

Before Karbala'

Yazid Demands Allegiance

Yazid, in order to assure his kingship, needed the submission of his political rivals. He ordered the governor of Medinah to take the allegiances of Imam Husayn (grandson of Prophet Muhammad and spiritual leader of the community) and Ibn az-Zubayr¹ (a political rival of Yazid) right away, and if they refuse, to kill them. It was late in the night, but the governor immediately sent a deputy to call them. He found them in Masjid al-Nabi, the masjid of the Prophet and the center of the city. Ibn az-Zubayr became suspicious of the governor's messenger coming at such a time.

Imam Husayn immediately said, "This must have to do with the death of Muawiyah, and the governor must want us to pay allegiance to his son Yazid before anyone knows about it."

This became apparent to Ibn az-Zubayr when he went to meet the governor. But, when Imam Husayn went, he went well armed, with thirty of his best followers, on horseback. Imam Husayn told them to wait at the door, and when they hear an argument, come in, otherwise, stay outside the door. As soon as he came inside, the governor told him straight out, "You have to pay allegiance to Yazid."

Imam Husayn replied, "A person like me should not pay allegiance secretly. If you want, you can call all the people, in public, and ask everyone, and us with them, to have one voice."

The governor accepted, but his secretary Marwan warned him, "If he leaves you and does not pay allegiance now, you will not have power over him again. Put him in prison until he pays allegiance, or kill him."

Imam Husayn said, "Whoever of you kills me will be sinful and untruthful." Then, to the governor, he said, "O governor! We are the People of the Prophet's House, and we are descendants of the Prophet. Yazid is a drunkard who kills people without reason, and a person like me does not pay allegiance to a person like him. However, let us meet in the morning and let us see, you and us, who is most eligible for leadership."

Then, the governor said some harsh words, in a loud voice, and when the thirty guards heard the noise, nineteen of them broke the door, came in, took Imam Husayn, and all thirty of the Imam's guards rode off together with the Imam.

Marwan turned to the governor and said, "You did not obey me, and you will not have power over the Imam again."

Governor Walid said, "Go and blame someone else, Marwan. You want me to kill Imam Husayn because he refuses to pay allegiance? And you think this is an easy thing to do, to get away with the blood of Husayn?"

The Imam immediately went to visit the grave of his grandfather and continued praying until morning. During the night, governor Walid sent deputies to Imam Husayn's house. They could not find him, and they thought that he left the city. In the morning, the governor's deputy found the Imam at the grave of his grandfather. He came to Imam Husayn, advising him to pay allegiance because it was better for his life.

Imam Husayn said, "If Muslims pay allegiance to Yazid, say goodbye to Islam."

The next night, Imam Husayn went to the grave of his grandfather again and recited a few chapters of the Holy Quran. Then he said, "O Lord! This is the grave of Your Prophet Muhammad, and I am the son of his daughter, and You know best what is happening to me. I do not want anything but to promote the right and prevent the wrong. I ask You by the right of this grave, that you choose for me what pleases You."

Then he cried and fell asleep. He had a dream that his grandfather Prophet Muhammad foretold what is going to happen in the future. When he woke up in the morning, he went to his family, his brothers, al-Atraf and Muhammad Ibn al-Hanafiyyah, as well as Umm Salamat, and other lady members of his family. They were upset about his refusal to pay allegiance to Yazid and his decision to leave Medinah for Mecca.

His argument to Umm Salamat was, "If I do not leave now, eventually they are going to kill me. I should not give them excuses at this time."

He bade farewell to all the family and asked them to be brave. When he left, he left his will with his half-brother, Muhammad Ibn al-Hanafiyyah. On the will he wrote:

"In the Name of God, the Most Kind, the Most Merciful. This is the will that Husayn Ibn 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib leaves to his brother Muhammad Ibn al-Hanafiyyah, that Husayn has witnessed that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His servant and His Messenger. He brought the truth from God that heaven is true, that hell is true, and the Time will come without any doubt, and God will resurrect everyone from his or her graves.

