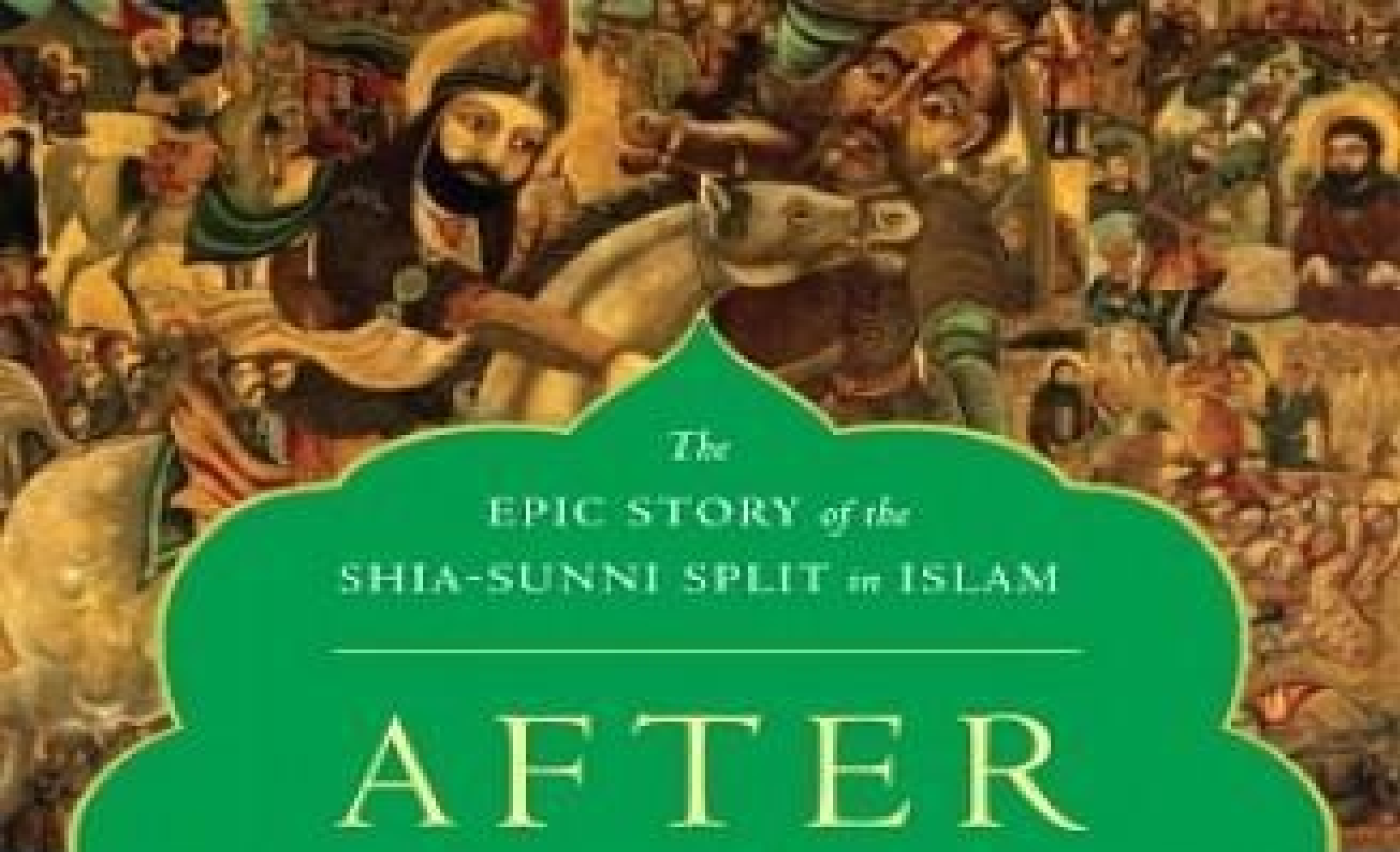




The
EPIC STORY of the
SHIA-SUNNI SPLIT in ISLAM

AFTER THE PROPHET

Lesley Hazleton



chapter 13

IT IS NOT TRUE THAT HUSSEIN DID NOT KNOW WHAT AWAITED him, the Shia maintain. The whole point is that he knew, yet set out nonetheless in full awareness of the sacrifice he would make. He had to have known, after all. There were so many warnings from so many people, warnings that began even before he started on the journey to Iraq with his family and those seventy-two warriors.

“Who can tell if the Kufans will really rise up and overthrow their oppressors?” worried one of his cousins. “These are people who can always be bought. They are slaves to the dirham. I fear they will desert you, even make war on you.”

Hussein seemed immune to such concerns. “By God, cousin, I know your advice is good and reasonable,” he replied. “But what is fated is fated, and will happen whether I heed you or not.”

Still, why court fate? Why ride toward it even as the warnings multiplied? Just one day’s journey out of Mecca, a rider came with a message from another cousin. “I ask you by God to return,” he wrote. “The hearts of the Iraqis may be with you, but I fear their swords belong to Yazid.” Hussein merely registered the warning and kept going.

The following day brought a message from none other than the governor of Mecca. Risking his position, even his life, he gave Hussein his personal guarantee of “safe conduct, kindness, generosity, and protection” if he would only return to Mecca. But all Hussein would say in response was: “The best guarantee of safe conduct is that of God.”

