

**The Mourning of the Birds at the
Killing of Ôusayn Ibn ٱAlî Ibn ʻAbû Àælib
in Shîٱite *Maqætil* Literature**

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Introduction

After the dramatic slaying of Ôusayn Ibn ٱAlî at the battle of Karbalæʻ by the Umayyads in 680, Shîٱite writers began describing this event in compositions called *maqætil*.¹ The first *maqal* to come down to us was written by ʻAbû Mikhnaf Lûà Ibn Yaôyæ (d. 775). This composition was of decisive importance for the development of the *maqal* genre. Certain of its motifs serve as its salient identification marks. Among these are the dream of the prophets, devils and angels, Jews and Christians, Ôusaynʻs thirst at Karbalæʻ, and natureʻs grieving at Ôusaynʻs killing. These motifs² unify the compositions of various times and places.

An account of nature mourning and weeping at the death of a leader, a saint, a prophet, a king, or a god is a widespread theme in folk literature. The ancient Babylonians in Mesopotamia, lamenting the death of Tammuz, the god of vegetation and fertility, wrote many poems bewailing his death in the name of the natural world, which had dried up and withered in its grief. The Greek equivalent of Tammuz is Adonis; of him too it is told that with his death plant life became desiccated and nature itself ceased to be.³

¹ On the development of *Maqætil* literature see our research: Khalid Sindawi, *Maqætil in Shîٱite Literature* (Hebrew), doctoral thesis, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 2000.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 150-240.

³ *HaMithologia Shel Amei HaOlam* (Mythology of the Peoples of the World, Hebrew) Roy Willis (ed.), Hed Artzi, Tel Aviv 1999. It should be noted that in Christianity as well, when Jesus died, nature was shaken and darkness covered the face of the earth: "Behold the veil of the sanctuary was rent in two from top to

Among the elements of nature weeping and mourning at the death of Ôusayn Ibn ٱAlî are the birds, which fulfill an important role in *maqætil* literature. Before entering into detail, we shall therefore clarify the function of animal life, including birds, in classical Arabic literature.

Birds in Classical Arabic Literature⁴

In classical Arabic literature the types of animals are described, and the benefits they render to human beings are also depicted, and so on. Not surprisingly, the Arabic dictionaries give many names and synonyms for animals and birds.

After the founding of the Abbasid kingdom (in 750) the Arabs began to classify the information and vast material accumulated through oral traditions, and to commit them to writing. Thus the accumulation of compositions in all fields of knowledge began. Among these, fauna, including birds, occupy an important place. The compositions focus on kinds of animals, their characteristics, their colors, and so on.⁵

As the compositions are dissimilar in terms of motivation and the purpose for which they were written, they differ in content as well. Some of the authors made use of animals to convey a certain message. A clear example of this is found in *Kalîla wadimna*, a story translated

bottom, the earth quaked and rocks split...” For more details see the New Testament, Luke 23:44-45; Matthew 2:21-52.

See also Sindawi, *Maqætil ...*, pp. 147-148. As in the case of John the Baptist, in Shi'ite literature descriptions appear in which the heavens turned red wept for him, as a sign of mourning and sorrow for his killing, and the sun shone red when it rose and set.

⁴ On the role of animals in Classical Arabic literature see the introduction to the article of Prof. George Kanazi, “Abû Bækr-al-ٱAllæf fî Rithæ' Hirr, *al-Karmil*, (11) 1990, University of Haifa, pp. 201-203.

⁵ See for example, ٱAbd al-Mælik Ibn Muðammad Ibn 'Ismæ'îl al-Tha'ælibî al-Nisæbûrî, *Thimær al-Qulûb fî al-Muêaf wa-al-Mansûb*, ed. Muðammad 'Abû al-Faêl 'Ibræhîm, Dær al-Ma'ærif, Cairo, 1977, pp. 446-449.

from Hindi into Persian and from Persian into Arabic in the first half of the 2nd century H/8th century CE. This composition opened the way to folk literature on animals in Arabic.

