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KHALID SINDAWI

THE IMAGE OF ḤUSAYN IBN ‘ALĪ IN *MAQĀTIL* LITERATURE¹

I. Introduction

This research concerns the image of Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī as reflected in the *maqātil al-Ḥusayn*. Ḥusayn’s dramatic death inspired many Shī‘ite poets, and from the second century of the Hijra (8th century AD), historians began to compose works describing this event. These works were known as *maqātil* (plural of *maqṭal*). Their composition developed mainly from the 8th until the 13th century, but it continues to the present day. The period of the research spans 500 years and is based mainly on four independent *maqātil* selected as characteristic: a) *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn* by Abū Mikhnaḥ (Lūṭ ibn Yaḥyā, d. 774/157); b) *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn* by Akḥṭab Khawārizm (d. 1172/568); c) *Muthīr al-ahzān wa munīr al-ashjān* by Ja‘far Ibn Namā (d. 1247/645); d) *al-Lahūf ‘alā qatlā al-tufūf* by ‘Alī ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 1266/664).

The term “*maqṭal*” conveys four main senses: 1) *maqṭal* as in *qatala*, the act of killing; 2) the reason for the killing; 3) a central organ in the body that is injured and results in death; 4) a description of the time and place of the killing.

Because Ḥusayn is a major personality, most *maqātil* center on his character. He is gifted with exceptional traits, in consequence of his descent from the Prophet and his role as an Imām continuing in his path. Authors of *maqātil* frequently refer to these traits and stress his similarity to his father, the Imām ‘Alī, and to his grandfather, the Prophet Muḥammad. Ḥusayn is represented in the *maqātil* as steadfast in his faith and obedient to commandment of prayer at the appointed times. He also performs supernatural acts of courage and works miracles and wonders.

The authors of the *maqātil* develop a connection between Ḥusayn and Jesus, and also Ḥusayn and John the Baptist, in order to bestow holy attributes upon Ḥusayn. The research also examines motifs such as the dream, the prophets, devils and

¹ This article is part of my thesis for a Ph.D. degree on the subject of the *maqātil* in Shī‘ite literature. The thesis was submitted in March 2000 at Bar-Ilan University, under the supervision of Dr. Yeshayahu Goldfeld, from Bar-Ilan University, and Prof. George Kanazi, from Haifa University. I am deeply grateful for their guidance.

angels, Jews and Christians, the weeping of nature over the death of Ḥusayn, Ḥusayn's thirst, his decapitated head, and the premonition of his death.

II. *Ḥusayn's birth*

II. 1. *General background: The shaping of a saint's image*

Before considering the particular characteristics of Ḥusayn, we would like to elaborate on the way images of saints are shaped in the culture of peoples, as they appear in hagiography.² Hagiography played a vital role in medieval cultural and intellectual life. To some extent our literature is rooted in hagiography, which still exists today in popular literature. This literature has specific features, such as the following:

Time and place are not defined. The reported event takes place in a wide geographical framework; the story is universal and could have happened at any time and place. Importance is only ascribed to the place of the saint's death or to the location of his relics. As to time, only the divine is taken into consideration, not the human.

On the other hand, the saint's image is a prototype with uniform traits. The monk, the virgin, the bishop and the imam all belong to the same category. They represent identical virtues and their personalities remain unobtrusive. Everything we know about them is symbolic and significant. Hagiographers shape and embellish their heroes and impart to them superior qualities. The saint is supposed to represent the perfection of human virtue: he is at once thinker, leader, healer, messenger, and martyr. The biography of a saint presents the following characteristics:

- a) origin – from a noble or a revered family;
- b) birth – generally associated with miracles or prophecies;
- c) traits – already as a child the saint reveals several outstanding virtues, such as charity, moral authority, courage, heroism, and great wisdom;
- d) an exceptional event: sometimes death followed by resurrection;
- e) self-sacrifice and martyrdom;
- f) relics of the saint or his body play an important role with his believers;
- g) the saint works miracles, during his lifetime and after his death.

Not all these components are always present, but the scheme is constant. Different saints will perform the same actions in similar circumstances. The miracles are also identical. However, the situation is dynamic: the person finds himself torn between heaven and hell, between the world of the living and the world of the dead, the seen and the unseen. The saint perpetually struggles with himself and others, with the devil. Though the text is known in advance (mission, choice, moral lesson), there is no development but only revelation. By this victory over his

² See R. Boyer, "An attempt to define the typology of Medieval Hagiography", in *Hagiography & Medieval Literature – a Symposium*, Odensee U.P., 1981, pp. 27-35.

hardships, the saint reveals God's glory. We shall now examine the characteristics of Ḥusayn's birth according to the above scheme.

II.2. *Ḥusayn's birth – its miraculous characteristics*

Ḥusayn was born on the fifth day of the month Sha'bān, in the fourth year of the Hijra - 625 AD.³ According to other versions, he was born on the third or fourth day of the said month.⁴ The life of Ḥusayn, as narrated in *Maqātil* literature, differs from that of ordinary mortals because he was a hereditary imam, gifted with supernatural forces and wonderful traits. His birth is also different and miraculous and is foretold by special signs. *Maqātil* literature venerates Ḥusayn and in several contexts emphasizes his descent from a noble and revered family. It reports the different stages of his life story from birth to death, creating a whole cycle of tales which shape the hero's image.⁵

It is told that he was born on the end of the sixth month of the pregnancy of his mother Fāṭima al-Zahrā', on the day of 'Āshūrā' (like Jesus Christ and John the Baptist),⁶ and he was killed 57 years later on the very same day,⁷ i.e. on the tenth day of Muḥarram, in the year 61 of the Hijra (10 Oct. 680 AD). The day of 'Āshūrā' is therefore sacred to the Shi'ites.⁸ Ḥusayn's birth was blessed by the angels. One of the traditions says that the angel Gabriel appeared with a thousand other angels from Heaven before the Prophet Muḥammad, to congratulate him on the birth of his grandson Ḥusayn.⁹

In other parts of the *maqātil* there is mention of dreams that brought the tidings of Ḥusayn's birth before it happened. For example, Umm al-Faḍl tells of a dream of Lūbāba bint al-Ḥārith predicting the impending birth of Ḥusayn.¹⁰ Furthermore, it is

³ Raḍī al-Dīn Abū al-Qāsim Muḥammad ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf 'alā qatlā al-ṭufūf*, Najaf: al-Maṭba'a al-Ḥaydariyya, 1950, p. 9.

⁴ Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī ibn Hibat Allāh al-Shāfi'i, known as Ibn 'Asākir al-imām al-Ḥusayn, *Min tārikh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. Muḥammad Bāqir al-Maḥmūdī, Qum: Majma' al-thaqāfa al-islāmiyya, 1414/1994², p. 38. See also al-Mufīd, *al-Irshād*, p. 198.

⁵ Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Ja'far Hibat al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (Ibn Namā), *Muthīr al-aḥzān wa-munīr subul al-ashjān*, Tehran, 1317/1899, p. 5.

⁶ On the similarity between Ḥusayn and John, see Kh. Sindawi, *The Maqātil in Shi'ite Literature* (Hebrew), Ph.D. thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, 2000, pp. 122-123.

⁷ In 'Alī Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 9, it is said that Ḥusayn was born on the third day of the month Sha'bān, in the year 4 of the Hijra/626 A.D. According to another tradition, reported by Ibn Ṭāwūs, Ḥusayn was born on the third day of Ramaḍān. A third tradition speaks about Ḥusayn being born on the fourth day of Elul, in the year 3 of the Hijra.

⁸ On the day of 'Āshūrā' and its holiness, see Aviva Schussman, *Stories of the Prophets in Muslim Tradition* (Hebrew), Ph.D. thesis, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1981, p. 156.

⁹ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 10.

¹⁰ See Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, ch. IV, Motif of Dream, pp. 153-167.

said that Ḥusayn's mother, Fāṭima – Muḥammad's daughter–, was a virgin when she gave birth to him, just like Jesus' mother, Maryam.¹¹ Fāṭima is much glorified in Muslim literature and is even called “The Lady of all Women, in this world and in the next one”. She is said to have been superior to all women by her virtues, her piety, and her distinction, and to have devoted her life to God.¹² Ḥusayn's birth was thus miraculous, a real saint's birth, from a virgin mother and preceded by special signs. Other traits of Ḥusayn, as represented in *maqātil* literature, also accord with the saint's image.