Besides, his numbers were growing. As his small caravan crossed over the jagged Hijaz mountains and into the high desert steppeland of northern Arabia, their pace timed to arrive at least every other night at a watering place—a well or at least a small shallow spring—word of their journey preceded them. Tribal warriors joined their ranks, roused by the idea of Hussein’s reclaiming power for Arabia. By the end of the first week of the three-week journey, the original seventy-two warriors had swelled to several hundred. By the time they reached Iraq they would surely be an army.

Yet still the messages kept coming, each one a warning to beware of Iraq. Each time Hussein acknowledged it as “good and reasonable advice,” and each time he ignored it. And then came the message that was surely impossible to ignore.

The messenger rode so hard that even in the twilight they could see the cloud of dust thrown up by his horse when he was still miles away. He came not from behind them, as the others had done, but from ahead—not from Mecca, that is, but from Iraq. They had just begun to set up camp when he pulled in, dismounted, and refused even a drink of water, so urgent was his news.

He had been sent by Hussein’s cousin Muslim, who had not misled Hussein when he had written that he should set out immediately for Kufa. All the men of that city had indeed streamed out to pledge allegiance to Hussein as the true Caliph. They had indeed sworn to rise up and oust Yazid’s governor Ubaydallah, and had called for Hussein to come and lead them on to Damascus, to unseat the usurper Yazid and to declare himself as the one and only true successor to his grandfather Muhammad and his father, Ali. All this was true, said the messenger, but things had changed.

If Muslim had been less devoted, he might perhaps have been a more careful judge of oaths given with such demonstrative alacrity. He might have remembered that oaths were one thing, the courage to follow through on them another. But he too had been caught up in the moment and had believed what he wanted to believe.

The men of Kufa could not be blamed. They had been carried away with hope, caught up in the heady idea of Hussein ready to overthrow oppression and injustice. But hope can be as evanescent as it is inspirational. The Kufans had families to care for, livings to make, lives to protect. They could recognize a superior force when they saw it.

Their governor, the son of the infamous Ziyad, was about to become still more infamous himself. Like his father before him—like any tyrannical ruler at any time, in fact—Ubaydallah knew how dangerous hope can be, and knew equally well how to quash it. There was no question of his ever allowing Hussein to reach Kufa, none either of Muslim’s ever leaving the city alive.

“Do not expose yourselves to death,” he told the Kufans. “If you shelter this man, you will taste the evil you have earned.” And with the stick well established, he introduced the carrot: a large bounty on Muslim’s head.

Nobody in Kufa entertained the slightest doubt as to exactly how Ubaydallah might wield the stick. Those who had displeased him in the past had been

crucified in the camel market, their bodies left there to rot as their homes were demolished and their families turned out into the desert. The twelve thousand men who had so loudly and bravely pledged to fight alongside Muslim under Hussein's command were quickly reduced to only four thousand, then to three hundred, then to a mere handful. Within the space of a single day, Muslim found himself alone.

He had gone from house to house, knocking on barred doors and pleading for shelter from Ubaydallah's police. He never thought to be suspicious when one door opened at last, never imagined that this family had taken him in only in order to betray him and claim the bounty on his head.

When Ubaydallah's agents came for him that evening, he managed to persuade one brave soul to ride out of Kufa as fast as he could, both night and day, and intercept Hussein. "Tell him to turn back," Muslim said. "Tell him the Kufans have lied to me and lied to him."

The messenger had set out even as Muslim was being taken in chains to the governor's mansion. There was no doubt what Muslim's fate would be. It was the evening of Monday, September 8, in the year 680, and whatever hope there had been for an uprising was utterly extinguished. At dawn the following morning, at the exact time that Hussein and his small caravan set out from Mecca en route to Iraq, Muslim's headless body would be dragged to the camel market and strung up for all to see.

This was the story the messenger told, and before he had even finished, the tribal warriors began to melt away into the darkness, leaving only Hussein, his family, and the original seventy-two warriors. Hussein's mission had surely failed before it had even begun. Yet if he considered for a moment turning back, there is no record of it.

"Man journeys in darkness, and his destiny journeys toward him," he said, and traveled on.

Nobody disputes what happened. What is in dispute is why it happened. And that question hinges on the unknowable—on what Hussein was thinking.

Why did he continue when he knew that his cause was already lost? Was he so convinced of the rightness of his claim that he could no longer judge reality? So full of *nasb*—that inborn quality of nobility and honor—that he could not imagine anything but triumph for the righteousness of his cause? So high-minded that he was, in the end, merely naive? Did he act in desperation or out of the purest of motives? In sheer folly or in supreme wisdom?

He was not a warrior or a statesman. He was a revered scholar, honored since his brother's death as the one who more than any man alive embodied the spirit of Muhammad, and he was no longer a young man. Why not be content to live out his days in the peace and quiet of Mecca or Medina? Why not leave the business of politics and power to those who could handle it? And why place his fate in the hands of the Kufans, the people who not twenty years before had refused his father's call to arms against Muawiya? They had knuckled under first to Muawiya and his governor Ziyad, and now to Yazid and his governor Ubaydallah. Did Hussein really think they had changed? Did he imagine that right and justice could prevail over power and strength? That seventy-two warriors could take on the whole might of Yazid's army?

