

Is Fasting on the Day of Ashura the Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (p)? What Happened on the Day of Ashura?

God states in the Holy Quran: “O you who believe, if an iniquitous person comes to you with tidings, then be discerning, lest you harm a people out of ignorance and become remorseful over that which you have done.”¹ The Quran also states: “And pursue not that whereof you have no knowledge. Truly hearing, and sight, and the heart – all of these will be called to account.”²

Many Muslims insist on the importance of fasting on the day of Ashura (10th of Muharram), considering it to be an extraordinary and highly encouraged sunnah (tradition) of Prophet Muhammad (p) and a way to expiate for one’s sins of the previous year. This short article studies the origin and validity of fasting on the day of Ashura and whether it can be considered a genuine sunnah of the Prophet.

The Reports Concerning Fasting on the Day of Ashura

The significance of fasting on Ashura originates in several reports that have been related in some of the major sources of tradition, such as those of Muhammad b. Ismail al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH/870 CE) and Muslim b. al-Hajjaj (d. 261 AH/875 CE), as well as others.³

One of the most oft-cited reports is the following: Narrated Ibn Abbas: The Prophet came to Medina and saw the Jews fasting on the day of Ashura. He asked them about that. They replied, “This is a good day, the day on which Allah rescued Bani Israel [Israelites] from their enemy. So, Moses fasted this day.” The Prophet said, “We have more claim over Moses than you.” So, the Prophet fasted on that day and ordered (the Muslims) to fast (on that day).⁴

Another report states: Narrated Ibn Abbas: I never saw the Prophet seeking to fast on a day more (preferable to him) than this day, the day of Ashura, or this month (i.e. the month of Ramadan).⁵

A third report states: Ibn Abbas reported that when the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) fasted on the day of Ashura and commanded that it should be observed as a fast, they (his companions) said to him: “Messenger of Allah, it is a day which the Jews and Christians hold in high esteem.” Thereupon the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) said: “When the next year comes, God willing, we would observe

¹ Holy Quran, 49:6.

² Holy Quran, 17:36.

³ For example, see *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book #26 Hadith #662, Book #31 Hadiths #116-117, #147, #181, #218-225, Book #55 Hadith #609, Book #58 Hadiths #172, #278-279, Book #60 Hadiths #28-31, #202, #261, Book #91 Hadith #370; *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6 Hadiths #2499-2504, #2506-2515, #2518-2520, #2522-2424, #2526-2532, #2602-2603.

⁴ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book #31 Hadith #222.

⁵ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book #31 Hadith #224.

fast on the 9th.” But the Messenger of Allah (may peace be upon him) died before the advent of the next year.⁶

Therefore, based on these and similar reports, it has been argued that the fast of Ashura (10th of Muharram), as well as the 9th of Muharram, were introduced by the Prophet Muhammad after his arrival to Medina and his witnessing the Jews (and Christians) celebrating the day of Ashura. Furthermore, it has been argued that the fast of Ashura is the most important fast of the entire year (besides that of the month of Ramadan). Based on further reports, it has been held that the significance of fast of Ashura is evident in that it expiates one’s sins for the previous year.⁷

On closer study, however, there appear to be several more reports related to Ashura and its fast. These other reports are usually excluded from current Muslim discourse that encourages fasting on Ashura. The vast majority of the reports concerning the fast of Ashura can thus be grouped according to the following main categories:

- 1) Reports suggesting that the fast of Ashura was initiated in Medina by the Prophet after witnessing the Jews (and Christians) celebrate Ashura by fasting. These include reports stating that the day of Ashura was considered an Eid (day of celebration) by the Jews (and Christians).⁸
- 2) Reports suggesting that the fast of Ashura was practiced in the pre-Islamic era by Quraysh and continued after the advent of Islam until the prescription of the mandatory fast of the month of Ramadan. Thereafter, the fast of Ashura was considered voluntary.⁹
- 3) Reports suggesting that in addition to the day of Ashura, fasting on the 9th of Muharram should also be observed in order to differentiate between the Muslims and the Jews and Christians.¹⁰

An Analysis of the Reports

Analysis of the content (matn) and chains (sanad) of the approximately 55 reports related to the fast of Ashura in the collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim leads to the following main questions:

1. Was the fast of Ashura initiated in Medina? If so, when?

The reports from category (1) above suggest that the Prophet encountered the Jewish

⁶ *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6 Hadith #2528.

⁷ *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6 Hadiths #2602-2603.

⁸ For example: *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book #31 Hadiths #222-223, Book #55 Hadith #609, Book #58 Hadiths #278-279, Book #60 Hadith #202, #261; *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6, Hadiths #2518-2520, #2522-2523.

⁹ For example: *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book #26 Hadith #662, Book #31 Hadiths #116-117, 218-221, Book #58 Hadith #172, Book #60 Hadith #28-31; *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6 Hadiths #2499-2504, #2506-2515.

