

About the Knowledge of the Holy Imams (A.S.)

☰ Category: [Ahl al-Bayt](#)

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Did Sayyid al-Shuhadā' 1 ('a) know that he would be martyred on his journey from Mecca to Kūfah? In other words, did he depart for Iraq with the intention to be martyred or to form a just and totally Islamic government?

Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a)—in the belief of the Shī'ah—is a sacrosanct Imām, the Prophet's (S) third successor, and bearer of complete trusteeship.

According to narrated confirmation and intellectual rationales, the knowledge of Imāms regarding external events is of two types.

First type of their knowledge

By God's will, the Imāms are aware of the truths of the world of existence in all conditions including that which can be perceived by the senses and that which is beyond them such as heavenly beings and past and future events.

Rationale: there are widely transmitted [mutawātir] narrations that are cited in Shī'ah compendiums of hadīth including, "Al-Kāfī", "Basā'ir", "Bihār al-Anwār", Sadūq's books, etc. These innumerable hadīths indicate that Imāms ('a) are aware of everything due to divine blessing not personal acquisition. Whatever they want to know, by the leave of God they realize with the slightest attention.

Of course, there are verses in the Holy Qur'an that determine knowledge of the unseen [ilm al-ghayb] to be specific to God, the Exalted. However, the exception in the following verse shows that the exclusiveness of knowledge of the unseen for God signifies that no one possesses such knowledge independently in and of itself, save God.

"He is knower of the Invisible and He reveals His knowledge of the unseen unto no one, save those messengers He has preferred..."²

Therefore, it is possible for preferred messengers to know about the unseen through divine instruction and for other elect to know through the prophets' instruction, as many narrations state regarding the Prophet and all the Imāms that they passed their knowledge to the next

before their deaths.

There are also intellectual rationales expressing that the Imāms ('a), who because of their brilliant status, are the most complete humans of their times, perfect manifestations of divine Names and Attributes, and know everything in the world and every personal incident.

Due to their fundamental nature, whatever the regard, its knowledge is made clear to them. In view of the fact that these rationales are dependent upon a series of complex intellectual matters that are beyond the scope of this article, I will leave them to be examined in their own special place.

Practical effects of Imamate knowledge and its relationship with obligation

A point that must be especially regarded is that such benedictory knowledge, as per the logical and cited reasons proving its existence, is completely inviolable, inalterable, and irreproachable. In other words, it is knowledge of that which is recorded in the Lawh-i Mahfūz³ and awareness of the certain providence [qadā'] of God.

This necessitates that the possessor of such knowledge per se has no duty regarding it because it is inevitable. Also, the person may hold no intention or desire in regard to acting on such knowledge since duty rises from the possibility of action and, where volition is concerned, action and avoidance of action are both facets of responsibility—either action or inaction may be intended.

However, in view of the fact that such knowledge is ineluctable and predetermined, there is no way that responsibility can apply to it.

For instance, it would be correct for God to tell His servant to perform a certain task that is possible to either do or not do. However, it is impossible for Him to command a person to or proscribe them from doing something that will certainly happen due to God's genetic providence since such a demand would be null and void.

Also, a person can intend to do something that is possible, set it as their purpose, and endeavor to achieve it. However, never can a person intend to do something that will assuredly and providentially happen and endeavor to carry it out since the willingness or unwillingness of a person has no effect on that which will assuredly happen because it will assuredly happen (regard carefully).

This shows that:

1. This benedictory knowledge of the Imāms ('a) has no effect on their actions and no relationship with their specific duties. Essentially, any sure event, because it is linked to certain providence and is inevitable, cannot pertain to commandments or injunctions, or human intention. Indeed, what the certain fate and providence of Truth, the Almighty, does necessitate is contentment with fate. Thus, Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) said amid blood and dust at the final hour of his life:

“With contentment for Your providence and in surrender to Your command. There is no object of worship besides You.”

Furthermore, in an oration before he left Mecca he said:

“The satisfaction of Allah is in our satisfaction; that of the Ahl al-Bayt.”⁴

2. In regard to divine providence, the certainties of a person’s action does not negate the fact that it is voluntary because divine providence regarding an act pertains to all its possible circumstances not the act in and of itself. For example, if God wants a person to perform a specific volitional action by his own free will, the external realization of this volitional act will be certain and unavoidable because the will of God has applied to it. Simultaneously, for the human in question it is voluntary and possesses the quality of possibility—as opposed to inevitability (regard carefully).

