`Ashura in History

Ibn ‘Abbas (may Allah be pleased with him) said: “The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came to Madeenah and saw the Jews fasting on the day of `Ashura. He said, ‘What is this?’ They said, ‘This is a righteous day, it is the day when Allah saved the Children of Israel from their enemies, so Moosa fasted on this day.’ He said, ‘We have more right to Moosa than you,’ so he fasted on that day and commanded [the Muslims] to fast on that day.” (Reported by al-Bukhaari, 1865)

“This is a righteous day” – in a report narrated by Muslim, [the Jews said:] “This is a great day, on which Allah saved Moosa and his people, and drowned Pharaoh and his people.”

“Moosa fasted on this day” – a report narrated by Muslim adds: “… in thanksgiving to Allah, so we fast on this day.”

According to a report narrated by al-Bukhaari: “… so we fast on this day to venerate it.”

A version narrated by Imaam Ahmad adds: “This is the day on which the Ark settled on Mount Joodi, so Nooh fasted this day in thanksgiving.”

“and commanded [the Muslims] to fast on that day” – according to another report also narrated by al-Bukhaari: “He said to his Companions: ‘You have more right to Moosa than they do, so fast on that day.”

The practice of fasting on `Ashura was known even in the days of Jaahiliyyah, before the Prophet’s mission. It was reported that ‘Aa’ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) said: “The people of Jaahiliyyah used to fast on that day…”

Al-Qurtubi said: “Perhaps Quraysh used to fast on that day on the basis of some past law, such as that of Ibraaheem, upon whom be peace.”

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) used to fast on `Ashura in Makkah, before he migrated to Madeenah. When he migrated to Madeenah, he found the Jews celebrating this day, so he asked them why, and they replied as described in the hadith quoted above. He commanded the Muslims to be different from the Jews, who took it as a festival, as was reported in the hadith of Abu Moosa (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: "The Jews used to take the day of `Ashura as a festival [according to a report narrated by Muslim: the day of `Ashura was venerated by the Jews, who took it as a festival. According to another report also narrated by Muslim: the people of Khaybar (the Jews) used to take it as a festival and their women would wear their jewellery and symbols on that day]. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: 'So you [Muslims] should fast on that day.'" (Reported by al-Bukhaari). Apparently the motive for commanding the Muslims to fast on this day was the desire to be different from the Jews, so that the Muslims would fast when the Jews did not, because people do not fast on a day of celebration. (Summarized from the words of al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar – may Allah have mercy on him – in *Fath al-Baari Sharh 'ala Saheeh al-Bukhaari*).

Fasting on `Ashura was a gradual step in the process of introducing fasting as a prescribed obligation in Islam. Fasting appeared in three forms. When the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) came to Madeenah, he told the Muslims to fast on three days of every month and on the day of `Ashura, then Allah made fasting obligatory when He said (interpretation of the meaning): *"... observing the fasting is prescribed for you..." [Al-Baqarah 2:183]* (*Ahkaam al-Qur'aan* by al-Jassas, part 1).

The obligation was transferred from the fast of `Ashura to the fast of Ramadaan, and this one of the proofs in the field of Usool al-Fiqh that it is possible to abrogate a lighter duty in favour of a heavier duty.

Before the obligation of fasting `Ashura was abrogated, fasting on this day was obligatory, as can be seen from the clear command to observe this fast. Then it was further confirmed later on, then reaffirmed by making it a general command addressed to everybody, and once again by instructing mothers not to breastfeed their infants during this fast. It was reported from Ibn

Mas'ood that when fasting Ramadaan was made obligatory, the obligation to fast `Ashura was lifted, i.e., it was no longer obligatory to fast on this day, but it is still desirable (mustahabb).

Virtues of fasting `Ashura

Ibn 'Abbas (may Allah be pleased with them both) said: "I never saw the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) so keen to fast any day and give it priority over any other than this day, the day of `Ashura, and this month, meaning Ramadaan." (Reported by al-Bukhaari, 1867).

The meaning of his being keen was that he intended to fast on that day in the hope of earning the reward for doing so.

