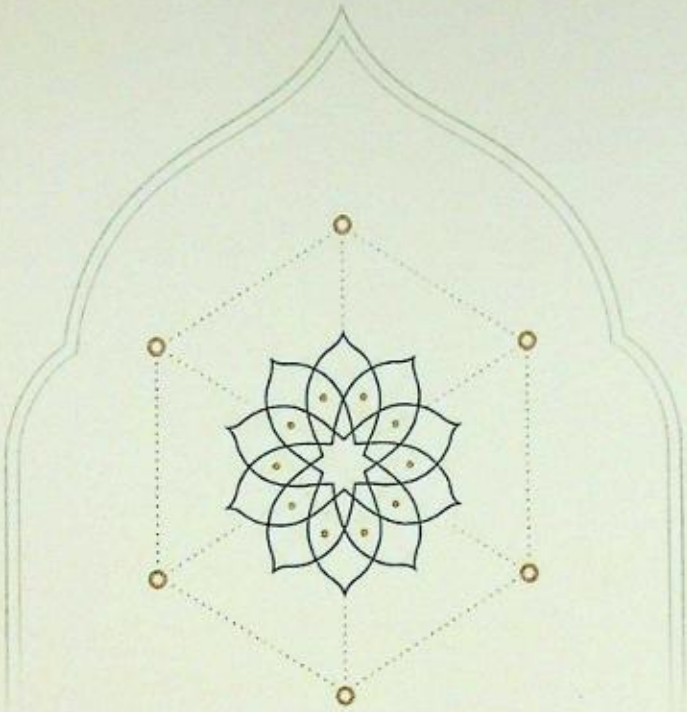


DAUGHTERS OF REVELATION

The Women of the Ahl al-Bayt

Fatima • Zaynab • Umm Kulthum • Sukayna • Fatima Masuma • Narjis

Dr Saiyed Ali Al-Razavi

They were remembered as daughters, sisters, mothers and mourners. But they were also witnesses, thinkers, survivors and custodians of a tradition.

Daughters of Revelation brings together the lives of six extraordinary women of the Ahl al-Bayt: **Fatima al-Zahra, Zaynab bint Ali, Umm Kulthum bint Ali, Sukayna bint al-Husayn, Fatima Masuma, and Narjis, mother of the Twelfth Imam.**

Across two and a half centuries, they lived through political upheaval, Karbala, captivity, persecution, disputed memory and the beginning of the Occultation. None held formal office. Yet each, in a different way, exercised lasting authority.

Drawing carefully on Shia and Sunni sources, historical chronicles, genealogies and literary records, Dr. Saiyed Ali Al-Razavi separates what can be established from what has been remembered, without diminishing the devotional tradition that preserved these women for generations.

The result is neither conventional hagiography nor detached scepticism, but a deeply respectful, intellectually honest exploration of the women who helped carry the legacy of the Ahl al-Bayt through some of its most dangerous years.

Their story is not only about what happened to them. It is about what they refused to let disappear.

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Daughters Of Revelation

The Women of the Ahl al-Bayt

Dr. Saiyed Ali Al-Razavi

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A NOTE ON NAMES AND HONORIFICS

Throughout this book, (PBUH) follows the name of the Prophet Muhammad, (AS) follows the names of the Imams, and (SA) follows the names of the women of the Ahl al-Bayt. These stand for salutations that Muslims say aloud when these names are spoken: peace be upon him, peace be upon them, peace be upon her. They are printed here in Latin characters rather than Arabic script so that the text stays readable to those unfamiliar with the convention, and unbroken to those who know it by heart.

Dates are given in the Hijri calendar first and the Common Era second, in the form 61 AH / 680 CE. Where only one is given, the context makes clear which is meant. Arabic terms are transliterated without diacritical marks, on the view that a reader who knows the words does not need them and a reader who does not will not be helped by them.

The family of the Prophet reused names across generations with a persistence that defeats casual reading. There are several women called Fatima in this book, and three or four women of one household answering to the name Umm Kulthum. Where confusion is likely I have added a patronymic, and Chapter 10 sets out the problem and the principle I have followed.

Introduction: The Half of the House Nobody Cites

Ask a room of Shia Muslims to name the women of the Ahl al-Bayt and you will get two answers immediately and then a pause.

Fatima (SA), of course. Zaynab (SA), certainly. After that it thins out fast. Somebody will say Sakina, meaning the child in Damascus. Somebody who has been to Qom will say Masuma. Umm Kulthum will surface as a name attached to an argument. Narjis (SA), if she comes up at all, comes up as a detail in the account of the twelfth Imam rather than as a person.

This is a strange situation for a tradition that defines itself by attachment to a household. Half of that household were women, and one of them was the Prophet's only surviving child, and the community that reveres them can name two.

This book is about six of them, across two hundred and fifty years, from the death of the Prophet (PBUH) to the disappearance of the twelfth Imam.

Two ways of getting this wrong

The existing literature fails these women in two directions, and the failures are so different that a book correcting one usually commits the other.

The first is the devotional flattening. In a great deal of writing, these women appear as arrangements of virtues rather than as people: patient, pure, obedient, sorrowful. The prose is warm and the effect is to make them uninteresting, because a person composed entirely of qualities has no situation, no constraints, and nothing to decide. Fatima (SA) becomes an emblem of purity rather than a woman who constructed a legal argument and delivered it to a hostile assembly.

Zaynab (SA) becomes a figure of endless grief rather than a political operator of considerable skill who converted a military annihilation into a permanent moral claim within eight weeks.

This kind of writing is produced by people who love them, which makes it harder to criticize and no less damaging. Reverence that removes the difficulty removes the achievement along with it.

The second failure is conscription. These women get recruited into contemporary arguments about how Muslim women should dress, work, speak and appear in public, by writers on every side, none of whom seem to have noticed that the six do not agree with one another. The conclusion of this book returns to that at length. For now it is enough to say that a tradition containing a woman who argued law in the mosque of Medina, a woman who presided over the literary life of a city for fifty years, a woman who withdrew from the world entirely and died of grief, and a woman who entered the household as a slave, is not a tradition that has settled these questions in advance for anybody.

What this book does instead

It treats them as people in situations, and it takes the sources seriously enough to say where they run out.

The argument running through all six lives is that each of them exercised a form of religious authority without holding any office that would have conferred it, and that the forms differ so much between them that the pattern is only visible when they are read together. Fatima (SA) argued. Zaynab (SA) testified. Sukayna (SA) judged. Fatima Masuma (SA) anchored an institution she never saw. Narjis (SA) preserved a line by concealing it. And Umm Kulthum (SA), whose chapters are about what the record does to a woman when nobody is collecting, shows what happens when none of that survives.

The book is organized in six parts, one for each woman, in chronological order: the claim, the witness, the disputed record, the survivor, the institution, and the vanishing point.

A word about who is not here. The obvious absence is Khadija (SA), and she is absent for a reason of structure rather than of standing. This book covers the two hundred and fifty years from the death of the Prophet (PBUH) to the disappearance of the twelfth Imam, and its subject is what the women of that household did once the household was under pressure from a state.

Khadija (SA) died before the migration, in a different situation entirely, and giving her a part of her own would have meant either distorting her to fit the arc or breaking the arc to fit her. She is treated at length in Chapter 2 instead, and readers will see there that the pattern this book traces begins with her: she held no office, she exercised the authority to confirm at the one moment when the whole thing could have ended, and she paid for the consequences for ten years. If this book had a seventh part, it would be hers, and it would come first.

Chapter 1 sets out the source landscape, which differs enormously between them, and the rules I have followed. Chapter 12, at the centre of the book, is the methodological argument on which everything else rests, and a reader who wants to know how the difficult material is handled before encountering it should read that chapter early.

A warning about three chapters

Three chapters in this book handle material that readers inside the Shia tradition may find uncomfortable, though not for the same reasons, and I would rather flag them here than have them come as an ambush.

Chapter 5 handles the events at the house in Medina. It sets out what the tradition holds about what was done at that door, states the grounds on which it holds it, shows how much of the surrounding scene the other tradition concedes in its own books, and says plainly that this book holds the tradition's account. What it does not do is pretend that historical method alone forces that conclusion, because it does not, and a reader told otherwise will be caught out the first time they meet a competent opponent.

Chapter 11 examines the reported marriage of Umm Kulthum (SA) to Umar ibn al-Khattab. It sets out four positions in their strongest forms, including the ones it does not accept, weighs the evidence, and arrives where the Shia tradition arrives, which is that the reports do not carry the weight placed on them. It contains findings that will surprise readers from both traditions, and the reason it looks at the material so closely is that a reader who has never seen it is defenceless.

Chapter 13 examines the relationship between the Sukayna of the early Arabic sources, who survived Karbala and lived until 117 AH, and the child of the Damascus mourning narrative who bears the same name. The source position is set out without softening.

What I want to say about all three, in advance, is that the discomfort is safe.

In none of them does the book give ground on anything the tradition actually holds, and in two of them it says so explicitly. What it declines to do is claim that historical method compels conclusions it does not compel. Chapter 12 explains at length why a tradition that can hold that distinction openly is considerably harder to unsettle than one that cannot. The devotional tradition is treated throughout as a serious thing doing serious work, not as a set of failed historical claims. Chapter 13 in particular argues that the mourning narrative should be recited and wept over, and should not be defended as documentary history, and that these two positions are compatible rather than a compromise between them.

Who this is for

Principally for Shia readers, and particularly those in the West, who know the names from the minbar and have never been shown the sources.

There is a specific reason for that focus. A young person raised on a version of the tradition in which every reported detail is certain, and who then encounters a competent hostile argument for the first time on the internet, tends not to conclude that one claim was overstated. They conclude that they were misled about everything. I have watched this happen. It is preventable, and preventing it requires giving people the difficult material from inside their own tradition, in a tone that is not defensive, before somebody else gives it to them in a tone that is.

t is also for readers outside the tradition, including Sunni readers, who will find that several of the arguments in this book rest on Sunni sources for Shia claims and on Shia sources for Sunni ones, because material preserved by the side it inconveniences is worth more in argument than material preserved by the side it flatters. Shia readers should understand that pattern for what it is. It is an instrument for arguing with people who do not accept your sources, not an admission that your sources need theirs. Chapter 1 sets this out properly.

And it is for anyone interested in how a religious tradition remembers, since these six lives happen to illustrate almost every way that memory can succeed and fail: preserved deliberately, lost through indifference, buried under a polemic, displaced by a devotional figure, anchored to a location, and dissolved entirely into competing names.

What I am not doing

I am not going to tell you what any of these women felt. The sources do not

contain interiority and I have declined to supply it, which makes parts of this book drier than a reader might wish and keeps it out of the large category of works that novelize and then present the result as biography.

I am not going to resolve the theological disputes between Sunni and Shia Islam. They appear here where they intersect with the lives, and I set out the strongest form of each position before responding, which is the least a reader is owed.

I am not writing from a position of neutrality and do not claim one. I hold the tradition whose sources I am examining. My reasoning is on the page precisely so that anyone who disagrees can see where to push.

And I am not adjudicating doctrine, though I do state where this book stands on the disputed episodes and why. There are two things going on in these pages and they need to be kept apart.

Most of the time the book reconstructs, working out what can be established from the surviving material without appeal to the tradition's own authorities, which is a narrower undertaking than a Shia reader may expect and produces a floor rather than a whole building. Where the tradition holds something on the authority of the Imams (AS), I say so, and I say that the book holds it too, and I mark clearly which of the two orders each sentence belongs to. What I never do is present the second as though it were a result of the first.

When this book says that something cannot be established, that sentence belongs to historical method and does not translate into a denial of what the Imams (AS) taught. Chapter 1 sets out the distinction and Chapter 12 sets out what the doctrinal register holds and why nothing here is in a position to overturn it. A reader who wants that argument before the difficult chapters should read those two sections first.

And I am not going to pretend that this book recovers all six. It does not. One of them is beyond recovery and the chapters bearing her name say so.

Beginning

The six women in these pages lived through the collapse of a succession, a civil war, a massacre, the sacking of Medina, two centuries of surveillance, and the disappearance of the figure their tradition was organized around. Not one of them held an office. Most of them lost.

They also argued a case in the mosque of Medina, indicted a caliph in his own throne room, saved the line of the imamate by lying across a sick young man, ran the literary life of a city for five decades, gave a provincial town a future that reaches into the present, and concealed a child from a state that was looking for him.

That is a considerably better story than the one usually told, and it has the additional merit of being closer to what the sources actually say.

We begin with the sources themselves, because everything else depends on knowing what they are.

CHAPTER 1: What We Actually Know, and How We Know It

Nobody wrote any of this down at the time.

That is the single most important fact about the material in this book and it is the one most readers have never been told. There are no archives from seventh-century Medina. There are no birth registers, no court records, no letters preserved in the hand of anyone in these pages, no contemporary chronicle, no inscriptions naming any of these women, and no archaeology that speaks to their lives. What there is, in every case, is a body of reports written down between one and five centuries after the events they describe, by people working within traditions that had their own purposes.

This chapter explains what those traditions were, what each of them is good for, and what the source situation looks like for each of the six women. It is the least dramatic chapter in the book and it is the one that makes the rest of it usable. A reader who understands the shape of the evidence can weigh what follows. A reader who does not will be at the mercy of whoever writes most confidently.

The kinds of books this material lives in

Early Islamic writing is not one thing, and the differences between genres matter more than the differences between authors.

The hadith collections came first in prestige and are the most rigorously assembled. On the Sunni side the major compilations were completed in the third century: al-Bukhari died in 256 AH, Muslim in 261, and the compilers of the Sunan works within a few decades of them. On the Shia side the four foundational collections run later, from al-Kulayni, who died in 329, through al-Saduq in 381 to al-Tusi in 460. Both traditions developed elaborate machinery for evaluating

the chains of transmitters behind each report. Both were assembling material principally for religious and legal use, which shapes what they collected.

The biographical and prosopographical literature exists to serve that machinery. Ibn Sad, who died in 230, produced the great compilation of generations. The dictionaries of transmitters that followed catalogue tens of thousands of people, with the specific aim of establishing whether a given person could be relied upon. This literature is astonishingly rich about anyone who transmitted reports and nearly silent about everyone else, a point Chapter 10 develops at length.

Historical writing proper is a separate enterprise with looser standards, and the looseness is deliberate. Al-Tabari, who died in 310, assembled an enormous chronicle from earlier sources and stated plainly that he was reporting what had been transmitted to him rather than vouching for it. For Karbala he drew on Abu Mikhnaf, a Kufan of the second century, whose own work survives mainly through this transmission. Al-Baladhuri, who died in 279, compiled a great genealogical history that preserves a good deal of politically awkward material, some of it used in Chapter 5. Historians of this period considered it their job to preserve variants rather than to adjudicate between them, which is frustrating and also fortunate.

Genealogy is its own discipline, practised by specialists, and it is the reason we know as much as we do about the women of this family. Genealogy records marriages, births and deaths because that is its subject, and it is largely indifferent to character or achievement. Most of what survives about Umm Kulthum (SA) is genealogical.

Literary and courtly writing, the adab tradition, preserves material nobody else was interested in. Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur, who died in 280, compiled an anthology of women's eloquence which carries the sermon of Chapter 4 and both of the sermons of Chapter 8. Al-Isfahani, who died in 356, assembled the vast Book of Songs, which is the principal source for Chapter 15, and also wrote a book on the killings of the Talibids. This literature is not rigorous and does not claim to be. It is also, because its interests were secular, sometimes the only place a woman appears as a person rather than as a link in a chain.

Local history and the maqtal literature fill in the rest. The Tarikh-i Qom, compiled in the late fourth century, is the anchor for Chapters 16 and 17. The mourning literature for Karbala runs from Abu Mikhnaf's material through al-Mufid in the fifth century to Ibn Tawus in the seventh, growing in detail as it goes, which is itself a finding.

And at the far end sits the encyclopedic compilation, above all al-Majlisi's Bihar al-Anwar, completed at the end of the eleventh century of the Hijra. It is indispensable and it is not a filter. Al-Majlisi gathered what he could find, including a great deal that earlier and more sceptical scholars had passed over, and a report's presence in his collection tells you that it existed, not that it was accepted.

What the chain system can and cannot do

The isnad, the chain of transmitters attached to a report, is the most impressive intellectual instrument the early Muslim scholarly tradition produced, and it is routinely misunderstood in both directions.

What it does is establish whether a specific report was plausibly carried from A to B to C by people who were in the right places at the right times and whom the tradition regarded as reliable. Applied seriously, over a large corpus, it filters out an enormous quantity of material. No comparable system existed anywhere else in the medieval world.

What it cannot do is verify that the first person in the chain reported accurately. A perfect chain back to an eyewitness establishes that the eyewitness said it. Whether the eyewitness was mistaken, or was repeating something they had heard, or had a reason to shade it, is outside the system's reach.

Nor was it applied uniformly. The rigour reserved for legal and creedal reports was consciously relaxed for historical narrative, for material encouraging voluntary acts of devotion, and for edifying stories. This is not a scandal; both traditions state the principle openly. But it means that a report about the events of 61 AH has generally passed through a much coarser sieve than a report about the rules of ablution, and readers who assume otherwise will overestimate the material badly.

Finally, the Sunni and Shia sciences of transmitter evaluation are related but distinct, and they sometimes assess the same individual very differently, partly because sectarian affiliation itself entered the criteria. A report can be sound by one tradition's standards and rejected by the other's without either side being unreasonable by its own lights.

How this tradition knows these women

Everything above describes how a historian works. Before setting out the rules this book follows, I have to say plainly that this is not how the Shia tradition primarily

knows the six women in these pages, and that the difference is not a detail.

Historical method reconstructs. It gathers surviving traces, weighs them against each other, asks who made them and why, and arrives at a probability. It is a method built for a situation in which no reliable witness is available, which is the ordinary situation of the past.

The Shia tradition is not in that situation, on its own account. It holds that the household of the Prophet (PBUH) continued for two and a half centuries in the persons of the Imams (AS), that they possessed the knowledge of what had happened to their own family, and that what they reported about it was reliable in a way that does not depend on the ordinary machinery of chains and corroboration. A report from Jafar al-Sadiq (AS) about his great-great-grandmother is not, within the tradition, a late source about an early event. It is testimony from a person the tradition holds to be protected from error, transmitted through a school that existed to preserve exactly that.

So there are two evidentiary orders in play whenever anyone discusses these women, and they are not competing versions of the same thing.

The first is transmitted authority. Its question is what the Imams (AS) said, and its standard is whether the report reaches them soundly. Once that is established, the content is settled, because the authority of the speaker is a doctrinal commitment and not an inference from probability.

The second is historical reconstruction. Its question is what an observer without access to that authority could establish from the surviving material. Its standard is evidence, and its conclusions are always provisional.

This book works mostly in the second order, and it needs stating rather than being allowed to operate silently, because a reader who does not notice it will misread a great many sentences. There are places, and Chapters 3, 5 and 11 are the main ones, where the tradition holds something on the authority of the Imams (AS) and this book holds it too. At those points I say so, and I mark which order the sentence belongs to, and I do not pretend that the second order got me there.

In particular, when this book says that something cannot be established, that is a sentence in the second order and it does not translate into the first. The historian's cannot be established is not the believer's did not happen. It means: from the surviving material, working without the tradition's own authorities as authorities, this is as far as the evidence reaches. A reader who holds the tradition

is not being asked to abandon what the Imams (AS) reported because a historian cannot independently corroborate it. Nobody could independently corroborate most of what any of us believe about our own grandparents.

What the second order is good for is this. It shows what can be defended without appeal to authority, which matters enormously when the person you are talking to does not accept the authority. It identifies where the tradition's picture has grown, which is worth knowing about one's own inheritance. And it establishes a floor: a set of things about these women that stand up on any account, held by anyone, from any starting point. That floor turns out to be much higher than most readers expect, and building it is a large part of what this book is for.

It is a floor. It is not a ceiling, and it was never meant to be the whole building.

Why Sunni sources appear so often

One consequence of the above needs its own paragraph, because it will otherwise look like something it is not.

This book cites Bukhari, Muslim, al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari and Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur constantly, and often at moments where a Shia source says the same thing. A reader could reasonably conclude that I regard Sunni attestation as the standard against which Shia material is measured. I do not, and it is worth saying why the pattern exists.

A report is most persuasive to the person who least wants to believe it. That is a fact about argument, not about the report. When a claim about Fatima (SA) can be shown to sit inside the collections of the tradition that has the least reason to preserve it, the claim becomes usable in a conversation with someone who accepts nothing from the Shia corpus. That is a rhetorical instrument, and this book uses it heavily because it is written partly for readers who will have to conduct exactly those conversations.

What does not follow is that Shia transmission is weaker, or that a report is improved by appearing in Bukhari. Within the tradition, al-Kafi and the works of al-Saduq and al-Tusi are the primary channel, and the material they carry about these women is fuller and closer to the household than anything in the Sunni collections. When this book reaches for the other tradition's books, it is reaching for common ground, not for validation. The distinction matters, and Chapter 12 returns to it.

Six women, six situations

The source position differs so sharply across these six lives that a single method applied uniformly would be useless. Here is what each chapter is working with.

For Fatima (SA), the material is comparatively abundant and comparatively polarized. Both canons preserve substantial reports about her, including material each tradition might have preferred to lose, and the striking thing is how much they agree on. Where they diverge is on three or four specific episodes clustered in the months after her father's death, and those episodes carry the entire weight of the sectarian dispute. Parts of her file are among the best attested in this book. Parts of it are among the most contested, and the two are not the same parts.

For Zaynab (SA), the position is peculiar. We have remarkable material for about eight weeks of her life and almost nothing for the other fifty-five years. Her sermons are preserved, both of them in a third-century literary anthology with no devotional stake, and in fuller versions in later works. The scene at the court is corroborated in general outline from outside the tradition. Her biography before 61 AH has to be reconstructed from what we know of her household, and after 62 AH it collapses into three competing graves.

For Umm Kulthum (SA), we have a genealogical entry, a marriage that generated a library, and very little else. Compounding this is a naming problem severe enough that the number of women being described cannot be established with confidence. She is the case where the sources fail most completely, which is why she occupies the middle of the book rather than a footnote.

For Sukayna (SA), the position inverts everything. She is the least present in devotional literature and by far the best documented as a person, because she lived a long and public life in a city whose social world the literary sources recorded in detail. We know what she said at dinner and whose poetry she preferred. We know this from books written by men who were interested in poetry and gossip, and who therefore recorded a woman rather than a symbol.

For Fatima Masuma (SA), we have a single well-focused local source written about a hundred and seventy years after her death by people whose town it was, plus the physical continuity of a site that has been maintained ever since. The life is short and thinly recorded. The location is the one thing in this book that nobody disputes.

For Narjis (SA), we have half a dozen names, a single elaborate narrative that

appears late and rests on one strand of transmission, and an earlier and much barer layer that contains only a birth and a witness. She is the least recoverable person in these pages and the one on whom the most rests.

The rules I have followed

Given all that, here is how this book proceeds. The reasoning behind these rules is set out at length in Chapter 12; the rules themselves are simple.

Earlier is better than later, and where a claim appears only in sources centuries after the event I say so.

Incidental attestation beats direct assertion. A jurist relying on a fact while arguing about something else is a better witness than a partisan asserting it.

Material that embarrasses the tradition preserving it carries extra weight, which is why several arguments in this book rest on Sunni collections for Shia claims and on Shia collections for Sunni ones.

Where the evidence runs out, I say that it has run out, rather than continuing in the same tone of voice.

The opposing case is given in the strongest form I can construct before I respond to it. A position that only appears in this book as a target is a position the reader cannot evaluate.

And historical, doctrinal and devotional claims are kept apart, because they answer to different standards and confusing them damages all three. This distinction runs through the whole book and is set out fully in Chapter 12.

What this book is not

Three disclaimers, briefly.

This is not a work of hadith criticism. I have not re-examined chains, and where I report that a chain is weak or contested I am relying on scholars who have done that work. A specialist will find nothing new here in that department.

This is not a devotional book, though I hope a devout reader can use it. It is not written to produce tears, though there are half a dozen places where I have stopped the analysis and tried to let the reader see what these lives actually looked

like, and it will occasionally say things that a majlis would not.

And it is not neutral. I write from inside the Shia tradition and the reader should assume I have the sympathies that implies. I have tried to make the reasoning visible enough that anyone who disagrees can see exactly where to push, which seems to me more useful than a claim of detachment that nobody would believe.

With that, we can begin, in a house in Mecca, with a girl who was born into the new religion rather than converting to it, whose age nobody recorded, and who lost her mother at a point in a childhood we cannot date.

PART ONE · THE CLAIM

Fatima al-Zahra

Medina, 11 AH

CHAPTER 2: The Daughter Who Was the House

We do not know how old she was when she died.

This is not a small gap and it is not the kind of thing a book should slide past in its opening pages, so let us take it directly. The Shia tradition generally places Fatima's (SA) birth in the fifth year after her father received the first revelation, which would make her around eighteen at her death. Much of the Sunni tradition places it around five years before the revelation, in the period of the rebuilding of the Kaaba, which would make her around twenty-eight or twenty-nine. Between those two figures lies a decade, and a decade is the difference between a girl and a woman with a settled adult life behind her.

Neither figure can be checked. Arabia in the early seventh century did not register births. Dates were reconstructed backwards, decades later, by relating a person's birth to a remembered public event, and the events chosen differ between the traditions in ways that are not innocent, because the age at which she died shapes how the reader pictures the woman standing in the mosque in Chapter 4. The younger reading gives a teenager confronting the leadership of the community. The older gives a mature woman of nearly thirty. Both traditions had reasons to prefer their own picture.

I raise it here rather than burying it in a note because it establishes the terms of everything that follows. This is a life we can describe in outline and in episode, with confidence about its shape and very little about its measurements. Anyone who offers you precise dates for Fatima (SA) is reporting a tradition, not a record.

Khadija's house

What can be said with confidence is where she started.

She was the youngest child of the household of Muhammad (PBUH) and Khadija (SA), and that household was not a poor one. Her mother was a merchant of standing in Mecca and was also the first human being to accept the message, which means that Fatima (SA) grew up inside a house where the new religion was not a controversy to be navigated but simply the condition of family life. Her mother had believed before there was anything to belong to.

That matters for what the child became. She did not convert. There was no moment of decision for her, no before and after. She is one of the very few people in the first generation of Muslims of whom this is true, and the tradition's later insistence on her particular purity has this ordinary biographical fact underneath it.

The house held other daughters, and here a point of housekeeping is needed, since readers of Shia and Sunni literature will encounter different accounts. The majority position across both traditions is that Muhammad (PBUH) and Khadija (SA) had four daughters: Zaynab, Ruqayya, Umm Kulthum and Fatima (SA). A minority current within Shia writing has argued that the elder three were Khadija's nieces or stepdaughters, raised in the house rather than born into it. The evidence for that revision is thin and it has never been the mainstream Shia view. I note it because you will meet it, and set it aside.

Of the four, only Fatima (SA) outlived her father, and only by months.

The first believer

Khadija (SA) deserves considerably more than the sentence in which most accounts of her daughter dispose of her, and since this book is about women of the household who exercised authority without office, she has a claim to be the first of them.

She was a merchant of Mecca in her own right, with capital, agents and caravans running north into Syria. In a commercial town that lived on the two seasonal trading journeys, this made her a person of standing, and the sources treat her that way without any sense of anomaly. She had been married twice before and was widowed, and she was managing the business herself.

Muhammad (PBUH) came into her employment. That is the order of events, and it inverts the arrangement most readers assume. He worked for her, on a journey she financed, and the report she received afterwards from the man she had sent with him is what prompted what came next.

The proposal was hers. The sources have her sending an intermediary to sound him out rather than waiting to be approached, and the marriage followed. He was around twenty-five. Her age is given as forty in the familiar reports and as twenty-eight in others, and as with the birth date of her daughter in the opening of this chapter, the tradition does not actually know. What is not disputed is the direction of the initiative.

For the next fifteen years, before anything happened on the mountain, they were a household of some prosperity in a prosperous town, with sons who died small and four daughters who lived.

Then, when she was around fifty-five, her husband came home shaking.

What she did next is the reason she belongs in this book.

The tradition preserves the scene closely and both branches of it agree on the essentials. He came back from the cave in a state, asked to be covered, and told her he feared for himself. She did not tell him he was mistaken and she did not tell him to rest. She told him that God would not disgrace him, and she gave her reasons, and the reasons are a list of his conduct: that he maintained his relatives, carried the burdens of the weak, gave to the destitute, honoured the guest and helped those struck by calamity. Then she took him to her cousin Waraqa, an old man of Christian learning, to have the experience identified.

Read that as a devotional scene and it is a wife comforting her husband. Read it as an argument and it is something considerably more interesting.

She is reasoning from character to authenticity. Her case is not that the vision felt true or that she trusts him in a general way. It is that a man whose life has this particular shape is not a man whom God abandons to delusion, and therefore the experience is what it appears to be. That is a piece of inference, made under pressure, in the first hour, by the only person present, and the entire subsequent history of Islam runs through her getting it right.

And then she acted on it. She believed him, which the tradition marks as the first act of Islam by anyone. She took him to be assessed by someone with the learning to assess it. And she spent the next decade paying for the consequences.

That last part is not a metaphor. The wealth she had built was consumed by the mission. It supported a household that had lost its commercial standing as the town turned against it, it supported converts without protection, and it went into the three years in the ravine described below, where the money bought what food

could be smuggled in. She entered the boycott a wealthy woman in her sixties and did not come out of it a wealthy woman, or in any real sense come out of it at all.

The Prophet (PBUH) took no other wife while she lived, in a society where that required no explanation and would have attracted none. Years after her death, in Medina, Aisha is reported as saying that she was never jealous of any of his wives as she was of Khadija (SA), whom she had never met, because of how often he spoke of her. That report is in Bukhari, and like the material discussed later in this chapter it is preserved by people with no interest in enlarging her.

So set her beside the six women of this book and the pattern is already complete before the book begins.

She held no office; there was no office to hold, since the religion did not yet exist as an institution. She exercised authority of a specific and identifiable kind, which was the authority to confirm. At the one moment when the whole thing could have ended in a frightened man deciding he was ill, the person who determined otherwise was a woman, and she determined it by argument rather than by feeling. She then underwrote it financially for ten years. Fatima (SA) arguing law in the mosque, Zaynab (SA) prosecuting a caliph in his court, is a pattern that starts in a house in Mecca with a merchant telling her husband why she thought he was right.

She died in the tenth year of the mission, at around sixty-five, having lived to see the boycott end and not much else. She was buried at al-Hajun outside Mecca, in the cemetery now called al-Mualla, and the monument over her grave was removed in the same campaign that levelled the tombs at al-Baqi in the 1920s. So the first Muslim, like most of the six women in this book, lies in a place her community can visit and cannot mark.

Three years in the ravine

When she was somewhere between an infant and a girl of about fourteen, depending on which of the two chronologies at the head of this chapter you accept, Mecca tried to starve her family out.

The Quraysh had found that persecution of individual Muslims was not working, in part because the clan system protected converts of good family. So they attacked the clan instead. A document was drawn up and hung in the Kaaba: no marriage with the Banu Hashim, no trade with them, no social contact of any kind, until they surrendered Muhammad (PBUH). The clan withdrew, or was

driven, into a ravine outside the city, and stayed there for something close to three years.

The reports of that period are consistent about hunger. Food came in when sympathizers smuggled it, which some did at risk. Children ate leaves. The sound of infants crying from the ravine is one of the details the sources preserve, and it is the kind of detail that survives because someone remembered being ashamed of hearing it.

This is Fatima's (SA) childhood, on either chronology. Not a period she read about later; the thing itself, for years, at an age when a person is being assembled. It is worth holding on to when we reach her willingness, in her twenties or her teens, to stand in a mosque and tell the assembled leadership of the community what they had been before her father came. She had a very particular knowledge of what that community had been prepared to do.

The year everything went

The boycott collapsed and the family came out. Within roughly a year, Khadija (SA) was dead, and so was Abu Talib, the uncle whose protection had made the Prophet's survival in Mecca possible.

The tradition calls it the Year of Sorrow, and the naming is not sentimental. The two deaths removed, in quick succession, the emotional centre of the Prophet's life and the political shield around it. The persecution intensified immediately, because it now could. This is the year of the failed journey to Taif, where he was driven out with stones and returned bleeding to a city that no longer had a place for him.

Fatima (SA) is now the youngest person in a house that has lost its mother, watching her father come home from a city that despises him.

And this, according to the tradition, is where the title comes from.

She is called Umm Abiha, the mother of her father. Titles in this literature are usually honorific decoration and can be read past. This one is a description of a specific arrangement in a specific house at a specific time, and it inverts the thing it names. A child who has just lost her mother becomes the person who tends the parent. The reversal is the point of the title, and it is not presented as charming. It is presented as what happened after Khadija died and somebody had to hold the household together.

The courtyard of the Kaaba

There is one episode from these years that both traditions record, and it is worth reading closely because it shows the relationship in operation rather than in praise.

The Prophet (PBUH) was praying in the precinct of the Kaaba. A group of Quraysh, having discussed it beforehand, sent one of their number to fetch the entrails of a slaughtered camel, and it was thrown across his back while he was in prostration. He did not move. The men laughed until, in the narrator's telling, they were falling against one another.

Then Fatima (SA) arrived. She was a girl. She removed the filth from her father's back, and then she turned and cursed the men who had done it.

The report is in Bukhari, transmitted from Ibn Masud, who says he was standing there watching and did nothing. That last part is why the story is credible: it is preserved in the words of a man who admits he had been a spectator to something a child put right.

Read it as the tradition presents it, and it is a story about a daughter's devotion. Read it as a scene, and something more particular is going on. The Prophet (PBUH) holds his prostration and absorbs the humiliation without response, which is the discipline of his mission in Mecca. The child does not. She acts, and then she speaks against the perpetrators by name. The division of labour in that courtyard, the one who endures and the one who names the wrong aloud, is the same division of labour that will appear in the mosque of Medina fifteen years later, and again at Karbala fifty years after that.

The women of this family speak when the men are constrained from speaking. It is a pattern, and it starts here.

North

The Prophet (PBUH) left for Medina in 622 CE with Abu Bakr, leaving Ali (AS) behind in his bed to cover the departure and to settle debts and return deposits held on his behalf. Fatima (SA) did not travel with her father.

She came afterwards, in a small party that the sources call the caravan of the Fawatim, the group of women named Fatima, escorted north by Ali (AS). Accounts

differ on the detail and one report has them pursued and confronted on the road. What is agreed is that the daughter of a man now under sentence in Mecca made the journey out of the city separately, and arrived in a settlement where her family had no property, no standing beyond her father's, and a great many new obligations.

She was, by either chronology, young. She had lived through a boycott, her mother's death, her father's public humiliation, and now displacement. The Medina she arrived in was not yet a Muslim city; it was a city with a Muslim faction, a large Jewish population, and two Arab tribes with a history of killing each other. The security that we retrospectively read into the hijra was not visible from inside it.

The marriage

She was married to Ali (AS) in the second year after the migration, shortly after Badr.

The reports agree that other men had asked and been declined, and that when Ali (AS) came he had almost nothing to offer. The dower was raised by selling his armour. The furnishing of the house is listed in the sources in a way that reads as deliberate: a sheepskin, a water skin, a hand mill, a pillow stuffed with palm fibre. The list survives because it was understood to be making a point about what the Prophet's daughter was permitted to expect.

Pause on the scale of what is being described. Almost everything that Shia Islam consists of, doctrinally and devotionally, descends through the marriage of two people in a bare room in Medina in the year 624.

The household

The sources give us more of this marriage than they give us of almost any other in the period, and a book that reduces it to a list of furniture has wasted the material.

Start with the division of labour, since it is reported and since it is put to a great deal of modern use. The account has the Prophet (PBUH) settling the arrangement between them: the work inside the house to her, the work outside it to him. Both are reported as content with it, and she is reported as saying that only God knew how pleased she was to be spared dealing with men.

That report is worth handling with the care the conclusion of this book recommends. It is a description of one household in Medina in the year 624, in a society where the outside work meant hauling water from a well and leading a camel, and it settles nothing about anybody else. It is also not the report of a woman being confined, since the woman in question would within a decade deliver a public address in the mosque to the assembled leadership of the community. Whatever the arrangement was, it was not a rule about where she was permitted to be.

What the inside work actually consisted of is not in doubt, because it is the subject of the exchange about the tasbih discussed in Chapter 5. She ground grain by hand with a stone mill. The reports say her hands were marked by it, and that the strap of the waterskin left its mark on her, and that she asked her father for a servant on the strength of this and was given a form of words instead. There are people in this story who lived in comfort. She was not one of them, and the sources do not present her poverty as an ornament of piety. They present it as her circumstances.

Ali (AS) is reported, long afterwards, as saying of her that he never angered her and she never angered him for as long as she lived. A statement like that is the kind of thing a widower says, and it should be read as one. But it is also the only surviving assessment of this marriage by either of the two people in it, and it is not nothing to have.

The children came quickly. Al-Hasan (AS) in 3 AH, al-Husayn (AS) the following year, then Zaynab (SA) and Umm Kulthum (SA), so that by her early twenties, or her early thirties depending on which chronology of this chapter you accept, she was running a household with four small children in it on almost no money in a city at war.

Two scenes from that household have carried, and both of them are about what the family did with what little they had.

The first is the cloak. The Prophet (PBUH) came to the house, gathered his daughter, her husband and their two sons under a mantle, and identified them as the ones intended by the verse about the removal of impurity from the people of the house. The doctrinal weight of this is set out in Chapter 5 and I will not anticipate it. What belongs here is that it happened in a room, with two boys aged about seven and six who would have remembered it, and that whatever else the household was, it was a place their grandfather came to.

The second is the story attached in the exegetical literature to the passage of the

Qur'an that opens by asking whether there did not come upon man a period of time. The account has the family vowing a fast in thanks for the recovery of the children from illness, and then, on three successive evenings, giving away the food prepared for breaking it: to a beggar, to an orphan, to a captive. They break each fast on water. It is recorded in both traditions' commentary literature, its chains are of the ordinary exegetical kind, and it is impossible to read it as anything other than a portrait the community wanted to keep of what went on inside that house.

Whether it happened as described, the tradition took the trouble to remember this family as the sort that gave away dinner three nights running. That is a choice about what to preserve, and it says something.

