

The Charm of the Red Rose



A Moral Explanation
of the Battle of Karbala

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TRANSLATOR'S PREFACE

As a Muslim girl, I grew up loving Imam Hussein deeply, yet the many interpretations of his martyrdom left me unsettled. Was his death simply God's will? If so, shouldn't we judge his killers less harshly? These questions stayed with me until I read Dr. Abolqasem Fanaei's *The Charm of the Red Rose: A Moral Explanation of the Battle of Karbala in Farsi*. Dr. Fanaei sees Karbala as a bold stand for moral principles—a view that struck a chord with me. Imam Hussein's refusal to accept humiliation inspired me most, driving me to share this profound work with English readers.

In a world needing cross-cultural understanding and moral clarity, this translation feels timely. Set in 680 CE, Karbala speaks to timeless struggles: resisting oppression, preserving dignity, and living virtuously amid hardship. Dr. Fanaei casts Imam Hussein as a role model for all—beyond Muslim or Shia boundaries—urging us to embrace values that connect us. I hope this translation shares that wisdom globally.

Translating this book was a heartfelt journey, weaving my reverence for Imam Hussein with the task of preserving Dr. Fanaei's philosophical insight. I've worked to make it clear and relatable for all readers. My deep thanks go to Dr. Fanaei for entrusting me with this honour. May this translation reflect his vision and inspire you to see Imam Hussein's legacy as a call to your own moral journey.

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Arak University, Iran, April 2025

PREFACE

The theories of two contemporary thinkers, Iris Murdoch and David Cook, raise two key and anxiety-inducing questions in the context of contemporary Imam Hussein Studies. Murdoch believes that in general, contemporary cultures focus on ethics and normative doctrines as crisis-oriented or what she calls 'quandary ethics'; that is, people only turn to ethical doctrines to resolve crises in their personal or social lives (Wadell, 1990). Otherwise, they do not care about ethical concerns. Now, a Shi'a Muslim can ask himself whether the teachings and school of Imam Hussein (may peace be upon him) are primarily concerned with addressing crises such as the removal of oppression in their daily life, or whether they can also serve as a reference and source of guidance beyond crises, and towards moral perfection.

David Cook, a contemporary martyrdom scholar, has also got an interesting observation regarding the approach of Islamic denominations towards the phenomenon of martyrdom. He states that for Ahl al-Sunnah wal-Jamā'a, that is the Sunni schools of Islam, martyrdom is seen as a happy phenomenon, while for Shi'as, it is regarded as a sorrowful event. As a result, Shi'as consider the martyrdom of their Imam as a subject of historical mourning. However, the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, who carries the honorific epithet as 'the master of all martyrs' and his companions, which is the subject of extensive mourning rituals in the Shi'a world, plays a significant role in shaping the identity of the Shi'a community (Cook, 2007). This creates a paradox where the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, in a forced battle with the Umayyad caliph

Yazīd ibn Mu‘awia (680 CE), is both a necessary component of Shi‘a historical identity and a matter of lamentation. Can this sorrowful identity be justified and defended?

In other words, if hypothetically, we imagine that Imam Hussein and his companions had not been martyred, the identity we know today in the Shi‘a world would have had a different form, content, and meaning; in which case, would the Shi‘as see the tragedy of ‘Ashura as historically incidental? Or conversely, do they simply consider it necessary to highlight the highest examples of self-sacrifice and martyrdom? In short, can martyrdom be considered as simultaneously a mournful incident and an identity-making?

These questions also encompass a set of other questions: From the perspective of which ethical school does the tragedy and sacrifice of Karbala find its best form and meaning? Which ethical systems, such as consequentialism, deontology, virtue ethics, formalism, rights-based ethics, religious ethics (divine command or Sharī‘ah-oriented), etc. can better explain this tragedy and sacrifice? To what extent is the mourning philosophy in the history of Shiism a tool and to what extent is it authentic and essential? In the tragedy of Karbala, are two individuals facing each other on opposing political camps, or are they two different theological schools – one representing Imam Hussein and the other Yazīd? In this confrontation, where does the historical equation of power, justice, and rationality stand? What lessons does the incident of Karbala teach us from the perspectives of violence studies, ethics of war and peace? What are the consequences of changing and transforming analytical perspectives on this event from customary intellectual rationality to emotional, re-

ligious, ritualistic, and jurisprudential ethics? What meaning, message, and outcome does the tragedy of Karbala hold in the equation of relationships between life, dignity, and freedom?

