

9. Abu Mhjan's Imprisonment

Abu Mehjan son of Habib Bin 'Amr Bin 'Omair was from the Thaqif tribe. He was a poet and a brave man. He embraced Islam when his tribe accepted Islam, he was a drunkard and 'Omar flogged him seven or nine times for drunkenness. According to al-Aghani, vol.21, p.142 a few people were found drunk and were arrested. 'Omar said to them, "You drank wine and you know God and His Prophet have forbidden it." They said that God had not forbidden it, and it is written in the Qur'an that believers who are pious and do good works cannot be guilty of eating or drinking anything. 'Omar asked his companions of their opinion.

They could not come to any decision. He sent someone to 'Ali Bin Abi Talib to ask for his comments. 'Ali said that according to the defendants interpretation to the Qur'an, then neither is blood, dead beast nor pork forbidden. 'Omar asked 'Ali what he should do with them? 'Ali said that if they say wine is not forbidden, they must be killed. But if they say that wine is forbidden and they have drunk it, they must be flogged. The defendants agreed that wine is forbidden, so they were flogged.

When Abu Mehjan was beaten he composed the following verse:-

In this uncertain world man cannot fight, crying over spilt milk will not put things right. I have patiently borne the loss of brothers of mine, But even for a day I cannot bear to lose the wine. By banning the wine, the prince of believers has made us depressed. We gather and cry in the room where the grape is pressed.

When Abu Mehjan said that even for a day he could not bear to give up wine, 'Omar said, "You have revealed your secret. I will punish you more because you are so eager to drink wine." 'Ali said that one must not be punished for something one has not committed,' and recited the following passage of Qur'an: "They (poets) admit to something they have not done." 'Omar recited the rest of the verse, "Except those who believe and do good works." 'Ali said to 'Omar, "Do you think they are believers, yet the Prophet of God has said that while one drinks he is not a believer."

According to al-Esaba, once 'Omar thought Abu Mehjan was drunk, and demanded to be allowed to smell his breath. Abu Mehjan said, "Spying is forbidden" and 'Omar left him. Tabari in vol.4, p. 152 among

the events of the year 14 Hejri says that 'Omar punished some of his companions, his son and Abu Mehjan because they had drunk wine.

Ibn Kathir in vol.7, p.48 says, "Abu Mehjan Thaqafi. was lashed seven times for drinking." It is written in Eqdolfarid that among the upper class people who are punished for drinking was Abu Mehjan, a real drunkard. According to al-Esaba and al-Aghani, Abu Mehjan loved a lady called Shamous. He tried unsuccessfully to see her. A neighbor of that lady had a builder in his house, Abu Mehjan found employment with the builder then saw the lady from the top of a wall. Then he composed the following verse:-

I looked at Shamous though God had forbidden, Looking at a lady who wanted to be hidden. Like a farmer who comes to town for a holiday, After selling his produce, I was cheerful and gay.

Shamous's husband complained to 'Omar. 'Omar sent Abu Mehjan to exile in Hazouzi [1](#), under the care of Jahra al- Nasri and another man. 'Omar told the guards not to allow Abu Mehjan to take his sword with him. Abu Mehjan hid his sword in a bag of flour, and on the shore before he boarded the ship he bought a sheep and made a feast for his guards.

Before the meal, Abu Mehjan pretended that he was taking flour to make bread. He drew his sword from the bag, Jahra saw it and ran to his camel, mounted it and went to Caliph 'Omar to tell his story.

According to al-Esaba and Esti'ab after the exile Abu Mehjan went to the Persian frontier under the custody of Sa'd Bin Waqqas. It was the Battle of Qadesyya Muhammad the son of Sa'd said that his father put Abu Mehjan in chains because he was drunk. Sa'd was not well that day and Khalid Bin 'Orfota commanded the army, and Sa'd was standing on a hill to watch the battle-field. Abu Mehjan who was fettered composed the following verse:-

What a sorrow to be locked in chains. And see men use their spears again and again. He then asked Salma, the wife of commander Sa'd, to free him and promised if he was spared, to come back and be chained again, and if he was killed they would be rid of him. Salma took the chains off Abu Mehjan's hands and feet. He then jumped on the back of Bala the horse of Sa'd with a spear in his hand. He attacked the enemy. Soldiers thought that he was an angel.

