Three Times Karbalāʾ

Comparing Early Accounts of the Death of al-Ḥusayn

Torsten Hylén, Dalarna University

This presentation is a partial result of a research project, where I attempt to trace the development of the story of the Karbalāʾ tragedy from the earliest texts up until the turn of the ninth century CE. Here, I will only have time to discuss a few traits that become visible when the three earliest versions available to us are compared, and in this, I will furthermore focus a bit on one of the transmitters of the story who is not so well known, Ḥuṣayn b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.¹

Summary of the story

First, a short summary of the story. The story has two quite distinct parts..

At the death of the caliph Muʿāwiya in 680 CE, Ḥusayn, who lived in Medina at the time, refused to give his pledge of allegiance to Muʿāwiya’s son Yazīd, and moved to Mecca. While there, he received letters from the Shiʿites of Kufa, who asked him to come and lead them in an insurrection against the governor. Ḥusayn asked his cousin Muslim b. ʿAqīl to go there and see if the situation was as favourable for him as the letters said. In Kufa, Muslim stayed with Hāniʾ b. ʿUrwa. He received the bayʿa from a large number of people and informed Ḥusayn about this. The governor, ʿUbaydallāh b. Ziyād, detained Hāniʾ and threatened to kill him. Muslim then went against the palace with a lot of Shiʿites in arms, but his people gradually deserted him, and he was left alone. Eventually Muslim was caught, and he and Hāniʾ were both killed. This is the first part of the story.

Not knowing about the developments in Kufa, Ḥusayn set out from Mecca with his family and a group of followers. He met several people on the way, many of whom warned him from going to Kufa. When he approached the town, he was intercepted by a large army sent out by Ibn Ziyād, which was commanded by ʿUmar b. Saʿd. He was stopped at Karbalāʾ. Ḥusayn tried to

¹ This presentation is based on a part of a chapter of my forthcoming book, From Skirmish to Karbalāʾ. It was delivered at BRAIS conference in Edinburgh 6–7 June 2022.
negotiate with ʿUmar and find a way out, but to no avail. In the battle that ensued, Ḥusayn and most of his family and followers were killed. Ḥusayn’s body was decapitated.

The survivors of his family were brought before the governor. Ibn Ziyād sent them and Ḥusayn’s severed head to the caliph Yazīd in Damascus, who then allowed the survivors to return to Medina.

Three Versions and Two Studies

Three versions of the story, dating from the eighth century CE are still extant. Elsewhere, I demonstrate that the three versions are mutually independent; none of them is based on one of the other two. Although they relate the same basic story, they are very different in length and content. The most famous one is of course the one by the Kufan historian Abū Mikhnaf. It is very long and detailed compared to the other two (around 150 pp.). The second in length (8 pp.) is the version ascribed to Abū Jaʿfar al-Bāqir, the fifth Shīʿite imām, who was active in Medina. Finally, there is a short version (5 pp.) of the Kufan traditionist Ḥuṣayn b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān.

As far as I have been able to detect, only two comparative studies have been made of the early versions of the Karbalāʾ story. Ian Howard published a seminal study in 1986, where he claims to list all the extant early versions. 30 years later, Antoine Borrut made a comparison of some (very brief) Christian accounts along with the ones by Abū Mikhnaf and Abū Jaʿfar. Neither Howard nor Borrut have included Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān in their studies. Howard mentions him briefly but does not include him in the list of accounts in the beginning of his article.

So, before we compare some aspects of the three versions, I will say a few words about Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who seems to be the least known of the three.

Ḥusayn b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān

As we have seen, Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān was a Kufan traditionist. According to al-Mizzī and other biographers, he was considered trustworthy in his transmission of ḥadīths. He lived a very long life and died in the middle of the eighth century at the age of 93. According to al-Mizzī and Ibn Hajar, he had lived in Kufa at the time of the Karbalāʾ affair and he reported about it. One authority reports:
He brought us [the account about] the killing of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī. He stayed with us for three days, and it was as if our faces were covered with ashes. I asked him, ‘What were you like in those days?’ He said, ‘[I was] a married man (rajul mutaʿahhil, Mizzī).’

He was probably around 18–20 years at the time.

His account is found in al-Balādhurī’s Ansāb al-Ashrāf and in Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh. The two versions are very similar, except that al-Balādhurī for some reason has split his account in two.

Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān was probably not a Shīʿite, but rather pro-Umayyad. There are several indications of that:

• No known Shīʿites in his isnāds.
• Al-Ḥusayn was prepared to turn to the Umayyad caliph Yazīd in order to avoid having to submit to Ibn Ziyād:
  ◦ (When al-Ḥusayn heard about the situation in Kufa, he ‘began to move toward the road to Syria, toward Yazīd’).
  ◦ In his negotiations with ʿUmar b. Saʿd, the only alternative that he presented was to give his bayʿa to Yazīd.)
• When describing what happened after the battle, Ibn al-Raḥmān makes Ibn Ziyād (not Yazīd) offend the severed head of al-Ḥusayn.