3. The appearance of the Imāms’ (‘a) actions should not be considered a reason for their ignorance of the unseen and to debunk the existence of this benedictory knowledge. This is like asking: if Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (‘a) knew what was going to happen, why did he send Muslim to Kūfah as his representative? Why did he write a letter to the people of Kūfah through Saydāwī? Why did he get himself killed when God states:

“And cast not yourselves by your own hands into destruction...”⁵

Why, why, why? The answer to all these questions has already been made clear from the foregoing discussion and there is no need for reiteration.

Second type of Imamate knowledge: normal knowledge

According to the Qur’an, the Prophet (S) and the Imāms (‘a) of his pure lineage are humans like the rest of us and the actions they perform in the course of their lives are similar to those of other humans—volitional and in accordance to normal knowledge. Like other people, the Imāms (‘a) determine the goodness and evil, and advantages and disadvantages of things through normal knowledge intending to do what is worthy of being done and endeavoring accordingly.

If external causes, factors, and conditions are favorable, their endeavors are successful and if causes and conditions are adverse, they fail. The fact that the Imāms (‘a) know the details of all past and future events has no effect on voluntary acts—as we have stated.

The Imāms (‘a) are like other human servants of God and are obligated to perform religious duties. Also, according to the leadership they have been given by God, which they must carry out by the normal laws governing humanity, they must perform their utmost in revitalizing truth and upholding the religion.

The movement of Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (AS) and its objective

With a short study of the general conditions of that time, the reasons behind Sayyid

al-Shuhadā's ('a) decisions and measures become clear. The darkest period in the history of Islam for the family of the Prophet (S) and their Shī'ahs was the twenty years of Mu'āwīyah's reign.

After Mu'āwīyah took over the Islamic caliphate through trickery and became the unconditional monarch of the vast Islamic country, he used all his great power to consolidate his rule and destroy the Ahl al-Bayt of the Prophet (S). Not only did he strive to destroy them, he wanted to completely eradicate them from the minds and tongues of the people.

He made a group of the Prophet's (S) saḥābah who were respected and trusted by the people his followers and used them to fabricate hadīths advantageous to the saḥābah and harmful to the Ahl al-Bayt. Also, at his order preachers cursed Amīr al-Mu'minīn ('a)—as a 'religious duty'—upon pulpits throughout the Islamic nation.

With agents such as Ziyad ibn Abiyah, Samrah ibn Jundab, and Busr ibn Artāh he killed the friends of the Ahl al-Bayt wherever he found them. In order to do this, he used gold, coercion, bribes, persuasion, and intimidation to the utmost extent possible.

Naturally, persistence of this environment would cause the masses to begin to hate the name of 'Alī and his family and those who had any love of the Ahl al-Bayt in their hearts to sever all their ties to them in fear of their lives, property, and family security.

The truth of this can be understood by reviewing the Imamate of Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) that lasted around ten years which—except the final few months—was contemporary with Mu'āwīyah. In this entire period, even one jurisprudential hadīth was not cited from him, although he was the Imām of the Time and clarifier of religious teachings and decrees.

(By hadīth I mean a narration that the people cited from him, showing that the people consulted him, not a narration cited from within his family such as by the next Imām.) This shows that in those days, the doors to the house of the Ahl al-Bayt were closed and the people's referrals to and consultations with Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) had reached zero.

The escalating pressure that had beset the Islamic society prevented Imām al-Hasan ('a) from continuing his fight or revolt against Mu'āwīyah because, firstly, Mu'āwīyah had gotten the fealty of the people and in light of this fealty, no one would follow the Imām. Secondly, Mu'āwīyah had made himself known as one of the great saḥābah of the Prophet (S), a Qur'anic scribe, and confidant and right-hand man of three of the first four caliphs.

He had even given himself the title of "Khāl al-Mu'minīn" (literally, Uncle of the Faithful) as a holy appellation. Thirdly, through his singular intrigue, he easily provoked the killing of Imām al-Hasan ('a) by his own relatives then rose in vengeance to kill the Imām's murderers. Then, he was able to hold mourning gatherings for the Imām and grieve for him!

Mu'āwīyah had made living conditions for Imām al-Hasan ('a) so bad that the Imām ('a) did not even have the least bit of security in his own home. Then, when Mu'āwīyah wanted to obtain the

fealty of the people for Yazīd, he poisoned the Imām ('a) using the Imām's own wife, martyring him.

