Parallels between
Ḥusayn bin ‘Ali & John the Baptist

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Introduction:

The message of all prophets was essentially the same since it originates from a single source – the Almighty God. As such, similarities between the teachings and stances of the prophets shouldn't surprise anyone. The similarities became more pronounced when we look at the lives of the divine guides from the Abrahamic family. You will undoubtedly notice many similarities between the two branches of Prophet Abraham: the Ishmaelites (from Ismāʻīl) and the Israelites (from Isḥāq). This article will focus on the similarities between Imam Ḥusayn and John the Baptist (Prophet Yaḥya).[1]

The Birth of Prophet Yaḥya (John)

Yaḥya was born six years before the birth of ʻIsa (Jesus) to Prophet Zakariyya (Zachariah). He was born Jewish from the prophetic family of Bani Isra'il. His birth was special; his parents were old and didn't have any children.

When Maryam was born to ʻImrān, she was placed under the custody of Zakariyya, who kept her inside the Temple -- no one was allowed to see her but him. He soon realized that Maryam is a special child. This was further confirmed when he witnessed her receiving food sent from the heaven. Seeing Maryam over time, the desire for his own child was rekindled in his heart.

Excerpts from Surah Maryam

See the earlier section of Surah Maryam, chapter 19.[2]

> [2]*This is* an account of the mercy of your Lord upon His servant, Zakariyyah, [3]when he prayed to His Lord in a low voice. [4]He said:
>
> > "My Lord! my bones have become feeble, my hair has turned white, but I have never been disappointed, my Lord, in praying to You. [5]*Since I have no child of my own,* I fear that my cousins will inherit me after me;(3) *more so, since* my wife is barren. [6]Therefore, grant me from Thee an heir who shall inherit me and also inherit the house of Yaʻqūb; and, O my Lord, make him pleasant."
>
> [7]*Allāh* said, "O Zakariyyah! We give you good news of a boy whose name shall be Yaḥya—and We have not made his namesake before."
>
> [8]*When Zakariyyah heard this good news,* he said *in astonishment,* "My Lord, how can a son be born to me while my wife is barren and I have already reached the extreme of old age?!

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1 This article is based on three speeches given in December 2010 at Baitul Qaim Centre, New Jersey. Some derivatives from this theme have been omitted from this article since they were more suitable for a lecture format.

2 The translation is based on my forthcoming *The Qur'an: An Explanatory Translation.* The italics are explanatory remarks that I have added for easier understanding.

3 This statement of Prophet Zakariyyah clearly show that a prophet's family-members can inherit his estate. And, therefore, the statement attributed to our Prophet (s) by Abu Bakr that, "We the prophets don't not inherit; whatever we leave behind is charity," is nothing but a concocted statement to deny Fāṭimah (a) her share in the inheritance.

[9]*Allãh* said, "So shall it be." Your Lord said, "It is easy for me. *Do not you see that* I created you aforetime, when you were nothing?!"

After Yaḥya was born, Allãh included him among his most chosen servants. [12]*Allãh said,* "O Yaḥya! (1) Hold the Book with strength." and (2) We gave him wisdom while he was still a child, (3) [13]and a tenderness from Us (4) and purity. (5) He was God-fearing, (6) [14]devoted to his parents, (7) and he was not arrogant and intractable *to the people.*

[15]Therefore, (8) peace be upon him on the day he was born, (9) and the day he shall die, (10) and the day he shall be raised to life."

Parallels between Yaḥya and Ḥusayn

The below sections will cover various categories and sub-categories where Yaḥya and Ḥusayn share similar traits and events in their lives.

Similarities At Birth

By looking at the story of Yaḥya's birth in the Qur'ān and what we know in history about the birth of Imam Ḥusayn, we can see the following similarities:

1) Good Tidings upon Birth

Both Yaḥya and Ḥusayn's entrance into this world were met with good news of their births. For Yaḥya, this was in form of one of the earlier quoted verses: "O Zakariyyah! We give you good news of a boy whose name shall be Yaḥya."

In the case of Ḥusayn, the angel Jibra'īl descended and informed the Prophet: "O Muḥammad, verily Almighty Allah gives you good news of a child to be born to Fāṭimah."[4]

Of course, the good tiding for Yaḥya was accompanied by joy while the good tiding for Ḥusayn was accompanied by the sadness for the Prophet (s) since Jibrā'īl foretold him about his martyrdom in Karbala. (See *Musnad* of Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal)

2) Names given by Allah

They both were also given names by Allah. In case of Yaḥya, the above verses say: "…whose name shall be Yaḥya—and We have not made his namesake before."

