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This is the accepted version of a paper published in *Journal of Qur'anic Studies*. This paper has been peer-reviewed but does not include the final publisher proof-corrections or journal pagination.

Citation for the original published paper (version of record):

Hylén, T. (2016)

The hand of God is over their hands (Q. 48:10): on the notion of covenant in al-Ṭabarī's account of Karbalāʾ.

Journal of Qur'anic Studies, 18(2): 58-88

<http://dx.doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2016.0239>

Access to the published version may require subscription.

N.B. When citing this work, cite the original published paper.

Permanent link to this version:

<http://urn.kb.se/resolve?urn=urn:nbn:se:du-15338>

The Hand of God is over their Hands (Q. 48:10):
On the Notion of Covenant in al-Ṭabarī's Account of Karbalā'¹

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This article is an analysis of the story of the killing of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī at Karbalā' in 61/680, as it is presented by Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). The main argument is that the notion of the divine covenant, which permeates the Qur'an, constitutes a framework through which al-Ṭabarī views this event. The Qur'anic idea of the covenant is read in structural/thematic continuity with the Hebrew Bible account of the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people, which has, in turn, been traced back in its basic form to Late Bronze Era treaties between rulers and their vassals.

The present study focusses on four speeches ascribed to Ḥusayn during the encounter he and his group had with the vanguard of the Kūfan army led by al-Ḥurr. These are analysed in accordance with their use of Qur'anic covenant vocabulary. They are also categorised within the broader framework of the eight standard characteristics of Ancient West Asian and Biblical covenants, as presented by George Mendenhall and Gary Herion, which have recently been developed in a Qur'anic context by Rosalind Ward Gwynne. This article argues that al-Ṭabarī's Karbalā' narrative presents the pact of loyalty to Ḥusayn as a clear extension of the divine covenant.

Introduction

Although today al-Ṭabarī is most well known as a historian and exegete, he, like many other scholars of his time, was erudite in several disciplines. Ulrika Mårtensson maintains that there is a close relationship between his works of *ḥadīth*, law, and exegesis on the one hand, and his main historical work, the *Ta'rikh al-rusul wa'l-mulūk*, on the other.² She furthermore argues that the concept of the divine covenant is central to al-Ṭabarī, as the law, in the sense of positive commands that regulate human affairs, is closely related to the divine covenant. In her view, the notion of the covenant used by al-Ṭabarī is closely linked to that of the Bible.

In a broader argument, R. Stephen Humphreys suggests that the covenant is central to the interpretation of history throughout early Islamic historiography. He argues that historians such as al-Ya'qūbī (d. 284/897), al-Mas'ūdī (d. 345/956), and al-Ṭabarī, had to rationalise

reports of violence and divisions among the early Muslims, and they did so by presenting these within a Qur'anic framework.³ Humphreys holds that virtually all of the pre-tenth (fourth Hījrī) century historians relate the same critical events from the early years of Islam within a wider structural pattern of Covenant (God's promise of salvation in return for the human obligation to obey and worship Him only), Betrayal (humanity's failure to fulfil the covenantal obligations and certain peoples' rejection of God's prophets), and Redemption (some communities' acceptance of the prophets, and the renewal of the covenant).⁴ Thus, Humphrey argues, 'the soul-searching provoked by the dialectic of scripture and historical experience crystallized in the form of an almost universally shared myth, one which we can call the myth of Covenant, Betrayal, and Redemption.'⁵ This myth, then, provides a pattern for the interpretation of history for all early Muslim historians.

A different view is however maintained by Boaz Shoshan. In his opinion, the concept of covenant is not as central in Islamic historiography as Humphreys and other scholars hold. Thus, he argues,

to see the motif of covenant ('*ahd*, *mīthāq*) between God and man as not only central to the Qur'ān – as, incidentally, it has been claimed of the Hebrew Bible – but “as the kernel of a powerful myth informing the whole body of early Islamic historical writing,” seems considerably strained.⁶

Although Shoshan agrees that the concept of the covenant is certainly found in al-Ṭabarī's *History*, he maintains that 'one should scrutinize the *History* for manifold expressions of theology and ideology rather than be satisfied with one overarching paradigm'.⁷

In the present article, I will analyse aspects of the story of the killing of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī at Karbalā' as it is related by al-Ṭabarī. I will argue that the notion of the divine covenant as expressed in the Qur'an and the upholding or breaking of that covenant lies at the basis of this story and functions as a grid through which the Karbalā' event is seen by al-Ṭabarī.

In spite of the fact that the Karbalā' story is of importance to many Muslims – to Shī'ites even paradigmatic – very few studies of the story have been conducted from a Western academic perspective. The *event* of the killing of Ḥusayn is often dealt with in the literature,⁸ but very few studies have been conducted regarding the Karbalā' story as a *narrative*. There exists a

narratological analysis of the Karbalā' story as text in the above-mentioned book by Boaz Shoshan: *Poetics of Islamic Historiography*.⁹ To Shoshan, the story of Ḥusayn's death is a tragedy through and through. It contains two different strands that, in a complex manner, work together to convey a tragic effect: on the one hand Ḥusayn's determination to follow God's will and go to Kūfa against the advice of his friends, and on the other his attempt to escape his destiny when he realises that he is threatened by death.¹⁰ In this way, Shoshan concludes, the Karbalā' story 'comes pretty close to the classical definition of tragedy, save for the element of *hubris*'.¹¹

My own doctoral thesis, *Ḥusayn, the Mediator*, is also an analysis of the Karbalā' story as a narrative.¹² There, I have made a structural analysis of the story, using a method that is inspired by the French Structuralist Claude Lévi-Strauss. The conclusion is that Ḥusayn is portrayed as a mediator in the structuralist sense of the word. In his attempt to save the emerging movement of believers from destruction, he has to take recourse to violence and rebellion. Thus, on the one hand he sunders the community of the believers, but on the other he does so in order to save it. In the present study, I look at the same material, but from a different theoretical perspective.

Recently, Antoine Borrut has published a study of the growth and shifting importance of the story about the Karbalā' affair.¹³ Borrut's study is an attempt to trace the development of the story in Umayyad and Abbasid historiography, and he thereby also touches on its vicissitudes in the Christian historiography of the time. The author concludes that in Umayyad times the story was preserved mainly as 'family narratives' in Kūfa and Medina, but that it was later developed in the 'process of legitimation of the new 'Abbāsī regime' with its purported connections to the 'Alid family'.¹⁴

The Covenant in the Qur'an and in Early Islamic Political Thought

Several scholars have argued that the notion of the divine covenant with humankind is very important in the Qur'an.¹⁵ Indeed, Andrew Marsham goes so far as to argue that 'as with the Bible, "covenant" is the "thematic centre" – *die Mitte* – of the Qur'ān'.¹⁶ The two most common terms used in the Qur'an to denote the divine covenant are *mīthāq* (occurring 25 times e.g. Q. 2:84; 3:187; 5:7; 57:8) and *'ahd* (occurring 29 times, e.g. Q. 3:77; 6:152; 13:25; 20:115).¹⁷ The same words are also used at times to signify pacts and alliances between human individuals and groups (for *mīthāq* see Q. 4:21, 90, 92; 8:72, and for *'ahd* see Q. 23:8;

and 70:32).¹⁸ In the Qur'an, these two words appear to be used interchangeably. In spite of the importance of the theme, it is never extensively dealt with in the Qur'an, nor in later exegesis or theology. Rosalind Ward Gwynne maintains that it is precisely because it is so fundamental to the Qur'an 'that the Covenant *as a discrete concept* does not have a clear profile in Islamic scholarship'.¹⁹ Al-Ṭabarī is no exception to this suggested trend: although it may be possible to posit the notion of the divine covenant as an omnipresent subtext in his writings (a contention which does not necessarily mean that it *structures* them), to my knowledge al-Ṭabarī never deals with covenant in a comprehensive manner in a specific place.²⁰

It is widely accepted that the emergence of Islam took place in an environment where Judaism and Christianity were established and influential. Themes and concepts from these (as well as from other religious traditions such as Zoroastrianism and Manicheism) formed a pool of latent traditions from which the adherents of early Islam drew. They did not passively appropriate these ideas, however, but re-moulded and adapted them in order to formulate a religious identity of their own.²¹ Many scholars have moreover demonstrated that the Qur'an itself is replete with Biblical motifs and notions, one of the most important of which is the idea of the divine covenant.²²

Just as the notion of the divine covenant in the Qur'an did not emerge in a vacuum, neither did that of the Bible. At least since the mid-20th century it has been generally recognised that the idea of the covenant of the Hebrew Bible, as well as its textual forms, are clearly influenced by suzerainty treaties from the Hittite empire (c. 1500–1200 BCE) and the Mesopotamian, especially the Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian empires (10th–6th centuries BCE), even though the implications of the similarities have been discussed.²³ The idea of a covenant between God and a chosen people of course continued in early Christianity.

