

## SUFFERING FOR THE SAKE OF COSMIC ORDER: TWELVER SHĪ‘AH ISLAM’S COPING WITH TRAUMA

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### Abstract

The relation established in Shī‘ite Islam between suffering, cosmic order, and the position attributed to the Shī‘ite community in this cosmic order, is very important in terms of understanding Shī‘ite-Islam identity. This article’s primary claim is that a deep investigation of Shī‘ite-Islam identity should be conducted in the context of its coping with the trauma of the tragedy of Karbalā’. Based on Jeffrey Alexander’s definition of trauma as a “cultural construction,” we claim that the coding, weighting, and narrating of the Karbalā’ tragedy in the course of the trauma process can provide us with important clues to understand the Shī‘ite-Islam identity. This article claims that in the Shī‘ite identity, the suffering experienced in Karbalā’ is considered a guarantee that cosmic order will be maintained. Suffering is interpreted as the cost of the battle between the *ḥaqq* (truth) and *bāṭil* (falsehood) and of preserving the right way; thus, suffering is glorified and transformed into a social activity of continuous character. In this way, the Shī‘ite community places itself both as “a subject of history” and as a dynamic social tradition.

*Key Words:* Shī'ite Islam, cultural trauma, suffering, tragedy of Karbalā', cosmic order, cultural memory.

## **Introduction**

The sociologist Jeffrey Alexander, who is famous for his studies of cultural traumas, says that “when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event” then cultural trauma occurs (Alexander 2012, 6). He continues as follows: “If the trauma process unfolds inside the religious arena, its concern will be to link trauma to theodicy” (Alexander 2012, 20). Accordingly, it is essential for a religious community, which feels it has been exposed to a terrible event, to approach the subject in the context of theodicy to find a satisfying answer to the question “why has this suffering taken place?” and to make sense of the trauma in question. It becomes possible to cope with a trauma only when that trauma can be interpreted. In this context, after the massacre of Karbalā' in 680 AD, the members of Shī'ite community attempted to cope with the pain that they felt over the tragedy by making it meaningful. It seems impossible to sufficiently understand the Shī'ite identity until we thoroughly explore the interpretation of the Karbalā' tragedy in Shī'ite Islam. We claim that the relation established in Shī'ite Islam between the suffering, cosmic order, and the position attributed to the Shī'ite community in this cosmic order, is very important in terms of understanding the Shī'ite-Islam identity.

The vast majority of Shī'ite scholars approach Shī'ite identity as a matter of faith (see for example Kāshif al-Ghiṭā' 1990, 145-152; al-Subḥānī 1421 AH, 361-364), whereas Sunnī scholars criticize Shī'ah claiming that this identity has unnecessarily kept historical events of suffering alive (Ibn Kathīr 1408 AH, 8:221). For this reason, studies on Shī'ite identity in the Islamic world do not sufficiently investigate the meaning of suffering in Shī'ite Islam and cannot provide us with a sufficient explanation of its dynamics and spirit in terms of Shī'ah identity. With respect to the research studies on the topic in the West, the number of which has relatively increased in the recent period, a significant number of them approach the topic either in doctrinal or/and historical (see Sachedina 1981, 1988; Momen 1987; Arjomand 1988; Halm 1991; Cole 2002; Jafri 1979) contexts or in the context of Shī'ite communities' political identities and attitudes in modern times (see Cole and Keddie 1986; Nakash 2006; Nasr 2007). Some exceptional studies attempt to understand the nature and soul of the

Shī‘ite Islamic identity based on an integrated approach. The two works that are the most closely related to our subject are those of Hamid Dabashi (2011) and Mahmoud Ayoub (1978).

Dabashi’s (2011) primary claim is that Shī‘ism gains its authority and legitimacy from its protesting character. This explanation overlooks the Shī‘ah’s specific view of cosmic order and more importantly, the construction of this view on a cultural level. If the abovementioned view and its construction on a cultural level were not realized, then the protesting character would not be sufficient for Shī‘ah to continue its existence. Al-Khawārij, which was a movement of protest, is a good example of that. In contrast, Dabashi’s explanation that Shī‘ite Islamic identity is the expression of the guilt feelings of pro-*abl al-bayt* groups over the murder of al-Ḥusayn represents a reductive approach. Describing such a comprehensive and sophisticated system solely as a compensation for feelings of guilt is an oversimplification.

Mahmoud Ayoub’s work (1978), which discusses Shī‘ite identity as a holistic body with its historical, doctrinal, cultural, sociological, and other dimensions, can be considered exceptional among Western studies and is a significant guide to understanding that identity. However, this work approaches Shī‘ite identity as a culture of passive suffering and thus, is also insufficient to understanding the dynamics of Shī‘ite identity.

The socio-political crisis, which was experienced by Muslim society and reached its peak with the Karbalā’ tragedy, was later represented by the Shī‘ite community on a cultural level, and thus was constructed as a cultural trauma within that community. Our claim in this article is that the deep investigation of Shī‘ite-Islam identity should be conducted in the contexts of its coping with the trauma in question. Because Jeffrey Alexander defines trauma as a “cultural construction” that is constructed through “coding, weighting, [and] narrating” (Alexander 2012, 35), we also claim that the coding, weighting, and narrating, which were used in the course of the “cultural construction” of the Shī‘ite-Islam community after the Karbalā’ tragedy, can provide us with important clues to understand that identity. In Shī‘ite-Islam identity, the interpretation of suffering based on the Karbalā’ tragedy is a matter of great importance. Although all religions address the problem of suffering and making it “bearable,” the interpretations of this problem vary. As Clifford Geertz

says: “As a religious problem, the problem of suffering is, paradoxically, not how to avoid suffering but how to suffer, how to make [it] ... something bearable, supportable – something, as we say, sufferable” (Geertz 1973, 104). In the Shī‘ite-Islam community, the interpretation of suffering is unique and different from those of other religious traditions. For instance, although Jesus’ suffering is consistently remembered in some rituals, it has not been transformed into social suffering in Christian culture.<sup>1</sup> In the Shī‘ite-Islam community, however, al-Ḥusayn’s suffering has been transformed into a social suffering culture in which Shī‘ite devotees actively participate. However, the making sense of the suffering in Shī‘ite Islam differs from that of Jewish society, which can be regarded as a “traumatized society.” In Jewish religious identity, the sufferings that Jewish society experienced in the time of Moses and other prophets and kings were the result of God’s punishment of people’s disobedience to His commands. This article’s primary claim is that in Shī‘ite, experienced suffering is considered a guarantee of maintaining cosmic order. Suffering is interpreted as the cost of the battle between the *ḥaqq* (truth) and *bāṭil* (falsehood) and of preserving the right way; thus, suffering is glorified and further transformed into a social activity of continuous character. In this way, the Shī‘ite community places itself both as “a subject of history” and as a dynamic social tradition.

