



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Imam Husayn Ibn ‘Ali *Medieval Islamic Civilization, An Encyclopaedia* **Azim Nanji**

Imam Husayn ibn ‘Ali was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and the son of Imam ‘Ali and the Prophet’s daughter Fatima. He is regarded as one of the early imams of the Shi‘is, and his refusal to offer *baya* (allegiance) to the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, which led to his death and the massacre of his family and supporters at Karbala in 680 CE, has immortalised him in the Muslim-and particularly Shi‘i-imagination as one of the great martyr figures of Islam.

Imam Husayn was born in Medina in 626 CE and, as a child, is believed to have been held in great affection by the Prophet Muhammad. As a young man, he participated in the work of his father, Imam ‘Ali, including in his military campaigns. After the death of his father in 661 CE and the accession to power of Muawiyah, Imam Husayn maintained a low profile and, although dismissive of the usurpation of power by Muawiyah, did not seek to foment open rebellion. However, when Muawiyah sought to impose his son Yazid as successor and thereby to institutionalise the rule of the Umayyad dynasty, Imam Husayn declined to offer allegiance (*baya*). He was approached by the people of Kufa to oppose Yazid and accept the mantle of leadership, which they believed was his right. In response to their call, Imam Husayn—together with a small band of followers and members of his family—left Mecca for Kufa. On his way, he learned of the executions of some of his closest supporters by the Umayyads and decided to urge those from his group who were not willing to put their lives at risk to voluntarily depart. He continued on his way to Kufa with the rest of the group, camping at a place called Karbala. In the meantime, a contingent from Yazid’s army of about four thousand members arrived at the scene and ordered the small band to acknowledge Yazid’s authority while also cutting off their access to the river for water.

The final confrontation, as recorded by Muslim historians, is the tragic account of the encirclement and massacre of Imam Husayn and his small army, which was said to number seventy-two men. They fought gallantly, but they were soon overpowered, and Imam Husayn, his brother, and some of his closest relatives were slaughtered. Imam Husayn’s head was taken to Damascus to be displayed before Yazid and his court.

The events of Karbala and the death of Imam Husayn catalyzed opposition to the Umayyad dynasty and rallied support around the family of Imam Husayn and the general cause of the ‘Alids. Imam Husayn’s son, ‘Ali (also known as Imam Zayn al-‘Abidin), who was spared in the battle, assumed the role of leader and imam of Husayn’s followers, thus crystallising further a distinctive Shi‘i identity.

Although there are differing accounts regarding where Imam Husayn’s remains were taken, it is generally believed that he was buried at Karbala, where, in time, a mausoleum was built to honour his memory. The mausoleum at Karbala is the most visited pilgrimage centre in Shi‘i Islam after the Ka‘ba. It is the centre of prayers, devotions, and rituals associated with Imam Husayn’s memory and death, which is commemorated in particular and with great religious fervour and intensity during the first ten days of Muharram, known as *Ashura*.

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The devotions during *Ashura* have evolved to represent two major ritual expressions. The first, known as *rawzeh-khani*, involves preaching that is based on the Karbala narrative and, over the ten-day period, a formal recounting of the events is made in the context of the Shi'i interpretation of Muslim history, with a special focus on notions of persecution, suffering, resistance, and martyrdom. Another major ritual expression developed much later in history and is known as *ta'ziyya*, a form of passion play that re-enacts the events of Karbala. During these rituals, some participants express their internal grief through acts of chest beating and flagellation. *Ta'ziyya* processions can be highly stylised and may include structures representing Imam Husayn's bier and a rider-less horse.

Imam Husayn's life and death are also evoked in special poems of remembrance that have been composed to highlight key themes such as justice, devotion, and courage in the face of oppression. Recitations of these poems, accompanied by music, have also developed into a special genre. Although a significant part of the focus of these expressions is found in Shi'i literature and cultural life, Imam Husayn's example has pervaded all periods of Muslim history, thought, and culture, and it transcends geographic and ethnic differences. Shrines, mosques, and places of remembrance are found throughout the Muslim world. Among the Shi'is, special structures called *Husayniyah* are built to commemorate *Ashura* and to hold sessions of remembrance for other imams and martyred figures.

In situations of historical conflict and warfare, Imam Husayn's example is often invoked to gain support for particular political and religious causes. This is illustrated in the appropriation of the Karbala narrative, for example, during the Iranian revolution in 1979 and during the recent conflicts in Iraq. However, the more enduring aspects of Imam Husayn's life are the ones that continue to inspire Muslims: selfless leadership, commitment, courage in the face of oppression and, above all, devotion to God and the cause of Islam.

Further Reading

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