To Sunnis, Hussein's determination to travel on to Iraq would be the proof of his unsuitability to take the helm of a vast empire. They would call it a quixotic and ill-fated quest, one that should never have been undertaken. Hussein should have acknowledged reality, they say, and bowed to history.

In time they would cite the bitterly anti-Shia thirteenth-century scholar Ibn Taymiya, whose writings are still central to mainstream Sunni thought. Sixty years with an unjust leader were preferable to a single night with an ineffective one, Ibn Taymiya declared. His reasoning was that without an effectively run state, the implementation of Islamic law was impossible. But he was also clearly stating that church and state, as it were, were no longer one and the same, as they had been in Muhammad's time.

It was Ibn Taymiya who dubbed the first four Caliphs—Abu Bakr, Omar, Othman, and Ali—the *rashidun*, or rightly guided ones, and they are still known as such in Sunni Islam. The Caliphs who came after them were thus not rightly or divinely guided, no matter the lip service they gave to Islam or the grandiose titles they claimed like the "Shadow of God on Earth." But even those who lacked true spiritual authority could serve in other ways. Muawiya had prevented what had seemed the inevitable disintegration of the vast Islamic empire; if not for him, Islam might never have been able to survive. His son, Yazid, may have utterly lacked his father's political skill, but so long as he did not try to assume religious authority—something he had no interest in doing—his rule was to be considered tolerable. Spiritual guidance was not to be expected of political leaders, Ibn Taymiya was saying, and in this he was defending his own turf. A whole new religious establishment had come into being under the Umayyads and their Abbasid successors—the clerics and theologians known as the *ulama*—and as the empire's central political authority waned, they became the gatekeepers of Islam, much as the rabbis were the gatekeepers of Judaism through the centuries.

The very idea of Hussein's acting out of spiritual authority and divine guidance was thus anathema to Ibn Taymiya and his ideological heirs.

But to the Shia, Hussein's journey to Iraq came to be the ultimate act of courage, the most noble self-sacrifice, made in a state of higher consciousness and with full knowledge of its import. Hussein would take the only way left him to expose the corruption and venality of the Umayyad regime, they would say. He would shock all Muslims out of their complacency and call them back to the true path of Islam through the leadership the Prophet had always intended, that of the *Ahl al-Bayt*. Divinely guided, he would sacrifice himself with the same purity of intention as the prophet Jesus did six hundred years before—a sacred sacrifice, willingly accepted for the sake of others. His surrender to death would be the ultimate act of redemption.

Hussein's story was about to become the foundation story of Shiism, its sacred touchstone, its Passion story. The long journey from Mecca to Iraq was his Gethsemane. Knowing that the Kufans had betrayed him, he rode on nonetheless, in full awareness of what was waiting for him.

Three weeks after leaving Mecca, his small caravan was within twenty miles of Kufa. They halted for the night at Qadisiya, the site of Omar's pivotal battle against the Persian army. That glorious victory now seemed to belong to another era, though it had been only forty-three years before. There would be no pivotal battle here this time. Ubaydallah had sent cavalry detachments from Kufa to block all the routes leading to the city, including the one from Qadisiya. His orders were to bring Hussein to him in chains to swear allegiance to Yazid.

But there would be no chains yet. Not even Ubaydallah could terrorize everyone. The captain of the hundred-man detachment that stopped Hussein was called Hurr—"freeborn" or "free man"—and as though living up to his name, he could not conceive of using force against the Prophet's grandson and his family. Instead, in a gesture of peaceful intent, he approached Hussein with his shield reversed. Then, like so many before him, he tried to persuade him that if he could not pledge allegiance to Yazid, he should at least turn back to Mecca.

"No, by God," came the answer. "I will neither give my hand like a humiliated man nor flee like a slave. May I not be called Yazid. Let me never accept humiliation over dignity." And in demonstration of that dignity, Hussein stood high in his saddle and addressed Hurr's men, many of them the same Kufans who had previously pledged to rise up against Yazid under his leadership.

"I have here two saddlebags full of your letters to me," he said. "Your messengers brought me your oath of allegiance, and if you now fulfill that oath,

you will be rightly guided. My life will be with your lives, my family with your families. But if you break your covenant with me, you have mistaken your fortune and lost your destiny, for whoever violates his word, violates his own soul.”

With men such as Yazid and his governor Ubaydallah in power, he said, “the goodness of the world is in retreat, and what was good is now bitter. Can you not see that truth is no longer practiced? That falsehood is no longer resisted? When that is so, I can only see life with such oppressors as tribulation, and death as martyrdom.”

And there it was, out in the open: martyrdom—*shahadat*—the destiny toward which Hussein had been journeying, and that had been journeying toward him.

Shahadat is a word of subtle shadings, though as with the double meaning of *jihad*, this may be hard to see when the image of Islamic martyrdom is that of suicide bombers so blinded by righteousness that they sacrifice not just their own lives but all sense of humanity. In fact, while *shahadat* certainly means “self-sacrifice,” it also means “acting as a witness,” a double meaning that originally existed in English too, since the word “martyr” comes from the Greek for witness. This is why the Islamic declaration of faith—the equivalent of the *Shema Israel* or the Lord’s Prayer—is called the *shahada*, the “testifying.” And it is this dual role of martyr and witness that would inspire the leading intellectual architect of the Iranian Revolution of 1979 to utterly redefine Hussein’s death as an act of liberation.