Several scholars of the Qur'an have argued that there are close parallels between the Biblical notion of the covenant and that found in the Qur'an. Thus, John Wansbrough writes: 'The source of the covenant imagery [in the Qur'an] was clearly Biblical, and predominantly Pentateuchal,'²⁴ whereas Reuven Firestone holds that, although there are significant differences, 'the Qur'ānic references to covenant ... demonstrate both direct and indirect parallels with the Hebrew Bible and New Testament.'²⁵ While most confine themselves to indicating similarities in uses of concepts and terms, Gwynne takes a step further, and attempts to find structural similarities as well, between AWA and Biblical notions of the

covenant on the one hand, and those in the Qur'an on the other. According to Gwynne, there is no particular covenant-making event related in the Qur'an which is 'equivalent to the Mosaic Covenant-event on Sinai. On the contrary,' she continues, '*the paradigmatic Covenant* is not set out in one place, even though its elements are integral to the Qur'anic idiom.'²⁶ When talking about 'the paradigmatic Covenant', she refers to a covenant-making occasion that includes several of eight characteristics that Mendenhall and Herion have isolated in AWA covenants, and that are clearly manifest in the Sinai covenant, for example.²⁷ Thus, she maintains, although there is no such obvious event described in the Qur'an, the many references and allusions to these features demonstrate a certain continuity between the Qur'anic understanding of covenant and AWA covenants as mediated through the Hebrew Bible. When discussing the Sinai covenant in relation to older covenant formulae, Mendenhall and Herion make it clear that cultural forms are bound to change when transferred from one context to another. For that reason, the Sinai covenant has changed both in form and content to suit the new circumstances, though it has kept many of the traits of older covenants in the surrounding world.²⁸ The same must probably be said about any adaption of the concept to late antique Arabia.

Here follows the list of formal characteristics of covenantal texts with some of the examples from the Qur'an given by Gwynne, and others added by me.²⁹ At some points I will also refer directly to Mendenhall's and Herion's study, and make comparisons with ancient covenants, especially with the Biblical texts relating the foundation of the Sinai covenant.³⁰

1. The covenant-giver is identified. Q. 96:1 (*your Lord who created*); 7:172 (*Am I not your Lord?*).³¹

2. The historical relations are described reciprocally, setting out the benefits and the resulting obligations. A short such passage is found in Q. 42:12–13 (thus, v. 13: *He has instituted for you from the religion what He charged Noah with, and that which We have inspired you (with), and what We charged Abraham, and Moses, and Jesus with: "Observe the religion, and do not become divided in it"*).

Mendenhall and Herion argue that in older covenants, the first two traits listed above are often separate and elaborate. At the giving of the covenant at Sinai, however, God identifies himself

through his acts in history much more briefly: ‘I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.’³²

3. The stipulations of behaviour are given, often in an ‘if ... then’ format. In Arabic, conditional clauses can be formulated in many ways, often with ‘when’ (*idhā*), followed by a command prefixed with a *fa-*, as in Q: 58:11 (*When it is said to you “Make room in the assemblies”, make room! ... And when it is said “Rise up”, rise up!*)

4. Provision is made for safekeeping of the document and the public reading. Q. 85:21–22 (*a guarded Tablet*); 56:77–8 (*a hidden Book*); 87:19 (*pages*); 2:78 (*Book*); 96:1 (*Recite, in the name of your Lord!*).

5. A list of witnesses is given. Mendenhall and Herion talk about third party witnesses. In the Qur’an, however, God is sufficient as witness: Q. 2:84 (*And when We made a covenant with you ... then you agreed (to it) and bore witness*); 3:81 (*[God] said, “Bear witness, and I shall be with you among the witnesses”*), 4:166 (*But God bears witness to what He has sent down to you ... and the angels (also) bear witness. Yet God is sufficient as a witness*); 73:15 (*Surely We have sent to you a messenger as a witness over you*).

6. Blessings and curses for obedience and disobedience are described. This feature is common in the Qur’an, in many different forms. An example is Q. 5:1–11 (thus, v. 10–11: *But those who disbelieve and call Our signs a lie – those are the companions of the Furnace. You who believe! Remember the blessing of God on you*).

7. The covenant is ceremonially ratified, often by sacrifice of an animal. There are several roots with the meaning of sacrifice in the Qur’an. The one which is used in explicit covenantal contexts is *n-s-k*, ‘the first meaning of which appears to be “worship”, which includes the secondary meaning of sacrifice.’³³ In this way, Gwynne argues, it is used in e.g. Q. 2:128 (*And show us our rituals [manāsikanā], and turn to us (in forgiveness)*); 6:162 (*Say: “Surely my prayer and my sacrifice [nusukī], and my living and my dying are for God, Lord of the Worlds”*).

According to Mendenhall and Herion, oaths were not used to ratify the covenant in the earliest texts, but in the Sinai covenant a verbal statement (‘Everything that the Lord has

spoken we will do')³⁴ is combined with a blood sacrifice.³⁵ In the Qur'an, the verbal declaration of the people in response to God's question in the making of the first covenant is appropriate here; it is a clear verbal statement in line with the one made by the Israelites at Sinai, although not strictly an oath: (*Remember*) when your Lord took from the sons of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them bear witness about themselves: "Am I not your Lord?" They said: "Yes indeed! We bear witness" (Q. 7:172).

8. If the covenant is actually broken, curses are imposed and punishment follows.

Mendenhall and Herion argue that, although not found in the covenantal texts themselves, there must have been a point at which the suzerain declared the covenant as broken and executed the punishments described in the text.³⁶ The Qur'an, according to Gwynne, is replete with actual cursings from God – not just threats of curses as in 6 above. The first instance in the where the root *l-'-n* ('curse') occurs is in Q. 2:88 (*God has cursed them for their disbelief*), and Gwynne comments: 'Ṭabarī explains its meaning as "distancing" (*b-'-d*) from God and His mercy, "expulsion" (*t-r-d*), "humiliation" (*kh-z-y*), and "ruin" (*h-l-k*).'³⁷ Another case is Q. 5:13 (*For their breaking of their covenant [mīthāqahum], We cursed them and made their hearts hard*). But in particular, there are the many so-called punishment narratives, stories of peoples in history that have been punished for their disobedience.³⁸

Several passages in the Qur'an indicate a close relationship between the believers' adherence to the divine covenant and their belief in the prophets that God has sent (also, of course, Muḥammad) and their message (Q. 2:40–1; 4:155; 5:12). This included the expression of loyalty to Muḥammad as political authority (Q. 33:15). He is described as a *good example* (*uswatun ḥasana*, Q. 33:21); in several places the believers are admonished to *obey God and the messenger* (Q. 3:32, 132; 4:59, *et passim*); and in Q. 4:80 it is said that [*w*]soever obeys the messenger has obeyed God. In Q. 9:111; 48:10, 18; and 60:12 the making of a pledge of loyalty to Muḥammad is expressed through the verb *bāya'a*, a word which, together with the cognate noun *bay'a*, had strong commercial connotations and often referred to the making of a contract between seller and buyer. In Q. 9:111 the close relationship between the commercial and the spiritual senses of the word is clear:

Surely God has purchased [*ishtarā*] from the believers their lives and their wealth with (the price of) the Garden (in store) for them. They fight in the way of God, and they kill and are killed. (That is) a promise binding on Him in the Torah, the

Gospel and the Qur'an. Who fulfils his covenant [*'ahdihi*] better than God? So welcome the good news of the bargain [*bay'*] you have made with Him [*bāya 'tum bihi*]. That is the great triumph!³⁹

The *bay'a* was a reciprocal relationship, where both parts had obligations and rights towards one another, and was manifested through a public ritual in which the parties involved clasped their hands. In the Qur'anic verses referred to above, the connection between the pledge of loyalty to Muḥammad and a similar pledge to God is made apparent. The pledge of loyalty to Muḥammad was therefore presented as a natural extension of the divine covenant.⁴⁰

After the death of Muḥammad, this loyalty was directed towards the perceived ruler who was supposed to be following in the footsteps of the Prophet.⁴¹ As the conflicts in the early history of Islam show, ideas about what this meant in practice differed.⁴² Thus, ideas about who was the legitimate ruler, the *imām* of the community, came to vary significantly. This was a matter not only about politics as it is understood in the secular West today, but ultimately of salvation. It was crucial to belong to the right group – the true believers – in order to be able to do God's will, since divine guidance was found within that group. Patricia Crone has suggested that the role of the *imām* was like that of the leader of a caravan in the desert. He had two fundamental tasks: he gave the community existence – without the leader, no caravan, only scattered travellers in the desert; and he guided it to its destination, because a true *imām* was, himself, guided by God:

He knew better than anyone else because he was the best person of his time: it was his superior merit that made people follow him. His guidance was seen as primarily legal, or in other words he declared what was right and wrong, for it was by living in accordance with God's law that people travelled to salvation. The coercion he might use to prevent people from straying from his caravan, or sowing dissension in it, was part of his guidance too, for anyone who strayed from the right path was lost and everyone would perish if the caravan broke up ... Everyone who travelled with him would be saved, everyone else was lost.⁴³

The earliest centuries of Islam especially were categorised by intense periods in which different groups vied with one another for political power in an attempt to make their specific

forms of religion and polity the norm. It is around one of these contests about legitimate leadership that the Karbalā' event revolves.

