

The Qur'anic Biography of Imam Husayn: A Translation of Sayyid al-'Ulama's "Husayn ('a) and the Qur'an"

Sayyid 'Alī Naqī Naqvī, popularly known as Sayyid al-'Ulama, was widely considered to be the most prolific and influential mujtahid in the Indian subcontinent of the twentieth century. Originally from Lucknow, India, he hailed from a renowned family of scholars, called Khāndān-e Ijtihād of the Shi'i Awadh state. He studied in Najaf for many years under the most prominent marājī' of his time, including Mirzā Muḥammad Ḥusayn al-Nā'inī, Ḍiyā' al-Dīn al-'Irāqī, and Abu al-Ḥasan al-Isfahānī. He wrote prolifically and spoke widely on a number of key and pressing issues facing the Shi'i community of the Indian subcontinent. He was also affiliated for many years with Aligarh University as a Reader and as the Dean of Shi'i Theology.

In this short treatise, Sayyid al-'Ulamā' gives a Qur'anic biography of the Lord of Martyrs, Imam Ḥusayn ('a), and sheds light on the causes of the event of Karbala. In this brief but profound text, he provides an exegesis of the life of Imam Ḥusayn ('a) and his heroic martyrdom through particular verses that highlight the most pivotal aspects of the Imam's life. Meant for a wider audience, the text strips down a lengthy discussion to its fundamentals so as to provide us a striking lesson: that the Imam is the Qur'an embodied, a claim eminently provable by the following Qur'anic verses themselves.

The treatise is translated by Dr. Syed Rizwan Zamir, associate professor of religion in Davidson College in Davidson, North Carolina. Dr. Zamir's Ph.D. dissertation was on the religio-intellectual thought of Sayyid 'Alī Naqī and his profound influence on the religious and social landscape of the Shi'i community in South Asia. The Qur'anic translations are loosely based on Arberry's translation of the Qur'an.

In the name of Allah, the most Merciful, the All-Compassionate.

Section I: A Synopsis of the Martyr of Karbalā's life as Given in God's Words (i.e., the Qur'an)

The Imam's ('a) family:

Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33):33

إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا

O People of the House, God only desires to put away from you all abomination and to cleanse you thoroughly.

His birth:

Sūrat al-Aḥqāf (46):15

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ إِحْسَانًا ۚ حَمَلَتْهُ أُمُّهُ كُرْهًا وَوَضَعَتْهُ
كُرْهًا ۚ وَحَمْلُهُ وَفِصَالُهُ ثَلَاثُونَ شَهْرًا ۚ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا بَلَغَ أَشُدَّهُ وَبَلَغَ
أَرْبَعِينَ سَنَةً قَالَ رَبِّ أَوْزِعْنِي أَنْ أَشْكُرَ نِعْمَتَكَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيَّ
وَعَلَىٰ وَالِدَيَّ وَأَنْ أَعْمَلَ صَالِحًا تَرْضَاهُ وَأَصْلِحْ لِي فِي ذُرِّيَّتِي ۚ إِنِّي
تُتِبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَإِنِّي مِنَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ

We have charged man to be kind to his parents; his mother bore him painfully, and painfully she gave birth to him; his bearing and his weaning are thirty months. Until, when he is fully grown, and reaches forty years, he says, "O my Lord, grant me that I may be thankful for Thy blessing that Thou hast blessed me and my father and mother, and that I may do righteousness well-pleasing to Thee; and make me righteous also in my offspring. Behold, I repent to Thee, and am among those who surrender."

His ultimate objective:

Sūrat al-An‘ām (6):163

لَا شَرِيكَ لَهُ ۚ وَبِذَلِكَ أُمِرْتُ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُسْلِمِينَ

“No associate has He. Thus have I been commanded, and I am the first of those that surrender.”

His journey from Medina:

Sūrat al-Qaṣaṣ (28):21

فَخَرَجَ مِنْهَا خَائِفًا يَتَرَقَّبُ ۚ قَالَ رَبِّ نَجِّنِي مِنَ الْقَوْمِ الظَّالِمِينَ

So he departed therefrom, fearful and vigilant; he said, “My Lord, deliver me from the evil-doing people.”