### **Suffering: From Tragedy to Identity**

The building of Shī‘ite identity on the cultural level is directly related to the tragedy of Karbalā’. The sociopolitical crisis, which had started during the period of the third Caliph, ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, reached its peak with the tragic murder of al-Ḥusayn and his followers in 680 AD by the army of the second Umayyad Caliph Yazīd ibn Mu‘āwiyah, in Karbalā’. This tragic murder of al-Ḥusayn and his followers caused a great deal of grief and disappointment among pro-*abl al-bayt* Muslims. This grief and disappointment was so deep that some of them, guilty that they had left al-Ḥusayn alone to face Yazīd’s army, initiated a movement called *al-Tawwābūn* (the Penitents), which was organized to avenge the murder. Participants in this movement can be considered the first generation that played a

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<sup>1</sup> Some marginal Christian groups, such as Penitents, can be regarded as exceptional in Christian culture.

significant role in the cultural construction of the Shī'ite identity based on the tragedy of Karbalā'. The initial forms of 'Āshūrā' ceremonies, which represent one of the important religious rituals of Twelver Shī'ism, were organized by those who took part in the *Tawwābūn* movement. However, these historical realities should not lead us to claim that Shī'ite tradition and most of its teachings and rituals represent a means of compensating the guilty feelings of a certain group of Muslims over the murders of 'Alī and al-Ḥusayn, as one researcher claims (see Dabashi 2011, 1-26). Acceptance of Shī'ite culture, which has a sophisticated and comprehensive system of history, time, eschatology, etc., as a system established to compensate for guilt is oversimplifying the subject. Shī'ite identity is the result of the cultural constructive processes with the aim of restoring identity and meaning to the loss of pro-*abl al-bayt* Muslims over what they have experienced, providing a collective identity, in light of past events, with reinterpretation, and including a worldview and ethos that mutually support one another. To speak of the existence of such a construction process may not always claim that Shī'ite beliefs were later added to Islam. What concerns us here is not entering into endless discussions on the roots of Shī'ism, but the success of Muslims with Shī'ite identity in coping with suffering and making sense of it in a way that elucidates past, present, and future.

It can be seen that in the aftermath of the Karbalā' drama, pro-*abl al-bayt* Muslims entered a "process of making sense of the suffering," or as Jeffrey Alexander says, a "trauma process" (Alexander 2012, 15-19). This process was also the starting point for the representation and construction of Shī'ite identity on the cultural level. What we mean here by "the representation on cultural level" is the transformation of certain beliefs, rituals, and symbols to the shared forms of knowledge, worldview, and practice in a certain community. Even the establishment of the key elements of cultural construction process, which is usually a continuous process, requires a long period of time. In this context, it is seen that the representation of Shī'ite identity's key elements on the cultural level took shape within a period of two and one-half centuries starting at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

Certainly, the severity of the incident was not sufficient for the transformation of the Karbalā' tragedy into a cultural trauma and for the spread of suffering felt in the aftermath of the tragedy to large masses and transferring it from generation to generation. It was

essential to propagate and disseminate the representation of the experienced social crisis on the cultural level, along with the symbolic representations of the social events that occurred and the past, present, and future of Shī'ite community. Accordingly, the construction of a cultural identity centered on the tragedy of Karbalā' was possible only by creating a meaning-making discourse. This function was performed by the Imāms, who were the parties involved in the Karbalā' tragedy and excluded from political life; however, because they were descendants of the Prophet, they also held a privileged position in Muslim society. According to Shī'ite ḥadīth sources, Imāms such as al-Ḥusayn's son 'Alī Zayn al-'ābidīn, encouraged their followers to engage in activities such as visiting the grave of al-Ḥusayn, weeping for the martyrs of Karbalā', remembering al-Ḥusayn while drinking water and writing poems to reduce people to tears, constantly keeping the memory of the Karbalā' tragedy alive. One of the famous Shī'ite scholars, Ja'far ibn Qawlawayh al-Qummī (d. in 367 AH/977 AD), in his book *Kāmil al-ziyārāt*, speaks of such ḥadīths in detail (see al-Qummī 1417 AH, 165-496).

The abovementioned cultural construction process, however, has continued up to the present through the "reinterpretation mechanism," and thus the sufferings of the Karbalā' tragedy's victims preserve their central position in Shī'ite identity. As the sociologist Bernhard Giesen, who is famous for his works on trauma and identity, says, "The collective identity of victims is, of course, a retrospective one: it is not our own suffering here and now, but the suffering of the past, the suffering of others that is turned into an identity of the present." (Giesen 2013).

### **Suffering as a Metanarrative**

Twelver Shī'ism presents an identity formed around the question "why did the sufferings in Karbalā' happen?" and tries to make sense of those sufferings. Otherwise, there would be a loss of meaning on the sociocultural level, if such a great suffering was not carefully interpreted. The Shī'ite community overcame the loss of meaning by means of the cosmic reference. The tragedy of Karbalā' and the sufferings experienced there appear, in this context, to be a metanarrative in Shī'ite identity. According to Jeffrey Alexander, constructing a successful cultural representation of a metanarrative is related to making sense of suffering, and it should give persuasive

answers to the questions about four important issues: the nature of pain, the nature of the victim, the relation of the trauma victim to the wider audience, and attribution of responsibility (Alexander 2012, 17-19). It seems that the metanarrative of suffering in Shī'ite culture focuses on giving a comprehensive and persuasive answer to those four questions.

In Shī'ite culture, the sufferings of Karbalā' are interpreted in metaphysical terms and by relating them to the cosmic order. According to this metanarrative, although the event of Karbalā' is the uprising of al-Ḥusayn and his supporters against Yazīd, it goes beyond a simple revolt. This event is the peak and determinant of the struggle that has been continuing since the outset of human history. This struggle, whose price is suffering and that has been carried by prophets and Imāms, is the fight between just and unjust, oppressor and oppressed, good and bad, and more importantly, between "true religion" and "distorted religion." This struggle has been experienced by *Hābil* (Abel) and *Qābil* (Cain), and all prophets, including Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad. Al-Ḥusayn, whose mission was to preserve the "true religion" from distortion, also managed with his followers to preserve it at the expense of their suffering. In other words, history itself is the history of cosmic suffering, and the Karbalā' tragedy is the peak of these sufferings.

Shī'ism does not only persuade people of the endurance of the events that occurred but also expresses that all those sufferings served the highest purpose. Accordingly, those who take part, through remembering, in this suffering also serve the same purpose. Thus, suffering is extolled and expressed as a savior of the "true religion." The existence of the "true religion" and salvation becomes dependent on suffering. In one sense, cosmic suffering provides history with meaning. In other words, the sufferers have provided history with meaning. With the appearance of the Twelfth Imām (al-Mahdī), the inevitable end, in which the cosmic sufferers will be rewarded and those who caused them to suffer will be resurrected and punished (the doctrine of *raj'ab*), will come. It is also the end of history and cosmic suffering.

