CHAPTER 48

Images of Paradise in Popular Shi‘ite Iconography

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In the visual expression of the Muslim world, paradise is the pivotal notion of bounty and happiness untroubled by the concerns and worries of human existence. As such, it is the ultimate reward for the true believer.1 Meanwhile, Shi‘ite Muslim imagery in general is dominated by the event of martyrdom, in particular the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson Ḥusayn and his followers at Karbala.2 Undoubtedly, Shi‘ite imagery has undergone a certain development over the centuries. Today, few images could represent the modern Iranian interpretation of Shi‘ite identity more specifically than, say, the depiction of Yazīd b. Mu‘awiya's troops parading Ḥusayn's severed head at Karbala, such as shown in a drawing illustrating the scene in a nineteenth-century lithographed edition of Sarbāz Burūjirdī's martyrological book Asrār al-shahāda (The spiritual realities of martyrdom)3 or Iranian artist Maḥmūd Farshchhiyān's famous modern painting of Ḥusayn's wounded horse returning to the wailing women at the camp without its master, a large version of which was temporarily installed in 2008 at the street crossing north of Tehran's Lālah Park.4 Considering the impact of Ḥusayn's fate as the quintessential expression of martyrdom for Shi‘ite Islam, there is little surprise that the Shi‘ite imagery of paradise, in both learned and popular contexts, is no exception to the above mentioned rule: martyrdom is a direct way to paradise, and paradise is the ultimate reward for the martyr.5

The two areas of popular Shi‘ite Islamic imagery I wish to consider briefly in the following both illustrate this belief in different, though ultimately connected ways. First, I discuss the depiction of paradise as part of the cumulative representation of the battle of Karbala (in 61/680) produced in the Qajar

1 Blair and Bloom, Images of paradise.
2 Aghaei, Martyrs; Newid, Der schiitische Islam; Varzi, Warring souls; Flaskerud, Visualizing belief and piety; see also Chelkowski and Dabashi, Staging a revolution 44–65.
3 Marzolph, Narrative illustration 101, fig. 37; see also Marzolph, Pictorial representation.
4 See Puin, Islamische Plakate ii, 458–60, and iii, 860, no. G-16.
5 On historical and contemporary notions of martyrdom in Islam see, e.g., Khosrokhavar, L'Islamisme; Khosrokhavar, Les nouveaux martyrs; Mayeur-Jaouen, Saints et héros; Neuwirth, Blut und Mythos.
period. My examples include the tilework installed on commemorative buildings such as the Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushīr, erected in 1876 by the wealthy philanthropist Mirzā ʿAbd al-Ḥasan Mushir al-Mulk (Fig. 48.1), or the Imāmzādah-yi Ibrāhīm in Shiraz⁶ and the large canvasses that used to serve as prompts for professional storytellers performing in the streets and marketplaces well into the twentieth century.⁷ Second, I discuss images of paradise incorporated into modern murals, many of which have been installed in recent years on the windowless walls of large buildings in the Tehran cityscape.⁸ The extent to which any of these areas may or may not be adequately termed “popular” is open for discussion. The depictions of the battle of Karbala, on the one side, may be regarded as “popular” since they satisfy the demand of large gatherings of people from various strata of society commemorating the tragedy of Karbala by listening to, watching or actively partaking in live performances, whether recited or acted on stage. The murals, on the other side, might be regarded as a kind of “intentional folklore” (often termed “propaganda”) insofar as they have been installed by state-subsidized institutions such as the powerful Bunyād-i shahid (The Martyr’s Foundation). Their aim is to keep alive and firmly root the memory of recent martyrs within present and future society, predominantly the memory of those men that lost their lives during the so-called “imposed” war of defense against the neighboring country of Iraq, as model characters of true Shiʿite behavior.

In the images of the battle of Karbala prepared in the Qajar period, both the scenes on tilework and on canvas depict a number of the battle’s well-known scenes, such as Ḥusayn lamenting the death of his son ʿAlī Akbar, Ḥusayn bidding the women farewell while holding his son ʿAlī Aṣghar, and Ḥusayn attacking the enemy. In addition, the depictions regularly feature a vision of the hereafter. While in the tilework images considered here, this vision is placed in an arching area above the battle scenes, in the images on canvas it is regularly put on the image’s upper side. The images on canvas concentrate on the battle scenes that are usually displayed around a central image of Ḥusayn attacking the enemy, and depict the image of the hereafter, sometimes in a truncated version, showing hell below and paradise above, separated by the pul-i ṣirāṭ, the narrow bridge that the dead must cross in order to be directed to either

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⁶ Humāyūnī, Ḥusayniyyah-yi Mushīr; Ansari, Malerei 254, no. 54; Fontana, Ahl al-Bayt, fig. 58; And, Ritüelden drama 310; Chelkowski and Dabashi, Staging a revolution 62–3; Chelkowski, Patronage and piety 95; Newid, Der schiitische Islam 250; see also Mirzāʾī Mihr, Naqqāshīhā.
⁷ Sayf, Naqqāshī; Ardalān, Murshidān; see also Floor, Theater, particularly 119–23.
⁸ Marzolph, The martyr’s way to paradise; Chehabi and Christia, The art of state persuasion; Gruber, Mural arts; Karimi, Tehran’s post Iran-Iraq war murals.