And then there are the children themselves, who are the best evidence available about her, since two of them are the subjects of Parts Two and Three of this book and two more became Imams. She had somewhere between five and eight years with al-Hasan (AS) and al-Husayn (AS), and rather less with the girls. Zaynab (SA) was perhaps five when her mother died.

Five years is not long, and look at what came out of that house anyway. The woman who stood in Yazid's court and told him that his victory proved nothing had a mother who stood in the mosque of Medina and told its leadership the same kind of thing, and had four or five years in which to watch her do it. Chapter 6 argues that Zaynab (SA) served a long political apprenticeship. It began here, and it began early.

The door

One thing about that house needs describing on its own, because it is the only glimpse the sources give of these people at ease and it would be a poor book that left it out.

The house stood against the wall of the mosque, and there was a door in that wall. The reports, which are in both traditions and which caused a good deal of later argument, hold that the Prophet (PBUH) ordered the doors of the other houses opening onto the mosque to be closed, and left this one. It is remembered as the door of Ali (AS), and it was equally the door of his wife. So her father, at that point the head of a state and the most consulted man in Arabia, could step out of the place where he led the prayers and be in his daughter's house.

He used it. The accounts have him going to her first when he came back from a journey and to her last when he set out on one, which is the behaviour of a

man arranging his travelling around a person rather than fitting her into it. When she came into a room where he was, he stood up. He took her hand and kissed it and put her in his own place, and Aisha, who reported this, plainly found it remarkable enough to mention.

The boys were in and out of the mosque. One report has the Prophet (PBUH) holding a prostration far longer than the congregation expected, and explaining afterwards that a grandson had climbed onto his back and he had not wanted to hurry him. There is another, in Bukhari, of a man of the Bedouin watching him kiss al-Hasan (AS) and saying that he had ten children and had never kissed one of them, and being told that a man who shows no mercy will not be shown any.

This is a household with almost nothing in it: a sheepskin, a hand mill, a water skin. It is also, on the evidence, a happy one. The grandfather comes through the door most days. The children are all over him. The daughter is spoken about, by a woman with no reason to flatter her, in terms of a father who could not sit while she was standing.

It lasted about nine years. Everything else in Part One of this book happens after it ended. The nine years need to be in view all the same. A reader who meets Fatima (SA) only in the mosque of Chapter 4 and the courtyard of Chapter 5 has met a woman in the worst months of her life, and does not know what she had been living before them.

The mihrab

One further thing about that household, and it is the thing this book has been slowest to say.

Fatima (SA) prayed. Not in the general sense in which everyone in the story prayed, but in a way that the people around her noticed and thought worth recording, which in a house full of people who prayed is a distinction of some weight.

Her son al-Hasan (AS) is reported as saying that he saw his mother standing at her place of prayer on the eve of a Friday, and that she went on bowing and prostrating until the light came into the sky. He says he listened to her, and that she prayed for the believing men and the believing women, naming them, one after another. He says she did not pray for herself at all. And when he asked her afterwards why she asked nothing for herself when she asked so much for everyone else, she told him: the neighbour first, then the house.

That report is doing something that no amount of theological elaboration improves on. It is a whole ethic in seven words, and it comes with an address: it is about a specific street in Medina and the people living along it. It is also a description of an entire night of standing by a woman who had been grinding grain by hand during the day and whose hands are the subject of the exchange in Chapter 5.

The tradition remembers her place of prayer specifically. It has a name in the reports, the mihrab of Fatima (SA), and the association is strong enough that the angels are said to have spoken with her there, which is where the title al-Muhaddatha comes from. That claim belongs to the doctrinal register and I set it out properly in the next chapters. What belongs here is the more ordinary observation underneath it: this was a woman with a place in her house where she went at night, often enough that her children knew where to find her and what she would be doing when they did.

Hold that alongside the mosque of Chapter 4. The same person did both. A book that gives you only the sermon has given you a jurist and lost a worshipper, and the tradition has never made that separation, because from inside it the sermon and the night prayer are the same commitment expressed in two directions.

The reports that should not have survived

Which brings us to the puzzle this chapter exists to raise.

The Shia collections carry a large body of reports about the Prophet's regard for his daughter, which surprises nobody. What is worth examining is that a substantial part of the same material is preserved in the most authoritative Sunni collections, where by the standards of later sectarian argument an editor would have had every reason to lose it. It did not get lost.

Bukhari and Muslim both carry the statement that Fatima (SA) is a part of him, and that whoever angers her angers him. The same collections carry the account of the deathbed whispering. He tells her something that makes her weep, and then something that makes her laugh. She reveals afterwards what it was: that he was dying, that she would be the first of his family to follow him, and that she is the foremost of the women of this community.

Abu Dawud and Tirmidhi carry Aisha's report that when Fatima (SA) came in, the Prophet (PBUH) would rise, take her hand, kiss it, and seat her in his own place. Muslim carries the account of the mubahala, the confrontation with the

Christians of Najran, in which the Qur'an instructs him to bring his sons, his women and himself, and he brings Ali (AS), Fatima (SA), al-Hasan (AS) and al-Husayn (AS) and no one else.

Read that list as a Shia polemicist and it is a gift. Read it as a historian and it is something more interesting.

These reports are in the Sunni canon because they were too widely known to omit. They were circulating before the theological positions hardened, in a period when saying that the Prophet stood up for his daughter did not commit anyone to a doctrine of succession. The collectors were assembling what was reliably transmitted, and this was reliably transmitted, so in it went. The sectarian reading came afterwards and had to be applied to material that was already common property.

Note carefully what that argument is and is not. It is not a claim that these reports become true by appearing in Bukhari. Within the Shia tradition they were never in doubt and their authority comes from elsewhere entirely, as Chapter 1 explains. The argument is about what can be shown to a person who accepts nothing from the Shia corpus, and the answer is: rather a lot of this.

That is a strong position for a claim to be in. It is much harder to argue that a report was invented by a faction when the faction's opponents preserved it themselves.

But notice what the reports actually say, because the language is more specific than affection. To say that a person is a part of you is a statement about identity. To say that anger against her is anger against you attaches a consequence to how she is treated, and the consequence is religious rather than social. To stand for a daughter and seat her in your own place, in a society where a father did not do that, is a public act performed in front of witnesses who noticed and recorded it. To answer a divine instruction to bring your women by bringing exactly one woman is a designation.

None of this proves the case that Shia Islam builds on it. The Sunni tradition reads these reports as describing an exceptionally beloved daughter and stops there, which is a coherent reading and not a strained one. What the reports do establish, whichever way you read them, is that the relationship was understood by the first generation to be unusual enough to require reporting, and that its terms were not the ordinary terms of family feeling. Something was being marked out.

And that is why the events of the following chapter were never going to be a routine probate dispute. When the leadership of the community declined the claim of the woman these reports describe, they were not merely refusing a request about a date plantation, and everyone standing in that mosque knew it.

CHAPTER 3: Fadak, and the Argument About Inheritance

Fadak was an oasis.

It sat roughly a hundred and forty kilometres north of Medina, in the direction of Khaybar, and it produced dates and grain. Its inhabitants were Jewish farmers. It was worth having, and by the standards of seventh-century Arabia it was worth a great deal, but it was not a kingdom. Almost everything difficult about the dispute that follows comes from the gap between what the property was and what it came to mean.

This chapter treats the matter as a legal case, because that is what it was. It sets out what was claimed, on what basis, what the answer was, and where each side is strong and where each is thin. It does not attempt to close the file. Fourteen centuries of scholars have failed to close it and I have no new evidence to offer. What I can offer is an account clear enough that a reader can see what the actual points of disagreement are, which is more than most treatments of Fadak provide, on either side.

How Fadak came into the Prophet's hands

In 7 AH the Muslims took Khaybar by force after a siege. Fadak did not fight. Its people, seeing what had happened up the road, sent to negotiate and came to terms.

That distinction carries the whole legal weight of what follows, so we should be slow about it. Property taken by force in war is ghanima, spoils, and the Qur'an sets out how it is divided: four fifths to the fighters, one fifth reserved. Property that comes into Muslim hands without fighting is fay, and the Qur'an treats it altogether differently. The verse in Surat al-Hashr is explicit that no horse or camel

was ridden against it, and it assigns the disposal of such property to God and His Messenger and to named categories of recipient, beginning with the near relatives.

So Khaybar was divided among an army. Fadak was not. Fadak fell under the personal administration of the Prophet (PBUH), to be disposed of as he judged. Nobody disputes this. It is the common ground on which both later arguments are built, and it explains why Fadak, out of all the property in the Hijaz, was the piece that could be given away by a single decision.

What was actually claimed

Popular retellings compress the dispute into one object. The sources do not. There were three separate claims, and they have different legal characters.

The first was Fadak itself. The second was a share of the produce of Khaybar, the portion reserved to the Prophet from the fifth. The third was the charitable endowments in Medina, the gardens that had come to the Prophet from Mukhayriq, a Jewish ally who left them to him on his death at Uhud.

These are not the same kind of thing. The Medinan gardens had been administered as endowment during the Prophet's lifetime and were the weakest of the three claims, which may be why they receive least attention. The Khaybar share was a claim on revenue, and turned entirely on the inheritance question. Fadak was different, because Fadak was the one that could be argued as a gift.

Keeping the three apart matters, because the strongest response to one of them is irrelevant to another, and a great deal of the argument between the two traditions consists of each side answering a claim the other side was not making.

Two arguments, and why she made both

Fatima (SA) advanced her case in two distinct forms, and readers who come to this expecting a single tidy claim are often thrown by it. Some polemicists have treated the doubling as evidence of bad faith, a claimant trying whatever might work. It is nothing of the sort. It is the normal shape of a legal case with an alternative pleading, and any lawyer would recognize it.

The primary argument is that Fadak was never part of the estate at all, because it had been given to her during her father's lifetime.

The alternative argument is that if it was part of the estate, then she inherits from it as any daughter inherits from any father.

The two do not contradict each other. The first says the question of inheritance never arises. The second says that if it does arise, she wins on it anyway. What follows takes them in that order.

The first case: Fadak as a gift

The claim is that when the verse instructing the Prophet to give the near relative his due was revealed, he called for Fatima (SA) and assigned Fadak to her, and that she held it from then until his death.

This is not only a Shia report. Versions of it appear in Sunni collections and commentaries, including in al-Suyuti's great compilation of exegetical traditions, attributed to companions including Abu Said al-Khudri. The chains have been challenged, and Ibn Kathir among others treats the report as weak. So the evidentiary position is: a report that exists in both traditions, considered sound by one and defective by the other, on grounds of transmission rather than content.

If the gift is accepted, everything else falls away. A gift completed in the donor's lifetime is not part of the estate. The famous report about prophets not leaving inheritance, whatever its status, has nothing to say about property that was already someone else's before the death occurred.

So the dispute over Fadak proper is not primarily a dispute about inheritance law. It is a dispute about possession and proof, and this is where it gets procedurally interesting.

The reports say she was asked to produce witnesses. She brought Ali (AS) and Umm Ayman, and in some versions al-Hasan (AS) and al-Husayn (AS). The testimony was held insufficient, on the standard the Qur'an sets for the recording of debts: two men, or one man and two women. Ali is a husband and an interested party. Umm Ayman is one woman.

Three objections have been made to that handling, and they are of unequal quality.

The first is the strongest and it is procedural. Under the evidentiary rules the tradition itself would go on to codify, a person in possession of property is not required to prove title. The burden lies on the party asserting a claim against

the possessor. If Fadak was in her hands and being administered on her behalf, the demand for witnesses was addressed to the wrong party. This is a serious argument, and it is worth noting that it is an argument from ordinary law rather than from any special status.

The counter is that the character of Fadak as fay meant it was never simply private property in the ordinary sense, so ordinary possession rules did not straightforwardly apply, and that the administration was in any case being conducted in the name of the head of state. That is a real answer, though it concedes something, because it means the case was decided on a special rule rather than the general one.

The second objection concerns the witnesses themselves, and it is more rhetorical than legal. Umm Ayman had raised the Prophet, and there are well-attested reports of him praising her in the strongest terms. Ali (AS) is the man the Prophet called his brother. To weigh their word and find it wanting was, the argument goes, an insult dressed as procedure. As a matter of feeling this lands. As a matter of law it does not, because evidentiary rules that bend for eminent witnesses are not evidentiary rules, and the tradition rightly refused to build them that way.

The third objection is that the standard applied, drawn from the verse on recording debts, was designed for commercial documentation rather than for testimony about a completed transfer, and that the tradition elsewhere accepted single witnesses in a range of matters. This one is properly contested among jurists and I do not think it can be settled here.

The second case: inheritance

If Fadak was part of the estate, the claim becomes a plain inheritance claim, and it runs into the report that Abu Bakr is said to have cited: that the prophets are not inherited from, and that what they leave is charity.

This report appears in the most authoritative Sunni collections, including Bukhari and Muslim. Its presence there is why the Sunni position is not, as Shia polemic sometimes implies, an embarrassed improvisation. From within that tradition it is a sound report from the Prophet, and a sound report from the Prophet settles a question.

Three lines of challenge have been made to it.

The first is about its transmission. In the earliest form of the story it is a report known to one man, produced at the moment it was needed, in a dispute in which

he was the deciding authority. Reports of that shape attract scrutiny in any legal system. The standard answer is that the report is not in fact solitary: the later dispute between Ali (AS) and al-Abbas over the same properties, recorded in the same collections, has Umar reciting the ruling in the presence of several senior companions who confirm having heard it. Whether that constitutes independent corroboration or a single tradition reported twice is exactly the sort of question on which the two schools of hadith criticism reach different answers, and both answers are defensible.

The second challenge is technical, and it is the one that has occupied Muslim legal theorists most. Can a report transmitted through a small number of chains restrict the application of a general ruling in the Qur'an?

This is not a partisan question. It is a live dispute within Sunni legal theory itself. The Hanafi position has generally been that a solitary report cannot specify or override the general sense of the Book. The Shafii position has generally allowed it. So a Shia jurist arguing that the verses of inheritance cannot be cut back by this report is making an argument that a Hanafi would recognize as respectable, and this is worth saying plainly because it changes the character of the disagreement. It is not a case of one tradition inventing an objection. It is a case of a general methodological dispute landing on a specific and painful instance.

The third challenge is exegetical, and it is the argument Fatima (SA) makes in the sermon that forms the next chapter. The Qur'an describes Sulayman as inheriting from Dawud. It records Zakariyya praying for an heir who would inherit from him and from the house of Yaqub. Both are prophets. If prophets leave no inheritance, what are these verses describing?

The answer given by the other side is that in both cases the inheritance is prophethood, knowledge and station, not property, and that the Qur'an uses the vocabulary of inheritance for non-material succession elsewhere. This is a reasonable reading and it cannot be dismissed. The response to the response is that Zakariyya is described as fearing what his kinsmen would do after him, which reads more naturally as a worldly anxiety, and that prophethood is a divine appointment rather than something a man may request for his son. That too is reasonable. This is a real interpretive standoff and anyone who tells you it is obvious in either direction is selling something.

The case for the other side, stated properly

Books written from within the Shia tradition often present the opposing position only in order to knock it down, and the result is that readers come away unable to explain why any intelligent person ever held it. That is a failure of nerve. The position has a serious form and here it is.

A prophet is not a private man. What comes to him through his office comes to him as trustee of the community, not as a merchant accumulating an estate. On this reading, the ruling that prophetic property reverts to public charity is not a deprivation of his family; it is the logical consequence of the office. The Prophet (PBUH) had lived accordingly, distributing what came to him and dying with almost nothing in the house.

The reports further hold that Abu Bakr did not treat the family as strangers to the revenue. He is reported to have said he would maintain the household from it as the Prophet had done, withholding the title but not the support. Whether that offer was made in the terms reported is disputed. If it was, it changes the complexion of the decision, because it makes it a ruling about the legal character of the property rather than an attempt to impoverish anyone.

And there is a consistency argument. The Prophet's widows also received no share of an estate. The same rule was applied to them, and the reports have Aisha and Hafsa raising the question and being answered with the same tradition. A rule applied uniformly to every potential heir is harder to characterize as targeted.

Each of these can be answered. The trustee argument does not touch Fadak if Fadak had already been given away. The maintenance offer, if made, still leaves a person holding property at the discretion of the state rather than by right, which is precisely what was being contested. The consistency argument is weakened by the fact that the widows retained their apartments. But the position stands up under pressure, and a reader should understand that the men who held it were not obviously acting in bad faith on the face of the record. What they were doing was making a decision, at speed, in the weeks after the death of the founder, with a fragile polity and an unresolved succession, that happened to fall on the one household with a competing claim to authority. Whether that timing was coincidence is the question nobody can answer from the documents.

What the record will support

Here is what I think a careful reader can conclude.

That Fadak came under the Prophet's sole disposal as fay is certain. That Fatima

(SA) claimed it, that the claim was refused, and that she was angered by the refusal is recorded in the collections both traditions regard as authoritative, and the reports of her estrangement from Abu Bakr until her death sit in Bukhari as well as in the Shia sources. Anyone arguing that the dispute is a Shia invention has not opened the books, including their own.

That the gift occurred is the position of the Shia tradition, transmitted from the Imams (AS) about property that had belonged to their own house, and this book holds it. It is also attested, though contested, within the Sunni tradition, which is more than a reader of the polemics would expect. What an observer working without the tradition's authorities can say is narrower: that the gift is reported in both traditions, that its chains are accepted by one and challenged by the other, and that on that basis alone it is possible and unproven. Chapter 1 explains why those two sentences are not in competition.

That the report about prophetic inheritance was cited is not in dispute. Whether it should have been sufficient to overcome the Qur'anic inheritance verses is a question of legal method on which the schools were always going to divide.

And that the procedural handling was irregular is, I think, the strongest part of the claimant's case, and the part that receives least attention because it is less dramatic than the rest. The demand that a possessor prove title is the anomaly here. It is a smaller point than the ones usually shouted about, and a harder one to answer.

What the documents alone cannot settle is intention. Whether the refusal was a sincere application of a remembered ruling, or a political decision to deny an independent revenue stream to a rival household, is a question about the interior of men who died fourteen centuries ago, and the papers do not contain it. The Shia tradition has an answer, and it does not derive it from the papers. It derives it from the household's own account of what was being done to it, which is testimony rather than inference, and which the following chapter puts on the record in the woman's own words.

The property afterwards

The most revealing part of the Fadak story is what happened to the oasis over the following two hundred years, because it demonstrates something that no argument about hadith chains can: the case was never treated as closed, including by the people in charge.

Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz, the Umayyad caliph remembered for his attempt at re-

dress, returned Fadak to the descendants of Fatima (SA) around the turn of the second century. His successor took it back. The early Abbasids, who had come to power partly on the strength of sympathy for the Prophet's family, returned it again, and then took it again, and then returned it, and then took it, across the reigns of al-Saffah, al-Mansur, al-Mahdi and Harun al-Rashid. Al-Mamun returned it once more, in a decision recorded as following a hearing at his court, and had the restitution written into the register. Al-Mutawakkil, who set about erasing the shrines, confiscated it a final time.

One report from this period is too good to omit and too pointed to accept without a note. Harun is said to have told Musa al-Kazim (AS) to state Fadak's boundaries so it could be returned, and to have received in reply a description that began at one frontier of the empire and ended at another, at which point the offer was withdrawn. The story appears in Shia sources and functions as a parable about what was really being claimed. Whether it happened, I cannot say. What it is telling you is that by the second century the tradition itself understood Fadak to be a stand-in for something much larger.

A caliph does not repeatedly hand back and reclaim a date plantation because he cannot decide about agriculture. Each restitution was a signal of alignment with the Prophet's family and each confiscation a withdrawal of it. The oasis had become a piece of political vocabulary, and every ruler for two centuries knew how to read it.

Why it did not stay a property case

Fadak is remembered because of what the refusal implied rather than because of what it cost.

For the Shia tradition the implication is direct. If the Prophet's daughter, in the mosque of Medina, in front of the companions, could be told she was mistaken about her father's intentions, then the household's standing as the authoritative interpreters of what the Prophet meant had been rejected at the first opportunity. The land is the occasion. The subject is authority.

For the Sunni tradition the episode is a hard one but not a foundational one. A ruling was made on the basis of a sound report; a family member disagreed with it; the disagreement was painful and is recorded honestly, including her anger and the estrangement, which is itself a mark of the integrity of the collections that preserved it.

Both traditions are describing the same events. What separates them is not the facts but the question of what a disagreement between the Prophet's daughter and the Prophet's successor can be permitted to mean.

Which brings us to the mosque. Because whatever the merits of the claim, the way she pressed it produced a document that both traditions preserved, that Baghdad anthologists copied for its literary quality two centuries later, and that remains the earliest sustained piece of religious argument attributed to a Muslim woman.

That is the next chapter.

CHAPTER 4: The Sermon

She walked to the mosque, and the sources pause to tell us how.

This is unusual. Early Muslim historical writing is not much interested in how anybody walks. It records what was said, who was present, and who transmitted the account. Yet in almost every version of what follows, the narrator stops before the first word of the sermon to describe the approach. Fatima (SA) came to the mosque wrapped in her covering, surrounded by women of her household and her father's clan. And her gait, we are told, did not differ from the gait of the Messenger of God (PBUH).

The detail is doing work. It is a claim made with the body before any claim is made with the tongue. The man who had stood in that space and addressed that community was three months dead, and the woman now entering it moved as he had moved. Everyone present would have understood the point, because in a society that read character through bearing, the resemblance was the argument in miniature. She had not come as a claimant to an estate. She had come as the continuation of something.

A curtain was placed for her. She sat, and she sighed, and the reports say the assembly wept until the mosque shook with it, and then waited until the noise settled before she began. That pause matters too. A person who intends to complain speaks into the emotion. A person who intends to argue waits for it to pass.

The form she chose

What she then delivered was a khutba, and the choice of genre is the first thing a modern reader is likely to miss.

A khutba is not a speech in the loose sense. In the Arabic of the period it is a defined form with a defined shape: praise of God, testimony of faith, blessings

on the Prophet, then the body of the address, then a closing. It is the vehicle of the Friday assembly and of formal public occasions. It carries the authority of the pulpit even when delivered away from one. To open in that register is to announce that what follows belongs to the category of public religious speech rather than private appeal.

Fatima (SA) had a domestic grievance available to her. She could have made a personal approach, and the tradition is clear that personal approaches were made, before and after. Instead she assembled the elements of a formal sermon and delivered it in the mosque of Medina to the leadership of the community. Whatever else the Khutba Fadakiyya is, it is a woman using the highest available form of religious address, and being permitted to finish.

The consequence shapes everything that follows. Because she chose the form, she inherited its obligations. A khutba cannot open with a property dispute. It opens with God. And so the longest and least-quoted portion of the most famous speech ever attributed to a Muslim woman is not about Fadak at all.

First movement: beginning at the beginning

The opening section is a compressed theology of creation. God is praised for what He has given, thanked for what He has inspired, and described as the one who brought things into being from nothing, without a prior model to copy and without any need that the making might satisfy.

He originated things without a pattern before them, and made them without a need that drove Him to it.

Read quickly, this is conventional pious opening. Read as argument, it is the foundation stone, and she is laying it deliberately.

The claim is that God creates out of wisdom rather than necessity. Nothing in the created order is arbitrary; nothing is there because it had to be. From this she moves, without visible seam, into the testimony of faith and then into the section that gives the sermon its intellectual character: a catalogue of the divine laws, each one paired with the purpose it serves.

Faith is made a purification from the sin of associating others with God. Prayer is prescribed to keep you clear of arrogance. The alms tax purifies the soul and increases what a person has. The fast establishes sincerity. The pilgrimage builds up the religion. Justice brings hearts into order. Obedience to the Household is

set as a discipline for the community and their leadership as a protection against its splitting apart. Striving in God's path gives Islam its standing. Patience earns reward. Commanding what is right serves the public good. Kindness to parents holds back God's anger. Keeping ties of kinship extends life and increases number. Retaliation preserves blood. Honouring vows exposes a person to forgiveness. Honest weights and measures put an end to fraud. The prohibition of wine keeps people away from filth. The prohibition of slander keeps the curse away. The prohibition of theft is there so that people may remain chaste.

The list runs longer than that, and no summary conveys its rhythm, which is relentless. What matters is its shape. Every ruling is given a reason. Not one is left standing as bare command.

This is a substantial position in Islamic legal theory, and later jurists would spend centuries arguing about it. Are God's commands purposive, so that a human being can perceive the wisdom behind them and reason from it? Or are they simply commands, binding because they were issued, with any apparent purpose being incidental? Fatima (SA) takes the first view and takes it comprehensively, in a mosque, in the presence of the men who would shortly be deciding what the law of this community was going to look like.

And she is setting a trap, though it will be twenty minutes before it closes.

If the law is purposive, then a ruling has to be able to give an account of itself. If every prescription in the revealed order serves a legible good, then a rule that removes a daughter's inheritance from her ought to be able to say what good it serves. She has not mentioned Fadak. She has already made it very difficult to answer her without one.

Second movement: the mirror

From law she turns to history, and the temperature changes.

She describes the community her father found. They were, she says, on the edge of a pit of fire, drinking from fouled water, eating from what was scraped together, despised, in fear that those around them would seize them. The Qur'anic allusion is unmistakable and she expects it to be caught, because the verse she is drawing on had been revealed about precisely this audience and had told them they were on the brink of a pit of the Fire until God saved them.

It is a hard passage and it is meant to be. A sermon that intends to shame will often

flatter first. This one does the reverse. Before she asks anything of them, she tells the assembled leadership of the Muslim community what they had been before her father reached them: not a noble people awaiting guidance, but a frightened and squalid one. The rhetorical logic is exact. If they were nothing before the Prophet (PBUH), then everything they now possess, including the authority by which they are currently governing, is a gift held in trust from his household.

Then she turns to her cousin and husband, and does something politically pointed. She describes how, whenever the fire of war was kindled, God put it out, and how Ali (AS) would be thrown into its mouth while others held back. She does not name the ones who held back. She does not need to. In a room of a few hundred men, most of whom had been at Badr or Uhud or heard the accounts a thousand times, the sentence does its own work.

This is the passage that persuades some readers the sermon must be a later composition, and the objection deserves to be met rather than deflected. It is aimed exactly where a Shia partisan of a later century would want it aimed. But it is worth noticing that it is also aimed exactly where a woman in her position, three months after her father's death, with her husband excluded from the succession, would want it aimed. Motive is not evidence of forgery. It is, in this case, evidence of nothing more than a person having a motive, which she certainly did.

The hinge

Then the Prophet (PBUH) dies, and the sermon turns on a single sentence: Satan put his head out from where he had been hiding.

She describes the moment with a coldness that is more effective than fury. The one who had been waiting found a community that answered him, found them ready to be led, found their commitment shallower than it had appeared. And then she quotes the verse revealed on the day of Uhud, when a rumour ran through the ranks that Muhammad had been killed and the line broke: that he is a messenger, that messengers have passed away before him, and that if he dies or is killed, some will turn back on their heels.

The choice of verse is the sharpest single move in the sermon. It was revealed about a false report of his death. She applies it to the true one. The implication is that the community failed the test at Uhud when the news was only a rumour, and has now failed it again in earnest. She is not accusing them of apostasy. She is accusing them of something more embarrassing, which is predictability.

Third movement: the legal argument

Only now, well past the halfway point, does she come to the matter at hand. And when she does, she argues like a lawyer.

The structure is a chain of Qur'anic citations followed by a set of questions that leave the other side no comfortable exit. The verses are chosen with care and they are all about inheritance, which is to say she meets the counter-argument on the only ground where it can be tested.

She cites Sulayman inheriting from Dawud, two prophets, the transmission described in the plain language of inheritance. She cites Zakariyya asking God for an heir who would inherit from him and from the house of Ya'qub, another prophet, asking for exactly the thing she is now told prophets do not leave. She cites the verse establishing that blood relatives have prior claim to one another in the Book of God. She cites the verse of shares, which assigns the son twice the portion of the daughter and thereby assumes a daughter has a portion at all. She cites the verse on bequest.

Then the questions. Has a verse been revealed excluding me, and my father is not in it? Do you say that people of two different religions do not inherit from one another, and are my father and I not of one religion? Or are you better acquainted with the general and the particular of the Qur'an than my father and my cousin?

The middle question is the elegant one, because it invokes a rule that the community already accepted. A Muslim does not inherit from a non-Muslim and a non-Muslim does not inherit from a Muslim; that principle was settled. She is pointing out that the only established ground on which a child could be barred from a parent's estate is difference of religion, and inviting them to say which of the two of them they think was not a Muslim.

The third question does something else. It moves the dispute from the substance of the law to the question of who is competent to state it. If a report exists that excludes prophetic inheritance, and if that report is unknown to the Prophet's daughter and unknown to the man the Prophet raised, then the reach of the report is the issue, not merely its content. She is asking who holds the interpretive authority in this community, which is a much larger question than who holds an orchard in Khaybar.

The technical arguments that would later be built around all of this, whether a single-chain report can restrict a Qur'anic ruling, whether Fadak was inheritance

at all or a gift made in the Prophet's lifetime and therefore outside the scope of the report entirely, are set out in the previous chapter and I will not repeat them. What belongs here is the observation that the sermon anticipates them. The argument in the mosque is already recognizably a legal argument, with citation, principle, and the isolation of the opposing case. It did not need scholastic elaboration to become one.

Fourth movement: the turn

And then she stops arguing.

The final section of the sermon is addressed to the Ansar, the Medinans who had taken her father in when Mecca drove him out, and the register changes completely. There is no more citation. There is no more structure. What replaces it is reproach, and it is the part of the sermon that people remember.

She calls them the supports of the community and the helpers of the faith, and asks what this slackness is regarding her right, this drowsiness in the face of a wrong done to her. She reminds them of what they had been, of oaths given, of their reputation for not letting a claim pass. She asks whether they are afraid, and nswers with the verse that tells them God has more right to be feared.

Then the line that ends it, and it is worth giving in something close to its own words. Take it, she tells them, saddled and bridled, this thing you are taking. It will meet you on the Day of Resurrection.

Take it, saddled and bridled. It will meet you at the meeting-place, and how excellent a judge is God, and how excellent an advocate is Muhammad, and the appointed time is the Day of Rising, and on that day the false ones will lose.

The image is of a camel handed over fully harnessed, prepared, ready to be led away. Keep the land, she is saying, and take it complete, because you are also taking what comes with it. It is the sentence of a person who has finished making a case and has not finished making a claim. She has moved the dispute out of the jurisdiction of Medina and into a court that has not yet convened.

No one who heard it, on any account of the day, seems to have known what to say.

How the text reaches us

A book that has spent a chapter reading a sermon closely owes its readers an account of where the sermon comes from, and this one is more interesting than the usual answer.

The sermon is preserved in the Shia tradition, transmitted through the household and recorded across the classical corpus, and that is where it has always primarily lived. What makes it unusually strong ground in any argument is that the earliest full text now surviving is not in a Shia book at all. It is in Balaghat al-Nisa, The Eloquence of Women, compiled in Baghdad by Ahmad ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur, who died in 280 AH / 893 CE and who was not writing a work of Shia devotion. He was assembling an anthology of women's oratory as literature.

He includes the sermon because it is a superb piece of Arabic, and that is a useful thing for a modern reader to know, because it means the text was circulating in general literary culture and not only inside a partisan tradition. It is also found in al-Tabarsi's al-Ihtijaj, in Ibn Abi al-Hadid's commentary on the Nahj al-Balagha, where he takes it from an earlier and now lost book on the Saqifa by al-Jawhari, and in a number of other collections with the usual variations of wording.

The chain given in Balaghat al-Nisa deserves a moment. It runs through Abd Allah ibn al-Hasan, from his mother Fatima bint al-Husayn, from her aunt. The aunt is Zaynab bint Ali (SA).

So the text of this sermon comes to us, on its own account, through the woman who is the subject of Part Two of this book, transmitted down a line of women in the same household. That is not proof of anything. Chains can be constructed backwards and often were. But it does tell us how the tradition itself understood the transmission of the family's memory, and the answer is that the memory ran through the daughters. It is a pattern that will repeat, and by the time we reach Damascus in 61 AH it will have become the mechanism by which everything survives.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid, writing in the seventh century of the Hijra as a Mutazili and no Shia, records that he put the question of authenticity to his own teacher: is this fabricated? The answer he reports receiving was that his teacher believed it to be sound. When he pressed further and said that it sounded to him like the speech of Ali (AS), the reply was that the family of Abu Talib were simply like that, and that eloquence ran in them.

The position on the text is this. The Shia tradition holds the sermon to be hers and transmits it as such, and this book proceeds on that basis. What can be added,

for anyone who does not accept that authority, is that the external position is unusually good: a text of it was circulating in general literary culture within two centuries, in a book with no doctrinal interest in it, and a leading Mutazili scholar of the seventh century regarded it as sound.

What should also be said, because a reader will meet the objection, is that the surviving versions differ in wording, as one expects of a long oral text carried by memory, and that some vocabulary sits more comfortably in a later century than an earlier one. That is a statement about the surface. It is true of almost every early Islamic text anyone relies on, including a great deal that nobody disputes, and it does not touch the argument of the sermon, which is preserved consistently across every version and is the thing this chapter has been reading. Chapter 12 sets out how to think about this properly, because with Umm Kulthum (SA) the same conditions produce a far worse outcome and the difference between the two cases is instructive.

The second sermon, and why it is not this one

One point of housekeeping, because the two texts are frequently merged in retellings and the merger flattens both.

There is a second address attributed to Fatima (SA), delivered later, when she was ill and confined to her house, to a group of women of the Muhajirun and the Ansar who came to ask after her. It is a different kind of text: shorter, angrier, private in setting, and directed at the political situation rather than at a legal question. It contains no argument from Qur'anic inheritance verses and makes no mention of Fadak.

The distinction is worth keeping. The mosque sermon is a public legal and theological performance delivered to the men holding power. The house sermon is a bitter assessment delivered to women in a sickroom. Treating them as one speech turns a jurist into a mourner, which is precisely the substitution this book exists to resist.

What the sermon establishes

Set aside, for a moment, whether her claim was correct. The previous chapter says where this book stands on that, and readers of the two traditions have disagreed about it for fourteen centuries.

What this chapter has been describing is something the disagreement does not touch. In the mosque of Medina, within months of the Prophet's death, a woman delivered a formal khutba to the assembled leadership of the Muslim community. She opened with a theology of creation, advanced a purposive account of divine law, gave a historical narrative of the community's origins that was frankly humiliating to her audience, made a technical argument from five Qur'anic passages, raised a question about who holds interpretive authority, and closed by declining to accept the outcome. She did this in the highest register the language possessed, and the community found her sufficiently impossible to answer that the text of what she said was still being copied into literary anthologies in Baghdad two and a half centuries later, by men who had no doctrinal reason to preserve it.

That is the fact this book is built around. Not that she was wronged, though this book holds that she was. That she argued.

She would be dead within months. What she said in the mosque outlived every man who heard it.

CHAPTER 5: The Short Life and the Long Afterlife

She outlived her father by somewhere between forty and ninety-five days. The tradition has never agreed on the figure, and modern Shia practice has resolved the disagreement in the most practical way available, by commemorating two dates and treating the whole span between them as a season of mourning.

What is agreed, across both traditions, is the character of those weeks. She was ill. She withdrew. She did not recover. And she died estranged from the leadership of the community her father had founded.

The Shia sources say so at length and in detail, as one would expect of the tradition that has kept her memory. What makes the point unarguable in any company is that the other tradition says it too. It sits in Bukhari, in plain language: that she was angered, that she kept away from Abu Bakr, and that she did not speak to him until she died. Whatever else is disputed about these months, the estrangement is not, and nobody has to take it on anyone's authority.

The house

Between the sermon and the burial lies the episode that Shia Muslims mourn every year and that Sunni Muslims are generally taught did not occur. It is the single most inflammatory subject in Islamic historical writing and there is no neutral way to place it in a book. So I will set out what the tradition holds, on what grounds, and where an outside observer can and cannot follow.

The Shia account is this. In the days after the Saqifa, men came to the house of Fatima (SA) to compel Ali (AS) to give allegiance. Fire was brought and a threat was made to burn the house with those inside it. The door was forced. Fatima (SA) was behind it, and she was crushed between the door and the wall, and

struck. She was carrying a child, a son the family had already named Muhsin, and she lost him. She did not recover. The injuries and the grief together killed her within a few months, at eighteen or at twenty-eight depending on which chronology of Chapter 2 you follow, and the burial arrangements described later in this chapter were made by a woman who knew exactly why she was dying.

The Sunni tradition rejects the assault and the miscarriage. On that account there was a delay in allegiance, resolved after some months without lasting violence, and Fatima (SA) died of illness while still aggrieved over Fadak.

What the tradition holds, and on what basis

The Shia position does not rest on inference from fragments. It rests on transmitted testimony, and the testimony is early and internal.

The account is present in the earliest strata of Shia material, in Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays and then across the classical corpus, in al-Kulayni, in al-Saduq, in al-Mufid, in al-Tabarsi and in the biographical and maqtal literature after them. Crucially, the reports are not anonymous rumour that a later community assembled. They are transmitted from the Imams (AS) themselves. Muhsin is named as a son of Ali (AS) and Fatima (SA) in reports from the household, and his loss is attributed in those reports to what was done at the door. The tradition also preserves the fact of her injuries in the mourning material and in the ziyarat addressed to her, in which she is greeted as the one who was wronged and whose right was taken.

Chapter 1 set out why this matters and it is worth restating here, because this is the chapter where the distinction earns its place. Within the Shia tradition, a report from an Imam (AS) about his own great-grandmother is not a late source about an early event. It is testimony from a person the tradition holds to be protected from error, transmitted through a school that existed to preserve exactly this. The tradition affirms what happened at that door because the people best positioned to know said so, and said so in a setting where they had nothing to gain and, under Umayyad and then Abbasid surveillance, a great deal to lose.

That is the ground the tradition stands on, and it is not a weak one. It is a different one from the ground a historian stands on, and the two should not be confused in either direction.

What an outsider can follow

Now the second order, for readers who do not accept the first and for Shia readers who will at some point have to argue with them.

