

The Proofs of God Hujaj Allāh¹

We have attempted in the previous chapter of this study to depict the family of Muḥammad in their role as members of the House of Sorrows and their high status as the friends (*awliyā'*) of God and His elect. The *imāms*, like prophets and other great personalities in man's religious history, are seen by the *Shi'ī* community at one and the same time as humiliated and exalted, poor yet infinitely rich, persecuted and sorrowful, yet possessing both authority and bliss. Although they were finally martyred, for their sake the universe and all life was created. Through their suffering and martyrdom, the *imāms* will manifest their glory and authority on the last day. Their sufferings have confronted humanity with the choice of eternal bliss or damnation. The *imāms*, who are the friends (*awliyā'*) of God, are also His *khulafā'*, His vicegerents and representatives on earth, and the guardians of His revelation. It is this aspect of the concept and role of the *imāms* that we shall explore in the present chapter.

First, we shall examine the creation of the *imāms*: the manner of their creation and the substance from which they were created. We shall then consider their relationship to God and the world, and their place in the history of divine revelation or communication with mankind. The questions that concern us here are, first, the place of the *imāms* within the divine covenant with man, or what we may call the initial revelation or primordial trust (*amānah*) that God offered to all creation before the world was made; second, the relation of the *imāms* to actual revelations, especially the Qur'ān, as well as their relations to the prophets, especially to the Prophet Muḥammad (both as his descendants and as heirs to his prophetic mission and secret knowledge); and finally, the actual personality of the *imām*, the signs of his imamate, and his physical and spiritual characteristics. As in all other chapters of this study, we are concerned with *Shi'ī* piety as expressed in the sources we are examining.

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the proper background for

the discussion of the life, mission and death of *Imām* Ḥusayn. It is important to emphasize a point that has already been stressed: namely, that Ḥusayn was from the beginning regarded by the Muslim community as much more than just a pious and virtuous man. He was the grandson of the Prophet, and this gave him a special place in the community and contributed much to the growth of the ideas and devotional practices that his death inspired. Nevertheless, the cosmic significance of his death, an idea that developed rapidly after his martyrdom, is due to a great extent to his office as an *imām*. It is as a part of his role as an *imām* that the sufferings and martyrdom of Ḥusayn have been regarded by the *Shī'ī* community as a source of redemption for themselves, as well as a source of judgment and condemnation for their opponents. This redemptive aspect of his suffering cannot be understood properly without some idea of the role of the *imāms* in the history of salvation. Nor would the *Shī'ī* views on his miraculous birth, his extraordinary life and his miraculous death be fully comprehended without such a background. Thus in this chapter we shall prepare the way for a consideration of Ḥusayn the *Imām* through an investigation of the imamate itself in *Shī'ī* Islām.

2.1 THE CREATION AND SUBSTANCE OF THE *Imāms*

The *imāms*, for *Shī'ī* Muslims, may be thought of as a primordial idea in the mind of God which found temporal manifestation in persons occupying a position midway between human and divine beings. They are human, or created, beings in that they do not share in the divine pre-eternal existence (*azaliyyah*) or eternal undying continuity (*abadīyyah*) of God; and, like all human beings, they are subject to death and resurrection. Yet they were first conceived in God's mind as a principle of order, harmony and goodness in the world; then they were made substantial as luminous entities or conventicles of light transmitted in the loins of prophets and wombs of holy women until they reached actualization in the Prophet Muḥammad. They were then born as men through the 'Prince of the Faithful' and first *Imām*, 'Alī, and his wife, Fāṭimah, the daughter of Muḥammad.

The divine qualities of the *imāms* may be clearly discerned in the

many traditions recounting the manner of their creation and their essential substance. Unlike other men, the *imāms* were shaped not of the dust of the earth, but were first created as forms of light singing the praises of God long before the material world came into being. In a long tradition, the Prophet addressed his daughter, saying:

O daughter! God, praised and exalted be He, cast a glance on the inhabitants of the earth and chose your father and made him a prophet. He cast a second glance and chose your husband, 'Alī, and made him a brother and vicegerent (*waṣī*) for me. He cast a third glance and chose you and your mother and made you the two mistresses of the women of the worlds. He cast a fourth glance and chose your two sons and made them the two masters of the youths of paradise. . . .²

All things were created, we are told in the Qur'ān, through the divine Word (*amr*),³ the divine fiat. The *imāms*, however, were chosen through the power of the divine eye. Thus it is not only the omnipotence of God the creator and His sovereignty which are manifested in the creation of the *imāms*, but also His compassion and love. For in creating the *imāms*, God, so to speak, turned His face toward the world, and His glance generated the Holy Family who are regarded as the true source of divine mercy. The *imāms* are therefore regarded in *Shī'ī* theological statements of belief (*'aqīdah*) as an act of divine grace,⁴ and the earth cannot be without an *imām* at any time.⁵

The sixth *Imām*, Ja'far, declared, in answer to one of his disciples, that if the earth were to be void of an *imām*, it would melt away with all its inhabitants.⁶ The *imām*, as we shall see more clearly below, is the perfect man (*al-insān al-kāmil*) whose mere existence is necessary for the subsistence of the world. In fact, the *imām* attained a much greater religious significance very early in *Shī'ī* tradition than the perfect man ever did in later Sufism.⁷

The many traditions that relate the actual creation of the *imāms*, although containing many variations and disparities in detail, all have the same purpose: to show the exalted status of the *imāms* and their nearness to God. The sixth *Imām*, it is reported, related to one of his disciples, Abū Baṣīr, the manner of the creation of the Prophet

Muḥammad and the *imāms* in a divine saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*), uttered directly by God to Muḥammad.

God said, 'O Muḥammad! Verily I created thee and 'Alī as two lights [a spirit without body] before I created my heavens, throne, and the ocean. You never ceased then from praising and glorifying me. I then united your two spirits into one, and that also never ceased from praising and sanctifying me. I then divided the one spirit into two and two into four: Muḥammad, 'Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn.'

The *Imām* went on to say, 'Then God created Fāṭimah from light, first a spirit without a body, then He touched us with His right hand and His light shone in us.'⁸ From the context of this tradition, it appears that this last act, the manifestation of the divine light in the *imāms*, is related to their earthly existence.

We have already seen in the previous chapter of this study⁹ that the *imāms* were created before all things in the universe, and that they are greater than all creation. The tradition just cited goes a step further and suggests that the *imāms* preceded even the divine manifestation itself. They belong to that time before time was, to the time when God Himself was in 'absolute self-obscurity',¹⁰ before He had created His throne, the locus of His majesty, encompassing the entire universe.¹¹ The *imāms* are usually considered along with the great things of creation: visible things such as the heavens, the earth and the great ocean, and invisible things such as the throne of God, His angels and the tablet and pen of destiny. The *imāms* are declared to be greater than all the marvels of creation, which were created for their sake and whose sustenance depends on their existence.

It is of course difficult, and not altogether justified by the unsystematic nature of the materials examined in this discussion, to attempt any systematic construction of the mode of creation of the *imāms*. One can say, however, that they existed as essences of divine light before every created thing and then began to take form along with the rest of creation. As creation proceeded, they also moved from extremely subtle into more concrete forms. Even their human bodies were created of a special substance long before their actual birth into the world. Again Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, in describing this process of concretization, said,

God created us from the light of His majesty and formed us from a well guarded clay preserved under His throne. He then caused that light to dwell in it [i.e., the clay]. Thus we became luminous humans (*bashar nūrānīyyūn*) giving no share of the stuff of which we were created to anyone.¹²

2.2 THE PLACE OF THE *Imāms* IN HUMAN HISTORY AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO DIVINE REVELATION (*Wahī*)

The *imāms* are the heirs of the prophets and share in honor and favor with God. They are the hidden meaning of the revealed word of which they are a concrete personification. We have already seen how the words of the Qur'ān refer first to them and secondarily to others.¹³ The sixth *Imām* goes a step further in this exegetical identification of the Word with the person in a brief exegesis of the famous 'Light' verse.¹⁴ A disciple asked the meaning of the 'Light' verse, and the *Imām* recited the verse with his commentary as follows:

God is the light of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche [Fāṭimah] wherein is a lamp [Ḥasan], the lamp in a glass [Ḥusayn], the glass as it were a glittering star [Fāṭimah is like the radiant star among the women of the world], kindled from a Blessed Tree [Abraham], an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West [neither Jewish nor Christian] whose oil well nigh would shine [knowledge is about to burst out from it], even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light [an *imām* proceeding from it after another *imām*]; God guides to His Light whom He will [God guides through the *imāms* whom he will].¹⁵

The *imāms* are not only symbols of the divine light or vessels through which it shines; rather they are both light and vessel.¹⁶ They are the true shoots of the 'Blessed Olive Tree', Abraham, who himself personified the true faith, the pure (*ḥanīf*) religion free from the deviations of East or West. Thus the *imāms* preserve in themselves the uncontaminated authenticity of divine revelation and continue its history unbroken. Finally, with the Qur'ān, they are the instrument of divine guidance. They are the 'speaking (*nāṭiq*) Qur'ān', the active or living

logos while the Qur'ān is the 'silent' (*ṣāmit*), immanent divine logos whose understanding and application depend on them.

The *imāms*, moreover, are the primordial covenant between God and the world, and His charge (*amānah*) which He offered to the heavens and the earth. The sixth *Imām*, Ja'far, again said, instructing al-Mufaḍḍal, one of his chief disciples, on the meaning of the *amānah* verse of the Qur'ān:

God [blessed and exalted be He] created the spirits [of men] two thousand years before their bodies. He made the spirits of Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭimah, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn and of the other *imāms* the highest and noblest of all. God then manifested them [i.e., the spirits of the Holy Family] to the heavens, earth and mountains and their light dazzled them. He then said to the heavens, earth and mountains, 'These are my beloved ones, my friends (*awliyā'*), and my proofs (*ḥujaj*) over my creation and the *imāms* of my human creatures. . . . For those who love them [i.e., accept their authority (*walāyah*)] I created my paradise, and for them that oppose them and show enmity towards them I created my fire'.¹⁷

The *amānah*, or divine charge, is the *imāms* themselves and their *walāyah*, which here means both their nearness to God as His friends (*awliyā'*) and also their authority (*walāyah*) over men. God continues in the tradition just cited to threaten those who claim the *imāms'* prerogatives and to give assurances to those who recognize their authority:

He who claims for himself their status with me and nearness to my majesty, him will I punish with a torment not inflicted on anyone in the worlds and will consign him to the lowest pit of my fire with the associators (*mushrikīn*). But they who accept their authority (*walāyah*). . . will I make them enter with the *imāms* into the gardens of my paradise. To those people will I grant whatever they please; my favor (*karāmah*) will I freely bestow on them and cause them to dwell nigh unto me. I shall make them intercessors for the sinners of my men and women servants. Their *walāyah* [i.e., the *imāms'*] is the charge (*amānah*) I laid upon my creation. Who among you, therefore, would bear it with all its burdens and claim it for himself instead of my chosen ones.¹⁸

The *Imām* then commented that the heavens and the earth refused to bear the heavy burden of this charge or to claim high status with the majesty of God. Man, however, accepted it; man here means those people who claimed the authority of the *imāms* falsely.¹⁹

To accept this divine primordial charge actually means to accept the *imāms* as the mediators between God and men, to confess that their authority is absolute both in the spiritual and temporal realms. So the charge was offered to all creation; all things except man accepted it in humility and submission. Man, however, did not accept this charge as belonging to its rightful claimants, but foolishly claimed it for himself. For this reason, we are told, the Qur'ān called man 'wrongdoing and foolish'.

The *amānah*, the divine charge to men, was transmitted from one prophet to another, each one transmitting it to the elect of his people. Thus it will continue until the coming of the *Mahdī*, who will be given authority to judge persons and nations according to how worthily they bore the *amānah*. Then the earth will be renewed and the covenant of God with men be kept forever more.

The tradition under consideration pushes the Qur'ānic symbolism to its extreme limits. The heavens and the earth are not symbolically offered the *amānah* but actually warned of the consequences of rejecting it or claiming it for themselves. They are addressed by God, and, exactly like men, they receive the divine threat and promise. All creation must indeed share in the history of salvation and judgment through the primordial choice to affirm or to reject the divine covenant with creation, which is the absolute lordship of God²⁰ and the authority of His vicegerents in creation, the *imāms*.

A somewhat haggadic interpretation of the crucial role of the *imāms* in the divine plan of judgment and redemption is presented by the sixth *Imām* in the same tradition we have been considering. His interpretation concerns the actual cause of the sin of our first parents and the means of their forgiveness. We are told that when God created Adam and Eve, He put them in paradise, the Garden of Eden. He commanded them not to eat of the tree of wheat, the Islāmic counterpart of the apple tree in Western tradition. They saw the *imāms* near the throne of Divine Majesty as forms of light glorifying God. Astonished, they asked who these persons were and were told to look

on the leg of the throne, where they saw their names inscribed ‘with the light of the Almighty’. Still marvelling, they exclaimed, ‘Oh how greatly favored are the people of this station by Thee, how well beloved by Thee and how noble are they in Thy sight!’²¹ God then described the *imāms* and their place in creation to Adam and Eve saying,

Had it not been for their sakes, I would not have created you. For these are the treasurers of my knowledge and the ones entrusted with my great secret. Beware that you not look at them with envy and desire their high status and favor with me lest you incur by this my censure; enter into disobedience of me and be among the wrongdoers.²²

The tradition goes on in the usual form of such exegetical tales to relate that Adam and Eve asked to see the fire which God had prepared for these wrongdoers, and the fire showed its awful means of torture. They were warned not to look with envious and covetous eyes at the luminous *imāms*, but Satan whispered in their hearts words of envy, covetousness and disobedience, and they were tempted and fell into sin. God, however, wished to forgive them, and He sent the angel Gabriel who reproached them for coveting the high station of those who were better than they, and counselled them to pray for forgiveness in the names of the Prophet Muḥammad, his daughter Fāṭimah, her husband, their two children, and their descendants, the *imāms*. The sixth *Imām* concluded with the words, ‘And God forgave them for He is the Forgiver, the Merciful.’²³

The wrong done through the sin of Adam and his wife could not be totally repaired. Before Adam’s sin only good things existed. The forbidden tree bore wheat, the good grain. When, however, Adam and his wife ate of the tree, barley grew in the wheat’s place, and only what was not touched by them remained wheat. The eighth *Imām*, commenting on the same tradition, said, ‘The source of all wheat is what they did not eat, and the source of all barley is what grew in the place where they did eat.’²⁴

It may be remembered that, as a consequence of Adam’s sin, Genesis tells us, ‘cursed is the ground because of you. . . .thorns and thistles it shall bring forth to you. . . .’²⁵ The natural harmony was disrupted,

and the essential goodness of creation corrupted; man had to struggle with the earth for the goods it had given freely and of its own accord. The Qur'ānic term for man's fall from paradise literally means to fall or come down from a higher into a lower place.²⁶

Like nature, man could no longer return to his essential purity and bliss, but could only hope to attain his paradisaical state on a different plane of existence in the life to come, the life after death. The sin of Adam, according to this tradition, was caused by another sin: envy and covetousness. Only after Adam and Eve wished to be like the *imāms* was Satan able to tempt them. A tradition from the eighth *Imām*, al-Riḍā, presents an even neater parallel, reporting that Adam looked with envy at the *imāms* and Eve at Fāṭimah. Whereupon God gave Satan authority over them, and they ate of the forbidden tree.²⁷

The sin of Adam and Eve is a mild form of the sin of subsequent humanity. The first pair committed the sin of envy by wishing to be like the *imāms*, but later men committed the graver sin of claiming the *imāms*' authority and high status for themselves. Thus the Qur'ānic reproach of foolishness and wrongdoing to man is aimed by the *imāms* at the members of the Muslim community who rejected the divine charge by rejecting the *imāms* themselves and showing hostility to them and their followers.

The divine *amānah*, looked at in the abstract, is the knowledge of God, His revelations, and the imamate of the twelve *Imāms* who are the true guardians of divine revelations and possessors of the knowledge of its true meaning. Concretely, the *amānah* is the *imāms* themselves even as they appeared in flesh and blood in the world. They embody in their actual lives the true way (*sunnah*) of all the prophets; after cessation of revelation, they alone could communicate divine knowledge to men. The eighth *Imām*, speaking of the *imāms*, declared that God had made them his trustees in His heavens and earths. He goes on to say, '... through our worship can God be truly worshipped, and without us God would have never been worshipped.'²⁸

In a tradition attributed to the sixth *Imām*, we find perhaps the clearest statement summarizing most of the ideas about the *imāms* with which we have been concerned so far. It therefore deserves to be

quoted in full. The *Imām* is supposed to have addressed one of his disciples as follows:

O Khaythamah, we are the tree of prophethood and house of mercy; we are the keys of wisdom, the essence of knowledge, and the locus of apostleship, the frequenting place of angels and repositories of the secret of God. We are God's trust (*wadī'ah*) to His servants, and His great sacred object (*ḥaram*). We are the covenant (*'ahd*) of God [with men], and he who keeps our covenant has kept God's covenant.²⁹

We have seen throughout this study that the *imāms* are greater and more exalted than all the prophets who came before Muḥammad. As they and Muḥammad, their father, were created of the same divine light, they are his equals. Together with him they constitute the cream of humanity, the best of all creatures, earthly as well as celestial beings. Thus if the Qur'ān connects obedience to God and love of God to the obedience and love of His Apostle,³⁰ *Shī'ī* tradition equates rejection of the *imāms* with the most unforgivable sin, the sin of association or *shirk*.³¹

Although the *imāms* were not, as were the prophets before them, recipients of revelation, they are the heirs of all previous revelations in their various tongues.³² Revelations, like the Qur'ān and the *Injīl* (Gospel), were revealed to be transmitted to men. They possess a hidden or esoteric as well as an apparent or exoteric meaning. The *imāms* alone among men know the hidden meaning of revelation, and thus in them alone can revelation be preserved and fully communicated to others. It is not true, however, that the *imāms* received no revelation. Like the prophets before them, they were given knowledge of the 'Great Name of God', signifying secret knowledge that the prophets communicated only to their vicegerents (*awṣiyā'*) and to no one else.³³ God, we are told on the authority of the sixth *Imām*, has a great name composed of seventy-three letters. Seventy-two of these were communicated to the prophets of old; one remains hidden in His knowledge, disclosed to no one. Prophets like Jesus and Moses received a few letters each, through which they were able to perform miracles and prove the truthfulness of their missions to their people. Muḥammad, the last of the prophets, inherited all seventy-two letters

communicated to earlier prophets. These letters he communicated to the *imāms* after him.

The *imāms* likewise received an inheritance of secret knowledge passed from the Prophet to 'Alī and Fāṭimah, and from them to the rest of the *imāms*. One of these actual scrolls of written revelation is the tablet (*lawḥ*) of Fāṭimah. It was a tablet of emerald which God sent as a gift to her father on the occasion of the birth of Ḥusayn. It contained the names of her husband, 'Alī, and the *imāms* after him and described their hard lot in the world. Jābir b. 'Abdallāh al-Anṣārī, one of the famous companions of the Prophet, who lived until the days of the fifth *Imām*, made a copy on a leather scroll. The fifth *Imām* summoned him one day and recited from memory the entire document. Then he assured Jābir that the tablet was in his possession and would be passed down from one *imām* to the next until it reached the *Mahdī*.³⁴

Another revealed text is the scroll (*muṣḥaf*) of Fāṭimah.³⁵ After the death of the Prophet, Fāṭimah was distraught with grief. An angel (in some sources, Gabriel) came to console her. He told her of all that was to take place in the world after her; and 'Alī wrote down everything she heard from the angel until he completed the text of the sacred scroll. The sixth *Imām*, on whose authority this tradition is related, described the *muṣḥaf* of Fāṭimah as a scroll three times larger than the Qur'ān, but not duplicating it in any way. It has nothing concerning legal sanctions (*ḥalāl*) and prohibitions (*ḥarām*). It contains knowledge of all that is to be until the Day of Resurrection.³⁶

The white *jafr*,³⁷ a scroll containing the tablets of Abraham and Moses, the Psalms (*zabūr*) of David and the Gospel (*Injil*) of Jesus, is also traditionally cited as inherited revelation; it does not, however, contain a Qur'ān. It is an inheritance from Adam, containing the knowledge of all prophets and vicegerents and the knowledge of the learned among the children of Israel who had passed away.³⁸ There is also a red *jafr*, a vessel containing the armor of the Apostle of God, the staff and actual tablets of Moses, and the shirt of Joseph. This latter *jafr* is a symbol of temporal authority, as the other is a symbol of prophetic gifts.

Finally, there is the *jāmi'ah*, said to be a long scroll, which may contain esoteric knowledge that the Prophet possessed but did not communicate to the rest of the community. It is supposed to have been

dictated by him to ‘Alī. The *jāmi‘ah*, from its title, appears to be a general text containing all knowledge, even knowledge of legal sanctions and prohibitions. It is, we are told, seventy cubits long as measured by the arm of the Apostle of God.³⁹

However exalted the position of the *imāms* may be, many traditions aim at distinguishing them from prophets, and especially from prophets like Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad, sent as messengers with a specific revelation intended for other men. Among the texts considered above, only one, the *muṣḥaf* of Fāṭimah, can claim to be an original revelation. Yet the *muṣḥaf* of Fāṭimah cannot be considered a new revelation because it does not bring any new law (*sharī‘ah*), nor was it intended for the general community of Muslims or any people other than the *imāms* themselves. The red *jafr*, according to a tradition ascribed to Ja‘far al-Šādiq, ‘. . . will be opened by the man of the sword [i.e., the *Mahdī*] for the sword’.⁴⁰

The traditions we are examining in this study, and many like them, have led some members of the *Shī‘ī* community to go so far in their devotion to the *imāms* as to regard them as gods in human form. The earliest awareness of such extremist dangers is expressed in a fairly well known tradition attributed to the Prophet and found in *Shī‘ī* as well as *Sunnī ḥadīth* collections. One day the Prophet addressed the Prince of the Faithful, saying:

‘O ‘Alī! by Him in whose hand my soul is, had it not been that some groups of my community would say of you what Christians had said of Jesus, son of Mary, I would say of you today things such that you would not pass by a group of Muslims without their taking the dust from under your feet seeking by it good favor (*barakah*).⁴¹

The sixth *Imām*, Ja‘far, horrified by the views of the extremists (*ghulāt*) and delegationists (*mufawwiḍah*),⁴² said:

God curse the extremists (*ghulāt*) and the delegationists (*mufawwiḍah*) for they took lightly disobedience to God. They disbelieved (*kafarū*) in Him and associated others (*ashrakū*) with Him. They went astray and led others astray wishing to escape the performance [of religious and legal] duties (*farā‘id*) and the rendering of obligations (*ḥuqūq*) [of God].⁴³

There were and still are many Muslims who reject most of the claims made by, and for, the *imāms* and accord them scant recognition. It is hardly enough, in the *Shī'ī* view, to regard the *imāms* just as good men and members of the Prophet's family. Rather, *Shī'īs* regard the supremacy of the *imāms* over all the men and their office as leaders and teachers of the community as essential to true Islām. Thus there were those who went so far in their veneration of the *imāms* as to accord them worship with God, and also those who rejected most of the traditions making high claims for the *imāms* as later and often non-Islāmic fabrications. Between these two extremes, moderate *Shī'ī* '*ulamā*' have for centuries been struggling for a more sober view of the *imāms*, one which would preserve their authority (*walāyah*) in the community without losing sight of their human character and limitations.

The sixth *Imām*, we are told, when asked if the *imāms* knew that which is hidden (*al-ghayb*), vehemently denied this, saying, 'When knowledge is opened for us we know, and when it is withdrawn, we do not know. . . .For God alone knows that which is hidden, and no one else knows anything save what God has granted him to know.'⁴⁴

2.3 THE PERSONALITY OF THE *Imām* AND SIGNS OF HIS IMAMATE

For *Shī'ī* Islām, the doctrine of the *imamate* is an integral part of the doctrine of prophethood. Although *imāms* cannot exist without prophets (of whom they are vicegerents or representatives [*awṣiyā'*]), they play a much more vital role than prophets in the creation, life and eschatology of the world. Like the prophet, the *imām* possesses the gift of miracles as proof of his claims and a sign of divine favor. Like only the greatest of the prophets, the *imām* is infallible, or, more precisely, protected (*ma'sūm*) from error. In a long polemical tradition,⁴⁵ the eighth *Imām*, 'Alī al-Riḍā, describes the *imām* thus:

. . . if then a servant has been chosen by God for the management of the affairs of His servants, God would open his breast for that and place in his heart the springs of wisdom and inspire him with knowledge in full measure. Thereafter, he [the *imām*] will be

incapable of giving wrong council or be amiss, from the right direction. For he is infallible and fortified, rightly guided and well succored, protected from sins and errors. God had favored him with all this that he may be a proof (*ḥujjah*) for His servants and His witness over His creation: 'That is the bounty of God; He gives it unto whomsoever He will; and God is of bounty abounding.'⁴⁶

In the same tradition, al-Riḍā describes the physical characteristics of the *imām* as a sign of his imamate. The passage is very interesting and brief enough to be quoted in its entirety:

The *imām* has signs (*'alāmāt*). Of all men he should be most knowing, most wise, most pious, most courageous, most generous and most prayerful. He should be born circumcised, clean and pure. He should be able to see what is behind him as he is able to see what is before him. He should cast no shadow. When he falls from his mother's womb, he should fall on the two palms of his hands [i.e., in prostration (*sujūd*)] raising his voice with the two *shahādas*,⁴⁷ professions of faith. Only his eyes, but not his heart, should sleep and he should not have wet dreams. He should be one spoken to by the angel [Gabriel] (*muḥaddath*).⁴⁸ The mail (*dir'*) of the Apostle of God should fit him, and his sword should be *dhū al-fiqār*. Neither his urine nor his feces should be seen, for God had charged the earth to swallow all that comes out of his body. His odor should be more fragrant than musk. He should be dearer to men than their own selves; and he should be more loving and compassionate towards them than their own fathers and mothers. He should rule by what is commanded [by God] and be most strict in the avoidance of that which is prohibited (*ḥarām*). His prayers should be answered, so that were he to pray for a hard rock to be split in two, it should be so. He should possess a scroll (*ṣahīfah*) containing the names of all his followers (*Shi'ah*) and another containing the names of his enemies till the Day of Resurrection. He should possess the *jāmi'ah* [see above] which is a scroll seventy cubits long and containing the knowledge of all that the children of Adam need. He should possess the greater [white] *jafr* and the smaller [red] *jafr* which is the whole skin of the sheep containing all branches of knowledge, even the price [or compensation] (*arsh*) of the smallest injury (*khadsh*), and

the punishment for an offense as one flogging (*jaldah*), one half a flogging and even one third of a flogging. He should possess the scroll (*mushāf*) of Fāṭimah.⁴⁹

In this tradition we see clearly that the *imām* not only possesses all the qualities of the perfect man or prophet, but combines with these all the special distinctions of the *imām*. In his piety, spiritual perfection and special favors (*karamāt*), the *imām* is like the perfect man. In his physical characteristics of valor, cleanness, generosity and general excellence, he resembles the perfect man not just of the Islāmic tradition but also of other traditions where this concept is found.⁵⁰ In the signs, or regalia, of his temporal power, the *imām*, although bearing some resemblance to the Jewish messiah, actually manifests his unique position in the history of religion. He is the perfect ruler possessing the actual power, wisdom and authority of Muḥammad, the Prophet and ruler: the ideal head of a community. The *imām* is a powerful expression of the hopes, aspirations and spiritual ideals not only of Muslims but also of religious men everywhere. Viewed in the context of the historical development of human spirituality, he stands at the summit of a mature spiritual elevation and personifies a human ideal nourished by human faith and culture, but never to be realized until creation has reached its moment of readiness for the final transformation.

