

The Martyr of Karbala

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An essay focusing on the elements of revolution and martyrdom of the tragedy of Karbala.

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Introduction

Human history may be regarded as a series of crises and revolutions, its most important stages written with the blood of martyrs. In the history of Islam, al-Husayn ibn 'Ali, the martyr of Karbala, wrote one of the most brilliant chapters; a chapter which still and after more than thirteen centuries, echoes in the minds and hearts of Muslims everywhere. It is remarked by a modern Muslim writer that with every Karbala Islam is renewed.

The martyrdom of Husayn is of great significance in Islamic history. This is because of the man himself; his character, piety, valour, magnanimity, patience, and perhaps most important of all, at least for Shi'is, his relationship to the Prophet Muhammad, and the latter's love for him. It is furthermore of great significance because of what this martyrdom itself meant for the religion of Islam in exposing the wrong and upholding the right through the sharp contrast between him and his followers on the one hand and his antagonists on the other. He rejected the rule of a man who was generally agreed not to have been fit to rule. In this sense he was a revolutionary, as indeed he is now regarded by contemporary writers¹.

The manner of his death, the cruelty of the massacre of his sons, relatives and small group of followers, gives him a high place among the martyrs. Finally, this act of sacrifice, patient suffering and agonised

death, can be regarded as a redemptive act, as again it has been by Shi'i Muslims for centuries. A very good example of this is clearly illustrated in the Ta'ziya and the many suggestive themes and hagiographical myths and legends repeated over and over again in narrative stories (*Maqatil*) of Husayn's martyrdom. These, then, are the three main elements of the tragedy of Karbala: revolution, martyrdom and redemption; and this essay will focus mainly on the first two elements.

[1.](#) See for example "Muhammad Mahdi Shams al-Din", Thawratal-Husayn and "Abbas Mahmud al-Aqqad. Abu al-shohada Al-Husayn. Both works are highly analytical and must be read in full for a proper understanding of their views.

Husayn the Imam: His Birth and Early Life

Husayn, the son of Ali and Fatimah, daughter of the Prophet, was born at the beginning, perhaps on the 3rd, of Sha'ban in the fourth year of the Hijrah. Only he and Jesus, son of Mary, we are told, were in the womb for only six months. Thus we can see that his birth was not an ordinary event since he is regarded by the Shi'i community as the third Imam after 'Ali, his father and al-Hasan his brother. His birth and indeed, his entire life cannot be regarded as belonging to the normal flow of human history. This fact must be clearly kept in mind as we are not dealing here with history as such but rather with a special man who is in reality outside the realm of natural human history; he provides one of the focal points of history itself.

Prophets, beginning with Adam, and after him Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Jacob, Moses, Joshua, Solomon and Jesus all were told about his birth and martyrdom at the spot of Karbala and each in turn shared his grief and wept for his death. Zachariah was also told of the "five people of the Kisa" (cover) and of the death of Husayn. This was revealed to him as the five letters that precede Surah 19 of the Qur'an. These are *Kaf*, meaning Karbala; *Ha*, meaning the green crescent (*Hilal*); *Ya*, meaning Yazid; *'Ain*, meaning his thirst ('Atashuhu); and *Sad*, meaning his patience (*Sabruhu*)[1](#).

Then Zachariah begs God to give him, old as he was, a son who would also be **wrongly** martyred so that he could fully share in the tragedy of Karbala and in the grief of the Prophet and his family for the death of the saint. So the martyrdom of Husayn is often compared with that of John the Baptist (Yahya): "As God for the head of Yahya killed seventy thousand men, so He will for the head of Husayn and **seventy** thousand men by the Mahdi will come"[2](#).

The heavens cried, we are told, for the death of only these two men.

In such stories, we see an attempt at integrating Husayn into the history of humanity linking his death with the beginning as well as all with the important landmarks of history. God, our sources suggest, opened the history of martyrdom with Abel and closed it with Husayn[3](#).

The grief of the holy family for Husayn is compared by many devotional traditions to that of Jacob for his

son, Joseph. It is even greater, for Jacob was a Prophet who knew that his son was alive and yet lost his sight through weeping in longing for him. How then, it is asked by the only surviving son of Husayn, could he not weep when he himself saw the cruel massacres of his father and his friends and family, his father who was the Imam and "master of the youths of paradise"⁴.

Before the birth of Husayn, Gabriel (Jibril) came to the Prophet to announce the good news and to offer his condolences for the child's coming martyrdom. God, through the angel, gave the two Imams at their birth names similar to those of the children of Aaron (Harun). As Aaron was the legate (*Wasi*) of Moses, so 'Ali was the legate of Muhammad and the names of the children of the two legates must be similar.