Ḥusayn displays remarkable traits; he is gifted with moral authority, courage, and heroism. He sacrifices his life and dies a martyr's death; his relics are sacred and very important to Shī'ite believers; and finally, Ḥusayn works miracles during his lifetime and also after his death, by means of his decapitated head. The head can speak and it influences the events that occur after the slaying.¹³

Ḥusayn's death too is exceptional. He was killed on the day of 'Āshūrā', the tenth day of Muḥarram, and we have seen that some of the traditions also assign his birth to the same day, as opposed to the historical data. According to Shī'ite authors, it is not by accident that he was killed on that given day. We mention here a few of the tributes of praise that Shī'ite literature attaches to the day of 'Āshūrā'.

The day of 'Āshūrā' witnessed very important events. On that day, God created the and also the Royal Throne and the stars; on that day, man was created; it is also the day when our Father, Abraham, was born; Jesus was likewise born on the day of 'Āshūrā' and rose to Heaven on that same day. The Prophet Muḥammad was allegedly also born on the day of 'Āshūrā'; but this statement is historically incorrect, as Muḥammad was in fact born on the twelfth day of the month Rabi' al-awwal.

Other historical events related to the day of 'Āshūrā' are the following: on that day, Noah's Ark came to rest on Mount Ararat (al-Jūdī); and it was the day when God parted the sea before Moses, and the Hebrews were able to cross it; on that day, Jonas was vomited from the whale's maw; and it will also be the date of Doomsday and of the resurrection of the dead.¹⁴

¹¹ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 3.

¹² al-Sayyid Murtaḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Fayrūzabadī, *Faḍā'il al-khamsa min al-ṣiḥāḥ al-sitta*, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alamī, 1402/1982⁴, V, p. 156.

¹³ See Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, ch. IV, Motif of the decapitated head, pp. 215-24.

¹⁴ Al-Muwaffaq ibn Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Bakrī al-Makkī al-Ḥanafī (Akḥṭab Khawārizm), *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn*, Najaf: Maṭba'at al-Zahrā', 1367/1948, pp. 3-4; Kh. Sindawi, “'Āshūrā' Day and Yom Kippur”, *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 38 (2001), pp. 200-214.

If we examine all the events supposed to have happened on the day of ‘Āshūrā’, even if this is not historically correct, we observe that most of them are related to prophets or messengers of God and connected with salvation from distress. The birth and the death of Ḥusayn both coincide with a day when important events took place. The Shī‘ites thereby emphasize the fact that Ḥusayn holds a very honorable rank, similar to that of the prophets and the saints before him, and that he was able to perform miracles and to save people from distress, just as his forebears did.

All these characteristics, including Ḥusayn’s venerable origin and the story of his miraculous birth are aimed at the shaping of his image, not only as a warrior and a hero but also as a holy man.

III. *The image of Ḥusayn: outward appearance*

III.1. *The face and the beard*

Ḥusayn’s outward appearance mostly serves as a first sign of recognition, although the authors of *maqātil* use only a small number of particulars in their exterior description, and these particulars occupy but little space. Authors of *maqātil* chose to concentrate upon two of Ḥusayn’s face and of his beard. These two descriptions repeatedly appear in *Maqātil* literature in various connections and are dominant features of the outward appearance, with hardly any other exterior signs of recognition.

a) *Ḥusayn’s face shines with light and no other can be compared to it*

In the *maqṭal* of Ibn Namā we find Hilāl Ibn Nāfi‘ saying: “the radiant and comely Ḥusayn”¹⁵ A similar tradition is quoted as having been pronounced by Khawlī al-‘Aṣbaḥī, in the *maqṭal* of Ṭāwūs.¹⁶ Another tradition related to Ḥusayn’s face appears in the Ibn Ṭāwūs *maqṭal*, as spoken by Hilāl ibn Nāfi‘, from the Umayyad army. Hilāl said: “I never saw a fairer face than that of Ḥusayn.”¹⁷ At another place, Ibn Ṭāwūs noted that Ḥusayn had a large head.¹⁸

b) *Ḥusayn’s beard is thick, like the beards of his father and grandfather*

Maqātil literature often refers to Ḥusayn’s beard, reporting that when he was wounded, he smeared his beard and his head with his blood and said: “This is how I shall meet my God, smeared with my own blood, since I have been despoiled of my right to rule.”¹⁹ As with in other features, the authors of the *maqātil* elaborate on the

¹⁵ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 39.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

¹⁷ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 69.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

¹⁹ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 64.

similarity of Ḥusayn's outward appearance to that of his father 'Alī and his grandfather Muḥammad, who were both full-bearded (*'aẓīm al-lihya*). Being a hereditary Imam and the successor of his father and grandfather, Ḥusayn would naturally display a similar exterior appearance and resembling traits.

From Muḥammad's biography we learn that the Prophet's beard reached his breast (*mala'at lihyatuhu mā bayna hādhihi ilā hādhihi qad mala'at naḥrahu*).²⁰ Ḥusayn's father 'Alī was also full-bearded and his beard was as long and large as the Prophet's.²¹

In the *maqṭal* Amīr al-Mu'minīn, Ibn Abī al-Dunyā tells us about a tradition he heard from Umm Ja'far, 'Alī's maidservant, who said: "I was washing 'Alī's hand, and all of a sudden, he seized his beard and pulled it up to his nose, and he spoke to his beard and said: Woe unto you, for on next Friday you will be smeared in blood and that's what happened."²²

A similar story is told in the Akḥṭab Khawārizm *maqṭal*, but this time it refers to Ḥusayn. Khawārizm says: "When Abū al-Ḥutūf al-Ju'afī shot a three-headed arrow, the arrow hit Ḥusayn on his forehead. Ḥusayn pulled the arrow out and threw it on the soil. Blood poured off his forehead like water flowing from a gutter and covered his face and his beard. Then he started filling his hands with it and tossed it towards heaven. Afterwards, he smeared his beard and cried out: 'Thus shall I meet my grandfather Muḥammad in Paradise, like my father met him.'²³

Another trait of the exterior appearance is the light shining from ḡusayn's face, a light reaching the zenith of heaven. This light was generally seen at night-time, after his head was cutoff.

The authors of the *maqātil* are probably induced to stress the radiance of the face by their belief that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib and, before him, the Prophet Muḥammad, came into existence as a light that descended from the loins of Adam, until it reached the loins of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, the Prophet's grandfather. Here the light splits into two parts: one half reaches Muḥammad through his father 'Abd Allāh, and the other half is given to 'Alī through his father Ṭālib. From 'Alī, the light passed to his two sons, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn, and from them down to the twelfth Imam.

Several traditions relate in detail this transmigration of light from the time of Adam and down to the twelfth Imam. One such narrative appears in the book by al-

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 41, 319.

²¹ 'Abd Allāh ibn Muḥammad al-Qurashī ibn Abī al-Dunyā, *Maqṭal Amīr al-Mu'minīn*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Ṭabaṭbā'i, Qum 1408/1988 ("Turāthunā", 12), pp. 93, 106, 108.

²² Ibid., pp. 11, 108, 110.

²³ Khawārizm, *Maqṭal*, p.39.

Mas‘ūdī *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya* on the Imam ‘Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib,²⁴ about the spark called the light of God (*nūr Allāh*), the light of wisdom (*nūr al-ḥikma*) or simply the light (*al-nūr*). This light illuminates the souls of the Imams and symbolizes the divine spirit, which bestows divine virtues upon its holders.²⁵

III.2 Ḥusayn’s clothing

The meticulous description of Ḥusayn’s clothing is given a considerable place in *maqātil* literature. Authors of the *maqātil* attached a great importance to the way Ḥusayn was dressed, and they emphasized the fact that he wore his grandfather Muḥammad’s clothes, which he had inherited from his father ‘Alī and his brother Ḥasan. The question is: why did the authors of the *maqātil* place such a stress on this subject? The answer is that the Shī‘ites consider Ḥusayn to be the successor of his father ‘Alī and his grandfather, the Prophet. In order to fulfill this mission, he must identify himself with them in everything, including in his outward appearance and his clothing.

I think that the authors also wanted to say that although the matter in question is only the outer clothing, which is but an exterior shell, it reflects their inner and genuine belief. These are sacred garments, but at the same time they must be magnificent clothes that strike awe in the hearts of the masses. In addition to the clothes of his grandfather, Ḥusayn also uses the Prophet’s own arms and rides his horse and sometimes his camel. Abū Mikhnaf says: “When Ḥusayn was in Karbalā, at the end of his prayer he put on his grandfather’s armour, covered his head with his grandfather’s turban, known as al-Saḥāb, and girded the sword Dhū al-Faqār; then he faced the enemy, the Umayyad.”²⁶ More particulars are the following:

²⁴ Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Mas‘ūdī, *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya li-l-Imām ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib*, no place, no date. I, pp. 17, 52, 69, 74, 137.