In the case of Ḥusayn, the ḥadith continues, "and inform him, O Jibra'īl, that I have named him as al-Ḥusayn." Both these names were never used before for any prophet.

3) Authority in childhood

They both had authority in their childhood. For Yaḥya, the verse says: "We gave him wisdom while he was still a child."

And in regard to Ḥusayn, his authority in childhood can be seen in an event in which he becomes a witness to the Prophet's agreement for the tribe of Thaqīf in 8 AH. The document was dictated by the Prophet and written by Khālid bin Sa'īd. And it said, "This copy of the document has been

[4] Al-Kulayni, *al-Uṣūl min al-Kāfi,* vol. 1, p. 464.

witnessed by ʻAli bin Abī Ṭālib, Ḥasan bin ʻAli and Ḥusayn bin ʻAli…"[5] In the year 8 AH, the age of Ḥusayn was only four.

4) Character

Their exemplary character has been described in identical ways, mentioning their tenderness, purity, & always being God-consciousness. Regarding Prophet Yaḥya, these qualities were listed in the above-mentioned verses of Surah Maryam.

Imam Ḥusayn was also blessed with the qualities: He was known for his special devotion for prayer as witnessed in the famous Duʻā of ʻArafah and also in his request to the Yazidi forces to postpone the hostilities for the next day as he "loved to pray to his Lord at the night." He was part of the five individuals under the mantle when the verse of purity was revealed; and he was an embodiment of God consciousness.

5) Statement of peace upon them

Expressions of peace and blessings upon birth, death, and resurrection:

The verses quoted above also said, "…peace be upon him on the day he was born, and the day he shall die, and the day he shall be raised to life." An interesting point to note is that Allāh has quoted the same statement made by ʻIsa for himself in Surah Maryam, verse 33.

Observing the fact that there is a prayer for both prophets Yaḥya and ʻIsa, for their birthdays, deaths, and the day of resurrection, proves that remembering these days (of *milād* or *wafāt*) and praying on these days is not forbidden or *bidʻah*.[6]

For all three occasions, Allah talks about *"salām"* on those days. What does *"salām"* mean here? It means to wish or pray that that person would be free from any worry or concern that may occur on that day. Imam ʻAli ar-Riza (a) explains the ayat:

> "The most distressful time for a human being occurs in three situations: 1. the day he is born and comes from [the protective and familiar environment of] the womb of his mother and sees the [new, unfamiliar] world; 2. the day he dies and sees the next world and its people; 3. the day he will be resurrected and will see the judgement that he hadn't seen in this world. So Allah bestowed peace (salām) upon Yaḥya in these three situations and calmed his fear…"

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[5] See *aṭ-Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Saʻd and *as-Sīrah* of Ibn Hishām. Its worth mentioning that the Prophet (s) considered the 4 year

[6] An apparent caveat to this is that it doesn't enable Muslims to celebrate Christmas, Good Friday, or Easter Monday:
Christmas: ʻIsa was not born on the 25th of December. This was a Roman pagan celebration of their Sun god, and they wanted to keep it even after converting to Christianity. The Church 'Christianized' this celebration by changing it from the Sun god's birthday to the birthday of God's son. The description of Jesus' birth in the Bible indicates that it must have taken place in early fall season and not in the winter.
Good Friday/Easter Monday: The crucifixion of Jesus is not part of Islamic beliefs; therefore, Muslims don't commemorate his shahādat on Good Friday, nor do they celebrate his subsequent resurrection two days later on Easter. According to Islam, ʻIsa is still alive in occultation.
However, Muslims do believe that the day Jesus was born, the day he shall die (after joining Imam Mahdi at the end of time), and the day of resurrection, are all important days for which even Jesus prayed for peace upon himself.

As for Prophet Yaḥya, John the Baptist, his birthday as well as his day of martyrdom are important days on which Allāh blessed peace upon him.

Ḥusayn also became a shahīd for the sake of Allāh, in a situation more tragic than that of Yaḥya. Using the same principle that we see in the Qur'ān, we also can easily say: وَ السَّلام علی الحسین یَوْمَ وُلِدَ وَ یَوْمَ قتل وَ یَوْمَ یُبْعَثُ حَیًّا – Salutations to Ḥusayn on the day he was born, on the day he was killed, and the day he shall be raised back to life.