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said: "For fasting the day of `Ashura, I hope that Allah will accept it as expiation for the year that went before." (Reported by Muslim, 1976). This is from the bounty of Allah towards us: for fasting one day He gives us expiation for the sins of a whole year. And Allah is the Owner of Great Bounty.

Which day is `Ashura?

Al-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: " `Ashura and Tasu`a are two elongated names [the vowels are elongated] as is stated in books on the Arabic language. Our companions said: `Ashura is the tenth day of Muharram and Tasu`a is the ninth day. This is our opinion, and that of the majority of scholars. This is the apparent meaning of the ahaadeeth and is what we understand from the general wording. It is also what is usually understood by scholars of the language." (*al-Majmoo'*)

`Ashura is an Islamic name that was not known at the time of Jaahiliyyah. (*Kashshaaf al-Qinaa'*, part 2, *Sawm Muharram*).

Ibn Qudaamah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

" `Ashura is the tenth day of Muharram. This is the opinion of Sa'eed ibn al-Musayyib and al-

Hasan. It was what was reported by Ibn ‘Abbas, who said: ‘The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) commanded us to fast `Ashura, the tenth day of Muharram.’ (Reported by al-Tirmidhi, who said, a saheeh hasan hadith). It was reported that Ibn ‘Abbas said: ‘The ninth,’ and reported that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) used to fast the ninth. (Reported by Muslim). ‘Ataa’ reported that he said, ‘Fast the ninth and the tenth, and do not be like the Jews.’ If this is understood, we can say on this basis that it is mustahabb (encouraged) to fast on the ninth and the tenth, for that reason. This is what Ahmad said, and it is the opinion of Ishaaq.”

Fast Tasu`a with `Ashura

‘Abd-Allah ibn ‘Abbas (may Allah be pleased with them both) said: “When the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) fasted on `Ashura and commanded the Muslims to fast as well, they said, ‘O Messenger of Allah, it is a day that is venerated by the Jews and Christians.’ The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said, ‘If I live to see the next year, in sha Allah, we will fast on the ninth day too.’ But it so happened that the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) passed away before the next year came.” (Reported by Muslim, 1916).

Al-Shaafa'i and his companions, Ahmad, Ishaaq and others said: “It is mustahabb to fast on both the ninth and tenth days, because the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) fasted on the tenth, and intended to fast on the ninth.”

On this basis it may be said that there are varying degrees of fasting `Ashura, the least of which is to fast only on the tenth and the best of which is to fast the ninth as well. The more one fasts in Muharram, the better it is.

Why is it mustahabb to fast on Tasu`a?

Al-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “The scholars – our companions and others – mentioned several reasons why it is mustahabb to fast on Tasu`a:

- the intention behind it is to be different from the Jews, who only venerate the tenth day. This opinion was reported from Ibn ‘Abbas…
- the intention is to add another day’s fast to `Ashura. This is akin to the prohibition on fasting a Friday by itself, as was mentioned by al-Khattaabi and others.
- To be on the safe side and make sure that one fasts on the tenth, in case there is some error in sighting the crescent moon at the beginning of Muharram and the ninth is in fact the tenth.”

The strongest of these reasons is being different from the People of the Book. Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) forbade imitating the People of the Book in many ahaadeeth, for example, his words concerning `Ashura: ‘If I live until the next year, I will certainly fast on the ninth day.’” (*al-Fataawa al-Kubra*, part 6, *Sadd al-Dharaa’i’ al-Mufdiyah ila’l-Mahaarim*)

Ibn Hajar (may Allah be pleased with him) said in his commentary on the hadith “If I live until the next year, I will certainly fast on the ninth day”:

“What he meant by fasting on the ninth day was probably not that he would limit himself to that day, but would add it to the tenth, either to be on the safe side or to be different from the Jews and Christians, which is more likely. This is also what we can understand from some of the reports narrated by Muslim.” (*Fath*, 4/245)

Ruling on fasting only on the day of `Ashura

Shaykh al-Islam said:

“Fasting on the day of ‘Aashoraa’ is an expiation for a year, and it is not makrooh to fast only that day…” (*al-Fataawa al-Kubra*, part 5). In *Tuhfat al-Muhtaaj* by Ibn Hajar al-Haytami, it says: “There is nothing wrong with fasting only on `Ashura.” (part 3, *Baab Sawm al-Tatawwu’*)

Fasting on `Ashura even if it is a Saturday or a Friday

Al-Tahhaawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) allowed us to fast on `Ashura and urged us to do so. He did not say that if it falls on a Saturday we should not fast. This is evidence that all days of the week are included in this. In our view – and Allah knows best – it could be the case that even if this is true (that it is not allowed to fast on Saturdays), it is so that we do not venerate this day and refrain from food, drink and intercourse, as the Jews do. As for the one who fasts on a Saturday without intending to venerate it, and does not do so because the Jews regard it as blessed, then this is not makrooh…” (*Mushkil al-Aathaar*, part 2, *Baab Sawm Yawm al-Sabt*)

The author of *al-Minhaaj* said:

“ ‘It is disliked (makrooh) to fast on a Friday alone…’ But it is no longer makrooh if you add another day to it, as mentioned in the saheeh report to that effect. A person may fast on a Friday if it coincides with his habitual fast, or he is fasting in fulfilment of a vow, or he is making up an obligatory fast that he has missed, as was stated in a saheeh report.”

Al-Shaarih said in *Tuhfat al-Muhtaaj*:

“ ‘If it coincides with his habitual fast’ – i.e., such as if he fasts alternate days, and a day that he fasts happens to be a Friday.

‘ if he is fasting in fulfilment of a vow, etc.” – this also applies to fasting on days prescribed in sharee’ah, such as `Ashura or ‘Arafaah. (*Tuhfat al-Muhtaaj*, part 3, *Baab Sawm al-Tatawwu’*)

Al-Bahooti (may Allah have mercy on him) said: “It is makrooh to deliberately single out a Saturday for fasting, because of the hadith of ‘Abd-Allah ibn Bishr, who reported from his sister: ‘Do not fast on Saturdays except in the case of obligatory fasts’ (reported by Ahmad with a good isnad and by al-Haakim, who said: according to the conditions of al-Bukhaari), and because it is a

day that is venerated by the Jews, so singling it out for fasting means being like them… except when a Friday or Saturday coincides with a day when Muslims habitually fast, such as when it coincides with the day of ‘Arafaah or the day of `Ashura, and a person has the habit of fasting on these days, in which case it is not makrooh, because a person’s habit carries some weight.” (*Kashshaaf al-Qinaa’*, part 2, *Baab Sawm al-Tatawwu’*)

What should be done if there is confusion about the beginning of Muharram?

Ahmad said: “If there is confusion about the beginning of the month, one should fast for three days, to be sure of fasting on the ninth and tenth days.” (*al-Mughni* by Ibn Qudaamah, part 3 – *al-Siyaam – Siyaam `Ashura*).

If a person does not know when Muharram began, and he wants to be sure of fasting on the tenth, he should assume that Dhoo’l-Hijjah was thirty days – as is the usual rule – and should fast on the ninth and tenth. Whoever wants to be sure of fasting the ninth as well should fast the eight, ninth and tenth (then if Dhoo’l-Hijjah was twenty-nine days, he can be sure of having fasted Tasu`a and `Ashura).

But given that fasting on `Ashura is mustahabb rather than waajib, people are not commanded to look for the crescent of the new moon of Muharram as they are to do in the case of Ramadaan and Shawwaal.

Reward for fasting `Ashura

Imaam al-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“Fasting `Ashura expiates for all minor sins, i.e., it brings forgiveness of all sins except major sins.”