A minority facing a majority:

Sūrat al-Baqarah (2):249

فَلَمَّا فَصَلَ طَالُوتُ بِالْجُنُودِ قَالَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مُبْتَلِيكُمْ بِنَهَرٍ فَمَنْ شَرِبَ مِنْهُ فَلَيْسَ مِنِّي وَمَنْ لَمْ يَطْعَمْهُ فَإِنَّهُ مِنِّي إِلَّا مَنْ اغْتَرَفَ غُرْفَةً بِيَدِهِ ۚ فَشَرِبُوا مِنْهُ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا مِّنْهُمْ ۚ فَلَمَّا جَاوَزَهُ هُوَ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ قَالُوا لَا طَاقَةَ لَنَا الْيَوْمَ بِجَالُوتَ وَجُنُودِهِ ۚ قَالَ الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلَاقُوا

اللَّهُ كَمِ مِّنْ فِئَةٍ قَلِيلَةٍ غَلَبَتْ فِئَةٌ كَثِيرَةٌ بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ ۗ وَاللَّهُ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

And when Saul went forth with the hosts he said, "God will try you with a river; whoever drinks of it is not of me, and whoever tastes it not, he is of me, except him who scoops up with his hand." But they drank of it, except a few of them; and when he crossed it along with those who believed with him, they said, "We have no power today against Goliath and his hosts." Said those who reckoned they should meet God, "How often a little company has overcome a numerous company, by God's leave! And God is with the patient."

A loyal contingent and final farewells:((In this section, the original Urdu text isn't clear, and seems to refer to the farewells between the various followers of Imam Husayn who comprise that loyal contingent.))

Sūrat al-Aḥzāb (33):23

مِّنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ رِجَالٌ صَدَقُوا مَا عَاهَدُوا اللَّهَ عَلَيْهِ ۗ فَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ قَضَىٰ نَحْبَهُ وَمِنْهُمْ مَّنْ يَنْتَظِرُ ۗ وَمَا بَدَّلُوا تَبْدِيلًا

Among the believers are men who were true to their covenant with God; some of them have fulfilled their vow by death, and some are still awaiting, and they have not changed in the least.

Final words of advice:

Sūrat al-ʿAṣr (103):3

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

Save those who believe, and do righteous deeds, and counsel each other unto the truth, and counsel each other to be steadfast.

The greatness of patience:

Sūrat al-Baqarah (2):156

الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

Who, when they are visited by an affliction, say, “Surely we belong to God, and to Him we return...”

His final end:

Sūrat al-Fajr (89):27-30

يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ﴿٢٧﴾ ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً
﴿٢٨﴾ فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي ﴿٢٩﴾ وَادْخُلِي جَنَّاتِي ﴿٣٠﴾

(27) “O soul at peace, (28) return unto thy Lord, well-pleased, well-pleasing!
(29) Enter thou among My servants! (30) Enter thou My Paradise!”

His eternal life:

Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (3):16

الَّذِينَ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا إِنَّنا آمَنَّا فَاغْفِرْ لَنَا ذُنُوبَنَا وَقِنَا عَذَابَ النَّارِ

Who say, “Our Lord, we believe; forgive us our sins, and guard us against the torment of the Fire...”

Section II: Causes and Reasons of Imam Husayn’s Heroic Acts as Given in God’s Words (i.e., the Qur’an)

Abraham’s (‘a) prayer that there be true guardians of Islam from his progeny:

Sūrat al-Baqarah (2):127-128

وَإِذْ يَرْفَعُ إِبْرَاهِيمُ الْقَوَاعِدَ مِنَ الْبَيْتِ وَإِسْمَاعِيلُ رَبَّنَا تَقَبَّلْ مِنَّا ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴿١٢٧﴾ رَبَّنَا وَاجْعَلْنَا مُسْلِمِينَ لَكَ وَمِن ذُرِّيَّتِنَا أُمَّةً مُّسْلِمَةً لَّكَ وَأَرِنَا مَنَاسِكَنَا وَتُبْ عَلَيْنَا ۖ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيمُ

﴿ ١٢٨ ﴾

(127) And when Abraham, and Ishmael with him, raised up the foundations of the House: “Our Lord, accept this from us; Thou art the All-hearing, the All-knowing; (128) and, our Lord, make us submissive to Thee, and of our seed a nation submissive to Thee; and show us our holy rites, and turn towards us; surely Thou turnest, and art All-compassionate...”

