

Exemplary Women: Umm ul-Banin



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Al-Islam.org

Message of Thaqaalayn vol. 12, no. 3, Autumn 2011

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Publisher(s):

Ahlul Bayt World Assembly [4]

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Category:

Women [6]

Early Islamic History [7]

Journal:

vol. 12, no. 3, Autumn 2011 [8]

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Person Tags:

Umm ul-Banin [9]

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Abstract

Fatima bint Hazam, or Umm ul-Banin, was known for her noble lineage, upright morals, and enduring devotion toward the Ahlul Bayt. After having been wed to Imam Ali (a) and raising his children after the death of his first wife, Lady Fatima (a), she displayed excellence in her responsibilities as a wife and mother of the orphaned children.

She favored the Imam's children over her own, and this was especially seen as she was more grieved upon the news of Imam Husein's martyrdom than of the death of her own four sons who were martyred with him. It was after the tragedy of Karbala that Umm ul-Banin undertook the role of publicizing the event, conveying the message of the noble martyrs, and perpetuating the path of Imamate through her sermons, elegies, and lamentation.

A Descendant of the Brave

Fatima bint Hazam al-Kilabiyya notably known as Hazrat Umm ul-Banin or "mother of several sons" was a descendant of a valiant family. Her father, Hazam, was the son of Khalid ibn Rabi'ah ibn Kilab. His respected mother, called Leila or Shamamah, came from the family of Sahl ibn Amir ibn Malik ibn Jafar ibn Kilab, all brave Arab forefathers well-known in the region of Hijaz. Also, Hazrat Umm ul-Banin was a descendant of Prophet Muhammad's great-grandfather, Abd Manaf, through some generations.²

In his book *Maqatil al-Talibin*, Abul-Faraj Isfahani spoke of her.³ According to historical accounts, Umm ul-Banin's paternal and maternal uncles were both among the valiant Arabs in the pre-Islamic era. Historians praise them for their courageousness in the battlefields. Besides heroism, they were the chiefs and leaders of their tribe so much that the former Sultans succumbed to them.

Thus, the family of Hazrat Umm ul-Banin was pre-eminent among the noblemen of their time in terms of honor, valor, nobility, and hospitality. Umm ul-Banin inherited these lofty characteristics from her ancestors, integrated them with what she learned from the family of revelation, and passed them on to her children.

Her Marriage to the Commander of the Faithful (a)

After the Master of the Pious, Imam Ali, (a) had lost Hazrat Zahra (a); that is, after the wretched of the time had martyred her, his young children needed a mother who would be affectionate towards them while simultaneously being his comforting wife. Hence, Imam Ali (a) approached his brother, Aqil, a genealogist in the Arab world, and asked, "From among the Arabs, choose a lady as my wife, someone who is a descendant of the brave Arabs and can bear me a magnanimous and valiant son." After giving it some consideration, Aqil suggested that the Imam marry Umm ul-Banin Kilabiyyah because no Arab was found braver than her forefathers. Imam Ali (a) liked his brother's idea and sent him to propose to her on his behalf.⁴

The Importance of a Noble Family

Taking into account the noble blood of the bride, the Imam taught his followers a moral lesson: "Good manners demonstrate a pure lineage and excellent family origin."⁵

There is no doubt that taking familial nobility into account in marriage is necessary as the characteristics of forefathers and parents are very likely (and of course, not necessarily) to influence the children's behavior. Of course, to the Imam, noble blood was not only essential for marriage, it is an essential quality in a ruler in order to run a state and government, which is no less important than family. He emphasized on associating with noble people in his letter to Malik Ashtar:

You should associate with decent [and virtuous] people who have been [raised] in noble families, have a good record, and live with a good reputation. It is also so with people who are of valor, munificence, and magnanimity because such people are the center of bounty and the branch of the tree of beneficence and virtue.⁶

The Auspicious Marriage

When Aqil proposed to Umm ul-Banin on Imam Ali's behalf, the Hizam family was overjoyed; they welcomed him with open arms, taking great pride in this proposal.⁷ However, the father politely asked Aqil for some time to seek the opinions of both Umm ul-Banin and her mother, Shamamah, daughter of Suheil.

The Joyful Dream

When Umm ul-Banin's father went to his wife and daughter to ask for their opinion, he listened to his daughter describing her last night's dream to her mother:

Oh mother! I dreamed that I was in a green luxuriant garden. There were flowing brooks and many fruits. The moon and stars were shining. I was staring at them, thinking about the greatness of creation, Allah's creatures and the sky lying above without any pillar as well as the light of the moon and stars...I was lost in these thoughts when the moon came down from the sky and lay on my lap. It was glowing so brightly that I was dazzled. Completely stunned, I saw four other bright stars descend on my lap, too.

