An Introduction
to the Shia Tradition in Islam

DEATH AT KARBALA: HUSAIN'S MARTYRDOM AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN THE LIGHT OF SHIA THEOLOGY

In the weeks that followed my first encounter with the Moths of Husain I learned about many aspects of Shia devotionalism, from preachers, dirge-chanters, avid flagellants, and disapproving skeptics. But before I examine Shia ritual practices and the controversies surrounding them, it might be useful at this point to sketch the historical events commemorated every year in Shia ritual: the seventh-century death of the Imam Husain and the sufferings of his family at the battle of Karbala.

Left unsettled at the death of Muhammad in A.D. 632 was the question of succession to leadership of the Islamic community: to whom should power devolve, and how should a ruler's qualifications be determined? One party favored the process of election by a circle of advisors and community leaders, the other espoused the cause of Ali ibn Abi Talib, cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, who had married the Prophet's daughter Fatima. The latter group referred to themselves as shi‘at ‘Ali ("Alid partisans/supporters of Ali") or simply as al-shi‘a. They maintained that the Prophet himself, guided by divine inspiration, had designated Ali as his successor. Moreover, Ali's ties by marriage and blood bound him more closely than anyone else to the family of Muhammad.

Despite his qualifications, Ali was blocked repeatedly from power: first the Prophet's companion Abu Bakr became caliph, then Umar, then Uthman. Ali did not contest their election, apparently out of a desire to avoid civil war. Finally, he did obtain the caliphate and ruled for some
five years, only to be murdered in 661. His wife Fatima predeceased him; so devoted was she to her father that she died of grief within a few months of the Prophet’s death. During this final period of her life, according to Shia sources, Fatima had been abused by Ali’s rivals. Abu Bakr prevented her from inheriting property bequeathed her by the Prophet; and Umar, in a confrontation at Ali’s home over the right to the caliphate, suddenly shoved open the door of the house, thereby striking Fatima and breaking several of her ribs.¹

Upon Ali’s death the caliphate passed to Muawiya ibn Abi Sufyan, governor of Damascus and Syria. Muawiya was a Qurayshi (a member of the Prophet Muhammad’s tribe) but also belonged to the wealthy Umayyad clan, notorious for its late conversion to Islam and its obstinate hostility to Muhammad in the early days before the Prophet’s final success in Mecca.

The Shias’ hopes now focused on Hasan and Husain, the two sons of Ali and Fatima. At stake was a growing Islamic empire that had already conquered much of the Near East, North Africa, and Iran. Muawiya coerced the elder son Hasan into yielding him the caliphate; Hasan was then forced into a pensioned retirement in Medina (where, according to Shia sources, he was subsequently poisoned at the caliph’s order). Although he was deprived of the caliphate, Hasan is nevertheless revered today as the second Imam (the first was Ali). In Shiism the term Imam indicates those members of Abl-e Bayt (the Prophet Muhammad’s family) who are the true spiritual leaders of the Muslim community, regardless of any political recognition or lack thereof extended by the Muslim world at large.²

In the year 680 Muawiya died and was succeeded by his son Yazid. The latter is reviled today as a tyrant who felt no shame at making a public display of his drinking and immoral lifestyle. At Muawiya’s death Alid partisans in the Iraqi city of Kufa, long a Shia stronghold, sent messengers to Mecca to Ali’s surviving son Husain, urging him to come to Kufa, lead a Shia revolt against Yazid, and claim the caliphate that was rightfully his by virtue of descent from the Prophet. Husain accepted the call and set out from Mecca with only a small band of followers, including his personal bodyguard and the women and children of his household.

But Ali’s son never reached Kufa. At Karbala, near the Euphrates River, southwest of what is today Baghdad, he was intercepted and surrounded by forces loyal to Yazid. Meanwhile the Umayyad governor of Kufa had quelled the incipient rebellion there and by intimidation had prevented any Shia attempts to rescue their leader at Karbala. From the second to the tenth day of the month of Muharram the Imam Husain and his followers withstood siege by Yazid's army, which hoped to force the small band to surrender.