In time, as Arab society changed from desert Bedouin ways to modern urban living, and with the transition from nomadic life to permanent settlement, the Arabs' attitude to nature altered.⁶ Among other things they showed interest in animals and fowl that they had not known in the desert, including birds of beautiful appearance. From that time massive volumes on animals are known to us, such as the early work of al-Jæðiz (d. 868) *al-Ôayawæn* and a much later book, *Ôayæt al-Ôayawæn al-Kubræ* by al-Damîrî (d. 1405). These two compositions contain detailed information on animals and their characteristics.

The Qur'æn mentions tigers,⁷ and there is also a mention of the hoopoe that talks with King Solomon.⁸ In another place a fowl praises God.⁹ There are references to animals as well.

Three essays on fowls are known from the Abbasid period: *Kitæb al-àayr*, written by 'Aômæd Ibn Ôætîm al-Bæhilî¹⁰ (d. 846), the work of 'Abû Ôætîm al-Sijistænî¹¹ (d. 862), and the work of Kamæel Mujæshiþ Ibn 'Aslam Ibn Muðammad Ibn Shujæþ al-Ôasib¹² (d. 951).

From a later period, we find philosophical compositions on birds such as that of Ibn Sînæ (d. 1037), *Risælat al-àayr*, by al-Ghazæli (d.

⁶ A striking expression of this can be found, for example, in the Arabic poetry of that period. For details see Gustave Von Greunebaum, *Al-'Istijaba lilàabiþa fî al-Shþir al-þArabî*, translated by Dr. Kamæel Yazijî, in *Dirsæset fî al-Adab al-Arabî*, Manshûræt Maktabat al-Hayæt, Beirut, n.d., pp. 159-200.

⁷ Qur'æn 27:16.

⁸ Qur'æn 27:20.

⁹ Qur'æn 24:12

¹⁰ See Muðammad Ibn Yaþqûb 'Isôæq, known as al-Nadîm, *al-Fihrist*, ed. Riêa al-Mæzindarænî, Dær al-Masîra, 2nd ed., Beirut, 1988, p. 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 64.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 339.

1111), and of Farîd al-Dîn al-Ḥaḥāḥ (d. ?), *Manāiq al-ḥayr*. The latter two are a kind of mystical writing: the bird is described in them as wishing to reach God, to stand before the throne of glory and to express its willingness to join the ranks of the ministering angels.¹³

From later periods are the work of Zayn al-Dîn ‘Umar Ibn al-Muzaffar al-Wardî (d. 1445), *Mantiq al-tayr bi’iradat al-khayr*, and the composition of Shihab al-Dîn ‘Ahmad Ibn Yahya Ibn Hajala al-Tilmisani (d. 1375), *Mantiq al-tayr*.¹⁴ All are about birds. No wonder then that the *maqatil* writers used birds in their writings.

Birds Mentioned in the *Maqatil* Literature and Their Functions

Four kinds of birds are mentioned in the *maqatil* literature: the dove, sparrow, owl, and eagle. We shall discuss each separately and detail the role that it has in this literature.

1. The Curse of the Doves

A tradition from the sixth ‘imam, Jaḥfar al-Ḍaydī (d. 765), tells that doves of the *al-rāḥibiyya* breed¹⁵ are the bane of ‘Uṣayn’s killers because of their cooing. Dāwūd Ibn Farqad told that when sitting in Jaḥfar al-Ḍaydī’s home he looked at the cote of *al-rāḥibiyya* doves

¹³ See Kāḥim Saḥd al-Dîn, “al-Ḥanqā fi al-Turathayn al-‘Arabî wa-al Gharbî”, al-Turath al-Shaḥbî, vol. III, 1986, pp. 128-134.

¹⁴ See ‘Ajî Khalîfa Muḥāfa Ibn ‘Abdallāh al-Qusānāi al-Rūmî al-‘Anafî, *Kash al-‘Aunûn ‘an ‘Asāmî al-Kutub wa-al-Funûn*, Dar al-Fikr lilāibaḥā wa-al-Nashr wa-al Tawzîḥ, Beirut, 1994, II, 692.

