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The Third Imam: Husayn ibn ‘Ali

Birth and Martyrdom

Imam Husayn (a.s.) was born on the third or fifth of Sha‘ban in the fourth year A.H. in Medina. His father was Ali Ibn Abi Talib (a.s.) and his mother was Fatimah (s.a.), Prophet Muhammad (S)’s daughter. His nickname was Abu ‘Abdullah and his most famous titles were Tayyib, Sayyid, Sibt, Wafi, and Mubarak.

At his birth time, Gabriel was revealed to the Messenger of Allah (S) for congratulating and brought Allah’s message to the Prophet (S) to name the infant Husayn. The Messenger of Allah (S) recited ‘adhan in his right ear and ‘iqamah in his left ear. On the seventh day after Imam Husayn’s (a.s.) birth, two sheep were sacrificed for him and the meat was divided among the poor.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) lived fifty six years and some days, according to some narrations. He lived six years and several months with Prophet Muhammad (S) before the Prophet (S)’s demise, thirty years with his father, ten years with his brother Imam Hasan (a.s.) after his father’s demise, and ten years after his brother’s demise. He was martyred on the day of ‘ashura (tenth of Muharram) in the year sixty one A.H. in Karbala and his holy body was buried in that land.^{[1](#)}

Texts Proving His Imamate

For proving the Imamate of Imam Husayn (a.s.) general reasons can be used that were pointed out before. Moreover, the Messenger of Allah (S) has stipulated the Imamate of Imam Hasan (a.s.) and Imam Husayn (a.s.) in many traditions.

The Messenger of Allah (S) has stated, “My two sons are the Imams, either they rise for Imamate or not.”^{[2](#)}

Moreover, Imam Hasan (a.s.) introduced his brother, Imam Husayn (a.s.), as his successor and the Imam before his demise.

Imam Sadiq (a.s.) has stated in a tradition, “Hasan Ibn Ali (a.s.) called his brother, Muhammad Ibn Hanafiyah, before his demise and said, ‘Do you know that Husayn Ibn Ali (a.s.) will be the Imam after my demise? The Almighty Allah wants it and the Messenger of Allah (S) has stipulated it. The Exalted Allah knows well that you –the Ahlul Bayt– are His best servants. Allah selected Prophet Muhammad (S) as prophet. The Prophet (S) selected Ali (a.s.) as the Imam and my father Ali (a.s.) selected me as the Imam and I select Husayn (a.s.) for the Imamate position.’ Muhammad Ibn Hanafiyah stated, ‘O my brother! You are the Imam and surely fulfill your duty.’”[3](#)

Ali Ibn Yunusi ‘amili has written in his book Sirati Mustaqim: Amiral Mu’minin (a.s.) had stipulated the Imamate of his son, Hasan (a.s.), as he stipulated the Imamate of his son, Husayn (a.s.). The Shi’ah narrators have narrated that Hasan (a.s.), before his demise, selected his brother Husayn (a.s.) as the Imam, entrusted prophet hood authority and Imamate covenant to him, and informed the Shi’ah of his Imamate and succession after himself. This is an obvious issue with no obscurity.[4](#)

Mas’udi has written in ‘Ithbatul Wasilah: When Imam Hasan (a.s.) got sick, his brother Abu Abdillah came to visit him. They talked for a while and then Imam Hasan (a.s.) set his brother Husayn (a.s.) as his successor. He taught Husayn (a.s.) Allah’s Great Name and entrusted the legacy of the prophets (S) and Amiral Mu’minin’s (a.s.) will to him.[5](#)

Muhammad Ibn Hanafiyah told Imam Sajjad (a.s.), “You know that the Messenger of Allah (S) entrusted the Imamate and leadership after himself to Amiral Mu’minin (a.s.) and then to Hasan (a.s.) and Husayn (a.s.).”[6](#)

Imam Husayn’s Virtues

The Messenger of Allah (S) stated, “Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn. Everyone who likes Husayn is loved by Allah. Husayn is a sibti (son of daughter) of my sibti.”[7](#)

Prophet Muhammad (S) also said, “Everyone who wants to see the most beloved person in the heavens and the earth should look at Husayn.”[8](#)

