w* or *t-q-y*),[61] is absolutely central in the Qur'an.[62] Derivatives of the root occur in several contexts dealing with the divine covenant. Thus, Qur. 5:7–8:

> Remember the blessing of God on you, and His covenant [*mīthāqahu*] with which He bound you [*wāthaqakum*], when you said, 'We hear and obey.' Fear God [*wa-ittaqū Allāh*]! Surely God knows what is in the hearts. You who believe! Be supervisors for God, witnesses in justice, and do not let hatred of a people provoke you to act unfairly. Act fairly! It is nearer to the fear of God [*taqwā*]. Fear God [*wa-ittaqū Allāh*]! Surely God is aware of what you do.[63]

In these verses, the fear of God is a precondition for the believer who wants to adhere to His covenant. Returning to al-Ḥusayn's speech, the word with

[61] For a short discussion of the alternatives, see Alexander, 'Fear', 194–5.

[62] For *w-q-y* and its derivatives in the Qur'an, see e.g. Alexander, 'Fear'; Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, 195–200 and *passim*; Ohlander, 'Fear of God'.

[63] I have departed from Droge's translation here. He translates the derivates of *w-q-y*: 'Guard (yourselves) against God'. Another place where the covenant (in this case the word *'ahd* is used) is used in conjunction with derivates of *w-q-y* is Qur. 3:76.

the meaning 'satisfying' (to God) is a derivative from the root *r-ḍ-y*, which I have discussed above with reference to its occurrence in Qur. 48:18 and its connection to the *bayʿa*. As we saw there, God promises His satisfaction as a reward for those who adhere to the covenant. In al-Ḥusayn's speech, no word for 'covenant' is used, but his mentioning of the fear of God together with God's satisfaction places it in a covenantal context, especially since Abū Mikhnaf has located the speech between two other speeches that make more overt reference to the covenant.

In summary, the message al-Ḥusayn is trying to convey is that the fear of God, a *sine qua non* for every Muslim, implies accepting the authority of al-Ḥusayn, the foremost living member of the *ahl al-bayt*, and his remaining in Kufa. That God should be satisfied is contingent on this acceptance.

A comparison of this speech with Mendenhall and Herion's list renders the following result:

1. and 2. Identification of the covenant-giver and historical prologue
   Al-Ḥusayn explicitly states: 'We are the family of the house (of Muḥammad), more entitled to the authority of this government over you than these.'

3. Stipulations
   The stipulation 'If you ... recognise the rights of those to whom they are due' is here embedded in the blessings and curses.

4. Deposits and public readings
   Again, al-Ḥusayn is referring to the letters from the Kufans, with their invitations and their promises to support him.

6. Blessings and curses
   As demonstrated in Table 4.1 and the discussion pertaining to it, most of this speech is expressed in terms of the formal blessings and curses found in many AWA covenants, for example in the Sinai covenant, although in the latter case they are 'enormously elaborated'.[64]

[64] These words are used by Mendenhall and Herion, 'Covenant', 1184b, in referring to Deut. 28. See also the parallel text in Lev. 26.

The rest of the items in the list of covenantal characteristics are not found in this speech, at least not manifestly so.

The First Speech

Turning now to the first, short speech, al-Ḥusayn delivers this in front of the Kufan vanguard, at the time of the midday prayer:

> People, it is an excuse [for my coming here] [*innahā maʿdhira*], both to God the Mighty and Exalted and to you, that I did not come to you until your letters were brought to me, and your messengers came to me saying, 'Come to us, for we have no leader [*imām*]. God may unite us in guidance [*ʿalā al-hudā*] through you.' Since this was your view, I have come to you. Therefore, if you give me what you guaranteed in your pacts [*ʿuhūdikum*] and covenants [*mawāthīqikum*], I will come to your town. If you will not and are averse to my coming, I will leave you for the place from which I came to you.[65]

Al-Ḥusayn here explains that he has come because the people of Kufa have written to him and called on him to become their leader (imam). If the Kufans are prepared to give him what they guaranteed in their 'pacts and covenants' (*ʿuhūd*, *mawāthīq*, sg.*ʿahd*, *mīthāq*) he is willing to fulfil that mission; if not, he will return to Mecca. As I have mentioned above, there are many places in the Qur'an where the words *ʿahd* and *mīthāq* refer to alliances and pacts between humans. Similarly, in this context, the terms *ʿuhūd* and *mawāthīq* are clearly being used in a political sense to denote the promises and oaths of allegiance given by those who had summoned him. The references to God and His guidance through al-Ḥusayn, as well as the wider meaning of the words and the context, indicate, however, that there are also religious issues in play here.[66] It is interesting to note the parallel conditional sentences at the end

[65] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 297–8.