Upon hearing the true dream of his daughter, Hizam ibn Khalid was delighted and gave her the glad tidings, saying, "Surely Allah, the Blessed, the Almighty, has turned your dream into a reality. I give you the good news of felicity in both this world and the hereafter!" Then, he told his wife, "Do you find our daughter, Fatimah, qualified enough to be Imam Ali's wife? Know that his house is the house of revelation, prophethood, knowledge, wisdom, courtesy, and good manners. If you find your daughter deserving of this house, let's agree with this blessed marriage!"

"Oh Hizam! By Allah, I trained her well and I have requested the Almighty Allah to make her extremely happy. You can give Imam Ali her hand in marriage," Shamamah said.

Consequently, they gave Aqil a positive response, their heart swelled with great pride. Thereby, the ties of marriage united Umm ul-Banin and Imam Ali forever. From the very beginning of the marriage, Imam Ali found Fatimah Kilabiyyah, who was still young, a woman of complete wisdom, deep, firm faith, and

lofty manners of high characteristics. He esteemed her and wholeheartedly strove to revere her.

Hazrat Umm ul-Banin was also a truly dutiful wife. In addition to training righteous children, she showed maximum loyalty to the Imam. After the martyrdom of Imam Ali (a), although she maintained her youth and extreme beauty, she did not remarry in respect to her great husband.⁸

Devotion to the Prophet's Household

Without doubt, Umm ul-Banin was a devoted lady, all too aware of the rights of the Prophet's Household. She loved them sincerely and dedicated herself to their friendship. They also considered her of lofty status and worthy position.

Her devotion was especially witnessed during the Battle of Karbala. Upon the return of the caravan of Karbala to Medina, Umm ul-Banin asked Bashir, "Oh Bashir! What news do you have about Aba Abdallah al-Husayn (a)?" Bashir instead told her of the martyrdom of her four sons. She said, "Oh Bashir! With such a bad news, you shocked and scared me to death. Tell me about Husayn (a). May my offspring and all what is under the blue sky be sacrificed for Aba Abdallah al-Husayn (a)." Bashir replied, "May Allah grant you a great reward for the tragedy that happened to our master, Imam Husayn (a)."⁹

These words of Umm ul-Banin demonstrate the power of her faith as well as her great adherence to Imam Husayn (a). Her statement, 'If Imam Husayn is alive, the martyrdom of all my four sons does not matter,' reveals the elevated level of her faith.¹⁰

Umm ul-Banin's unaffected love for the Prophet's offspring and sacrifices of her children for Imam Husayn (a) produced an effect in this world as well. The Prophet's Household did their best to respect and esteem Umm ul-Banin and her sons, not failing to express gratitude to them.

A Loving Mother to Hazrat Zahra's Children

Umm ul-Banin tried to fill the gap left by the loss of a mother for the children of Hazrat Zahra, particularly for the Prophet's two sons – Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn (a).

The Holy Prophet's offspring found their mother in this pious lady and felt the pain of loss of a mother reduce. Umm ul-Banin preferred the children of the Prophet's daughter, who were the very epitome of perfection, to her own and showed them more care and affection.

Knowing their greatness, Umm ul-Banin sought to be at their service; she did not deny them anything. The very day she moved in with Imam Ali's household, both Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn (a) were sick and confined to bed. But as soon as the bride of Abu Talib's Household entered the house, she soothed and nurtured them like a kind mother.

It is written that when Umm ul-Banin married Imam Ali (a), she suggested that he call her 'Umm ul-

Banin,' her nickname,¹¹ instead of Fatimah – her name at birth – so that Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn (a) might not recall their mother by hearing the name 'Fatimah'. This prevented their bitter past from being stirred up and feeling the pain of being motherless.¹²

Raising Righteous Children

Umm ul-Banin gave birth to four sons: Abbas, Abdallah, Uthman, and Ja'far.¹³ The prominent one was Hazrat Abbas, who was born on the 4th of Shaaban, 26 A.H. in Medina.¹⁴

All these four young men trained by Umm ul-Banin were influenced by the lofty traits of their holy father in the first place; they also learned good manners, especially altruism from their virtuous mother. Each was an embodiment of virtues such as valor, decency, nobleness, and magnanimity.