The Karbalā' Story, a Summary

The issue of the sources for al-Ṭabarī's version of the Karbalā' story is a complex matter that deserves at least an article of its own.⁴⁴ In the present study, I will not differentiate between the sources that al-Ṭabarī uses in order to construct his narrative. Elsewhere, I have argued that al-Ṭabarī himself has edited the text of the sources so as to subtly make his personal understanding of the tragic affair shine through.⁴⁵ Since, in this study, I am ultimately interested in al-Ṭabarī's presentation of the matter, I will take my point of departure in the editorial present of the *Ta'rikh*.⁴⁶

Before entering a detailed analysis of the text, I will give a short summary of the story of Ḥusayn's death at Karbalā', as it is given by al-Ṭabarī.⁴⁷

At the death of the Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiya in 60/680, Ḥusayn, who resided in Medina at the time, refused to give his *bay'a* to Mu'āwiya's son Yazīd, and fled to Mecca. While he was in Mecca, the people of Kūfa sent letters and envoys to him, imploring him to come and lead them in an insurrection against the governor. Ḥusayn replied by sending his cousin Muslim b. 'Aqīl as his representative to find out if the situation was as they described. When the latter arrived in Kūfa, a great number of people declared their allegiance (Ar. *bāya 'ū*) to Ḥusayn. Muslim informed Ḥusayn that it was safe to come to Kūfa.

In the meantime, 'Ubaydallāh b. Ziyād became installed as the new governor in Kūfa. He infiltrated the Shī'ite community, and was informed about Muslim's whereabouts. Muslim was arrested and eventually executed. The people that had pledged their allegiance to Ḥusayn were bribed or intimidated into withholding their support for Ḥusayn and Muslim.

Ḥusayn had however left for Kūfa, unaware of the developments there. Since the people of the town were well known for abruptly switching allegiances, he was warned several times against going to Kūfa, both before his departure and during the journey, but Ḥusayn went on. Even when information about the true situation in Kūfa and the death of Muslim reached him, he decided to continue.

When Ḥusayn and his group (perhaps a hundred persons, including men, women and children) approached Kūfa, they were stopped by a vanguard of the governor's army (about 1,000 men) at Dhū Ḥusum. The commander of the force was al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Tamīmī. Al-Ḥurr asked Ḥusayn to come with him to Kūfa and the governor, but Ḥusayn refused. The two groups stood against each other, but occasionally gathered and prayed together with Ḥusayn as *imām*. Ḥusayn also gave several speeches mainly directed to the people of the Kūfan army. Finally Ḥusayn began moving with his group, and al-Ḥurr and his force followed them closely. Al-Ḥurr was clearly distressed about the situation he was in, as his esteem for Ḥusayn was very high. Al-Ḥurr then received a letter from the governor, commanding him to stop Ḥusayn's group and cut them off from all access to water. They were brought to a halt at Karbalā' close to the Euphrates, but hindered from reaching the water.

Eventually, an army of 4,000 men, headed by 'Umar b. Sa'd, joined al-Ḥurr's force. Ḥusayn tried to negotiate with 'Umar to settle the matter peacefully. The latter was prepared to accept Ḥusayn's offer to return to Mecca or go somewhere else, but the governor Ibn Ziyād demanded that Ḥusayn must come to Kūfa and give his *bay'a* to the caliph Yazīd there, before the governor. When Ḥusayn refused to do that, 'Umar was forced to fight him. As the army was set in motion against Ḥusayn, al-Ḥurr deserted and joined Ḥusayn.

The battle began. At first it proceeded through a number of duels which are related in great detail, but the Kūfan commanders realised that Ḥusayn's fighters killed at least as many as were killed from their own group, and prohibited any further single combat. The Kūfans then attacked on a larger scale. The bravery of Ḥusayn and his relatives and followers, their fierce defence, their thirst and desperation, but also their faith and determination to do God's will, is vividly described. The cowardliness and wickedness of the enemy, who did not refrain from attacking and killing the family of the Prophet – including the infant son of Ḥusayn – and their followers, is also described in great detail. Finally Ḥusayn himself was killed and his head was cut off. The head, together with the survivors from his family, was brought before Ibn Ziyād in Kūfa. They were then sent to the caliph in Damascus. Finally, Ḥusayn's family were released and sent to Medina.

Ḥusayn's Speeches

Above, I mentioned that Andrew Marsham and others have demonstrated that, in early Islam, the relationship between the ruler and his subjects was seen in covenantal terms, as an

extension of the divine covenant.⁴⁸ In the following, I will argue that the story about the death of Ḥusayn as a consequence of his efforts to gain religious and political power, describes the battle as a struggle to fulfil the covenant. This idea, often expressed through giving or refusing to give the *bay'at*, but also through other covenantal language and symbols, is essential in the account. We have seen in the summary above that the whole story begins with Ḥusayn's refusal to give his pledge of allegiance to the new Umayyad caliph Yazīd b. Mu'āwiya in 60/680.⁴⁹ As the loyalty of the people of Kūfa vacillates, Ḥusayn attempts through his words and actions to gain their support. This becomes particularly clear in the passage which describes the encounter he and his group had with the vanguard of the Kūfan army led by al-Ḥurr.

In that context, al-Ṭabarī relates four speeches ascribed to Ḥusayn; the first three directed to the Kūfans, and the fourth to his own followers. The first three speeches emphasise, each more than the previous, the grave consequences to be faced in the hereafter if one chooses not to follow him. The last speech portrays a gloomy vision of this world and Ḥusayn's longing for death and the meeting with God. In the following, I will analyse the four speeches and demonstrate that they are filled with allusions and references to the divine covenant. I will not, however, discuss them in the order they appear in al-Ṭabarī's account. Since the covenantal features are most clearly manifested in the third speech, I will begin with that before I trace the foreshadowing of its motifs in the second and then the first speech. Finally I will say a few words about the fourth speech, which differs from the previous three in several respects. After each speech except the fourth, I will make a comparison with Mendenhall's and Herion's list of characteristics of AWA covenants related above.

Ḥusayn's third speech

In the third speech ascribed to Ḥusayn, he is very outspoken against the Umayyads and the capricious Kūfans:

People, the Apostle of God (Ṣ) said: 'Whoever sees an authority who is acting tyrannically, making permissible what God has forbidden, violating God's covenant (*'ahd Allāh*), and opposing the Sunna of the Apostle of God (Ṣ) by acting against the servants of God sinfully and with hostility, and does not correct⁵⁰ them by deed or by word, it is God's decree that that person will know the consequences [of his neglect] (*kāna ḥaqqan 'alā'llāhi an yudkhillahu*

mudkhalahu).⁵¹ Indeed, the present [authorities] (*hā'ulā'i*) have cleaved to obedience to Satan and have abandoned obedience to the Merciful; they have made corruption visible; they have not administered the punishments laid down by God; they have appropriated the taxes exclusively to themselves; they have permitted what God has forbidden, and they have forbidden what He has permitted. I am more entitled than anyone else to put things right (*anā aḥaqqu man ghayyara*).⁵²

Your letters were brought to me, and your messengers came to me with your oath of allegiance (*bi-bay'atikum*) that you would not hand me over or desert me. If you fulfil your pledge (*bay'atikum*), you will attain your rectitude (*rushdakum*), for I am al-Ḥusayn, the son of 'Alī, and the son of Fāṭima, daughter of the Apostle of God (S). My life is with your lives; my family is with your families. In me you have an example (*uswa*). However, if you will not act, but you break your covenant (*'ahdakum*) and lift off the pledge of allegiance to me (*bay'atī*) from your necks, then, by my life, that is not a thing that is unknown of you. You have done that to my father, my brother, and my cousin Muslim. Anyone who was deceived by you would be gullible. Thus have you mistaken your fortune and lost your portion [in the hereafter].⁵³ For *whoever breaks [his oath], only breaks it against himself* [Q. 48:10]. God will enable me to do without you. Peace be with you, and the mercy and blessings of God.⁵⁴

Here, the connection between the divine covenant and the pledge of loyalty to Ḥusayn is made obvious through their co-occurrence. In the speech, Ḥusayn benefits from his consanguineous relationship to the Prophet to legitimise his claims. Firstly, the whole speech starts with a prophetic *ḥadīth*, the implication of which is that Ḥusayn has the right to correct the present government; secondly, Ḥusayn calls attention to his position as the grandson of Muḥammad – and thereby as the heir of the Prophet – who can provide guidance to rectitude (*rushd*), and be a model (*uswa*) just as the Prophet was (Q. 33:21); and thirdly, he refers to a passage from the Qur'an which was originally directed to Muḥammad (Q. 48:10), and applies it to himself and his family:

Surely, those who swear allegiance to you [*yubāyi'ūnaka*] swear allegiance to God [*yubāyi'ūna'llāh*] – the hand of God is over their hands. So whoever breaks

[his oath], only breaks it against himself, but whoever fulfils what he has promised [*‘āhada*] to God – He will give him a great reward.

