

## **Background article: Practices, Festivals and commemorations**

### **Ashura: the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn**

The Day of Ashura is the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim year. It was the day, in the year 680, when Imam Husayn and his seventy-two companions were massacred by the Umayyads on the Field of Karbala. It is marked with deep mourning by Shi'a Muslims. Sunnis also deeply regret the death of the Prophet's grandson, but the commemoration that unfolds here is kept by the Shi'a.

### **The events behind Ashura**

{See the Section on Setting the Scene, The Shi'a perspective on Islam for more details and context}

Imam Hasan, the second divinely-appointed Imam, grandson of Muhammad and son of the first Imam, Ali, speaking in the name of God, designated his brother Husayn to succeed him before he died around 669. Husayn lived in Madina and observed his late brother's agreement to keep out of politics as long as the Caliph Mu'awiya lived. A crisis was bound to follow when Mu'awiya named his son Yazid to succeed him as Caliph. Yazid was notorious for his immoral life and failure to observe the most basic commands of the Qur'an. After taking over as Caliph on the death of his father in 680, Yazid decided to send out his agents to demand an oath of allegiance from the people individually. Imam Husayn could not possibly give such an oath to him. It would be openly to support a tyrant and fail completely to give the appropriate leadership to the community. In order to avoid an open clash with the agents of Yazid, Husayn moved from Madina to Makka with his family and a group of close supporters in the hope that the agents would not come for him and cause trouble in the holy city.

Iraq had always been the power-base of the Shi'a and especially the city of Kufa, where Ali was killed. The difficulty was that the people of Kufa were fickle supporters and could not be trusted. The leaders of the community there wrote to Husayn to say that they needed him as their guide and asked him to come to live amongst them. There was the obvious question as to whether they could be trusted on this occasion. Husayn sent one of his trusted companions, Muslim ibn Aqil, to check out the situation in Kufa. Yazid heard what was happening and replaced the Governor of Kufa with his own man, with orders to stamp out any support there for Husayn. Muslim ibn Aqil was killed and the people of Kufa were pressurised into withdrawing their invitation to Husayn.

Husayn knew that his duty was to go to support the people of Kufa. He also heard that the agents of Yazid were going to come for him in Makka, but he did not want to see the holy city defiled with fighting. Husayn left Makka with his family and close supporters during the Hajj of 680 and set off in the direction of Kufa. Yazid's man in Kufa heard what had happened and sent a force of soldiers under the leadership of al-Hurr to shadow Husayn's party. They had been ordered not to let him turn back to

Makka or to call at various settlements along the way. On one occasion, after several days of travelling, al-Hurr rode into Husayn's camp with his men. Such travel in the desert is demanding and water is always a concern. Husayn noticed that the soldiers and their horses were in need of water so ordered that his water supply should be shared with men and horses to quench their thirst. During the discussion between al-Hurr and Husayn, it came time for prayer and al-Hurr and his men lined up in one congregation with Husayn's party and prayed with Husayn acting as *imam*. Some days later, on the battlefield of Karbala, al-Hurr would leave the Umayyad army to ride to Husayn's side, to beg his forgiveness for the part that he had played in bringing him to this situation. He was forgiven by Husayn and fought on his side in the battle, ultimately dying at the hands of his former comrades.

Al-Hurr had orders to arrest Husayn and bring him to Kufa. Husayn resisted and insisted on returning to Madina. Both sides were reluctant to fight and so a compromise was reached. Husayn and his party would go to neither place until al-Hurr had received instructions from the Governor of Kufa. Some faithful people escaped from Kufa and came to join Husayn's party, which eventually numbered some seventy-two armed men plus women and children. Whilst waiting for the new instructions, both parties moved on in the direction of Karbala. When the instructions from Kufa arrived, they were forced to halt on the Plain of Karbala, where Husayn's party were surrounded and cut off from the river from which they drew their water. The Umayyad army was numbered in thousands, so the odds were impossibly stacked against Husayn. The climax came when Husayn was given the demand that he must pledge allegiance to Yazid at Karbala before he would be allowed to leave. This he could not do. He foresaw that this would result in a battle and there would be great loss of life. He asked his companions to leave him and go to safety to save their lives. They refused, saying that they would prefer to stay and die with Husayn.

Orders reached the Umayyad army to say that they were to use force and attack and kill Husayn. As the time of battle drew near, valiant attempts were made by members of Husayn's party to break through to the river to bring back water for the children; one such was made during the battle by Husayn's half-brother, Abbas, who was butchered in the process. Husayn approached the Umayyads to ask for water for his six-months-old son Ali Asghar but the Umayyads killed the child with an arrow to the throat whilst he lay in his father's arms. Husayn himself was the last to die after having been seriously wounded with swords and arrows. Eventually his head was cut off as a trophy and the bodies of the dead were desecrated by running the horses over them. The battle took place on the 10<sup>th</sup> of the month of Muharram (10 October 680).

The women and children, who were mainly the great-grandchildren of Muhammad, were taken as captives first to Kufa, where they were humiliated and had to watch the severed head of Husayn ridiculed. The same happened when they were led as prisoners to the Umayyad court in Damascus. The group included another son of Husayn, Ali ibn Husayn (also known as Zayn al-Abidin), who had been designated by his father as the next Imam, and Zaynab, the daughter of Imam Ali and sister of

Husayn. Eventually they were allowed to leave Damascus and return to Madina, where the fourth Imam lived out the remainder of his life.

### **Karbala remembered to this day**

This is such a momentous event in Muslim history that it is commemorated to this day by ten days of mourning. These begin on the first of the month of Muharram and reach their climax on Ashura Day itself, the tenth of the month. The solemn mood continues with a further forty days passed in remembrance. No celebrations take place during this time and Shi'a Muslims tend to dress in solemn clothing, with the women, and often also the men, wearing black. For the first nine days, there are nightly gatherings to re-tell the story. On Ashura Day itself, there are solemn processions and lamentations. These are days of spiritual renewal and reflection when people consider how they can strengthen their "Husayn nature" and combat any tendencies they may have to act with injustice and arrogance like Yazid. It is a time of renewal of commitment to oppose injustice wherever it is found and to support the cause of right: "If only I had been there with Husayn, I would have stood firm and died with him." The sacrifice of Karbala acts as a model for life wherever and whenever it is lived, as is shown by the saying, "Every day is Ashura; every place is Karbala." Every human being has the duty to promote the good within society and to oppose the evil or else injustice, tyranny and barbarism will prevail.

Husayn goes down in Shi'a history as the Prince of Martyrs. His death assumes almost cosmic proportions; how could anyone of any time not shed a tear for the pure and innocent Husayn thus cruelly murdered? A martyr is one who makes the ultimate submission of their life in obedience to the command of God to stand for truth no matter what the enemy does; even to the point of accepting death rather than disobedience. Death with justice is held to bring joy to the human heart, whereas life with oppression and injustice is suffering. This spirit of facing persecution and suffering in the knowledge that one is in the right has coloured Shi'a history. They have always been a numerical minority within the Muslim community and for most of their history have lived as a minority under non-Shi'a rule. They have faced persecution and several of the Imams have met with violent deaths; through all this, the example of Husayn stands centre stage.

The time of mourning and remembrance comes to an end forty days after Ashura, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of the month of Safar. This is called Arba'in (Arbaeen) and is marked with gatherings, processions and addresses to those assembled.