

# 'Ashura Lectures 1990

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An analysis into the Martyrdom of Imam Hussain through looking into Yawm al-Tarwiya

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# Yawm al-Tarwiya, a day of beginning and ending in the martyrdom of Imam Husayn

The day Imam Husayn began his tragic journey, his most tragic journey, was *Yawm al-Tarwiya*, 8th Dhu l-Hijja<sup>1</sup>.

*Yawm al-Tarwiya* is the day the pilgrims making the *hajj* collect water and provisions and head for Mind, ready to leave for 'Arafa on the next day. Before this, they normally make the *tawaff* of the Ka`ba and the *say* between al-Safa and al-Marwa.

Thus it is really the first day of the rituals of the *hajj*. Why did Imam Husayn, who loved the worship of God and practised the rites of religion whenever he could, leave the rest of the rituals of the *hajj*? He only performed the *tawaf* and the *say* and then trimmed his hair, thus having performed the rites of the *`umra*, the lesser pilgrimage<sup>2</sup>.

Why did he not perform the *hajj*? Why did Imam Husayn not delay his journey to Kufa for a few days? It would have made little difference in time. What was the urgency for his departure, for beginning his journey?

Here, I hope to provide the answer but that answer needs some awareness of the background to this decision, for it is in the background that the answer lies.

However, before going on to that, it must be remembered that that self-same *Yawm al-Tarwiya* was not only a day of beginning, i.e. the beginning of Imam Husayn's tragic journey to Karbala', but it was also a day of ending, the ending of the activity on behalf of Imam Husayn in Kufa.

For on that day Kufa became a city governed by martial law with soldiers on the streets and exits and entrances blocked. The Shi'a were in hiding, frightened for their lives. Thus, on the self-same day that Imam Husayn began his journey to Kufa, where the people had asked him to come, that city and those people had been forced to end their activity on his behalf.

This beginning and this ending that occurred on *Yawm al-Tarwiya* can only be properly understood and explained by looking at the events which led up to it.

After the death of Imam Ali, Mu'awiya had forced Imam Hasan to withdraw from political authority. The Imam had agreed in order to avoid further bloodshed, in order to avoid the *Umma* being torn apart even more by warring factions.

But Imam Hasan had not simply withdrawn, he had withdrawn on the basis of an agreement, in which, among other things, Mu'awiya had agreed that after his death, political authority should revert to those entitled to it. To all intents and purposes, this meant that political authority would revert to Imam Hasan and after him to his brother, Imam Husayn<sup>3</sup>.

As long as there was this possibility of the community returning to proper government without the awful bloodshed of a violent insurrection, the two brothers held to the agreement. However, Mu'awiya, himself, set about ruthlessly breaking other clauses in the agreement<sup>4</sup>.

He had agreed that Imam Ali should not be cursed, yet the Imam continued to be cursed from the pulpits in Umayyad controlled mosques, so much so that the brave Shi'ite Hujr ibn `Adi was killed on refusing to participate in such disgraceful and shameful practices<sup>5</sup>.

Indeed Mu'awiya took his outrageous behaviour a stage further by almost certainly arranging the poisoning of Imam Hasan<sup>6</sup>. Yet still Imam Husayn adhered to the agreement made by his brother. Why? Because an undertaking had been given by the Imam and the basic, most important condition had not yet been violated. As long as there was a chance that political authority might be transferred back to those entitled to it, to the Imams, Imam Husayn was going to adhere to the agreement.

In the face of the dishonour of the Umayyads and Mu'awiya, Imam Husayn gave the world an example of honour and integrity. Then Mu'awiya attempted to violate the ultimate clause of the agreement by arranging the succession of his son, Yazid. Imam Husayn refused to accept this. When Mu'awiya died and the Umayyad minions accepted Yazid, Imam Husayn refused to acknowledge Yazid<sup>7</sup>.

This breach of the agreement meant that Yazid's rule was unconstitutional, illegal, a violation of all the principles of legal constitutional government.

However, Imam Husayn was threatened with death if he refused. He was living in Medina, the Sanctuary of the Prophet, but he saw that Yazid had no respect for the Sanctuary of the Prophet. Therefore Imam Husayn moved to Mecca, the Sanctuary of God, in the hope that Yazid might at least show respect to God<sup>8</sup>.