According to the mainstream of Islamic exegetical tradition, the context of the passage of which this verse is a part is the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya, where Muḥammad is in a situation of distress and renews the *bay‘a* with his followers by putting their hands together.⁵⁵ The argument in the verse quoted is that when Muḥammad and his followers clasped their hands, God held His hand over them and the pledge of loyalty was thus to God as well as to Muḥammad.⁵⁶ Al-Ṭabarī follows this interpretation in his commentary to the verse.⁵⁷ A few verses further on in the same sura (Q. 48:18–19), God’s answer to this pledge is described:

Certainly God was pleased [*raḍiya*] with the believers when they were swearing allegiance to you [*yubāyi ‘ūnaka*] under the tree, and He knew what was in their hearts. So, He sent down the *Sakīna* on them, and rewarded them with a near victory, and many spoils to take.

The verb *raḍiya* (from the root *r-d-y*), which is here translated “was pleased”, has given this event its name in Muslim tradition: *bay‘at al-riḍwān* (“The pledge of [God’s] pleasure”).⁵⁸ There is, then, a close connection between adhering to the covenant with God and being the object of His pleasure.⁵⁹ Another interesting word in this verse is *sakīna*, which has strong connotations of the presence of God. Al-Ṭabarī glosses it ‘He [God] sent down peace of mind (*al-ṭum‘anīna*), firmness in what was their religion and good discernment about the truth that God had guided them to’.⁶⁰ Thus, the person to whom the pledge is given is Muḥammad, and when one gives the oath of allegiance to Muḥammad, one is also giving the oath to God. The result is God’s satisfaction, His sending down of His *sakīna*, and the imminent victory over the enemies. According to Marsham, Q. 48:10 became the *locus classicus* for the legitimacy of the Abbasid caliph and the *bay‘a* to him, at least from the 860s (i.e. 250s AH). But, he convincingly argues, the main idea of the verse was widespread long before that:

[T]he notion that the verse expresses – that blessings from God were the reward for loyalty to his representatives and violation of agreements with them led to material and spiritual destruction – was axiomatic in the late antique Near East and thus in early Islam.⁶¹

Thus, Ḥusayn tries to convince the people from Kūfa that the divine covenant, which implies the acceptance of the authority of the Prophet, is extended to include the acceptance of *his own* authority. To submit to the religious and political authority of Ḥusayn is to submit to that of Muḥammad, which in turn means submitting to God.

In summary, the thrust of the argument in this speech is that it is the duty of all Muslims to correct a sinful ruler. Since Ḥusayn is the grandson of the Prophet and the son of ‘Alī, he has more right than anyone else to put bad conditions right. The people of Kūfa have made a pact of allegiance with him (the two words *bay‘a* and *‘ahd* are used to denote this pact). By holding on to it and following his example they will attain rectitude and by implication God’s pleasure and His presence.⁶² Breaking the agreement means that they will be eternally lost, since a pact with Ḥusayn is equal to a pact with the Prophet which, in turn, is a pact with God. Thus, it is of utmost importance that the believer makes the correct decision as it leads to a *great reward* from God, whereas the wrong choice means eternal damnation.

Applying Mendenhall’s and Herion’s list of criteria to this speech, the following seem relevant to me:

1 and 2. Identification of the covenant-giver and historical prologue. Although Ḥusayn is not strictly the covenant-giver, he is the representative of God who instituted the covenant, and as such he is identified here: ‘I am al-Ḥusayn, the son of ‘Alī and the son of Fāṭima, daughter of the Apostle of God (Ṣ).’ Thus, Ḥusayn refers to his genealogy rather than directly to deeds that his family has performed in the past. As everyone knew what his ancestors, the Prophet and ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, had done in the past, reference to genealogy must be regarded as equal to reference to deeds in history. Because of this, he can also say about himself: ‘I am more entitled than anyone else to put things right.’

3. Stipulations. The people of Kūfa have pledged through letters and messengers that they would not hand Ḥusayn over or desert him. He, in his turn, promises: ‘My life is with your lives; my family is with your families. In me you have an example.’

4. Deposits and public readings. I regard the letters that the Kūfans sent to Ḥusayn with their pledges to support him as the text of the covenant, which is here referred to. I will have more to say about this below.

6. Blessings and curses. These are very clear in the speech: the attainment of rectitude and by implication God's pleasure, and punishment in the hereafter, respectively.

The items 5, 7, and 8 in Mendenhall's and Herion's list are not applicable to this speech.

Ḥusayn's second speech

The second address of Ḥusayn to the Kūfan army is very interesting in its structure.

People, if you fear [God] (*in tataqqū*) and recognise the rights of those to whom they are due, this will be more satisfying to God (*arḍā li'llāh*). We are the family of the house (*wa-naḥnu ahl al-bayt*),⁶³ more entitled to the authority (*wilāya*) of this government (*amr*) over you than (*min*) these who claim what does not belong to them, who bring tyranny and aggression among you. If you dislike us and are ignorant of our rights, and your view is different from what came to me in your letters and what your messengers brought to me, I will leave you.⁶⁴

The speech can be said to consist of two conditional sentences, one at the beginning of the speech (C1 in Table 1) the other at the end (C2 in Table 1), both beginning with the Arabic conjunction *in*, 'if'. These sentences deal with what will happen if the Kūfans accept or reject Ḥusayn. Between these two is a statement in which Ḥusayn declares the respective merits and demerits of his own family and 'these who claim what does not belong to them', by which must be understood the present government, the Umayyads. The parallel structure of the speech is very clear. The Arabic preposition *min*, 'than', acts like a pivot. The text above this word deals with the merits of taking Ḥusayn as leader; that below gives the consequences of taking the Umayyads as leaders. The central statement first contrasts the *ahl al-bayt* – here represented by Ḥusayn, to the 'these who claim what does not belong to them' – the Umayyads. Secondly, it states that the former are entitled to authority, whereas the latter are pretenders who bring tyranny and aggression. A closer look at the conditional sentences reveals an obvious parallelism, as can be seen from Table 1.

Table 1. Parallelism of conditional sentences (C1 and C2) in Ḥusayn’s second speech.

	Col. 1	Col. 2	Col. 3	Col. 4
C1	If	you fear [God]	and recognise the rights of those to whom they are due	this will be more satisfying to God
C2	If	you dislike us	and your view is different from what came to me in your letters and what your messengers brought to me	I will leave you

Organised in this way, it becomes clear that the sentences make up three important oppositions, arranged in columns in the table. In Column 2, the fear of God (*taqwā*) is opposed to the dislike of the *ahl al-bayt*. Column 3 opposes the acceptance of the authority of the *ahl al-bayt* to the breaking of the promises made to Ḥusayn. In Column 4, the outcomes of the choice of the Kūfans are opposed: God’s satisfaction, against Ḥusayn leaving. Essential to the message of Ḥusayn in this speech are the two words in the first conditional sentence: ‘fear (of God)’ and ‘satisfying (to God)’. These words are so common in the Qur’an that we easily forget the covenantal implications they have. The former, from the root *w-q-y* (or possibly *t-q-w* or *t-q-y*),⁶⁵ is absolutely central in the Qur’an.⁶⁶ Derivates of the root occur in several contexts dealing with the divine covenant. Thus, Q. 5:7–8:

Remember the blessing of God on you, and His covenant [*mīthāqahu*] with which He bound you [*wāthaqakum*], when you said, “We hear and obey.” Fear God [*wa’ttaqū’llāh*]! Surely God knows what is in the hearts.