Hadhifah has narrated from the Messenger of Allah (S), “Allah has granted Husayn a virtue that He has given to no one, except to Joseph, son of Jacob.”[9](#)

Hadhifat Ibn Yaman says, “I saw the Messenger of Allah (S) holding Husayn’s hand and saying, ‘O people! This is Husayn Ibn Ali. Know him! By Allah that he will be in the Paradise, along with his friends and the friends of his friends.’ He then continued, ‘Hasan and Husayn are the best people on the earth, after their father and I, and their mother is the best woman in the world.’”[10](#)

Prophet Muhammad (S) said, “Hasan and Husayn are my two flowers on the earth.”[11](#)

The Prophet (S) stated, “Hasan and Husayn are masters of the youth of the Paradise and their father is

more virtuous than them.”[12](#)

Worship

Imam Husayn (a.s.) was asked, “Why do you fear Allah so much?” Imam Husayn (a.s.) answered, “No one is safe from hardships of the Hereafter except that he fears Allah in this world.”[13](#)

Abdullah Ibn ‘Ubayd says, “Imam Husayn (a.s.) went to *Haji* pilgrimage on foot twenty times, while he had a horse to ride.”[14](#)

Imam Sajjad (a.s.) was asked, “Why are your father’s children so few?” Imam (a.s.) replied, “I am even wondered of my birth; my father performed a thousand rak’ahs of prayer a day.”[15](#)

It is narrated that Hasan (a.s.) and Husayn (a.s.) were going to *Haji* pilgrimage on foot. Everyone who passed them on horseback landed and continued the way on foot. Walking was difficult for some of the pilgrims. They told Sa’d Ibn Abi Waqqas, “Walking is hard for us, but we cannot ride while these two honorable persons walk.” Sa’d Ibn Abi Waqqas related their speech to Imam Hasan (a.s.) and added, “I wish you rode your horses for the comfort of these weak pilgrims.” Imam Husayn (a.s.) said, “We do not ride, since we are obliged to walk to *Haji* pilgrimage. However, we run away from this path for the sake of other pilgrims.” Then Imam Hasan (a.s.) and Imam Husayn (a.s.) did so.[16](#)

Almsgiving

Imam Husayn (a.s.) went to visit Usamat Ibn Ziyad who was sick and told Imam Husayn (a.s.), “Woe! I am sad!” Imam Husayn (a.s.) told him, “Why are you sad my brother?” Usamah said, “O son of Messenger of Allah (S)! I am in debt to the tune of sixty thousand dirhams. I am fearful of dying with this debt.” Imam Husayn (a.s.) said, “Do not be sad! I will pay your debt before your demise.” And he did so.[17](#)

Shu’ayb Ibn Abdur Rahman says, “After Imam Husayn (a.s.) was martyred, a mark was seen on his holy shoulder. Imam Sajjad (a.s.) was asked, ‘What is this sign?’ Imam (a.s.) answered, ‘This mark is for the sac of food my father used to carry on his shoulder to feed the poor, the orphan, and the widowed.’”[18](#)

It is narrated from Imam Husayn (a.s.), “This speech of Prophet Muhammad (S) that ‘The best deed after *Salat* (prayer) is joyfulness of the believer’s heart, provided it does not include committing a sin,’ is proved for me. One day I saw a slave who was eating along with a dog. He ate a mouthful then threw a piece for the dog. I asked him the reason. The slave answered, ‘O son of Messenger of Allah! I am very sad. I try to make this dog happy so that Allah will delight me. My master is a Jew from who I want to separate.’

