



‘ĀŠŪRĀ’

‘ĀŠŪRĀ’, tenth day of Moḥarram, the first month of the Islamic calendar; for Sunnis it is a day on which fasting is recommended, and for Shi‘ites a day of mourning for the martyrdom of Imam Ḥosayn. As a fast day ‘Āšūrā’ was adopted from the ancient Jewish rite of Yom Kippur (Day of Atonement); the Arabic term derives from the Hebrew word ‘*āsōr*’ with the Aramaic determinative ending *-ā*. It refers broadly to the first ten days of Moḥarram, but more specifically to the tenth day. The Jewish observance of Yom Kippur, which falls on the tenth of Tishri, the first month of the Jewish calendar, dates from pre-exilic times. It evolved into an elaborate rite of purging both sanctuary and nation on the occasion of the New Year; the ritual involves self denial and forgiveness and includes a twenty-four hour fast from sunset to sunset (see *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, Jerusalem, 1971, V, pp. 1376-87).

There is some disagreement among modern scholars as to the exact day of the year on which ‘Āšūrā’ fell in early Islam. The Prophet came to Medina in September, 622; there he may have first observed the Jewish custom of the Yom Kippur fast. It remains in dispute whether he intended the ‘Āšūrā’ fast always to coincide with the Jewish tenth of Tishri, or the community sought later to harmonize the fast and the new year with Jewish custom. The Hadith literature is unanimous in asserting that the first ten days of Moḥarram, and more particularly the tenth, possessed special sanctity, even in pre-Islamic times; if this is so, the Jewish fast confirmed an earlier Arab tradition, giving it religious content and prestige. Be that as it may, the Jewish character of ‘Āšūrā’ was soon obscured since the month of Moḥarram could not always coincide



with Tishri, though Moḥarram was retained as the first month of the Muslim year. Furthermore, it appears that the fast enjoined on Muslims was a day of fast, at least after the first years of the Prophet's arrival at Medina (Abū Dāwūd, *Sonan*, Ḥomṣ, 1969, II, p. 819; Boḳārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Cairo, n.d., III, p. 30; Ebn Ḥanbal, *Mosnad*, Beirut, n.d., III, p. 484). The pre-Islamic Arabs were probably familiar with fasting as a religious act, and some Hadiths report that the Meccans of Qorayš used to fast on the day of 'Āšūrā' and that the Prophet also observed the fast in Mecca (Abū Dāwūd, II, pp. 817-18; Moslem, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Beirut, III, pp. 146-48; Boḳārī, III, p. 30). When the Prophet migrated to Medina, he enjoined the 'Āšūrā' fast on Muslims until the fast of Ramaḏān was instituted during the second year of the hijra; thereafter, it was made into a voluntary fast (see the above references and especially Boḳārī, III, p. 30). According to other traditions, when the Prophet came to Medina he found the Jews fasting the day of 'Āšūrā' and was told that on that day God caused Pharaoh and his people to drown and Moses fasted in gratitude. The Prophet remarked, "We are more worthy of Moses than you," and ordered that the fast be observed by Muslims (Abū Dāwūd, II, p. 818; Moslem, III, p. 149; Ebn Ḥanbal, I, p. 291, III, p. 340). Quite early, however, the Islamic community wished to distinguish itself from the Jews; according to some traditions, Muslims should fast the ninth, or the ninth and the tenth of Moḥarram (Abū Dāwūd, II, pp. 818-19; Moslem, pp. 149-50; Termeḏī, *Sonan*, Medina, II, p. 127; Ebn Ḥanbal, I, p. 129; see also I. Goldziher, "Usages juifs d'après la littérature religieuse des musulmans," *Revue des Études Juives* 28, 1894, pp. 82-84). The Muslims found it disagreeable, moreover, that Jews fasted on a day which they also observed as a day of joyous festivities (Moslem, III, p. 150). Early Muslim tradition regarded the day of 'Āšūrā' as an auspicious occasion. On it, the ark of Noah rested on dry land, and thus God gave Noah and his progeny life, safety, and blessing. It is therefore incumbent on every man to do good and to show generosity, especially to his kin, on this day (Ḥakīm Termeḏī, *Nawāder al-oṣūl fī ma'rafat aḳbār al-rasūl*, Beirut, n.d., II, p. 126; Abū Dāwūd, II, p. 815). Tradition asserts further that the 'Āšūrā' fast is an expiation for the sins of the previous year, though this was challenged quite early (Termeḏī, *Sonan* II, p. 126) and indeed the fast was declared unnecessary after the institution of Ramaḏān (Boḳārī, III, p. 30).