The confrontation at the house is not only a Shia report, and the Sunni attestation is broader than most readers of either tradition expect. Al-Baladhuri, writing in the third century, records a report in which Umar comes to the house with fire and threatens to burn it, and in which Fatima (SA) confronts him directly. Al-Tabari carries a version in which Umar declares that those inside must come out and give allegiance or he will set the house alight, and in which al-Zubayr emerges with a drawn sword, stumbles, and is seized. Comparable material appears in Ibn Abi Shayba's Musannaf and in al-Jawhari's book on the Saqifa, which survives through Ibn Abi al-Hadid. The work containing the fullest early narrative, al-Imama wa al-Siyasa, is conventionally attributed to Ibn Qutayba, and that attribution is doubted, which weakens it without making it worthless.

So this much is common ground, established from the other tradition's own books: an armed party came to that house, fire was brought, a threat was made to burn it with people inside, the Prophet's daughter came to the door and confronted them, and at least one man was disarmed by force. That is not a disagreement about atmosphere. It is a violent scene, conceded by the side with every reason not to concede it.

And a child named Muhsin, son of Ali (AS) and Fatima (SA), appears in the genealogical literature outside the Shia tradition, recorded as having died in infancy, with no cause given.

Consider, then, what the objection actually amounts to. Nobody disputes that armed men brought fire to the door. Nobody disputes that she came to it. Nobody disputes that a son of hers named Muhsin died as an infant around this time. What is disputed is the few feet and the few seconds between those conceded facts, and the disputed portion is the portion that only one side had any interest in recording.

That asymmetry is the thing to hold on to. The absence of the assault from Sunni collections is not evidence that it did not happen; it is what one would expect if it did. Men do not compile the record of their own worst day. The material that survives on the other side survives because it could not be suppressed entirely, and what could not be suppressed entirely was the fire and the threat. Everyone agrees the party arrived armed and intending to burn a house down. The suggestion that nothing further occurred requires believing that a group in that condition, at that door, having already drawn on one man, stopped precisely at the point where the

record would have become unbearable.

Where this book stands

I hold the tradition's account. I think it is what happened, and I have said so rather than leaving the reader to infer it.

What I will not do is claim that historical method alone compels that conclusion, because it does not, and a reader who is told otherwise will be embarrassed the first time they meet a competent opponent. Historical method, working without the authority of the Imams (AS), gets as far as an armed party, fire at the door, a confrontation with Fatima (SA), a man disarmed, an infant son dead of causes unrecorded, and a woman who died within months estranged from the leadership and demanding a secret burial. It gets a very long way. It does not get all the way, and the gap is bridged by testimony rather than by inference.

That is not a weakness in the Shia position. It is a description of what kind of claim it is. The tradition never held this on the strength of Baladhuri. It held it because the family said so, and it has been saying so, at cost, for fourteen centuries, in a community that was punished for saying it.

A reader who wants the argument about registers set out at length will find it in Chapter 12. A reader who simply wants to know whether this book thinks a door was forced on the daughter of the Prophet (PBUH) has the answer in the first line of this section.

The instructions

She asked to be buried at night. She asked that Ali (AS) wash and shroud her, and that named people among the leadership not be told and not attend. She asked that her grave be left without a mark.

The Shia sources give the instructions in full. Bukhari, which had no reason to keep it, records the essentials anyway: that she was buried at night, and that Ali (AS) buried her without informing Abu Bakr. So this is another of the points where the two traditions do not have to be reconciled, because they are not in disagreement.

It is worth stopping to consider how unusual this was. Medina was a small city and the burial of the Prophet's daughter was, by any normal measure, an event

of the whole community. Funeral prayer is a collective obligation and a public one. To die and be put in the ground in darkness, by four or five people, with the location withheld, is not a private preference about ceremony. It is a refusal, executed in the only medium a dying woman had left.

And it is a refusal with a long fuse, which is the part that shows real judgement. A protest made in speech can be answered in speech, and the answer can be recorded alongside it and the two can be left to cancel out. A protest made by absence cannot be answered at all. Every generation of Muslims since has had to notice that the Prophet's only surviving child was buried in secret, and has had to explain why. There is no version of the story in which that fact goes away.

The grave was never found because it was never meant to be. The tradition offers three candidate locations, and it has kept all three rather than settling on one: inside her own house, which was later absorbed into the expanded mosque of the Prophet; in the cemetery of al-Baqi; or in the space between the Prophet's grave and his pulpit. Pilgrims to Medina today are advised to greet her at all three, which is a solution of some elegance and also an admission.

The refusal to locate her, together with the later destruction of the Baqi monuments in the twentieth century, means that the most venerated woman in this book has no shrine anywhere. Chapters 9, 13 and 17 are in large part about what shrines do to memory, and this tradition builds a great many of them. It is worth registering at the outset that the one figure it would most certainly have built for left instructions designed to prevent it, and that those instructions have held for fourteen centuries.

The night

It is worth trying to see it, once, before the analysis resumes.

Medina in the month she died is a small town of mud brick and palm, and after the last prayer it goes quiet in the way that towns without lamps go quiet. The date gardens are black. The wells are covered. Somewhere a dog. The mosque, which had been full at sunset, is empty, and the grave of the man who built it is on the other side of a wall, three months old.

There are four or five people in the courtyard. One of them is her husband. They have washed her, as she asked, and they have wrapped her, and they are working without light because light would be seen. She had been ill for weeks and she is not heavy to carry.

They go out through a door that does not face the street. There is no procession, which is the point. There is no announcement, no call, none of the sounds by which a town learns that someone has died and turns out to walk behind them. The Prophet's daughter is carried through her own city by four men and nobody looks up.

They dig. It takes as long as it takes. The ground in Medina is stony and this is being done by hand, at night, by men who buried the Prophet (PBUH) in this same town three months ago and are now burying his daughter. Nobody says very much. Ali (AS) is reported to have spoken afterwards, standing over the grave, addressing the Prophet (PBUH) directly and telling him that his daughter had come to him, and that if he asked her what his community had done she would tell him, and that patience was beautiful except in this.

Then they fill it in. And then, because she asked for this too, they flatten it, so that in the morning there is nothing there to see.

Somewhere in the level ground of that city, under a courtyard or a paving stone or the floor of a building that came later, there is a young woman who was buried in the dark on purpose. She is not lost. She was put there by people who knew exactly what they were doing and who were carrying out an instruction, and the instruction was that no one should ever be able to stand in the right place and feel that the matter had been settled.

Fourteen centuries later, no one can. That was the arrangement.

Her standing in the tradition

Most of what has come before in this chapter is history, done as carefully as the sources permit, with the exception already marked, where the tradition's own testimony carried the argument past the point the documents reach. What follows is doctrine outright, and the change of register should be visible, because it is the change Chapter 1 described and the standards are not the same.

Fatima (SA) occupies a position in Shia Islam that is not a conclusion drawn from weighing reports. It rests on the Qur'an, on the Prophet (PBUH), and on the testimony of the Imams (AS), who are the tradition's authority on their own house. This section sets out what is held and why, and it does not hold it tentatively. Where the picture was elaborated by later generations, and some of it plainly was, I say so, because a reader is owed the difference between what the Imams (AS) taught and what was subsequently built around it. That distinction

protects the doctrine rather than diminishing it.

Start with the one that is in both canons, because it is the most ordinary and the most revealing.

The tasbih. She came to her father asking for a servant, the grinding and hauling having worn her hands. He did not give her one. He gave her a formula to say after each prayer, thirty-four repetitions of one phrase and thirty-three each of two others, and told her it was better for her than what she had asked for.

This is in Bukhari and in Muslim. It is not a Shia devotion that Sunnis happen to tolerate; it is a practice with unimpeachable joint attestation, still performed by Shia Muslims after every obligatory prayer, and named after her. The exchange also tells you something about the household that no amount of later veneration improves on. She asked for help with the housework and was told to pray instead.

Then the titles. Al-Zahra, the radiant. Al-Batul, which carries a sense of being set apart. Al-Siddiqa, the truthful, and al-Tahira, the pure. Al-Muhaddatha, the one addressed by angels. Sayyidat nisa al-alamin, mistress of the women of all the worlds.

The last of those is the one that gets argued about, and the argument is usually put the wrong way round. It is said that the Shia have inflated a narrower Sunni report. What the Sunni collections actually preserve is a version of the same designation with the scope reduced: in Bukhari's account of the deathbed whispering, the Prophet (PBUH) tells her she is the foremost of the women of this community, or in another wording of the women of Paradise.

The Shia tradition holds the unrestricted form, on the authority of the Imams (AS) who transmitted it, and the presence of a clipped version in the other tradition's books is not evidence that the fuller one was manufactured. Reports lose scope in transmission at least as often as they gain it, and a designation that placed the Prophet's daughter above the women of every age was precisely the kind of thing later transmitters had reason to narrow.

Then the central matter, which is her ismah.

Shia doctrine holds that Fatima (SA) was preserved from sin and from error. This is not an honorific and it is not a pious exaggeration of the ordinary virtue of a good woman. It is a doctrinal position with a defined content, and she is one of the fourteen to whom the tradition applies it. It rests on three things. It rests on the verse of purification in Surat al-Ahzab, in which God states His will to remove

impurity from the people of the house and to purify them completely. It rests on the report of the cloak, in which the Prophet (PBUH) gathered Ali (AS), Fatima (SA), al-Hasan (AS) and al-Husayn (AS) under a mantle and named them as the ones intended. And it rests, above all, on the teaching of the Imams (AS), who said what the verse meant and were in a position to know.

The report of the cloak is not obscure and is not confined to Shia sources. Muslim carries a version of it, as do others, and the Prophet (PBUH) is recorded excluding his wives from the group when the question was put to him directly. The Sunni reading generally takes the verse in a broader sense on the strength of its surrounding context, which addresses the wives. That reading has to explain why the Prophet (PBUH) himself is reported gathering five people under a cloak and answering, when asked, that the person asking was not among them.

So this is a disagreement between the two traditions, and I have set out the other side's case as I have throughout. But it should be clear that this book is not neutral between them, and that the Shia position is not an inference from an ambiguous verse. It is the reading given by the household about itself, transmitted by the people the verse was revealed about. It is the hinge on which the doctrinal status of all six women in this book turns, and it is not in doubt within the tradition this book is written from.

The Mushaf of Fatima needs plain speaking, because it is routinely misrepresented and the misrepresentation is corrosive.

Shia sources describe a text associated with her, dictated in the period after her father's death and written down by Ali (AS), containing knowledge of things to come, and held thereafter by the Imams. Polemical writing has repeatedly presented this as evidence that the Shia possess a rival Qur'an. That claim is false, and it is contradicted by the Shia sources themselves, which state explicitly that the text contains nothing of the Qur'an. Whatever one makes of the tradition, and it belongs to a category of report that even within Shia scholarship is handled with caution, it is not a scripture and has never been claimed as one. Readers who encounter the accusation should know that it does not survive contact with the material it claims to describe.

Beyond that sits the Fatima of the later mystical and philosophical writing: a pre-existent light, the point at which prophethood and imamate meet. The dynasty that ruled North Africa and Egypt for two centuries named itself after her. Poetry in Persian, Urdu and Arabic has built on her for a thousand years. This material is theologically serious, it is the work of some of the most careful minds

the tradition produced, and it is also a long way in idiom from a young woman in Medina selling armour to furnish a room.

The distance in idiom is not a problem to be explained away, and it is not evidence of invention. Later theologians were not adding to what they had received. They were working out, in the vocabulary of their own centuries, what follows if the verse of purification means what the Imams (AS) said it means. That is what theology is, in every tradition that has any, and the reasoning is on the page and can be examined by anyone who wants to.

What a reader should resist is the flattening in either direction. The polemicist who says the veneration is invented because the earliest reports use plainer language has confused idiom with content. The devotee who reads the fully developed vocabulary back into the Medinan house, as though the woman grinding grain in Chapter 2 spoke of herself in the terms of a seventh-century philosopher, has lost the person the whole thing is about. She was both. That is the difficulty and it is not a contradiction.

The Fatima of ordinary houses

There is one more thing to say about her, and it is the thing a book of this kind is most likely to leave out, because it is not a historical question and not a doctrinal one either.

Fatima (SA) is present in Shia domestic life to a degree that no other figure in this book approaches and that a reader outside the tradition would not guess from any of the foregoing.

The tasbih described above is said after every obligatory prayer by observant Shia Muslims, which is thirty-four and thirty-three and thirty-three, five times a day, for a lifetime. Whatever else a person knows about her, they have her name attached to a physical habit performed on a prayer mat since childhood.

The report of the cloak is not only a proof text. In Iran, in Iraq, in Pakistan and India and wherever their families have gone, it is recited aloud in homes, very often by women, very often in gatherings that men are not particularly involved in, and often at moments of difficulty: an illness, an examination, a birth, a thing hoped for. It has a performance tradition and a repertoire and people who are known for reciting it well.

Her name is the most common female name in the Shia world, in its several forms,

and the two most common are hers: Fatima and Zahra. A person from these communities will know more women named after her than after anyone else alive or dead.

And she is invoked. Not argued about, not cited, but called on, in the two syllables that come out of people in this tradition when they are frightened or in pain or startled, the way other communities reach for other names.

None of this is doctrine and none of it is history. It is practice, and it belongs to the third of the three registers set out in Chapter 12, and it is the register in which the overwhelming majority of Muslims actually encounter her.

Which brings out something that only becomes visible once the whole of this book is in view.

Every other woman in these pages is attached to a place. Zaynab (SA) has Rawiya and Cairo, contested but real. Sukayna (SA) has al-Baqi and a tomb in Damascus. Fatima Masuma (SA) has a city built around her. Even Narjis (SA) has a precinct that people gesture towards. The tradition assembles itself around graves, as Chapter 9 argued at length, and it does this because graves were the only real estate history ever granted it.

Fatima (SA) refused it a grave.

So the devotion attached to her had nowhere to go, and it went into time instead. It went into a fixed formula said after every prayer. It went into a text recited in a front room. It went into a season of the year, the days of Fatimiyya, when this community wears black for a woman whose death date it does not know and therefore commemorates twice. It went into what people name their daughters.

A tradition that could not build her a shrine built her into the hours of the day and the calendar of the year, and into the mouths of the people who love her, and into the names of a very large number of women now living.

She said she was not to be locatable. She is the least locatable and the most present figure in this book, and the second follows from the first.

What she left

Fatima (SA) was, on any chronology, young when she died. She held no office, whatever station this chapter has set out that she held. She commanded nothing.

She left an estate that had been refused her and a grave that cannot be found.

She also left two sons who would become the second and third Imams, one of whom would be poisoned and one of whom would be killed with most of his family on a plain in Iraq. She left a daughter who would carry the account of that killing into the court of the man responsible. She left a sermon that both traditions preserved. And she left a method, which is the thing this book is most interested in: the practice of meeting power with argument, in public, in the highest register available, and of refusing consent in a way that outlasts the refusal.

The refusal was the last thing she did. She had it written into her burial.

Fifty years later, her daughter would need it.

PART TWO · THE WITNESS

Zaynab bint Ali

Karbala, Kufa, Damascus, 61 AH

CHAPTER 6: Formed in Three Houses

Zaynab (SA) is famous for ten days.

Almost every treatment of her begins at Karbala, spends its energy there, and treats the fifty-five years beforehand as a waiting room. The effect is to make what she did in 61 AH look like a miracle, a woman who had apparently been doing nothing in particular suddenly producing, under the worst conditions imaginable, two of the most consequential speeches in Islamic history.

That is a bad way to understand anybody. What this chapter argues is that the woman who stood in the court at Kufa was not improvising. She was drawing on a political apprenticeship of extraordinary length and quality, served in three cities, under four caliphs, at the centre of every crisis the community had. By the time she was taken to Kufa as a prisoner she had already lived there as the daughter of its ruler. She knew the city. She knew exactly what it was capable of, because she had watched it do the same thing to her father.

Born into the interval

She was born in Medina, most probably in the fifth or sixth year of the Hijra. Her grandfather named her, and the reports say he wept when he did.

That detail belongs to a category the reader should learn to recognize. Traditions about the naming of children who will later suffer are shaped by knowledge of the suffering; the tears are a narrative device before they are a historical claim. It does not follow that they were invented. It follows that we cannot use them as evidence of anything except how the community later understood her life.

What we can use is the timing. She was about four or five when the Prophet

(PBUH) died, and her mother died within months of him. So Zaynab (SA) lost her grandfather and her mother in the same year, at an age where the second loss is the one that registers.

She was raised thereafter by her father, alongside two brothers roughly seven and five years her senior, and a younger sister. The household was not large, was not wealthy, and had just been through the events of Chapters 3 and 5. Whatever else Zaynab (SA) absorbed as a small child, she absorbed the atmosphere of a family that had made a claim, lost it, and decided not to press it further by force.

Twenty-five years of not being in charge

The period from 11 to 35 AH is the least discussed in the whole of Shia historical writing, for the understandable reason that nothing happens in it. Ali (AS) holds no office. He farms, digs wells, teaches, gives legal opinions when asked, and does not contest the succession.

For a book about political formation this quarter-century is not empty at all. It is the whole curriculum.

Zaynab (SA) grew from infancy to about thirty inside a household that believed it had been passed over and had chosen restraint. She watched her father advise the men who had displaced him, and watched him do it competently and without visible sabotage. She watched the community expand across Persia and into Egypt while her family stayed in Medina without command. She watched, in other words, a sustained demonstration of how to hold a grievance without letting it govern your conduct, which is precisely the discipline she would need in a courtroom in Damascus.

She also watched the community change. The Muslims of 35 AH were not the Muslims of 11 AH. The conquests had brought in wealth on a scale nobody had planned for, along with garrison cities full of tribesmen who had never met the Prophet (PBUH) and had joined a movement already victorious. The complaints that eventually destroyed Uthman were about money, appointments and the behaviour of governors. Zaynab (SA) was an adult through all of it, in the household everybody consulted and nobody obeyed.

The marriage

She was married to her cousin Abd Allah ibn Jafar, and the match deserves more

attention than it usually receives, because it complicates the picture most readers carry.

Abd Allah was the son of Jafar ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin who had led the migration to Abyssinia and been killed at Muta. He was also, by the standards of Medina, seriously rich. The sources treat his generosity as proverbial and record him giving away sums that made people uncomfortable. He was a public figure with property, clients and standing, and he lived a long life, dying decades after the events this book turns on.

So Zaynab (SA) did not live in poverty. She ran a substantial household. She had at least five children, including Awn and Muhammad, and the domestic life implied by the sources is one of means and social weight. The image of her as a figure of pure austerity, which the devotional literature sometimes reaches for, is not what the record describes.

There is a report, very widely repeated in modern writing, that she made it a condition of the marriage that she be permitted to accompany her brother al-Husayn (AS) whenever he travelled. I would treat this with caution. Its attestation is late, and it has the tidy retrospective shape of a tradition constructed to explain something that later needed explaining, namely why a married woman with children was on the road to Iraq. The simpler explanation, that this was a family in which the women travelled with the men in a moment of crisis, needs no special clause in a marriage contract.

One thing about Abd Allah does matter, and it will matter again in Chapter 9. He did not go to Karbala. He was in Medina, and the reports have him writing to al-Husayn (AS) urging him not to make the journey. He sent his sons. He kept his wife informed of nothing that could have stopped her. Two of those sons did not come back, and he survived them both by many years.

The second house: Kufa

In 36 AH her father became caliph, and the family moved to Iraq.

Kufa was not a city in the way Medina was a city. It was a garrison town laid out for an army, populated by tribal contingents settled by quota, with a population that had grown enormous within a generation and had almost no shared history. It was rich, quarrelsome, and structurally incapable of stable loyalty, because the loyalties that mattered in it were tribal and ran in every direction at once.

Zaynab (SA) lived there for roughly four and a half years, as the daughter of the man attempting to govern it. That is the single most important fact in this chapter.

What she saw in that time was a case study in political failure that no amount of reading could have supplied. She saw the Battle of the Camel, in which the Prophet's widow took the field against the Prophet's cousin. She saw Siffin, and the arbitration that followed it, and the way a settlement acceptable to a leader can be rejected by his own supporters. She saw those supporters secede, become the Kharijites, and be destroyed at Nahrawan by the man they had followed. She saw her father's letters to his governors, some of which survive and are among the most disillusioned political documents in Arabic. She saw an army that would not muster, a treasury that emptied, and a city that cheered in the mosque and stayed home when called.

And in 40 AH she saw it end, when her father was struck in the mosque of Kufa during the dawn prayer and died two days later.

He too was buried in a concealed grave. The location was kept secret for over a century, out of fear of what his enemies would do to the body, and only revealed publicly in the Abbasid period. That is the second time in two generations that his family put someone in the ground where their enemies could not find them, and Zaynab (SA) was present for it.

Back to Medina, and a third funeral

The family returned to Medina. Al-Hasan (AS) made terms with Muawiya and withdrew from politics, and about ten years later he died, on the standard Shia account by poison administered at his enemies' instigation.

He had asked to be buried beside his grandfather if it could be done without conflict. It could not. The reports describe an armed party assembling to prevent it, and arrows striking the bier as it was carried. Al-Husayn (AS), rather than force the issue, took his brother to al-Baqi and buried him there.

Zaynab (SA) was in her forties by then. Count what she had witnessed by that point: a claim to succession refused, a mother dead in bitterness and buried in secret, a father assassinated in a mosque and buried in secret, and now a brother whose funeral had to be diverted under fire. Four funerals, three of them conducted defensively.

This is what I mean by apprenticeship. Nothing that happened at Karbala would have been unfamiliar to her in kind. It was only unfamiliar in scale.

What she knew

The tradition gives her two titles worth examining. The first is Aqila Bani Hashim, which is usually rendered as the wise woman or the noble lady of the clan, and which carries a sense of sound judgement rather than ornament. The second is a phrase attributed to her nephew Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS), who is reported to have addressed her in Kufa as one who knows without having been taught.

Modern writing frequently states that she held regular teaching sessions for the women of Kufa, expounding the Qur'an. I want to be careful here, because this claim has become standard and its early attestation is thinner than its popularity suggests. It may well be true. Women of standing did teach, and there is nothing implausible about the daughter of Ali (AS) doing so in the city he governed.

What we have as firmer ground is the reaction in the street when she spoke there in 61 AH. The accounts of that day record the Kufans falling silent, and record someone saying that she spoke as though the tongue of Ali (AS) were in her mouth. That is a comparison made by people who had heard the original. It tells us she had a recognizable rhetorical formation, and it tells us her audience could identify its source. Whether or not she ran classes, she had plainly been doing something with the material for a very long time.

So much for what she knew. A chapter that describes only a political education will have produced a very capable woman with no interior, so before the departure, what the tradition says she was.

She prayed at night, and she prayed at night as a settled habit rather than as a response to catastrophe. The report on which Chapter 7 rests, transmitted from her nephew, is not that she prayed on the eleventh of Muharram. It is that she did not omit the night prayer at any point during the journey and the captivity, which is a statement about a practice already in place before any of it began. A person does not acquire that discipline in a prison in Damascus. She brought it with her from Medina, and she had been keeping it, on this account, through the years in Kufa and the years of waiting before them.

She was a transmitter. This is easy to miss because she is remembered for two speeches, but the sermon read in Chapter 4 reaches us, on its own chain, through

her. She heard her mother deliver it, or received it from someone who did, and she passed it to the next generation of the household, and it came down through her niece and her niece's son into the books. Whatever else Zaynab (SA) was doing in the quiet decades, she was carrying the family's record and handing it on, and the most important document in Part One of this book survives because she did.

And the two titles set out above point the same way once they are read carefully. Aqila denotes settled judgement, the quality of a person whose assessment is worth having. Her nephew's description of her as one who knows untaught is a statement about religious learning, made by an Imam, about a woman, in public, at the worst moment of both their lives. Neither is decoration.

Set the titles beside the transmission and the night prayer, and the picture is consistent: a woman with a formation, an established practice, and a body of knowledge that the people around her recognized and drew on.

One more thing, which the sources give us only in glimpses and which matters more than the glimpses suggest. She had been present at every one of the family's losses and had not been broken by any of them. The tradition has a word for that and the word is sabr, and it does not mean the passive endurance the English cognate suggests. It means holding a position under load. By 60 AH she had been holding one for fifty years.

The decision

Muawiya died in Rajab of 60 AH, and his son required from Medina what his father had been careful never to demand in that form: a public oath of allegiance from al-Husayn (AS) personally.

The refusal, the departure for Mecca, the letters from Kufa promising support, the sending of Muslim ibn Aqil to verify them, his betrayal and execution, and the decision to continue anyway, are the standard narrative and I will not rehearse them. What concerns this chapter is that Zaynab (SA) was somewhere in her mid-fifties, married to a wealthy man who was staying behind, with children and a settled life in Medina, and she went.

The sources do not give us her reasoning. They rarely give us any woman's reasoning. What we can observe is the shape of the choice: she left security to travel with a brother who had been told by nearly everyone whose opinion he valued not to make the journey.

And she was going to Kufa.

That is the sentence this chapter has been building towards. She was not going into the unknown. She was going back to the city that had cheered her father in the mosque and left him without an army, the city where he had been killed, the city whose character she had studied at close range for four and a half years. Whatever expectations al-Husayn (AS) held about Kufan support, his sister had grounds for holding fewer.

Eight months later she would be brought into that same city in ropes, and she would speak to a crowd in the street, and some of them would be weeping, and she would tell them exactly what she thought of Kufan weeping. Chapter 8 will read what she said.

She had known these people for twenty-five years.

CHAPTER 7: Ten Days

This chapter does not retell Karbala.

It is the most narrated event in Shia history, recited annually in every city where Shia Muslims live, and a reader who has picked up this book does not need another account of the battle from me. What that reader is unlikely to have been given is the ten days seen from inside the women's camp, told as a sequence of decisions rather than a sequence of losses.

So: the facts in a paragraph, then four moments, and one thing that is not a moment at all.

Al-Husayn (AS) reached the plain of Karbala on the second of Muharram in the year 61, with a party numbering perhaps a hundred and fifty, of whom fewer than eighty were fighting men, the rest being women and children of his household. He was intercepted there and prevented from proceeding. From the seventh, access to the river was cut. On the tenth, after negotiations failed, his companions were killed in the course of a morning and he was killed in the afternoon. The camp was looted and the tents burned. The survivors, almost all of them women and children, together with one adult male too ill to have fought, were taken prisoner and marched to Kufa and then to Damascus.

Zaynab (SA) was somewhere in her mid-fifties. Two of her sons were among the dead.

One point about the sources before we start, because it bears on everything in this chapter. Much of the earliest material on Karbala reaches us through al-Tabari, drawing on the account of Abu Mikhnaf, which in turn depends heavily on a man named Hamid ibn Muslim. He was not a partisan of al-Husayn (AS). He was with the other army. A great deal of what follows, including the most damaging details, is therefore preserved in the reporting of a man who was standing on the wrong side of the field.

One: the night before

The account comes from Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS), who was inside the tent, ill, being nursed by his aunt.

He describes his father withdrawing that evening and reciting some lines of poetry about the treachery of time towards its companions, repeating them. He says he understood immediately what was meant. He says Zaynab (SA) heard it too, and that she came out with her garment trailing, and cried that she wished death had taken her first, and struck her face and tore her collar, and fell insensible.

Her brother revived her. And then he asked her for something.

He told her not to let grief take away her self-command. He told her that everything on the earth dies, and that his grandfather and father and mother were better than him and had died. And in the reports he asks her directly not to tear her clothes for him, not to scratch her face, not to cry out for ruin when he is killed.

This is the request of a man arranging what will happen after his death, and he is not arranging it for her comfort. He is asking her to be capable of something on the eleventh, and the capability he needs is composure. The mourning he is forbidding is the ordinary Arabian mourning of the period, which is loud, physical and self-destroying, and which ends with the mourner incapacitated. He needs her not incapacitated.

Her decision, made that night, is to accept it.

Everything she does in the following weeks depends on this exchange. A woman who spent the eleventh of Muharram tearing at her face does not deliver a legal indictment in a governor's court eight days later. The composure that makes Kufa and Damascus possible was requested, granted and paid for in a tent on the ninth.

Two: the appeal to the commander

On the afternoon of the tenth, with her brother on the ground and the encirclement closing, Zaynab (SA) came to the door of the tent and called out.

She did not call for help. She did not call to the men killing him. She called to Umar ibn Sad by name, the commander of the army, the man in charge, and asked

him whether Abu Abdallah was to be killed while he stood watching.

The report says he turned his face away, and that tears ran down his beard, and that he said nothing.

Look at the choice being made. She had seconds, one sentence, and no power whatever. She could have begged. She could have cursed. She used the sentence to fix responsibility on the one man present who had a name, a rank and a reputation to lose, and to require him to acknowledge in public what he was doing.

It did not save her brother. It was never going to. What it did was establish, in front of an army of witnesses, that the commanding officer knew exactly who was being killed and chose not to prevent it. That is not a plea. It is the taking of a deposition, and it is the first act of the case she will present in Kufa and Damascus.

The detail about his tears comes to us, again, from the reporting of his own side.

Three: the body over the boy

The killing finished in the afternoon. The tents were stripped and set alight and the surviving women and children scattered into the open ground, and then soldiers came through the wreckage looking for any male who could be counted a combatant.

They found Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS), aged in his early twenties, prostrated by fever, unable to stand.

The reports have Shimr moving to kill him. They have Zaynab (SA) throwing herself across the young man and saying that he would not be killed unless she was killed first. And they have Umar ibn Sad, the same man she had addressed hours earlier, calling his soldiers off and ordering that the boy be left alone.

It is worth being blunt about what turns on this.

Every Imam after the third, and therefore the entire subsequent structure of Twelver Shia Islam, descends from the young man lying in that wreckage. The line runs through him and through no one else, because every other adult male of the house was dead by mid-afternoon. Chapters 16 through 21 of this book, the shrine at Qom, the hawza, the twelfth Imam and the whole doctrine of the occultation, exist because a woman in her fifties lay down on top of a sick man and made a soldier decide whether to go through her.

It is the most consequential act by any woman in Shia history, and it takes perhaps four seconds.

And in between: the night prayer

One thing belongs between the third moment and the fourth, and it is the only item in this chapter that is not a decision made towards anybody else.

The night of the tenth into the eleventh was spent in the open, among burnt tents, with the dead unburied a short distance away, with children who had watched it happen, with no shelter and no water beyond what the soldiers permitted, and with a sick young man who had nearly been killed that afternoon.

The reports say that Zaynab (SA) prayed that night.

The transmission is from her nephew, and the claim is specific: that she did not omit her night prayer at any point in the journey that followed, and that on this night she prayed sitting down, because she no longer had the strength to stand.

The attestation belongs to the maqtal literature rather than to the earliest layer, and a reader who has come this far will know what that means and will not need me to labour it. What can be said is that the detail is not the kind a hagiographer reaches for. A composer inventing piety would have her standing. The specification that she prayed seated is a concession, and it is the sort of concession that gets included because someone remembered it rather than because it improved the story.

I include it because a chapter that presents this woman entirely as a political actor has told you something true and left out the thing she would have said mattered. The composure her brother asked for on the ninth had to come from somewhere. On the evidence of her own tradition, it came from the ordinary discipline of a person who prayed at night, and who went on doing it on the one night in her life when nobody on earth would have held it against her to stop.

Four: the road out

They were moved on the eleventh, and the route out went past the field.

The captives were brought past the bodies, which had been left unburied and had been ridden over. This was not carelessness. Prisoners are taken along a particular

road for a reason, and the reason here was to break them before they reached Kufa.

It is worth stopping the analysis and looking at what she was walking through, because the sentence that follows will otherwise be a fact about rhetoric.

It is the second week of October and the plain is flat and pale and there is nothing on it. The river is a line of green half a mile off, and they had not been allowed to reach it for three days. The tents are burnt down to their frames. What the horses have not trodden into the ground is lying where it fell: a shoe, a cooking pot, somebody's comb.

And the men are on the ground, all of them, in the open, in the sun, where they have been since yesterday afternoon. They are her brother and her nephews and her cousins and the sons of her father's friends. Two of them are her own sons, and she is walking past them roped to a line of women, and she is fifty-five years old, and she is not permitted to stop.

The children are with her. Some of them are four and five. They have not been fed and they have not been told what is happening and they are being made to walk past this because a decision was taken that they should.

That is the road. That is what is under her feet when she starts to speak.

And it is at this point, according to the reports, that Zaynab (SA) begins to speak.

Not to mourn. She had been asked not to, and the accounts of what she says are not the vocabulary of lamentation but of address. She calls on her grandfather. She names what is in front of her, that this is al-Husayn (AS), in the open, covered in blood, his body dismembered, his daughters prisoners. She tells the dead man that the angels of heaven are weeping, and she does it out loud, in front of the army that produced the scene.

Hamid ibn Muslim, who was there and on the other side, is reported as saying that she made every one of them weep, enemy and friend alike.

That sentence is the hinge of Part Two. In the space of a morning she has taken the instrument that was meant to humiliate her, the forced march past the corpses, and converted it into a platform. The bodies are the evidence. The soldiers are the audience. The event that was designed to end a rebellion has just acquired a narrator, and she is going to narrate it in the capital city of the province and then in the capital city of the empire.

Her brother had asked her not to mourn him. He does not seem to have specified what she should do instead.

She had worked it out by the eleventh.

CHAPTER 8: Kufa and Damascus: The Testimony

By the evening of the tenth of Muharram, the rising was over.

Be unsentimental about it. Militarily, Karbala was not a defeat but an annihilation, and it was a small one. Seventy-two men were killed, by the count the tradition keeps. The Umayyad state suppressed larger revolts than this without much difficulty and would go on doing so for another seventy years. Ibn al-Zubayr held Mecca against Damascus for nine years and had a rival caliphate; almost nobody outside specialist reading can say much about him. Al-Mukhtar took Kufa itself and killed the men responsible for Karbala; he is a footnote. The Tawwabun, who we will come to, marched out four thousand strong to die for al-Husayn (AS) and are barely remembered outside the tradition.

So the question this chapter has to answer is not why Karbala was tragic. Plenty of things were tragic. The question is why this particular slaughter of seventy-two men became the organizing event of a global religious tradition, recited annually in a hundred languages fourteen centuries later, when comparable and larger catastrophes of the same period are the property of historians.

The answer, or a substantial part of it, is that this one had a witness who understood what she was holding, and who was given two opportunities to speak in public before the state worked out what she was doing.

What she had to work with

Consider Zaynab's (SA) position on the eleventh of Muharram. She had no army, no money, no property, no freedom of movement, and no adult male protector, since the only surviving man of the house was a sick prisoner in his early twenties whose life she had saved by lying on top of him. She was roped and being marched.

She had exactly one asset, and it was an odd one. She had an audience.

Prisoners of a certain rank are not disposed of quietly. They are displayed, because display is the point of taking them. The Umayyad plan was to parade the household of the Prophet through the streets of Kufa and then through the streets of Damascus, and to bring them into the presence of the governor and then the caliph, in order to demonstrate to two capital cities what happened to people who refused allegiance.

That plan required putting her in front of large numbers of people, twice, in the two most politically consequential cities in the empire, in circumstances of maximum public attention. Nobody appears to have considered what she might do with it.

Kufa: prosecuting the mourners

They entered Kufa in Muharram of 61. The accounts describe the streets full and the crowd weeping.

The witness we have for what happened next is a man who gives his name as Hudhlam and says he arrived in the city as the captives were brought in. He reports that Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS) spoke, and then that Zaynab (SA) signalled to the people to be quiet, and that when she did, breathing stilled and the bells on the camels went silent. He says he never saw a woman of such reserve speak with such eloquence, and that she seemed to be speaking straight from the tongue of Ali (AS).

Note the situation. She is a prisoner addressing a crowd that is on her side. They are weeping. They are the population of the city that wrote to her brother, invited him, promised him support, and then did not come.

She does not thank them.

She opens with praise of God and blessings on her grandfather, which is the formal shape, and then turns on them: people of Kufa, people of deceit and desertion. And then the question that runs through the whole address, which is whether they are crying.

Are you weeping? Then may your tears never dry, and may your wailing never fall silent.

And then the image the sermon is built on, which she takes from the Qur'an: they are like the woman who unravels her yarn after she has spun it strong.

The figure is worth stopping over, because the choice is exact. The Qur'anic verse describes someone who does the work, achieves the thing, and then picks the thread apart with her own hands, and it is applied there to people who break oaths after making them. It is not an image of failure. It is an image of self-sabotage by a party who had already succeeded. The Kufans had built something: they had accepted Ali (AS), they had the sons of the companions among them, they had the letters, they had the numbers. And they took it apart themselves. Nobody did it to them.

It is also, and she will have known this, an image of women's work. She is standing in ropes in front of the men of a garrison city and telling them they have behaved like a woman who spoils her own spinning, which in that setting is not a compliment about domesticity.

She goes on to tell them that they have taken their oaths as an instrument of deceit among themselves, that what they have earned is God's anger, and that they will carry this shame and never wash it out. She tells them to weep much and laugh little, because the stain they have taken on will not come off. And she closes with the verse warning those who disbelieve not to imagine that the respite granted them is a favour.

Hudhlam says the people were stunned, that hands went to mouths, and that an old man beside him wept until his beard was wet.

Why she refused them the tears

A modern reader may find the Kufa sermon uncomfortable, and the discomfort is worth examining rather than smoothing over. These people were sympathetic. They were grieving. They were, many of them, frightened men who had been intimidated into inaction by a governor who had made an example of anyone who moved. Was it necessary to flay them?

I think the answer is yes, and that the reason is political rather than emotional.

Public grief is a solvent. A community that weeps for a wrong it permitted is a community discharging its obligation in the cheapest available currency. The tears do the work that action was supposed to do, everyone feels the appropriate feelings, and by the following season the matter has been metabolized into sorrow,

which is a comfortable place for it to live. This happens constantly, in every society, and it is one of the most reliable mechanisms by which atrocities are absorbed rather than answered.

Zaynab (SA) shuts that exit within hours of arriving in the city. She does not tell them their grief is inadequate; she tells them it is disqualifying, that it is itself an item in the indictment, and that the shame is now a permanent attribute of Kufa. She makes weeping cost something instead of resolving something.

It worked, and we can measure it. Four years later, several thousand Kufans marched out under Sulayman ibn Surad, calling themselves the Tawwabun, the Penitents, with the explicit and stated purpose of expiating their failure to come to al-Husayn (AS). They had no realistic prospect of victory and most of them were killed. Whatever one thinks of that as a strategy, it is not the behaviour of a population that has been allowed to cry the matter out. Something kept the wound open, and the sermon in the street is the most obvious candidate.