On this realationship between a prophet and his legate (*wasi*) Ibn Shahrashub in *al-Manaqib* bases his proof of the Immamate of the sons of Ali after him and of Husayn and his children in particular. As Moses was greater than Aaron and yet God willed that the prophethood should continue in the progeny of the latter, so he also willed that the immamate be in the progeny of Husayn and not in that of his brother Hasan.

It is not possible, or even necessary, to enumerate here all the miracles and special favours that attended the birth of Husayn. A Huri of paradise, we are told, came and acted as midwife, and an angel reluctantly told Muhammad that his son and the son of his daughter, who was like the Virgin Mary in purity (*batul*) and favour with God, will be martyred. Such prophesies were told by the Prophet to his daughter who wept bitterly and wished that her son were not born. Thus in Husayn the Qura'nic verse

"his mother bore him painfully, and painfully she gave birth to him", (Quran XLVI : 14)

was fulfilled. Other angels came to seek intercession from the Prophet for the sake of the newborn child for a wrong they had done in Heaven. One of them became henceforth known in Paradise as the "*Mawla* (client) of Husayn". Both the names of these angels and the conflicting accounts regarding them suggest the artificiality of such tales. Nevertheless, such tales are quite common of the lives of saints and prophets everywhere.

Gabriel showed Muhammad the spot in which Husayn was to be martyred, and gave him a handful of its soil, and told him all the details of the tragedy. The handful of soil was kept in a bottle with Um Salamat (the Shi'i counterpart of A'isha, the wife of the Prophet) until the death of Husayn when the soil turned into blood. We shall often return to this interesting and rather important blood motif in this discussion.

The history of mankind, according to the Islamic view, is in essence the history of Divine Revelation. Hence, it begins with a prophet as Adam, the Father of mankind, is regarded. Its culmination was reached with the last of the prophets, Muhammad who is the "Seal of the 'Messengers of God'".

After him, the guideline of history, so to speak, is provided by the Qur'an, the eternal Word of God. Yet, the world cannot be left without an Imam who is the rightful interpreter of the revealed text, legislator and proof of God among His creatures. So before the birth of Hasan, the Prophet instructed his daughter

Fatimah not to nurse him until he had returned from his journey. But as he was long in coming, the mother anxiously nursed the child who by this act lost the inheritance of the Imamate.

When Husayn was born the Prophet came to him, again after a long absence during which the child was not nursed, nursed him himself and whispered secret words in his ears that nobody could understand. Thus the child was initiated into the role of Imam. The Prophet nursed him for forty days by putting his tongue into his mouth, thus the flesh of the child grew out of the flesh of the Prophet as he was nourished not by his mother's milk but by the prophetic blood. In this we see the link, or rather continuity, between the apostolic cycle and the Imamic cycle in its physical and most concrete form. We are told that the Prophet was once seen kissing the mouth of Husayn and saying:

"Thou are a Sayyid (lord or master), son of a Sayyid and father of Sayyids. Thou art an Imam son of an Imam and father of Imams. Thou art a Hujjah (divine proof), son of a Hujjah and father of Hujjahs." [5](#)

According to Twelver Shi'i doctrine, an Imam is designated not by human choice but rather by a revealed text (*nass*). Therefore in proof of the Imamate of 'Ali and his children many Qur'anic verses are believed to have been revealed and fulfilled. Among the many verses cited by our sources, perhaps the most famous are those of Surah LXXVI (Man). There we read

"they give food, for the love of Him, to the needy; the orphan, the captive: "We feed you only for the Face of God; we desire no recompense from you, no thankfulness." (LXXVI: 8,9).

This verse was fulfilled as on three successive days a poor man, an orphan and a captive came and begged them for alms. Each time they ate their few morsels of bread and left them hungry. These we are told were angels who came to try them and substantiate their Imamate. God then sent them heavenly food of which they ate for many days without it diminishing.

But of the Imamate of Husayn in particular and that of his descendants after him, we read that the Prophet said, after being the first to nurse him,

"God had willed it (that is the Imamate) to be in your descendants until the last day" [6](#).

In time of need, on the *'Id*, when the holy family had nothing for the two young boys, Ridwan, the keeper of the gates of Paradise, brought them Paradisical clothes. Of Husayn himself, we are told that he performed many miracles: healing a sick man of a fatal fever, foretelling future events, and making the infant of an adulterous woman confess his mother's adultery. A group of men came to him to hear of the mysteries of the holy family (*Ahl al-Bayt*) and the secret knowledge of the Imams. He asked to speak to each man alone to see if they could bear such esoteric knowledge. The first man he spoke to for a short time lost his mind and went around as a madman, for the knowledge hidden from men could not be born by the uninitiated. The Imams indeed have the knowledge of all things and "with them is the knowledge of the Book" ("*Ilm al-Kitab*).