[66] Here, I analyse only the words of al-Ḥusayn. Other aspects of this section of the text which add to the 'religious' context, such as his dress and the fact that he is allowed to lead all the people (his own group as well as the Kufan army) in prayer, are not dealt with. I have discussed these in 'Ḥusayn, the Mediator', 120–5.

of the speech. Although the receiving and renouncing of al-Ḥusayn are not explicitly followed here by divine sanctions, as in the second speech, they still augur the meaning of the conditional sentences of that address (see Table 4.1 and the discussion associated with it).

The following items from Mendenhall's and Herion's list are found in the speech:

3. Stipulations
   Ḥusayn refers to the 'pacts and covenants' from the Shi'ites of Kufa, where they guaranteed him support and help. In return, he was to give them divine guidance (*hudan*).

4. Deposits and public readings
   Here, al-Ḥusayn quotes verbatim from the letters from the Kufans and their invitation to him to come and give them guidance.

5. List of witnesses
   Ḥusayn invokes both 'God the Mighty and Exalted' and the people in front of him as witnesses that he has come because he was invited by the people of Kufa.

6. Blessings and curses
   The blessings and curses are here given in a weaker form than in the following speeches, as they refer only to his physical presence or absence, rather than to the spiritual consequences of this.

The other characteristics of the list are not applicable to this speech.

What is at stake in the three speeches analysed so far is the extension of the divine representation on earth to al-Ḥusayn himself. When he admonishes the Kufans to adhere to their promises to support him, the close connection between God's satisfaction and his own presence indicates that he presupposes and is building on the divine covenant with humankind, and that he regards loyalty to himself as an extension of the divine covenant. This is in no way unique in the early history of Islam; many pledges of loyalty to the caliphs, both Umayyads and, later, Abbasids, share the same premise. Indeed, it can be said that much of the discussion about the legitimate ruler in early Islam revolved around this question: who was to be accepted as the

representative of God, and thus as the one worthy of the *bayʿa*, the extension of the divine covenant?[67]

The Fourth Speech

In the fourth speech accounted for in Abū Mikhnaf's account, al-Ḥusayn turns to his followers rather than to the Kufan army:

> You have seen what this matter has come to. Truly, the world has changed and has become worse; its goodness has retreated and it has become very bitter. There remains only a small rest of it, like the dregs of a jar, a paltry life like an unhealthy pasturage. Can you not see that truth [*ḥaqq*] is no longer practised and falsehood [*bāṭil*] no longer desisted from, so that the believer rightly desires to meet God? I can only regard death as martyrdom [*shahāda*] and life with the oppressors as a tribulation.[68]

The words 'truth' (*ḥaqq*) and 'falsehood' (*bāṭil*) are very common in the Qurʾan; the former is often used as a synonym for God's revelation and His guidance (see for example Qur. 2:119, 9:33, and 35:24), and is frequently opposed to the latter (for example Qur. 2:42; 34:49 and 47:1–3). Thus, al-Ḥusayn here regrets that the world has changed for the bad, and says that the believer rightly desires to meet God. Martyrdom is preferable to life 'with the oppressors'. In spite of the fact that the story of Karbala has become the main example of martyrdom in Shiʿite lore and theology, this is the only occurrence of the word *shahāda*, 'martyrdom', in the text. Although no word for 'sacrifice' is used in the text, the fact that al-Ḥusayn is prepared to die to keep his pact with God can be regarded as an allusion to self-sacrifice. When al-Ḥusayn has delivered his speech, one of his companions responds, speaking for all his men, and asserts their loyalty to him, even to death. In contrast to the lack of response from the people of Kufa after the previous speeches, here al-Ḥusayn's followers renew their pledge to support him.

In the speech itself, I find nothing except the reference to the sacrifice as ratification of the covenant (item 7) that can obviously be associated with the criteria in Mendenhall and Herion's list. The reactions of al-Ḥusayn's

[67] Marsham, *Rituals*, 114–17, 168–80, 230–49 and *passim*.
[68] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 300–1.

followers are, however, important in this respect, and will be dealt with below.