Ali Shariati is all but unknown in the West, yet for years he was idolized in Iran on a par with the Ayatollah Khomeini. He was not a cleric but a sociology professor well versed in theology. Educated at the Sorbonne, he was widely read in Western philosophy and literature and had translated both Sartre and Fanon into Persian, as well as Che Guevara. His blending of sociology and theology was to create a new kind of Islamic humanism that inspired millions, not the least because he was an absolutely charismatic speaker. By the early 1970s he was drawing crowds of thousands at a time—so many that they blocked the streets around his lecture hall in Teheran, listening in rapt silence to his voice on loudspeakers—and his published lectures had become Iran’s all-time best sellers. Students and laborers, religious and secular, male and female—all those who would soon take to the streets to oust the Shah’s regime—responded with an intense sense of hope and power as Shariati almost single-handedly gave new life to the core event of Shia Islam.

In one of his most famed lectures, he celebrated Hussein as the purest example of martyrdom. By refusing either to cooperate or to be pressured into silence, and by accepting that this would mean his own death, Hussein achieved nothing less than “a revolution in consciousness,” one that far surpassed the details of its historical place and time to become “an eternal and transcendent phenomenon.” And as Shariati went on to take his listeners into the seventh century, inside Hussein’s mind, he had no need to stress the parallel with what they themselves faced under the repressive regime of the Shah.

“There is nothing left for Hussein to inherit,” he said. “No army, no weapons, no wealth, no power, no force, not even an organized following. Nothing at all. The Umayyads occupy every base of society. The power of the tyrant, enforced with the sword or with money or with deception, brings a pall of stifled silence over everyone. All power is in the hand of the oppressive ruler. Values are determined solely by the regime. Ideas and thoughts are controlled by agents of the regime. Brains are washed, filled, and poisoned with falsehood presented in the name of religion, and if none of this works, faith is cut off with the sword. It is this power which Hussein must now face.

“This is the man who embodies all the values that have been destroyed, the symbol of all the ideals that have been abandoned. He appears with empty hands. He has nothing. The Imam Hussein now stands between two inabilities. He cannot remain silent, but neither can he fight. He has only one weapon, and that is death. If he cannot defeat the enemy, he can at least disgrace them with his own death. If he cannot conquer the ruling power, he can at least condemn it. For him, martyrdom is not a loss, but a choice. He will sacrifice himself on the threshold of the temple of freedom, and be victorious.”

As Shariati spoke, *shahadat* became not just an act of witnessing but an act of revelation, exposing repression and oppression, corruption and tyranny. Hussein’s martyrdom was no longer an end but a beginning. It was a call to action in the here and now.

“Martyrdom has a unique radiance,” Shariati declared. “It creates light and heat in the world. It creates movement, vision, and hope. By his death, the martyr condemns the oppressor and provides commitment for the oppressed. In the iced-over hearts of a people, he bestows the blood of life and resurrection.”

Such sacrifice was not for Islam alone. It was for all people, everywhere. Hussein acted as witness “for all the oppressed people of history. He has declared his presence in all wars, struggles, and battlefields for freedom of every time and land. He died at Karbala so that he may be resurrected in all

generations and all ages.”

Shariati was only forty-four when he himself died in 1977, two years before many of his students would be shot as they marched through the streets to oust the Shah. The cause of death was a heart attack, just three weeks after he had fled into exile in England. Some say it was brought on by the lingering effects of repeated arrest and interrogation by the Shah’s security forces; others, that it was the result of poison covertly administered by secret agents—a swift, sharp jab from a hypodermic needle, perhaps, and the poison as sure as the ones developed by Muawiya’s physician Ibn Uthal fourteen centuries earlier. Either way, the Shah was too late. Shariati had already transformed Hussein and his death at Karbala into the incandescent impetus for revolution.

For centuries, Hussein’s martyrdom had been the central paradigm of Shia Islam, the symbol of the eternal battle between good and evil, but Shariati raised it to the level of liberation theology. He transformed Ashura, the ten-day commemoration of what happened at Karbala, taking it out of the realm of grief and mourning and into that of hope and activism. Karbala would no longer merely explain repression; it would be the inspiration to rise up against it, and Shariati’s most famous call to action would become the new rallying cry of activist Shiism, chanted by idealistic young revolutionaries in the streets of Teheran even as the Shah’s troops fired volley after volley into the crowd: “Every day is Ashura, and every land is Karbala.”

If Hussein had resolved on martyrdom, Hurr was equally resolved not to be the one who brought it about. But he was confronted with a terrible dilemma: his orders from Ubaydallah on the one hand, his respect for Hussein on the other. This was the last surviving member of the People of the Cloak, the Prophet’s own grandson, his flesh and blood. If Hurr could not allow him to continue on to Kufa, neither could he attack him.

It was Hussein himself who resolved Hurr’s dilemma by turning in the least expected direction—not back to Arabia, or on to Kufa, but to the north. He led his small caravan along the desert bluff overlooking the immense flat valley formed by the Euphrates and the Tigris, and Hurr and his men rode alongside, more like an escort than an enemy detachment. At dusk, with the women and children tired and thirsty, Hussein gave the order to pitch their tents just below the bluff, within sight of fields and orchards watered by a branch of the Euphrates. It was Wednesday, the first day of the month of Muharram, and Hussein had reached his destination. He would travel no farther.