So far Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān. Let us now compare a couple of scenes as described in the three versions. I will argue that this comparison suggests that the Karbalāʾ story as we have it today was possibly originally transmitted as two separate stories: one about Muslim b. ʿAqīl in Kufa, and one about Ḥusayn and the battle at Karbalāʾ. Let us begin with Muslim.

**Muslim b. ʿAqīl in Kufa**

In the story about Muslim b. ʿAqīl in Kufa, the insurrection against the governor and the capture of Muslim, there is a significant difference between the accounts of Abū Mikhnaf and Abū Jaʿfar on the one hand, and Ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān on the other. In the former, Muslim is deserted by his friends, he wanders alone and reaches a house where a woman takes him in and hides him. His location is
made known and there is a fight at the house, where Muslim is wounded and caught. In the latter, Muslim and some of his men enter the central mosque and fight there with the men of Ibn Ziyād. Muslim is wounded but manages to escape, reaches a house of Kinda where a woman helps him. He is found and caught without a fight. In other words, we have two versions of Muslim’s fight.

The latter version is related not only by Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, but also by a certain ʿIsā b. Yazīd al-Kinānī (d. c. 750) in a short tradition given by Ṭabarī, and by Ibn Saʿd in his Tabaqāt.

Moreover, Ṭabarī has an interesting transition when he passes from Abū Jaʿfar’s account about Muslim to that of Abū Mikhnaf. He writes:

‘As for Abū Mikhnaf, he gives a fuller and more complete account of the story [qiṣṣa] of Muslim b. ʿAqīl’s visit to al-Kūfa and his death than the report of ʿAmmār al-Duhnī from Abū Jaʿfar, which we have just mentioned.’

The German scholar Ursula Sezgin writes in her book about Abū Mikhnaf, that it is not clear here exactly what Ṭabarī meant by the word qiṣṣa. Did he talk about a separate story, or simply of the account about Muslim that he had just related? It might well mean the former, a separate story, and I think that the result of the comparison that I am doing here points in that direction. It will hopefully be clearer when we move on to the second case, which is taken from the second part of the story: the role and function of al-Ḥurr.

**Al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Yarbūʿī**

When we look at al-Ḥurr in the Karbalāʾ story, we find that the variants are grouped differently than in the case of Muslim b. ʿAqīl. In that case, Abū Jaʿfar’s and Abū Mikhnaf’s versions were similar, while Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān differed. When it comes to al-Ḥurr, it is Abū Jaʿfar’s version which diverges from the other two.

The version that is best known and has become ‘standard’ is of course the one of Abū Mikhnaf and Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. According to them, al-Ḥurr was the commander of some cavalry of the army from Kufa. When the battle was about to begin, he deserted the Kufans and joined Ḥusayn, fought with him and killed a couple of Kufans. Abū Mikhnaf’s version is of course a lot more elaborated than this; there he becomes one of the main protagonists of the story. The core is the same as in Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, though (so also Ibn Saʿd).
In the account of Abū Jaʿfar, however, the figure of al-Ḥurr is much less prominent. Here, al-Ḥurr alone meets Ḥusayn outside of al-Qādisiyya, when the latter is on his way to Kufa, and tells him that the Kufans do not support him. Ḥusayn wants to return, but the brothers of Muslim persuade him to continue. That is all we hear about al-Ḥurr in Abū Jaʿfar’s account. Just a couple of lines. Nothing about him being commander nor of his joining Ḥusayn. In other words, we have two significantly different versions of the account of al-Ḥurr.

**Conclusion**

- Each part of the Karbalāʾ story exists in two versions.
- The two versions of the first part about Muslim in Kufa (1A and 1B in Figure 1) are connected to different versions of the second part about al-Ḥusayn’s death (2A and 2B in Figure 1)
- There is furthermore a possible reference to a separate story (*qiṣṣa*) about Muslim.
- Therefore, the first part, about Muslim, and the second part, about al-Ḥusayn’s death, may originally have been transmitted as separate stories.

The significance of this tentative conclusion is not historical as much as methodological, at least in my opinion as a historian of religions. Rather, studies like this help us see how the Karbalāʾ story, as well as other stories from the formative period of Islam, developed in the community of believers. We see similar developments in the stories about Jesus in the New Testament, about the Buddha, and of other persons of great religious import. Although it is perhaps not so obvious in the present study, similar tradition-historical investigations help us see how the stories are gradually invested with theological meaning. Thus, they become narratives that are foundational for the world view and identity of the various religious communities.

Thank you for listening!
The Karbalāʾ Story

1) Muslim in Kufa.  2) Death of al-Ḥusayn.

Abū Jaʿfar (d. 732)

Ibn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (d. 753)

Abū Mikhnaf (d. 774)

Figure 1. Illustration of the possible tradition history.