

The Tragedy of Karbala



The Prophet's ﷺ grandson's
struggle against
an oppressive tyrant

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"Verily, in the remembrance of Allah do hearts find rest".
[Holy Quran: Surah 13, Ar-Ra'd, Ayah 28]

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Jihad

The Struggle of Our Times

Jihad is often understood as fighting and aggression, sadly this is a limited meaning of the broad concept of Jihad as envisaged by the Quran.

Jihad is derived from the Arabic triliteral verb Ja-ha-da which means to strive, struggle and work hard. In Islamic law it is defined as 'to make every possible sacrifice for the protection, preaching and honour of Islam.' To utilise all physical, material and intellectual power at one's disposal, for furthering the cause of Islam, and to oppose the enemies of Islam. This Jihad is not merely optional or recommended but a compulsory duty of a believer. It must be emphasised that;

- Islam is not merely knowledge but action;
- Islam is not merely preaching but practicing;
- Islam is not merely explanations but creativity;
- Islam is not merely knowing purpose of life& achieving it;
- Islam is not merely philosophic debates but means of producing results

Salvation and success do not lie in asceticism and hiding from the world nor does success lie in meditation alone but depends on Jihad; striving and struggling.

In order to clarify the meaning of Jihad the Quran has contrasted it with sitting and laziness. In surah Nisa, ayah 95, Allah says: 'The believers who sit at home and remain unscathed cannot be equal to those who fight in the cause of Allah with their wealth and lives.'

The aim of this contrast is to show how far apart the two groups of Muslims are in God's view; it also reveals the nature of Jihad i.e. it is the opposite of laziness, sloppiness, casualness and sitting down!

Here we should pause for a moment and reflect on our own state, are we amongst the Mujahids or the sitting ?

Types of Jihad

The Quran talks about five different types of Jihad:

1. **Jihad against the self** - This is struggling against the lowly desires of the ego and trying to overcome the temptations; The yearning for pomp, greed for material wealth, envy and jealousy. The struggle is to uproot evil from the heart. In short working to improve one's morality and spirituality. This is precisely the kind of Jihad described in the following hadith, 'Jabar رضي الله عنه reports that the Prophet ﷺ was speaking to a group of companions who had just returned from the battlefield and he ﷺ remarked, 'congratulations on your safe return, you have returned from a lesser battlefield to a greater battle. The greater battle for a man is to fight against his lowly desires.' In another hadith he ﷺ said, 'The fighter is the one who fights against his ego.'

2. **Jihad with knowledge** - The messenger ﷺ said. 'Knowledge is my weapon. Congratulations on your safe return, you have returned from a lesser battle to a greater battle. The greater battle for a man is to fight against his lowly desires.' Most of the conflict around us is a direct consequence of ignorance. To remove the darkness of ignorance is the duty of every Muslim. Hearts are seldom captured by the sword but knowledge has that enchanting power. This is why God says, *'Invite people to the way of your Lord with wisdom.'* This is sometimes called Jihad bil Quran, Jihad using Quran. Whilst in Makkah, the blessed Mustafa ﷺ was told to use this type of Jihad, *"Do not follow the unbelievers but fight them with the big fight."* (Furqan, ayah 52). In other words use the powerful arguments of the quran to challenge and attack these pagans. According to Imam Abu Bakr Ar-Razi this form of Jihad is greater than Jihad with ego and Jihad with wealth.(See Ahkam ul Quran). Therefore it is the duty of every young Muslim to learn the knowledge of Islam so that they may be able to spread the truth.

3. **Jihad with wealth** - Mans material wealth is a trust from God; the man of faith happily spends it in God's path to earn his Lord's pleasure. Religious work like any other work requires money. Here lies the need for generous donations, to part with one's hard earned cash is a Jihad of a special kind and no wonder the Glorious Quran encourages this in various ways to give for good cause, *"Come out for Jihad in God's path whether you are equipped lightly or heavily, struggle with your wealth and person, that is better for you if you know."* In our materialistic society most of us are too busy to be able to spare time to learn the religion of God and even less likely to preach. However, we can take part in spreading Islam by

helping Mosques, Schools, charities and organisations doing Islamic work with our money. This is the least we can do for Islam.