¹⁵ The cry of this breed is the loudest and sharpest of all the varieties of dove. It is named after the village of Rāḥib, where they are raised. It is a high quality variety with a large frame; thus it brings a higher price than other varieties. For more information see:

Jamāl al-Dîn Muḥammad Ibn Makram Ibn Manāūr al-Miḍrî, *Lisān al-‘Arab*, Dār Sādir, 1st ed., Beirut, 1995, III, 421, entry “Rāḥib.” See also

‘Abū ‘Uthmān Ibn Baḥr al-Jāḥiā, *al-‘Aḥawān*, Dār Saḥb., ed. Fawzî Ḥaawî, 3^d ed., Beirut, 1982, I. 455.

and listened to their cooing. 'Abû ʔAbdallæh asked him, "Hey, Dæwûd, do you know what these doves are saying?" "No I don't," he replied. He said, "Believe me, these birds are cursing Ôusayn's killers. So, please [addressing the Shîʔites], take doves of this variety and breed them in your homes."¹⁶

The *maqætil* writers in this tradition utilized the feature typical of *al-ræʔibiyya* doves, namely cooing with a sound more shrill than that of other varieties of doves. They offered an explanation to suit their purpose: the cooing of *al-ræʔibiyya* doves is actually a curse directed at the killers of Ôusayn. Accordingly, the 'imæm Jaʔfar al-Ôædiq, an authority among the Shîʔites during his life,¹⁷ asks the members of his sect to breed this variety of dove in their homes so that the curse upon Ôusayn's killers will be heard repeatedly in every home in the Shîʔite community.¹⁸

It is of interest that the role of doves during times of mourning is mentioned in Judaism also. Doves are deemed to share in the sorrowing of Israel over the destruction of the temple and the exile on the night of the Ninth of Av. When the Jews lament over the destruction and the sound of their grief rises on high, in the darkness of the night a white dove appears and weeps. According to Vilnay, "Every eve of the Ninth of Av one dove stands at the corner of the

¹⁶ 'Abû al-Qæsim Jaʔfar Ibn Muôammad Ibn Qulawayh, *Kæmil al-Zayæraet*, ed. ʔAbd al-Ôusayn al-'Amînî al-Tabrîzî, Najaf, 1937, p. 98.

¹⁷ On the status of the 'imæm Jaʔfar al-Ôædiq see for example, Husain M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shîʔa Islam*, Longman, London and New York, 1979, pp. 259-288. See also

Dwight M. Donaldson, *The Shîʔite Religion*, London, 1933, pp. 129-141.

¹⁸ It is noteworthy that the Shîʔites today, and especially those living in villages in Iraq and southern Lebanon raise this variety of dove to this day.

Western Wall because during that night it will lament, and all the following day until evening.”¹⁹

2. The Mourning of Birds

It is related of Jaʿfar al-ʿAḍīq: “I was in the habit of crumbling crumbs for the birds, and they ate out of my hand. When ʿĀshūrāʾ Day came round, marking the anniversary of ʿUṣayn’s death, the birds stopped eating; then I knew that the birds were fasting on account of their mourning the death of ʿUṣayn Ibn ʿAlī.”²⁰

In this tradition the birds behave like human beings, fasting out of sorrow over ʿUṣayn’s death and not eating at all on that day.²¹ When one of the people of grace is killed, nature is appalled and the birds alter their behavior.

3. The Mourning of the Owls

A tradition from Yaʿyā Ibn Sawfān, also attributed to Jaʿfar al-ʿAḍīq, refers to these night birds. al-ʿAḍīq explains to his entourage why the owl is not seen in the daylight hours but only at night: “In the time of my grandfather the Prophet Muḥammad, the owl lived in inhabited places and perched in houses and palaces, and when the people sat down to dine they would throw bits of their food to it. When the owl heard of the death of ʿUṣayn they swore an oath never to live again in settled places but only in deserts and piles of ruins.