Abraham's ('a) last will and testament to his children, that they remain guardians of Islam:

Sūrat al-Baqarah (2):132

وَوَصَّىٰ بِهَا إِبْرَاهِيمُ بَنِيهِ وَيَعْقُوبُ يَا بَنِيَّ إِنَّ اللَّهَ اصْطَفَىٰ لَكُمُ الدِّينَ
فَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ

And Abraham charged his sons with this and Jacob likewise: "My sons, God has chosen for you the religion; see that you die not save in surrender."

The greatest fulfillment of Abraham's ('a) prayer is the chosen messenger, Muhammad (ﷺ), his progeny, and his true followers:

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (3):68

إِنَّ أَوْلَى النَّاسِ بِإِبْرَاهِيمَ الَّذِينَ اتَّبَعُوهُ وَهَذَا النَّبِيُّ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا ۗ وَاللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

Surely the people standing closest to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet, and those who believe; and God is the Protector of the believers.

After the Prophet of Islam, it was certain that the larger ummah will deviate from the right path:

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (3):144

وَمَا مُحَمَّدٌ إِلَّا رَسُولٌ قَدْ خَلَتْ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ الرُّسُلُ ۚ أَفَأَنْ مَاتَ أَوْ قُتِلَ
انْقَلَبْتُمْ عَلَىٰ أَعْقَابِكُمْ ۚ وَمَنْ يَنْقَلِبْ عَلَىٰ عَقْبَيْهِ فَلَنْ يَضُرَّ اللَّهَ
شَيْئًا ۚ وَسَيَجْزِي اللَّهُ الشَّاكِرِينَ

Muhammad is but a Messenger; Messengers have passed away before him. If he should die or is slain, will you turn back on your heels? If any man should turn back on his heels, he will not harm God in any way; and God will recompense the thankful.

The Muslims, after gaining power, did corruption on earth and broke the bonds of love and intimacy:

Sūrat Muḥammad (47):22

فَهَلْ عَسَيْتُمْ إِنْ تَوَلَّيْتُمْ أَنْ تُفْسِدُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَتُقَطِّعُوا أَرْحَامَكُمْ

If you turned away, would you then perchance work corruption in the land, and break your bonds of kinship?

In this [situation], it is necessary for there to exist a certain group that will exhort people toward goodness and—to the extent possible—forbid evils.

Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (3):104

وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ ۚ وَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

Let there be a people among you, calling to good, and bidding to honor, and forbidding dishonor; those are the successful.

It is such a group whose raison d'etre is precisely to keep striving to oppose these evils:

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (3):109

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۗ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ

To God belongs all that is in the heavens and in the earth, and unto Him all matters are returned.

This group should never obey those who deny God:

Sūrat Āl 'Imrān (3):149

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَطِيعُوا الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا يُرَدُّوكُمْ عَلَىٰ أَعْقَابِكُمْ
فَتَنقَلِبُوا خَاسِرِينَ

O believers, if you obey the unbelievers they will turn you upon your heels, and you will turn back in a state of loss.

One should stay firm on the straight path and one should not form bonds with oppressors:

Sūrat Hūd (11):113

وَلَا تَرْكَنُوا إِلَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا فَتَمَسَّكُمُ النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ
مِنَ أَوْلِيَاءَ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ

And rely not on the evildoers, so that the Fire touches you—you have no protectors apart from God—and then you will not be helped.