Husayn was a paragon of courage, wisdom and magnanimity. He often gave all he had to the poor considering the poor to be more deserving of his own wealth than he himself. But he always gave to those deserving both as to need and knowledge. This is illustrated by several stories where he and a needy man engage in edifying discourse intended to test the man's knowledge and piety saying that the Prophet declared that an act of good work (*Ma'ruf*) must be matched with knowledge (*Ma'rifah*).⁷ He is said to have made twenty-five pilgrimages on foot and prayed incessantly day and night. His ascetic life, patience and clemency, generosity and firmness of heart were proverbial. In knowledge, character and physical appearance, he was most like the messenger of God.

Another tradition in proof of his Imamate, and quite illustrative of later Shi'i doctrinal developments, is the following which I shall quote at some length. On the night of the heavenly journey (*Mi'raj*) the Prophet was told by God that the people of the Household (*Ahl al-Bayt*) are the best among men. Then God continued:

"Oh Muhammad, I directed at the earth a great gaze and from it I took one of my own names for thou; thus I shall not be mentioned in any place except that thou be mentioned with me. I am Mahmud and thou art Muhammad. I gazed once more at the earth and from that gaze I took another of my names for 'Ali; I am the most exalted ('Ala) and he is 'Ali (the exalted one).⁸"

Then God told Muhammad that He created him and the five and their progeny of Imams from a conventional of His own light. God then asked if Muhammad wished to see them and was told to look to the right of the throne where He saw similitudes of the twelve Imams standing in prayer. Among them the twelfth, the Mahdi, was like a great star in his splendour. God spoke again and said;

"Oh Muhammad these are the proofs (Hujaj) of mine in the world, and the Mahdi is the necessary (wajib) proof. He is the proof for their (the Imams') friends (awlia) and their avenger from their enemies"⁹

1. Ibn Shahrashub, *Manaqib Ali Abi Talib*, 224.

2. Ibn Shahrashub, *Manaqib Ali Abi Talib*, 224.

3. Turayht, *al-Muntakhab*, 32.

4. Al-Khawarizmi, *Maqta al-Husayn* Vol, 1, 165–167 and Ibn Sharashub op.cit., Vol, III, 43.

5. Al-Khawarizmi, op. cit., 145

6. Ibn Sharashub, op. cit., 151. For the discussion of the Qur'anic verse just quoted see also 215

7. Al-Khawarizmi, op.cit, 146

8. Turayht, op. cit., 106.

9. Turayht, op. cit., 106.

From Revolt to Martyrdom

We have tried so far to set the martyr of Karbala in his religio-devotional context. It is hopefully clear from what has been said up to this point, that Husayn, before being a martyr, was a man of special status in the religious and social history of Islam. His death, moreover, was not the death of just any martyr or hero, but the death of one with a special divine mission in the dynamic life of Islam, and Imam whose primary role is not only to be a ruler but a teacher also. Before returning to all these points, it is necessary to sketch the actual historical events of a great tragedy of Karbala to which we now turn.

a. From Madina to Makka: Prelude

In reconstructing the historical events of the revolution of Husayn, one must at least refer to earlier history. This cannot be undertaken here for many obvious reasons. In the first place, the real beginning of the events leading to this episode go back to the first Caliphs, especially the Caliphates of 'Uthman and 'Ali. It was agreed between Hasan and Mu'awiya that at the death of the latter the Caliphate should go to Hasan or to his brother Husayn. So during the Caliphate of Mu'awiya, Husayn honoured this agreement and did not stir the people to revolt although this would have been quite possible.

Mu'awiya died in the middle of Rajab 60 A.H. He had before his death begun to secure the Caliphate for his son Yazid. This led to many secret schemings and dissensions on many sides. Husayn himself received a large number of letters and emissaries from the people of Kufa asking him to come to them and lead their revolt against the rule of Yazid. He considered this proposition seriously, for from the beginning he refused to give allegiance (Baya) to Yazid in spite of all pressures and threats from Yazid himself and his governor in Madina, al-Walid B. 'Utbah, and also Marwan B. al-Hakam who advised the former to imprison Husayn until he consented or to behead him.

As events took such a turn Husayn saw himself justified in rising against this new and unjust rule. He thus left Madina at night and took the main road to Makka. Here the drama of the tragedy begins to unfold itself with all its powers and recklessness. Here we begin to have sharp points of contrast between Husayn and every other character in this drama. Ibn az-Zubayr, for instance who was another claimant to the Caliphate, after pretending sickness and in every other way trying to delay coming before the authorities to give his *Bayah*, escaped during the night taking instead a by-road.