¹⁹ Vilnay, Ze’ev, *Agadot Yisrael* (Hebrew: Legends of the Jews), Kiryat Sefer, Jerusalem, 1984, pp. 124-125.

²⁰ ʿAkhāab Khawārizim, ʿAbū al-Muʿayyad al-Muwaffaq Ibn ʿAḥmad Ibn Bakr al-Makkī al-ʿĀnāfī, known as ʿAkhāab Khawārizim, *Maqtal al-ʿUṣayn*, Maʿbaʿat al-Zahrā, Najaf, 1948, p. 90.

²¹ It should be noted that the Shīʿites fast on ʿĀshūrāʾ Day in mourning over the killing of ʿUṣayn. For details see my article, Khalid Sindawi, “ʿĀshūrāʾ Day and Yom Kippur,” *Ancient Near Eastern Studies*, 38 (2001), pp. 208-209.

Since then the owl fasts and grieves throughout the entire day, and when night falls it laments over Ôusayn's death until dawn breaks."²² Another tradition explaining why the owl is active only at night is given by al-Damîrî after al-Jæôiz. The owl does not emerge during the day out of fear of the evil eye. Because it is a beautiful bird and thinks that it is the finest of all creatures, it appears at night so as not to be harmed by the evil eye of other animals.²³

This tradition shows how the *maqætil* writers took a feature typical of the owl — its nocturnal habits, and attributed to it a "reason" that fits their aim: the absence of owls in the daytime arises from their sorrow and sadness at the killing of Ôusayn Ibn †Alî .

Attributing a reason for some manifestation is common in classical Arabic poetry as a rhetorical device, called by the Arab rhetoricians *ôusn al-ta†lîl* (a good new explanation).²⁴ The *maqætil* writers emulated this device from the domain of poetry in their prose. They make use of artistic rhetorical means in Arabic to intensify the grief over Ôusayn.

4. The Avenging Eagle

'Abû Mikhnaf gives a tradition from an anonymous Christian eremite who converted to Islam and made the pilgrimage to Mecca. He told the people at the *maqæm* (the place in Mecca where Abraham was) that one day when he was sitting in his hermitage (*sawma†atihi*) in the

²² Ibn Qulawayh, *Kæmil al-Zayeræt*, p. 99.

²³ See Kamæl al-Dîn Muôammad Ibn Mûsa Ibn †Îsæ al-Damîrî, *al-Ôayæt al-Ôayawaen al-Kubræ*, Dær al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1st ed., Beirut, 1994, I, 232.

²⁴ It should be noted that this rhetorical device is called *Ôusn al-Ta†lîl*, or *al-Ta†lîl* or *Ôusn al-Tawassul/al-Ta†lîl* in Arabic. The Arab rhetorician Ibn Sinæn al-Khafæjî calls it *al-Istidlæl bilta†lîl*. The rhetorician al-Ôalabî calls it *Ôusn al-Tawassul*. It is a common device in Arabic poetry. For details see

In†æm Fawwæl †Akkæwî, *al-Mu†jam al-Mufaòòal fi †Ulûm al-Balægha*, Dær al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya, 1st ed., Beirut, 1992, p. 392.

desert he suddenly saw a bird as big as an eagle landing on a rock at the sea shore. “It vomitted up a quarter of a man and then flew upwards to the skies. A few minutes later it again settled in the same place and spewed up another quarter of a man; it repeated this procedure four times. The four parts joined together and became a man, but at that very instant the eagle again tore him into four parts, swallowed them, and flew upwards.”

