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Encyclopaedia of Islam, THREE

al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib

(3,363 words)

Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib was one of two sons of Fāṭima (d. 11/632), the daughter of Muḥammad, to survive into adulthood and the third Imām of the Twelver Shīʿa. He was born in Medina in 4/626 (one year after his brother al-Ḥasan, d. 50/670) and was killed at Karbalāʾ, at the age of fifty-seven, on 10 Muḥarram (also known as ʿĀshūrāʾ) 61/10 October 680, in a battle with an Umayyad army. (This article provides a condensed biography of al-Ḥusayn, with a particular emphasis on his death. For a more comprehensive and detailed account, see Veccia Vaglieri, and Wilferd Madelung's section of the article by Calmard, Chelkowski, and Madelung.)

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1. Al-Ḥusayn's life

Al-Ḥusayn was born and raised in Medina, in the household of ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/660) and Fāṭima. Although he was only six years old at the time of Muḥammad's death, al-Ḥusayn and his brother are often depicted as objects of the Prophet's love. Muḥammad is reported to have allowed his grandsons to climb onto his back and shoulders as he performed prayers. In one famous account, he declares that "al-Ḥusayn is of me, and I am of al-Ḥusayn." In another, he designates al-Ḥusayn and al-Ḥasan as the "leaders (*sayyids*) of the youth of paradise" (al-Mufīd, 197–8, 249). In several instances, Muḥammad demonstrates foreknowledge of al-Ḥusayn's death at Karbalāʾ (Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 354; al-Mufīd, 250). For example, he gives Umm Salama (d.

60/680) a small bottle containing dirt and informs her that it will become red and moist after al-Ḥusayn's killing. (These traditions appear in both Shī'ī and non-Shī'ī sources: al-Ya'qūbī, 2:159; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 354; al-Mufīd, 250–1; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:268–9.)

Al-Ḥusayn's status is invariably tied to that of his immediate family. According to most Shī'ī exegetes, the term “family of the house” in Q 33:33 refers narrowly to five figures (Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn) whom God has purified of sin and elevated above the rest of humanity. The family is also distinguished by its involvement in an episode of mutual cursing (*mubāhala*) with the Christians of Najrān (10/631) (Q 3:61) and by its inclusion in the widely circulated “tradition of the cloak” (*ḥadīth al-kisā'*). There is, in fact, an entire category of traditions specifically dedicated to praise of these five figures. (For a collection of these accounts, see al-Mufīd, 197–9, and Haider, *Shī'ī*, 54–65.)

Al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn were the only male descendants of the Prophet to produce offspring who survived into adulthood. This meant, in practical terms, that every later figure to claim descent from the Prophet had a lineage that included either al-Ḥasan or al-Ḥusayn. It also differentiated them from their half-brothers (e.g., Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafīyya, d. 81/700–1), who lacked a direct genetic link to Muḥammad.

Al-Ḥusayn appears only sporadically in the historical record before 40/660. Although he was present at key moments such as the siege of 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (r. 23–35/644–56) in Medina in 35/656 and the Battle of Ṣiffīn in 37/657, he played only a secondary role. This changed following 'Alī's murder, as al-Ḥasan struggled to secure Kufan support against Mu'āwīya b. Abī Sufyān, the first Umayyad caliph (r. 41–60/661–80). Al-Ḥusayn opposed his brother's decision to conclude an agreement with Mu'āwīya whereby the latter was acknowledged as caliph in exchange for a considerable annual stipend. The deal also specified that the caliphate would pass from Mu'āwīya to al-Ḥasan and then to al-Ḥusayn (Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 355–6). Hostile sources characterise the treaty as a selling of the caliphate, while friendly sources ascribe it to the treachery and unreliability of al-Ḥasan's Kufan followers. Al-Ḥusayn's critique of the deal accords with descriptions that contrast his fiery temperament with al-Ḥasan's conciliatory tendencies.

