

*The Insider & Outsider Perspectives
on the Battle of Karbalā*

by

Syed Mohammad Haider

Supervisor: Prof Bettina Schmidt

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University of Wales Trinity Saint David for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic
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Abstract

The Battle of Karbalā is one of the most significant events of early Islamic history, occurring in 680 A.D. The event witnessed the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, Husayn ibn Alī, lead a revolt against the 2nd Umayyad Caliph, Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiya. Although, for different reasons, the event holds significance to both the Shī‘a and the Sunnī Muslims. For the Shī‘a, the event signifies the infallibility of the Prophet’s family, introducing him as Shī‘ism martyr, as well as affirming the belief in hereditary succession to the Prophet’s family. For the Sunnī, the event highlights a contentious period of the nascent Islamic community, in which the offspring of prominent Muslims engage in violent conflict, challenging the Sunnī ideal of communal harmony.

Yet, the Battle significantly departs from its indigenous sources, specifically within the non-Muslim, Western European perspective. Within this perspective, the Battle coverage's coverage starkly contrasts with its overwhelming and detailed narratives in Islamic historical sources. The battle is generally viewed as a political event of a political opportunist, at times, willing to take advantage of the unpopularity of a caliph. Although often highlighting the event's effect on the Shī‘a, the event lacks any further significance.

This study analyzes the various perspectives on the Battle of Karbalā, including the Shī‘a-Islamic, Sunnī-Islamic, and western non-Islamic positions, using Russell McCutcheon’s insider/outsider model. It will analyze not only the various insider and outsider perspectives on the battle but why there are differences within each perspective, highlighting sectarian biases, preference for historiographic traditions, and their effect on contemporary religiopolitical relations and the study of religions.

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Chapter I.

Introduction & Background

Introduction

The Battle of Karbalā is one of the most significant events in Islamic history, particularly when analyzing intra-Islamic relations within contemporary Islam. This event witnessed Husayn ibn Alī, the maternal grandson of Islam's Prophet Muhammad, leading a rebellion against the second Umayyad caliph, Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiya. The traditional Islamic narratives present the battle as a moment of moral reckoning for the wider Islamic community, focusing on the embarrassing circumstances that led to the eventual murder of the grandson of the Prophet¹. Within this perspective, Husayn's rebellion is based not just on the illegitimate political ascension of a particular dynasty but on a revolution with a moral and spiritual basis. To mark the occasion, millions of Shī'a (as well as some Sunnī) Muslims commemorate Husayn's death annually, on *Āshūrā*, or the tenth day of the Islamic lunar calendar when the events are believed to have occurred, recounting stories of his bravery as well as his pain and suffering, reminiscent of Christ's suffering during the Passion.

Within its contemporaneous environment, the events of Karbalā were not of much significance in terms of militaristic results. The Umayyad forces surrounded Husayn and his small entourage and swiftly proceeded with his execution. From this point of view, the uprising of Husayn was a failure, specifically from his attempt to thwart the established order. Yet, this event proved to be not only a hindrance to the stability of the Umayyad Empire but provided Shī'ism with a bolstering martyr figure for future rebellions, which remains relevant in contemporary Islamic societies.² When analyzing medieval Islamic texts, the Battle of Karbalā transitions from a historical, and political conflict into a spiritual and moral one, with a set of heroes and villains, presented in epic fashion.

¹ Hugh Kennedy. 2016. *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates: The Islamic Near East from the Sixth to the Eleventh Century* (New York, NY: Routledge Member of the Taylor and Francis Group), p. 77

² M.A. Shaban. 1971. *Islamic History: A New Interpretation, Vol. 1: A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132)* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), p. 91

When analyzing the specific narratives on the Battle of Karbalā, there is a clear divergence between perspectives, echoing similarities of the insider and outsider debate by Russell McCutcheon.³ The insider tradition presents vivid and detailed descriptions of this event but also showcases diverse opinions. This is due to the insider tradition's sectarian allegiances, specifically between the Shī'a and the Sunnī. This event can mean something different to each perspective, in which poetic and parabolic stylization showcases motives, with characters demonstrating conflicts of morality. Although the description of the events of early Islamic history showcases divergences, both the Shī'a and the Sunnī recount historical events from the same sources, highlighting the freedom of interpretation within the insider tradition based on one's theological and political loyalties.⁴

In contrast, the non-Muslim tradition does not pay much heed to the Battle of Karbalā, especially when comparing it to its ubiquitous mention in Islamic chronicles. The outside tradition, in this case, western and non-Islamic historians, glance through the battle as generally insignificant, apart from the theological developments that took place, primarily the development of Husayn as the martyr figure for the Shī'a. Even with the sparse analysis of the Battle of Karbalā from the outside perspective, there are (similar to the insider perspective) different interpretations. Various scholars from the outside perspective view the event as a political stunt, primarily that of a rebellious Husayn, engaging in a quest to topple the existing government to be caliph himself and to pass on to his heirs.⁵ Contrasting to the insider perspective, the narratives of a moral uprising and the absence of political greed, is generally disregarded.

Inside and outside perspectives are significant aspects of religious studies, especially for a prospective researcher. This approach is significant to understand a religious, social, or cultural tradition, making it an integral aspect of the study of religions. For instance, a researcher would aim to balance the objectivity often associated with the outsider tradition but require empathy

³ Russell T. McCutcheon. 1999. *The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Religion* (London, England: Continuum International Publishing Group)

⁴ Tayeb El-Hibri. 2018. *Parable and Politics in Early Islamic History: The Rashidun Caliphs* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. ix

⁵ Kennedy, *Prophet*, p. 41

and understanding of the insider perspective to research religion, especially in how it views itself. Therefore, the Battle of Karbalā will be used to understand the broader debate between insider and outsider perspectives in religious studies, showcasing the intricacies of diverse perspectives within the insider perspective, along with the historical negligence of this event from the outsider perspective.

This study will analyze the various perspectives on the Battle of Karbalā, including the Shīʿa-Islamic, Sunnī-Islamic, and western non-Islamic positions, using McCutcheon’s insider/outsider model. It will address the question of not only what the insider and outsider perspectives are on the battle but why there are such divergent and drastic perspectives on this event. To understand the perspectives between these respective traditions, one must revisit the events of decades before the battle, specifically toward the death of the Prophet Muhammad, which will be analyzed in the background section. Part I. will explore the Sunnī and Shīʿa positions, respectively, illustrating the diversity within the insider tradition, which portrays a cohesive narrative of events that present a contentious period and are surprisingly self-critical. Part II will analyze the outsider perspective of the battle, specifically, how insider texts and historiographic traditions of medieval Islam are perceived in relation to the Battle of Karbalā. Part III will analyze the validity of both the insider and outside perspectives, presenting how a concoction of both traditions is an asset in understanding Islamic historical tradition and the study of religions. All parts will analyze historiographic cultural traditions, theological developments within Islam, and contemporary religiopolitical rhetoric to gain a vivid understanding of the inside and outside perspectives on the Battle of Karbalā.

Background

To understand the Battle of Karbalā, there needs to be an assessment of the contemporaneous political system and traditions of early Islam. Political governance and religious authority have often been intertwined, specifically concerning Prophethood in the Islamic tradition. For example, the Qurʾān makes mention of the term “caliph” (*khilāfah*) when referring to the Prophet Adam as “a successor on earth.”⁶ Additionally, the Qurʾān gives the

⁶ [The Cow, 2:30. The Qurʾan. M.A. Abdel Haleem (trans.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 7]

same designation to the Prophet, King David, specifically when God tells David he is given “mastery over the land.”⁷ In these separate occasions, God is not only designating a Prophet to mend a community’s religious, spiritual, and moral standing but doing so via divine political authority. Within this ideological framework, Islam’s relationship with divine political authority develops into the central idea of a caliphate.⁸

To understand the practical applications of a caliphate, one must analyze the political landscape of pre-Islamic Arabia. In between the two great empires of its time, the Byzantine Empire and the Sassanian Empire, pre-Islamic Arabia (specifically the Hijaz region in which Islam was founded) was absent from direct empirical subordination. The Arabian Peninsula was also mostly desert with rugged terrain and scarce rainfall. Primarily because of these conditions, these respective empires did not consider the direct empirical control of Arabia in their interest, instead relying on agreements with local tribes for economic relations. Due to the absence of direct influence from these empires, religious influence from these respective empires was also rare, with the dominant religion being local paganism, with a focus on a tribal social system.⁹ These factors paved the way for Islam’s birth and the eventual spread of the caliphate across the Arab peninsula.

Although not officially a caliph, Muhammad set up a proto-state in the city of Medina, in which agreements and administrative decisions were made regarding Muslims and non-Muslims. His skills as a proto-statesman, specifically within the Constitution of Medina, demonstrated his aptitude as an arbitrator. This early conception of a state within Muhammad’s lifetime became the base of the eventual caliphate, specifically (at this time) with the city of Medina as its headquarters. Therefore, Medina was the centre of religious and political authority, specifically in the delegation of administrative and religious decisions.

⁷ [Sad, 38:26, *The Qur’an*. M.A. Abdel Haleem (trans.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 291]

⁸ To analyze more on the perspectives of Islamic political authority, specifically on the concept of the caliph being “God’s representative on Earth” (*Khilāfaht Allah*), as compared to the debated “the Prophet’s (political) Successor (*Khilāfaht Rasul Allah*)” see *God’s Caliph* by Crone & Hinds

⁹ Fred M. Donner. 2012. *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press), p. 27-29

After Muhammad's death, a pending issue plagued the Muslim community, specifically succession to political and religious authority. Muhammad left no male heirs, leaving heirs only through his daughter, Fatima. There was no clear designation of a successor of the caliphate (although the Shī'a might take exception to this notion), either in the Qur'ān or any other verifiable document. Therefore, the nature of the caliphate, specifically regarding its succession, was quite enigmatic, leaving the stability of the caliphate vulnerable to civil strife. To make matters worse, as Muhammad's burial process was being prepared by his family (such as Alī, his cousin and son-in-law who was a potential candidate for the caliphate), they were left out of the decision regarding the succession to Muhammad, with the debate of this event holding prominence to the present day.¹⁰

The dispute over the Prophet Muhammad's succession led to the development of the two dominant sects within Islam- Sunnism and Shī'ism. It is important to note that (similar to the idea of the caliphate), the divergence between the Sunnī and Shī'a is political and theological. The Sunnī position holds that the Prophet Muhammad's companions are most qualified for the caliphate as long as they belong to the dominant tribe of the Quraysh. This position is held due to the belief that the companions were critical in the formation of the supporting traditions of the Prophet, therefore having higher esteem for leadership.¹¹

The Shī'a take exception to the Sunnī position, primarily due to the reverence they attach to Muhammad's family. Although leaving no male heir, Muhammad left behind a daughter, Fatima, who was married to his cousin, Alī ibn Abī Tālib. It is from this hereditary line that the Shī'a hold the succession of Muhammad's divinity and, therefore, political authority. This position is given further credence by the status accorded to Muhammad's family (*Ahlul-Bayt*) in the Qur'ān. According to this perspective, Muhammad and his family are elevated to their contemporary faithful and families, similar to the status the Qur'ān accorded to previous prophets and their families. This is primarily due to the mention of the Prophet Muhammad's family in the Qur'ān, specifically in which God purifies them from sin,¹² leading to the belief of

¹⁰ Hugh Kennedy. 2016. *Caliphate: The History of an Idea* (New York, NY: Basic Books), p. 4-5

¹¹ El-Hibri, p. viii

¹² [The Joint Forces, 33:33. *The Qur'an*. M.A. Abdel Haleem (trans.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 268]

their infallibility. Although the Sunnī position does not contradict the sanctity of the *Ahlul-Bayt*, the idea of spiritual hierarchy, and thus political superiority, is disagreed upon.