Similarities in Qualities:

Moving on to Sūrah Āl-e-ʻImrān, Allāh has described Prophet Yaḥya with 5 qualities. These qualities can be found in both Yaḥya and Ḥusayn. See the following verses (3:38-39):

> [38]Then Zakariyyah prayed to his Lord, saying, "My Lord! Grant me from Thee a good offspring. You surely hear all prayers."
>
> [39]Then the angels said to him while he was praying in the Sanctuary, "Allāh gives you the good news of *a son named* Yaḥya *who will be* (1) the verifier of 'a word of Allāh' (i.e., 'Isa), (2) the honourable, (3) the chaste and (4) a prophet from (5) among the good ones."

1) Both were 'Verifiers'

Yaḥya was 'the verifier' who came to prepare the people for advent of 'Isa. And Ḥusayn was the verifier of the Prophet of Islam by the way of his sacrifice. The Prophet himself had said: "Ḥusayn is from me and I am from Ḥusayn."

The truth of the Prophet's message only survived by the sacrifice of Ḥusayn. After the tragedy of Karbala, an Umayyid in Medina taunted Imam 'Ali Zaynu 'l-'Ābidīn by asking, "Who is the victorious now?" The Imam responded, "When the time of ṣalāt come and you hear the call for prayer, then you will know who is the victorious." In other words, in the call of the prayer, every day, my grandfather's name is announced and not of your Umayyid ancestors!

2) Both were 'Sayyid'

Yaḥya was 'sayyid, the honourable' while Ḥusayn is 'sayyid, the chief of the youths of Paradise." In the hereafter, Ḥusayn will even be the 'sayyid' of Prophet Yaḥya!

3) Both were 'Guiders'

Yaḥya was a 'nabi' (a 'prophet' who receives the message of Allāh) and becomes the source of guidance for the people. Ḥusayn was an Imām who faithfully preserved the message of Allāh (sent to Prophet Muḥammad) and conveyed it to people. Their function was the same: to guide the people to Allah.

4) Both were 'Ṣāliḥiyn'

Yaḥya was "from the ṣāliḥiyn, the good-doers" who protested against the evil-deeds of the ruler of his time. See the story from the Bible:

He pointed out the sins of the king, Herod Antipas, son of Herod the Great (Matthew 14:3-4):

> [3]Now it was Herod who had arrested John, chained him up and put him in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife. [4]For John had told him, 'It is against the Law for you to have her.'

Herod had married his brother Philip's wife, Herodias. (Mark 6:17-18)

> [17]Now it was this same Herod who had sent to have John arrested, and had had him chained up in prison because of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife whom he had married. [18]For John had told Herod, 'It is against the law for you to have your brother's wife.'

She wanted to kill John (Mark 6:19)

> [19]As for Herodias, she was furious with him and wanted to kill him, but she was not able to do so, [20]because Herod was in awe of John, knowing him to be a good and upright man, and gave him his protection. When he had heard him speak he was greatly perplexed, and yet he liked to listen to him.
> [21]An opportunity came on Herod's birthday when he gave a banquet for the nobles of his court, for his army officers and for the leading figures in Galilee.
> [22]When the daughter of this same Herodias came in and danced, she delighted Herod and his guests; so the king said to the girl, 'Ask me anything you like and I will give it you.'
> [23]And he swore her an oath, 'I will give you anything you ask, even half my kingdom.'
> [24]She went out and said to her mother, 'What shall I ask for?' She replied, 'The head of John the Baptist.'
> [25]The girl at once rushed back to the king and made her request, 'I want you to give me John the Baptist's head, immediately, on a dish.'
> [26]The king was deeply distressed but, thinking of the oaths he had sworn and of his guests, he was reluctant to break his word to her.
> [27]At once the king sent one of the bodyguards with orders to bring John's head.
> [28]The man went off and beheaded him in the prison; then he brought the head on a dish and gave it to the girl, and the girl gave it to her mother.

Similarly, Imam Ḥusayn protested against Yazid and refused to recognize him as a legitimate leader of Muslims for "he was a drunkard, a murderer of innocent souls, and an open sinner."

> On a side note, its worth realizing that faithful follower of Imam Ḥusayn will never drink alcohol if he remembers what Yazid did with the head of Ḥusayn (a). In words of Imam Riza (a): "So whoever is from our Shī'as, he should refrain from intoxicants and chess. And whoever sees intoxicants or chess, then he should remember al-Ḥusayn and curse Yazīd and the family of Yazīd. Thus, Almighty Allah will erase his sins even if they as many as the stars."