When the Imam moved to Mecca, the Shi`a in Kufa had some hope that he might lead them to victory, that with their help he might become the leader of the *Umma* in the full sense that was his right. They wrote to him asking him to come to Kufa. Others also wrote, not true members of the Shi`a, but political opportunists who felt there might be some advantage to themselves<sup>9</sup>.

Imam Husayn sent his cousin Muslim ibn `Aqil to find out about the state of affairs in Kufa. Muslim's task was to ascertain the strength and reality of support for Imam Husayn and to organize it, if it was sufficient, for the Imam's coming, but he was not sent to prepare for battle. He reported to the Imam that there was strong support for him in Kufa and urged him to come.

However, Yazid had received information of the situation in Kufa. He appointed a ruthless governor, Ibn Ziyad, to suppress opposition in Kufa. This man, by spies and bribery and treachery, managed to infiltrate Muslim's organization. He arrested the man whom Muslim was staying with, Hani' ibn `Urwa. When Muslim learnt of this, he immediately summoned his supporters to instant action.

This was an impossible situation, he had not consulted his main advisers, many of whom do not seem to have been present. The undertaking was premature, disorganized and lacking real generalship.

It had been an immediate response to an unexpected situation. As such it was doomed to failure. Soon, as a result of Ibn Ziyad's use of bribery of the tribal leaders, Muslim was left abandoned, hiding alone in the streets of Kufa. The next day he was captured and both he and Hani' were killed.

That enterprise had come to an end on Yawm al-Tarwiya, the very day that Imam Husayn was beginning his tragic journey. But why did the Imam begin that tragic journey on that day? Mecca was the Sanctuary of God and the Imam did not want to be in any way responsible for the violation of God's Sanctuary, even as a victim.

He had refused to begin his enterprise in Mecca itself because he did not want Mecca to be the scene of fighting and therefore a violation of God's Sanctuary. He was also aware that the agents of Yazid were ready to kill him in that Sanctuary. <sup>10</sup>

Therefore he realized that, in order to preserve the sacredness of Mecca, the Sanctuary of God, he had to leave it. He said:

**By God, I would prefer to be killed a few inches outside the Sanctuary of Mecca, than to be killed**

**a few inches within it. I swear by God that even if I were in the deep hole of a snake, they would pull me out in order to carry out their will. By God, they will violate me just as the Jews violated the Sabbath<sup>11</sup>.**

This was the reason for the beginning of that journey on *Yawm al-Tarwiya*. That day, *Yawm al-Tarwiya*, was a day of beginning to avoid the violation of the sanctity of Mecca; it was a day of beginning towards a destination where the enterprise had already reached its ending; it was the first tragic day of that most tragic journey.

<sup>1</sup>. Tabari, *Ta'rikh* (Leiden, 1879–1901), II, 271–2.

<sup>2</sup>. Tabari, *op. Cit.*, p. 276.

<sup>3</sup>. According to Ibn Qutayba (attributed) in *Al-Imama wa-l-Siyasa* (Cairo, 1904), I, 261, it was to go to Imam Hasan. Ibn A'tham suggests a shura, see *Al-Futuh* (Hyderabad, 1971), IV, 159–60.

<sup>4</sup>. For a fuller discussion of the agreement and the breaches of it, see I. K. A. Howard, 'Events and Circumstances Surrounding the Martyrdom of Husayn b. `Ali', *Selected Articles from Al-Serat* (London 1975–1983), pp. 58–60.

<sup>5</sup>. See *ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>6</sup>. See Shaykh al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, English translation by I. K. A. Howard, (London, 1981), pp. 287–88.

<sup>7</sup>. I. K. A. Howard, 'Events . . .' *op.cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>8</sup>. I. K. A. Howard, 'Events . . .' *op.cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>9</sup>. For a fuller account of Muslim ibn `Aqil in Kufa, see *ibid.*, pp. 62–6.

<sup>10</sup>. For references to this, see S. H. M. Jafri, *Origins and Early Development of Shi'a Islam* (London, 1979), p. 218, note 23.

<sup>11</sup>. Tabari, *op. Cit.*, p. 276.