Although this period of contention remained within the early Islamic community, the proto-Sunnī perspective dominated, with the first three caliphs outside the Prophet's family. After much civil strife, mainly due to allegations of nepotism and corruption against the third caliph, Uthmān ibn 'Affān, Alī finally succeeded in the caliphate. Although one would expect civil strife to calm with the ascension of the Prophet's relatives, it led to the first official civil war (*fitna*) amongst the Muslims. Although due to no shortage of reasons, the primary basis for the controversy was the nature of Alī's ascension, particularly his actions (or lack of) against the murder of the preceding caliph, Uthmān.¹³

Accusations of Uthmān's nepotism and preference for his clan, the Umayyads, prompted civil outrage, leading to his assassination. Though the claims against Uthmān were not unfounded, his assassination led to broader issues, particularly what was to become of Uthmān's previous administrators, many of whom were fellow relatives. This is particularly true for the Governor of Syria, Mu'āwiya ibn Abī Sufyān.¹⁴ Although appointed as governor before Uthmān's reign after the death of his elder brother, Mu'āwiya consolidated a significant power base in Syria during Uthmān's reign and held close relations with his kinsman. Evidence suggests that Alī intended to depose Mu'āwiya from his position as governor, sighting administrative morality and a departure from Uthmān's nepotistic approach. Yet, Mu'āwiya was adamant about retaining his position as governor, using the assassination of his fellow kinsman as his basis. To make matters more precarious, as Alī's caliphate faced opposition in multiple other directions, Mu'āwiya eventually laid claim to the caliphate himself, putting the nascent Muslim community into civil war (*fitna*).¹⁵

Yet, Mu'āwiya's claim to the caliphate also brought controversy, mainly due to his lineage. Except for a few (such as Uthmān), the Umayyads had been initially hostile to

¹³ Kennedy, *Caliphate*, p. 21

¹⁴ G.R. Hawting, 2000. *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750* (New York, NY: Routledge Member of the Taylor and Francis Group), p. 26

¹⁵ Kennedy, *Prophet*, p. 69

Muhammad's preaching of Islam. Mu'āwiya's father, Abū Sufyān ibn Harb, had been the primary foe of Muhammad in their native city of Mecca. Due to Abū Sufyān's overwhelming influence as a Meccan aristocrat, Muhammad had to flee Mecca, ultimately setting up a base in Medina. After Muhammad's conquest and return to Mecca, Abū Sufyān (as well as a young Mu'āwiya) converted to Islam.¹⁶ Considering the Umayyad history of armed opposition to Islam, claiming the caliphate against the Prophet's family was controversial for someone of questionable Islamic lineage. From the Shī'a perspective, especially considering the special status given to the Prophet's family in the Qur'ān, Mu'āwiya's claim not only lacked political merit but was an attack on Alī's divine merit. This belief by the Shī'a goes even further with the view that after the Prophet's death, there was a conspiracy to thwart Alī of any administrative success and, therefore, the divine authority to rule.¹⁷

Alī's assassination by a radical ex-follower¹⁸ paved the way for Mu'āwiya's claim to the caliphate to become a reality, with the accompanying desire for the Muslim community to end the *fitna*. Although there was a demand for Alī's eldest son Hasan to lay his claim to the caliphate, he not only abdicated his claim but engaged in a treaty with Mu'āwiya. The treaty outlined Hasan's abdication, giving Mu'āwiya official authority on the condition that after Mu'āwiya's death, the process of choosing the next caliph would return to the consultation group (*shura*).¹⁹ Yet, long after Hasan's death, as Mu'āwiya lay on his deathbed, Yazīd was declared caliph. The ascension of Yazīd not only introduced the hereditary dynasty of the Umayyad Empire but inserted Husayn's arrival into the conflict, introducing the second *fitna* and the Battle of Karbalā.²⁰

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 71

¹⁷ El-Hibri, p. viii

¹⁸ Wilferd Madelung. 2001. *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), p. 308

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 322

²⁰ Shaban, p. 90-91

Part I.

The Battle from Sunnī and Shī‘a Positions: The Insider Perspective

A significant mistake a prospective researcher can make when engaging in religious studies research is the belief of approaching the insider tradition as a monolithic community. This leads to incorrect assessments and limits understanding of the various intricacies involved within a respective religion. As with the outsider perspective, there are multiple perspectives within the insider tradition. When assessing this from an Islamic perspective, Muslims are part of a diverse global community belonging to different ethnicities, nationalities, and sects. To approach the Battle of Karbalā with a simplistic and monolithic approach, specifically an event that has tremendous consequences for theological development and polemical rhetoric, would be to neglect the insider tradition.

It is important to note that the extensive narratives within Islamic historiographic tradition have strong polemical loyalties. To understand the diversity of perspectives of the Battle of Karbalā, the two dominant sects of Islam, the Shī‘a and the Sunnī, will be analyzed in separate sequences, including but not limited to theological development, intra-Islamic polemics, and sectarian allegiances. Due to this, when referring to a specific insider position of a respective sect, the perspective will be referred to as such (such as the “insider-Shī‘a perspective” or the “insider- Sunnī perspective”) to specify each of the insider perspectives.

Although outside the scope of this study, it is imperative to highlight that even further perspectives exist within a respective sect. For instance, although the Shī‘a are and have been a separate sect within Islam for centuries, there are various subsects within Shī‘ism and, therefore, the possibility of differing perspectives on the Battle of Karbalā among the Shī‘a themselves. These sub-sects include but are not limited to the Ismā‘īlīs, Bohrās, and the Zaydīs. For the purpose of this study, the dominant form of Shī‘ism, the Imāmīs (or the “Twelvers”), will represent the Shī‘a perspective.

Similarly, the Sunnīs also have various (and often conflicting) views on Islamic theology and historical events with other fellow Sunnīs. They have multiple subsects of their own,

including but not limited to Wahhabism, Deobandism, and forms of Sufism. To generalize and conclude the Sunnī position within such a magnanimous sect would invalidate a key argument this study intends to make, specifically in identifying the intricacies of different perspectives within the insider perspective. However, due to the limitations set for this project, the dominant Sunnī idea of *ahl al-sunna wa'l jama'a* (“those who adhere to the community”), a formative theological idea shared across various forms in Sunnī subsects will be examined the insider-Sunnī perspective.

Chapter II.

The Shī'a Perspective

The significance of Islamic political history needs to be emphasized to understand the critical development of theological principles, specifically the formation of sects within Islam. After the Prophet Muhammad's death, the disintegration stages start almost immediately. Based on a revolutionary social movement with monotheism at its core, Islam emphasized the importance of the individual Muslim, absent of the individual's gender, tribe, race, or social status. This is demonstrated by the Qur'ān, in which God states, "the most honored of you are the ones who are most mindful of him."²¹ According to this verse, racial, gender, and tribal loyalties, are secondary factors, at least in terms of spiritual merit. Most importantly, this verse implies that in pre, and early Islamic society, tribal politics and social stature were primary factors of Arab social and political standing. The insider- Shī'a perspective holds, similar to the Sunnī, that Muhammad's insertion as a Prophet was to challenge the Meccan (and later, the Arab) aristocratic status quo.

Yet, after the Prophet's death, there was an uncomfortable contention among the Muslims. For the Shī'a, the painful events of Islamic history are of no issue, a fundamental divergence from the Sunnī perspective. If anything, the divisions of the early Muslims are a welcomed topic employed by the Shī'a to make a larger theological argument, specifically the erred judgment of the early Muslims pertaining to leadership. To the Shī'a, for Alī to have been cast aside as a viable candidate for the caliphate led to the embarrassing circumstances of the Battle of Karbalā. Hence, limiting the discussion of division amongst important Islamic figures would disservice the Shī'a position. From the insider-Shī'a perspective, the more uncomfortable and embarrassing the circumstances, the more the insider-Shī'a theological claims hold credence. Thus, the basis of the insider-Shī'a perspective fully culminates with the Battle of Karbalā

²¹ "People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should recognize one another. In God's eyes, the most honoured of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is all knowing, all aware." [The Private Rooms, 49:13. *The Qur'an*. M.A. Abdel Haleem (trans.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 339]

Theological Development

The Battle of Karbalā had a rippling effect on developing Shīʿa theological doctrine, specifically on how the insider-Shīʿa perspective views the Prophet Muhammad’s family. Already a defining perspective before the battle, Karbalā cemented a long-standing conflict within the nascent Muslim community even further. Though it would be inaccurate to call these early partisans of Husayn Shīʿa, since the formation of organized sects was still in construction, they could be referred to as the proto-Shīʿa community. This community specifically attached the Husayn as a victim of state oppression and a martyr. Therefore, Husayn eventually became the symbol for the disenfranchised in proto-Shīʿa circles, primarily non-Arab Muslims, fueling rebellion with an immortal memory of Husayn.²²