Beyond al-Ḥusayn's Speeches

The speeches ascribed to al-Ḥusayn are saturated with formal allusions to and themes similar to those found in covenant formulae enacted in Ancient West Asia, particularly in the form these took in the Sinai covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people. It is to be noted that in later exegesis of Qur. 2:27, the covenant given to the People of the Book in the Torah is the same as that which Muḥammad preached. For al-Ṭabarī, for example, the divine covenant of the Bible includes acceptance of Muḥammad as a prophet.[69] What we have in the four speeches discussed here, however, are not covenantal formulae in themselves; they are, rather, attempts by al-Ḥusayn to re-enact the *bayʿa* that the inhabitants of Kufa have already made with him, and thus by extension with God, through their letters and envoys. Hence, the text refers to the divine covenant by allusions rather than accounting for it *in extenso*.[70]

Similar allusions to the covenant are found throughout the Karbala story. In what follows I will recapitulate the main arguments advanced in the analysis above by reviewing Mendenhall and Herion's list, at the same time giving further examples of passages from the story outside of the speeches whose themes fit into the characteristics of the covenant that they have suggested.

1. AND 2. IDENTIFICATION OF THE COVENANT-GIVER AND HISTORICAL PROLOGUE

In the speeches analysed above, al-Ḥusayn refers to his genealogy rather than recounting a list of historical deeds. The same is true in speeches and addresses other than those analysed above in which he refers to his genealogy as an argument both for his inviolability and for the fact that those who invited him should adhere to their pacts. Thus, in a letter to the people of Basra written before he set out on the journey to Kufa, he declares:

> God gave preference to Muḥammad before all His creatures. He graced him with prophethood and chose him for His message. After he had

[69] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, vol. I, 263–5.
[70] As I have mentioned above, Gwynne argues that this is true also for the Qur'an.

> warned His servants and informed them of what he had been sent with, God took him to Himself. We are his family, those who possess his authority [*awliyā'*], those who have been made his trustees [*awṣiyā'*], and his inheritors; we are those who have more rights to his position among the people than anyone else.[71]

Similarly, al-Ḥusayn's genealogy is referred to in many places: by al-Ḥusayn himself, for example in a speech just before the battle,[72] by his son,[73] and by others, such as al-Ḥurr once he had joined al-Ḥusayn.[74] Hence, both al-Ḥusayn and his supporters argue that his authority derives from God, via his grandfather, the Prophet Muḥammad. The covenant-giver is ultimately God, not al-Ḥusayn, and his followers recognise this pattern of authority. One of his most ardent companions, Zuhayr b. al-Qayn, who initially disliked him but experienced an almost Pauline conversion on the road between Mecca and Kufa,[75] says to one of the Kufan opponents:

> By God! I did not ever write to him; I did not ever send messengers to him; I did not ever promise him my help. However, the road brought us together. When I saw him, I was reminded by him of the Apostle of God and of his position with regard to the Apostle of God. I knew his enemies and your party whom he was going toward. Then, I saw that it was right that I should help him, be in his party and put my life forward to protect his, because of the truth of God and the truth of His Apostle, which you have abandoned.[76]

[71] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 240.
[72] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 329–30.
[73] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 356.
[74] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 334–5. It is interesting to note that the function of the references to al-Ḥusayn's genealogy change slightly as the story moves. In the beginning it is used to argue for his political precedence; later, when he is surrounded by the army, it is used as an argument for his inviolability. (For a discussion of this, see Hylén, 'Ḥusayn, the Mediator', 168–76.) This use of one's genealogy is of course not unique to the family of the Prophet, as lineage in general was extremely important in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia, and referring to one's ancestors was the main means for placing oneself on the status ladder among the Arabs. For many Shi'ites, though, ancestry was of paramount importance as the legitimacy of the whole movement depended on the descent of its leaders from the Prophet Muḥammad. See Chapter 10.
[75] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 290–1.
[76] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 319.

3. Stipulations

The mutual obligations stipulated in the *bayʿa* between al-Ḥusayn and the Kufans are referred to only in passing in the speeches analysed above. They are stated more directly, however, in the letters from the Kufans, where they promise to support him against the Umayyad authorities in the town. Thus, Sulaymān b. Ṣurad, al-Musayyab b. Najaba and Rifāʿa b. Shaddād – that is, some of the men who later became the leaders of the Tawwābūn (see Part II) – and others purportedly write to him:

> There is no imam over us. Therefore come, so God may unite us in truth through you. Al-Nuʿmān b. Bashīr is in the governor's palace; we do not gather with him for the Friday prayer. Nor do we accompany him out of the mosque for the Festival prayer. If we hear that you will agree to come to us, we will drive him away until we pursue him to Syria, if God wills.[77]