There are several ways to provide answers to the above questions. The first is through referring to the prophetic tradition (*sirah*) and statements of Imam Hussein and his companions during the incident of Karbala. Second, it is through the posthumous analyses of Imam Hussein scholars and 'Ashura scholars relying on various ethical and historical theories.

Importantly, this book falls into the category of Imam Hussein studies that serves scholars facing complex moral questions in the contemporary world. It therefore is very timely, offering unique answers and insights into some of the above questions. The main motivation of Imam Hussein studies for the contemporary world is, firstly, to ensure that the personality of the Imam and his teachings are not confined solely to the tragedy of Karbala. Secondly, it aims to make both the overall teachings, and the teachings derivations thereof, from the tragedy and sacrifices of Karbala a guiding light for present and future generations.

The present work in the Persian language appears as a special issue in a series published annually by the Shiraz Majd Institute serving various scholars with interest in Islamic Peace Studies. The edited series tackle the tragedy of Karbala from the political, economic, psychological, sociological, legal and moral philosophy perspectives. In its English translation however, the present work on its own can be studied as an independent scholarship that helps an analytical view of the 'Ashura tragedy and a critical perspective of Yazīd's political system from a moral stance.

As I have frequently alluded to in my introductions to the Persian language series, if Imam Hussein's teachings are examined from the perspective of the ethics of war and peace, especially the comparative warfare ethics, it yields new and astonishing results, which are worthy of consideration by peacebuilders and future-studies scholars.

The present book, written by Abolqasem Fanaei, is important for several reasons. First, it provides a different perspective on the ethical and biographical analysis of Imam Hussein from the viewpoint of a moral philosophy. As a result, it sheds light on new dimensions of the teachings of Imam Hussein and highlights his profound moral contributions. Through a morally critical lens focused on the Karbala tragedy, Fanaie explores the relationship between power, justice, rationality, dignity and freedom. Moreover, Fanaie highlights the fine demarcation between the legalistic Shari'ah-centred and ethical approaches, which contributes to the global dissemination of the teachings of Karbala and its heroes as moral exemplars. While sensitive to the fallacy of *anachronism*, Fanaie provides the religious intellectuals and neo-Mu'tazilite inclinations a valuable source of intellectual nourishment. Its relevance extends to recent controversial discussions regarding the relationship between religion and power.

The ethical analyses in this book which are focused on the triad of fear-centric, greed-centric, and freedom-centric religiosity, provides the readers with assistance in confronting the challenges discussed by contemporary German Egyptologist, Jan Assmann. According to Assmann, one of the most significant cultural tensions in history is the tension between polytheistic⁷ religions, including Greek and Egyptian religions, and

Abrahamic monotheistic religions that do not tolerate any other deity besides the one supreme God (Assmann, 2018).

Assmann believes that the concept of “exclusivity” in monotheistic perspectives inherently carries the potential for nurturing violence. However, some other contemporary European thinkers have arrived at different ways of attributing the causes of violence to ideologies. For example, Hannah Arendt (1970), Slavoj Žižek (2008) and Byung-Chul Han (2018) consider ideologies as causes of positive violence. A Muslim political philosopher may argue that there is no need to take a circuitous route in tracing the roots of social and political violence. For this, it may be sufficient to examine the theories of one of the most important and influential Muslim political philosophers, Abu al-Ḥasan al-Māwardī (d. 350 AH), to see how a despotic ruler, solely through military power, and no other merit, achieves legitimacy and control over an Islamic community in order to establish security (al-Māwardī, 2018). In contrast to the aforementioned ideology, one of the distinctions of traditional Shi’a political philosophy is the emphasis on the primacy of divine justice over security. This preference is manifested in a famous saying that sovereignty may sustain with disbelief, but not with injustice.