Martyrdom is a crucial characteristic of Shīʿa theological belief, distinct from other features of martyrdom within Islam. In the Qurʾān, before Husayn’s death, martyrdom is a vital aspect of Islamic doctrine. For instance, God states, “[d]o not say that those who are killed in God’s cause are dead; they are alive, though you do not realize it.”²³ Though not in the traditional sense, this implies a form of immortality for those designated as martyrs since their death is not conventional. The Qurʾān makes it clear that they are as close to being alive as possible, setting aside the associated tribulations of death. However, when examining the exegesis of the Qurʾān, this verse pertains to the martyrdom of the early Muslims in the Battle of Badr (624) against the Meccan pagans during the Prophet’s life. It is important to note that the exegesis of the verse pertains to those Muslims who died in warfare against non-Muslims when Islam was a novel idea.²⁴

²² Kennedy, *Prophet*, p. 77

²³ [The Cow, 2:154. *The Qurʾān*. M.A. Abdel Haleem (trans.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 17]

²⁴ Asma Afsaruddin. 2017. “Dying in the Path of God: Reading Martyrdom and Moral Excellence in the Quran,” in *Roads to Paradise: Eschatology and Concepts of the Hereafter in Islam*, ed. by Todd Lawson Sebastian Günther (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill), p. 163

Within the insider-Shī'a perspective, martyrdom is no longer a Muslim versus non-Muslim characteristic. One can easily be considered a martyr if the oppressor is a Muslim and the oppressed is also a Muslim. This is effortlessly embodied in the Battle of Karbalā, with Husayn, the victim being a Muslim (undoubtedly of high regard due to his lineage), and the oppressor, Yazīd, also a Muslim. This distinct introduction of martyrdom is a departure from the traditional Islamic concept of martyrdom, cemented by the events of Karbalā. Additionally, this introduced the aspect of salvation being attributed to those who "lost" in the traditional, worldly sense.²⁵ Although a military defeat from all material perspectives, Karbalā is not presented as a loss from an insider-shī'a standpoint- rather quite the opposite.

Symbolism, specifically to the Prophet Muhammad's family, is a consistent feature of Shī'a practice. The aftermath of the Battle of Karbalā began the process of formalizing this aspect in organized Shī'ism almost immediately. For instance, after the death of Husayn and his companions, we see the introduction of an early Iraqi Shī'a figure, Mukhtār al-Thaqafī (d. 687). Although jailed during the Battle of Karbalā, he embarks on an epic quest to hunt down Husayn's killers after gaining freedom. Mukhtār gathers an impressive set of supporters to avenge Husayn, officially leading a rebellion against the Umayyad Caliphate. In a battle against the existing regime, one can witness the employment of early Shī'a symbolism, specifically on the theological argument of the infallibility of the Prophet's family. Mukhtār parades a chair, claiming to be that of Husayn's father, Alī, as a ceremonies practice to rouse emotion amongst his supporters (undoubtedly giving himself simultaneous authority).²⁶ This illustrates the direct consequences the events of Karbalā had on the symbolic image of the infallible Husayn and his family within proto-Shī'ism, continuing to hold prominence within the contemporary insider-Shī'a perspective.

Undoubtedly, one of the most significant concepts of the insider-Shī'a perspective, specifically regarding a distinct theological development, is the concept of messianism. With Husayn becoming the immortal symbol and martyr for the Shī'a, the idea of a continuing symbol

²⁵ Patricia Crone. 2004. *God's Rule - Government and Islam: Six Centuries of Medieval Islamic Political Thought* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press), p. 124

²⁶ Ibid, p. 78

was to be introduced immediately after the Battle of Karbalā. Interestingly, the same Mukhtār is witnessed as being integral to this concept, illustrating his own influence in Shīʿism. With Mukhtār’s rallying cry to avenge Husayn, we see one of the earliest claims of a *Mahdī*, or a Messiah, with Mukhtār credited as being the first to implement the term in a messianic form.²⁷ Mukhtār would eventually hold the messiah position for Husayn’s half-brother, Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya, hoping to transfer the public sympathy for Husayn to his brother.²⁸

Although the position of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyya as the *Mahdī* for the Shīʿa was short-lived, it was an idea that would have a lasting impression on not just the Shīʿa but Islam as a whole. Historically, there is no evidence of an organized concept of the *Mahdī* before Mukhtār’s quest to avenge the killers of Husayn. A possible explanation for this can be the non-Arab following of Mukhtār and proto-Shīʿism, many of whom brought alien concepts such as the promised messiah and even the transmigration of souls.²⁹ From the insider-Shīʿa theological perspective, the *Mahdī* is the already-born twelfth Imam (as well as the direct descendant of Husayn), to return when deemed fit. It is essential to note the timeline of these developments – all occurred almost immediately after the Battle of Karbalā. Therefore, the Battle serves not just as a standalone incident of valor and a symbol of an immortal martyr in Husayn but introduces continuing that infallible stature, specifically in Husayn’s descendants.

When assessing the theological influence of the Battle of Karbalā from the insider-Shīʿa perspective, the event introduced a separate aspect of pilgrimage for the Shīʿa, including but not limited to the shrine of Husayn in Karbalā (present-day Iraq). Although pilgrimage is not alien to Islam, such as with the mandate to visit Mecca, a separate set of pilgrimages became a significant and even required component of Shīʿism.³⁰ This is best exemplified by the attributed narratives of Husayn’s great-grandson and the sixth Shīʿa Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. According to one report, al-Ṣādiq extols the virtues of paying homage to Husayn through the pilgrimage to Karbalā, professing it as a core ritual of the Shīʿa. Interestingly, one report of al-Ṣādiq even

²⁷ Ibid, p. 77

²⁸ Ibid, p. 24

²⁹ Hawting, p. 52

³⁰ Najam Haider. 2011. *The Origins of the Shīʿa: Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kūfa* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), p. 246

attributes the superiority of the pilgrimage to Karbalā in comparison to the required pilgrimage to Mecca.³¹ Whether this attribution from al-Ṣādiq is historically accurate can easily be questioned, but the debate of this narrative's historicity is not relevant in the present discussion. What matters here is that later Shī'a theological tradition morphed their own theological concepts, distinct from other Muslims, such as pilgrimage, directly resulting from the Battle of Karbalā.

Husayn: Jesus for the Shī'a?

To understand the intricacies of the insider-Shī'a perspective of the Battle of Karbalā, it is helpful to explore the image of Jesus Christ with that of Shī'ism's Husayn ibn Alī. This illustrates the theological overlap between the two Abrahamic faiths and highlights the influence Christian doctrine had in forming a distinct Shī'a identity, specifically in the association of Christ's imagery to that of Husayn.

What makes this association even more interesting is that the insider-Shī'a perspective associates Husayn with not just Islam's Christ- but also of Christianity. Although the two share various similarities, such as the virgin birth, miraculous incidents, and disruption to the social order, the role of Christ in Islam and Christ in Christianity is different. In Christianity, Christ is a member of the Trinity, where he is at the centre, and ends with the brutality of the Passion. Contrastingly, in Islam, Christ is only but a Prophet, with his mission to propagate the same monotheistic concept of *Tawhid* as did Muhammad, with the actual Christ being saved from death, living in occultation until the present day to return with the *Mahdī*.³² Yet, for the Shī'a, Husayn has much in common with the suffering of Christianity's Jesus than the Almighty-rescued Jesus of Islam.

To understand the similarities of Christianity's Jesus to the Husayn of the Shī'a and its relevance in the Shī'a insider perspective on the Battle of Karbalā, one can analyze the *maqatil* literature. The *maqatil* are a series of literature narrating the Battle of Karbalā, developed by

³¹ Ibid

³² Gabriel Said Reynolds. 2009. "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, 72.2: p. 251 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40379003>

Shī‘a historians from the 8th to the 13th century.³³ In these narratives, the valor of Husayn is at the forefront, along with his suffering during battle, detailing his actions until his eventual martyrdom. One integral feature the *maqatil* implements to highlight the tragic suffering of Husayn is to correlate his undeniable standing in Islam and his image to that of Jesus.³⁴ For instance, the *maqatil* states that, like Jesus’ mother, Mary, Husayn’s mother, Fatima, was also a virgin when she bore him.³⁵ The *maqatil* authors employ the shared theme of Mary’s chastity in Islam and Christianity to that of not just Christ but Husayn and Fatima. This continues the argument of Husayn’s esteemed lineage (and miraculous birth) and is inserted to make his martyrdom even more tragic. For the oppressor to not recognize Husayn’s miraculous and infallible nature during the Battle of Karbalā illustrates the epic and undeniable godlessness of not just the Umayyad opponents but all those who deny Husayn’s infallibility.

Similarly, the biblical nature of Husayn’s death is consistent in the *maqatil*, with strong similarities to Christianity’s Christ. For instance, with prevailing darkness and constant earthquakes, sunshine was no longer visible when Christ was killed. With Husayn, the impact of his death on the natural world is almost identical, with the shared features of earthquakes, the eclipse of the sun for forty days, and natural disasters like blood pouring from the sky,³⁶ as if the natural world is also in mourning their suffering.

Additionally, the significance of the forty days of suffering found in the narratives of Husayn and Jesus in the *maqatil* are also evidence of their shared imagery. For instance, Jesus was crucified on a Friday, with his resurrection occurring on Sunday. Jesus’ temporary stay on earth lasted for forty days, during which he later returned to heaven. Similarly, after the death of Husayn, the natural world’s calamities also lasted for forty days, with a similar narrative of Husayn being temporarily risen to the heavens and later returning to the material world in Karbalā, where his body lay unburied.³⁷ Therefore, the *maqatil* narratives effectively use the Battle of Karbalā to extol not just the heroics and merit of the battle but Husayn as an infallible.

³³ Khalid Sindawi. 2003. “The Image of Ḥusayn Ibn ‘Alī in ‘Maqātil’ Literature,” *Quaderni Di Studi Arabi*: p. 79 <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25802958>

³⁴ Ibid, p. 100

³⁵ Ibid, p. 82

³⁶ Ibid, p. 102

³⁷ Ibid

However, his infallibility is not complete without his exemplified valor on the day of Āshūrā. Therefore, the insider-Shī‘a perspective of Husayn’s infallibility, lineage, and larger argument for divine authority, is complete with his heroics at Karbalā.

