Key concepts

- Ashura is an annual occasion when events at Karbala are commemorated by Shi'a Muslims. There are several rituals carried out by some, including processions, self-flagellation and ta'ziyah plays and pilgrimage. The importance of this is Shi'a Muslim identity is central to this theme.

- The meaning behind Ashura in marking the struggle to stand up for righteousness against oppression, even against overwhelming opposition, is an important theme. To what extent Muslims should commemorate this with displays of self-harm is a matter of debate.

- For Sunni Muslims, Ashura is a day of optional fasting, marking the time when Moses (Musa) led his people to freedom from Egypt. For Shi'a Muslims, the main focus of Ashura is marking the tragic events at Karbala.

- Shi'a believe Muhammad appointed Ali and his family as successors and they had the righteous claim to continue to lead the Caliphate. Grandsons Hasan and Husayn, supporters and family were threatened to give up the claim and hopelessly outnumbered by opponent Muawiyah's forces. They did not however give up and were instead martyred at Karbala.

- This gave rise to the sectarian division between Shi'a and Sunni Muslims who are in many ways very similar. However, at Ashura Shi'a carry out distinctive rituals, including either symbolic or actual self-flagellation, often beating their chests to commemorate and empathise with the suffering of Hasan and Husayn.

- Some re-enact the events in special ta'ziyah plays. Millions may visit Karbala annually and join street processions, making public display of their grief.

- Self-flagellation can be interpreted in different ways: from tapping the chest in a light, symbolic manner, to beating it or even whipping the back with sharp objects.

- Devoted Shi'a Muslims say the pain is a blessing because they feel the suffering and align with the cause of righteousness of Hasan and Husayn. Any blood shed might bring them reward and the passion they feel makes the pain go away.

- Some criticise this because it is regarded as sinful to harm yourself in Islam. Some argue the all-compassionate God would not want Muslims to suffer.

Key quotes

'From a practical point of view, there is little to separate Shi'ite from Sunni in terms of everyday law and jurisprudence ... In fact, there are arguably more differences – jurisprudentially, at least – between different Sunni groups than there are between Sunni and Shi'ites.' (Turner)

'The Muslim community's conscience was deeply touched by the tragic end to the debacle at Karbala.' (Waines)

'It accounts for the special vision and character of Shii Islam as a disinherited, oppressed community, loyal to God and His Prophet, struggling throughout history to restore God's rule and a just society.' (Esposito)

'I can only regard death as martyrdom and life with these oppressors as a tribulation.' (Husayn)

'Remembrance and ritual re-enactment of the tragedy at Karbala is a cornerstone of faith, personal and community identity, and piety.' (Esposito)

Key words

Muharram	Shi'a	Sunni	Ramadan
Yom Kippur	Ta'ziyah	Husayniyyat	Yazid
Uthman	Siffin	Shimr ibn Dhiljawshan	Ali
Muawiyah	Kharijites	Husayn	
Caliphate	Caliph		

Issues for analysis and evaluation
Key questions, arguments, and debates

1. Whether a focus on suffering during Ashura misrepresents Shi'a identity. Shi'a Islam includes many features, such as the importance of the leadership of Imams and pilgrimages. Most beliefs and practices are the same as Sunni Islam. Is Ashura over-emphasised as a difference? Or is the focus on suffering wrong because it is truly about standing up for righteousness?

2. Self-harm as excessive religious devotion. Muslims are asked to make sacrifices in many ways: to give up their time to pray five times a day, and to give money from their earnings to Zakah. However, is 'self-harm' going too far? Many Sunnis would say so and there are different opinions about the way in which the sorrow and suffering of Karbala may be commemorated at Ashura amongst Shi'a Muslims. These could be evaluated in response to this issue.