We have seen in this chapter the central position that the *imām* occupies in *Shīʿī* Muslim piety, theological and religious thought, the role he plays in defining right conduct according to the *Sharīʿah* and his significance to the total *Weltanschauung*. Much space and attention has been devoted to the general concept of the *imām* in order finally to elucidate the specific personality, life and death of *Imām* Ḥusayn, the main concern of this study. Ḥusayn, the third *Imām*, occupies a unique place among the *imāms* of *Shīʿī* Muslims. He was brought up and nourished in a special way, as we shall see, by the Prophet from whom he directly received the prophetic inheritance. He was chosen by God to be the father of the *imāms* rather than his older brother Ḥasan. His highest distinction, however, is that he is the master of martyrs who made the greatest sacrifice in the way of God. Indeed, if the concept or ideal of the *imām* embodies all spiritual and physical perfections for the

Shī'īs, then *Imām Ḥusayn* can be regarded as the living perfection, or concretization, of this ideal. Many of the ideals and ideas discussed in this chapter will appear again, but in full life, with personality and meaning, as we follow the 'Master of the Youths of Paradise' from birth to martyrdom and beyond, to final vindication.

The Sigh of the Sorrowful *Nafas al-Mahmūm*¹

The martyrdom of *Imām* Ḥusayn has been regarded by the *Shīʿī* community as a cosmic event around which the entire history of the world, prior as well as subsequent to it, revolves. Furthermore, this event has been regarded as divinely preordained: through it God's justice and mercy are manifested, and hence man's redemption and condemnation are achieved. It was stated at the outset of this discussion that, in some way, all suffering may be regarded as a means of human redemption. This redemptive suffering as manifested in the tragedy of Muḥarram, has been viewed in two ways. First, the death of Ḥusayn has been regarded as a sacrifice in the struggle (*jihād*) in the way of God for the right against the wrong, for justice and truth against wrongdoing and falsehood. Ḥusayn has '...redeemed the religion (*dīn*) of his grandfather with his soul, family and children. . . .'² Through his death, moreover, the foundations of the Umayyad kingdom crumbled. Ḥusayn died, as we saw in the previous chapter, in order that Islām might be preserved as an ideal to inspire all subsequent generations of Muslims to strive for its realization.

The second way in which Ḥusayn's death may be regarded as a redemptive act is through the participation of the faithful in the sorrows of the *Imām* and his beloved family. It will be seen, moreover, that not only mankind, but all creation as well, is called upon to participate in this tragic event. (We have often emphasized this point; it will be the aim of this chapter to study in detail the various means of this participation.

We shall first examine traditions asserting the great merit of weeping for Ḥusayn's calamity and the participation of all things in mourning his death. Secondly, we shall discuss the means of commemorating this tragedy through an examination of the *ta'zīyah majālis* celebration, discussing briefly the development of the *ta'zīyah majālis* (memorial services) and describing a typical *ta'zīyah majālis*. In the third part of this chapter we shall consider the place of poetry in the

Muḥarram ritual. We shall first discuss the special merit of composing and reciting poetry in memory of Ḥusayn, then we shall analyze at some length a few of the major themes, techniques and structures of this special genre of literature. Finally, we shall deal at some length with the *zīyārah* (pilgrimage) ritual, its performance, and some of the main themes in the *zīyārah* literature. In the appendix to this chapter (Appendix D), we shall give a partial translation of a *ta'zīyah majlis*, some examples of Persian elegies, and selections from the text of an important *zīyārah* prayer.

5.1 THE MERIT OF WEEPING FOR ḤUSAYN

In Islāmic tradition *jihād* or the struggle in the way of God, whether as armed struggle, or any form of opposition of the wrong, is generally regarded as one of the essential requirements of a person's faith as a Muslim. *Shī'ī* tradition carried this requirement a step further, making *jihād* one of the pillars or foundations (*arkān*) of religion.³ If, therefore, Ḥusayn's struggle against the Umayyad regime must be regarded as an act of *jihād*, then, in the mind of devotees, the participation of the community in his suffering and its ascent to the truth of his message must also be regarded as an extension of the holy struggle of the *Imām* himself. The *ḥadīth* from which we took the title of this chapter states this point very clearly. Ja'far al-Ṣādiq is said to have declared to al-Mufaḍḍal, one of his closest disciples, 'The sigh of the sorrowful for the wrong done us is an act of praise (*tasbīḥ*) [of God], his sorrow for us is an act of worship, and his keeping of our secret is a struggle (*jihād*) in the way of God'; the *Imām* then added, 'This *ḥadīth* should be inscribed in letters of gold.'⁴

As one of the essentials of faith, *jihād* must be regarded as an act of worship, bringing high rewards in the hereafter with God. Thus *Shī'ī* sources speak of the reward (*thawāb*) for weeping for the sufferings and afflictions of the Holy Family and especially for the death of the martyred *Imām* Ḥusayn.⁵

The *Imām* himself declared, we are told, 'I am the martyr of tears (*qatīl al-'ibrah*), no man of faith remembers me but that he weeps.'⁶ But for those who do indeed remember Ḥusayn's calamity and weep for it,

again the *Imām* is said to have promised, 'There is no servant (*abd*) whose eyes shed one drop of tears for us, but that God will grant him for it the reward of the countless ages in paradise.'⁷ Weeping is to be a reminder to the faithful of the sufferings of the *imāms*; it is the remembrance more than the weeping that is important. Thus we read that the sixth *Imām* said, 'Anyone who remembers us or if we are mentioned in his presence, and a tear as small as the wing of a gnat falls from his eye, God would forgive all his sins even if they were as the foam of the sea.'⁸ We shall often have to return to this theme in this chapter. The point we wish to stress, however, is that after the death of *Imām* Ḥusayn, both the *imāms* and their followers lived in fear and had to propagate their teachings in secret. It was no longer easy to express their opposition to Umayyad and later 'Abbāsīd rule through armed struggle. (The only vehicle was the secret, yet active, participation in the sufferings of *ahl al-bayt* through weeping and other means of remembrance.)

The first to provide a powerful example of this incessant sorrow was the fourth *Imām*, 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn. The emphasis on sorrowful remembrance of the great tragedy of Karbalā¹ owes its beginning to him, for he himself lived this tragedy to its bitter end. It was he who first carried this expression of sorrow from a mere shedding of tears into an actual participation of the faithful, not only in the sorrows of the *Imām*, but also in their persecutions: In a classic statement attributed to him, he first declares that whoever weeps for the death of his father, Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī, God would grant him large mansions in paradise to live therein eternally. He goes on to say:

{ . . . and any man of faith (*mu'min*) whose eyes shed tears until they run down copiously on his face for a harm we have suffered at the hands of our enemies, God will ensure for him a place of righteous mansions to dwell therein for countless ages in paradise.) And, any man of faith who may suffer harm for our sake and his eyes shed tears for such harm . . . God would surely take away all pain from his face on the Day of Resurrection and would protect him from His wrath and the fire.⁹

'Alī, son of Ḥusayn, was considered the greatest of weepers, for he mourned his father for forty years. Whenever food was brought before

him, he would remember his father's sufferings and weep until his food became wet with his tears. He would repeat at the same time, 'The son of the Apostle of God [Ḥusayn] was killed hungry, the son of the Apostle of God was killed thirsty.'¹⁰ One day he went out to the wilderness accompanied by his servant; he prostrated himself on the ground and began to sob loudly until his face was bathed with his tears. The servant then protested that if his master would not cease his weeping he would surely perish. But the sorrowful *Imām* replied that Jacob was a prophet and had twelve children; when God temporarily absented one of them, his hair turned white and his eyes became blind. Yet he, the *Imām*, saw with his own eyes his father and seventeen of his cousins killed; so how could he not weep for them.¹¹

Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn provided the powerful example for all weepers here on earth, but after his death his example became but a memory of the past. The actual continuity of sorrow between the Holy Family and their devotees is most powerfully presented in the mother of the martyred *Imām*, Fāṭimah the Radiant. We observed that she remains as the mistress of the House of Sorrows, not only in this world but in the world to come as well. We shall return again at much greater length to her role after her death in the following chapter. Her tears will kindle God's wrath against her son's murderers, evoking His mercy and forgiveness for the *Imām's* community of mourners. Still, however, we are told that she began her long lamentations in paradise immediately after his death, and thus will she continue till the day of his final vindication. All things weep in emulation of her tears, and the tears of the faithful here on earth are but a way of sharing in her sorrows and a means of bringing consolation to her broken heart.

Fāṭimah's incessant weeping and its effect on all creation is dramatically described by the sixth *Imām*. Al-Šādiq declared to Abū Baṣīr, one of his prominent followers, that whenever he looked at the children of Fāṭimah, his eyes would well up with tears for their hard lot in this world. He then wept as he embraced his own son Ismāʿīl, who evoked that memory. The sixth *Imām* continued:

. . . for truly Fāṭimah continues to weep for him [Ḥusayn], sobbing so loudly that hell would utter such a loud cry, which, had its keepers [the angels] not been ready for it, . . . its smoke and fire

would have escaped and burned all that is on the face of the earth. Thus they contain hell as long as Fāṭimah continues to weep . . . for hell would not calm down until her loud weeping had quieted.¹²

The seas would come nigh, bursting into one another, had the angels charged to watch over them not rushed to contain their waves and cool down the burning fire of their sorrow with their wings. The angels, likewise, weep for Fāṭimah's weeping, praising God and invoking his mercy. The *Imām* addressed his disciple, saying, 'O Abū Baṣīr, would you not also wish to console Fāṭimah?' The two wept together for a long time until the man left the *Imām*, his heart heavy with grief.¹³

It was stressed in this study that the House of Sorrows includes not only all of humanity, but all of creation, both the universe and the heavenly realms, this world and the world to come. Further, all things are integrated into the drama of martyrdom and endowed with feelings and personality not very different from human feelings and emotions. Here we see myth attaining its highest expression, where men and inanimate things play an active role in a universal drama which transcends all limitations of time, space and human imagination. The sixth *Imām* asserted that when Ḥusayn was killed, all things, visible and invisible, paradise and hell, and the seven heavens and seven earths with all their inhabitants, wept for him. Specifying even more exactly the manner and duration of this great mourning, he said to another one of his close followers, Zirārah b. A'yun:

O Zirārah, the heavens wept for forty days with blood.¹⁴ The earth wept for forty days as it was covered in black [literally, in mourning]; the sun similarly wept for forty days with eclipses and redness. The mountains were torn asunder and scattered, and the seas burst.¹⁵

The *Imām* then described the terrible sorrow and violence of hell and the continuous weeping of the angels, concluding, ' . . . had it not been for the *hujaj* [proofs or witnesses] of God on earth, the earth would have split open and melted away with all its inhabitants.'¹⁶

As liturgical materials, these traditions all exhibit powerful directness of language and insistent repetition of ideas aimed at evoking deep sorrow in the participants, a psychological and emotional state of

total immersion in the spirit of the *ta'zīyah* celebration. Most of them paint a vivid picture of the tragedy and its effects, first on members of the Holy Family themselves, then on humanity in general, and finally on nature and the entire universe. Any tradition could provide the themes needed to remind the faithful of their own part in the sacred drama and thus provide the basis for a *ta'zīyah majlis*, or memorial service. It may perhaps be of some interest to describe briefly the various themes of one such celebrated tradition.

The tradition we will now consider is a dialogue between the eighth *Imām*, 'Alī al-Riḍā, and one of his disciples, al-Rayyān Ibn Shabīb. The man came to visit the *Imām* on the first day of Muḥarram and the *Imām* asked him if he were fasting. Ibn Shabīb said that he was not, and asked why he should fast on that day in particular. The *Imām* observed that it was the day on which Zechariah begged God, saying 'Lord, give me of Thy goodness a goodly offspring. Yea, Thou hearest prayer.'¹⁷ The *Imām* went on to say that men (that is, the Arabs before Islām) had prohibited fighting during this month, yet Muslims had killed the descendant of their Prophet during it and had taken their women captive. Thus they violated the sanctity of this sacred month.

Having set the tone of sorrow, the *Imām* then addressed his companion: ' . . . O Ibn Shabīb, if you would weep for anything, weep for Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, for he was slain like a lamb, and with him were slain eighteen men of his family the like of whom could not be found on the face of the earth.'¹⁸ The *Imām* related the tragic event and the sorrow it should evoke in every heart to the cosmic expression of grief, declaring that the seven heavens and earths wept for Ḥusayn. He stressed the necessity for human grief; mankind should join that universal chorus of mourners.

The tradition under consideration provides a complete picture not only of *Shī'ī* Muḥarram piety, but *Shī'ī* hopes and bitter disappointments as well. The *Imām* continued, asserting that four thousand angels came down from heaven to lend support to Ḥusayn against his enemy, but they found him dead. They were charged by God to guard his grave and weep for him until the day of the appearance of the *Mahdī*, the avenger of Ḥusayn's blood. ' . . . They shall be among his supporters with their war cry, "O the revenge for the blood of Ḥusayn."¹⁹ Then

the *Imām* returned to the original theme of weeping and informed Ibn Shabīb that he had been told by his father on the authority of his fathers that when Ḥusayn died the heaven rained down blood and red clay. The *Imām* assured his disciple that if he would weep for Ḥusayn and make a pilgrimage to his tomb, God would forgive all his sins no matter how grave and numerous they might be. Finally, stressing the intimate relationship of the *imāms* with their followers in the House of Sorrows, the *Imām* told Ibn Shabīb, ‘. . . If it would please you to have the reward (*thawāb*) of those who were martyred with Ḥusayn, say whenever you remember “Oh how I wish I were with them [that is, the martyrs of Karbalā’] that I may have achieved great victory.”’ To emphasize further this point, the *Imām* counselled his disciple, ‘. . . If you wish to be with us in our high stations in paradise, rejoice for our joy and grieve for our sorrow, and hold fast to our authority (*walāyah*); for even if a man would take a stone as his master (*walī*) God would bring him together with it for reckoning on the Day of Resurrection.’²⁰

It must be clear from our discussion so far in this chapter that sorrow and weeping for the martyrdom of *Imām* Ḥusayn and the suffering of the Holy Family became a source of salvation for those who chose to participate in this unending flow of tears. For human beings, this is a choice which they could make or refuse, thereby choosing salvation or judgment.) The rest of creation, however, is by divine decree the stage, as it were, upon which this drama of martyrdom is forever enacted. By being part of the sacred drama, nature itself becomes sacred. This sacralization of nature may be seen symbolically in the sanctity of the days of Muḥarram, the sacralization of time, and of Karbalā’, the sacralization of space.

It was observed in the previous chapter that *Imām* Ḥusayn and his family encamped in Karbalā’ on the second of Muḥarram; this may be regarded as the beginning of the end of the tragic ordeal. As Ḥusayn was destined to suffer martyrdom in Muḥarram, even before time began (at least calendrical time) so the days of this month, especially the first ten, have always belonged to sacred time. We shall therefore begin the second section of this study by examining a few traditions that deal specifically with the sanctity of ‘*Āshūrā*’.

5.2 THE *Ta'zīyah* CELEBRATION: ITS GROWTH AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The death of Ḥusayn serves as a strong basis for identity and cohesion in the *Shī'ī* community,¹ as well as a basis for the integration of all creation into the community's spiritual history. (Great emphasis is laid on keeping the memory of this tragic event alive by all possible means, in spite of opposition, hardship and persecution.) From the beginning, the impetus was provided by the *imāms* themselves, who promised great rewards for the tears of the devotees. The promise of eternal bliss and security nourished and even encouraged the hopes and aspirations of the community for a better life even in this world. Hence, the concept of *jihād* (holy struggle) gained a deeper and more personal meaning. Whether through weeping, the composition and recitation of poetry, showing compassion and doing good to the poor or carrying arms, the *Shī'ī* Muslim saw himself helping the *Imām* in his struggle against the wrong (*ẓulm*) and gaining for himself the same merit (*thawāb*) of those who actually fought and died for him. The *ta'zīyah*, in its broader sense the sharing of the entire life of the suffering family of Muḥammad, has become for the *Shī'ī* community the true meaning of compassion. Empathy with the *imāms* is expressed through weeping and recitation of elegies and the performance of the entire *ta'zīyah* ritual.)

Through ritual, religious men and women can relive an event in their spiritual history and renew their relationship with it. Through the enactment of an important event of the past, the 'now' of a religious community may be extended back into the past and forward into the future. Thus, history is no longer the mere flow of happenings in time without purpose or direction. Rather, through the present moment, that is, the ritualistic moment, time and space become unified and events move toward a definite goal. In the ritualistic moment, serial time becomes the bridge connecting primordial time and its special history with the timeless eternity of the future. This eternal fulfillment of time becomes the goal of human time and history.)

It may be argued with only partial justification that Islām provides few such moments for the community of the pious, apart from the five

daily prayers, the fast of Ramaḍān, and the pilgrimage ritual of the ḥajj; the *Shi'ī* group of this community has more than made up for whatever deficiency might exist.²¹

The renewal of the relationship of the pious *Shi'ī* Muslims with their *imāms*, who lived in the long ago of the community's history, can be achieved at any moment in time through the *ta'zīyah* ritual, but especially on the day of 'Āshūrā'. Every Muḥarram becomes the month of the tragedy of Karbalā' and every 'Āshūrā' the day of the martyrdom of *Imām* Ḥusayn.

The special significance of the day of 'Āshūrā' arises from the sufferings and martyrdom of the third *Imām*, his family and friends. Very early Islāmic tradition has claimed for that day high status: it was said that on it many supernatural events took place. Such claims were soon countered by the gravity and character that the day of 'Āshūrā' acquired. It is to be observed not as a festive occasion of joy and blessing, but as the day of sorrow and mourning. Indeed, the tenth of Muḥarram should not resemble any other day of festivity; there is no observance of special acts of worship, such as on the days of Ramaḍān. It is a day on which only sad remembrance should be observed.¹

One day, one of the companions of the sixth *Imām* came to see him and found him exceedingly sad, tears running down his cheeks. The *Imām* reminded his friend that his sorrow was for the day of 'Āshūrā', the day of afflictions. The man asked if one should fast on that day, and the *Imām* specifically enjoined his disciple to experience hunger and hardship by not eating or drinking, but not to observe that day as a regular fast. Rather, he counselled his follower to break his fast an hour after the mid-afternoon prayers with a piece of hard bread and a drink of water. 'For it is at that time of day that the tragic ordeal for Ḥusayn and his companions was over as they lay dead on the ground, thirty men of the family of the Prophet and their companions.'²²

Here again we see a definite tension within the tradition. We are sometimes told that the day of 'Āshūrā' was a day on which God performed special acts of creation, or manifested His mercy and forgiveness to the prophets of old. We shall examine a few examples of this kind of tradition presently. In the tradition just cited, the *Imām* declared that, ' . . . God in His wisdom created light on Friday, the first

of Ramaḍān, and darkness on Wednesday, the day of 'Āshūrā'.²³ 'Āshūrā' is a day of darkness and disorder, in the universe, On it, darkness, the symbol of evil and chaos, was created; on it, after the death of Ḥusayn, the laws of nature were suspended as the sun darkened in mid-day, the stars collided with one another, and the heavens were troubled.

According to a very early tradition already referred to,²⁴ the Prophet was told that when Ḥusayn died, '. . . The earth shall be shaken from its foundations, the mountains shall quiver and be disturbed, the seas will rise up in furious waves, and the heavens shall quake with their denizens, all in anger and sorrow for thee O Muḥammad, and for what thy progeny shall suffer after thee. . . .'²⁵ These were not simply portents showing the gravity of the event, as we saw in Chapter 3 above, but a genuine manifestation of the grief and angry vengeance of entire creation. The tradition goes on to assert that all things would then seek permission from God to lend support to the wronged *Imām* and his companions; but God would insist that vengeance is His, and will mete out such terrible torments for these evildoers as not to be compared with the torments of any other people.

The *imāms* strongly insist that the day of 'Āshūrā' should not be taken as a day of joy and festivity; according to some non-*Shī'ī* traditions, it seems that the day was regarded as such.²⁶ There is a *ḥadīth* reported from 'Alī, the first *Imām*, on the authority of Maytham al-Tammār, who told it to a woman, Jabalah al-Makkīyyah. She asked how it should be that people would regard the day of 'Āshūrā' as a day of joy and blessing. Maytham wept and answered:

. . . They shall fabricate a *ḥadīth* [prophetic saying] claiming that it was on that day that God forgave Adam, but in fact, He forgave him during the month of Dhū-l Ḥijjah [i.e., the month of pilgrimage and feast of sacrifice]. They shall assert wrongly that it was the day on which God accepted David's repentance, but that also was in Dhū-l Ḥijjah.²⁷

Then Maytham continued to refute the claims that on the tenth of Muḥarram, Noah's ark rested on dry land, and God split the Red Sea for the children of Israel, assigning different dates to these events.²⁸

The day of 'Āshūrā' according to the eighth *Imām*, must be ob-

served as a day of inactivity, sorrow and total disregard for worldly cares. It may be that the unique character of this day has evolved as a reaction to traditions which sought to assert its sacred and joyous aspects. It may also be that the ancient Jewish ('*Āshūrā*') observance, characterized by grief, fasting and total inactivity, played a role in the growth of Shi'ī ('*Āshūrā*') piety. Furthermore, ('*Āshūrā*') is the only day in the Islamic calendar, to our knowledge, clearly stipulated as a day of total rest. Of course, this injunction has never been taken literally. Rather, the entire period of ('*Āshūrā*'), the first ten days of Muḥarram, is full of activity but of a special kind.

It must also be remembered that the month of Muḥarram, even in pre-Islāmic times, was regarded as a sacred month. Let us conclude our remarks by quoting at some length the stipulations of the eighth *Imām* concerning the observance of the day of ('*Āshūrā*')

He who abandons any cares for his needs on the day of ('*Āshūrā*'), God would fulfill all his needs in this world and the next. He who takes the day of ('*Āshūrā*') as the day of his afflictions and grief and weeping, God would make the Day of Resurrection a day of his joy and exaltation, and we shall be a comfort and security for him in paradise. But he who calls that day a day of blessing, and on it stores any provisions in his house, these provisions would not be blessed. He would be moreover consigned along with Yazīd, ('Ubaydallāh Ibn Ziyād and 'Umar Ibn Sa'd to the deepest pit of the fire.²⁹

The manifestation of sorrow and grief by actually weeping for the Holy Family of Muḥammad needs an impetus. We have seen that one strong aid for creating the proper atmosphere of sorrow has been to relate one or more of the many traditions attributed to the *imāms*, enjoining their followers to lament Ḥusayn's martyrdom and the sufferings of other members of his family. By emphasizing one or several aspects of the tragedy of Karbalā', the devotees are reminded of the object of their sorrow. Soon special memorial services (the *ta'zīyah majālis*) developed, giving this religio-political phenomenon a rich ritualistic character.

Tradition insists that the *ta'zīyah majālis*, or commemorative services for the death of Ḥusayn, started immediately after his death. On their way to Kūfah, the women and children of the martyred *Imām*

stopped by the headless bodies, left unburied, and raised the lament for him and his companions. It is reported that before leaving Karbalā', Ibn Sa'd prayed over the dead of his camp and buried them; but he left Ḥusayn and his companions unburied until three days later, when people of the tribe of Asad, living in the neighborhood, buried Ḥusayn where he was and dug a separate mass grave for the rest of his companions near him.³⁰ The last act of cruelty of the Umayyad general, who denied the grandson of the Prophet the last rites of a proper burial, is mentioned in many poems and popular traditions.

In Kūfah, moreover, the men and women of the city met the captives of the Holy Family beating their heads and breasts and weeping in deep remorse for their own treachery. According to the historian al-Ya'qūbī, it was then that the movement of the repenters (*al-tawwābūn*) began.³¹ This movement was to play an important role in the subsequent history of the Muslim community and, more importantly for our purpose, in the development of the *ta'zīyah* tradition through the unswerving devotion of its members to the memory of the son of the Apostle of God and their equally unswerving determination to avenge his blood.

In Damascus, at the house of Yazīd, his own women joined those of Ḥusayn in a lamentation which lasted seven days. The *Via Dolorosa*, along which the *Imām* and his family had walked from Medina to Karbalā', was again traversed back to the holy city by way of Damascus by the Holy Family, this time bereft of its leader. We are told that, on their way back to Medina, the women and children of Ḥusayn requested their kind escort to pass by Karbalā'; there, forty days after the tragic event, they held the first lamentation at his grave.³² In Medina, the people of the city met the captives with lamentations and grief. From that time onward Medina became a house of mourning for the clan of Hāshim and their supporters until al-Mukhtār sent the head of Ibn Ziyād to 'Alī, Ḥusayn's son.

