

**Virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā' in Shī'ī Literature: A Comparative
Study of Early Shī'ī Texts up to the End of the Fifth Century AH /
Beginning of the Twelfth Century CE**

Abstract

Millions of Imāmī or Twelver Shī'īs visit the holy cities of al-Najaf and Karbalā' every year and perform the pilgrimage rites over the mausolea of the imams 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660) and his son al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (d. 60/680), who are buried in these two cities respectively, according to Shī'ī tradition. The huge and growing number of annual pilgrims testify to the importance of pilgrimages among the Shī'a, while the numerous writings by Twelver Shī'a authors on the sites themselves and the pilgrimage rites performed there, which constitute a rich prose and poetry literature of its own, indicate the importance of these holy places and the high esteem in which they have been held in the Twelver heritage over generations.

Despite the modernization which the Muslim Orient has experienced in recent years and the attendant ethical and behavioral changes in many aspects of the lives of individuals and societies in the Arab and Islamic worlds in general, the Shī'ī pilgrimage rites, especially those associated with the two holy tombs in al-Najaf and Karbalā', continue to represent victory of Shī'ī religious tradition over the changes in standards which have shaken and changed the Arab and Islamic countries. Shī'ī holy places have thus remained important and influential for the structure of society and for the individual's connection to the Shī'ī heritage, and help express the continued association of the Shī'ī model with tradition and with the motif of the imam.

The present study focuses on an important aspect of Twelver Shī'ī heritage, namely the adherence of the Shī'a, in ancient as well as in modern times, to the sect's holy sites, with special focus on the importance of al-Najaf and Karbalā' in Shī'ī tradition. The study compares various Shī'ī texts composed until the end of the fifth century AH / beginning of the twelfth century CE. The chapters and topics examine the presence of the two sites in Shī'ī tradition as reflected in relevant religious writings and Shī'ī works of literature, prose as well as poetry, within the afore-mentioned time frame.

The study is based on religious and literary sources, mainly of early Twelver Shī'ī origin, since these form the basis for most later writings. The sources used here have played a conspicuous role in the dissemination of major Shī'ī concepts and in transforming them into foundations of Shī'ī religious thought in succeeding ages. However, in a number of cases the study will also make use of literary, historical and religious materials that belong to non-Shī'ī traditions. Most of the latter stem from Sunnī sources and provide quite clear demarcation lines between Sunnī and Shī'ī conceptions with respect to the study's main topics. A comparison of the two traditions in relation to many of the topics enriches the study and enhances its reliability, since it is well known that many important aspects of Shī'ī thought can be understood more deeply when compared to their Sunnī counterpart.

The study aims at clarifying a number of basic concepts that stand at the heart of Shī'ī doctrine: Islamic "virtues" literature, its characteristics, its materials and its aims in light of the Twelver heritage. These very early Shī'ī sources can provide us with more precise knowledge about the presence of al-Najaf and Karbalā' in Shī'ī tradition, enabling us to trace how this led to the creation of "virtues" and pilgrimage literatures, and the various genres and religious and historical materials that can be found throughout the Shī'ī

writings in question. They can also help add to our store of scholarly research, and provide some novel and useful insights into understanding Twelver Shī'ī dogma and its evolution.

Twelver Shī'ism is the second largest sect in Islam, after the Sunnīs. As is well known, the beginnings of the rift between Shī'a and Sunna occurred already in the Early Muslim period, and has since only grown. At the root of the conflict between the two groups lies a political dispute about the religious and political role of the caliph and the imam in the Muslim state, which broke out immediately after the Prophet's death. The rule of the first three caliphs served as a catalyst for the solidarity felt towards the fourth caliph, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660), by a group of the Prophet's Companions who believed that the rightful leaders of the Muslim community are members of the Prophet's family. This solidarity with 'Alī constituted the beginning of the Shī'ī movement, which took on a clearly political character when certain Muslim groups withdrew their support for 'Alī, thus plunging the state into a critical situation. A bloody civil war ensued in the years 36/66 and 37/657, which put a temporary stop to the Muslim conquests and brought about the deaths of numerous major Islamic figures, including 'Alī himself.