Before setting out, Husayn went to the graves of his grandfather the Prophet, his father, mother and his brother to bid them all farewell. Like every good drama, the revolution of Husayn had its moral dilemma. The moral problem here was the choice to say yes to an unjust rule, to accept something which would directly violate his basic principles, or oppose it and try, even knowing that he would fail, to destroy it. He, of course, chose the latter and more heroic course, and in the end paid with his life to keep the spirit of revolution and change alive in Islam.

The martyr is often reassured in his resolve in ways which the historian chooses to reject or at least disregard as unscientific evidence. But for those to whom the martyr's death is in the end more significant than his life, to them it is this supernatural aspect of a martyr's death that provides the strength to face life, and the meaning to what is otherwise just an intellectual religious ideology. So Husayn, the martyr of Karbala, while at his grandfather's grave got his reassurances in dreams where the Messenger of God spoke to him in words of affection and great sorrow;

"Oh Husayn my beloved, I see thee soon spattered in thy blood, slain in the spot of Karbala, the spot of *karb* (sorrow) and *bala* (calamity) by a wicked gang of my community (*ummah*), thirsty with no one to give thee water to drink. Will they nonetheless seek my intercession nay, may God not grant them my intercession on the day of judgement."[1](#)

Weeping bitterly, still in his dream, Husayn cried out:

"Oh my grandfather I have no need of this world. Take me now with thee into thy tomb".

The Prophet answered:

"No my son, there is a high station for thee in Paradise which thou canst not attain except through martyrdom"[2](#).

Thus Husayn left the city of the Prophet with his wives, children and others of his close relatives and set out for Makka, repeating as he went the verse:

"So he escaped from thence, fearing, vigilant. He said: "My Lord! Deliver me from the wrongdoing folk". (Qur'an XXVIII, 21.)

In his last testament to his brother Muhammad Ibn'al-Hanafiyya he hears witness that there is no God but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Then he briefly sets forth his own position, that is of abiding by the religion of Islam, not seeking power or wealth or to create discord in the community of his grandfather, but rather of upholding the truth and opposing falsehood.

From that time on he answered those who advised him against rising up in revolt or going to Iraq:

"I saw the messenger of God in a dream, he sent me on a mission and I shall proceed, whether it be for me or against me"

Tabari reports this statement of Husayn in Makka when Ibn Ja'far, his cousin secured a letter of surety for him from the governor of the Holy City. Husayn read the letter and answered with the statement above quoted. To the question of Ibn Ja'far as to what that mission was, he replied:

"I am not telling anyone of that until I meet my Lord."[3](#)

Tabari again reports that when Husayn, went to the tomb of the Prophet to pray and where he saw the

dream just mentioned, he was leaning on two men one each side. This suggests that he may have been ill. This must be borne in mind against the accounts of heroic fighting attributed to him by most writers, both classical and modern.

Husayn reached Makka in Ramadan 60 A.H. and stayed in it till the Hajj season in Dhul-Hujjah of the same year. He cut short his pilgrimage however making it instead an 'Umrah, and set out for Iraq. Earlier he had sent his cousin Muslim Ibn Aqil to Kufa in Iraq to take in person the allegiance of those who wrote to Husayn and prepared the grounds for his coming. Muslim was at first received enthusiastically by the people who came to him in large numbers promising complete support to Husayn even with their lives.

Nu'man Ibn Bashir, then governor of the city, did nothing to oppose except threatening strong retaliation in case of any direct confrontation. Soon however the success of Muslim was reported to Yazid who dismissed Nu'man and appointed 'Ubayd Allah Ibn Ziyad in his place. The latter had Muslim arrested after a valiant fight and put to death with his host and partisan Hani b. 'Urwa al-Muradi. Muslim's heroism and integrity are dramatically portrayed by most writers on the subject. Later sources tend to explain away any illusion to the hesitation of his friend Hani⁴, Husayn's hurried departure from Makka before the end of the pilgrimage season may be regarded by historians as an act of clever politics. He left then, one may say, so as not to attract attention when people were busy with the pilgrimage. There are however other arguments for this action, and perhaps ones more fitting the character of the man and the situation. He himself gives this reason for this departure:

"By God if I be killed outside it (the *Ka'b ba*) even to the length of a palm (that is the palm of the hand), it is preferable to me to being killed inside it to the length of a palm. By God! even if I hide in the hole of a vermin (*hama*) they would seek me out and execute in me their desire . . ." ⁵

A variation of this is quoted by most sources where he leaves the city so that the sanctity of the house of God would be violated by the shedding of human blood in it. Again he met a man on the way to Iraq who asked why Husayn left the proximity and protection of the sacred house. He answered:

"The Umayyads usurped my wealth and I was patient; they insulted me and my family and I said nothing; and now they seek my life so I went away."