'Āšūrā' in Shi'ite piety. After the death of Mo'āwīa in the spring of 60/680, his son Yazīd succeeded him as caliph. Yazīd's succession by hereditary appointment rather than election or popular acclaim met with strong opposition in many quarters of a community already torn by conflict and



dissension. Among the many dissenting groups was the party (*Šī'a*) of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭāleb (q.v.), led by his son, Imam Ḥosayn (q.v.). Ḥosayn's supporters in Kūfa urged him to lead them in revolt against Yazīd's rule; after some hesitation, he answered their persistent entreaties, not simply from political motives, but also because of an idealistic view of Islam that he sought to defend at all cost. His martyrdom has therefore been regarded by Muslims, Sunni as well as Shi'ite, as the model for self sacrifice in the way of God, a revolt against wrong-doing and oppression. This fact has not been fully appreciated by most Western historians; yet it is crucial for a true understanding of the significance of 'Āšūrā' for the Muslim community in general, and especially its Shi'ite members.

Ḥosayn left for Kūfa with his family and about seventy men. On the second of Moḥarram, 61/680 he encamped on the plain of Karbalā', where he faced an army of about 4,000 men sent to intercept him by the governor of Kūfa, 'Obaydallāh b. Zīād. After a week of fruitless negotiations, the head of the army, 'Omar b. Sa'd, put the choice to Ḥosayn and his followers of either surrendering to the authority of Ebn Zīād or fighting. The battle that ensued lasted from early morning to mid-afternoon. Ḥosayn and his followers, including the able male members of his family, were killed; his women and children were led captive first to Kūfa, then to Damascus. Yazīd, who had appointed Ebn Zīād governor of Kūfa specifically to deal with the problem of Ḥosayn, was moved by the pitiful sight of the captives and finally, at their own request, sent them back to Medina (for details, see Ṭabarī [Cairo], II, pp. 295-390; Mofīd, *Eršād*, ed. Sayyed Kāẓem al-Mīāmawī, Tehran, 1377/1957-58, pp. 215ff., tr. I. K. A. Howard, London, 1981, p. 370).

The death of Imam Ḥosayn produced an immediate reaction in the Muslim community, especially in Iraq. When the people of Kūfa saw his head and the pitiful state of the captives, they began to weep and beat their breasts in anguish (Ya'qūbī, ed. M. S. Baḥr-al-'olūm, Najaf, 1384/1964, II, pp. 231ff.). Many of them regretted their failure to support Ḥosayn and were filled with remorse; they came to form the movement known as the repenters (*al-tawwābūn*). The chaos and bloodshed that followed gives eloquent testimony to the far-reaching effect of the tragedy of Karbalā' on subsequent Muslim history (J. Wellhausen, *The Arab Kingdom and its Fall*, tr. M. G. Weir, Beirut, 1963, esp. pp. 147-200).

Among the few who escaped the massacre of Karbalā' was Ḥosayn's only surviving son, 'Alī Zayn-al-'ābedīn (see 'Alī b. Ḥosayn), who was spared on



account of youth and sickness; he was soon proclaimed fourth Imam by a considerable segment of the Shi‘ite community. His home in Medina became an important center for the growth of the ‘Āšūrā’ cultus; no doubt his piety, political quietism, and continuous sorrow for the tragedy provided the religious basis of the ‘Āšūrā’ celebration.

Commemorative services (*maǰāles al-ta’zīa*) first held in the houses of the imams and their followers, originally consisted of recounting the tragedy, reflecting on its meaning, and reciting elegies (*marāṭī*) in memory of the martyred Imam. From the beginning, these *maǰāles* were not limited to the ‘Āšūrā’ days, but were and still are held at any time of the year. Soon the shrines of the imams in Iraq and Iran became important centers of pilgrimage (*zīāra*), where the pious held their lamentations (Ebn Qawlūya, *Kāmel al-zīārāt*, ed. Mīrzā ‘Abdallāh Ḥosayn Amīnī Tabrīzī, Najāf, 1356/1937, pp. 325-26).

