Dating versions of the Karbalāʾ story

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The following presentation is one of the fruits of an ongoing project I am working with, which attempts to trace the development of the image of Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī in early Shīʿism. In the centuries that followed his death at Karbalāʾ, the image of him was magnified from being an ordinary human being (although he was the grandson of the Prophet) to being a person that in some senses transcends the human. In the same process the story of his killing at Karbalāʾ developed from a tragic account of the death of a close relative of the Prophet to a myth about a cosmic battle between good and evil.

There are several texts in early Islamic historiography that talk about this event, and when studying these I have become convinced that it is possible to see a development over time in the image of Ḥusayn and of the battle. In order to trace that development it is necessary to study the relationship between the different versions of the account, and preferably to date them, if not in absolute time, so at least relative to one another – which one is earlier and which is later? In this presentation I will discuss the relationship between two versions of the Karbalāʾ story that are found in Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh*: one shorter ascribed to the fifth Shīʿite Imām, al-Bāqir (d. 732)[1]; and the longest and most complex of all the early renderings, compiled by Abū Mikhnaf who lived a generation later (d. 774)[2].

The short version, then, is ascribed to Imām Bāqir according to the *isnād*. However, I have learned not to put too much trust in *isnād*s. At least it is important to have them corroborated by other evidence before one can rely on them. Now, this version is much shorter and less detailed than the long one. In Ṭabarī's account of the Karbalāʾ event, the long version takes well over 90% of the space, whereas the short one ascribed to Imām Bāqir only covers about 5%.[3] The brevity and lack of detail of the short version made the Scottish arabist Ian Howard doubt its authenticity.[4] It would not have been possible, he argued, that what was probably intended to pass as "the official Shiʿite version" of the account would lack so much detail and put Ḥusayn in such bad light as this version did.

Howard was not really interested in the relative dates of these two versions. His intention was to investigate their historical accuracy. His study is excellent in that it traces all the early sources What is really problematic with his approach, though, is that he assumed that the later

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[1] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 227–232, 281–283).
[2] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 216–223, 232–272, 288–390)
[3] Of a total of about 170 pages in the Leiden edition.
[4] Howard (1986:127–130)

Shīʿite image of Ḥusayn and the Karbalāʾ event is more or less historically correct, and that facts which contradict this are false. Thus, he presupposes that early Shīʿite historiography and imamology were static and did not develop. In contrast to this, I think that some of the arguments used by Howard can – and should – actually be turned against him. They rather indicate that the short version is older and at least to some extent more accurately relate what actually happened. I mentioned this, without really arguing for it, in a short piece published in Swedish several years ago.[5] More recently, Antoine Borrut has, independently of me, stated the same, but like me Borrut did not argue for this position in detail.[6]

However, it is important not to take anything for granted when we deal with history as far back as this. Thus, although Borrut's, my own, and others' inklings about the older age the short version might seem evident, this has to be proven, or at least made probable, and this is what I will try to do now. So the conclusions that I will offer in this paper are by no means sensational. They rather corroborate what most people have already thought, but no one has hitherto really argued for.

