

Fasting on The Day of Ashura

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In Bukhari's Kitab al-Sawm there are two reports about this topic:

1. Ibn Umar reports that the Prophet used to fast on the day of Ashura and also commanded (others to do the same). When the fasting in the month of Ramadan became wajib he stopped doing that (the fasting on the day of Ashura).
2. Ayisha reports that the Quraysh used to fast on the day of Ashura during the period of *jahiliyyah* (before Islam), so the Prophet of Islam commanded (to do the same) until the fasting in the month of Ramadan became wajib. Then he said: Fast if you wish, or do not if you wish otherwise.

Both reports imply that fasting on the day of Ashura is optional for Muslims. Some other reports say that actually the Prophet had asked the Muslims to fast on the day of Ashura because the Jews of Medina also used to fast on that day (Yom Kippur). When Ramadhan fast became the law of Sharia, that was dropped.

There are two considerations in the treatment of this subject:

1. A historical background of the Islamic calendar, and
2. The difference in *fiqh* according to various schools of thought in Islam.

The Islamic Calendar

The months as known to us today (Muharram, Safar, etc.) had been in use for a long time by the Arabs of Hijaz. They were lunar months. However, there was one great difference. The first month used to be Rabi-ul-Awwal and not Muharram. The name (Rabi-ul-Awwal) implies that it was the month of the spring season. Because of those months being lunar, the seasons would change. To counter that, the Arabs used to add an extra month after every four years. So, every four years, they would add an extra month

of Rajab, or that of Muharram, or another month, depending upon their circumstances and inclinations.

Therefore, in the short-term, they ran a lunar month, but over a long period of time, they ran a solar calendar. That says that the Ashura of *Jahiliyya* was quite different from the Ashura that we have today.

When the Prophet of Islam began legislating in Madina, he forbade the adding of an extra month every four years. That freed the Islamic calendar from seasonal dependence. As the months of Rabi-ul-Awwal and Rabi-uth-Thanee had implied spring, the months of Jumada I and II implied months of winter in the past.

Now the Jews had always had their own calendar. Their Yom Kippur did not necessarily fall on the Ashura of the period of *Jahiliyya*. However, their practice of fasting on Yom Kippur is current even today, although the shape and form of the fast is different.

It is true that the Prophet of Islam had accepted Bayt-ul-Muqaddas as the first Qibla. It was changed to Mecca in the second year of Hijra, in Medina. Fasting in the month of Ramadan was also made law in that same year. We believe that the Muslim historians have got confused during the fast of Yom Kippur due to that coincidence.

Historically, fasting in the month of Ramadan was also instituted in the second year of Hijra. The Prophet's Hijra had taken place in the month of Rabi-ul-Awwal. That is very clearly a proof to the fact that only one month of Muharram fell in between the event of Hijra and the institution of fasting in the month of Ramadan. So both reports in Bukhari, i.e., Ibn Umar's saying that "the Prophet used to fast on the day of Ashura..," and Ayisha's report that "the Arabs used to fast on the day of Ashura in *Jahiliyya* ...," lose all credibility. Both these reports appear to be later fabrications in an effort to reduce the significance of Ashura as the day of martyrdom of Imam Husayn.

There are no orders from the Prophet about any acts of worship other than the five-times-a-day salat. All other laws were instituted after the Prophet had arrived in Medina.

If there was such a practice as fasting on the day of Ashura (or on another day or days) current to the Muslims in the Meccan period which was then replaced by the fasting in the month of Ramadan, the Qur'an would have mentioned it. That is proven by the fact that the Qibla was changed in the second year of Hijra and the Qur'an documented it:

سَيَقُولُ السُّفَهَاءُ مِنَ النَّاسِ مَا وَلَّاهُمْ عَنْ قِبَلَتِهِمْ الَّتِي كَانُوا عَلَيْهَا ۚ قُلْ لِلَّهِ الْمَشْرِقُ
وَالْمَغْرِبُ ۚ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ (٢:١٤٢)

“The foolish among the people will ask, ‘Why did they turn away from the direction of prayer they used to face?’ Say, [O Prophet,] ‘The east and west belong [only] to Allah. He guides whoever He wills to the Straight Path.’” (2:142)

If you look at the verses of fasting, it appears as a direct one-time commandment. There is no mention of any past practice of fasting, even though it does mention the practice of fasting during the period of previous prophets:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ
(٢:١٨٣)

O believers! Fasting is prescribed for you—as it was for those before you—so perhaps you will become mindful [of Allah].

