

A Brief Historical Account of Events Leading to the Martyrdom of Imam Husain, r.a.

Adapted from *The Dictionary of Islam* by T.P. Hughes

Al-Husain was the second son of Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, by her husband Ali, the fourth Khalifah. A brother to al-Hasan, the fifth Khalifah. According to the Shi'ahs, he was the third Khalifah. He was born A.H. 4, and died at Karbala A.H. 61, being cruelly slain in his conflict with Yazid, the seventh Khalifah, according to the Sunnis.

The martyrdom of al-Husain is celebrated by the Shi'ahs every year during the first ten days of Muharram ; an account of his tragic death is therefore necessary for understanding the intensity of the last days of the "Imam Husain" are enacted in the "Miracle Play," a translation of which has been given in English by Sir Lewis Pelly. A brief historical account of the events relating and leading to the martyrdom of Imam Husain as given by Sir Lewis Pelly, will be of interest to the English-speaking people in western countries.

"Shortly after the accession of Yazid, Husain received at Mecca secret messages from the people of Qufa, entreating him to place himself at the head of the army of the faithful in Babylonia. Yazid, however, had full intimation of the intended revolt, and long before Husain could reach Qufa, the too easy governor of that city had been replaced by Obaidallah (Ubai-du'llah ibn Ziyad), the ruler of Basra, who by his rapid measures disconcerted the plans of the conspirators, and drove them to a premature outbreak, and the surrender of their leader Muslim. The latter foresaw the ruin which he had brought on Husain, and shed bitter tears on that account when captured. His head was struck off and sent to Yazid. On Husain arriving at the confines of Babylonia, he was met by Harro (al-Hurr), who had been sent out by Obaidallah with the body of horsemen to intercept his approach. Husain, addressing them, asserted his title to the Caliphate, and invited them to submit to him. Harro replied, 'We are commanded as soon as we meet you to bring you directly to Qufa into the presence of Obaidallah, the son of Ziyad.' Husain answered, 'I would sooner die than submit to that,' and gave the word to his men to ride on; but Harro wheeled about and intercepted them. At the same time, Harro said, 'I have no commission to fight with you, but I am commanded not to part with you until I have conducted you into Qufa; but he bade Husain to choose any road into that city 'that did not go directly back to Mecca,' and 'do you,' said he, 'write to Yazid or Obaidallah, and I will write to Obaidallah and perhaps it may please God I may meet with something that may bring me off

without my being forced to an extremity on your account.' Then he retreated his force a little to allow Husain to lead the way towards Qufa, and Husain took the road that leads by Adib and Cadisia. This was on Thursday the 1st of Muharram, A.H. 61 (680 A.D.) When night came on, he still continued his march all through the night. As he rode on, he nodded a little, and waking again, said, 'Men travel by night, and the destinies travel toward them; this I know to be a message of death.'

"In the morning, after prayers were over, he mended his pace, and as he rode on, there came up a horseman, who took no notice of him, but saluted Harro, and delivered to him a letter, giving orders from Obaidallah to lead Husain and his men into a place where was neither town nor fortifications, and there leave them till the Syrian forces should surround them.

"This was on Friday, the 2nd of Muharram. The day after, Amer (Umar ibn Sa'id) came upon them with four thousand men, who were on their march to Dailam. They had been encamped without the walls of Qufa, and when Obaidallah heard of Husain's coming, he commanded Amer to defer his march to Dailam and go against Husain. But one and all dissuaded him. 'Beware that you go not against Husain, and rebel against your Lord, and cut off mercy from you, for you had better be deprived of the dominion of the whole world that meet your Lord with the blood of Husain upon you.' Amer was fain to acquiesce, but upon Obaidallah renewing his command with threats, he marched against Husain, and came up with him, as aforesaid, on Saturday the 3rd of Muharram.

"On Amer sending to inquire of Husain what brought him thither, the latter replied, 'the Qufans wrote to me; but since they reject me, I am willing to return to Mecca.' Amer was glad when he heard it, and said, 'I hope to God I may be excused from fighting against him.' Then he wrote to this purpose to Obaidallah; but Obaidallah sternly replied, 'Go between him and the river,' and Amer did so; and the name of the place where he cut Husain off from the Euphrates was called Kerbela (Karbala): '*Kerb* (anguish) and *bela* (vexation), trouble and affliction,' said Husain when he heard it.

"Then Husain sought a conference with Amer, in which he proposed either to go to Yazid, to return to Mecca, or, as some add, but others deny, to fight against the Turks. Obaidallah was at first inclined to accede to these conditions, until Shamer stood up and swore that no terms

should be made with Husain, adding significantly that he had been informed of a long conference between Husain and Amer.

