



The Day the Ocean Split

The Sacred Day of ❖ Ashura

Translation of Ibn Rajab's *Latā'if al-Ma'ārif*
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‘Āshūrā’: The Evolution of an Ancient Holy Day

Introduction

In the two authentic compilations (*ṣaḥīḥayn*), it was reported that Ibn ‘Abbās was asked about fasting on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and he replied, “I have never seen the Messenger of Allah ﷺ fast on a day seeking its virtue like he did with this day - he meant ‘Āshūrā’ and this month - he meant Ramaḍān.”

The day of ‘Āshūrā’ has great virtue and ancient sacredness given that it was a day known by the prophets. Nūḥ and Mūsā both fasted on it as we will soon mention God-Willing. Ibrāhīm al-Hajarī¹ reports from Abī ‘Īyāḍ from Abū Hurayrah that the Prophet ﷺ said, “The prophets used to fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’, so you all should fast as well.” Baqī ibn Makhḥad reported this in his Musnad.² The people of the book used to fast on this day along with the Quraysh during the pre-Islamic (*jāhili*) times. Dalham bin Ṣāliḥ³ asked ‘Ikrimah (Mawlā Ibn ‘Abbās), What is special about ‘Āshūrā’? He replied, “The Quraysh committed a grave crime in the pre-Islamic period and it weighed heavy on their hearts. They asked how they could redeem themselves (*tawbah*). It was said to them to fast on ‘Āshūrā’ the 10th of Muḥarram.

There were 4 phases regarding the fasting of ‘Āshūrā’ in the life of the Prophet ﷺ,

First Phase: Makkan - Solitary Practice

He used to fast on this day in Makkah but not command the people to fast on it. It is reported in the two authentic compilations from ‘Ā’isha that she said, “‘Āshūrā’ is a day that the Quraysh used to fast in the pre-Islamic period. The Prophet ﷺ also used to fast on this day. When he came to Madinah he fasted and commanded others to fast as well. When the obligation of Ramaḍān fasting was established then he would make Ramaḍān the period where he fasted. Whoever wished they could fast on ‘Āshūrā’ and whoever wished could eat.”⁴

¹ Weak narrator that would often falsely elevate narrations to the Prophet ﷺ when they were actually sayings of a companion.

² Also found in the Mūṣānnaḥ of Ibn Abī Shaybah, vol. 2, p. 471 accessed [online](#).

³ Ibn Ḥajar declared Dalham to be a weak narrator in Taqrīb at-Tahdhīb accessed [online](#)

⁴ Bukhārī, 2002.

Second Phase: Early Madinan (1-2 AH) - Emphasis

When the Prophet ﷺ came to Madinah he saw the people of the book fasting and sanctifying the day. He used to love to align with them regarding what he was not explicitly commanded to do. He fasted on this day and commanded the people to fast on it, emphasizing it, encouraging it to the point that the children used to fast on the day.

In the two authentic compilations, it was reported that Ibn ‘Abbās said, “The Messenger of Allah ﷺ came to Madina and found the Jewish people fasting on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and so the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said to them, “What is the significance of this day that you observe fasting on it?” They said: It is a great day. It is when Allah delivered Mūsā and his people, and drowned the Pharaoh and his people, and Mūsā observed fasting out of gratitude and we also observe it. Upon this the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “We have more right, and we have a closer connection with Mūsā than you have,” so Allah's Messenger ﷺ observed fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’, and gave orders that it should be observed.”⁵

In the Musnad of Imam Aḥmad, Abū Hurayrah narrates that the Prophet ﷺ passed by a group of Jewish people that were fasting on ‘Āshūrā’. He asked them, “What is the significance of this day that you observe fast on it? They said: It is a great day. It is when Allah delivered Mūsā and his people, and drowned the Pharaoh and his people. It is also the day that the Ark (of Nūḥ) settled on Mount Judi. Both Nūḥ and Mūsā fasted out of gratitude to Allah. The Prophet ﷺ said, “I have more right to Mūsā and I have more right to fast on this day, so he commanded his companions to fast.”⁶

