

# The Urban Well

## The Mercy Seminar 2021, Term 3.5

### Opening Comments

The readings for this evening represent prayers for forgiveness from the Hadith and from the Shiite tradition, to give us a more concrete sense of how Muslims have appealed to God for the forgiveness of their sins, including the Prophet Muhammed. Since this is the first time we are using sources from the Shi'a tradition, it is important to give some sense of the origins of that tradition.

When the Prophet Muhammed died in 632, he did not leave behind any sons, and did not indicate who should lead the Ummah or united community after he died. There were two schools of thought about this matter: those who thought they should elect the most qualified leaders, likely from the Companions of the Prophet, and those who thought it should be a blood relation of the Prophet. The majority of Muslims favored choosing one of the Companions, in this case Abu Bakr, but others favored choosing Muhammed's cousin and son-in-law, Ali ibn Abi Talib, whose prayer for forgiveness we read this evening. Those who prefer Ali call themselves Shiat Ali, or Shia, meaning followers of Ali. Those who followed Abu Bakr called themselves Sunni, for tradition.

After the third caliph is assassinated, Ali is elected to be the fourth caliph in Islam in 656. However, violence breaks out again, and Ali is assassinated in 661. His son, Hussein, marches from Mecca to Karbala in 680, in present day Iraq, to take the caliphate from the corrupt caliph Yazid of the Ummayyad Dynasty. However, his band of 72 followers is massacred by the forces of the caliph that number in the thousands. Hussein is beheaded, and his head is brought to Yazid in Damascus as a tribute.

Hussein's massacre at Karbala becomes the central event in the Shia tradition, and is commemorated every year on *Ashoura*, the most solemn date on the Shiite calendar. "*Ashura* is marked with passion plays and public expressions of grief. All Shia who are capable are expected to make a pilgrimage to Karbala, where Hussein is buried, at some point in their lives to mark the day of *Ashura*." This brings into Shia Muslim life the theme of suffering, opposition, and martyrdom which is quite different than the Quran's view of the success of the Prophets, and makes Shia sound more like Christians in this regard. Shia view suffering and martyrdom as ways of atoning for sin, and seek to emulate Imam Hussein in his willingness to die for his faith.

The Shia are subsequently led by Imams, not Caliphs, and this continues until the eleventh Imam dies in 873. Muhammad al-Mahdi, or simply the "mahdi," meaning "divinely guided one," was destined to become the Twelfth Imam. However, in 874, when he was six years old, he went into hiding to protect

himself from persecution by the Abbasid dynasty, and is believed to have hidden in a cave below a mosque in Samarra, which is on the Tigris River about one hundred miles north of Baghdad. The cave is blocked by a gate the Shia call “the “Gate of Occultation,” which has become one of the holiest sites for Shia, for they gather here to pray for the return of the twelfth Imam, who will emerge for the Last Judgment along with Jesus, to restore peace and justice to the world, after a period of violent upheaval.

Shia Muslims view the Quran as the most authoritative text, and they have their own collections of Hadith. They also seek a spiritual meaning in the Quran, as interpreted by their imams, which is not the surface meaning of the text. The Shia link human sin and righteousness to providential events in the world, indicating that God is more influenced by human actions for Shia than is the case for Sunni Muslims, for whom the will of God is all-powerful and determines all events, including our ability to return to God. Hence they are more concerned than Sunni Muslims to exhort, admonish, and even compel sinners to repent.

The Shia also develop much more elaborate prayers and rituals around repentance and forgiveness, and they are especially concerned to link forgiveness to repentance, in a way we do not see in the Sunni Hadith. The practice of sincere repentance involves three rituals: a complete body wash or ritualistic purification; fasting on Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday; and the prayer of repentance, which consists of four cycles, and include the recitation of specific passages from the Quran.

We have two examples of prayers of repentance and forgiveness from early Shia sources. The first is from Imam Zayn al-Abidin, who was the son of the martyred Imam Hussein. He is the author of a book of prayers which is of very high authority in Shiite tradition, though there are scholars who think that the whispered prayers have been edited by others, and are not as authentic as other prayers recorded in this book. The second is from Ali ibn Abi Talib, who is the son-in-law of Muhammed, whose followers are called Shia. Do you detect any differences between these prayers and those from the Sunni Hadith?