During the Umayyad period, the memory of the death of Ḥusayn was kept in the homes of the *imāms* and other members of the Hāshimite clan. Poets frequented the homes of the *imāms* and led the lamentation (*niyāḥah*) sessions with their verses. The *imāms* provided the liturgical basis for this new manifestation of popular piety in the

traditions already discussed in this study and many others like them. This period was a formative one for *Shī'ī* piety and the growth of its distinctive religious identity. Men like the fourth *Imām*, Zayn al-*Ābidīn*, and his descendants after him expressed their protest against the ruling authorities through their tears and the tears of their followers in private gatherings, where the sufferings and wrongs inflicted on the Holy Family were remembered and grieved. (It was in this early period that the *ta'zīyah* tradition was established; it was only a matter of time before it became a public form of religious piety.³³)

In the early stages of *Ābbāsīd* rule, the *ta'zīyah* celebrations were fostered and encouraged by the new rulers themselves. For political reasons, and probably out of genuine religious feelings, at least for some of the early architects of the *Ābbāsīd* empire, the caliphs of the house of *Ābbās* championed the cause of the *Hāshimītes*. Through this cause they sought to legitimize their own claims to authority. Thus *ta'zīyah* sessions were at first held openly, but when this political weapon began to threaten *Ābbāsīd* claims to authority, rulers such as al-Mutawakkil (847–861 A.D.) did all they could to crush this pietistic movement. Al-Mutawakkil destroyed the tomb of *Ḥusayn* and forbade pilgrimages to the shrine. Yet all his efforts served to strengthen the *ta'zīyah* tradition rather than to crush it.³⁴

As *Shī'ism* spread and *Shī'ī* rulers, or rulers with strong *Shī'ī* sympathies, arose, the *ta'zīyah* celebrations gained popularity. In Iraq, the *Buwayhīds* gave the *ta'zīyah* celebrations their encouragement and patronage. Thus we read that in 352/963 on the day of *Āshūrā*, the *Buwayhīd* ruler Mu'izz al-Dawlah closed the markets of Baghdad and draped them in black sackcloth. *Shī'ī* men and women paraded the streets in solemn processions, mourning the martyred *Imām Ḥusayn*.³⁵ Similar practices and customs appeared in Syria in the *Ḥamdānīd* court, in Egypt during *Fāṭimīd* rule, and later in Iran with the rise of the *Safavīd* dynasty.

In the first and second centuries of the *hijrah*, lamentation sessions (*majālis al-niyāḥah*) were held in the houses of the people of the Holy Family, and much later in the shrines of the *imāms*. With the third century, we witness the appearance of the professional mourner (*nā'iḥ*) who chanted elegies, related stories of the sufferings of the *imāms*, and in time read one of the martyrdom narratives (*maqātil*) which were

written specifically for that purpose. Such professional leaders of the *ta'zīyah majālis* were also known as *qurrā' al-Ḥusayn* (readers for Ḥuṣayn).³⁶ These leaders contributed much to the growth of *Shī'ī* popular piety, especially to the crystallization of the Muḥarram cultus. It is related that one day, as the mosque of Baghdad was crowded with people celebrating a *ta'zīyah majlis*, a man came and asked for a well-known *nā'ih*. The old man declared that he had seen Fāṭimah al-Zahrā' in a dream; she had ordered him to seek that particular *nā'ih* and convey her command to him to mourn her son with the poem of 'Alī al-Nāshī'. Hearing this, men beat their breasts and faces in excitement and offered the messenger of the holy woman all kinds of hospitality. He refused, saying 'God forbid that I, the slave of my mistress al-Zahrā', accept wages for her service.'³⁷ Since such professional mourners are still present, fresh tales, expressing the pleasure of members of the Holy Family with those who show their utmost dedication to their memory, continue to be told. Hence, the old relationship of the *imāms* and their followers is never broken, rather it is often renewed by fresh dynamic contacts between the *imāms* and their devotees.

'By the end of the third century in Baghdad, Aleppo and Cairo, there were special houses for the *ta'zīyah* celebrations known as *Ḥusaynīyyāt*. To this day, these large halls are constructed as annexes to mosques; frequently they are gathering places for all kinds of official and unofficial religious ceremonies and occasions.) Primarily, however, these halls are houses of sorrow where people gather to share in the tragic lives of the *imāms*. The *Ḥusaynīyyah* of a town or village has come to serve as the starting point of the 'Āshūrā' procession. For over eleven centuries, devotees have formed into large processions on special occasions. They go through the streets of the town chanting dirges for the *Imām* and his family, and finally return to the *Ḥusaynīyyah* for the actual celebration of a *ta'zīyah majlis*. In many places where the seclusion of women is still strictly observed, men go out during the day and women at night, barefoot and bareheaded, lamenting the dead of Karbalā' as they beat their breasts and heads. Even to the present time, as the author witnessed in Iran recently, in spite of the disapproval of both the civil and religious authorities, women and men beat themselves with chains inflicting wounds on

their heads with large sharp knives to display their grief and share the actual physical pains of the family of the Prophet Muḥammad.

Quite early in the development of the Muḥarram cultus, people felt the need for some concrete symbol or representation of the events of Karbalā'. First a horse appeared in the middle of the procession, covered with a shroud and smeared with blood; this represented the horse of Ḥusayn after the *Imām*'s death.³⁸ By the tenth Islāmic century (fifteenth century A.D.), this procession began to evolve into the familiar passion play, or what may be more accurately termed the representation (*shabīh*) of the entire battle of Karbalā', with people playing the various roles of its major characters.³⁹ We need not here enter into any detailed discussion of this interesting phenomenon in *Shī'ī* Islām, as it has received attention from many scholars for the last three centuries. It is important to emphasize, however, once more that the *ta'zīyah* celebration has assumed many forms, reflecting the diverse cultures in which it is commonly held. As the author grew up in a *Shī'ī* milieu, it may be of some interest to describe a few such celebrations in which he took part.

Although the death of Ḥusayn and his family and friends is usually commemorated during the first ten days of Muḥarram of every year, *ta'zīyah majālis* may be sponsored by people at any time in fulfillment of a vow, in gratitude to God for a successful undertaking, in dedication of a new house, or simply out of the desire of a pious person to have a *ta'zīyah majlis* held at his home. The months of Ramaḍān, the rest of Muḥarram and up to the 20th of Ṣafar are especially favored for holding such memorial sessions. A *majlis* held in fulfillment of a vow or as the desire of an individual is usually brief, lasting not more than half an hour. It consists of reading an episode of the journey of Ḥusayn, or the life of the Holy Family in general, and perhaps some exhortations by the reader.

During the (*Āshūrā*) period, the *ta'zīyah majālis* are held in the afternoons in the homes of prominent people of the village or community, and in the evening in the *Ḥusaynīyyah* or some other public place. Every evening the community joins the *Imām* on his journey from Medina to Iraq, step by step. The *majlis* begins with a short reading from the Qur'ān, then the reader chants or reads a long passage or poem describing some of the episodes of that particular day of the

journey, and tries to emphasize some hardship encountered on the way by the *Imām* or someone of his family. Finally, the reader himself, or another orator, gives a long sermon on the sufferings of earlier prophets or the persecutions suffered by members of the Holy Family before and after Ḥusayn.

The *majlis* is often followed by a procession through the streets of the town. Such processions give the town or village folk poet an opportunity to extemporize a dirge for the people to chant as they parade the streets. They also give the young men of the community an opportunity to show their devotion, employing all their strength to beat their bare chests. Late one summer, the author was amazed by the fervor of a young man who had just returned from a sanatorium after a critical lung operation. His loud cries of *allāhu akbar* and hard chest beating could have hardly been endured by a healthy person, let alone one in his condition. Finally, the *ta'zīyah majālis* provide an opportunity for people to show their generosity in sharing their wealth and even basic provisions with others, as they distribute food and beverages of various kinds to the participants. In large towns or cities, as was the case in Mashhad, the *ta'zīyah majālis* are sponsored by guilds: bakers, textile, or carpet merchants and the like. The elaborateness and generosity of food distribution, as well as the rank and number of the *ta'zīyah* leaders in a *majlis*, depend on the means of the individual or group sponsoring it.

The day of (*Āshūrā*) itself is the culmination of the enactment of the tragedy in all its details. The day begins right after the dawn prayers with a reading of the *maqṭal*, or *maṣra'*, as it is called in Lebanon, the actual martyrdom narrative of Ḥusayn, the male members of his family and friends. The reading is often interrupted by loud prayers and salutations of peace on Muḥammad and his family, and an occasional round of sweets, dates or beverages distributed by a member of the community in the hope of a heavenly reward for his good deed. It is especially meritorious to relieve the thirst and hunger of the faithful on such an occasion, as a sort of substitute for the fervent wish to have done the same for the martyrs of Karbalā'. Around mid-morning, as the reading ends, people are again led for a while by a folk poet specially gifted in dirges (*nadb*) for the *Imām*, his children, brothers and cousins. The day ends, sometimes with a staged enactment of the

events of the martyrdom in a large open air area outside the town, or with a long *zīyārah* of (‘*Āshūrā*’). The observance ends around mid-afternoon, when the entire congregation is invited to the homes of the pious and well-to-do for a special meal. The food consists of one dish, wheat cooked in a broth of lamb or beef shanks, an elaborate dish that the women usually spend many hours preparing.

As every activity of the (‘*Āshūrā*’) period must be in some way related to the Holy Family and, more specifically, to the event of Karbalā’, the pious find much edification and symbolism even in this holy repast. A woman once related that as she and other women of the house were busy preparing the (‘*Āshūrā*’) *harisah*, as this dish is called, a venerable old woman came to help, She was invited to stay and share the food, but she declined, saying, ‘Would I eat food prepared for the soul of my brother Ḥusayn?’ The woman, of course, was Zaynab, the sorrowful sister of the martyred *Imām*.

For some people, even these shanks of animals and large chunks of meat used in the (‘*Āshūrā*’) food have their symbolic significance. (‘*Alī al-Akbar*’ was supposed to have been cut into pieces by the swords of the enemies. Thus the pieces of meat serve as a reminder of his cruel death. Such dramatic and often gory symbolism is quite common in popular *Shī‘ī* Muḥarram folklore. It may be of some interest, therefore, to conclude these remarks on the ta'zīyah celebrations with a few words about one such dramatic tale.

Ḥusayn, according to folk tradition, had a young daughter three or four years old called Ruqayyah. When the captives were brought to Yazīd, she wept incessantly, asking for her father. One night she dreamed of him and woke up utterly distraught with grief for his absence. Yazīd ordered that her father’s head be brought to her so she might look at it and be consoled. The young girl took the head to her bosom and cried out with bitter tears:

O father, who did bathe you in your blood! O father who did sever your jugular vein! O father, who made me an orphan when I am still a child! Who is left for us after you; who shall succor a young orphan girl until she grows up. O father, who shall care for the widows after you. . . .Lost without you are these tearful eyes of the women. Terrible without you, O father, is our despair and captivity. Would

that I could have been a ransom for you. Would that I was blind and could not see your grey head stained with your blood.⁴⁰

The girl then pressed her lips to the dead mouth and died. This story may be taken as a good representative of the highly popular literature of the Muḥarram piety. Such folklore tales often provide the themes of popular elegies (*marāthī*), especially those put in the mouth of one or another of the women of the Holy Family. Poetry has played an important role both in the inception and growth of the Muḥarram cultus; we shall therefore now turn to the consideration of this important genre of the *ta'zīyah* literature.

5.3 THE PLACE OF LAMENTATION POETRY (*Marāthī*) IN THE MUḤARRAM CULTUS

One of the most important elements in the development of the *ta'zīyah* ritual has been, and still is, poetry. In verse, the poet could express religious, cultural and social ideas and sentiments, not only of his heart and mind, but also of the collective soul of the people, so to speak. The poet, in a way, portrays his culture and speaks for his people. Before we analyze a few of the poetic themes and relate them to the hagiographical developments with which we have been concerned in this study, a word may be in order concerning the actual emphasis placed on the composition and recitation of lamentation poems, of what we may call dirges or elegies (*marāthī*) by the *imāms* themselves.

The purpose of writing and reciting such poetry is not simply to display artistic talent, but more importantly to induce sorrow and weeping. Yet a poem that does not describe in tender and highly artistic language some aspect or episode of the tragedy would not have fulfilled its purpose. This gives the *marāthī* genre of poetry a unique character. It is perhaps the most dramatic and epic-like poetry, at least in Arabic.

It may be safely inferred from many reports that the *imāms*, especially the sixth *Imām*, used to gather their followers together to remember the death of Ḥusayn. Poets were often asked to recite their verses of lamentation and grief for the gatherings. Two closely

analogous traditions are most often cited by *Shīʿī* scholars, both early and modern ones. One day, the sixth *Imām*, Jaʿfar al-Šādiq, asked one of his followers, Abū ʿImārah al-Munshid (the chanter or reciter), to recite some verses about Ḥusayn. The man began to recite his verses, and the *Imām* and his family began to weep until the wailings of the women could be heard in the street. The verses our chanter recited were not of his own composition; they will be discussed later. The *Imām* then announced to Abū ʿImārah the great reward he would have in the world to come and continued:

. . . He who recites poetry about Ḥusayn, causing fifty persons to weep and weeps himself, will have a place in paradise.

Then the *Imām* continued to repeat the same statement, each time reducing the number of people caused to weep: first to thirty, twenty, ten, then even to one. He concluded, ‘. . . Even if one recites poetry about Ḥusayn and weeps himself alone, or even pretends to weep, his will be paradise on the Day of Resurrection.’⁴¹

Two important factors have always given poetry a special place in the *taʿzīyah* ritual: the Arabic poetic genius and the place poetry has enjoyed in Arabic culture, both before and after Islām; and, equally important, the high reward promised the poet on the Day of Judgment. We shall now turn to a brief discussion of some of the major themes and techniques of the *marāthī* poetry. As the literature is truly vast, we shall have to choose only a few examples, following a loose chronology for the early centuries.⁴²

The hagiographical traditions and pietistic religious ideas so far discussed in this study are powerfully and dramatically expressed in very early poems. We have chosen somewhat arbitrarily a few themes to serve as a structural basis for this brief discussion. Our first major theme will be the assertion, in different forms and contexts, that the killing of Ḥusayn was a great sin committed by his murderers, as grievous as the annulment of the sacred precepts of the religion or the killing of a prophet. The second theme will deal with the piety and generosity of the murdered *Imām*, and the nobility, beauty and suffering of the women captives. Rarely is Ḥusayn portrayed as the great warrior we saw in Chapter 4. The poetry we are considering is meant to evoke sorrow, not the spirit of heroism, in the mind of the faithful.

Our third theme will be the participation of all things in creation in the sorrows and sufferings of the *Imām* and his family, and the linking of this tragedy to the prophets of old. This theme is quite a familiar one, as our discussion in Chapter 1 demonstrated. The idea, however, of linking the ancient prophets to the death of Ḥusayn appears somewhat late in poetry. More recent literature asserts that it was for the sake of the *imāms* that the prophets enjoyed divine favor.

Fourthly we shall discuss a poetical technique which is especially popular. This is the dramatization of a specific aspect or episode of the Muḥarram tragedy where the speaker is one of the Holy Family, either the prophet, his daughter Fāṭimah, or one of the women who was present at the battle. This dialogue between the Prophet and one of the women of the Holy Family usually presents the complaint of the family of Ḥusayn for the wrong they have suffered. Occasionally, the person addressed is Fāṭimah, the mother of the *Imām*; her pathetic reaction is vividly portrayed. This poetic device provides a powerful instrument for the *ta'zīyah* leader to create the proper emotional atmosphere for the actual *ta'zīyah majlis*. This will be a suitable point of transition to the last section of this discussion; that is, a consideration of a few dirges which are specifically meant to be chanted in the *ta'zīyah majlis*.

The period following the death of Ḥusayn was a stormy one in Islāmic history. Poets did not generally dare to compose poetry in his memory; when they did, it was kept secret out of fear of the Umayyad authorities.⁴³ The first poet, according to some reports, to compose an elegy (*marthīyah*) on Ḥusayn was 'Iqbah b. 'Amr al-Sahmī.⁴⁴ In al-Sahmī's *marthīyah*, we see a kind of warm and simple piety and grief for the death of the *Imām* and those martyred with him. It is an expression of devotion and reverence, free from the hagiographical and political allusions characteristic of many other poems, especially those belonging to later centuries. The poet, we are told, visited Karbalā' either soon after the death of Ḥusayn or later towards the end of the century.⁴⁵ There he stopped at the tomb of the *Imām* and recited his verses. His poem seems to have been composed in Karbalā', perhaps extemporized as a sudden expression of deep emotion.

I passed the grave of Ḥusayn in Karbalā', and on it my tears flowed copiously.

I continued to weep and grieve for his suffering, and my eye was well assisted by tears and sobs. And with him I mourned a group of men whose graves surround his own.

May the light of an eye, seeking consolation in life when you [Ḥusayn and his followers] were frightened in this world, be darkened.

Peace be upon the dwellers of these graves in Karbalā' . . . May peace be upon them with the setting of the sun and its rising: Peace carried from me by the winds as they blow to and fro.

Men in troops continue to flock in pilgrimage to his grave, where on them flows its musk and sweet fragrance.⁴⁶

The last verse of this short poem may indicate a later development in the reference it makes to the pilgrims. It may be, on the other hand, simply an expression of praise for the *Imām* in drawing large groups of people to his grave.

It was argued in Chapter 4 that the death of Ḥusayn has been regarded as a source of inspiration as well as a definite offense against the religion of Islām; these ideas are as old as the tragedy itself. Ḥusayn, as we have seen, reproached his opponents for the unlawful and irreligious act of seeking to kill the son of the Prophet's daughter. This charge of unforgivable crime against the *Imām*'s murderers, as well as the fact that his death was as grievous as the death or violation of all religious principles, has provided the theme for much poetic literature since the time of the tragic event itself.

It is reported that a man of the second generation after the companions of the Prophet,⁴⁷ the followers (*al-tābi'ūn*) as they are called, disappeared for a month after seeing the head of Ḥusayn nailed to the gate of Yazīd's palace in Damascus. When he reappeared, his friends asked the reason for his long absence. He said, 'Do you not see what has befallen us?' Then he recited the following verses:

They came with your head O son of Muḥammad's daughter thoroughly bathed in its blood.

Thirsty did they kill you, no regard to revelation (*tanzīl*) or exegesis (*ta'wīl*) did they show in your death.

It is as though, through you O son of the daughter of Muḥammad,
they purposely killed an apostle.

They cried as they killed you 'God is most great', yet in killing you
they truly killed the cries of *takbīr* and *tahlīl*.⁴⁸

This sense of shame, humiliation and remorse has found expression in almost all poems written in praise of the Holy Family, or in commemoration of their sufferings. The sanctity of Islām and its Prophet were thought to have been violated by men who professed faith in the religion of Islām and the apostleship of its Prophet. It was equally felt by men who were themselves the perpetrators of the shameful act, and by those who did nothing to prevent it. Such feelings often express themselves in violent outbreaks of revolt and other political activities. Also, inevitably, men motivated by the love of power and political gain took full advantage of these feelings. It is, for instance, an historical fact that the 'Abbāsīd dynasty rose to power on the basis of their kinship with the Holy Family and through the loyalty of *Shī'ī* Muslims. We can observe a fluctuation in the development of the Muḥarrām commemoration between free and powerful expression of the pietistic emotions and imagination of the faithful, and the quiet and often muffled tearful voices of the poets and the rest of the community. This fluctuation, however, was never widespread or lasting. It was therefore never a hindrance to the growth of the rich poetic literature which continues to develop down to our own time.

A poet, Ja'far Ibn 'Affān al-Ṭā'ī, who died about two decades after the establishment of 'Abbāsīd rule (d. ca. 153/770) could still be clear in his condemnation of the Umayyad culprits and their accomplices. He, like many other poets of the first two centuries of Islāmic history, belonged to the circle of the *imāms* and first recited poetry to them. Al-Ṭā'ī recited his verses to the sixth *Imām* in one of the *ta'zīyah* commemoration sessions.

He began his poem with the declaration, 'Let him who wishes to weep, weep for Islām for its principles (*aḥkām*) were violated and abandoned.' Then the poem describes the death of Ḥusayn and his having been left a prey for birds and beasts on the sands of Karbalā'. Men did not lend him support because they lost their senses and went astray. The poet continues:

They rather extinguished their light with their own hands, may those hands be paralyzed. For Ḥusayn called upon them for help in his struggle in the name of Muḥammad as his son, Ḥusayn, was as dear to him as his own soul. Nor did they respect his kinship to the Apostle, and their feet stumbled and went astray. May the Merciful not bless the community of his grandfather, even though they may perform prayers and fasts to God. . . .⁴⁹

Another poet who lived about a century later, al-Sirrī,⁵⁰ expressed in a few powerful verses most of the sentiments connected with the death of *Imām* Ḥusayn. The poet begins with a sort of prayer that the tomb containing the corpse of the thirsty *Imām* be shaded with aromatic plants (*rayḥān*). He then continues to describe the feelings of the devotees at the mention or remembrance of the *Imām*:

It is as though our hearts at his remembrance are placed on burning coals, or are pierced with sharp knives.

The poet then reiterates the idea that the death of Ḥusayn was like the destruction of religion:

Forsooth they did not efface the traces of his father, rather in killing him they destroyed the foundations of religion.⁵¹

The last verse alludes to the political idea that by killing Ḥusayn, his enemies sought to destroy the spiritual and political ideals which 'Alī embodied for the *Shī'ī* community, and which provided its *raison d'être*.

The theme we have been considering in the last few paragraphs may be regarded as a very important one in the tragedy of Karbalā'. For while in recent times many Muslim thinkers, and even *Shī'ī* ones, have consciously attempted to purge the Muḥarrām cultus of many of its mythical and supernatural accretions, they continue to see the death of Ḥusayn as the most important, powerful protest in Islāmic history against all wrong, religious as well as political.

As previously observed, Ḥusayn was seldom portrayed as a hero, especially in poetry and other types of *ta'zīyah* literature. His sufferings, abandonment and, finally, ruthless murder are themes better suited to heighten the emotions of the participants and draw out their

tears. His beauty and nobility, as well as that of his womenfolk, besides adding a romantic element to the otherwise sordid picture, have served to stir the emotions of the devotees. Ḥusayn whose luminous countenance even in his last moments of life dazzled those who saw him,⁵² was soiled with blood and sand and left to be discolored by the burning sun. Likewise, his sisters and daughters who had been hidden from the eyes of men, and whose beauty struck those who saw them as they were carried off as captives, were unveiled and exposed for all to see, mounted on camels without cover or protection.⁵³

Al-Sirrī expressed these ideas with great clarity and artistic excellence. In his verses, we see the skillful use of imagery against the usual effective background of tragedy and suffering. Here are a few verses from the beginning of a long poem:

Shall I forget at the banks of the Euphrates (*al-Ṭaff*) Ḥusayn lying slain on the ground, and around him the pure ones [that is, other male members of his family] like the resplendent stars.

Shall I forget Ḥusayn on the day when his head was carried away, radiant as the full moon (*badr*) on a full moon night.

Shall I forget the women captives, how, after the seclusion of soft chambers, were exposed.⁵⁴

This theme of the nobility and magnanimity of *Imām* Ḥusayn is expressed with a deep feeling of love and bereavement, the intimacy of a loving and distraught wife, in the few verses attributed to his wife, al-Rabāb, of the tribe of Kalb. Ḥusayn was especially fond of her and her young daughter, Sukaynah; he admitted his love in a few warm and delicate verses.⁵⁵ We are told⁵⁶ that, after his death, she never slept under a roof, but spent the last year of her life wandering in the wilderness and mourning her martyred husband. In the following short poem, she recalls Ḥusayn as a loving husband, a refuge for the poor and destitute and a provider for his children:

Behold him who was a light shining in the darkness, is now in Karbalā' slain and unburied . . .

You were for me a fast mountain to lean upon, and you were a true friend in kinship (*raḥim*) and faith (*dīn*).

Who is left for the orphans and the needy after him who used to provide for the destitute, and to whom every poor person would run for refuge. . . .⁵⁷

Among the most important poets who dedicated their talents to the praise and elegizing of the Holy Family was Ismā'īl Ibn Muḥammad al-Ḥimyarī, who lived in Baghdad between 205/820 and 273/886, or 278/891. Al-Ḥimyarī was himself a *sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet's family. He is significant not only for his lineage but also for his poetry, which was not only of high artistic calibre, but also typified the religious as well as the political mood of his time.

His famous *qaṣīdah*, already referred to in this chapter,⁵⁸ opens in the usual old Arabic style by addressing a visitor to the tomb of the beloved, thus presenting a concrete picture of the lover or devotee remembering his beloved on the spot of his death. The poet recalls how the sacred bones of *Imām* Ḥusayn, the main subject of the poem, were trampled by the hooves of strong horses. He declares that, after this grave event, life could never again be pleasant. Alluding to the excellence of the *Imām* and his family, their being most worthy of temporal and spiritual leadership, he says:

Behold a grave containing a man whose ancestors are the pure ones,
the best of all men.

His fathers were the people of leadership, the true successors of the
Prophet and his vicegerents.

They were men of great virtue, men of refined character and pleasant
temperament.

The poet then turns to the hypothetical visitor of the sacred shrine and says:

And when you pass by his grave let the halt of your mount be long.
Weep there for the pure one, the son of the pure man [‘Alī] and pure
and unblemished woman [Fāṭimah].

Weep like a wailing woman whose man is suddenly snatched by
death.⁵⁹

The poet ends by again returning to the political aspects of the conflict between the *Imām* and his antagonists. He charges his hypothetical

pilgrim to curse Ibn Sa'd and others of the *Imām*'s enemies, naming the chief ones. He emphasizes Ḥusayn's courage and great virtue, contrasting them with the greed, cowardliness and treachery of his opponents. As the purpose of all such elegiac poetry is to bring forth the tears and sighs of the faithful, al-Ḥimyarī ends his poem with these two powerful verses:

O my eye, weep therefore as long as you live for those who always honored their word and kept their covenant.

What excuse have you to cease shedding tears of blood, when of that you are most worthy.⁶⁰

We have seen often in this study how the afflictions of the 'people of the cloak' (*ahl al-kisā'*) were reflected in nature, in the stars and inhabitants of heaven, and even in hell and paradise. The prophets and holy men of old shared in the grief and suffering of the Holy Family; for their sakes, they were blessed and honored by God. All these ideas, with many variations, are expressed in poetry. In fact, this theme of the participation of all things in the great tragedy of Ḥusayn and his family appears in some of the earliest poems, continuing for many centuries as one of the richest themes not solely limited to *Shī'ī* poetry.

Al-Shāfi'ī (Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi'ī, d. 204/819), one of the most important Sunnī jurists and founder of the Shāfi'ī school of jurisprudence (*fiqh*), left us a very good example of this type of elegiac poetry. He begins his poem on the usual note of sorrow and tears for the sufferings of the *ahl al-bayt*. Then, referring to the martyred *Imām*, he describes 'a man slain for no wrong he had committed, whose shirt is dyed as though in crimson'. The poet goes on to depict the event of Karbalā' in vivid imagery. 'There was much wielding of the sword and great clatter of the spears, and of the horses there was much sobbing after sorrowful neighing.' The theme then shifts to the portents manifesting the participation of nature in the universal grief:

The world quaked for the sake of the family of Muḥammad, and the hard mountains almost melted.