In another letter, some Kufan Shiʿites write: 'The region[78] has grown green; the fruit has ripened; the waters have overflowed. Therefore, if you want to, come to an army that has been gathered for you.'[79] It is furthermore stated that more than fifty letters with similar messages were sent to Al-Ḥusayn within a few days. Al-Ḥusayn's part of the obligations is described in his reply, a letter in which he states that if what they say is true, he will come and be an imam 'who acts according to the Book, one who upholds justice, one who professes the truth and one who dedicates himself to the essence of God'.[80]

4. Deposits and public readings

According to Abū Mikhnaf, al-Ḥusayn regarded the letters of invitation from the Kufans as binding treaties. He refers to them in the first three speeches, but also in a speech delivered just before the battle, in which he

[77] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 234. On the refusal to pray with the governor as marker of political disunity, see van Ess, *Theologie*, vol. I, 17–19.

[78] Lit. *al-janāb*, 'region' or 'tract'; see Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, vol. I, 467a. Howard has not translated this word.

[79] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 235.

[80] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 235.

quotes the last letter cited above.[81] We have also seen how his companion Zuhayr b. al-Qayn indirectly refers to the letters as documents of a binding treaty when he argues that he is supporting al-Ḥusayn despite having written no letters and made no promises. Implicit in Zuhayr's argument is that those who had written to al-Ḥusayn are even more obliged to stand by him.

An incident related after al-Ḥusayn's second speech emphasises the importance of the letters, and can be regarded as a case of 'public reading'. After the speech, al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd, the commander of the enemy, questions the existence of the letters:

> 'By God! We know nothing of these letters that you mention.' Al-Ḥusayn said: 'O, 'Uqba b. Sim'ān, bring out the two saddlebags in which their letters to me are kept.' He brought out two saddlebags that were full of documents and scattered them in front of them.[82]

Thus, the letters are kept by al-Ḥusayn and presented as a proof that he had actually received pledges of allegiance from the people of Kufa.

5. List of witnesses

No formal list of third-party witnesses is given in the text. Implied in the incident of the scattering of the letters is that al-Ḥurr becomes a witness to the pact between al-Ḥusayn and the people of Kufa. Furthermore, as we saw in the analysis of the first speech, God is called on as a witness. Indeed, God is the true covenant-giver, and in the Qur'an He is sufficient as a witness.

6. Blessings and curses

The blessings and curses are very obvious in the speeches; if the people keep their promises, al-Ḥusayn will come to them, God will be satisfied, they will attain rectitude and 'a great reward' from God, and so on. On the other hand, if they break the pact, al-Ḥusayn will leave them and they will lose their reward in the hereafter. Similar explicit formulae of blessings and curses do not occur elsewhere in the story.

[81] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 330.
[82] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 298–9.

7. Ratification

Al-Ḥusayn's speeches contain no trace of any ratification of the treaty they refer to. As I have shown above, the AWA treaties were frequently ratified through a blood sacrifice; less often, through an oath. In the Qur'an, neither oaths nor sacrifices are means used to confirm the covenant between God and humankind, though verbal assents to God and His covenant are mentioned on a few occasions. In Abū Mikhnaf's account of the Karbala story, al-Ḥusayn several times declares his loyalty to God, as in the following prayer just before the battle:

> O God! It is You in Whom I trust amid all grief. You are my hope in all my distress. You are my trust and provision in everything that happens to me, no matter how much the heart may seem to weaken, ingenuity to fail, the friend to desert and the enemy to rejoice. I have received it [the distress] through You and I complain to You out of my desire for You, You alone. May You dispel it for me and relieve me of it. You are the Master of all grace, the Possessor of all goodness and the Ultimate Resort of all desire.[83]

Furthermore, al-Ḥusayn's followers several times verbally assert their willingness to stand by his side. After the fourth speech analysed above, Zuhayr b. al-Qayn speaks for all of them, saying:

> We have heard God guide your words, son of the Apostle of God. By God! If, by helping and supporting you, we must abandon [this world], even if our world were eternal and we could be immortal within it, we would still prefer going with you to staying in it.[84]

Like al-Ḥusayn, his followers are prepared to die in order to uphold the covenant. Later, the night before the battle, al-Ḥusayn gives his followers permission to leave him. They re-assert their allegiance to him and promise that they will sacrifice their lives for him, saying:

> By God! We will not leave you. Rather, our lives will be a sacrifice [*al-fidā'*] for you; we will protect you with our necks [*bi-nuḥūrinā*],

[83] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 327.
[84] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 301.