It is also true that the Prophet of Islam left some of the practices which were known and current in the period of *Jahiliyya* as part of Islamic law. But he also constituted some reforms in those old practices. For example, Hajj was practiced in *Jahiliyya* - the Prophet continued with that but forbade people going round the Kaaba stark naked, which was practiced by the Arabs of *Jahiliyya*.

The Qur'anic verse imposing the fast of the month of Ramadan implies that fasting over a period was actually a part of the religious law of some (if not all) of the past prophets:

O people of the faith, fasting has been ordained for you, like it was for those who came before you. Perhaps you would abstain. (Q.2:183)

Qur'an has not mentioned about the fast of Ashura. It is strange. Because, the change of Qibla is very clearly mentioned in the Qur'an.

The fools will say: What happened to them that they turned away from their previous Qibla? O Prophet, tell them: East and west both belong to Allah, Allah guides on the right path whomever He wills (Q.2:142)

It is very clear that Qur'an takes this kind of change in law very seriously. So much so that it actually tries to justify it. It, therefore, follows that if there was a change in the law of fasting, Qur'an would have mentioned it some way. Instead, the commandment of fasting as stated above, comes as a direct command, as if that is the first time fasting has been mentioned. That makes the Bukhari reports hard to swallow.

However, Bukhari is a very respected and revered book among Muslims. Reports cannot just be ignored from Bukhari. On the other hand, in spite of the name SAHEEH given to the Bukhari book, not all reports contained in that collection are absolutely correct and accurate.

The report in Bukhari stated below is really ridiculous. Let us look at it. "When the Prophet came to Medina he saw that the Jews were fasting on the day of Ashura. He said: We have more right over the ways of Moses than you. So he commanded the Muslims to fast on the day of Ashura."

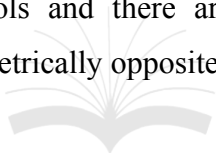
Let us ask ourselves a question here: Did the commands in Islamic law come to the Prophet as direct communication as WAHY to the Prophet from Allah or the Prophet instituted some commands out of his own personal whim to compete with the Jews?

A common-sense answer to this question would put paid to the question of fasting on the Day of Ashura.

That brings us to the next topic.

DIFFERENCE IN THE FIQH OF VARIOUS SCHOOLS

Among the majority Sunni Muslim group, there are four different schools of law: Hanafee, Shafi'i, Maliki and Hanbali. There are laws which are the same in all four schools and there are those which are different in them. In some cases the law is diametrically opposite among some schools.



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According to the Shi'a Ithna Ashari school, the law is as stated in the *fiqh-e-jafari*.

The law in the four schools of Sunni Islam is mainly based on the hadith reports transmitted via one or more Companions of the Prophet and/or by the wives of the Prophet. The law of *fiqh-e-jafari* is based on the reports collected and transmitted by the twelve Imams and Fatima Zahra, the daughter of the Prophet of Islam. This exclusiveness in report transmission is based on the Shi'a belief that there are fourteen infallible souls who are free from all sins, therefore, from forgetfulness and mistakes (the Prophet of Islam, the twelve Imams, and Fatima Zahra – *Alla humma salli alaa Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*).

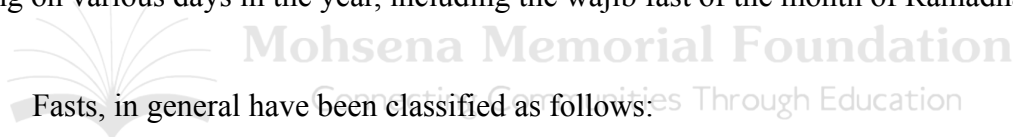
In addition to that, the chain of reporters who have brought the reports from the Imams have to be knowledgeable, just and pious. For that an elaborate science of RIJAL

has been developed in which biographies of these reporters have been researched thoroughly.

Thus elaborating upon the law of fasting, the Shi'a scholars have discussed the subject thoroughly. Here is a short list of books, which have dealt with it.