4. **Jihad with sword** - The quran calls this 'Qital', or fighting and going to war, killing and being killed. It's sadly almost a necessity of human existence, whether we like it or not it's a historical reality that mankind will fight, he will wage wars against others. writing about this necessity of wars Hammudah Abdalati says: *'This may sound strange. But is it not a matter of historical record that humanity - from the early dawn of history up till now - has suffered from local, civil and global wars? And it is not also a fact that, more often than not, victorious allies settle their disputes over their gains and the status of their defeated enemies through wars and threats of wars? Even today humanity lives under constant fear and buzzes of war over many hot spots in the world. Could God overlook these facts of life? or could the Quran fail to deal with the matter in a realistic and effective manner? Certainly not! And that is why Islam has recognised war as a lawful and justifiable course for self defence and restoration of justice, freedom and peace.'* The Quran says, *'Fighting is prescribed for you, and you dislike it. But it is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you, and that you love a thing which is bad for you. God knows, and you know not.'* (Surah Al-Baqarah, ayah 216). Anyone who is killed in this noble cause is rewarded with nothing less than Paradise: *'And do not call those killed in God's path as being dead, they are in fact alive but you are not aware.'* (Surah Al-Baqarah, ayah 154). Allah says, *'Those who believe and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in Allah's cause with their goods and their selves have the highest rank in the sight of Allah. They are those who will achieve salvation.'* (Surah Tawbah, ayah 20)

5. **Jihad through righteousness** – Even good work done with the intention of pleasing the Lord and serving the humanity can be considered as Jihad. Women once came to the Prophet ﷺ and asked to be allowed to take part in the battle. He ﷺ said to them *'Pilgrimage is your Jihad.'* A certain man came to the blessed Prophet ﷺ from far away. He wanted to take part in a battle, he ﷺ asked him if his parents were alive. He replied 'yes.' The Prophet ﷺ told him *'go and serve them that's your Jihad.'* (Bukhari). In short any deed that is good is a Jihad.

The Jihad of Imam Hussain ؑ

The tragedy of Karbala¹ (61 AH) was an incident that took place in 61 AH yet it is still fresh in the minds of the Muslims. You may wonder why? Perhaps because Imam Hussain ؑ was the grandson of the Prophet ﷺ? Or because the forces of oppression were very brutal? Perhaps because it was a great Jihad? Perhaps it taught the Muslims to be determined to establish the truth and never to compromise with forces of evil. The Jihad of our times is to keep struggling against forces of secularism, atheism, consumerism and liberalism (lacking traditional principles and values)

With the aim of establishing traditional moral values of kindness, patience, gratitude, humility, modesty and respect. It is those values that guarantee true freedom to mankind and a sense of fraternity and one family

¹ Karbala is a city in Iraq, located about 100 km southwest of Baghdad. The name Karbala is derived from the word 'Karb' which means sorrow, and 'Balā' which means disaster. In the time of Imam Hussain's ؑ life, the place was also known as Al-Ghadiriyah, Nainawa, and Syathi'ul-Furat

The Tragedy of Karbala

The Background to the gruesome tragedy that shook the Muslim world

On the 10th of Muharram, 61 after Hijrah (680 AD) the grandson of the beloved messenger ﷺ was martyred by the army of Yazid. This tragedy shook the Muslim world and continues to be remembered by those who love the Prophet's ﷺ and his family.

The death of Imam Hussain ؑ, his struggle for truth, justice and the greatness of Islam is still commemorated today.

After the death of the beloved Prophet ﷺ in 11 AH, Abu Bakr ؓ became the first muslim ruler and took the title of Khalifa. He was followed by Umar, Uthman, and Ali (May Allah be pleased with all of them.) These four are known as the Khulufaa Ar-Rashidun – The Rightly Guided Deputies. By now, the whole Muslim world included the whole of the Arabian Peninsula. Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan in the East, Azerbaijan along the Caspian sea in the North, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Egypt in the West. The martyrdom of Ali ؓ left a vacuum for the leadership of this fast growing and energetic empire.

Amir Muawiya ؓ who had been the governor of Syria and Egypt took this opportunity to become the sole Muslim ruler. For the next 20 years Amir Muawiya ؓ justly ruled and extended the boundaries of the Islamic Empire. He conquered North Africa and Sudan, Northern India and Sindh and had been taken and further North Turkistan had also been conquered. In the West, Sicily and Crete had also been taken.