During the Omayyad period, the ‘Āšūrā’ cult and the spirit of revolt it fostered grew in secret under persecution and repression. The ‘Abbasid rulers, who came to power on the wave of pro-‘Alid revolt, at first encouraged and patronized large public assemblies in commemoration of the sufferings of the Prophet’s family (Ahl-e Bayt, q.v.) and the tragedy of Karbalā’. By the end of the 4th/10th century, professional mourners (*nā’eḥ*), also known as the reciters or story tellers (*qorrā*) of Ḥosayn, chanted elegies and led the pious in dirges; they normally read martyrdom narratives (*maqātel*) relating the story of Ḥosayn in all its details.

In 351/962, under Buyid patronage, ‘Āšūrā’ was declared a day of public mourning in Baghdad. Processions were held in the streets of the city, markets closed, and shops draped in black (‘Abbās Qomī, *Nafas al-mahmūm*, p. 226, Persian tr. *Romūz al-šahāda* by M. B. Kamara’ī, Tehran, 1379/1960; Hebat-al-dīn Šahrestānī, *Nahzat al-Ḥosayn*, Karbalā’, 1969, pp. 149ff.). Special edifices were built for the celebrations of ‘Āšūrā’ (called Ḥosaynīya; also *takīa* in Iran), and by the end of the 3rd/9th century these were common in Cairo, Aleppo, and many Iranian cities.

Iran’s special devotion to the family of the Prophet is reflected in the traditions of dubious authenticity that Šahrbanū, the daughter of Yazdegerd III, the last Sasanian emperor, was married to Ḥosayn, or that she was also the mother of ‘Alī Zayn-al-‘ābedīn (see Maǰlesī, *Beḥār al-anwār* XLV, Tehran, 1384/1964, pp. 328-32). Through this marriage, Ḥosayn and his descendents combined royal nobility with the imamate; for the Shi‘ites of Iran, he is thus both the spiritual



head of the community and in some way of national hero, but devotion to him was not limited to Shi'ites. As early as the 5th/11th century Iranian poets composed elegies in his memory. One of the most comprehensive works, in poetry and prose, on the subject in Persian is *Rawzat al-šohadā'* by a Sunni author, Ḥosayn b. 'Alī Wā'eẓ Kāšefī, (d. 910/1504-05). An outstanding Shi'ite poet was Moḥtašam Kāšānī (d. 996/1588; see the translation of his famous *haftband* in Browne, *Lit. Hist. Persia* IV, pp. 172-77). From Iran, the 'Āšūrā' celebration was carried to the Indian subcontinent and other parts of the Muslim world influenced by Iranian culture. The greatest impetus for the development of the 'Āšūrā' celebration as a popular religious and artistic phenomenon came with the rise of the Safavids to power in the early 10th/16th century. It was during their rule that the important dramatic genre known as *ta'zīa* (q.v.) was highly developed and popularized.

Both in its theological aspects and religious rites, the Moḥarram cultus is a unique phenomenon in Islamic piety. The event of Karbalā' soon acquired cosmic significance; by the mid-4th/10th century, Shi'ite hagiography placed Ḥosayn's death at the center of world history: It was decreed by God before creation, and subsequently revealed to all the major prophets, who vicariously shared in it; at Ḥosayn's birth legions of angels came to the Prophet expressing their joy for the new child and their sorrow for his impending death. Ḥosayn himself knew all the details of his coming tragedy and chose it willingly as an act of self-sacrifice in the way of God. After his death, all things—the heavens and earth, sun and stars, paradise and hell—mourned him. Fāṭema, the sorrowful mother of the Imam, continues to shed bitter tears in paradise until the day of final reckoning, when the blood of the martyr shall be avenged and she vindicated.