When Imam Ali (a) was martyred, Umm ul-Banin's oldest son – Abbas ibn Ali – was about 14 years old, with his other brothers younger than him. After the martyrdom of their holy father, their mother's sacrifices and Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn's guidance showed them the right way.

This self-sacrificing lady wholeheartedly devoted her youth and energy to training and raising the offspring of Imam Ali (a). As a loving and concerned mother, she was at their service. All Umm ul-Banin's children were trained most appropriately. Finally, following the rightful Imam and with complete willingness, they sacrificed their lives for the exaltation of the truth.

Matchless Forbearance

The following are two instances of this angelic lady's patience in hardships:

According to historians, once Commander of the Faithful, Imam Ali (a), put Abbas on his lap, folded up his sleeves, and started kissing his arms, weeping bitterly. Astounded by the scene, Umm ul-Banin asked the Imam, "Why do you weep?"

Softly and sadly the Imam answered, "I am looking at these two arms because they remind me of what will happen to them."

"What will happen to them?" Umm ul-Banin asked fearfully and hastily.

Imam Ali (a) sadly replied, "They will be cut off from the forearm."

These words hit her like a lightning and her heart sank. Then, she anxiously asked, "Why?" The Imam informed her that the arms of her son will be cut off while defending his brother, protecting the Divine Shari'ah, and the Prophet's daughter. Umm ul-Banin wept bitterly along with women around her.¹⁵

At this moment, Umm ul-Banin showed her great profound faith and forbearance. She also expressed gratitude to Allah that her son would display utmost loyalty and be sacrificed for the Prophet's son and

daughter.

Likewise, her well-known words on hearing the news of martyrdom of all her four sons revealed her patience and tolerance and adorned the history of Karbala. While Bashir told the news of martyrdom of 34-year-old Abbas, 24-year-old Abdallah, 21-year-old Uthman, and 19-year-old Ja'far to the mother, she showed patience and only asked about Imam Husayn.¹⁶ She said, "Tell me about Husayn" and when she received the news of Imam Husayn's martyrdom she said, "All of the arteries of my heart are torn. May all of my children and whatever that exist under this azure heaven be sacrificed for the sake of Imam Husayn."

Umm al-Banin and Ashura'i Poems

Sayyid Muhsen Amin said about Umm al-Banin, "She was an eloquent poet, from a noble and brave family."¹⁷

When women addressed her as Umm ul-Banin and expressed condolences to her, she composed the following lines:

Oh women of Medina! Do not call me Umm ul- Banin and do not know me as the mother of the hunting lions anymore.

I had some sons, because of whom I was called Um al-Banin. But now there is no son left for me and I have lost all of them.

Yes, I had four hawks [sons], which were shot and whose jugular veins were cut.

The enemies slashed their pure bodies with their spears. My sons ended the day while they were on the ground with severed bodies.

If only I could know if it is true that they cut off the arms of my son, Abbas?¹⁸

Another poem of hers reads as follows:

Oh the one who saw [my dear son] Abbas [the son of Haidar al-Karrar] attacking like his father fighting with cowardly enemies! Oh the one who saw Ali's other sons, each of which was like a hunting lion – fighting around him!

I was informed that my son Abbas was hit with a metal stick on his head while his arms had been already cut off. Woe to my lion cub [Abbas], who was hit with a metal stick on his head!

Oh my son, Abbas! If [your arms were not cut off] and you had a sword in your hand, no one would dare to approach you.¹⁹

According to Imam Baqir (a), “After the event of Karbala, whenever Umm ul-Banin heard of the martyrdom of her sons, particularly the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (a), she used to go to Baqi‘ cemetery in Medina, where she resided, and commemorated them while in deep grief for those godly men. The people of Medina joined her to listen to her words besides merely mourning their martyrdom. This was so touching that even Marwan – an enemy of the Prophet’s Household – was moved to tears by Umm ul-Banin’s elegies and lamentation.

A main feature of Umm ul-Banin’s poems was her awareness of the then political events and relevant affairs. After the event of Karbala, she was able to convey the message of the oppressed and truth-seeking martyrs of Ashura to the future generations; she also could awaken the unaware people to the truth through her art of reciting elegies of the martyrs of Karbala.

Her extraordinary acts and spiritual status

Umm ul-Banin was also known for her spiritual status and extraordinary. The following refers to one of this mystic’s numerous miracles:

A Sterile Hanafi Couple become Fertile

In the city of Kut, Iraq, there was a mourning session held for Hazrat Umm ul-Banin in the house of Hajjiyyah Um Abd-ul-Amir in Muharram 11th– 20th.