Brilliant stars darkened and others quivered as many veils were violated and many garments rent.

This refers to the violation of the sanctity of the women captives, their own sorrows and rending of garments. Al-Shāfi'ī then asks in aston-

ishment how men could pronounce prayers and salutations on the Apostle of the clan of Hāshim and yet attack his descendants. He concludes by asserting:

. . . if my sin is my love for the family of Muḥammad then this is a sin of which I shall never repent. For they are my intercessors on the day of my standing before God for the final reckoning, the day on which men shall behold great and fearful things.⁶¹

The theme we are considering was articulated by one of the earliest poets in what may be the first or second elegy to come down to us. The poet is Sulaymān Ibn Qattah, who died in Damascus around 126/743.⁶² From the reference the poet makes to specific tribal relations and feuds, it may be inferred that his *marthīyah* is very old. Like many other poets, he sets the background with an actual visit to Karbalā', then goes on to describe the sorrow this visit evoked in him. In the second verse, the poet declares in the form of a rhetorical question:

. . . do you not see how the sun became sick for the death of Ḥusayn and all lands were disturbed.

For they [the Holy Family] have become a grave loss for us after being a great hope . . .

The poet then reproaches the tribe of Qays for their treachery and promises revenge. Shimr, the infamous antagonist of Ḥusayn, was a member of that tribe; therefore, to some extent, the whole tribe must share in his guilt. Ibn Qattah finally returns to the theme of the grief of the cosmos: 'Behold the heavens took to weeping for his death, and our stars mourned him and prayed for him.'⁶³

The last two poems, although quite early, show a fair degree of development. Whether such poems, written at the beginning of the *ta'zīyah* development, must be regarded as simply exaggerations intended to dramatize the tragic event, or whether they actually echo ideas already current in the community, we cannot determine with absolute certainty. However, we can discern the rapid growth of the idea of the cosmic significance of Ḥusayn's death in poetry no less than in prose. A poet who died around the middle of the fourth century of the *hijrah* (mid-tenth century) could already end one of his long and

dramatic elegies with the reproach, ‘. . . O you sons of treachery, whom did you kill?! By my life you killed him through whom all existence subsists.’⁶⁴

We have seen that the prophets of old were told of the sorrows and sufferings of the Holy Family, and directly shared in them. We saw further, in Chapter 2, that Adam’s sin of disobedience was forgiven for the sake of the *imāms*; their names were the secret knowledge revealed to him and the cause of his forgiveness. An unnamed poet who must have lived around the 11th/17th century carries this idea to its ultimate conclusion.⁶⁵ He proclaims that the *imāms* are the light of God and the secret meaning of many of the *sūrah*s of the Qur’ān. Their names were inscribed from eternity on the throne of God. So far the poet simply reiterates some of the ideas we have already encountered in the second chapter of this study. Then he goes further:

. . . had it not been for their sakes, Adam would not have been created nor would any other man have come into being. The earth would not have been spread, or the heavens lifted up, nor would have the sun risen or the full moon appeared. In their names, Noah invoked God’s help in the ark, and thus was saved from the waters of the flood.

Nor, if it were not for them would the fire of the friend (*khalīl*) [Abraham] have turned into coolness and peace,⁶⁶ neither would those great coals have become extinguished.

If it were not for them, Jacob’s sorrow would have never ended, nor Job’s afflictions have been taken away from him.

The poem goes on to list all other major prophets, and to show that their miracles were granted for the sake of the *imāms*. The *imāms* were the secret power in the staff of Moses; for their sake, the sea was parted. For their sake, David’s repentance was accepted, and Jesus was able to raise the dead.⁶⁷ The last verse declares, in fact, that the secret of every prophet before them was part of, or due to, their secret. The special favor granted to each of the major biblical prophets was so granted because of the *imāms*; whatever esoteric powers the prophets possessed were derived from the *imāms*’ esoteric power. Not only prophetic power depended on their being, but the entire creation revolved around them. These are not new ideas, but received new

power and intensity through poetic expression; poetry had to serve the same function and purpose for Muslims that the icon and other pictorial representations did in Christian piety.

One unnamed poet painted such an effective picture that his verses are chanted in many *majālis* of the ('Āshūrā') celebration.⁶⁸ The poet begins by declaring his great sorrow for the martyrs of Karbalā': 'I have wept for the killing of the family of Muḥammad, on the banks of the Euphrates (*al-Ṭaff*) until every member of my body shed tears.' Then the poet begins by painting his picture of their plight:

. . . and the womenfolk of Muḥammad were among the enemies, pillaged and their goods divided amongst low and dissolute men. They were pushed around like slave girls, mistreated and beaten with whips . . . as though they were war captives or even more lowly.

Their head covers and veils were forcibly torn off their heads and faces.

Behold a man, his limbs tied in stalks with no one to set him free, and a noble woman taken captive and her earrings snatched away.

He finally turns to the martyred *Imām*:

By God, I cannot forget Ḥusayn dismembered under the hooves of the horses.

Stripped of his clothes, clad only in a garment of crimson, and yet on the morrow he was to wear garments of paradise.

The picture here painted includes all of nature. ' . . . the sun wailed as would a bereaved mother, with hair disheveled,⁶⁹ and time (*dahr*) rent its garments and masked its face.'⁷⁰

One interesting element which we often see in poetry is the exaggeration of actual facts, such as the treatment of captives by their captors. Our early sources say the captives were robbed of their jewelry and other such finery, but there is no mention of any kind of violence being inflicted on them. Yet later poets, wishing to draw a sharp contrast between the sufferings of the Holy Family and the cruelty of their captors, assert that the women were driven before their captives with whips. This is yet another means by which the poets could stir the feelings of pity and sorrow in their hearers.

The *marāthī* genre of poetry often employed dramatic dialogue. Such dialogues would be introduced by or interspersed with pathetic pictures of the suffering of Ḥusayn and his family. Another interesting characteristic of this type of poetry is the use of a story-telling technique in describing the events of Karbalā' and the situation of one or more persons as they were killed or frightened by the ruthless mobs of Ibn Sa'd's army. Sometimes this technique is used with great intricacy and dramatic skill. Often a poet starts a dialogue between himself and the Prophet, and then, when relating a different episode of the tragedy, puts the words in the mouth of one of the women who witnessed the episode.

One of the most famous early poets, Di'bil Ibn 'Alī al-Khuzā'ī,⁷¹ excelled in the use of this technique. In fact, his poetry covers all the themes we have been considering and many others in a great variety of poetic expression. In his famous '*Tā'iyyah*', Di'bil relates the story of Karbalā', mentioning or alluding to most of the traditions connected with it. Towards the end of his poem he addresses Fāṭimah, the mother of the martyred *Imām*:

O Fāṭimah, if you could only imagine Ḥusayn slain, killed thirsty on the bank of the Euphrates; you would then beat your cheeks, O Fāṭimah, over him and let your tears flow copiously down your face.

O Fāṭimah, rise up, O daughter of goodness, and raise the dirge for [men] like heavenly stars lying dead in the wilderness . . .

The poet then goes on to enumerate the graves of the *imāms* and their descendants, naming the lands of their dispersion. Finally, he reiterates the fervent hope of every *Shī'ī* Muslim of witnessing the return of the twelfth *Imām*, the *Mahdī*: '. . . until the day of gathering (*ḥashr*) when God shall send the *qā'im* (*Mahdī*) to relieve us of all sorrows and afflictions. . . .'⁷²

In another poem, Di'bil relates the martyrdom (*maqtal*) of Ḥusayn, employing the dialogue form at several points. He begins in a way familiar in classical Arabic poetry, where a hypothetical person standing at the ruins of the beloved is addressed:

O you who are standing mourning the ruins and chanting, by God, you have gone astray and your guide has left you.

Why do you claim much sorrow when you seek comfort? If you truly are sorrowful, how is it that you can sleep?⁷³

The poet goes on to provide the guidance his hypothetical friend has lost; he enjoins him to weep for Ḥusayn and his family instead, just as Muḥammad and the angels of heaven wept for them. The religion of Islām was torn asunder at his death, and since that day, all Islām continues to mourn him.

After this long introduction, the poet turns to recount the *maq̄tal* with the sister of Ḥusayn, Zaynab, as narrator. He introduces her thus:

How can there be rest when Zaynab, among the women captives, fervently cried out, 'O Aḥmad, behold Ḥusayn cut to pieces with swords, a martyr bathed in his blood.

Naked, without a shroud or garment was he, his bones broken by the hooves of the horses.

And your sons, the virtuous ones, lying slain around him like sacrificial victims, with no one to give them burial.'

Having painted this picture of blood and death, the poet goes on to show the reaction of the cosmos to the grave event. The moon and stars at Ḥusayn's death gathered together in mourning. They wept because they saw Ḥusayn killed by many enemies with few to defend him. The sorrowful sister of the *Imām* continues to tell the Prophet how she and the other women were carried captives, humiliated and their sanctity violated. She then describes the orphans: '. . . around me are the orphans of my brother, robbed of their clothes and humiliated'. After complaining of their thirst, while dogs could drink safely from the waters of the Euphrates, she returns to describe the manner in which Ḥusayn was killed:

. . . O grandfather, behold Shimr treacherously wishing to slay Ḥusayn, O what eye can control its tears. When he [Shimr] was about to let the sword fall upon him, he [Ḥusayn] called out in a low voice 'O Thou who art the only One (*awḥad*), Thou are witness over them and Thou seest their wrongdoing.'⁷⁴

Di'bil's poems on the tragedy of Muḥarram present a complete picture of that tragedy and the grief of the entire universe. Yet he, unlike many

other poets, retains a continuity of presentation which gives his poetry epic character.

Another poet who displayed similar talent and sensitivity was Aḥmad Ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ṣanawbarī, a famous poet who died in Aleppo in 334/945. He emphasized Ḥusayn's noble death more than his valor as a fighter. In fact, al-Ṣanawbarī draws a sharp contrast between Ḥusayn standing firm like a lion in the face of death and Ḥusayn lying on the ground muttering pathetic cries for help with no one to come to his aid:

. . . who shall come to the aid of one whose horse was wounded and whose tents were pulled down.

Who is for the dismembered corpse left naked and abandoned under the sky.

Who is for the one who was embalmed with sand and washed with his blood . . .⁷⁵

While al-Ṣanawbarī employs dramatic techniques to portray the tragedy and draw his hearers into its spirit, he remains somewhat restrained and sober. It is interesting to compare the way a contemporary of his, al-Ṣaqr al-Muṣīlī (d. 305/914), expresses similar ideas. The poet addresses the Prophet, relating to him what his descendants suffered after his death. He describes how Ḥasan vomited up his liver because of the poison he was treacherously given to drink. Then he describes how the thirsty Ḥusayn was killed in Karbalā' and his family taken captive as though they were not the family of the Prophet. Al-Muṣīlī, wishing to show how Ḥusayn suffered and was wrongly beheaded, then loses his sense of sequence. He writes, '. . . a body without a head lying on the ground, stretching once a limb and then contracting another in great fear'.⁷⁶ The poet, it seems, was not troubled by the fact that the agonizing state of the *Imām* he describes should have preceded his beheading.

We are dealing here with poetic exaggeration, quite common among the *marāthī* poets. One final example of this type of exaggeration may be seen in the work of 'Alī Ibn Iṣḥāq al-Zāhī. He represents a trend of exaggeration which continues to the present time, at least in Arabic and Persian poetry, the two languages familiar to the author. We have already seen the poet's extremism in regarding

Ḥusayn as the person through whom all existence subsists. In the poem we are about to consider, he paints in popular language a vivid and exaggerated picture of the women captives after the martyrdom of their protector.

. . . I can imagine Zaynab by Ḥusayn's side, her hair disheveled. There she stopped, rubbing her hair on his bleeding neck and displaying all her hidden sorrows.

And Fāṭimah [Ḥusayn's daughter] quaking with fear as she saw the whip coming down to strike her side.⁷⁷

The poet goes on to describe the death of Ḥusayn, how his head was carried on a spear to the Umayyad authorities, first in Kūfah and then in Damascus.

In the previous chapter, many orations were attributed to various members of the family of Ḥusayn after his death. While the orations display a great deal of rhetoric and a high degree of sophistication, (the poetry for the most part is written for popular audiences and clearly designed to be used in popular *ta'zīyah* celebrations. As usual, the first to raise the lamentation in verse was Zaynab, the woman who assumed responsibility for the orphans until they were brought back to Medina. As far as can be ascertained, the poem attributed to her is reported only in very late sources, perhaps not earlier than Majlisī's *Biḥār*, where it is quoted in its entirety.⁷⁸

Majlisī puts the poem in the context of a spontaneous *ta'zīyah majlis.*) He reports that while Umm Kulthūm, Ḥusayn's other sister, was reproaching the Kūfans for their treachery, the head of Ḥusayn was carried by. Seeing it, Zaynab could not control her emotions; she hit her forehead on the post of her litter and blood gushed out. Then she beckoned to the people to listen and lamented her brother in verse. She starts by expressing deep sorrow for her brother's fate and then goes on:

. . . O my brother, behold Fāṭimah [that is, his daughter]; speak to her for her heart is nigh melting.

O my brother, your compassionate heart towards us, why has it become hard as stone.

O my brother, if you could only see Zayn al-Ābidīn captive and

orphaned, unable to move. Each time he receives the painful blows, he cries to you in tears and humiliation.

O my brother, draw him to you, embrace him and calm his frightened heart.

How humiliating it is for an orphan to call upon his father when he is nowhere to come to his rescue.⁷⁹

It is clear that this poem is not intended to tell a story or report the details of the battle and its aftermath, but rather to present an imaginative picture of the sick youth, pathetic enough to inflame the emotions of the participants of the *ta'zīyah* celebration.) Here again our sources generally agree that the men of Ibn Sa'd's army were specifically ordered not to disturb the sick boy; as far as we know, this order was obeyed. But of course *Shī'ī* piety stopped at nothing in trying to portray the antagonists' cruelty toward the *Imām* and his family.

Another poem attributed to the *Imām's* sister, Umm Kulthūm, expresses the same sentiments as the poem we have just discussed. Umm Kulthūm's poem, however, is especially interesting in that we can see how it grew from a few verses in the early sources to a long and poorly constructed popular elegy.⁸⁰ In its abbreviated form, the poem is a statement of how the family of Ḥusayn left Medina with men and youths only to return orphaned and humiliated. 'O city, Medina of our grandfather, receive us not; for we return to you with sorrows and bereavements. We left you with a family intact, and we return to you with neither men nor sons.'⁸¹

In the longer version of the poem only the first verse is the same. The ideas expressed in the second and third verses are couched in much more popular language and drawn out over several verses. A hypothetical person is asked to relate the situation to the Prophet; he does so at considerable length. The same story is then told to Fāṭimah, with an emphasis on the captivity and persecution of the women. Another strange characteristic of this poem is that many of the words and expressions used in it are clearly Persian borrowings from the Arabic. Often both the grammar and meter are faulty. This may suggest that this poem in its final form had developed in an area where both Persian and Arabic were spoken. The elegy is undoubtedly

meant for the lamentation (*niyāḥah*) sessions. Umm Kulthūm addresses Fāṭimah thus:

. . . O Fāṭimah if you could only see your daughters captives and scattered in the lands.

. . . O Fāṭimah, what you have suffered at the hands of your enemies was not more than an inch (*qīrāt*) of what we have endured. Thus if you were still living, till the Day of Resurrection, you would have continued to sing the dirge for us . . .

After Fāṭimah, Ḥasan is addressed and the same story is repeated with slight variations. This poem is put together artificially, without much care for consistency: in the last verse, for example, it addresses not the people it is intended to address, but the supposed participants in the *ta'zīyah*: '. . . and this is my story and situation (*sharḥ ḥāl*), weep for us then all you who have heard me.'⁸²

One last poem worthy of note is a short elegy attributed to Ḥusayn's daughter Sukaynah. It has already been observed that Ḥusayn was especially fond of her; we are told further that before the battle, he patted her on the head (as was the custom to indicate the fact that a sad event was to be disclosed) and comforted her with a few sad verses.⁸³ Sukaynah's elegy is couched in very sophisticated language; the images and expressions employed are simple, yet tender and highly artistic.

She begins by declaring that her sorrow and grief will never end, and asks that her continuous weeping therefore be excused. She goes on to tell of Ḥusayn's martyrdom and abandonment, the cause of her weeping. As did her aunts and brother in prose, Sukaynah turns in verse to reproach for their unfaithfulness those who killed her father; she promises harsh retributions in the hereafter for all except those who joined his camp. Finally she vows again to weep all her life for her father's death: 'O my eye occupy yourself in weeping all your life; weep with tears of blood, not for a child, family or friends, rather for the son of the Apostle of God. Pour out your tears and blood. . . '⁸⁴

The last two verses echo a popular tale of the young daughter's continuous weeping after her father's death, to which we shall return soon. Here again, every member of the family of Ḥusayn has a role to play in the House of Sorrows, thus providing the needed example for

various members of the community. Sukaynah's role is usually that of the orphan child, serving as an example for mothers with young children and especially for young girls, who are called upon to emulate the tears of their example.

The poems we have been examining, especially those attributed to members of the Holy Family, emphasize quite strongly the element of lamentation.) Thus, they should be kept in mind as we now turn to a few examples specifically designed for use in the 'Āshūrā' celebration or in general *ta'zīyah n:ajālīs*. These elegies often have a special rhythm suited for accompaniment by a beating of the breast as the participants chant in unison the lamentation verses. The rhythm is of short staccato-like structure: a short meter is employed, often with intricate and quite varied rhymes. The poems constantly return to the first verse or verses, which express the main theme.

It will not be possible in this brief discussion of the Muḥarram poetry, especially lamentation poetry (*shī'r al-niyāḥah*) intended for the *ta'zīyah* celebration, to attempt anything resembling an adequate survey of the literature. The amount of material available to us in Arabic alone is truly vast and still growing. We shall therefore content ourselves with a few representative examples.

One typical and powerful elegy expresses the ideas we have been considering, and a great deal more. Abū al-Ḥasan 'Alī Ibn Aḥmad al-Jurjānī al-Jawharī (d. ca. 380/990) opens his long *qaṣīdah* with a call to the faithful for weeping, whom he addresses as the 'People of 'Āshūrā'. None of the classical forms of Arabic poetry are followed; rather the poet immediately comes to the point of his call. The people of 'Āshūrā' are enjoined to remember that 'Āshūrā' was the day of the demise of Islām, the day the daughters of Muḥammad were taken captive as though they were the war captives of Byzantium or China. Thus the poet calls on the family of the Prophet to proclaim their grief and mourning. Each verse begins with the word 'today', then recounts one aspect after another of the tragedy, not an event of past history but as part of the here and now. Here are a few examples.

Today rose on the heights of al-Ṭaff [the hills of Karbalā'] their [the Holy Family's] mourner crying, 'Who is to care for an orphan or a sorrowful and humiliated captive.'

Today the grey beard of the Muṣṭafā [chosen one] was smeared with a blood which has become the perfume of the black-eyed houris. Today the flaming light of God was extinguished and the face of Islām flushed with anger and humiliation.⁸⁵

It is not sufficient, however, to talk in abstraction about the consequences of the tragedy; the poet recounts in detail the painful ordeal of Ḥusayn, his death at the hands of Muslims, and the reaction of the Christian monk of Qinnisrīn.⁸⁶ The monk reproaches vehemently the evildoers, professes Islām, and in the end is cut to pieces by the mob for his harsh words and loyalty to the severed head of the *Imām*. As the poet begins with a general call for weeping, so he ends with an injunction to his own eyes to shed their tears. ' . . . O my eye leave no tears for the morrow or for any other sorrowful man. Rather cry aloud, and hide no pearls [that is, tears] you have in store, for a sacred tomb in Karbalā'.⁸⁷

It was observed above that the poems of lamentation (*niyāḥah*) are rhythmically well-suited for chanting to the accompaniment of a measured beating of the breast. An interesting example of this is provided by the famous poet al-Nāshi' al-Ṣaghīr (Alī b. Wāṣif, who himself led many lamentation sessions in the fifth/eleventh century, in Baghdad and other important centers of the Muslim world. The poem is divided into stanzas of three verses; the third always rhymes with the last verse of the preceding stanza. The meter is generally short with a conscious attempt at imitating or at least stimulating a measured beating of the breast. It will not be possible to demonstrate this interesting structure in translation, but the themes and ideas of the poems are introduced with an abruptness that accords well with the rhythmic structure.

This poem is especially interesting for its terse language, and the pathetic picture it presents of *Imām* Ḥusayn pleading for mercy, but to no avail. This form of dramatic narrative cast in the third person, but here and there interspersed with first-person statements as the *Imām* is made to tell his own story, gives this poetry a particularly powerful character. It allows the audience to empathize with the characters of the tragedy and share emotionally in their sorrows and pains. Perhaps the later Muḥarram passion play grew out of this poetic idiom. In the

passion play, the characters are represented by actual persons; the acting, however, remains minimal, the emphasis placed instead on scenery and dialogue. We can see the trend from a narrated dialogue to one between real persons, then from word pictures to actual stage presentations.

Al-Nāshi' begins his elegy by rhetorically asking Sukaynah, Ḥusayn's daughter, whether her heart was not stricken with grief for the death of Ḥusayn and Ḥasan. He answers his own question by declaring that she suffered terrible thirst and sorrow and that every member of her body shed tears. Ḥusayn then takes up the dialogue, reminding his opponents of his noble lineage, and begging for a drink of water for his little infant. Of course, the people insist that the thirst of the infant would never be quenched until Ḥusayn submits to the authority of the usurpers. He refuses and chooses to fight instead. With pointed rapidity, the poet portrays the sorrows of the Holy Family in the person of Ḥusayn's young daughter, the thirst of an innocent infant, and the frustration of Ḥusayn, left with no choice but to sacrifice both the infant and his own life.

Having created the proper atmosphere of empathy and sorrow, the poet goes on with his story:

. . . Thus they agreed on betraying him and gathered together to kill him, to slay him with his infant, and the blades were sharpened. They pillaged his den (*arīn*) [likening the *Imām* to a lion] and stained his forehead with blood and soil.

. . . They violated the sanctity of his women and slew his suckling babe; they found his sick youth, and his wives they took captive. . .

They [the women] cried 'O Muḥammad! O our grandfather Aḥmad, behold us taken captive by slaves and all of us are in mourning.'⁸⁸

Finally the poet renews his call for weeping, ' . . . O my eyes, pour out your tears for the children of the Prophet's daughter. Shed your copious tears without ceasing, for thus should a wise man weep.'⁸⁹

It is not possible to do complete justice to (this genre of poetry, as it varies so much, not only from culture to culture but even within each culture) Men and women extemporize colloquial elegies as the need arises. Many of these are on a very popular level, never written down.

In many cases a mourning man or woman leader chooses any one of the themes discussed in this study and extemporizes verses, displaying all the ornamentation in the poetic and hagiographic idiom of which imagination is capable.

One of the most common techniques used in *niyāḥah* poetry, examples of which have already been discussed, is that of using one of the women of the Holy Family as a speaker; she recounts the tale of the suffering of the *Imām* and his family to another dead family member, whether the Prophet, the mother of the *Imām* or, less commonly, his father or dead brother Ḥasan. The elegy we are about to consider is an interesting one in that the speaker is Fāṭimah, the eternal weeper. She does not relate a story, but rather shows pathetic love and concern for her dead son. Ḥusayn, who was over fifty years old at the time of his martyrdom, is portrayed as a child physically in need of a mother's care. Tearfully, Fāṭimah asks how the various details of her son's burial were executed. It is perhaps better to let the poem speak for itself:

How great is my grief for you, O my child, you who are the one lost to friends and family.

Again I say how great is my sorrow, O my child, for after you I shall desert sleep and even sleeplessness.

Woe is me, who took care of his shrouding, who beheld his face, throat and eyes.

Woe, woe is me, who did wash him and walk behind his bier.

Woe, woe is me, who did pray over him and lay him in his grave.⁹⁰

This popular and powerful poem was consciously composed for the *ta'zīyah majālis*. After the dramatic picture of a helpless man, who in life could not defend himself, and after death had no one to give him a proper burial, the poet concludes with an expression of his hope and the hope of the community in general for the coming of the *Mahdī* who will lead the victorious army of God and avenge the blood of his martyred forebear. Moreover, the poem is put in the context of a moving tale, a sort of apocalyptic dream which Sukaynah had in Damascus at the house of Yazīd.

The young girl sees all the prophets and holy women of old, among them Muḥammad and his daughter Fāṭimah. The little girl runs to her

grandmother to complain of what befell them at the hands of their enemies. Fāṭimah, the blood-stained shirt of Ḥusayn pressed to her bosom, utters a loud and pathetic cry, raising a lamentation with the dirge just cited.

Perhaps the poet knows, as well as his audience, that the picture presented is not the actual story. Yet, while the *ta'zīyah majlis* lasts, myth transcends itself; for the moment, it becomes history. For the historian of religion, however, the myth actually becomes part of history: the history not of the event, but of the community's understanding and interiorization of it, the history not of historical facts, but of the way the community has lived them. This interiorization of the drama of Karbalā' is powerfully expressed in the *zīyārah* ritual. Through this ritual the community renews its covenant with and its loyalty to the *imāms*, and in a very personal way renews its own participation in this drama. We shall end this chapter, therefore, with a consideration of the *zīyārah* ritual: its major themes, its structure and performance.

5.4 THE *Zīyārah* RITUAL AND ITS PLACE IN *Shī'ī* PIETY

The sanctity of a particular place as the shrine of a holy man or woman, or as the place of a theophany, is a well known phenomenon in man's religious history. The case of Karbalā' is a typical one. As it gained significance for *Shī'īs* more recently than did the ancient *Ka'bah* for Muslims or the holy house of Jerusalem, it was necessary first to identify this new spot with earlier sacred places to give it equal prominence and sanctity. This the *imāms*, or more probably their followers after them, did with all the usual exaggeration of an apologetic and persecuted community. It would not be useful to consider the traditions concerning the Karbalā' piety chronologically because we cannot discern any chronological development. We shall, therefore, examine a few of the traditions beginning with the more moderate ones, and going on to those which are extreme.