The eremite went on: “I was dumbfounded at what I had seen. When the next day the eagle returned and repeated its performance, and again the quarters joined together, I left my cell and asked the man, ‘Who are you?’ He replied, ‘I am Caliph Yazîd Ibn Muḏæwiya, the slayer of Ôusayn Ibn ḏAlî.’ Then I inquired about Ôusayn and I was told that he was the grandson of God’s messenger, the prayers and blessings of Allah be upon him. Thereupon, I converted to Islam and came here to the Ka‘ba on the pilgrimage and to visit the grave of the Prophet, the prayers and blessings of Allah be upon him.”²⁵

In this tradition ‘Abû Mikhnaḏ elaborates a similarity between ḏAbdal-Raômæn Ibn Muljam al-Murædi (killed 661) the slayer of ḏAlî, and Yazîd the slayer of Ôusayn. He seems to have copied the

²⁵ See ‘Abû Mikhnaḏ Lûà Ibn Yaôyæ, *Maqatal al-Ôusayn wa-maôraḏ Ahl Baytihi wa-Aððæbihi fi Karbalæ’ al-Mushtahir bi-Maqatal ‘Abî Mikhnaḏ*, Mu’assasat al-Aḏlamî, Maâbaḏat al-Amîr, 1st ed., Tehran, 1952, p. 144. It should be noted that *Maqætil* from the modern period developed this story and added to it new dimensions. See for example, ḏAbd al-Ôusayn ‘Ibræhîm al-Ôusaynî, *Safînat al-Najæt ḏIbrat Karbalæ’*, Manshûræt Maktabat al-Hilæl, 2nd ed., Beirut, 1987, I, 168-171. The author added to the story a separate chapter dedicated to the demise of Caliph Yazîd, “Ôadîth hælak Yazîd.” See also Muôammad Jawæd Mughaniyya, *al-Majælis al-Ôusayniyya*, Dær al-Jawæd and Dær al-Tayyær al-Jadîd, 4th ed., Beirut, 1984, p. 132. See also

ḏAbd al-Ôusayn ‘Ibræhîm al-ḏÆmilî, *al-Muḏid fi Dhikræ al-Sibà al-Shahîd*, Manshûræt Dær Maktabat al-Hilæl, 3d ed., Beirut, 1984, p. 202.

tradition describing the horrific end of Ibn Muljam and adapted it to Yazîd with slight changes.²⁶

Note that the *maqætil* writers ascribed this tradition to an anonymous Christian ascetic so as to show the reader that even non-Muslims passed on the tradition, believed it, attested to it, and converted to Islam immediately upon witnessing the events from close by. The story's structure clearly indicates that the *maqætil* writers wished to convince the Shî'ites that this was a true occurrence and that the events took place in reality and are not subject to any doubt.

Not by chance was the eagle "enlisted" in the story. The eagle is a predatory bird and is capable of preying on a human being. The *maqætil* writers took advantage of this trait and added mythological dimensions to it: the eagle cuts Yazîd into four parts, swallows them one by one, vomits them up as a whole man, and then quarters him again. Here the eagle seems to fulfill the wish of the Shî'ites for vengeance against Yazîd. The punishment meted out by the eagle related at the end of the *maqatal* is a *kind of* catharsis in the Aristotelian sense, preceded by feelings of fear and compassion.²⁷ Catharsis releases the reader from these feelings, which filled him while reading the story set forth in the *maqatal*. The Shî'ite reader's involvement in the story of the killing of Ôusayn, and his identification with the fear, the sorrow, the violent treatment, and the pain of Ôusayn and his men, need relief at these moments of crisis. *Maqætil* writers of this kind wished to free the reader of the emotional stress by describing the end of Yazîd at the close of the *maqætil*.

The Qur'æn²⁸ refers to the tale of the avenging bird in the context of the War of the Elephant (570). 'Abraha, the commissioner of Kush in

²⁶ See Mumin Naf'allæh al-Shablanjî, *Nûr al-Abðær fî Manæqib Æl al-Nabî al-Mukhtær*, al-Dær al-ÛAlamiyya lilâibaÛa wa-al-Nashr, 1st ed., Beirut, 1985, pp. 189-190.

²⁷ On this term see J.A. Cuddon, *Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 4th ed., Blackwell Reference, Oxford, 1998, p. 114.