## Some of the people Imam Husayn met on his tragic journey to Kufa

When Imam Husayn travelled along that tragic road to Karbala<sup>1</sup>, many tribesmen joined him. Few of those who joined him on the road actually died at Karbala<sup>1</sup>. But these men were not traitors or cowards, they left the Imam with the Imam's blessing. Most of them had originally believed that they were going to a victory that was already awaiting them, but some actually joined him knowing that the end of the journey was doom. These men were important witnesses of events and have provided us with many of the details of the account of that tragic journey and the dreadful slaughter.

Among the tribesmen who joined the Imam on the journey were two men from the tribe of Asad. On *Yawm al-Tarwiya* these two men from the tribe of Asad, who lived in Kufa, entered Mecca just before Imam Husayn left. They had come to make the pilgrimage. They saw him leave and heard him refuse to lead a revolt in Mecca. It seems they performed the *tawdf* around the Ka'ba and the say between al-Safa and al-Marwa with him. When these rites were finished, Imam Husayn trimmed his hair as the completion of the lesser pilgrimage, the *`umra*, and departed for Kufa while these two men went on to

Mina to perform the rites of the *hajj*<sup>1</sup>.

After they had completed the pilgrimage, both of them were determined to join Imam Husayn. Just as they were catching up with him and about to join him, they saw a rider coming from Knfa deliberately turning off the road to avoid meeting the Imam. The two men, anxious to discover his reason for doing this, went after him.

They caught up with him and, as they all came from the same tribe, conversation among them all was easy. The man from Kufa told the other two that he had left Kufa after Muslim ibn `Aqil and Hani' ibn `Urwa had been put to death. Kufa was now an armed camp waiting to seize Imam Husayn. With this news, the two men went back to Imam Husayn's group and asked to speak to him.

They said they had news to give him and wanted to know whether they should speak to him privately or in front of all the people with him. The Imam held no secrets from his faithful followers: they all learnt of the sad events in Kufa. After a family conference, all the members of the Imam's family wanted to continue the journey with him, but with the Imam's blessing, some of the tribesmen left him then<sup>2</sup>.

However, these two men from the tribe of Asad stayed with the Imam and were still with him when he was stopped by the vanguard of the forces sent against him by Ibn Ziyad. They seem to have escaped from death either before or during the battle. Imam Husayn had given them and other tribesmen permission to leave him when he said, on the day before the battle:

I know of no followers more fitting and more virtuous than my followers, nor of any family more pious and caring about family relationships than my family, may God reward you well on my behalf. Indeed I think that our final day will come tomorrow through these enemies. I have thought about you.

All go away with the absolution of your oath, for there will be no obligation on you from me. This is a night whose darkness will give you cover to use. Use it as a camel, to ride away with it. Every one of you take the hand of a man from my family, then scatter in your lands of the Sawad and your towns, until God relieves you. The people only want me. If they find me, they will cease searching for anyone else<sup>3</sup>.

Another two Arab tribesmen went to Imam Husayn and asked if they could stay and fight with him but when there were no other of his supporters left that he would allow them to escape. He gave them the permission they sought and when most of his supporters had been killed, they escaped<sup>4</sup>.

To these four men, we are greatly indebted, for they have provided us with many of the details of what took place on Imam Husayn's tragic journey.

There were two men whom Imam Husayn actually asked to join him on his journey. The first of these, Zuhayr ibn Qayn, did not belong to the Shi`a. If anything, he seems to have been opposed to the Shi`a, he appears to have been a man who was a good Muslim but whose only thoughts on matters of the true destiny of the Islamic *Umma* concerned his own interests which he perceived, or was told, were not

going to be improved by the advent of the Imam to political office.

He had been on the pilgrimage and was returning with his wife and some of his tribesmen. They must have caught up with Imam Husayn and the two parties were travelling alongside each other. Zuhayr was trying to avoid any contact with the Imam and kept his camp away from Imam's.

In fact when Imam Husayn sent a messenger to ask to talk to him, he refused. However, when his wife shamed him into going to talk to Imam Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, the reality of his former false ideas became clear, he felt the magnetism of the charismatic Imam, he perceived his goodness, he saw an ideal that could not be deserted. He left his wife and comrades and joined the Imam<sup>5</sup>.

He became an important adviser and supporter and died fighting for him at Karbala<sup>6</sup>.