1. Baha-ud-Deen Amilee - *Risala fi-s-Sawm*.
2. Kashif al-Ghita - *Risala fi-s-Siyam*
3. Al-Qummi - *Kitab as-Sawm*
4. Al-Akhbari - *Takhlees al-ahkam fi masail as-Siyam*
5. Al-Ansari - *Kitab as-Sawm*
6. Muhammad Baqir at-Tabreezi - *as-Sawmiyya*

Elaborate discussions will be found in the above mentioned books about the fasting on various days in the year, including the wajib fast of the month of Ramadhan.



Fasts, in general have been classified as follows:

- (a) *Wajib* - compulsory, must be done, if left out without reasonable cause the Muslim commits a sin.
- (b) *Mustahab* - recommended, bring additional blessings and thawab, no sin if left out .
- (c) *Makruh* - recommended not done, if done no sin associated with the act.
- (d) *Haram* - prohibited, must not be done, if done the person commits a sin. (for example, the fasting with the intention of SAWM on the days of two Eeds is Haram)

It is logical to ask: who would want to do a MAKROOH fast? It is logical that no one would want to go without food and water if it does not bring Allah's Mercy. We take up this argument a little deeper in the following text.

Most of the scholars of *fiqh-e-jafari* have argued that the fast of the day of Ashura is *makruh*, some have gone on to say that it is *haram*. All those statements are based on the research done as stated above.

The Day Of Ashura

This day has special significance for those Muslims who love, revere and follow the holy Ahlul-Bayt. It is the day on which Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet of Islam, was butchered at Karbala in 61st year of Hijra with 72 of his companions, in three days of hunger and thirst. A siege was laid on his camp for seven days by an army of 30,000 or more to deny him supplies of any kind.

To commemorate that great sacrifice, the devotees of Imam Husayn, do not eat or drink anything on the day of Ashura (without the intention of Sawm) all day. Then they break that fast after the Asr prayer. So, this act of fasting is not an act of worship of Allah (in which case the Muslims will have to continue with the fast until Maghrib time), but a show of solidarity with Imam Husayn and his companions at Karbala. However, it is not a wajib act. It is left to the individual's own sense of devotion and reverence.

The Shi'a Hadith Reports On The Sawm (Fast) Of Ashura

In this part of this article on this topic, we will look at some of the *hadith* reports recorded by the great Shi'a scholars of the source. There are four all-time greats in all the books that are available from the Shi'a *muhadditheen*:

1. *Al-Kafi* by Muhammad bin Yaqaob al-Kulaynee (d. 329 Hijra) - in three volumes:
 - (a) *Usool*
 - (b) *Fur'oo*
 - (c) *Rawdha*
2. *Man La Yahdhuru-Hul Faqeeh* by Shaykh Sadooq (d. 381 hijra)
3. *Tahzeeb*, and,

4. *Al-Istibsaar* both by Shaykh Toosi (d.460 hijra)

Given below are the reports in two of the books.

Kulaynee in his *Fur'oo al-Kafi* has six reports in the Kitab-us-Siyam in the chapter exclusive to Ashura:

(1) The fifth Imam Muhammad Baqir (*Alla humma salli ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*) says that the Prophet used to fast on the day of Ashura until fasting in Ramadan was prescribed.

(2) Both the fifth Imam and the sixth Imam said: Do not fast on the day of Ashura and on the day of Arafah while in Mecca, Medina or in your home town and in any town.

(3) The sixth Imam J'far as-Sadiq (*Alla humma salli ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*) was asked about the fast on the day of Ashura. He said: Fasting was stopped (matrook) on that day after Ramadhan fast was instituted. And what is matrook, is bid'a. Then the *ravi* says: I asked him whether his father (the fifth Imam) would say the same thing, He replied, yes. He (the sixth Imam) added that there is nothing mentioned in the book of Allah about the fasting on the day of Ashura nor is it in the Sunnah (of the Prophet), except in the sunnah of Aale-Ziyad, who had killed Husayn bin Ali.

(4) When the eighth Imam Ali ar-Ridha (*Alla humma salli ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*) was asked about it he replied: It is a fast (taken) from Ibn Marjanah. It was the day when Aal-e-Ziyad took a vow of fasting if they were successful in killing Husayn bin Ali. It is a day of *musibat* for the family of the Prophet and therefore, for all Muslims. Do not fast on this day and do not wish for prosperity (baraka) on that day. And Monday is also a bad day, for on that day Allah did the *qabdh-i-rooh* of the Prophet of Islam. Only the enemies of Muhammad and Aale-Muhammad celebrate on those days. On the day of Ashura Husayn bin Ali was killed and Ibn Marjana celebrated that. It was a day of calamity for Aal-e-Muhammad. Anyone who fasts on this day and asks for prosperity on this day Allah will make his heart crooked and he will be raised (on the day of judgement) with those who made it their sunnah.