The sixth *Imām*, Ja'far, declared to the pilgrims that his great grandfather's tomb, '*al-ghādirīyyah* [i.e., the whole area of Karbalā' and its environs] is of the earth of the Holy House (*bayt al-maqdis*)'.⁹¹ The

sacred house of the *Ka'bah* is known as the *ḥaram*, meaning the place both of sanctity and safety.⁹² In the previous chapter, Karbalā' was characterized as *ḥaram*, in a statement that Ḥusayn made to the believers of the *jinn* who came to lend him support and destroy his enemies.⁹³ His son, Zayn al-Ābidīn, not only affirms his father's claim, but goes far beyond it. If the tradition we are about to quote is genuinely his, then we can hardly speak of any development of the Karbalā' piety as such.⁹⁴ Rather (the spot of the grave of Ḥusayn began to share in the *Imām*'s sanctity almost immediately after his death. This is probable because a strong emphasis on pilgrimage to Karbalā' developed immediately and soon led the authorities to destroy the tomb and forbid this pious act. The fourth *Imām* told his followers that:

God made the spot of Karbalā' a sacred and safe *ḥaram* 24,000 years before He created the earth of the *Ka'bah* and made it a sacred and secure *ḥaram*. When, moreover, God [exalted be He] shall cause the earth to quake and be melted, Kārbalā' shall be lifted up as it is, luminous and pure, and placed in the highest of the gardens of paradise. It shall be made the most exalted abode wherein only prophets and apostles shall dwell.⁹⁵

Here the *Imām* places Karbalā' on an equal, if not higher, stage in creation than the *Ka'bah* and claims for it a primordial place, more exalted than is usually accorded the ancient house of Mecca. He does not stop there, however; rather, in the rest of his statement, he claims that Karbalā' shall be the resplendent star whose light shall dazzle the eyes of all inhabitants of the earth. It shall cry out with rightful pride, ' . . . I am God's earth, sacred, pure and blessed, for in me is contained the master of all the martyrs and master of the youths of paradise.'⁹⁶

As usual, however, it is to the sixth *Imām* that we have to turn for the most apocalyptic and polemical traditions. Unlike his grandfather, who was satisfied with a high claim for Karbalā' without challenging the status of the *Ka'bah* in Islām, Jā'far sharply contrasts the two spots so that the *Ka'bah* is all but damned by God himself. This tradition, typical of so many attributed to him, displays all the marks of a fantastic myth. The *Imām* declared that when God created the *Ka'bah*, it waxed proud, saying, ' . . . who is like me when God had built His

house upon me, and men flocked to me from every place, and God made me His secure *ḥaram*!⁹⁷ But God commanded the spot of the *Ka'bah* to be humble and silent before Karbalā', for its high favor, compared to the latter, is no more than a needle dipped in the sea which carries some of its water. Great favor has been bestowed on Karbalā' because it contains the remains of the martyred *Imām*. Thus God continued:

. . . Had it not been for the sake of him whom the earth of Karbalā' contains I would never have created thee or the house on which thou pridest thyself. Be quiet therefore and hold thy peace, be a humble earth, meek and humiliated before the spot of Karbalā', or I will cause thee to melt and be thrown into the fire of hell.⁹⁸

No doubt traditions like these drew, and still continue to draw, large crowds of men and women to the holy shrine. In fact, at many points in Muslim history, and especially in times of strife between Safavid Iran and the Ottoman rulers, pilgrimage to the shrine of Karbalā' took the place of the *ḥajj*. The sixth *Imām*, who lived most of his life in Medina, stopped at nothing to entice his followers to visit the tomb of his martyred forebear. We shall discuss presently some of the great rewards promised to those who undertake the journey to the banks of the Euphrates, especially under perilous conditions.

It was not enough, however, to offer promises of future rewards; rather, the sanctity of Karbalā' rendered its soil a source of blessing and healing in this life. We are told that 'God recompensed Ḥusayn [for his martyrdom] in that He rendered supplications answered at his shrine, and the healing [of every disease] in the soil of his tomb.'⁹⁹ Many traditions enjoin the faithful to apply the sacred soil to their sick members, or to drink it mixed with water in case of an internal ailment. The soil of Karbalā' is potent in itself, hence the faithful should keep it in a clean place, and recite praise to God and prayers upon the Prophet and his family over it, lest the devil or other evil spirits of the *jinn* contaminate it. The sacred soil could lose its magical healing power if not specially guarded and treated.¹⁰⁰

The sanctity of Karbalā' was declared by God himself through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet; not only is its sacred character affirmed, but the history of its shrine is foretold in the famous tradition to which

we have often referred in this study, attributed to 'Alī, son of Ḥusayn, and reported on the authority of his aunt Zaynab. This tradition has the prestige of being in some way a divine saying (*ḥadīth qudsī*); moreover, it presents a complete *Shīʿī* eschatological picture. We shall quote at some length the portion dealing with Ḥusayn and his shrine.

. . . And when this group of men [Ḥusayn and his companions] will have departed to their final resting places, God himself will undertake the receiving of their souls with His own hand. Then will descend from the seventh heaven multitudes of angels with vessels of emeralds and rubies filled with the waters of life, and paradisaical garments and perfumes. They will wash their corpses with that water, dress them with those garments and embalm them with that perfume. Then God shall send people of thy *ummah* [Muḥammad's community] whom the people of unbelief (*kufṛ*) will not know, and who had not taken part in shedding the blood [of those men] in word, thought or deed. They will bury those corpses and raise a sign for the grave of the master of martyrs. It shall be a beacon for the people of truth, and the means for the faithful (*mu'minīn*) of final victory, and the delight of angels. From every heaven there will come 100,000 angels every day and night, praying over him, and circumambulating his shrine. They shall incessantly offer praise to God at his grave, and beg forgiveness for his pilgrims. They will record the names of those who will flock to him, those who seek by this only nearness to God and to thee O Muḥammad.¹⁰¹

The fourth *Imām* goes on to relate the divine message regarding the devotees who would flock in pilgrimage to the grave of his father. Finally, returning again to the shrine of Karbalā', he continues '. . . and there will be men on whom God's curse and wrath will surely fall, who will strive to efface all traces of that grave, but God will not permit them to accomplish their evil intent'.¹⁰² It must be observed that if, indeed, people like al-Mutawakkil did try to efface all traces of the sacred tomb, they could not efface them from the hearts of the *imāms'* followers.

The sacred tomb of the *Imām* in Karbalā' has never been without its crowds of pilgrims. Unlike the *hajj* which is limited to a special session, the *ziyārah* of *Imām* Ḥusayn is possible, and equally effective,

at any time and even at any place. When the author visited the shrine in May 1971, not during the special *zīyārah* season, the place thronged with crowds of pilgrims from many lands. It is now, as it has always been, a true house of tears and sighs to which the pious *Shī'īs* bring their joys and sorrows, to offer thanks to God and the *Imām* for their successes and supplications for their hardships and pains.¹⁰³

We saw in Chapter 1 how predictions of the sufferings and persecutions of the Holy Family were often set against the background of a happy and intimate family gathering. It is probable, in our view, that most such traditions are variations of the cloak (*kisā'*) incident; many of them include it. In early tradition, the Prophet was in the house of 'Alī, sharing with its members the usual meagre meal. As in such tales of dramatic contrast, the mood of the Apostle of God suddenly changed from manifest pleasure to sorrow and tears. The dramatic effect in this tradition seems to be quite consciously intended. No one dared to ask the Prophet the reason for his weeping; but Ḥusayn, still a young boy, jumped on his grandfather's lap and inquired about the cause of his sorrow. The Prophet replied that Gabriel had come to announce the calamities that were to befall the Holy Family, and thus snatched away that brief moment of happiness. The main purpose of this tradition is to accord prophetic sanction to the pilgrimage to the shrine of Karbalā' and to assure the faithful of great rewards for its performance. Thus Ḥusayn asked:

. . . O father, what shall be the reward of those who visit our graves, scattered as they will be in the earth? [The Prophet answered] These will be men and women of my community who would make pilgrimage to your grave seeking blessing by this act. It will be incumbent upon me to seek them out on the Day of Resurrection and save them from the awful fears of that hour and from all their transgressions: and God would cause them to dwell in paradise.¹⁰⁴

The *zīyārah* therefore may be regarded as an act of covenant renewal between the Holy Family and their followers. This covenant, to be sure, is a covenant of love, sincere obedience and devotion on the part of the community, and, on the part of the Holy Family, of returned love, compassion and the promise of high rewards and intercession in the world to come. This phenomenon in Islām is not totally unlike the

relationship we see between the community of ancient Israel and Yahweh or between most of the ancient communities of the Near East and their gods, for that matter.

We cannot enter any further into the interesting comparison of this phenomenon in Islām with its ancient counterparts in Near Eastern religious traditions. The *zīyārah* ritual, however, is integrated into the history of the ancient prophets, and claimed as an emulation of a divine act. We are told that a man went secretly one night to visit the tomb of Ḥusayn; he was met near the shrine by an angel in human form who ordered him to wait until dawn because Moses, the prophet, had asked permission from God to perform the sacred pilgrimage, and he, with a retinue of 70,000 angels, was spending the night at the *Imām*'s tomb.¹⁰⁵

An even more interesting connection with the ancient prophets is one established between the spot of the sacred grave and the birth of Jesus. The Qur'ān suggests that Mary, the mother of Jesus, fearing the reaction of the people to her giving birth to a child out of wedlock, took the newborn infant and retreated to a faraway place.¹⁰⁶ 'Alī, son of Ḥusayn, when asked concerning the location of her place of retreat, answered, 'She set out from Damascus until she reached Karbalā', and there, on the spot of Ḥusayn's tomb, she left the child and returned on the same night.'¹⁰⁷ That this account, besides being quite fantastic, could hardly agree with the Qur'ānic story of the birth of Jesus did not seem to disturb the *Imām* or whoever of his followers was responsible for it. One reason for this connection between the ancient prophet and the persecuted *Imām* may be that Jesus and his mother, according to Islāmic tradition, were suspected by their people, and thus were in need of divine proof and vindication. They were, according to the Qur'ānic account, vindicated. Nonetheless, their situation was analogous to that of the *imāms*, whose authority and status were questioned by the people, if not altogether rejected by the majority. The vindication of the ancient prophet, therefore, is fittingly linked to the tomb of the *Imām* who suffered the greatest wrong. The tradition may also suggest that the favor of vindication was granted the ancient prophet and his mother for the sake of the martyred *Imām* on the spot of his burial.

One of the followers of the sixth *Imām*, Ṣafwān al-Jammāl, on whose authority some important *zīyārah* traditions were reported,

came one day to visit him apparently in Medina. Şafwān, it seems, lived in Iraq and paid his visit to the *Imām* during the *hajj* season. The sixth *Imām* asked Şafwān if he frequented the tomb of Ḥusayn, and he answered affirmatively. Şafwān asked in turn if the *Imām* himself visited the sacred shrine also. The sixth *Imām* answered,

. . . How could I not visit it when God himself visits it every Friday night. He descends to it with the angels, prophets and vicegerents. He descends with Muḥammad, the best of prophets and us, his vicegerents, the best of vicegerents.

Şafwān asked again in astonishment, 'Then you make a pilgrimage to him [Ḥusayn] . . . and thus achieve a pilgrimage to God himself.' 'Yes', said the *Imām*, 'Hold fast to this and you will be accorded the same merit as though you have performed this same pilgrimage, and that is truly a favor, yes, truly a favor.'¹⁰⁸ This interesting tradition perhaps reaches the ultimate limit of anthropocentrism within Islāmic doctrine, but it is doubtful that it can be accepted at its face value by most Muslims, including moderate *Shī'īs*. It goes also as far as it is possible to go in enticing pious *Shī'īs* to sacrifice everything for the great honor of the pilgrimage. A tradition is often reported on the authority of many of the *imāms*, with minor variations, that 'anyone making pilgrimage to the tomb of Ḥusayn acknowledging his right [that is, to the *imamate*] would be as though he had made pilgrimage to God on His throne'.¹⁰⁹ Modern editors of early sources reporting this tradition go out of their way to try to explain it metaphorically. Nonetheless, it is clear that it was important for the *imāms* themselves, and certainly for the community, to preserve the Muḥarram cultus in its entirety. To that end, neither the *imāms* nor their disciples spared anything.

The highest reward promised those who frequent the tomb of Ḥusayn is declared to be the honor of being his close companion in paradise. They will sit and converse with him under the divine throne; this they will prefer to all the pleasure of paradise:

. . . they would be told 'Enter paradise,' but they would refuse . . . and the houris would send messengers to them saying 'come to us, for we long for you as do the everlasting youths' (*wildān*),¹¹⁰ but

they would not even raise their heads to listen to them because of the great bliss and favor they shall experience in Ḥusayn's company.¹¹¹

The tradition goes on to describe the terrible state of their enemies and their great fear and torments on that day. Finally, it concludes with a dramatic description of the great pomp with which Ḥusayn's companions will be carried on splendid mounts to their mansions in paradise.¹¹²

These are but a few examples of the great rewards promised in return for the sacred pilgrimage. We are further told that whoever spends of his wealth to make pilgrimage to Ḥusayn will enter paradise without reckoning. Any man who is beaten for making a pilgrimage will be given for every strike a *hourī*, and for any pain, a thousand merits (*ḥasanāt*). The man who is killed for his devotion to the Holy Family and his determination to visit Ḥusayn's grave is a true martyr. Angels will clean his substance, literally clay (*tīnah*), until it is as pure as the clay of the prophets. With the first drop of his blood, God will forgive all his sins. After his death, a door will open from his grave to paradise, through which its fragrance will blow to comfort him. He will not experience the reckoning and torment of the grave; on the Day of Resurrection, he will be raised with the prophets; with them and the angels he will be taken up to heaven to sing divine praises before the throne of majesty.¹¹³ In fact, in the minds of the *imāms* and their immediate followers, such great merits are granted not so much for the act of the pilgrimage itself, but more perhaps for the difficulties *Shīʿī* Muslims had to face in performing it. As we shall see presently the *zīyārah* can be brief, lasting no more than the few moments spent at the sacred tomb, or it can be performed anywhere facing in its direction.

Before we describe a few *zīyārah* rituals, both at the tomb and elsewhere, a word may be in order concerning the attitude of proper reverence.¹¹⁴ It has already been observed that the *zīyārah* ritual may be regarded as an act of covenant renewal between the pilgrims and the *imāms*. Furthermore, through the *zīyārah*, the pilgrim participates directly in the sufferings and sorrows of the martyr of Karbalā': the devotees emulate, as far as possible, the sufferings of their *Imām*. Thus, the sixth *Imām*, al-Ṣādiq, enjoined his followers, 'If you wish to visit

the grave of Ḥusayn, do so in a state of sorrow and grief; be hungry and thirsty, for Ḥusayn died sorrowful, hungry and thirsty.¹¹⁵)

Another way in which this identification between the *Imām* and his devotees may be seen is the special significance attributed to the pilgrimage on the day of 'Āshūrā'. The sixth *Imām* declared that:

Whoever spends the night of 'Āshūrā' at the grave of Ḥusayn would meet God on the Day of Resurrection, stained with his blood as though he had fought with Ḥusayn on the plain of Karbalā'.¹¹⁶

In a similar tradition, the sixth *Imām* declares that such a devotee would be stained not with his own blood, but rather with the blood of Ḥusayn, and would be counted among those who were martyred with him.¹¹⁷

In myth and ritual, time and space are treated as loci of the sacred. Karbalā' has its special significance in *Shī'ī* piety because it is the locus of the sacred remains of the *Imām*; similarly, the day of 'Āshūrā' is especially sacred because it is the locus, so to speak, of his sufferings. Hence, performing the *zīyārah* ritual in Karbalā' on the day of 'Āshūrā' has great merit. We shall now examine a few of the major themes of the *zīyārah* liturgy, and describe briefly its performance. In the appendix to this chapter an important text of a *zīyārah* attributed to the twelfth *Imām*, the *Mahdī*, will be discussed in some detail.

The shrine of Karbalā' is held by *Shī'ī* piety to be equal in the eyes of God to the ancient shrine of Mecca, the holy city of Islām, if not more exalted. Similarly, pilgrimage to the shrine of Karbalā' is at least as meritorious as the obligatory *hajj*, the sacred pilgrimage to the Ka'bah, if not more so. To a certain man who came on a pilgrimage to the grave of Ḥusayn from far off Yemen for no reason but to visit the sacred tomb and offer supplications to God, the sixth *Imām* declared that one pilgrimage to the tomb of Ḥusayn equals 30 pilgrimages in the company of the Apostle of God, with all their rites of 'umrah, the lesser pilgrimage. Thus his reward was equal to his unselfish devotion to the wronged *Imām*.¹¹⁸ (The fifth *Imām*, al-Bāqir, was even more generous than his son. He declared in a long dialogue with one of his followers that one pilgrimage to Karbalā' on the day of 'Āshūrā' is equal to a thousand thousand *hajj* pilgrimages and an equal number of engagements in the holy war with the prophets.¹¹⁹)

The man asked what he should do if he lived too far away to be able to perform the *zīyārah* rites at the sacred shrine on the day of 'Āshūrā'. The *Imām* instructed him to perform the following *zīyārah*, one of the earliest and most popular liturgical pieces of the *zīyārah* literature.¹²⁰ A man in a distant country should go to the wilderness, or up onto a high roof in his own house; then turn his face toward Karbalā' and pronounce many salutations of peace on the martyred *Imām* and curses on his murderers. He should then offer two prostrations of prayer (*rak-ahs*) in the middle of the day, after which he should hold a mourning session (*ma'tam*) in his house to which he should invite all his friends and relatives. The attitude enjoined is one of total immersion in the tragedy, as though it had just been witnessed by the participants. The participants should offer each other condolences, saying, 'May God grant us great rewards for our bereavement of Ḥusayn, and count us among those who will exact vengeance for his blood with His friend (*walī*) the well guided (*Mahdī*) *Imām* of the family of Muḥammad.'¹²¹

The actual *zīyārah* petition (*du'ā'*) then follows. It is an eloquent confession of absolute loyalty to the *imāms* and total disassociation (*barā'ah*) from their enemies. In this *zīyārah* as in most others of the same genre, we see a great display of emotions: love and hatred, meekness and fervent hope are contrasted with violent and hostile anger, frustration and impatient anticipation. The devotee's love for and loyalty to the *imāms* is equalled by his hatred and hostility for their enemies, the Umayyads and their agents. He is meek and sorrowful for the sufferings of the *Imām* and his companions, but flaming with zeal to be in the victorious army of the *Mahdī*, to take part in avenging Ḥusayn's sacred blood. The text under discussion is a long repetition of these themes. Here we quote only a few short passages, each repeated a hundred times by the participants led by a chanter. A trance-like state seizes the participants as they repeat over and over again these invocations of curse and blessings, loyalty and hostility, making this experience a powerful one:

. . . O God, curse him who usurped the rights of Muḥammad and the family of Muḥammad and his supporters from the first to the last of them. O God, curse the group that gathered together for the

killing of Ḥusayn and pledged allegiance to his enemies to kill him and his companions; O God, curse them all.¹²²

This outburst of condemnation is followed by an invocation of peace and humble loyalty to the *Imām*, again repeated a hundred times.

Peace be upon you, O Abū ‘Abdallāh, and upon the spirits of those who dwell in your spacious house. . . . From me to you is a salutation of God’s peace as long as I live and day and night follow one another. May God not make this my last *zīyārah* to you. Peace be upon Ḥusayn and upon ‘Alī, son of Ḥusayn and upon the companions of Ḥusayn, on them all be God’s peace, prayers, and blessings.¹²³

The *zīyārah* ends with a petition, uttered in prostration, for Ḥusayn’s intercession and praise to God.

This *zīyārah*, simple only in its ritualistic structure, may be contrasted with others designed to be performed at the tomb itself. These call for prostrations, genuflections and circumambulations of the shrine. Most, if not all, such *zīyārāt* share the same themes. First, the salutation of peace to the *Imām*, his family and friends is pronounced, followed by a profession of faith in *walāyah* (spiritual and temporal authority) of the *imāms*, curses on their enemies, and finally an expression of the fervent hope of the devotees to be among those who avenge the sacred blood of the martyrs with the *Mahdī*.¹²⁴ We shall analyze briefly one quite interesting *zīyārah* of this genre which the *Imām* al-Šādiq taught two of his prominent disciples, Yūnus and al-Mufaḍḍal.

The text under consideration is especially significant because it expresses many of the themes of sorrow and revenge already discussed in this and the previous chapters of this study. This *zīyārah* introduces the theme of the dependence of all things in creation on the existence of the *imāms* as well. After the pronouncements of peace on the martyrs surrounding the *Imām*, the pilgrim addresses *Imām* Ḥusayn:

Peace be upon you, O martyr (*qatīl*) of God and son of His martyr . . . the object of the vengeance (*tha’r*) of God and son of His *tha’r*, and the one to be avenged by the inhabitants of the heavens and the earth. I bear witness that your blood dwells in the abodes of eternity

(*khuld*) and that for it the confines of the divine throne quaked, and that it was mourned by all creatures. The seven heavens and seven earths, and all that live in them, the inhabitants of paradise and hell, and all things visible and invisible of God's creation wept for it.¹²⁵

The pilgrim declares himself to be a humble slave (*abd*) of God and an obedient servant (*mawlā*) of the *Imām*. The *imāms* alone render possible God's mercy and the reward of paradise; thus the pilgrim repeats three times, 'Whoever wishes to approach God must begin with you [the *imāms*].'¹²⁶

It is a well known phenomenon in the history of religion that God acts in nature and history through special persons on whom depend the preservation of order and harmony in creation. The Logos of the fourth Gospel, through which all things were made, may be taken as a good example. The Prophet and his family come very close to occupying a similar exalted position for *Shī'ī* Muslims. The pilgrim therefore continues to emphasize the role the *imāms* play in his salvation and the ongoing natural processes:

Through you [the *imāms*] God causes falsehood to be exposed and evil times to be taken away. Through you, God blots out what He wills and establishes what He wills, and through you He removes slavery and humiliation from our necks. Through you God takes revenge for the blood of every believer [man and woman] that must be exacted. Through you the earth brings forth its trees, and trees bear their fruits. Through you the sky sends down its rain and sustenance. Through you God takes away all sorrow and calamity . . . through you the earth, which carries your bodies, glorifies God, and through you its mountains are fixed in their places.¹²⁷

The *zīyārah* ends with the usual curses upon the murderers of Ḥusayn and his companions, and salutations of peace upon him and his fellow martyrs.

Another liturgical *zīyārah* text which we shall briefly examine is one of the oldest and perhaps one of the best examples of liturgical prayers. Unlike the *zīyārahs* we have discussed so far, it has fewer invocatory prayers and many more prayers of thanksgiving and profession of faith in God, devotion to the *imāms* and acceptance of their *walāyah*.

The profession of faith is not limited to the *shahādah*, but includes the affirmation of the reality or truth of death, the reckoning of the grave, resurrection and final judgment.

After all this, the pilgrim addresses the *Imām* and his companions with salutations of peace, and affirms once more his unswerving devotion to the *Imām*. He declares that the grave where he stands is the grave of the beloved of Muḥammad, who is the beloved of God; that the *Imām* did truly struggle in the way of God in order to bring men from darkness into light, from error and falsehood to the gate of true guidance. Therefore, the pilgrim comes to reaffirm his covenant with the *Imām* and express disapprobation of the *Imām*'s enemies, whom he curses in long and eloquent imprecations.

Finally, the pilgrim affirms the continuity of the *imāms* with the prophets by stating, after the invocation of peace, that the *Imām* is the heir of Adam, the pure one (*ṣafwah*) of God, of Noah the prophet of God, of Moses, the interlocutor of God, of Jesus, the spirit of God, of Muḥammad, the beloved of God, and the two previous *Imāms*, 'Alī, his father, and Ḥasan, his brother. The pilgrim attests that the *Imām* is the great light guiding to the right way.

. . . You are a light in the exalted loins [of prophets], a light in the darkness of the earth, a light in the air, and a light in the heavens on high. In all these you were a light that would never be extinguished, and the one whose speech is the word of truth and guidance.¹²⁸

The text under consideration provides one of the longest and most complete *ziyārahs*. The pilgrim is reminded of all the ideas and events surrounding Karbalā' and the hopes of vindication which bind him to the *imāms*. The text displays great eloquence and imagination, and even a spontaneous lack of systematization characteristic of the best liturgical literature.

Since our concern in this chapter has been the remembrance of *Imām* Ḥusayn and his special place in *Shī'ī* piety, we have limited ourselves to his *ziyārah* to the exclusion of those of the other *imāms*. There are, however, *ziyārahs* for each of the *imāms* individually and for all of them collectively as well. One collective *ziyārah* deserves a few remarks on account of the ideas it expresses about the relationship of the *imāms* to God on the one hand, and to the community on the other. The text of

this *zīyārah* is attributed to the eighth *Imām*, al-Riḍā. The *zīyārah* begins as usual with invocations of peace on the *imāms*, but does not mention their names until nearly the end of the text. It begins:

Peace upon them who are the locus of the knowledge of God. Peace upon them who are the dwelling place of the remembrance (*dhikr*) of God. Peace upon them who are the manifestation of God's command (*amr*) and His prohibition (*naḥī*). Peace upon them: whoever accepts their authority (*walāyah*) would have accepted God's authority, and whoever shows hostility to them would have shown hostility to God. Peace upon them; whoever knows them would have known God, and whoever acknowledges them not would have denied God. Peace be upon them; whoever seeks protection (*i'tasama*) in them would have sought protection in God and whoever abandons them would have abandoned God.¹²⁹

Having affirmed faith in the *imāms* and their status with God, the pilgrim then goes on to affirm his loyalty to them and calls to witness the sincerity of his devotion.

I call God to witness that I am peace (*šilm*) to him who peacefully submits to you, and war to him who wars against you. I believe in all your secret and open manifestations, and delegate to you all my affairs.¹³⁰

The *zīyārah* ends with the usual curses on the enemies of the *imāms* and prayers upon the Prophet and the *imāms*, naming them individually.

This last *zīyārah* text suggests strongly, especially in the original Arabic, the absolute loyalty of the community to the *imāms*, a loyalty not only spiritual but also political. The words, 'I am peace to him who peacefully submits to you and war to him who wars against you (*anā šilmun li-man sālamakum wa-ḥarbun li-man ḥārabakum*)' are not meant metaphorically, but concretely. This affirmation of allegiance, the *bay'ah* to the *imāms*, has its own special *zīyārah*. We shall end this chapter with a brief discussion of an interesting *zīyārah*, known as *zīyārat al-muṣāfaqah*, the giving of the *bay'ah*; and with a prayer of the sixth *Imām* affirming this sacred pact with the community of the faithful.