In the two authentic compilations, Salamah bin al-Awka’ reports that the Prophet ﷺ commanded a person from the Banū Aslam to announce to the people, ‘Whoever has eaten, let him fast the remaining of his day, and whoever has not eaten, let him fast, for verily today is the day of ‘Āshūrā’⁷

It is also reported from Rabī’ bint Mu’awwidh that she said that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ sent someone on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ to a village from the Anṣar that was close to Madina (announcing): Whoever has woken up fasting let him complete it and whoever has woken up eating then let him fast the remainder of the day. So from that day we used to fast and would encourage our children to fast. We would make the children toys out of wool so that if they would cry from the fast they would be given the toy until it was time to break their fast.⁸

Ruling of Early Madinan ‘Āshūrā’

⁵ Bukhārī, 2004.

⁶ Musnad Imām Aḥmad, 8717; The portion regarding Nūḥ is considered a weak variation of the more authentic report that exclusively mentions Mūsā according to Al-Haythamī, Ibn Kathīr and [others](#).

⁷ Bukhārī, 2007

⁸ Bukhārī, 1960.

The scholars differed regarding whether the ruling of ‘Āshūrā’ before the obligation of Ramaḍān was *wājib* (compulsory) or *sunnah mu’akkadah* (strongly emphasized). The school of Abū Ḥanīfah said it was *wājib* along with the opinion of Imām Aḥmad and Abu Bakr al-Athram. Imām Shāfi’ī said it was emphasized *mustaḥabb* (encouraged) only. This is also the position of many of the Ḥanābilah.

Third Phase: Post-Ramaḍān (2 AH) - De-Emphasis

When Ramaḍān was legislated, the Prophet ﷺ stopped commanding his companions to fast on this day and stopped emphasizing it. This is based on the ḥadīth of ‘Ā’isha as quoted earlier. It is also mentioned from Ibn ‘Umar in the two authentic compilations that the Prophet ﷺ fasted ‘Āshūrā’ and commanded to fast on it but when Ramaḍān became obligated he left that.⁹ Ibn ‘Umar would not fast on ‘Āshūrā’ unless it corresponded with his usual days.

In another version from Ibn ‘Umar in Muslim, “The people of pre-Islamic ignorance used to fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and the Messenger of Allah ﷺ would fast on it along with the Muslims before the obligation of Ramaḍān. When it became obligated, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said, “Verily ‘Āshūrā’ is a day from the days of Allah, whoever wishes can fast on it and whoever wishes can leave it.”¹⁰ In another version, “whoever loves to fast on it then let him fast on it, and whoever doesn’t like to, then let him leave it.”¹¹

In the two authentic compilations from Mu’āwiyah it is mentioned he heard the Messenger of Allah ﷺ say, “This is the day of ‘Āshūrā’, Allah has not obligated you to fast on it. I am fasting on it and whoever wants can and whoever doesn’t want can eat.”¹²

There are many other narrations of similar meaning reported from other companions including ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ūd, Jābir bin Samurah and Qays bin Sa’īd. All of these narrations indicate that the Prophet ﷺ did not maintain the obligation of fasting on it after the obligation of Ramaḍān. He left it as a choice for them and did not forbid fasting on it.

Ruling of Post-Ramaḍān ‘Āshūrā’ Fasting

This connects to the question of when an obligation is abrogated, does it become *mustaḥabb* (encouraged) by default or not? This is a well-known difference of opinion amongst the scholars. You will find some of the companions like Qays bin Sa’īd after mentioning the abrogation describe that they continued to fast as well - indicating it is *mustaḥabb*. But it is narrated from Ibn Mas’ūd and Ibn ‘Umar that the abrogation also includes any encouragement to fast. Sa’īd ibn al-Mūsāyyib said that the Messenger of Allah ﷺ did not fast on ‘Āshūrā’. Dāraqutnī said that the majority of scholars considered it *mustaḥabb* but not *mu’akkadah* (strongly emphasized).

⁹ Muslim, 1126.

¹⁰ Muslim, 1126.

¹¹ Muslim, 1126.

