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New Meanings to Old Rituals: The Emergence of Mourning Rituals in Shī'ite Islam

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Introduction

The 'Āshūrā' celebration is one of the central rituals in Shī'ite Islam. It commemorates the killing of Ḥusayn b. 'Alī, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, by an Umayyad army at Karbalā' in 680 CE. We are told how the inhabitants of Kūfa asked Husayn to come and lead them in an insurrection against the Umayyad authorities. While Husayn travelled towards Kūfa, the governor of the city was able to turn the sympathies of the people against him. Some of those who had invited him now were part of the army that went against him and eventually killed him. Others stayed in Kūfa, but did nothing to help him in his desperate fight against the army.¹

The story of the Penitents (Ar. *Tawwābūn*) takes place four years after the death of Husayn. In this account, some of the men that failed to support him feel deep regret for their neglect to come to the help of the grandson of the Prophet. They gather, choose Sulaymān b. Ṣurad as their leader, and discuss how they can best make penitence (Ar. *tawba*) for this crime. In their deliberations over their sin, they find that it is like the Israelites' worship of the golden calf. In that situation, Moses sentenced the children of Israel to let them kill each other², and following this example the *Tawwābūn* now consider committing collective suicide. Since suicide is prohibited in the Quran, however, they agree on not taking recourse to this drastic measure. They decide that they will instead take to arms and go against the Umayyad army – to kill those that killed Ḥusayn, or be killed themselves in the attempt to find revenge for him. The *Tawwābūn* are well aware that this deed in all probability will lead to their own death, but they regard it as an act of martyrdom for the cause of the loyalty to the Prophet and his offspring. On their way to the battlefield they stop at Ḥusayn's tomb at Karbalā', dedicating themselves to remorseful prayer and crying over their own sin. As they move on, they

¹ The most complete account of this event is found in Ṭabarī, *History*, XIX: 1–183; Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫ*, II: 216–390. For analyses of this story, see Shoshan, *Poetics*, 233–252; Hylén, 'Ḥusayn'; and recently Borrut, 'Remembering Karbalā'.

² Qur. 2 :54, cf. Ex 32 : 25–29.

eventually meet the Umayyads and are defeated. Some of the few survivors feel great shame that they were not killed in the campaign.³

Very few analytical studies have been made of the story of the *Tawwābūn*.⁴ In fact, the only thorough investigation of the text that I am aware of is a very interesting study made by Gerald Hawting.⁵ In this article, the author discusses the relationship between the Jewish Day of Atonement (‘*Āshūrā*’) and the Shī‘ite ‘*Āshūrā*’ celebrations, and argues that the *Tawwābūn* with their emphasis on self-mortification (even literary so) is the link between the two feasts. Thus, Hawting highlights the merging of Jewish rituals with early Islamic ideas and customs. He does not, however, discuss the importance of rituals for the creation of group identities. In the present paper, I will instead focus on early Islamic customs, and see how they are reformed and filled with new content, as one of several means to build a distinct Shī‘ite identity within the emerging movement of believers.⁶ Furthermore, whereas Hawting highlights the speeches made by Sulaymān b. Ṣurad and his companions in the beginning of the story, I will focus on the visit to Ḥusayn’s grave, which is placed roughly in its middle section.

Leor Halevi has shown in his book *Muhammad’s Grave*⁷ that rituals surrounding death and burial of a person in early Islam developed as a way to create a distinct Islamic community in contrast to the *Jāhili*, Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian surroundings. While some of the previous mortuary rituals were appropriated, they were often adapted to fill the needs of the emerging *umma* to demarcate itself against the non-Islamic context.

In the case of the *Tawwābūn* we also see specific Shī‘ite components that mark the group out from other sections of the Islamic community. These rituals are given significance through the emerging myth about the family of the Prophet and its presumed right to rule the Muslims.