> with our foreheads and with our hands. If we are killed, we have fulfilled and accomplished what we promised.[85]

The formula 'our lives will be a sacrifice for you' and similar expressions involving the word *fidan*[86] are very common in Arabic, denoting willingness to give one's life for another. In this passage, however, the sacrificial connotation is strengthened by the juxtaposition of the word *naḥr* (here in plural form: *nuḥūr*), which, besides signifying the upper part of the breast and the neck of the human body, also signifies the part of the camel's body where it is stabbed when sacrificed.[87] But it is not only through their words that the followers show that they are sticking to their pact with al-Ḥusayn. Almost all of them are in fact killed in the ensuing battle, and it can be argued that the deaths of al-Ḥusayn and his followers are described as a sacrifice, even if no word with that meaning is expressly used in the story. In this context it is noteworthy that each time blood is mentioned in the story, it is the blood of al-Ḥusayn, his family, and his supporters. Though many of his enemies are killed in the battle, nothing is said of their blood.[88]

Though Abū Mikhnaf describes the killings of al-Ḥusayn and his followers as sacrifices, they are, however, imbued with a different symbolic value from that of the ratification sacrifices as analysed by Mendenhall and Herion. Their deaths are not a warning of what will happen if they break the covenant with God, but the outcome of their keeping it, as we can see from the statement quoted above. Thus, while al-Ḥusayn and his followers ratify the covenant through verbal assent, neither oaths in the sense of 'self-cursings' nor enactments of such oaths through sacrifices are to be found in Abū Mikhnaf's account.

[85] Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 323.

[86] This word can also be translated 'ransom', but even so it has clear sacrificial connotations. See Ådna, 'O Son', 316–17. The word is also used in the same context by one of al-Ḥusayn's followers, when he says 'We will not [leave you]. Rather we will sacrifice (*tafdīka*) for your safety our lives, property and families' (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 322). Although the text seems to be corrupt here, the variants given in the Leiden edition use verbal derivatives of the root *f-d-y*.

[87] Lane, *Arabic–English Lexicon*, vol. II, 2774b–c; see also Ådna, 'O Son', 340.

[88] See e.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 351, 359, 360, 370. The only time the blood of al-Ḥusayn's adversaries is mentioned is when he says to the Kufans, just before his death: 'If you kill me, God will send misfortune among you and cause the shedding of your blood' (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh*, II, 365).

8. The imposition of the curses, should the covenant be broken

This, again, is a feature absent from al-Ḥusayn's speeches. In the account of the battle that ensues, however, several situations are related where people are punished for their contempt and mockery of al-Ḥusayn – in other words, for their violation of the covenant. On one of these occasions, we are told that a certain ʿAbdallāh b. Ḥawza scorns al-Ḥusayn, who prays:

> 'My Lord! Drive him into the Fire!' Then [Ibn Ḥawza's] horse became troubled in a stream and made him fall. His leg was stuck in the stirrups and his head fell to the ground. The horse bolted and dragged him along, making his head strike every stone and clod of earth until he died.[89]

In this and similar situations, al-Ḥusayn does not personally have the power to punish those that have broken the covenant; instead, he curses them and lets God execute the punishment. This is yet another indication that it is in fact God, not al-Ḥusayn, who is the covenant-giver.

Karbala and Covenant in Abū Mikhnaf's Account

Abū Mikhnaf regards the Karbala event as a serious violation of the divine covenant with humankind. In his rendering of the affair, al-Ḥusayn, as the foremost representative of the family of the Prophet Muḥammad, is the person to whom God has given the authority to lead the community of believers.[90] To refuse to accept him as leader is to go against God's will and thus to break His covenant. On the contrary, holding fast to the *bayʿa* to al-Ḥusayn, whatever the cost, means adhering to the covenant. Abū Mikhnaf seems to regard the Karbala event as a kind of test which God put to the Muslim community. Thus, he makes Zuhayr b. al-Qayn, the zealous companion of al-Ḥusayn, say, in a speech just before the battle:

> People of al-Kufa, here is a warning to you of God's punishment, a warning insofar as it is the duty of a Muslim to advise his brother Muslim – and we are

[89] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 337. Variant versions of the same event are given subsequently in the text. Other examples of al-Ḥusayn's curse leading to God's punishment of the cursed are found in al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 312, 361–2.

[90] This may indicate that he actually identified as a 'soft' Shiʿite, as van Ess (*Theologie*, vol. I, 311) and Crone (*Political Thought*, 117–18) maintain.