In the following years, al-Ḥusayn was repeatedly approached by Kufans (most prominently, Ḥujr b. 'Adī, d. 51/671) who urged him to renounce the agreement and launch his own rebellion. He steadfastly refused these calls and upheld the terms of the treaty, even after al-Ḥasan's death in 50/670. (For these and similar episodes, see al-Balādhurī, 2:456–61; al-Mufīd, 200. For al-Ḥusayn's interactions with the Umayyad court during Mu'āwīya's caliphate, see Madelung, in Ḥusayn b. 'Alī).

2. Karbalā' and al-Ḥusayn's death

The remainder of this article focuses on the events leading to al-Ḥusayn's death and is based on information preserved in the earliest sources, both Shī'ī and non-Shī'ī; elements drawn from a particular sectarian tradition are explicitly identified as such.

Mu'āwiya **b.** Abī Sufyān died in Damascus in 60/680 without having secured the oath of allegiance for his son Yazīd (r. 60–4/680–3) from the inhabitants of the Ḥijāz. Yazīd, keenly aware of his precarious position, wrote to al-Walīd **b.** 'Utba (d. 64/684), his governor in Medina, instructing him to administer the oath immediately. He hoped to establish control of the city before inhabitants learned of Mu'āwiya's death. Yazīd was particularly worried about two potential rivals for the caliphate who had previously refused the oath, 'Abdallāh **b.** al-Zubayr (d. 73/692) and al-Ḥusayn **b.** 'Alī.

Ibn al-Zubayr immediately fled Medina for Mecca, avoiding the main road to elude riders sent by al-Walīd to bring him back. Al-Ḥusayn refused to take the oath in private, declaring that he would do so only together with the larger population of the city. Al-Walīd did not press him further, despite the advice of al-Marwān **b.** al-Ḥakam (who would rule as caliph, 64–5/684–5) that al-Ḥusayn be forced to take the oath under threat of death or imprisonment. Soon after this meeting, al-Ḥusayn followed Ibn al-Zubayr to Mecca, accompanied by members of his family and his closest supporters. (For these events, see al-Dīnawarī, 228–9; al-Ya'qūbī, 2:154–5; Aḥmad **b.** Ibrāhīm, 357–60; al-Mufīd, 199–202.)

In Medina, al-Ḥusayn received a steady stream of letters from Kufa, urging him to come to the city and promising him widespread support. The Kufans lamented their lack of a leader (an Imām) and hailed al-Ḥusayn as the only man qualified to fill this position. In response, al-Ḥusayn dispatched a small party led by his cousin Muslim **b.** 'Aqīl **b.** Abī Ṭālib (d. 60/680) to investigate the situation. Muslim was instructed, if conditions proved favourable, to inform al-Ḥusayn who would then travel to Kufa. (For this episode, see al-Balādhurī, 2:463–4; al-Dīnawarī, 230; Aḥmad **b.** Ibrāhīm, 361; al-Iṣfahānī, 99; al-Mufīd, 202–5.)

Muslim initially had considerable success in Kufa. He worked with Hānī' **b.** 'Urwa (d. 60/680) to secure the oath of allegiance from thousands of Kufans. Reports of Muslim's activities reached Nu'mān **b.** Bashīr (d. 65/684), the Umayyad governor of Kufa, who steadfastly refused to institute any strong countermeasures (Aḥmad **b.** Ibrāhīm, 361–2; al-Mufīd, 205–6). When Yazīd was informed of the situation, he removed Nu'mān from office and placed Kufa under the jurisdiction of the governor of Basra, 'Ubaydallāh **b.** Ziyād **b.** Abīhī (d. 67/686).

According to most reports, Ibn Ziyād entered Kufa in disguise and was initially mistaken for al-Ḥusayn. He was alarmed by the situation and took up residence in the governor's palace, where he began systematically to undermine Muslim's efforts. The sources strongly contrast Ibn Ziyād's tactics of intimidation with Muslim's unwillingness to act decisively. In one striking report,

Muslim squanders an opportunity to kill Ibn Ziyād and seize control of the palace, to the exasperation of his Kufan supporters (al-Dīnawarī, 234–5; al-Iṣfahānī, 101–2). Ibn Ziyād eventually secured the backing of tribal elites, who then convinced their fellow tribesmen to abandon Muslim. He was quickly captured and put to death on 9 Dhū l-Ḥijja 60/10 September 680. (For the conflict between Muslim and Ibn Ziyād, see al-Dīnawarī, 232–42; al-Ya‘qūbī, 2:155–6; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 362–5; al-Iṣfahānī, 99–109; al-Mufīd, 205–16.)