Generally speaking, longer and more detailed accounts of an historical event are often based on earlier more terse descriptions. But brevity and lack of detail is not *necessarily* a sign of priority in time. A shorter text could be a summary of an earlier, longer version. Thus, the short version of the Karbalāʾ event could theoretically be based on the long one. I find that conclusion implausible, however. The differences are too significant, and in fact I believe them to have emerged independently of one another. One argument will suffice: the comparison between the two in their accounts of Ḥusayn's meeting with al-Ḥurr. According to the short version Ḥusayn met al-Ḥurr and him alone, outside Qādisiyya before the Karbalāʾ event. Al-Ḥurr warns Ḥusayn against going to Kūfa, but he decides to continue.[7] This is all we hear about al-Ḥurr in the short account – just a couple of lines. In the long version on the other hand, al-Ḥurr plays a much more significant role.[8] There he is commander of the vanguard of the army from Kūfa. He is clearly uneasy about his task to arrest Ḥusayn, but tries to make Ḥusayn surrender peacefully and come with him to Kūfa. Later, when the battle is about to begin, he deserts the Kūfan army and joins Ḥusayn. In the long version, then, al-Ḥurr is one of the main protagonists. If the short version had used the long text as a model, al-Ḥurr's role would have been significantly diminished. Generally, it is quite unlikely that an important person whose status increases the prestige of a group or a movement is made less important in a later version. In my view, such a reduction of the significance of al-Ḥurr is hardly plausible. If there was a relationship of dependency between these two texts, the changing roles of al-Ḥurr would rather go in the other direction; that the picture painted of him in the long version would be an extension and amplification of that in the short one. But there are indications that this is not the case either. So, for example, other versions of the story, notably the very short account by Ḥuṣayn b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān which is most probably independent of both Imām Bāqir's and Abū Mikhnaf's versions, acknowledges al-Ḥurr as one

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[5] Hylén (2011)
[6] Borrut (2015:264–265)
[7] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 281)
[8] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 295–303, 332–335)

of the commanders of the Kūfan army, and that he deserted and joined Ḥusayn.[9] In other words it agrees with the long version, but in a much shorter form. There are also other details, which I cannot go into now, which suggest that the two versions are independent of each other. In my view, none of the two versions under consideration here functioned as a *vorlage* to the other, but rather that they go back to a common pool of traditions about the Karbalāʾ event.

So, the brevity of the short version does not in itself prove that it is earlier than that of the long one, but there are other details which suggest that the shorter version was compiled a good deal before the longer one.

Let us go back to Ḥusayn's meeting with al-Ḥurr outside Qādisiyya in the short text. The same incident is related in the long one, but there it is not al-Ḥurr whom Ḥusayn encounters, but two men of al-Asad. (See Table 1.)

Table 1

Imam al-Bāqir[10]	Abū Mikhnaf[11]
[Al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Tamīmī] told him to go back, for he had not left behind him anyone who desired good for him. Al-Ḥusayn had intended to return,	[The two Asadīs] said, "We adjure you before God, for your own life and for your family that you do not go from this place, for you have no one to support you in al-Kūfah and no Shīʿah. Indeed, we fear that they will be against you."
but the brothers of Muslim b. ʿAqīl were with him and they declared, "By God! We will not return until we take our vengeance or are killed."	At that the sons of ʿAqīl b. Abī Ṭālib jumped up…[and said], "By God! We will not go back until we have taken our vengeance or have tasted the death that our brother tasted." …
He replied, "There is no good in life without you."	Al-Ḥusayn looked at us and said, "There is no good in life without these men."

As we can see, Abū Mikhnaf's version is longer and more elaborated. One detail which made Howard doubt that the short version ascribed to Imām Bāqir is authentic is the statement that Ḥusayn intended to return. This goes against the later Shīʿite image of him, an image which Howard seems to have assumed had always been the same, and for that reason this version could not have originated with Imām Bāqir, the grandson of Ḥusayn. In the long version, however, nothing is said about Ḥusayn's wish to return. Therefore, according to Howard, it must be the correct rendering. Anyone who is familiar with historical-critical methods for

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[9] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 285–286)
[10] Ṭabarī, (1990:74–75). In some of the quotations from this work below I have slightly amended the translation.
[11] Ṭabarī (1990:87–88).

interpreting ancient texts knows what is sometimes called "the criterion of dissimilarity" or "the criterion of embarrassment," which is used as one of several means to establish the historicity of an event reported. This criterion says that if an incident is likely to have caused embarrassment for the later community, it can hardly have been created by later tradition but is probably authentic, or at least very early. In my view, this is just the kind of passage where this criterion can be applied. It indicates that the short version emerged before the image of Ḥusayn was raised to a position where he bravely and consciously went straight into the jaws of the enemy.

The second passage that I want to discuss can be interpreted in a similar way: it is the negotiations that Ḥusayn entered into with ʿUmar b. Saʿd, the commander of the Kūfan army.[12] (See Table 2.)