¹⁰ For example: *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6 Hadiths #2526-2529.

observance of Ashura and requested the Muslims to begin observing the fast of Ashura in Medina. Reports from category (3) seem to suggest that the fast of Ashura (and the 9th of Muharram) was commanded by the Prophet shortly before his death. Thus, the question is: When did this alleged encounter between the Prophet and the Jews (and Christians) occur? Was it when the Prophet first arrived in Medina, as the reports from category (1) seem to suggest? Or was it later and shortly before his death, as the reports from category (3) seem to suggest?

Historians have noted that the Prophet arrived in Medina in the month of Rabi al-Awwal (the 3rd month of the lunar calendar). The year of his arrival would later be considered the first year of the Muslim calendar (1 AH). Therefore, if the Prophet encountered the Jews fasting on the day of Ashura (10th of Muharram, the 1st month of the lunar calendar), it could not have been before the 2nd year AH, as the reports from category (1) seem to suggest. On the other hand, if the reports from category (3) are taken into consideration, this means that this encounter took place in Muharram of the 11th year AH, since the Prophet died in Safar (the 2nd month) of the 11th year AH. So, the question remains: in what year did the Prophet dictate the command to fast on the day of Ashura? If it is said that it was the 2nd year AH, this means that the Muslims were fasting on the day of Ashura for 8 years before they realized that they should differentiate themselves from the Jews and Christians. If it is said that the Prophet dictated this command shortly before his death in the 11th year AH, then how is it possible that the Prophet had no idea that the Jews (and Christians) commemorated Ashura (since he clearly inquired about this act), while he spent at least 10 years of his life in the city of Medina? Furthermore, most historians note that most, if not all, of the Jews had left Medina after the year 5 AH.

2. Was the fast of Ashura initiated before or after Islam?

The reports from category (1) suggest that the Muslim fast of Ashura began in Medina after the Prophet witnessed the Jews fasting on that day. The reports from category (2) suggest that fasting on Ashura was an established pre-Islamic custom that was observed by Quraysh and that the Prophet also adopted it until the fast of the month of Ramadan was established. The question is: When did the fast of Ashura begin? Before or after Islam? If it is said that the fast of Ashura was initiated before Islam and adopted by Quraysh, then what about the reports that suggest that the Prophet commanded the Muslims to fast after encountering the Jewish fast in Medina? If it is said that the fast began in Medina, then what about the reports that suggest that the fast of Ashura was an established pre-Islamic tradition adopted by Quraysh? Did Quraysh adopt this from the Jews and Christians? If so, how is it possible that the Prophet would not know the significance of this fast until he arrived in Medina?

3. When was the fast of Ashura considered voluntary?

Let us assume that the fast of Ashura was actually commanded as an obligation by the Prophet. The reports from category (2) seem to suggest that this command transformed from an obligation to a voluntary fast when the fast of the month of Ramadan was

prescribed. The question is: When did this transformation take place?

Muslims are unanimous in their opinion that the fast of the month of Ramadan was prescribed in the 2nd year AH. If this is the case, that means that after the 2nd year AH, Muslims were no longer required to fast on Ashura, but now had the option to do so or not. Assuming that the Prophet initiated the Muslim fast of Ashura in Medina, this could not have occurred before the 2nd year AH (since he arrived in Medina in the month of Rabi al-Awwal 1 AH and the first Ashura in his time during Medina would have had to been in 2 AH). Therefore, this means that the Muslims were obligated to fast on Ashura in 2 AH and then 8 months later, in Ramadan 2 AH, were obligated to fast in Ramadan. Thus, on Ashura 3 AH, the Muslims were given the option not to fast anymore. Is it possible that, as some of the reports suggest, the most important fast of the year (outside of Ramadan) would only be required once, and then quickly be transformed into a voluntary act? Furthermore, to what extent was the fast of Ashura emphasized as being recommended? Some reports suggest that once the fast of Ramadan was prescribed, that of Ashura was “abandoned” by the Prophet himself and that very well-known companions such as Abdullah b. Umar and Abdullah b. Masud seem to have emphasized the point of giving up the fast of Ashura.¹¹

4. Who related what?

The reports from category (1) found in the collections of al-Bukhari and Muslim have been related mostly on the authority of the companions Abdullah b. Abbas and Abu Musa al-Ashari. The reports from category (2) have been related mostly on the authority of Aisha the wife of the Prophet and the companion Abdullah b. Umar. The reports from category (3) have been related on the authority of Abdullah b. Abbas (including some from Hakam b. al-Araj reporting from Ibn Abbas).

It is important to note here that neither Aisha nor Ibn Umar are in the reports from category (1), and neither Ibn Abbas nor Abu Musa are in the reports from category (2). In other words, Ibn Abbas and Abu Musa allegedly related only the reports that suggest that the fast of Ashura was initiated in Medina, while Aisha and Ibn Umar allegedly related only the reports that suggest that the fast of Ashura began in the pre-Islamic era.