In Mecca, al-Ḥusayn received Muslim’s initial positive reports and resolved to go to Kufa. The sources preserve many reports of prominent figures urging al-Ḥusayn to remain in the Ḥijāz. In Medina, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya counselled al-Ḥusayn to solidify support in Mecca before proceeding to Iraq. He received similar advice from ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar (d. 73/692–3) and ‘Abdallāh b. al-‘Abbās (d. 68/687–8). The latter was particularly adamant, noting that the Kufans had abandoned both ‘Alī and al-Ḥasan in times of great need. He suggested that al-Ḥusayn head to Yemen instead or, at the very least, leave behind the women and children before setting out for Iraq. In a commonly cited report, al-Ḥusayn asked the poet Farazdaq (d. 110/728 or 112/730) about the Kufans and was told that “their hearts are with you, but their swords are against you.” (For these and similar reports, see al-Balādhurī, 2:466–9; al-Dīnawarī, 243–5; al-Iṣfahānī, 110; al-Mufīd, 218.)

Despite these warnings, al-Ḥusayn departed from Mecca on 8 Dhū l-Ḥijja 60/9 September 680, accompanied by most of his family. He was unaware of the deteriorating situation in Kufa, where Ibn Ziyād had taken control of the city and begun military preparations for the ‘Alid’s arrival. Al-Ḥusayn learned of these developments from Bedouins along the way and then received word of Muslim’s death. At this point, he considered returning to Mecca but was dissuaded by Muslim’s kin, who were intent on exacting revenge for his death (al-Dīnawarī, 247; al-Mufīd, 222).

The first hostile force al-Ḥusayn met was a contingent of cavalry led by al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd al-Tamīmī (d. 61/681). After a brief exchange, he categorically refused al-Ḥurr’s request that he accompany him to Ibn Ziyād, in Kufa. When the two sides prayed together, al-Ḥusayn took the opportunity to explain his position, urging the Kufans to honour their letters and support him against the Umayyads. He then produced saddlebags full of letters, to the genuine bewilderment of al-Ḥurr, who claimed that neither he nor his soldiers had written to him. The stalemate continued for some time, and the rhetoric between the two sides became increasingly hostile. Al-Ḥurr prevented al-Ḥusayn from turning back to Medina or proceeding to Kufa and continued to shadow his movements. He then received new orders from Ibn Ziyād to stop al-Ḥusayn’s caravan and force him to camp in a desert area without access to water. At this point, Zuhayr b. al-Qayn (d. 61/680) advised al-Ḥusayn to engage the enemy immediately before the arrival of reinforcements. Al-Ḥusayn, however, refused to initiate hostilities and was forced to set up camp

in Karbalā', on the outskirts of the city of Nīnawā (Nineveh) on 2 Muḥarram 61/2 October 680. (For al-Ḥusayn's interactions with al-Ḥurr, see al-Balādhurī, 2:472–7; al-Dīnawarī, 249–51; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 366–7; al-Iṣfahānī, 111–2; al-Mufīd, 223–7.)

