

# Hazrat Zainab and Karbala: A Paradigm of Faith-Based and Female Resistance

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The tragedy of Karbala (۱۰ AH / ۶۸۰ CE) represents a foundational narrative of resistance and empowerment, marking the martyrdom of Imam Hussain ibn Ali, his family, and his companions. Often underemphasized, yet equally significant, is the role of the women—particularly Hazrat Zainab bint Ali, the sister of Hussain (AS). As the daughter of Ali and Fatimah and the granddaughter of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Zainab’s unwavering faith and resolute leadership during and after the events at Karbala have rendered her a lasting symbol of female resistance and moral authority within Islam.

The Qur’an, regarded as the most authoritative source in Islam, consistently affirms the equality of men and women. It assures believers that God will not “waste the work of any worker among you, whether male or female” (Qur’an ۴:۱۹۵), promising equal reward for righteous deeds. Islam, in principle, recognizes that both genders are equally capable of faith, knowledge, and piety. Numerous hadith further affirm the dignity of women, with the Prophet explicitly condemning and abolishing the pre-Islamic Arab practice of female infanticide (wa’d al-banat).

Although social norms in many Muslim societies have often assigned distinct roles to men and women—at times conflicting with modern feminist ideals of equality and autonomy—women in early Islam, such as Khadijah, the Prophet’s first wife, and Fatimah, his daughter, actively participated in public life, commerce, and scholarship. Hazrat Zainab bint Ali is part of this historical continuum: a lineage of Muslim women who resisted tyranny and injustice. Figures such as Zainab are now increasingly reframed as spiritual forerunners of feminism—women who exercised leadership, commanded respect, and asserted agency within an Islamic framework. As one contemporary scholar notes, Zainab’s life can be interpreted “all the way back in the seventh century” as embodying “feminist ideals,” making her story “vital to the history of female empowerment.”

At Karbala, all the male members of the family, including Imam Hussain, were martyred, leaving behind women and children. Among the survivors were Zainab bint Ali, her sister Umm Kulthum, and Muhammad al-Baqir. Classical historians, including al-Ṭabarī, provide detailed accounts of these events. During the battle, Tabari records that at a critical moment, Zainab emerged from her tent and addressed the enemy commander, ‘Umar ibn Sa’d: “Woe upon you, Umar! Is Abu ‘Abd Allah [Hussain] being killed while you (stand by and) watch?” Her voice—challenging the moral conscience of the enemy—constitutes one of the earliest recorded instances of female protest in Islamic history.

When her words received no response, she continued: “Woe upon you (all), is there not a Muslim among you?”

Following the martyrdom of Imam Hussain, Tabari describes Zainab’s management of the crisis. She protected the honor of the camp and upheld the dignity of womanhood. As a woman, she assumed leadership of the household and protected the surviving members. It is reported that Imam Hussain entrusted the care of the women and children to her before his death. After his voice—symbolizing justice—was silenced by arrows, Zainab emerged as the pillar of strength for the survivors. Her courage and composure amid immense grief provided a practical and spiritual model for those around her, ensuring she did not falter in the face of adversity.

In the aftermath of Karbala, Zainab led the caravan of survivors first to Kufa and then to the Umayyad capital of Damascus as captives of Yazid’s army. Throughout this journey, she never relinquished her dignity or convictions. In Yazid’s court, she delivered a powerful address that highlighted the Prophet Muhammad’s generosity toward the Meccans and contrasted it with Yazid’s tyranny. In a well-known rebuke, she stated:

“O son of the freed [Abu Sufyan]! Is it justice that you keep your women and slave-girls in seclusion while parading the helpless daughters of the Prophet on camels in the hands of your enemies?”

She proceeded to denounce Yazid for arrogantly celebrating his victory, asserting that the memory of Hussain could never be extinguished:

“So scheme your schemes, and exert your efforts, and intensify your enmity, for by Allah, you shall never erase our remembrance, nor kill our revelation...”

These speeches, preserved in early Islamic sources, testify to her eloquence and moral clarity, even before foreign audiences. Her words moved many to tears or stirred outrage against Yazid.

Zainab’s leadership—both in the immediate aftermath of the battle and in the court of the Umayyads—has long been celebrated in Islamic tradition. Scholars refer to her as *Sayyidat Nisa’ al-Jannah* (“Leader of the women of Paradise”), and narrations describe how Imam Hussain valued her counsel. Without her “struggle, efforts, and honorable positions,” many believe that the revolution of Imam Hussain would have been forgotten. This traditional view underscores Zainab’s essential role in preserving the mission of Karbala. As Imam Hussain’s son later remarked, it was Zainab who “ensured that the message of Imam Hussain did not vanish from the pages of history.” In this way, she became the voice that transmitted Karbala’s moral and ethical lessons to future generations.

Her leadership was not only symbolic but also practical. During Imam Zayn al-‘Ābidīn’s illness, she personally ensured his safety and that of the entire caravan. By protecting Hussain’s heir and organizing the captives, she safeguarded both the Ahl al-Bayt and the continuity of the Imamate. In Damascus, Zainab served as the spokesperson of the Prophet’s household. Historians recount that crowds gathered to hear her recite the horrors of Karbala. Even in captivity, she cited Qur’anic verses and prophetic ethics, declaring, “I fear none but Allah,” and reminding Yazid that the days of oppression were limited.