²⁵ For details, see: E. Kolberg, “The Shī‘a, ‘Alī’s faction”, in *Contestation and Revolution in Shi‘ite Islam* (Hebrew), ed. M. Kremer, Tel-Aviv: Kibbutz Meuhad, 1985, p. 15; U. Rubin, “Pre-existence and light, Aspects of the Concept of Nūr Muḥammad”, *IOS*, 5 (1975), pp. 62-119; Muḥammad ‘Alī Amīr-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, transl. by D. Streight, State University of New York Press, 1994, pp. 29-43. See also, U. Rubin, *The Prophet Muḥammad in Ancient ḥadīth Literature* (Hebrew). Ph.D. thesis, Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv 1976, I, pp. 154-155. See also: Abū Ja‘far ibn Ya‘qūb ibn Ishāq al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, ed. Muḥammad Ja‘far Shams al-Dīn, Beirut: Dār al-Ta‘āruf li-l-maṭbū‘āt, 1411/1990, I, pp. 244-257; Muḥammad ibn ‘Īsā al-Tirmidhī, *Awṣāf al-nabī*, ed. Samīḥ ‘Abbās, Beirut: Dār al-Jīl, no date, pp. 28, 31, 100, 264.

²⁶ Luṭ ibn Yaḥyā (Abū Mikhnaf), *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn ‘alayhi al-salām*, ed. ‘Umar Abū al-Naṣr, Beirut 1971, p. 58.

a) *Ḥusayn's burnous*

Some sources report that Ḥusayn wore the burnous he had inherited.²⁷ Traditions found in the Ibn Namā, Ibn Ṭāwūs, and Abū Mikhnaf *maqātil*²⁸ describe the garment worn by Ḥusayn as being the Prophet's burnous. According to other sources, mainly Sunnite, the Prophet Muḥammad offered one of his burnouses to the poet Jāhilī Ka'b ibn Zuhayr, when Ka'b came to beg his pardon for having vilified him. The sources relate that the Prophet forgave Ka'b and presented him one of his burnouses as a gift. Later on, the first Umayyad Caliph (661-680) bought the garment from Ka'b ibn Zuhayr for 600 dinars and it kept on passing from one Calif to the next and was considered by them as a symbol of blessing.²⁹

b) *The Prophet's turban (al-Ṣaḥāb)*

Ibn Ṭāwūs reports: When Ḥusayn had taken position to face the Umayyad army, he made a speech to glorify his family, reminding his listeners that he was scion of the Prophet, specifying the exceptional traits and the virtues of the Alids and how these superiorities distinguish them from other people (from the Umayyad). Among the matters mentioned in his speech, and in order to frighten the Umayyad warriors, he said: "Didn't you know that this turban which I put on my head is the turban of Allāh's messenger?"³⁰ without, however, mentioning that he was referring to the illustrious turban al-Ṣaḥāb.³¹

c) *The sword of Ḥusayn, Dhū al-Faqār*³²

We must, of course, emphasize the fact that the Arabs, like other peoples, customarily names to their arms and boasted about their swords at the time of the battle, when some warrior challenged an enemy to a duel. Some of the names given to swords are connected with the place where these swords were manufactured, for example *sayf hindī*, a sword connected with India where it was made. This name

²⁷ Ibid., p. 85.

²⁸ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 40.

²⁹ See 'Abū Maṣṣūr 'Abd al-Malik ibn Muḥammad 'Ismā'il al-Tha'ālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb fi al-mudāf wa-l-manṣūb*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1985, p. 61. See also: Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad, *Dirāsāt fi adab wa nuṣūṣ al-'aṣr al-islāmī*, Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, 1986, p. 87.

³⁰ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 49.

³¹ The turban al-Ṣaḥāb was black and has been compared to a rain-laden cloud (*saḥāb*). The Prophet's turban was considered a symbol of blessing. See: Jamāl al-Dīn Ibn Manẓūr al-Miṣrī, *Lisān al-'Arab*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1990, I, p. 461, s.v. "s ḥ b".

³² Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqṭal*, pp. 59, 83. For the sword Dhū al-Faqār see my article "The Sword 'dhū al-faqār' in Shi'ite Literature", *al-Karmil*. Studies in Arabic Language and Literature [University of Haifa], 21-22 (2000-2001), , pp. 201-218.

means that the sword is either of an excellent quality or of iron imported from India. Another example is *sayf yamānī*, a sword made in Yemen.

As for the sword Dhū al-Faqār, it had two heads. The Shi'ites claim that this sword was taken from heaven by Adam, was made of myrtle, and had been used by Adam to fight hostile devils. An inscription on the sword told that it would always be used by prophets in their wars, each prophet in his turn, till it was inherited by 'Alī who resorted to it in defense of Muḥammad. The sword continued to pass on by legacy until it came into the hands of Ḥusayn who fought with it at Karbalā. After Ḥusayn was killed, the sword was inherited by other Imams.³³

According to Sunnite sources, the sword Dhū al-Faqār had belonged to Munabbih ibn al-Ḥajjāj, and the Prophet seized it as booty in the battle of Badr (March 16, 624). After the battle he offered it as a present to his cousin 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, to reward him for his heroic fighting.³⁴ We thus observe deep contradictions between Shi'ite and Sunnite sources regarding the history of the sword.

In the *maqṭal* Ibn Ṭāwūs al-Lahūf, the sword is not mentioned by name. But when standing facing the Umayyad army, Ḥusayn praises his sword (without naming it) and says: "Did you know that this sword is the Prophet's sword?" In another place, Ibn Ṭāwūs asserts that the sword Ḥusayn fought with in the *maqātil* was not Dhū al-Faqār. He also adds that the Dhū al-Faqār was preserved with other possessions³⁵ of the Prophet and the Imams,³⁶ without mentioning the place where it was kept. Finally, Ibn Ṭāwūs reports the existence of several versions of the identity of the plunderer who took hold of Ḥusayn's sword. He mentions two persons, both whom could have stolen the sword. The sword is not mentioned in the *maqṭal* Ibn Namā. However, the author notes that Ḥusayn's sword was stolen after his death by Ibn al-Falāfīs al-Nahshalī or by Jāmi' ibn al-Khalq.³⁷ This sword is very important to the Shi'ites.

³³ See Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad al-Sarawī al-Mazandarānī ibn Shahrashūb, *Manāqib al-Abī Ṭālib*, ed. Yūsuf al-Buqā'ī, Beirut: Dār al-'Aswā', 1993, III, p. 81. Other versions are mentioned there concerning the origin of the sword.

³⁴ See Muḥammad ibn 'Umar ibn Wāqid al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-Maghāzī*, ed. M. Jones, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-'Alamī li-l-maṭbū'āt, 1409/1989³, p. 209. See also Muḥammad ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, no date, I, p. 485 sqq.

³⁵ This represents the pattern by which the *waṣiyya* was passed on from Muḥammad to 'Alī and afterwards to the other imams. Also the *waṣiyya* itself consisted of several details symbolizing its sublime character. One of the most important is Muḥammad's sword, Dhū al-Faqār, and other items, such as the al-Jafir book that was in the possession of the prophets and came into the hands of Shi'ite imams, and also the *al-ṣahīfa al-jāmi'a*, and others.

³⁶ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, pp. 77, 91.

³⁷ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 72.

Not all sources refer to Ḥusayn's clothing or to his sword. In the *maqṭal* Ibn Ṭawūs al-Lahūf, we do not find much about Ḥusayn's garment, nor does the *maqṭal* Akḥṭab Khawārizm make any mention of Ḥusayn's clothing. As to the sword used by Ḥusayn in his battles, it is not even mentioned in the entire *maqṭal* Akḥṭab Khawārizm.

III.3. *Ḥusayn's horse*

Ḥusayn's horse plays an important role in *Maqātil* literature. It is said to have been one of the Prophet's horses and it was inherited by Ḥusayn from his brother Ḥasan. Opinions differ concerning the horse's name. Abū Mikhnaf writes that it was called Maymūn,³⁸ while Akḥṭab Khawārizm believes that its name was al-Murtajiz.³⁹ The horse behaves like a human being and has even special attributes owing to its being the Prophet's horse.