Indeed, my movement is not evil, reckless, mischievous, or unjust. I do support correcting what is wrong in the nation of my father, I do want to encourage the right, and prevent the wrong, and follow the tradition of my grandfather, and my father, 'Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Whoever accepts me by truth, God is the protector of the truth, and whoever refuses this, I will be patient while God decides between me and them, and He is the best Judge. This is my will to my brother and all success depends on God, and only on Him I rely."

Imam Husayn sealed the will and gave it to his brother Muhammad Ibn al-Hanafiyyah. He left Medinah on Sunday night, two days before the end of Rajab, along with his brother 'Abbas, the children of his brother Hasan, and other family members. While leaving he recited the Verse from the Quran:

"So, he [Prophet Moses] left it [the city] in fear, hoping. He said, 'O Lord! Save me from the unjust people!"²

He chose to take the main route to Mecca. Some tried to convince him to take a less-traveled route, so it would not be so easy for the governor to find him.

Imam Husayn refused, saying, "I am not going to deviate from the common road, and God does whatever He decides."

The Imam Enters Mecca

Imam Husayn settled at the house of 'Abbas Ibn 'Abdul Muttalib. The people of Mecca visited him and pilgrims visiting the city for the upcoming Hajj season also visited him. Ibn az-Zubayr also visited the Imam, but he was jealous that the Imam was attracting all the attention. Occasionally, Imam Husayn went to visit the grave of his grandmother Khadijah, and prayed there. Before he left Mecca, he sent messages to the leaders of the city of Basrah, Malik Ibn Musma' al-Bakri, al-Ahnaf Ibn Qays, al-Mundhir Ibn Jarud, Mas'ud Ibn 'Amr, Qays Ibn al-Haytham, and 'Amr ibn 'Ubayd Ibn Mu'ammar.

Imam Husayn's letter read "Indeed, God has chosen Muhammad from among His creation for His prophethood, then He took him to Himself. God has advised His Creatures through His Prophet. We are his family, his followers, and heirs, and we deserve his succession more than anyone else. People chose me for this and I have accepted that, and I have sent my deputy to you with this book, and I call you to observe the book of God and the tradition of His Prophet, because his tradition has been denied and innovation has been revived. If you listen, I will guide you to the right path."

Al-Mundhir Ibn Jarud immediately turned in the messenger to the authorities because he thought the messenger was a spy of Ibn Ziyad, posing as the Imam's messenger in order to trap Imam Husayn's followers. When the messenger was turned in, al-Mundhir realized that he was truly the Imam's messenger but it was too late, and Ibn Ziyad ordered him to be hung that same night. Al-Ahnaf Ibn Qays replied to the Imam, saying, "Be patient. Indeed, the promise of God is truth," and hinted that now

is not the right time to stand up to Yazid.

Mas'ud Ibn 'Amr gathered the tribes of Tamim, Hamdarah, and Sa'd and asked Bani Tamim, "What do you think of me?"

They answered, "You are the backbone of our tribe, you are the head, and the honorable one."

He said, "I have gathered you for consultation on an important matter."

They asked, "What can we do?"

He said, "Muawiyah is dead, and you know what Muawiyah has done and he appointed his son Yazid as his successor. He is a drunkard and a womanizer, and has been appointed as the leader for Muslims without the consent or knowledge of the people. I swear by the name of God that I wish to fight in Jihad against him. And, this is Husayn, son of 'Ali, grandson of the Prophet of God, with a clear lineage, and firm knowledge, and excellent character, and he is most fit for this matter.

I am going to go and get my armor and battle gear, and whoever wants to do whatever he wants, it is up to him."

Banu Hamdarah replied, "We do what you do, we help you by our swords, and protect you by our bodies!"

Banu 'Amir also said similar things, but the tribe of Bani Sa'd replied, "Let us think about it, and we will get back to you with a response."

So, Mas'ud Ibn 'Amr wrote to Imam Husayn saying, "You come and I am going to be your helper. All of our necks are in your obedience."

When Imam Husayn read the reply, he said, "May God protect you on the Day of Judgment."

Later, Masud gathered his army but, as they were on their way to meet the Imam at *Karbala'*, the news reached them that Imam Husayn was killed. Masud was very upset that he was not able to help the Imam in time.