Myth and ritual

In this context, I define “myth” as *a narrative that is foundational to the world view and identity of a group of people*.⁸ Thus, myth, as I use the term, has nothing to do with whether a story is historically “true” or “factual.” It is a story with a specific function as foundational. Myth and ritual often (but far from always) function in symbiosis, to strengthen and support each other. Myth gives meaning to rituals, and rituals help embody and internalize values and precepts, as well as function as group demarcations. What we call new religions or new religious movements of course never pop up in a vacuum. They normally rather emerge

³ The most complete account is again found in Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 497–513, 538–578; Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 80–97, 124–160. For the sake of convenience and accessibility, in the rest of the paper I will refer only to Hawting’s English translation. The pagination of the Leiden edition of Ṭabarī’s *Ta’rīkh* is found in the margins of the translation.

⁴ Wellhausen (*Oppositionsparteien*, 71–74) and Jafri (*Origins*, 222–234) each has a short section on the *Tawwābūn*, but these are mainly uncritical renderings of the sources. Calmard (‘Culte’, 66–69), and more recently Halm (*Shi‘a Islam*, 16–20) and Dakake (*Charismatic Community*, 90–95) have discussed important ideas and concepts as they relate the story, but none of them can be said to be in-depth studies of the text. As my discussion below will show, I have benefitted from these three studies, however.

⁵ Hawting, ‘Tawwābūn’.

⁶ For a study of the appellations “believers”, “Muslims”, and “Islam,” and their developments, see Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*.

⁷ Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*.

⁸ For a discussion leading up to this definition, see Hylén, ‘Ḥusayn’, 27.

relatively slowly and crystallize out of the context as their members mark themselves off from the surrounding groups and build a new identity, different from those of their immediate environment. This is a process that we can observe in the emerging group of believers that came to define themselves as Muslims,⁹ and, within this larger group, the subgroup called the Shī'ites (as well as other groups, such as the Khārijites). In the process of crystallization, myth and ritual both play important roles. Myth gives the group its rationale, its *raison d'être*. Rituals, as public, bodily enactments of the myth, serve both to embody and internalize the values of the group into the individual, and to demarcate the group from its surroundings.

In the tradition from Emile Durkheim many scholars have demonstrated the importance of rituals for the creation and sustaining of group identities.¹⁰ In particular Paul Connerton discusses the importance of bodily practices, among which rituals are to be counted, as means for internalization of values of a society and the continuous sustainment of these values. As behaviors are automatized, the body (not just the intellect) “remembers” them. Furthermore, he argues, behavior is very conservative and much less prone to change than the ideas and thoughts that give behavior its “meaning” in an intellectual sense. Thus, bodily practices are important for what he calls “social memory”.¹¹ Interpretation of ritual on the other hand – i.e. the process of filling rituals, so to say, with an intellectual content – depends on myths which make up what he calls “a reservoir of meanings”. He says, following Paul Ricoeur: “The mythic material contains a range of potential meanings significantly in excess of their use and function in any particular arrangement, any singular structure.”¹²

Hence, rituals in themselves are not bearers of “meaning” in an intellectual sense. They need to be filled with meaning. Several scholars of ritual argue this, so for example Caroline Humphrey and James Laidlaw who talk of ritual as “apprehensible” in that “they are, as it were, waiting for, and apt for, the achievement of self-interpretation.”¹³ Thus, while rituals normally change very slowly (if at all), they are constantly re-interpreted as the historical contexts change.

Burial customs in early Islam

Let us return, then, to early Islam and see how this theoretical discourse can be applied on burial customs and the story of the *Tawwābūn*. Epitaphs on 7th and early 8th century Arabic tombstones show that visits to graves and prayer for God's mercy over and forgiveness for the deceased were common in early Islam.¹⁴ Thus, on a tombstone containing one of the earliest inscriptions known from a Muslim context, we read:

In the name of God, the Merciful the Compassionate, this grave belongs to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Khayr al-Ḥajrī.

Forgive him, O God, and make him enter [Paradise] by your mercy, and let us go with him.

⁹ Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*.

¹⁰ See e.g. Turner, *Ritual Process* (MORE REFERENCES NEEDED) to mention just a few.

¹¹ Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 3–5.

¹² Connerton, *How Societies Remember*, 56–57.