It is also worth exploring the shared notion of martyrdom in Christianity and the insider-Shī‘a perspective within Islam, specifically concerning the images of Husayn and Jesus. For instance, the term “martyr” is commonly used in the New Testament, explicitly used as a witness. Not only is martyrdom considered a pietistic aspect of faith, specifically in its resistance to oppression, but the martyr is also tied to a specific event rather than an idea.³⁸ Likewise, the Qur’ān extensively mentions the concept of a martyr (*shahid*), mentioning the term “witness” well over fifty times.³⁹ For Christ, his event as a witness would be exemplified in his suffering during the Passion, dying for all the sinful of the past, present, and future. Similarly, the Battle of Karbalā would serve as Husayn’s own version of the Passion, with the narratives extolling his virtues and piety during his suffering, serving his purpose as a witness.

Additionally, the characteristics that Jesus and Husayn share in their quest for martyrdom are their righteousness and selflessness. Christianity and Islam share the notion of a martyr’s purpose, not being worldly, with the martyr not indulging in the material aspects of success. Instead, the martyr’s only motivation is to be a witness to the truth, with the event of martyrdom exemplifying this notion.⁴⁰ This is further illustrated in the shared concept of pre-ordainment, specifically in the deaths of Christ and Husayn. Christ’s suffering during the Passion in the hands of godless oppressors is pre-ordained to absolve all sinners of the past, present, and future. Similarly, from the insider-Shī‘a perspective, Husayn’s death at the Battle of Karbalā was also pre-ordained, giving Husayn the esteemed title of the “Prince of Martyrs”⁴¹ not only giving him the aura of sainthood but similarities to Jesus’ suffering during the Passion. The Shī‘a designation of Husayn as a Christ-like figure is a significant distinction from the traditional

³⁸ Mahmoud M. Ayoub. 1987. “Martyrdom in Christianity and Islam,” in *Religious Resurgence: Contemporary Cases in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism*, ed. by Mary Elaine Hegland Richard T. Antoun (New York, NY: Syracuse University Press), p. 67

³⁹ Ibid, p. 70

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 75

⁴¹ Ibid, p. 73

Sunnī perspective on Husayn as well as the overall narrative on the Battle of Karbalā, which will be analyzed in the following chapter.

Karbalā in Shī‘a Political Discourse

To understand the insider-Shī‘a perspective on the Battle of Karbalā, it is helpful to examine the relatively recent episode of Iran’s Islamic Revolution, which successfully culminated in 1979. Led by the Shī‘a clergy, there are various instances of the Battle of Karbalā being employed by Iran’s theocratic actors to mobilize public support against the Shah of Iran.⁴² Although there are other instances of Karbalā symbolism employed throughout various Islamic polities, the present purpose is not intended to view Karbalā’s relationship with political rhetoric. Rather, it is to analyze how the reception of that rhetoric is received to understand the existing perspectives on the battle, especially with Iran being the only Shī‘a theocratic state within contemporary Islamic society. Therefore, the use of Karbalā in Iranian political rhetoric allows religious studies students to successfully analyze how the Shī‘a of Iran view the Battle of Karbalā, further illustrating the insider-Shī‘a perspective.

Even prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Āshūrā rituals in Iran were a consistent feature of Iranian society in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Although there were instances of these rituals being used to raise opposition to the political status quo, the Shī‘a rituals were also forms of a more consolidated identity and social belonging, irrespective of political tensions.⁴³ However, during the 1960s and 1970s, there was a more blatant use of the Battle of Karbalā and its associated symbols for a political uprising in opposition to the Iranian monarchy.⁴⁴

The Āshūrā rituals and their associated symbolism to the Battle of Karbalā were effectively used to garner public sympathy for the Shī‘a theocratic cause. Along with the more explicit use of Karbalā symbolism by Ayatollah Khomeini, other Iranian leaders such as Ali Shariati and Morteza Motahhari were also prominent political figures using the Battle of Karbalā

⁴² For more on the effective use of Karbala symbolism in Iran, see: Kamran Scot Aghaie. 2004. *The Martyrs of Karbalā: Shi‘i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press),

⁴³ Ibid, p. 159

⁴⁴ Ibid, 158

and its associated symbols and rituals to garner public support.⁴⁵ Even for those Iranians who were not proponents of a theocratic state, the ritualistic aspect of Karbalā was a common feature along varying political spectrums of Iranian politics.

Morteza Motahhari, a disciple of Ayatollah Khomeini, had a significant effect on rousing public support for the Shī‘a theocratic movement. Although acting as a political figure during much of his sermons, it is vital to note Motahhari’s religious credentials as a scholar with immense religious authority within the Shī‘a clergy. In one of his sermons, Motahhari states, “[there] is always a Moses and a Pharaoh, an Abraham and Nimrod, a Mohammad an Abu Jahl, an Alī and [Mu‘āwiya], a [Husayn] and [Yazīd].”⁴⁶ From Motahhari’s perspective, the Battle of Karbalā is not a singular, abstract event. Karbalā is the culmination of a continuous struggle against oppression emerging from the time of Abraham, with Husayn as his eventual torchbearer. Additionally, Motahhari is engaging in light Islamic polemics with this statement. Motahhari does not shy away from giving Husayn’s (as well as his father, Alī’s) sacrifice equal standing to those of earlier Prophets, echoing the insider-Shī‘a perspective of the Battle of Karbalā and its significance.

When analyzing the success of using the Battle of Karbalā as a public mobilization tool for those opposed to the Iranian monarchy, its success is not surprising. The extensive use of the battle by varying levels of Iranian political society highlights its importance in the overwhelming Shī‘a population of Iran. What the successes of these events provide is the awareness the Shī‘a population of Iran had of the Battle of Karbalā and the resonance of the event with the insider Shī‘a perspective. If the Battle of Karbalā did not hold emotional and spiritual resonance with the Iranian Shī‘a population, its effect on mass mobilization for resistance against the Iranian monarchy would not be so successful. Scholar Kamran Scot Aghaie argues that a critical factor for the loss of public support and eventual power for the Iranian monarchy was its lack of use of the Karbalā symbolism and rituals to their advantage⁴⁷, demonstrating its cultural, social, and political relevance in the insider-Shī‘a perspective.

⁴⁵ Ibid

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 74

⁴⁷ Ibid, p. 154

Chapter III.

The Sunnī Perspective

Even from a modern perspective, the Battle of Karbalā continues to be a thorn between the two Islamic perspectives. Even as recently as 1802, puritan Wahhabi ideologues based in modern-day Saudi Arabia sacked the shrines at Karbalā, looting many of the shrines' adornments and associated valuables.⁴⁸ With various shrines and Shī'a centers in the Arab and Islamic world, it is interesting to note the location of the looting, signifying the various perspectives the Battle has in religious memories, protruding to the modern period. Yet, the Sunnī perspective on the Battle of Karbalā is far more complicated than the Shī'a.

To understand the Sunnī perspective on the Battle of Karbalā, it is imperative to analyze Sunnī political theory and the Sunnī attitude to communal harmony. In stark contrast to the Shī'a perspective, this chapter does not evaluate Sunnī theological beliefs on the Battle of Karbalā, illustrating perhaps the most significant divergence between the two groups. From the Sunnī perspective, the Battle of Karbalā is a historical (albeit tragic) event, but not a religious one.

It is perhaps due to its lack of theological cohesiveness on the battle that the Sunnī perspectives on the event significantly range from the Shī'a similarity of highlighting Husayn's righteousness to an explicit pro-Umayyad stance. Whereas Shī'a theology centered on the Battle of Karbalā as its central identity, the Sunnī perspective did not. From the Sunnī perspective, to engage in staunch theological development after the Prophet's death is heresy. Since the Prophet Muhammad is the seal of the Prophets and no prophet is to come after him, that also signifies the seal of any future, distinct theology. However, it would be naive to assume that no Sunnī theological development occurred after the Prophet's death.

⁴⁸ Antoine Borrut (ed.). 2015. *Remembering Karbalā': The Construction of an Early Islamic Site of Memory* (The Hebrew University of Jerusalem), p. 3

That is not to say that there is no relationship between the Battle of Karbalā and its importance to Sunnī theological belief, specifically regarding political culture. Though not viewed within a prism of theology, the events of Karbalā had a profound impact on the Sunnī theological concept of communal harmony, regularly challenged by their Shī'a opponents and ideas of idealistic rebellion. Therefore, the Sunnī perspective on the Battle produced its own narratives of an ideal, cohesive Islamic community (*ummah*) to employ not only against Shī'a theological arguments but to bolster political stability to quell any future religiopolitical attempts at rebellion.

The Caliph

Assessing the Sunnī attitude towards the role of the caliph in Muslim society is predicated on a pragmatic issue. Apart from the Prophet Muhammad, there is no universal acceptance of religiopolitical leaders in Islam. Although the Shī'a clergy has some reminiscence of Catholic papal authority, there is no central authority in Islam for the Muslims to turn as there is with the Catholic papal authority.⁴⁹ Therefore, unfit leadership can also be a subjective issue, presenting the Sunnī perspective with pressing questions. For instance, what if a Muslim leader has questionable moral character but provides economic stability for the broader Muslim subjects? Similarly, what is the role of a Muslim caliph with upright moral character but not capable of economic and administrative success? These questions illustrate the ambiguous and even precarious nature of the Islamic caliphate, especially when there is not the ease of designation by divine authority as there is with the Shī'a. Alongside these pertinent questions, Sunnī historians and Umayyad apologists had no interest in broadcasting the events of Karbalā due to their embarrassing and bitter consequences.⁵⁰

To understand the Sunnī perspective of the Battle of Karbalā, one needs to analyze the Sunnī perspective on the role of the caliph. Though this is not an explicit reference to the Battle of Karbalā itself, the events of Karbalā shaped the need for the Sunnīs to explicitly identify

⁴⁹ Robert B. Shelledy. 2004. "The Vatican's Role in Global Politics," *The SAIS Review of International Affairs*, 24.2: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26999231>, p. 150

⁵⁰ Borrut, p. 16

where the caliph was situated in both theological and political terms since Husayn revolted against a specific caliph. For example, before the events at Karbalā, dynastic politics was shunned in Islamic tradition. Within the Qur'ān, kingship has often been equated to brutality and immorality, such as with the Pharaoh being the antithesis of Moses.⁵¹ Unlike the chosen and humble caliph, a King, is an individual that prioritizes the materials of the present world and whose power is obtained by brutality and force.⁵² The Umayyads were commonly referred to as the original proponents of Kingship (*mulk*). The latter deviated from the ideal Islamic leader⁵³ with narratives stating such in the chronicles of Islamic Sunnī historians al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī.