One man in the city had ten children, and when the Imam's messenger came with the message, he gathered his children and said, "I am going to help Imam Husayn. Whoever wants to help me is welcome." Two of his sons, 'Abdullah and 'Ubaydullah, accepted. The three of them joined the Imam in Mecca and stayed with him until they were killed with him at *Karbala'*.

While the Imam was in Mecca, the people of Kufah sent letters inviting him, individually and in groups, all asking the Imam to come to Kufah. They stated that they were rejecting the governor of Kufah, an-Numan Ibn Bashir. The letters of invitation continued. In one day, he received six hundred letters.

They insisted, but he never replied to any of them. The last letter that came to him was from Shihab ibn Rab'i, Hajjaj ibn Abjar, Yazid ibn al-Harith, Azra ibn Qays, 'Amr ibn al-Hajjaj, and Muhammad ibn 'Umayr ibn 'Utarib. Their letter said, "Indeed, people are waiting for you. They have no choice but you, O son of the Messenger of God! Hurry! Hurry! The land is green, the fruits are ripe, and if you arrive, you arrive to an army totally loyal to you."

The Imam received two sacks of letters, 12,000 in all, and wrote one letter in response to all of them. He gave replies to the last two messengers of Kufah, saying:

"In the name of God, the Most Kind, the Most Merciful. From Husayn ibn 'Ali, to the group of Muslims and believers: Indeed, Hani and Sa'd came to me carrying your letters and they are the last messengers that came from you. I understand every episode you have mentioned, and the arguments of most of you, 'We have no leader, come to us, and may God guide us through you to the truth.' Therefore, I send to you my brother and cousin; a trustworthy one from my family, and I commanded him to write to me about your situation and your decision. If he writes to me the decision of most of the people and the intelligent ones among you, as you have written to me and I have read your letters, then I will come to you as soon as possible. Indeed, a leader should follow the Quran and be just to the people. He should believe in truth and strain himself for the sake of God. Peace."

Then, he gave the letter to Muslim ibn 'Aqil and said, "Go to Kufah. Whatever God wishes will happen, and I wish that you and I will be in the ranks of the martyrs. When you arrive in Kufah, reside with the reliable people."

The Journey of Muslim ibn 'Aqil

The Imam sent three people with Muslim: Qays ibn Mash'ar al-Saydawi, 'Imarah ibn 'Abdullah al-Saluli and 'Abdul Rahman ibn 'Abdullah al-Azdi. The Imam said to Muslim, "Fear God, and check to see if whatever the people of Kufah are saying in their letters is true. If that is the case, write me a letter immediately about the situation."

Muslim left Mecca on the 15th of Ramadan traveling by way of Medinah. He went to Masjid al-Nabi and prayed there. Then he bade farewell to his relatives and asked two people to help lead the way for him to Kufah. On the way, they were lost and decided to stop, but Muslim kept going. He did not stop until he reached a place called Batn al-Khabt where he found some water and stayed. He immediately sent a messenger to Imam Husayn and informed him of what happened. The Imam replied that he should continue towards Kufah without any delay. On his way he stayed near the water of the tribe of Tay, then he left.

He arrived in Kufah on the 5th of Shawwal and went to the house of Mukhtar ibn Abi Ubayd al-Thaqafi who was an intelligent, experienced person and a follower of the People of the House. From his arrival, all the Followers of Kufah gathered to Muslim's house expressing their welcome and obedience to the

Imam. After Muslim read the Imam's letter to them, 'Abis Ibn Shabib al-Shakiri stood up and said, "I am not talking on behalf of these people and I do not know what they have in mind and I do not deceive you. I swear by God I tell you what I believe and what I will do, I will be there whenever you call me and I fight for you against your enemy, and I shall use my sword for you, until I reach my Lord, and I do not need anything but nearness to God."

Habib Ibn Mu'ahir stood and said, "You said what is in your heart briefly, and I swear by God that I say the same thing."

Sa'id Ibn 'Abdullah al-Hanafi stood and said similar things and then people paid allegiance to Muslim, and they were counted as 18,000, and in another report 25,000, and in Shi'bi's report, 40,000. Then, Muslim wrote a letter to the Imam and sent it with 'Abis Ibn Shabib al-Shakiri, explaining the situation and the intense desire of the people for his arrival. In his letter he said, "A leader does not lie to his people. The people of Kufah, so far, have paid allegiance to me, 18,000 of them, so depart for Kufah as you receive my letter."