Then he said (may Allah have mercy on him):

“Fasting the day of ‘Arafah expiates for two years, and the day of `Ashura expiates for one year. If when a person says ‘Aameen’ it coincides with the ‘Aameen’ of the angels, he will be forgiven all

his previous sins… Each one of the things that we have mentioned will bring expiation. If there are minor sins for which expiation is needed, expiation for them will be accepted; if there are no minor sins or major sins, good deeds will be added to his account and he will be raised in status… If he had committed major sins but no minor sins, we hope that his major sins will be reduced." (*al-Majmoo' Sharh al-Muhadhdhab*, part 6, *Sawm Yawm 'Arafaah*)

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: "Tahaarah, salaah, and fasting in Ramadan, on the day of 'Arafah and on `Ashura expiate for minor sins only." (*al-Fataawa al-Kubra*, part 5)

Not relying too much on the reward for fasting

Some people who are deceived rely too much on things like fasting on `Ashura or the day of 'Arafaah, to the extent that some of them say, "Fasting on `Ashura will expiate for the sins of the whole year, and fasting on the day of 'Arafah will bring extra rewards."

Ibn al-Qayyim said: 'This misguided person does not know that fasting in Ramadan and praying five times a day are much more important than fasting on the day of 'Arafah and `Ashura, and that they expiate for the sins between one Ramadan and the next, or between one Friday and the next, so long as one avoids major sins. But they cannot expiate for minor sins unless one also avoids major sins; when the two things are put together, they have the strength to expiate for minor sins. Among those deceived people may be one who thinks that his good deeds are more than his sins, because he does not pay attention to his bad deeds or check on his sins, but if he does a good deed he remembers it and relies on it. This is like the one who seeks Allah's forgiveness with his tongue (i.e., by words only), and glorifies Allah by saying "Subhaan Allah" one hundred times a day, then he backbites about the Muslims and slanders their honour, and speaks all day long about things that are not pleasing to Allah. This person is always thinking about the virtues of his *tasbeehaat* (saying "Subhaan Allah") and *tahleelaat* (saying "Laa ilaaha ill-Allah") but he pays no attention to what has been reported concerning those who backbite, tell lies and slander others, or commit other sins of the tongue. They are completely deceived." (*al-Mawsoo'ah al-Fiqhiyyah*, part 31, *Ghuroor*).

Fasting `Ashura when one still has days to make up from Ramadan

The jurists differed concerning the ruling on observing voluntary fasts before a person has made up days that he or she did not fast in Ramadaan.

The Hanafis said that it is permissible to observe voluntary fasts before making up days from Ramadan, and it is not makrooh to do so, because the missed days do not have to be made up straight away.

The Maalikis and Shaafa'is said that it is permissible but is makrooh, because it means that one is delaying something obligatory.

Al-Dusooqi said:

"It is makrooh to observe a voluntary fast when one still has to make up an obligatory fast, such as a fast in fulfilment of a vow, or a missed obligatory fast, or a fast done as an act of expiation (kafaarah), whether the voluntary fast which is being given priority over an obligatory fast is something confirmed in sharee'ah or not, such as `Ashura and the ninth of Dhoo'l-Hijjah, according to the most correct opinion." The Hanbalis said that it is haraam to observe a voluntary fast before making up any fasts missed in Ramadan, and that a voluntary fast in such cases does not count, even if there is plenty of time to make up the obligatory fast. So a person must give priority to the obligatory fasts until he has made them up." (*al-Mawsoo'ah al-Fiqhiyyah*, part 28, *Sawm al-tatawwu'*).

Muslims must hasten to make up any missed fasts after Ramadan, so that they will be able to fast 'Arafaah and `Ashura without any problem. If a person fasts 'Arafah and `Ashura with the intention from the night before of making up for a missed fast, this will be good enough to make up what he has missed, for the bounty of Allah is great.

Common Bid'ahs on `Ashura

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) was asked about the things that

people do on `Ashura, such as wearing kohl, taking a bath (ghusl), wearing henna, shaking hands with one another, cooking grains (huboob), showing happiness and so on. Was any of this reported from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) in a saheeh hadith, or not? If nothing to that effect was reported in a saheeh hadith, is doing these things bid'ah, or not? Is there any basis for what the other group do, such as grieving and mourning, going without anything to drink, eulogizing and wailing, reciting in a crazy manner, and rending their garments?

