

Husayn b. 'Ali (626-680 C.E.)

The third Shi'i imam, Husayn was the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad and son of Fatima and 'Ali. Husayn became famous as he was killed in the tragedy at Kerbala, Iraq.

When the Umayyad caliph Mu'awiya died in 680 C.E., his son Yazid asked Husayn to pledge allegiance to him. Husayn refused claiming that, based on an agreement reached between Mu'awiya and Husayn's elder brother, al-Hasan, he was more entitled to the caliphate. Husayn also argued that that due to his un-Islamic practices, Yazid was not fit to rule the Muslim community. Due to the imminent threat to his life, Husayn left Medina for Mecca.

The Shi'is of Kufa, a garrison town in Iraq, wrote several letters to Husayn, promising him assistance if he was to join them. Unsure of their support, Husayn sent his emissary Muslim b. 'Aqil, to verify their pledges of allegiance. When Muslim assured Husayn of support from the people of Kufa, Husayn left Mecca with a group of about fifty men, relatives and friends able to bear arms, together with women and children.

In the meantime, Yazid introduced a new governor in Kufa, 'Ubayd Allah b. Ziyad, who established a regime of terror and oppression. Husayn's sympathizers in Kufa, including Muslim b. 'Aqil, were either imprisoned or killed. Husayn was stopped in the desert by Hurr b. Yazid al-Riyahi and forced to camp at Kerbala. For three days, Husayn and his companions were denied access to water and suffered terribly from thirst.

As more troop reinforcements arrived from Kufa to secure Husayn's pledge of allegiance, several attempts by Husayn at averting a conflict failed. A battle finally took place on the 10th of Muharram (the first month of the Muslim calendar). Despite putting

up severe resistance against a numerically superior and a better-equipped force, Husayn and his companions were massacred and their bodies trampled. After pillaging Husayn's tents, the women and children were taken as captives to Yazid in Damascus.

Husayn's martyrdom instilled much emotion in Shi'ism, traits that are evident in the Shi'i community even today. Shi'is still mourn, flagellate and even cut their bodies in memory of Husayn and his companions. Others re-enact the events in Kerbala with annual passion plays. Husayn's death injected a sense of passion for martyrdom and inspired Shi'is to defy oppressive rulers.

Soon after his death, Husayn's followers in Kufa rose against Yazid. Even though they were defeated, the Penitents, as they came to be called, set the tone for further Shi'i uprisings against unjust rulers. Under Mukhtar b. 'Ubayd's (d. 687) revolt, many of those responsible for Husayn's death were captured and brought to justice. Husayn's death also inspired future Shi'i revolts against both the Umayyad and 'Abbasid regimes.

Due to his death and close connection to the Prophet, Husayn has been revered in both the Shi'i and Sunni literature. He is exalted because of the motives that led to his sacrifice. He is also revered for not compromising his principles against the threats of a dictator, preferring, instead, to die rather than live in humiliation. Shi'i hagiographic literature is replete with many legends on and anecdotes of miracles performed by Husayn. His tomb in Kerbala has become a pilgrimage site for the Shi'is, many of whom visit it to benefit from the miracles, blessings, and intercession, reportedly available at his shrine.

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