The uncomfortable nature of the historical conflicts reintroduced an alternative to the Sunnī idea of a caliph. In contrast to the ideal caliph in Sunnī tradition, particularly the first four caliphs of Islam (the *Rashidun* era)⁵⁴, the moral stature of the caliph is significantly toned down. The caliph transitions from being an incorruptible and humble figure to an overtly human figure who can have significant character and moral flaws. From this perspective, even if a caliph can be frivolous and corrupt, going against the caliphal authority is worse. Rebelling against the reigning leader leads to bloodshed and civil strife, which can do more damage to not just the material aspects of society, but communal relations of the Muslim community.⁵⁵ This notion introduces a critical component of Sunnī identity, namely the “*ahl al-sunna wa'l jama'a*,” or those Muslims who “[adhere] to right practices and communal solidarity.”⁵⁶

Interestingly, the Sunnī perspective on administrative tyranny is reminiscent of the medieval European-Christian attitude to divine punishment on a whole community. For instance, if a community is at the hands of a rigid and corrupt leader, these faults lie with the community. Therefore, along with other forms of preordainment, tyrannical leaders were also a form of divine punishment for their sins.⁵⁷ The reign of a corrupt leader signals that a significant part of

⁵¹ [The Forceful Chargers, 79:20. *The Qur'an*. M.A. Abdel Haleem (trans.). (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2015) p. 407]

⁵² Hawting, p. 12-13

⁵³ Kennedy, *Caliphate*, p.35

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.7-8

⁵⁵ Crone, *God's Rule*, p. 135

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 126

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 135

society erred in sinful behavior. Hence, the proper way to correct this flaw was to restore one's moral and religious behavior instead of engaging in rebellion. To participate in rebellion would scapegoat a more significant issue within the community and be futile since the community itself is responsible for its predicament.

When examining the Sunnī perspective on the potential of a morally unfit caliph, it is valuable to decipher the works of the 13th-century puritan Sunnī scholar Ibn Taymiyya. Credited with being the ideological founder of the later Wahhabi movement of the 20th century, Ibn Taymiyya's views on the potential of an unfit caliph are clear. The caliph may be morally and administratively corrupt, but to raise arms against him would be equivalent to moral sin. When asked why it would be against the interests of Muslim society to rebel against a corrupt leader, Ibn Taymiyya states that obeying this morally questionable leader becomes incumbent since “sixty years domination of a despotic ruler are better than one single night passed without a ruler.”⁵⁸ It is to be noted that Ibn Taymiyya makes this exception only to Muslim (in this case, a puritan Sunnī) leaders. When expressing his views on a despotic rule or attack from non-Muslims, he states that “to repulse the enemy would become a personal duty on all.”⁵⁹

When analyzing the Sunnī theory on the caliph and its associated challenges, one can look more directly at the narratives of the reigning caliph during the Battle of Karbalā, Yazīd I. Although hailed, even by Sunnī authors such as al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī, as a seasoned villain, some narratives showcase an attempt to propagate some legitimacy for Yazīd's caliphate. When evaluating a statement by Ibn Umar (the son of the second *Rashidun* Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb), he is appalled by the reversal of allegiance against Yazīd, especially to those who had previously pledged allegiance to him. Upon hearing this, Ibn Umar gathered his sons and family, informing them of where they stood as a family, already having pledged allegiance to Yazīd. If they violate this oath, it will violate a pact to God, as well as the Prophet, and warning if anyone

⁵⁸ Camille Mulcaire(ed.). 2013. *Assessing Al-Qaeda from the Teachings of Ibn Taymiyya* (E-International Relations), p. 2 <https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/15/assessing-al-qaeda-from-the-teachings-of-ibn-taymiyya/>

⁵⁹ Ibid

were to violate this pact, the consequences would be “a cutting off between [Ibn Umar] and [whoever violates the pact].”⁶⁰

This narrative, used to justify those who pledged allegiance to Yazīd, is chivalrous. Illustrating an aura of Arabian loyalty and virtues, the narrative does not mention the nature of Yazīd’s conduct or the validity of concerns against his authority. The narrative plays at the ideal Arab customs of not violating agreements, accompanied by a slight overtone of masculinity. It is also important to note to whom this narrative is attributed, specifically, Ibn Umar, the son of the second Rashidun Caliph, Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb. Umar’s reign is often illustrated as the ideal era of Islamic imperialism in moral, religious, and economic terms. To put it simply, Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb is the ideal Sunnī caliph. Therefore, to include this narrative to his son, who holds immense authority in Sunnī hadith transmission, is meant to justify the Sunnī conception of caliphal office, in this case, against the Shī‘a (or those sympathetic to the Shī‘a) argument. If Yazīd is good enough for the son of Umar, he should be good enough for the rest of the Muslims.

Ultimately, due to the Battle of Karbalā, the Sunnī perspective holds a compromise on the caliph's position and role. In this compromise, the caliph is limited in his role as a religious model and authority, delegating this responsibility to the clergy (*ulamā*). If anything, the caliph’s role is to maintain cordial relations between the administrative and religious leaders.⁶¹ This separation of authority is uniquely secular, in which religious authority is delegated outside of caliphal administration. Moral qualifications for public office are less severe if religious authority is relocated elsewhere. Therefore, the Battle of Karbalā, specifically its basis of a revolt against a less-than-ideal caliph, provided the Sunnīs with an alternate proposition and compromise in which religious and administrative authority was to be shared rather than controlled by one individual.

⁶⁰ Andrew Marsham. 2009. *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press), p. 99

⁶¹ Hawting, p. 11

Communal Solidarity

However, The Battle of Karbalā was also a significantly traumatic event. For the Shī‘a, the trauma is evident, in which divine political and spiritual authority was brutally massacred. Yet, for the Sunnī, the trauma is equally traumatic, albeit for different reasons. Although not the first (and certainly not the last) episode of rebellion in Islam’s history, the Battle of Karbalā cemented not just a bitter event that has to be explained to later generations but cemented an end to an ideal, cohesive Islamic community.⁶² The circumstances of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandson brutally killed in the plains of Iraq, murdered by the son of whom the Sunnī consider the Prophet’s companion was challenging to explain. Along with the contradictory nature of circumstances, the core of Sunnī theology is at stake, attempting to make sense of what happened.

Likewise, it is no surprise that these explicit Sunnī concepts of communal solidarity are rooted in Umayyad encouragement, undoubtedly after the Battle of Karbalā. The Battle of Karbalā had significant resonance with the Islamic community, for both the proto-Sunnī and proto-Shī‘a, due to Husayn’s relation to the Prophet Muhammad and the esteemed place of the *Ahlul Bayt*. Umayyad caliphs post-Karbalā patronized theological concepts of communal loyalty, in this case, to the caliphate. These (later) Sunnī ideas of communal loyalty have roots in Umayyad patronage to maintain political stability and avoid future rebellion.⁶³ For instance, a statement of Ibn Umar goes so far in the relationship between reigning authority and communal harmony that he states that whoever “separated from the *jamā‘a* [dies] a pagan death.”⁶⁴

The Marwānid Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik (r. 705-715), regularly preached the importance of communal harmony, specifically in its relationship to the state. Malik, who inherited a significantly fractured and deteriorated empire with constant episodes of alternate

⁶² Borrut, p. 8

⁶³ Abbas Barzegar. 2015. “‘Adhering to the Community’ (Luzūm al-Jamā‘a): Continuities between Late Umayyad Political Discourse and ‘Proto-Sunnī’ Identity,” *Review of Middle East Studies*, 49.2, p. 141
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26250450>

⁶⁴ Crone, *God’s Rule*, p. 137

claims to the caliphate, found it in his interest to promote these ideas from a secular and religious perspective. Patronizing religious elites allowed beliefs (and later traditions) of communal solidarity to seep into the legal structure of Sunnī scholars, making it an identifying tradition contrasting to their Shīʿa counterparts.⁶⁵ Interestingly, the succeeding Abbasid Caliphate, which initially rebelled with a Shīʿa narrative and illustrated Umayyad brutality, endorsed these same concepts once in power.⁶⁶ It is not surprising that the Abbasids swiftly changed their narrative from a sympathetic pro-Shīʿa to a Sunnī one, making it the dominant concept again.

When confronted with the uncomfortable nature of this period of Islamic history, the Sunnīs take a different position when revisiting this period. Whereas the Shīʿa place holds to hold the perpetrators of Karbalā responsible fully and explicitly, the Sunnī perspective holds that the matters of civil strife in Islamic history are complicated and not for later generations to pass judgment on. These individuals were presented with unique and, at the time, extraordinary circumstances, and to pass judgment (either positive or negative), would be a disservice to both parties. It is not for later Muslims to judge since the ultimate determination is left to God alone since God is the only one who is aware of the facts and intentions of all parties.⁶⁷

Additionally, the Sunnī perspective holds that these events disservice the broader Muslim community. They do not answer the contemporary issues of Muslims and the changing circumstances that affect Muslim society. Discussions of sectarian divide and vocal positions of historical events can upset social and civil stability, with these discussions shunned. Similarly, as one should not discuss these events to maintain civil accord, active involvement in any conflicts of leadership is also to be discouraged. To preserve unity and civility in Muslim society, even oppressive government should be tolerated since the destruction of the social and material is worse than any form of a tyrannical government.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Barzegar, p. 144

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 141

⁶⁷ Crone, p. 135

⁶⁸ Ibid

Umayyad Legitimacy

One of the most significant features of the Sunnī perspective on the Battle of Karbalā is the attempts to have either a neutral position on the affair or even more explicit support for the reigning Umayyads. The events of Karbalā provided the Shī‘a with a powerful argument about the nature of the Islamic government and precisely what it should be. To the Shī‘a, the Battle of Karbalā was not a stand-alone event. It highlighted where the Muslims erred in judgment, specifically pertaining to leadership after the Prophet Muhammad’s death, attacking the proto-Sunnī position. If Husayn’s father, Alī, had initially been the sole candidate for leadership, these embarrassing circumstances would not have occurred. Therefore, the Sunnī position had to confront this specific issue and argument and to overtly criticize the Umayyads would continue to bolster the Shī‘a argument⁶⁹, opening the opportunity for soft and explicit Umayyad exoneration.

