

Imam Husain's Journey from Madinah to Karbala

Presented by Syed H. Akhtar

Muharram (Arabic: محرم). It is the first month of the Islamic calendar. Instead of joyous celebration, Muslims mark the beginning of the New Year by taking up the black attire of sorrow and participate in mourning gatherings in which the sacrifices of Husain and his companions are commemorated.

It is one of the four months of the year in which fighting is prohibited. Muharram is so called because it was unlawful to fight during this month; the word is derived from the word 'haram' meaning forbidden. It is held to be the most sacred of all the months, excluding Ramadan. It is the same month when Husain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was brutally massacred in **Karbala** alongside his family and friends in the year 680 CE/61 AH on the 10th day of month of Muharram (Ashura).

Karbala (Arabic: كربلاء). It is a city in Iraq, located about 100 km (60 mi) southwest of **Baghdad**. The battlefield was here, a desert region located beside one of the branches of the Euphrates River. In the time of Husain ibn Ali's life, the place was also known as al-Ghadiriyah, Naynawa, and Shathi'ul-Furaat. Both Husain and his half-brother Abbas ibn al-Murtadha were here buried by the local Bani Asad tribe at what later became known as the Mashhad Al-Husain. Later on city grew up around the tombs.

Reason for the Battle of Karbala. Yazid, the ruler of the time, demanded allegiance from Husain, because he knew too well that the acceptance of the entire Muslim community was of no value without Husain's allegiance. In reply to this unacceptable demand, Husain majestically replied: ***"a person like me can never pledge allegiance to a person like him"***, thereby highlighting the principle on which his stand was based. Husain took a stand to restore freedom, peace, equality and justice; qualities which the Divine Message had perfected, but were constantly undermined by those who hijacked religion and acted in its name. In a Will that he wrote before leaving Medina, Husain said; ***"I have risen as I seek to reform the community of my grandfather. I wish to enjoin good and forbid evil."***

Outcome of the battle. "The tyrant dies and his rule ends, the martyr dies and his rule begins." (Soren Kierkegaard. A Danish philosopher, theologian and poet)

On the side of Yazid there were about 30,000 - 40,000 men led by Umar ibn Sa'ad. Husain ibn Ali's group consisted of about 72 men, including 18 family members and 54 supporters including a 6 month old baby. There were women, children and elderly. Yazid militarily gained victory, but within a few decades the rule of Banu Umayyah crumbled and came to an end. Husain ibn Ali is still alive in the hearts of millions of devotees.

Casualties. From Yazid's army about 5000 soldiers from were killed according to Shia tradition. From Husain's camp about 123 were martyred, including 72 Men and 51 children.

Hurr was one of the highest ranked commanders in Yazid's army, left Yazid's army and joined Husain with his son and a slave on the 10th of Muharram. He died fighting, but not before killing 41 enemy soldiers.

Yazid's army initiated hostilities and Husain was forced to fight. Yazid's army had cut off their food and water supply for three days. Enduring temperatures around 55°C without food or water, the men from Husain's camp fought valiantly and were all brutally slaughtered. Husain was forced to witness the savage mutilation of Abbas – his brother, the callous murder of his nephew Qasim, the torture and execution of his innocent son Ali Akbar and finally the depraved murder of his six month old baby boy – Ali Asghar. Left alone finally Husain was also attacked, his body was showered with arrows, his head was severed and the hooves of the horses of Yazid's cavalry trampled on his body. Husain and their supporters were decapitated; their bodies were mutilated and trampled by horses. The aftermath of the battle led to the humiliation of the women of Husain's camp. Their tents were looted and burnt, leaving the women to the mercy of Yazid's soldiers. The aggrieved children who had lost their fathers were beaten. The captives were made to travel from Karbala to Syria. Their Headscarves were snatched off and they were made to trek barefoot, chained, shackled, and taken on camels without saddles, due to which many of the children fell off the camels and the women were not allowed to even stop and help their children. The graves of these children can still be seen in the desert between Karbala and Kufa.

The distance between Karbala and Kufa is about 106 miles. Average travel by camel per day was: 30-45 miles.

The severed heads of all the males, including that of Husain's six month old son were raised on lances (as war trophies) and paraded through the streets. On arriving at Damascus, via Kufa, (A distance of about 750 miles), they were paraded in the town, for all to see. A barrage of stones, rubbish and verbal abuse bombarded them. They were kept in prison for over a year. It is to be noted that people who did this with the family of Mohammad (SA) were themselves Muslims.

The Route taken by Imam Husain (A.S.) from Madinah to Karbala

Distance between Medina and Karbala is about 1,100 miles*. After leaving Madinah for Makkah for Hajj Pilgrimage, Husain was forced to terminate Hajj and he left for Kufa, because Yezid had sent assassins to Makkah to kill him.