All this suggests other aspects of the story of the conflict of Husayn with the Umayyads and his martyrdom which we do not know. From all available sources one must conclude that he had such definite fears and resolutions that cannot be explained as obduracy or love of power when he would not flinch from his resolve to continue to his death, even when that became an increasing certainty at every stage. It is suggested by all sources that Husayn received the news of the death of Ibn Aqil even before he left Makka.⁶

The great poet al-Farazdaq met Husayn as the latter was leaving the Ka'bah and advised him against going to Iraq saying I left the hearts of the Kufans with you but their swords with the Umayyads. Husayn

answered that things happen according to a divine decree and God's will is not knowable to man. Then he continued with these verses:

**"If this world be counted precious, the pleasure of God is more elevated and more knowable.
And if bodies be created for death then the death of man by the sword in God is best.
And if wealth be given according to a divine decree, why should then man cling to wealth.
And if treasures be gathered to be in the end left behind why then should a man be grasping after
that which he must abandon.⁷"**

It is impossible in this short essay to recapture the deep emotions evoked by narrators of a tragedy of Karbala in their listeners, of Husayn's long hours of solitude and prayer at the tomb of the Prophet, his sorrow, weeping and resignation. The Prophet, and all the family of Husayn are pictured as sharing the same sentiments with Husayn. We read that at the time of this tragedy a general lamentation was raised in Paradise by all prophets, by the father, mother and brother of Husayn, for the great suffering in store for him, his thirst, complete abandonment by all except for a small group of his friends and relatives. The journey which he made from Makka was indeed the Via Dolorosa with the Mask of the prophet as the guardian of sorrows, intense suffering and heroism.

Suffering and the agonies of expected death are for the devotees of Husayn not sentiments of cowardice and fear. They are rather sentiments of absolute courage and victorious struggle against the powers of evil and darkness. Husayn wrote a letter, we read, to his relatives of the Hashimite clan calling them to share in his great conquest in these words: "He of you who joins us would be martyred, but he who remains behind shall not attain to conquest". We shall return again to this theme later. But let us now follow our martyr to the final act of his great tragic drama.

b. From Makka to Karbala: Finale

As Husayn and his small party proceeded towards Kufa in Iraq, the certainty of the futility of discussion became increasingly apparent to all. He sent another messenger to the people who invited him to come and assume leadership, and with them to fight against the rule of Yazid which was not yet recognized by many Muslims. The messenger was discovered on the road taking him to Ibn Ziyad who ordered him to curse 'Ali and his family or be killed.

He went up on the roof of the palace and instead blessed 'Ali and his family and cursed Yazid and Ibn Ziyad and called the people to the support of Husayn. He was thrown down and killed. Muslim also waged a valiant fight against the soldiers of Ibn Ziyad and came close to victory until some notables from the palace balconies threatened the people with the Syrian armies and everybody left Muslim at the last moment. He roamed the streets aimlessly and in the end was betrayed by the son of a woman who gave him shelter and treacherously put to death. Through threats and bribery of the people Ibn Ziyad gained full control of the situation just before Husayn arrived in Karbala. So Ibn Ziyad sent first an army under the leadership of Hurr Ibn Ziyad ar-Riyahi who was ordered to compel Husayn to give allegiance to

Yazid and bring him alive to Ibn Ziyad.

Thus Husayn was sure of what was to come. He therefore gathered his followers and relatives and asked them to flee for their lives and leave him alone as he was the only one wanted. "Behold the night has come, take advantage of it as you would a camel for you and let every one of you take the hand of one of my family and scatter through out the land. For they want me alone and if they take hold of me they would not seek to harm any of you". When before he hesitated and thought of going back, the sons of Muslim said: "No by God! we shall not go back until we either avenge the blood of our father or suffer his fate." Husayn answered: "*There is no good in life after you.*⁸"

This was the last real chance for him to be saved from death and he refused it. His followers and relatives, likewise, al! in one voice cried out that they would not abandon him but would rather die with him or live with him.

The tendency by later writers has been to deny any such hesitation on the part of Husayn and his followers. This however, is a thing unnecessary, for whatever we say of Husayn he was a man who, like all men, loved life and wished to avoid suffering and death. The real test is rather whether even when later 'Umar Ibn Sa'd and his generals urged him to accept the Caliphate of Yazid and submit to Ibn Ziyad he would have really given up his struggle. This he did not do and it is in this that his greatness lies, and that his opposition could be truly called a revolution. During the last days of his life when death was imminent, and even to the last moment, he sought rather to save his opponents from committing such a grievous sin against the grandson of the Prophet, his family and pious followers.