Animals which behave like human beings, understand their thoughts, and speak their language are regarded in popular literature as bringing prosperity. These animals are friends to the man and they often save him from death, or at least courageously fight at the side of their master. Not only that: animals pray, fulfill commandments, and, as in the present case, are endowed with superior traits: they disclose secret wisdom and anticipate the future.⁴⁰

Sure enough, Ḥusayn's horse fought courageously at the side of his present master, as it had done with its former three masters, the Prophet, 'Alī and Ḥasan, and it anticipated what was to happen. Abū Mikhnaf writes: "When Ḥusayn arrived at Karbalā on the back of his horse, the animal stopped and would not move forwards though Ḥusayn spurred it to advance further." The authors of the *maqātil* wish thus to indicate that the horse knew as well as its master that Ḥusayn's fate was to be settled at Karbalā.

³⁸ Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqṭal*, p. 48.

³⁹ Khawārizm, *Maqṭal*, p. 38. The ancient Arabs would give their thoroughbred horses special names. In their stories of battles and heroism, Arabs glorify their horses and recount the heroic acts of these horses during the fights. Hishām ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ṣā'ib al-Kalbī has a long list of more than 100 names of horses and of their masters (*Ansāb al-khayl*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī, Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1946, p.129). As to the name Murtajiz, the writer Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥabīb al-Baghdādī points out that the horse of the Prophet was named Murtajiz, because of its harmonious neighing (*summiya bi-dhālika li-ḥusn ṣahīlihi*); see *Kitāb al-Munammaq fi akhbār Quraysh*, ed. Khurshid Aḥmad Fārūq, Beirut: 'Alam al-Kutub, 1985, p. 406. See also: 'Abū 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad ibn Ziyād al-A'rābī, *Asmā' khayl al-'arab wa-fursānihā*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Aḥmad, Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍa al-Miṣriyya, , 1984, p. 79; and also: Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab*, V, p. 305, s.v. "r j z".

⁴⁰ For details see: Dov Noy, *Forms and Designs in Popular Tales*, ed. by Edna Chichili, Jerusalem 1983, pp.102-103.

A similar story is told about the Prophet Muḥammad's camel: When Muḥammad emigrated from Mecca to Medina, people from each of the different clans in the region invited him to settle down with them. The Prophet said: "We shall let the camel free, and it will lead us." The camel made its way towards the clan of the son of Ibn al-Najjār, at Qubā', and there it knelt down. All the Prophet's efforts to make it advance further were in vain. At this place was built the first mosque.

And now, back to Ḥusayn's horse. Abū Mikhnaf quotes a tradition connected with 'Alī who said at the battle of Ṣiffīn (657), near Karbalā: "My son Ḥusayn will be killed at Karbalā, while being thirsty, and his horse will panic, will neigh and say: 'Disaster, disaster, woe onto the people who killed the Prophet's grandson!'"⁴¹

And indeed, when Ḥusayn was killed at the end of the battle, his horse began to neigh, leaping over the corpses of the killed fighters, one corpse after the other, until it reached Ḥusayn's body (*waqafa 'alā juthat al-Ḥusayn*). It collapsed on him, smeared its mane with Ḥusayn's blood and hid its head into the earth as a sign of grief at Ḥusayn's death. Then the horse started neighing so loudly that its whinny could be heard all over the desert. The commander of the Umayyad army, 'Umar ibn Sa'd, was amazed by the terrible sight before his eyes and shouted to his men: "Woe on you, bring it to me, this is a horse from the horses of Allāh's messenger."⁴² Some of the men approached the horse to catch it. But when the horse became aware of the danger, it began to kick about and to offer resistance, till it killed several warriors and caused many riders to tumble down from their mount. Every effort to catch it was in vain. After that, the horse again smeared its mane in Ḥusayn's blood, shedding tears like a human being.

And then, the horse galloped towards the tents of Ḥusayn's men. When they saw it and heard it neighing and crying, they understood that the horse was bringing them terrible news: the news of Ḥusayn's death. Then the horse left the men's tents, broke into a gallop towards the Euphrates that flowed nearby, and threw itself into the water.

Here, the authors of the *maqtal* draw a comparison between Ḥusayn's horse and the Prophet's ass, 'Afīr, which also killed itself after Muḥammad's death. When the ass became aware that its master, the Prophet, had died, it broke the rope that tethered it and started running till it reached a well belonging to his son Khuṭama, near Qubā'. It threw itself into the well, which became its tomb.

In this connection there is a tradition related to 'Alī, the Amīr of the Faithful, who said: "The ass 'Afīr talked with Allāh's messenger and said to him:

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqtal*, p. 45.

Forgiveness on my father and mother, and I was told by my father who heard it from his grandfather who heard it from his father, who was with Noah on his Ark, that Noah patted his back and said: ‘Among your offspring will be an ass which will be ridden by the Prophet, the last of the prophets. I praise God for myself being that ass.’”⁴³ Abū Mikhnaf says that Ḥusayn’s horse will rise from the dead on doomsday, when al-Mahdī (*ṣāhib al-zamān*) will come.⁴⁴ This might be connected with the Jewish concept of the resurrection that will take place on the day when the Messiah arrives, riding an ass.

IV. *Ḥusayn’s image: his character and personality*

IV.1. *Following the commandment of praying at the appointed time*

Maqātil literature stresses the fact that Ḥusayn and his followers are steadfast in their faith and frequently read from the Qur’ān.⁴⁵ Ḥusayn is described as praying regularly at the appointed time, despite difficult circumstances that often coincide with the time of prayer. Ḥusayn mostly led the prayers, and his followers stood behind him. But, even after he had been killed, his severed head went on reading portions and surahs from the Qur’ān.⁴⁶

The importance of keeping the appointed time for prayer is stressed in the Qur’ān. In Qur. 2:238, we find: “Observe that the five prayers be read at their time”; in Qur. 4:103: “Say your prayers in the form and at the time prescribed to the Faithful”. Qur’ān commentators insist upon punctuality in the observance of prayer times, especially the middle prayer. Let us also recall that a similar emphasis appears in the Talmud: “And said Rabbi Halbo A.R. Hona, one has always to be punctual for the Minha prayer [...]. Rabbi Johanan said the same for the evening prayer [...], and R. Bar Yizhak for the morning prayer” (*Blessings* 6).

Three of the four *maqātil* we are dealing with in the present work refer to the subject of prayer at the appointed time. The *maqṭal* Akḥṭab Khawārizm informs us that Ḥusayn and his followers read the Qur’ān and prayed during the first nine nights of the month of Muḥarram, in the year 61/680.⁴⁷ This is perhaps the place to note that modern Shī‘ites follow Ḥusayn and his supporters and have made their

⁴³ Abū Ja‘far ibn Ishāq al-Kulaynī, *Uṣūl al-kāfi*, I, p. 293.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 99.

⁴⁵ The commandment of keeping the time appointed for the prayer is an integral part of the faith. For details, see: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Kitāb Tafsīr al-khams mi‘at āya min al-Qur’ān al-Karīm*, ed. by Y. Goldfeld, Shfar‘am: Dār al-Mashriq, 1980, pp. 14-16.

⁴⁶ For details, see Ch. IV, The motif of the decapitated head, in Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, pp. 215-224.

⁴⁷ Akḥṭab Khawārizm, *Maqṭal*, p. 30.

customs the rule. They frequently read the Qur'ān and the *maqātil*, especially during the seven nights in the month of Muḥarram.

The Ibn Ṭāwūs *maqṭal* also mentions that Ḥusayn always kept the appointed time for prayer, never missing a prayer, and usually praying at the appointed time. Here is what it says:⁴⁸ When Ḥusayn was living in Mecca, before he went to Iraq, as soon as the time for prayer arrived, he prayed (apparently alone) at one of the two sacred places: *al-rukn wa-l-maqām*.⁴⁹

The Ibn Namā *maqṭal* does not speak of Ḥusayn's prayers because it is abridged, and concentrates only upon central events and motifs, as explained by the author himself in his introduction.

The Abū Mikhnaf *maqṭal*, however, assigns considerable space to Ḥusayn's prayers. The fact of keeping the appointed time for prayer finds its highest expression during the Karbalā campaign. Being already on his way to the battle, Ḥusayn faces the problem of praying in due time. Abū Mikhnaf says: When Ḥusayn encamped at al-Tha'labiyya, all of a sudden appeared before him a troop of 1000 horsemen from 'Umar ibn Sa'd's army, under the command of al-Ḥurr ibn Yazīd al-Riyāhī. Al-Ḥurr and his warriors were thirsty and asked Ḥusayn and his followers to give them some water. Ḥusayn granted this request and allowed them and their horses to drink their fill. By now it was the time of prayer. Ḥusayn got up and placed himself at the head of the worshippers, while both camps – his and his enemies' – stood behind him, praying.⁵⁰

Abū Mikhnaf tells us that after the battle had begun Ḥusayn asked his brother al-'Abbās to approach 'Umar ibn Sa'd, the commander of the Umayyad forces, to request him to defer the fight for one day so that Ḥusayn and his followers might pray and read the Qur'ān for one more night. Al-'Abbās's request was granted. Ibn Ṭāwūs adds that during all this night a buzzing like the buzzing of bees was heard from Ḥusayn's camp,⁵¹ as they read the Qur'ān and prayed.⁵²

After his brother al-'Abbās was killed, Ḥusayn urged his followers to break up and escape at night, but they refused. The next morning, Ḥusayn got up and said the morning prayer together with his supporters.⁵³ During the battle of Karbalā, it was

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

⁴⁹ Shihāb al-Dīn Yāqūt ibn 'Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-buldān*, Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 1399/1979, V, p. 163, s.v. "r k n".