Imam Husayn (a.s.) went to the slave’s master and paid two hundred dirhams to buy the slave. The Jewish man said, ‘I grant this slave to you. I grant a farm to him and pay you back your money.’ Imam

Husayn (a.s.) said, 'I accept your granting, grant all of it to the slave and free him.' The Jewish man's wife who witnessed all these events said, 'I embrace Islam and forgive my dowry to my husband.' The Jewish man said, 'I embrace Islam too and grant my house to my wife.'"¹⁹

Anas says, "I was with Imam Husayn (a.s.) when a female slave came and gave some flowers to Imam (a.s.). Imam Husayn (a.s.) told the female slave, 'I free you in Allah's path.' I said, 'O son of Messenger of Allah (S)! She gave you worthless flowers. Why did you free her?' Imam Husayn (a.s.) stated, 'Allah has trained us this way, ***When a (courteous) greeting is offered you, meet it with a greeting still more courteous, or (at least) of equal courtesy.***'"²⁰ Better than the flowers was freeing that slave that I did.""²¹

A slave of Imam Husayn (a.s.) committed something wrong and deserved to be punished. Imam (a.s.) ordered to punish him. The slave said, "O my master! 'Those who restrain anger.'" Imam (a.s.) said, "I pardon you." The slave said, "O my master! 'And those who pardon (all) men.'" Imam (a.s.) said, "I forgive you." The slave then said, "O my master! 'For God loves those who do good.'"²² Imam Husayn (a.s.) stated, "I free you in Allah's path and will pay you twice what I had given you before.""²³

An Arab nomad went to Imam Husayn (a.s.) and said, "O son of Messenger of Allah! I have accepted a full blood-money, but cannot pay it. I thought I can ask it from the most generous person and found such a person in Prophet (S)'s Ahlul Bayt." Imam Husayn (a.s.) said, "I ask you three questions; if you answered one of them, I will give you one third of the money you need, if you answered two questions, I will pay two third of the property, and if you answered all three questions, I will give you all of it."

The Arab man said, "O son of Messenger of Allah! Does a noble knowledgeable character like you ask questions from someone like me?!" Imam (a.s.) replied, "Yes. I heard my grandfather, the Messenger of Allah (S), who said, 'Everyone does goodness as much as his understanding.'" The Arab man said, "Ask me! I will answer if I know and I will learn from you if I do not know. And there is no power but from Allah." Then Imam Husayn (a.s.) asked the nomad these questions and he answered:

- What is the best deed?
- Belief in Allah.
- What is the means for delivering from the calamities?
- Reliance on Allah.
- What is human adornment?
- Knowledge that accompanies patience.
- What if it does not exist?

- Property that accompanies humanity and equanimity.
- And if this does not exist too?
- Poorness along with patience.
- And if it does not exist?
- Then a thunder should come from the heaven and fire him!

Imam Husayn (a.s.) laughed and granted the Arab man a thousand dinars. Moreover, Imam (a.s.) gave the nomad his ring, which cost two hundred dirhams and said, “Fulfill your debt with that money. Sell the ring and spend it for your life.”

The Arab nomad took them and said, “God knoweth best where (and how) to carry out His mission.”^{[24](#)}

The ‘Ashura Event

The events, which happened on the day of ‘ashura (tenth of Muharram of the year 61 A.H.), are among the most tragic events in the history of Islam and even in the world history. On this day, Imam Husayn (a.s.), son of Messenger of Allah (S), was killed in Karbala, along with some of his brothers, sons, cousins, close relatives, and friends, by someone who knew himself the caliph of Messenger of Allah (S).

In spite of all the recommendations about him, Imam Husayn (a.s.) was cruelly martyred by an army that considered itself Muslim and follower of his grandfather, the Messenger of Allah (S). The cruel massacre and inhumane arrests in Karbala blackened the history record. Reviewing this bitter event is necessary for recognizing Imam Husayn (a.s.). It, however, requires a separate work and is not possible in the present book. We only discuss the purposes of Imam Husayn (a.s.) in his bloody uprising.

The Purposes and Method of Imam Husayn

For knowing Imam Husayn’s (a.s.) purposes in Karbala exactly, it is better to refer to his own words. When leaving Medina, Imam (a.s.) wrote in his will to Muhammad Ibn Hanafiyah, “I do not exit Medina for evilness, oppression, or corruption. Surely I leave Medina for reforming the affairs of my grandfather’s ummah. I want to enjoin good and forbid evil and follow the tradition of the Messenger of Allah (S) and my father, Ali Ibn Abi Talib.”^{[25](#)}

According to Imam Husayn’s (a.s.) speech, he had three main purposes; reforming the Muslims’ affairs, enjoining good and forbidding evil, and revitalizing the norms of the Prophet and Imam Ali (a.s.).