You who believe! Be supervisors for God, witnesses in justice, and do not let hatred of a people provoke you to act unfairly. Act fairly! It is nearer to the fear of God (*taqwā*). Fear God [*wa’ttaqū’llāh*]! Surely God is aware of what you do.⁶⁷

In these verses, the fear of God is a basic condition for the person who wants to belong to the covenant of God. Returning to Ḥusayn’s speech, the word with the meaning ‘satisfying’ (to God) is a derivate from the root *r-d-y*, which I have discussed above with reference to its occurrence in Q. 48:18, and its connection to the *bay‘a*. As we saw above (in the quotation of Q. 48:18), God promises His satisfaction as a reward for those who adhere to the covenant. In

Ḥusayn's speech, no word for 'covenant' is used, but his mentioning of the fear of God together with God's satisfaction places it in a covenantal context, especially since al-Ṭabarī has located the speech between two other speeches with more overt references to the covenant.

In summary, the message that Ḥusayn tries to convey is that the fear of God, a *sine qua non* of every Muslim, implies accepting the authority of Ḥusayn, the foremost living member of the *ahl al-bayt*, and his staying in Kūfa. The satisfaction of God depends on this acceptance.

A comparison of this speech with the list of Mendenhall and Herion gives the following result:

1 and 2. Identification of the covenant-giver and historical prologue. Ḥusayn explicitly states: 'We are the family of the house (of Muḥammad), more entitled to the authority of this government over you than these.'

3. Stipulations. The stipulation: 'you ... recognise the rights of those to whom they are due,' is here embedded in the blessings and curses.

4. Deposits and public readings. Again, Ḥusayn refers to the letters of the Kūfans, with their invitations and their promises to support him.

6. Blessings and curses. As demonstrated in Table 1 and the discussion pertaining to it, most of this speech is set up as the formal blessings and curses found in many AWA covenants, for example in the Sinai covenant, although in the latter case they are 'enormously elaborated'.⁶⁸

The rest of the items in the list of covenantal characteristics are not found in this speech, at least not manifestly so.

Ḥusayn's first speech

Turning now to the first short speech, Ḥusayn delivers this in front of the Kūfan vanguard, at the time of the midday prayer:

People, it is an excuse [for my coming here] (*innahā ma'dhira*), both to God the Mighty and Exalted and to you, that I did not come to you until your letters were brought to me, and your messengers came to me saying, 'Come to us, for we have no *imām*. God may unite us in guidance (*'alā'l-hudā*) through you.' Since this was your view, I have come to you. Therefore, if you give me what you guaranteed in your pacts (*'uhūdikum*) and covenants (*mawāthīqikum*), I will come to your town. If you will not and are averse to my coming, I will leave you for the place from which I came to you.⁶⁹

Ḥusayn here explains that he has come because the people of Kūfa have written to him and called on him to become their leader (*imām*). If the Kūfans are prepared to give him what they guaranteed in their 'pacts and covenants' (*'uhūd, mawāthīq*, sg. *'ahd, mīthāq*) he is willing to fulfil that mission; if not, he will return to Mecca. As I have mentioned above, there are many places in the Qur'an where the words *'ahd* and *mīthāq* refer to alliances and pacts between humans. Similarly, in this context, the terms *'uhūd* and *mawāthīq* are clearly being used in a political sense, to denote the promises and oaths of allegiance that were given by those who summoned him. The references to God and His guidance through Ḥusayn, as well as the wider meaning of the words and the context, indicate however that there are also religious issues at play here.⁷⁰ It is interesting to note the parallel conditional sentences at the end of the speech. Although in this speech, the receiving and renouncing of Ḥusayn are not explicitly followed by divine sanctions as in the second speech, they still augur meaning of the conditional sentences of that address (see Table 1 and the discussion associated with it).⁷¹

The following items from Mendenhall's and Herion's list are found in the speech:

3. Stipulations. Ḥusayn refers to the 'pacts and covenants' from the Shī'ites of Kūfa, where they guaranteed him support and help. In return, he was to give them divine guidance (*hudan*).

4. Deposits and public readings. Here, Ḥusayn makes a verbatim quote of the letters from the Kūfans and their invitation to him to come and give them guidance.

5. List of witnesses. Ḥusayn invokes both 'God the Mighty and Exalted' and the people in front of him, as witnesses that he has come because he was invited by the people of Kūfa.

6. Blessings and curses. The blessings and curses are here given in a weaker form than in the following speeches, as they refer to his physical presence or absence only, and not to the spiritual consequences of this.

The other characteristics of the list are not applicable to this speech.

What is at stake in the three speeches analysed so far, is the extension of the divine representation on earth to Ḥusayn himself. When Ḥusayn admonishes the Kūfans to adhere to their promises to support him, the close connection between God's satisfaction and his own presence indicates that he pre-supposes and builds upon the divine covenant with humankind, and regards the loyalty to him as an extension of the divine covenant. This is in no way unique in the early history of Islam, and many pledges of loyalty to the caliphs, both Umayyads and later on Abbasids, share the same premise. Indeed, it can be said that much of the discussions about the legitimate ruler in early Islam revolved around this matter: who was to be accepted as the representative of God, and thus as the one worthy of the *bay'a*, the extension of the divine covenant?⁷²

Ḥusayn's fourth speech

In the fourth speech accounted for by al-Ṭabari, Ḥusayn turns to his followers and not the Kūfan army:

You have seen what this matter has come to. Truly, the world has changed and has become worse; its goodness has retreated and it has become very bitter. There remains only a small rest of it, like the dregs of a jar, a paltry life like an unhealthy pasturage. Can you not see that truth (*ḥaqq*) is no longer practised and falsehood (*bāṭil*) no longer desisted from, so that the believer rightly desires to meet God? I can only regard death as martyrdom (*shahāda*) and life with the oppressors as a tribulation.⁷³

The words 'truth' (*ḥaqq*) and 'falsehood' (*bāṭil*) are very common in the Qur'an; the former is often used as a synonym for God's revelation and His guidance (see e.g. Q. 2:119, 9:33, and 35:24), and is frequently opposed to the latter (e.g. Q. 2:42, 34:49, and 47:1–3). Thus, Ḥusayn

here regrets that the world has changed for the bad, and says that the believer rightly desires to meet God. Martyrdom is preferable to life ‘with the oppressors’. In spite of the fact that the story of Karbalā’ has become the main example of martyrdom in Shī’ite lore and theology, this is the only occurrence of the word *shahāda* in the text. Although no word for ‘sacrifice’ is used in the text, the fact that Ḥusayn is prepared to die to keep his pact with God, can be regarded as an allusion to self-sacrifice. When Ḥusayn has delivered his speech, one of his companions responds, speaking for all his men, and asserts their loyalty to him, even to death. In contrast to the lack of response from the people of Kūfa after the previous speeches, here Ḥusayn’s followers renew their pledge to support him.

In the speech itself, I find nothing except the reference to the sacrifice as ratification of the covenant (item 7), that can obviously be associated to the criteria in Mendenhall’s and Herion’s list. The reactions of Ḥusayn’s followers are however important in this respect, and will be dealt with below.

The Notion of the Covenant in the Karbalā’ Story

The speeches ascribed to Ḥusayn are saturated with formal allusions to and themes similar to those found in covenant formulas enacted in Ancient West Asia, especially in the form it has taken in the Sinai covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrew people. It is to be noted that according to al-Ṭabarī in his comment on Q. 2:27, the covenant given to the People of the Book in the Torah is the same as that which Muḥammad preached. According to him, the divine covenant of the Bible includes the acceptance of Muḥammad as a prophet.⁷⁴ What we have in the four speeches discussed here are not covenantal formulae in themselves, however; they are rather attempts by Ḥusayn to re-enact the *bay‘a* that the inhabitants of Kūfa have already made with him, and thus by extension with God, through their letters and envoys. Hence, the text refers to the divine covenant by allusions rather than accounting for it *in extenso*.⁷⁵

Similar allusions to the covenant are found throughout the Karbalā’ story. Below, I will recapitulate the main arguments from the analysis above by going through Mendenhall’s and Herion’s list, and at the same time give examples of passages from the story outside of the speeches with themes that fit into the characteristics of the covenant that they have suggested.