The tragedy of Karbalā' and al-Ḥusayn's suffering have always held a central position in the history of suffering. It is believed that throughout history many prophets, including Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Salomon, and Jesus, shed tears over al-Ḥusayn's tragedy and

blamed his murderers (see al-Majlisī 1983, 44:242-245). This means that the cause-effect relationship of what happened cannot be always established because inevitably, the former is cause and the latter is effect when the history of suffering is revealed in metanarrative. Those who were provided with divine knowledge had much earlier expressed their grief over what happened in Karbalāʾ.

Another important point in terms of Shīʿite identity is that sufferings are not related to the inevitable divine destiny while they are interpreted. The Karbalāʾ events are not viewed as inevitable predestination. There are people who are responsible for the suffering. Evil does not come from God, but from men's free actions. This feature, which is reflected in the Shīʿite theology of free will, highlights individual *ikbtiyār* (freedom and choice) against *jabr* (divine compulsion). Unlike the doctrine of free will in Ashʿarite-Sunnī theology, which has been criticized for paving the way for compulsion, this approach contains a more active identity potential. By differentiating between the *jabr al-Umayyī* (the Umayyad compulsion) and "Shīʿite justice" in terms of free will, Shīʿite circles relate the notion of *jabr* to the efforts of the Umayyad dynasty to legitimize what they had done in Karbalāʾ, and the notion of free choice to *abl al-bayt* (Muṭahharī 1426 AH, 29). Although Yazīd and his army are the main people liable for the tragedy, all who accepted a religious-political authority out of *abl al-bayt* are indirectly guilty of it.

The determination of the guilty in metanarrative also determines the stances in practical-religious life: "not to resemble the guilty side." However, the realization of explicit identity disintegration in terms of religious life between the two parties, which existed under a single roof, became possible because sharp borders were drawn. The following ḥadīth ascribed to Jaʿfar ibn Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, who is accepted as the founder of Jaʿfarī *fiqh*, which is considered by Twelver Shīʿites as the only legitimate school of jurisprudence, strikingly shows how these borders were determined:

I said, "What if both ḥadīth from you would be popular and narrated by the trustworthy people from you?" The Imām replied, "One must study to find out which one agrees with the laws of the Qurʾān and the Sunnah and it does not agree with the laws of the

*‘āmmab*.<sup>2</sup> Such ḥadīth must be accepted and the one that disagree with the laws of the Qur’ān and the Sunnah and coincides the *‘āmmab* must be disregarded.” I said, “May Allah take my soul in the service of your cause, what if both *faqīhs* (scholars of the Islamic law) would have deduced and learned their judgment from the Book and the Sunnah and found that one of the ḥadīth agrees with the *‘āmmab* and the other disagrees with the *‘āmmab* which one must be followed?” The Imām replied, “The one which disagrees with the *‘āmmab* must be followed because in it there is guidance.” I said, “May Allah take my soul in the service of your cause, what if both ḥadīths would agree with the *‘āmmab*?” The Imām replied, “One must study to find out of the two the one that is more agreeable to their rulers and judges must be disregarded and the other must be followed.” I said, “What if both ḥadīths would agree with their rulers?” The Imām replied, “If such would be the case it must be suspended until you meet your Imām. Restraint in confusing cases is better than indulging in destruction” (al-Kulaynī 1388 HS, 1:68; for the English version, see al-Kulaynī 1999).

Because of the common metanarrative and integrating the individual biography into this metanarrative, Shī'ites, who come from different historical backgrounds, possess different ethnic identities, live in different geographical areas and under various regimes, have a strong collective memory and have emotional unity. The Shī'ite metanarrative jogs Shī'ite individuals' memories about a notion that they are members of a community that has been traveling in history from the beginning of creation as the carriers of a sacred heritage, that is, the carriers of the “true religion.” This unity is not only a unity of ideal but also a unity of the people whose souls were specially created (for some narratives about this subject in Shī'ite ḥadīth sources, see al-Ṣaffār 1362 AH, 40). This community has a clear opinion about its journey not only from the past to the present but also from the present to the future, to the end of history. Their journey is a part of the cosmic order. Accordingly, a Shī'ite Muslim thinks of himself/herself as united with other Shī'ites and with the cosmic order as a part of a long-term journey. This thought provides

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<sup>2</sup> The term *‘āmmab* (the masses or the general ones), which has a negative meaning in Shī'ite sources, is ascribed to Sunnī Islam, but the term *kbāṣṣab* (the special ones) to the Shī'ah.

him with vertical-historical integration and solidarity oriented to the past and future offshoots and with present-oriented horizontal-social integration and solidarity. It could be said that the cement of this integration is suffering. The acceptance of sharing the sufferings experienced in “the sacred journey” as one of the pillars of piety and even faith, which are distinguishing characteristics of Shī‘ite faith, produces a communion between the believers and provides Shī‘ite communities with solidarity.

### **Suffering as a Form of Remembering**

The transformation of Shī‘ite teachings, which are based on the sufferings experienced in Karbalā’, to a sociocultural identity, became possible using the symbols of remembering that provide participation in those sufferings. These symbols, which appear sometimes as a place, sometimes as an object, sometimes as a religious ceremony and sometimes as an artistic expression, by their stimulating visual, aural, and emotional characteristics, remind people about Karbalā’ by reevoking suffering, and thus constantly reproducing Shī‘ite identity.

There are many narratives in Shī‘ite culture in which feeling sorrow, suffering, weeping, and even reducing people to tears for al-Ḥusayn are good deeds that will be rewarded in the afterlife (al-Ṣadūq 1368 AH, 83; al-Majlisī 1983, 44:293). The glorification of suffering and the acceptance of providing it with continuity and transforming it into a social event as an indispensable feature of piety is one of the distinctive characteristics of Shī‘ism. This state is one of continuous remembering, that is, remembering via suffering.

This spiritual state, which is intensely experienced, especially during religious ceremonies, continues to shape the culture after the ritual (for discovering how the moods emerged during rituals shape daily life after rituals, see Geertz 1973, 119-124). The significant part of cultural products, which are produced by the impacts of the mentioned spiritual state, enter basic rituals over time, and this cycle lasts for hundreds of years. What lies at the center of this cycle is, of course, the month of Muḥarram, in which commemoration ceremonies of the Karbalā’ tragedy are organized, especially the ceremonies on the day of ‘*Āshūrā*’ (on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Muḥarram), when the martyrdom of al-Ḥusayn took place. In the first years following the Karbalā’ tragedy, these activities were initiated by a limited number of people, such as members of *abl al-bayt* and the

movement of *al-Tawwābūn* (the Penitents), as an activity of shedding tears. Over time, these activities gained prevalence in society, and through the addition of new symbols and rituals over centuries, it not only became a special tradition but also led to the formation of a social culture.

The mourning activities started as commemoration ceremonies of al-Ḥusayn's martyrdom. These ceremonies covered a period of sixty days starting from the beginning of the month of Muḥarram. The common point of all these ceremonies expressed by means of different symbols is keeping al-Ḥusayn's suffering alive and sharing this suffering so that it will not be forgotten. For this purpose, we see that lamentation elegies, which had once been performed at Imāms' and their descendants' shrines, starting with the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AH, began to be performed by the leadership of professional lamenters, accompanied by professionally written elegies. According to Mahmoud Ayoub, "these leaders contributed much to the growth of *Shī'ī* popular piety, especially to the crystallization of the Muḥarram cultus." (Ayoub 1978, 154).