¹² Bukhārī, 2003.

The companions that observed its fasting included ‘Umar, ‘Ali, ‘Abdur-Raḥman ibn ‘Awf, Abū Mūsā, Qays bin Sa’d, Ibn ‘Abbās and others. Ibn ‘Abbās’ earlier quoted statement indicates it remained *mustahābb* when he said, “I never saw the Messenger of Allah ﷺ fast on a day seeking its virtue like the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and the month of Ramaḍān.” Ibn ‘Abbās was with the Prophet ﷺ toward the end of his life and whatever he remembered was in this time period.

Abī Qatādah reports that a man asked the Prophet ﷺ regarding fasting on ‘Āshūrā’ and he said, “I hope that Allah will expiate the year before.”¹³ This phrase comes from a larger ḥadīth where he asks about all different types of voluntary fasting.

Ḥafṣah bint ‘Umar, the mother of the believers said that the Prophet ﷺ never used to leave off fasting on the day of ‘Āshūrā’, the 10 days of dhul hijjah and the 3 days of the every month.¹⁴

Fourth Phase: Late Madinan - Re-Emphasis

Toward the end of the Prophet’s ﷺ life he became determined to single out the day for fasting and also add an extra day to be distinct from the people of the book. In Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim it was reported from Ibn ‘Abbās that when the Prophet ﷺ fasted on ‘Āshūrā’ he commanded others to fast on it. The companions said, “O Messenger of Allah ﷺ, it is a day that is sanctified by the Jews and the Christians? The Messenger of Allah said, “So in the next year we will fast on the 9th as well God-Willing (InshAllah). Ibn ‘Abbās said before the next year came, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ passed away.”¹⁵

It is narrated in the Musnad of Imam Aḥmad from Ibn ‘Abbās that the Prophet ﷺ said, “Fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and be distinct from the Jews by fasting the day before and after it.”¹⁶ In another version it says “or after it”.¹⁷ The “or” could mean it is a choice for people or it could mean the narrator was in doubt whether the Prophet ﷺ said the day before or the day after.

There is another wording of this narration, “If I am still around, I will command fasting on the day before and the day after it.” In another version it says “If I am around next year I will fast the 9th and I will command to fast the day before (‘Āshūrā’) and the day after it. This was reported in Abū Mūsā al-Madīnī’s collection. There is an authentic narration to Ibn ‘Abbās from Ibn Jurayj when he reported from ‘Aṭā’ who said he heard Ibn ‘Abbās say regarding the day of ‘Āshūrā’, “Be distinct from the Jews and fast the 9th and the 10th.” Imām Aḥmad said, “I go with this position.”

¹³ Muslim, 1162.

¹⁴ Nasā’ī, 2416.

¹⁵ Muslim, 1134.

¹⁶ Musnad Aḥmad, 2154. Declared weak by Shawkānī, Al-Arnā’ūṭ and others.

¹⁷ Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzaymah, 2095.

It was narrated on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās that he fasted on the ninth and tenth, and this was caused by the fear of missing ‘Āshūrā’. And it is narrated by Ibn Abī Dhī‘b, from Shu‘bah, the freed slave of Ibn ‘Abbās, from Ibn ‘Abbās: that he used to fast on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ while travelling, fasting both days for fear of missing it. And it is also narrated from Abu Ishaq that he fasted on the day of ‘Āshūrā’ and the day before it, and the day after it, saying: “I only did that out of fear of missing it.” It is also narrated from Ibn Sīrīn that he used to fast for three days when there was disagreement regarding sighting of the new moon (indicating the beginning of a new month), as a precaution. It is also narrated from Ibn ‘Abbās and al-Dhahḥāk that the day of ‘Āshūrā’ is the ninth day (of Muḥarram).

When is ‘Āshūrā’?

Ibn Sīrīn said: there is no disagreement that it (‘Āshūrā’) is on the tenth day, except for Ibn ‘Abbās because he said it (‘Āshūrā’) is the ninth day. Imam Aḥmed said in the narration of Maymuni: “I do not know (if) it is the ninth or the tenth, but we fast on both days. If there is disagreement regarding the (sighting of the) new moon then fast for three days as a precaution. Ibn Sīrīn said the same.”