1 and 2. Identification of the covenant-giver and historical prologue. In the speeches analysed above, Ḥusayn refers to his genealogy rather than recounting a list of historical deeds. The same is true in speeches and addresses other than those analysed above. In these, he refers to his genealogy as an argument both for his inviolability and for the fact that those who invited him should adhere to their pacts. Thus, in a letter to the people of Baṣra before setting out on the journey to Kūfa, he writes:

God gave preference to Muḥammad before all his creatures. He graced him with prophethood and chose him for His message. After he had warned His servants and informed them of what he had been sent with, God took him to Himself. We are his family, those who possess his authority (*awliyā`*), those who have been made his trustees (*awṣiyā`*), and his inheritors; we are those who have more rights to his position among the people than anyone else.⁷⁶

Hence, Ḥusayn argues that his authority derives from God, via his grandfather, the Prophet Muḥammad. The covenant-giver is ultimately not himself, but God. His followers recognise this pattern of authority. One of his most ardent companions, Zuhayr b. al-Qayn, who initially disliked him but experienced an almost Pauline conversion on the road between Mecca and Kūfa,⁷⁷ says to one of the Kūfan opponents:

By God! I did not ever write to him; I did not ever send messengers to him; I did not ever promise him my help. However, the road brought us together. When I saw him, I was reminded by him of the Apostle of God and of his position with regard to the Apostle of God. I knew his enemies and your party whom he was going toward. Then, I saw that it was right that I should help him, be in his party and put my life forward to protect his, because of the truth of God and the truth of His Apostle, which you have abandoned.⁷⁸

3. Stipulations. The mutual obligations stipulated in the *bay`a* between Ḥusayn and the Kūfans are only referred to in passing in the speeches. In more direct form, however, they are found in the letters from the Kūfans, where they promise to support him against the Umayyad authorities in the town. His reply, in a letter in which he states that he will be ‘an *imām* who

acts according to the Book, one who upholds justice, one who professes the truth and one who dedicates himself to the essence of God', describes Ḥusayn's part of the obligations.⁷⁹

4. Deposits and public readings. It is clear that Ḥusayn regarded the letters of invitation to him from the Kūfans as binding treaties. He referred to them in the first three speeches, but also in a speech that he delivers just before the battle.⁸⁰ We have also seen how his companion Zuhayr b. al-Qayn indirectly refers to the letters as documents of a binding treaty, when he argues that although he did not write any letters or make any promises to Ḥusayn, he supports the latter. Implicit in the argument is that those who had written to him are even more obliged to stand by him.

An incident related after Ḥusayn's second speech emphasises the importance of the letters, and can be regarded as a case of 'public reading'. After Ḥusayn's talk, al-Ḥurr, the commander of the enemy, questioned the existence of the letters:

'By God! We know nothing of these letters that you mention.' Al-Ḥusayn said: 'Oh, 'Uqba b. Sim'ān, bring out the two saddlebags in which their letters to me are kept.' He brought out two saddlebags that were full of documents, and scattered them in front of them.⁸¹

Thus, the letters were kept by Ḥusayn and presented as a proof that he had actually received pledges of allegiance from the people of Kūfa.

5. List of witnesses. No formal list of third party witnesses is given in the text. Implied in the incident about the scattering of the letters is that al-Ḥurr becomes a witness to the pact between Ḥusayn and the people of Kūfa. Also, as we saw in the analysis of the first speech, God is called on as a witness. Indeed, God is the true covenant-giver, but as we saw above, in the Qur'an He is sufficient as a witness.

6. Blessings and curses. The blessings and curses are very clear in the speeches; if the people keep their promises, Ḥusayn will come to them, God will be satisfied, they will attain rectitude and 'a great reward' from God, etc. On the other hand, if they break the pact,

Ḥusayn will leave them and they will lose their future reward. Similar formulae of blessings and curses do not occur elsewhere in the story.

7. Ratification. Ḥusayn's speeches do not contain any trace of ratification of the treaty they refer to, except the reference to martyrdom in the fourth address. As I have shown above, the AWA treaties were usually ratified through a blood sacrifice, but at times also through a verbal declaration. In the story of Karbalā', Ḥusayn's followers verbally assert their willingness to stand by his side several times. After the fourth speech analysed above, Zuhayr b. al-Qayn speaks for all of them, saying:

We have heard God guide your words, son of the Apostle of God. By God! If, by helping and supporting you, we must abandon (this world), even if our world were eternal and we could be immortal within it, we would still prefer going with you to staying in it.⁸²

Just like Ḥusayn, his followers are prepared to die in order to uphold the covenant. Later, the night before the battle, Ḥusayn gives his followers permission to leave him. They reassert their allegiance to him and promise that they will sacrifice their lives for him. Thus, they say:

By God! We will not leave you. Rather, our lives will be a sacrifice (*fiḍa'*) for you. We will protect you with our necks (*bi-nuḥūrīnā*), with our foreheads and with our hands. If we are killed we have fulfilled and accomplished what we promised.⁸³

The formula 'our lives will be a sacrifice for you' and similar expressions involving the word *fiḍa'*⁸⁴ are very common in Arabic, denoting the willingness to give one's life for another. In this passage, however, the sacrificial connotation is strengthened by the juxtaposition of the word *naḥr* (here in plural form: *nuḥūr*), which signifies, besides the upper part and the neck of humans, the part where a camel is stabbed when sacrificing it.⁸⁵ But it is not only through their words that the followers show that they stick to their pact with Ḥusayn. Almost all of them are in fact killed in the ensuing battle, and it can be argued that the deaths of Ḥusayn and his followers are described as sacrifices, although no word with that meaning is expressly used in the story.⁸⁶ In this context it is noteworthy that, with only one possible exception, each

time blood is mentioned in the story it is that of Ḥusayn, his family, and his supporters. Although enemies are killed in the battle, nothing is said of their blood.⁸⁷

8. The imposition of the curses, should the covenant be broken. Again, this is a feature that is not found in Ḥusayn's speeches. In the account of the battle that ensues, several situations where people are punished for their contempt and mockery of Ḥusayn are related. On one of these occasions, we are told that a certain 'Abdallāh b. Ḥawza scorned Ḥusayn, who prayed:

'My Lord! Drive him into the Fire!' Then [Ibn Ḥawza's] horse became troubled in a stream and made him fall. His leg was stuck in the stirrups and his head fell to the ground. The horse bolted and dragged him along, making his head strike every stone and clod of earth until he died.⁸⁸

In this and similar situations, Ḥusayn does not personally have the power to punish those that have broken the covenant. Instead, he curses them and lets God execute the punishment. This is yet another indication that it is in fact God, not Ḥusayn, who is the covenant-giver.

Conclusion

In this study, I have argued that the idea of the divine covenant functions as an underlying pattern in al-Ṭabarī's version of the Karbalā' story. I have suggested that the notion of the divine covenant as expressed in the story shows clear similarities to the religio-political treaties between rulers in Ancient West Asia and their vassals, and thus to the covenant between Yahweh and the Hebrews at Sinai as related in the Hebrew Bible. Themes and notions about the covenant made up part of the 'traditional stock of monotheistic imagery' that existed in pre- and early Islamic West Asia, and were taken up and adapted by the early Muslims.⁸⁹ The track of influence thus continues to the relation between the tribal chiefs and kings in pre-Islamic Arabia and to the Qur'an. In early Islamic times, the same notion is found in the idea that the caliph is the representative of God on earth, and that the *bay'a* to him is an extension of the divine covenant. Although it was so intrinsic in early Islamic political and theological thinking that there was no way of going outside it, so to say, when writing about the events that had formed Islamic society up to their days, al-Ṭabarī has used, and indeed emphasised it, as an underlying pattern when relating the Karbalā' story.⁹⁰ In the

works referred to earlier in this article, Marsham, Crone and Hinds, and others have shown that the covenantal relationship between God, the ruler, and his subjects, was very much alive in different legal documents and in court poetry. I hope that this study has demonstrated that it is also found in the historiographical narratives about early Islamic history.

I began this article by pointing to the difference between the opinion of Mårtensson, Humphreys and others, who regard the notion of the covenant as very basic throughout the entire *Ta'rikh* of al-Ṭabarī, and Shoshan who has a different view on this matter. Although it is impossible to conclude from this study alone whether this concept permeates and structures the whole of al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* – more comprehensive investigations (probably in conjunction with his *Tafsīr* and his other works) are needed in order to reach a final verdict on this issue – the present study shows that the Karbalā' story is steeped with allusions to the divine covenant, and to a certain extent is even structured by it.

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¹ Acknowledgments: I wish to thank my colleagues at Dalarna University, especially Dr Therese Rodin, for their support and comments. Furthermore, I am grateful to Dr Ulrika Mårtensson at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology as well as to my two anonymous readers, whose comments helped me sharpen my arguments. Finally I am deeply indebted to the editor of this volume, Dr Marianna Klar at SOAS, for her pertinent remarks and numerous literature proposals. The responsibility for all shortcomings of the article is my own. This article is part of the research project ‘Revenge or Martyrdom! The Story of the Penitents as a Link to the Early Development of Shī‘ism’, funded by the Swedish Research Council (reg. no. 421-2011-1806).

² Mårtensson, *Tabari*, pp. 48–53.

³ Humphreys, ‘Qur’ānic Myth’, p. 272.

⁴ Humphreys, ‘Qur’ānic Myth’, pp. 276–8.

⁵ Humphreys, ‘Qur’ānic Myth’, p. 278.

⁶ Shoshan, *Poetics*, p. 90, quoting Humphreys, ‘Qur’ānic Myth’, p. 278.

