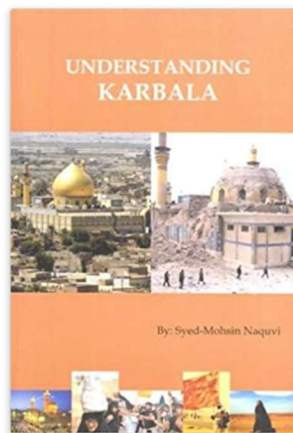


Book Reviewer: Ali Abbas – ali.abbas.q@gmail.com



Understanding Karbala Paperback – January 1, 2005

by Syed-Mohsin Naquvi (Author)

★★★★★ 1 rating

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The author in the book explores Karbala not just as a story or a historical event, but as a paradigm. The various episodes in the story of Karbala have been referred to in a fragmentary way at various places in the book. The author suggests that the reader be familiar with the story of Karbala prior to reading this book.

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Language

Publication date

His learning is that of wisdom, and I really appreciated the work that he had done

Over the years I have struggled to find an appropriate book that covers the tragedy of Karbala, especially as an introduction, in English. Running into 240+ pages, the book is "Understanding Karbala", by Syed Mohsin Naquvi, M.M.F Inc.

I endorse this book for the following reasons:

1. It penetrates the subject from the vantage point of how, sociologically, the Karbala paradigm has an appeal that goes beyond the ritualistic. It has inspired the Hezbollah of Lebanon and also the majority Shi'ite country Iran. As Hezbollah derives its inspiration from being distinctively Shi'i, it comes to the fore for its tenacity in dealing with the 2006 aggressive posturing of Israel.
2. In sequence, the treatment of a key critical concept from within the Holy Quran, "Leadership", as it unfolds in 2:124 is presented. This verse forms the basis of Leadership to those who are Just and a denial of this Grace from God to those who are un-just. As Shi'i Islam's upholding of Justice is exemplified by the tragedy of Karbala, while all other non-Shi'i actors who were contemporaries of al-Husayn (ع), decided to sit it out.
3. The book breaches the subject of Hajj, as it relates to migration but also pertinently as it related to moving from one particular faith state to another. Hajj exemplifies that sacrifice of Ibrahim's son, Ismail -- which was then ransomed with that of the sacrifice of al-Husayn (ع). Husayn (ع) is thus integrated into the cosmic cycle of being chosen, to deal with the Hajj, as a migration to a state that can only be attained with the Sacrifice. This is attested with the Quranic proclamation in Chapter 37, verses 103-107, where both Shi'i and Ahl al Sunna commentators project al-Husayn (ع) as the one who the ransom was directed to. While the book so far establishes the revelatory nature as expressed in the Quran, it establishes the

theological Self-Disclosure of keeping leadership within the prophetic household, for they are Just. This is a covenant, a solemn reflection of God's expectations from His creation.

4. After establishing the contextual relevance of the tragedy as it is related to the geopolitical affair, the theological basis for the event as it transcends time is presented. The book treats the subject of historicity as it records the tragedy. We have to keep in mind that this is where the Divine Will meets the human actors, al-Husayn (ع) and his band of 72 followers, and hence history also becomes Sacred. It is also here in a chapter where the sources are laid bare, and the strength of the work is in the citation of resources that are treated in the academic world (Mahmoud Ayub, S.H.M. Jafri, I.K.A Howard, Annemarie Schimmel, David Matthews, Wilfred Madelung).

5. The presentation finds itself presenting the varying perspectives of the struggle of al-Husayn (ع) and his tragic death. From the western historian, to the western admirer of the Ahl al-Bayt, to the maintainers of the status quo within the Islamic Polity, to philosophers and ethicists, it breaks down such perspectives with ample citation of their beliefs.

6. While the status quo maintained a quasi "spiritually materialistic" face, his struggle was seen as a mere "materialistic" endeavor, notwithstanding that al-Husayn (ع)'s own spiritual stature was thus conveniently ignored. Addressing thus the natural reaction, was al-Husayn (ع)'s struggle simply to attain "Material Power"? The author traces the development of Islamic Polity from the death of Muhammad through the time when Yazid was appointed by his father Muawiya to the throne. Muawiya fought battles with Ali, Hasan and his timely death brought Yazid to the fore. Such a historical sweep is critical to understanding how Husayn (ع)'s revolution was either appreciated or castigated.

7. Historical sources in the Arabic are treated at length. A particularly intriguing portion is the summation of the views held by Ibn Kathir at-Dimashqi (patron of Ibn Taymiya's thought). While this historical source is far removed in terms of the placement, other Arabic sources are identified that place it closer to the actual event, from historians like at-Tabari, al-Mufid, and other Maqatal works. By far, the book covers half of its content at this stage. Perhaps the least understood aspect are the rituals that have attended to the remembrance of the tragedy. as a means and as a vehicle to not only make every one participate, from a child, to the youth and the adults, male and female, but also to "inspire an understanding of the message and the vehicle" to the modern mind. Poetry is used as a vehicle for such remembrance, both in its original language, i.e. Arabic and other languages, Persian and Urdu.

This is a work that needs to be appreciated for the treatment of the themes, the breadth of scholarship that makes further research possible and in all honesty, a resource that ought to serve as a spiritual and educational tool for those who wish to understand this beautiful yet tragic event in history, it's beauty lies in al-Husayn (ع)'s willingness and resignation to God's Will and the beauty of Love that emanates from it

In conclusion, this work also fuses all available resources in the English language into a single narrative, by joining the historical to the ahistorical. It is equally for the lover of ideals imbued by Imam al-Husayn (ؓ)'s sacrifice, as it is for the academic or the lover of poetry or a critical historian. It should adorn every household, seeking to bridge the cultural gap between parents and their children, the Urdu speaking and those immersed in English-speaking cultures.

Wa ma-tawfiqi Illa-bilLah