

## Introduction

Few people in world history have been so important that their names have lived on for centuries. How many events are of such significance that they are commemorated every year by tens of millions? What does it say when people are prepared to risk their lives to be able to take part in such acts of remembrance? Such a person was Hussain, the grandson of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam. The event was the terrible massacre in 680 when he was killed along with seventy-two companions. Yet this event is thought of as a victory. A victory for justice and truth. A victory to show that the purity of the message brought by the Qur'an and given to Muhammad must be defended at all costs and not defiled by those not worthy of it.

Something had gone horribly wrong in the early Muslim community. Here was the grandson of the Prophet being killed by those who claimed to lead that community, not even fifty years after Muhammad's death. How could such a catastrophe happen? As the grandson of Muhammad, who had been loved by his grandfather, who always wanted to have him nearby, all Muslims have great love and respect for Hussain. His killing is not a sectarian issue: one group of pious Muslims against another. It was the action of corrupt, tyrannical individuals who had captured the leadership of the Muslim community. Muslims, both Sunni and Shi'a, find that many of the leaders of this Umayyad dynasty, which ruled the Muslims from 661 to 750, were unworthy of that office and were far away from the ideals and practices of Islam as taught by the Qur'an and Muhammad.

The massacre took place on the tenth of the Muslim month of Muharram, the first month of the Muslim calendar, at a place called Karbala in Iraq. Shi'a Muslims, who have a special love for, and devotion to, Hussain (who has a unique and revered place in their understanding) will spend the first ten days of this month in deep mourning, remembering those events that culminated in the massacre. The beginning of the Islamic year is not just a season of mourning for Shi'a Muslims but also one of self-reflection and rededication – rededication of their lives to the ideals by which Hussain lived and for which he died. This period of revival comes to a climax on the tenth day, the anniversary of the massacre itself, the Day of Ashura. Throughout the world, wherever there are Shi'a Muslims, the Day of Ashura will be commemorated as a day of solemn lamentation. Ashura is followed by a period of forty days of subdued mourning, during which no weddings or other festivities take place. The whole season comes to an end on the fortieth day, Arbaeen, when millions of people converge on Karbala to pay their respects to Hussain and his stand for uprightness and justice. This pilgrimage to Karbala on Arbaeen goes way back into history; it commemorates the visit made forty days after the event by members of the family of Hussain who survived the massacre. At times of persecution pilgrims took back roads and travelled by night to avoid mortal danger. Many will walk fifty miles to Karbala from the city of Najaf, which is home to the shrine of Hussain's father. Others walk even greater distances from Iran or even from India. In recent years, the number of pilgrims has been approaching twenty million, making it the largest annual gathering on earth. It is a monumental achievement of the communities through which they pass, that the pilgrims are given food, drink, and first

aid; places are found for them to rest and sleep. All in an atmosphere of peace and harmony.

The history of humankind has witnessed many tragedies; in this sense the massacre at Karbala is not unique. It shows us the depths to which human beings can sink. It shows us also the length to which people are capable of going for the sake of their high ideals, for the sake of the just cause in which they believe, and out of pure love and devotion to God. The martyrdom of Hussain and his companions stands head and shoulders above such tragedies in the history of Islam. We might reflect upon the status of Hussain, the devastation of his family, what would have happened if the stand had not been taken, and the brilliance of the beacon that was lit on that day to show a way for all men and women to follow. As the story unfolds, there is much here upon which we can all ponder.

As we might expect, the vast majority of those who make the Arbaeen walk are Shi'a Muslims, but Muslims of all traditions take part on this day. Not only Muslims, but people of other religions and people who belong to no faith community. A wide range of people have been inspired by the example of Hussain, from Gandhi to Martin Luther King and Nelson Mandela. It is a fundamental principle of religion that great religious figures do not belong to their own community alone but, because they belong to God, they belong to all humankind. Hussain, the hero of Karbala, is worthy of consideration by women and men of every age and place on earth – and that is the inspiration behind this short book.

It is hoped that this book will stimulate some discussion about the relevance of Hussain, and his grandfather, for our own times. Both Hussain and the Prophet Muhammad deserve to be better known and to be discussed by the widest possible audience. The story in these pages has been told using traditional Shi'a sources, as listed at the end of the book. Each chapter begins with some discussion points to draw out elements of what follows. All dates are given according to the Common Era. With profound thanks, I acknowledge the contribution of Shaykh Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, who read and commented on each chapter, helped to unpick knotty questions, and improved the translation of many quotations.