From those who observed fasting on the ninth and tenth days were al-Shāfi‘ī, Aḥmed and Ishaq. Abu Ḥanifa disliked fasting only on the tenth day. Al-Ṭabarānī narrated from Ibn Abī al-Zinād who heard from his father, who heard from Kharijah ibn Zaid on the authority of his father (Zaid ibn Thābit) who said: “The day of ‘Āshūrā’ is not the day that people say it is. (Rather) it was the day during which the Ka‘bah would be draped and the Ethiopians would perform their festivities to the Prophet ﷺ. It was a day that rotated through the year, and people would come to a specific Jewish man to ask him about it. When the Jewish man died, they would come to Zaid ibn Thabit to ask him.”

This would imply that ‘Āshūrā’ is not in Muḥarram and that it is based on the solar calendar, like the calendar of the People of the Book. But this contradicts the practice of Muslims, past and present.¹⁸

In Saḥih Muslim¹⁹, on the authority of Ibn ‘Abbās, (it is narrated that) the Prophet ﷺ used to count from the new moon of Muḥarram, then began fasting on the ninth day. (Regarding Zayd ibn Thābit’s narration referenced earlier) Ibn Abī Zinād is not relied upon in what he

¹⁸ Ibn Ḥajr declared the chain to Zaid ibn Thābit as good (*jayyid*). He writes, “The way to reconcile the reports is to say that this may indeed have been the original state of affairs. However, when the Prophet ﷺ commanded the fasting of ‘Āshūrā’, it became a ruling established by the Sharī‘ah, and thus it would now be determined according to the sighting of the lunar months. The Muslims then followed this practice. As for the claim that the People of the Book based their fasting on the solar calendar, there is reason to question it for the Jews, as we have observed among them that they determine their fasts according to the lunar months. It is possible that there once existed among them a group that calculated their months according to the solar calendar, but such a group no longer exists today, just as those whom Allah mentioned as saying, “‘Uzayr is the son of Allah” have disappeared, though Allah informed us that they once held such a belief. Exalted is Allah far above what they ascribe to Him.” (Fath ul-Bārī, vol. 7, p. 323).

¹⁹ Muslim, 1087.

narrates alone (without corroboration), and he attributed the entire narration to Zaid ibn Thābit, but its ending cannot be from Zaid, so perhaps this is a statement from a later narrator, and Allah knows best.

Travelling and ‘Āshūrā’

A group from the early Muslims were fasting while travelling; among them was Ibn ‘Abbās, Abū Ishāq al-Sabī‘ī, al-Zuhrī. And he said: Ramaḍān has a restricted number of days, but ‘Ashūrā’ is a day that cannot be missed. And Aḥmed explicitly states that ‘Āshūrā’ should be fasted while travelling.

And ‘Abd Ar-Razzaq narrated in his book, from Israīl, from Simāk ibn Ḥarb, from Ma’bad al-Quraishī who said: The Prophet ﷺ was in Qudayd²⁰, when a man came to him. He (the Prophet ﷺ) said to him: “Have you eaten anything today?” - for the day of ‘Āshūrā’ - He said: “No, except I drank some water.” He said: “Do not eat anything until the sun sets and command those behind you to fast on this day.” And perhaps the ones commanded were the people of Qudayd. And he narrated with his chain of transmission on the authority of Tāwūs that he used to fast on ‘Āshūrā’ when he was settled, and he did not fast while travelling.

Ancient Roots of ‘Āshūrā’

It has also been said that the day of ‘Āshūrā’ was the day of adornment that Mūsā had his appointment with Pharaoh (and the magicians), and that it was a festival for them. It is narrated that Mūsā, peace be upon him, would wear linen and apply *koḥl* (black eyeliner) on that day.