This same Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a), who rebelled against Yazīd without delay after the death of Mu'āwiyah and even sacrificed his own infant child on this path, could not make this sacrifice when Mu'āwiyah was alive because against Mu'āwiyah's deceptive self-righteousness and the allegiance he had extracted from the Imām, his martyrdom would have absolutely no effect.

This was a summary of the woeful conditions Mu'āwiyah had created in this Islamic society in which he had completely closed the doors to the Holy Prophet's (S) house taking away from the Ahl al-Bayt all effect and function.

The death of Mu'āwiyah and caliphate of Yazīd

The final blow Mu'āwiyah struck against Islam and Muslims was to turn the Islamic caliphate into a hereditary despotism installing his son Yazīd as his successor though his son did not possess any kind of religious character even in the form of hypocrisy.

He blatantly spent his days in song, wining and dining, lovemaking, and making monkeys dance. He had no respect for religious laws. All this beside, he had no religious belief to the extent that as his soldiers were bringing the Ahl al-Bayt prisoners and the heads of the martyrs of Karbalā into Damascus, he came out to watch and, after having heard a crow squawk (which is held in some places to be a bad omen), he said:

The crow squawked and I said shriek or not,

I have surely taken my dues from the Prophet.⁶

Also, when they brought the Ahl al-Bayt captives and the holy head of Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) before him, he sang some verses one of which was:

Hāshim⁷ played with the Land; for no report has come nor divine revelation.

The rule of Yazīd, which was the continuance of Mu'āwiyah's policy, made the duty of Muslims clear. It also made obvious the status of the Ahl al-Bayt's relationship with Muslims in general and the Shī'ahs—who were doomed to be completely forgotten.

Under these conditions, the most effective and decisive factor in instigating the downfall of the Ahl al-Bayt and destroying the foundations of truth was for Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) to swear fealty to Yazīd, declaring him the inviolable caliph and successor to the Prophet (S).

Because of Sayyid al-Shuhadā's ('a) own true leadership, he could not swear fealty to Yazīd in effect taking a potent step in obliterating the religion. His duty was to refrain from pledging allegiance and God expected nothing less from him.

On the other hand, refusal of fealty held a tragic consequence. That terrible unassailable power of the time demanded allegiance with its entire being—it either wanted fealty or a head—and it was not content with anything else. Therefore, the death of the Imām ('a) was guaranteed if he

did not give his allegiance.

In view of the interests of Islam and Muslims, Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) resolutely chose not to pledge fealty and thus be killed. He dauntlessly preferred death over life and his divine duty was to refrain from giving allegiance and be martyred. This is why some narrations state that the Prophet of Allah said to him in a dream that God wanted to see him dead.

Also, he said to some of the people who advised him against this movement that God wanted to see him dead. In any event, this regards the mandate [tashrīṭ] will of God, not His genetic [takwīnī] will because as we have previously stated, volition has no effect in His genetic will.

Refusal of a life in disgrace, consent to the Red Death (the death of a martyr)

Indeed, Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) chose to reject fealty and thus he chose death. He preferred death over life and the course of events proved that he made the correct choice since the heart-rending circumstances of his martyrdom, affirmed the persecution and righteousness of the Ahl al-Bayt. After his martyrdom, similar movements and bloodshed continued for twelve years.

After that, with the slight calm that transpired at the time of the fifth Imām ('a), the Shī'ahs came in torrents from all around to that same Household that no one paid attention to at the time of Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a).

Thus, day by day, the numbers of the Shī'ahs of the Ahl al-Bayt increased and their rightfulness and brilliance began shining and glistening throughout the world. The basis for this was the Ahl al-Bayt's legitimacy in tandem with their persecution, and the pioneer upon this field was Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a).

Now we wish to present a comparison of the conditions of the Prophet's Household and their reception by the people in the Prophet's day and the situation—which becomes more revitalized and more deep-rooted with every passing year—after Sayyid al-Shuhadā's ('a) martyrdom during these last fourteen centuries, making the verity of Sayyid al-Shuhadā's ('a) choice clearer than day. A poem recited by Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a)—according to some narrations—is an indicator of this same truth:

And it is not for us to feel fear, because our desires will be realized in the final government.

This is why in his last will and testament, Mu'āwiyah greatly emphasized that if Husayn ibn 'Alī refrained from swearing allegiance to Yazīd, Yazīd should leave him alone and not object.