The road to Damascus

From Kufa the captives were sent on to the capital, a journey of several hundred miles, and they arrived in a city that had prepared a celebration.

Damascus in 61 AH had not experienced the events that produced Karbala. It was a prosperous Umayyad capital, Syrian, with a population loyal to the dynasty, and its knowledge of the Prophet's family was largely what the state had told it. The captives were brought in decorated, in daylight, as a triumph.

Then they were taken into the presence of Yazid.

The confession in the throne room

What happened in that court is described consistently enough across the sources that the shape can be trusted, whatever one concludes about the wording.

The head of al-Husayn (AS) was brought in a vessel and set before the caliph, and he struck at the mouth with a cane. A companion of the Prophet who was present is reported to have objected, having seen the Prophet (PBUH) kiss that mouth.

And then Yazid recited poetry. The lines are known: he wished his elders killed at Badr could see this, so that they would cry out in satisfaction and tell him he had

settled the account.

Consider what that is. Badr was the battle in which the Meccan aristocracy, including Yazid's own great-grandfather, was broken by the Muslims. To say that Karbala settles Badr is to say that this is not a state suppressing a rebel. It is one clan taking revenge on another clan for a defeat suffered in the pagan period, and it makes the entire religious framing of the Umayyad caliphate into decoration.

The reigning caliph, in his own court, in front of his own notables, has just said the quiet thing out loud. And there is a captive standing in the room who was raised in the household of Ali (AS) and knows precisely what to do with a confession.

Damascus: contesting the victory

She rises and begins, as always, with the formal opening, and then with a verse: that the end of those who did evil was evil, because they rejected God's signs and mocked them.

Then the sentence that reframes the entire room.

Do you imagine, Yazid, that because you have closed the corners of the earth and the horizons of the sky upon us, and we are driven forward as captives, that we are abased before God and you are honoured?

This is the whole argument of the speech, delivered in its second minute. The question in the room is not who won. Everyone can see who won. The question is what winning proves, and she raises it before he has had a chance to answer it for her.

Her answer comes from his own scripture. She cites the verse warning those who disbelieve not to think that the respite God gives them is good for them, since it is given so that they may increase in sin. Applied here, the argument is that his victory is not evidence of divine favour but consistent with the opposite, and that the theology he governs in the name of contains an explicit warning against the inference he is making. He is a caliph. He cannot answer this by denying the verse.

Then she goes at his lineage, and this is the sharpest thing in either sermon.

She calls him the son of the freed ones. The phrase refers to the Meccans who were pardoned at the conquest of the city rather than being put to the sword,

and Yazid's family were among them. In a court whose entire authority structure ran on genealogical precedence, in a room full of men who understood exactly what that word meant, she has just told the caliph that his family entered Islam on the losing side, as a mercy, and that he is the descendant of pardoned enemies addressing the descendants of the man who pardoned them.

And she attaches it to a specific charge, which is where it becomes lethal. Is it justice, she asks, that his own women and slave girls sit behind curtains while the daughters of the Messenger of God are driven from city to city with their faces uncovered and their veils torn, displayed to every passer-by, near and far, with no man of their family left alive?

This is an argument constructed entirely out of the court's own values. She is not appealing to a standard the Umayyads reject. She is invoking the honour code they profess and applying it to the scene they have staged, and pointing out that they have done to the Prophet's household exactly what they would consider an unbearable disgrace if done to their own. The triumphal parade was the state's idea. She has just made it evidence.

She tells him to scheme as he likes and exert every effort, and that he will not erase their memory or extinguish their revelation, and that his own days are few. She tells him that she does not consider him worth reproaching, but that eyes weep and hearts burn. And she closes by praising God, who sealed the affairs of the first of them with forgiveness and the last of them with martyrdom and mercy.

That final sentence is doing something specific. It places the killing inside a frame in which it is a completion rather than a defeat, and it does so as a formal doxology, which is to say it takes the standard closing formula of religious speech and uses it to file the day's events under a heading Yazid cannot contest without arguing against the form of the sentence itself.

What it did

The court retreated, and the retreat is recorded.

Yazid began to distance himself from the killing, laying responsibility on Ibn Ziyad, his own governor, and expressing regret that it had been carried out as it was. The captives were not executed. They were housed, and after a period they were sent back to Medina with provision and escort. The state that had brought them there to demonstrate the price of defiance sent them home.

It is possible to read this as calculation rather than defeat, and I think it partly was. Yazid could see that the display had gone wrong, that the mood in his own capital had shifted, and that keeping the Prophet's family in Damascus was now a liability. But that is precisely the measure of what the speech accomplished. A caliph does not adjust his position because a prisoner has moved him. He adjusts because the political value of the tableau has inverted, and it inverted while she was speaking.

The longer effect is the one this chapter opened with. She had, in the space of a few weeks, given the event a fixed public interpretation in both of the cities that mattered, in the presence of hostile witnesses who transmitted it. By the time the state understood that the killing needed to be managed as a narrative, the narrative already existed, had been delivered twice in public, and was being carried by people who had been standing in the room.

That is why Karbala is not a footnote and Ibn al-Zubayr is.

How reliable is any of this

The reader who has come this far is owed the usual accounting, and it is much the same as for the Fadakiyya.

The Kufa sermon is in reasonably good shape by the standards of the period. It appears in Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur's third-century anthology of women's eloquence, the same collection that preserved Fatima's (SA) sermon, alongside its appearance in the Shia sources. That is early, and it is a literary rather than a devotional context.

The Damascus sermon is on better ground than is usually assumed, and this is worth stating clearly because a good deal of writing on both sides has it wrong. It too appears in Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur's third-century anthology, alongside the Kufa sermon and the Fadakiyya. A Sunni literary compiler in Baghdad, some two centuries after the event, recorded a scene in which a captive woman of the Prophet's house tells an Umayyad caliph that his victory proves nothing and calls him the son of the freed ones.

Later works, principally al-Tabarsi in the sixth century and Ibn Tawus in the seventh, carry fuller versions, and the wording varies between all of them. The surrounding scene, the head in the court, the striking with the cane, the verses about Badr, the objection from a companion present, and the caliph's subsequent shifting of blame, is likewise attested in the earlier historical literature including

outside the Shia tradition.

So the honest position is this. Both speeches were made, and both were written down within about two centuries by a compiler who was not a partisan of the household and was interested in them as literature. Their arguments, the refusal of absolution at Kufa and the refusal to accept defeat as a verdict at Damascus, are consistent with everything else we know about her and with the documented behaviour of Yazid afterwards, which requires explaining somehow. The specific wording has also been carried for centuries by a tradition with strong reasons to polish it, and has been polished, and the versions differ. Both things are true, and neither cancels the other. Chapter 12 sets out why I think a mature tradition can hold that position without anxiety.

Under whose authority

One thing needs saying before this chapter closes, because a reader could take the last several pages as describing a woman acting on her own initiative, and that is not how the tradition understands it.

The surviving Imam was in that column. Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS) was ill, roped, and in the hands of the state, and the reports have him speaking in Kufa and in Damascus at the points where he was able to. He was also, from the afternoon of the tenth of Muharram, the Imam of the age. Nothing Zaynab (SA) did in those weeks was done outside his authority, and the tradition is clear that she acted with his knowledge and, in the reports, at moments under his direction.

That is not a diminishment and it should not be read as one. It is the difference between a freelancer and an advocate. A woman who speaks because she has decided to speak is doing one thing; a woman who speaks on behalf of an authority that has been prevented from speaking, in a setting where the authority's survival depends on his not being the one who speaks, is doing something considerably more disciplined. The composure her brother asked her for in Chapter 7 makes sense in exactly this light. He was not asking her to bear up. He was asking her to be fit to hold a position that was about to fall to her.

She held it, in ropes, in two hostile cities, until the household was returned to Medina and the Imam could resume it. Then she stopped. There is no record of her contesting anything afterwards, which is itself evidence about what she had understood herself to be doing.

The witness

One last observation, and it is the reason Part Two is titled as it is.

Zaynab (SA) did not fight at Karbala and could not have. She did not save her brother and did not try to. What she did was survive it deliberately, having been asked to, and then testify, twice, under conditions where testimony was the only instrument available and where using it carried an obvious risk of being killed for it.

Her brother made the event. She made it mean something, and she did it in the eight weeks when it could still have been made to mean something else. Had she gone silent, or gone mad with grief, or simply wept in the street in Kufa like everybody else, there is a version of the seventh century in which Karbala is a small suppressed revolt in a period full of them, remembered by specialists.

That is the claim this book makes about her, and it is a claim about work rather than about suffering. The suffering is not in dispute and it has never needed my help.

She had perhaps another eighteen months to live, and the sources go almost silent about them. That silence, and the three graves it ends in, is the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9: Three Graves

She went home, and the sources stop.

This is the ordinary fate of women in early Islamic historical writing and it should not surprise us, but the contrast here is unusually sharp. For eight weeks in 61 AH we have Zaynab (SA) in close-up: her words in a Kufan street, her words in a Damascene court, the reactions of named witnesses. Then the captives are sent back to Medina, and the record thins to almost nothing. She has perhaps a year and a half left, or perhaps rather more depending on which death date you accept, and we can say very little about it with confidence.

What we do have is a scatter of reports, a husband whose later conduct is awkward, and three cities that claim her body.

Medina, and the problem of an inconvenient survivor

The state had a difficulty with the returned captives, and it was a difficulty of its own making.

Killing them would have been straightforward in Kufa and impossible in Medina. They were now in the Prophet's own city, publicly, having been released by the caliph himself with provision and escort, which was Yazid's way of closing the episode. What they carried with them was an account of what had happened, and unlike in Damascus they were now among people who had known al-Husayn (AS) personally.

There are reports that Zaynab (SA) used the time. The accounts describe her speaking about Karbala in Medina, gatherings forming, and the governor writing to Damascus to say that her presence in the city was a problem and that people were being stirred by her. The consequence, in these accounts, is that she was required to leave, and that she chose Syria or Egypt depending on which version

you are reading.

I would treat this material with the same caution I have applied elsewhere. Its attestation is not early, and it has an obvious function: it explains why a woman who should have died in Medina has a tomb somewhere else. Traditions that solve a problem this neatly deserve to be checked, and this one cannot be. It may be true. A governor writing to complain about an unmanageable religious figure is entirely plausible Umayyad administrative behaviour, and she was plainly capable of being unmanageable. But it is precisely the kind of report that a shrine tradition needs in order to exist, and we should notice that before we lean on it.

The commonly given date for her death is the fifteenth of Rajab, 62 AH, which would put it around eighteen months after Karbala and make her about fifty-seven. Other dates circulate. As with her mother, the tradition does not know.

The husband

Abd Allah ibn Jafar outlived his wife by something like twenty years, dying around the year 80 AH, and his later life sits uncomfortably beside everything in the previous two chapters.

He had not gone to Karbala. He had sent two sons, who were killed there. And in the years afterwards he remained a wealthy and prominent man in Medina, on functional terms with the Umayyad state, in receipt of the stipends and gifts that such men received from Damascus. There are reports of Yazid making a payment to him in connection with the deaths of his sons, and reports of his continued standing under Abd al-Malik.

Shia writing tends to pass over this quickly, and I understand why, but the omission does the material no favours. It is more interesting than the silence suggests.

What it shows is that the household of the Prophet in the second half of the first century was not a uniform bloc of resistance. It contained people who took the road to Iraq and people who stayed in Medina and drew a stipend, and in this case the two were married to each other. That is not a scandal to be managed. It is the normal condition of families under authoritarian government, and recognizing it makes the choices of the people who did go more legible, not less. Zaynab (SA) travelled to Karbala from a comfortable house that would still be comfortable when she got back, and her husband's continued prosperity is the proof of it. She had something to lose and she was not obliged to lose it.

It also raises a question the sources will not answer. She spent her last years in the household of a man who had stayed behind, having watched his sons and her brother die and having then addressed a caliph on the subject. We do not know what that marriage was like afterwards. We know only that nobody thought to write it down, which is itself a comment on what the sources considered worth preserving about her.

Three cities

And now the graves.

Three places claim to hold Zaynab (SA), and each has a developed tradition, a shrine, and a constituency. They cannot all be right and it is not certain that any of them is.

The first claim is Damascus, at Rawiya in the Ghouta south of the city. The associated story is that she went to Syria, in some versions because of the exile from Medina and in others because her husband held land there and a famine drove them to it, and that she died and was buried on that land. This is today the most significant of the three by any measure of practice. The shrine has been substantially rebuilt and expanded in the modern period with Iranian support, and it draws very large numbers of pilgrims from Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan and the Gulf.

Its political weight has been considerable: during the Syrian conflict that began in 2011, the defence of the shrine was invoked explicitly as a justification for foreign Shia armed involvement in the country. Whatever one concludes about the seventh century, a claim about a burial site produced consequences in the twenty-first.

The second claim is Cairo, at the mosque of Sayyida Zaynab in the old city. The associated story has her travelling to Egypt after Karbala, being received there, and dying within a year or so. The shrine is a major centre of Egyptian popular devotion with an annual festival, and here is the part that matters for this book: the devotion is overwhelmingly Sunni. Egypt is not a Shia country. Hundreds of thousands of Sunni Muslims venerate this woman annually at a tomb they believe to be hers, which is a fact worth setting against the assumption that the women of the Ahl al-Bayt belong to one community.

The third claim is Medina, in the cemetery of al-Baqi, and it is the least visited and the most probable. It requires no journey, no exile narrative and no supporting

story. It says that a woman in her fifties returned to her own city with the surviving members of her family and died there a year or two later and was buried where her relatives were buried. That is what usually happens to people. If the Baqi claim is correct, her grave has been unmarked since the demolition of the cemetery's monuments in 1926, which is to say that the most likely resting place of the woman in this chapter is a patch of open ground in Medina with nothing on it.

On the evidence, neither the Damascus nor the Cairo tradition can be traced back anywhere near the first century. Both surface in the medieval period, centuries after the fact. Both may also be complicated by a problem this book will meet head-on in the next chapter, which is that this family reused names relentlessly. There was more than one Zaynab in it, and there were other women of the Prophet's descendants named Zaynab in later generations, any of whom could have been buried in Syria or Egypt and later identified with the famous one.

How a shrine gets made

I want to treat this as a mechanism rather than as an error, because the mechanism is one of the most important things in this book and it will recur in Chapters 13 and 17.

A shrine requires three things. It requires a community with a need, meaning people who require somewhere to go and something to do with what they feel. It requires a narrative that connects a person to a place. And it requires a site that someone is willing to maintain.

Notice that a body is not on the list. A body helps, and the tradition always claims one, but the claim is generated by the other three conditions rather than the reverse. Where devotion is strong and a location is absent, a location will be supplied, and it will be supplied by people who are not lying. They are reasoning: she was in this region, this is an old tomb of a woman of the family, the community here has always said so. Two centuries later the reasoning has become a fact, and the fact acquires a dome, and the dome acquires an endowment, and by then the question of what is underneath has become almost impossible to raise politely.

And once the site exists it does real work. It organizes pilgrimage, it structures a calendar, it employs people, it becomes a place where a woman from Lahore and a woman from Beirut stand next to each other. In the twenty-first century it became a reason for men to fight. None of that depends on the accuracy of the

identification, which is precisely why the accuracy is so rarely examined.

So what should a reader do with three graves?

I would suggest this. The historical question, where is the body, is legitimate and the honest answer is that al-Baqi is most likely and we do not know. The devotional question, what is happening at these places, is a different question with a different answer, and treating the second as though it were a failed attempt at the first is a category error. The pilgrims at Rawiya and at Cairo are not conducting a badly executed archaeological investigation. They are doing something else, and the something else is not made false by the uncertainty, though it would be made poorer by pretending the uncertainty is not there.

A tradition built out of tombs

Step back far enough and something structural comes into view.

The sacred geography of Shia Islam is almost entirely a geography of graves. Najaf, Karbala, Kazimayn, Samarra, Mashhad, Qom, Rawiya: the map is made of tombs, and specifically of tombs of people who were killed, poisoned, imprisoned or exiled. There is no Shia capital in that list. There is no cathedral, no seat of government, no site commemorating a victory. And at the two ends of the Hijaz, in the cemeteries at Mecca and Medina, lie the graves that the community can visit and cannot mark: Khadija (SA) at al-Mualla, and at al-Baqi the Imams and, most probably, the woman who is the subject of this chapter.

This is what a tradition does when it loses. Communities that hold power build their sacred geography out of the places where they exercise it, the great mosque of the capital, the site of the founding conquest. Communities that do not hold power build it out of the places where their people were put in the ground, because those are the only locations history has actually granted them. Every shrine in that list is a defeat with a dome on it.

Which makes the two women of Part One and Part Two into a matched pair, and the pairing is not accidental.

Fatima (SA) has no grave, because she instructed that she was not to be locatable, and the tradition honoured the instruction by refusing to settle on one of the three possible spots in Medina. Zaynab (SA) has three graves, because the tradition could not bear for her to have none and supplied what history had withheld.

One woman hid herself and the community respected it. The other was lost and the community would not accept it. Both outcomes are failures of location, and they point in opposite directions, and between them they describe how this tradition handles absence: sometimes by preserving it deliberately, sometimes by filling it in.

Hold that thought. Because in the next part of this book we meet a woman about whom the tradition cannot even agree on the number of people involved, and the techniques for handling absence are about to be tested a great deal harder.

PART THREE · THE DISPUTED RECORD

Umm Kulthum bint Ali

Medina, and the gaps in the record

CHAPTER 10: The Woman in the Margins

We do not know her name.

Not in the sense that it has been lost, exactly. In the sense that the thing everyone calls her is not a name at all, and the name underneath it is reported inconsistently, and there is reasonable doubt about how many women the reports are actually describing.

This chapter is going to move slowly, and some readers will find it frustrating. That is deliberate. Everything difficult about Part Three follows from the material in this chapter, and a reader who skips it will arrive at the marriage question in Chapter 11 without the equipment to evaluate what is being claimed on either side. So we begin with the unglamorous business of what a name is.

Umm Kulthum is not a name

In Arabic naming practice, a person has an ism, a given name, and very often a kunya, which is a teknonym: Abu something or Umm something, father or mother of a named child.

The kunya is frequently the name a person is actually known by in daily life and in the sources. Abu Bakr, Abu Hurayra, Abu Talib, Umm Salama, Umm Ayman: these are all kunyas, and in several cases the underlying given name is less familiar to most Muslims than the kunya is. It is a form of respectful address, and it functions rather like the way an English speaker might know a man for years as someone's father without ever needing his first name.

Two features of the practice matter here.

The first is that a kunya does not require a corresponding child. Kunyas were given to children, assigned in affection, adopted by choice, and applied to people who never had a child of that name or any child at all. The Prophet (PBUH) gave kunyas to boys. So Umm Kulthum does not tell us that this woman had a daughter named Kulthum, and there is no reason to look for one.

The second is that kunyas were common property. Umm Kulthum was a popular one. It was not distinctive, it was not reserved, and it could belong to several women in the same city and the same clan and the same household in the same generation.

Which is exactly what happened.

The collision

Consider the following, all within two generations of one family.

The Prophet (PBUH) had a daughter called Umm Kulthum, who married Uthman ibn Affan after the death of her sister Ruqayya, and who died before her father.

Ali (AS) had a daughter by Fatima (SA) called Umm Kulthum, who is the subject of this part of the book.

Ali (AS) also had daughters by other wives, and the lists include further women of the family carrying the same kunya: an Umm Kulthum described as the middle one, reported as the wife of Muslim ibn Aqil, and an Umm Kulthum described as the younger, sometimes given the name Nafisa. Depending on which genealogist you follow, there are three or four women in this one household answering to the same designation.

And the woman we are calling Umm Kulthum bint Ali is herself, in most reports, actually named Zaynab. She is Zaynab al-Sughra, the younger Zaynab, sister of the Zaynab of Part Two, who is correspondingly al-Kubra, the elder.

So we have two sisters both named Zaynab, one of whom is universally known by a kunya that at least three other women of the immediate family also carried, one of them the Prophet's own daughter.

And the lists do not agree. Al-Mufid treats Zaynab al-Kubra and Zaynab al-Sughra, the latter carrying the kunya Umm Kulthum, as the two daughters of

Fatima (SA). Other genealogists separate Umm Kulthum from Zaynab al-Sughra and count them as different women. At least one early genealogical report gives her name not as Zaynab at all but as Ruqayya. The difference is not a quibble. It changes the number of people in the household, and it changes which reports attach to which woman.

I want to be clear that this is not a peculiarity of Shia sources, or a sign that someone has tampered with the record. It is a general feature of early Islamic genealogy, it affects Sunni and Shia compilations equally, and it is worse for women than for men, for reasons we will come to. Any book that presents a clean single list of Ali's (AS) daughters with confident identifications is concealing a mess.

What can be said

Here is what I think survives scrutiny.

A daughter of Ali (AS) and Fatima (SA), younger than Zaynab (SA), commonly known as Umm Kulthum and probably named Zaynab, was born in Medina in the years before her mother's death and lived to adulthood. She was therefore a small child, perhaps three or four at the outside, when Fatima (SA) died, and she was raised in her father's household in Medina.

She was married, and probably more than once. The reports have her connected in later marriages to sons of Jafar ibn Abi Talib, which is to say into the same family that Zaynab (SA) married into, and a woman marrying successively within a clan after being widowed is entirely ordinary for the period.

She was reportedly at Karbala, and reportedly spoke in Kufa.

She died at some point that the sources do not agree on.

That is the list. It is embarrassingly short for the daughter of Ali (AS) and Fatima (SA), the sister of two Imams, and it is shorter than what we have for a great many minor figures of the same period who were nobody in particular.

What cannot

And here is what does not survive scrutiny, or at least does not survive it intact.

Her death is unclear. There is a well-known account, present in Sunni sources, in

which she and her son Zayd died on the same day and were prayed over together, with a question arising about the order of death for inheritance purposes. It is a vivid report and it is also the sort of report that gets attached to the wrong person, because its interest is legal rather than biographical. Other accounts place her death at other times. Some accounts have her dying before 61 AH, which would remove her from Karbala altogether.

Her presence at Karbala is therefore not certain. The maqtal literature includes her among the captives and attributes a lament or an address to her in the streets of Kufa, delivered alongside Zaynab's (SA). But this material is late relative to the events, and if the sources cannot agree whether Zaynab al-Sughra and Umm Kulthum are one woman, then the question of which woman is speaking in Kufa cannot be settled either. A reader is entitled to a straight answer here and the straight answer is that there was probably another sister present and speaking, that she was probably this one, and that probably is as far as the evidence reaches.

Her marriages are disputed in a way that goes beyond ordinary uncertainty, for reasons that are the subject of the next chapter.

There is one absence in that list which deserves to be named separately, because he other five parts of this book all contain it and this one does not.

We know nothing about her religious life. Not one report of how she prayed, what she recited, whether she fasted beyond the obligation, what she asked God for. Her mother's night vigil is remembered because a son sat and listened to it. Her sister's night prayer at Karbala is remembered because a nephew noticed she was praying seated. Nobody was watching this woman, or if they were, nobody wrote it down.

That is the most complete kind of loss there is. A person can survive in the record as a political actor or as a name in a genealogy. To vanish devotionally, in a tradition organized around devotion, is to be lost from the inside.

Why the record is like this

It is worth understanding the mechanism, because the temptation is to read a thin record as evidence of suppression, and suppression is rarely the explanation.

Early Islamic biographical writing developed for a purpose, and the purpose was the authentication of hadith. The great compilations of names exist because a report is only as good as the people who carried it, and evaluating those people

required knowing when they lived, whom they studied with, where they travelled and what their reputation was. This produced an extraordinary body of information about a very specific population: transmitters.

Women who transmitted are therefore well documented, and there are a great many of them. Aisha is one of the most thoroughly documented individuals of the seventh century for exactly this reason. Women who did not transmit fall through the system, and what remains of them is genealogy, which records who they married and whom they bore, because that is what genealogy is for.

So the shape of the record for Umm Kulthum (SA) is the shape the record takes for a woman of high birth who did not become a channel of religious transmission. We know the marriages because marriages are genealogical data. We know almost nothing else because nothing else was being collected.

Her elder sister escapes this only because of eight weeks in 61 AH. Had Zaynab (SA) not spoken in Kufa and Damascus in front of transmitters, she would be exactly as thin in the sources as Umm Kulthum (SA) is, and this book would have a very different Part Two.

And then there is the other reason

That explains the thinness. It does not entirely explain this particular woman, because something additional has happened to her.

Umm Kulthum (SA) is the only figure in this book about whom the two traditions disagree not merely in interpretation but in basic content, and the disagreement concerns one reported episode: a marriage to Umar ibn al-Khattab. Chapter 11 examines the reports and explains why the Shia tradition has not accepted them.

What belongs here is the effect that dispute has had on everything else about her, which is that it has eaten her.

In the Sunni sources a marriage is recorded without drama, as one fact among others, and she remains a minor figure of the family. In Shia writing the reports are contested, and the contest takes several forms: the chains are held unsound, or the woman is identified as one of the others carrying the same kunya, or the episode is described as a seizure rather than a union. All of these are arguments about one transaction. None of them is about her.

The result is a woman who has been discussed for fourteen centuries almost exclusively in terms of who she was or was not married to, by writers on both sides whose interest in her ends the moment that question is settled. She was at Karbala, possibly. She spoke in Kufa, possibly. She raised children, buried at least one, survived the destruction of her family, and lived a full adult life in one of the most turbulent periods of Islamic history. None of that has generated a literature. The marriage has generated a library.

There is something worth noticing in that, before we go anywhere near the evidence. A woman whose life is contested becomes, in the hands of both her defenders and her detractors, a smaller person than she was. The argument is conducted over her rather than about her, and the effect of winning it, on either side, is not to recover her.

I cannot repair that. The material to write the life she actually had does not exist and I am not going to invent it. What the next two chapters can do is handle the dispute honestly, which nobody's tradition has much incentive to do, and then ask what the whole episode teaches about reading a record with holes in it.

That second question is the reason Part Three sits in the middle of this book rather than at the end.

CHAPTER II: The Marriage Question

This is the chapter that will decide what some readers think of this book, so let me say at the outset how I intend to handle it.

I am going to set out what is reported and where. I am going to state the four positions people hold, in the strongest form each can be given, including the ones I do not accept. I am going to weigh the evidence, and I am going to land where the Shia tradition lands, which is that these reports do not establish what they are habitually made to establish. What I am not going to do is get there by refusing to look at the material, because a reader who wants that can find it in a hundred other books and will be defenceless the first time somebody opens the sources in front of them.

The question is whether Umm Kulthum (SA), daughter of Ali (AS) and Fatima (SA), was married to Umar ibn al-Khattab.

The reports

The account, in its most common form, runs as follows. In the years of his caliphate, Umar approached Ali (AS) seeking marriage to his daughter. There was some initial deferral, the reports variously citing her youth or other reasons. Umar then raised the matter with al-Abbas, the Prophet's uncle. The marriage was contracted, with a dower given as a large sum. A son was born, named Zayd. Umar was killed in 23 AH, and she subsequently married within the family of Jafar ibn Abi Talib, in some accounts more than once.

This material appears across the major Sunni biographical and historical compilations: Ibn Sad, al-Baladhuri, al-Tabari, and the standard companion dictionaries such as Ibn Abd al-Barr's and Ibn al-Athir's. It is also presupposed by legal reports

in the Sunni collections, of which more shortly.

Now the part that surprises most readers, and which anyone approaching this argument should know before they take a side.

Material on the episode is also present in the classical Shia sources.

Al-Kafi, the foundational Shia hadith compilation, carries reports on it. So does the legal literature of al-Tusi, in the course of discussing her waiting period after Umar's death. What those sources describe, though, is not a marriage in the sense the Sunni reports mean. The best known formulation, attributed to Imam Jafar al-Sadiq (AS), calls it something taken from the family by force, an honour seized rather than a union entered. That distinction matters more than anything else in this chapter and I will come back to it.

So the classical Shia position, as it stands in the earliest layer, is not that nothing occurred. It is that whatever occurred was extracted rather than agreed, and that calling it a marriage alliance misdescribes it. Outright denial that anything happened at all is a later development, and its most significant early proponent is al-Shaykh al-Mufid in the fourth and fifth centuries, followed by al-Sharif al-Murtada, and in modern times most thoroughly by Jafar Murtada al-Amili, who devoted a full study to arguing that the reports are a fabrication.

A reader from either tradition should sit with that for a moment. The Sunni reader who assumes the Shia simply deny an inconvenient fact is wrong about the sources. The Shia reader who assumes the denial is the ancient position and the acceptance a Sunni imposition is also wrong about the sources.

Four positions

Everything written on this question falls into one of four categories.

The first is that the marriage occurred and was unremarkable. On this reading it is one of a number of marriages linking the leading families of Medina, of exactly the kind that Arabian politics ran on, and it demonstrates that relations between Ali (AS) and Umar were functional. This is the mainstream Sunni position and it is often deployed as an argument against the Shia account of the period: men whose families intermarry are not men in a state of rupture.

The second is that the marriage occurred under duress. Ali (AS) did not want it, resisted, and eventually consented because refusal carried costs the household

could not bear at that moment. This is the classical Shia position and it has the considerable advantage of fitting the sources of both traditions without requiring any of them to be discarded.

The third is that a marriage occurred, but not to this woman. There are several forms of this. The most respectable notes the name collisions set out in the previous chapter and proposes that the woman married was a different Umm Kulthum, perhaps a daughter of Ali (AS) by another wife. A weaker form points to the separately attested report that Umar sought and was refused a daughter of Abu Bakr, also called Umm Kulthum, and suggests confusion between the two episodes. There is also a marginal late tradition, occasionally encountered in polemical writing, in which a substitute of supernatural character was provided in her place. I mention that one only so that readers who meet it know that it is not taken seriously by scholars of any standing on either side, and that citing it damages the case it is meant to support.

The fourth is that no such marriage occurred at all, and that the reports were generated later, in a period when demonstrating harmony between the household of the Prophet and the early caliphs served an obvious political purpose.

What supports occurrence

Four things, and they are not equally strong. I set them out at their best, because a reader who has not seen the case cannot evaluate the answer to it.

The breadth of attestation is the first. This is not a report in one book. It appears across genres, in historical writing, in biographical dictionaries, in genealogy and in legal discussion, compiled by authors in different cities across several generations. Fabrications do occur and they do spread, but a fabrication that penetrates this many independent kinds of literature is doing unusually well.

The presence of related material in the Shia corpus is the second, and it is the item usually pressed hardest. A report that embarrasses the tradition preserving it has a claim on our attention that a flattering report does not, and the earliest Shia scholars did not simply discard this material. It should be said at once what that material actually says, though, because the argument is regularly made as if it said something else. The classical Shia reports do not describe a marriage. They describe a seizure, in the plainest terms the language allows. They are evidence that something occurred which the household regarded as a wrong done to it. They are not evidence of a marriage alliance between families on good terms, and

that distinction decides this chapter.

The third is the legal literature, and it is the strongest item on this side. When a jurist discusses how a woman observed her waiting period after the death of a particular husband, he is not making a polemical point. He is doing technical work, and the episode functions as background rather than as claim. Incidental attestation of this kind is generally worth more than direct assertion, because the transmitter has no stake in the detail he relies on. The answer to it, developed below, is that a jurist of the fourth or fifth century is relying on the reports that reached him, and whether those reports are sound is precisely the question at issue.

The fourth is Zayd. A son of Umar named Zayd, distinguished as the elder, is present in the genealogical record, with an account of his death as a young man from a stone thrown while he was trying to separate men fighting. Whether he left offspring is itself disputed. If the marriage is an invention, he is an invention too, and inventing a named person into the genealogy of the second caliph is a considerably larger undertaking than inventing an anecdote.

What supports doubt

'our things, and the first is the strongest.

The transmission is narrower than the breadth suggests. A large number of the accounts converge on a small number of early transmitters, and the genealogist al-Zubayr ibn Bakkar features prominently among them. If the reports across all those different books are drawing on a common upstream source, then the impressive spread is an illusion produced by later compilers copying from the same place. This is a serious objection and it is the load-bearing element of al-Mufid's case and of the modern arguments that follow him.

The second is motive, and it comes with a supporting observation about the state of the reports. The Umayyad and early Abbasid periods generated an enormous quantity of material demonstrating that the Prophet's family and the first caliphs were on excellent terms, because that proposition was politically valuable to whoever was in power. A marriage alliance is the single most efficient way to make the point.

And the accounts we have contradict each other on almost every detail: whether the consent was free or extracted under threat, whether the marriage was consummated, whether Zayd was born of it, whether he left children, whether he

and his mother died together, and whether the dower was five thousand dirhams, forty thousand, or some other figure. Al-Mufid makes exactly this argument, and it is a good one. Material that would have been useful to invent deserves closer examination than material that would not, and material that cannot keep its own story straight deserves closer examination still.

The third is chronology, and it is more serious than a first reading suggests. Fatima (SA) died in 11 AH, so her youngest daughter cannot have been born later than that year, and she was the younger of two sisters born after two brothers. The marriage is dated in the sources to Dhu al-Qada of 17 AH. Run the arithmetic on any birth year the sources will support and the reported bride is a child, somewhere between about six and about eleven, being sought by a man in his fifties who was head of state.

Defenders answer that early betrothal was practised and that the ages reported for other marriages of the period raise comparable questions. That is a real answer as far as it goes. It does not remove the strain, and it obliges the defender to concede that whatever the reports describe, it is not the ordinary marriage alliance between adults that the argument from the reports usually requires.

The fourth is the one Chapter 10 supplies, and it has grown stronger the more carefully the genealogies are read. There were three or four women in this one household carrying the kunya Umm Kulthum, and at least one further woman of that name in the family of Abu Bakr, of whom it is separately reported that Umar sought her and was refused. A body of reports about a marriage to a woman called Umm Kulthum, transmitted by men who were not always careful to say which one, is exactly the material in which a substitution of referents would be invisible. This is not a desperate expedient. It is the ordinary consequence of the naming problem that the previous chapter spent its length establishing.

Looking at the duress position honestly

Before the conclusion, one observation about the position most Shia readers will have grown up with, because it deserves examination rather than automatic acceptance.

The duress account says that Ali (AS) consented under pressure. That requires a specific political situation: he must have lacked the standing to refuse a request of this kind, and refusal must have carried a real cost.

It is sometimes objected that the rest of the record does not describe that situation,

since this is the same man reported declining to give allegiance for six months and being consulted on questions of state. The objection misses what kind of pressure is in play. It need not have been a threat of violence. A public refusal by the Prophet's family of a marriage request from the head of state, weeks or months after the events of Chapter 5, would have been an act of open political confrontation by a household that had decided against open political confrontation and was paying for that decision daily. Nobody has to make a threat for everybody in the room to understand the cost.

That is a coherent account of coercion, it fits the political situation the rest of this book describes, and it is what the classical reports themselves say. The formulation attributed to Imam al-Sadiq (AS) does not describe a marriage at all. It describes something taken from the family by force. Whatever else one does with that report, one cannot use it as evidence of cordial relations, which is precisely what it is most often used for.

Where this book stands

The Shia tradition does not hold that this was an ordinary marriage, and neither does this book.

The tradition's position has taken two forms across fourteen centuries and it is worth being clear that they are two, because opponents often present the later one as an embarrassed retreat from the earlier. The classical reports, in al-Kafi and in the material transmitted from the Imams (AS), treat the episode as a seizure rather than a union. From al-Mufid onward, the dominant position has been that the reports themselves do not stand up, and that is where the majority of Shia scholarship has remained, including in the most thorough modern study of the question.

That later position is not a retreat. It is what happened when scholars of the calibre of al-Mufid and al-Murtada applied the tradition's own source criticism to a body of reports and found it wanting. They were not inventing a defence. They were doing the thing this book has been doing since its first chapter, and reaching a conclusion.

And their conclusion holds up. Look again at what the material consists of.

A large proportion of it converges on a single early transmitter whose reliability was questioned in his own time, so that the impressive spread across a dozen later books is an illusion produced by copying. The reports contradict one another on

every material particular: whether consent was freely given or extracted, whether there was a consummation, whether Zayd was born of it, whether he left descendants, whether he and his mother died on the same day, and whether the dower was five thousand dirhams or forty thousand. The chronology requires a bride who was a child.

The naming problem of Chapter 10 supplies at least three other women to whom the reports could refer, one of them separately attested as having been sought by Umar and refused. And the political value of the claim, in the century that produced it, was very high indeed, at a moment when demonstrating harmony between the Prophet's household and the first caliphs was worth a great deal to the people paying the transmitters.

That is not a sound body of evidence. It is a cluster of reports which cannot agree with itself, resting largely on one man, arriving at exactly the conclusion its period found convenient. If material in this condition concerned any other question, no one would build an argument on it.

So the position of this book is the position of the tradition. The reports do not establish what they are usually made to establish. If anything occurred, the earliest testimony from the Imams (AS) describes it as something taken by force, and the Prophet's household is not the party that should be explaining itself.

I put it that way rather than as a flat denial for a reason that matters to the argument rather than to the doctrine. The strongest form of the Shia case does not need the episode to have been erased from history. It needs only what the evidence already shows, which is that these reports cannot carry the weight of the inference resting on them. A reader who goes further and says the whole thing is fabricated is on ground that al-Mufid, al-Murtada and the mainstream of modern Shia scholarship have occupied for a thousand years, and they are in good company. A reader who stops one step short, at the classical position, gives up nothing at all.

What follows, and what does not

The last thing to do with this question is to notice how little would turn on it even in the version least favourable to the tradition, because almost all the heat here comes from an assumption both sides make and neither examines.

The assumption is that the marriage, if it occurred, settles the larger question. On the Sunni side: families in bitter conflict do not intermarry, therefore the

Shia account of the succession is overstated. On the Shia side, in its more anxious forms: if the succession account is right, this cannot have happened, therefore it must be denied at all costs.

Both inferences are weaker than they look, and the history of every political society ever studied is the reason.

Marriage alliances between parties in serious conflict are not an anomaly. They are one of the standard instruments by which such conflicts are managed. European dynastic history is very largely a record of people marrying the families they were fighting. A marriage can express reconciliation, or it can express the terms on which a defeated party has agreed to live with an outcome it does not accept, and from the outside these look identical. The ceremony does not tell you which one it was.