We may agree that not only for a Shi’a thinker but also for anyone living in the 21st century, the preoccupation with certain societies or political parties regarding the equation of power, security and justice is not a novel aspiration. These concerns have reflections in many contemporary discussions on democratic systems. For instance, if a researcher delves into the depths of ideological conflicts between Republican and Democratic parties in the United States, they will realise

that the main theoretical debate revolves around choosing between security and power on the one hand, and justice and freedom on the other as the most significant ethico-political debate in social life. By examining the teachings of Imam Hussein as a living moral role model engaged in one of the most tragic historical confrontations, this book also addresses many significant ethical equations of war and peace that can provide a lens to evaluate present-day conflicts and tragedies.

Let's keep in mind that the Islamic world is living in an era that carries vivid and distressing memories of the widespread violence perpetrated by groups such as the so-called ISIS, the Taliban, Boko Haram, and the UK/US/NATO/Israeli-backed invasions of Palestine, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Lebanon, as well as the Indian State oppression in Kashmir. With the help of analyses that we have in this book, and based on the teachings of the tragedy of Karbala experienced by Imam Hussein and his companions, the Muslim world could successfully establish a non-violent political philosophy to not only construct a certain unified way of thinking but also shape the tangible socio-political life for the present and future generations all over the globe. If that could happen, then it would be safe to say that this book achieved its goal.

I would like to express my gratitude and deep appreciation to Professor Fanaie for this enlightening special edition. Its novel academic and analytical approach establishes an excellent scholarship in contemporary Imam Hussein Studies which I would regard as useful for seminarian as well as university curricula.

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INTRODUCTION

*Then, O sleepers, mourn for yourselves
For this heavy slumber is an evil death*

Rumi

This book is a moral explanation of the Battle of Karbala. The event is multidimensional and warrants reflection and analysis from various perspectives, many of which have indeed been presented before. Historians and analysts who have studied the event have somewhat highlighted the moral subtleties, considerations, values and virtues evident in the character and actions of Imam Hussein, his family and companions. That being said, it would seem that the existing literature on the Battle of Karbala has not offered a *comprehensive* moral explanation of Imam Hussein's stance; hence, there is a need to articulate the moral principles governing his actions and reactions, and the virtues shaping his personality as the central figure of this highly significant event. This book attempts to take a small step towards filling this gap.

The explanation of historical events is subject to errors and oversights that analysts should strive to avoid; perhaps the most important of these being the fallacy of anachronism. Simply put, anachronism is the attribution of new concepts, or new definitions of old concepts, to individuals or groups who lived in the distant past. The literature of modern and contemporary ethics encompasses important distinctions, such as between religion and morality; the public sphere and the private; social/public and personal/

private morality; political and comprehensive conceptions of justice; rightness and goodness; church and state; ethical and meta-ethical theories; and topics such as human rights and citizenship. These have emerged as a result of gradual advances in ethics, and do not seem to have had a strong presence in the mentality and culture of people who lived in the pre-modern world.

Moreover, we are facing the inevitable and irreconcilable multiplicity of comprehensive moral, religious and philosophical systems in large and advanced modern societies – a situation perhaps less occurrent in pre-modern societies.

It seems, at first glance, that we have two options in such a predicament: either give in to the fallacy of anachronism or give up trying to learn from history by studying and appreciating it. Is there a third option? My answer to this question is the affirmative, for the following reasons:

First, fundamental moral principles and virtues have been present in human culture since ancient times. These include justice, courage, generosity, humility, forgiveness, human dignity, and both inner and outer freedom. The same is true regarding metaethical theories about the nature of moral goodness and badness and their relation to divine command and the edicts of rulers; the precedence of justice over political authority or vice versa; and awareness of the diversity of human motivations in moral behavior, among others.

Second, the attribution of new concepts or new definitions of old concepts to the past – the fallacy of anachronism – is one thing; answering the question of what historical figures, such as Imam Hussein, would say and do in the face of the issues, problems and questions we deal with in our

context and time, is another thing altogether.

Therefore, in my opinion this question can be answered without falling into anachronism. However, in order to do so, one must implement thought experiments, undergo cultural translation, distinguish between what is essential and what is accidental, and stage a rational reconstruction of what has been done or said in the past. This is the method that I have employed in the moral explanation of the Battle of Karbala, although it is up to the readers to judge my success in this regard. In my approach, I have simply tried to answer the question of what Imam Hussein would say and do if he lived in our context by studying, analysing, and expounding what he said and did in his own context of yore.