In other words, both Yaḥya and Ḥusayn were doing *amr bil ma'rūf* and *nahi 'anil munkar*. Imam Ḥusayn, in his written will, explains the purpose and method of his mission. He wrote: "…I have risen only for seeking reform in the community of my grandfather and I would like to command good and forbid evil."

5) A Difference

Yaḥya was 'chaste' in the sense that he was not yet married when he was killed. While Ḥusayn was married. This makes the test and trial of Imam Ḥusayn comparatively more difficult and yet

Ḥusayn willingly sacrificed everything for the sake of Allah. Two lines of poetry attributed to Imam Ḥusayn on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ truly reflects his inner most feelings:

تركت الخلق طرا فى هواك و أيتمت العيال لكي أراك

فلو قطعتموه فى الحب إربا لما مال الفواد إلى سواك

I left the world for sake of Your love
I let my children be orphans for meeting Thee
If they cut my heart into pieces in Your love
My heart will not turn but to Thee

Similarities in Martyrdoms

1) Status of their Killers

In Shī‘ī narrations from the Imams, we see statements that the killer of Yaḥya bin Zakariyyah was of illegitimate birth, as was the killer of Ḥusayn bin ‘Ali.

Some comments on legitimacy of birth are relevant here:

1. Islam greatly values the legitimacy in birth; and therefore marriage –as the only means of legitimate birth– is considered a good deed.
2. In Shī‘a Islam, there is a very well-known view about those who hate Imam ‘Ali bin Abi Ṭālib (a): According to the Prophet (s), none can hate ‘Ali but a person who is either a hypocrite (munāfiq) or of impure birth (i.e., either through zinā or conceived at a time when relations were forbidden between a couple). For example, Abu Sa‘īd al-Khudari says, “We the community of Anṣār used to test our children by their love for ‘Ali (a). If a child was born among us and didn’t love ‘Ali, we would not consider him to be from us.” Similar statements can be seen from ‘Ubādah bin aṣ-Ṣāmit and Jābir bin ‘Abdullah al-Anṣāri.
3. This belief has some important implications in our faith: on a positive side, a legitimate relationship will perpetuate the love of Ahlul Bayt among the people; and, on a negative side, a person of illegitimate birth is disqualified from certain duties such as leading the congregational prayer, etc.
4. A final, and important point in these remarks, is that this refers only to those who have hatred (bughdh) towards Imam ‘Ali (a). Therefore, it does not refer to the vast majority of Sunni Muslims or non-Muslims who do not necessarily have hatred towards ‘Ali even if they don’t believe in him. They don’t believe in him as the first khalifa but still respect him. In short, disbelief and hatred are not the same; and so bear in mind that not all Sunnis are Nāṣibi (those who have hatred towards ‘Ali).

If you study the biographical notes about those who were involved in killing Imam Ḥusayn (a), you will come to know that they were of illegitimate birth: Yazīd, Ibn Ziyād, Shimr and others. Muslim historians have talked about the status of their birth.

When Ibn Ziyād sent the message through ʻUmar ibn Saʻd that "Ḥusayn must pledge allegiance to Yazīd on my hand," Imam Ḥusayn (a) responded clearly by saying, "Should I surrender to the son of an adulteress? No, by Allah, I shall not do so. I will rather die before it, and that would be more pleasant."[7]

On the day of 'Āshūrā', Imam Ḥusayn said in his sermon: "Verily, the bastard, son of a bastard, has given me two choices: sword or disgrace. Far be disgrace from us! هيهات منا الذلة Allah, His Messenger, the believers, and pure wombs and proud souls will not allow that obeying a sinful ruler be preferred over an honourable death." (This settles the question whether Imam 'Ali willingly pledge to the khulafā' of his time.)

2) The Heavens Cried Blood upon Their Martyrdom

There are narrations from the Shiʻa Imams that the heaven cried blood upon their martyrdoms.

But can such a thing be possible from Islamic point of view? Well, verse 44:29, after describing the end of Firʻawn and his people, says, "The heaven and the earth did not cry on them."

This verse gives an indication that the earth and sky hold the ability to cry. They simply didn't in the context of the above verse with Firʻawn, and they did for Yaḥya and Ḥusayn. We can't comprehend how they cry, but we shouldn't be surprised. The Qur'ān also says that the heavens and the earth sing the praise of God but we don't understand it. See 17:44.