This happened twenty-seven nights before Muslim's death. The Kufans wrote to the Imam, "Continue on your way. You have 100,000 swords here. Please do not hesitate to come as soon as possible."

Meanwhile, those who were allied with the Umayyads, such as 'Umar Ibn Sa'd Ibn Abi Waqqas wrote to Yazid telling him of the movement of Muslim and the people of Kufah and pointing out that his present governor, an-Numan Ibn Bashir is not fit to stand against them. Yazid consulted his Christian chief advisor, Sirjawn. He advised Yazid to replace the governor with 'Ubaydullah Ibn Ziyad who was a known bastard. Marjanah³ is his mother and he is called Ibn Ziyad even though the identity of his father is not known. Sirjawn reminded Yazid that his father, Muawiyah adopted Ibn Ziyad and trained him in the military, and added that it was Muawiyah's wish to use Ibn Ziyad. Then, he gave Yazid a letter sealed by Muawiyah, predicting the importance of Ibn Ziyad in difficult situations. Yazid immediately opened the letter and implemented his father's plan.

'Ubaydullah Ibn Ziyad was in Basrah, not far from Kufah. Yazid wrote to him, "Go to Kufah, capture Muslim Ibn 'Aqil, and see what is appropriate to imprison him, send him to exile, or kill him."

Ibn Ziyad went with five hundred people from Basrah and he did not delay or stop for any reason. Some of his people got sick on the way, and he left them to die in the desert. When he arrived in al-Qadisiyyah, his servant, Mahran, fell behind, and Ibn Ziyad left him to die.

Before he reached the city, Ibn Ziyad dressed up like Imam Husayn so that, when he passed through the guards and the people, they would think that he was the Imam. They came to him and said, "O, grandson of the Prophet of God," but he did not reply at all. When he reached Kufah from the Najaf entrance, people came to him welcoming him with one voice, but he did not reply and continued immediately towards Qasr al-Imarah, the castle of the governor. When he knocked on the door, the governor an-Numan did not open. Instead, he went up to the roof and said, "O Son of the Messenger of

God! I am not going to welcome you in this castle!"

Ibn Ziyad said, "Open the door, your night will be too long."

When someone heard him and realized that it was a trick, he said, "O people! I swear by the Ka'bah that this is Ibn Ziyad, not Imam Husayn!"

The people all ran away to their houses, and in the morning Ibn Ziyad announced a meeting in Masjid al-Kufah, and made a speech warning them and encouraging the enemies of the Prophet's House by giving bribes.

He said, "Anyone who helps the enemy of the governor and does not report that to us will be hanged in front of his own house!"

Muslim Stands

Ibn Ziyad immediately went hunting after Muslim. When Muslim heard about the speech of Ibn Ziyad and his threat, he decided to find a new place to stay. That night, he secretly left the house of Mukhtar and went to the house of H̄ani Ibn 'Urwah who was Sheikh of the tribe of Murad. He had 4,000 cavalry and 8,000 infantry, not including their other allies, which would be 30,000 all together. At that time, a man named Sharik Ibn 'Abdullah al-A'war was also visiting H̄ani. Ibn Ziyad and he were both from Basrah, so when Sharik became sick Ibn Ziyad came to visit.

Sharik told Muslim that this was the perfect time to kill Ibn Ziyad. While they were talking, Ibn Ziyad came in. Muslim hid. Sharik was nervous and said something to signify to Muslim to come and kill Ibn Ziyad.

Ibn Ziyad looked at H̄ani and said, "It seems your cousin (Sharik) is hallucinating."

H̄ani replied, "He has been talking nonsense for a while, ever since he got sick. He does not know what he is saying.

After Ibn Ziyad left, Sharik asked Muslim, "Why did you not come to kill him?"

Muslim replied, "For two reasons: First, I heard the Hadith of the Prophet saying, "Innal iman qayd ul-fatk" (a believer does not assassinate anybody by deception), and second, H̄ani's wife took my hand and made me swear to God not to kill him, crying and begging me not to."

When H̄ani heard that, he said, "Ya wailah! She has killed me, killed herself, and killed everybody by what she has done!"