The *zīyārah* we are about to discuss, of unknown authorship, was

copied by al-Majlisī from an old *zīyārah* collection whose author is not identified.¹³¹ The Arabic word *muṣāfaqah* comes from the root *ṣafaqa*, meaning to strike one's hand on that of another in accepting an agreement or pact. It is also used to signify the conclusion of a pact of allegiance (*bay'ah*) between an individual and a leader. It, therefore presupposes the actual presence of the two parties to the pact. It is important to keep this in mind, because the *imāms*, for the *Shī'ī* community, are not simply persons no longer present; they are seen to be omnipresent in the community, hearing the petitions of its members and demanding their unbroken allegiance, love and loyalty. Appropriately, therefore, this *zīyārah* is to be performed at the grave of *Imām Ḥusayn*, that is, at the spot where his concrete presence is presupposed.

For the most part, the text speaks for itself; thus we shall quote it at some length. By way of initial greeting and paying of respect, the pilgrim begins with these words:

I come, O my master, to you a pilgrim offering my salutation of peace upon you. I come seeking refuge in you and fleeing to you. I come to renew my covenant and my *bay'ah* to which God had bound my neck. It is the covenant and pledge of acceptance, demanded of me by God, of your *walāyah* and dissociation from all your enemies. I come affirming and confessing anew that obedience which God had made obligatory upon all men.¹³²

The pilgrim is then to place his right hand on the tomb in the manner of a man offering the *bay'ah* and to address the *Imām*, saying:

Here is my hand spread out (*muṣāfiqah*) to you in *bay'ah* . . . accept therefore this of me, O my *Imām*. For I come to you cognizant of what God has made obligatory upon us of rendering support (*nuṣrah*) to you.¹³³

If the devotee sincerely pledges a renewal of his covenant, then he may be assured of the *Imām's* adherence to his own side of the covenant. This assurance is declared by the pilgrim on behalf of the *Imām* in the words:

. . . O my master and *Imām* . . . I bear witness that you have kept your covenant. . . as you have promised him who comes to you as a pilgrim to fulfill all that which he hopes for of your goodness.

To you I have come from my country placing on you my reliance before God. Fulfill therefore my hope in you.¹³⁴

The pilgrim ends with a petition (*du'ā'*) that he may be included in the company of the Holy Family in this world and in the world to come.

It was suggested above that the *zīyārah* pilgrimage to the tomb of *Imām* Ḥusayn often entailed many hardships for the pilgrims. It must be added here that the *imāms* were cognizant of this fact, as well as of the general disadvantage their followers had to face as a small minority in the Muslim community. The sixth *Imām* lifted up his hands one day to heaven, and in tears prayed:

O God these [the *Shī'īs*] are but a small group of people. Make therefore our life their life and our death their death. Do not set over them an enemy of Thine that Thou mayest not bereave us of them. For if Thou wouldst bereave us of them, Thou wouldst never be truly worshipped in Thine earth.¹³⁵

More moving still is the *Imām's* prayer for the pilgrims to the tomb of his grandfather, the wronged martyr. In this prayer we see a grateful recognition by the *Imām* of the sacrifice and devotion of his pious followers as he poured out his heart before God on their behalf. In a way this prayer may be regarded as an intercessory petition similar to the prayer of Christ for his disciples before his passion, as reported in the fourth Gospel.¹³⁶ Yet unlike Christ's prayer, the prayer of the *Imām* retains all the Islāmic elements of the *zīyārah* tradition of which it is a part.

Mu'āwīyah Ibn Wahb, one of the sixth *Imām's* close disciples, entered the *Imām's* house one day and found him on his prayer rug, uttering the following invocation after his prayers:

O God, Thou who hast chosen us for Thy special favor, promised us the gift of intercession, granted us the vicegerency (*waṣīyyah*), given us the knowledge of what is past and what is to come and caused the hearts of men to incline towards us, forgive me and my brethren. Forgive the pilgrims to the grave of my grandfather Ḥusayn, those who have spent their wealth in their desire to show their loyalty to us, and in hope for that which Thou, for our sake, hast in store for them. This they did for the joy they would bring to the heart of Thy

Prophet, wishing only to obey our command and thus bring anger and fury to the hearts of our enemies. In all this they wish only Thy good pleasure. Reward them therefore with Thy pleasure in them. Protect them in the night and day, and reward well their families and children whom they have left behind. Go with them and protect them against the evil of every powerful and weak man among Thy creatures and the evil of the satans of men and *jinn*. Grant all that which they had desired of Thee in their sojourn away from their homes. Reward them for all that they have sacrificed for us over the needs of their own children. O God, our enemies have taunted them for coming to us, but that did not deter them from seeking us in opposition to our enemies. Be merciful, O God, towards those faces which were discolored by the heat of the sun. Be merciful towards those cheeks which are pressed to the tomb of Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ḥusayn and towards those eyes whose tears have run down in compassion for us. Have mercy, O God, for those hearts that have grieved for us. O God, into Thy hands I commend these bodies and souls until they shall be gathered at the pool (*al-ḥawḍ*) on the day of the great thirst.¹³⁷

To this goal, the happy reunion of the *imāms* and their followers at the source of life-giving water, we shall now turn.

At the Pool of al-Kawthar (*Alā-Hawḍ al-Kawthar*)¹

Suffering, whatever its nature may be, can lead to the annihilation, both physical and spiritual, of the sufferer. But we have argued that ultimate victory over evil, suffering and death, can be achieved only through suffering and death.² In fact, where redemption is the primary goal of the life of a religious community, it is accepted as a divine gift of eternal life granted through death. The Christian case is one of the most powerful examples of this phenomenon in human history. We would like to argue that this quest for salvation, in different forms to be sure, plays a major role in the religious life of the *Ithnā'asharī Shī'ī* community.

It will be our task in this chapter to emphasize this claim by showing, in a very direct way, how the sufferings of the Holy Family of Muḥammad are linked to the high status of its members on the Day of Judgment and the salvation of their devotees. We shall attempt to show further that while the Christian concept or concepts of redemption remain fully Christian and thus non-Islāmic and more specifically non-*Shī'ī* concepts, there is much that is common to the two religious traditions in this respect. Indeed, *Shī'ī* eschatology, while remaining within the Islāmic framework, resembles the eschatology of post-biblical Judaism and of the early Christian church. Although the concept of redemption in *Shī'ī* piety is always presented within the context of intercession (*shafā'ah*), in actual fact it goes beyond the accepted traditional Islāmic understanding of this concept. We shall keep our discussion within the context of intercession, indicating those elements in the *Shī'ī* concept of redemption which go beyond the limits of intercession.

We shall, in this chapter, investigate the intercessory prerogative of the Prophet and his descendants, the *imāms*. This divine favor is a direct reward for their endurance of suffering, privation and death. This favor will be manifested to the entire creation in the exalted station of the *imāms* before the throne of God. As they were here on

earth 'the weak ones (*al-mustad'afūn fī al-ard*)',³ so on the last day they will share in the sovereignty of God over His creation. We shall next discuss the symbol of this authority of the Prophet and his descendants: *ḥawḍ al-kawthar*, source of eternal life and relief from hardships on the Day of Resurrection.

It has been argued in this study that the faithful followers (*Shī'ah*) of the *imāms* share fully in their sufferings and sorrows. Consequently, they will share also in acts of redemption, healing and judgment. This prerogative of redemption and judgment will be granted by God to Fāṭimah, the mother of the sorrowful *imāms* and mistress of the House of Sorrows, and by her to the devotees of her descendants. Our next point of consideration, therefore, will be Fāṭimah's intercessory role on the Day of Judgment, effecting a final vindication for herself, her descendants and their followers.

Finally we shall see that absolute vengeance and fulfillment of all the spiritual and temporal hopes of the *Shī'ī* community are embodied in the twelfth *Imām*, the *Mahdī*. He shall come as the final executor of God's judgment and His proof over His creation. The *Mahdī*'s return (*raj'ah*) will be our final point of investigation.

6.1 INTERCESSION: THE REWARD OF SUFFERING

The *imāms*, as we have seen throughout this study, were from the beginning destined by God to drain the cup of suffering and martyrdom and to play a decisive role in human salvation and judgment. To a large extent, the intercessory prerogative of the *imāms* is dependent upon their patient endurance of privation, rejection and persecution. Indeed, *Shī'ī* piety has insisted, in many cases with little or no evidence, that all the *imāms* were martyred. In this way they all share directly in the martyrdom of Karbalā', in its sufferings as well as its rewards.

We saw in Chapter 2 that God offered the *walāyah* (spiritual and temporal authority) of the *imāms* to the entire creation as the primordial divine trust (*amānah*). He had already decreed, however, who among men would freely accept this divine trust and who would as freely reject it. By this decree humanity was marked, some for eternal

bliss and others for eternal torment. Thus we are told that the *imāms* possessed a special heavenly writ (*ṣahīfah*) containing the names both of their followers and their enemies until the Day of Resurrection.⁴

The problem of human freedom and divine sovereignty and will is as complex a theological issue in Islām as it is in Christianity. While both the broad emphasis and the more basic theological orientation are quite different in the two traditions, the *Shīʿī* view is closer to the Christian position than it is to the strict *Sunnī* Islāmic view. God wills, knows and decrees; yet man is still responsible for his choice, a choice which confronts him at every moment, as the earth would never be void of a proof or witness (*ḥujjah*) of God over His servants⁵ both to judge and to redeem them. The proximity of the *Shīʿī* view to that of Christianity is perhaps due to the fact that both accept a mediator between man and God, one whose essential being and place in human history plays a determining role in the divine plan for creation, revelation and salvation. Thus we must agree with Henri Corbin that *Shīʿī* imamology is a kind of 'Islāmic christology'.⁶ In Christian piety, Christ is the eternal Logos, the divine Word; the agent of creation on the one hand, and on the other hand the slain lamb standing before the throne of majesty both to save and to judge. The *imāms*, likewise, are at one and the same time the pivot of creation and reason for its subsistence, and the blood-stained martyrs whose death is a point of contention between God and their persecutors.⁷

The close connections between the sufferings of the Holy Family and the divine favor or intercession are presented in a tradition reporting a dialogue between God and the Prophet, on the night of the Prophet's heavenly journey (*miʿrāj*). The Prophet, we read, was told by God, 'Thy Lord wishes to try thee with three things to test thy patience.' The Prophet assented, praying for patience and endurance; the first trial was hunger and privation, as he was to give all that he possessed to the poor.⁸ The second trial was the persecution and calumnies which Muḥammad had to suffer at the hands of the hypocrites and the wounds inflicted upon him. The third trial was the persecution and wrong his family was destined to suffer after him. The details of this calamity have already been discussed in Chapter 1, when we considered those portions of the famous tradition of 'Alī, son of Ḥusayn, and others dealing with the insults, wrongs, and physical

violence which Fāṭimah suffered; violence which is said to have caused her to lose her child. We also observed the treachery, opposition and finally martyrdom which 'Alī suffered at the hands of his enemies. The heavenly voice described the death of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn; to all this the Prophet assented, submitting his will to the divine decree as he repeated, 'To God do we belong and to Him we shall return.'⁹

It may be inferred that the persecutions and wrongs which the family of the Prophet Muḥammad had to suffer were due to the wickedness and folly of men. They were allowed by God to take place, however, in order to manifest the right over the wrong and thus establish His contention (*ḥujjah*) against evil men. An interesting point of comparison can be made with the biblical assertion that God hardened Pharaoh's heart in order that he and his people might deserve the punishment of the ten plagues.¹⁰

The death of Ḥusayn was especially decreed by God to consummate the divine plan, not only for human history here on earth, but also for the world to come. Thus the heavenly voice continued concerning Ḥusayn:

. . . he would beg for my assistance, but my decree had already predestined him and those with him for martyrdom. For his death shall be my contention [or argument (*ḥujjah*)] against the inhabitants of the earth.¹¹

The judgment of this divine contention will be executed by the ninth descendant of the martyred *Imām*, the *Mahdī*, one of whose epithets is *ḥujjat Allāh* (the proof, witness or contention of God).¹² The tradition goes on:

Then will I [God] bring out of his [Ḥusayn's] loins a male descendant whom I shall grant victory and vengeance for Ḥusayn. He shall fill the earth with justice and rule it with equity. Great fear will come over all men during his time. He shall kill so many, that people would doubt him [believing him an oppressor].¹³

We shall return to the role of the *Mahdī* later.

Trials and tribulations were decreed for the family of Muḥammad, but so was a promise of high rewards on the last day. 'Alī is to have the gardens of paradise for an inheritance. To him will be given control

over the *ḥawḍ al-kawthar*, to give its waters to his friends (*awliyā'*), to drink and to turn his enemies away thirsty. The fires of hell will be turned into 'coolness and peace' for him;¹⁴ he shall enter and release anyone in whose heart is the weight of an atom of love for *ahl-al-bayt*.

According to a very early tradition, reported even in *Shī'ī* sources on the authority of 'Abdallāh, son of 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, who heard it from his father, the Prophet said:

When the Day of Resurrection shall come, the throne of God will be adorned with every beautiful ornament. There will be brought two platforms of light, the length of each being 100 miles, and placed one on the right and the other on the left of the throne. Ḥasan and Ḥusayn will be seated each on one of them, thus they will adorn the throne of God as would two earrings adorn the face of a woman.¹⁵

Moreover, as a reward for what the two *imāms* had suffered in this world, they will have favors beyond the imagination of the hearts of men. Again, we see the familiar contrast between the sad plight of the *imāms* here on earth and their exalted status with God in heaven. Yet, like Christ, who will display his wounds of suffering and death on the day of final reckoning, crowned with the crown of glory and power, so *Imām* Ḥusayn will still appear as a body without a head.¹⁶

The exalted status of the *imāms* in the world to come is always linked with the rewards promised to their followers for their own sufferings and endurance for the *imāms*' sake. This total vindication and exaltation of the *imāms* provides a sense of security and even exultation for the pious *Shī'īs*. More concretely still, it strengthens their hope for a blessed existence, as it promises restoration and healing after the period of struggle, persecution and the despair of failure.

If the twelfth *Imām* symbolizes for the *Shī'ī* community the temporal power, success and conquest which neither the *imāms* nor their followers have enjoyed in this world, 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the first *Imām*, embodies spiritual hopes, or rather hopes belonging to the hereafter, hopes of vindication and the infinite pleasure of paradise. In the construction of traditions depicting the majesty and power of the Prince of the Faithful, pious imagination has displayed great eloquence and artistic fantasy. The magnetism of the personality of 'Alī has even attracted people from outside the *Shī'ī* community. Al-Khawārizmī

reports a tradition attributed to the Prophet which places 'Alī not far below the throne of God:

When the Day of Resurrection comes, 'Alī shall sit on al-Firdaws, which is a mountain higher than the entire paradise (*jannah*). On its top is the throne of light, and before him flowing the waters of Tasnīm.¹⁷ No one will be able to pass over the *ṣirāt*¹⁸ except if he had accepted his authority (*walāyah*) and that of his descendants. 'Alī will then stand over the *ṣirāt* causing those who love him to enter paradise and those who hate him to be consigned to hell.¹⁹

This passage exemplifies a technique typical in *Shī'ī* tradition: obscure words which have come into the Arabic language, whether from oriental or ancient western languages, are concretized and used to convey an aspect of mystery and myth beyond their generally accepted meaning. Firdaws, for example, which means 'paradise', becomes a specific place in paradise with a special significance. This imaginative use of words at times is even applied to simple Arabic words. In most cases such a word would serve as the basis of a story conveying some special aspect of mystery, hagiography or some particular eschatological idea. The tradition we are about to consider displays all these elements, expressed in an interesting and romantic way.

'Alī and the Prophet are introduced as unknown people into the heavenly court on the Day of Judgment; they themselves appear as uninformed guests, so to speak, wondering at the things they see, and in turn evoking astonishment and admiration among angels and prophets. Like many traditions of this genre, the story ignores the publicly recognized and acclaimed presence of the two great personalities, Muḥammad and 'Alī, displayed in other traditions. Their absence, however, is only a dramatic device to introduce the Prophet and his beloved cousin and son-in-law, and to stress their glorious personalities. *Ḥadīth al-wasīlah*,²⁰ as this tradition is called, was related on the authority of the famous companion, Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī. The Apostle of God said:

If you wish to invoke God, invoke Him through my *wasīlah*. He was asked, 'O Apostle of God what is the *wasīlah*?' And he answered, 'It is my station in paradise. It has a thousand steps, the

distance between each step would take a thoroughbred horse a month to gallop. . . . It will be made of every kind of precious stone. . . . It will be erected on the Day of Resurrection among the stations of the prophets shining like the resplendent moon among the stars. There will not be on that day a prophet, veracious man (*ṣiddīq*) or martyr, but that they would exclaim "Blessed is he whose station this is." Then will the proclamation proceed from the presence of God for all men and angels to hear: "This is the station of Muḥammad."'

The tradition goes on, with all the realism of an actual life situation, to describe the Prophet coming clad in new and shining garments with 'Alī before him. The latter will carry the standard of Muḥammad, the standard of exaltation (*ḥamd*) on which will be inscribed 'There is no God but God, those of good fortune (*al-muflihūn*) will be rendered victorious by God.' The angels will gaze at them, thinking them to be two noble and highly favored prophets. Prophets will marvel, thinking them to be two archangels near the divine throne. Then Muḥammad will ascend to the top of that station, with 'Alī only a step below him. The divine voice will again announce, 'This is my beloved Muḥammad, and that is my friend (*walī*) 'Alī. Blessed are they who love him and woe to them who have hated and calumniated him.' Thus those who loved 'Alī in this world will rejoice and those who hated him will grieve. Riḍwān (the keeper of paradise) and Mālik (the keeper of hell) will come to the Prophet and deliver into his hands the keys of paradise and hell. The Prophet will give them to 'Alī, who will then permit whomsoever he wishes to enter paradise and whomsoever he wishes to enter the fire. In this mood of exultation, the tradition concludes, '. . . And hell shall be on that day more obedient to 'Alī than a young servant (*ghulām*) would be to his master.'²¹

The intercessory character of this tradition is obvious. It is, however, interesting to note the similarity in this tradition between 'Alī, the vicegerent and successor of Muḥammad, and Simon Peter, the prince of the apostles and keeper of the keys of the kingdom. In the *Shi'ī* doctrine of the imamate-succession, Saint Peter (*Sham'ūn al-ṣafā*) is declared to be a prophet.²² The equality of status between the Prophet Muḥammad and his vicegerent on the last day, however, goes

beyond the depiction of the relationship between Saint Peter and Christ on the Day of Judgment. In *ḥadīth al-wasilah*, as in other similar traditions, 'Alī is especially shown as not simply an intercessor, one who pleads with God on behalf of his followers, but further as a judge with all the divine powers of 'loosing and binding'.

While 'Alī shares in the sufferings and martyrdom of the *imāms*, and hence in their rewards of intercession on the last day, his authority rests more on his own special status as 'the brother'²³ and vicegerent (*waṣī*) of the Prophet. It is therefore more accurate to say that the other *imāms* and members of the Holy Family share in his great authority, because they share in the clear appointment of him and his descendants as the rightful leaders (*imāms*) of the community.

The community of devotees of the *imāms* will share as directly in their prerogatives of intercession as they do in their sufferings. More specifically, the community will share in the reward of redemption for suffering promised to the martyred *Imām* Ḥusayn. An early tradition clearly expresses this idea, reporting one of the many announcements given by the angels to the Prophet of his grandson's impending death. Umm Salamah, in whose house such angelic visits were supposed to have taken place, exclaimed as she heard the sad prediction, 'O Apostle of God ask God to spare him that [i.e., painful death].' He answered,

I did, but God revealed to me that he [Ḥusayn] shall have a high degree [in paradise] unattained by any other of God's creatures. He shall have a group of followers (*Shī'ah*) who will intercede and their intercession will be accepted. . . . Blessed are those who will be among the friends (*awliyā'*) of Ḥusayn and his followers (*Shī'ah*). By God they will be triumphant (*fa'izūn*) on the Day of Resurrection.²⁴

We saw in our discussion of the *zīyārah* of the covenant (*muṣāfaqah*) that the *imāms* are omnipresent, ready to hear the supplications of their devotees and to intercede with God on their behalf. They are, we are told, like the sun whose warm rays and brilliant light shines over the world giving it light and guidance. During their lives, the *imāms* may be likened to the sun in its full splendor, unveiled by clouds. After their death, regarded only as a period of occultation (*ghaybah*), they are like the sun shining through the clouds, a light hidden by a veil (*ḥijāb*). Yet the sun behind the clouds loses nothing of its power or brilliance; on

the contrary, it becomes more accessible to the weak sight of men whose eyes would burn out if they were to look at the naked sun.²⁵

The *imāms* know all the details of the lives of their followers. This is asserted in a tradition interpreting the Qur'ānic verse, 'Act, for God shall see your actions and His Apostle and the believers.'²⁶ A man asked the eighth *Imām*, al-Riḍā, to pray for him; the latter answered, 'How could I not do so when all your deeds are brought before me every day and night.' Then he repeated the above quoted verse in proof of his claim.²⁷ The seventh *Imām*, Mūsā al-Kāẓim, once declared, 'God became wrathful with the *Shi'ah*, so he made me choose between them or myself and I shielded them, by God, with my soul.'²⁸ This *ḥadīth* is included in the chapter of *Kitāb al-Ḥujjah* asserting the knowledge of the *imāms* of all events before they take place. The Arabic word *waqā* means 'to protect against something'; thus the *Imām* allowed the wrath of God to fall upon him rather than his followers. Unfortunately, this tradition alone clearly expresses an unequivocal idea of redemption; but the idea is, in our view, implied in much of the literature we have been considering in this chapter.

6.2 THE DAY OF THE GREAT THIRST

The pool of *al-kawthar* is a concrete symbol of the rewards and favors of the Holy Family and the final vindication of their sufferings: *ḥawḍ al-kawthar* is, therefore, the antithesis of the House of Sorrows. Its waters will wash away the blood and tears of the martyrs, not only of the Holy Family, but of all who died in the way of Truth or chose to be included in the House of Sorrows during their earthly sojourn. Before we examine the role of the Prophet and his son-in-law, the Prince of the Faithful, as the masters of this paradisaical spring, we shall cite at some length an interesting tradition which describes the pool in dramatic and vivid language.

Many of the traditions cited in the previous chapter connected with the pilgrimage to the tomb of Ḥusayn aimed at enticing the pious followers of the *imāms* by promising them unimagined pleasures in paradise as a reward for their effort. The tradition we are about to discuss also promises fantastic pleasures to those who perform the

holy pilgrimage or to those who may not be able to make the pilgrimage but still wish to do so in sad remembrance of the martyr of Karbalā'. In a long dialogue between the sixth *Imām*, Ja'far al-Šādiq, and Masma', apparently a prominent man in the service of the 'Ab-bāsid authorities and a pious follower of the *Imām*, al-Šādiq asked if Masma' frequented the tomb of Ḥusayn. Masma' answered that he was a well-known man, so he feared the reprisals of the authorities. He did, however, remember the *Imām*'s martyrdom and grieved for him, so that his sorrow was clearly seen on his face. The *Imām* told him that his tears would be well rewarded on the Day of Resurrection, when he should see the *imāms* at the *ḥawḍ* and his joy would have no end. Like all things in creation, the *ḥawḍ* is not simply a spring of water, but a living personality with human feelings and human emotions. Thus the *Imām* first asserted that '... *al-kawthar* will rejoice at a person who loves us as he approaches it, that it would give him to taste of such great foods that he would wish never to leave it'.²⁹ Although the *ḥawḍ* is a spring of water, here we see it as a source of life-giving substance, of both food and drink. The *Imām* continued his vivid account by asserting that whosoever drinks from its waters will never thirst again for all eternity. Then describing the *ḥawḍ* itself, the *Imām* went on:

... In coolness, it is like camphor (*kāfūr*); its fragrance is that of musk and its taste is that of ginger (*zanjabil*), sweeter than honey, softer than butter, and clearer than tears. . . . It springs out of Tasnīm³⁰ and flows through the rivers of the gardens over a bed of rubies. It contains goblets as numerous as the stars of heaven. Its fragrance may be smelled from a distance of a thousand years' journey. Its goblets are of gold and silver and all kinds of precious stones. From it emanate so many sweet odors in the face of one drinking from it, that such a person would exclaim 'Would that I be left here forever, for I desire no substitute for this.'³¹

The *Imām* then reassured his friend that he would be among those who would drink from the *ḥawḍ*. The rest of the tradition describes 'Alī standing at the *ḥawḍ*, giving his friends to drink of its waters and turning his enemies away thirsty.

The doctrine of salvation through faith rather than works is a familiar one, both in Christianity and in other religious traditions. In

Christianity, the insistence of St. Paul on this idea and, centuries later, of Martin Luther, are cases in point. With even greater popular pietistic fervor, the same idea was expressed in Japanese Buddhism in the Nambutsu formula of faith in the Amida Buddha.³² Islām for the most part places an equal emphasis on works and faith. Faith (*imān*), in the view of many Muslim theologians, is both an acceptance of the heart and an action of the limbs.³³ *Shīʿī* piety shifted the emphasis greatly to the side of the heart's acceptance.

Many of the traditions under consideration likewise equate love for the Holy Family with faith in God and hatred towards unbelief (*kufr*).³⁴ Acceptance of the *walāyah* of the *imāms* is part of faith in the divine oneness, and rejection of it is as grave a sin as associating other gods with Allāh. All other sins may be forgiven through the intercession of the *imāms*; in fact, the *imāms*, and Ḥusayn in particular, are the intercessors for all sinners in the Muslim community who accept their *walāyah* and share their sufferings.

In a tradition³⁵ describing the events of the Day of Judgment, the entire human race will be brought together for the final reckoning. Men will stand barefoot and naked under the burning sun of the desert at the gathering place (*maḥshar*). They will remain standing until their sweat will flow in streams, unable to breathe from fatigue and thirst. Finally, a voice will call out from the divine throne, 'Where is the prophet of the gentiles, or unlettered prophet (*al-nabī al-ummī*)! . . . Where is the prophet of mercy, Muḥammad, son of 'Abdallāh!' The Prophet will come forward, preceding all, until he stands at the *ḥawḍ* whose length equals the distance between Yemen and Damascus. 'Alī will also be summoned to stand with the Prophet at that great *ḥawḍ*. All men will pass before him and will be given to drink and many will be turned away.