Mu'āwiyah did not make this final testament as a result of sincerity and love, rather he knew that Husayn ibn 'Alī would not give his fealty and if he was killed by Yazīd, the Ahl al-Bayt would be marked by persecution which would be dangerous for the Umayyad dynasty and the best method of promotion and advancement for the Ahl al-Bayt.

The Imām indicates his duty

Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) was aware of his divine duty which was refusal to swear fealty and knew better than anyone the limitless and unassailable power of Banī Umayyah and the character of Yazīd. He realized that an integral necessity of refraining to give fealty was his death and his divine duty necessitated martyrdom.

He explained this matter in various places with differing words. In the gathering of the governor of Medina who asked Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) for his fealty to Yazīd, he said: "One such as me does not give fealty to a person like Yazīd." During his nightly exit from Medina, he quoted his grandfather, the Holy Prophet (S), who said to him in a dream that God wanted—as a duty—that he dies. In an oration before he departed from Mecca, in answer to those who wanted to dissuade him from going towards Iraq, he repeated this.

On the way, in reply to an Arab personage who insisted that he desists from going to Kūfah or else he would surely die, the Imām declared: "This is not unknown to me. However, they will not leave me alone and will kill me regardless of where I am."

Even though some of these narrations have contradictors or are weakly documented, regard and analysis of the prevailing conditions of the day completely substantiates them.

Variance of the Imām's method throughout the rebellion

Of course, when we say the purpose of the Imām's ('a) rebellion was martyrdom and that God had asked for his martyrdom, we do not mean that God had asked him to first refrain from giving allegiance to Yazīd and then sit and notify the agents of Yazīd that they should kill him; thus, performing his duty in a nonsensical and irrational manner, naming it rebellion.

Rather, the Imām's ('a) duty was to rise up against the evil caliphate of Yazīd, deny him fealty, and carry out his dissent, which would end in his martyrdom, by any possible means.

This is why the Imām's ('a) method varied in line with prevailing conditions throughout his rebellion. First, when he was pressured by the governor of Medina, he began his nocturnal journey from Medina and sought refuge in Mecca—which was God's sanctum and a religious haven—and stayed there for a few months.

In Mecca he was under the covert surveillance of the caliph's intelligence officers until it was decided that he be killed or captured at the time of hajj and be sent to Shām. On the other hand, a deluge of letters was coming in from Iraq for the Imām ('a). Thousands of letters promised him support and aid, inviting him to Iraq.

In the final letter from the people of Kūfah, which—according to some historians—was clearly sent to finalize their vows, the Imām decided to initiate his blood-filled campaign and rebellion. First, though, he sent Muslim ibn 'Aqīl as his representative to guarantee the truth of their pledge. After a while, Muslim sent a letter explaining the favorable conditions for the Imām's uprising.

In view of these two factors, i.e. preserving the sanctity of the House of God from the secret

officers of Shām who had come with the intent of either killing or capturing the Imām ('a) and the apparent readiness of Iraq for rebellion, he set out for Kūfah.

Then, in the middle of the way, when he received news of the horrible assassination of Muslim ibn 'Aqīl and Hānī, he altered his method from an offensive uprising and war to a defensive rebellion. He filtered and purified his assembly, keeping only those who would aid him to their last drop of blood, and proceeded towards the site of his martyrdom.

Question: What is the nature and extent of the knowledge of Imām ('a)? Does the Imām have knowledge of the details of his death, even the exact time?

Answer: According to many narrations, the Imāms ('a) have attained such proximity to God that they can know by the will of God whatever they wish to know. This includes thoroughly detailed knowledge of their deaths and martyrdoms. There are no rational grounds to repudiate this matter and there are also narrations saying that each Imām holds a 'Tablet from God' in which their specific duties are recorded. Still, they are obligated to preserve the appearance of normal life.

Here an answer to a certain criticism is made clear, that advancing towards certain danger is not logical. Reason demands that a person never does something that they know entails definite danger, especially mortal danger.

Hence, how can one believe that the Imāms ('a), who are the wisest among the wise, will do something that they know will end in their deaths? Essentially, no person willfully does something that he definitely knows is dangerous. In addition, how can an Imām satisfy himself to voluntarily cause his own death whereby divesting the human world of the blessings of his existence?