> still brothers in one religion and one faith [*wa-naḥnu ḥattā al-āna ikhwatun wa-ʿalā dīnin wāḥidin wa-millatin wāḥidin*] as long as the sword does not strike between you and us. Therefore, you are still appropriate persons to receive advice from us. When the sword strikes, the protection will be cut asunder. We will be a community, and you will be a community. God has tested us and you [*inna Allāha qad ibtalānā wa-iyyākum*] through the offspring of His prophet Muḥammad so that He might see what we and you are doing. We summon you to help them and to desert the tyrant, ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād.[91]

The tragedy of the affair, according to Abū Mikhnaf, was that the majority of the Muslims did not pass the test; the community was split between those who adhered to the covenant and those who did not.

But even though the covenant vocabulary and structure are so prominent in his account of the Karbala drama, it is hard to say whether Abū Mikhnaf has intentionally adopted this language and style in his relation of the event. In other words, was this his usual way of describing the human–divine relationship, or has he endeavoured to structure this particular story within the covenant framework? Without more extensive studies of Abū Mikhnaf's writings, his vocabulary and his way of structuring his historiographical works, it is difficult to say. In the stories about the Tawwābūn and al-Mukhtār that will be discussed below, however, there are few of the overt references to the covenant that we find in his version of the Karbala story.

Al-Ṭabarī himself probably regarded the idea of the divine covenant as a major factor in history, and thus saw human history as a result of God's intervention.[92] If so, he would have been inclined to foreground, perhaps even amplify, Abū Mikhnaf's way of describing the Karbala event. In many other historiographies of early Islam that use Abū Mikhnaf's account of Karbala as a source, the covenant theology does not figure as ubiquitously as in al-Ṭabarī's version. Though most historians base their accounts on Abū Mikhnaf, many of them completely exclude the speeches: for example, Ibn Ṣaʿd, al-Yaʿqūbī and al-Iṣfahānī. Others include some of the speeches, but sometimes in

[91] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 331.

[92] See the studies by Ulrika Mårtensson, for example her 'Discourse'; *Tabari*; 'Ibn Isḥāq', but cf. Shoshan, *Poetics*, 85–107.

abbreviated form. Thus, al-Balādhurī gives only a short version of the second speech,[93] while al-Mufīd has the two first speeches in full in his account.[94] Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī gives the three first speeches more or less complete, but he places them in contexts that differ from that given by Abū Mikhnaf. Thus, for example, he presents the third speech as a letter from al-Ḥusayn to the Shiʿite Sulaymān b. Ṣurad and his companions in Kufa, admonishing them to hold on to their promises.[95] The covenant setting that is so prominent in al-Ṭabarī's version of Abū Mikhnaf is thus played down in most of the accounts that are based on this one.

Abū Mikhnaf and Early Shiʿite Covenant Theology

Several scholars have argued that the idea of the divine covenant was a salient aspect of early Shiʿite theology, but in a way that is very different from how it was conceived in the Ancient West Asian tradition related above. The Shiʿite ideas about the covenant were, rather, placed in a late Antique esoteric framework influenced by Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. Most of these scholars base their research on collections of hadiths from the imams, collections that were compiled from the late third/ninth up to the end of the fourth/tenth centuries.[96] Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, however, argues that, even though each separate hadith cannot with any certainty be said to derive from the imam to which it is ascribed, the ideas expressed are probably very old and originate in the time of the second/eighth-century imams like al-Bāqir and al-Ṣādiq.[97] Ideas on the covenant similar to those expressed in the hadiths examined by Amir-Moezzi are also found in the texts from Shiʿite 'extremists' (*ghulāt*) which are much earlier than the hadith collections, and which are examined by Mushegh Asatryan.[98] Here, I will only reiterate the most important points concerning the esoteric notion of the covenant expressed in these writings in order to enable a comparison with Abū Mikhnaf's Karbala account.[99]

[93] Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, vol. III, 1,306.
[94] Al-Mufīd, *Al-Irshād*, 224–5.
[95] Ibn Aʿtham al-Kūfī, *Futūḥ*, vol. V, 143–5. The first and second speeches are found on pp. 135 and 137 respectively.
[96] The collections of Shiʿite hadiths will be further discussed in Chapter 10.
[97] Amir-Moezzi, 'On Spirituality'.
[98] Asatryan, *Controversies*.
[99] This section is based on Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, 33–7; 'Cosmogony'; Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Shiʿi Islam*, 11–18. See also Asatryan, *Controversies*, 67–8; Bar-Asher, *Scripture and*