Twelver Shī'īs believe that 'Alī was the legitimate political and religious heir after the death of Muḥammad and consider his role of imam as a continuation of the work of the prophets. 'Alī, according to this view, was imam, heir and caliph at one-and-the-same time. Shī'īs also believe that 'Alī's descendants possess the same right of leading the Muslim nation. Twelver Shī'īs agree on the identity of twelve imams, beginning with 'Alī himself, followed by his descendants, including ten descendants of his son al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (d. 61/680). The latter was followed by eight imams and then a ninth, the mysterious twelfth imam Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-'Askarī, called "the occulted imam" (who disappeared between the years

256/878 and 329/941 in the so-called "minor occultation", followed by the "major occultation", which has lasted to the present day). Twelver Shī'īs do not recognize the legitimacy of most of the Muslim caliphs and rulers, in particular the first three caliphs Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (d. 13/634), 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644) and 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (d. 35/656). All three are considered illegitimate, as are all the caliphs of subsequent periods, such as those of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties. The interest which Shī'ī tradition shows in al-Najaf and Karbalā' derives from the sanctity which the sect attributes to the imamate and to the person of the imam as the object of legitimate loyalty and as a performer of miracles during his lifetime and after his death. Due to this the imam is considered a source of authority by those who believe in him, and an enemy by Muslims who are hostile to the Shī'ī doctrine. The Shī'ī adherence to al-Najaf and Karbalā' in particular serves to promote the Shī'ī creed, since 'Alī and al-Ḥusayn, whose respective graves are located in these two cities, are major figures in Shī'ī doctrine. Through the promotion of the sanctity of their places of burial and the ascription of miraculous properties to them, the sanctity of those who are buried there is promoted as well.

The importance attached to "virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā'" literature in Shī'ī texts helps to promote loyalty to 'Alī and his descendants the imams, and to inculcate the Shī'ī creed, in which the imams' superior qualities play an important role. It also contributes to refuting the views of their doctrinal opponents, especially the Sunnīs.

The study attempts, in its theoretical and analytical chapters, to arrive at answers to the following questions, that address the core issues with which it deals:

1. Can the literature of "virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā'" be considered a specifically Shī'ī genre with its own specific characteristics? What are its most prominent features?
2. What are the main similarities and differences between Sunnī and Shī'ī "virtues of cities" literatures, especially with respect to Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem?
3. What are the dominant linguistic and rhetorical devices (linguistic formulations and creative rhetorical usages) in the literature of the virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā'?
4. Why do Shī'ī believers perform the pilgrimage to al-Najaf and Karbalā'.
5. How reliable are Shī'ī traditions about the virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā'?
6. How are the virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā' reflected in Shī'ī poetry?

These are important questions, whose answers can help support some of the present study's hypotheses. Perhaps the most significant of these is the consideration of this literature as a specific creation of Twelver Shī'īsm, from which the Shī'ī heritage takes most of its materials and its characteristics, which it uses for the specific Shī'ī sectarian objectives of promoting the standing and sanctity of the imams. In this sense, it is a doctrinal genre wrapped in literary garb, a feature which it shares with the non-Shī'ī versions of this kind of literature.

The study uses a number of methodologies in its treatment of the Shī'ī materials:

A. *The qualitative analytical* method in dealing with texts that are directly connected to its main topic: Virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā' in Shī'ī Tradition: A Comparative Study of Early Shī'ī Texts up to the End of the Fifth Century AH / Beginning of the Twelfth Century CE. The study involves the compilation of theoretical and scholarly compositions that

constitute its theoretical background. In practical terms this means engaging with a variety of texts belonging to the early Muslim "virtues of cities" literature in general. The study adopts a method of analysis based on literary and terminological understanding, occasionally comparing different Shī'ī sources, while at other times comparing Shī'ī with non-Shī'ī writings.

B. *The inductive method*, that is, collecting observations concerning the works examined in the study, sorting them and deriving conclusions, according to the criteria used in the study.

C. *The descriptive method*, which involves describing the works' contents and comparing them with each other in order to determine which topics and information are new, which are repetitions, which aspects are in need of further study, and which have not yet been paid any scholarly attention at all.

Students of the Shī'a are well aware that Twelver Shī'īs in the past suffered from persecution and oppression by the ruling sect in the Muslim state, because they were perceived as a threat to the authority of the caliphs, who belonged to the Sunnī majority. For this reason, Shī'īs have striven to preserve and strengthen their collective identity, using the motif of virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā', paving the way to extolling the virtues of other burial sites of imams. Shī'ī theoreticians have thus spared no effort to use every possible traditional text that could provide support for the doctrine of the virtues of holy burial sites, especially those of 'Ali and al-Ḥusayn.