I thought I would end with one of the authentic prayers of repentance from Imam Zayn al-Abidin, to give you a fuller sense of the Shia practice of repentance:

## **12. His Supplication in Confession and in Seeking Repentance toward God**

1- O God,  
three traits have prevented me from asking Thee  
and one trait has urged me on:

2- I am prevented by a command Thou hast commanded in which I have been slow,  
a prohibition Thou hast prohibited toward which I have hurried,  
and a favour through which Thou hast favoured  
for which I have not given sufficient thanks.

3- I am urged to ask Thee  
by Thy gratuitous bounty upon him who  
turns his face toward Thee  
and comes to Thee with a good opinion,  
since all Thy beneficence is gratuitous bounty  
and every one of Thy favours a new beginning!

4- So here I am, my God,  
standing at the gate of Thy might,  
the standing of the lowly, the surrendered,  
asking Thee in my shame,  
the asking of the destitute, the pitiful,

5- admitting to Thee that  
at the time of Thy beneficence I surrendered not  
save through abstaining from disobedience toward Thee  
and in none of my states was I ever without  
Thy Kindness.

6- Will it profit me, my God,  
to admit to Thee the evil of what I have earned?  
Will it save me from Thee  
to confess the ugliness of what I have done?  
Or wilt Thou impose upon me in this my station  
Thy displeasure?  
Will Thy hate hold fast to me in the time of  
my supplication?

7- Glory be to Thee! I do not despair of Thee, for Thou hast opened the door of repentance toward  
Thyself.  
Rather, I say, the words of a lowly servant,  
having wronged himself  
and made light of his Lord's inviolability,

8- and whose sins are dreadful, great,  
whose days have parted, fled,  
until, when he sees the term of his works expired  
and the limit of his lifetime reached  
and knows with certainty that he has no escape from Thee,  
no place to flee from Thee,  
he turns his face toward Thee in repeated turning,

makes his repentance toward Thee sincere,  
stands before Thee with a pure and purified heart,  
then supplicates Thee with a feeble, quiet voice.

9- He is bowed before Thee, bent,  
his head lowered, thrown down,  
his legs shaking in fear,  
his tears flooding his cheeks.

He supplicates Thee:

O Most Merciful of the merciful!

O Most Merciful of those toward whom seekers of mercy keep on turning!

O Tenderest of those around whom run  
seekers of forgiveness!

O He whose pardon is greater than His vengeance!

O He whose good pleasure is more abundant  
than His anger!

10- O He who seeks His creatures' praise  
with excellent forbearance!

O He who has accustomed His servants  
to the acceptance of their repeated turning!

O He who seeks to heal their corruption  
through repentance!

O He who is pleased with the easy of their acts!

O He who recompenses with the much their little!

O He who has made himself accountable to them to respond to supplication!

O He who pledged Himself by His gratuitous bounty to give them excellent repayment!

11- I am not the most disobedient of those who have disobeyed Thee and whom Thou hast forgiven,  
nor am I the most blameworthy to offer excuses  
which Thou hast accepted,  
nor am I the most wrongdoing of those who have  
repented to Thee,  
and to whom Thou hast returned

12- I repent to Thee in this my station,  
the repentance of one  
remorseful over what preceded from him hastily,  
apprehensive of what has gathered around him,  
pure in shame for that into which he has fallen,

13- knowing that pardoning great sins is nothing great for Thee.  
overlooking enormous misdeeds is not difficult for Thee,  
putting up with indecent crimes does not trouble Thee,  
and the most beloved of Thy servants to Thee is he who refrains from arrogance before Thee,  
pulls aside from persistence,  
and holds fast to praying forgiveness!

14- I am clear before Thee of arrogance,  
I seek refuge in Thee from persistence,  
I pray forgiveness from Thee for shortcomings,  
I seek help from Thee in incapacity!

15- O God,  
bless Muhammad and his Household,  
dispense with what is incumbent upon me toward Thee,  
release me from what I merit from Thee,  
and grant me sanctuary from what the evildoers fear!  
For Thou art full of pardon,  
the hoped-for source of forgiveness,  
well known for Thy forbearance.  
My need has no object but Thee,  
my sin no forgiver other than Thee -could that be possible?

16- I have no fear for myself except from Thee;  
Thou art *worthy of reverential fear,*  
*and worthy to forgive.*  
Bless Muhammad and his Household, grant my need,  
answer my request favourably, forgive my sin,  
and give me security from fear for myself!  
*Thou art powerful over everything,*  
and that is easy for Thee.  
Amen, Lord of the world!