The other person whom Imam Husayn met and asked to join him, was `Ubayd Allah ibn Hurr. He was a Kufan noble who earlier in Kufa had professed some support for the Imam, but this was talk rather than action. He had left Kufa in order to avoid the moral dilemma of choosing sides. By his earlier words he would have had to have chosen Imam Husayn's side, but he felt that that would be the losing side. By chance, he had pitched his tent along the route that Imam Husayn was taking after being intercepted by the vanguard of the enemy's forces. So, when Imam Husayn asked him to join him, he refused and the Imam went on without him.<sup>7</sup>

He regretted this decision for the rest of his life. After Imam Husayn was killed, he went to visit Karbala' and there recited a beautiful poem of sadness, regret and remorse. In it he says:

**Oh how much I regret that I did not help him!**

**Indeed every soul that does not set upon the right course, regrets.**

**Indeed because I was not among his defenders,**

**I have a great grief that will never depart.<sup>8</sup>**

Finally there was a third group of people who joined Imam Husayn. These men came from the ranks of the enemy who had come to kill Imam Husayn. The most notable of these was Hurr ibn Yazid. He had been the commander of the vanguard of horsement sent out to stop Imam Husayn from getting to Kufa. He was a soldier, a loyal, trustworthy man who obeyed orders and expected his leaders to act with integrity and honour. He had stopped Imam Husayn and accompanied him around Kufa, neither letting him go on into Kufa, nor back to Mecca<sup>9</sup>.

In this period, he got to know more about the Imam and the moral implications of what he was involved in. He was able to recognize the goodness, the honour, the outstanding qualities of the Imam. He never believed that his superiors would fight Imam Husayn and kill him. Right up until the last moment, he hoped that they would change their orders.

When he saw that they would not, on the very morning of the dreadful battle, he rode over to the Imam,

he asked for forgiveness for what he had done and asked if he could fight and die for him<sup>10</sup>. With the approval of the Imam, he fought bravely and died in the service of the Imam<sup>11</sup>.

These three groups of people whom the Imam met on his tragic journey to Karbala<sup>1</sup> are important in that those who survived give us valuable information about the tragic journey. This is essential if the account of the Imam's great sacrifice is to be known by later generations. The others who died with Imam Husayn are in many ways more important because their sacrifice on behalf of the Imam serves as an inspiration to the rest of us.

- <sup>1</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 275–6.
- <sup>2</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 291–2.
- <sup>3</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 321.
- <sup>4</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 321–2.
- <sup>5</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 290–91, 354–5.
- <sup>6</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 350.
- <sup>7</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 305–6.
- <sup>8</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 389.
- <sup>9</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 297–300.
- <sup>10</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 333–4.
- <sup>11</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 350.

## The role of the Shi`a in Kufa in the martyrdom of Imam Husayn

The role of the Shi`a in Kufa is very important as one of the factors involved in Imam Husayn beginning his tragic journey on Yawm *al-Tarwiya*, 8th Dhu al-Hijja, and in the ending of activities on behalf of the Imam on that day with the defeat of his cousin Muslim ibn `Aqil.

At first sight the whole of the Shi'i movement appears blameworthy. They invited the Imam to come to Kufa; they failed to give proper support to Muslim ibn Aqil when he was defeated; they lived on content with life after their Imam had been killed. In some ways they have been described as responsible for the death of Imam Husayn.

However, this terrible indictment of the Shi`a in Kufa does not apply to the real Shi`a in Kufa, the men who were really committed to the *ahl al-bayt*, the family of the Prophet.

Many people in Kufa were described as members of the Shi`a but only a few of them can really be so described. There were many people in Kufa who were dissatisfied with Umayyad rule but, in the main, their dissatisfaction involved personal interests; they thought these personal interests would be better

looked after by a Caliph who did not live in Damascus and use most of their taxes for the benefit of himself and the Syrians.

Their interests, then, were personal gratification of immediate needs; they were not really concerned about what the Imams have always held to be important: those things which will benefit the Islamic *Umma* in its search for obedience to the will of God. Many of the tribal leaders were men from families that had opposed Islam and the Prophet.

Earlier, because of this they had lost their positions but later they were allowed to return to leadership of their tribes by `Uthman and the Umayyads. As long as there was a chance of success for Imam Husayn's enterprise, they pretended support, hoping that, if successful, the Imam would allow them to remain in their positions. In reality, they supported the Umayyads and Yazid, their paymaster. They were the equivalent of the hypocrites, the *munafiqan*, in the time of the Prophet.