Two mornings later, the third day of Muharram, the small encampment had been surrounded by an army. When news reached Ubaydallah that Hurr had allowed Hussein to travel north instead of arresting him, he had sent no fewer than four thousand cavalry and archers out from Kufa, under the command of a notoriously ruthless general. If Hurr could not do the job, this man would.

His name was Shimr, a name destined to live on in the Shia annals of infamy alongside Muawiya, Yazid, and Ubaydallah. His orders were clear. He was to place Hussein's encampment under siege, cutting it off from all access to the river. In the terrible, stifling heat, he was to allow not one drop of water through his lines. Thirst would bring Hussein to his knees.

With four thousand trained soldiers against a mere seventy-two warriors, there was to be no escape. Nor did Hussein want any. Now that he had reached his final destination, he and all those with him would pass from the time-bound realm of history to the timeless one of heroes and saints.

As both the survivors and the besiegers told their memories of the next seven days, they would unfold as an almost stately series of events, as though the story were playing itself out on a stage far larger than this desolate patch of sand and stone. Even as they spoke, the tellers seemed aware of how sacred it would be, of how history would loose the bonds of gravity and soar into legend. While Shimr and his four thousand men waited for thirst to do its work, limiting themselves to occasional skirmishes with Hussein's warriors, undying memories were created. One by one, the iconic images of Shiism were brought into being.

There was Hussein's nephew Qasim, who married his cousin, Hussein's daughter, in that beleaguered encampment. Even as they all knew what was to come, they celebrated life over death, the future over the present. But the marriage was never consummated. No sooner was the ceremony over than Qasim demanded that he be allowed to go out to engage the enemy in single combat. It was his wedding day; he was not to be denied. Still in his embroidered wedding tunic, he stepped out from the tents toward Shimr's lines.

"There were ten of us in that sector, all on horseback," one of Shimr's men remembered, "and a young man all in white came toward us, a sword in his hand. Our horses were circling and prancing, and he was nervous, turning his head this way and that. I saw two pearls swinging from his ears as he moved." They did not swing long. The newly made groom was cut down, and all the promise of a wedding day abruptly snuffed out.

Then there was Abbas, Hussein's half brother, who wore two white egret's plumes atop his chain mail helmet, a distinction awarded only the bravest

warrior. Driven by the parched cries of the children as the small encampment ran out of water, he made his way through the enemy lines at night and filled a goatskin at the river, only to be ambushed on the way back. One man against many, he fought until his sword arm was cut off. At that, they say, he laughed, even as the blood poured out from him—“This is why God gave us two arms,” he declared—and went on fighting with the other arm, the neck of the goatskin clenched between his teeth. But when the other arm too was cut off, all the valor in the world could not save him. The sword that pierced his heart also pierced the goatskin, and the water ran red with his blood as it spilled out onto the sandy soil.

And there was Hussein’s eldest son, Ali Akbar. He was on the brink of adulthood, a fresh-faced youth, yet he too insisted on going out to do single combat, determined to die fighting rather than of thirst. “A lad came out against us with a face like the first splinter of the moon,” said one of those who crowded in on him. “One of his sandals had a broken strap, though I can’t remember if it was the left one or the right. The left, I think.”

When Ali Akbar was quickly cut down, Hussein “swooped down like a hawk” to cradle his dying son. That is how the two are still shown in Shia posters, a famed pose deliberately mirrored in other posters showing Muqtada al-Sadr, the leader of the Mahdi Army, cradling the body of his father, the revered cleric Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr, who, along with his two older sons, was murdered by Saddam’s thugs in 1998.

But perhaps the most iconic image of all was that of Hussein’s infant son. Just three months old, he was so weak from dehydration that he could no longer even cry. Hussein himself, despairing, came out in front of the tents and held the infant up in his arms for all the enemy to see. His voice cracked and parched with thirst, he begged Shimr’s men to have mercy on these children, to allow water at least for them.

The only reply was an arrow, shot straight into the neck of the infant even as he lay in Hussein’s outstretched hands.

They say that the infant’s blood poured between Hussein’s fingers onto the ground and that as it did so, he called on God for vengeance. But stories told again and again, through the generations, develop their own logic. In time it was said that Hussein beseeched God not for vengeance but for mercy. “Oh God, be my witness, and accept this sacrifice!” he said, and the infant’s blood flew upward from his hands in defiance of gravity and never returned to earth.

Then came the eve of the final day—*ashura*, the tenth of Muharram—the

setting for the Shia equivalent of the Last Supper. Hussein begged those of his men who still survived to leave him to his fate. “All of you, I hereby absolve you from your oath of allegiance to me, and place no obligation upon you. Go home now, under cover of darkness. Use the night as a camel to ride away upon. These men of Yazid’s want only me. If they have me, they will stop searching for anyone else. I beg you, leave for your homes and your families.”

They stayed. Their mouths parched, lips swollen, voices harsh and rasping with thirst, they swore never to leave him. “We will fight with you until you reach your destination,” one of them proclaimed. And another: “By God, if I knew that I was to be burned alive and my ashes scattered, and then revived to have it done to me again a thousand times, I still would never leave you. How then could I leave when what I now face is a matter of dying only once?”