Amir Muawiya ؓ was a great statesman and strategist. Acting upon advice, he appointed his son Yazid as the heir to the throne; Amir Muawiya ؓ had instituted monarchy. He had successfully persuaded prominent people in Kufa, Damascus, Egypt and Hijaz (cities of Makka and Madina) to give allegiance to Yazid. Although there were some dissatisfied voices including Imam Hussain ؑ, Abdullah bin Umar, Abdu-Rahman ibn Abu Bakr, and Abdullah ibn Zubair, all of them were in madina.

Amir Muawiya ؓ died in 60 AH and Yazid was enthroned as ruler of the Islamic Empire. Yazid felt threatened by the refusal of Imam Hussain ؑ to swear allegiance to him. He feared that if Imam Hussain ؑ declared himself as Khalifa Hijaz and Iraq would automatically accept him and this will lead to conflict and war. Yazid wrote to Walid ibn Utbah, the governor of Madina to force Imam Hussain ؑ to give allegiance. Walid knew this was an impossible task, he summoned Imam Hussain ؑ and presented Yazid's letter. Imam Hussain ؑ diplomatically responded by saying that he needed to think about it.

Kufa in Iraq Simmers

The people of Kufa known better as Shi'ah Ali (friends of Ali عليه السلام) believed that the Khilafat was the right of the Prophet's صلى الله عليه وآله family only. When they heard about Yazid's appointment they decided to deny Yazid's Khilafat and instead gave allegiance to Imam Hussain عليه السلام. They were encouraged in their knowledge that Imam Hussain عليه السلام had also refused to accept Yazid as the Khalifa.

By now, Imam Hussain عليه السلام had moved with his family to Makka as he sensed trouble in Madina. The Kufans began to write letters requesting him to come to Kufa to take up the throne. Within a short period of time hundreds of letters had arrived all passionately asking him to come to Iraq and that they would lay down their lives for him. Imam Hussain عليه السلام was overwhelmed by all these requests so he sent his cousin Muslim ibn Aqeel to go and investigate their claims. When he arrived in Kufa he was given a rapturous welcome and within a few days, eighteen thousand Shi'ah Ali's had sworn the oath of allegiance to Imam Hussain عليه السلام. Muslim ibn Aqeel wrote to Imam Hussain عليه السلام stating that the people of Kufa sincerely want you as their Khalifa. Nauman ibn Bashir, the government and their spies were fully aware of all this, and informed Yazid that he would lose Kufa and Iraq if he did not appoint a governor in Kufa. Yazid acted hastily and sacked Nauman and appointed Abdullah ibn Ziyad as the new governor. Ibn Ziyad was ruthless and cracked down on Shi'ah Ali with an iron fist, he threatened them so much that they revoked their allegiance to Imam Hussain عليه السلام.

Imam Hussain's عليه السلام envoy Muslim ibn Aqeel was killed and the uprising against Yazid effectively quelled overnight. That was the loyalty of the Kufans for Imam Hussain عليه السلام.

Muslim ibn Aqeel's messengers had told Imam Hussain عليه السلام enthusiastically the Kufans were waiting for him. So Imam Hussain عليه السلام left Makka along with his family and many well wishes. At this time, the Imam عليه السلام knew nothing of the changed circumstances of Kufa under ibn Ziyad.

Abdullah ibn Abbas advised Imam Hussain عليه السلام not to go to Kufa. He told him the Kufans were not trustworthy and if he wanted to go anywhere he should go to Yemen, the home of the true believers of Ahle Bayt. But Imam Hussain عليه السلام believed that Yazid had declared his kingship and he would do anything to preserve it, he would even violate the sanctity of Makka. So he عليه السلام saw no point in staying in Makka. He wanted to make it plain that he would not show allegiance to a man who is undeserving of such noble office.

Ibn Ziyad received the news of Imam Hussain's عليه السلام departure from Makka, and made plans to capture him. He sent his army under the command of Hur Ibn Yazid and Amr Ibn Saad. They tried to stop his caravan moving towards Kufa and demanded that he gave allegiance to Yazid. The Imam عليه السلام refused. He was now stranded at Karbala. Ibn Ziyad ordered that they should not be allowed access to

the water of the Euphrates. Here on the desert of Karbala, the family of the Prophet ﷺ was left without water. Imam Hussain ؑ now realized that there was no alternative but to go ahead with a battle.