¹³ Humphrey and Laidlaw, *Archetypal Actions*, 133–166, quote from p. 160. See also Bell, *Ritual*, 210–223.

¹⁴ Halevi, *Muhammad's Grave*, 14–32, 226–233; Donner, *Narratives*, 85–86

Seek forgiveness for him whenever this inscription is read, and say “Amen!”

This inscription was written in Jumādā II of the year 31 [January or February of the year 652 CE].¹⁵

Leor Halevi asks to what extent this inscription can be called “Islamic” as the only unambiguous indication of the dead belonging to the movement that later came to be known under the label “Islam” is the reference to the Hijrī calendar. Although there is no reason to doubt that this ‘Abd al-Raḥmān identified himself as a “Muslim”, or perhaps as “Believer” (*Mu’min*) or Emigrant (*Muhājir*), the inscription itself can hardly be said to be “Islamic”. Halevi demonstrates throughout his book how the customs around deaths and burials were gradually “Islamized” during the 8th and early 9th centuries, and we can see how epitaphs increasingly came to include references to Muḥammad, quotations from the Qur’ān, formulaic confessions of faith, etc. In a similar manner other burial customs, such as the washing of the dead body, the procession and communal prayer at the burial, and the physical appearance of the grave were given specific “Islamic” characteristics.

Consequently, on another tombstone at a grave of a woman about four decades later, there are more of Islamic characteristics, such as the reference to the Muslims as a family (the *ahl al-Islam*), lament over Muḥammad’s death, and the *shahāda* (although in a slightly different form than what we are used to). Still, though, there is no quotation from the Qur’ān. These only emerge in the second quarter of the 8th century CE.

My point here is that many of the traditions regarding death and burial already existed among Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, as well as in the *Jāhili* religious traditions. To a certain extent, the Muslims continued these customs and rituals, but placed them in a new context and adapted them and, in certain cases, gave them a new content. In the same process, some earlier traditions were completely prohibited, and yet others were added. This is true not only of rituals surrounding death and burial, of course, but also other rituals, such as prayer, pilgrimage, fasting, etc.

Similar processes took place within the different factions of what came to be Islam as a whole. Halevi mainly discusses the tradition(s) of death and burial developing in what came to constitute the Sunni branch, and only briefly touches upon Shi‘ism. In this paper, I will look at the Shi‘ite rituals emerging around the dead Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī and their relation to the myth about him that developed parallel to this. The story of the *Tawwābūn* is the earliest account that we have of these rituals.

Sources for the story of the *Tawwābūn*

As far as I have been able to find out, all accounts of the *Tawwābūn* available to us go back to that written by Lūt b. Yahyā al-Azdī, better known as Abū Mikhnaf (ca. 689–775). His “book” *Kitāb Sulaymān b. Ṣurad wa-‘Ayn al-Wardā* seems to be the main source for all later works on the subject.¹⁶ For the present study, I will use the account found in Ṭabarī’s

¹⁵ Translation from Halevi, *Muhammad’s Grave*, 14. For an alternative translation, see Donner, *Narratives*, 85.

¹⁶ Other monographs about this subject were written by some other, later authors. Some of these are lost. I have not been able to investigate whether all the books extant are based on Abū Mikhnaf’s work.

History.¹⁷ Ṭabarī has used the recension of Hishām b. al-Kalbi (d. 819), and has probably quoted the entire text. There are several shorter versions, such as those by Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī (d. c. 819),¹⁸ al-Balādhurī (d. 892),¹⁹ and al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 956),²⁰ all based on Abū Mikhnaf’s account. Thus, the fullest account of the affair of the *Tawwābūn* available to us is that given by Ṭabarī. Unlike the narration of the tragedy of Karbalā’, I find no obvious traces of editing from Ṭabarī’s side in his account of the *Tawwābūn*. The reason is probably, that the story of the *Tawwābūn* is not as politically and theologically inflammable as the Karbalā’ Drama. Of course, we should not exclude the possibility that Ibn al-Kalbi has made some editing, but for the same reason that I do not think that Ṭabarī edited the text – is just was not important enough – I find no reason to believe that Ibn al-Kalbi made any substantial changes in Abū Mikhnaf’s work. Thus, I see no reason to doubt that Ṭabarī’s version very closely follows, or even reproduces Abū Mikhnaf’s text. We do not know when it was originally written; to be safe, let us say sometime towards the end of the author’s life, i.e. between 750 and 775.