⁵⁰ Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqṭal*, p. 40.

⁵¹ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 50.

⁵² The comparison between the voices of Ḥusayn and his followers, while praying and reading the Qur'ān, with the buzzing of bees recurs in all the *maqātil*. For details on this comparison, see Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, p. 222.

⁵³ Ibn Ṭāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 58.

once again time for prayer. Then Ḥusayn called the army of ‘Umar ibn Sa’d to interrupt the fighting, so that he and his followers might be able to pray. ‘Umar ibn Sa’d granted the request and ordered his men to temporarily cease fighting.⁵⁴

From all the above we infer that according to *maqātil* literature Ḥusayn was steadfast in his faith, followed the commandments of prayer at the time appointed by the Qur’ān, and did not defer the time of a prayer under any circumstances, even if this entailed the most grave complications.

IV.2. *Ḥusayn’s weeping*

Another trait of Ḥusayn that appears in the *maqātil* is his deep feeling, grief, and sensitivity. In several situations he sheds tears and even is overcome by sobbing. Here too we must compare Ḥusayn with the Prophet Muḥammad, weeping being one of the latter’s traits. Ibn al-Jawzī quotes several versions telling that the Prophet used to shed bitter tears. A study of these traditions shows us that the Prophet’s crying could stem from several causes: a) anxiety over the future of the Muslim people; b) act of grace to God for His multiple favours; c) supplication for God’s pity; d) sometimes, the Prophet’s crying expressed the longing of the lover for his beloved (*shawq al-ḥabib ilā ḥabibihi*).

The Prophet is reported to have said: “Alas God, turn my two eyes into crying eyes and make me appear in thy sight before the tears become blood and both become embers.”⁵⁵ We therefore see that crying is a permanent feature in the Prophet’s image, and since there is a great similarity between the characteristics of the Prophet and of his grandson Ḥusayn, the trait of crying appears likewise to be permanent in Ḥusayn.

The question is: in what circumstances and when does Ḥusayn weep? Authors of *maqātil* record some emotions and situations that Ḥusayn experienced at a given time which caused him to cry. Ḥusayn weeps for the first time when he decides to leave the Hijaz and go to Iraq. He visits his grandfather’s grave in Medina and sheds bitter tears there, as he knows the fate that awaits him.⁵⁶

Ḥusayn cries for the second time when his son, ‘Alī al-Akbar, asks for his permission to take part in the battle. Ḥusayn gives his consent⁵⁷ and tears flow from his eyes. Later he learns that his son has been killed by an arrow. Ḥusayn fills his hands with his son’s blood, tosses it towards heaven and cries.⁵⁸ The third time is

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 20.

⁵⁵ Abū al-Faraj ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ‘Abū al-Faraj Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Wafā bi-aḥwāl al-Muṣṭafā*, Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘āda, 1374/1955.

⁵⁶ Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqtal*, p. 15.

⁵⁷ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 35.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 84; see also p. 35.

when he hears that Ibn ‘Umar’s army has decided to kill him because they hate his father, ‘Alī.⁵⁹

Other occasions when Ḥusayn burst into tears are these: when his nephew al-Qāsim ibn al-Ḥasan asks for his permission to take part in the battle. He gives his consent and starts crying, since he knows that his nephew will be killed. Ḥusayn also sheds tears when he learns that one of his warriors fell in the battle,⁶⁰ and he weeps bitterly on hearing that his brother al-‘Abbās has been killed.⁶¹

The popular *maqātil* mention many more cases of crying than reported in the canonic literature. A study of the popular *maqatal* ascribed to al-Isfarāyīnī *Nūr al-‘ayn, fī mashhad al-Ḥusayn*,⁶² reveals the following circumstances of Ḥusayn’s crying: when his brother, al-‘Abbās fell,⁶³ when he failed to obtain drinking water from the river Euphrates,⁶⁴ when his son, al-Qāsim, was killed,⁶⁵ when he learns of the hostility of the second Calif, Yazīd, towards him;⁶⁶ when he reads the epistle of the people of Kūfa, inviting him to Kūfa;⁶⁷ when he comes to Karbalā and says: this is a land of grief and disaster;⁶⁸ when he fails to persuade Ibn ‘Umar to renounce the fighting,⁶⁹ when all his followers who took part in the battle are killed and he remains alone in the fight. In all these cases Ḥusayn burst into bitter tears.

IV.3. *Bynames given to Ḥusayn in maqātil literature*

The exceptional traits of Ḥusayn and the virtues ascribed to him find their expression in the multiple bynames or epithets that have been used by authors of *maqātil*. Ḥusayn is a central character of *maqātil* and most of them turn on his image. This image is endowed, as we saw above, with many sublime attributes, since he is a descendant of the Prophet and an imam continuing in his path. Because of these two facts, authors of the *maqātil* have given Ḥusayn several epithets

⁵⁹ Abū Mikhnaḥ, *Maqatal*, p. 85.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁶¹ Abū Mikhnaḥ, *Maqatal*, p. 66.

⁶² Abū Ishāq al-Isfarāyīnī, *Nūr al-‘ayn fī mashhad al-Ḥusayn*, Cairo: Maktabat Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī wa-awlādihī, 1374/1955³.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

reflecting the superlative traits which are related to the Prophet, as quoted in the sources.⁷⁰

A thorough investigation of the *maqātil* examined in the present research yields no less than 42 such appellations only some of which are mentioned here.⁷¹ By their means Shi‘ite authors refer to the following attributes and characteristics.⁷²

a) Ḥusayn’s consanguinity with the Prophet Muḥammad:

Ibn bint rasūl Allāh [the grandson of God’s messenger – 9]; ibn rasūl Allāh [son of God’s messenger – 6]; ibn bint al-nabī [the son of the Prophet’s daughter – 1]; ibn Fāṭima sayyidat al-nisā’ [the son of Fāṭima, lady of the women – 1]; thamarat fu’ād al-zahrā’ al-batūl [fruit of the heart and the love of the virgin - 1]; khāmis aṣḥāb al-kisā’ [the fifth of those who wore the Prophet’s cloak - 1]; ibn nabī Allāh [son of Allāh’s prophet – 2]; ibn khātām al-nabiyyīn [son of the last prophet]; shafī’ [son of the champion of the right – 1]; farkh al-rasūl [offspring of the messenger – 1]; mizāj mā’ al-rasūl [the messenger’s descendant – 1]; thamarat fu’ād al-rasūl [fruit of the messenger’s heart – 1]; salīl khatim al-nubuwwa [offspring of the last prophet – 1]; salīl al-hudā [offspring of him who goes the right way – 1].

b) Ḥusayn is an imam continuing in the path of his father ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, and he therefore is the leader and the guide of his people:

al-imām [6]; abū al-a’imma [the father of the imams – 1]; ibn ‘Alī al-murtaḍā [the son of ‘Alī in the will of God].

c) Ḥusayn was unjustly killed at Karbalā:

al-shahīd al-maḥlūm [martyr for God’s sake and unjustly fallen – 2]; Ḥusayn al-madhḥūh [Ḥusayn the slaughtered – 1]; abū ‘abd Allāh al-maqtūl [father of Allah’s servant who was maliciously killed]; ṣāḥib al-Ṭaf [name of the place where Ḥusayn was killed - 1]; al-farkh al-azhar al-maḥlūm [the offspring with a radiant face, the wronged].

d) Ḥusayn was killed as a martyr (*shahīd*) and he will gain a seat in Paradise:

⁷⁰ See Maḥmūd, Ayoub. “The excellence of Imam Ḥusayn in Sunni ḥadīth tradition”, *Al-Serat*, 12, (1986), pp. 58-70.