The real Shi`a in Kufa, life-long supporters of Imam `Ali and the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt*, met in the house of their leader Sulayman ibn Surad, and there they heard that Imam Husayn had refused to pledge allegiance to Yazid and had gone to Mecca. They decided that they would write and ask the Imam to come to Kufa. However, Sulayman warned them that they should only do so if they were prepared to lay down their own lives to defend the Imam's.

Yet of the four leaders who signed the letter<sup>1</sup>, only one, Habib ibn Muzahir, managed to get to Imam Husayn when he was stopped so tragically at Karbala', and to die fighting on his behalf in that battle<sup>2</sup>.

Why is that? Or even, why did they not die defending Muslim ibn `Aqil?

To answer these questions it is necessary to look at the situation when Muslim ibn Aqil arrived in Kufa. The place was alive with rumour and talk of the coming of Imam Husayn. The authorities of Yazid in Kufa were lax and ineffective. Therefore everybody believed that it would be easy to overthrow them. Even the tribal leaders had written to Imam Husayn urging him to come<sup>3</sup>.

When Ibn Ziyad arrived as Kufa's new governor, he bribed the tribal leaders to support him; he bullied and bribed lesser men to inform on each other; he used money and spies to infiltrate the Shi`i organization which through the laxity of the previous governor had been too open. He soon learnt a great deal about the organization. He then arrested Hani', the man whom Muslim was staying with. As a result, Muslim called his supporters to fight but it was a premature call, a reaction to an unexpected situation<sup>4</sup>.

In the ensuing conflict there is no mention of the four Shi`i leaders who had written to Imam Husayn. Such was their devotion that it is unlikely that they would not have been present in the battle unless they were simply unavailable. In view of the haste in which the whole matter took place, this seems highly likely.

Of the four leaders that Muslim appointed on that day [5](#), only two are known to belong to the group of the real Shi`a, the other two are unknown and it seems that the latter two almost certainly deserted him when the situation was proving dangerous. As for the other two, they were good, brave members of the Shi`a.

They would not have deserted Muslim and must have become separated from him in the chaos that took place. Both of these men, Muslim ibn `Awsaja and Abu Thumama, were among the small group of members of the Shi`a in Kufa who were able to get to Imam Husayn and die fighting for him at Karbala'[6](#).

With the defeat of Muslim ibn `Aqil, Kufa was under martial law, spies were everywhere, every road was patrolled, every exit to Kufa blocked, it was difficult for anyone to get to Imam Husayn. Yet in addition to the three names which have already been mentioned, a few more managed to do this. One of the best known of these was Nafi' ibn Hilal[7](#).

He also died fighting for Imam Husayn at Karbala'[8](#). I am sure that many others of the real Shi`a in Kufa wished to join Imam Husayn but were unable to do so. Their later actions seem to confirm this because after the tragic martyrdom of Imam Husayn, they spent the next few years of their lives in grief for the martyred Imam and in activities dedicated to avenging his death.

When the opportunity came amid the chaos of an Umayyad internal struggle for power, they marched against the army of Ibn Ziyad which had had to leave Kufa because of the changed political circumstances.

First they went to the tomb of the martyred Imam and spent the day and night in grief and lamentation for the suffering and death of Imam Husayn. In one sense this was the first public *majlis* that took place but this was a *majlis* with a difference: it went on for a day and a night and it was a preparation for death. They were determined that they would avenge the death of Imam Husayn and atone for their failure or die. They died, almost to a man, and by their deaths they demonstrated their true commitment to the Imam and atoned for the failure which circumstances had made inevitable[9](#).

Thus the real Shi`a of Kufa may have been a cause for the Imam's journey and his death, but by their actions they have kept his memory alive until today.

[1.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., Ibid., pp. 235–6. Apart from Sulayman and Habib, the other two were Musayyab ibn Najaba and Rifa`a ibn Shaddad.

[2.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 348.

[3.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 235.

[4.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 255.

[5.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 255.

[6.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 343 and 350.

[7.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., P. 302.

[8.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 351.