“Then call upon God and seek his forgiveness,” said Hussein, “for our final day will come tomorrow.” And then he used the Islamic phrase uttered in the face of death: “We belong to God, and to God we shall return.”

It was a long night, that last night. A night of prayer and preparation. Hussein took off his chain mail and put on a simple white seamless robe—a shroud. He had myrrh melted in a bowl and anointed himself and his men with the perfume, and all of them knew that they were being anointed as corpses are, for death.

“Tears choked me and I pushed them back,” one of Hussein’s daughters would remember. “I kept silent and knew that the final tribulation had come upon us.”

Tears are infectious, almost physically so. Whether in a movie house or in real life, people fight back tears of sympathy and then find that their vision has blurred and the fight has already been lost.

But for the Shia, there is no fighting back tears. On the contrary, they are encouraged. Grief and sorrow are the signs of deep faith, the overt expression not only of atonement and horror but of an abiding conviction that the tears count, that they have purpose.

In the ten days leading up to Ashura, every detail of the ordeal at Karbala fourteen hundred years ago is recalled and reenacted. The story so central to Shia Islam has been kept alive year after year, century after century, not in holy writ but by the impassioned force of memory, of repetition and reenactment.

A vast cycle of *taziya*, or Passion plays, is staged every year—so many of them in so many places that the Oberammergau cycle of medieval Christianity is a pale mirror by comparison. The pacing is almost stately, the dialogue more a

series of speeches than give-and-take, but no Broadway or West End performance has ever had so rapt an audience. Every appearance onstage of a black-robed Yazid or Ubaydallah or Shimr is greeted by hisses and boos. The newlywed groom about to bid farewell to his still-virgin bride before going to his death is acclaimed with tears. As Hussein holds up his infant son in front of the enemy, people beat their breasts and wail softly, almost to themselves, as though if they could stifle their sobs, the tragedy would somehow be averted.

But the height of the Passion plays, the most intense point, comes not when Hussein is actually killed but at the moment he dons his white shroud. For all the terrible pathos of what has already happened, this moment—one of the least dramatic to Western eyes—is the most unbearable for the audience. It is the moment of calm in the face of death, the willing acceptance of the call to self-sacrifice.

For ten days the commemoration of Ashura has been leading to this moment. Men have gathered in *husseiniya*—“Hussein houses”—special halls set aside specifically for telling the story of Karbala, for tears and reflection, grief and meditation. Women have crowded into one another’s homes to build the wedding canopy for Hussein’s daughter and his nephew Qasim, then decorate it with silk ribbons and strew petals on the floor, creating a marriage bed for the union that will never be consummated. They stretch another, smaller canopy over a cradle and fill it with offerings for Hussein’s infant son: candies and toys. They implore Hussein to intercede for them and for their children in their twenty-first-century lives, to keep them safe from drugs and violence and any of life’s other temptations and dangers. And they mourn, beating their breasts and slapping their cheeks faster and faster as their chanting picks up its pace—“Hussein, Hussein, Hussein, Hussein, Hussein”—until they have no strength left.

Everything culminates on the tenth day, the day of the processions. Men and boys march by the hundreds in the villages, by the thousands and tens of thousands in the cities. Whole squadrons of men beat their chests in unison, their hands clenched into hollow fists, the better to reverberate against the rib cage. And with each step, each blow, “Oh Hussein, oh Hussein ...”

The echoing thud of one man striking himself this way is sobering; the sound of thousands can be heard miles away, as loud as the tolling of a cathedral bell at Easter, and far more terrifying for the knowledge that this is the sound of flesh on flesh.

Some go further. They beat themselves not with their fists but with flails of chains, and at the end of each length of chain, a small blade. They flick the flails

over the left shoulder, then over the right, again and again until their backs are bloodied. A few even use knives to slash at their foreheads so that the copious blood of a head wound flows down over their faces to mix with their tears. The sight fills even the most resolute onlooker with awe and a kind of sacred horror.

Throughout the procession, people carry posters blown up large, garlanded with flowers and with green and black silk banners—green for Islam, black for mourning. Some are the standard ones of Hussein, his *keffiya* falling in graceful folds to his shoulders, but others are specifically for Ashura. These show his bare head angled back, blood on his forehead and his mouth open in agony. The head seems to float in space, and in a way it does: it is speared on the point of a lance.

And at the center of each procession, a white riderless horse, Hussein's horse, its saddle empty.

The sun rose inexorably on the morning of the tenth of Muharram, October 10, in the year 680. As it gained height and heat, the last of the seventy-two warriors in Hussein's encampment went out one by one to meet their deaths. By the time the sun was high in the sky, only Hussein himself remained.

He said farewell to the women of his family, mounted his white stallion—Lahik, the Pursuer, he was called—and rode out from the tents to confront his destiny. As he charged into the enemy lines, the archers fired, volley after volley. Arrows studded the horse's flanks, yet still he kept charging. Astride him, Hussein struck out left and right with his sword and for a few moments, it hardly seemed to matter that he was only one man against four thousand. "By God I have never seen his like before or since," one of Shimr's men would remember. "The foot soldiers retreated from him as goats retreat from an advancing wolf."