Historians note that Ibn Abbas was born 3 years before the Prophet’s migration from Mecca to Medina. This means that he must have been between 4-12 years old to have experienced the Prophet’s encounter with the Jews and the command to fast on Ashura (depending on whether we assume this encounter to have occurred earlier or later in Medina). On the other hand, historians note that Abu Musa, who was from Yemen, was never present in Medina until the Battle of Khaybar in 7 AH since the Prophet had sent him to Yemen to preach to his tribe. Therefore, assuming that the command to fast on Ashura took place in the 2nd year AH, Ibn Abbas would have been a little boy and Abu Musa would not have been present in Medina to witness these events and report them.

¹¹ *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book #31 Hadith #116, Book #60 Hadith #30; *Sahih Muslim*, Book #6 Hadith #2507-2508, #2510-2513.

Assuming that the command took place later on in Medina, this would bring us back to the questions raised above.

5. More questions...

Finally, perhaps it may be beneficial for us to reflect on the following questions: Assuming that the Prophet encountered the Jews in Medina fasting on Ashura and commanded the Muslims to do so as well, is it possible that our great Prophet, sent by God to teach and guide all of humankind, would not know about the status of Moses and would have to resort to inquiring from either the Jews themselves or his own companions about this act? Furthermore, did the Jews of Medina follow the same calendar as the Muslims (or Arabs)? Assuming that they did, is the day of Ashura now, or has it ever been, celebrated by Jews as the day in which Moses and the Israelites were saved? Jews currently celebrate that event on Passover, which falls on the 15th of the Jewish month of Nisan (1st month of the Jewish year). Did Ashura and Passover coincide in the 2nd year AH? a quick date conversion would tell us that the 10th of Muharram 2 AH equated to the 11th of Av (5th Jewish month), not the 15th of Nisan. On the other hand, assuming that the encounter with the fasting Jews took place on the 10th of Muharram 11 AH, this would equate to the 11th of Nisan. Here, however, we will once again encounter the problems raised above regarding the fast of the month of Ramadan and the conversion of the Ashura fast command from an obligation to a voluntary act.

Keeping all of the above points in mind, it is safe to argue that the reports pertaining to the fast of Ashura are apocryphal, since there is no way to join these reports together without encountering serious and persistent contradictions. Since it may be concluded that the reports pertaining to the fast of Ashura are fabrications, we must ask: Is it still permissible for us to continue to encourage the fast of Ashura as if it were a genuine and highly encouraged sunnah of the Prophet?

What is Ashura and Why is it Important?

If these reports are fabrications, why were they inserted into Muslim tradition? What was the point? There is no other answer to this question other than the Umayyad attempt to divert Muslim attention away from the significance of the day of Ashura as being the day in which Imam Husayn b. Ali was brutally murdered in 61 AH/680 CE, along with his family members and close companions, in Karbala by the Umayyad army under the command of Yazid b. Muawiya. This heinous crime was followed by the capture of the women and children, along with Imam Ali b. al-Husayn, and their procession to Kufa to the court of Ubaydullah b. Ziyad, then to Damascus to the court of Yazid himself, and finally back to Medina. In order to cover up the severity of this crime, the Umayyads instituted a strong campaign of propaganda, claiming that Ashura was a joyous occasion and that it should be celebrated by fasting, as the reports hold. In this way, they would be able to divert Muslim attention away from the tragedy of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and transform this occasion into one of celebration.

Unfortunately, it seems that the Umayyad plan to divert attention away from the tragic

martyrdom of Imam Husayn has largely succeeded. In some parts of the Muslim world, some Muslims actively celebrate the day of Ashura with gifts and congratulatory messages. There is often absolutely no mention of Imam Husayn or recollection of the tragedy that took place on Ashura. Still more, some Muslims actively oppose any remembrance or mourning of Imam Husayn on Ashura, arguing that this is an “innovation.” Sadly, they are quite ready to celebrate a fictitious event that allegedly was introduced into Islam from the non-Muslims, while opposing commemoration of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn, who Muslim tradition holds to be not only the beloved grandson of the Prophet, but, according to the Prophet himself, “Husayn is from me and I am from Husayn.” This statement alone is enough evidence that in commemorating Imam Husayn one is honoring the beloved Prophet Muhammad.

Finally, why is it that Imam Husayn specifically is continuously commemorated? Weren't other important companions and family members of the Prophet also killed? Why are they not remembered in the same way that Imam Husayn is? The answer to this is simple: while several important figures were killed, none were killed in the same manner that Imam Husayn was, and for the same reasons. Some figures, such as Hamza, the uncle of the Prophet, were killed in battle. Other figures, such as the early caliphs, were killed out of personal grudges. It was Imam Husayn that was brutally murdered by the state. It was Imam Husayn who stood up against state oppression and injustice and for the truth. And for this, he was murdered in such a heinous way. Imam Husayn's message of standing for truth and justice is one that is universal. Standing up against injustice will always remain an ultimate human endeavor. Thus, in commemorating Imam Husayn, we are reminded of his great objective, which will always remain applicable and relevant in our lives. Today, more than ever, Muslims can and should learn from Imam Husayn's great stand in addressing the various challenges of our times.

“Thus it is. And whosoever magnifies the rituals of God, truly that comes from the reverence of hearts.”¹²

¹² Holy Quran, 22:32.