Husayn reached the spot of Karbala on the second of Muharram 61 A.H. Later traditions record the story that when his horse reached the spot it refused to move any further. Husayn asked what the place was called and people answered Naynawa. He asked again whether it was known by any other name. He was told that it was also known as al-Ghadiriyya. Is there any other name by which it was known? he asked. This time the answer came: "Karbala". He then remarked:

"We are God's and to Him we return. This is the spot of *Karb* (sorrow) and *Bala* (calamity). This is the last station of our journey, this is the place wherein our blood will be shed,"

then to his followers,

"Let us make this our halting place⁹".

Karbala was on the banks of the Euphrates, and there the two armies struck camp facing one another.

The orders came to Hurr and later to Ibn Sa'd to prevent Husayn from reaching the waters of the Euphrates so that thirst would compel him to surrender. For a few days this order was not enforced and little clashes between Husayn's men and those of Ibn Sa'd took place as the former forced their way to the river. But Husayn's main aim was not to fight, but to admonish, thus he insisted that he shall not be the first to start hostilities. He mounted one day after prayers his horse and in an important short

discourse summed up his purpose in coming to them and set forth his entire philosophy in these words:

"Oh men, the messenger of God, on whom God prayed and said peace, said: 'anyone who sees an Imam in authority, tyrannical and wrongdoing (ja'iran), permitting what God had prohibited and prohibiting what God had permitted, opposed to the Sunna of God and his apostles, and committing transgression against the servants of God; if such a man is not opposed by another in word and deed, God will bring this other man to the punishment he well deserves".[10](#)

He then contrasted himself, the son of the daughter of the Prophet, with the men to whom they now shifted their allegiance, men who abode in the obedience of Satan and forsook the obedience of the Merciful, who annulled the limits of divine decrees and transgressed against divine law. Then he asked who was the more worthy of the Caliphate, was it Yazid or himself? Rehindring them, furthermore, of their letters and messengers they had sent, urging him to come. When they denied having written these letters he called out and two sacks full of letters were displayed before them.

This evidence confounded them and a hush of deep shame and regret fell over the people. Still however they did not have the courage to heed the voice of their own consciences and the words of admonition and threats of God's punishment addressed to them. Then Husayn in deep chagrin and despair spoke again and said:

You see what has befallen us in this matter. Do you see how the world has changed and taken on a false character, how its good is diminished so that no more is left of it but as the grass of a poor pasture. Do you see how men abide not by the truth, and how falsehood is not abandoned. Let then the believer seek the company of his Maker in truth. Yea, I consider life with the wrong-doers a burden (*barman*) and death a blessing, a martyrdom preferred.[11](#)

Ibn Sa'd was reluctant to accept the assignment of fighting against Husayn. But he, like others, sold his own conscience to fear and worldly goods. It was for him to choose between the governorship of the Rayy, a rich province and kill Husayn, or lose that prestige and gain instead God's pleasure and a place in history beside Husayn and his fellow martyrs.

Ibn Sa'd and Husayn met on several occasions privately at night between the two camps. In one conversation Husayn tried to dissuade Ibn Sa'd from the evil deed he has been assigned against him. The latter confessed however that he wished not to fight against him yet he was afraid that Ibn Ziyad would take away his large estates, destroy his house or harm his family. In another quite controversial conversation, (whether it was public or private, historians are not agreed) Husayn offered to go back to where he was, go to Yazid and settle matters with him, or go and live in any country they chose for him as one of its inhabitants. Some have understood his statement "to put my hand in Yazid's hand" to imply giving *Ba'a*. But on the authority of his client (mawla) 'Uqbah b. Sam'an, he offered only to be left to" ... *roam God's broad earth until we see what will be decided in this matter among the people.* "[12](#)

Ibn Sa'd, still attempting to avoid a direct confrontation with Husayn, wrote to Ibn Ziyad of Husayn's wish

to give up the struggle. Here again, what he wrote and the answer he received is a matter of controversy. Be that as it may, Ibn Ziyad decided to score a complete victory over Husayn and would have it only that the latter come before him as a captive, then he would decide what to do with him.

He therefore sent another man, Shamir b. Dhi-Jawshan, the Judas of the martyrdom of Husayn, who insisted on carrying out the orders of Ibn Ziyad. He was instructed to kill Ibn Sa'd and take his place as leader of the army, if the former would not comply with the orders of the Amir. Thus on the eve of the 10th of Muharram the horsemen of Ibn Sa'd started towards Husayn's camp meaning to bring matters to a head.