In most cases there are two or – less common – three informants in the *isnāds* between Abū Mikhnaf and the event of the *Tawwābūn*. Regarding the episode of the visit to Ḥusayn’s grave, three traditions are given that describe what happened (see Figure 1 below). Although they picture the same event, they are so different in content, language and style, that it is improbable that Abū Mikhnaf could have made them up himself. It is probable therefore, that the traditions transmitted to Abū Mikhnaf looked very much as they do in his account. Thus, the traditions that Abū Mikhnaf used cannot have been created later than during the generation before him. I even suspect that behind these three traditions is a common oral tradition, although I have not thoroughly investigated them in relation to the rest of the story. Certain wordings and expressions are similar, such as “they cried in unison” or “together” in all three traditions²¹ and the epithets of Ḥusayn and his companions in two of them.²² However, this needs to be investigated further before any substantiated conclusions can be drawn.

What can be said with some amount of probability, then, is that the account of the *Tawwābūn*’s visit to Ḥusayn’s grave in the version of Ṭabarī, gives us a picture of the image of and feelings for Ḥusayn at least as early as in the second quarter of the 8th century CE.

Old rituals and new content

So, what does the account of the visit to the grave tell us? All three traditions transmitted by Abū Mikhnaf relate that the *Tawwābūn* ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness for Ḥusayn. Thus, the visit at the grave together with the prayer for God’s mercy and forgiveness is in conformity with the traditional ritual, as we could see from the examples of tombstones earlier.

¹⁷ Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh*, II: 497–513, 551–553.

¹⁸ Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, *Kitāb al-Futūh*, VI: 47–53, 58–87. For the dating of Ibn A‘tham, see Conrad, "Ibn A‘tham and His History".

¹⁹ Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, V: 204–213.

²⁰ Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, V: 213–221.

²¹ I: *ṣāhū ṣayḥatan wāḥidatan wa-bakaw*; II: *bakā ’l-nās bi-ajma ’ihim*; III: *nādaw ṣayḥatan wāḥidatan*.

²² II: *Allahumma, irḥam Ḥusaynan al-shahīd ibn al-shahīd, al-mahdī ibn al-mahdī, al-ṣiddīq ibn al-ṣiddīq*; III: *Ya-rabb... irḥam Ḥusaynan wa-aṣḥābihi, al-shuhadā’, al-ṣiddīqīn*.