The idea of the divine covenant in early Shiʿism is closely related to its cosmogony, as the covenant-founding events (in the plural, as we will see) occur before the creation of human beings in bodily form. As mentioned above, the Qur'anic verse about the primordial covenant (Qur. 7:172) is central to the notion of the divine covenant in Islam. Imami Shiʿism, however, talks of a covenantal relationship between future Believers (*mu'minūn*) and God long before the occasion mentioned in that verse. According to early Shiʿite sources, God created humankind in several stages, in increasingly less subtle and more material forms. Very early on (if this expression can be used about a situation preceding historical time), He made a covenant with the true Believers while they were still in the form of 'particles' (Ar. *dharr*) or 'shadows' (Ar. *aẓilla*). This pact included not only a promise on the part of the Believers to worship and adore God, but also a vow of love and loyalty (*walāya*) towards the Prophet, towards the imams, and towards the Mahdi, the messianic saviour at the end of time.[100] Later, God created the descendants of Adam in the form of particles by mixing earth with water of different quality: this is the covenantal occasion between God and humankind referred to in Qur. 7:172. One hadith states:

> A man asked Abū Jaʿfar [al-Bāqir] about [the meaning of] God's word, '(Remember) when your Lord took from the sons of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them bear witness about themselves: "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes indeed!"' to the end of the verse [Qur. 7:172]. He replied, in the presence of his father [ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, the fourth imam], 'My father reported to me that God took a fistful [*qabḍa*] of earth [*turāb*], the earth [*turba*] from which he created Adam. Then he poured fresh, sweet water on it and left it for forty days; then he poured salty, bitter water on it and left it for forty days. When the clay had fermented, He took it and kneaded it vigorously, and then [the descendants of Adam] came out like particles [*dharr*] from his right and from his left. He ordered

Exegesis, 132–6; Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 145–55; Vilozny, *Constructing a World View*, 69–72, 125–6.

[100] Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, 34; see also Amir-Moezzi, 'Cosmogony'. This first covenant God made not only with the believers (*mu'minūn*), but also with various spiritual beings such as angels, and with the prophets. Amir-Moezzi calls these entities 'the Pure Beings' (*Divine Guide*, 34).

> all of them to descend into the Fire, and so the People of the Right [*aṣḥāb al-yamīn*] entered, and it became cool and harmless for them, while the People of the Left [*aṣḥāb al-shimāl*] refused to enter.[101]

Here, the division of humankind between the true Believers who follow God's command (the People of the Right) and the unbelievers who disobey Him (the People of the Left) is made clear. Amir-Moezzi argues that according to the sources, the covenant mentioned in Qur. 7:172 includes all humankind, but that 'this oath covers only one point: the Unicity of the Creator'.[102] Thus, recognition of the unity of God (*islām*) is natural to all human beings. The true Believers, the People of the Right, are included in this covenant, but they have already taken the oath of *walāya* mentioned above, and will remain faithful to God, the Prophet and the imams. The People of the Left, on the other hand, have indeed declared their monotheism through the affirmation that God is their Lord – as expressed in the covenant verse – but since they have not promised *walāya* to the prophets and imams, they will inevitably fall into sin and will thus always be opposed to the true Believers.[103]

Amir-Moezzi further explains that the opposition between true Believers and non-believers is only a symptom of the conflict between cosmic good and evil powers that existed long before the creation of humankind. The first entities that were created, he writes, were the mutually opposed supreme intelligence (*ʿaql*) and ignorance (*jahl*), and their armies:[104]

> These, in turn, are symbols and archetypes of the Imam and his followers on the one side and of the Enemy of the Imam and his henchmen on the other. This primeval struggle has an echo in every age and in every historical cycle throughout all time.[105]

[101] Al-Kulaynī, *Al-kāfī*, vol. II, 7, 'Kitāb al-īmān wa-l-kufr', Bāb 2, no 2. I have drawn on the translations of Dakake (*Charismatic Community*, 150) and Amir-Moezzi (*Divine Guide*, 36). Words in square brackets are added by me.

[102] Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, 36. But cf. Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 280, n. 32.

[103] The notion of predestination inherent in this interpretation of the covenant was crucial in early Shiʿism, and is well-discussed by Dakake in *Charismatic Community*, 149–55. For similar Sunni views, see Jaffer, 'Covenant Theology', 107–11.

[104] Amir-Moezzi, *Divine Guide*, 6–8, 36.

[105] Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Shiʿi Islam*, 16.