⁷¹ In modern Muslim literature, the number of Ḥusayn’s bynames reaches 70. For details, see for example: Tawfiq ‘Abū al-‘Alam, *al-Ḥusayn ibn ‘Alī*, Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1990, p.65; see also: *Tārikh Ahl al-Bayt naqtan ‘an al-a’imma al-Bāqir wa-l-Ṣādiq wa-l-Riḍā wa-l-‘Askarī ‘an ābā’ihim ‘alayhim al-salām*, ed. al-Sayyid Muḥammad Riḍā al-Ḥusaynī, Beirut: Mu’assasat Āl al-Bayt ‘alayhim al-salām li-ḥyā’ al-turāth, 1411/1940, p.132.

⁷² The number appearing alongside each byname shows the frequency of its appearance in the *maqātil* studied in this work.

al-shahīd [the martyr – 1]; sayyid shabāb ahl al-Janna [the master of the Paradise young – 3]; ibn sādāt al-shuhadā' [son of martyrs masters – 1]; al-shahīd al-mazlūm [the oppressor martyr]; al-sibṭ al-shahīd [the grandson (of the Prophet) martyr].

V. Heroic deeds and working of miracles

V.1. Feats of heroism displayed by Ḥusayn

Ḥusayn is described as being endowed with many powers, some of which are supernatural and were inherited from his father and his grandfather. These powers allow him to perform the heroic deeds reported in the *maqātil* and depicted as extraordinary; they are acts of a superhuman heroism, which exceed the power of man and bear a divine character. They are the supreme forces displayed by prophets, their heirs, and their descendants.

At the battle of Karbalā, Ḥusayn did not retreat before the enemy who exceeded his troops in numbers and in strength. He was not afraid of death. He is told to have leapt forth against the Umayyad camp and killed a great many horsemen, about 1500, during the first attack and as many in the second one. When the two camps, that of Ḥusayn and that of 'Umar ibn Sa'd met, Ḥusayn challenged any of Ibn Sa'd's horsemen to a duel; every horseman that came to fight him was killed. Ḥusayn went on fighting till he had killed a great many of them.⁷³

Later on, he was assaulted by 30,000 horsemen. He is told to have charged and pushed them away. They scattered and disbanded in all directions, like goats attacked by a wolf. Sometimes we find another comparison for the scattering of Ibn Sa'd's army; it is written that the enemies dispersed like a swarm of locusts,⁷⁴ so frightened were they by Ḥusayn.

When Ḥusayn's cousin, al-Qāsim ibn al-Ḥasan, cried out for help during the battle, Ḥusayn came running to save him and stood by him like a hawk. He saved him from the Umayyad army with the courage⁷⁵ and the heroism of a lion.⁷⁶ At the end of the battle, Ḥusayn fell and was killed only because he was pierced by a

⁷³ Ibn Tāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 66.

⁷⁴ Both mentioned comparisons recur throughout Muslim literature, and they are characteristic of the style. For details, see: Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, pp. 249-50.

⁷⁵ Abū Mukhnaf, *Maqṭal*, p.85. See also: Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 37 and Khawārizim, *Maqṭal*, p. 27.

⁷⁶ One of the names given to Ḥusayn's father, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, is "Ḥaydara", the lion, which emphasizes his heroism. Authors of the *maqātil* stress the similarity between Ḥusayn's and 'Alī's heroic behaviour.

three-headed poisoned arrow. Only then did he lose a large quantity of blood⁷⁷ and he collapsed. The *maqātil* report that 72 wounds by sword had been inflicted on his body.

In sum, authors of the *maqātil* attached a great importance to Ḥusayn's heroic behaviour at the battle of Karbalā. This heroism is displayed in multiple ways: Ḥusayn killed a large number of fighters from the Umayyad army; Ḥusayn leapt upon the enemy camp like a lion and a hawk and scattered the enemy warriors in all directions; Ḥusayn held on; he received 72 sword blows and was not killed; he was killed only when hit by a three-headed poisoned arrow.

Ḥusayn is not a hero because he is a powerful man with physical strength. He amazed the people around him because his heroism – like the heroism of his grandfather, the Prophet, his father, his brother Ḥasan and the other imams - did not derive from physical power but from the fact that something within him acted in a different way; in other words, Ḥusayn is a conduit of prophetic and divine revelation.

V.2. *Ḥusayn as a performer of miracles and wonders*

Maqātil literature describes Ḥusayn as a performer of miracles, looked upon by society as an ideal, since he was gifted by God with the power of working miracles, just like his grandfather and his father. He is defined as a saint performing miracles and wonders that are inaccessible to ordinary men. Allāh granted him this power in order to strengthen his trust and his faith in God and also the respect he enjoys among the people.

Miracles and wonders are phenomena characterizing the saints, and they embody Allāh's respect and esteem for these holy men. Some people assert that miracles and wonders help the saint to fulfill the commandments and are a proof of his integrity and righteousness.⁷⁸ Authors of the *maqātil* are eager to stress that Ḥusayn worked miracles and that he is the chosen man, because of his piety and his integrity. By attributing to Ḥusayn the gift of working miracles, they generate in the hearer/reader recognition of Ḥusayn's right to hold power as an Imam, a leader and a guide unto the community.

The miraculous deeds have many facets in *Maqātil* literature.

⁷⁷ The blood pouring from Ḥusayn's heart is comparable to water flowing from a gutter. For details, see for example Khawārizm, *Maqatal*, p. 38.

⁷⁸ For details, see: Šābir Muṣṭafā As'ad, "The Ziyārāt of 'Abd al-Ghanī ibn Ismā'il ibn 'Abd al-Ghanī an-Nābulī in Syria and the Land of Israel", in his work *al-Ḥaḡīqa wa-l-majāz fī riḡlat bilād al-Shām wa Miṣr wa-l-Hijāz*, Ms. Vienna (Fluegel 1269) MXT 712, diss., Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan 1957, pp. 23-24.

a) Most of Ḥusayn's miracles related in Muslim literature are aimed at saving him and his people, as seen in *al-faraj* literature, in *ba'da al-shidda* and in martyrology, where we find tales of miracles and wonders. Most of the events where Ḥusayn appears as the miracle worker revolve around salvation and deliverance.

b) In other cases, the miracle worked by Ḥusayn punishes the enemy. This happens when the enemy's cruelty increases and all hope for an improvement of his behaviour is lost; then God compensates Ḥusayn for the harsh realities of life. Ḥusayn is made to believe in the presence of secret forces that are able to save him from the calamity he faces, and the miracle occurs.

c) While some miracles are immediate and God answers Ḥusayn's call there and then, others happen only after several days or months.

a) *Miracles that bring salvation*

Sometimes we read stories of miracles that are not of a great importance, such as this: Ḥusayn's elder son, 'Alī (al-Akbar) longed for grapes when they were not in season. Ḥusayn struck with his hand a column of the mosque, produced from it grapes and bananas, fed his son and said: "God gives the saints more than they need."⁷⁹

At another occasion Ḥusayn camped under a dried-up palm tree. He spread out his rug under the tree, lifted his hand in prayer and muttered a few words. Suddenly the tree turned green, grew leaves and produced dates. The owner of the camel that Ḥusayn had hired was scared and said: "This is witchcraft!" but Ḥusayn answered: "Woe on you, this is no witchcraft, but an appeal from the Prophet's grandson that has been immediately answered!"⁸⁰

Sometimes the miracle is connected with real salvation. As recalled, one of the main difficulties faced by Ḥusayn and his army at the Karbalā battle was thirst.⁸¹ Several miracles are ascribed to Ḥusayn in this connection: Ḥusayn's son, 'Alī, performs feats of heroism, kills 120 horsemen, and returns from the battle with severe wounds. He goes to his father and tells him that his forces are weakened by an extreme thirst, adding: "If I could take only one gulp of water, I would be able to defeat the enemy."⁸² Ḥusayn wept and said: "Come near me and stick out your tongue." Ḥusayn sucked his tongue, gave him a ring and said: "Take this ring in

⁷⁹ Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr ibn Rustum al-Ṭabarī (al-ṣaghīr), *Dalā'il al-imāma*, Qum: Qism al-Dirāsāt al-Islamiyya, Mu'assasat al-Bi'tha, 1413/1993, p. 183.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

⁸¹ See Ch. IV, the Motif of thirst, in Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, pp. 211-14.

⁸² Khawārizm, *Maqatal*, p. 31.

your mouth and go back to fight.” And, behold – says Akḥṭab Khawārizm, ““Ali’s throat was wet, his thirst disappeared and he returned to the battle.”⁸³

Not only did Ḥusayn save his son from thirst, but also all his men. On one occasion, Ḥusayn called his followers and told them: “Whoever is thirsty, let him come to me.” All his warriors approached and he put his thumb into the hand of one of them. All of a sudden, water gushed from the hand and all of them drank to their heart’s content. The water was very tasty, with a savour unknown in this world.

