

Who was Hussain?

Every one of us is born into a certain context. We are born at a time and place, and into a certain family. Many of the influences of our early life just seem natural. What part did our parents play in shaping the way that we think and act? If we were lucky enough to know our grandparents, what part did they play in giving us a set of values, a way to live our lives? If you think back though, how much were you aware of this at the time? Often our characters are shaped before we really know what is happening to us. What must it be like though to be born into a particular role early in life? Maybe we were born into a farming family, when it was an automatic assumption that we would take over the family farm. Maybe we had parents who were doctors or teachers; naturally we would feel the call to follow them. As a great philosopher once said, 'Life can only be understood looking backwards, but it must be lived looking forwards.' To understand 'Who was Hussain?' we need to begin by looking at the family from which he came.

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Hussain's grandfather was Muhammad, who was to become the Prophet of Islam. Muhammad was born in the year 570CE into a family of merchants living in the city of Mecca in the Arabian Peninsula. As a young man, he learnt the family business and established a reputation for being trustworthy and honourable. Mecca was a city associated with Abraham. He and his son Ishmael had built there the Ka'bah, a simple cuboid building built for the worship of God alone. The Arabs of that area had followed the religion of Abraham and Ishmael. They came to the Ka'bah on pilgrimage to worship God. About four hundred years before the time of Muhammad, idol worship spread down to Mecca from the ancient civilisation around Syria. Muhammad came from a family who had never worshipped idols but believed that there is only one God. He was a religious seeker, always in search of deeper understanding of the one God in whom he believed.

By the time that he was twenty-five, Muhammad had established a reputation as a reliable and efficient merchant. He attracted the attention of a rich widow called Khadija. She had inherited her husband's business but looked for a manager to go on camel-train journeys carrying her merchandise to faraway markets. She employed Muhammad and was so impressed by his character that she asked him to marry her. They were in a monogamous marriage for twenty-five years until Khadija died.

Muhammad's uncle had a young son called Ali. He came to live with Muhammad and Khadija. He was an established member of the household and so his character was trained by them both. Muhammad, whose mission was to lead people back to the purity of the faith of Abraham, received his call to prophethood in the year 610CE. This was when the Qur'an started to be revealed to him. It continued to be sent down from God in small portions until shortly before his death in 632CE. For those not familiar with the contents of the Qur'an, Muslims believe it to be the last scripture sent by God to the earth that confirms earlier scriptures and corrects any errors that have crept into them

over the centuries. It teaches the universal faith of Adam, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and thousands of other prophets sent by God to all the peoples of the earth. It contains guidance for an ethical way of life. Principal themes are the worship of God alone, establishing justice upon the earth, the value of all human life, the centrality of the family as the basis of society, care for the weak and defenceless, and that faith is expressed in actions to promote all that is good and oppose what is harmful within human society and the whole of creation. Muhammad was told by God in the Qur'an to call a meeting of his family and to explain that he had been called to be a prophet of God. At this gathering Muhammad asked who would believe him and follow him. Only Ali came forward to pledge his belief and support. He was still a youth of nine years at this time but Muhammad declared that he would be his successor as head of the community after him.

Muhammad and Khadija were blessed with a daughter called Fatima. She too grew up in this household and so both she and Ali were able to observe the life of Muhammad at close quarters. The Qur'an says that Muhammad is a 'beautiful example' of the way in which a human life should be lived (Q. 33:21). This was a life lived in obedience to the message of the Qur'an. This would bring fulfilment in this life and lead one to the life of Paradise after death. Not surprisingly then, both Ali and Fatima had their characters shaped by the life and example of Muhammad. They noted what he said, the way in which he behaved and the way that he treated other people: they just 'drank in' the way of life that he lived. Ali knew from the beginning that he would be called to be the leader of the new Muslim community after Muhammad. Naturally, he modelled his whole life on the example that he received so that he could fulfil this calling.

When Fatima grew up and became a young woman, many men approached Muhammad to enquire if they might be able to marry her but it was always planned in Muhammad's mind that Fatima should marry Ali, which she did. In this way they would carry on the style of life, shaped by the Qur'an and the example of Muhammad, into the next generation. Fatima and Ali had two sons, Hasan, who was born in 625^{CE}, and Hussain, who was born in 626^{CE}. As was the Arab custom, they both had 'son of Ali' included with their given name; so, Hussain ibn Ali. Khadija had died in 619^{CE}. The Household of the Prophet, or in Arabic the Ahl al-Bayt, then comprised five people: Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan and Hussain. Muhammad had a particular love for Fatima and always treated her with great respect. It is reported that he would stand up when she came into a gathering and give her his place. This special closeness continued throughout her life. We are told that when Muhammad lay dying, he told Fatima that his death was close. Her eyes were filled with tears. And then he told her that she would be the first of his family to die after him. And now her face was a picture of joy; to think that she would not have to live long without her beloved father and would soon join him in the life of Paradise.