So even on the reading least favourable to the tradition, nothing follows about the grievance, because we independently know the grievance existed. The Shia sources describe it at length, the estrangement of Chapter 5 is recorded in Bukhari as well, and nobody in either tradition disputes it. A household that had been publicly refused its claim, and had watched what happened at the door, and then found itself unable to refuse a request from the man who now held power, is not a household in a state of warm relations. It is a household in a state of survival, which is what the whole of this book has been describing.

That is why the Shia position can afford to be examined. The tradition holds that these reports are unsound, and the source criticism supports it. And even if that were reversed tomorrow, the account of the period this book gives would not move an inch.

And her

One last thing.

Everything in this chapter has been about what the marriage proves. Whether it demonstrates concord, whether it was coerced, whether the chains are sound, what it implies about the succession. Fourteen centuries of argument, thousands of pages, in which a woman is the subject of every sentence and the topic of none of them.

And notice that even the arguing has been conducted over her head. Not one of the reports, on either side, records whether she was asked. They set out the

negotiation between the men in some detail and do not appear to have found the question interesting. Whatever did or did not happen in 17 AH, that silence is in every version of it.

What can be said about her life without depending on any of the disputed material is very little. She married within her cousins' family. She buried at least one son. She may have lived to see Karbala and may have stood in the street at Kufa, and Chapter 10 explains why even that cannot be settled.

And here is the shape of what was not written down.

Nobody recorded what she looked like. Nobody wrote down her voice, or what she was like to sit with, or whether she was funny. There is no account of her at her mother's burial, though she was three or four and she was there. There is no account of her at her father's, or her brother's. If she had a friend, we do not know her name. If she had an opinion about anything at all, it has not survived.

She was in the house at Medina for the twenty-five quiet years of Chapter 6, growing up alongside a sister whose every word in one eight-week period we can still read. She was in the same rooms. She heard the same conversations. She is invisible and her sister is not, and the difference between them is not character. It is that one of them happened to speak in front of men who were writing things down.

Somewhere behind the library about her marriage there is a woman who woke up on ordinary mornings for perhaps fifty years, and prayed, and fed people, and buried a son, and had views about her brothers, and grew older, and died. Every part of that is certain and not one detail of it is recoverable.

This is the most common thing that has ever happened to a human being, and it is worth grieving over even when it happens to somebody whose name we do not need to guess at.

The literature on her marriage is enormous. The literature on her is this chapter and the last one, and both of them are mostly about the literature.

That is the failure this part of the book is named for, and the next chapter is about how it happens.

CHAPTER 12: What Fractured Memory Teaches

Three books have been written about Umm Kulthum (SA), many times over, and each of them can be got out of the same material.

One would describe a daughter of the Prophet's household who married the second caliph in a union that demonstrates the essential harmony of the first Muslim generation, bore him a son, was widowed by his assassination, married again among her cousins, and lived out an ordinary life of high birth.

One would describe a young woman used as an instrument in a political settlement she had no part in making, whose family consented because the alternative was worse, and whose subsequent life was spent among relatives who understood what had been done.

One would describe a woman about whom a body of reports was constructed after the fact, in the service of a political programme, and who has been buried under an argument that was never about her.

Same woman. Same sources. The difference is not that some of these writers have read material the others have not. It is that a record with holes in it can be made to support incompatible reconstructions, and every tradition tends to find the reconstruction it needs. Chapter 11 sets out which of the three I think the evidence supports and why. This chapter is about the prior question, which is how a record gets into a condition where three answers are available at all.

This chapter is about how that happens, how to tell the difference between the various things that can go wrong with a record, and what a community loses and does not lose by admitting that a question is open. It is the chapter this book was built around, and it applies well beyond the woman who prompted it.

Three different things go wrong

The gaps in early Islamic biography are usually discussed as though they had a single cause. They do not. There are at least three distinct processes at work, they produce different results, and treating them as one thing is the source of most bad argument on all sides.

The first is ordinary loss. Most of what happens to most people is never recorded by anyone, and the small proportion that is recorded is preserved for reasons unrelated to what a later reader wants to know. We saw the mechanism in Chapter 10: the biographical literature of early Islam exists to authenticate hadith, so it documents transmitters in extraordinary detail and everybody else hardly at all. That is not censorship. It is a filing system built for one purpose being consulted for another. Add oral transmission across generations, add a naming convention that produces four women with the same kunya in one household, and you have silence and confusion without anyone having done anything wrong.

The second is devotional amplification. A community that venerates a figure thinks about that figure continuously for centuries, and thinking produces material. Vocabulary shifts, and the shift has to be read carefully rather than assumed to be growth: Chapter 5 examines a designation that appears in restricted form in one tradition and unrestricted in the other, and shows that the usual inference about which came first does not follow. Gaps get filled, because a silence in the life of someone beloved is uncomfortable and a plausible completion is always available. Stories migrate towards the more famous figure, so that an incident belonging to an obscure person attaches itself to a prominent one, which is why a small number of individuals in any tradition end up with implausibly eventful lives.

And details acquire the retrospective tidiness we noticed in Chapter 6, where a marriage clause conveniently explains a later journey, and in Chapter 9, where an exile conveniently explains a distant tomb.

None of this is lying. Every step is taken in good faith by someone who believes what they are transmitting. Devotional amplification is what love does to a record over a long enough period.

The third is polemical construction, and here intention does enter, though usually not in the crude form the word suggests. In a society where political legitimacy rested on relationships to the founding generation, claims about those relation-

ships were worth money and power, and material that supported the right claims had a strong tailwind. It did not require conspiracies. It required only that reports which were useful found more transmitters than reports which were not.

And polemic has a defensive form which is less often acknowledged. A tradition under attack develops responses, and the responses harden into positions, and the positions eventually acquire the status of things everybody has always known. That is a real hazard and a reader should watch for it. It is worth distinguishing, though, between a defensive reflex and a scholarly finding that happens to be convenient. When al-Mufid concluded that the reports discussed in Chapter 11 were unsound, he did so by examining their chains, and the examination is on the page and can be checked. A conclusion is not discredited by being useful to the person who reached it.

They leave different fingerprints

The useful thing is that these three processes do not look alike, and a reader can learn to tell them apart. Six questions do most of the work.

Who benefits? Not as an accusation but as a filter. A report that would have been valuable to someone deserves more scrutiny than one that would have been valuable to nobody. Reports demonstrating warm relations between the Prophet's family and the early caliphs had obvious value to the Umayyad and Abbasid states. That does not make them false. It means the base rate for such material being generated is high, and we should adjust accordingly.

Does it embarrass the transmitter? This is the strongest single tool available, and it cuts in every direction, which is worth watching. It is why Chapter 11 takes the classical Shia reports seriously as testimony to a coerced seizure while finding the Sunni complex unsound, and why the tears of Umar ibn Sad in Chapter 7 are credible, since they reach us through his own side, and why the estrangement matters in Chapter 5. People do not invent material that damages them, so when a tradition preserves something awkward the most economical explanation is that it could not get rid of it.

One caution, since this tool is used so heavily here: it is an instrument for arguing with people who do not share your premises, and it says nothing about the reliability of material that is not awkward for anybody. A report is not improved by appearing in the other side's books, and the Shia corpus is not on trial every time this book cites Bukhari. Chapter 1 sets out why the pattern exists.

Is the claim asserted or assumed? A report that argues for something is weaker than a report that takes it for granted while arguing for something else. A jurist working out a waiting period is not trying to establish that a marriage occurred; he is relying on it in passing to solve a different problem. Incidental attestation is the closest thing this field has to a hostile witness under cross-examination.

Does it solve a problem too neatly? Traditions that answer exactly the question a later generation found awkward, and answer it cleanly, warrant suspicion in proportion to their convenience. This is not proof of invention. Real events are sometimes convenient. But convenience is a signal and should be registered as one.

Is the attestation broad or is it one source wearing many coats? Twelve books agreeing tells you nothing if all twelve are copying the same third-century compiler. Tracing back to the point of convergence is tedious and it is the difference between an argument and an impression.

Does the figure grow? Take a single claim, place its earliest and latest forms side by side, and look at the direction of travel. Claims that expand steadily across centuries are usually being developed rather than transmitted. This does not make the developed form worthless, but it does tell you which layer you are standing on.

You have been doing this for eleven chapters

None of these tools is exotic and the reader has been using them throughout this book, whether or not the machinery was visible.

When Chapter 2 declined to pick between the two birth dates for Fatima (SA), that was an application of who benefits: each tradition's chronology produces the picture it prefers. When Chapter 4 accepted the substance of the Fadakiyya while conceding its polish, that was developmental layering. When Chapter 5 separated what the other tradition concedes about the door from what only the Imams (AS) transmit, and affirmed the second without pretending the first compelled it, that was the two evidentiary orders of Chapter 1 being kept apart on purpose. When Chapter 6 flagged the marriage clause and Chapter 9 flagged the exile from Medina, that was retrospective convenience. When Chapter 7 leaned on Hamid ibn Muslim and Chapter 8 on Yazid's change of position, that was hostile attestation. When Chapter 11 traced a dozen books back to one transmitter, that was breadth against depth.

This is the method the book has been running on, and it is not a specialist apparatus. It is what any careful person does with a disputed account of anything.

What actually holds the building up

Now the question this chapter exists to answer. If the record is like this, what happens to a tradition that depends on it?

Less than people fear, and the reason is that traditions are not uniform structures. They have load-bearing elements and they have a great deal that is not load-bearing, and confusing the two is the most common error in religious argument on every side.

Take the hardest case in this book and test it. Suppose the question in Chapter 11 were settled tomorrow, against the tradition's reading, beyond any argument.

Shia Islam rests on a set of claims about designation, authority and succession, argued from Qur'anic verses, from reports of the Prophet's statements, and from a reading of what the community did after his death. Every one of those arguments would stand exactly where it stands now. The verse of purification would still say what it says. The event at Ghadir would still be reported as it is reported. The Fadak dispute of Chapter 3 would still have happened, and the estrangement would still be recorded in both traditions. Nothing in the doctrinal structure of the tradition is fastened to the marital history of a woman about whom almost nothing else is known.

And yet enormous energy has been spent on it, on both sides, as though the whole edifice were resting there.

The same test applies elsewhere. If the Damascus tomb in Chapter 9 holds someone other than Zaynab (SA), nothing doctrinal moves. If the Kufa sermon has been polished in transmission, and it has, its argument is still the argument that was made. If the wording of the Damascus sermon has moved between the third-century anthology and the later versions, and it has, Yazid still had to change his position afterwards and still had to explain himself.

A tradition that knows which of its claims are structural can hold the rest loosely, examine them freely, and revise them when the evidence requires without any sense of danger. A tradition that has never made the distinction cannot examine anything, because every question feels like the first crack.

The brittleness problem

This has a practical dimension, and it is the reason I have written the last two chapters the way I have.

Consider a young Shia Muslim in London or Toronto or Sydney who has been taught a version of the tradition in which every claim is certain and every reported detail is a matter of loyalty. One evening they encounter a well-made polemical argument about the marriage of Umm Kulthum (SA), or about the age of a figure, or about the chain of a famous report. The argument is not stupid. It cites the sources. It is better constructed than anything they were given.

What happens next is predictable, and I have watched it happen. Because they were taught that everything is certain, the discovery that one thing is uncertain does not register as a local correction. It registers as the discovery that they have been misled, and the natural inference is that they have been misled about everything else too. A single weak chain takes down the whole structure, not because the structure depended on it, but because they were told it did.

The strategy of defending every claim with equal force does not produce robust believers. It produces believers with an enormous surface area, every square inch of which has to be held, and it hands the opposition a hundred easy targets in place of the few difficult ones that actually matter.

A person who has been told from the beginning that we do not know how old Fatima (SA) was, that the Fadakiyya has been polished in transmission, that Zaynab's (SA) grave is truly uncertain, and that the marriage of Umm Kulthum (SA) is a real historical question with respectable people on both sides, is not a weaker Shia. They are a considerably harder person to unsettle, because nobody can tell them anything about their tradition that their tradition has not already told them.

Three registers, and the error of confusing them

One more distinction, and it is the one this book most wants its readers to carry forward, because the next chapter is going to require it.

There are three different things a person can be doing when they talk about these women, and they answer to three different standards.

There is the historical register, which asks what happened and is answerable to evidence. This book spends most of its time here.

There is the doctrinal register, which asks what is true about authority, guidance and obligation, and which is answerable to scripture, reasoning and the established positions of the tradition. Historical findings bear on it, sometimes heavily, but it is not reducible to them.

And there is the devotional register, which is what happens in a majlis, at a shrine, in a poem, in the practice of a family. It asks what a community should hold before itself, how grief is to be carried, and what it means to stand somewhere and weep. It is answerable to the tradition's own accumulated forms and to whether it produces people of a certain kind.

The category error runs in both directions and both versions do damage.

One direction takes a devotional narrative and defends it as a historical finding. That places the whole devotional structure at the mercy of the next person with a source-critical argument, which is the brittleness problem again.

The other direction takes a historical finding and presents it as a refutation of the devotion, which is the standard move of a certain kind of sceptic and rests on a misunderstanding of what the devotion was doing. A woman weeping at a shrine is not making a claim about a body under the floor. She is doing something older and less literal than that, and telling her the identification is uncertain does not touch it, any more than telling a person their grandfather's war stories were embellished touches what those stories did in the family.

Keeping the registers apart is what allows a person to be historically honest and devotionally serious at the same time. It is not a compromise between the two. It is the recognition that they were never in competition, and that the competition was manufactured by people who needed one of them to lose.

What the doctrinal register actually holds

Having named that register, I owe the reader an account of what is in it, because a book that mentions it once and then spends two hundred pages elsewhere has not really conceded anything.

Within the Shia tradition, the standing of these women is not a conclusion drawn from the kind of evidence this book has been weighing. It rests on three things.

It rests on the Qur'an, and specifically on the verse of purification, which states God's intention to remove impurity from the people of the house and to purify them completely. Whatever one concludes about the extent of the group intended, the verse is scripture and its standing does not depend on any chain.

It rests on the Prophet (PBUH), through the report of the cloak, the mubahala, the statement that Fatima (SA) is a part of him, and the identification of her as foremost among women. This material is not marginal in either tradition.

And it rests on the Imams (AS). This is the part a historical treatment tends to leave out, and it is the load-bearing part. The tradition does not hold that Fatima (SA) is protected from error because scholars have inferred it from the sources. It holds it because the Imams (AS) taught it, and because the authority of the Imams (AS) is itself established on separate grounds, from designation and from the reports about the succession. The chain runs from doctrine to biography, not the other way round.

That has a consequence which should be stated flatly, because it governs how the rest of this book ought to be read.

Nothing established in Chapters 11, 13 or 20 touches any of this. Not one item. If the marriage of Umm Kulthum (SA) occurred, the verse of purification says what it says. If the child in Damascus is a devotional figure rather than a documented one, the report of the cloak is where it was. If the Byzantine princess is a later construction, the imamate still descends by designation through the male line and has never depended on a maternal genealogy. The historical findings in this book are findings about what an unaided observer can reconstruct. They are not findings about what the tradition holds, and they are not in a position to overturn it, because they are not answering the same question and they do not operate at anything like the same level of confidence.

The reverse also holds, and a Shia reader should be as clear about this as about the rest. The doctrinal register does not settle historical questions either. That the Imams (AS) are authoritative on religion does not turn every report attributed to them into a dated document, because the question of whether a given report actually reaches them is itself an ordinary question about transmission, and the tradition's own scholars have always treated it as one. Shia rijal exists precisely because not everything ascribed to an Imam was said by him. When this book weighs such a report as evidence, it is doing what al-Mufid and al-Tusi did, and it is not disputing the authority of the speaker. It is asking whether he spoke.

So the honest description of what this book is doing, and I would rather give it plainly than let a reader assemble it from clues, is this. Most of the time it reconstructs. Where the tradition holds something on the authority of the Imams (AS), as in Chapters 3 and 5, I say so and say that this book holds it too, and I mark which of the two orders the sentence belongs to. What the book never does is present the second as though it were a result of the first.

So where the reconstruction stops short of what the tradition affirms, the correct reading is that the reconstruction stopped, not that the tradition has been corrected. And where the reconstruction supports what the tradition affirms, which is a great deal more often than the reader of a critical book might expect, that is a bonus rather than the foundation, because the foundation was never historical in the first place.

I have written it this way for a specific reason. A tradition that can only defend its women by insisting on unanimity is defending them on the weakest available ground. A tradition that can say, here is what we hold and why, and separately here is what stands up without any appeal to our own authorities, and the second is a good deal more than our opponents admit, is in a far stronger position on both counts.

Where I am standing

A word about my own position, since this chapter has been telling other people to declare theirs.

I am not writing from outside. I hold the tradition whose sources I have been examining, and readers will have inferred as much from the honorifics if not from the argument. I do not think that disqualifies me, and I do not think the alternative, a pose of neutrality that nobody actually occupies, would be more honest.

What it does mean is that the reader is entitled to watch for the places where I might be going easy, and I would rather point at them than have them found. On the two questions where this book takes a position against the grain of Sunni scholarship, in Chapter 5 and Chapter 11, the position I take is the one my own tradition holds, and a sceptic is entitled to say so. I have been readier to notice when devotional material has been elaborated than to notice when sceptical arguments are motivated. And this chapter's argument, that a tradition loses nothing by holding its uncertainties openly, is a convenient argument for someone who

has just spent a chapter conceding that a much loved narrative is late.

I think all of it is right anyway. But you should notice that I would.

Forward

The next part of this book concerns a woman about whom the tradition holds two accounts that cannot both be true, and where the stakes are not academic.

One account describes a child who died in a Damascus prison and has a shrine there visited by enormous numbers of people, whose story is recited every Muharram and has produced more tears than anything else in this book. The other describes an adult woman who survived Karbala by decades and became one of the most cultivated figures in Medina.

The tools assembled in this chapter are about to be used on material that many readers love. I have set them out first, at length, so that when I use them nobody will think I have reached for them opportunistically.

And I would ask the reader to keep hold of the three registers, because Chapter 13 is going to need all of them.

PART FOUR · THE SURVIVOR

Sukayna bint al-Husayn

Medina, after the killing

CHAPTER 13: Two Sukaynas

If you grew up in a Shia household in Iran, Pakistan, India or anywhere their diaspora reaches, you know a child called Sakina.

She is three or four years old. She was thirsty at Karbala and asked her father for water. She was taken captive with the rest, marched to Kufa and then to Damascus, and kept in a ruin. She could not sleep without her father, and in the prison she dreamed of him, or was brought his head, and she died there. She is buried in Damascus and there is a shrine over her, and if you have been to it you will have seen grown men unable to speak.

If instead you read the Arabic literary and historical sources of the second and third centuries, you meet a woman called Sukayna bint al-Husayn. She survived Karbala. She returned to Medina. She married several times, was widowed by politics more than once, presided over the most celebrated literary salon in the city, judged poetry competitions between the leading poets of the Umayyad age, set a fashion in hairstyles that scandalized jurists, and died an old woman in Medina in the year 117.

The name in both cases is the same name.

They cannot both be describing one person, and this chapter is about what to do with that.

Before anything else

I want to say something directly to the reader who recites the majlis of Sakina every Muharram, or whose mother does, or who has stood at that shrine.

This chapter is not going to tell you that you have been deceived, or that your grandmother was credulous, or that the tears were wasted. It is not going to do that because it would not be true, and because I do not think that is what the

evidence shows. What it is going to do is separate two things that have become fused, explain where each came from, and then argue that the devotional tradition survives the separation intact and is better understood afterwards.

Chapter 12 set out three registers and asked the reader to keep hold of them. This is the chapter that needs all three.

The Sukayna of the sources

Start with what the early Arabic material describes, because most readers of the majlis tradition have never encountered it.

Her given name was Amina. Sukayna was a pet name given by her mother, al-Rabab bint Imru al-Qays, a woman of the Kalb tribe whom al-Husayn (AS) married and about whom he is reported to have composed verses declaring his love for a house containing Sukayna and Rabab. That is not devotional literature. It is preserved in the great literary anthologies because it is good poetry by a notable man about his wife and daughter.

She was at Karbala. She was among the captives. She came back to Medina with her mother, who is said to have refused all offers of remarriage and died within a year or so of the killing.

And then Sukayna lived for more than fifty years.

She married Musab ibn al-Zubayr, brother of the man who held Mecca against Damascus, and he was killed in the fighting in Iraq in 72 AH. She married again afterwards, more than once, into prominent Medinan families, and the sources disagree about the order and number in the way they always do.

She became, in Umayyad Medina, something for which the modern vocabulary is inadequate. Poets came to her house. Jarir and al-Farazdaq and Kuthayyir and Nusayb, the leading figures of the age, sought her opinion and competed for her judgement, and her verdict on a poem carried weight in a society where poetry was the most prestigious thing a person could produce. She was quoted for her wit. She dressed distinctively and other women copied her, including a way of arranging the hair that acquired her name and was disapproved of from some pulpits.

She died in Medina in 117 AH, aged around seventy. The sources for all of this are principally literary and biographical rather than devotional: the great song-book

of al-Isfahani, the biographical compilations, the Medinan social history preserved by genealogists.

Chapters 14 and 15 are about this woman, and I will not anticipate them further here.

The Sakina of the majlis

Now the other one, and I want to describe her properly rather than as a foil.

The narrative of the child in Damascus is one of the most emotionally powerful things the Shia tradition has produced, and its power is not accidental. It is carefully built. The child is small enough to be entirely innocent of politics. She asks for water, which is the simplest possible request. She cannot understand where her father has gone, which converts a theological catastrophe into a form of loss that any listener has felt or fears. And she dies in a ruin far from home, of grief rather than of violence, which means there is no enemy to blame in the final scene and therefore nothing to discharge the sorrow onto.

In the Persian and Urdu traditions she is called Sakina. In Arabic contexts and at the Damascus shrine she is generally called Ruqayya. The two names attach to the same figure.

What she does in a majlis is specific and worth naming. The killing of seventy-two men is an atrocity that the mind slides off, because that is what the mind does with numbers. A child asking for water is something the mind cannot slide off. She is the point at which an abstract horror becomes bearable to contemplate by becoming unbearable in one particular, and every liturgical tradition in the world has figures that do this work. She is not decoration on the Karbala narrative. For most people she is how the Karbala narrative gets in.

Where each comes from

Here is the source position, stated plainly.

The adult Sukayna is attested early, widely, and in sources with no devotional stake. She appears in literary anthologies compiled by men interested in poetry and gossip, in biographical dictionaries, and in genealogy. Her marriages are recorded, her death date is recorded, her poetic judgements are recorded, and the material about her is of the ordinary secular kind that accumulates around

a socially prominent person. Nobody constructed this. There was no reason to.

The child who dies in Damascus is not in the early material. She is not in al-Tabari. She is not in al-Mufid's Irshad, which lists the children of al-Husayn (AS). She is not in the early maqtal literature, which is not shy about grief and would plainly have used her had the account been available.

The narrative appears, in something like its familiar form, in a Persian work completed in the seventh Islamic century, the Kamil-i Baha'i of Imad al-Din al-Tabari, roughly six hundred years after Karbala. Three details of that first appearance are worth having. The child is not named. She is four years old rather than the three of the later retellings. And she dies in the palace of Yazid, not in the ruin. The author's own cited source is a work by a Sunni writer which has not survived, so it cannot be checked. From there the account enters the Persian mourning tradition, is elaborated considerably in the popular martyrology of the tenth Islamic century, passes into Urdu, and through the majlis becomes one of the best-known episodes in the entire corpus.

The shrine in Damascus, near the Umayyad Mosque, is later still. The earliest description of a tomb at that site associated with this child comes from the tenth Islamic century, the sixteenth of the Common Era. It was rebuilt under Iranian patronage in the early twentieth century and again, more extensively, in the late twentieth.

So the honest statement is: the adult is historical, and the child, as a distinct narrative with a name and a death scene, appears six centuries after the event and cannot be traced earlier.

Here is the distinction on which this whole chapter rests, and it should be said in one sentence rather than left to be inferred. The events at the door in Chapter 5 are affirmed in this book because the Imams (AS) transmitted them; the child in Damascus is not, because nobody did. That is the entire difference. It is not a question of which account is more moving or which community holds it more fiercely. It is a question of whether the tradition's own authorities are behind it, and on the house they are, and on this they are not.

A related clarification follows, because a reader who has come from Chapter 5 may notice what looks like a double standard and it is worth showing that it is not one. There I argued that the absence of the assault on Fatima (SA) from Sunni collections proves nothing, since men do not compile the record of their own worst day. Here I am treating absence as decisive.

The difference is whose silence it is. Sunni silence about what the Umayyad-era establishment's predecessors did at a door in Medina is exactly the silence one would expect, and explains itself. Shia silence about a martyred child of al-Husayn (AS), maintained through six centuries of maqtal literature written by people whose entire purpose was to record the sufferings of that family, explains nothing and is very hard to account for on any reading except the obvious one. Silence is evidence when the party keeping it had every reason to speak.

How the two collapsed into one

The mechanism is the one Chapter 10 set out, and it is almost mechanical once you see it.

Sukayna was young at Karbala. The estimates run from small child to young woman, and Chapter 14 sets out why I incline to the older end of that range, but a number of the accounts have her as a young child and the maqtal tradition includes her among the children of the camp. That is the seed. There is a real, attested, young daughter of al-Husayn (AS) called Sukayna who was present at Karbala and who suffered the captivity.

What the later tradition did was take that child and not let her grow up.

The Persian and Urdu recitation traditions rendered the name as Sakina and attached to it the death in Damascus. The Arabic name Ruqayya attached to the same figure at the shrine. And the adult woman of the Medinan salons, who is entirely absent from Persian and South Asian devotional literature, simply never appears, so there is no collision to notice. A person raised entirely within the majlis tradition has no occasion to discover that Sukayna bint al-Husayn was judging poetry contests in the 90s AH, because that material lives in a different literature in a different language serving a different purpose.

Two additional factors helped. Some genealogies do list a daughter of al-Husayn (AS) named Ruqayya, which gives the name something to attach to. And children did die in the captivity: the tradition is unanimous that an infant son of al-Husayn (AS) was killed at Karbala, and a march of several hundred miles with small children under those conditions would have produced deaths whether or not anyone recorded them. The horror the narrative describes is not invented. Only this particular child, with this name and this scene, is undocumented.

What I think is actually going on

Here is my reading, and it is a reading rather than a finding.

The child of the Damascus narrative is a crystallization. The captivity contained a number of children who suffered in ways that were real, diffuse and largely unrecorded, because nobody records the deaths of children in a prisoner column. Over centuries, the tradition did what traditions do with diffuse suffering: it concentrated it into a single figure with a name, an age, a request and a death scene, so that it could be held in the mind and wept over.

That is not falsification. It is closer to what a monument does. A tomb of the unknown soldier contains one body and represents a hundred thousand, and nobody standing in front of it is confused about this, and nobody thinks the monument is a lie because the man inside it did not personally fight in every battle.

The narrative of Sakina performs the same function for the children of Karbala, and it performs it extremely well, which is why it spread across three languages and two continents without institutional promotion. It answered a need. The need was real and the suffering it points at was real.

What it is not is a report. And the trouble comes when it is defended as one.

Why the defence is the dangerous part

This is the brittleness problem from Chapter 12, in its sharpest form.

When the narrative is taught as documented history, it is placed in the historical register, where it has to compete on evidence, and on evidence it will lose to anyone who has spent an afternoon with the sources. A young person who discovers, from a hostile website, that the central figure of the mourning they grew up with is not in any source for six hundred years, has been set up to conclude that the whole tradition is invention. That conclusion is wrong, but it is the natural conclusion for someone who was told the wrong thing about what kind of claim was being made.

Whereas a person who has been taught from the start that Sakina is how the tradition holds the children of Karbala before itself, that the suffering she represents is documented even though her particular scene is not, and that she comes to us through six centuries of a community's grief rather than through a chain of transmitters, has nothing to be blindsided by. The hostile website tells them something they already know, and it tells them nothing about whether they should weep.

And they should weep. That is the part the source-critical account does not touch and was never equipped to touch.

The shrine

Which leaves Damascus.

The shrine of Sayyida Ruqayya is a working site of enormous devotional intensity. People travel a very long way to reach it. What happens there is real regardless of what is or is not beneath the floor, and the argument of Chapter 9 applies directly: a shrine requires a community with a need, a narrative connecting a person to a place, and someone willing to maintain the site. A body is not on the list.

I would add one observation particular to this case. Of all the places in the world where the Shia tradition might have located a grieving child of the Prophet's family, it located her in Damascus, a few hundred metres from the Umayyad Mosque, in the capital of the dynasty that killed her father.

That is not an accident of geography. It is a claim, made in stone, in the enemy's city, and it is the same claim Zaynab (SA) made in Yazid's court in Chapter 8: you won the battle and you do not get to keep the meaning. The shrine puts a child's grave in the middle of the victor's capital and makes the capital come and look at it. Fourteen centuries later, the Umayyads are a chapter in a textbook and there are queues around that building.

Whatever the seventh century contained, the tradition has understood exactly what it was doing.

How to hold both

So, practically, for a reader who has to walk out of this chapter and back into a majlis.

Recite Sakina. Weep for her. She is the tradition's way of holding something that actually happened to actual children, and there is no better way of holding it that anyone has found in fourteen hundred years. She belongs to the devotional register and she is doing exactly what she should be doing there.

Do not defend her in the historical register, because she was never a historical claim and putting her there exposes her to an attack she cannot survive and does

not deserve.

And know that there was also a real Sukayna, who was at Karbala as a girl, who lived through it, who went home, and who became one of the most remarkable women in the Hijaz. She has been almost entirely lost to the community that reveres her family, because a devotional narrative occupied her name and stopped her from ageing.

Recovering her costs nothing and gains a great deal, and the next two chapters are the attempt.

She survived. That is worth a book of its own, and it is the part nobody recites.

CHAPTER 14: Living Afterwards

She had fifty-six years left.

That is the fact this chapter is built on and it is the one nobody mentions. The Karbala narrative ends, in every version anyone recites, somewhere between the burial of the dead and the return of the captives to Medina. What happens next is not a coda. For the people who came back it was most of their lives, and in Sukayna's case it was more than five decades of ordinary time, lived in a city she had grown up in, among people who knew exactly what had happened to her family.

The tradition has almost nothing to say about it. This chapter is an attempt to say what can be said, and to be honest about the large parts that cannot.

How old was she

Start with arithmetic, because it disciplines the imagination.

Her death is usually placed in 117 AH, with some accounts giving later dates. Karbala is 61 AH. So whatever her age on the tenth of Muharram, she lived another fifty-six years after it, and any account of her must accommodate that span.

The sources describe her at Karbala variously, and the range runs from a small child to a young woman. If she was four, she died at about sixty. If she was fourteen, she died at about seventy. Both are possible. What is not possible is the version implied by the devotional tradition discussed in the last chapter, in which the child does not come out of Damascus at all, and it is worth noticing that the arithmetic alone does not rule that version out. Only the sources do.

I incline towards the older end, for two reasons. One report has it that before the journey to Iraq, al-Hasan's son asked al-Husayn (AS) for one of his daughters in marriage and was told to choose between Sukayna and her sister Fatima, which implies she was of marriageable age in 60 AH. And she was married to Musab ibn al-Zubayr within roughly a decade of Karbala, into the leading opposition family of the age. Both are inferences rather than statements, and I would not build much on either, but they point the same way.

What matters for this chapter is that she was young. Young enough to have been formed by it, and young enough that everything that made her the woman of Chapter 15 happened afterwards.

Her mother's answer

Before we come to what Sukayna did with survival, we should look at what her mother did, because the contrast is the argument of this chapter in miniature.

Al-Rabab bint Imru al-Qays was a woman of the Kalb tribe, married to al-Husayn (AS), and the mother of Sukayna and of the infant son killed at Karbala. She was among the captives. She came back to Medina.

The reports say that she was then sought in marriage by prominent men of Quraysh, which is unsurprising: she was young, well connected, and the widow of a figure whose family carried enormous prestige even in defeat. She refused all of them. In one account she says she will take no father-in-law after the Messenger of God. And she is said to have refused shade for a year, remaining exposed, and to have died within about twelve months.

Some of these reports are the kind of material Chapter 12 taught us to be careful with. The refusal of shade in particular has the shape of a tradition that has been perfected in the telling. But the core of it, that she declined remarriage and died soon after, is reported straightforwardly enough and is entirely credible.

What Rabab did is one of the two things a tradition knows how to honour. She made her grief total, permanent and physically visible, and she did not survive it long. That is legible. It has a name and a vocabulary. Every tradition in the world can find words for the widow who does not recover.

Her daughter did something else, and the tradition has been struggling with it ever since.

And then the city was sacked

Something is usually left out of the account of the survivors' return, and leaving it out badly distorts the picture. Medina in the years after Karbala was not a place of quiet recovery.

In 63 AH, two years after the killing, Medina revolted against Yazid. The Umayyad response was an army, a battle at the Harra on the outskirts, and then the sacking of the city. The accounts describe several days of killing and plunder inside the Prophet's own city, with large numbers of the surviving companions and their sons among the dead, and they describe the survivors being made to give allegiance in humiliating terms afterwards.

Sukayna was there. So was the surviving Imam, so were the other women who had come back from Damascus. Two years after being marched across Iraq and Syria as prisoners, they watched a Syrian army come into Medina and do to the whole city a smaller version of what had been done to their family.

The following year the same army moved on Mecca and besieged Ibn al-Zubayr there, and the Kaaba was damaged in the fighting. Then Yazid died. Then the empire fell into civil war for a decade.

This is the world in which Sukayna grew up. Not a stable order in which one atrocity stood out, but continuous political violence, in which her family's catastrophe was the first of several she would live through personally.

The revenge

And she lived to see the killers killed, which is a thing that happens more rarely than fiction suggests and is worth pausing on.

Four years after Karbala the Tawwabun marched out of Kufa to expiate their failure and were destroyed, as Chapter 8 described. Two years after that al-Mukhtar took Kufa and set about hunting the men who had been on the field at Karbala, and he found a great many of them. Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad, the governor who had ordered the operation, was killed in battle in 67 AH, and the reports describe his head being sent to Kufa and then onward.

Within six years of her father's death, most of the men responsible for it were dead, several of them badly.

I raise this because there is a strain of thought which holds that grief is completed by justice, and the record here is a useful corrective. The revenge was thorough. It was public. It was carried out explicitly in her father's name. And it does not appear to have altered anything about how the family lived afterwards, nor did it stop the tradition from mourning, which it has now been doing for fourteen centuries with the perpetrators long since dead.

Whatever the mourning is for, it is not for a debt that killing Ibn Ziyad could settle. That is worth knowing about a practice one participates in.

Widowed again

She had been betrothed or married before Karbala to her cousin Abd Allah, son of al-Hasan (AS), and he was killed on the field with the rest. Some years after the return to Medina she married Musab ibn al-Zubayr, brother of the man holding Mecca and the Hijaz against Damascus, and himself governor of Iraq.

It was a substantial match, politically and socially, and it placed her in the household of the principal armed opposition to the Umayyad state. The reports describe the marriage in warm terms and preserve exchanges between them.

In 72 AH Musab was defeated and killed in Iraq by the forces of Abd al-Malik, abandoned by troops who had been bought, in a battle fought roughly in the region where her father had died eleven years earlier.

So: at somewhere between twenty and thirty years old, she had lost her father, her brothers, her uncles and cousins in a single afternoon, her infant brother in the same event, her mother the following year, and now her husband, and every one of those deaths was political and every one of them was inflicted by the same dynasty.

She married again afterwards. The sources disagree about how many times and in what order, and some of the reports are clearly confused. What is clear is that she did not withdraw.

What we cannot know

Here I have to stop and mark a limit, because the temptation at this point in a chapter like this is to start writing fiction.

We do not have Sukayna's interior life. We have no letters, no reported reflections of any depth, no account from anyone who asked her what it had been like. The material about her is external: whom she married, what she said in company, how she dressed, which poet she preferred. It is the record of a public figure as observed from outside, and it is unusually rich for a woman of the period because it is that kind of record.

So I am not going to tell you what she felt. Anyone who does is writing a novel, and there is a substantial modern literature that does exactly this and presents the result as biography.

What can be done is to lay the external facts in sequence and let the reader hold them, which is what this chapter has been doing. A girl comes out of Karbala. Her mother dies of it within a year. Her city is sacked when she is a teenager. She marries into the opposition and is widowed by the state at around thirty. She lives another forty-five years in the city where all of this happened, in full public view, and she becomes known for her wit.

That last clause is the one that does not fit, and it is the whole subject of the next chapter.

Two roles, and she took neither

Which brings us to what I think is the real reason Sukayna disappeared from the tradition that reveres her family.

The Karbala narrative has two positions available for a woman. The first is the martyr, which was not on offer to her because she lived. The second is the permanent mourner, and it is a position of enormous honour: Zaynab (SA) occupies a version of it, her mother Rabab occupies the purest version of it, and the whole devotional apparatus of the tradition is built to receive women who take it.

Sukayna took neither.

She did not die and she did not spend fifty-six years in mourning. She grieved, presumably, in whatever manner she grieved, and then she married, and ran a household, and gathered poets, and made judgements about verse that men repeated, and set fashions, and was quoted, and grew old, and died in her bed in Medina.

There is no slot for that. A tradition that commemorates a catastrophe needs

its survivors to remain visibly marked by it, because the survivors are the living evidence, and a survivor who recovers enough to hold a literary salon looks, from a certain angle, like a person who has stopped taking it seriously.

I want to argue that the angle is wrong, and wrong in an important way.

Surviving an atrocity and then constructing a life is not a failure of loyalty to the dead. It is the harder of the two options, and it is what the overwhelming majority of survivors of the overwhelming majority of atrocities actually do, because the alternative is to let the perpetrators take the rest of the life as well as the part they took directly. Every study of the aftermath of mass violence describes the same thing: people go home, and marry, and work, and laugh at things, and carry it.

Rabab's answer is honoured because it is legible as grief. Sukayna's answer is harder to see, and the tradition has largely not seen it, and in the space where she should have been it installed a child who never had to grow up and therefore never had to face the question at all.