On his journey from Makkah to Karbala there are 14 places mentioned in history books where Imam either stayed, or interacted with people, or delivered sermons.

1. **Saffah:** Here Imam met Farazdaq the poet whom Imam asked about conditions in Kufa. He said, 'He said, 'People's hearts were with you but their swords were against you.' Imam replied, 'Allah does what he wishes. I leave it to him who proposes the just cause.'
2. **Dhat-el-Irq:** Here Imam's cousin Abdullah Ibn Jafar brought his two sons Aun and Mohammed to their mother Hazrat Zainab and to help the imam. He tried to persuade the Imam to return to Madinah but Imam replied, 'my destiny is in the hands of Allah.'
3. **Batn-er-Rumma:** Imam sent a letter to Kufa with Qais bin Mashir, met Abdullah bin Mutee who came from Iraq. When he heard of Imam's intention, he tried to stop him. He said Kufans were not faithful and could not be trusted. But Imam continued his journey.
4. **Zurud:** Imam met Zohair Ibn Qain. Zohair was not among the followers of Ahlulbait. But when Imam told him of the purpose of his journey Zohair gave all his possessions to his wife, told her to go home and said that he wished to be martyred with the Imam.
5. **Zabala:** Imam learnt from two tribesmen coming from Kufa of the death of Hazrat Muslim. Imam said, 'Inna Lillaahi wa Inna Ilaihi Rajaoon.'
6. **Asadi Tribesmen** tried to dissuade the Imam from his journey but he persisted, saying, "We are for Allah and we shall return to Him who surely will take account for our sacrifices." Here Imam told his companions the news of the death of Muslim and Hani and that people in Kufa were not prepared to be their helpers. Imam said, 'Those who want to depart leave now.' Various tribesmen who had followed the Imam left.
7. **Batn-e-Aqeeq:** Imam met a man from the Tribe of Akrama who told him that Kufa was no more a friendly town and was now surrounded by Yazid's army. No one could get in or out of the town. But the Imam carried on.
8. **Sorat:** Imam stayed the night here and in the morning ordered his companions to take as much water as they can.
9. **Sharaf:** While the Imam was passing from this place, one of his companions shouted that he could see the approach of an army. Imam asked for a safe place, preferably a mountain behind them. A guide took them to the nearest mountain.
10. **Zuhasm:** It was here that Imam met Hurr's army of 1000 men. They were thirsty so Imam ordered his men to give them water. Imam himself helped several thirsty soldiers to drink. Even animals were given water to drink. Zuhr prayers were led by the Imam and all followed him including Hurr's soldiers. Imam told Hurr that he was responding to the invitation of the Kufa people, but if you have changed your mind, have become ignorant of our Rights and have forgotten your promises, I shall turn back. But he was denied to turn back by Hurr's and was forced to bypass Kufa.

11. **Baiza:** Imam reached Baiza the next day and delivered one of his most famous sermons. 'O People, the Prophet has said that if a man sees a tyrannical ruler transgressing against Allah and the Prophet and oppressing people but does nothing by word or action to change the situation then it will be just for Allah to place him where he deservingly belongs. Do you not see to what low level the affairs have come down...? Do you not observe that truth has not adhered to and falsehood has no limit? And as for me, I look upon death as but a means of attaining martyrdom and I consider life among transgressors as nothing but an agony and an affliction.'
12. **Uzaibul Hajanat:** Here Imam stayed away from the army of Hurr and met Trimmah bin Adi. After having learnt about the Kufan abandonment of his envoy it was clear that he had no hope of support or even survival in Kufa. Nevertheless he refused an offer of safety, if not success extended to him. Trimmah pleaded to him to accept the offer of 20,000 trained men of his tribe to help him if he wanted to go to Kufa or he could retire to the mountains and safety. Imam replied to Ibn Adi, 'Allah Bless you and your people. I cannot go back from my word. Things are destined.'

It is clear from this reply that he was fully aware of the dangers he would face and that he had a certain strategy and plan in mind to bring about a revolution in the conscience of the Muslim Ummah. He did not try to mobilize military support which he could easily have done in Hejaz nor did he try to exploit whatever manpower help was available to him.

13. **Qasr-e-Bani Makatil:** It was evident here that Kufa was no more his destination. As Hurr did not want to leave him, he by-passed Kufa and took a new route. Resting in the afternoon he uttered 'Inna Lillah.' His 18 years old son Ali Akbar approached him and enquired. Imam said that in his sleep he had heard someone saying that these people were going to their deaths. Ali Akbar asked, 'Are we not on the Right path. Death meant nothing to them. Death of this kind transforms into the glory of martyrdom.'
14. **Nainawa (Karbala):** At this place a messenger of Ibn Zaid brought a message for Hurr not to leave the Imam. The battered caravan passed through Ghaziriya to a place called Karbala. Imam sighed, asked for the name of the place. Someone said Karbala. Imam said, "Yes, this is the place of Karbin-wa-bala. (A place of pain and torture.) Let us stop here for we have arrived at our destination. This is the place of our Martyrdom. This is Karbala." On the orders of the Imam, the tents were erected near the river which was a tributary of the River Euphrates some miles away.