He was dozing outside his tent, and again saw the Prophet Muhammad in a dream who announced to him that tomorrow his main meal (iftar) will be with him and the rest of his family in Paradise. Husayn was awakened by his sister Zaynab, and sent his brother al-'Abbas to ask Ibn Sa'd to leave them until the next morning so that they can pray to God that night and think matters over. We are told that on that night one could hear from their camp, human voices like the humming of bees, in prayer, reading of the Qur'an and cries of farewell. Still another time Husayn asked his followers to escape with their lives and leave him alone to his fate. But again they all cried with one voice reasserting their loyalty and determination to fight with him until they taste his martyrdom. Some said, and the statement is attributed with some variations to most of them, that they would rather be killed a thousand times and not abandon him. He then accepted their sincerity and devotion to his cause and begged God's mercy on their souls.

So, it was on Friday or Saturday, the 10th of Muharram, 61 A.H. that the greatest tragedy in Islam took place. Ibn Sa'd, after ordering his men to prepare for battle, himself shot an arrow in the direction of Husayn's camp saying: "Bear witness for me with the Amir (Ibn Ziyad) that I was the first to shoot an arrow.¹³"

The battle started and Husayn's followers fell one after another, mostly in single combat. Their valour, devotion and selfsacrifice provide the theme of many a story for the imagination of later writers and folklore among the pious.

The first to die of Husayn's own family was his eldest son 'Ali al-Akbar. Then al-'Abbas, his brother seeing the suffering of the women and children from thirst made his way to the water among swords and spears, and under a barrage of arrows. He got the water for the thirsty ones, but on his way back he was attacked and killed after a desperate and courageous fight. It is said that first his hands, one after another, were struck off, then he grasped the sword with his teeth and fought; killing men before he was struck with an iron bar on the head and then cut to pieces by the angry and excited mob.

Husayn called for his infant son 'Abd Allah, perhaps born during the first days of Muharram in the camp, to embrace him and beg for a drink of water for the languishing child. A man shot an arrow into the child's neck which slew him in his father's lap. Husayn filled his cupped hands with the blood and threw it up towards Heaven, according to many traditions, not a drop of it returned to earth.

Husayn continued to the last moment to try to move the hearts of his enemies with one cry after another of prayer to God for help, and reproach to them for their cruelty. Some of these cries and discourses would most eloquently speak for themselves. I shall therefore give here one of two examples.

Just before the battle, he addressed the Kufans praising God and praying on His Apostle, and apologising for his coming to them, and offering to go back if they would leave him alone. He said:

Do therefore remember who my ancestors were and know who I am, then return to your own consciences and reprimand them. Behold whether it is lawful for you to kill me and violate my sanctity (hurmah). Am I not the son of your Prophet, the son of his legate (wasi) and cousin who was the first to believe in God and confirm His Apostle in what He revealed to him. Is not Hamzah the first of martyrs my father's uncle and is not Ja'far of the two wings flying in Paradise my uncle?

Did no good man among you relate to you the saying of the Apostle of God concerning me and my brother 'these two are the masters of the youths of the people of Paradise'? So if you believe not what I say, and it is the truth; for by God I never told a lie since I knew that God (exalted be He) loathes lying and harms by it only those who abide in it.

But if you belie me, there are those among you whom you could ask . . . (here he enumerates most of the still living companions of the Prophet and then continues) they can tell you that they heard this saying from the Prophet concerning me and my brother. Is there not in this a cause to prevent you from shedding my blood? [14](#)

Shamir, the main architect of this cruel massacre, answered that he does not understand what Husayn meant. A follower of Husayn, Habib Ibn Muzahir, remarked that Shamir tells the truth, for God had sealed the hearts of these men so that they would not understand and their torment be increased for all the sins they committed against His servants.

Among the people whose hearts were indeed moved was al-Hurr, the man first sent by Ibn Ziyad to compel Husayn to surrender. His death was indeed a moving act of courage as were all the others who displayed great valour in contrast with the cowardice of the Kufans who came in the thousands to buy the pleasures of Ibn Ziyad and his material gifts with the innocent blood of these people. It is generally agreed that four thousand men were sent to fight against Husayn with his small following of no more than seventy-five fighting men.

These were quickly killed and Husayn was left alone standing on the battle-field in despair and confusion. He raised his hands to Heaven with the Book of God before him and prayed saying:

Oh God! Thou art my help in every calamity, and my hope in every difficulty. Thou art for me a trust in every problem that faces me. Every sorrow that weakens the heart and leaves no way out, and makes a friend forsake his friend and enemies rejoice. All these I bring before Thee with my

complaints as I come to Thee, to Thee alone and no other. Thou hast always taken away my grief. and removed my difficulties, for Thou art the source of every mercy and grace and the end of every wish. [15](#)

At the end of the day Shamir urged men to kill Husayn who had already received many arrows and stabs by sword and spear. Some traditions have it that as Husayn lay dying on the ground spattered with his blood and nodding his head up and down as if in a doze from weakness, no man wished to be the one to kill him and meet God with his blood.