Zainab’s eloquence was legendary. She could provoke emotion, divide public opinion, and incite criticism of the ruling authority. Her oratory became a potent political weapon—complementing Hussain’s sword. Some accounts indicate that after she chastised Yazid, even non-Muslim nobles pleaded for the release of the captives. Her respected lineage, piety, and intellect conferred upon her an authority that few women of early Islamic society possessed. Later commentators highlight her erudition: Imam Ali Zayn al-‘Ābidīn famously declared that she “is so knowledgeable herself that she does not need to be taught by someone else.”

Zainab bint Ali embodied qualities central to feminist thought: moral courage in the face of oppression, advocacy for justice, and an unwavering sense of personal dignity. Her actions defied stereotypes of women as passive observers. Rather, she actively shaped events—comforting the wounded, leading the survivors, and holding oppressors accountable. Today, she is often invoked as a prototype of Muslim female leadership and resistance. At approximately age ١٠, she endured unimaginable suffering and became the anchor for the remaining family. Thus, she stands as an exemplar of steadfastness, courage, humility, and inner strength. Several elements of her story align closely with feminist ideals of empowerment, including the following:

### **Empowerment through Knowledge and Speech**

Zainab was renowned for her intellect and eloquence. Known as *al-‘Āqilah* (“the wise woman”) and *al-‘Ālimah* (“the learned woman”), these titles underscore that her authority stemmed from merit and knowledge, not merely from her gender or lineage. She utilized her wisdom to educate others. After Karbala, Zainab is said to have returned to Medina and established educational centers for women. She dedicated her remaining years to promoting female education, producing a generation of women versed in theology, law, and social activism (Gephart, *Bringing the Lioness of Karbala to the West*, StandWithDignity.org). Her recorded speeches attest to her mastery of religious rhetoric and scripture, emphasizing that women can also be transmitters of religious knowledge and critique.

## **Moral Resistance**

Feminist thought frequently emphasizes the ethical dimension of resistance. Zainab's defiance was nonviolent but grounded in principled, prophetic ethics. Even in moments of personal trauma, she invoked shared religious values to challenge injustice. In Damascus, she famously quoted Qur'an ٣:١٦٩: "Think not of those who are slain for Allah's cause as dead..." as reassurance of the martyrs' divine reward. Her activism was thus directed toward fulfilling divine justice rather than any political aim. Her message—"Allah does not like oppression toward His servants"—resonates with modern feminist concerns and illustrates the historical precedent for women's moral agency in Islamic tradition.

## **Independence and Self-Sacrifice**

Zainab willingly chose to accompany Hussain on a dangerous path rather than remain safely in Medina. After his death, she refused to be silenced or subdued by the victors. Her strength and resolve mirror feminist principles asserting that women need not conform to socially prescribed roles of fragility. Male figures in her family acknowledged her leadership. In her later years—spent in teaching, prayer, and social engagement—she exemplified the integration of religious piety and social agency.

Hazrat Zainab's life affirms that Islam accommodates and even champions female leadership and agency. Like Khadijah, Fatimah, Maryam, and Asiyah, she exercised significant influence. Zainab in particular emphasized that women, too, are stewards of the ummah's moral and spiritual well-being. Her story resonates with feminist insistence on women's right—and duty—to speak publicly and uphold justice. The Qur'an's pairing of men and women in every spiritual category (e.g., Qur'an ٣٣:٣٥) offers further theological support for this vision of gender equity.

Though she fulfilled her role as a devoted family member by Islamic standards, Zainab transcended domestic boundaries when circumstances demanded. Unlike some modern feminist figures, she did not reject her religious identity but drew strength from it. Her piety, including regular observance of Tahajjud (night prayers), grounded her resistance in spirituality. Her example shows that devoutness and empowerment are not mutually exclusive; one can be religiously observant and still challenge unjust norms.

Today, Hazrat Zainab remains a revered figure, particularly in Shi'a communities. Her shrine in Damascus attracts pilgrims, and her narrative is widely commemorated in Muharram majālis. While she has been somewhat absent from mainstream feminist discourses, her story is gradually being recognized. American journalist Anna Gephart remarked that learning about Zainab made her "angry" for not having encountered such

a powerful feminist figure earlier in life. She described Zainab as “a strong feminist” whose narrative “must be told in the context of a modern feminist world.”

Moreover, Zainab’s legacy extends beyond religious contexts. Her epithets—“Lioness of Karbala” and “Second Fatimah”—are invoked by women’s rights activists and interfaith advocates across Muslim societies. During recent uprisings in the Middle East, she served as a symbol of moral resistance. Even beyond the Muslim world, her story has been cited as a classical example of female leadership confronting authoritarianism. The values she embodied—courage, eloquence, and resistance to silence—are universal and continue to inspire new generations in the pursuit of justice.