But did it really happen? Are there any reports verifying it? Al-Balādhūri, a Sunni historian, in his *Ansāb al-Ashrāf,* makes the following remarks:

> Muḥammad bin Sīrīn: "This kind of redness was not seen in the sky until the killing of al-Ḥusayn." (vol. 3, p. 1329)
>
> Abi Qabīl: "The sky become dark on the day Ḥusayn was killed until the stars were visible." (ibid)
>
> Sālim al-Qāṣ: "On the day of Ḥusayn's killing, the sky rained blood." (ibid)
>
> Ibn Shihāb: "On the day of Ḥusayn's killing, no stone in Shām was picked up but that there was blood underneath it." (vol. 3, p. 1351)

3) Both Heads Spoke after Martyrdom

Both of their heads retained the ability to speak after martyrdom.

Yaḥya's head spoke to the king and said, "Fear Almighty Allah."

As for Imam Ḥusayn, his head was heard reciting verses of the Qur'ān multiple times.

The Prophet had said that the Ahlul Bayt and the Qur'ān will never separate from one another till the day of judgement. Its real meaning is that you cannot be a true follower of the Qur'ān without

[7] Ibn Qutaybah in *al-Imāmah wa 's-Siyāsah*. Also see Ḥasan al-Baṣri's comment when he was told about the martyrdom of Imam Ḥusayn, "Worst is a community in which an adulteress's son kills its Prophet's son." Al-Balādhūri, *Ansāb al-Ashrāf,* vol. 3, p. 1351.

being the follower of Ahlul Bayt, nor a true follower of Ahlul Bayt without being a follower of the Qur'ān.

But on an extraordinary level, it means that even if you severe the head of Ḥusayn, you cannot separate him from the Qur'ān – his blessed head will still recite the Qur'ān on the spearhead!

4) Both Heads were Presented to Tyrants in Trays

The heads of both were presented in a tray to the tyrant ruler of their times.

For Prophet Yaḥya, his martyrdom was provoked by the ruler's wife and daughter, after which his head was presented on a tray. Refer to the previously quoted sections of Mark 6:19 for the narration.

When the head of the Imam was brought in the presence of Yazid, he started hitting it with his cane, especially on the lips and teeth of Imam Ḥusayn. Abu Barazah al-Aslami, (a companion of the Prophet) when he saw this, he could not tolerate. He said: "O Yazid, move your cane; for by Allah I have seen the Prophet (s) kissing these lips and those of his brother Ḥasan; and he used to say, 'You both are chiefs of the youths of Paradise; may Allāh curse your killers and prepare the hell-fire for them.' O Yazid, on the day of judgement, 'Ubaydullāh ibn Ziyād will be your intercessor while he (i.e., Ḥusayn) will come with Prophet Muḥammad (s) as his intercessor!"

Yazīd became angry and asked him to be removed from the audience.

Abu Mikhnaf narrates that the representative of the Catholics in the audience asked Yazīd, "Whose head is this?" Yazīd shamelessly said that this is the head of Ḥusayn the grandson of the Prophet.

The Catholic: "You should know that just before I came here, I was in the church when I heard an unusual commotion. I look around, I saw a young person whose face was shining like the sun and he had descended from the heaven with a group. So I asked them, 'Who is this?' They said, 'This is the Messenger of Allah (s) and is surrounded by the angels who are giving condolence for his son Ḥusayn.'"

Then the Catholic told Yazid, "Woe to you, remove the head from yourself otherwise Allah will destroy you."

Yazid ordered that the Catholic be killed. Amazingly, the Catholic priest died with the kalima of Islam on his lips!

Interestingly, the Masjid Umawi in Damascus is the same place where you can see the maqam-e ra's of Yaḥya's head and maqam-e ra's of Ḥusayn. "Maqām" here means the place where the heads had been placed.

Conclusion:

Shīʻī ḥadīth talk about the many similarities between Yaḥya & Ḥusayn. Reviewing the struggles they faced, they both opposed the rulers of their time for similar reasons, they both were similarly martyred, both of their heads were presented to rulers in trays and were placed in the same Damascus palace, and the skies & earth cried upon their martyrdoms.

The only – and significant – difference, is that Yahya was single during all these events, whereas Husayn was not only married, but also had a family with him, who were integral to the journey and saga of Karbala and beyond.