On the 10th of Muharram, Imam Hussain ؑ with his band of 72 came face to face with the army of Yazid. They fought bravely but were outnumbered 1:50.

The Story and its lessons

In Karbala, Imam Hussain ؑ told Ibn Zaid, general of Yazid's army that he was not looking for an armed conflict and wanted peace. Imam Hussain ؑ proposed to accept any of the three conditions:

1. To return back to Medina
2. To be sent to the borders of the Islamic lands
3. To meet Yazid in Damascus in Syria. Ibn Zaid refused to accept peace and warned that tomorrow he would launch the attack.

That night Imam Hussain ؑ gathered his family and relatives and said, *'You people are free to go. The enemy only wants me.'* Everyone replied, *'We will stay and die with you.'* All night they prayed and read Quran. In the morning Imam Hussain ؑ and 72 of his followers stood and faced the army of Yazid. Before the battle began, the Imam said to the enemy, *'O people! Do not be hasty, listen to my words. If you accept my offerings of peace and be just to me then you will be the most fortunate of people. Look who I am! Will torturing and killing me give you a pleasure? Am I not your beloved Prophet's ﷺ grandson? Am I not the son of Ali, one of the very first to accept Islam? Can you not remember the sayings of the Prophet ﷺ regarding me and my brother that we will be the chiefs of Paradise? Will you still go ahead and shed my blood?'*

But the enemy was oblivious to these holy words and in reply immediately launched an attack. Imam Hussain ؑ and his followers fought back. The enemy was surprised, they could not break through. For days Imam Hussain ؑ held them back. But the overwhelming numbers of the enemy eventually surrounded the camp and cut off the water supply from the River Euphrates.

The real time of Muharram had arrived. The sun was setting. It's Asr time. The Imam is preparing to leave his tent. Standing amongst his family, their sadden faces and tearful eyes gaze at him. Zainab looked at her injured brother. Sakina took a final look at her daddy. Sharbanu also looked at her beloved husband perhaps for the last time.

The Imam consoled everyone and counselled them to be patient and determined. He said goodbye and left the dark and gloomy tent. He came to sow the seed of speaking out for the truth and to water the fields of Islam with his blood. Since, in

nature one body gives way for another to be born in the world. The seed disappears in the soil so that the shoot may appear, buds of cotton lose their identity so that man may wear cotton, wheat grains are milled so that man may get bread, oil burns as the room may shine, the coal burns to produce the heat to produce steam to drive the turbines which produce the electricity. The grandson of the messenger of God ﷺ suffered pain, endured sorrows, allowed his children and relations to be slaughtered so that the people may learn to stand up against tyrants and oppressors. So that people would not submit to cruel rulers.

His mouth was like dry wood, he headed straight for the river, Shimr said to Amr 'look Hussain is thirsty and weak but still we can't control him, he is dying but more alive than us. If he is allowed to drink water he will be revitalised, stop him now!'

Amr orders his soldiers to close in on Hussain. The Imam lifts a handful of water to his mouth but a devilish man Ibn Ram fires his arrow at him and it strikes his mouth. He falls back painfully pulling out the arrow. He looks at the heaven and cries; 'God who else can I complain to other than you.'

Blood gushes from his wounded mouth. Like an injured lion he gets up, takes his sword and charges at the enemy. The son of Haider is ferocious and fights courageously, his sword moves like electric, chopping the heads of the Fussaqa. The enemy encircle him, draw closer to him. Hussain is bleeding from his 45 wounds, with arrows stuck all over. Finally Ibn Shareek cuts off his hand, he has bled so much that there is no strength left in his right hand and his legs give in, he falls. Syed is wounded, Syed has fallen, all alone, no one to help. Sunan comes forward and cuts off Imam's head. Thus the greatest sacrifice was completed.

Iqbal aptly says;

The story of Islam is simple but colourful, it began with Ismail and ended with Hussain

All were martyred except the women and Ali ibn Hussain ؑ, the son of Imam Hussain ؑ who was critically ill.