While these mourning sessions were being held, a Hanafi family moved to this neighborhood. Vazirah – an infertile woman– was a member of this family, who could not have a baby after 10 years of marriage and had lost all her hopes. Her neighbors told her, “Why don’t you invoke Umm al-Banin?” Vazirah answered, “It’s no use doing it since medicine could not do anything for me. I even used traditional medicines and fasted on the birthday of Zakariyya, but it was no use.”

“Whoever eats the ritual meal which is offered to commemorate the personality of Umm ul-Banin and considers her an intermediary between him and Allah, his prayer will be granted. Why don’t you do so? Allah may grant you a daughter and you can name her ‘Fatimah’ after the blessed Umm ul-Banin,” they said.

Looking at them silently and anxiously, Vazirah suddenly started to speak and anxiously told them, “Ok, but provided this is between you and me. My husband and family must not know anything about it.” They replied, “Alright, tomorrow or the day after tomorrow come to Hajjiyyah’s house, where a mourning session is held, ending with Marthiya (an elegiac poem recited to commemorate the martyrdom or suffering) of Umm ul-Banin.”

Filled with both fear and hope, Vazirah left home to Hajjiyyah Um Abd-ul-Amir’s, veiling her face. She was distraught, sweating with shame. The nearer she got to the mourning session, the faster her heart beat. To her, the voice of the Marsiya reciter had a pleasant tune and pinned her hopes on getting rid of

psychological pain. She entered the house, and took part in the mourning session.

When the Marsiya reciter finished with the elegies that triggered lamentation for Umm ul-Banin, he prayed that the sick would be healed. Then a ritual meal was offered to commemorate the personality of Umm ul-Banin and the women present there asked for blessings by eating the food served. They were sitting around the table on which the ritual meal was served, praying that the sick would be healed and their requests granted. With her trembling hands, Vazirah took some food, got up, and left the house in tears. Hoping that they would be healed, her husband and Vazirah ate that food at night.

After about one month, Vazirah began to feel different; she suffered from dizziness and chest pain and she lost her appetite. She slept a lot and had difficulty going to the crowded places. She also struggled with housework and was especially feeling anxious.

Her husband noticed these changes and was concerned. They went to a doctor who assured them that those were symptoms of pregnancy. In order to ensure that it was true, the doctor recommended they undergo a laboratory test the next day. Upon hearing the news, they were delighted.

The next day, the couple found the test result positive. They went back home and performed prostration in gratitude to Allah. The news of her pregnancy spread among their relatives and their home was replete with joy. But she continued to hide the vow she made.

Months passed quickly and finally the ninth month came. In the early spring and just before the call to the Morning Prayer, she gave birth to a girl, delighting everybody. Vazirah said, "In order to be blessed, let's name the baby Fatimah," but her in-laws disagreed and said, "Name her Ayishah." To resolve any disagreement, they named her Boshra.²⁰

Demise

Eventually, the godly life of Umm ul-Banin, which was replete with affection and struggle, came to an end about ten years after the event of Karbala. During her blessed life, she conveyed the message of the martyrs and perpetuated the path of Imamate; in other words, she completed her mission.

After the heartrending event of Karbala, she accomplished her political and social mission, namely keeping the eternal heroic event of Ashura alive in the best way possible. Umm ul-Banin passed away in 69 A.H. and was buried in Baqi' cemetery next to the Prophet's aunts Safiyyah and 'Atikah, the four Shi'a Infallible Imams,²¹ and other luminaries of Islam.²²

In his praise of Umm ul-Banin, Sheikh Ahmad Dajili, a well-known Arab poet wrote:

Oh Umm al-Banin! What sublime characteristics you enjoy! Due to the sorrow that came upon you [because of] your faith, you will be remembered forever.

Conclusion

The dream Umm ul-Banin saw prior to Imam Ali's proposal to her proved to be true. Indeed, she spent her life luxuriously in terms of reaping abundant blessings in this world that would guarantee her a successful afterlife. Best known for her deep love for Allah and the Ahlul Bayt, she adopted the role of being a faithful wife and an affectionate mother.

In raising her own four sons, she passed her adoration for the Household (a) to them, ensuring that they display loyalty to the Chief of the Martyrs, Imam Husayn (a). After the tragedy of Karbala, through her undying grief and her talent in elegies, she persevered in keeping the message of Karbala alive.

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