Answer: The unreasonableness of performing a voluntary act entailing certain danger is because usually people do everything for their own good and therefore, they do not do something that would entail their extermination. However, if one determines that the deed is more important than preserving their own life, they will surely carry it out without fearing their own death. In substantiation, hundreds of examples may be found in various movements and revolutions. A living proof of this is the incident of Karbalā; the Husaynī movement.

Suppose for a minute that the martyrdom of Sayyid al-Shuhadā' ('a) was not voluntary. What about the actions of each of the martyrs of Karbalā which would surely entail death? There is no doubt that they preferred that the Imām ('a) live a few hours more over their own life. Hence, each of them threw themselves into the maws of death to extend the Imām's life.

This makes it clear that this criticism—that basically no person will voluntarily perform an action that they know is definitely dangerous—is unfounded.

In description of the Pharaoh and his people, God, the Exalted, states:

“And they denied the miracles and invitation of Moses (‘a) even though they were certain of their truth...”⁸

According to the Qur’an, the people of Pharaoh knew of their certain demise in the case that they continue to deny certainty and disbelieve. Even so, they still did what they did and were drowned.

Here also, it is obvious that the criticism asking how the Imām (‘a) can content himself with voluntarily surrendering himself to death depriving the human world of the blessings of his existence is completely baseless.

Because, as we have indicated, knowing of the importance of his martyrdom in relation to continuing his life, the Imām (‘a) preferred martyrdom. No Shī‘ah, rather no Muslim, and more precisely no reasonable human being should be ignorant of the awe-inspiring effects of the Husaynī martyrdom in the Muslim World, especially in the Shī‘ah World, throughout these nearly fourteen centuries.

Throughout the vast treasury of Islamic jurisprudence, the teachers of which are the lineage of the Prophet (S) as per the widely transmitted Hadīth al-Thaqalayn, there is no hadīth related from Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (‘a).⁹ Indeed, some scholars are quoted to have said that only one hadīth has been found from him.

This is the product of ten years of Sayyid al-Shuhadā’s (‘a) Imamate! This clearly indicates that the incrimination ignited during the twenty year reign of Mu‘āwiyah, generated such a woeful situation for the Holy Prophet’s (S) family to the extent that the people turned away from Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (‘a).

Now compare the benefits of the Imām’s (‘a) short life against the astonishing and enduring effects manifested in the Muslim World throughout the thirteen hundred years subsequent to his martyrdom, in order to understand the truth or untruth of the following disputation: why would the Imām (‘a) divest the Muslim World of his existential blessings with his martyrdom?

In addition to what has already been said regarding this issue, if there must be a criticism, it cannot relate to Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (‘a) but to divine decree and pose the question: why should God, the Exalted, from whom the world must take benefit, decree martyrdom causing his servant’s blood to spill upon the earth?

Does this criticism—assuming that one does not understand or feel partial to the previous reply—have any response but to say that God, the Almighty, is absolutely Wise and performs nothing unwisely and without benefit?

Like His other decrees, the decree of the Imām’s (‘a) martyrdom is not without wisdom even assuming the case that we do not understand it and, even if we do direct this criticism towards the Imām (‘a), this same answer is relevant because the Imāms (‘a) are manifestations of God’s

Wisdom and they will never perform an unwise or useless deed.

1. It literally means liege of the martyrs and refers to the third Imām, Husayn ibn ‘Alī. [trans.]

2. Sūrat al-Jinn 72:26-27.

3. This literally means the Guarded Tablet, which is a repository of all knowledge. [trans.]

4. This means that whatever the Ahl al-Bayt are satisfied with, God is satisfied with, because their will and satisfaction has faded into the will and satisfaction of God. [trans.]

5. Sūrat al-Baqarah 2:195.

6. Cited by Ālūsī in the 26th section of “Tafsīr-i Rūh al-Ma‘ānī”, p. 66, from “Tārīkh-i Ibn al-Wardī” and “Wāfī al-Wafiyāt”.

7. In full Banī Hāshim, literally Children of Hāshim; he was an ancestor of the Prophet (S). Specifically, in this verse it refers to the Prophet and the Imāms. [trans.]

8. Sūrat al-Naml 27:14.

9. The Shī‘ahs cite narrations from Sayyid al-Shuhadā’ (‘a) in jurisprudential issues. However, they are narrations through other Imāms such as Imām al-Sādiq, Imām Mūsā ibn Ja‘far, and Imām al-Ridā (‘a). For instance:

That which I refuted were narrations that people other than the Imāms cited, showing consultation of the people.