This reminds us of the story of Moses and the Hebrews, when Moses made water gush from the rock to quench the thirst of his people. The manna and the quails that the Hebrews ate in the wilderness are similarly recalled by this other miracle: Ḥusayn’s men suffered from hunger during the battle and there was nothing for them to eat. Ḥusayn called out: “The table is laid,” and there appeared immediately a table laden with all kinds of food. Ḥusayn fed his men and also himself, and he quenched their thirst with drinks from Paradise.⁸⁴

b) *Miracles aiming at punishment*

In the *maqṭal* Abū Mikhnaf we find the following tradition: At the time of the battle of Karbalā a man called Jubayra al-Kalbī cursed Ḥusayn and challenged him to fight. Ḥusayn asked him what his name was, and he answered: Jubayra al-Kalbī. Thereupon Ḥusayn said: “Oh God, burn him in the fire of this world before he arrives at the fire of hell!”⁸⁵ The moment Ḥusayn had finished his plea, God answered it immediately. All of a sudden, Jubayra’s horse leapt forward and threw the rider into a ditch. He was severely wounded in the head and was burned at once. Ḥusayn’s followers exclaimed: “Allāh akbar” (Allāh is the greatest of all) and expressed their amazement at God’s immediate answer to Ḥusayn. Then a divine voice was heard from Heaven, saying to Ḥusayn: “God acceded to your request and blesses you.” ‘Umar ibn Sa’d’s army was stunned and frightened; they reacted by cursing, by scorn and abuse.⁸⁶ The authors of the *maqātil* considered this miracle a punishment of the enemy. This kind of miracle not only saved Ḥusayn from danger, it also led to disastrous consequences for those who had plotted against him and were duly punished. A fighter from ‘Umar ibn Sa’d’s army shot an arrow at Ḥusayn at a time when Ḥusayn was drinking water. The arrow hit him at the corner of his mouth and Ḥusayn cursed him and said to him: “Would that the Creator shall never more quench your thirst!”⁸⁷

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ al-Ṭabarī, *Dalā’il*, pp. 188-89.

⁸⁵ Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqṭal*, p. 62.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 63.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 94.

Another tradition, quoted in the Ibn Namā *maqṭal* is this: “Ḥusayn cursed a man named Muḥammad ibn al-Ash‘at, from ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d’s army (*bi-‘an yaj‘alahu allāh āyat^m li-aṣḥābihi*), asking the Creator to make an example of him for his fellow warriors. All of a sudden the man’s horse threw him. His foot got caught in the ring of his spur, and the horse kicked him and tore him into two pieces. Ibn Sa‘d’s army was amazed to see how quickly God answered Ḥusayn’s request.”⁸⁸

In all the miracles of this kind, Ḥusayn curses his enemies, especially those who cursed, scorned and abused him, and those who plotted against him. All of them are duly punished.

c) *Miracles that come to pass after a certain time*

Some of the miracles do not materialize on the spot but only a while later. When his nephew, Ibn Qāsim, was killed in the battle, Ḥusayn cursed ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d’s army and said: “Alas, my God, deprive them of rain and of blessing.” (*iḥbis ‘anhum qatr al-samā’ wa-ḥrimhum barakātika allāhumma fa-riqqhum*). One year later, God answered Ḥusayn’s request.⁸⁹

In another connection: Once Ḥusayn fell during a battle and a man called al-Kindī came up to him and took his helmet. Ḥusayn cursed him and said: “Would it be that your right arm be cut off and that on the Day of Judgement the Creator put you into the group of the oppressors.” When al-Kindī went home with Ḥusayn’s helmet his wife knew what had happened and she said to him: “You are no more my husband (*lasta anta ba‘l^m lī*) and I am no more your wife (*walā anā laka ahl*). I shall be no more with you under the same roof (*walā jumi‘tu anā wa-anta taḥta saqf wāḥid*).”⁹⁰ Al-Kindī became enraged and tried to slap his wife’s face; she edged away from him and his arm hit the door knob and was cut off at the elbow. The man lived in utter poverty till the end of his days.

Another tradition related in the Ibn Namā *maqṭal* tells that a man named Zar‘ā ibn ‘Abān ibn Dārim shot an arrow at Ḥusayn while the latter was drinking from a spring, and the arrow hit his gums. Ḥusayn cursed him, saying: “Alas, my God, let him die from thirst, and never forgive him!”⁹¹ Ibn Namā reports: a few days later, when Zar‘a woke up in the morning, he felt an intense heat in his belly and an extreme cold in his back. His folk tried to cool his front part with fans and put stoves behind him. But nothing changed, until his belly burst like a camel’s belly.

⁸⁸ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 33.

⁸⁹ Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqṭal*, p. 81.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

⁹¹ Ibn Namā, *Maqṭal*, p. 37.

Miracles of another sort quoted in the *maqātil* are connected with laws of nature. I refer to the weeping of the nature and of the whole creation over Ḥusayn's death.⁹² In this case the miracle happens when Ḥusayn has been already killed. The authors of the *maqātil* seemingly wish to prove that God is able to change the laws of nature when a saint is maliciously killed.

In other words, the authors of the *maqātil* try to highlight the fact that through Ḥusayn God performs miracles and wonders, during his life and after his death, just as He did with the prophets. Being a scion of the Prophet's family, Ḥusayn is gifted with attributes similar to those of the Prophet and the other Imams. One of these similarities is his capacity to work miracles and wonders.⁹³

VI. Similarities between Ḥusayn and Jesus Christ and John the Baptist

VI.1. Similarities between Ḥusayn and Jesus

One of the ways chosen by *maqātil* authors in their attempt to develop Ḥusayn's image into the image of a saint was to establish a similarity between him and Jesus the Nazarene.⁹⁴ The question is how to find an analogy between two historical personalities that seem so utterly different. Shi'ites establish a connection between Ḥusayn and Jesus because both of them are superior persons and model figures. According to the belief of the Shi'ites, the Imams - Ḥusayn being one of them - are the successors of the prophets. So they emphasize the continuity of revelation in the transmission of the *waṣīyya* (legacy) from one prophet to another and, after them, to the Imams, in an uninterrupted chain. The prophets in the chain are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muḥammad.

The *waṣīyya* was revealed to the Imams in a continuous chain through the "Aṣṣiyā'" (the heirs) of the prophets, these being Seth, 'Imrān, Shu'ayb, Zechariah,

⁹² For details on this miracle, see the motif of the weeping of nature over Ḥusayn's death, in Ch. IV, in Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, pp. 205-10.

⁹³ In Shi'ite literature of a literary mode exists called *Dalā'il al-Imāma*. It consists mainly in praise for the Imams, their virtues and attributes, the traits that distinguish them from ordinary people and, among other things, the miracles and wonders performed by each of them. For details, see Kohlberg, "The Shī'a", p. 15; Shadhān Ibn Jibrā'il, *Kitāb al-Faḍā'il*, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lāmī li-l-maṭbū'āt, 1988, pp. 65-85; Muḥammad ibn al-Nu'mān al-Akbarī al-Baghdādī (al-Shaykh al-Mufīd), *al-Irshād*, Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lāmī li-l-maṭbū'āt, 1410/1989³, pp. 249-51.

⁹⁴ On this subject see: Maḥmūd Ayoub, "Towards an Islamic Christology: An Image of Jesus in Early Shī'i Muslim Literature", *MW*, 66 (1976), pp. 163-88. Ayoub notes that the Shi'ites also develop a similarity between 'Alī and Jesus (p. 167). As evidence he cites in two Shi'ite treatises. The first is *Tuḥfat al-'uqūl 'an āl al-rasūl*, by Muḥammad al-Ḥasan ibn 'Alī ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Shu'ba al-Ḥarrānī, and the second is *al-Kāfi*, by Muḥammad ibn Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī (op. cit., p. 170).

‘Alī, and others. According to those sources, Jesus is considered the prophet who received the *waṣīyya* from Zechariah, just as Ḥusayn received the *waṣīyya* from his brother Ḥasan, who himself had been given it by his father ‘Alī, who was Muḥammed’s heir.

In a thorough examination of Jesus’s life-history in the New Testament, I discovered several common features of Jesus and Ḥusayn. The authors of the *maqātil*, who were influenced by stories from the life of Jesus, chose several events of his life and transplanted them into their chronicles, adapting them for their readers, and dressing them in Islamic Shi’ite garb. Thus they attributed to Ḥusayn the image of a saint, descending from a family of saints.