Sharik died after three days of his sickness. Ibn Ziyad honored him at his funeral. Later, when Ibn Ziyad realized that Sharik was helping to hide Muslim, he wanted to exhume his body, but he did not because

it was buried near the grave of one of his own relatives.

Meanwhile, the Followers were secretly contacting Muslim in Ḥanī's house. Finally, Ibn Ziyad hired a slave named Ma'qil and gave him 3,000 Dinars to report on the Followers.

Ma'qil disguised himself as a person from Syria and said he was the slave of a tribe of Followers called Dhul-Kila and God has given him guidance to convert, and when he heard that there was someone following Imam Husayn, he came to help. He said he had money to give to the representative of the Imam.

Ma'qil went to the masjid and infiltrated the people who were devoted to prayer. He saw Ibn 'Awsajah al-Asadi and got close to him. He told him that he had money for the Imam and he did not know what to do with it. So, Ibn 'Awsajah prayed for him and led him to Muslim Ibn 'Aqil. Muslim gave it to Abi Thumlah al-Sa'idi who was in charge of money. Everyday, this Ma'qil came to Muslim in Ḥanī's house and reported to Ibn Ziyad all the activities of the Followers.

Ḥanī Ibn 'Urwah

When Ibn Ziyad was sure of Muslim's residence in Ḥanī's house, he sent spies to watch the activities outside and inside the house and see who comes and who does not. Then, he sent some people to Ḥanī, saying, "The governor missed you and he asked about your health and we have told him that you are an old man and cannot come, but he said he wanted to see you." They insisted that Ḥanī would visit the governor. He refused, but they insisted and finally succeeded. When he arrived in the castle, Ibn Ziyad said to him, "A traitor comes on his feet!"

Shurayh al-Qadi sat by his side as Ibn Ziyad said to Ḥanī, "You have brought Muslim Ibn 'Aqil to your house! You have gathered arms for him!"

Ḥanī denied. When the argument became heated, Ibn Ziyad called Ma'qil. Then Ḥanī said to Ibn Ziyad, "You know I know your father, and I would like you to be honored, I would like to advise you. You and your people should leave this city and go to Sham (Syria) because now we have someone who is more deserving to be obeyed than you and your friends."

Ibn Ziyad said, "You are not going to leave me until you bring him to me."

Ḥanī said, "If he was under my feet, I would not lift my feet for you."

Ibn Ziyad threatened him with death, and Ḥanī replied, "That would be a declaration of war."

Ibn Ziyad took his sword and cut Ḥanī's nose with it, then ordered the guards to take him down to the dungeon.

'Amr Ibn Hajjaj, Ḥanī's brother in law, heard that Ḥanī was killed. He and a group of his tribe went and

surrounded the castle. Ibn Ziyad ordered Shurayh al-Qadi to announce that H̄̄ni is alive and not dead. When he did that, they left, but he never told them that H̄̄ni was in the dungeon. When Shurayh went to the dungeon to see H̄̄ni, H̄̄ni said to him, “Ten of my people would take me away from this.”

Shurayh did not even let H̄̄ni know that his people actually did come, but they were tricked. Instead, he told H̄̄ni not to worry and everything will be fine.

When Muslim heard the news about H̄̄ni he left H̄̄ni’s house and called his followers. They gathered, and there were 4,000 in all. They chanted the slogan of the Muslims at the battle of Badr during the time of the Prophet. Muslim divided them into four groups and they marched towards the castle. Ibn Ziyad had only thirty people. He locked all the doors and told Shurayh al-Qadi to deceive the people. Shurayh went to the roof of the castle and announced, “O people of Kufah! Do not kill yourselves. An army of reinforcements is coming from the capital Damascus!”

One by one they left, and the four thousand shrank to three hundred, then to thirty, then when Muslim started praying the ‘Esha –Evening– Prayer, there were only three people behind him. When he finished praying, there was no one left. He walked around the streets of Kufah, not knowing where to go.

When Ibn Ziyad realized that his trick worked, he sent his spies to look from the high towers of the castle to check the reaction of the people. When he noticed that not many people were around, he ordered soldiers to see if any of the people left were rebellious. Then he tied torches to ropes and lowered them from the roof of the castle over the wall of the masjid to see if there was anybody hiding there.