Attendees at the ceremonies of Muḥarram, by shedding tears for the sufferings of Imāms, al-Ḥusayn's in the first place, and performing rituals such as striking their chests or beating their backs with chains, were able to physically feel suffering as an attempt to experience suffering. Reciting *marsiyyah*, *nawḥah* (elegies) in company with poems and music has had a critical importance, as it made spreading and maintaining the elegy tradition easier, making them stick in people's minds more deeply. Over time, there appeared many theatrical drama-plays such as *Shabihs* (mourning plays) that more effectively bring the tragedy of Karbalā' to life. *Shabihs*, which became widespread starting in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, theatrically re-enact many concrete symbols of the Karbalā' events, including al-Ḥusayn's horse. Both in *marsiyyahs* and *shabihs*, the Karbalā' events are narrated in detail from beginning to end, and sometimes these narratives last for days. Accordingly, both these ceremonies and more impressive types and figures of remembering have been developed for centuries.

While talking about the symbols of remembering that keep Shī'ite memory alive in Shī'ite culture, the remembering places, which have an importance position in Shī'ite culture, should not be forgotten. Al-Ḥusayn's shrine in Karbalā', of course, is the most important among

them. Visiting this shrine and sharing al-Ḥusayn's suffering there by shedding tears is accepted by Shī'ites as the most important pilgrimage after *ḥajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca). The visitors to Karbalā' enjoy great respect in Shī'ite society and they have a special title, *Karbalā'ī*. It is emphasized in Shī'ite sources that this pilgrimage will be rewarded both in this world and in the afterlife. Shī'ites do not perform a visit only to Karbalā' but also to the shrines of Imāms and their relatives that are spread around the Islamic world. These shrines are the places of remembering for Shī'ites. These pilgrimages to the places of remembering are regarded by M. Ayoub "as an act of covenant renewal between the Holy Family and their followers." (Ayoub 1978, 184).

The abovementioned ceremonies and rituals, which evoke sorrow and condolence in attendees, have executed crucial functions in keeping social memory alive and constantly remembering the Karbalā' tragedy. As M. Ayoub laconically writes, "Every Muḥarram becomes the month of the tragedy of Karbalā' and every 'Āshūrā' the day of the martyrdom of Imām Ḥusayn" (Ayoub 1978, 149). Accordingly, Shī'ah has managed to make suffering a central element of collective memory through the symbols and ceremonies that enhance empathy and identification with Karbalā' victims. In this context, it could be said that the impacts of rituals are not limited to merely the month of Muḥarram. In particular, together with the Iranian Revolution, the common slogan among Shī'ite youth, "Every day is 'Āshūrā', every place is Karbalā'," laconically expresses the impact of the rituals in the spatio-temporal continuum. It could be observed that Karbalā' is continuing to shape life and culture both in daily life and in sociopolitical issues.

Many attitudes and behaviors that have become a part of daily life also bring the suffering of Karbalā' to mind. In funeral ceremonies for their deceased relatives, Shī'ites also shed tears for Karbalā' martyrs; meaning that they remember al-Ḥusayn, Karbalā', and Imāms every time they are sad. Shī'ite scholars also encourage it. It is noteworthy that in Shī'ite societies, for 60 days starting from the 1<sup>st</sup> Muḥarram, all kinds of entertainment, including wedding and engagement parties, is halted.

Because al-Ḥusayn and his supporters had been deprived of water for days before they were murdered, water reminds people of al-Ḥusayn's suffering and has become one of the most important

symbols of daily life. One popular behavior among Shī‘ites is to pray to Allah for Imāms and to curse Yazīd after drinking water. The symbols that bring Karbalā’ to mind have even entered into the cuisine of Shī‘ite communities. Cooking special food called *iḥsān* in memory of Imāms and distributing them to people is a popular behavior in Shī‘ite society. In addition, visual symbols that remind people of the Karbalā’ tragedy are widespread. Unlike Sunnī scholars, who categorically forbid drawing pictures of sacred religious figures, Shī‘ah scholars allow all means that can keep Karbalā’ events in memory, including drawing pictures of Karbalā’ victims (for the views of contemporary Shī‘ah scholars (*mujtabids*) on this subject, see Sīstānī n.d.; al-Hakeem 2013; Shīrāzī n.d.). Al-Ḥusayn’s and other Karbalā’ martyrs’ imaginary pictures, which remind believers of the suffering, are widely distributed among Shī‘ites.

### **Suffering as a Price of Chosenness**

Jan Assmann, who is famous for his studies on social memory, claims that the act of social remembering is closely related to the belief in chosenness and, in parallel, to the sense of obligation: “The principle of memory follows on from that of “being chosen” – being chosen means nothing less than a complex network of rigidly fixed obligations not allowing under any circumstances memory to fade away.” (Assmann 2011, 17).

Shī‘ite social memory’s strong and efficient preservation of its existence for centuries is largely attributable to the principle of chosenness in Shī‘ite identity. According to Shī‘ah, the twelve Imāms are the final and most important circle of chosen people after the prophets. These people, who possess extraordinary power, shoulder responsibilities related to providing the cosmic order such as the salvation of humanity, the order of universe, and the course of history. The preservation of “true religion” is at the heart of this cosmic order. Their followers and supporters also join the ranks of the chosen people. According to a narrative in the most important Shī‘ite ḥadīth sources, the sixth Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq explained the unity of Imāms and their followers and their chosenness as follows:

... He [God] created the souls of our followers [Shī‘ahs] from our clay and their bodies from a hidden clay beneath that clay. Allah did not placed anything as a share of that which they are created

in anyone except the prophets. For this reason, we and our followers became human beings. The rest of the people became riff-raff for Hell and to Hell (al-Kulaynī 1968, 2:389).