# The Survivors from the Household of Imam Husayn

The survivors of the tragic journey to Karbala' from the household of Imam Husayn can be divided into three groups: servants, a few male relatives and the women who had accompanied Imam Husayn. Of the servants who accompanied Imam Husayn, a few survived. The most notable of these was `Uqba ibn Sim'an who was the personal servant of Imam Husayn. He had come into the Imam's family through the Imam's marriage to Rabab bint Imru' al-Qays<sup>1</sup>.

He appears to have been an old man who was not able to take part in any of the fighting. When captured at the end of the battle and asked who he was, he answered that he was a servant who was owned, thus indicating that although he was a freed slave he regarded himself very much as in the service of the Imam.

His survival is very important for our account of Imam Husayn's journey. He gives us many details of that journey and in particular he gives us details of the negotiations with the enemies of Imam Husayn which the Imam conducted. `Uqba was close to the Imam during all of these. The enemies of the Imam and the supporters of Yazid later put forward claims and propaganda to try to undermine people's respect for the heroism of the Imam, and also to try to shift the ultimate responsibility for his death away from Yazid by making it all the fault of Ibn Ziyad. They claimed that Imam Husayn was willing to accept the authority of Yazid but could not bring himself to make the pledge to Ibn Ziyad, which Ibn Ziyad insisted on receiving. Thus they try to show that it was Ibn Ziyad's fault, not Yazid's, that the Imam was killed.

`Uqba ibn Sim'an is the man who is able to rebut this wicked propaganda. He says:

I accompanied [Imam] Husayn. I left Medina for Mecca with him and Mecca for Iraq. I did not leave him until he died. There was nobody who addressed a word to him in Medina, in Mecca, on the road to Iraq or in the camp until the day of his death without my hearing the conversation. By God, he did not give the promise which the people claim to recall when they allege that he would put his hand in the hand of Yazid ibn Mu'awiya or that they should send him to anyone of the Muslims' border stations. Rather he said: 'Leave me and I will travel this broad land so that we may see how the people's affair develops'<sup>2</sup>.

The witness of `Uqba ibn Sim'an is an important, an essential, rebuttal to the scurrilous propaganda of the opponents of Imam Husayn.

Of the male relations of Imam Husayn who set out on that tragic journey, nearly all died the deaths of

martyrs. One or two of the sons of Imam Hasan received guarantees of security from relatives of their mothers and were allowed to leave. In this connection Abbas, `Uthman, Ja`far and `Abd Allah, all half-brothers of Imam Husayn refused such offers of security and preferred to die with the Imam<sup>3</sup>.

However, the survivor who was the most significant, the most important, was the young man who became Imam after his father's death; I mean Imam Zayn al-Abidin `Ali ibn Husayn. It seems that God had intervened, for on the day of the battle the future Imam was struck down by an illness so severe that he was unable to raise himself from his bed and take part in the fighting. Otherwise he would certainly have fought and died. Thus God spared his life at that juncture so that the Imamate could pass from his martyred father to himself.

His survival has also added enormously to our record of that fatal journey and the days at Karbala' before the battle. After the battle he was dragged from his sick bed and taken to Ibn Ziyad along with the women members of Imam Husayn's family<sup>4</sup>.

There he was almost killed but for the intervention of his aunt, the sister of Imam Husayn, Hazrat Zaynab. The young man, now the new Imam, had in his captivity not only grief for his martyred father, but also responsibility from the grieving women of his family. He had to endure the threats and taunts of Ibn Ziyad and Yazid. Yet his destiny, the destiny for which the illustrious Imam, the martyred Imam, had prepared him, was to carry on the leadership of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, the holy family of the Prophet, and the Shi`a. No one can dispute that he accomplished with great honour the destiny left to him on the blood-strewn plains of Karbala'.

Finally there is the third group of survivors, the women of the family of Imam Husayn. In particular I shall speak of Hazrat Zaynab but although she is the most wondrous, the most tragic of all these women, all of them suffered terribly. Before I go on, I must endeavour to answer the question frequently asked, namely, why did Imam Husayn take, or even allow, these women with him on that tragic journey?

The answer to this question lies in the difference between politics and idealism. As far as the Imam was concerned the Shi'a, the tribal leaders, and nearly all the people in Kufa had asked him to go there. He was going, therefore, not in war but in peace. He expected, at least according to their promises, that there would be no real fighting. His own envoy had sent him word that everything was ready for him.

In his own heart the Imam certainly knew that this was not the case but his generosity of spirit required that those who had voluntarily given him such undertakings should be accepted according to their undertakings; he could not judge them as sinners until they had sinned.