Table 2

Imam al-Bāqir[13]	Abū Mikhnaf[14]
Al-Ḥusayn said to [ʿUmar], "Choose one of three:	Al-Husayn said, "Choose one of three courses for me:
Either that you let me depart to where I came from;	Either that I should return to the place from which I came;
or that you let me go to Yazīd;	or that I should put my hand in the hand of Yazīd b. Muʿāwiyah, and he should make his own judgment about what is between him and me;
or that you let me go and join one of the frontier posts."	or that you should send me to any one of the Muslims' border stations you wish, where I can be one of its inhabitants with the same rights and responsibilities."

Like in the previous example, the account ascribed to Imām Bāqir is shorter and terser, whereas that of Abū Mikhnaf is more elaborated. The content is basically the same, however. Again, it is Ḥusayn's concessions that are problematic to Howard: how could the Shīʿite Imām be ready to yield to the Umayyad caliph? But in this example Ḥusayn's attempts at compromise are found in both texts, so Howard takes recourse to a tradition in the long version that immediately follows the negotiation *khabar*.

> According to Abū Mikhnaf—ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Jundab—ʿUqbah b. Simʿān: I accompanied Husayn. I left Medina for Mecca with him, and Mecca for Iraq. I did not leave him until he died. There was no one who addressed a word to him, either in Medina, in Mecca, on the road, in Iraq, or in the camp, until the day of his death, without my hearing the conversation. By God! He neither

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[12] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 282, 313–314)
[13] Ṭabarī (1990:75).
[14] Ṭabarī (1990:109).

gave the promise, which the people claim to recall when they allege that he would put his hand in the hand of Yazid b. Muʿāwiyah or that they should send him to any one of the Muslims' border stations. Rather he said, "Leave me, and I will travel this broad land so that we may see how the people's affair develops."[15]

Here, a certain ʿUqba b. Simʿān says that he followed Ḥusayn everywhere, and heard every word he said from Medina to his death in Iraq, and he never heard him surrender or promise that he would leave. In the short version there is no such tradition, and for that reason it cannot be authentic, Howard states. He argues that this version "while still showing the death of Imam al-Ḥusayn to be a tragedy it diminishes the status of the Imam."[16] I want to interpret the report from ʿUqba b. Simʿān in an opposite direction. To me this is another obvious case where the criterion of embarrassment must be applied. The idea that an Imām was prepared to capitulate to the Umayyads was unbearable to later Shīʿīs, and therefore this tradition was created to weaken the credibility of the negotiation report. To put it differently, the tradition from ʿUqba suggests that the tradition about the negotiations between Ḥusayn and ʿUmar was very early and so well known that it was impossible to deny its existence; it had to be neutralized by a counter-tradition. Two conclusions might be drawn from this: First, the embarrassment that the negotiation tradition might have caused is an indication of its historicity; the talks between Ḥusayn and ʿUmar might very well have occurred and something like the suggestions ascribed to Ḥusayn may have been stated. Second, the absence of ʿUqba's counter-tradition in the short version is a clear indication that it was compiled when the notion of Ḥusayn as an Imām raised above ordinary humanity had not yet began to arise, whereas in the time of Abū Mikhnaf this development had begun.

The third passage that I would like to discuss is admittedly less probative than the previous ones, but I find it very interesting since it is the only *khabar* in the entire account of Abū Mikhnaf that is reported by Imām Bāqir. It is the incident about the killing of Ḥusayn's baby boy.[17] (See Table 3.) Again we can see that Imām Bāqir's version is short and terse, whereas that reported by Abū Mikhnaf is more elaborated. Again, moreover, the content is basically the same. What has struck me in this passage is the different contents of the supplication that Ḥusayn offers to God. Whereas the long version is what one would expect from a pious Muslim, and is similar to many expressions by Ḥusayn as given in this version, that of the short version is parallel to what is expressed in the story of the Penitents (the *Tawwābūn*).