Since Yazīd was a highly controversial figure for his killing of the Prophet’s progeny, the neutrality is less explicit and tailored towards the Umayyad lineage rather than one individual. It is essential to note the influence of Umayyad patronage on this propagation of thought within the proto-Sunnī perspective. For instance, to provide legitimacy for the later Umayyad Empire, poets of Umayyad patron would recount the legitimate ascension of the first Umayyad to high office, ‘Uthmān bin ‘Affān. Although not the founder of a distinct dynastic Umayyad Empire, ‘Uthmān was elected by an administrative council (*shura*) prior to the dynastic Umayyad Empire. Therefore, the Umayyad dynasty is legitimate since its basis was in the *shura* while simultaneously propagating Umayyad superiority for authority over their contemporaries.⁷⁰

In regard to his direction (or lack thereof) towards the Battle of Karbalā, there are attempts within the Sunnī position to absolve any responsibility for the events to Yazīd. When analyzing the historical chronicles of Sunnī-Islamic historian al-Ṭabarī, multiple attempts exist to exonerate Yazīd from any involvement in the horrific affairs at Karbalā. For example, a narration

⁶⁹ Hawting, p. 18

⁷⁰ Crone, *God’s Rule*, p. 36

in Ṭabarī states that Yazīd's governor of Kūfa and Basra, 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād was the primary culprit in Husayn's murder since Yazīd did not give direct orders to kill Husayn. Interestingly the narration also manages to engage in religious polemics by putting the responsibility on Yazīd's Christian advisor, Sarjun. According to this narrative, since Sarjun advised Yazīd to appoint ibn Ziyād as Governor, Sarjun is also held culpable, possibly highlighting the contemporaneous attitude of Christians in the Islamic government.⁷¹ Other narratives even blame military subordinates and even go as far as to shift the blame from the Syrian base of Umayyad support to the Iraqis.⁷² These levels of narration provide Yazīd with multiple levels of administrative exoneration, providing various other options for the killing of Husayn rather than Yazīd. This argument suggests that the caliph may not have been as flawed or despotic as commonly presented, with external circumstances primarily responsible for the aftermath of the Battle of Karbalā. Therefore, neither the caliph explicitly violated the sanctity of the Prophet's family, and Husayn can still be a victim of oppression (although not at the authority of Yazīd).

It is also notable for analyzing not just what Ṭabarī includes in his extensive catalog narratives but what he excludes. A significant factor in opposition to Yazīd was the violation of his father, Mu'āwiya's pact with Husayn's older brother Hasan, specifically of returning authority to the administrative council (*shura*) in deciding the next caliph if Hasan agrees to abdicate to Mu'āwiya. This portion would explain the significance of what led to the Battle of Karbalā and illustrate not only Yazīd but Mu'āwiya in a damaging light. However, Ṭabarī decided not to include any narrations detailing this aspect of the violation, although his Sunnī peer al-Balādhurī had no issue doing so.⁷³ Including such narrations could damage any chance of Umayyad legitimacy or make apologetics for the Umayyad position more difficult. Therefore, excluding such narrations (still widely available in other chronicles) aids in providing the Sunnī defense of and to the Umayyads.

⁷¹ I.K.A. Howard. 1991. *The History of Al-Ṭabarī: The Caliphate of Yazīd Ibn Mu'āwiya* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press), p. 18

⁷² Borrut, p. 28-29

⁷³ Howard, p. xi-xxi

Even Yazīd's actions outside of Karbalā are provided with ammunition for exoneration. For instance, after the Battle of Karbalā, a strong response erupted throughout Muslim society, propelling further rebellion against Yazīd's government, most notably from Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, a son of a prominent Sunnī companion of the Prophet. During ibn al-Zubayr's rebellion, he made Mecca a base for his support, with Meccan citizens taking up arms against the Umayyads. As a response, Yazīd and his army entered Mecca and not only laid siege to the holy city but also significantly damaged the Ka'aba. Even in response to the bombardment of Mecca, some narrations absolve Yazīd from any responsibility, with one narration claiming the bombardment was an honest mistake and another blaming a native defender of Mecca.⁷⁴

Since Yazīd's actions at and beyond Karbalā damaged Umayyad legitimacy, Umayyad apologists needed to extend Umayyad legitimacy beyond Yazīd alone. For instance, the later Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik, is heralded as the Umayyad who ended the second civil war amongst the Muslims, under which the Battle of Karbalā fell. After his successful quelling of the rebellion and quasi-caliphate of Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr, the year is designated as "the year of the (reestablishment of the) community," echoing the Sunnī notion of the importance of communal unison.⁷⁵ Abd al-Malik's ancestor, and brief Umayyad Caliph, Marwān, is also held in esteem by Sunnī tradition, using many of his decisions and propagations for legal rulings. Interestingly, one tradition also ascribes Marwān as appearing as a maxim of the Prophet Muhammad, undoubtedly used to bolster Umayyad legitimacy.⁷⁶

The Sunnī attempt to legitimize Umayyad authority or to transfer any negative culpability away from the dynasty is a critical divergence from that of the Shī'a. The Umayyads represent the antithesis of proper Islamic values for the Shī'a, precisely due to their multi-generational conflicts with the Prophet Muhammad's kin and preventing the divinely appointed family from leadership. Their view of the Umayyads is lucid and unequivocal. However, the Sunnī position is more complex, leading to perhaps the most considerable distinction between the two.

⁷⁴ Hawting, p. 14-15

⁷⁵ Ibid, p. 14

⁷⁶ Ibid

Part II.

The Battle from Western, European Positions: The Outsider Perspective

The following section and chapter will evaluate the outsider perspective on the Battle of Karbalā, specifically on how outside scholars view the event and its significance (or lack thereof). However, understanding the use of terminologies, specifically “outsider” or “Western” is imperative. To begin with, if the insider perspective is from an indigenous Islamic perspective, the outsider perspective undoubtedly becomes non-Muslim sources. However, this part will evaluate Western, non-Muslim perspectives, encompassing alternate religious and geographical factors. It is important to make this distinction. For instance, although one may be an Orthodox Coptic Christian of the Middle East, their perspective could reasonably differ from that of a European Christian. Not only could the differences between Eastern and Western Christianity impose a different perspective on any of Islam’s historical or theological beliefs, but the more alien a language or culture can be, the more there is a possibility of a radically alternate perspective. For example, a Middle Eastern Christian Arab could identify intricate nuances of the Arabic language and culture, which would be difficult for a non-Middle Eastern European Christian unless Arabic is mastered at an advanced level.

This part will also analyze the biases associated with the Western European study of Islam and apply these biases and associated principles to the Battle of Karbalā. Therefore, fundamental principles and arguments in Edward Said’s *Orientalism*⁷⁷ will also be mentioned, specifically in how the non-European East (or as commonly referred to by Said as the “Orient”)⁷⁸ is viewed by Western Europe, as well as its associated history and attitudes that continue to the present day. For instance, criticism of Islamic historiography and the arguments against the traditional Islamic narratives need to be highlighted, even if critics of Islamic historiography do not directly mention the Battle of Karbalā. Prominent European Orientalists of the 19th, 20th, and 21st centuries such as Julius Wellhausen, Hugh Kennedy, and Patricia Crone will be analyzed to

⁷⁷ Edward Said. 1979. *Orientalism* (New York, NY: Vintage Books)

⁷⁸ Ibid, p. 1

understand not just the outsider perspectives on the Battle of Karbalā but how it radically differs from that of the insider-Islamic perspectives.

Chapter IV.

The Western European Perspective

To begin with the Western European perspective of the Battle of Karbalā, it is noteworthy to highlight the relative lack of importance the event is given. While the event is significantly mentioned by Islamic historical chronicles, the event is rarely mentioned in detail in Western academia. For example, Ira Lapidus' *History of Islamic Societies* is an encyclopedia-level text, spanning from the arrival of Islam (including pre-Islamic Arabia) to events of the 21st century, such as the September 11th, 2001, attacks. Yet, even within this voluminous text spanning over one thousand pages, the Battle of Karbalā and Husayn ibn Alī are only mentioned within one page⁷⁹, equal to that of T.E. Lawrence.⁸⁰ Never mind the theological importance the event had on the development of the Shī'a and their growing discontent with the dominance of the Sunnī, Western academia fails to highlight the impact the event had (and continues to have) on Islamic political culture and rebellion.

This is a critical component of the outsider perspective. In the study of religions, source material and all associated information are derived from the insider perspective. Therefore, scholarly activity cannot be conducted or available without the indigenous source material from the insider, leaving the outsider dependent on the insider for critical information. Although the Battle of Karbalā is a significant event in Islamic history (and theology for the Shī'a), the outsider perspective chooses to bypass this and relegate it to a minimal, almost nonconsequential event. To understand why the outsider perspective bypasses circumstances that the Islamic perspective deems significant, it is helpful to understand the Western academic attitude toward Islamic Studies, particularly historiographic tradition.

However, as highlighted with the argument of diversity of perspectives within the insider perspective, it is important to note that the outsider perspective (including that from a Western European perspective), is also diverse. To present the work or diversity of perspectives within the outside perspective as a monolithic entity (a belief often attached to the insider perspective),

⁷⁹ Ira M. Lapidus. 2014. *A History of Islamic Societies* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), p. 69

⁸⁰ Ibid, p. 582

would be the antithesis of this research model and the intended argument. Due to the scope of this study, the primary focus will be on Western revisionist scholars of Islamic history, specifically those critical of Islamic source material and/or those who present an alternate analysis from Islamic sources. The next section will examine how Islamic sources from the insider perspective are not only perceived by the outsider perspective but often disregarded.

Islamic Historiography

Modern conceptions of rendering the historical past are significantly different from the late-antique period, in which Islam first emerged in the Arabian Peninsula. This is especially true in the oral transmission of history, which is probably the most drastic departure from modern historical practice. Whereas (modern) Western historical tradition emphasizes compiling historical data on paper while the events occur, the historically Arabian practice is different.⁸¹ Pair that with linguistic and cultural barriers, this aspect of historical study can easily be alien to the Western academic.