⁷ Shoshan, *Poetics*, pp. 85–107. I presume that this critique includes Mårtensson by implication, although her works are published after Shoshan’s book. For al-Ṭabarī’s (as well as other historians’) use of various patterns in dealing with a specific historical event, see Keshk, ‘Historiography’.

⁸ Many introductions to Islam and to the political and religious history of its first centuries briefly mention this traumatic event; see e.g. Berkey, *Formation*, pp. 87–8; Tillier and Bianquis, ‘De Muhammad’, p. 91; Hawting, *First Dynasty*, pp. 50–1; Rippin, *Muslims*, p. 133; Shaban, *Islamic History*, vol. 1, p. 91. The reason why it is not given more space in books such as these is probably that in political terms the event as such was hardly important. It is rather, as Hawting expresses it ‘in the long run, in its emotive and mythological significance that Karbalā’ is really important’ (Hawting, *First Dynasty*, pp. 50–1). Works which specifically deal with Shī’ism (such as Ayoub, *Redemptive Suffering*; Halm, *Shi’a Islam*; Jafri, *Origins*) often give longer accounts of the affair. Andrew Newman very briefly touches upon the Karbalā’ event itself his recent history of Shī’ism (Newman, *Twelver Shiism*, p. 20), but discusses its later repercussions in many places. A good discussion of the Karbalā’ event with particular focus on the concept of *walāya* is found in Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, esp. pp. 81–90.

⁹ Shoshan, *Poetics*, pp. 233–52.

¹⁰ Shoshan, *Poetics*, pp. 235–6, p. 245.

¹¹ Shoshan, *Poetics*, p. 252.

¹² Hylén, ‘Ḥusayn’.

¹³ Borrut, ‘Remembering Karbalā’’. I am grateful to one of the anonymous readers for calling my attention to this article, and to the author for providing me a copy of it before it was published.

¹⁴ Borrut, ‘Remembering Karbalā’’, p. 33.

¹⁵ The most comprehensive study of the Qur’ānic notion of covenant to my knowledge is Darnell, ‘Divine Covenant’. See also Böwering, art. ‘Covenant’, pp. 1–24; Gwynne, *Logic*; Weiss, ‘Covenant’.

¹⁶ Marsham, *Rituals*, p. 41. See also Weiss, ‘Covenant’, p. 54.

¹⁷ The numbers of occurrences of these words mentioned here include only their “pure” forms as noun and verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) respectively. In addition to these, both roots occur several times in verbal and other forms. For a good overview of the uses of these and other words with the meaning of ‘covenant’ in the Qur’an, see Böwering, art. ‘Covenant’.

¹⁸ For further discussions of this, see Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. 9; Böwering, art. ‘Covenant’, p. 464b.

¹⁹ Gwynne, *Logic*, pp. 1–5. The quotation is from p. 4, italics in original. See also Weiss, ‘Covenant’, p. 50, n. 2.

²⁰ In the *Tafsīr*, al-Ṭabarī discusses the concept of the covenant in several places, such as when one of the words appears in the text as in his comment on Q. 2:27 (the first occurrence of the word ‘*ahd*’) (*Jāmi*’, vol. 1, pp. 263–5), or on Q. 7:172, where the first covenant between God and humankind is established (*Jāmi*’, vol. 6, pp. 148–59). As Gwynne observes, however (*Logic*, p. 4), these are not systematic discussions of the concept of covenant. Many of the traditions about these verses referred to in the *Tafsīr* are also brought up in the *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 1, pp. 133–7; *History*, vol. 1, pp. 304–7). Again, the passages in the *Ta’rīkh* are not discussions of the covenant as a concept. In fact, it is interesting that in Q. 7:172 none of the words for ‘covenant’ are used, but the commentaries are unanimous about this being the first establishment of the divine covenant. For discussions of the centrality of this verse, see Gwynne, *Logic*, pp. 1–2; Böwering, art. ‘Covenant’, p. 466, and especially Qadi, *Primordial Covenant*.

²¹ Rippin, ‘Literary Analysis’, p. 157, referring to the ideas of Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*. For the prevalence of Judaism, Christianity and other religious traditions, see e.g. Berkey, *Formation*, pp. 1–55 *et passim*, and Bianquis et al., *Débuts*, chapters 1–6.

²² For an overview of the works of some of these scholars, see Firestone, ‘The Qur’ān and the Bible’. Indeed, the entire volume of which Firestone’s article is a contribution deals with this issue (Reeves (ed.), *Bible and Qur’ān*). For the adaption and use of the Biblical notion of the divine covenant in the Qur’an, see esp. Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 1–12; Böwering, art. ‘Covenant’; Firestone, ‘Divine election’; Gwynne, *Logic*, pp. 1–24.

²³ Mendenhall and Herion, art. ‘Covenant’; Cross, ‘Kinship’, pp. 17–19. For a good survey of more recent studies on the Biblical notion(s) of covenant, see Hahn, ‘Covenant’. As Hahn and others show, there is not one single covenant related in the Hebrew Bible, but several (see esp. p. 286). The empires mentioned here span over a great time frame, from late Bronze Age to early Iron Age, and a vast geographical area including Anatolia and Mesopotamia (and at times also Egypt). For the sake of brevity, I will use the term Ancient West Asian (AWA) below, when I talk of the extra-biblical sources from these cultures.

²⁴ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. 10.

²⁵ Firestone, 'Divine election', p. 398. See also Böwering, art. 'Covenant'; Gwynne, *Logic*, pp. 1–24. Each of these gives further references.

²⁶ Gwynne, *Logic*, p. 6, emphasis mine.

²⁷ Mendenhall and Herion, art. 'Covenant'.

²⁸ Mendenhall and Herion, art. 'Covenant', p. 1183b.

²⁹ The headings below are quoted verbatim from Gwynne, *Logic*, pp. 7–20. Not all her references to the Qur'an are given. If some of the examples seem far-fetched at first glance, it must be remembered that Gwynne often has rather lengthy discussions about them.

³⁰ Mendenhall's and Herion's list is a model, that is, an abstraction of reality made from numerous covenantal documents from different historical contexts throughout the area and historical period that I have chosen to call Ancient West Asia. Thus, no single document or description of a covenant manifests all these characteristics, and the features can be given different relative weight in various documents (Mendenhall and Herion, art. 'Covenant', p. 1180b; see also Kitchen, *Reliability*, p. 285).

³¹ All through the article, I have used Droge's translation of the Qur'an except when indicated. Throughout, parentheses are as in the original. Square brackets are added by me.

³² Ex. 20:2. I have used the translation of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible.

³³ Gwynne, *Logic*, p. 15. For a longer discussion of this word, see Ådna, 'O Son of the Two Sacrifices', pp. 308–10. (Ådna's doctoral thesis has recently been published in revised form (Ådna, *Muhammad*), but the published edition was not available to me at the time of writing.)

³⁴ Ex. 19:8; 24:3.

³⁵ Mendenhall and Herion, art. 'Covenant', p. 1182a, p. 1185a.

³⁶ Mendenhall and Herion, art. 'Covenant', pp. 1182a-b.

³⁷ Gwynne, *Logic*, p. 17. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 1, p. 574.

³⁸ For discussions of these, see e.g. Marshall, art. 'Punishment Stories'; Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 2–5.

³⁹ For a discussion of the commercial and covenantal aspects of this verse, see Marsham, *Rituals*, pp. 44–9.

⁴⁰ Marsham, *Rituals*, pp. 40–2; Tyan, art. 'Bay'a'; Landau-Tasserón, *Religious Foundations*, pp. 4–6.

⁴¹ Landau-Tasserón, *Religious Foundations*, pp. 21–5; Kister, 'Concepts of Authority'.

⁴² See e.g. Crone, *Political Thought*, pp. 23–5; van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, vol. 1, p. 8, pp. 17–19.

⁴³ Crone, *Political Thought*, p. 22.

⁴⁴ For a basic overview of the sources, see the two articles by I.K.A. Howard, 'Husayn the Martyr' and 'Translator's foreword', and Hylén, 'Husayn', pp. 111–16. A recent discussion of the sources is found in Borrut, 'Remembering Karbalā', esp. pp. 22–9.

⁴⁵ Hylén, 'Husayn', pp. 115–16. Several studies have concluded that this was the normal procedure for al-Ṭabarī; see e.g. Hodgson, 'Two Pre-Modern Muslim Historians', p. 57; Humphreys, 'Qur'ānic Myth', p. 275; Shoshan, *Poetics*, pp. 120–4; Mårtensson, 'Discourse'.

⁴⁶ Thus, when in the following I write that Ḥusayn or another person said or did something, I do not mean that they necessarily said or did so. It is merely a convenient way to describe what has been related by al-Ṭabarī and his sources.