It was Shamir who came forward, knelt on his chest, stabbed him many times with his sword, while the other laughed saying: "Praise God who had sent the most evil of his creatures to kill him," and then cut off his head.. Other traditions attribute the final beheading of Husayn to other men, but all agree. that it was at least at the instigation of Shamir. The head was sent with the other heads of Husayn's followers first to Ibn Ziyad who despatched them along with the women and children as captives to Yazid in Damascus. Only 'Ali, Zayn al-'Abidin, then a sick boy, survived this tragedy.

Most traditions agree that Yazid wept for the death of Husayn, cursed Ibn Ziyad, and sent the women and children to Medina with good provisions returning to them all that they were robbed of by the Kufan mobs. Yet the fact that he did not punish Ibn Ziyad for his deed, nor even tried to prevent it, his sorrow has been interpreted by many as just a pretence, or at least an act of diplomacy to please the people.

Be that as it may the death of Husayn has provided food for thought and devotion for many generations up to this day. It has received countless interpretations, and every generation sees its struggle in the light of his struggle. In this sense Husayn triumphed and Yazid lost.

[1.](#) Al-Khawarizmi, op. cit., Vol. I, 187

[2.](#) Al-Khawarizmi, op. cit., Vol. I, 187.

[3.](#) Al-Khawarizmi, op. cit., Vol. I, 192

[4.](#) Tabari, Tarikh Vol. VI, 219.

[5.](#) Tabari, Tarikh Vol. VI, 219.

[6.](#) Al-Khawarizmi op. cit., Vol I, 213

[7.](#) Al-Khawarizmi op. cit., Vol I, 223

[8.](#) Tabari, op. cit., 217

[9.](#) Tabari, Tarikh, op. cit., p. 229

[10.](#) Tabari, Tarikh, op. cit., p. 229

[11.](#) Tabari, Tarikh, op. cit., p. 229

[12.](#) Tabari, Tarikh, op. cit., 235

[13.](#) Al-Khawarizmi, op. cit., Vol. II, 25

[14.](#) Tabari, Tarikh, op. cit., 242-243

[15.](#) Tabari, Tarikh, op. cit., 241-242

Conclusion: Husayn in History

Husayn has gone into history in two ways. First, to the modern secularist man, or one who looks at religious revolutions from their social aspects, Husayn's uprising is seen as a noble act. To such a man the comparison between Husayn and his followers, and Yazid and Ibn Ziyad and their armies is an important fact of difference between right and wrong. After Husayn fell and was finally beheaded, they trampled his body under the hooves of their horses. Nor was this the last act of treachery against God's creatures.

For it was in the time of Yazid that the "radiant city" of the Prophet was sacked and both Helpers (*Ansar*) and Emigrants (*Muhajirun*) were put to the sword. So the revolution of Husayn is seen by men like al-'Awwad, Shams al-Din, and others as the first and greatest of all Islamic revolutions, which they regard as extensions of Karbala. Aqqad writes of this stream of sacred blood that has run through human history and of the martyr of Karbala: To these (great martyrdoms) the martyr of Karbala Husayn Ibn Ali, may God be pleased with him, belongs. Nay, he is the prince of martyrs (*Abu al Shuhada'*) and spring of continuous martyrdom not to be compared with any other spring in human history. [1](#)

The other way in which Husayn has gone into history may be seen, with all the intensity of human emotions, in the Ta'ziya celebrations during the first ten days of Muharram. Here Husayn is completely and physically present to the pilgrims to his shrine in Karbala, or wherever his head is claimed to be. The head itself has had its own peculiar history. Although its exact spot of burial is unknown, it has been claimed by many people. The pious Umayyad Caliph, Umar Ibn Abd al-'Aziz, is supposed to have prayed over it and buried it, thus shedding a bright ray of light over an otherwise dark era. The Fatimids, at the summit of their glory, sought to crown their empire with the sacred head, which is said to have been found and brought by them to Cairo where the mosque of Husayn still stands.

In this drama we have good and bad characters. The martyrdom of its hero has been the source both of controversy and inspiration through the centuries. But he himself passed into eternity, into the company of other great martyrs, martyrs whose lives continue to shine as the guiding star in human history. To time, that is time untouched by the nobility of great ideals and the blood of martyrs, he addressed these harsh words:

**Oh time, (Dahr), fie on thee of a friend, forbear.
How thou claimest in the morn and at eventide
Many an illustrious victim**

[1.](#) Aqqad, op.cit, 93

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