The fifth *Imām* went on to say that when the Prophet sees that among those turned away from the *ḥawḍ* are some who love *ahl al-bayt*, he will weep and exclaim, 'O Lord, the *Shīʿah* of 'Alī, the *Shīʿah* of 'Alī'. God will then send an angel to ask why he was weeping and the Prophet will reply:

'How could I not weep when I see men of the *Shīʿah* of my brother 'Alī, son of Abī Ṭālib, turned away towards the people of the fire

and prevented from drinking of my *ḥawḍ!*' Then God would say to him 'O Muḥammad, I have given them to thee and have forgiven all their sins. They shall be with thee and with those whose authority (*walāyah*) they have accepted. They shall inherit thy *ḥawḍ*, for I have accepted thy intercession for them and have favored them for thy sake.'³⁶

In this tradition, we see the Prophet interceding for the sinners of the community (*Shī'ah*) of 'Alī. Many traditions, however, depict 'Alī playing not simply the role of intercessor, but also that of a harsh judge. In such traditions we can discern all the bitterness, revengeful hatred and frustration of which a persecuted community is capable. This sublimation of political frustration and failure has found its perfect embodiment in the True Prince of the Faithful, 'Alī, son of Abī Ṭālib. In him the community has found its ideal of power and political excellence and all the virtues of a hero. We shall end this section with an account of the Prince of the Faithful at the paradisaical *ḥawḍ*, driving his enemies away with the rod of absolute authority and vengeance.

More than most other traditions of its genre, the dialogue of the sixth *Imām*, Abū 'Abdallāh al-Ṣādiq, with Masma' displays gloating pleasure at the punishment, torment and remorse which the enemies of the Holy Family are to suffer in the world to come. The closest parallel to this tradition in the Christian scriptures is the gory images presented by the writer of the Apocalypse of John. In fact, a comparison between the traditions we are investigating and the Book of Revelations would be highly instructive.

It seems that whatever the essential message of a religious tradition may be, the community living by this message must find a way to strengthen the hope and confidence necessary for its members to endure the hardships and persecutions of a small religio-political minority. The community, therefore, finds its ultimate consolation not only in the rewards of bliss for its persecution but also in the eternal damnation of its persecutors. As the events of both the Apocalypse of John and the eschatological traditions attributed to the twelver *Shī'ī imāms* are supposed to take place outside the present existence, when neither remorse nor repentance shall avail, judgment and salvation go hand in hand. This characteristic exultation in both

the merciless judgment of God and the tender, sentimental exuberance of the faithful in the bliss to come seems to be common to the apocalyptic literature of the Judaeo-Christian-Islāmic tradition. We shall have a little more to say on this point before the close of this discussion.

The long and graphic description of *ḥawḍ al-kawthar* aims at kindling the longing of the faithful for the great bliss awaiting them as well as their zeal for the cause of the martyred *Imām* Ḥusayn and his persecuted descendants. The sixth *Imām*, therefore, asserts that all eyes that shed tears for the Holy Family would be blessed with the sight of *al-kawthar*; and that the greater the love a devotee would show for *ahl al-bayt*, the greater and more intense would be his pleasure at the *ḥawḍ*. Finally, at some length, the *Imām* describes his worthy forebear, 'Alī, exercising control over the great *ḥawḍ*:

At *al-kawthar* shall stand the Prince of the Faithful with a stick of thorns (*awsaj*) in his hand with which he would destroy our enemies. Then the enemy will plead, saying, 'But I do profess the two *shahādas*'; 'Alī will answer, 'Go to your *Imām fulān* [omitting the name, but intending Abū Bakr or 'Umar] and ask him to intercede for you.' The man will reply, 'My *Imām* whom you mention has disowned (*tabarra'a*) me.' But 'Alī will reply, 'Turn back and ask him whom you have accepted as your master (*walī*) and preferred him over all other creatures; if he is indeed the best of men, ask him to intercede for you; for the best of men is he who can intercede.' The man will plead, 'I am perishing of thirst!' But 'Alī will retort, 'May God increase your thirst and never quench it.'³⁷

Just as the *imāms* were killed here on earth in cold blood, so will they have the pleasure of meting out the punishment of the sword to their enemies in manifold measure. We shall, in the remaining pages of this study, follow the final scenes of this drama to its consummation before the divine throne. We shall briefly investigate the place of the faithful devotees of the *imāms* in the redemptive drama of martyrdom, Fāṭimah's role in that drama, and, finally, the consummation of the entire mission of the *imāms*, and with it that of the history of creation, in the return of the *Mahdī*, the great avenger, the man of the sword.

6.3 THE FAITHFUL REMNANT³⁸

We have often stressed in this study the identity of substance, destiny and final beatification of the *imāms* and their followers. 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 (*aḥl al-bayt*) on the last day. Moreover, the oppressors of the elect community of God and His Apostle will share the same terrible fate as those who stained their hands with the sacred blood of Ḥusayn and many of his descendants.³⁹

The tradition attributed to 'Alī, son of Ḥusayn, to which we have repeatedly referred in this study, graphically describes the rewards of faithful pilgrims to the sacred shrine of Karbalā'. An untold number of angels will receive them at the sacred tomb and beseech God to forgive all their sins.

. . . They shall engrave on their faces with the stylus (*maysam*) of the throne of God, 'This is the pilgrim to the grave of the best of martyrs and son of the best of prophets.'⁴⁰

On the Day of Judgment, a dazzling light shall shine in the pilgrims' faces, and by this light they will be recognized. Then the Prophet and 'Alī, with Gabriel and Michael, will gather these people together, save them from the fears of hell and bring them into the gardens of paradise.

We examined in Chapter 4 above a curious tradition reported on the authority of the sixth *Imām* which contradicts the very fact of Ḥusayn's martyrdom. It describes him sitting on a throne of precious stones on the mount of Raḍwah, near Mecca, in the company of all the ancient prophets waiting for the coming of the *Mahdī*.⁴¹ This tradition may have been based on an earlier and equally fantastic account of the great favors given to the followers of the *imāms* as they shall sit around *Imām* Ḥusayn in great pomp and splendor. This latter account has no time reference, but the Day of Resurrection may be intended. It is noteworthy that both traditions are attributed to Ja'far al-Šādiq and reported on the authority of al-Mufaḍḍal Ibn 'Umar al-Ju'fī. Al-Mufaḍḍal has been a highly controversial figure among the disciples of the sixth *Imām*, some people branding him as an extremist deviate, a

follower of Abu al-Khaṭṭāb, a notorious disciple, and others praising him for his piety and trustworthiness.⁴²

The following tradition declares that the pilgrims to the shrine of Karbalā' are served by angels and fed on the food of paradise. Then, as an afterthought, in response to the astonishment of al-Mufaddal, the sixth *Imām* exclaimed, 'Shall I tell you more?' He then went on,

I could see a couch of light over which is set up a dome or canopy (*qubbah*) of red rubies and adorned with precious stones. I could see Ḥusayn reclining on that couch and around him are set up ninety thousand green canopies. I could see the believers flocking to him and greeting him. God, be He exalted, would then address them, saying, 'Ask me my friends (*awliyā*); for long you were done harm, humiliated and persecuted. Behold, today you would not ask me for a need you may have in this world or the world to come, but that I would grant it.' . . . They shall then eat and drink in paradise. This, by God, is the great favor (*karāmah*) of which there will be no end.⁴³

We noted earlier in our discussion of the *ziyārah* ritual that through the *imāms* God causes the rain to fall, the earth to bring forth its fruits and all evil and wrong to be alleviated. The place of the devotees in the maintenance and preservation of the universal order of things is asserted in many traditions attributed to the Prophet and the *imāms*. In a tradition attributed to the Prophet, he foretells the death of Ḥusayn at the hands of evil and corrupt men in a brief dialogue with Fāṭimah. Of the devotees of the *imāms* he speaks as follows:

Then will come to bury Ḥusayn and his companions men who love us, whose knowledge of God and zeal to uphold our rights is unequalled among men. They alone among men shall turn to us. They are the lamps in the darkness of wrongdoing, and they are the true intercessors. They shall meet me at my *ḥawḍ* on the last day, and I shall recognize them by their names. . . . They are the support (*qiwām*) of the earth and through them [i.e., their *barakah*] the rain comes from heaven. . . .⁴⁴

These few elect of the Muslim community, and indeed of humanity, occupy the place of intermediaries between God and the *imāms* and the rest of mankind. They are the righteous sufferers through whose favor

God's mercy is manifested. It may be observed that this phenomenon of the elect community, the friends (*awliyā'*) of God and His true servants, is a familiar one in the spiritual history of humanity. We need only to mention the holy nation of ancient Israel, the Buddhist *sangha* or order of the elect, and the Christian church as the communion of saints, the sacred body of the crucified savior. In these and other cases, we can discern an analogous role to that claimed by the *imāms* for their community (*Shī'ah*) of the faithful. These elect are the sign of divine love and providence; they are the standard by which the state of corruption or goodness of society can be judged. In the eschatological consummation of human history, they alone will be the witnesses to the truth and its preservers. As a reward for their suffering and steadfastness, 'they shall inherit the earth'.⁴⁵ They are the redeemed community, and, in a way, through their participation in the sufferings and favors of the *imāms*, they will play a decisive role in the final consummation of history, the 'salvation-history' (*Heilsgeschichte*) of humanity, a role, in the view of *Shī'ī* piety, both concrete and violent. This holy remnant will make up the human part of the victorious forces of the *Mahdī*. We shall return at some length to the *Mahdī* and his supporters, but first we must briefly consider the important role of the sorrowful mother of the *imāms*, Fāṭimah al-Zahrā'.

6.4 FĀṬIMAH: THE MISTRESS OF THE DAY OF JUDGMENT

In sharp contrast to the violence characterizing the long drama of suffering and revenge with which we are concerned stands Fāṭimah, the sorrowful mother who endured all her sufferings patiently. Her only weapon was and still is her tears, which here on earth were a source of grief and embarrassment to the people of Medina and in paradise continue to be a flaming fire kindling the grief and anger of the celestial hosts and the wrath of God himself. God, we are told, is wrathful when Fāṭimah is angry and pleased when she is happy.⁴⁶

It was observed above (Chapter 2, in our discussion of the exegesis of the 'light verse' attributed to the sixth *Imām*) that Fāṭimah shares with the *imāms* not only their sufferings but also their high status with God. Her name, like those of her father, husband and two sons, is

derived from a divine name or attribute. Thus on the leg of the throne is written the name of God 'Fāṭir' (Creator), and beside it the name 'Fāṭimah' as the earthly symbol of the divine creative power. The Prophet called his daughter Fāṭimah (the weaned one) because God had spared her,⁴⁷ her progeny and those who love them from the fire.

Fāṭimah's humiliation will be amply rewarded. The poverty and privation which she endured in life will be matched with unimaginable glory. All creatures, men, angels and *jinn*, will be dazzled by her radiant light as she stands before God to pass judgment on her persecutors and grant intercession to those who love *ahl al-bayt*. The mistress of the House of Sorrows will be the mistress of the Day of Judgment.

In a prophetic tradition (*ḥadīth nabawī*) related on the authority of the famous *ḥadīth* transmitter, Abū Hurayrah, we have a vivid description of Fāṭimah's royal entry into the divine presence:

When the Day of Resurrection shall come, and all creatures will stand before God for judgment, a voice from behind the veil (*ḥijāb*) shall announce, 'O men turn down your gaze and bow down your heads, for Fāṭimah, the daughter of Muḥammad, is about to traverse the *ṣirāt*.'⁴⁸

Fāṭimah will pass over the bridge of separation on a she-camel of light with a crown adorned with jewels on her head. On her right and left, she will be surrounded by multitudes of angels and will advance until she is on the same level as the throne of God. She will dismount and stand before God with the blood-stained shirt of her martyred son Ḥusayn in her hand and say:

. . . O Lord, judge Thou between me, and those who had wronged me. Judge between me and those who killed my child.

A voice from the divine throne will answer, 'O my beloved and daughter of my beloved, ask me and thou shalt be given, intercede with me for thine intercession will be accepted.'⁴⁹

Fāṭimah will seek divine retribution for the wrongs she and her martyred son suffered. While *Sunnī* and *Shī'ī* views differ regarding her own sufferings and the cause of her death, they concur on her deep sorrow for the death of her son and her right to seek vengeance from

God on the last day upon those who committed such a crime against God and His Apostle.⁵⁰ Fāṭimah will therefore stand before God, either with the blood-stained shirt of Ḥusayn or with the *Imām* himself, a body without a head.

In a tradition attributed to the fifth *Imām*, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, we are told that:

On the Day of Resurrection, Fāṭimah will stand at the gate of hell, and on the forehead of every man will be written 'mu'min' [believer] or 'kāfir' [unbeliever]. A lover (*muḥibb*) [of the Holy Family] whose sins were too numerous would be ordered to the fire. Fāṭimah would read between his eyes the word 'lover,' and so she would say, 'O my Lord and Master, Thou hast called me Fāṭimah and protected me (*faṭamtanī*) and those who accept my *walāyah* and that of my descendants, from the fire, for Thy promise is true and Thou wouldst not revoke Thy promise.'

God would repeat her words in confirmation and continue,

. . . But I ordered the servant of mine to the fire so that thou mayest intercede with me on his behalf and I would accept thine intercession for him, in order to manifest to my angels, prophets and apostles and the people of the gathering (*mawqif*) thy status with me. Thus whosoever thou readest between his eyes 'believer,' take him by the hand and lead him to paradise.⁵¹

This tradition provides one of the clearest expressions of the concept of redemption in *Shī'ī* piety. Intercession is generally understood in Islām as necessary for those who have led a good life but whose balance of good and evil deeds inclines more to the side of evil than to the side of good. Both the intercession of the prophets and the friends (*awlīyā'*) of God, coupled with divine mercy, may benefit the transgressing believer. Fāṭimah's role, as depicted in the tradition we have just cited, is more than that of an intercessor. She is given the authority to counteract the divine judgment. She does not intercede on the behalf of a believer that his punishment may be lightened, but rather saves a sinner from the torment of hell altogether. Of special interest in this tradition is the conscious identification of the love for *ahl al-bayt* with faith. Thus God is made to say, 'Whosoever thou

readest between his eyes “*mu'min*” . . .’ instead of the earlier inscription ‘*muḥibb*’.

We have already discussed in this chapter the divine decree of suffering and persecution for the family of Muḥammad, and the reward each of its members will have on the Day of Judgment. Fāṭimah will be highly recompensed for her many sufferings and humiliations. Thus God addressed the Prophet on the night of his heavenly journey,

As for thy daughter, I shall make her stand near my throne where she will be told, ‘Behold, God hath given thee power over His creatures. Whosoever hath wronged thee and thy children, thou mayest judge them as thou wishest; for God will accept thy verdict concerning them.’⁵²

All the gathered multitudes of men and angels will witness as those who wronged her are brought forth and she orders them to the fire. The wrongdoers will be filled with remorse for their crimes against God and the people of the household of His Apostle, for rejecting their *walāyah* and taking other men as their masters (*awliyā'*).

As Fāṭimah was the first to suffer wrong after the Prophet, her final vindication will bring the drama of sorrows and sufferings of *ahl al-bayt* to a close. Her vindication, moreover, will include the vindication of her husband and their descendants. The Prophet is supposed to have described this final episode of the drama thus: On the Day of Resurrection his daughter will be told to enter paradise, but she will refuse, saying, “I will not enter until I know what was done to my son [Ḥusayn] after me.” Fāṭimah will then see her martyred son, a body without a head, contending with his murderers. Horrified by this sight, she will utter a loud cry to which the Prophet, earlier prophets and angels will respond with similar cries of grief and horror. At this, God himself will flame with wrath for her and will order the kindling of a fire, called *Habhab*, which has burned for a thousand years. Into this black furnace the murderers of Ḥusayn and ‘bearers of the Qur’āns’ (that is, the people who fought against ‘Alī in the Battle of Siffin) will be consigned.⁵³

In a different version of this tradition, Ḥusayn is transformed, before Fāṭimah’s eyes, into the best of forms. His murderers and all

those who shared in taking his blood will be brought together for the final retribution. They will be killed and resuscitated until each of the *imāms* has killed them once. The sixth *Imām* concludes, ‘. . . Then will all anger be appeased and all sorrow forgotten.’⁵⁴ The final episode of revenge just discussed must be preceded by a universal period of restoration here on earth where the *Mahdī*, the twelfth *Imām*, will be given universal authority. We shall, therefore, end this chapter with an investigation of his mission, which will usher in the consummation of human history.

6.5 AL-MAHDĪ, THE FINAL AVENGER

Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, everyone who pierced him and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him.⁵⁵

The long history of the *imāms* began before time and creation. They were, according to *Shī‘ī* piety, supposed to have existed with God as His primordial Word and Spirit. ‘Alī, the first *Imām*, in a long sermon reported on the authority of his great grandson, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, said:

God, exalted be He, is One (*aḥad wāḥid*) unique in His unity. He uttered a word which became a light. From that light He created Muḥammad and created me and my progeny. Then God uttered another word which became a spirit, which He made to dwell in that light and the light He made to dwell in our bodies. Thus we are the spirit of God and His words.⁵⁶

The tradition goes on to assert that the *imāms* were hidden in a green cloud (*ẓillah khadra*), praising and magnifying God before there was sun or moon, day or night. The *imāms*, therefore, are the true divine Logos which preceded all creation; through them, and for their sake, all things were made.

The *imāms* collectively are like Christ for the *Shī‘ī* community. Each

of them, moreover, embodies one or several aspects of this quasi-Christological personality. On earth, Ḥusayn was the embodiment of the betrayed and suffering martyr, mirroring Christ in his sufferings. The twelfth *Imām*, the *Mahdī*, on the other hand, mirrors in his personality and mission the judging and victorious Christ, the Christ who is to come on the clouds of heaven, whose return the community still awaits with anxious anticipation. The time of his concealment (*ghaybah*) is a time of travail, a period of disintegration which must precede the final restoration. Finally, like the second coming of Christ, his reappearance or return (*raj'ah*) will be a time of fear and remorse, of going astray and general chaos. All this, however, will be followed by a long period of peace, prosperity, and the final triumph of truth over falsehood when justice and equity will reign forever. Thus it is related that the Prophet said,

If there will remain of this world one day, God will prolong that day until a male descendant of mine, whose name shall be my name and patronym (*kunyah*) will be my *kunyah*. He shall fill the earth with equity and justice as it has been filled with inequity and wrongdoing.⁵⁷

The literature dealing with the *Mahdī*, his birth, concealment and return, is vast and complex. A critical discussion of even a fraction of it is beyond the scope of this study.⁵⁸ We shall therefore discuss only a few selected traditions to reconstruct a sequential history of the *Imām*. The personality of the hidden *Imām* has provided *Shī'ī* piety with rich soil for the most fantastic hagiographical imagination. Indeed, some of the traditions, especially those dealing with his return, have been a source of embarrassment for *Shī'ī* 'ulamā' and traditionists. For our purposes, however, such traditions do reflect *Shī'ī* piety, its hopes, disappointments and visions of a better existence; so we shall not overly concern ourselves with the question of authenticity and the theological acceptability of these traditions. We do not, however, wish to imply that all of them represent official *Shī'ī* beliefs. We shall indicate when necessary strong objections to or approvals of some of the traditions, and the men on whose authority they were transmitted.

It has already been stressed that the *imāms* of the *Ithnā'asharī Shī'ī*

community stand at the end of a long line of prophets and vicegerents. Even the number twelve is taken to be normative, the number of vicegerents (*awṣiyyā'*) of every major prophet. Furthermore, each prophet and his chief vicegerent had a period of concealment, a period of trial for their community and a cause for the establishment of divine judgment against his opponents.⁵⁹ Another reason for the concealment of other prophets and vicegerents was the threat to their lives from evil rulers. The coming of the *Mahdī* at the end of human history will be the fulfillment of the mission of all the prophets before him and the time of their final vindication.

The last prophet, Muḥammad, and the *imāms* after him, announced the coming of the *Mahdī*; traditions related from the *imāms* display an air of impatient expectancy on the part of the community. Al-Kulaynī relates that 'Abd al-Malik Ibn A'iyun, a disciple of the fifth *Imām*, said, 'I rose to leave the *Imām* Abū Ja'far [al-Bāqir] supporting myself with my arm, and I wept'. The *Imām* asked what made him weep and 'Abd al-Malik answered, 'I had hoped to see that great event [i.e., the coming of the *Mahdī*] while I still had strength in me.' The *Imām* retorted angrily, 'Are you [i.e., his followers] not satisfied that your enemies kill one another while you sit safely in your homes? For when that event shall come, each man among you will be given the strength of forty men. . . . You would be the foundations of the earth and its treasurers.'⁶⁰

This dialogue depicts well the situation during the period of the *imāms* between the death of Ḥusayn and the beginning of the concealment of the twelfth *Imām*. There is no doubt, in our view, that both the *imāms* and their followers expected a victorious future *imām* who would succeed where Ḥusayn had failed and who would attain power for himself and his community. Such expectations could be very dangerous, and thus the *imāms* had to keep this hope alive without kindling the zeal of their followers into an armed revolt. They therefore constructed an increasingly complex metaphysical and theological cult of the *Mahdī*. His birth, occultation and return were beyond the knowledge of any man and it was even unlawful for the *imāms'* followers to speculate about such things. Not even his name was to be mentioned; men were to refer to him only by his many titles and epithets, such as: *al-Qā'im* (the rising one), *Ḥujjat al-Muḥammad*

(the proof of the family of Muḥammad), *Sāhib al-Zamān* (master of the age), and, of course, the *Mahdī*.⁶¹

Like the *imāms* before him, the twelfth *Imām* is said to have had a miraculous birth. He was born on the eighth day of Sha‘bān in the year 255 of the *hijrah*⁶² (869 A.D.). He came out of his mother’s womb prostrate in the attitude of prayer, pure and circumcised, raising his voice in the profession of faith (*shahādah*). His father took him in his arms, passed his hands over his mouth, eyes and ears and said, ‘Speak, O my son.’ The *Imām* recounted the names of all the *imāms* from ‘Alī to himself and prayed that the relief (*faraj*) of the community be at his hands.⁶³ The infant grew up miraculously so that by the time his father died, less than five years later, he had reached manhood and was of age to bear the burden of the *imāmah*. His infancy is reminiscent of that of Moses and Jesus. Like them, his birth was kept secret except from the few elect. Forty days after his birth, like Moses in *Shī‘ī* tradition,⁶⁴ he was taken away and cared for by angels, returning only for brief visits at intervals of forty days. When a great aunt asked to see the blessed infant one day, his father replied, ‘O aunt, we have committed him to the care of Him in whose charge the mother of Moses put her child.’⁶⁵

In most early traditions the disappearance of the infant was supposed to have been caused by the wide search conducted by the ‘Abbāsīd authorities for any male child of the eleventh *Imām*. The plan was to kill such an infant if found, and thus break the line of the imamate succession.⁶⁶ Perhaps this fear is hinted at in the tradition which asserts that the young mother of the twelfth *Imām* showed no signs of pregnancy while carrying him.⁶⁷ The mother of the *Imām* was a Christian slave girl captured during a Muslim expedition against Byzantine territory. This unknown war captive has been given an exalted place in the universal history of prophetic succession. Narjis, as the girl was called, was made to be a granddaughter of the Byzantine emperor. Long before her captivity, she was visited by Fāṭimah, the venerable ancestress of the *imāms*, who instructed her in the principles of Islām and prepared her for the great role she was to play. Finally, the prophets Jesus and Muḥammad with their vicegerents Simon Peter (Sham‘ūn) and ‘Alī appeared to the girl. Muḥammad asked for her hand from Jesus, and ‘Alī and Simon Peter acted as witnesses to the marriage contract. Fāṭimah and the Virgin Mary also came to bless the

sacred marriage. From that time on the eleventh *Imām*, Ḥasan al-‘Askarī, the girl’s future spouse, came to see her every night in a dream. He finally ordered her to flee her country and allow herself to be sold into slavery.

In this way the twelfth *Imām*’s lineage combined both royalty and prophecy. More important still is the direct inclusion of Christianity in the popular concept and mythic history of the *imāms* in *Ithnā‘asharī Shī‘ism*. The connection of the hidden *Imām* with the earlier prophets, their revelations and communities, is an integral part of the *Shī‘ī* doctrine of the *imām*. In popular piety, as we shall see later, this connection becomes an identification of the *Mahdī* with all the prophets before him.

It has been observed that every prophet had a period of concealment (*ghaybah*). Thus the *ghaybah* of the *Mahdī* is a continuation of the ancient practices (*sunan*) of the prophets. The sixth *Imām* told one of his disciples, Sudayr, ‘Our *Qā‘im* will have a long concealment (*ghaybah*).’ Sudayr asked the reason for this and the *Imām* continued, ‘It is because God would have the ways (*sunan*) of the earlier prophets [i.e., their concealments] continued in him. It will be necessary for him . . . to equal all the periods of their concealments.’⁶⁸ The concealment of the *Mahdī*, like the concealments of earlier prophets and vicegerents, was decreed by God who alone knows the wisdom behind His own decrees.

The *Mahdī* had two periods of concealment: one during which he communicated with the community through special representatives, and a longer or greater concealment which will continue until he returns at the end of the world. Men living during the period of his greater occultation should not ask questions but only pray for his return. Al-Kulaynī, the famous *Shī‘ī* traditionist, wondered about the *Imām*’s concealment, its length and the wisdom behind it. The answer came to him through the *Imām*’s second representative (*wakīl*), Muḥammad b. ‘Uthmān al-‘Umarī:

As for the reason for the *ghaybah*, God says, ‘O believers, question not concerning things, which if they were revealed to you, would vex you.’⁶⁹

For there were none of my fathers but that there was in his neck an

allegiance (*fī 'unuqīhi bay'ah*) to one of the tyrants (*tawāghīt*) of his time. I shall return when I return, and there is for no evil ruler a *bay'ah* in my neck. As for the benefits that can accrue from me during my *ghaybah*, they are like those of the sun when clouds hide it from the sight of men. I am the safety for the inhabitants of the earth as the stars are for the inhabitants of heaven.⁷⁰

The *Imām* counselled his followers not to inquire about things which do not concern them, but to pray instead for God to hasten their relief.

More than any of the *imāms* before him, the twelfth *Imām* embodied the fears, disappointments and final fulfillment of all the hopes and aspirations of the *Shī'ī* community. In the tradition just cited, all the *imāms* before him had to give tacit approval under duress to the unlawful authority of the rulers of their time. The *Mahdī* will be free of this sanction of usurpation, always unlawful, since the *imām* alone has the right to be the head of the community.⁷¹ The reason for his lesser concealment, attributed to the Prophet himself, is that he was afraid of being killed.⁷² Moreover, the *imāms* before him were often betrayed by their own followers, as was the case with both Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. Thus when the *Mahdī* comes, there will be no one guilty of such a heinous crime against the true representative of God and His Apostle. Rather, those who accept his *walāyah* during his absence, and are not swayed by hardships, doubts and persecutions, will be greatly rewarded for their patience and steadfastness.

