

The Feast of Moharram

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As I looked from my window one day late in October I saw a number of flags floating from the tops of some of the houses of a Persian village close by. This was a new sight, and I wondered what it could mean. Each house seemed to have two flags, one of black, and one of red, white and green, and on the latter there was an ensign. On inquiring, I found that this decoration was in honor of the feast of Moharram which the Shiah sect of Mohammedans celebrate in commemoration of the death of Hussein, one of their religious heroes, a grandson of Mohammed.

Hussein was killed at Kerbela on the tenth of Moharram (the first month in the Mohammedan year). His tragic death is mourned in various ways, wherever the Shiah sect of Mohammedanism is found. In Bahrein last year quite elaborate celebrations took place. Every strictly orthodox Shiah wore black clothes for the entire month of Moharram, and decorated his house with a black flag, the sign of mourning. Since the greater number of Shiahs in this town are Persians, the Persian flag, red, white and green, was in great evidence also.

The Shiah mosque was draped in black. In the homes of the people, throughout the town, an unusual number of readings was held, the theme of which was the sufferings and death of Hussein. At these readings the women beat their breasts and wail and weep real tears over the death of their beloved Hussein.

On the ninth day of the month a bier draped with gaily colored cloth was carried through the streets on the shoulders of four men, followed by a number of men and women beating their breasts and crying; this in honor of the nephew of Hussein who was murdered on that day.

The culmination of these religious demonstrations was reached in the "Eed el Ashoor," the feast of the tenth day. On the morning of this day a big parade was held, in which the religious zealots, who are anxious to obtain a good reward in the next world, took part. A very elaborately planned procession it was. First came the standard-bearers carrying black flags, an emblem of mourning, and the Persian flags. Following these were two companies of about twenty men each, brandishing swords in the air and occasionally gashing themselves on the forehead and chanting in a mournful tone, "O Hussein! O Hussein!" These men wear new white garments to display the blood from their streaming wounds to the best advantage.

The body of the procession was made up of men and boys representing different relatives of Hussein who were taken prisoners, some of whom were killed. Two camels, one of them bearing the son and daughter of Hussein and the other bearing his sister, headed this division. Following these were two horsemen, Hussein's assassins, accompanied by ten or fifteen men on foot, all of whom were wildly brandishing staves and swords which they carried and pressing closely

upon a third horse, endeavoring to kill its rider, who was Hussein's brother. After these there came a fourth horse on which rode Hussein's son, dying from a wound caused by a sword which was still sticking through his skull. This headpiece was so ingeniously arranged that it gave the exact appearance of a sword thrust through the head. There followed four men carrying on their shoulders a bier supposed to contain the body of Hussein's son-in-law. Then came a smaller bier on which was Hussein's son, and following these was the bier of a nephew. The first two were draped with gaily colored cloths and little mirrors, but the latter was draped in black. Most important of all was the bier of Hussein himself. This was draped in white and on it sat a pure white dove. To make the beheading of the beloved hero more realistic a man lay on the bier with his head out of sight. In the place where the head should have been there protruded the



AN ARAB SWORD DANCE

neck of a freshly slaughtered animal which at the beginning of the performance spurted blood in a most gruesome manner.

The end of the procession was composed of two companies of about twenty-five men each, naked from the waist up, beating their breasts with their hands as hard as they could and crying continually, "O Hussein! O Hussein!"

When the parade was over the participants were feasted in a royal manner, the feast being provided by money left for that purpose by some who have crossed over to the other world. And thus ended the celebration commemorating the death of Hussein, a hero of a religion that permits all sorts of superstitions, and that drags its followers down to a plane of living, both moral and physical, that is almost unthinkable.

All you who read this, will you not join with us in prayer that Christ's Kingdom may come to these people who need Him so sorely?