The 'Āšūrā' ritual possessed from its inception a dramatic tension. The sufferings and privation of the Ahl-e Bayt are contrasted with their high status with God and the reward they will enjoy in paradise. The weeping of all things for their suffering, and especially for the death of Ḥosayn, is contrasted with the cruelty of their enemies. Finally, the great rewards which the mourners of Ḥosayn will enjoy in the hereafter are sharply contrasted with the torment and remorse which the enemies of the Ahl-e Bayt will suffer on the Day of Resurrection. By the end of the 4th/10th century the main themes and hagiographic tales of the Moḥarram cultus had taken shape; these were further elaborated and popularized through the *ta'zīa* and the popular orations eventually known as *rawza-k'vānī* (q.v.). Through their grief and



remembrance, the pious vicariously share in the sorrows and sufferings of the Ahl-e Bayt and renew their relation with the imams. This remembrance is powerfully expressed in the *ziāra* ritual, which can be performed either at the shrine of an imam on the day of 'Āšūrā' or at any time in an open space outside the city or town; it is usually followed by a meal at the homes of well-to-do members of the community, the donation of which is a pious act of great merit.

Very early, Shi'ite Muslims distinguished their observance of the 'Āšūrā' from both its Jewish and Islamic antecedents. They denied all claims for special favors granted by God on that day to the ancient prophets; hence it is to be observed not as a day of thanksgiving and exaltation, but as one of sorrowful remembrance. It should not be observed as a regular fast day; rather the pious must experience hunger and thirst in emulation of the Imam and his family in Karbalā', but must break the fast before sunset. It is to be understood not as a day of blessing, but of chaos and disorder, a day of ill-omen.

This emphasis on mourning in the Moḥarram cultus has led some scholars to postulate a direct relation between it and the ancient myths and rites of Tammuz-Adonis (B. D. Erdmans, "Der Ursprung der Ceremonien des Hosein-Festes," *ZA* 9, 1894, pp. 302ff.; Ch. Virolleaud, *Le théâtre persan ou le drame de Kerbéla*, Paris, 1950, pp. 128-36). To what extent the 'Āšūrā' rites could have been influenced across so many centuries by these ancient myths can not be determined; the fact that Ḥosayn happened to die on the spot where the cult of the ancient god was celebrated is simply an interesting coincidence which proves nothing. Iranian influences on the Moḥarram cultus have also been suggested by scholars who point to ceremonies in seventh-century Sogdia and K̄vārazm commemorating the unjust death of the legendary hero Sīāvoš at the hands of Afrāsīāb that included breast-beating and the chanting of threnodies (A. Bausani, *Persia Religiosa*, Milan, 1959, pp. 420-21; E. Yarshater, "Ta'ziyeh and pre-Islamic mourning rites in Iran," in *Ta'ziyeh: Ritual and Drama in Iran*, ed. P. Chelkowski, New York, 1979, pp. 88-94). The "blood of Sīāvoš" (*kūn-e Sīāvoš*) is, in fact, invoked in the text of at least one *ta'zīa* (C. Virolleaud, *Le théâtre persan*, p. 132) and there may be other echoes of the Sīāvoš myth in the Persian *ta'zīa* literature. It is, however, unlikely that memories of Sīāvoš should have influenced formatively the Shi'ite mourning ceremonies of 'Āšūrā', which originated in areas far removed from Outer Iran and which are perfectly explicable, in any event, in terms of the ethos of Shi'ism.

It is more plausible that any parallels between the various mourning rites are



due more to similarities in psychology and a general thematic continuity in mythological development by geographically related cultures. The 'Āšūrā' cultus in Shi'ite Islam is based on an historical event and commemorated the death not of a god, but of a man who was intensely involved in the life of an actual community. Like other great men and religious heroes, Ḥosayn the martyr continues to live on in the community through poetry, myth, and ritual, but above all through the actual events of the community's history. Whatever its origins or relations to other religious phenomena, the 'Āšūrā' cultus is yet another instance in human history of man's attempt to deal creatively and meaningfully with his ephemeral condition.

See also ['Azādārī](#); [Moḥarram](#); and [Ta'zīa](#).

For a music sample, see [Abbās Khāni – Navā](#).

For a music sample, see [Nowhe of Men's Mourning](#).

For a music sample, see [Nowhe Zeynab](#).

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