This book contains three interviews and three articles organized into five chapters. The first interview (Chapter One) entitled, “Karbala: The Scene of the Confrontation Between ‘Alawīte Islam and Umayyad Islam”, endeavours to place the Battle of Karbala in its historical context; introduce Imam Hussein as a moral and spiritual role-model for humanity; as well as explore and explain the logical ramifications and implications of this view. This interview was conducted on 24 August 2020 at the House of Humanities Thinkers in Tehran. I sincerely thank all the management and staff of the House of Humanities Thinkers, especially Dr Mohammad Jalali and Mr Mehdi Simaei, the host of the programme, for the invitation and for making the necessary arrangements for recording and broadcasting the interview online.

The second and third interviews (Chapter Two) entitled, “The Battle of Karbala from a Moral Perspective”, show that a moral explanation of the battle of Karbala is not only possi-

ble, but also desirable. In the course of these two interviews, three important moral principles are emphasised as a basis for explaining the important decisions that were made by Imam Hussein: the Principle of Justice, the Principle of Human Dignity and the Principle of Freedom. The role of the common approaches and theories of normative ethics in explaining the Battle of Karbala is also explored in these interviews. The last topic addressed in these interviews is the Ethics of Mourning.

These two interviews were held at Kashan's Imam Hussein Cultural Centre in the form of a series of online conversations entitled, "Condoling with the Sun" on 23/9/2020, transcribed by Abdul-Rasoul Kohanzad from the Majd Research Centre in Shiraz, and reviewed and rewritten by myself. I sincerely thank all the management and staff of the Imam Hussein Cultural Centre for the invitation and for making the necessary arrangements for recording and broadcasting the interviews online. I would also like to thank my colleague, Dr Hamed Shivapoor, who took on the responsibility of organising the meeting and designing the questions.

The first article in this collection (Chapter Three) entitled, "Common Explanations of the Battle of Karbala", attempts to review, analyse, and critique some of the most important and common explanations of this event; namely, mythical or metaphysical, political, and jurisprudential. The first edition of this article was presented in a public lecture on 1/5/2008 at the Tawhid Centre in London.

The second article in this collection (Chapter Four), entitled, "Hussein: The School of Justice and Dignity", explains the importance and status of justice and dignity among

moral values; delineates the mechanisms, conditions and stages of the realisation of social justice; and attempts to explain the journey of Imam Hussein from Medina to Mecca and then Karbala in light of the principle of justice and the principle of dignity. The first edition of this article was presented as a public lecture on 8/8/2008 at Tawhid Centre in London. I sincerely thank Mr Mohammad Reza Jalaeipour for his invitation and for arranging the presentation of these two articles.

The third article in this collection (Chapter Five), entitled, “Religious and Meta-Religious Morality in Karbala”, explains one of Imam Hussein’s sayings in Karbala and elucidates the relationship between religious and meta-religious ethics. These two moral systems differ from each other more in the domains of moral psychology and the motivational reasons for action than in their value and normative content. The first edition of this article was read in a public lecture held on Ashura on 16/11/2013 to a group of students and Iranian compatriots residing in Cambridge. I would like to express my gratitude to the organisers for the invitation to this event.

I would also like to thank Dr Seyyed Rasoul Mousavi and Dr Mohammad Hussein Motahhari for assisting me in sourcing most of the sources and documents used in these interviews and articles and compiling the list of references. Dr Seyyed Amir Hussein Husseini and Seyyed Emad Tabatabai have added to the richness of the discussion in the first and second articles of this collection with their written and spoken criticisms and suggestions. A long, challenging and enlightening conversation with Dr. Mohammad Amir Qudusi prompted me to add an explanation of my method and

some of my premises in the moral explanation of the Battle of Karbala in this introduction.

Finally, I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to Dr Mohammad Jafar Mahallati and his colleagues at the Majd Research Centre in Shiraz, as well as to Mr Akbar Ghanbari, manager of Negāh-e Mo‘āṣer Publications. I am also deeply indebted to the distinguished translator of this book, Dr Elham Farahani and to the respected editor, Dr Hassan Shikoh. May Allah Almighty bless all these esteemed individuals with continued health and ever-growing success.

Abolghasem Fanaei

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