There are many accounts of the special relationship that Muhammad had with his two grandchildren. As was quite common in Arab society at that time, he always spoke of them as his sons. He liked to have them near him as often as possible. We hear of him pausing a meeting when the two boys appeared and then bringing them to sit one on

each knee. On one occasion, we are told that one or both of them climbed onto his shoulders while he was in prostration on the floor in prayer. He held onto them and allowed them to ride on his back as he completed the prayer. Although they were still small boys, everyone could notice the special rapport that they had with Muhammad and the way in which he would train their characters. Muhammad referred to them as ‘The Leaders of the Youths of Paradise’.

Two special events made it very clear to Hasan and Hussain that they were indeed destined for a particular place within the Muslim community. Muslim scholars agree that these two events happened close together and towards the end of Muhammad’s life. The first event is recorded in the Qur’an (Q. 33:33) in which, Fatima, Ali, Hasan and Hussain were called by the Prophet, who then covered them all with his cloak or blanket. It was on this occasion that the verse of the Qur’an was revealed, ‘Indeed God desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household [Ahl al-Bayt], and purify you with a thorough purification.’ This event is of great importance especially for Shi’a Muslims. They understand that only the ultimately pure God can purify to an ultimate degree and thus these five, the Ahl al-Bayt, were rendered utterly pure and sinless. Therefore, when they spoke, their words could be relied upon to be without error. Over the next two hundred and fifty years, there were to be a further nine descendants of Hussain, who were chosen and similarly purified. These nine, plus Ali, Hasan and Hussain were the twelve divinely-appointed Imams, chosen by God to guide the community after the death of Muhammad. These twelve, plus Muhammad and his daughter, Fatima, exclusively comprise the fourteen members of the Ahl al-Bayt. Shi’a Muslims give particular weight to a Hadith, or authentic saying of Muhammad, that he would leave after him ‘two most precious things’, these being the Qur’an and the Ahl al-Bayt: never would they separate until the Day of Judgement at the end of the world. In this way, these divinely inspired leaders have an essential role to play as guardians of the authentic interpretation of Islam through all ages.

The second event took place in the year 631CE, the year before Muhammad died. A delegation had come to visit him from a Christian settlement in the south of the Arabian Peninsula called Najran. They had a long and detailed discussion with Muhammad about the correct way to believe in and worship God and about the person of Jesus. It was on this occasion that a large portion of verses of the Qur’an were revealed (Q. 3:1–85). In these verses the Christian understanding of Jesus as a divine being was corrected; Jesus had the great honour of being a prophet of God, like Muhammad. No greater honour could be given to any human being but he was not divine. After long discussion, the Christians and Muhammad were unable to come to an agreement on this question. It was then that Muhammad received a verse of the Qur’an which gave a way of resolving this question. ‘Come! Let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, our souls and your souls, then let us pray earnestly and call down God’s curse upon the liars’ (Q. 3:61). This form of mutual cursing was known before in the biblical tradition (1 Kings 18:20–40). It was the ultimate way of resolving a question of great importance and allowing God to decide. Whoever was not telling the truth would be cursed, indeed killed, by God. In Arabic this was called *mubahala*.

The next morning the Muslim and the Christian groups were to send forward the people referred to in this verse and then pray for God ultimately to decide their dispute. Muhammad appeared with his daughter, Fatima (our women), Ali, whom Muhammad often referred to as his soul (*nafs*), and Hasan and Hussain (our sons). It is reported that when the Christian delegation saw the eminence of those who were standing against them and when they reflected that Muhammad was so certain of the truth of his position before God that he was prepared to stake his entire family on the question, they decided not to go through with the mutual cursing. They argued that if Muhammad was indeed a prophet of God, then no good could come from such a challenge. Instead they asked Muhammad to send a wise member of his community to live amongst them to act as a judge in any question that they could not resolve themselves. They agreed that they would go back to Najran and live under Muhammad's protection, for which they would make a contribution to the Muslim community treasury.

These two experiences, coming on top of all that they had heard from their parents and grandfather about their special position within the Muslim community, had a profound influence on Hasan and Hussain. They knew that they were called perfectly to obey God in all things and to be God's representatives in guiding the community after Muhammad's death. In this way their characters were formed during these early years. The experience of Muhammad having complete trust in God and being prepared to sacrifice himself and all his family for the sake of the message became a model for Hussain's later life as we shall see. Hasan was only eight-years-old and Hussain six-years-old when their grandfather Muhammad died. Their mother Fatima died shortly afterwards. From now on they would be trained in the way of life laid down by the Qur'an and the Prophet through the life and teaching of their father Ali.