The abovementioned belief is also reflected in other main Shīʿite sources, which describe Sunnīs as *ʿāmmah* (the masses) and Shīʿites as *kbāṣṣah* (the special ones). The notion of chosenness in Shīʿite belief contains two meanings like the two sides of medallion: being chosen to fulfil a duty and being chosen to be saved. In this sense, being a Shīʿite Muslim means being chosen as the protector of the trust that the Imāms inherited from the chain of prophets, that is, the protector of the “true religion.” It also means the only way of salvation in terms of being the bearer of this “trust.” However, there is a price of this chosenness: suffering. In this context, the existence of suffering is interpreted and explained within the context of chosenness. Because the sufferings, which began with *Hābīl* (Abel) and *Qābīl* (Cain) and continued with the lives of the prophets and reached its peak in Karbalāʾ, are the manifestations of chosenness, they should not be forgotten and should be shared and experienced to join the rank of chosen ones. Accordingly, the belief of chosenness that plays a significant role in providing memory with continuity makes it possible to make sense of suffering, which is the central element of Shīʿite identity, in the relation with the cosmic order. Being chosen for responsibility in the protection of the cosmic order makes suffering for the sake of fulfilling this responsibility not only sufferable but also meaningful and valuable. The bearableness of the Karbalāʾ tragedy, which is accepted in Shīʿite theology as the peak of all sufferings borne by the prophets for the sake of protecting the “true religion,” is based on the acceptance of their sufferings as the price of chosenness. If this price is not paid, the obligations arising from chosenness cannot be fulfilled and the salvation arising from chosenness cannot be realized. “The community, inasmuch as it has shared in the suffering of the Holy Family here on earth, will share in the great rewards and gift of intercession of the Prophet and the people of his household (*ahl al-bayt*) on the last day” (Ayoub 1978, 210). For this reason, suffering is not merely a worth-bearing, but beyond that, it is an act that should be glorified.

### **Shīʿah Islam as an Indispensable Part of the Cosmic Order**

One of the most important beliefs of Shīʿite-Islam is expressed in a ḥadīth ascribed to the fifth imām of the Twelver Shīʿites Muḥammad

al-Bāqir (95-114/714-732): “By Allah! Since the death of Adam, God has not left the earth without an Imām, who guides people to Allah” (al-Ṣadūq 1966). Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq (114-148/732-765) reveals another function of Imāms according to which Earth cannot be without a *ḥujjah* (Imām, proof of God to humanity) who guides people to Allah: “Abū Ḥamzah narrates: I asked Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq: ‘Can the earth exist without an Imām.’ He replied, ‘If the earth was left without an Imām it would collapse.’” (see al-Kulaynī 1968, 1:179). Similar narratives have been ascribed to other Imāms as well (see al-Kulaynī 1968, 1:178-179; al-Ṣadūq 1404 AH, 2:246-247; 1405 AH, 201-202). If we combine these two ḥadīths, which have many versions, then it can be said that Shī‘ite Islam ascribes to Imāms a special role in maintaining the cosmic order. On the one hand, this cosmic order includes the truth’s (the “true religion”’s) undistorted existence, and on the other hand the order of the universe. For this very reason, chapters on the justification of the doctrine of *Imāmate* (spiritual leadership of Muslim community) in Twelver Shī‘ite sources are much broader in size than those of other Islamic doctrines, and thousands of volumes have been written on this topic because, in Shī‘ite tradition, *Imāms* are the people chosen by God, through which the divine plan is realized. *Risālah* (prophethood) cannot be considered completed without *Imāmate*. According to some Shī‘ite sources, the reason for the revelation of the following Qur’ānic verse was the divine appointment of the Imāms: “... Today have I perfected for you your religion and completed my favour upon you and approved Islam for you as a religion.” (Q 5:3) For them, only by the appointment of Imāms did God complete religion ... (al-Ṣadūq 1361 HS, 96; al-Ṭabarsī 1415 AH, 3:274). Not only *risālah* but also many subjects related to the cosmic order, including the arrival of *qiyāmah* (end of the world), cannot be thought about and understood without *Imāmate*.

Karbalā’, in turn, is a place and time of maintaining order, saving religion from distortion and destruction, and separating *ḥaqq* (truth) from *bāṭil* (falsehood), Cosmos from Chaos. Al-Ḥusayn, by courageously and heroically fighting, consciously preferred dying to remaining silent against the distortion of religion and the triumph of falsehood. He sacrificed himself, but managed to maintain the continuation of the order. In other words, al-Ḥusayn, who was charged by God to save the “True Religion” and sacrificed his worldly life for this mission, maintained the continuation of the cosmic order.

In this context, it could be said that the interpretation of history and the notion of universe in Shī'ite identity are based on the tragedy of Karbalā'. In particular, Sunnī scholars, who do not view Karbalā' from the same perspective, consider the importance of it to Shī'ite identity as exaggerated. For instance, Ibn Kathīr, one of the outstanding Sunnī scholars and historians, in his famous book on Islamic history called *al-Bidāyah wa-l-nihāyah* writes:

However, it is not good to express sadness and grief [over al-Ḥusayn's tragedy] in the manner in which the Shī'ites mourn, and which mainly consists of hypocrisy. His father, who was more excellent than him, was also martyred. But they [Shī'ites] do not mourn for him, like they mourn for al-Ḥusayn (Ibn Kathīr 1408 AH, 8:221).

In parallel with this central place of *Imāms* and the tragedy of Karbalā' in the interpretation of history and the universe, the maintenance of the cosmic order in Shī'ite culture is also grounded on the existence of the Imām's supporters. In this sense, *Imāmate* is the trust of God and His last prophet, and being a Shī'ite Muslim means bearing this trust and protecting it. Belonging to Twelver Shī'ism also means taking part in the implementation of the divine plan into practice, in other words, taking part in maintaining the cosmic order.

In Shī'ite thought, the realization of the divine plan, the realization of the process of cosmic history, and the protection of the abovementioned trust are not separable from one another. The realization of the process of cosmic history, that is, the possibility of the building of a "just society" by al-Mahdī, in which he will punish the enemies of *abl al-bayt* and will reward their supporters (Shī'ites), will take place at the result of his having enough power against oppression in the days of his *ẓubūr* (appearance). He was occulted because of his enemies' oppressions and his supporters' inability to protect him against his enemies. Although traditional Shī'ite thought proposes that in the period of appearance, the source of al-Mahdī's power will have a divine character in the modern period, especially in Shī'ite-Islamist circles, who, by means of the principle *wilāyat al-faqīh* (rule of religious leaders), obtained the opportunity to undertake political activities, making the necessary correlation between his appearance and the position of Shī'ite society. This modern interpretation proposes not a passive *intizār al-Mahdī*

(expectation of the Mahdī), but the thought of “building a strong Shī'ite society until the *zuhūr* of al-Mahdī,” and it claims that the position of Shī'ite society is one of the conditions of his appearance (Hassan 2008, 58; Hanson 2006, 55-56). For the supporters of this standpoint, Shī'ites must be worthy of al-Mahdī in terms of their ethical and political power when he appears. Therefore, it could be said that the realization of the process of cosmic history can be possible when the principles of Shī'ite Islam are obeyed.