"Then Obaidallah sent Shamer with orders to Amer, that if Husain would surrender unconditionally, he would be received; if not, Amer was to fall upon him and his men, and trample them under his feet. Should he refuse to do so. Shamer was to strike off Amer's head, and himself command the attack against Husain.

"Thus passed Sunday Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, the 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th, and 9th. Amer drew up his forces close to Husain's camp, and himself rode up to Husain as he was sitting in the door of his tent just after the evening prayer, and told him of the conditions offered by Obaidallah. Husain desired Amer to give him time until the next morning, when he would make his answer.

"In the night, his sister came weeping to his bedside, and, awaking him, exclaimed, 'Alas for the desolation of my family! My mother Fatima is dead and my father Ali, and my brother Hasan. As for the destruction that is past! And alas for the destruction that is to come!' 'Sister,' Husain replied, 'put your trust in God, and know that man is born to die, and that the heavens shall not remain; everything shall pass away but the presence of God, who created all things by His power, and shall make them by His power to pass away, and they shall return to Him alone. My father was better than me, and my mother was better than me; and my brother was better than me; and they and we and all Muslims have an example in the Apostle of God.' Then he told his men that Obaidallah wanted nobody but him, and that they should go away to their homes. But they said, 'God forbid that we should ever see the day wherein we survive you!' Then he commanded them to cord their tents close together, and make a line of them, so as to keep out the enemy's horse. And he dug a trench behind his camp, which he filled with wood to be set on fire, so that he could only be attacked in front. The rest of the night he spent in prayer and supplication, while the enemy's guard patrolled all night long round and round his camp.

"The next morning both sides prepared for the slaughter. Husain first washed and anointed himself with musk, and several of his chief men did the like; and one asking them what it meant, Husain replied pleasantly, 'Alas! There is nothing between us and the black-eye girls of Paradise but that those troopers come down upon us and slay us!' Then he mounted his horse, and set the Qur'an before him, crying, 'O God, Thou art my confidence in every trouble and my hope in every adversity!' and submitted himself to the judgment of his companions before the opened pages of the sacred volume. At this, his sisters and daughters began to weep when he cried out in bitter anguish

self-reproachfully, 'God reward the son of Abbas,' in allusion to advice which his cousin, Abdullah ibn Abbas, had given him, to leave the women behind in Mecca. At this moment, a party of the enemy's horse wheeled about and came up to Husain, who expected to be attacked by them. But it was Harro, who had quitted the ranks of the Syrian army, and had now come to die with Husain, and testify his repentance before men and God. As Harro rode into the doomed camp, he shouted back to Amer, 'Alas for you!' Whereupon Amer commanded his men to 'bring up the colours.' As soon as they were set in front of the troops, 'Bear witness that I shot the first arrow,' and so the fight began on both sides. It raged, chiefly in a series of single combats, until noon-day, when both sides retired to prayer, Husain, adding to the usual office the 'Prayer of Fear,' never used but in cases of extremity. When shortly afterwards, the fight was renewed, Husain was struck on the head by a sword. Faint with the loss of blood, he sat down by his tent and took upon his lap his little son Abdullah, who was at once killed by a flying arrow. He placed the little corpse upon the ground, crying out, 'We come from God and we return to Him. O God, give me strength to bear these misfortunes.' Growing thirsty, he ran toward the Euphrates, where, as he stooped to drink, an arrow struck him in the mouth. Raising his hands, all besmeared and dripping with blood, to heaven, he stood for awhile and prayed earnestly. His little nephew, a beautiful child, who went up to kiss him, had his hand cut off with a sword, on which Husain again wept, saying, 'thy reward, dear child is with thy forefathers in the realms of bliss.' Hounded by the Shamer, the Syrian troops now surrounded him; but Husain, nothing daunted, charged them right and left. In the mist of the fighting, his sister came between him and his slayers, crying out to Amer, how he could stand by and see Husain slain. Whereupon, with tears trickling down his beard, Amer turn his face away; but Shamer, with threats and curses, set on his soldiers again and at last one wounded Husain upon the hand, and a second gashed him on the neck, and a third thrust Him through the body with a spear. No sooner had he fallen to the ground than Shamer rode a troop of horsemen over his corpse, backwards and forwards, over and over again, until it was trampled into the very ground, a scarcely recognizable mass of mangled flesh and mud.

"Thus, twelve years after the death of his brother Hasan, Husain, the second son of Ali, met his own death on the bloody plain of Kerbela on Saturday, the 10th day of Muharram, A.H. 61 (680 A.D.)

From al-Husain and his brother al-Hasan, are derived the descendants of the Prophet known throughout Islam as Sayyids.