It can be concluded that the main purpose of Imam Husayn (a.s.) has been reforming the affairs of the ummah, who had forgotten the tradition of Prophet Muhammad (S) and gone astray in worshipping,

social, ethical, political, and economic aspects. Imam Husayn (a.s.) wanted to do this important job completely via enjoining good and forbidding evil.

As a result, Imam Husayn's (a.s.) movement was for protest and for reform, which was done in the form of enjoining good and forbidding evil in various levels and steps, based on time and place requirements:

The first step; immigration from Medina: After Mu'awiyah's death, his son, Yazid, wrote to and ordered Walid, the governor of Medina, to take the oath of allegiance from Husayn Ibn Ali (a.s.) and kill him if he refused to do so. However, Imam Husayn (a.s.) did not consider Yazid's government legal and refused to recognize it. For showing his disagreement, Imam Husayn (a.s.) left Medina for Mecca. This is considered a kind of forbidding evil.

The second step; staying in Mecca: Imam Husayn (a.s.) was going to stay in Mecca and speak for Muslim pilgrims coming from various countries to *Hajj* to show his opposition to the government in office, which is another type of enjoining good and forbidding evil. In Mecca, however, two new events occurred that could affect Imam Husayn's (a.s.) intention.

The first event was that the Shi'ah of Kufah were informed of Imam's (a.s.) opposition to allegiance with Yazid and his moving to Mecca. They wrote so many letters to invite Imam Husayn (a.s.) to Kufah. The second event was that Imam Husayn (a.s.) was informed that Yazid has hired some people to assassinate Imam (a.s.) secretly.

The third step; moving toward Kufah. The two mentioned events changed the situation. On one hand, Imam Husayn (a.s.) could not stay in Mecca. The reason was that killing him inside haram (sanctuary) in Mecca dishonored the sanctuary of Allah's House and had no benefit. On the other hand, the Shi'ah of Kufah had invited Imam (a.s.) and he had no reason for not accepting their invitation.

Therefore, Imam Husayn (a.s.) felt duty-bound to move toward Kufah, which was the continuation of his protest movement. Of course, to be on the safe side, he sent Muslim Ibn 'Aqil along with a letter to Kufah in order that he observe the situation directly and report to Imam Husayn (a.s.). After a while, Imam Husayn (a.s.) received a letter from Muslim, saying, "A great number of Kufah people have taken the oath of allegiance with me and are waiting for you."

Imam Husayn (a.s.) felt that he should move toward Iraq, not only for continuing his protest, but also for establishing an Islamic government. The letters of Kufah Shi'ahs and that of Muslim showed that it would be possible without probable battles and with the support of many Shi'ahs. Therefore, Imam Husayn (a.s.) could revitalize the tradition of his grandfather, Messenger of Allah (S), in an Islamic government and reform the Muslims' affairs, which is the best level of enjoining good and forbidding evil.

Meanwhile, if the Kufah Shi'ahs did not fulfill their promises or other problems arose, Imam Husayn (a.s.) could do his new duty according to time and place conditions. In any case, he would not abandon his protest movement. Imam Husayn (a.s.) changed his *Hajj* pilgrimage to 'Umrah and went toward Kufah.

The fourth step; being informed of Muslim's martyrdom. Imam Husayn (a.s.) heard the news of Muslim's martyrdom in Tha'labiyyah and faced new conditions to decide accordingly. The first measure was relating the event directly to his companions and taking their advice.

The sons of 'Aqil said, "We should avenge Muslim's murder or be killed in this way." Imam Husayn (a.s.) stated, "Life has no value after the martyrdom of Hani and Muslim." Some of the companion said, "O son of Messenger of Allah (S)! By Allah that you are not like Muslim. When you enter Kufah, the Shi'ah who have invited you will surely rush to you and support you."