When they could not find anyone, Ibn Ziyad announced that anyone who gives shelter to Muslim would be killed, and he ordered his soldiers to search all the houses and capture Muslim. Then, he ordered guards at the entrance of the city to catch all of those who were on Muslim’s side.

Meanwhile, Mukhtar Ibn ‘Ubaydullah al-Thaqafi was in his village, Khatwaniyyah. Ibn Ziyad ordered everyone to denounce Imam Husayn and carry the white flag of surrender, and everyone did, including Mukhtar, but Ibn Ziyad ordered to imprison Mukhtar and ‘Amr Ibn al-Harith, and hit them with his sword. They remained in prison until the day of Ashura.⁴

Muslim walked alone in the streets of Kufah in the neighborhood of Kindah. After some time, he became tired and stood in the middle of the street. The owner of one of the houses there was a woman called Taw’ah who had a son named Bilal. She was looking for her son to come home but she saw Muslim standing in the street. She did not recognize him at first, but when she realized that he was Muslim Ibn ‘Aqil, she gave him shelter, fed him, and kept him in a different room than her son’s. When her son came home and saw his mother going to the other room, he asked her what was going on, and she refused to tell him. He kept insisting until, after making him promise to keep it secret, she told him.

But, in the morning, her son Bilal went and told Ibn Ziyad where Muslim was. Ibn al-‘Ash’ath came with seventy soldiers to capture Muslim at dawn while he was praying. When he heard horses galloping,

Muslim knew that he was discovered. He finished his prayer and said to Taw'ah, "You have done what you should do, may the Messenger of God intercede for you. Yesterday, I dreamed that my uncle 'Ali, Leader of the Faithful, told me: You will be with me tomorrow."

The soldiers got off their horses and came in, but Muslim went to them, fought them, and forced them out of the house. He fought bravely, pushing all of the soldiers back into the street and killing forty-one of them. He fought with the strength of a man that knows it is his last fight. He cut, hit, and pushed soldiers out of his way. Some of them, he grabbed by their hands and threw them onto the rooftops. With more than half of his troops dead and the rest injured, the leader sent a message to Ibn Ziyad requesting more troops.

Ibn Ziyad responded, "What? I sent you out to get one man, not an army!"

The leader replied, "Do you think you want me to catch a grocery boy of Kufah? You want me to capture a sword of the People of Muhammad!"

Muslim fought one-on-one and hit Bukayr twice. Bukayr's sword hit Muslim on his mouth and cut his upper lip. Muslim hit him on his head and neck and killed him. They realized that they could not get him one by one, so they went on the rooftops and hit him with stones. Then, they set reeds on fire and threw them at him.

He said:

"I swear I am not going to die except as a free man!

Though death is a bad thing,

Everyone faces difficulty some day.

Hot and cold would mix one day.

His soul would return to him, and be permanent.

I am afraid that I would be lied to, or deceived."

He became weak from his wounds and loss of blood and he leaned against a wall. They continued shooting arrows and throwing rocks until he said, "Why do you throw rocks on me and we are the family of the Prophets? We are not unbelievers!"

Ibn al-'Ash'ath, the chief of the army, came close to him and said, "Do not kill yourself, you are under my protection."

Muslim answered, "I am not going to be captured as long as I have power. No! That will never happen!"

Muslim attacked him and the chief ran away. Once he retreated away from Muslim, the chief gave the order and the soldiers all attacked at once from all sides. Someone hit Muslim from behind. He fought and retreated backwards until he fell into a covered pit that they dug as a trap for him. After he fell into the pit, they took his sword from his hand and captured him. When they took his sword away from him, he cried.

1. ‘Abdullah ibn az-Zubayr (624–692 CE) led a rebellion against the Umayyad dynasty and was killed in a fighting against the Umayyad army sent by Abdu’l-Melik ibn Marwan.

2. The Holy Qur'an; Sura of al-Qasas 28:21.

3. Marjana, Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad's mother, was such a notorious prostitute that everybody all over the Islamic State had heard of her name.

4. Day of ‘Ashura is the tenth of Muharram, celebrated as a day of mourning (the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussayn.)

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