It is clear in many of the early traditions that people expected the return of the *Mahdī* during the reign of the 'Abbāsids. This expectation grew in intensity as the power of the 'Abbāsīd caliphate weakened and revolts sprang up throughout the Muslim world. As this hope was not realized, the emphasis began to shift to an indefinite future. The time of the return of the *Mahdī* was declared to be a secret guarded by God, known only to Him. The expectant followers of the *imāms*, who wished to be among those destined to make up the great and victorious armies of *al-Qā'im*, were told that their patient wish to be so honored would earn them the same merit as if they had fought and died with him. Thus the fourth *Imām*, 'Alī Zayn al-'Ābidīn, was supposed to have declared to one of his disciples, Abū Khālid al-

Kābilī, that the *ghaybah* of the twelfth vicegerent of the Apostle of God would be a long one. He continued:

. . . The people of the period of his *ghaybah*, who profess his imamate and wait for his appearance, are better than the people of any other age. For God shall give them such knowledge and understanding wherewith the *ghaybah* for them would be like vision or presence (*mushāhadah*). They shall be considered by God as though they had fought alongside the Apostle of God with the sword. They are truly our faithful followers (*Shi'ah*) and the enjoiners to the religion of God openly and in secret.⁷³

A tradition relating a long sermon of 'Alī, the first *Imām*, further asserts that any believer who dies a natural death before the coming of the *Mahdī* will be resurrected in order to be martyred with him and will thus attain the merit of dying in the way of God. Anyone, on the other hand, who is killed will also be resurrected in order to enjoy the peace and security of the *Mahdī*'s reign and die a natural death after a very long life.⁷⁴

The return of the *Mahdī* will be preceded by a long period of chaos and degeneration, to continue with increasing intensity until evil, falsehood and wickedness dominate the earth. The disintegration is to be complete and universal. There will be total disorder: political unrest, immorality, falsehood and a total disregard for the principles of religion. Nature will manifest similar signs of disorder and chaos. The final stages of this total disintegration will be the sign, for the small and faithful remnant, of the coming of the *Mahdī*, who will usher in a new era of restoration. These manifestations of universal disintegration will be the signs of the *Mahdī*'s return (*raj'ah*), since he was to come after the final collapse of 'Abbāsīd rule. Such predictions must have been made either at the time of these events or shortly afterwards, in retrospect.⁷⁵

Another strange but telling sign is to be the appearance of al-Sufyānī 'Uthmān Ibn 'Andasah, a descendant of Yazīd, at the head of a large army from Damascus. After wreaking death and destruction in the land, the army will proceed towards Mecca and Medina to destroy them and defeat the *Mahdī*. But God will cause the earth to open up and swallow the entire army while still in the desert. This prophecy

reflects well the events which were supposed to have taken place during the last year of Yazīd's short reign.⁷⁶

These political events will be only part of the general disorder in the world. A man asked the fifth *Imām*, al-Bāqir, about the signs of the coming of the *Mahdī*; the *Imām* answered:

It will be when women will be like men and men like women; when men would be satisfied with men and women with women; and when females would ride astride saddled horses. It will be also when false testimonies will be accepted and true testimonies rejected; when men would take the blood of other men lightly, commit fornication and devour the money of the poor in usury.⁷⁷

In those days, moreover, religion will be just a name on the lips of people and the Qur'ān will become dead words on paper with no meaning or influence in the lives of men and women. There will appear sixty false men claiming to be prophets.⁷⁸ Then will appear the anti-Christ (*al-Dajjāl*) and he will mislead people with great signs and miracles.⁷⁹ Many will go astray and only the few elect of God will be steadfast in the faith.

These traditions are but a continuation of the long history of the apocalyptic vision of humanity. They remind us of the apocalyptic warnings of Christ that, before his second coming, many false messiahs will appear. Fathers will betray their sons and sons their fathers, and nations will rise up against other nations. When these and many other terrible signs appear, 'The coming of the son of man [the true messiah] will be at hand.'⁸⁰ Similarly, when all justice, truthfulness and goodness disappear from the earth, then God will rescue His creation and restore harmony and order forever.

This general chaos will be manifested in nature as well. The earth shall withhold its fruits and the heavens their rain; the sun will rise in the west and set in the east, and there will be earthquakes in the east and the west.⁸¹

In Islām, as in Christianity and other religious traditions, this apocalyptic vision of the last days is an essential part of the redemptive history of humanity.⁸² *Al-Qā'im*, for the *Ithnā'asharī Shī'ī* Muslims, will come to complete the task of Ḥusayn, the great martyr of Karbalā'. Hence he shall appear, according to many traditions, on the day

of 'Āshūrā', 'the day on which Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī, was killed'.⁸³ He shall appear first in Mecca, the holiest city of Islām, but will make his headquarters in Kūfah. There, where 'Alī was killed and buried, and nearby Karbalā', the sacred shrine of Ḥusayn, the *Mahdī* will have his seat of judgment.

Like Christ and other saviors, the *Mahdī* will save humanity and the entire creation from degeneration. Al-Mufīd, perhaps reflecting earlier ideas of the *Mahdī*'s mission, asserts that *al-Qā'im* will reign for a period of seven years, each year equaling ten of our years. Thus, after a reign of 70 years, the *Mahdī* will die and forty days later the resurrection will come.⁸⁴ This final period is the time of the end, when the earth will be without an *imām* and no repentance will be accepted.

Although according to this tradition, the *Mahdī* will fulfill his mission and usher in the resurrection, *Shī'ī* piety could not accept an eschatology which did not include the Prophet, 'Alī, and his two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. In particular, the return (*karrah*) of Ḥusayn to revenge his own blood was promised very early. Perhaps one of the earliest references appears in a tradition reporting an exegesis by the sixth *Imām* of the following Qur'ānic verse: 'And mention in the Book Ishmael; he was true to his promise, and he was a Messenger, a Prophet.'⁸⁵ The *Imām* commented, 'This was not the son of Abraham, but rather Ismā'īl, son of Ḥazqīl.'⁸⁶ This otherwise unknown prophet was supposed to have been tortured by his people, who flayed the skin of his head and face and left him to suffer a slow and painful death. God sent to him the angel of torment who was commanded to obey the Prophet's orders in punishing these cruel people. But the prophet declined this divine offer of immediate revenge and prayed instead, 'O my Lord . . . Thou hast promised Ḥusayn to return him to this world to avenge himself on those who killed him. My wish is that Thou wouldst return me with Ḥusayn to this world so that I may also avenge myself on those who did this to me.'⁸⁷ This tradition contains all the basic elements that were to go into the saga of the return of Ḥusayn with the *Mahdī*, elements which were woven into some of the most fantastic tales.

In another account contemporary with the one just quoted, we read of the return not only of Ḥusayn, but of the Prophet, 'Alī and Ḥasan as well. Here, clearly the *Mahdī* was regarded first and foremost as an

avenger and only secondarily as the messiah at whose hands God would establish equity and justice in the earth. In this tradition, moreover, the Prophet and the first three *imāms* appear before the *Mahdī* with multitudes of angels and all the prophets of old. We are told that on the night of a Friday, the eve of the *Mahdī*'s return, God will send an angel to the heaven of this world. Before dawn, the angel will set up pulpits of light for Muḥammad, 'Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn near the sacred house of Mecca. The gates of heaven will be opened, and all prophets and believers with innumerable angels will join the Prophet and his vicegerents. At sunset the Prophet will exclaim:

O Lord, Thy promise which Thou didst give in Thy Book, 'God has promised those of you who believe and do righteous deeds that He will surely make you successors in the land, even as He made those who were before them successors.'⁸⁸

All the angels and prophets will repeat the same words. Then Muḥammad, 'Alī, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn will bow down in prostration and say, 'O Lord show Thou Thy wrath, for the sanctity of Thy women servants has been violated; Thy elect ones were killed and Thy pious servants humiliated.'⁸⁹

Before we look briefly again at the return of Ḥusayn and his final part in the drama of the consummation of time and human history, we shall attempt a reconstruction of the story of the reappearance and reign of the *Mahdī*. The ideas of the following sketch are drawn from several often contradictory traditions. We shall attempt only to present an outline of the *Mahdī*'s activities, bearing in mind that the simple historical sequence here presented gives no indication of the complexity of the material on which we draw.⁹⁰

The *Mahdī* will appear on the day of 'Āshūrā'. Six months prior to his appearance, in Jumāda II and through the first ten days of Rajab, the heavens will pour down heavy rains such as were never experienced before. With this rain, God will cause the flesh and bodies of believers to sprout out of the earth. The sixth *Imām*, to whom this tradition is attributed, continues: 'I can see them [the resuscitated believers] hastening to the *Mahdī* while they wipe the dust off their heads.'⁹¹ The *Mahdī* will be joined first by 313 believers, the number of the martyrs of Badr. He will lean his back against the wall of the *Ka'bah* and utter

the Qur'ānic verse: 'God's remainder is better for you, if you are believers. . . .'⁹² Then applying the sacred text to himself, he would add, 'I am the remnant of God in His earth.'⁹³ To the 313 men will be added 10,000 warriors and with this army the victorious 'Proof of God', the *Mahdī*, will proceed to subdue the earth.

That the *Mahdī* will consummate not only the mission of the last prophet Muḥammad and the *imāms* after him, but that of all prophets before him, is clear from the way his mission is related to theirs. Thus we are told that all the angels who were with Noah in the ark, with Abraham in the fiery furnace, with Moses when he parted the sea for the children of Israel, with Jesus when God lifted him up to himself and with Muḥammad in the Battle of Badr, will come to support the *Mahdī* in his struggle.⁹⁴

The *Mahdī*'s continuity with earlier prophets is carried further, identifying him with all the prophets and their vicegerents. A late tradition, attributed to the sixth *Imām*, and reported on the authority of al-Mufaḍḍal, tells that the *Mahdī* will stand, leaning his back, against the wall of the *Ka'bah* where he will receive the *bay'ah* of the angels, the *jinn* and the believers of men. Then he will address all creatures, saying, ' . . . He who wishes to look at Adam and Seth [his son and vicegerent], behold I am Adam and Seth.' Then he will mention the rest of the prophets and their vicegerents: Noah and Shem, Abraham and Ishmael, Moses and Joshua, Jesus and Simon Peter, Muḥammad and 'Alī and the rest of the *imāms*; after every prophet he will proclaim, ' . . . Behold I am . . . ' that prophet and his vicegerent.⁹⁵ Then the *Mahdī* will recite the book or scroll (that is, the sacred revelation) of every prophet, and the community of each prophet will testify that this is their book as it was revealed. It is rather strange to see that the Qur'ān, claimed by all Muslims to be free of any distortion (*tahrīf*) or change (*tabdīl*), is treated in this fantastic tradition like any other revealed book. What is said of the Qur'ān is said of all the other books as well:

Then *al-Qā'im* would recite the Qur'ān and the Muslims would exclaim, 'This, by God, is the true Qur'ān which God sent down to Muḥammad, including what is left out of it, distorted and changed.'⁹⁶

Finally, the *Mahdī* will destroy the holy house of Mecca, the *Ka'bah*, except for the first foundations which were raised by Adam and Abraham and his son Ishmael, for what was built subsequently was not built by a prophet or vicegerent.⁹⁷ From his headquarters in Kūfah, the *Mahdī* will send his armies of men, angels and *jinn* to conquer the entire earth. He will avenge the blood of Ḥusayn so that he '... would kill the descendants of the murderers of Ḥusayn in punishment for the deeds of their fathers'.⁹⁸

In the age of the *Mahdī*, space and time will lose their value. Thus, as he stands in the sacred precincts of the *Ka'bah*, Gabriel will call out, 'Hasten all ye men to the *bay'ah* of God!' All the men of the scattered community will hear the call and run to answer it. 'The earth shall be rolled up for them', and they will stand before the Master of the Age in the twinkling of an eye.⁹⁹ The *Mahdī* shall purify the earth of all evil, wrongdoing and falsehood. He will 'call men to Islām anew' and guide them to the truth.¹⁰⁰ There will be no unbeliever at that time who will not return to the true faith, nor will there be any corruption in men or things. All infirmities will be healed and all disease, poverty and privation will disappear forever. 'In his reign lions will be tamed, the earth will give forth its fruits in abundance and the heavens will pour down their blessings.'¹⁰¹

The era of the *Mahdī* is like the peaceable kingdom envisioned by the ancient prophet of Israel.¹⁰² The *Shī'ī* vision of an era of absolute peace, prosperity and blessing goes further than the Isaianic vision, resembling more closely perhaps the new earth envisioned by the venerable seer of Patmos, St. John the Divine.¹⁰³ Like the beloved disciple John, the sixth *Imām* al-Ṣādiq envisioned an earth 'resplendent with the light of its Lord'¹⁰⁴ where men 'will have no need for the light of the sun or moon, and darkness will be dispelled forever'.¹⁰⁵

If, however, the *imāms* and their early followers were satisfied with such a great vision, the imagination of subsequent generations, fired perhaps by the years of long and fruitless anticipation with no visible *imām* to give guidance, could stop at nothing less than the revenge of the martyred *Imām* Ḥusayn himself for his own blood. We have already seen in this chapter two references to the return (*karrah*) of Ḥusayn to this world to exact vengeance for his own blood. In neither of the two traditions, however, were any details given of the execution

of the martyred *Imām*'s revenge. In fact, our second account does not necessarily have to be interpreted as an actual return; rather it can be seen as a temporary spiritual appearance by the Prophet and the three *imāms* who play no further role in the final episode of this eschatological drama here on earth.

One of the most explicit traditions to speak of the actual return of Ḥusayn is reported on the authority of the notorious disciple of the sixth *Imām*, Abu al-Khaṭṭāb. He related from the sixth *Imām* that:

The first to be brought forth from the earth and to return to this world is Ḥusayn, son of 'Alī. For the return (*raj'ah*) is not general, but rather limited. Only those who manifested true belief or extreme unbelief (*shirk*) will be returned [that is, before the resurrection].¹⁰⁶

In another tradition reported on the authority of Ḥumrān Ibn A'yūn, a famous disciple of the fifth and sixth *Imāms*, the fifth *Imām* said that Ḥusayn will come back to this world and reign for a long time, until '... his eyebrows shall fall over his eyes of old age'.¹⁰⁷ It is further related that Ḥusayn himself described his own *raj'ah* as well as his great achievements: he would conquer India and break every idol; he would kill every animal which God had made unlawful (*ḥarām*) to eat, so that only clean animals remain on the earth; finally, he would make Jews and Christians choose between Islām and the sword. Those who accept Islām will be greatly rewarded while those who refuse will be put to the sword. In his reign, trees will break under the burden of their own fruits and people will be able to eat summer fruits in winter and winter fruits in summer. Every infirm person will be cured, and every poor person well provisioned.¹⁰⁸

The drama we have been following has many endings. We saw one possible conclusion in the final vindication of Fāṭimah and the revenge that is to be exacted by all the *imāms* as they one by one kill their enemies. The sixth *Imām* declared that after this, 'All anger shall be appeased and all sorrow forgotten.'¹⁰⁹ These endings, connected with the return of Ḥusayn and his venerable father and grandfather, are the products of later imagination. The early scene fades almost imperceptibly into the celestial realms, and on the Day of Resurrection Ḥusayn will witness the death of his victorious descendant, the *Mahdī*.

Since no one should perform the funerary duties of a vicegerent except another vicegerent,¹¹⁰ Ḥusayn will bury the *Mahdī* and reign in his stead with his companions who were killed with him in Karbalā' for three hundred long years.

This will not, however, be the end. The millennial reign of Ḥusayn will culminate with the final defeat of Satan and all his hosts. The man at whose hands this final victory will be achieved is 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib, the heroic wielder of the great sword (*dhū al-fīqār*). Then, 'God the Invincible (*al-Jabbār*) himself will descend in clouds of fire with the angels', and his eternal decree will be executed.¹¹¹ This final battle against the very principle of evil will naturally be fought near Karbalā', the stage of the earthly portion of our drama.

We have insisted throughout this study that Ḥusayn, the great martyr, embodies for the *Shī'ī* community the entire drama of suffering, revenge and redemption. That the *imāms*, especially the twelfth, will play a major role in this drama is of course clear from all that we have said. But that the entire drama revolves around Ḥusayn, who is its omnipresent hero, is equally indisputable. In fact, it may safely be stated that, at least for later *Shī'ī* piety, this great universal drama which began before creation with Ḥusayn as its chief character will end with him. What follows on the Day of Resurrection will be simply a foregone conclusion of his final judgment. Through his death, Ḥusayn provided the final proof or contention (*hujjah*) of God over and against His creation. Hence, it will be his prerogative to pronounce the divine judgment over all men. Thus the sixth *Imām* is supposed to have boldly asserted, 'The one who shall conduct the final reckoning (*ḥisāb*) of men before the Day of Resurrection is Ḥusayn Ibn 'Alī. As for the Day of Resurrection itself, it shall be a day of sending forth (*ba'th*) to the Garden or to the Fire.'¹¹²

Thus the cycle will be completed. We began with a pure and holy creation, a creation which has been confronted with a choice between judgment or salvation. History is the stage on which this choice is painfully and dramatically worked out. When the process is completed, creation will return to its original purity and 'the earth shall be changed to other than the earth'.¹¹³ All dominion will belong to God.¹¹⁴

tree itself finally dried up and died with the death of Ḥusayn. On the day he died (that is, the day of 'Āshūrā'), its bark emitted streams of blood, to the astonishment of everyone. The people knew that this was a sign of a great calamity. Soon after, the tree disappeared and not even a trace of it was to be seen.¹²

B. APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 3: 'THE MASTER OF THE YOUTHS OF PARADISE'

B.1 DISCOURSES OF *Imām* ḤUSAYN

In a long sermon which he delivered in Medina before his journey to Iraq, Ḥusayn first recounted the great benefits the community had received through Islām. He reminded his listeners of the duties and obligations which God had laid upon them and which they had neglected: they had not shown mercy to the weak; they had indulged in wrongdoings; and they continued to prefer this world to the next, as though it were their eternal abode. Then he spoke of his own claims to leadership and his motives in seeking it:

O God Thou knowest that we did not seek, in that which we have done, the acquisition of power, or the possession of the remains of ephemeral wealth. Rather we seek to manifest the truths of Thy religion and establish the right in Thy lands; so that the wrong among Thy servants may be vindicated, and that men may abide by the ordinances (*farā'id*), paths (*sunan*) and Thy judgments (*aḥkām*). If therefore you [men] would deal with us justly and lend us your support it shall be to your good. For behold wrongdoers have prevailed over you, and they seek to extinguish the light of your Prophet. It is to God that we go for help, in Him we trust, to Him we refer judgment and to Him shall be our return.¹³

On his way to Karbalā', Ḥusayn met the famous poet, al-Farazdaq, just outside Mecca. He asked the poet about the situation in Kūfah, and was told that while the hearts of men were with him, their swords were with the Umayyads. Ḥusayn recited the following verses in answer to the poet's advice not to go to Iraq.¹⁴

If the world be counted a thing precious, still the abode of God's reward [that is, paradise] is higher and more noble. And if bodies be made for death, then the death of a man by the sword in the way of God is the better choice. And if men's provisions be allotted by divine decree, then it is more worthy of a man not to run after worldly gain. And if wealth be gathered in order to be finally left behind, why should a man be tight-fisted with that which he would have to abandon.¹⁵

The following little sermon Ḥusayn delivered to his companions on the way to Karbalā', when he had learned of the treachery of the Kūfāns, won over by Ibn Ziyād by bribes and threats:

Behold this world had changed and taken on a false character. Its goodness has disappeared so that there is no more left of it than a drop of stagnant water in a large vessel, or the scant grass of a poor pasture. Do you not see that righteousness is not sought after, and falsehood is not abandoned. Let the man of faith therefore seek the company of his Lord in truth. For I see death as a state of bliss and life with the wrongdoers as a heavy burden. Verily men are the slaves of wealth, and religion is no more than words upon their lips which they ruminate. They profess it as long as their life provisions flow, but when tried with afflictions, the number of the men of faith is diminished.¹⁶

Shortly before reaching Karbalā', after learning of the death of his cousin Muslim, Ḥusayn sent a letter to the Kūfāns with his brother in nursing:¹⁷

Furthermore, woe to you O men for your loss; when you cried to us in fear we answered you with all haste. But you unsheathed a sword against us which was in our own right hand. You have kindled against us a fire which we spark against our enemy and yours. Thus you turned against your friends and became a strong arm for your enemies. You did this not because they established justice among you, nor that you had any such hope in them. Nor have we done you any wrong, or have wavered in our resolve. Yours then shall be great woes. You have abandoned [your allegiance] when the sword has not yet been wielded, your resolve shaken and your opinion

mistaken. At first you hastened to it [that is, allegiance to him] like flies, and then ran away as would butterflies. Fie on you and malediction on the satans of this community, the unfaithful partisans and abandoners of the Book, those who . . . distort their words, and oppose the practices (*sunan*) by adopting illegitimate children into their families.¹⁸

. . . by God, it is a treachery well known among you, for in it you were born and grew up. . . . May God's curse be upon those who revoke their oaths after asserting them, for God shall be their witness. Behold the usurper, the son of a pretender [Yazīd], has sought to force one of two alternatives from us: either strife or humiliation. But far be it from us to accept humiliation, neither God nor the faithful would wish that for us. Ours are pure abodes [the reference here is to his lineage on both sides] and uplifted heads [literally, *noses*] and resolute hearts to prefer obedience to dissolute men (*li'ām*) over the death of noble men. Thus I shall rush upon them with this small following in spite of the fierceness of the enemy, their large numbers, and abandonment of those who pledged their support. . . . in God your Lord and mine I trust.¹⁹

B.2 SHORT SAYINGS OF *Imām* HUSAYN

He said one day to a man who was indulging in gossip against another, 'O man, cease your backbiting, for backbiting is the nourishment of the dogs of the fire [hell].'

A man said to him, 'A good deed done to an undeserving man is lost.' He answered, 'No not so, rather a good deed is like the pouring of rain: it falls on the righteous as well as the wicked.'

He once said, describing the difference of worship and motives for it, 'There are those who worship God only in fear [i.e., of Hell], and that is the worship of slaves; there are those who worship God in covetousness [i.e., of Paradise] and that is the worship of merchants; but there are those who worship God in thankfulness and this is the worship of free men; it is the best of worship.'²⁰

B.3 PRAYERS AND MEDITATIONS OF *Imām ḤUSAYN*

The following two prayers attributed to Ḥusayn are warm with the glow of piety and genuine mystical love of God. One day he was heard by Sharīḥ, one of the companions of the Prophet, praying thus after offering his obligatory prayers in the mosque of Medina.

My Lord and Master, is it for the instruments of torture in hell that Thou hast created my members and hast Thou made my entrails to be filled with the *ḥamīm* [the boiling waters of hell]. My God if Thou wouldst require of me reckoning for my sins, I would request of Thee magnanimity. If Thou wouldst imprison me with the transgressors, I would tell them of my love for Thee. My Lord, as for my obedience to Thee it can benefit Thee not; and as for my disobedience, it can do Thee no harm. Grant me therefore I pray that which benefits Thee not, and forgive me that which doth Thee no harm, for Thou art the most Merciful.²¹

The following selection is a truly mystical colloquy between man, the friend (*walī*) of God, and his Lord. It shows at one and the same time the humility of the servant in worship and the intimate love which the Lord has for him. One day Ḥusayn passed with Mālik Ibn Anas, a famous companion, by the tomb of Khadījah, the Prophet's first wife and Ḥusayn's grandmother. Ḥusayn began to weep and asked Mālik to leave him alone for awhile. After long prayers, Mālik heard him praying:

My Lord, O my Lord Thou art my Master. Have mercy therefore on a servant who seeks refuge in Thee. On Thee, O most High, is my reliance, blessed is he whose Master Thou art. Blessed is he who is a vigilant servant bringing all his troubles before Thee Lord of majesty alone. Where in him there would be neither disease nor sickness, rather only his love for his Master. When he complains of his trouble and tightness of throat [with tears], God would answer him and remove his sorrow. When in darkness he comes in supplication, God would grant him His favors and draw him nigh. Then he shall be addressed 'Lo, I hear the *labbayka* O my servant, for thou art in my bosom (*kanaf*) and all that thou didst say We have heard. Thy

voice delights my angels, behold We have heard thy voice. Thy invocations are before me moving behind veils [of light], behold We have removed the curtains for thee. . . . ask me therefore without fear or hesitation, or any reckoning, for I am God.²²

C. APPENDIX TO CHAPTER 4: 'THE WRONGED MARTYR'

CONCERNING ḤUSAYN'S ASCENSION TO HEAVEN

The text from which this appendix is taken was first published by the Catholic Press in Beirut, Lebanon, under the title *al-Haft w-al-Azillah*. The present edition was published under another title, *al-Haft al-Sharīf*,²³ dealing with the virtues of the sixth *Imām*, Ja'far al-Šādiq, and attributed to one of the *Imām*'s most important disciples, al-Mufaḍḍal Ibn 'Umar al-Ju'fī.

The earlier Catholic Press edition considered the text as a medieval *Ismā'īlī* document. But the editor of the present edition, Muṣṭafā Ghālib, who is an *Ismā'īlī* himself, spends much time in the introduction refuting this attribution and attributing the text instead to the *Nuṣayrī Shī'ī* sect. There is, as we shall see below, some textual evidence for Ghālib's claim in the frequent references to *al-Qā'im*, the expected *Mahdī* of the Twelver and *Nuṣayrī Shī'ī* sects. We give below some selections from chapters 38 through 40, concerning the killing of an *imām* and the killing of Ḥusayn considered from the esoteric point of view.

Chapter 38. 'Concerning the Knowledge of the Killing of an Imām'

Said al-Mufaḍḍal, 'I said to my master, al-Šādiq, tell me about the killing of the *Imām* and how can that happen. He smiled showing his teeth and said, "Perhaps you mean the killing of Ḥusayn and the way he was slain and the death of the Prince of the Faithful ['Alī] and the death of Zakarīyyah [Zechariah] and Yaḥyā [John the Baptist] and Jesus" . . . [al-Šādiq continued], These are, O Mufaḍḍal, the pure ones of God, His friends (*awlīyā'*) and elect. You [people]