The next day, al-Ḥurr's cavalry was supplemented by a larger force under the command of 'Umar b. Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ (d. 66/686), who had been sent initially to restore order in the area around Rayy (al-Balādhurī, 2:478). Ibn Sa'd was eager to avoid hostilities and immediately entered negotiations with al-Ḥusayn who, according to most sources, offered three alternatives: he would return to the Hījāz; he would travel to Yazīd and personally take the oath of allegiance; or he would head to the frontier to fight the enemies of Islam ([ps.-]Ibn Qutayba, 2:11; al-Balādhurī, 2:482; al-Iṣfahānī, 114; al-Mufīd, 229–30; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:336; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:265). The sources suggest that Ibn Ziyād was inclined to accept these terms before the intervention of Shamir b. Dhī l-Jawshān (d. 66/686). Shamir noted that anything short of al-Ḥusayn's complete submission would be evidence of Ibn Ziyād's weakness. Persuaded by this argument, Ibn Ziyād rejected the offer and instructed Ibn Sa'd to demand full surrender. He also commanded that al-Ḥusayn be denied water, drawing parallels to the siege that led to the killing of 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (al-Balādhurī, 2:481; al-Dīnawarī, 255; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:336). Shamir was authorised to kill Ibn Sa'd, if the latter refused to carry out the order, and to take his place at the head of the army. (For these events, see al-Balādhurī, 2:482–7; al-Dīnawarī, 253–6; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 367–8; al-Iṣfahānī, 112–4; al-Mufīd, 227–30; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:336–7.)

The denial of water to al-Ḥusayn's camp is dated to 7 Muḥarram 61/7 October 680 (al-Balādhurī, 2:481–2; al-Dīnawarī, 255; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 368–9). There are reports that al-Ḥusayn's half-brother 'Abbās b. 'Alī (d. 61/680) led a small party that managed to fill some water skins but that this did little to alleviate the situation (Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 369; al-Iṣfahānī, 117). Al-Ḥusayn asked and was granted a final night of prayer before hostilities commenced on the 10 Muḥarram/10 October. This night is generally depicted as one of prayer and meditation. Al-Ḥusayn repeatedly advises his followers to leave under the cover of night, but they remain steadfast and loyal. Some accounts portray encounters in which al-Ḥusayn sees visions of the Prophet who predicts his death or in which he counsels his sister (Zaynab bt. 'Alī, d. 62/682) or his sick son ('Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Zayn al-Ābidīn, the future fourth Twelver Imām, d. 94 or 95/712 or 713) to remain strong in the face of future hardships. (For the denial of water and the night before the battle, see al-Balādhurī, 2:484–6; al-Ya'qūbī, 2:157–8; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 369–71; al-Iṣfahānī, 114–6; al-Mufīd, 227–30; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:337–9.)

On the morning of 'Āshūrā' (10 Muḥarram 61/10 October 680), al-Ḥusayn placed his tents close together, dug a trench behind them, and lit a fire to prevent the enemies from attacking from the rear. Al-Ḥusayn also addressed the opposing army, going as far as to name individuals who had specifically summoned him to Kufa. This had little effect, although there is a general consensus

that al-Ḥurr b. Yazīd defected to al-Ḥusayn before the hostilities and was killed in the subsequent fighting (al-Balādhurī, 2:489; al-Dīnawarī, 256; al-Mufīd, 235). Later sources cite elaborate versions of al-Ḥusayn's speech that include long descriptions of his distinctive Hāshimite lineage as a blood descendent of the Prophet. In earlier sources, many of these points are instead articulated by al-Ḥusayn's supporters (cf. al-Ya'qūbī, 2:158, with al-Mufīd, 234–5, and Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:271).

The battle consisted of a series of skirmishes between al-Ḥusayn's seventy-two supporters and a much larger 'Umayyad force. There are reports of individual combat, as well as fighting on a larger scale. The sources report the deaths of important individuals, particularly members of al-Ḥusayn's household, including his eldest son (ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Akbar), his infant son (ʿAbdallāh b. al-Ḥusayn), his half-brother and standard bearer (al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī), and his nephews (al-Balādhurī, 2:492–8; al-Dīnawarī, 256–7; al-Ya'qūbī, 2:158; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 374–5; al-Iṣfahānī, 94–5 and 114–6; al-Mufīd, 236–40; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:339–40). By late afternoon, al-Ḥusayn was left alone and surrounded by enemies. There was some hesitation as individuals were reluctant to bear the responsibility of striking the death blow. Most sources identify al-Ḥusayn's killer as Sinān b. Anas b. ʿAmr al-Nakhāʿī (d. 66/686?) who then cut off the ʿAlid's head and handed it to al-Khawālī b. Yazīd al-Aṣḥabī for transport to Ibn Ziyād in Kufa. (For al-Ḥusayn's death, see al-Balādhurī, 2:499–501; al-Dīnawarī, 258; al-Ya'qūbī, 2:158; Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm, 372–3; al-Iṣfahānī, 118; al-Mufīd, 242; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:341; Sibṭ Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:276.)