Elsewhere I have argued that the story of the *Tawwābūn* is indeed very early, and goes back at least to the beginning of the 8th century, if not earlier.[18] The Penitents are deeply troubled by their guilt of having invited Ḥusayn, the grandson of the Prophet, and then failed to support him when he came. The same idea is expressed several times in the long version of the Karbalāʾ story, and I am pretty sure that this is *the* most ancient motif in the developing image

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[15] Ṭabarī (1990:109).
[16] Howard (1986:129)
[17] Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 282, 360)
[18] Hylén (2017). For the full story of the Penitents, see Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 497–513, 538–578)

Table 3

Imam al-Bāqir[19]	Abū Mikhnaf[20]
An arrow came and struck his son while he had him in his lap.	Al-Ḥusayn was brought his young child; he was in his lap. Then one of you, Banū Asad, shot an arrow that slaughtered the child.
He began to wipe the blood from him, saying,	Al-Husayn caught the blood. When the palm of his hand was full, he poured the blood onto the ground and said,
"O God! Judge between us and a people who summoned us so that they might help us and then killed us."	"O Lord, if it be that You have kept the help of heaven from us, then let it be because Your purpose is better than [immediate] help. Take vengeance for us on these oppressors."

of Ḥusayn.[21] This motif is of course quite unusual in other strands of Islam, and less common in later Shīʿism than it was in the very beginning. Although it is certainly found in later Shīʿism as well, the idea of trust in God's higher purposes fits much better with the general image of God in Islam. It is thus more likely, in my opinion, that the idea of betrayal of Ḥusayn is the earlier motif, and the idea of God's omniscience and best purposes is later

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As we touch upon the content of the texts rather than the form, this brings us to another point: In the short account ʿAlī is not mentioned once, whereas in the long version he is often brought up, as the father of Ḥusayn, as a model of piety and courage, etc. This matches again with the story of the Penitents, where Ḥusayn is not associated with ʿAlī in the oldest layers. I

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[19] Ṭabarī (1990:75).
[20] Ṭabarī (1990:154).
[21] See also Halm (1997:16–20)
[22] Hylén (2017). For the full story of the Penitents, see Ṭabarī (1879–1901:II, 497–513, 538–578)
[23] See also Halm (1997:16–20)

think that those passages where ʿAlī is linked to Ḥusayn in the Penitents' story make up a more recent layer, inserted in the earliest versions. In the earliest parts of the story of the Penitents, Ḥusayn is referred to as the grandson of the Prophet and the son of Fāṭima, not of ʿAlī. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Sean Anthony and others have argued that the notion of ʿAlī as "a semi-legendary figure of heroic and even sacred dimensions"[24] and the cult of him as the messiah was an important element, at least in certain Shīʿite strands a good deal before the 680s.[25] Of course everybody was aware that Ḥusayn was the son of ʿAlī, but it seems to me that the earliest texts do not associate this relation with Ḥusayn's inheritance of ʿAlī's supernatural qualities or functions. My hypothesis is that this was something which occurred in connection with another son of ʿAlī, Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya, and the movement of the Kaysāniyya which emerged in connection with al-Mukhtār and his revolt in 685–686. Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya was attributed with the spiritual heritage of ʿAlī.[26] While the Kaysāniyya movement died out in the following century, the idea lived on that the sons of ʿAlī had inherited something of his qualities and functions, and of course the combination of physical descent from the Prophet via Fāṭima and a spiritual descent from ʿAlī was undefeatable. So, the sequence of the two versions of the Karbalāʾ story that I have argued for here, first the shorter one with no mention of ʿAlī and then the long one where Ḥusayn is depicted as the son of ʿAlī and his heir, suits well with such a picture of the general development of ideas as I, somewhat impressionistically, have painted here.

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[24] Amir-Moezzi (2014:44)
[25] Amir-Moezzi (2016); Anthony (2012:195–225)
[26] For the Kaysāniyya, see Anthony (2013); Qadi (1974)

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