That is the substitution Chapter 13 described, and this is why it matters. It is not only that a real woman was displaced by a devotional figure. It is that the tradition replaced the difficult example with the simple one, and lost the model that most of its adherents actually need.

Most people reading this will not be asked to die for anything. A number of them will be asked to survive something and keep going afterwards.

There is a woman in this story who did that for fifty-six years, and the next chapter is about what she made with them.

CHAPTER 15: The Salon

Picture a room in Medina, some time in the eighties or nineties of the Hijra.

In it are several of the most celebrated poets in the Arabic language, men whose verses are being memorized from Khurasan to Spain and who are accustomed to being flattered by governors. They have come to recite, and they have come to be judged, and the person who will judge them is a woman in her fifties who is the granddaughter of the Prophet of Islam and the daughter of the man killed at Karbala.

She hears them out. She gives her verdict. The verdict is repeated around the city and finds its way into the anthologies, which is why we know about it thirteen centuries later.

That room is the subject of this chapter, and the first thing to say about it is that most readers of this book will find it difficult to believe in.

Why Medina became a city of poets

The setting needs explaining, because the Medina of Sukayna's adulthood is not the Medina anyone pictures.

After the second civil war, the Hijaz lost. Power sat in Damascus and later in Iraq, and Medina, the city where the community had been founded, became a provincial town of great prestige and no authority. It had been sacked at the Harra. Its attempt at revolt had failed. It was full of the sons and grandsons of the companions, men with the most distinguished names in Islam and no route to influence whatsoever.

It was also rich. Money flowed into the Hijaz from an empire that stretched to the Oxus, in stipends, in pensions, in the proceeds of estates, and it arrived in a city with nothing political to spend it on.

What happens to a wealthy, cultivated, politically neutered elite is predictable, and it happened here. Umayyad Medina became the most sophisticated social world in the Arabic-speaking lands. It produced the great love poetry of the period. It produced professional musicians and singers whose names are still known. It produced fashion, connoisseurship, gossip, and salons. And, in the same decades and often in the same families, it produced the jurists and traditionists who would lay the foundations of Islamic law.

That combination is the thing modern readers find hardest to hold, and it is not a contradiction anyone at the time appears to have noticed.

What went on in her house

The material about Sukayna comes overwhelmingly from literary sources rather than devotional ones, and principally from al-Isfahani's enormous Book of Songs, along with the Medinan genealogists and the adab compilations that drew on them.

These sources describe her as the centre of a circle. Poets attended: the great names of the age, the men whose rivalries structured Arabic literary history for a century. They recited to her. She commented, and her comments were quoted. In one well-known account she convenes several of them, has each perform, and then delivers a ranked judgement with reasons.

Understand what that means in context. In the Arabia of this period, poetry was not entertainment in the modern sense. It was the primary medium of reputation, the instrument by which tribes were praised and enemies destroyed, and the closest thing the society had to a public press. A person whose verdict on a poem carried weight held real cultural power, and that power was ordinarily exercised by men in the courts of caliphs and governors.

The sources also describe her wit. She is quoted for exchanges in which she has the better of someone, usually a man, usually briefly. Some of these are certainly polished in transmission, because that is what adab literature does to a good line. What matters is that a body of such material attached itself to her, which happens to people who are known for saying things worth repeating.

And they describe her appearance and her influence on fashion. A way of arranging the hair carried her name, other women adopted it, and it drew disapproval from some quarters. The detail is small and it tells us something exact: she was the sort of figure other people copied.

The marriage contracts

The most striking material about her is legal, and it is worth handling carefully because it is easy to overstate.

The reports describe her marrying more than once after Musab's death, and they describe her attaching conditions to at least one contract. The conditions named in the accounts include that her husband take no other wife, that he not interfere with her conduct, and that she keep her own company as she chose. There is a further report of a dispute in which a husband breached the terms and she took the matter before authority and prevailed.

The legal background makes this less astonishing than it sounds and more interesting than it first appears. Stipulated conditions in a marriage contract were a recognized instrument, and the question of which conditions bind is a standard topic in the developed schools of law. She was not inventing anything. She was using an available mechanism with unusual confidence, and doing so as a woman with the social standing to make the terms stick and to be heard when they were broken.

That is what independence looked like for a woman of her class and period. Not the absence of a legal framework, but the vigorous use of one.

The other half of the reports

And now the material that gets left out of both the devotional retelling and the literary one, because neither has a use for it.

The same body of sources that describes the salon describes her as a woman of prayer. She is reported as fasting beyond what was required of her, as praying at night, and as being asked about her father and answering. She is remembered for a sharp exchange with a daughter of Uthman who claimed precedence as the child of a martyr, and Sukayna (SA) said nothing at all until the call to prayer came and the words of the testimony were reached, and then asked her whether the man being named was her father or mine. That is not a poetry judgement. That is a woman who had been thinking for a long time about exactly what she was descended from.

She also, according to the reports, kept the memory alive. The accounts of the returned captives describe them speaking about Karbala in Medina, and she was

among them, for decades, in the city where it could be said and heard by people who had known the dead.

Set that beside the poets in the room and the fashion in hairstyles and the marriage conditions, and what you have is not a contradiction but a life, of the kind that most people actually have, in which the same person prays before dawn and is amusing at dinner and knows what her clothes are doing. The tradition has generally been willing to remember one half of that or the other. Almost nobody has been willing to remember both at once, and the woman only exists at the intersection.

The objection

Now the difficulty, and it deserves a full section rather than a footnote.

A strand of Shia scholarship has held that much of this material is unreliable, and in its stronger form that it was manufactured. The argument runs that the Umayyads and their successors had an obvious interest in portraying the Prophet's descendants as frivolous, that adab literature is not a rigorous genre and never claimed to be, that al-Isfahani was writing three centuries after the events for an audience that wanted entertainment, and that the name-collision problem of Chapter 10 makes it entirely possible that some of these anecdotes belong to nother woman.

Each of those points has force and none of them should be dismissed.

But apply the tools from Chapter 12 and the picture does not collapse.

Who benefits? The defamation theory requires that the material was produced to damage the family. Yet almost none of it is damaging by the standards of its own time and place. Being a connoisseur of poetry, keeping distinguished company, dressing well and having a sharp tongue were not disgraces in Umayyad Medina; they were marks of the elite. If someone set out to blacken the reputation of the Prophet's granddaughter, this is a strikingly inept attempt. The material only looks compromising when read against standards of female conduct that developed centuries later, and a forger works with the standards he has.

Is it asserted or assumed? Much of it is incidental. She appears in accounts that are about a poet, or about a rivalry, or about a piece of verse, and she is present in them as furniture, because that is where such conversations happened. Incidental attestation is the strong kind.

Does the figure grow? Here the direction of travel is the wrong way round for the forgery hypothesis. The devotional tradition did not expand her worldly reputation over time. It deleted her, and replaced her with a child, as Chapter 13 described. Material that a tradition steadily suppresses is not material that tradition's enemies successfully planted.

My reading is that the broad picture is sound and a good deal of the detail is embellished. She held a salon, judged poetry, was quoted, and was socially prominent. Specific anecdotes, especially the ones with a perfect closing line, have been improved in transmission the way every good story in every adab collection has been improved. That is an ordinary conclusion about an ordinary body of literary material, and it requires no conspiracy in either direction.

The tension nobody at the time reported feeling

Which brings us to the argument of this chapter.

The fasting and the night prayer and the exchange about her father sit in the same books as the poets, the hairstyle and the marriage conditions, often on the same page. There is no sense, anywhere in the early material, that these facts are in conflict, and no indication that anyone thought an explanation was owed. Nobody writes a defence of her, because nobody had charged her with anything.

The tension is ours. It arrives from a much later construction, in which piety for a woman is understood to entail withdrawal, and public presence, refinement, wit and fashion are understood to sit somewhere on a scale between frivolity and impropriety. That construction has a history and it is not a short one, but it is not the seventh century and it is not the eighth.

This matters well beyond one woman, and it is why Part Four sits where it does in this book.

A reader who has been taught that the women of the Prophet's household are models of a particular kind of feminine conduct is going to find Sukayna either impossible or scandalous, and will resolve the difficulty by disbelieving the sources. But the household of the Prophet, taken as a whole and honestly, does not produce a single model. It produces Fatima (SA) arguing law in a mosque. It produces Zaynab (SA) delivering an indictment in a caliph's court. It produces Rabab, who withdrew from the world entirely and died of grief. And it produces Sukayna, who survived, married repeatedly on her own terms, and presided over the literary life of a city for decades.

These are four different lives. They cannot be reduced to one template, and the attempt to reduce them is what has caused three of the four to be flattened and one of them to be quietly removed.

What the salon actually was

One further observation, and it is speculative, so I mark it as such.

Sukayna was the daughter of a man killed by the state, living in a city that state had sacked, under a dynasty whose legitimacy her family denied. She had no political instrument available. Her uncle's revolt had ended at Karbala; the Medinan revolt had ended at the Harra; the Kufan risings had ended in slaughter. Armed opposition was finished for a generation and everybody knew it.

What she had was a house that the most celebrated men of the age wanted to be invited to.

I do not want to overstate this. There is no evidence she used the salon as a political instrument, and I am not going to invent any. But consider the position objectively. In the decades after the Umayyads destroyed her family, the most prestigious cultural gathering in the Prophet's city was hosted by the survivor of that family, and the leading poets of the empire came to her to have their work judged. Her name was on a hairstyle. Her opinions circulated. The dynasty could suppress a revolt and could not do anything at all about that.

Presence is not resistance. But a family the state had tried to erase remained, for fifty years, at the centre of the social life of the city where the religion began, and it remained there because of a woman.

The woman in the room

Put her in the room one more time before the chapter closes, because the analysis has been about the room and not about her being in it.

It is Medina in high summer, seventy years after the Hijra. The courtyard is shaded and there is water somewhere and the heat is coming off the walls. The poets are seated. They are famous men and they are nervous, in the particular way that famous men are nervous when they are about to be judged in public by someone whose verdict will be repeated.

The woman they have come to is in her fifties. Her hair is arranged in a way that half the women of the Hijaz have copied. She is listening properly, the way people listen who intend to say something afterwards.

And she was at Karbala. She was in the tents when they burnt. She walked to Kufa and she walked to Damascus and she stood in that court, and she came home, and her mother refused every offer that came and was dead within the year, and she was in this city when the Syrian army came into it and did what it did for three days.

None of the men in the courtyard is going to mention any of that, and she is not going to either, and in a few minutes she will say something about a line of verse that will still be quoted in Baghdad in two hundred years.

That is what surviving looks like from the outside. It looks like an afternoon.

The end of Part Four

She died in Medina in 117 AH, or thereabouts, having outlived nearly everyone.

She had seen Karbala, the Harra, the siege of Mecca, the second civil war, the reign of Abd al-Malik, the conquest of Spain, the height of Umayyad power under al-Walid, and the beginning of the dynasty's decline. She had buried a father, a mother, brothers, at least one husband and probably more. She was among the last people alive who had been in the camp at Karbala and could remember it.

Nobody appears to have asked her about it.

And that, in the end, is what happened to Sukayna bint al-Husayn. The tradition that reveres her family had no use for a survivor who flourished, so it took her name, gave it to a child who died, and let the woman go. She is recoverable, but only from books written by people who were interested in poetry rather than in her, which is why the fullest portrait we have of the granddaughter of the Prophet comes to us from a song collection.

Part Five moves forward the best part of a century, to a different kind of woman entirely, and to the only one of the six whose grave nobody disputes.

PART FIVE · THE INSTITUTION

Fatima Masuma

Qom, 201 AH

CHAPTER 16: The Journey North

The four women so far have been known for things they did. Fatima (SA) argued a case in a mosque. Zaynab (SA) delivered two indictments. Umm Kulthum (SA) is known, unfortunately, for a marriage. Sukayna (SA) held a salon for fifty years.

Fatima Masuma (SA) is known for where she stopped.

She made one journey, did not complete it, and died in a town she had not intended to reach. There is no recorded speech, no legal argument, no confrontation with authority, no salon. By the ordinary standards of biography she is the thinnest figure in this book, and by the standards of what actually followed she is arguably the most consequential, because the town she died in became the intellectual capital of Shia Islam and it is not obvious that it would have done so otherwise.

This chapter is the journey. The next is what the journey built.

A childhood in a house without its father

She was born in Medina in 173 AH, the daughter of Musa al-Kazim (AS), the seventh Imam, and is generally reported to have been a full sister of Ali al-Rida (AS), who was some twenty years her senior.

The circumstances of her upbringing were shaped by a single fact. Her father spent much of her childhood in Abbasid custody, moved between prisons in Basra and Baghdad, and died there in 183 AH, when she was about ten. The circumstances of his death are disputed in the usual way; the Shia tradition holds he was poisoned, and the Abbasid authorities held that he died naturally in confinement, which is the answer such authorities generally give.

So she grew up in a large household in Medina, headed after 183 AH by her elder brother, which was under continuous surveillance and periodic pressure from a state that regarded its very existence as a political problem. Her formation was in a family that had by then been living under this arrangement for the better part of two centuries and had developed a settled way of doing it: no revolt, extensive teaching, careful correspondence, and the maintenance of a network of followers across Iraq and Iran that the state could monitor but not dismantle.

That network matters for what happens later in this chapter. When she turned towards Qom, she was not choosing at random.

Why she did not marry

She did not marry, and neither, according to the reports, did a number of her sisters. This is unusual enough to require comment, and the explanations offered fall into three groups.

The first is legal and social: that a suitable match was hard to find, since the criteria of equivalence applied to the daughters of an Imam narrowed the field of acceptable husbands to a very small number of men, most of whom were relatives.

The second is that their father left instructions to that effect, and reports to this end circulate in the tradition.

The third is political, and I think it is the most persuasive, though it is inference rather than testimony. The Abbasid state had an obvious interest in marriage into the Alid line, since such marriages produce claims, and the household had a corresponding interest in not supplying them. A daughter who does not marry cannot be married to a caliph's son, and cannot become the mother of a rival claimant, and cannot be used to demonstrate that the family has been reconciled to the dynasty. Chapter 11 examined a marriage that both traditions have read as a political statement. The absence of marriages in this generation is arguably a political statement of the same kind, made in the negative.

None of these explanations is documented in a way that settles the matter, and it is possible that different considerations applied to different sisters. What can be said is that she reached the age of twenty-eight unmarried, in a household where that was apparently normal, and that this left her unusually free to travel.

The summons

In the year 200 AH, al-Mamun did something no Abbasid caliph had done before or would do again.

He had won a civil war against his brother, he was ruling from Marv in Khurasan rather than Baghdad, and his position in the Arab heartlands was weak. His response was to summon Ali al-Rida (AS) from Medina and, in Ramadan of 201, to name him heir apparent, adopting the green of the Alids in place of Abbasid black.

Historians have argued about the motive for a thousand years and the argument is not settled. The generous reading is that al-Mamun was attempting a sincere reconciliation of the two branches of the Prophet's family and a resolution of the century-long Alid problem. The cynical reading is that he was neutralizing the most dangerous figure in the empire by absorbing him, converting a focus of opposition into a court official, and doing so on terms that made refusal impossible. The Shia tradition takes the cynical reading and points out, reasonably, that al-Rida (AS) was dead within two years and that the succession reverted immediately.

What matters here is the logistics, because they tell us something.

Al-Rida (AS) travelled to Khurasan without his family, and the route he was taken on was chosen for him. It went south and east through Basra and Ahvaz and Fars, and it conspicuously avoided Kufa and avoided Qom. Those were the two places in the empire where a passing Alid Imam could have drawn a crowd, and the state had no intention of finding out how large a crowd.

So the journey began with the household of the eighth Imam in Medina and the Imam himself two thousand miles away in Khurasan, having been escorted there by a route designed to keep him away from his own supporters.

Going after him

In 201 AH, the year of the investiture, Fatima Masuma (SA) left Medina to join her brother.

She travelled with a party of relatives, brothers and nephews among them, and the reports give the number variously, in the region of twenty or more. It was a substantial group and it was travelling the length of the empire.

Register what this involved. The distance from Medina to Khurasan is something

over two thousand miles by the practicable routes. It crosses desert, then Iraq, then the Iranian plateau. It takes months. And the party undertaking it consisted of members of a family that the state watched, moving towards a court where their most prominent member had just been elevated in circumstances nobody trusted.

The sources do not tell us why she went, and I will not invent a reason. The obvious one is that a sister was going to a brother she had probably not expected to see again, in a situation that was either a triumph or a trap and looked at that distance like both.

Saveh

They got as far as Saveh, on the Iranian plateau, about fifty miles short of Qom and still a very long way from Khurasan.

What happened there is reported in two forms. In one, the caravan was attacked and a number of her companions were killed. In the other, and often alongside it, she fell ill. Some accounts combine these, and some accounts hold that she was poisoned.

The evidential position is unclear and I would not press any version of it. Saveh at this period is described in the sources as a town hostile to the Alid cause and Qom as the opposite, which gives the attack narrative a context that makes it plausible without confirming it. Illness on a months-long journey requires no explanation at all. Both may be true; a party that has been attacked and lost people is also a party in which someone may become ill.

What is consistent across the accounts is what she did next. She asked how far it was to Qom.

Why Qom

This is the decision the rest of the book turns on, and it is usually presented as though she chose the town at random, or was guided to it. She was doing neither. She was going somewhere specific and she had reasons.

Qom in 201 AH was already a Shia town, and had been for a century. It had been settled in the years after 94 AH by the Ashari, an Arab clan from Kufa who had come east following the failure of the revolt of Ibn al-Ashath, bringing their alle-

giances with them. They established themselves, prospered, and made the place a centre of Shia scholarship and a node in exactly the network of correspondence and support that the household in Medina had spent generations maintaining.

A daughter of Musa al-Kazim (AS), ill or injured in Saveh, asking the distance to Qom, is a woman asking to be taken to friends. The Ashari of Qom were not strangers who happened to be nearby. They were her family's people, and they had been for a hundred years.

The reports say that when word reached the town, a delegation came out to meet her, led by Musa ibn Khazraj al-Ashari, and that he took the bridle of her mount and brought her into the town himself. She was housed in his own residence, in a room the tradition later called the House of Light, and she lived there for something like seventeen days.

Then she died. It was 201 AH, and she was twenty-eight.

The road in

It is worth seeing the arrival, since it is the moment the rest of this part of the book depends on.

The road from Saveh comes down out of dry hills into a plain, and Qom in the third century is a small town of brick and orchards on a river that is not much of a river. It is autumn. The dates are in. The town has perhaps a few thousand people in it, Arabs from Kufa two or three generations settled, farmers, some scholars, a mosque.

And on a particular afternoon the whole of it goes out onto the road.

They have heard who is coming. They walk out, and they find a party that has been on the road from Medina for months and has come through whatever happened at Saveh, and in the middle of it a sick woman of twenty-eight who has asked, of all the places she could have asked for, for them.

The head man of the town takes hold of her camel's bridle himself and leads it in. That is the detail the sources kept, and it is the right one to keep. It is a small provincial notable, on foot, in front of a crowd, walking an animal down his own street because of who is sitting on it.

The camel stops in front of his house. She is carried in. She has seventeen days.

Seventeen days

The tradition is specific about the length of her stay and almost silent about what happened in it, and the little it does say is worth slowing down for, because it is the only sustained glimpse of this woman doing anything at all.

She was ill, in a house that was not hers, in a town she had not intended to reach, still more than a thousand miles short of a brother she had crossed an empire to see and would not now see. Whatever had happened at Saveh had happened. She was twenty-eight. And the reports say that she spent the time praying.

The room is still shown. It is a small chamber in Qom, separate from the shrine, known as the Bayt al-Nur, and pilgrims go to it as well as to the tomb. What is preserved there is not a grave and not a relic. It is a place where somebody stood.

There is no recorded speech from those seventeen days. No sermon, no letter, no reported conversation of any substance, no instruction about her burial of the kind Fatima (SA) left. If she said anything about what had happened at Saveh, it is gone. What the tradition has kept instead is the bare shape of how a dying woman used the last two and a half weeks of her life, which is that she prayed in a borrowed room among strangers who had come out of the town to fetch her.

That is the whole of it, and it is the reason the ziyarat text of Chapter 18 exists and the reason a city grew here rather than at Saveh. Something about those seventeen days persuaded the people of Qom that what had arrived among them was worth building over.

The burial

Musa ibn Khazraj gave land he owned at Babilan on the edge of the town, and a grave was prepared.

The tradition preserves an account of what happened next which is worth reporting as the tradition reports it. There was a difficulty about who should place her in the grave, since the men present were not her kin and no male relative of hers was available. While the question was being discussed, two riders came out of the desert with their faces covered, dismounted, performed the burial, remounted, and left without speaking to anyone.

That is a story rather than a report, and it belongs to the devotional register in

the sense set out in Chapter 12. What it is expressing is a real problem, which is that a woman of the Prophet's house died among people who honoured her and had no right to touch her, and a real conviction, which is that the family did not abandon her. Whether two men rode out of the desert, the community that told this story for eleven centuries was saying something true about how it understood her death.

A canopy of reeds was put over the grave. That was the beginning.

On the sources

The reader is owed the usual accounting and this time it is comparatively good news.

The principal early source for all of this is the Tarikh-i Qom, a local history of the town compiled in the late fourth century of the Hijra, roughly a hundred and seventy years after her death. By the standards of everything else in this book that is close. It is a local record of a local event, written by people whose town it was, and its interest is civic as much as devotional.

It is not a contemporary account and it has the characteristics of a work compiled from local memory. But the core, that she came, that she was received, that she died and was buried on donated land at a specific location, is the kind of material a town history preserves accurately, because a town knows where its graves are.

And this is the one point in this book where the location is not disputed by anybody. Fatima (SA) has no known grave. Zaynab (SA) has three. The child of Chapter 13 has a shrine and a contested identity. Masuma (SA) is where everyone agrees she is, under a dome that has been continuously maintained since the third century.

An unfinished journey

She never reached her brother. He died the following year in Tus, in circumstances the Shia tradition regards as poisoning, and was buried where Mashhad now stands.

So the two of them lie about six hundred miles apart in Iran, at the two ends of a journey that neither completed, and between them they anchor the two most visited religious sites in the country. Neither was born within a thousand miles of

it.

What Masuma (SA) did was travel and die. That is the whole of the recorded life, and a book that has spent fifteen chapters insisting on what these women accomplished has to be honest that here the accomplishment is not in the life.

It is in what a town did with a grave.

CHAPTER 17: How a Grave Built a City

They put a canopy of reeds over her.

That was the whole of it in the year 201: a mound of earth on donated land at the edge of a provincial town in the Iranian plateau, with a shelter of woven reeds to keep the sun off. If you had ridden past it in 202 you would not have looked twice.

Eleven centuries later, the same spot is covered by a gold dome, surrounded by courtyards, and stands a few hundred metres from the largest centre of Shia religious learning in the world, in a city that has supplied the senior clergy of a modern state and from which a revolution was launched. Something happened in between, and this chapter is about the mechanism, because the usual account, which is that holiness attracts devotion and devotion builds institutions, explains almost nothing.

The first dome, and who built it

The reed canopy stood for something over fifty years.

The first permanent structure over the grave is attributed to Zaynab, a daughter of Muhammad al-Jawad (AS), the ninth Imam, around 256 AH. She is said to have come to Qom, visited the grave of her great-aunt, and had a dome of brick raised over it.

The detail is worth pausing on, and I have not seen it remarked on elsewhere. The first monument at the most important women's shrine in Shia Islam was commissioned by a woman of the same family, two generations later, and the tradition records her doing it without evident surprise. Two further women of the household are reported to have been buried in the same enclosure afterwards.

Whatever else this was, it began as something the women of the family built and maintained for one of their own.

From there the expansions run in a long series, through the Buyid period, the Ilkhanids, the Safavids, and the Qajars, each dynasty adding courtyards, tilework, minarets, and its own name. The gold on the dome dates from the early nineteenth century.

A correction, before the argument

There is a tidy story about Qom that this chapter is not going to tell, and it should be disposed of first.

The tidy story is that a saint died in an obscure town, the town became a place of pilgrimage, and the scholarship grew up around the shrine. It is the story the chapter title implies and it is not quite right.

Qom was already a Shia scholarly centre before her arrival and independently of it. The Ashari clan who settled the place after 94 AH brought Kufan learning with them, and by the third century Qom was one of the principal centres of hadith transmission in the Shia world, producing figures whose collections underlie everything that came afterwards. Ibn Babawayh, known as al-Saduq, who compiled one of the four foundational Shia hadith collections and whose Kamal al-Din supplies the material for Chapter 19 of this book, was a Qomi of the fourth century. That tradition did not need a shrine to exist.

So the grave did not create Qom's scholarship. What it did was something less dramatic and, over a millennium, more decisive. It gave the town a permanent identity that outlasted its scholarly primacy.

Because Qom's primacy did not last. From roughly the fifth century the intellectual leadership of Shia Islam moved elsewhere, to Baghdad under al-Mufid and al-Murtada and al-Tusi, then to Najaf, then to Hilla, then under the Safavids to Isfahan, then back to Najaf and Karbala. For most of the intervening thousand years Qom was a shrine town of respectable but secondary scholarly importance. Cities lose these competitions all the time and generally do not come back.

Qom came back, and the reason it was able to is that it still had the grave.

The mechanism

Here is how a tomb becomes an institution, set out as a sequence, because the steps are ordinary and it is their combination that does the work.

First, a grave produces visitors. This requires only that people believe there is a reason to come, and the reports encouraging visitation to this particular grave, discussed in the next chapter, did precisely that job.

Second, visitors produce an economy. Pilgrims need lodging, food, transport, guides, water, and they buy things. A shrine town of any size supports a population that has a direct material interest in the shrine continuing to attract people.

Third, and this is the step that matters, a shrine attracts endowment. Land, buildings, orchards and revenues are made over in perpetuity as waqf, by rulers seeking legitimacy, by merchants seeking merit, and by ordinary families. Endowment is not a donation that is spent. It is a permanent income stream, legally protected, administered by the shrine, and immune in principle from confiscation.

Fourth, that income supports scholars and students. A seminary is not primarily a building. It is a mechanism for feeding, housing and paying stipends to several thousand young men who are not producing anything for years at a time, and the entire question of whether such an institution can exist in a given place is a question about where the money comes from.

Fifth, scholars produce authority, authority attracts more students and more endowment, and the cycle closes.

Every major centre of Shia learning has been built this way, on the same five steps, around a tomb. Najaf grew around the grave of Ali (AS). Karbala grew around the grave of al-Husayn (AS). Mashhad grew around the grave of al-Rida (AS), her brother, at the other end of the journey she did not finish. Qom grew around hers.

The structural consequence nobody planned

Now the part that I think is the most important idea in this part of the book, and it follows directly from the mechanism above.

Compare how the great Sunni institutions of learning were founded. The Nizamiyya colleges were established by a vizier of the Seljuk state. Al-Azhar was founded by a dynasty and has been entangled with Egyptian governments ever since. The pattern across most of Sunni history is that the major seminaries were state

projects, funded by rulers, with appointments that rulers took an interest in.

The Shia centres were not founded by anybody. They accreted around graves, and they were funded by two streams that bypass the state entirely: endowment made by private persons, and the direct religious payment of khums, which in Shia law is owed by the believer to the qualified scholar rather than to any government.

The consequence is a clerical establishment whose income does not depend on the ruler, and that is an extremely unusual arrangement. It means the senior clergy can, if they choose, take positions that the state dislikes, and continue eating. It is the reason a marja in Samarra could issue a ruling on tobacco in 1891 that broke a concession granted by the Shah, and the reason the clergy could take the positions they took in the Constitutional Revolution, and the reason Qom in the twentieth century was able to become a centre of political opposition that the Pahlavi state could harass but never defund.

None of this was designed. It is a structural property that emerged from the fact that a persecuted minority built its institutions around the tombs of its dead, because tombs were the only real estate history had granted it. Chapter 9 observed that Shia sacred geography is almost entirely a geography of graves. This is what that geography turned out to be worth.

1922

The modern history of Qom turns on a single decision taken just over a century ago.

In 1922, Shaykh Abd al-Karim Hairi Yazdi, a senior scholar trained in the Iraqi centres and then teaching at Arak, moved to Qom at the invitation of local clergy and set about rebuilding the seminary there. The word usually used is revival rather than foundation, and it is the right word: Qom had a hawza before him, weakened and without standing. He reorganized the curriculum, secured funding, and attracted students, and within a few years the number studying there ran into four figures.

The timing was not accidental. Najaf and Karbala had just been through the Iraqi revolt of 1920 and its aftermath under the British mandate, and a number of senior scholars were expelled from Iraq in 1923. The centre of gravity of Shia learning was under political pressure in the place it had occupied for centuries, and there was an obvious alternative: a town inside Iran, geographically central, historically Shia to its foundations, with a major shrine, an endowment base, and

a scholarly memory that had never entirely gone.

Within a generation the seminary Hairi rebuilt had become the principal institution of Shia learning in Iran. Under Ayatollah Burujerdi, who died in 1961 and who was for years the most widely followed marja in the Shia world, Qom consolidated that position.

And it is from Qom that the political history of Iran in the second half of the twentieth century largely proceeds. The protests of 1963 began there. Ruhollah Khomeini taught there and was arrested there. The demonstrations of January 1978, and the state's response to them, set in motion the cycle of mourning processions that ran through that year and ended with the fall of the monarchy. After 1979 Qom became the clerical capital of a state organized on principles developed in its seminaries.

I record this as causation rather than as endorsement. The politics of the Islamic Republic are contested, inside Iran and outside it, among Shia Muslims as much as anyone, and this book has no business adjudicating them. What is not contested is the line of descent: the institution that produced those events sat where it sat because a woman died in that town in 201 AH and a community would not let the grave be forgotten.

The seminary and the woman

There is an irony in all this that I do not think should be passed over.

For most of its history, the seminary that grew beside her tomb did not teach women. The scholarly tradition of Qom, like every comparable tradition, was a tradition of men, and the woman at the centre of the city's identity was venerated rather than studied, visited rather than read, and could not have enrolled in the institution her grave paid for.

That has changed to a degree. Formal women's seminaries were established in Qom in the later twentieth century, the largest of them named for her ancestor, and there are now substantial numbers of women in advanced religious study in the city, some of them teaching and publishing. Whether that constitutes a resolution or a beginning is a live argument among people better placed than me to have it.

But the shape of the thing is worth registering. A woman of the Prophet's family made one journey, died among strangers who honoured her, and her grave gener-

ated an institution which for eleven centuries was closed to women like her. That is not a criticism of anyone in particular. It is simply what happened, and a book about these six women would be dishonest to notice everything else about Qom and not notice that.

What a town did

Return, finally, to the reeds.

Nothing about the outcome was contained in the event. A young woman of a well-known family died while travelling, which happened constantly and generally left no trace whatsoever. There were Alid graves all over Iran and Iraq in the third century and most of them are gone, or are local sites of modest significance visited by people from the next village.

The difference at Qom was not the grave. It was the town. The Ashari had been there for a century, they had the learning and the network and the money, they took her in when she was ill, they gave the land, they built over it, and their descendants kept the thing going through eleven hundred years, several conquests, and long periods when Qom mattered to nobody outside Qom.

The grave gave the town a reason. The town gave the grave a future. Neither would have done anything alone.

Which leaves the question of what the visitors are actually doing when they come, and what the tradition claims is happening at that grave, which is a theological question rather than a historical one and is the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 18: Intercession and Its Meanings

In the text recited by pilgrims at her shrine there is a sentence that has caused more argument between Muslims than anything else in this book.

O Fatima, intercede for me in the Garden.

A visitor is addressing a woman who died in 201 AH and asking her for something. To a large part of the Muslim world that sentence is unremarkable devotional practice with a long pedigree. To another part of it, the sentence is the definition of the gravest sin in Islam.

This chapter explains what is being claimed, what the arguments on each side are, and where I think the honest difficulties lie, including the ones on my own side. Readers who have been told that this practice is idolatry, and who have never been given the case for it, should find the case here. Readers who perform it every year and have never had to defend it should find something useful too.

The title

Start with what she is called, because a good deal turns on it and the usual explanations get it wrong in both directions.

Masuma is from the same root as isma, the term for the protection from sin and error which Shia doctrine affirms of the Prophet (PBUH), of Fatima (SA) and of the twelve Imams (AS): the fourteen, and no others. Her name is not on that list, and the tradition has never put it there. Hostile writers sometimes assume the Shia are making the stronger claim for her and attack it. Enthusiastic ones sometimes make it. Neither is the position of the schools.

But the correction usually offered is worse than the error, because it treats the title as flattery. It is not. The title is attributed to Ali al-Rida (AS), and a title given to a woman by an Imam is not a courtesy. It is an assessment, made by the person the tradition regards as qualified to make it, of what she was.

What it asserts is a state of purity, sustained, in a life the sources otherwise tell us almost nothing about. Shia scholars have discussed for centuries what degree of protection the word carries when it is applied outside the fourteen, and the discussion is a real one and not settled, with some holding a station approaching ismah in the technical sense and others a lesser but still extraordinary preservation. What none of them holds is that it means nothing in particular.

So the accurate statement is narrow and it should be made precisely. She is not one of the Ma'sumin. She is Masuma, and the tradition means something definite by that, on the authority of an Imam, and it is a great deal more than a compliment.

Like most of the material specific to her, the title reaches us through the Qomi tradition rather than through the early hadith corpus, which is a fact about transmission and not an argument against the content.

The reports

Two reports do most of the work in encouraging visitation to her grave, and both require an honest note.

The first is attributed to al-Rida (AS) and holds that whoever visits Masuma at Qom is as one who has visited him. The second is attributed to Jafar al-Sadiq (AS), and states that a woman of his descendants named Fatima, daughter of Musa, will die at Qom, and that through her intercession the Shia will enter the Garden.

Applying the tools of Chapter 12: the second is a prediction attributed to a man who died about twenty-five years before she was born, which places it in a category of report that requires foreknowledge and is therefore evaluated differently by different readers depending on prior commitments. It is also transmitted through a very late channel, being cited from a scholar of the twelfth Islamic century. The first is more ordinary in form but comes through the same Qomi tradition as everything else about her, and its chains are not strong by the standards applied to legal reports.

What that means practically is this. If these reports were being used to establish an obligation, a Shia jurist would want better chains before ruling. They are not

being used that way. They are being used to encourage a recommended act, and the standards applied to such material have always been more relaxed, in Sunni jurisprudence as much as Shia, for the reasonable enough reason that the cost of a weak report encouraging a voluntary good deed is low.

A reader should hold the reports at that weight. They are the warrant for a devotional practice, not the foundation of a doctrine.

What the Qur'an says about intercession

Now the substance, and it is more interesting than the shouting suggests, because the two sides agree on considerably more than either usually admits.

The Qur'an addresses intercession repeatedly and its position is consistent. Intercession belongs to God. Nobody intercedes with Him except by His permission. Intercession will not avail except for those He permits and approves. Those addressed besides God possess no power of intercession, except those who bear witness to the truth and know.

So the scriptural picture has two components which have to be held together. Intercession is real; the Qur'an does not deny that it happens. And it is entirely derivative; no intercessor has any independent standing, and permission is prior in every case.

Sunni doctrine affirms this too, and affirms it in strong terms with respect to the Prophet (PBUH). The intercession of the Prophet on the Day of Judgement is a well-established Sunni belief, resting on sound reports and on the Qur'anic reference to the praiseworthy station. No mainstream Sunni school denies that intercession exists or that the Prophet will exercise it.

This is worth stating plainly because it locates the disagreement correctly. The dispute is not about whether intercession happens. It is about whether a living person may ask for it, and from whom, and whether death changes the answer.

The two questions actually in dispute

The objection, in its serious form, runs as follows. Worship is due to God alone. Calling upon anyone besides God is worship. Therefore addressing a request to a dead person is the association of partners with God, which is the one sin the Qur'an declares unforgivable. Supporting verses are cited to the effect that those

in the graves cannot be made to hear.

The response turns on a distinction and a question.

The distinction is between worship and request. Asking a person to pray for you is not worshipping that person. Every Muslim tradition accepts this while the person is alive: asking a pious relative to pray for you is unremarkable, and there is well-known material about the early community seeking the prayers of particular individuals. If asking a living man to pray for you is not shirk, then asking is not intrinsically an act of worship, and the category collapses. What remains is not a question about the nature of the request but about the state of the person being asked.

Which is the question: does death change it?

Those who defend the practice argue that it does not, and make several points. The Qur'an explicitly forbids describing those killed in God's path as dead and states that they are living. Reports describe the Prophet (PBUH) addressing the slain of Badr in their graves. The standard prayer that every Muslim recites includes a salutation addressed to the Prophet in the second person. And the verses about the dead not hearing are read as describing the spiritually unresponsive rather than as a general metaphysical claim, since the same Qur'an describes prophets addressing their peoples after death.

Those who reject it argue that these are exceptions rather than principles, that the salutation is a formula rather than an address, and that the practice, whatever its theoretical defensibility, produces in ordinary practitioners exactly the confusion the prohibition exists to prevent.

I do not think this argument is going to be settled, and I am not going to pretend to settle it in a chapter of a book about six women. What I can do is point out that it is a real argument between serious people, conducted with scriptural evidence on both sides, and not the confrontation between monotheism and paganism that its noisier participants describe.

What the text at Qom actually says

The most useful thing available to a reader here is the ziyarat text itself, because it answers the theological question directly and almost nobody on either side of the argument has read it.

It does not begin with her. It begins with God, with an extended affirmation of divine oneness. It proceeds through salutations upon the Prophet (PBUH) and the Imams (AS), placing her in a chain rather than treating her as a source. When it reaches the request, the request is that she intercede, which is to say that she ask, which is to say that the pilgrim is asking her to ask.

There is no point at which the text attributes independent power to her. There is no point at which anything is sought from her rather than through her. The structure of the composition is an argument in itself, and it is the same argument the theologians make: God is one, these are His chosen, they have standing with Him, and I am asking one of them to speak for me.

Whether that is permissible is the disputed question. What it is not is a claim of divinity, and a person who reads the text can see that within about ninety seconds.

Where the difficulty actually is

Now the part that a defence of this practice should not skip, and usually does.