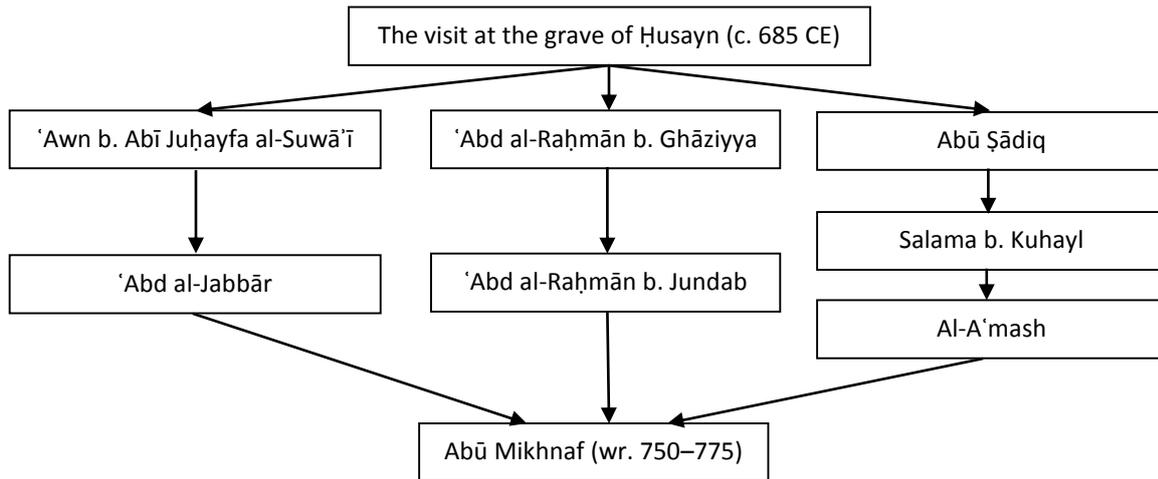


Figure 1. The three traditions about the visit to the grave

In her book on early Shi‘ism, *The Charismatic Community*, Maria Massi Dakake writes that the visit of the *Tawwābūn* to the grave of Ḥusayn “represents the first recorded instance in Islamic history of organized communal mourning and prayer of a deceased and ‘saintly’ person.”²³ Personally, I would not express it in this way. Firstly, as we have seen, the custom of visiting graves and praying for the deceased was common. It must have been expected that visitors came in groups to the graves, at least at times, as the tombstones urge the literate visitors to read and pray, and the others to say “Amen”. In the case of the *Tawwābūn*’s visit to Ḥusayn’s grave, the person buried happens to be someone with a very special position, particularly for the Shi‘ites. Again, however, we must remember that we cannot know what actually happened at the grave and image of Ḥusayn the *Tawwābūn* themselves had. We are given a description of what happened that is written perhaps 50 years after the event. At this time, i.e. in the second quarter of the 8th century, the myth about Ḥusayn had begun to develop. This we can see above all from the account of the Karbalā’ event itself, but it is also indicated in the story of the *Tawwābūn*.

Thus, the position of Ḥusayn in the image of the *Tawwābūn*, or at least in that of the narrators, make things differ from the previous tradition as far as we know it. New elements have entered that gives this visit a special tinge. The first thing one observes when reading this text is the abundant weeping and shouting at the grave. But it is to be noticed that nothing is said about wailing. This is not a ritual of mourning, and on this point I also disagree with Dakake’s statement above.²⁴ The loss of Ḥusayn is hardly regretted anywhere in the story – instead it is the magnitude of the treason of the Kūfan Shi‘ites and the need to repent from it that is in focus. So, all three traditions relate that when the *Tawwābūn* come to the grave, they weep and shout, not for the grief of having lost Ḥusayn, but for their own sin. They pray not only about forgiveness for Ḥusayn, but also for themselves, and this is something that is not recorded earlier to my knowledge. Thus, the informant of the second tradition says: “... the

²³ Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 94.

²⁴ See also Halm, *Shi‘a Islam*, 19, where he writes that the ‘Āshūrā’ rituals “are not mourning rituals, as is often believed, but a ritual of repentance”.

people wept together and I heard most of the people expressing the wish that they had fallen with him.”²⁵ The transmitter of the third tradition lets us know that

[w]hen Sulaymān b. Ṣurad and his companions reached the tomb of al-Ḥusayn, they cried out in unison, “Oh Lord, we have betrayed the son of our Prophet’s daughter! Pardon us for what we did in the past and relent toward us... If you do not pardon us our sin and have mercy on us, then we are among those who are lost.” They remained there a day and a night praying over him, weeping and abasing themselves.²⁶

Secondly, the wish for martyrdom is expressed in two of the traditions. This is the corollary of the prayers for forgiveness. Above, in the summary of the story, I mentioned that this was the very rationale for the *Tawwābūn*’s going out on warpath. Seeking revenge or martyrdom were the main indications of true repentance. We have already heard a quote about their wish to have fallen with Ḥusayn from the second tradition, and in the third Sulaymān is reported to have said:

Praise be to God who, if He had wished, would have honored us with martyrdom with al-Ḥusayn. Oh my God, since you forbade us it together with him, do not forbid us it on his account after him.²⁷

And later in the same tradition one of his companions says:

By God, even if the fight against those who killed [Ḥusayn, his father and his brother] is where the sun goes down or the earth ends, it is incumbent upon us to seek it until we attain it. That is our booty and it is martyrdom, the reward for which is heaven.²⁸

Thirdly, in the statements of the *Tawwābūn*, we find the concepts of “dissociation” (*barāʿa*) from those who killed Ḥusayn or share their views, and “enmity” (*ʿadāwa*) towards them. These notions are of course very important in Shīʿism, as delimiters of the true community.²⁹

Turning our focus from the *Tawwābūn* to Ḥusayn himself, or rather the image of him as expressed in the story, he is described as a martyr (*shahīd*) together with his father ʿAlī b Abī Ṭālib, but the two are also given the epithets “rightly guided” (*mahdī*) and “righteous” (*ṣiddīq*).³⁰ But this is not enough. In one of the traditions, Ḥusayn, his father and brother Ḥasan are said to be “the best of Muḥammad’s community (*umma*) (who will be) imploring God’s favor on the Day of Resurrection (*wasīlatan ʿinda ʿllāh yawma ʿl-qiyāma*)”.³¹ According to Jean Calmard, this is the first time that Ḥusayn is invoked as an intermediary

²⁵ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 132.

²⁶ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 132.

²⁷ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 133.

²⁸ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 134.

²⁹ See Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 65–67.

³⁰ “The martyr the son of the martyr, the right-guided one son of the right-guided one, the righteous son of the righteous.” Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 132.

³¹ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 133.

(*wasīla*) between God and human, although the word does not here have the meaning that it received in later Shī‘ism.³²

The transmitter of the third report further says about the *Tawwābūn*: “I saw them thronging about the tomb of al-Ḥusayn more thickly than the people throng around the Black Stone” [of the Ka‘ba].³³ As Dakake says, “[t]o connect this stone with the tomb of al-Ḥusayn is a statement of immense symbolic significance for understanding the concept of the sanctity of Ḥusayn as the bearer of Prophetic blood”.³⁴ The inviolability of Ḥusayn and the family of the Prophet is very prominent in the Karbalā’ story,³⁵ and although the word *ḥurma* (“inviolability”) is mentioned only once in the present narrative with regard to Ḥusayn,³⁶ the idea is certainly there.

Conclusion

In summary, the traditional ritual of visiting a grave and asking for God’s mercy and forgiveness for the dead is given a new meaning in this story: The *Tawwābūn* pray for forgiveness for themselves for their sin of not supporting Ḥusayn at Karbalā’; they wish to be martyred if they cannot get revenge for him; and they dissociate themselves and manifest enmity towards the adversaries of the family of the Prophet. The reason for this is that Ḥusayn is given a position high above other humans (apart from the Prophet, his father ‘Ālī and his brother Ḥasan). Thus Ḥusayn is rightly guided (*mahdī*); he is the best of Muḥammad’s community; he will implore God’s favor on the Day of Resurrection; and he is equated with the Black Stone of the Ka‘ba and therefore inviolable.

This story contains a paradox, which in my view further indicates the old age of the story. On the one hand the *Tawwābūn* ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness for Ḥusayn; on the other they depict him as almost superhuman. As Shi‘ism develops, its adherents find no need to ask for God’s mercy and forgiveness of Ḥusayn; he is one of the fourteen *ma‘šūmūn*, the infallible of the family of Muḥammad. This paradox, I would argue, signals that in this story we have an account of a movement in transition, where old traditions mingle with new customs and ideas, where the re-interpretation of the old burial rituals have just begun, but have not yet reached a stage that we see later in the history of Shī‘ism.

³² Calmard, ‘Culte’, 68–69.

³³ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 133.

³⁴ Dakake, *Charismatic Community*, 94. Dakake indicates a similar statement of one of the *Tawwābūn* after the battle proper, where he calls the enemy “destroyers of the sacred sanctuary” (*yā mukhribī ‘l-bayt al-ḥarām*). See Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 156.

³⁵ Hylén, ‘Ḥusayn’, 172–174.

³⁶ Ṭabarī, *History*, XX: 91.

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