Shī'ite society has not been left alone during the period in which is advancing toward the final stage of cosmic history. Indeed, the society is indirectly in contact with the divine world by means of the *Imām* of the time (al-Mahdī), who although was occulted by God, is now among people. According to Twelver Shī'ism, although the *wahy* (divine revelation) was ended by the Prophet Muḥammad, the contact of the Imāms, who are the *ḥāfiẓ li-l-sbar'* (guardians of the divine law), with the divine world has been continuing. Shī'ah express this connection with the word *muḥaddath*. To avoid being accused by Sunnī scholars of giving the function of the Prophet to Imāms, Shī'ite scholars emphasize the difference between divine revelation and *muḥaddath*ness. A ḥadīth, which is ascribed to Imāms Muḥammad al-Bāqir, Ja'far al-Sādiq, and 'Alī al-Riḍā, describes the essential differences between *rasūl*, *nabī*, and *muḥaddath* (imām). According to that ḥadīth, the *Rasūl* (the Messenger) openly sees the angel *Jibrīl* (Gabriel) and speaks to him. *Nabī* (the prophet) sees *Jibrīl* in his dream. He does not see the angel, but hears his voice. *Muḥaddath* (imām), in turn, only hears the voice of the angel, but he does not see the angel, neither openly nor in his dream (al-Ṣaffār 1362 HS, 339-344; al-Kulaynī 1968, 1:176-177). Although Twelver Shī'ite scholars insistently differentiate between *muḥaddath*ness and *wahy* (revelation), they see it as a continuation of *wahy* in terms of functionality. The preservation of *wahy* from distortion becomes possible because of the *muḥaddath* Imāms, who are supported by divine knowledge. According to this thought, God, who sent *wahy* to the Prophet, protects the *wahy* using the infallible Imāms, which can be called “the notion of the uninterruptedness of the divine message.” Unlike the Sunnī perspective, which does not accept the existence of a special group of men that protects the divine law, the connection with God has not been interrupted in Shī'ite Islam. This connection is in place for the protection and strengthening of the “true religion,” for the formation of a just society by al-Mahdī's appearance and then for

the arrival of *qiyāmah* (end of the world), eventually being called to account before God. Because the realization of all these events cannot be possible without “an uncorrupted group of believers” (Shī‘ites), the abovementioned connection also functions to maintain a Shī‘ite community, which is representative of the truth and balancing factor in the cosmic order. Because of this connection, total deviation from the “true religion” of Shī‘ite society is prevented, which means that if Shī‘ite scholars united in a wrong decision in a religious matter, then al-Mahdī would not remain silent; he would intervene to correct that decision and prevent the religion’s distortion (see Sachedina 1981, 144-146). This intervention means that the Shī‘ites’ position in the world is protected by al-Mahdī himself.

The connection between al-Mahdī and Shī‘ite society is also at the individual level, too. According to Shī‘ah, though al-Mahdī does not openly appear to people, he lives on Earth and can help his followers if needed. There are many books in Shī‘ite culture that are full of narratives on this matter. Pious Shī‘ite Muslims believe that al-Mahdī, God willing, can help and even meet them. The popular practice of writing petitions stating problems and grievances addressed to al-Mahdī and leaving them in holy places or throwing them into flowing rivers is a good example of this belief. There is a special place for leaving notes to the Imām in Jamkaran Mosque of Qom, where it is believed al-Mahdī was seen.

Al-Mahdī, who can be everywhere whenever he wants, continues to receive messages from God by means of *ilhām* (divine inspiration); he can sometimes meet Shī‘ite scholars and pious believers and send them messages. The famous Shī‘ite scholar al-Ṭabarsī gives a list of those had seen al-Mahdī (see al-Ṭabarsī 1979, 425). Thus, Shī‘ite society, albeit indirectly, becomes a living recipient of the divine messages. Although Shī‘ite scholars do not accept that in the period of *al-ghaybah al-kubrā* (greater occultation), one can receive messages from al-Mahdī, which can be binding on all Shī‘ites, they do not reject the notion that a pious person can meet al-Mahdī and receive personal messages from him. In this context, there is a belief among Shī‘ites that even today, many Shī‘ites can be in touch with al-Mahdī; this can also be seen in the *tawqī‘āt*, which, according to Shī‘ite sources, received letters sent by al-Mahdī to Shī‘ite community through his *al-Sufarā’ al-arba‘ah* (four representatives) during his *al-ghaybah al-ṣuḡbrā* (minor occultation between 874-941 AD) (see al-Īrāwānī 1420 AH, 33-39, 41-43).

Shī'ite society's passion is kept alive by accepting itself as a living interlocutor of Divine messages. Religion for Shī'ite Muslims is not a system lost to the mists of time, but a system that presents the here and now, addressing the Shī'ite community. In this context, if Shī'ite communities are central actors in the cosmic historical process, they are also in the position of forming this cosmic historical process and are at the center of it. The close association of Shī'ite identity with the cosmic order has strengthened that identity.

### **The Notion of Time and the Doctrine of *Intizār***

The Shī'ite notion of time is crucial to understanding and inseparable from Shī'ite identity. In the Shī'ite notion of time, we can see the impact of other components of Shī'ite identity and the traces of the notion of time are clearly noticed in those components. It could be said that there are close connections between the Karbalā' events, the belief of Mahdī and the notion of time. In this context, the past in Shī'ite belief is the time of pain, defeat, and oppression, but the future is the time of hope, happiness, triumph, and justice. In brief, the past is the time when imperfectness dominated, but the future is the time when perfection will dominate. The past was full of imperfectness because, including during the time of the Prophet Muḥammad, it was not possible to establish social order, and it witnessed sufferings and oppressions that reached their peak with the Karbalā' events. The future is full of hopes because the twelfth Imām, who was occulted because of the despotic regime, will appear before doomsday and will punish the resurrected oppressors (the doctrine of *raj'ab*). In addition, he will reward his supporters and will lead society by establishing a just, ideal social order. Accordingly, justice will take place before the end of the world. What shapes the present are the memories of the past and the expectations and goals related to the future. In this sense, "the present" is the time that keeps in itself the past and the future. The doctrine of *intizār* (expectation) is of a great importance in terms of revealing the importance of the past and future in shaping the "today" of Shī'ite identity.

As a possessor of a cosmic time notion, the Shī'ite identity, instead of possessing a notion of time that moves from the past to the future within the framework of cause-effect relation, possesses a concept of time in which the past, present, and future are intertwined with each other. In this concept of time, not only can the future arise from the past but also the past can arise from the future. At the metaphysical

level, the time whose knowledge was available for all eternity has a characteristic of the narrative whose beginning and end were known beforehand and that has internal integrity. However, the source of the narrative taking shape in the course of time is not this metaphysical knowledge; on the contrary, what generates this knowledge is the narrative that will take place in the future. The internal integrity of the narrative in question depends on the consistency between its elements. Accordingly, the latter in the narrative cannot be separable from the former, and the former cannot be separable from the latter in terms of integrity and consistency. More concretely, for example, some prophets, although they lived much earlier in terms of time, could shed tears for the Karbalāʾ sufferings, or because al-Mahdī will appear and punish the resurrected oppressors and justice will be established under his leadership, the divine intervention in the oppressions towards al-Ḥusayn can be postponed. Accordingly, an event that will happen in the future can shape the course of an event that happened in the past.