Furthermore, Asatryan has demonstrated that already in the *ghulāt* texts from the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries, the battle at Karbala figures in connection with the esoteric cosmology reviewed above.[106]

I will return to the Imami Shiʿite idea of the cosmic struggle in Chapters 10 and 11. For now, it is enough to state that there are no indications that Abū Mikhnaf held the dualist ideas that are found in the Shiʿite sources referred to by Amir-Moezzi. This is not unexpected, of course, as he probably did not identify as a Shiʿite of the kind discussed by the latter – and maybe not as a Shiʿite at all. Perhaps more surprising is the total absence from the hadiths of references to the battle at Karbala which mention what Abū Mikhnaf describes as al-Ḥusayn's and his followers' adherence to the divine covenant and its violation by the enemy. One might have expected the importance of the cosmic battle and the notion of the divine covenant in early Shiʿism, in the context of the interpretation of the Karbala drama as 'the most tragic illustration of Shiʿism's dualistic vision',[107] to call for the use of Abū Mikhnaf's covenantal perspective on this event.

Again, we must remember that Abū Mikhnaf was probably not an Imami Shiʿite, and that it is unlikely that he shared the dualist world-view expressed in the early Imami sources. In his version of the Karbala story, the Muslim community is not pictured as divided in a cosmic conflict ordained throughout eternity. For him, the Muslims belonged together and should be united in faith and under one leader – although he probably thought that the Umayyad dynasty did not provide the leadership that was needed. An example of Abū Mikhnaf's wish to emphasise the unity of the Muslims is the common prayer on the occasion when al-Ḥusayn and his followers have just been intercepted by al-Ḥurr and his troop. The time for noon prayer is coming, and al-Ḥusayn prepares to pray. When he comes out of his tent, he delivers his first speech (see above), but receives no reaction from the Kufans. Abū Mikhnaf continues: 'al-Ḥusayn asked al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd whether he wanted to lead his followers in the prayer. He replied, "No, but you pray and we will pray with you leading the prayer."' After the common prayer, the two groups split up again and resume their former positions.[108]

[106] Asatryan, *Controversies*, 28–34.
[107] Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Shiʿi Islam*, 25.
[108] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 298.

The tragedy of Karbala, according to Abū Mikhnaf, is that in this battle Muslims turned against Muslims, and, even more, that Muslims turned against the offspring of the Prophet Muḥammad and killed them. This is well-expressed in the words of al-Ḥusayn's companion Zuhayr b. al-Qayn in his address to the Kufans quoted above:

> we are still brothers in one religion and one faith as long as the sword does not strike between you and us ... When the sword strikes, the protection will be cut asunder. We will be a community, and you will be a community. God has tested us and you through the offspring of His prophet Muḥammad so that He might see what we and you are doing.[109]

A similar attitude can be seen in al-Ḥusayn's refusal to begin the battle – he prefers to wait for the enemy to open hostilities, even though it means less martial advantage for him and his companions.[110] In contrast to this, Abū Mikhnaf pictures the enemies as initiating the fight when he has the evil Shamir b. Dhī al-Jawshan incite the governor of Kufa and enemy army commander, ʿUmar b. Saʿd, to attack,[111] and makes ʿUmar shoot an arrow towards al-Ḥusayn's camp and say, 'Be witnesses that I was the first to shoot.'[112]

Passages such as these are far from the exclusivism found in Imami Shiʿite sources, and this might explain why later Shiʿite renderings of the Karbala story, while based on Abū Mikhnaf's version and making ample use of the details and imagery of his text, ignore his covenantal framework. Thus, if the early date of the esoteric Shiʿite ideas is accepted in accordance with the argument of the scholars mentioned above, we are able to compare two more or less contemporary views of the divine covenant with humanity that are nevertheless very different. This might also explain why al-Ṭabarī, whose interest in a more traditional view of the covenant Ulrika Mårtensson has forcefully argued,[113] has preserved Abū Mikhnaf's *Kitāb maqtal al-Ḥusayn* more or less unabridged, as far as we can tell.

[109] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 331.
[110] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 307–8.
[111] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 315–17.
[112] Al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, II, 335.
[113] Mårtensson, 'True New Testament'; *Tabarī*; 'Ibn Isḥāq'.

According to Abū Mikhnaf, many people in Kufa felt that the killing of al-Ḥusayn at Karbala was very wrong, and regretted that they had not supported him at Karbala. It is to a group of these who wanted to do penitence for what they regarded as not only neglect of loyalty to the family of the Prophet, but also a sin against God, that we turn in Part II of the book.