This is an account of Husain's stay in Karbala leading up to the massacre on the day of Ashura.

Day 1: Muharram 1, AH 61 (1st October 680) Husain and his followers were forced to make camp in the desert of Karbala, 75km from Kufa. It is here that Husain and his followers' torment began

Day 4: Imam Husain (A.S.) begins negotiations with ibn Sa'ad stressing he has no desire to initiate bloodshed and asks to be allowed to withdraw to Arabia but ibn Sa'ad refuse to relent. Meanwhile the situation in Husain's camp is becoming more and more desperate due to the lack of water and fresh supplies.

Day 6: The lack of water leads to desperate measures. Husain uses a tent pole to dig a well, but their relief is short-lived as it dries up. Ibn Ziyad sensing their anguish sends 500 troops to reinforce the cordon around the Euphrates.

Day 7: Fearing for the health of the women and children, Husain asks his brother 'Abbas to conduct a midnight raid past the Caliphate troops to bring back water from the river. Despite a brief skirmish 'Abbas brings back some precious water to camp earning himself the title, 'Saqqā', or water bearer. The water does little to assuage the thirst of the entire camp.

Day 8: In desperation Husain sends a message to Sa'ad requesting they meet, he questions Sa'd's allegiance to Yazid by asking, "Don't you fear God on the Day of Judgment? You know who I am". Sa'd's loyalty is unshaken; he considers trying to act as a peacemaker between Husain and Yazid but is dissuaded when his supporters urge him not to compromise.

Day 9: After a long, hot day in the desert filled with the cries of children for water, Husain's camp prepares for the attack they know is coming and are powerless to stop. Husain gathers his companions together and pleads with them; "Whoever remains with me will be killed tomorrow; so consider this opportunity as Allah sent and take advantage of the darkness and go home to your villages." He then extinguishes all the lights in the camp to allow those who want to leave to do so. His followers wept and replied, "Oh master do not thus shame us before Allah...were we to desert you, may the wild beasts of the jungle tear us to pieces." Husain sends one last message to Sa'ad asking to be spared one last night so that they may pray to Allah and recite the Qur'an

Day 10: "Ashura," Friday, 10th Muharram, 61 AH (10th October AD 680). On what was to be his last day Husain and some of his followers implore the ibn Sa'ad troops for the final time not to shed the blood of the Prophet's house. Hurr switched sides and fought to defend Husain and he was the first martyr. One by one Husain's supporters fell on the battlefield. He took his six-month-old baby son and pleaded for water for the baby. The enemy responds by shooting poisoned arrows which pierce the neck of the baby killing it instantly. Finally Husain is the last left standing finally falling on the battlefield next to his dead comrades. Covered in wounds, Husain is then decapitated and his body is mutilated in order to send souvenirs back to Yazid. His followers suffer a similar fate. Their bodies were trampled by enemy horses and left where they fell denying them a Muslim burial. Yazid's soldiers then loot and plunder the remains of the camp taking the women and children as prisoners, including Ali bin Husain, the ailing son of Imam Husain (A.S.), who survived.

Lessons we learn from Karbala

“Imam Husain uprooted despotism forever till the Day of Resurrection. He watered the dry garden of freedom with the surging wave of his blood, and indeed he awakened the sleeping Muslim nation. Husain weltered in blood and dust for the sake of truth. Verily he, therefore, became the bed-rock (foundation) of the Muslim creed; la ilaaha il-lal Laah (There is no god but Allah).” —**Sir Muhammad Iqbal**

It also teaches us to be patient, to stand up against any form of injustice and oppression. The best homage that we can pay to the great tragedy is to do some soul-searching. Do we measure up to be the true followers of the Prophet [PBUH]? Have we really understood the message of Imam Husain? Are the tears for Husain drawn merely by the scenes of unprecedented butchery? Would we stand up to the false narrations of the events at Karbala meant to generate excessive grief? Was Karbala a political war or a struggle to uphold the true faith? Are we ready to put aside our differences and respect each other’s views, especially during our religious discourses in the month of Muharram?

After we have answered these questions, then we would understand the real message of Karbala.

Excerpts from “What is Muharram?” from the web site:

moralsandethics.wordpress.com/2008/01/11/what-is-muharram/

*** Research and preparation of this section by Syed M.R. Shabbar**