The Shīʿite concept of time essentially differs from that of Sunnī Muslims, who constitute the majority of the Islamic world, and this difference forms the cause and effect of the differences between the two Muslim identities. Addressing these differences will more clearly reveal the relationship between the Shīʿite concept of time and other characteristics of Shīʿite identity. According to Sunnīs, *ʿasr al-saʿādab* (the golden age), where the ideal society was established, took place in the period of the lifetime of Prophet Muḥammad and the first four caliphs, but for Shīʿites, the Prophet did not have an opportunity to build a model society; instead, he trained model people, *abl al-bayt* (the people of his household, namely, ʿAlī, Fāṭimah, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn). The past, from the election of the first caliph to the tragedy of Karbalāʾ, was the period that was full of sufferings and injustice towards the Imāms of *abl al-bayt*.<sup>3</sup> However, this does not mean that the age of happiness will never be established in this world. With the appearance of the twelfth Imām (al-Mahdī) before doomsday, the “true religion,” that is, Shīʿism, will gain a victory, a socioeconomic prosperity will dominate and vengeance will be taken on sacred

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<sup>3</sup> According to Shīʿah, all Imāms, except the occulted Twelfth Imām, were killed, either by sword in the case of ʿAlī and al-Ḥusayn or by poisoning in the case of the other Imāms. Sunnī sources usually do not accept that the Imāms were poisoned.

people's oppressors. Thus, the ultimate justice, which did not take place in the past, will be established in the future. In this context because the ideal period in Sunnī tradition took place in the past, it emphasizes "former times" and "lost ones," and looks at the present and future as the times that should be illuminated in light of the past. Accordingly, because the past is idealized in Sunnī Islam, it attempts to carry the past to the present and future. In Shī'ah, however, the illumination itself will take place in the future. In this context, it is meaningful that unlike Sunnī Muslims, Shī'ite Muslims have not usually been inclined toward puritanical movements that try to literally and strictly carry the early period of the Muslim community into the present time. According to the Sunnī approach, degenerations appear when we move away from the past, but in Shī'ah, every passing day brings us nearer to the "ideal period." In this regard, it might not be a coincidence that the philosopher, Mullā Ṣadrā, who proposed the theory of *ḥarakah jawhariyyah* (substantial motion) and claimed that the whole existence is in motion towards perfection, was a Shī'ite Muslim.

Doomsday, in other words, the future in Shī'ite-Islamic culture is a time, which is hoped to come as soon as possible, and what can make it happen is the intense devoutness of Shī'ites. Because Shī'ite identity sees the ideal not in the past but in the future, it could be said that it has a more flexible and dynamic structure in terms of the realization of structural transformations within tradition. One of its significant examples is Khomeinī's theory of *wilāyat al-faqih* (the doctrine of the authority of Islamic jurists). The significant fraction of Shī'ites, who had for centuries stipulated that a legal state could be established only with the appearance of al-Mahdī, accepted this doctrine and thus achieved a legal Shī'ite state. In addition, with this doctrine, the passive doctrine of *intizār* was transformed into an active, operational expectation aimed at preparing the circumstances of al-Mahdī's appearance. However, it should not be understood from all these facts that Shī'ite identity possesses Western-like evolutionary time notion. In Shī'ite culture, the past is not accepted as an unwanted one, and getting rid of its values is not considered necessary. In Shī'ism, taking part in an ideal society that will be established with the appearance of al-Mahdī can become possible to the extent of remembering and experiencing the past, or more clearly, the sufferings of the past. Accordingly, although there was not an enviable aspect of the past, which was full of sufferings, it is also a

period that should not be forgotten. Remembering the past does not arise from longing for the past, but from its being part of a moving power that carries the world towards a happy and just order.

### **Some Modern Sociopolitical Implications of the Tragedy of Karbalā'**

Throughout history, their notion of time has fortified Shī'ites over pressures and pains, prompting the thought of *intizār* (expectation), which keeps them in shape even today. The doctrine of *intizār*, which means the state of intense expectation, is at the same time the state of watchfulness and keeping the faith alive. This notion fortified Shī'ism with patience at times when it was in the passive position, and now it has been transformed into an active doctrine of *intizār*, especially within political groups of Shī'ite origin. Today, Shī'ite-Islamist circles, which, especially with the opportunity provided by the doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh*, have obtained opportunities to undertake active political participation, have already left a passive approach to *intizār* and put forward the notion of "establishing a strong Shī'ite society until the appearance of al-Mahdī." According to Shī'ism, al-Mahdī, who was hidden by God because of people's pressure, will have enough strength to withstand all pressures. Unlike traditional Shī'ite thought, which accepts that the source of that strength is divine, *wilāyat al-faqīh*-based modern Shī'ite movements claim that in addition to divine support, al-Mahdī's supporters must be in a powerful position. For them, Shī'ites must ethically and politically be worthy of him when he appears, which means transforming the notion of *intizār* from a passive position to an active one, and at the same time, it is a good example of this notion's transformation in Shī'ite memory over the course of time. Although it has some roots in the *akbbār* (narratives) ascribed to Imāms, the idea of transforming the notion of *intizār* into a dynamic form is a new idea (see al-Kulaynī 1968, 1:242-243; al-Majlisi 1983, 47:372-373). It is difficult to speak of such a Shī'ite notion of *intizār* in the Middle Ages. It has instead appeared as the result of the self-confidence derived from the establishment of the Iranian Islamic Republic, which takes its legitimacy from the doctrine of *wilāyat al-faqīh*. It also reflects the possibility of a future-indexed dynamic notion of history. This notion makes it possible to transform a thought, which has been preserved in the depth of memory, into different forms according to different circumstances.

Time after time, the interpretation of contemporary subjects by influential Shī'ite social figures referring to Karbalā' events, and al-Ḥusayn's suffering and struggle have shown the influence of the Karbalā' tragedy on sociopolitical issues. The leader of the Iranian Revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeinī, also related the Karbalā' events to justice-seeking attempts in today's world, claiming that this event was not limited to a certain period, but to the struggle between oppressors and oppressed in all times. In this sense, for him, the slogan "Every day is *Āshūrā*", every place is Karbalā'" carries a great meaning (about the modern meanings ascribed to this slogan, see Khomeinī 1358 HS, 9:57). In a sound recording of the famous Iranian thinker Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (1920-1979), the statement that "All those who want to help al-Ḥusayn should do something for Palestine" (İslami Uyanış, 2012) is very important in this context. In another statement, he said: "The Palestinian issue would fill al-Ḥusayn's heart with sorrow. If al-Ḥusayn lived today, he would say: 'If people want to mourn for me and lament over my death, their slogan should be Palestine (and similar issues)'" (Aytaş 2014). Another Iranian thinker, 'Alī Sharī'atī (1933-1977), who was popular among Shī'ite youth before the Iranian Revolution, reminded people of al-Ḥusayn's martyrdom, and called upon them to resist social degeneration at the cost of their lives and like al-Ḥusayn, to come to the help of their people and recall disappearing truths. In this sense, al-Ḥusayn is an ideal embodiment of martyrdom. The *shabīd*, by his death, chooses not to "flee the hard and uncomfortable environment" (Moghadam 2007, 133-134).