Thus when the Imam set out with his family he was declaring to the Kufans, to the world, his willingness to give them an opportunity to fulfill their promises. Furthermore, the women of the holy family of the Prophet were special, honoured above other women. They were to symbolize the sufferings of women down through the ages when they have to endure the loss of their good and honourable men at the hands of political and military opportunists. These women also suffered the anxiety of the coming loss as

the battle drew near. This is typified by the account of Hazrat Zaynab just before the battle. Imam Husayn recited:

**Time, shame on you as a friend!  
At the day's dawning and the sun's setting  
How many a companion or seeker will be a corpse?  
Time will not be satisfied with my substitute,  
the matter will rest with the Mighty One  
And every living creature will have to journey  
along the path.**

Hazrat Zaynab, his sister, could no longer control herself. She jumped up, tearing at her clothes and said:

**I will lose a brother! Would that death had deprived me of life today! My mother Fatima is dead and my father Ali and my brother Hasan. Oh you are the successor and the guardian of those who remain . . . . May God accept my life for yours!**

The Imam tried to pacify his sister but she could not be pacified and eventually, so severe was her grief, that she fell down in a faint. The gentle Imam bathed her face with water and told her,

**'Sister, fear God and take comfort in the consolation of God.'<sup>5</sup>**

The next day these women had to watch the men of their family struck down one after the other until finally Imam Husayn himself was killed. The grief of that was not enough, their tents were pillaged, their possessions stolen, their very clothes torn from them.

Then, in a pathetic, sad column they were taken as prisoners to Ibn Ziyad together with the new Imam Zayn al-'Abidin. When they were brought before him, he was about to have the new Imam, son of the martyred Imam, killed. Hazrat Zaynab clung to the arm of the young Imam and begged that if Ibn Ziyad killed him, he should also kill her. Realising that she really meant it, Ibn Ziyad was shamed into sparing his life<sup>6</sup>.

Their miseries were not yet ended, the tearful procession of women was taken to Yazid and then to Medina. There, Hazrat Zaynab sought to keep the memory of the martyred Imam, Imam Husayn, alive. Such was her influence, the power of her grief, that the Umayyad authorities became disturbed. They knew that the memory of the Imam preserved by the tears of those who loved him, was a threat to their own immoral existence. According to some sources, they sent Hazrat Zaynab into exile in Egypt, where, grief-stricken, she died in the following year<sup>7</sup>.

These survivors from the household of Imam Husayn, whether servant or young Imam or sister, have made the story of Imam Husayn ring out through the ages right up to the present time.

- [1.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 232.
- [2.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 315.
- [3.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 317.
- [4.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 367.
- [5.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 323–4.
- [6.](#) Tabari, op. Cit., p. 373.
- [7.](#) M. M. Shams al-Din, The Rising of al-Husayn, English translation by I. K. A. Howard (London, 1981), p. 145.

## Lessons from the Martyrdom of Imam Husayn

Students of the so-called historical method argue that in terms of immediate history, nothing was achieved as a result of the events on `Ashura, i.e. Muharram. They say that it was a tragedy, but its overall effect on the political events of the period was negligible.

This is their conclusion and when they are asked why the Islamic books of history, written by scholars many centuries ago, devote more space, more pages, more words, to that event than to any other in the history of Islam, why there are more books devoted to that event in Islamic history than to any other, they shrug their shoulders and mumble something about the Shi`i influence on the writing of history. Yet, many of the writers are not members of the Shi`a. The famous Islamic historian Tabari devoted nearly two hundred pages to the story. No other event receives as much attention from him<sup>1</sup>. He most certainly was not a member of the Shi`a<sup>2</sup>.

The fact is that these petty scholars with their tendentious criticisms are concerned only with the narrow details of political history. They do not perceive the cosmic nature of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn. For them, history is the restricted study of immediate cause and effect in political developments. But real history is about something far more important than that. Real history concerns men's relationship with God and how that relationship affects men's relationships with each other. Real history attempts to show the cosmic significance of events, not their narrow immediate political results.

The tragedy of Karbala', the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, is one of those events of cosmic significance. Its lessons concern not just one group of men and their relationship to the world, but all mankind. It is a moral paradigm.