But it could not last. "Why are you waiting?" Shimr yelled at his troops. "You sons of men who urinate at both ends! Kill him, or may your mothers be bereaved of you!" An arrow struck home in Hussein's shoulder, the force of it throwing him to the ground, and they finally crowded in on him.

By the time they were done, there were thirty-three knife and sword wounds on his body. Even that was not enough. As though trying to hide the evidence, they spurred their horses over his corpse again and again, trampling the grandson of the Prophet, the last of the five People of the Cloak, into the dust of Karbala.

At that moment, what the Sunnis consider history became sacred history for the Shia, and the aura of sacredness would permeate the memories of what happened next. There is no mention in the earliest accounts of Hussein's three-

year-old daughter Sukayna roaming the battlefield; no mention either of tears streaming from the eyes of his white horse or of the sudden appearance of two white doves. But who can hold that against the millions of Shia for whom Ashura is what defines them? Details accrue around a story of such depth and magnitude, in the Passion of Hussein as in the Passion of Christ.

Eventually, those who remembered would tell how Lahik, that noblest of all Arab stallions, bowed down and dipped his forehead in his master's blood, then went back to the women's tent, tears streaming from his eyes, and beat his head on the ground in mourning. They would tell how two doves flew down and dipped their wings in Hussein's blood, then flew south, first to Medina and then to Mecca, so that when people there saw them, they knew what had happened, and the wailing of grief began. They would tell how the three-year-old Sukayna wandered out onto the battlefield in search of her father, crying out for him piteously, surrounded by blood-soaked corpses.

With time, it made no difference if Abbas had really fought on with only one arm, or if the horse really did cry, or if the doves really did fly down as though from heaven. Faith and need said they did. The stories have become as true as the most incontrovertible fact, if not more so, because they have such depth of meaning. As with the death of Christ, the death of Hussein soars beyond history into metahistory. It enters the realm of faith and inspiration, of passion both emotional and religious.

Shimr's men hacked off Hussein's head, along with those of all seventy-two of his warriors. They slung most of the severed heads in sacks across their horses' necks, each one proof of the kill, a guarantee of a cash reward from Ubaydallah back in Kufa. But Hussein's head was singled out. Shimr ordered it speared on a lance and carried like a trophy in front of his army. As the Quran had been desecrated at Siffin, so now was Hussein's head at Karbala.

Shimr did not bury the seventy-two headless corpses; instead, he ordered them left behind in the desert for hyenas and wolves to feed on. He had the women and children put in chains and led them on the long trek to Kufa, stumbling behind the head of Hussein. When they reached the governor's palace, Ubaydallah laughed with pleasure as Shimr tossed the severed trophy onto the floor in front of him. He even poked at the head with his cane, sending it rolling over the stone tiles. At the sight, one elderly companion of the Prophet was so appalled that he could contain himself no longer, no matter the danger. "Take your cane away, by God!" he erupted. "How often have I seen the Messenger of

God kiss that face you now desecrate!” And in tears, the old man limped out of the assembly hall before the soldiers could stop him, to speak his mind one last time.

“A slave has given power to a slave and has made the people his inheritance,” he told the people outside. “You, Arabs, are the slaves after today. You killed the son of Fatima when the bastard governor ordered you. You have accepted shame and humiliation. Let destruction come to those who accept humiliation.”

The old man’s anger and dismay struck deep into the collective conscience. The Prophet was dead not fifty years, yet here the men of his family had been massacred, and the women humiliated. As the news spread throughout Islam, a sense of bitter shame spread with it, and a new name came into being for the family of Muhammad: *Bayt al-Ahzan*, the House of Sorrow.

Yet this ignominious death in the desert, like that ignominious death on the cross six centuries earlier, would prove to be not the end but only the beginning.

chapter 14

WOLVES AND HYENAS DID NOT DEVOUR THE CORPSES AS SHIMR had planned. Once he had led away his captives, farmers ventured out from a nearby village, buried the seventy-two headless bodies, and marked the graves. Just four years later, pilgrims—the precursors of the millions who now arrive each year—began to arrive on the anniversary of the massacre, and it was they who named the gravesite Karbala, “the place of trial and tribulation.”

Hussein’s head would have many resting places, its presence spreading along with the story of what had happened. Most say it is buried by the east wall of the Grand Mosque in Damascus, but some have it in a shrine near the main entry to the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo, while yet others maintain that it was spirited away to Azerbaijan for safekeeping. Some even say it was returned to Karbala. But far more important than the physical remains, what survived was the story, and it was the survivors who told it—the women and the girls, and one boy.

Ali Zayn al-Abidin, Hussein’s adolescent son, never took part in the fighting. He could not rise from his bedding in the women’s tent. Struck by severe fever, he had tossed and turned helplessly as his friends, his kin, and finally his father went out to meet their deaths. So when Shimr and his men came bursting into the women’s tent and caught sight of him, the sick boy was an easy and obvious target, and he too would certainly have been killed were it not for his aunt, Hussein’s sister Zaynab.

“Do not let Satan take away your courage,” Hussein had told her on that final night, and now she displayed that courage. She hurled herself over her nephew and defied Shimr to run her through with his sword. “If you kill him, then you kill me with him,” she declared.