The similarity between Jesus and Ḥusayn is expressed in the following features:

- a) *The mother’s pregnancy and the birth.*
- b) *Supernatural forces and working of mirac’les.*
- c) *Premonition.*

Ḥusayn, like Jesus before him, knew exactly the day he would die.⁹⁵ Jesus, before he died, asked the women of Jerusalem to refrain from weeping for him and from smiting their cheeks as a sign of their grief.⁹⁶ Ḥusayn too asked his wives and sisters, before he launched his last attack on Karbalā, to refrain from weeping and from smiting their cheeks as a sign of grief after his death.

When Jesus was aware that the time for his death had come, he retired in solitude and prayed. He prayed to God that He reduce the duration of his punishment: “Oh my Father, if this cup not pass away from me, except I drink it, Thy will be done.”⁹⁷ Likewise did ḡusayn pray during the night before he was killed, as he knew that his last hour had come; he recited *ṣalāt al-khawf* (the prayer read in distress). When Jesus found himself in a difficult situation among his enemies, he said: “Thinkest thou that I cannot now pray to my Father and he shall presently give me more than twelve legions of angels ?”⁹⁸ The same also happened to Ḥusayn .

- d) *The kind of death*

It is written in the New Testament that the priests had promised to pay Judas Iscariot thirty pieces of silver if he pointed out at Jesus and delivered him into their

⁹⁵ *The New Testament*, Matthew, 26:18.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, Luke, 23:28.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, Matthew, 26:42.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, Matthew, 26:53.

hands.⁹⁹ It is also told in the *maqatil* that the Calif Yazīd promised a “*dara*” (ten thousands drachms) to any one who brought him Ḥusayn’s head.

When Jesus was caught by his enemies, they bound him, and one of them stood up and mocked him saying: “Save thy, if thou be the Son of God, save thyself!”¹⁰⁰ The same thing happened to Ḥusayn, when Shamar approached to cut off his head.¹⁰¹

At the hour of his death¹⁰² Jesus was thirsty, and so was also Ḥusayn. When his soul was leaving him, Ḥusayn said to his assassin: If you have to kill me, give me a gulp of water. But the assassin refused and mocked him, saying: In a few moments you will taste death, drop to drop.¹⁰³ Ḥusayn then, like Jesus, was to quench his thirst in heaven. Jesus would drink from the eternal cup, and Ḥusayn from a paradisiacal source.

Both were killed on a Friday and both were stabbed at their death. After Jesus’ death, his killers divided his clothes among themselves.¹⁰⁴ Likewise, when Ḥusayn was killed, his assassins shared out his clothing and his belongings.

e) *After the death*

When Jesus died, nature shook, there was darkness over all the earth, and the sun was darkened and the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom, and the earth did quake and the rocks rent.¹⁰⁵ Nature suffered the same disasters when Ḥusayn was killed. The heavens darkened, the sun was eclipsed for 40 days, the horizon reddened, and blood poured from the sky.¹⁰⁶

Jesus was crucified and died on a Friday and was resurrected three days later on a Sunday. He stayed on earth for 40 days and then went up to heaven, where he was seated on the right hand of God.¹⁰⁷ It is also told that Ḥusayn, after his death, was brought to the fifth heaven and was returned later to the earth in Karbalā, where he remained, not buried, for three days.¹⁰⁸

⁹⁹ Ibid., Matthew, 16:14.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., Matthew, 23:40.

¹⁰¹ Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqatal*, p. 94.

¹⁰² *The New Testament*, John, 19:28. See also Abū Mikhnaf, *Maqatal*, p. 99.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁰⁴ *The New Testament*, John, 19:34. See also Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, Mu’assasat al-Wafā’, Beirut 1983², vol. 44, p. 199; Ibn Tāwūs, *al-Lahūf*, p. 73.

¹⁰⁵ *The New Testament*, Luke, 23:44-45 and Matthew, 27:51.

¹⁰⁶ See Ch. IV, Motif of the nature weeping on Ḥusayn, in Sindawi, *The Maqātil*, pp. 205-210.

¹⁰⁷ *The New Testament*, Mark, 16:19.

¹⁰⁸ *Āyat Allāh* al-Shaykh al-Tustarī, *al-Khaṣā’iṣ al-ḥusayniyya*, ed. al-Sayyid Ja’far al-Ḥusaynī, Beirut: Dār al-Surūr, 1994, p. 37.

VI.2. *Between Ḥusayn and John the Baptist*

In addition to the similarities between Ḥusayn and Jesus, I also found common features between the image of Ḥusayn and that of John the Baptist, known in Islam as the Prophet Yaḥyā. These features are:

- a) The mother's pregnancy and the birth: God announced to Zechariah the birth of his son Yaḥyā (Qur. 7:19). The Prophet Muḥammad also announced to his daughter Fāṭima the impending birth of her son Ḥusayn. The pregnancy with John lasted six months, and the same was the case with Ḥusayn.¹⁰⁹
- b) Breastfeeding: Neither Yaḥyā nor Ḥusayn was breast-fed by their mothers. When John was born he was taken to heaven and received food from the rivers of paradise. As to Ḥusayn, he sucked food from his grandfather Muḥammad's thumb.¹¹⁰
- c) Naming of the newborn: Yaḥyā's name was chosen by God himself: "Oh, Zakariyyā, now we announce you the coming of a son, and his name will be Yaḥyā" (Qur. 5:19). Ḥusayn's name was given to him by the Prophet Muḥammad.
- d) Radiant face: John's face illuminated the house, and so too did Ḥusayn's face. Whoever sat in the same room with Ḥusayn saw the light shining from his face.¹¹¹
- e) Frequent weeping and weeping of heaven: Ḥusayn as well as John are described as regularly retiring in solitude and weeping. After their death, Heaven wept for them. The sky reddened after Yaḥyā's killing as a sign of grief and mourning, and the sun was red when it rose and set. A similar phenomenon occurred after Ḥusayn's killing.¹¹²
- f) The speaking head: The severed head of Yaḥyā speaks to Herod after its decapitation; similarly, Ḥusayn's head speaks to the Calif Yazīd.

Al-Mufīd relates in his book *al-Irshād* a tradition that he heard from Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynā who said: "We went on an expedition with Ḥusayn, and at every place where Ḥusayn camped, he recalled the killing of Yaḥyā and wondered how it happened that the head of Yaḥyā had been offered as a gift to a Hebrew whore". From this tradition it may be inferred that Ḥusayn is described as one who not only

¹⁰⁹ Ibn Namā, *Muthīr*, p. 5.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, XIV, pp. 180, 198.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 187-88.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, pp. 211, 215-216.

knew the bitter fate awaiting him, but also knew from the stories of the preceding prophets that his destiny would be like that of Yaḥyā.¹¹³

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SUMMARY

Authors of maqātil endeavour to arouse in their readers' hearts a sense of similarity of Ḥusayn's image with the images of the Prophet and of Ḥusayn's father, 'Alī, Ḥusayn is therefore defined as resembling his father and grandfather in his traits and in his behaviour, in his exterior appearance – his face and his beard, in his way of clothing, and his personal belongings. Maqātil authors make use of every possible means to attribute to Ḥusayn the exterior and interior characteristics of his grandfather. They seek thereby to show that Ḥusayn has the same characteristic attributes as his grandfather: his clothing, his garments, his turban, his sword, his horse, and his camel – all these had belonged to his grandfather and passed on to him by legacy. Since prophets and their scions are endowed with special traits, with signs and wonders, so all their belongings and the items they inherited from their ancestors are endowed with particular attributes and supernatural properties.

Besides, the Shi'ites believe that all objects, belongings, clothing, and arms bequeathed by the prophets to their heirs originate from Paradise. They were owned by the first prophet, Adam, and from him they descended into the hands of the last prophet, Muḥammad. He in turn bequeathed them to 'Alī, and from 'Alī they passed to the succeeding imams. We can therefore understand the excitement of the Umayyad army over Ḥusayn's body, their seeking to plunder his turban, his burnous, his sword, and his armour. They knew indeed that these items were highly valuable.

At the beginning of this article we noted the fashioning of Ḥusayn's image into a saint's image, characterized by the following features: miraculous birth to a virgin mother and predicted by special signs, superior traits throughout his life, and finally, a martyr's death. Authors of maqātil intend to bestow upon Ḥusayn the attributes of a saint by developing, among other things, a similarity between him and the historic figures of Jesus and of Yaḥyā (John the Baptist). Ḥusayn is like them in his virtues, his powers, his gift to work miracles, and also the tragic fate that befalls him.

¹¹³ For details, see al-Mufid, *al-Irshād*, p. 251.