The Imam's ؑ head was cut off and put on a spear and sent to Yazid in Damascus.

A Hero of Islam: Imam Hussain ؑ

Imam Hussain was the grandson of the Prophet ﷺ. As a young man he was very pious, intelligent and extremely handsome. Historians have said he looked very similar to the Prophet ﷺ. The Prophet ﷺ loved his grandson very much. On one occasion the Prophet ﷺ leading the prayer. As he went into prostration (sajda), the young Hussain ؑ climbed onto the Prophets ﷺ back. The Prophet ﷺ remained in

that position for a long time until the boy climbed down. On another occasion the Prophet ﷺ was passing his

Daughter Fatima's ﷺ house and heard young Hussain ﷺ crying. The Prophet ﷺ stopped and went into the house and said, '*Fatima, don't you know it hurts me to hear Hussain cry.*'

Imam Hussain ﷺ learned his knowledge from his father (Ali ﷺ) He inherited virtues and chivalrous character from his father. He fought with great honour against the Christians in the siege of Constantinople.

In April 680 AD (61 AH), Yazid the son of Amir Muawiyah ﷺ proclaimed himself as the Kalifa of Islam. The vast majority of Muslims including many sahaba were shocked and refused to accept Yazid . The Khalifa should be elected by the plebiscite of the people and he, above all, should be an exemplary Muslim.

Yazid was a man who drank alcohol and committed adultery. He was both cruel and treacherous living a life of pomp and luxury. On one occasion he gained great pleasure by dressing up a monkey as scholar of religion and carried the animal mounted on a donkey wherever he went.

Imam Hussain ﷺ was the very opposite of Yazid. He was very pious and humble living a life of simplicity. Many Muslims wanted him to be the rightful Khalifa of Islam. Yazid sensed this and was outraged. He immediately went on a campaign of terror where many people were tortured and forced to give him the allegiance. However Imam Hussain ﷺ was not afraid and refused to recognise him.

Some Personalities of Karbala

1. Numan Ibn Bashir – He was the governor of Kufa. His allegiance was with Imam Hussain ﷺ, when Yazid found out this he sacked him and instead appointed Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad in his place.
2. Muslim Ibn Aqeel – The cousin of Imam Hussain ﷺ. He was sent to Kufa by Imam Hussain ﷺ to verify the support of the Kufan's for Imam Hussain ﷺ. When he came to Kufa, thousands of people swore oath of allegiance to him, showing their support for Imam Hussain ﷺ. However, as soon as Ubaidullah Ibn Ziyad became governor of Kufa they switched their allegiance and deserted Imam Hussain ﷺ who was brutally murdered in Kufa.
3. Hani - He was a wealthy leader in Kufa who gave refuge to Muslim Ibn Aqeel ﷺ in his own house. However he was discovered and killed by Ibn Ziyad.

4. Abbas - Imam Hussain's younger half brother. A staunch ally of Imam Hussain ﷺ till the end. He fought bravely in the battle of Karbala when he was butchered by the Yazidee's
5. Qasim - The son of Imam Hasan ﷺ and therefore a nephew of Imam Hussain ﷺ. He too was brutally martyred in Karbala.
6. Ali Akbar - The eldest son of Imam Hussain ﷺ. A handsome young man who was killed by the Yazidee's, as he challenged them courageously.
7. Sharbanu - The wife of Imam Hussain ﷺ. She was the daughter of the deposed king of Persia Yazdgerd. She accompanied her husband and stood by him till his death.
8. Ali Asghar - The six month baby of Imam Hussain ﷺ. Imam Hussain ﷺ held him in his arms showing the agony of the baby's thirst, but the barbaric army sent an arrow which pierced his tiny throat.
9. Zainab - She was the sister of Imam Hussain ﷺ. She witnessed the horrors of Karbala, survived and spent the latter days of her life in Cairo, where she is buried in an area named after her.

The battle between right and wrong: political consequences of Karbala

The tragedy of Karbala is one of the most famous events of Muslim history. It is not merely a story of the injustice perpetrated against an individual namely Imam Hussain ﷺ but it has a much wider significance. In particular it was a clash between monarchy and khilafat (the Islamic mode of government based on consultation, selective democracy and piety). The clash between truth and falsehood, the war between justice and oppression is as old as man. History is full of examples of just and upright people defending truth and challenging the tyrants even if the tyrant wielded the power of the state and the army.

