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Book Review:

The Ethics of Karbala: Myths, Modernity, and Virtues of Nobility by Cyrus Ali Zargar (London & New York, Routledge, 2025)

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The Ethics of Karbala: Myths, Modernity, and Virtues of Nobility by Cyrus Ali Zargar is an intellectually rich and deeply moving work on the ways the memory of the Battle of Karbala is still shaping Islamic ethical consciousness. Published in 2024, the book is an exemplar of the new generation of interdisciplinary Islamic studies that integrate traditional Islamic scholasticism, modern philosophy, literary criticism, and theology. Although the battle of Karbala is among the most passionately observed and emotionally charged events in the history of Islam, Zargar positions the story not just as a historical tragedy, or a matter of theological argument, but as a source of ethics. This approach encourages the reader to consider virtue as a tradition, not an abstract goal, practiced in the body to be aroused by recollection, ritual, poetry, and politics.

The book primarily examines the way the Karbala figures, especially Husayn ibn Ali, were constructed as moral role models in centuries of Islamic literature and intellectual traditions. Zargar relies on the language of virtue ethics. Although, this is most traditionally seen as a characteristic of Aristotle, it is also very much aligned with Islamic thought, given the focus in Islamic traditions on character, intentionality, and moral



development. Instead of defining Karbala legally or doctrinally, he highlights values, such as *karam* (nobility), *shajaa'a* (courage), *sabr* (patience) and *wafa* (loyalty) as reflected in the story and transmitted in different cultural manifestations.

The way the book redefines Islamic ethics as performative and narrative-based is one of the most vivid features of the book. Zargar does not bring Karbala down to the level of a symbolic conflict between good and evil; he demonstrates that the story has turned into an explanatory paradigm in which Muslim communities, especially in the Shi'i traditions, construct meanings of suffering, pride, martyrdom and struggle. Husayn is positioned as an ethical projection, no longer, as it were, in a religious or even theological way, but in the affective or communal practices which hinge on his memory. The mainstream performances of Muharram, the melodrama of *maqatal* recitations, the emotional heights of odes, all of these are ethical performances by their very nature, and they continue to highlight the values of Karbala in turn.

Zargar's advantage is in his capability to provide scholarly rigor while being emotionally sensitive. He pays tribute but does not turn the book into a complete hagiography of the religious dynamism of Karbala. He does not even idealize suffering as a goal. Rather, he writes of agony, loss and sorrow as multi-layered processes that have the potential to bring about ethical self-exploration, social criticism and spiritual regeneration. His criticism of grieving, not only at a personal level but as a normative act, is, perhaps, the most difficult part of the book. Mourning is resistance, a protest against the injustice that is natural or predetermined by fate. This is how, Zargar thinks, grief itself might be a moral virtue in combination with devotion to the truth, memory and moral imagination.

The book achieves a rather unique accomplishment: it introduces Islamic materials to modern participants in philosophical discussions. People like Friedrich Nietzsche and Muhammad Iqbal are invited by Zargar to discuss relationships between the ideas of nobility, strength, and

overcoming the self in the context of cultural differences. It is particularly daring and provocative to compare Nietzsche's idea of noble virtue to the notion of *karam* offered by Husayn. To Nietzsche, nobility consisted of self-affirmation and creativity, whereas when Zargar says that Karbala is a city of nobility, he refers to nobility based on sacrifice and refusing and enduring suffering. There are no contrasts that are reduced or collapsed. However, Zargar uses them to examine the processes through which the contradiction between moral weakness and strength is mediated by various traditions.

The book is an alternative to mainstream Western representations of ethics that bask in autonomy, utility, or obligation. What is right, according to Zargar, is not necessarily relevant to the ethical heritage of Karbala, rather, the central question is what kind of soul is formed through faithfulness, courage, and trust in divine righteousness. Therefore, ethics is not a matter of what is right, but is rather a question of cultivating a kind of soul to which one must belong to determine what is right. This aligns with strands of Islamic theology, specifically with Shi'ism in Islamic tradition, where moral clarity is best achieved through the example of the Imams, said to be walking Qur'an's who breathe life to well-known ethical perfection.

At the same time, though, Zargar never limits his analysis to Shi'i thought alone. As surely as the memory of Karbala is central to Shi'i religious identity, motifs of resistance to oppression, filial obedience, and the battle between compromise and integrity resound across sectarian boundaries. This is one of the book's quietly powerful achievements: to present Karbala as a matter of doctrine, but also as a shared ethical legacy across Islamic traditions, though variously interpreted and practiced.

The book is yet quite readable stylistically. The style of writing is clear, thoughtful, and sometimes lyrical, as needed in a book that is ever so busy with literature. He spares no expense in invoking Arabic and Persian poetry and talks at greatest length about how Karbala has been re-

written and re-read throughout the centuries. Instead of citing texts as authorities, he interprets them as moral gestures in which each poem or elegy promotes some greater rhetoric of virtue, memory and piety. However, this is probably one of the shortcomings of the book: interaction with the historical context is rather shallow. Readers seeking a long political or social history of Karbala, or a record of the early Islamic schism, will be frustrated. Zargar is also concerned with the symbolic and moral existence of Karbala rather than the north-order historiography of seventh century Arabia. This is not a real weakness, though, as it clearly frames the target audience of the book. It is more of a historical reconstruction than a work of ethics and cultural critique.

The other aspect on which the book could have elaborated further was comparing Karbala morals with the current political situation in the Muslim world. Although Zargar points to contemporary injustices, especially in the Shi'i context of countries such as Iran or Lebanon, these references are oblique. A deeper explanation of how Karbala still manages to inspire modern resistance movements, or how its legacy is being utilized for other purposes, could have been another element of analysis. Nowadays, when religious symbols are being exploited daily to facilitate political agendas, an understanding of the ethics of memory is akin to the memory itself. Zargar does not indulge in political polemic, and this is one of the strengths of the book. He does not instrumentalize Karbala by projecting it on to the present. Instead, he invites the reader to reflect gradually, attentively, and directly, about what it is to be a good human being. Today, living in a world obsessed with efficiency, strategy and results, *The Ethics of Karbala* is a wake-up call that ethics, when stripped down to bare bones, is about the way we live and what we are willing to stand for.

The book also comes at an opportune time. Talk of virtue has become fraught in religious and secular contexts alike. Pop ethics tends to lean towards legality, identity or grievance, and less to virtue. Zargar does not oppose the role of rights, justice, or political criticism. Yet he insists

that ethical discourse loses its soul without a language of virtue that lacks any moral vocabulary based on nobility, loyalty and spirituality. By doing this, what the book ultimately invites is not so much about deeper engagement with Karbala, but a call to take a more inherent, character-centered form of ethics back. One that honors both the past and the possibility of the present.

The Ethics of Karbala is a valuable and well-written contribution to the disciplines of Islamic philosophy, virtue ethics and religious philosophy. It is addressed to readers in a variety of fields, including in philosophical, theological, literary, and even ethical traditions. Whether Karbala is seen as a sacred memory, a historical fact or a cultural narrative, Zargar's book provides new horizons for approaching the ethics of memory. Most importantly, it reminds us that stories are important not because they help us arrange facts within some kind of cultural amber, but because we are who we are thanks to them. We are asked to confront deep questions: What do we want to be as human beings? What would we suffer in the name of truth? And what does it mean to live with honor in a world which invites us, hour by hour, to forsake it?