It seems that Shī'ite society reacted to these messages, which were issued before the Iranian Islamic Revolution. Accordingly, suffering in Shī'ite culture, rather being a passive peculiarity, becomes a motor of transformation and development, and sometimes provides society with mobilization in terms of different sociopolitical issues. According to Iranian thinker H. Babaei, who attempts to reveal the basics of suffering's contribution to social solidarity in Shī'ite theology, "In the Shī'ite community, the memory of *liberative suffering* constitutes the theological basis of solidarity, resistance, and righteousness." Babaei defines the term of liberative suffering not as "suffering from," which instigates rancor and revenge, but rather "suffering for," which promotes solidarity. He concludes that suffering in Shī'ite belief is "suffering for" which provides people with solidarity to prevent new suffering (see Babaei 2010, 615-631). Thus, the activity of

“remembering through suffering” actually strengthens social solidarity. Its concrete examples can be seen in Shī‘ite societies. In this context, one important development is the activities in ‘*Āshūrā*’ ceremonies, such as beating backs with chains or using cutting tools for bloodletting to sympathize with Karbalā’ martyrs, have given their place to mass blood donation campaigns in some Shī‘ite societies. Accordingly, it seems that the Karbalā’ events in Shī‘ite societies are interpreted and explained differently in different periods and conditions, but at the same time, it has always preserved its feature of being an important reference guide. Thus, on the one hand, it has been constantly re-interpreted and re-explained in terms of current problems, and on the other hand, it has been a reference point for solving current problems, it has continued to shape the present time and culture.

### **Conclusion**

The murder of al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī and many other members of the Prophet’s family by the army of the second Umayyad caliph Yazīd I on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month of Muḥarram 61/10 October 680 caused deep sorrow among those who sympathized with him. This sorrow later functioned as a major element of the formation of Shī‘ite-Islam identity and its preservation. Thus, the constant remembrance of al-Ḥusayn and his followers’ suffering in company with some symbols and rituals and keeping them alive did not remain only a memory of a sorrowful incident, but a way to keep Shī‘ite identity alive.

After the Karbalā’ event, the process of making sense of it started. While making sense of it, Shī‘ite circles approached it not from a physical-historical perspective, but from a metaphysical-super-historical perspective. On the one hand, this perspective gave Shī‘ah an opportunity to differ from the Sunnī perspective, which approached the subject from historical point of view, and thus to form its own identity and preserve it; on this other hand, this enabled an interpretation of the event within a broader frame by carrying it to a super-historical level. Thus, the Karbalā’ event, which was narrated by historians as a political and tragic event, occurred during a certain historical period, and was carried to a cosmic-divine level and evaluated in a broader frame of meaning. Al-Ḥusayn and his family’s sufferings can be interpreted in this context as “Suffering for the sake of the cosmic order.” For as one of the Imāms chosen by God to preserve the “true religion,” al-Ḥusayn struggled against Umayyad

dynasty, which wanted to corrupt Islam, with the intention of protecting the will of God on Earth, that is, protecting true Islam from distortion. By doing that, he played a key role in preserving the cosmic-divine order and prevented Islamic society, which is the representative of this order, from completely capitulating to chaos.

This interpretation of the Karbalā' event had an impact on Shī'ite identity in some respects. First, the idea that the murder of their Imām was not a simple historical event and that it had a direct connection to the preservation of the cosmic-divine order enabled Shī'ites to gain power by tackling this culturally constructed trauma. Second, this interpretation gave Shī'ites a different identity from that of other Muslims and became a central element of Shī'ite identity. As a central element of Shī'ite identity, it has provided this identity with continuity and re-interpretations. That is why every year, millions of people attend the commemoration ceremonies of the Karbalā' events, and these ceremonies fortify society with an active culture of suffering.

As mentioned above, “the Karbalā' culture” and the principle of *Imām* that includes this culture is the basis of Shī'ite identity and memory. The main characteristics of this identity can be arranged as follows:

1. Because, according to Shī'ite theology, it represents the “true” and “undistorted” Islam, it ascribes to Shī'ite Islam a special role in the preservation of the cosmic-divine order. This order has survived because of the Twelve Imāms who, it is believed, were chosen by God to preserve the religion. The chain of Imāms, which starts with ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, passed an important examination at the time of al-Ḥusayn ibn ʿAlī, and thus, managed to preserve the religion from distortion. Now the divine order is preserved by *al-Mahdī al-muntazar* (the expected Mahdī), who, although in occultation, is believed to be alive and will appear when the time comes. However, for the preservation of the religion, not only the existence of Imāms but also the existence of their followers, that is, the existence of Shī'ites, should be necessary. It is believed that they are the only community on Earth living in conformity with the divine will. Moreover, the appearance of al-Mahdī, his provision of justice on Earth and the punishment of the oppressors of *ahl al-bayt*, who played a role in the Karbalā' massacre in the first place, depends on his having a powerful body of supporters. Especially in the recent period, it is observed that this last aspect is driven forward more

explicitly than in the past. It is, rather, related to the self-confidence provided by the Iranian Shī'ite Islamic Revolution to Shī'ite communities from all around the world.

2. The “process of suffering” that emerged with al-Ḥusayn's and his supporters' tragedy at Karbalā' paved the way for the cultural establishment of tragedy-based Shī'ite identity. This establishment was achieved by taking the tragedy out of its historical context and interpreting it in the metaphysical context; it was also achieved through the symbols and ceremonies that can keep this interpretation in the minds of people. Thus, suffering was made meaningful and bearable, and it became possible to constantly keep it alive. Because of these meta-narratives, the representation of suffering as a metaphysical value and criterion for piety came with its constant remembrance. At the result, “remembering by means of suffering” became one of the significant characteristics of Shī'ite identity. The “constant remembrance of suffering,” which is mostly considered by Muslims other than Shī'ites as incomprehensible, becomes meaningful within this context.

3. One of the characteristics that makes the Shī'ite culture of suffering genuine is that it possesses not a passive, but an active structure. Indeed, it became possible because of the meta-narratives related to Karbalā'. According to those metanarrative, a Shī'ite Muslim should not confine his/her commemoration of the Karbalā' events to shedding tears for al-Ḥusayn and his relatives; he should also wait for al-Mahdī's appearance and take sides with him when he appears. In this sense, the Karbalā' event is not only a completed historical event but also a future event that will happen. According to Shī'ite doctrine of *raj'ab*, both oppressors and oppressed will return to the world, and oppressors will be punished. Accordingly, the battle of Karbalā' will end up with the victory of al-Ḥusayn and his supporters. Even according to some Shī'ite sources, al-Ḥusayn will be the first to return to the world (al-Majlisī 1983, 53:39). This shows a special characteristic of Shī'ah's super-historical perception of time. The past, present and future are interlaced with each other in this perception of time.

In conclusion, it can be said that the Karbalā' event has been super-historically interpreted by the Twelver Shī'ah, and this interpretation has fortified Shī'ites with an active, bearable and re-

interpretable culture of suffering on social level. It has also preserved its determining role in Shī'ite identity throughout history.

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