What the text says and what happens in the courtyard are not always the same thing. Anyone who has spent time at a major shrine, in Qom or Mashhad or Najaf or for that matter at Sunni sites in South Asia and North Africa, has seen practice that goes beyond what the theology licenses. Requests addressed as though to a source rather than to an intercessor. Behaviour towards physical structures that is hard to square with anything in the texts. A relationship to the saint that has, in individual cases, become something the doctrine does not sanction.

This is not a Shia problem or a Sunni problem. It is what popular religion does everywhere and always, in every tradition on earth, and pretending otherwise in order to win an argument is not honest.

What should be said in response is two things. First, the tradition polices this itself: Shia scholars have written against excess in shrine practice for centuries, and the theological literature is considerably more careful than the polemics against it assume. Second, the existence of practitioners who exceed a doctrine is not an argument against the doctrine, or every religious position ever held would fall, since all of them have adherents who get them wrong.

The honest statement is that the practice as taught is defensible, that the practice as sometimes performed is not, and that this gap is a matter for the tradition's own teachers rather than for its opponents to exploit.

Why this is raw

One piece of context, because the argument is not conducted in a vacuum.

In 1925 and 1926, the monuments over the graves in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Medina were demolished, along with other structures in the Hijaz, on the basis of the theological position described above. Among the graves whose monuments were removed were those of Imams of the Shia tradition, of the Prophet's family, and, if the most likely identification in Chapter 9 is correct, of Zaynab (SA).

That is why this discussion cannot be conducted as a seminar. For a very large number of Muslims it is not an abstract question about the epistemology of intercession. It is a question about a cemetery they cannot visit properly, and the argument is heard as the justification for something that was done to their dead within living memory of their grandparents.

I state this to explain the temperature, not to settle the theology. The demolition does not make the doctrine behind it wrong, and the pain it caused is not an argument. But a reader who wonders why Shia writing on intercession is often more heated than the philosophical content requires now knows why.

Authority without office

Which brings this part of the book to its point.

Fatima Masuma (SA) held no office. She was not an Imam and the tradition does not claim she was. She did not transmit a body of hadith, did not deliver a sermon anyone recorded, did not rule on law, did not lead anything. In the formal structure of Shia authority she occupies no position at all.

And the tradition assigns her one of the most substantial intercessory roles in its devotional life, builds its principal centre of learning around her grave, and sends millions of people to ask her for things.

That is not an anomaly. It is the thesis of this book, appearing here in its most explicit form. One word of care about it, since this is where a reader is most likely to trip: office is not the same as station. Chapter 5 affirms of Fatima (SA) a station that the tradition ranks highest after prophethood, and she still held no office, because an office is a post with functions that somebody appoints you to and could appoint another to instead. The claim of this book concerns offices. It has

never been a claim about rank.

Every woman in these pages has exercised something like authority without holding any office that would confer it. Fatima (SA) argued law in a mosque she could not lead prayers in. Zaynab (SA) delivered an indictment in a court where she was a prisoner. Sukayna (SA) shaped the literary judgement of a city from a private house. And here, in Qom, that pattern stops being an observation about individual lives and becomes a formal category: a woman with no office, occupying a permanent institutional position in the religious life of a global community, because of who she was and where she died.

The tradition worked out what to do with these women. It did not always do it well, as Part Three and Part Four have shown at length. But it did not simply lose them, and at Qom it built something enormous on one of them.

Part Six moves to the last of the six, and to the hardest case of all: a woman about whom the tradition cannot agree on a name, an origin, or how she came into the household, and whose son is the reason any of it continues.

PART SIX · THE VANISHING POINT

Narjis

Samarra, 255 AH

CHAPTER 19: The Byzantine Princess

The story that follows is the best story in this book, and it exists in essentially one place.

I am going to tell it properly first, at length and without interruption, because it deserves that and because a narrative cannot be assessed until it has been heard. The examination comes in the next chapter. For the space of this one I am going to let it run.

It is preserved by Ibn Babawayh of Qom, known as al-Saduq, who died in 381 AH, in his book Kamal al-Din, written to address the difficulty that the twelfth Imam had by then been absent for a very long time and the community needed help holding on. The account is given on the authority of a man named Bishr ibn Sulayman, described as a dealer in slaves, a descendant of the Prophet's companion Abu Ayyub al-Ansari, and a neighbour and follower of the tenth and eleventh Imams in Samarra.

This is Bishr's account.

The commission

He was summoned by Ali al-Hadi (AS), the tenth Imam, who was living under close supervision in the garrison city of Samarra, where the Abbasid state had moved its capital and where it kept the head of the Alid house within reach.

The Imam taught him a letter written in Greek, and made him learn it. Then he gave him two hundred and twenty dinars and a set of instructions.

Go to the crossing on the Tigris at Baghdad, he was told, where the boats come

in carrying captives and the dealers gather to buy. Wait.

Among the traders there will be a man named Amr ibn Yazid, and among his people will be a girl wearing two heavy silk garments, who will not permit herself to be inspected and will not allow herself to be touched, and who will speak from behind a covering. You will hear her cry out in Greek, and what she will be saying is that the honour of her lineage has been violated. A buyer will offer three hundred dinars for her and she will refuse him, in Arabic, and tell him that if he came with the wealth of Solomon and the kingdom of Solomon he would not have her affection, so let him spare his money. The dealer will ask her what she wants, since she refuses everyone. She will tell him to ask the buyers, and to bring her the man whose heart is settled with her.

At that point, said the Imam, present yourself. Give her the letter.

The riverbank

Bishr went to Baghdad, to the crossing, and waited.

The boats came in. The dealers spread out their captives. And it happened as he had been told it would: the trader, the girl in the two silk garments, the refusal to be seen, the cry in Greek about the honour of her house. A man offered three hundred dinars and was told, in Arabic, that neither Solomon's wealth nor Solomon's kingdom would purchase her regard, and that he should keep his money.

The dealer asked her what she expected him to do. She told him to find the man whose heart was at rest with her.

Bishr came forward and handed over the letter.

She read it, and she wept. And she said to the dealer: sell me to the man who wrote this.

She swore that if he did not, she would kill herself. Bishr negotiated the price, and the price came to exactly two hundred and twenty dinars, and he paid it and took her away.

On the road

She carried the letter with her and would not put it down. She kissed it, and

pressed it to herself, and Bishr, who had watched all of this and understood none of it, finally asked the obvious question. How can you show such reverence for a letter from a man whose name you do not even know?

She told him he was ignorant of the standing of the family of the Prophet, and then, since they were now travelling together, she told him who she was.

Her name, she said, was Malika. She was the daughter of Yashua, the son of the Caesar of Rome. Her mother was descended from Shamun, the successor of Christ.

And then she explained how a granddaughter of the Byzantine emperor had come to be standing in a slave market on the Tigris.

The wedding that would not take place

When she was thirteen, her grandfather decided to marry her to his brother's son.

He assembled the court for it, in the manner of an imperial wedding. The accounts give numbers: three hundred monks and priests, seven hundred of the nobility, a throne raised on steps and set with crosses and images, and the bridegroom brought forward.

When the crosses were raised, they fell. When the steps were mounted, the throne collapsed. The bridegroom fell from it in a faint. The colour left the faces of the priests and their leader said to the emperor that he should be spared this marriage, since these were the signs that accompanied the passing of the Christian religion.

Her grandfather took the omen badly and ordered the whole thing prepared again, more carefully. It was done a second time, with the same result. The assembly broke up and Caesar returned in distress to his palace and had the curtains drawn.

The first dream

That night, she said, she dreamed.

She saw Christ in her grandfather's palace, and Shamun with him, and the disciples gathered. And where the throne had collapsed they set up a pulpit of light. Then Muhammad (PBUH) entered with Ali (AS) and the Imams of his line and a great company.

Christ rose to meet him and embraced him.

And Muhammad (PBUH) said: I have come to ask you for Malika, the daughter of your successor Shamun, for my son. The son meant is al-Hasan al-Askari (AS), the eleventh Imam, addressed in the account by his kunya, and he is present in the dream with the others.

Christ looked at Shamun and told him that nobility had come to him, and that he should join his line to the line of the family of Muhammad. Shamun said that he would. And the marriage was contracted there, in the dream, with Christ conducting it, and the descendants of Muhammad (PBUH) and the disciples of Jesus as witnesses.

She woke and told nobody. She was the granddaughter of the Roman emperor and she had dreamed the wrong thing, and she says plainly in the account that she was afraid to speak of it.

The illness

Then she fell ill, and the illness was of the kind that physicians cannot address.

Her grandfather brought every doctor in the city to her and none of them could do anything, and eventually he sat by her and asked her whether there was anything in the world she wanted, because if there was, he would have it brought.

She asked him to release the Muslim prisoners in his gaols, and to take the chains off them, and to be kind to them. He did it, out of desperation, and she made a show of recovering slightly so that he would continue.

And then she dreamed a second time.

The mistress of the women of the worlds came to her, with Maryam the daughter of Imran beside her and a thousand handmaidens of Paradise. And Malika said to her: you are the one who has done this to me, and your son has not come to visit me since.

Fatima (SA) told her that her son would not come to a woman who associated others with God, and who held to the religion of the Christians, and that this was Maryam bint Imran, who dissociated herself from that religion.

Malika said that she believed. She testified that there is no god but God and that

Muhammad is the Messenger of God, and Fatima (SA) drew her close and put her head against her breast and comforted her and told her to expect a visitor.

And after that, she said, he came to her every night in sleep, until she asked him why he stayed away in daylight, and he told her that the separation would be long, and that she should be patient, and that she should expect to be brought to him.

The crossing

Then, in the last of the dreams, she was told what to do.

There would be a raid, on such and such a night, on the frontier. She was to disguise herself among the servant women, put on their clothing, and go out with a group travelling towards the border. She did it. She left the palace of the Caesar of Rome dressed as a maid, in a company of women, and walked towards the frontier of a state at war with her grandfather.

The Muslim raiders took the whole party. She gave a false name, and she was sold, and she passed through hands until she stood on the bank of the Tigris in two silk garments refusing to let anyone look at her.

Bishr asked her how she came to speak Arabic. She told him that a maidservant of her grandfather's had taught it to her, coming to her morning and evening, and had told her that the Arabic tongue would be needed.

Samarra

He brought her to Samarra and into the presence of Ali al-Hadi (AS).

The Imam looked at her and spoke to her in Greek, and asked her how God had shown her the honour of Islam and the abasement of Christianity and the nobility of the household of Muhammad. She answered him.

He offered her a gift and she declined it and asked instead for something else, and he told her she would have what she asked. Then he called for his sister, Hakima, the daughter of Muhammad al-Jawad (AS), and told her to take the girl and to teach her.

And he said, in the account, that she would bear a son who would fill the earth with justice as it had been filled with injustice.

In the household she was called Narjis.

What kind of story this is

That is the account, and I hope the reader has enjoyed it, because there is a great deal to enjoy.

It is beautifully constructed. It has a prophecy that is fulfilled in detail on the riverbank, which is the oldest satisfying device in narrative. It has a heroine who refuses three hundred dinars and is bought for two hundred and twenty, so that her worth is established by her refusal rather than by her price. It has two dream sequences, escalating. It has Christ personally officiating at a marriage into the family of Muhammad (PBUH), and Mary appearing in order to release a Christian girl from Christianity, which is about as economical a piece of theological argument as could be devised.

And that is the thing to notice before we go any further, because it is the key to everything in the next chapter.

The story does not merely make Narjis (SA) a princess. It makes her a descendant of Shamun, that is to say Simon Peter, the man the account identifies as the successor appointed by Christ. The word used is the same word Shia theology uses for the successor appointed by Muhammad (PBUH).

So the child of this marriage inherits from both lines at once. He is the last of the successors of Muhammad (PBUH), and through his mother he descends from the first of the successors of Jesus. The Mahdi of this narrative is not simply a Muslim figure who will appear at the end of time. He is the point at which the two lines of appointed succession, the one running from Christ and the one running from Muhammad (PBUH), converge in a single person.

That is an enormous claim, and it is made almost casually, in a dream, in the middle of a love story.

Nobody constructs a story like that by accident. Which raises the question of who did construct it, and when, and whether there was a woman underneath it, and what happens to the doctrine if there was not.

That is the next chapter, and it is going to be less fun than this one.

CHAPTER 20: The Other Accounts

The mother of the twelfth Imam is called Narjis in the account we have just read. She is also called Sayqal. She is also called Susan. She is also called Rayhana. She is also called Maryam, and in some lists Khamt. In the narrative of Chapter 19 her original name is Malika.

That is six or seven names for one woman, spread across the early Shia sources, and the disagreement is not a minor variation of spelling. Different authorities, some of them writing within living memory of the events, give different answers about who she was.

This chapter is about what that means. It is the least comfortable chapter in this part of the book and the one that most needs the equipment assembled in Chapter 12.

Start with the names themselves

Look at the list again and something becomes apparent that is easy to miss if you read the names as names.

Narjis is the narcissus. Susan is the lily. Rayhana is sweet basil or myrtle. Sayqal means burnished or polished, as of a blade.

These are not the given names of freeborn women of the period. They are the kind of names given to slaves in wealthy households of the third Islamic century, drawn from flowers, gemstones, scents and qualities, assigned on acquisition and used thereafter. Anyone who has read Abbasid-era literature will recognize the register immediately: it is the naming convention of the household establishment, and it appears everywhere from caliphal palaces to merchant houses.

So the list is not really a set of competing reports about what a woman was called. It is what we would expect of a woman who came into a household as a slave, received a household name, and is remembered under several of them because the transmitters knew her by whichever one they had heard.

That reading does not require the story of Chapter 19 to be false. In that story she is given the name Narjis in the household, and the account is explicit about it. But it is worth noticing that the naming pattern is exactly what we would expect on the simplest reading, and that the simplest reading does not include a Byzantine palace.

What the earliest sources have

Now the source layering, and the direction of travel is instructive.

Al-Kulayni died in 329 AH, roughly seventy years after the events, and his al-Kafi is the earliest of the four foundational Shia collections. It contains material on the birth of the twelfth Imam, including the account of the Imam's aunt Hakima who was present. What it does not contain is the Byzantine princess.

The elaborate origin narrative appears in al-Saduq, who died in 381 AH, and in a small number of works of roughly that period and later. Al-Mufid, writing afterwards and probably the most rigorous mind in the tradition's early history, gives her name in al-Irshad without the accompanying story. Al-Tusi records variant names.

So the pattern is the one Chapter 12 described as developmental layering. The earliest material has a woman, a birth and an aunt as witness. The Byzantine grandfather, the collapsing crosses, the dream marriage conducted by Christ and the slave market on the Tigris arrive later, in a single elaborated narrative, and do not appear in the collection that stands closest to the events.

The chain, and the empire

Two further difficulties, one technical and one factual.

The technical one is that the whole narrative rests on a single strand of transmission through Bishr ibn Sulayman, who is otherwise not a well-attested figure. A story of this magnitude resting on one report from one man is in a weak evidential position by the standards the tradition itself applies to legal material.

The factual one is harder. The account gives the girl's father as Yashua, son of the Caesar of Rome, which would make her granddaughter of a reigning Byzantine emperor in the period around the 250s of the Hijra. The Byzantine imperial succession of those decades is documented from the Byzantine side in considerable detail, and it does not accommodate this. There is no emperor whose son bore that name and no known granddaughter of the imperial house who disappeared into the Muslim frontier. Nor did the Byzantine imperial family claim descent from Simon Peter; the idea is not part of Byzantine dynastic ideology at all.

This is not a matter of the sources being silent. It is a matter of a well-documented institution not having room for the person described.

The shape of the story

And then there is the form of the thing, which the reader may have noticed while enjoying it.

The captured foreign princess of royal blood who turns out to be the mother of a great figure is one of the most widely distributed motifs in the hagiography of the medieval world. It appears in Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Persian material. Its function is invariably the same: to supply noble ancestry on the maternal side where the historical record supplies something more ordinary.

Recognizing a motif is not proof of invention. Reality occasionally arranges itself in the shape of a story. But when a narrative conforms this closely to a known template, arrives centuries late, rests on a single chain, and contains a factual claim that the other side's well-kept records cannot accommodate, the accumulation is difficult to argue with.

The reading that fits

Here is what the evidence most economically supports, and I want to state it plainly rather than gesturing at it.

The household of the Imams in Samarra, like every substantial household of the period, included slave women, and the Imams had children by them. This is not a scandalous claim or a marginal one. It is the ordinary and documented pattern of the line: the mother of Muhammad al-Jawad (AS) was a slave woman said to be of Nubian origin, the mother of Ali al-Hadi (AS) is described as North African, and the mother of al-Hasan al-Askari (AS) is likewise remembered as

a slave woman of the household with a name of the flower-and-quality type. For several generations, the mothers of the Imams were women who entered the house through purchase or gift.

The most economical reading of Narjis (SA) is that she was such a woman. She may well have been of Byzantine origin, since a great many captives of the period were, and the frontier warfare that supplied the slave markets ran across Anatolia continuously. It should be said that this is not the only tradition about her origin: another strand within the Shia sources describes her as an African woman, and a third has her not purchased at all but born and raised inside the household of the Imam's aunt. These accounts cannot all be right, and the disagreement about something as basic as where she came from is itself the finding. She received a household name. She bore a son to the eleventh Imam in or around 255 AH. And the rest was supplied later, by a community that needed it to be supplied, for reasons we are about to come to.

I hold that reading with moderate confidence and I recognize it is not the version most readers will have been taught.

Why the story was needed

And now the part that makes the elaboration comprehensible rather than merely deflatable, because a tradition that fills a gap is always doing it for a reason and the reason here is unusually clear.

Al-Hasan al-Askari (AS) died in 260 AH, in his late twenties, in a garrison city, under state supervision. And the community immediately faced a crisis with no parallel in its history: it was told that the next Imam existed but could not be seen.

The claim was contested at once, and most damagingly from inside the family. The dead Imam's brother Jafar advanced his own claim and denied that any son existed. The Abbasid authorities took a direct interest, because an unlocated Alid heir was a security problem, and the sources describe the household being searched, the estate disputed, and women of the house being held and examined for evidence of pregnancy. Whatever else was happening in Samarra in 260 AH, the existence of a child was a live legal and political question being investigated by the state.

Now consider the position of a Shia partisan arguing this case in the following decades. The claim is that the Imam of the age is a child nobody has seen, born in secret, whose birth the authorities investigated and whose own uncle denies. And

the mother, on the ordinary account, is a slave woman of the household with a flower name.

That last detail was not doctrinally damaging, but it was rhetorically indefensible against opponents who were not arguing doctrine. The elaboration answers it comprehensively. The mother is not an anonymous slave; she is an emperor's granddaughter who chose this, and chose it under instruction from Christ himself, and whose lineage runs back to the first successor of Jesus.

That is a very good answer to the question being asked. It is such a good answer that its usefulness is itself grounds for suspicion, which is what Chapter 12 warned about.

The load-bearing test

Which brings us to the question a Shia reader will be asking by now, and it deserves a direct answer.

If the Byzantine narrative is a later construction, what happens to the doctrine?

Nothing.

Apply the test from Chapter 12 and ask what the imamate actually rests on. It rests on designation, transmitted from father to son, established by the statement of the preceding Imam. It has never rested on the maternal line. Had it done so, the tradition would have collapsed several generations earlier, since the mothers of the ninth, tenth and eleventh Imams were all slave women and nobody in the tradition has ever regarded this as a difficulty. In Islamic law the child of a free father and an enslaved mother is free and inherits fully; the mother's origin has no bearing on the son's standing.

So the Byzantine princess is theologically ornamental. She is a magnificent ornament, and she carries a striking claim about the convergence of two lines of succession which has nourished a great deal of Shia thought about the universality of the final Imam. But she is not holding anything up. Remove her and the structure does not move.

What is load-bearing is narrower and should be stated exactly. The doctrine requires that al-Hasan al-Askari (AS) had a son. It therefore requires that the son had a mother. It does not require that anyone know who she was, and the evidence that the community did not know is sitting in that list of names.

That last point is worth sitting with. The tradition transmitted, in its own most authoritative collections, half a dozen different names for the mother of the Imam whose existence its opponents denied. A movement engaged in wholesale fabrication would have settled on one. The disagreement is evidence of a community preserving what it had received rather than manufacturing what it needed, and it is, in a way its transmitters cannot have intended, a mark in favour of their honesty.

The woman under the story

Strip away the palace and the crosses and the dream and what remains is this.

A young woman, probably taken on a frontier that ran with captives for two centuries, sold at least once, brought into a household in a garrison city that was under permanent state observation. She was given a name that was not hers. She bore a son to a man who died young. And in the months around that birth the house was searched, the family was in litigation, the uncle was denying the child existed, and the authorities were examining the women of the household to find out whether anyone was carrying.

That is a life that requires no embellishment to be remarkable, and it is considerably more frightening than the version with the collapsing crosses in it.

She then disappears from the record almost entirely, which is the subject of the final chapter.

CHAPTER 21: The Mother Who Disappears

The account of the birth comes from a woman, was transmitted by a woman, and concerns an event that the tradition holds took place in front of almost nobody.

Hakima was a daughter of Muhammad al-Jawad (AS), which made her the aunt of the eleventh Imam and the great-aunt of the child. The reports have her summoned to her nephew's house in Samarra on the night of the fifteenth of Shaban in the year 255, and told to stay, because a child would be born that night.

She says she looked at Narjis (SA) and saw no sign of pregnancy. She said so. And she was told that it would be with this child as it was with the mother of Moses, whose condition did not show until the night itself.

She stayed. Towards dawn the signs came, and the child was born, and Hakima describes what she saw, and the description is the sort of thing that attaches to the birth of a figure of this significance in every tradition that has such figures. He was brought to his father. And then he was taken away.

That is the event on which the last thousand years of Shia Islam rest, and it was witnessed, on its own account, by an aunt.

What is recorded of her religion

The tradition does preserve something of her religious life. It is less than it preserves for any of these women except one, since Chapter 10 has already shown that of Umm Kulthum (SA) not a single act of worship survives at all. And it is more than a reader of the last chapter might expect.

Begin with the fact that her formation was arranged. In the narrative of Chapter

19, when she is brought to Samarra, Ali al-Hadi (AS) calls for his sister and gives her a specific instruction: take this woman into your house and teach her the obligations and the practices. That is a sentence about religious education, given as a directive, and what it describes is a convert being systematically taught how to pray and fast and conduct herself. Hakima, who will later be the witness at the birth, is here the teacher. The transmission of this household ran through its women in both directions, and this is the clearest single statement of it in the sources.

Then there is a line attributed to Narjis (SA) herself, and it is the only extended speech of hers that the tradition carries. Asked about al-Hasan al-Askari (AS), she is reported to have answered that from the night she became a Muslim at the hands of the best of women, Fatima al-Zahra (SA), not one night had passed in which he had not come to her.

Read that sentence for what it does rather than for what it claims. It is a woman dating her life from her conversion. Not from her capture, not from her sale, not from her arrival in Samarra, all of which were more violent and more recent. The night she took the testimony is the point from which she counts, and everything else in her account is placed before or after it. Whatever one concludes about the dream framework of Chapter 19, the sentence inside it is the self-description of a convert, and converts do talk like this.

Third, and most concretely, there is what she asks for when she is ill and her grandfather offers her anything in the world. She does not ask to be healed or married or left alone. She asks him to release the Muslim prisoners from his gaols, to take the chains off them, and to treat them well, and the account says he did it. A person can dispute every other element of that narrative and still notice what the tradition chose to have her ask for. Intercession for captives is the act it wanted attached to her name, and it is worth setting beside the fact that she would shortly be a captive herself.

And there is the setting of the birth. The household on the fifteenth of Shaban is fasting, and that night is one on which Muslims keep vigil. Hakima is brought there to break her fast, and the account has her eating, and praying, and sleeping, and waking in the night to pray again. So the one scene in which Narjis (SA) is visible at length is a house at prayer, and the woman herself moves through it in the most ordinary way available: she takes her visitor's shoes, asks after her, addresses her as the lady of the house and is told that she is the lady of the house.

The tradition also gave her a name of her own to be known by. She is Umm

Muhammad, the mother of Muhammad, and there are supplications reported for her, which is to say that at some point the community was not only remembering her but praying for her by name.

Two things have to be said about all of this, and they pull in opposite directions.

The first is that every item on the list comes from inside the same narrative complex Chapter 20 examined, and it inherits every difficulty set out there. This is not independent material. It is the devotional portrait, and the devotional portrait is late.

The second is that it is nonetheless what the tradition has, and a book that spends two chapters explaining why her origin story cannot be taken as history, and then declines to report what the same sources say about her religion, has made a choice that looks like scholarship and functions as neglect. She is the only woman in these pages with no independent record of any kind. Reporting the tradition's picture of her, and marking it as the tradition's picture, is the most that can honestly be done and it is more than nothing.

What she has, then, is this. She was taught. She counted her life from a conversion. She asked for prisoners to be freed. She fasted, in a house that fasted. And she was prayed for afterwards by people who did not know her name with any confidence and prayed for her anyway.

The pregnancy that did not show

The detail about the concealed pregnancy requires the honesty this book has tried to maintain, so let us look at it directly.

It is doing something specific. The Abbasid authorities, as Chapter 20 described, took a close interest in whether al-Hasan al-Askari (AS) had produced an heir, and the sources describe them examining the women of the household. A pregnancy that was not visible answers the obvious objection that a state which looked did not find anything.

A sceptic will say that this is precisely why the detail exists: it is an explanation built to fit the shape of an inconvenient fact. That is a fair observation and I will not pretend otherwise.

What can be said on the other side is that the objection it answers was real, immediate and public, and that the community needed some account of it within

a few years rather than a few centuries. Unlike the Byzantine palace of Chapter 19, this element is present in the earliest layer of the material, in al-Kulayni as well as in al-Saduq. It is not a late elaboration. It is part of the original claim, made when the people who had searched the house were still alive.

That does not make it true. It does mean it belongs to a different evidential category than the collapsing crosses, and a reader who dismisses both on the same grounds has not looked carefully.

A child raised out of sight

From that night, according to the tradition, the child was kept concealed.

A small number of trusted followers were shown him. The accounts name some of them. Beyond that circle, the community was not told, and the ordinary machinery of an Imam's household, the correspondence and the delegations and the visits, went on without reference to a son.

This is often presented as mysterious. It was not mysterious to anyone at the time. The three preceding Imams had lived under supervision in a garrison city built to keep the caliph's troops and the caliph's problems in one place. Al-Kazim (AS) had died in custody. The state had a settled interest in knowing where the Alid succession was, and a child whose existence was unknown was a child who could not be detained, monitored or used.

Concealing him was not a theological gesture. It was what a family in that position did with a son.

260 AH

Al-Hasan al-Askari (AS) died in 260, aged around twenty-eight, and the household came apart in public.

His brother Jafar claimed the inheritance and denied that any son existed. The estate was disputed before the authorities. The house was searched. And the sources describe the women of the household being detained and observed, because if there was an heir he would have to have come from one of them.

And here the record produces something that deserves more attention than it has received.

During the dispute, a woman of the household declared that she was pregnant. The claim had a precise legal effect: an estate cannot be divided while an heir may yet be born, so the declaration froze the proceedings. She was placed under guard and kept under observation, by some accounts for around two years, until the claim lapsed.

The sources are not clear about who this woman was, and they use more than one name, which by now the reader will not find surprising. Some accounts identify her with the mother of the child. Others do not, or leave it open.

If it was her, then the last recorded act of the last woman in this book was a deception maintained under confinement for two years, which drew the entire investigative attention of the Abbasid state onto her body and away from a child who was somewhere else.

I want to be careful. The identification is uncertain and I am not going to assert it. But the episode itself is not in doubt: someone in that household made that claim, and it worked, and the proceedings stalled, and no heir was produced for the authorities to take. Whoever she was, she bought time with the only asset available to her, and she did it in custody.

And then nothing

After that the record on Narjis (SA) simply stops.

There is no death date on which the sources agree and no account of her later years. There is no grave that anyone can point to, no shrine of her own, no annual commemoration. A tradition associates her burial with the precinct of the shrine at Samarra, where her husband and his father lie, but it identifies no place within it, and Samarra is not a city where anything has been easy to verify for a very long time. Of the six women in this book she is the only one for whom pilgrims have nowhere in particular to stand.

Try to hold what that means, because it is the last thing this book has to show you and it is easy to read as a source-critical observation.

On the reading the last chapter found most economical, a girl is taken on a frontier in a raid, in a year nobody wrote down. She is walked south. She is sold, and sold again, and at some point she stops being called whatever her mother called her and starts being called after a flower. The other accounts of how she came to that house differ, and one of them has her born inside it. What none of them disputes

is where she ends up.

She ends up in a house in a garrison town on the Tigris, watched by soldiers, in a family the government has kept under observation for three generations. She is taught how to pray. She has a son. The house is searched.

And then she goes out like a lamp going out. No death notice, no year, no grave, no dome, no night in the calendar, nowhere to leave a thread tied to a window. Millions of people across eleven centuries have organized their religious lives around a claim about her child, and not one of them has ever been able to say where she is or to be confident what to call her.

The tradition put domes over almost everybody. It could not put one over her, because it did not know where to stand. So the woman at the end of this book has no place, and her son has no place, and those two absences are the same absence, and it is very nearly the only thing anyone can say about either of them without an argument breaking out.

Al-Saduq places her death before her husband's. Al-Najashi has her alive after 260 AH and concealed in the house of one of his close companions, which if true would make her last years a continuation of the same strategy as everything else in this chapter. The tradition that has built domes over so many of its dead has built nothing over her, because it does not know where she is.

She is the mother of the figure at the centre of Shia eschatology, the woman without whom the entire structure of the twelfth Imam has no beginning, and we do not know her name with confidence, her origin with confidence, or where she is buried at all.

The arc

Which returns this book to where it started, and the symmetry is worth naming because it is not something I imposed on the material. It was there.

Fatima (SA) was buried at night, by four or five people, in a grave she instructed should not be marked, and it has never been found.

Ali (AS) was buried in a concealed grave and its location was kept secret for over a century.

Al-Hasan (AS) was buried at al-Baqi because his funeral could not safely go where

he had asked to go.

Al-Husayn (AS) was left unburied on a field and covered by strangers from a local tribe.

Zaynab (SA) is in one of three places and probably in an unmarked patch of the same cemetery.

And at the end of the line, a birth concealed from the state, a child raised out of sight, an occultation, and a mother who vanishes without a grave.

The tradition opens with a hidden burial and closes with a hidden birth. In between, almost every significant figure in it has been buried defensively, moved, denied a marker, or lost.

Concealment as a way of living

I want to make the general point carefully, because it is the last argument this book has to make about its subject and it is the one I think matters most.

Shia Islam developed the doctrine of the occultation, in which the Imam of the age is alive, present in the world, and hidden. It also developed, much earlier and far more pervasively, the practice of taqiyya, in which a believer may conceal their allegiance when disclosure would bring harm. Both have been mocked from outside as convenient evasions, doctrines built to explain absence and to license dishonesty.

Read them against the material in this chapter and they look like something else entirely. They are the theological articulation of a survival strategy that the community had been practising continuously, out of necessity, since the night Fatima (SA) was put into the ground without an announcement.

A minority that cannot hold territory, cannot win a battle, and cannot safely be identified has exactly one strategy available, and it is concealment. Hide the grave so it cannot be desecrated. Hide the child so he cannot be taken. Hide your allegiance so you can keep your position and your life. Hide the Imam himself, in the end, because a leader who cannot be found cannot be killed, and a movement whose head is beyond reach cannot be decapitated.

The occultation is that strategy raised to the level of doctrine. Whatever one concludes about it theologically, and this book has no business ruling on that,

its shape is the shape of everything that came before it. It is a community that had watched its leaders be killed one after another for two and a half centuries deciding, or being told, that this one would not be available to be killed.

And the last thing the last woman in this book did, on one reading of an uncertain report, was lie to the police for two years so that they would look at her instead of at her son.

Six women

So here is where they end up.

Fatima (SA) hid herself deliberately and the tradition honoured it, and she has no grave.

Zaynab (SA) was lost and the tradition could not accept it, and she has three.

Umm Kulthum (SA) was buried under an argument about one transaction and has been almost entirely obscured by it.

Sukayna (SA) survived, flourished, and had her name taken by a child who died, so that the tradition that reveres her family remembers a figure who is not her.

Fatima Masuma (SA) is the exception. Everybody knows where she is, and a city and a seminary and a great deal of modern history grew from that one certainty.

And Narjis (SA) is gone altogether.

Two hundred and fifty years separate the first from the last. Between them these women argued law in a mosque, prosecuted a caliph in his own court, held a city's literary judgement for fifty years, anchored an institution that still stands, and preserved a line by concealing it. Not one of them held an office. Not one of them could have held one.

That is the subject of the conclusion.

CONCLUSION: Six Ways of Holding a Tradition

The claim this book has been making is that each of these women exercised a form of religious authority, and that not one of them held an office that would have conferred it.

That formulation needs unpacking now that the cases are in, because it can be read as a piece of rhetoric and it is meant as a description.

Consider what offices existed. In the community these women lived in, religious authority was formally located in identifiable positions: the prophethood, then the imamate, then in the ordinary institutional sense the leading of prayer, the giving of legal rulings, the judgeship, the governorship, the administration of endowments. Every one of those was closed to them, and closed in a way that was not seriously contested at the time by anyone including themselves. None of the six is recorded as having sought an office or complained of being excluded from one.

One clarification, since the phrase will otherwise be misread. To say that Fatima (SA) held no office is not to say she held no station. Shia doctrine affirms of her a protection from sin and error, as Chapter 5 sets out, and places her among the fourteen. That is a station and it is the highest the tradition recognizes short of prophethood. It is not an office, because an office is a position with functions attached that somebody appoints you to and could appoint another to instead. Nobody could have been appointed in her place. The two things are different and this book is talking about the second.

And yet the tradition cannot be described without them. That is not a devotional statement. It is an observation about what happened.

Six forms

The forms differ, and the differences are the substance of this book.

Fatima (SA) exercised argumentative authority. She constructed a legal case, delivered it in the highest available public register, in the mosque, to the men who held power, and it was preserved by both traditions and copied into Baghdad anthologies two centuries later. She did not win. What she established was that the argument could be made and would be remembered, and the argument has outlived every institution that heard it.

Zaynab (SA) exercised testimonial authority. She survived deliberately, having been asked to, and then narrated an event twice in public under conditions where narration was the only instrument she had. She did it, as Chapter 8 sets out, on behalf of an Imam who was present and prevented from speaking, which makes it a more disciplined act than the freelance heroism it is often taken for. Karbala is a foundational event rather than a suppressed provincial revolt because a witness gave it a fixed public meaning in the two cities that mattered, before the state understood what was happening.

Umm Kulthum (SA) exercised nothing that we can recover, and her chapter is in this book precisely because of that. She is what the record does to a woman when nobody is collecting. What we know of her is a marriage that generated a library and a life that generated nothing, and the honest response to her is not to invent a compensating narrative but to say clearly that this happened and to notice how.

Sukayna (SA) exercised cultural authority. Her judgement on poetry was sought and repeated in a society where poetry was the primary instrument of reputation, and she held that position for decades in the city where her family had been destroyed. She also demonstrated the thing the tradition has found hardest to accommodate, which is that a person can survive an atrocity and then build a life, and that doing so is not disloyalty to the dead.

Fatima Masuma (SA) exercised institutional authority, all of it posthumous. She made one journey and died in a provincial town, and eleven centuries later that town holds the largest centre of Shia learning in the world, funded by a mechanism that grew from her grave and that made its scholars independent of the state. Nothing she did produced this. Where she stopped produced it.

And Narjis (SA) exercised custodial authority. On the account the tradition gives, she bore a child under surveillance, in a household being searched, whose

existence was denied by his own uncle and investigated by the state, and the child was not found. Whether the woman held under guard for two years on a false claim of pregnancy was her cannot be established. Somebody did it, and it worked.

What they have in common, which is not conduct

Set those six alongside each other and the first thing to notice is that they do not describe a way of behaving.

One argued in public and one is remembered for a marriage. One presided over a literary salon for fifty years and one never married at all. One was the daughter of a prophet and one was a slave in a household. One instructed that her grave be hidden and one has three graves and a fourth possibility. They lived across two and a half centuries, in Arabia, Iraq, Syria and Iran, in circumstances so different that a rule covering all of them would have to be empty.

What is common is not conduct. It is a relationship to a claim.

In each case something was being demanded, and in each case it was not surrendered. Fatima (SA) would not concede the claim. Zaynab (SA) would not concede the meaning of a defeat. Sukayna (SA) would not concede the rest of her life to the people who had taken her family. The community around Masuma (SA) would not concede a grave to obscurity. Narjis (SA), on the tradition's account, would not concede a child.

That is what these six have instead of an office. Not a manner, not a costume, not a fixed way of occupying a room. A refusal, exercised in whatever medium was to hand: a sermon, a court appearance, a poetry judgement, a burial instruction, a lie told under guard.

The conscription

Which brings me to something I have been holding back for twenty-one chapters, and I will say it once and then stop.

These women are routinely conscripted into contemporary arguments about how Muslim women should live, and the conscription happens in both directions and is dishonest in both.

One version presents Fatima (SA) as the model of domestic seclusion: the woman who stayed at home, whose piety consisted in withdrawal, and whose example settles questions about women in public life. That reading does not survive Chapter 4. A woman who delivers a formal khutba in the mosque of Medina to the assembled leadership of the community, arguing law from five Qur'anic passages and challenging their competence to interpret scripture, is not an argument for seclusion. She is the most public thing in this book.

The other version turns Zaynab (SA) into a modern activist and reads the categories of contemporary politics back into a woman who would not have recognized them, or presents Sukayna (SA) as a liberationist figure because she stipulated terms in a marriage contract, when what she was doing was using an ordinary legal instrument that her tradition supplied and that her jurists had already worked out.

A third version takes the report in Chapter 2 about the division of labour in her household, the inside work to her and the outside work to him, and treats it as a rule about where women belong. It is a description of one house in Medina in the year 624, in a society where the outside work meant hauling water from a well, and it is reported alongside the mosque of Chapter 4 without anybody in the early tradition noticing a tension. A report can be perfectly sound and still be the wrong instrument for the argument someone wants to win with it.

All three moves have the same structure. Take one woman, extract one feature, and present her as having already settled a question that people are currently arguing about.