It teaches sacrifice and opposition to injustice: it teaches integrity of purpose, love of family, gentleness, and bravery. In fact, in the account of the tragic journey and martyrdom of Imam Husayn, there are lessons in all the moral virtues. Perhaps the one that strikes most of us most forcefully, is our own inadequacy in comparison with the enormous sacrifice Imam Husayn made on behalf of mankind.

He voluntarily allowed himself to be the sacrificial victim, seeking to fulfil the will of God. On this day, nearly fourteen hundred years ago, the Imam prepared himself for death. He anointed his body in water

mixed with musk, it was the washing of the corpse before his body was a corpse, a preparation for his immediate entry into heaven. The symbols of his death are many, the suffering dreadful.

He watched as, one after another, his followers went to their deaths; as, one after another, his kinsmen went to their deaths; even his baby son was slaughtered in his arms as he gave him a farewell hug<sup>3</sup>.

Yet Imam Husayn was not merely the sacrificial victim, he was also the exemplar of bravery and fortitude. He fought a brave and fierce fight against so many. Such was his power and strength, such was the aura of his person—and he was by no means a young man—that the only way his enemies could kill him was by a whole group of them attacking him at the same time and stabbing him together. The humiliation of the death was total; the vindictiveness and wickedness of this action by men is illustrated by the fact that his clothes were ripped from his body and then horses ridden over it<sup>4</sup>.

The lesson is clear to us all: it shows the lengths of human wickedness. Imam Husayn exemplifies all suffering humanity. In that death, in those blows to his body, in the trampling of horses over it, Imam Husayn is the model, the paradigm of all unjust deaths, of all humans suffering.

In this, his death teaches suffering men to endure, to remain steadfast in their belief in God. It also has a lesson to teach men who are more fortunate, that the world is a transitory place, worldly success is not an end in itself, and that man should always be aware of the suffering Imam Husayn experienced. By their awareness of this they will learn to treat worldly success with humility.

In the real sense of cosmic history, the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is a mighty triumph, a wondrous victory. Who would know the name Yazid today except for the fact that he was responsible for the martyrdom of Imam Husayn? Otherwise he would just be another of the thousands of despots, tyrants, and bullies that have abused their authority, another footnote in the history of man.

However, because his tyranny and wickedness was responsible for the good, the noble, the pure Imam's death, he, by killing the Imam, the human model of goodness and bravery, has become the human model of injustice and wickedness.

The triumph of Imam Husayn lies in the fact that his inspiration has moved men to grieve for him throughout the centuries. The pure light of ennobled humanity in the Imam has motivated generation upon generation of the Shi'a, to suffer endless hardship, to keep his memory alive.

The first beginnings of the *majlis*, the sessions held in honour of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, are to be discerned in the first gatherings of the surviving family of the martyred Imam. Very soon these gatherings of grief developed outside the family to include others<sup>5</sup>.

Not long afterwards there was the *majlis* of the Kufan penitents, the *tawwabin*, when they gathered at his graveside to lament, to grieve, to prepare for death in the battle that was to come, to try, in some small way, to make themselves worthy of the sacrifice Imam Husayn had made for them and all mankind.

All despotic regimes have felt threatened by these *majlises*. Throughout the centuries they have tried to prevent them. At one time even the site of Imam Husayn's grave at Karbala' was ploughed up<sup>6</sup>.

They feared the grief and lamentation for Imam Husayn because in that grief and lamentation people remembered the goodness, the justice, the kindness, the gentleness, and the bravery of the martyred Imam. These were not qualities that tyrannical governments wished people to think about, their concern was bribery, corruption, nepotism, and naked force. They saw the threat to their world, to their values, to their position. Seeing it, they sought to suppress the memory of Imam Husayn. However, such was the power, the influence, the glory of that memory, that they could not remove it from the hearts of men, from the Shi'a of all the Imams, the Shi'a of Imam Husayn.

The triumph of the martyred Imam is such that every year on `Ashura, in places all over the world, the faithful gather together to remember the Imam.

- <sup>1</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., 216-390.
- <sup>2</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 360.
- <sup>3</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 366.
- <sup>4</sup>. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 368.
- <sup>5</sup>. M. M. Shams al-Din, op. cit., pp. 140-50.
- <sup>6</sup>. Tabari, Ta'rikh, III, 1408.

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