Yemen, built a Christian church at Sanʔæ, the capital of Yemen, so as to attract the attention of the Arabs to it and to divert from the Kaʔba, the chief sanctuary in Mecca. ʔAbraha went up against the Kaʔba to wage war with the elephants he took with him, and he laid siege to Mecca. But he was forced back because God (in the Muslim version) saved his sanctuary by sending against the besiegers birds from the sea that looked like hawks. Each bird carried three stones as small as lentils. It carried one in its beak and two in its claws. In his tradition no stone struck a man without it killing him, and the rest fled. To ʔAbraha himself God sent horrible sores, and his body fell apart limb by limb. His troops took him with them to Sanʔæ where he died after his body was left merely the size of a chick; he did not die before his heart was removed from within him.²⁹

So the *maqætil*, like the Qurʔæn's account of the War of the Elephant, occasionally make use of the bird as the envoy of God, which punishes anyone who intends to harm a holy place or a holy person of special status. In the Qurʔæn the holy place is the Kaʔba; in the *maqætil* the holy person is the ʔimæm Ôusayn Ibn ʔAlî.

The bird in the Qurʔæn is from the sea; in the *maqætil* it is an eagle. Each of these punishes by a different method, which matches its characteristics and the situation in which the punishment takes place. In the Qurʔæn and in the *maqætil* the bird, which is the messenger of God, tortures a man who has harmed something sacred. In the Qurʔæn the leader who intended to harm the holy Kaʔba is tortured to death; in the *maqætil* it is the caliph Yazîd, who gave the order to murder Ôusayn. The *maqætil* writers seem to have been influenced, to some extent by ,the story in the Qurʔæn about the birds' vengea²⁸nce against the army of ʔAbraha.

²⁸ Qurʔan 105:3-4

²⁹ see: Ibn Hisham, *ai-Sira al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Mustafa al-Saqqa, ʔIbrahim al-ʔAbyari and ʔAbd al-Hafiz Shalabi, Dar al-Khayr, 1st .ed, Beirut, 1992, 1:44-45.

Summary

The *maqætil* writers used the motif of birds to convince the reader that nature itself grieves over the killing of Ôusayn. These authors magnified the characteristic features of doves, sparrows, owls and eagle, giving an account that suited their purpose, as is common in poetry.

What was this purpose? Ôusayn Ibn †Alî, grandson of the Prophet Muôammad, is the third 'imæm in the succession of twelve 'imæms, the heirs and successors of the Prophet Muôammad. The enlistment of birds in the *maqætil* seems to be one of the means of turning him into an exceptional and unique person.

ملخص

لقد استعمل كُتَّابُ "المقاتل" الطيور كفكرة رئيسية في عملهم الفني لإقناع القارئ أن الطبيعة نفسها تشعر بالحزن والأسى على مقتل الحسين. لقد ضخم هؤلاء المؤلفون الميزات البارزة لطير الحمام، الدوري، البوم والنسر مبرزين ذلك بما يفي بأهدافهم وما هو شائع في الشعر. ما هو ذلك الهدف؟ الحسين بن علي وهو حفيد النبي محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم هو الإمام الثالث من بين اثني عشرة إماماً وهم الأئمة والخلفاء للنبي محمد. إن توظيف الطيور في "المقاتل" هو إحدى الوسائل لجعله إنساناً غير عادي.

תקציר

כותב, ה"מקאתיל" בספרות השיעית משתמשים במוטיב בעלות הכנף על מנת לשכנע את הקוראים שהטבע עצמו מקונן על הריגתו של אלחוסין. מחברים אלו מעצימים את תיארון ותכונותיהן של היונות, הציפורים, הינשופים והנשרים, הם מתארים אותן בצורה המתיישבת עם כוונותיהם כפי שרגיל לנהוג בשירה. מה היתה הכוונה? אלחוסין בן עלי, נכדו של הנביא מוחמד, הוא האמאם השלישי מבין שושלת שנים עשר האמאמים. הוא היורש הלגיטימי והחליף של הנביא מוחמד. גיוס בעלות הכנף הקוננות בספרות זו הוא אחד האמצעים להפוך את אלחוסין לאדם מיוחד ועל טבעי.