They are appointed to always obey God, the Most Exalted, and no one else:

Sūrat al-Bayyinah (98):5

وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ حُنَفَاءَ وَيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ
وَيُؤْتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ۚ وَذَلِكَ دِينُ الْقِيَمَةِ

They were commanded only to serve God, devoting themselves to Him, men of pure faith, and to perform the prayer, and pay the alms—that is the religion of the True.

If it is not possible to perform one's duties, one has to abandon one's homeland:

Sūrat al-Nisā' (4):97

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ تَوَفَّاهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ ظَالِمِي أَنفُسِهِمْ قَالُوا فِيمَ كُنْتُمْ ۚ قَالُوا كُنَّا
مُسْتَضْعِفِينَ فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ قَالُوا أَلَمْ تَكُنْ أَرْضُ اللَّهِ وَاسِعَةً
فَتُهَاجِرُوا فِيهَا ۚ فَأُولَئِكَ مَأْوَاهُمْ جَهَنَّمُ ۚ وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا

And those the angels take, while still they are wronging themselves—the angels will say, “In what circumstances were you?” They will say, “We were abased in the earth.” The angels will say, “But was not God’s earth wide, so that you might have emigrated in it?” Such men, their refuge shall be Hell—an evil abode!

One should refuse obedience to anyone other than God, and in consequence one should not be anxious about loss of home or even death:

Sūrat al-‘Ankabūt (29):57

كُلُّ نَفْسٍ ذَائِقَةُ الْمَوْتِ ۗ ثُمَّ إِلَيْنَا تُرْجَعُونَ

Every soul shall taste of death; then unto Us you shall be returned.

If necessary, one should stand up and fight:

Sūrat al-Ḥajj (22):39-41

أُذِنَ لِلَّذِينَ يُقَاتِلُونَ بِأَنفُسِهِمْ ظَلَمُوا ۗ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ نَصْرِهِمْ لَقَدِيرٌ
﴿٣٩﴾ الَّذِينَ أُخْرِجُوا مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ إِلَّا أَنْ يَقُولُوا رَبُّنَا
اللَّهُ ۗ وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ لَفُتِنَتِ صَوَامِعُ وَبِيَعٌ
وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدُ يُذْكَرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا ۗ وَلَيَنْصُرَنَّ اللَّهُ مَنْ
يَنْصُرُهُ ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَقَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ ﴿٤٠﴾ الَّذِينَ إِنْ مَكَانَهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ

أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ ۗ
وَاللَّهُ عَاقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ ﴿٤١﴾

(39) Permission is given to those who fight because they were wronged—surely God is able to help them - (40) who were expelled from their homes without cause, except that they say “Our Lord is God.” Had God not driven back the people, some by the means of others, there would have been destroyed cloisters and churches, oratories and mosques, wherein God’s Name is much mentioned. Assuredly God will help him who helps Him—surely God is All-strong, All-mighty (41) who, if We establish them in the land, perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and bid to honor, and forbid dishonor; and unto God belongs the issue of all affairs.

Even if killed, God’s Will is more precious than the blessings of this world:

Sūrat Āl ‘Imrān (3):156

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَقَالُوا لِإِخْوَانِهِمْ إِذَا
ضَرَبُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ أَوْ كَانُوا غُزًى لَوْ كَانُوا عِنْدَنَا مَا مَاتُوا وَمَا قُتِلُوا
لِيَجْعَلَ اللَّهُ ذَلِكَ حَسْرَةً فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ ۗ وَاللَّهُ
بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ بَصِيرٌ

O believers, be not as the unbelievers who say to their brothers, when they journey in the land, or are upon expeditions, “If they had been with us, they would not have died or been slain”—that God may make that an anguish in their hearts. For God gives life, and He makes to die; and God sees the things that you do.

In the end, victory is for the folks of God:

Sūrat al-Mujādalah (58):21

كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَأَغْلِبَنَّ أَنَا وَرُسُلِي ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ

God has written, "I shall assuredly be victorious, I and My Messengers." Surely God is All-strong, All-mighty.