When examining the exposition of Islam during the Prophet Muhammad's lifetime, writing or compilation of written data was not a practical option for the Arabs. Apart from a rare treaty or contract, the social system of tribes and clans did not require composed written data. It is also no accident that, according to Islamic tradition, Muhammad received continuous oral revelations from God via the angel Gabriel. When these series of revelations were inscribed in written form, they were done on remnants of leather and animal bones.⁸² Most importantly, there are also economic factors for early Islam's use of oral transmission over written documentation. Oral transmission can be transmitted in various formats (such as poetry or other forms of orality), making it an inexpensive art, especially when compared to the expenses associated with paper.⁸³

Additionally, Western academics have a different perspective when evaluating Islamic history. While Islamic scholars may evaluate Islamic history (usually through Islamic sources)

⁸¹ Chase F. Robinson. 2003. *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), p. 18

⁸² Ibid, p. 8

⁸³ Ibid, p. 9-10

from a literal perspective, Western scholars may not. According to Islamic historian Chase Robinson, understanding early Islamic history may not have much to do with the historical past in and of itself. Due to the contemporaneous environments of later centuries, the Islamic historical past was reconceptualized to make sense of the present.⁸⁴ Therefore, the goal was not to present history as it occurred but rather a glorified and imagined history to understand the present. Robinson's statement and his views on Islamic historical compilation allows an understanding of the overall tenor of how Islamic sources are perceived by an outsider scholar.

However, there have been instances of Western academics paying little to no heed to Islamic historical sources, some more explicit than others. This can best be seen by scholars Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, specifically in their experimental text, *Hagarism*. Crone (whose voluminous works have been extensively cited in this study) and Cook collaborated on a joint venture, which challenges the Islamic narrative of its beginning in an explicit fashion. Crone and Cook argue that Islam did not begin as a distinct monotheistic ideology as constructed in its traditional sources. Rather, Islam began as a messianic movement called "Hagarism" with close association with Sarmatianism, with a distinct ideology of an organized Islam developing in the later Umayyad period.⁸⁵

Yet, the audacity of this argument is not necessarily the conclusion but rather the approach Crone and Cook incorporated in their study. In the preface of *Hagarism*, Crone and Cook not only mention how the sources used for the text were only non-Muslim sources but that the book in itself was "written by infidels for infidels," excluding any Muslim contribution whatsoever.⁸⁶ Crone and Cook justify their case for this approach, employing the argument for the lack of hard evidence of the existence of the Qur'ān prior to the seventh century. Yet, what is more telling is their methodology and purpose. According to the pair, since the historicity of Islam's origins is questionable, there are no grounds for accepting it while simultaneously accepting the lack of grounds to deny the Islamic narrative. Therefore, the pair argue that the

⁸⁴ Ibid, p. 11

⁸⁵ Bo Holmberg. 2004. "Hagarism Revisited," *Verbum et Calamus. Semitic and Related Studies in Honour of the Sixtieth Birthday of Professor Tapani Harviainen*: <https://portal.research.lu.se/en/publications/hagarism-revisited>, p. 59

⁸⁶ Patricia Crone, Michael Cook. 1980. *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press), p. vii-viii

only concrete academic approach they chose was to “step outside the Islamic tradition altogether and start again.”⁸⁷ It is noteworthy that both Crone and Cook eventually distanced themselves from the findings in *Hagarism*, with Crone calling the book a “graduate essay.”⁸⁸

Although not directly related to the Battle of Karbalā, the dissection of Western academics' attitude toward the study of Islam aids in understanding how the outsider perspective views the insider perspective. In terms of historiography, it is evident that Western scholars are at the very least apprehensive of accepting oral transmission, which, at times, spans over a century of dissemination. While acknowledging the historical, social, and economic factors of oral transmission compared to written documentation, it is evident that the Western preference for written data is preferred. The explicit bypass of Islamic sources Crone and Cook partook in highlights a key argument in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, specifically his sentiment on the Orient only receiving credibility once the Orientalist has refined and engaged in the subject.⁸⁹ Crone and Cook chose to disregard the insider perspective altogether by not including any indigenous sources, even though the history is of the insider. For it to get academic validation, Crone and Cook disregard the insider sources completely for the sake of (what they would argue as) credibility and scholarship.

Orientalists Perspective on the Battle of Karbalā

In terms of direct assessment of the Battle of Karbalā, it is noteworthy to note the divergence of the perspectives of Orientalist scholars of Islam and its divergence from Islamic perspectives. While the insider-Shī‘a perspective (along with some of the Sunnī echoing the sentiment) highlights the valor of Husayn and his selfless reasoning for launching a movement against the Umayyads, some Western academic perspectives view the Battle of Karbalā in a different light. For one, these perspectives of Western scholars view the event as a political stunt rather than one based on morality.

⁸⁷ Ibid, p. 3

⁸⁸ Liaquat Ali Khan. 2006. “Hagarism: The Story of a Book Written by Infidels for Infidels,” *Baltimore Chronicle & Sentinel* <http://baltimorechronicle.com/2006/042606AliKhan.shtml>

⁸⁹ Said, p. 283

For instance, one can view the work of the 20th-century German Orientalist Julius Wellhausen. While documenting the events of early Islamic history leading up to the Battle of Karbalā in *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall*, Wellhausen does not shy away from describing Husayn's movement as a political revolt. At one point, Wellhausen states how Husayn "let himself be lured out of his retreat in Mecca"⁹⁰, giving an impression of a political miscalculation by a man living in riches and comfort to gain even further in material success. Wellhausen's use of the term "retreat" in describing Husayn's residence signals his perspective on how Husayn was only willing to escape an otherwise rich and comfortable life for further riches by revolting against the Umayyads. In another instance, Wellhausen establishes that the Battle of Karbalā was a failure, specifically how "[t]he attempt at revolution flickered miserably," although highlighting the importance of the event for the Shī'a.⁹¹

Wellhausen's description of Husayn is even more direct in his succeeding text, *The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam*. In the text, Wellhausen criticizes Husayn, not just for what he perceives as a political miscalculation but for his behavior leading up to the battle to the day of the battle itself. At one point, Wellhausen compares Husayn to a child who "stretches out his hands to the moon. He makes the greatest claims and does not perform the least thing himself. Others must do everything," and then does not hesitate to describe Husayn as an inherently selfish figure, such as how as "soon as he meets opposition, it is all up with him; he wants to go back when it is too late and looks on as his followers die for him in battle, sparing himself until the end."⁹²

To gain further perspectives on Orientalist scholars directly pertaining to the Battle of Karbalā, one can also analyze the work of 20th- 21st-century German scholar Heinz Halm. In his introductory text, *Shi'a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, Halm, while highlighting the importance the event had on the Shī'a, including in political activity, does not pay much heed to Husayn's uprising against the Umayyads. In fact, Halm argues that the conflict between Husayn

⁹⁰ Julius Wellhausen. 1927. *The Arab Kingdom and Its Fall*, trans. by Margaret Graham Weir (Calcutta, British India: The University of Calcutta), p 146

⁹¹ Ibid, p. 147

⁹² Julius Wellhausen. 1975. *The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam*, trans. by S. M. Walzer R. C. Ostle (Amsterdam, Netherlands: North-Holland Publishing), p. 116

and Yazīd is a second-generation continuation of power struggles, succeeding the conflict of the fathers of both participants, namely Alī and Mu‘āwīya. Halm portrays the conflict to be one of the struggles of dynastic politics, even stating how in one view, Karbalā was a mere “elimination of a poorly equipped and indecisive pretender” in Husayn.⁹³ Therefore, although Halm provides the Shī‘a perspectives on the event, Karbalā, in his estimation, is disregarded as a moral movement and is reduced to a political gamble based on competing dynastic interests.

To conclude, Hugh Kennedy, another scholar referenced extensively in this study, assessment of the Battle of Karbalā mentions the effects the event had on the memory of Husayn and how it bolstered the Shī‘a identity and cause. However, in his text, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, Kennedy revisits the caliphate of Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwīya and interestingly does not designate his caliphate a failure, contrasting from the Islamic attitude of both the Sunnī and Shī‘a perspectives. Although highlighting the “disasters” of Karbalā and the Battle of Harra, in which rebellion spewed in the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, Kennedy maintains that Yazīd’s caliphate “was not devoid of achievement,” citing Yazīd’s attempts to stabilize the Syrian and Byzantium frontiers, as well as internal administrative policies.⁹⁴ However, any mention of Yazīd’s achievements is a significant departure from the insider perspective, both amongst the Shī‘a and the Sunnī. For the Shī‘a, any potential achievements are voided due to his killing of the Imam. Even for the Sunnī, Yazīd’s reign represents a contentious period in Islamic history in which prominent Muslims engaged in violent disagreements, the antithesis of the Sunnī idea of communal solidarity and unity.

Overall, the Orientalist attitude towards the Battle of Karbalā is centered around a political conflict, each with its unique interpretation depending on the scholar. That is not to say that this represents all Western scholars or academics. However, the central theme of political rivalry and conflicting interests is a commonality amongst Western scholars, relegating the event from a moralistic uprising commonly found within the insider perspective to a political gamble from the outsider perspective. Additionally, the Battle of Karbalā is seen as generally

⁹³ Heinz Halm. 1997. *Shi‘a Islam: From Religion to Revolution*, trans. by Allison Brown (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener Publishing), p. 16

⁹⁴ Kennedy, *Prophet*, p. 78

insignificant regarding its immediate, contemporaneous consequences. Although Western academics highlight the significance of the Battle of Karbalā in Shīʿa memory, the battle itself is generally downgraded as militarily insignificant, with no immediate repercussions for the Umayyads.

Part III. Conclusion:

The case study of the Battle of Karbalā and the events leading up to it highlight how various perspectives can have an alternate view of a singular event in its importance, meaning, and memory. From the insider-Shīʿa perspective, the Battle of Karbalā highlights the valor and bravery of the lone Shīʿa Imam, faced with imminent death. Although held in different sentiments, the Battle of Karbalā also had unintended consequences for the Sunnī, particularly due to its contentious circumstances, making the ideas of communal solidarity even more pressing. Yet, from the outsider-Western perspective, the event was a failed military and political stunt of an idealist pretender, hopeless to make his own claims to the caliphate.

The divergences of these respective perspectives also illustrate each perspective's differing attitude, namely the Western attitudes towards the study of Islam and Islamic historiography. Since the late antique method of studying early Islamic history differs drastically from modern Western academic standards, namely, the debate of oral transmission in comparison to written documentation also highlights a discrepancy between these perspectives. Therefore, the final section of this study will analyze the merits and demerits of the insider and outsider perspectives and where (if any) the possibilities of reconciliation between the two are possible.

Chapter V.