They did not settle it. Look at what is actually in this book. Rabab withdrew from the world entirely and died of grief within a year, and the tradition honours her. Sukayna (SA) lived a fully public life for five decades and the tradition, to its cost, forgot her. Masuma (SA) never married in a society where nearly everyone did. Fatima (SA) argued in a mosque and then instructed that her funeral be conducted in secret. Narjis (SA) entered the household as a slave.

These are not variations on a template. They are different answers, and the tradition has canonized women who gave incompatible ones.

That does not mean there are no norms, and I am not making an argument for indifference. It means the confidence with which these six are cited is not licensed by what they actually did. If a person wants to argue for a particular vision of how women should live, they should make the argument on its own terms, with

whatever evidence supports it. What they should not do is claim that the women of the Prophet's household have already made it for them, because those women disagreed with each other.

What this book could not do

An accounting of failures, since the book has spent a good deal of its length demanding that of others.

I could not recover Umm Kulthum (SA). Two chapters bear her name and both are largely about the literature that buried her. That is the honest outcome and it is still a failure, and I would rather name it than have a reader mistake the analysis for a life.

On the house in Medina I could not close the gap between what the other tradition concedes in its own books and what the Imams (AS) transmitted, using historical method alone. Chapter 5 says where this book stands and why, and it stands with the tradition. But the join is made by testimony rather than by inference, and a reader who wants the second kind of certainty will not find it there, because it does not exist.

I could not tell you what any of these women felt. The material does not contain interiority and I declined to supply it. This makes the book drier than a reader might want, and I think the alternative is worse.

And I could not escape my own position, which Chapter 12 discusses and which the reader has presumably been factoring in throughout.

And I did not settle the doctrinal disputes between the two traditions, which some readers will have wanted. This book states where it stands on them, in Chapter 3, in the two places where Chapter 5 takes a position, and in Chapter 11, and it stands with its own tradition in each case. What it does not do is claim to have proved those positions by the methods used everywhere else in it, because they do not rest on those methods and never did.

What the book has built instead is a floor: the part of the case for these six women that stands up without any appeal to the authority of the Imams (AS). The floor is a good deal higher than the tradition's critics allow, and constructing it was worth doing, particularly for readers who have to defend this material in rooms where that authority carries no weight. But a floor is what it is, and the house was already standing. The tradition's account of these women rests on the Qur'an,

on the Prophet (PBUH), and on the teaching of the Imams (AS), and it stands exactly where it stood before I began.

Half the house

One last thing, about the premise itself.

There is a reasonable objection to a book like this, which is that assembling six women into a separate volume is a way of setting them aside, and that the household of the Prophet should be written about whole. I have some sympathy with it. A chapter on Zaynab (SA) inside a history of Karbala would arguably serve her better than a part of a book about women.

My answer is that this book exists because the alternative has been tried for fourteen centuries and produced the situation described in these pages. Umm Kulthum (SA) reduced to a marriage. Sukayna (SA) replaced by a child. Zaynab (SA) present in the tradition for eight weeks of a fifty-seven year life. Narjis (SA) with half a dozen names and no grave. Fatima (SA) the exception, and even she is more often invoked than read.

These are not small figures who were reasonably passed over. One of them is the Prophet's only surviving child. One of them is the reason Karbala is remembered. One of them is the reason Qom is Qom. They were passed over anyway, and a separate book is a rough instrument for a problem that a better tradition of writing would not have created.

What they were doing

This story begins with a woman being buried at night in an unmarked grave, on her own instruction, so that a community would have to notice her absence forever.

It arrives, two hundred and fifty years later, at a woman whose name the tradition records half a dozen times over and cannot settle, concealing a child so successfully that he has not been located since.

In between: a sermon in a mosque, an indictment in a court, a body laid across a sick young man, a salon in Medina, a grave in Qom that built a city.

None of them held an office. Most of them lost. Between them they carried a

tradition across the period in which it could most easily have disappeared, and they did it by argument, by testimony, by survival, by presence, and by refusal.

That is what the daughters of revelation were doing, and it is a good deal more interesting than what they are usually said to have been doing, which is waiting.

APPENDIX A: Chronology

Dates before the Hijra are given in the Common Era only. Dates afterwards are given in the Hijri year with an approximate Common Era equivalent, since the two calendars do not align and a Hijri year normally spans parts of two Common Era years. Where a date is disputed, the entry says so.

Before the Hijra

c. 570 CE Birth of Muhammad (PBUH) in Mecca.

c. 595 CE Marriage of Muhammad (PBUH) and Khadija (SA), on her initiative. She had employed him on a trading journey to Syria; the sources differ on her age.

c. 605 CE Rebuilding of the Kaaba. Some Sunni chronologies place the birth of Fatima (SA) around this time.

c. 610 CE The first revelation. Khadija (SA) is the first to believe, reasons from her husband's conduct to the authenticity of the experience, and takes him to her cousin Waraqa. Her wealth funds the mission from this point.

c. 615 CE Shia chronologies generally place the birth of Fatima (SA) in the fifth year after the first revelation.

c. 616 CE The Quraysh boycott of the Banu Hashim begins. The clan withdraws to the ravine.

c. 619 CE The boycott ends. Deaths of Khadija (SA), aged around sixty-five, and of Abu Talib. She is buried at al-Hajun outside Mecca, in the cemetery later called al-Mualla. The Year of Sorrow. The failed journey to Taif.

The Medinan period and the first fitna

1 AH / 622 The Hijra. Fatima (SA) travels north separately, escorted by Ali (AS).

2 AH / 624 Badr. Marriage of Fatima (SA) and Ali (AS).

3 AH / 625 Uhud. Birth of al-Hasan (AS).

4 AH / 626 Birth of al-Husayn (AS).

5 to 6 AH / 627 Birth of Zaynab (SA). Birth of Umm Kulthum (SA) follows within a few years.

7 AH / 628 Khaybar taken by force. Fadak comes to terms without fighting and passes to the Prophet's disposal as fay.

8 AH / 630 Conquest of Mecca. The pardoned Meccans become known as the freed ones.

10 AH / 632 The Farewell Pilgrimage. The event at Ghadir Khumm.

11 AH / 632 Death of the Prophet (PBUH). The gathering at Saqifa. The events at the house of Fatima (SA), when an armed party came to compel allegiance; the Shia tradition holds that the door was forced, that she was injured, and that she ost the son already named Muhsin. See Chapter 5. The Fadak dispute and the ermon in the mosque. Death of Fatima (SA), between forty and ninety-five days after her father, and her burial at night in an unmarked grave.

13 AH / 634 Death of Abu Bakr.

17 AH / 638 The date given in the Sunni reports for a marriage of Umm Kulthum (SA) to Umar ibn al-Khattab. The reports are held unsound in the majority Shia position, and the classical Shia material describes any such episode as a seizure rather than a union. See Chapter 11.

23 AH / 644 Assassination of Umar.

35 AH / 656 Killing of Uthman.

36 AH / 656 Ali (AS) becomes caliph and moves the capital to Kufa. The Battle of the Camel.

37 AH / 657 Siffin and the arbitration.

38 AH / 658 Nahrawan. The Kharijites are destroyed.

40 AH / 661 Assassination of Ali (AS) in the mosque of Kufa. His grave is concealed for over a century.

41 AH / 661 Al-Hasan (AS) makes terms with Muawiya. The family returns to Medina.

c. 47 AH / 667 Approximate birth of Sukayna (SA). The date is uncertain; see Chapter 14.

c. 50 AH / 670 Death of al-Hasan (AS). His funeral is prevented from reaching the Prophet's grave and he is buried at al-Baqi.

Karbala and its aftermath

60 AH / 680 Death of Muawiya. Yazid demands allegiance. Al-Husayn (AS) leaves Medina for Mecca.

61 AH / 680 Second of Muharram: arrival at Karbala. Seventh: the water is cut off. Tenth: the killing. Eleventh: the captives are marched out. Kufa, then Damascus.

c. 62 AH / 682 Commonly given date for the death of Zaynab (SA). Place disputed; see Chapter 9. Death of al-Rabab within about a year of Karbala.

63 AH / 683 Medina revolts. The battle of the Harra and the sacking of the city.

64 AH / 683 Siege of Mecca. Death of Yazid.

65 AH / 685 The Tawwabun march out of Kufa and are destroyed.

66 AH / 686 Al-Mukhtar takes Kufa and begins hunting the men of Karbala.

67 AH / 686 Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad is killed in battle.

72 AH / 691 Musab ibn al-Zubayr, husband of Sukayna (SA), is killed in Iraq.

73 AH / 692 Abd Allah ibn al-Zubayr is killed at Mecca. The second civil war ends.

c. 80 AH / 699 Death of Abd Allah ibn Jafar, husband of Zaynab (SA), some twenty years after her.

94 AH / 713 Death of Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS). In the years following, the Ashari

clan migrate from Kufa and settle Qom.

114 AH / 733 Death of Muhammad al-Baqir (AS).

117 AH / 735 Death of Sukayna (SA) in Medina, on the fifth of Rabi al-Awwal by most accounts, and burial at al-Baqi. A minority of reports give a later date.

The later Imams, Qom and the occultation

148 AH / 765 Death of Jafar al-Sadiq (AS).

173 AH / 790 Birth of Fatima Masuma (SA) in Medina, on the first of Dhu al-Qada by the later accounts.

183 AH / 799 Death of Musa al-Kazim (AS) in Abbasid custody in Baghdad.

201 AH / 816 Al-Mamun names Ali al-Rida (AS) heir apparent at Marv. Fatima Masuma (SA) leaves Medina, is halted at Saveh, turns to Qom, and dies there seventeen days after her arrival, aged twenty-eight. The day is variously given as the tenth or twelfth of Rabi al-Thani. Burial at Babilan on land given by Musa ibn Khazraj al-Ashari.

203 AH / 818 Death of Ali al-Rida (AS) at Tus. Mashhad grows around the grave.

220 AH / 835 Death of Muhammad al-Jawad (AS).

254 AH / 868 Death of Ali al-Hadi (AS) at Samarra.

255 AH / 869 Birth of the twelfth Imam at Samarra, on the account transmitted from Hakima bint Muhammad al-Jawad.

c. 256 AH / 870 Zaynab, daughter of Muhammad al-Jawad (AS), raises the first dome over the grave at Qom.

260 AH / 874 Death of al-Hasan al-Askari (AS). The succession is disputed by his brother Jafar. The household is searched and the estate litigated. The minor occultation begins, conducted through four successive agents.

329 AH / 941 Death of the fourth agent. The major occultation begins. Death of al-Kulayni in the same period.

Afterwards

c. 378 AH / 988 Compilation of the Tarikh-i Qom, the principal source for Chapters 16 and 17.

381 AH / 991 Death of Ibn Babawayh al-Saduq at Rayy. His Kamal al-Din preserves the narrative of Chapter 19.

1218 AH / 1803 The dome at Qom is gilded under Fath Ali Shah.

1341 AH / 1922 Shaykh Abd al-Karim Hairi Yazdi establishes the seminary at Qom.

1344 AH / 1926 Demolition of the monuments over the graves at al-Baqi in Medina.

APPENDIX B: Genealogy

These tables give only the relationships this book depends on. They are not complete family trees, and they follow the majority reports where the sources disagree. Points of dispute are marked. Chapter 10 explains why apparently simple questions about who was whose daughter are harder than they look.

Table 1: The Prophet's household

Muhammad (PBUH), d. 11 AH

married Khadija (SA), d. c. 619 CE

Zaynab

Ruqayya

Umm Kulthum, married Uthman ibn Affan

Fatima (SA), d. 11 AH

A minority Shia view holds the elder three to have been raised in the house rather than born to Khadija (SA). The evidence is thin and the majority position across both traditions is as given.

Table 2: Fatima (SA) and Ali (AS)

Fatima (SA) married Ali ibn Abi Talib (AS), d. 40 AH

al-Hasan (AS), d. c. 50 AH, the second Imam

al-Husayn (AS), d. 61 AH, the third Imam

Zaynab (SA), d. c. 62 AH

Umm Kulthum (SA), most probably named Zaynab al-Sughra

Muhsin, who died in infancy. He appears in the genealogical literature of both traditions; only the Shia sources give a cause, and the Shia tradition holds that he was lost as a result of what was done at the door. See Chapter 5.

Ali (AS) had further children by other wives. The genealogical lists include two more women of the household carrying the kunya Umm Kulthum, described as the middle and the younger, so that three or four women in one family answer to the same designation. See Chapter 10.

Table 3: The generation of Karbala

Zaynab (SA) married Abd Allah ibn Jafar ibn Abi Talib, d. c. 80 AH

Awn, killed at Karbala, 61 AH

Muhammad, killed at Karbala, 61 AH

Ali, and further children

Jmm Kulthum (SA)

a marriage to Umar ibn al-Khattab, d. 23 AH, is reported in the Sunni sources. The reports are held unsound in the majority Shia position; see Chapter 11.

Zayd, called the elder, reported in the same body of material, killed as a young man by a stone thrown while he was trying to separate men who were fighting

later marriages reported within the family of Jafar ibn Abi Talib

al-Husayn (AS), killed at Karbala, 61 AH

by al-Rabab bint Imru al-Qays al-Kalbi, d. c. 62 AH

Sukayna (SA), given name Amina, d. 117 AH

Abd Allah, an infant, killed at Karbala

by other wives

Ali al-Akbar, killed at Karbala

Ali ibn al-Husayn (AS), d. 94 AH, the fourth Imam

Fatima, and daughters variously named in the lists

Some genealogies also list a daughter named Ruqayya. The Damascus narrative discussed in Chapter 13 attaches to that name and to Sakina interchangeably.

Sukayna (SA)

married Musab ibn al-Zubayr, killed 72 AH

further marriages reported into prominent Medinan families; the order and number differ between the sources

Table 4: The line of the Imams, and the mothers

This table is given because the maternal line matters to the argument of Chapter 20. From the ninth Imam onward the mothers were women who entered the household through purchase or gift, which is the ordinary and documented pattern of the line and is not regarded as a difficulty within the tradition.

4. Ali ibn al-Husayn, Zayn al-Abidin (AS), d. 94 AH

5. Muhammad al-Baqir (AS), d. 114 AH

6. Jafar al-Sadiq (AS), d. 148 AH

7. Musa al-Kazim (AS), d. 183 AH, in Abbasid custody

Ali al-Rida (AS), the eighth Imam

Fatima Masuma (SA), b. 173 AH, d. 201 AH at Qom

a number of further daughters, of whom several are reported not to have married

8. Ali al-Rida (AS), d. 203 AH at Tus

9. Muhammad al-Jawad (AS), d. 220 AH

mother a slave woman of the household, reported to be of Nubian origin

Zaynab, who raised the first dome over the grave at Qom

Hakima, the witness to the birth in 255 AH

10. Ali al-Hadi (AS), d. 254 AH at Samarra

mother a slave woman, described as North African

11. al-Hasan al-Askari (AS), d. 260 AH at Samarra

mother a slave woman of the household

Jafar, who disputed the succession and denied that a son existed

12. b. 255 AH at Samarra

mother named variously as Narjis, Sayqal, Susan, Rayhana, Maryam, Khamt and, in the narrative of Chapter 19, Malika. See Chapter 20.

Table 5: The house of the freed ones

Given because the taunt in Chapter 8 depends on it.

Abu Sufyan, of the Umayyad clan of Quraysh, an opponent of the Prophet PBUH) until the conquest of Mecca in 8 AH, when he was among those pardoned

Muawiya, d. 60 AH, first Umayyad caliph

Yazid, d. 64 AH, in whose court Zaynab (SA) spoke

When Zaynab (SA) addressed Yazid as the son of the freed ones, she was reminding a court organized on genealogical precedence that his family had entered Islam as pardoned enemies of the man whose descendants stood before him in ropes.

APPENDIX C: Principal Sources

What follows is not a bibliography. It is a short guide to the works this book leans on most heavily, with a note on what each is good for and where it should be handled carefully. Death dates are Hijri. Readers who want to check a claim in the main text will find the relevant genre described in Chapter 1 and the method for weighing it in Chapter 12.

Sunni hadith collections

al-Bukhari, d. 256 The Sahih. The most rigorously assembled Sunni collection. Used in this book chiefly for material that inconveniences the tradition preserving it: the estrangement of Fatima (SA), the night burial, the reports of the Prophet's regard for his daughter, the tasbih. Its authority in Sunni scholarship is very high and it is not a devotional Shia source, which is precisely why several arguments here rest on it.

Muslim, d. 261 The Sahih. Comparable standing. Carries the mubahala account and a version of the report of the cloak.

The Sunan works Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi and others, third century. Slightly more permissive standards. Source for the report that the Prophet (PBUH) stood for his daughter and seated her in his place.

Shia collections and early texts

Sulaym ibn Qays Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays. The earliest Shia stratum for the events of Chapter 5, and a text whose transmission has been argued over within Shia scholarship since the classical period. It should be cited as what it is: early, internal,

and contested at its edges rather than at its core.

al-Kulayni, d. 329 Al-Kafi. The earliest of the four foundational collections and the closest to the events of Part Six. Contains the birth account transmitted from Hakima without the Byzantine narrative, which is the basis of the layering argument in Chapter 20. Also carries the classical reports on the episode discussed in Chapter 11, which describe it as a seizure rather than a union.

Ibn Babawayh al-Saduq, d. 381 Man la yahduruhu al-faqih, and for this book more importantly Kamal al-Din, written to address the length of the occultation. Kamal al-Din is the source of the narrative told in full in Chapter 19. Al-Saduq was a Qomi and his work is central to Parts Five and Six.

al-Tusi, d. 460 Al-Tahdhib and al-Istibsar, and the Kitab al-Ghayba. The legal works contain the incidental material on waiting periods discussed in Chapter 11, which is the strongest single item running against this book's conclusion there and is weighed accordingly.

al-Mufid, d. 413 Al-Irshad, and the polemical and theological works. The most rigorous mind in the tradition's early history. He gives the name of the twelfth Imam's mother without the elaborate origin story, and his examination of the reports discussed in Chapter 11 established the position that the majority of Shia scholarship has held ever since.

Historical writing

Ibn Sad, d. 230 Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir. The great compilation of generations. Genealogical and biographical data on almost everyone in Parts One to Four.

al-Baladhuri, d. 279 Ansab al-Ashraf. A genealogical history that preserves a good deal of politically awkward material. Contains a report of the threat at the door used in Chapter 5. Together with the parallel material in al-Tabari and Ibn Abi Shayba, it is the external corroboration on which that chapter's second section rests.

al-Tabari, d. 310 Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk. The indispensable chronicle. For Karbala it transmits the material of Abu Mikhnaf, a Kufan of the second century, much of it dependent on Hamid ibn Muslim, who was with the opposing army. He also carries a version of the confrontation at the house discussed in Chapter 5, in which al-Zubayr is disarmed. Al-Tabari states plainly that he reports what was transmitted rather than vouching for it, and readers should take him at his word.

Literary and biographical

Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur, d. 280 Balaghat al-Nisa, surviving as part of a larger work on prose and verse. An anthology of women's eloquence compiled in Baghdad as literature rather than devotion, and described as the first book in Arabic devoted wholly to women. It preserves the Fadakiyya of Chapter 4, in two versions, and both of Zaynab's (SA) sermons in Chapter 8. Its non-devotional character and its early date are its principal evidential value, and it is the single most important source in this book.

al-Isfahani, d. 356 Kitab al-Aghani, and Maqatil al-Talibiyyin. The Book of Songs is the fullest source for Sukayna (SA) and therefore for the whole of Part Four. It is not rigorous, it belongs to the adab genre, and its anecdotes have been improved in transmission. It is also the only place a woman of this family appears as a person with opinions and a social life, and the reliability objection is examined at length in Chapter 15.

al-Zubayr ibn Bakkar, d. 256 Genealogist of Quraysh and a Medinan. A significant proportion of the reports discussed in Chapter 11 converge on him, which is the basis of the common-source objection set out there.

Maqtal and local history

Tarikh-i Qom, late fourth century A local history of the town, compiled roughly a hundred and seventy years after the events of Chapter 16. Civic rather than devotional in interest. By the standards of everything else in this book it is close to its subject, and it is the anchor for Part Five.

al-Tabarsi, sixth century Al-Ihtijaj. Contains fuller texts of both the Fadakiyya and the Damascus sermon. Late, and should be read as such, though both can be checked against the third-century anthology, which is what Chapter 8 does.

Ibn Tawus, d. 664 Al-Luhuf. A devotional maqtal of great influence and considerable literary power. Late relative to the events, and the growth of detail between the early material and this work is itself a finding, as Chapter 12 notes.

Imad al-Din al-Tabari, seventh century Kamil-i Baha'i, in Persian, completed in the 670s AH. The earliest work in which the narrative discussed in Chapter 13 appears in recognizable form, roughly six hundred years after Karbala. The child in it is unnamed and aged four. Its own cited source is a work by a Sunni author

which has not survived.

Later compilation

al-Majlisi, d. 1110 Bihar al-Anwar. An encyclopedic gathering of Shia tradition, indispensable and not a filter. Al-Majlisi collected what he could find, including material that earlier and more sceptical scholars had passed over. A report's presence here establishes that it existed in the tradition, not that it was accepted by it. Readers who encounter a claim cited only to Bihar should treat the citation as a starting point rather than a conclusion.

Modern scholarship

Jafar Murtada al-Amili, d. 1441 The most thorough modern treatment of the reports discussed in Chapter 11, arguing that they do not stand. It represents the majority position of contemporary Shia scholarship and the argument is followed there.

Western and academic work A body of critical scholarship on early Shia history exists in English, French and German and has been consulted. This book does not engage with it in the text, on the grounds that a general reader is better served by argument than by a survey of who has said what, but readers who want to pursue any of these questions further will find that the source-critical debates rehearsed here are conducted at greater length and with more apparatus in that literature.

APPENDIX D: Shrines and Ziyarat

This appendix lists where each of the six women is held to be buried, and marks plainly which identifications are secure and which are not. It is included because a reader who intends to visit any of these places is entitled to know what is known, and because the pattern across the six is itself one of the findings of this book. Chapter 9 sets out how shrines are made, and Chapter 12 explains why an uncertain identification does not invalidate what happens at a site.

Fatima al-Zahra (SA)

Status No known grave. Concealed by her own instruction.

Candidates Three, all in Medina: within her own house, later absorbed into the expanded mosque of the Prophet; in the cemetery of al-Baqi; or in the space between the Prophet's grave and his pulpit.

Practice Pilgrims are conventionally advised to give the salutation at all three, which is an elegant solution and also an admission. The tradition has preserved the uncertainty rather than resolving it, and Chapter 5 argues that this is a form of respect for the instruction she left.

Zaynab bint Ali (SA)

Status Contested. Three competing claims.

Rawiya, Damascus The largest and most visited. Substantially rebuilt in the modern period. The associated narrative depends on an exile from Medina or on family land in Syria, and cannot be traced anywhere near the first century. Some

scholars have proposed that the occupant is Umm Kulthum (SA) rather than her sister, which would resolve two problems at once and is discussed below.

Cairo A major centre of Egyptian popular devotion with an annual festival. The associated narrative has her travelling to Egypt after Karbala. Also medieval in origin. The devotion at this site is overwhelmingly Sunni.

al-Baqi, Medina The least visited and, in this book's assessment, the most probable. It requires no journey and no supporting narrative. If correct, the grave has been unmarked since 1926.

Umm Kulthum bint Ali (SA)

Status Uncertain, and complicated by the naming problem of Chapter 10.

Medina The reports of her death, including the account of the joint funeral with her son Zayd, point to burial at al-Baqi. Note that several accounts place her death before 61 AH, which would remove her from Karbala altogether.

Damascus The tomb at Rawiya has been identified by some scholars as hers rather than her sister's. This reading has the merit of explaining how a woman of the family came to be buried in Syria without requiring the exile narrative, and readers should be aware that the two entries in this appendix may describe one grave.

Sukayna bint al-Husayn (SA)

Status Reported burial in Medina, at al-Baqi, following her death there in 117 AH. Unmarked since 1926.

Damascus, Bab al-Saghir A tomb in the old cemetery is identified locally with her. This does not fit an adult death in Medina fifty-six years after Karbala and is best understood as another instance of the collapse described in Chapter 13.

Sayyida Ruqayya, Damascus The shrine near the Umayyad Mosque, associated with the child of the mourning narrative. The earliest description of a tomb at this site under that identification dates from the tenth Islamic century; it was rebuilt under Iranian patronage in the early twentieth and again more extensively later. Chapter 13 sets out the source position in full and argues that the devotional practice here is serious and should not be defended as documentary history. The

location itself carries a claim: a grieving child of the Prophet's family, placed a few hundred metres from the mosque of the dynasty that killed her father.

Fatima Masuma (SA)

Status Secure. The only uncontested grave of the six.

Qom Buried at Babilan on land given by Musa ibn Khazraj al-Ashari in 201 AH. A reed canopy, then a brick dome raised around 256 AH by Zaynab, daughter of the ninth Imam. Continuously maintained since, with successive expansions under the Buyids, Ilkhanids, Safavids and Qajars. The dome was gilded in the early nineteenth century.

Ziyarat She is the only one of the six with a ziyarat text tied to a known grave and attributed to an Imam, transmitted from al-Rida (AS). Chapter 18 reads it and notes that its structure is an argument in itself: it opens with the affirmation of divine oneness, places her within a chain rather than treating her as a source, and asks her to intercede, which is to say to ask.

Narjis

Status No identified grave and no shrine of her own.

Samarra A tradition associates her burial with the precinct of the al-Askari shrine, where her husband and his father lie, but identifies no location within it. The sources do not agree on when she died: al-Saduq places her death before her husband's, while al-Najashi reports her alive after 260 AH and in hiding.

Note She is the only one of the six for whom pilgrims have nowhere in particular to stand. Supplications for her are reported, but they are not tied to a place. Chapter 21 discusses what that absence completes.

A note on al-Baqi

Three of the six women in this book were most probably buried in the cemetery of al-Baqi in Medina, and a fourth may have been. The monuments over the graves there were demolished in 1926, and the cemetery today is open ground. The same campaign removed the monument over the grave of Khadija (SA) at al-Mualla in Mecca, which is why that grave appears in this appendix although she is not one

of the six.

The theological argument behind that decision is set out fairly in Chapter 18, along with the case against it, and this appendix is not the place to reopen either. What belongs here is the practical consequence for a reader planning a visit: at al-Baqi there are no markers, no way to identify an individual grave, and no certainty about who is where. Pilgrims give the salutation to the cemetery as a whole.

It is worth registering what that means for this book. Of the six women in these pages, one instructed that she be unlocatable and remains so, three are probably in a cemetery where nothing is marked, one lies under a gold dome that a city grew around, and one has vanished entirely.

That distribution is not a coincidence. It is the history of a minority, written in the location of its graves.

GLOSSARY: Terms

Transliteration is without diacritical marks throughout. Some of these words appear in the main text; others do not, because the book uses the English rather than the Arabic, and they are given here because a reader who goes further into this literature will meet them at once. Definitions are as the terms are used in this field rather than in their fullest technical range. Where a word carries a different sense in Sunni and Shia usage, the entry says so.

A to G

adab The literary and courtly writing of the classical Arabic tradition: anthologies, poetry criticism, refined anecdote. Not a rigorous genre, and sometimes the only place a woman appears as a person rather than as a transmitter.

Ahl al-Bayt The People of the House: the family of the Prophet (PBUH). Who exactly is included is one of the substantive disagreements between the traditions and is discussed in Chapter 5.

akhbar Reports, particularly historical ones, as distinct from hadith in the strict sense. Held to looser evidential standards, deliberately.

Ansar The Helpers: the Medinans who received the Prophet (PBUH) and the Meccan emigrants after the Hijra. Addressed directly in the closing section of the sermon in Chapter 4.

Aqila A title given to Zaynab (SA), carrying the sense of sound judgement rather than ornament.

bayah The oath of allegiance to a ruler. Its demand and its withholding drive the events of Chapters 5 and 6.

fay Property that comes into Muslim hands without fighting, and which the

Qur'an assigns to the disposal of God and His Messenger rather than dividing among an army. The legal category that made Fadak givable. See Chapter 3.

fitna Civil strife within the community. The first fitna follows the killing of Uthman; the second follows the death of Yazid.

ghanima Spoils taken by force in war, divided by a fixed Qur'anic formula. Contrasted with fay.

ghayba The occultation: the doctrine that the twelfth Imam is alive, present in the world, and hidden. The minor occultation runs from 260 to 329 AH, conducted through four agents; the major occultation continues.

H to M

hadith A report of the words or conduct of the Prophet (PBUH), and in Shia usage of the Imams (AS) also. The collections and their standing are set out in Chapter 1.

hawza A seminary of Shia religious learning. The hawza at Qom, established in its modern form in 1922, is the subject of Chapter 17.

Hijra The migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, and the start of the Islamic calendar. Dates marked AH are counted from it.

Imam In Shia usage, one of the twelve divinely designated successors to the Prophet (PBUH), holding an office with defined attributes. Not to be confused with the general Sunni usage, where the word can mean a prayer leader or an eminent scholar.

isma Protection from sin and error, affirmed in Shia doctrine of the Prophet (PBUH), of Fatima (SA) and of the twelve Imams (AS), the fourteen. The title Masuma comes from the same root and is given to Fatima Masuma (SA) on the authority of Ali al-Rida (AS); it does not place her among the fourteen, and Chapter 18 sets out what the schools do and do not take it to assert.

isnad The chain of transmitters attached to a report, and the instrument by which its reliability is assessed. What it can and cannot establish is discussed in Chapter 1.

khums A fifth part, owed as a religious payment. In Shia law it is owed to

the qualified scholar rather than to any government, which has the structural consequence described in Chapter 17.

khutba A formal sermon with a defined shape: praise, testimony, blessings, body, close. The vehicle of the Friday assembly. The choice of this form is the first significant move Fatima (SA) makes in Chapter 4.

kunya A teknonym, of the form Abu or Umm followed by a name. Often the name a person is actually known by. It requires no corresponding child and is not exclusive, which is the root of the difficulty in Chapter 10.

majlis A gathering, and specifically a mourning assembly at which the events of Karbala are recited. Plural majalis.

maqtal The literature of a killing, and specifically the body of narrative devoted to Karbala. It grows in detail over the centuries, which is itself a finding.

marja A senior scholar whose rulings are followed by lay Shia Muslims. Short for marja al-taqlid, a source of emulation.

mubahala The confrontation with the Christian delegation of Najran, in which the Qur'an instructs the Prophet (PBUH) to bring his sons, his women and himself. He brought Ali (AS), Fatima (SA), al-Hasan (AS) and al-Husayn (AS).

Muhajirun The Emigrants: the Meccan Muslims who made the Hijra.

N to Z

nihla A gift. The category under which Fadak is claimed in the primary argument of Chapter 3, as distinct from inheritance.

Quraysh The tribe of Mecca, to which the Prophet (PBUH), the Banu Hashim and the Umayyads all belonged.

rijal The science of evaluating transmitters. Sunni and Shia versions exist and sometimes assess the same individual very differently.

sabr Usually rendered as patience, which misleads. It denotes holding a position under load rather than passive endurance, and Chapter 6 argues that this is the sense in which it applies to Zaynab (SA).

Saqifa The covered assembly place in Medina where the succession was settled in

the hours after the Prophet's death.

shafaa Intercession. Affirmed by both traditions and disputed as to whether it may be requested, and from whom. The subject of Chapter 18.

sira The biographical literature on the life of the Prophet (PBUH).

taqiyya The concealment of allegiance where disclosure would bring harm. Chapter 21 argues that it is the everyday form of a survival strategy the community practised from the beginning.

tasbih The formula of praise taught by the Prophet (PBUH) to his daughter in place of the servant she asked for, recited after each obligatory prayer and named after her. Attested in both canons.

tawassul Seeking a means of approach to God, including by asking another to pray on one's behalf. Distinguished from worship in the argument set out in Chapter 18.

tawhid The oneness of God. The subject of the opening movement of the sermon in Chapter 4 and of the opening of the ziyarat text in Chapter 18.

Tawwabun The Penitents: the Kufans who marched out in 65 AH to expiate their failure to come to al-Husayn (AS), and were destroyed.

umm walad A slave woman who has borne a child to her master, whose child is free and inherits fully, and whose own status is altered in consequence. The ordinary description of the mothers of the later Imams. See Chapter 20.

waqf A permanent endowment, legally protected and administered in perpetuity. The financial mechanism that turned a grave into a seminary, described in Chapter 17.

wasi A designated successor or executor. This is the word behind the narrative of Chapter 19, which applies one term both to Simon Peter in relation to Christ and, in Shia usage, to Ali (AS) in relation to the Prophet (PBUH). The parallel is the point of that narrative.

ziyarat A visitation to a grave, and the text recited there. Fatima Masuma (SA) is the only one of the six women in this book with a ziyarat text attributed to an Imam and tied to a known grave.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Works Drawn On

A word about apparatus. This book has no footnotes, and the decision was deliberate rather than lazy. It is written for readers who want to follow an argument rather than to verify a citation, and a page carrying three numbered notes for every paragraph would have changed the kind of book it is. Where a claim rests on a particular source, the main text names that source in the sentence that uses it, which is a slower method and a more honest one, since it obliges me to say in the open what I am relying on.

Readers who want to check something will find Appendix C more useful than this list, since it explains what each work is and where it should be handled carefully. What follows is a plain register of the works drawn on, arranged by tradition and genre. Editions vary widely and several of these texts circulate in multiple recensions, so references throughout are by author and work rather than by volume and page.

Qur'an

Qur'anic passages are referred to by content rather than by chapter and verse number in the main text, since the argument in each case turns on what the verse says rather than on its location. The passages most often drawn on are those concerning inheritance, the purification of the People of the House, the mubahala, intercession, the status of those killed in God's path, the property taken without fighting, and the woman who unravels her yarn.

Sunni collections and compilations

al-Bukhari al-Jami al-Sahih.

Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Sahih.

Abu Dawud al-Sunan.

al-Tirmidhi al-Sunan.

Malik ibn Anas al-Muwatta.

Ibn Sad Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kabir.

Ibn Abd al-Barr al-Istiab fi Marifat al-Ashab.

Ibn al-Athir Usd al-Ghaba fi Marifat al-Sahaba.

al-Nasai al-Sunan.

Ibn Abi Shayba al-Musannaf, one of the Sunni works carrying material on the events of Chapter 5.

al-Suyuti al-Durr al-Manthur.

Shia collections and compilations

Sulaym ibn Qays Kitab Sulaym ibn Qays, the earliest stratum of the material discussed in Chapter 5. Its transmission has been debated within Shia scholarship since the classical period.

al-Kulayni al-Kafi.

Ibn Babawayh al-Saduq Man la Yahduruhu al-Faqih; Kamal al-Din wa Tamam al-Nima; Ilal al-Sharai.

al-Mufid al-Irshad; al-Masail al-Sarawiyya.

al-Najashi Rijal, cited in Chapter 21 for the report that Narjis (SA) survived her husband and lived in concealment.

al-Sharif al-Murtada al-Shafi fi al-Imama.

al-Tusi Tahdhib al-Ahkam; al-Istibsar; Kitab al-Ghayba.

al-Tabarsi al-Ihtijaj.

Ibn Tawus al-Luhuf ala Qatla al-Tufuf.

Imad al-Din al-Tabari Kamil-i Bahai.

al-Majlisi Bihar al-Anwar.

Historical, genealogical and literary

Abu Mikhnaf Maqtal al-Husayn, surviving principally through al-Tabari.

Ibn Ishaq al-Sira, in the recension of Ibn Hisham.

al-Waqidi Kitab al-Maghazi.

Ibn Abi Tahir Tayfur Balaghat al-Nisa.

al-Baladhuri Ansab al-Ashraf.

al-Zubayr ibn Bakkar Jamharat Nasab Quraysh; al-Akhbar al-Muwaffaqiyyat.

al-Tabari Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk.

al-Masudi Muruj al-Dhahab.

Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani Kitab al-Aghani; Maqatil al-Talibiyyin.

al-Qummi Tarikh-i Qom.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid Sharh Nahj al-Balagha, which preserves substantial parts of al-Jawhari's lost Kitab al-Saqifa wa Fadak.

Attributed to Ibn Qutayba al-Imama wa al-Siyasa. The attribution is widely doubted; see Chapter 5.

Modern works

Jafar Murtada al-Amili The principal modern study of the reports discussed in Chapter 11, arguing that they do not stand. Followed there.

General A substantial body of modern academic scholarship on early Shia history, the formation of the hadith corpus, Umayyad Medina, the development of the occultation doctrine, and the history of Qom has informed this book without

being cited in the text. Readers who wish to pursue any of these questions further will find them treated at greater length and with fuller apparatus in that literature, and will find that several of the source-critical debates rehearsed here have been conducted there for a century.

A note on what is not here

There is no list of the devotional literature in Persian and Urdu on which the mourning tradition rests, and its absence should not be read as a judgement.

That literature is enormous, largely uncatalogued, substantially oral, and it is the reason most readers of this book know these women at all. It is not a body of historical sources and it does not claim to be, which is why it does not appear in a register of works consulted for evidence. Chapter 12 sets out at length why that distinction is not a demotion, and Chapter 13 argues that the tradition in question is doing serious work that historical criticism was never equipped to touch.

A book about how these women are remembered would have to be built almost entirely from that material. This one is chiefly about what can be established from the written record, which is a narrower and less moving undertaking, and the two need each other more than either usually admits.

About the Author

Dr. Saiyed Ali Al-Razavi holds a PhD in Management and has built a career that has taken him across the world, giving him a genuinely international vantage point on the questions he writes about. But his academic training in management sits alongside a separate, lifelong pursuit, one he came to entirely on his own terms.

For as long as he can remember, Dr. Al-Razavi has been a student of religion and philosophy, self-taught out of pure interest rather than formal instruction. That independent path has shaped how he writes: with the curiosity of someone who came to the subject by choice, not obligation, and the discipline of someone used to rigorous academic standards.

His work centres on Shia history, theology and the contemporary issues facing Shia communities today. He researches, writes and translates Shia works for a growing global audience of English-speaking readers, many of whom were raised without easy access to their own tradition in a language they're fully fluent in. That gap, between rich, centuries-old scholarship and the everyday reader trying to connect with it, is what drives his work.

Dr. Al-Razavi writes for people who want to understand their history and their faith without needing a seminary background to do it, translating complexity into something clear, honest and usable.

Also By the Author

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