⁴⁷ The story in its entirety is found in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh*, vol. 2, pp. 216–23, pp. 227–390; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 1–10, pp. 16–183. A more comprehensive summary of the story with page references is given in Hylén, 'Husayn', pp. 205–27.

⁴⁸ Marsham, *Rituals*. See also Crone and Hinds, *God's Caliph*; Landau-Tasserón, *Religious Foundations*.

⁴⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh*, vol. 2, pp. 217–23; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 3–10.

⁵⁰ The text here and a few lines further down has the word *yu'ayyir*, and a couple of lines further down, *'ayyara*, which means "upbraid" or "reproach" (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh*, vol. 2, p. 300, lines 8 and 11). It is much weaker than *ghayyara* (lit. "cause change", in contexts like these usually rendered "put right"), which is normally used in similar contexts (Cook, *Commanding Right*, pp. 34–5), and which is used by al-Balādhurī in the same place. Cook suggests that the word here should be read as *ghayyara* (Cook, *Commanding Right*, p. 231, n. 26), and I have adopted this reading.

⁵¹ I have not been able to find this *ḥadīth* in any of the canonical collections. For the last two words (similar formulae are found in the Qur'an 4:31, 17:80, and 22:59) I have chosen this interpretation. The literal translation would be something like 'make him enter his entrance' (see Droge, *Qur'ān*, on the passages above).

⁵² See note 50 above.

⁵³ That the words of this sentence: '*fa-ḥazzakum akhta'tum wa-naṣībakum ḍayya'tum*', refer to the hereafter, is not entirely obvious. The word *ḥazz* can mean 'fortune', 'share', or 'lot'. Similarly, *naṣīb* means 'portion' or 'part of'. Both words are used in the Qur'an regarding matters of this world as well as of the next. To me it is obvious, however, that in the present context these words refer to the hereafter. For Qur'anic examples of this latter usage, see 3:176 for *ḥazz*; and 2:202, 7:37, and 42:20 for *naṣīb*.

- ⁵⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 300; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 95–6. Translations from al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh* used in this article are my own except where indicated. However, I rely heavily on that of Howard in al-Ṭabarī, *History*, vol. 19. For that reason, I give parallel references to the Arabic Leiden edition and to Howard's English translation.
- ⁵⁵ For an interesting discussion of this pledge and its relation to the divine covenant, as it is related in the Qur'an and the exegetical literature, see Darnell, 'Divine Covenant', pp. 127–51.
- ⁵⁶ Ibn Ishāq, *Life of Muḥammad*, pp. 505–6.
- ⁵⁷ Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 13, pp. 99–100.
- ⁵⁸ Darnell, 'Divine Covenant', p. 12.
- ⁵⁹ The root *r-d-y* furthermore has connotations of divine election, and can be regarded as a term included in the Islamic covenantal lexicon (Firestone, 'Divine election', p. 402). For early Abbasid developments of the use of the term *riḍā* and its uses in connection to the *bay'a* to the caliph and thereby to God, see Marsham, *Rituals*, pp. 187–8, pp. 295–9.
- ⁶⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 13, p. 114 (my translation). Darnell gives a good discussion of the term, its Hebrew provenance, and its covenantal connotations, Darnell, 'Divine Covenant', pp. 138–44.
- ⁶¹ Marsham, *Rituals*, p. 303.
- ⁶² For the connection between different forms of the root *r-sh-d* and guidance in the Qur'an, see Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, pp. 194–5.
- ⁶³ For discussions of the phrase *ahl al-bayt*, which was not only used to denote the family of Muḥammad, but other families as well, see Sharon, 'Ahl al-Bayt'; Sharon, 'Umayyads'. However although it is not explicit, in this case the reference is obviously to Muḥammad's family.
- ⁶⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 298; *History*, vol. 19, p. 94.
- ⁶⁵ For a short discussion of the alternatives, see Alexander, art. 'Fear', pp. 194b–195a.
- ⁶⁶ For *w-q-y* and its derivatives in the Qur'an, see e.g. Alexander, art. 'Fear'; Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concepts*, pp. 195–200 *et passim*; Ohlander, 'Fear of God'.
- ⁶⁷ I have departed from Droge's translation here. He translates the derivatives of *w-q-y*: 'Guard (yourselves) against God'. Another place where the covenant (in this case the word 'ahd is used) is used in conjunction with derivatives of *w-q-y* is Q. 3:76.
- ⁶⁸ These words are used by Mendenhall and Herion, art. 'Covenant', 1184b, in referring to Deut. 28. See also the parallel text in Lev. 26.
- ⁶⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, pp. 297–8; *History*, vol. 19, p. 93.
- ⁷⁰ Here, I analyse only the words of Ḥusayn. Other aspects of this section of the text which adds to the 'religious' context, such as his dress and the fact that he is allowed to lead all the people (his own group as well as the Kūfan army) in prayer are not dealt with. I have discussed these in Hylén, 'Ḥusayn', pp. 120–5.
- ⁷¹ I am grateful to Marianna Klar who indicated this to me.
- ⁷² Marsham, *Rituals*, pp. 114–17, pp. 168–80, pp. 230–49 *et passim*.
- ⁷³ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, pp. 300–1; *History*, vol. 19, p. 96.
- ⁷⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi'*, vol. 1, pp. 263–5.
- ⁷⁵ As I have mentioned above, Gwynne argues that this is true also for the Qur'an.
- ⁷⁶ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 240; *History*, vol. 19, p. 31. In a similar way, the genealogy of Ḥusayn is referred to in many places, both by Ḥusayn himself (e.g. in his speech just before the battle (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, pp. 329–30; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 123–5)), by his son (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 356; *History*, vol. 19, p. 150), and by others (e.g. al-Ḥurr's speech to the Kūfan army after he had deserted them and joined Ḥusayn (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, pp. 334–5; *History*, vol. 19, p. 129)). It is interesting to note that the function of the references to Ḥusayn's genealogy change slightly as the story moves. In the beginning it is used to argue for his political precedence; later, when he is surrounded by the army, it is used as an argument for his inviolability. For a discussion of this, see Hylén, 'Ḥusayn', pp. 168–76. This use of one's genealogy is of course not unique to the family of the Prophet, as lineage in general was extremely important in pre-Islamic and early Islamic Arabia, and referring to one's ancestors was the main means for placing oneself on the status ladder among the Arabs. In the case of the Shī'ites though, ancestry was of paramount importance as the legitimacy of the whole movement depended on the descent of its leaders from the Prophet Muḥammad. (I use the term 'Shī'ites' in a general sense here, referring to adherents of the descendants of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib).
- ⁷⁷ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, pp. 290–1; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 85–6.
- ⁷⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 319; *History*, vol. 19, p. 113.
- ⁷⁹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, pp. 233–5; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 24–6.
- ⁸⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 330; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 124–5.
- ⁸¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 94; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 298–9.
- ⁸² al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 301; *History*, vol. 19, p. 96. Zuhayr again expresses himself in a similar way just before the battle (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 332; *History*, vol. 19, p. 126).
- ⁸³ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, vol. 2, p. 323; *History*, vol. 19, p. 117.

⁸⁴ This word can also be translated ‘ransom’, but even so it has clear sacrificial connotations. See Ādna, ‘O Son of the Two Sacrifices’, pp. 316–17. The word *fidā*’ is also used by one of Ḥusayn’s followers related on the previous page.

⁸⁵ Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon*, vol. 1, pp. 2774b–c; see also Ādna, ‘O Son of the Two Sacrifices’, p. 340.

⁸⁶ I plan to discuss this more thoroughly in a forthcoming article.

⁸⁷ Besides the instances mentioned above, see e.g. al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, pp. 253, 351, 360; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 45, 145, 154. The possible exception is when Ḥusayn says to the Kūfans, just before his death: ‘If you kill me, God will send misfortune among you and cause the shedding of your blood’ (al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, p. 365; *History*, vol. 19, p. 160).

⁸⁸ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, p. 337; *History*, vol. 19, p. 131. Other versions of the same event are given subsequently in the text. Other examples of Ḥusayn’s curse leading to God’s punishment of the cursed in this world are found in al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, vol. 2, pp. 312, 361–362; *History*, vol. 19, pp. 107, 156–7.

⁸⁹ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 1–12; the quote is taken from p. 1.

⁹⁰ For a similar conclusion, see Borrut, ‘Remembering Karbalā’’, pp. 34–5. For comparison, I have made very cursory studies of al-Balādhurī’s (*Ansāb*, vol. 3, pp. 142–205) and al-Mufīd’s (*Irshād*, pp. 199–252, translated by Howard, *Kitāb al-Irshād*, pp. 299–376) accounts of the Karbalā’ story from the perspective of the covenant. As far as I can tell, this notion is not at all as prevalent in these versions as in that of al-Ṭabarī.