Translation of Thār and Thār Allāh

In Typical Ziarat-Texts in Favor of Imam al-Ḥusayn: Some Problems, Prospects, and Solutions

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Abstract**:** the author of the present study tries to elaborate on the meaning of *thār and thārAllah according to Ziarat-texts. Following this article, a book review on "Raḥmat-I Wāsi'ah: Bayān-I raḥmat-I Wāsi'ah-yi Khudā. Ḥadrat-I Sayyid al-Shuhadā 'alayh al-salām" which is a book about Imam Ḥusayn has been include.*

Key words*: thār, thār Allah*

Introduction

Approaching classics require much attention. [1]This holds true whether one intends to

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appreciate, teach, or translate them. On the other hand, the category of classics can be found not only in literature but also in other fields, e.g., psychology, linguistics, religious studies. As such, amongst the Islamic classics, one finds the ziarat-texts which have been issued by the Infallible Imams. As the ziarat-texts hold a particular position in the vast array of Islamic texts, approaching them require utmost attention. Since the ziarat-texts are in Classical Arabic, translating them demands particular attention because some of their phrases may not lend themselves so easily for translation.

Translating Ziarat-Texts

It is necessary to translate the ziarat-texts for various purposes. In the first place, not all Muslims, and particularly Shi□ite Muslims know Arabic, although they can read Arabic texts when they appear with the correct vocalization diacritics. (A great majority of Muslims, especially in the Middle Eastern countries, use scripts adopted from the Arabic language, with some modifications to make them suitable for their languages.) In addition, it is necessary to translate the ziarat-texts into other languages to make this purely Islamic treasury accessible to other people who may not be able to benefit from them in Classical Arabic.

When it comes to translating the ziarat-texts, at least two types of translation are necessary, mere translation, and exegetical translation. (For people who cannot read the ziarat-text based on their Arabic script, a kind of phonetic reading [phonemic transcription using Roman script] sounds necessary.) Apart from the mere translation that renders a parallel text of the original for the general public, the exegetical translation poses certain problems that require special attention. [2] It is in the case of the exegetical translation that doctrinal disambiguation, historical hints, and metaphorical indications are rendered to lay bare the fundamental framework and the back scenario of the ziarat-texts. This is because the ziarat-texts are not merely formal rites of physical presence in the shrine of a highly-praiseworthy, sacred dignitary. [3] Rather, they were by origin specific instructions that an Infallible Imam gave to an enquirer on how to approach and address an Infallible dignitary. [4] As such, they contain allusions to historic events and days, coupled with both direct and indirect references to Islamic figures and dignitaries; moreover, they are packed with Islamic doctrinal statements, hence some articles of faith are phrased in them. These characteristics prove that ziarat-texts deserve exegetical translation for better appreciation. It is in the light of such delicacies that the word “ *thār* ” and the titular phrase “ *Thār Allāh* ” are highlighted and tackled as just as a few (out of several) instances that require exegetical translation.

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“Thār”

The Arabic word *thār* means ‘blood’. It is a type of blood that was shed in an unjust way which in turn gives the parent or mentor of the slain person the authority to take revenge in return. Originally an Arab custom of the Jāhilīyyah era, it was one of those customs that was later approved and reinforced in the Islamic world. There is at least a certain Quranic indication in that when someone is killed unjustly, as a victim, and as an oppressed one, his (and by extension, her) parent or mentor preserves the right to retaliate and take revenge in the same way. (See the Holy Quran, Sura al-Isrā’ [17]: 33). Clearly, such punishment in the form of taking revenge is meant to prevent blood-shed in human communities.

There is another sense of *thār* that means the beloved (slain) person for whom revenge is taken. The same point signifies that when someone is slain, it is the right of his or her closest relative(s) to take revenge from the killer. [5] The greater the slain person in status, the more important will be the retaliator. By the same token, Allah has become the retaliator of Imam al-Ḥusayn’s blood, for he was the Infallible Imam of the Time. It does not mean that the fourth Infallible Imam ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn “al-Sajjād” (as the only remaining son of Imam al-Ḥusayn) never had the right to retaliate. Rather, it was due to the lofty status of Imam al-Ḥusayn and his matchless sacrifice that Allah has since become his retaliator. It is because of this reason that he has since received the honorable designation *Thār Allāh*, i.e., the (dignitary) whose blood-avenger is Allah. [6] Had Imam al-Ḥusayn never had any no other post-martyrdom designation as this one, the very designation proves sufficient to manifest the status of such a matchless sacrifice he accomplished. It is certainly the highest reward that Allah has bestowed upon Imam al-Ḥusayn that Allah is his blood avenger.