The Unique Islamic Reverence of ‘Āshūrā’

The Jews of Madinah and Khaybar during the time of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ would observe the festival. And the people of the pre-Islamic era followed their example in this, and they would drape the Ka’bah on this day. However something contrary to this is legislated and has come from our *Shari’ah*. In the *ṣāḥīḥayn*, from Abu Mūsā, he said: “The day of ‘Āshūrā’ was a day that the Jews venerated and the Jews considered it as a festival.” So the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “You all should fast on it.” And in a narration by Muslim: The people of Khaybar used to fast on ‘Āshūrā’, considering it as a festival, and they would dress their women on that day in their jewellery and finery. So the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “You all should fast on it.”

²⁰ A place near Makkah.

The Balance between Distinction & Imitation

It was narrated from An-Nasāʿī and Ibn Ḥibbān, in their versions: The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: “Differ from them, so fast on it (‘Āshūrā’). And this is evidence against taking it as a festival, and (as an evidence of) the recommendation of fasting during the festivals of the polytheists. Fasting negates taking it as a festival and although it coincides with their day of their fasting, there is a fasting another day as mentioned earlier. Within that, is a distinction from them in the manner of its (‘Āshūrā’) fasting. So there isn’t a total similarity ... And something similar to this principle can be found in the narration reported by Imam Aḥmed, and An-Nasāʿī and Ibn Ḥibbān, on the authority of Umm Salamah who said: that the Prophet ﷺ would fast on Saturday and Sunday more than any other day and he would say: “There are two days of celebration for the polytheists, so I like to differ from them.”²¹ If the two days are fasted together, he would therefore be different from the Jews and Christians in their veneration of singling out only one day. And fasting on them would be a way of differing from them in taking it as a celebration. This is how this hadith is reconciled with the narration prohibiting fasting on Saturday.

Charity & Family Time in ‘Āshūrā’

As for giving charity on this day, it was narrated from ‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Umar Ibn Al-‘Aas that he said: Whoever fasts on ‘Āshūrā’, it is as if he has fasted the entire year, and whoever gives charity on it (‘Āshūrā’), it is as if he has given charity for the entire year.” Narrated by Abū Mūsā Al-Madīnī.

As for being generous to one’s family on this day, Harb said: “I asked Aḥmed about the hadith that says: “Whoever is generous to his family on the day of ‘Āshūrā’,” and he did not consider it to be anything. Ibn Mansūr said: “I said to Aḥmed: Have you heard in the hadith: “Whoever is generous to his family on the day of ‘Āshūrā’, Allah will be generous to him the rest of the year?”” He said: Yes. It was narrated by Sufyan Ibn ‘Uyaynah, from Ja‘far al-Ahmar, from Ibrahim Ibn Muḥammad Ibn Al-Muntashir, who was among the best people of his time, that it reached him that whoever is generous to his family on the day of ‘Āshūrā’, Allah will be generous to him for the rest of the year. Ibn ‘Uyaynah said: We have tried this for fifty or sixty years and we have seen nothing but good.

And the statement of Harb, “Aḥmed did not consider it anything,” refers to the narration that is narrated as being traced back to the Prophet ﷺ, as its chain of transmission is not sound. It has been narrated through multiple chains of transmission, none of which are authentic. And from those who said this was Muhammad Ibn ‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Abdul Hakam. Al-‘Uqayli said: It is not preserved. It has been narrated by ‘Umar of his own statement: and its chain of transmission contains an unknown person who is not recognised.

²¹ Musnad Imām Aḥmad, 10052. Difference of opinion regarding its authenticity. Declared weak by Al-Albānī [As-Silsilat ad-Ḍa‘īfah, 1099], Ibn al-Qayyim considers fair (hasan) [Zad al-Ma‘ād, vol. 2, p. 75].

As for taking it as a day of mourning, as the Shi'as do because of the killing of Ḥussain Ibn 'Ali, it is the work of one whose actions have gone astray in this worldly life, while he thinks that he is doing good. Allah and His Messenger ﷺ did not command that the days of prophets' calamities and deaths are taken as days of mourning, so what about those less than them?

Extract from Laṭā'if al-Ma'ārif by Ibn Rajab

Section on 'Āshūrā', pp. 102 - 115

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