The present study consists of this *Abstract*, followed by an extended *Introduction* in which highlights are presented of the history of the literature on the "virtues" of holy Islamic holy sites and some holy cities. It also surveys the views of various scholars on this literature and also delineates the bounds of the present study, explains its methodology and presents the research questions with which it deals. *Chapter One* discusses a number of issues concerning Islamic holy sites, with a focus on the status of Mecca,

Medina and Jerusalem in the early "virtues" literature on Muslim cities. It also discusses the place with the afore-mentioned cities occupy in Islamic poetry and explains its role in enhancing their status in "virtues" literature. The chapter provides a comprehensive linguistic and terminological definition of the concept of "virtues literature" and surveys this literature in general, and the "virtues of the imams" specifically, in light of early Shī'ī tradition. *Chapter Two* focuses on early Shī'ī thought and the significance of place and soil in Shī'ī religious doctrine. It examines the origins of Twelver Shī'ī writings on the virtues of cities, followed by a brief biography of the two first imams, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and his son al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, an enumeration of the rituals which Shī'īs perform when on pilgrimage to al-Najaf and Karbalā', and finally a survey of Shī'ī articles of faith in relation to these two sites and their sanctity. *Chapter Three* deals in detail with some important aspects of the literature on the "virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā'", treating the following themes separately for each site: The call to visit the sites, the motif of the miracles associated with them, as well as dreams. *Chapter Four* compares aspects of the literature of the virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā' with the literature of the virtues of Mecca and Medina, followed by a brief critical reading of early Shī'ī poetry on the two former cities. The *Conclusion* presents the study's main results, consisting of answers to the main research questions and confirmation of the sources on which it was based.

The study is based on three types of sources. One consists of Shī'ī doctrinal and poetic texts, especially early tradition and poetry compilations that provided materials for later Shī'ī books. Another type of source used in the study is basic doctrinal texts, both Shī'ī and Sunnī, such as the *Ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* compilations, collections of the Prophet's sayings and doctrinal

epistles. The third type of source is historical works, chronicles and the Qur'ān.

Following our analysis of these source types the study came to the conclusion that the sanctity and "virtues" of the cities that are considered holy by Sunnīs, namely Mecca, Medina and Jerusalem, are based solely on verses of the Qur'ān and on the Prophetic *sunna*. For this reason, Muslims revere these cities, whatever their own personal preferences may be. The Shī'īs, on the other hand, attribute great importance to their own holy cities, whose standing is due to their serving as the burial place of their imams, or because they are associated with them in some other way. The sanctity of Shī'ī sites is based on the *ḥadīth* collections of the Shī'a, containing sayings attributed to the imams.

Sindawi, a researcher in the field of early Shī'ī literature, has dealt with important aspects of the literature of the virtues of al-Najaf and Karbalā'. In his thesis he dealt with the Shī'ī "battle literature" (*maqātil*), through which he came to examine Shī'ī themes connected to these two holy places and their sanctity, among them: Miracles associated with the two cities, the role of angels and demons, Jewish and Christian figures with a connection to both places, the killing of al-Ḥusayn and his connection to Karbalā', and more. Sindawi has focused on the use made by the Shī'a of *maqātil* literature in order to promote the sanctity of the imam al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (d. 61/680) in a way that is consistent with Twelver doctrine. He also studied 'Alī's grave, known as *al-Gharrī*, the meaning of its name, disparate Shī'ī traditions about the grave and the customs associated with pilgrimage to the site. Sindawi's afore-mentioned study fits in with one of the themes of the present study, namely the standing of al-Ḥusayn's tomb and its presence in early Shī'ism, and the role of Shī'ī poetry in promoting the tomb's reputation and pilgrimage to it.

However, the efforts of Sindawi and of others who addressed the topic of the "virtues of Islamic cities" literature focused mainly on Sunnī tradition and ignored its treatment in Twelver Shīʿa texts. The present study can significantly close this gap by highlighting the literature of "virtues of cities" in Islam from the perspective of early Shīʿism, through its focus on al-Najaf and Karbalāʾ in Shīʿī sources in the first five centuries AH.

Twelver Shīʿism was an important sect in early Islam and has survived to this day despite the historical and religious troubles that it faced. It is in fact the second largest denomination in the Muslim world and wields considerable influence in certain parts of this world in our times. The fact that it has not become extinct despite the surrounding hostility indicates that certain factors have worked in its favor. It is quite possible that the existence of a literature depicting the virtues of Shīʿī cities, especially al-Najaf and Karbalāʾ, has helped preserve the Shīʿī creed and even promoted its spread.