The aftermath of the battle lies outside the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the survivors (and the heads of the seventy-two dead) were first taken to Ibn Ziyād, who treated them with considerable contempt, before being sent to Yazīd b. Muʿāwiya, who expressed regret at the outbreak of hostilities (al-Balādhurī, 2:507–8; al-Dīnawarī, 261; al-Iṣfahānī, 119–20; al-Mufīd, 245–6; Ibn al-Jawzī, 5:342). The remaining members of al-Ḥusayn's family were then allowed to return to Medina, led by ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn, who had been ill and bedridden during the battle.

There appears to have been considerable regret in Kufa in the immediate aftermath of Karbalā'. This sentiment was reflected in the rise of the Penitent (Tawwābūn) movement led by Sulaymān b. Ṣurad (d. 65/684–5), which was quickly crushed in 65/685. Al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd (d. 67/687) also drew heavily on the memory of Karbalā' when he seized control of Kufa from 66/685 to 67/687 and carried out public executions of those complicit in al-Ḥusayn's killing. In subsequent ʿAlid revolutions, al-Ḥusayn's name was repeatedly invoked to rally support against the 'Umayyads.

Commemorations of the death of al-Ḥusayn began soon after 61/680. In their earliest form, they consisted of small gatherings in which elegies were recited for the fallen. By the times of the Imāms Muḥammad al-Bāqir (d. 117/735) and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765), at the very latest,

Karbalā' had become a focal point of Shī'ī pilgrimage. This was part of a larger process whereby Shī'ī identity crystallised around a set of distinctive ritual practices. Shī'ī sources include many traditions in which al-Bāqir or al-Ṣādiq compare visits to the tombs of al-Ḥusayn and his companions with the performance of the greater (*hajj*) or lesser (*umra*) pilgrimage (al-Mufid, 252; Haider, *Origins*, 243–7). In subsequent centuries, the Twelver Shī'a instituted local processions for the community to commemorate 'Āshūrā' without undertaking the difficult journey to Karbalā'. The most important of these was initiated by the Būyid ruler Mu'izz al-Dawla (r. 334–56/945–67) in Baghdad.

Accounts of Karbalā' became increasingly embellished over time. This is most evident in the Twelver Shī'ī sources but is seen also in non-Shī'ī sources. It was not until the rise of the Ṣafavid dynasty in Iran in the tenth/sixteenth century, however, that the Karbalā' narrative underwent a fundamental transformation in the Twelver Shī'ī tradition. This period witnessed the development of a script, the *rawḍat khānī*, that was performed publicly, with state sponsorship. The new narrative removed certain characters and added considerable dialogue and some supernatural elements. In subsequent generations, this text became the basis of annual public re-enactments (*shabih khānī* or *ta'ziyat khānī*). Outside the Iranian context, communities largely adopted the tenth/sixteenth century Ṣafavid narrative, incorporating it into a wide variety of local practices. The latter half of the twentieth century witnessed a new, politicised formulation of the Karbalā' narrative, under the influence of Third Worldism.

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The parenthetical references provided in the text of this article are drawn from representative primary sources that span sectarian orientations. They are listed in chronological order, based on the death of the author/compiler. For the most extensive and detailed biography of al-Ḥusayn (albeit from a non-Shī'ī perspective), see Ibn 'Asākir's *Ta'rikh madinat Dimashq*. For the most comprehensive account of Karbalā', see al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rikh*. These works are not cited above but are in accord with the substance of this article.

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