His reply was:

'Praise be to Allah, the Lord of the Worlds. Nothing to that effect has been reported in any saheeh hadith from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) or from his Companions. None of the imaams of the Muslims encouraged or recommended such things, neither the four imaams, nor any others. No reliable scholars have narrated anything like this, neither from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), nor from the Sahaabah, nor from the Taabi'een; neither in any saheeh report or in a da'eef (weak) report; neither in the books of *Saheeh*, nor in *al-Sunan*, nor in the *Musnads*. No hadith of this nature was known during the best centuries, but some of the later narrators reported ahaadeeth like the one which says, "Whoever puts kohl in his eyes on the day of `Ashura will not suffer from eye disease in that year, and whoever takes a bath (does ghusl) on the day of `Ashura will not get sick in that year," and so on. They also reported a fabricated hadith that is falsely attributed to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him), which says, "Whoever is generous to his family on the day of `Ashura, Allah will be generous to him for the rest of the year." Reporting all of this from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is tantamount to lying.'

Then he [Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him)] discussed in brief the tribulations that had occurred in the early days of this ummah and the killing of al-Husayn (may Allah be pleased with him), and what the various sects had done because of this. Then he said:

'An ignorant, wrongful group – who were either heretics and hypocrites, or misguided and misled – made a show of allegiance to him and the members of his household, so they took the day of `Ashura as a day of mourning and wailing, in which they openly displayed the rituals of jaahiliyyah

such as slapping their cheeks and rending their garments, grieving in the manner of the jaahiliyyah… The Shaytaan made this attractive to those who are misled, so they took the day of `Ashura as an occasion of mourning, when they grieve and wail, recite poems of grief and tell stories filled with lies. Whatever truth there may be in these stories serves no purpose other than the renewal of their grief and sectarian feeling, and the stirring up of hatred and hostility among the Muslims, which they do by cursing those who came before them… The evil and harm that they do to the Muslims cannot be enumerated by any man, no matter how eloquent he is. Some others – either Naasibis who oppose and have enmity towards al-Husayn and his family or ignorant people who try to fight evil with evil, corruption with corruption, lies with lies and bid'ah with bid'ah – opposed them by fabricating reports in favour of making the day of `Ashura a day of celebration, by wearing kohl and henna, spending money on one's children, cooking special dishes and other things that are done on Eids and special occasions. These people took the day of `Ashura as a festival like Eid, whereas the others took it as a day of mourning. Both are wrong, and both go against the Sunnah, even though the other group (those who take it as a day of mourning) are worse in intention and more ignorant and more plainly wrong… Neither the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) nor his successors (the khulafa' al-raashidoon) did any of these things on the day of `Ashura, they neither made it a day of mourning nor a day of celebration…

As for the other things, such as cooking special dishes with or without grains, or wearing new clothes, or spending money on one's family, or buying the year's supplies on that day, or doing special acts of worship such as special prayers or deliberately slaughtering an animal on that day, or saving some of the meat of the sacrifice to cook with grains, or wearing kohl and henna, or taking a bath (ghusl), or shaking hands with one another, or visiting one another, or visiting the mosques and mashhads (shrines) and so on… all of this is reprehensible bid'ah and is wrong. None of it has anything to do with the Sunnah of the Messenger of Allah (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) or the way of the Khulafa' al-Raashidoon. It was not approved of by any of the imaams of the Muslims, not Maalik, not al-Thawri, not al-Layth ibn Sa'd, not Abu Haneefah, not al-Oozaa'i, not al-Shaafa'i, not Ahmad ibn Hanbal, not Ishaaq ibn Raahwayh, not any of the imaams and scholars of the Muslims.'(*al-Fataawa al-Kubra* by Ibn Taymiyah)

Ibn al-Haaj (may Allah have mercy on him) mentioned that one of the bid'ahs on `Ashura was deliberately paying zakaat on this day, late or early, or slaughtering a chicken just for this occasion, or – in the case of women – using henna. (*al-Madkhal*, part 1, *Yawm `Ashura*)

We ask Allah to make us followers of the Sunnah of His Noble Prophet, to make us live in Islam and die in a state of faith. May He help us to do that which He loves and which pleases Him. We ask Him to help us to remember Him and be thankful to Him, to worship Him properly and to accept our good deeds. May He make us of those who are pious and fear Him.