A Translation Problem

Cases wherein the semantic content is opaque, i.e., not lexically transparent, must be dealt with a semantic decoding approach. This means that instead of adopting a word-for-for translation, the content of the phrase must be rendered and reconstructed in the target language. With this approach, *thār Allāh* must be rendered as “the dignitary whose blood-avenger is Allah”, not as “the blood of Allah”, [7] or as “your blood was unjustly shed in the way of Allah”. [8]

A serious translation problem springs from the translator’s insufficient expert knowledge. Any serious text that is subject to scholarly translation demands specialized knowledge on the part

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of the translator. Unfortunately, some translators of the ziarat-texts in favor of Imam al-Ḥusayn simply intend to render some service for his delight. Although appreciable, the scholarly side of such tasks cannot be sacrificed, neglected, or underestimated in any way for the mere devotion one may have.

Notes:

[1] In this paper, ‘classics’ receive little definition or treatment. However, the word is used in the sense of the works that are richly value-laden, hence deserving and subject to multiple levels of interpretation. Definitions of ‘classics’ can be found, inter alia, in Eliot, “What is a Classic?”; Calvino, “Why read the classics?”; and Kermode, *The Classic*, to highlight just a few.

[2] It needs little argument that the ziarat-texts must be translated by those who are already well-versed in the subject. Merely devout intent proves utterly inadequate; such translations must be carried out on the basis of authentic expositions and scholarly exegeses that are produced by qualified scholars.

[3] In the Shiʿite Islamic ritual practices, ziarat (and at times a special salaam) is paid to certain non-Muslim, e.g., Christian or Jewish, dignitaries. Examples abound in the case of the Jewish apostle Daniel who is buried at the city Shush, Khuzistan Province, southwest Iran. Lady Narjis, mother of the 12th Infallible Imam al-Mahdī, was in fact a descendant of an apostle of Jesus Christ. Although later on converted to Islam and found the honor of being married to the 11th Infallible Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī and giving birth to Imam al-Mahdī, she used to be a Christian princess in the Byzantium.
Her tomb is located in the same burial chamber wherein the tombs of the 10th Infallible Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī, 11th Infallible Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, and Lady ʿAkīmah (Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī’s sister) are located. Muslim pilgrims who go to Samarra, Iraq, pay ziarat to all of them. In a fragment of the ziarat-text in favor of Narjis, it is indicated thus: “May salaam be bestowed upon you […] O female descendant of an apostle of Jesus […] May salaam be bestowed upon you and your ancestors, the apostles [of Jesus Christ].”

[4] According to Islamic instructions, the souls of the Infallibles and dignitaries of very highly

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religious status answer their pilgrims' paying homage and help them have their needs fulfilled. That Lady Narjis is addressed in the ziarat-text in her favor indicates that she answers the homage being paid to her.

[5] Further details on the laws of retaliation and taking revenge can be found in Shīite sources of fiqh, e.g., Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī (d. 460 AH / 1067), *al-Nihāyah fī mujarrad al-fiqh wa al-fatāwā* ; English trans. *A Concise Description of Islamic Law and Legal Opinions*, by A. Ezzati (London, 20038).

[6] Amongst the Ashura-oriented research literature so far published, the late Ayatollah Mirza Abū al-Faḍl Thaqafī Nūrī Tīhrānī's book *Shifā' al-ṣudūr fī sharḥ zīyārah al-Āshūr*, 2 vols., ed. Sayyid ʿAlī Muwaḥḥid Abṭaḥī (Qum, 1370 Sh/ 1991); also published in 3 vols., with an index, ed. Ḥāmid Fadawī Adistānī (Qum, 1393 Sh/ 2014) is the best exposition of the concepts, synoptic biographical notes, and exegesis of the Ashura ziarat-text. A fuller and more informative biographical profile of the author can be found in Fadawī Ardistānī's edition, vol. 1, 55-77.

[7] Likewise, some translators put it in Persian as "*khūn-i Khudā*" (lit., the blood of Allah), an altogether wrong rendition.

[8] *Saheefa-e-Ziyaraat*, (Elmhurst, NY, 2003), p. 305.

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