The first thing in Yazid's rule with which Imam Hussain ﷺ was dissatisfied was the rejection of the Islamic principle of selecting the ruler by shura. The throne was handed down to Yazid. He was not selected by the righteous members of the community. He inherited power and authority. Imam Hussain ﷺ was not willing to accept his belligerent neglect of the Islamic principles. So he challenged Yazid's authority. The process of selective democracy and consultation which Muslims had so successfully applied until now was being wrecked. This was intolerable for Imam Hussain ﷺ.

The freedom to choose a pious and qualified leader that Islam had given to people was being taken away and the Muslim society once more thrown into the darkness of pre-Islamic feudalism and nepotism and tyranny. As the grandson of the Prophet

of Islam ﷺ and the son of the fourth khalifa Ali ﷺ, Imam Hussain ﷺ could not remain silent at such a tremendous change. He had to speak out against it. This was a political revolution that would destroy the Islamic society.

Imam Hussain ﷺ could not compromise with Yazid. Although he had no army he still stood up bravely against the tyrant. Thus setting an example for coming generations. He not only spoke out against the illegitimate government of Yazid but clashed with it. He knew he could not defeat the mighty armies of Yazid but he had to set a precedent. That tyranny and unjust rulers must not be allowed to get away with their ways. They must be stopped, fought against and if the price is one's head then so be it. For holding up the head of the Ummah he allowed his own head to be chopped!

The force of Yazid could not intimidate him. nor frighten him. Imam Hussain ﷺ gave this lesson to us with his blood. By being rebellious against the tyrant King, Imam Hussain ﷺ set a trend. The cause of justice, democracy and consultation was given a new lease of life by the blood of Hussain.

'As long as truth prevailed Imam Hussain remained a loyal and obedient citizen but when truth vanished he took out his sword and did not rest until he had sacrificed his life, wealth, relatives and friends for the establishment of truth.' (Ali Hugwari in Kushal Mahjoob)

The simple lesson of this great martyrdom is that a man of faith should be willing to even sacrifice his life for the sake of truth.

*In Hussain's grief eyes flow with tears
But again and again they say to me
'Proclaim the truth loudly
For still in this world there are
many tyrants like Yazid.*

Who was the Winner and Who was the Loser ?

The discussion of the following three points will help us to decide who was the winner and who was the loser in Karbala.

1. Yazid and his army were under the illusion that Imam Hussain ﷺ was fighting with them because it was an emotional and a temporary crisis. And that sooner or later he will give it up and even regret at what they had done. The question is is was this merely an emotional decision ?
2. It is well known that people join the side of the strong and avoid the weak side. People forsake the weak side. But did this happen at Karbala?

3. Yazid thought that after the demise of Imam Hussain ؑ his government would become legitimate and his role accepted by all the people. Did this happen?

All the historical evidence points to the fact that this was not an emotional off the cuff reaction but a carefully thought out plan of action. Imam Hussain ؑ was sure that Yazid was trampling over the boundaries of God and distorting the shariah. He had no right to do so and must be stopped. Imam Hussain ؑ kept on saying Yazid was wrong. Even when he was face to face with the mighty army of Yazid he said the same thing. Imam Hussain ؑ stood up for a principle. He would die for it but not compromise. And die he did. He gave the lives of his dearest and nearest and finally died himself.

Even after the martyrdom of Imam Hussain ؑ Yazid found no peace of mind. The people in Madina and other places were still unwilling to accept him. They were even more angered at Yazid for the killing of Imam Hussain ؑ. In fact the blood of Imam Hussain ؑ made things worse for Yazid's administration. Muslims could not tolerate this enormity, this injustice against the Prophet's ﷺ family. Shortly after Muawiya Ibn Yazid succeeded to the throne he abdicated saying '*I smell the blood of Hussain and it disturbs me.*'

Umar Ibn Abdul Aziz the just ruler of Bann Ummyyah would give 20 lashes to anyone who would call Yazid Amir ul Mumineen (the leader of faithful). All these historical records make it abundantly clear that Imam Hussain's ؑ decision to fight Yazid was the correct move at the time.