Sa'd saw the attacks by a horseman and said, "The jumps is similar to the jumps (my stead) Balga and the attack by spear is similar to the attack of Abu Mehjan, except that Abu Mehjan is locked up." When the enemy was defeated, Abu Mehjan came back. They put the chains on his hands and feet. Sa'd's wife told Sa'd the story of Abu Mehjan. Then Sa'd said, "By God I will not punish the man for drinking while he brought victory to Muslims." He then ordered Abu Mehjan to be freed. Abu Mehjan said, "I used to take the punishment as a penance, now that you do not punish me I will drink no more.

Saif's Narration

Tabari in vol.3, p.43 says that Sa'd imprisoned those men who drank wine and caused trouble. Sa'd insulted them by saying, "If we were not in the battle-field I would teach you a lesson that others might learn from it." Abu Mehjan was one of them whose hands and feet were chained. Tabari in vol.3, pp.55–57 says that after Sa'd's wife set Abu Mehjan free and he fought the enemy he came back to the prison, and they chained him.

Sa'd's wife asked Abu Mehjan why he was in prison? He said, "I used to drink wine before I embraced Islam. Now I compose verses admiring wine. Sa'd does not like it so he imprisons me." Salma told her husband Sa'd what Abu Mehjan had said, so Sa'd freed him from prison, and said to him, "I will not punish you for just talking about a crime." Abu Mehjan swore that he would not say things that were not good.

Abulfaraj in al-Aghani, vol.21, has recorded this story narrated by Saif from Tabari.

Ibn Hajar in al-Esaba, vol.4, p.175 says that Ibn Fathoun had criticized Abu 'Amr who had written in Esti'ab (as mentioned before) that Abu Mehjan was always drunk. It was enough to say that he was punished for drinking. It would be better to say that which Saif has recorded. Ibn Hajar then continues saying, "Saif is weak (not reliable) but what we have written is stronger and well known." Ibn Fathoun denies that Sa'd neglected to punish any drunkard, and he changed what Sa'd said, "I will not punish Abu Mehjan for drinking," to "Abu Mehjan will not drink anymore to be punished." Mas'oudi in vol.2, pp.422–424 Morouj al-dhabhab has quoted what Saif has narrated without mentioning Saif's name. But we know Mas'oudi has recorded from Tabari as he greatly praised Tabari at the beginning of his book.

Origin of Saif's story

Saif has recorded this story from Muhammad, Talha, Ziad and Bin Mihraq. The first two are the same fictitious men we mentioned in preceding stories. Saif has narrated 53 times in Tabari from Ziad who is unknown to biographers as is Ibn Mihraq.

Conclusion

Saif wanted to free Sa'd the companion and governor of Caliph from neglecting the religious punishment of a drunkard. He then has invented the conversation between Abu Mehjan the drunkard and Sa'd's wife who freed him from prison. Saif says that Sa'd's wife asked Abu Mehjan why Sa'd put him in prison.

Abu Mehjan replied because he talked nonsense, and not because he has drunk wine. Yet Muhammad, son of Sa'd, has recorded that Abu Mehjan told his mother, when she freed him that if he was killed in the battle they would be rid of him. Apparently the wife of the commander Sa'd, knew Abu Mehjan's past record, and of course the punishments of her husband inflicted on Abu Mehjan for his drunkenness.

But Saif said that Sa‘d freed Abu Mehjan saying he would not punish him for something he had not done, only talked of it. Then Abu Mehjan says, "I will not speak nonsense anymore." Ibn Fathoun also favoring on the Caliphs preferred the story of Abu Mehjan told by Saif. Mas‘oudi the trustworthy learned historian following Tabari has recorded what Saif has narrated. "Man may make mistakes." Yet Saif and those who recorded from him are not able to hide the truth.

1. Hazouzi: Name of a mountain in an island where people used to be exiled at that time.

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