(5) The sixth Imam was asked about it. He replied: Whoever fasts on that day with the hope and expectation of prosperity and blessings, his place is in Fire.

(6) This is the longest report in this chapter. It basically gives the same information. The day of Ashura is a day of calamity in the family of the Prophet. Husayn bin Ali was surrounded by his enemies on that day, he was denied supplies by a siege and was killed brutally. His enemies celebrated on that day by fasting. Anyone who fasts on this day with the hope of prosperity, will be with the enemies of Muhammad and Aal-e-Muhammad, His heart will become crooked and Shaytan will become his partner.

Let us now look at the reports in the Kitab-us-Siyam of Toosi's Al-Istibsar. There are seven reports in the chapter exclusively dedicated to the fast of Ashura.

(1) , (2) & (3): The three reports briefly state that the prophet fasted on the day of Ashura, and that a fast on this day becomes an expiation for one's sins.

(4) The sixth imam says: Do not fast on the day of Ashura, nor on the day of Arafa at Mecca or at Medina or in your hometown, or in any other land.

(5) The fifth Imam was asked about it and he said: This fast was abrogated after Ramadhan fast became wajib. And what is matrook is bid'a. There is nothing about it (fast of Ashura) in the book of Allah neither in the Sunnah (of the Prophet) except in the sunnah of Aal-e-Ziyad (in connection with the killing of Husayn bin Ali - *Alla humma salli ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*).

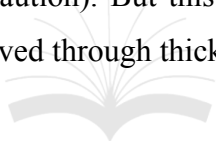
(6) This is a report from the eighth Imam Ali ar-Ridha (*Alla humma salli ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*). This is exactly the same report from the same chain of reporters as number (4) above from Al-Kafi.

(7) This report is similar to the one above and adds that whoever fasts on this day has made a mistake and has committed a sin (*athama wa akhta'a*).

Discussion

The first thing that is apparent from these reports mentioned above is the consistency between the two books. Even though the two authors lived nearly 130 years apart from each other they kept attached to the school of Ahlul-Bayt so ardently and faithfully.

The other thing that is very apparent is that both authors have faithfully recorded both kinds of hadith reports, i.e., those supporting the view that fasting of Ashura is recommended as well as those condemning it. For this some background is needed. Most of the Shi'a scholars lived under strict watch of the governments of their time. They had to work prudently when it came to expressing their opinions. At the same time, they had the duty to propagate the correct rulings according to the school of Ahlul-Bayt. They therefore made it their practice to record both kinds of reports in their writings. The first kind they would take from the popular knowledge among the masses. The second kind would come from the strict line of disciples of the school of Ahlul-Bayt. And it was these second kinds of reports which carried the true teachings of the Ahlul-Bayt. The only revealing thing was the chain of reporters. That is why the science of *rijal* became so important. Sometimes good reports have been side tracked due to a gap or an inconsistency in the chain of reporters. That was the price that had to be paid for *ihtiyat* (precaution). But this way the law of Shari'a according to the school of Ahlul-Bayt has survived through thick and thin.



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However, in the *Tawdheeh-ul-Masa'il* of the late Ayatullah Khumaynie, the late Ayatullah Abul Qasim AL-Khui and that of Ayatullah Syed Ali Husaini Seestani, it is stated that the fast of Ashura is *makruh*.

In view of the commandment uttered by the eighth Imam Ali ar-Ridha (*Alla humma salli ala Muhammadin wa aali Muhammad*), some of the Shi'a scholars have ruled that the fast on the day of Ashura (with the intention of *sawm*) is haram.

The bottom line is: even if it is a *makruh* fast, why and who would want to do this fast? What is the point in going without food and water for a day when it does not bring any additional *thawaab*. One would understand the reason for a fast on the day of Ashura if one had taken a vow for that or one had another wajib fast to fulfill. Other than that, there is really no solid ground to support the notion of a fast on the day of Ashura.

If it were such a blessed day for fasting, the Qur'an would not have gone by silently over that matter.

All the efforts in emphasizing this fast, in our opinion, are for one purpose, that is to undermine the significance of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn on that day.

May Allah give guidance to all of us.



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