Merits & Demerits of the Insider & Outsider Perspectives

The Insider Perspective

To begin with the insider perspective, perhaps its most considerable merit is that it encompasses the sources for the study of religion, including historical and theological materials. No matter its flaws and limitations, the outsider perspective is indebted to the insider, specifically retrieving its original sources. Without this, no outsider can engage in any scholarly advancement in the study of religion. Therefore, it is critical to retrieve information from the insider perspective and to understand it in its intended indigenous form. When positioning these factors in the study of Islam, it is helpful to pay heed to Anthropologist Talal Asad. Asad, echoing the sentiment of scholar Marshall Hodgson states that “Muslim societies must be understood on their terms and not a superimposed Western model.”⁹⁵

The critique of Islamic historiographical tradition is a valid one. Oral transmission relies on the human ability to accurately disseminate information from its original source, a challenge in any era. The first compilation of a written historical biography (*Sira*) of the Prophet Muhammad occurred approximately 150 years after his death.⁹⁶ There can be an honest assessment if the events presented in the *Sira* are history as narrated, considering not just the outstanding gap in years but the possibilities of error in oral transmission and interventions by political actors to retract or alter details. Even in the chronicles of al-Ṭabarī, in which much of the events of this study encompasses, there are significant contradictions, mentions of various mentions of miraculous incidents, as well as convenient absences of details, which were highlighted in this study.

⁹⁵ Carl W. Ernst, Richard C. Martin. 2010. “Introduction: Toward a Post-Orientalist Approach to Islamic Religious Studies,” in *Rethinking Islamic Studies: From Orientalism to Cosmopolitanism* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv6wgc97.5>, p. 9

⁹⁶ Mun'im Sirry. 2021. *Controversies over Islamic Origins: An Introduction to Traditionalism and Revisionism* (Newcastle upon Tyne, England: Cambridge Scholars Publishing), p. 5

However, even some of these limitations have reasonable explanations. When assessing the critique of scholars such as Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, specifically on the unreliability of Islamic sources and their methodology, one can continue to evaluate the works of the Islamic historian al-Ṭabarī. Regarding the debate between oral transmission and written documentation, scholar Ghada Osman argues that the two formats of information should not be viewed as two distinct art forms but as part of one cohesive entity.⁹⁷ Although highlighted earlier in this study, Osman delves further into the economic challenges of written works, specifically in the challenges of transportation, associated expenses, and the unfriendly Arabian terrain for travel. Along with this, oral transmissions were also perceived as more reliable than written compilations, highlighting a further sociological divergence from Western academic tradition.⁹⁸

Regarding the accusation of presenting a glorified Islamic past, there is undoubtedly a theme of parabolic heroics found in Islamic narratives, which the Battle of Karbalā strongly encompasses. However, to conclude that Islamic narratives are overwhelmingly unreliable does a disservice to Islamic historical tradition. One can evaluate the Battle of Karbalā as a case study. Although one can surmise certain details are being altered for further glorification, highlighting the contentious event itself is bold, especially for the Sunnī scholar (under which the historian al-Ṭabarī falls). To detail events of the second Islamic civil war in vivid detail, addressing not just the embarrassing events of Karbalā, but the factors leading to it, in which prominent Muslim figures engage in warfare and battle, is a bold endeavor.

Suppose the goal of the Islamic historian was to create a glorified Islamic past. In that case, one could bypass such controversial events and not engage in any self-critical periods of Islamic history, which the Battle of Karbalā no doubt is. This is especially true when understanding the Sunnī belief in communal cohesion and bypassing any controversy that could disrupt social relations, highlighting the freedom of Islamic scholars in addressing these painful yet essential periods of history for further generations of scholars. Yet, Sunnī historians, such as

⁹⁷ Ghada Osman. 2011. "Oral vs. Written Transmission: The Case of Ṭabarī and Ibn Sa'd," *Arabica* <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4057591>, p. 69

⁹⁸ Ibid, p. 80

al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī, have been at the forefront of disseminating conflicts of contentious periods, even if that can harm the Sunnī idea of communal civility.

The Outsider Perspective

In terms of the outsider perspective, in this case, non-Muslim, Western European scholars, one of the most significant merits of their approach to the study of Islam is the approach of objectivity (in most cases). Unlike a Sunnī or Shīʿa scholar, who is keen on representing the interests and position of their respective sect, the outside scholar is not interested in representing a particular internal Islamic perspective. Rather, they can evaluate both the Shīʿa and Sunnī positions to unbiasedly understand both perspectives and possibly come to a different conclusion.

However, it is also essential for the outsider perspective to be cognizant of inherent biases when evaluating Islamic historical texts. When considering potential biases of historical records on the Battle of Karbalā, there are instances of Umayyad propaganda to either limit the effects of the event or transfer blame altogether. This can best be witnessed by attempts to transfer the responsibility of the event from Yazīd to his Governor, ʿUbayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, and other deputies of the Caliph.⁹⁹ Even when evaluating Shīʿa historical sources, such as the compilations of historian Abu Mikhnaf, there are biases and significant factors in disseminating information. For example, Abu Mikhnaf's ancestors were key supporters of the first Shīʿa Imam and Husayn's father, Alī, and even participated in battle alongside him. Therefore, while disseminating historical information, Abu Mikhnaf also has an interest in proudly highlighting his own lineage, opening to potential biases.¹⁰⁰

However, the insider perspective must also be treated with scholarly respect, even when critiquing its content or methodology. One can view the approach of Crone and Cook in *Hagarism*, in which Muslim sources were entirely discarded, relying only on non-Muslim sources. This leads to an incomplete assessment of a critical study. When evaluating this from

⁹⁹ Borrut, p. 28-29

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, p. 23-24

the perspective of the Battle of Karbalā, non-Muslim sources are silent on the event, which is a rare occurrence otherwise.¹⁰¹ Therefore, the insider perspective offers valuable content for an outsider, even if the conclusion differs from the insider.

One can analyze the works of scholar Fred Donner in a healthy approach of an outsider approaching the study of Islam. Although a revisionist scholar challenging the narratives of traditional Islamic history, Donner's text *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* employs Islamic sources to make his argument that Islam was not a distinct religious doctrine, similar to Crone and Cook. Donner argues that Jews and Christians were initially included in Muhammad's broader monotheistic movement, which he terms the "Believers" movement.¹⁰² His argument of the inclusivity of Jews and Christians in this movement is derived by evaluating Islamic texts, mainly the Qur'ān. Donner concludes that evidence for a distinct Islam did not appear until the reign of the Umayyad Caliph, Abd al-Malik, almost a century after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰³ Although the conclusion has similarities to that of Crone and Cook, Donner does not discard Islamic sources to come to his conclusion and overwhelmingly relies on Islamic texts to make his argument.

Along with a lack of respect for the insider perspective, not paying heed to the sources of the insider can lead to incorrect assessments in the study of religion. This is accurately highlighted by Edward Said in *Orientalism*, explicitly on terminology relating to Islam. For instance, Orientalist scholars of the colonial period referred to Islam as "Mohammedanism." Scholars believed "Muhammad was to Islam as Christ was to Christianity."¹⁰⁴ Although this may seem like a minimal descriptive issue, possibly due to translative gaps, this presents a problem. Scholars are using the centrality of Christ in Christianity and inaccurately equating that to Muhammad. It is to be noted that Islam's notion of monotheism contradicts anything reminiscent of the Trinity in Christianity, and to appropriate a Christian term to Islam leads to an incorrect assessment. Therefore, it is necessary for the outsider perspective to accurately be attentive to the insider perspective, along with its associated sources.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, p. 15

¹⁰² Donner, p. 58

¹⁰³ Ibid, p. 194-195

¹⁰⁴ Said, p. 60

Conclusion

The case study of the Battle of Karbalā illustrates how one singular event can have drastically different interpretations, whether that be from intra-Islamic perspectives or non-Islamic perspectives. For one, the Battle of Karbalā is ubiquitously mentioned in Islamic sources, regardless of the sectarian loyalties of the historian. Yet, sectarian loyalties play a significant role in how this event is presented, either in historical details or a lack thereof.

For the Shī'a, the event represents a uniquely tragic yet defining moment in identity and theological development. If anything, the Shī'a are more galvanized in their original position in designating leadership to the Prophet's kin, using Karbalā to illustrate the dangers of erring from this decision. Yet, the event had unintended and long-term consequences for the Sunnī, albeit for different reasons. Along with Husayn's direct relationship with the Prophet, the Battle of Karbalā represents a painful period of Islamic history, opening more questions than it answers. Questions such as the caliph's role in communal harmony and the relationship between the Muslim and participation in rebellion deeply affected the Sunnī attitude of communal harmony and its relationship to theology.

This study's vital component highlighted the diversity of thought and perspectives from an intra-Islamic viewpoint. It is commonly and inaccurately assumed that a religious community holds a monolithic view of theology and a set of core beliefs. Not only is that not the case, but the Battle of Karbalā illustrates how a stand-alone event can mean something different to members of one religion, even if most individuals can agree on the outline of the incident and its result. Therefore, historical events and theological concepts can and do mean something different to members of a respective religion.

Alongside the diversity of intra-Islamic thought, the Battle of Karbalā also highlights how the outsider perspective, in this case, non-Muslim Western European scholars view the event. Contrasting with the various Islamic perspectives, the Western perspective does not pay as much heed to the event, apart from highlighting its importance to the Shī'a. The event is generally summarized within a few pages, with different historical events given more scholarly

attention. This illustrates how one perspective outside a religion relegates an event as generally insignificant compared to a religion's indigenous materials. This study intends to argue that importance and significance differ amongst participants and observers, which the Battle of Karbalā demonstrates.

Therefore, for a complete and holistic approach to the study of religion, a healthy combination of the insider and outsider perspectives aids a scholar in accurately understanding religion and coming to one's own, possibly alternate, conclusion. However, the insider perspective needs to be treated with scholarly respect and a particular approach of sensitivity. The Battle of Karbalā and its various perspectives is a significant case study when examining scholarly research in religious studies. The perspective has enormous resonance and consequences to the insider perspective and, therefore, needs to be scrutinized by the outside scholar. A reconciliatory and sensitive approach (such as the proposal of "guesthood" for wider acceptance to examine the insider perspective, as proposed by Graham Harvey¹⁰⁵) to the study of religion can promote a healthy exchange between the insider and outsider perspectives, furthering scholarly contributions from both perspectives. To do so, it is imperative for the outsider to fully engage and allow the insider to accurately explain their position, as well as the freedom for the outsider to take that perspective and associated materials to further the study of the religion in question.

¹⁰⁵ Graham Harvey. 2003. "Guesthood as Ethical Decolonising Research Method," *International Review for the History of Religions*, 50.2: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3270516>

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