Not even Shimr, it seemed, could kill the granddaughter of the Prophet in cold blood. Instead, he gave the order to take the boy captive along with the women. But Zaynab would do more than keep alive Hussein’s one remaining son; she would keep alive the memory of Karbala itself. Her words of grief as she was being led away in chains, her clothing torn and head bare, would haunt Islam through the centuries.

“Oh Muhammad, Muhammad, may the angels of heaven bless you!” she

wailed. “Here is Hussein in the open, stained with blood and his limbs torn off. Oh Muhammad! Your daughters are prisoners, your progeny are killed, and the east wind blows dust over them.”

Nobody in Iraq needed to be told what that east wind brought with it. That was the wind of blinding dust storms, the very breath of trial and tribulation.

Even Shimr’s men repented when they heard her, or so at least some of them would claim. “By God, she made every friend and every foe weep,” one said later. But if the soldiers did indeed weep, they still obeyed orders. Ubaydallah had the captives publicly humiliated by parading them through Kufa and, only once that was done, sent them on to the Caliph Yazid in Damascus, along with the severed heads.

Some say it was not Ubaydallah but Yazid himself who then poked at Hussein’s head with a cane and laughed gleefully as it rolled on the floor at his feet. But most say he angrily cursed Shimr and Ubaydallah for their “excess of zeal,” his conscience roused by the fact that Zaynab was there to call him to account.

No matter the chains, the torn clothing, the dust and blisters of the long desert march from Kufa, she stood proudly in front of the Umayyad Caliph and publicly shamed him. “You, your father, and your grandfather submitted to the faith of my father, Ali, the faith of my brother Hussein, the faith of my grandfather Muhammad,” she told him. “Yet you have vilified them unjustly and oppressed the very faith you profess.”

At this, Yazid himself broke down in tears. “If I had been there, Hussein, you would not have been killed,” he swore, and gave orders for the captives to be treated as honored guests in his own household. On the fortieth day after Karbala—the day the Shia commemorate as *Arbain*, or “forty”—he gave the women and girls and the one surviving son his assurance of protection and had them escorted back to Medina.

Perhaps he had remembered what some say was Muawiya’s dying caution to him: “If you defeat Hussein, pardon him, for he has a great claim.” If so, it was too late. Reviled by the Shia, Yazid would hardly be better treated in memory by the Sunnis. Few would grieve when he died only three years after Karbala, just as his forces were poised to take the city of Mecca, which had risen up in rebellion under the son of Aisha’s ill-fated brother-in-law Zubayr. Fewer still would grieve when his sickly thirteen-year-old son died just six months after that. And it is probably safe to say that none grieved for his second cousin Marwan, who then proclaimed himself Caliph. The man who had played such a

devious role behind the scenes throughout Othman's and Ali's caliphates finally achieved the power he had coveted for so long, but only briefly; within the year he would be smothered to death by his own wife.

All the while, "the Karbala factor," as it would come to be called, was rapidly gaining strength. The story told by the seventh-century survivors would not only endure but would grow in power to find renewed life in the twentieth century.

"Religion is an amazing phenomenon that plays contradictory roles in people's lives," said Ali Shariati, the charismatic lecturer who helped lay the intellectual foundation of the Iranian Revolution of 1979. "It can destroy or revitalize, put to sleep or awaken, enslave or emancipate, teach docility or teach revolt."

Khomeini understood him perfectly. Like Shariati, the Ayatollah grasped that Karbala was an enormously loaded symbol, a deep well of emotional, social, and political significance, seemingly infinitely adaptable to time and circumstance. Under the regime of the Shah, with political dissent banned under pain of imprisonment, torture, and execution, religion could become the umbrella language of protest and resistance. The Karbala story was the perfect vehicle for this. Its themes broke through the usual social and economic dividing lines to resonate with clerics and secular intellectuals, liberals and conservatives, urban Marxists and tradition-bound villagers alike.

"Let the blood-stained banners of Ashura be raised wherever possible as a sign of the coming day when the oppressed shall avenge themselves on the oppressors," Khomeini wrote from exile in France in November 1978, and on Ashura itself, which fell on December 11 that year, the traditional processions were transformed into a powerful political weapon. Under intense pressure, the Shah lifted martial law for just two days, and millions of Iranians responded to Khomeini's call and marched in the streets, alternating the ritual cry of "Death to Yazid!" with a new one: "Death to the Shah!"

Forty days later, on *Arbain*, Khomeini again called on the Karbala factor, comparing those killed in the streets by the Shah's troops with those killed by Yazid's troops fourteen hundred years earlier. "It is as if the blood of our martyrs were the continuation of the blood of the martyrs of Karbala," he wrote. "It is our religious and national duty to organize great marches on this day." Despite the reimposition of martial law, the Karbala story again became the means of mass mobilization, and again the Shah's troops opened fire, creating yet more martyrs. By the end of the month the Shah had fled into exile.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

British-born Lesley Hazleton is a psychologist and veteran Middle East journalist whose work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *Esquire*, *Vanity Fair*, *Harper's*, *The Nation*, *New Republic*, *New York Review of Books*, and other publications. The author of several acclaimed books on Middle East politics, religion, and history, including *Jerusalem*, *Jerusalem and Mary: A Flesh-and-Blood Biography of the Virgin Mother*, she now lives in Seattle, Washington. For more information, visit this book's Web site, www.AfterTheProphet.com.