In such conditions, Imam Husayn (a.s.) had two options; continuing his way to Kufah, or abandoning this way and going toward another city to fulfill his duty according to the new conditions there.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) preferred the first option, because first, he was not disappointed of support of people of Kufah, as emphasized by his companions too. Second, he thought that if the Kufah people would not fulfill their promises, he could fulfill his duty in Kufah better than in other lands and continue his opposition movement. Therefore, he decided to continue his way toward Kufah.

At this phase, Imam Husayn (a.s.) did something to help anyone of his companions who feared continuing this movement, but was ashamed to leave him. Imam (a.s.) told his friends, "As you have heard, Muslim is martyred and the conditions in Kufah have changed. I am going to Kufah anyway. However, I remove my oath of allegiance from you. Everyone who likes to leave me can go wherever he wants to."

A few of the people left the caravan of Imam Husayn (a.s.) and it went toward Kufah.

The fifth step; facing the army of Hur: Imam Husayn (a.s.) had planned to reach Kufah as soon as possible, but before reaching there, Hur and his army blocked their way. Imam Husayn (a.s.) told Hur, "The people of Kufah have invited me there. If they have relented, I will return to Hijaz or another land."

Hur replied, "I know nothing of this invitation. I have a mission to seize you and take you to Ibn Ziyad to decide about you."

This changed the conditions again. Surrendering to Ibn Ziyad led to a humiliating allegiance or martyrdom, neither of which was accepted by Imam Husayn (a.s.). Therefore, he changed his path and went another way to exit the blockage and move toward another destination.

The sixth step; reaching Karbala land. The caravan of Imam Husayn (a.s.) was proceeding and the army of Hur watched it without resorting to force until they reached Karbala. Then Ibn Ziyad sent a letter to Hur and ordered him to stop the caravan of Imam Husayn (a.s.). This new command created a new milieu.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) could not proceed to Kufah or any other place. Imam Husayn (a.s.) faced another dilemma here; he could surrender to Ibn Ziyad's will to be able to live some more years with humiliation,

or he could resist his enemies, preferring honorable defiance and martyrdom to humiliating life.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) did not abandon pursuing his purpose in these harsh risky conditions. He chose holy courageous war until martyrdom to teach a practical lesson of liberalism, religiousness, justice-seeking, and resisting autocracy and oppression. This way he unsteadied the bases of the Umayyites illegal government. This was in fact the best level of enjoining good and forbidding evil.

Imam Husayn's (a.s.) 'ashura is the school of liberty, religiousness, resistance against oppression, and defending the poor and the oppressed. This liberator school should always remain active and alive throughout history. Anytime and anywhere that oppression and autocracy exist and peaceful measures for opposing it does not suffice, the last resort will be revitalizing the lessons of 'Ashura school. That is why the infallible Imams (a.s.) attended to and recommended holding mourning sessions for Imam Husayn (a.s.) to encourage people to fight oppression. Crying for someone martyred in the way of combating oppression and defending the religion has so many rewards, as mentioned in various traditions.

- [1.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, pp. 200–201; Kashful Ghummah, Vol 2, pp. 216– 252; 'A'lamul Wura, Vol 1, p. 420, Matalibul Mas'ul, Vol 2, pp. 49, 51, 69, & 70.
- [2.](#) 'Ithbatul Huda, Vol 5, pp. 134–171.
- [3.](#) 'Ithbatul Huda, Vol 5, p. 169, Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 174.
- [4.](#) 'Ithbatul Huda, Vol 5, p. 173.
- [5.](#) 'Ithbatul Huda, Vol 5, p. 174.
- [6.](#) 'Ithbatul Huda, Vol 5, p. 170.
- [7.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 261.
- [8.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 297.
- [9.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 316.
- [10.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 262.
- [11.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 316.
- [12.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 264.
- [13.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 192.
- [14.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 193.
- [15.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 196.
- [16.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 43, p. 276.
- [17.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 189.
- [18.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 190.
- [19.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 194.
- [20.](#) Surah Al-Nisa' 4: 86.
- [21.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 195.
- [22.](#) Surah 'Ali 'Imran 3: 134.
- [23.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 195.
- [24.](#) Surah Al-'An'am 6: 124.
- [25.](#) Biharul Anwar, Vol 44, p. 329.

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