

Chapter 1: Preamble

The battle at Karbala is a well-known tragedy in the human history. It is not fiction or legend, but a historical fact, chronicled by several historians who were present in the battlefield, of whom Abu Makhnaf an independent reporter and Hamid ibn Muslim, the imbedded reporter of Yazid's army, are the best known.

The battle at Karbala is unique in several respects. At Karbala, Imam Husayn (a.s.) changed the very meaning and connotation of the terms 'victory' and 'defeat', 'life' and 'death'. He and his small group of his companions redefined human nature itself. They redefined the limits of human endurance of sufferings for a noble cause. In sacrificing their lives, they set an example to those who fight against anarchy and materialism to protect the freedom and independence of mankind. At Karbala, the conqueror became the loser and the vanquished became the victor. By sacrificing their lives, the martyrs of Karbala became immortal, while Yazid by killing them was erased out of the good books of history.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) showed that numbers and odds do not matter. What really matters, is the propriety, nobility and nature of the cause itself. Imam Husayn (a.s.) showed that truth and righteousness are ineffaceable and that the killing of a few persons, does not and cannot obliterate the truthfulness and nobility of their cause.

Before Imam Husayn (a.s.) and his companions sacrificed their lives in the battle at Karbala, a victorious person was the one who stood with a fluttering banner in his hand, while the vanquished lay slain on the ground, his flag lying limp beside him. The victor assumed the mantle of a successful mission, while the loser was clothed with the infamy of defeat and his unjust cause. Success in the battle was proof of victory of justice over anarchy and oppression. Victory was synonymous with a just and popular cause and the victor commanded the love, adoration and respect of the public. The victorious and their cause became immortal. The vanquished was buried in history, only to be remembered as a lesson to posterity, his defeat considered the defeat of his unjust cause.

Mothers loved to name their children after the victor and shunned the name of the vanquished. The victorious became heroes and the vanquished were treated as villains in the everlasting memory of a nation, country, tribe or culture. The epics, Iliad, Maha Bharatha, and Ramayana are some examples,

depicting truth and justice as personified in the triumphant hero.

All these concepts were changed by Imam Husayn (a.s.). For the first and perhaps the last time in history, the battle of Karbala established that the vanquished might also be the victorious in his cause. The triumphant were the ones who lay beheaded in the battlefield, their lifeless bodies, proclaiming the victory of a living cause of immortal truth.

Imam Husayn (a.s.) and his small group of companions redefined human nature itself. Generally, power and wealth attract people anxious to pick up the crumbs. Those who lose power or wealth, find only deserters. Karbala reversed this notion. None from the small group of Imam Husayn's companions deserted him, though they knew that at the end of the day only death and no worldly gain awaited them. On the other hand, even at the last moment before the battle commenced, several warriors from Yazid's huge army, crossed over to Imam Husayn's camp, despite knowing fully well that only death awaited them though worldly gain in the form of the spoils of war would have been within their easy reach, at the end of the day.

It is natural for every person facing immediate and imminent threat to his life, to seek and gather people for his support and assistance. It is more so where a war is planned and the leader gathers as many men as he could find to form an army capable of facing the threat.

Quite contrary to this human nature, Imam Husayn (a.s.) at every stage of his journey from *Medina* to *Karbala*, dissuaded people from joining him, saying that what Yazid sought was only his blood.

It is obvious that, firstly, Imam Husayn (a.s.) was convinced of the threat to his life and yet dissuaded people from joining him to form an army; secondly, he had no intention of waging a war; thirdly, he wanted to avoid bloodshed or at least to mitigate the loss of life; lastly, by taking ladies, children, his close relatives, a few aged companions, and the least number of able bodied youth, Imam Husayn (a.s.) wanted to show that though the small band of people held no threat to his empire, the cruel, atrocious, unjust and evil nature of Yazid and his huge army would certainly commit the most horrendous murder and atrocities without any excuse..

Imam Husayn (a.s.) showed that truth and justice do not always lie on the side of the victorious majority. He showed that numbers do not count and a handful of persons, standing up to oppression at the cost of their lives, do in fact represent truth, justice, independence, and freedom. He showed that truth is irrepressible, eternal, and would manifest itself even from the trampled and lifeless bodies of the martyr. Their death is not defeat but is in fact the victory of truth, righteousness, justice, and the very spirit of freedom of mankind.

In as much as its other aspects, the uniqueness of Karbala extends even to its pathos. There is not a single human relationship that was left out from the list of martyrs. The relationship of the patriarch and his family, between the leader and his followers, parent and child, newly wedded husband and wife, between siblings, between cousins and children of cousins, bond between friends, master and servant,

rider and steed etc., were all successfully put to test.

Historians, normally, are patronized by the winning party that assumes power and write the chronicles of the victorious. History may also record a few instances of individual valor of some opponent, but popular Historians never espouse the cause of the vanquished. Karbala is unique in this respect also. Without exception, every chronicler records the justness of Imam Husayn's cause, the cruel and unjust abuse of his dead body and the torment that the remaining members of his family and friends, particularly the widows and orphans suffered after the tragedy.

Any historian attempting to eulogize the cause of the defeated forces would be branded a traitor. Such historians and their records would be, mercilessly burnt and put out of circulation. However, at and after Karbala, the atrocities were so open and rampant that Yazid and his evil advisors, despite their tyrannical suppression and torture had no means or courage to prevent the tragedy of Karbala being related, recorded, repeated, and passed on to posterity.

In his speeches, letters, and discussions Imam Husayn (a.s.) made it clear that he was leaving Medina only in response to the call of the *Kufians* who had written thousands of letters and sent hundreds of emissaries complaining that they had no *Imam* to guide them in matters of faith and that, as the *Imam*, it was incumbent upon Husayn (a.s.) to hurry to their guidance. Their complaint against Mu'awiya first, and later against Yazid, was not so much regarding the physical or monetary suffering but against the willful distortion of the principles of Islam. Therefore, it became obligatory for Imam Husayn (a.s.) to leave Medina and go to rescue the faith from being mutilated and corrupted by Mu'awiya and his son Yazid. There was absolutely no political motive in this.

Later, when al-Hurr's cavalry surrounded Imam Husayn's caravan, sealing off all roads except the one leading to *Kufa*, a false propaganda was made by Yazid that Imam Husayn's journey was an affront to the political power of Yazid. Imam Husayn (a.s.) made it clear that he was invited by the people of *Kufa* for religious guidance and that he had no political aspirations, and said that he would move out to any far-off land beyond the domain of Yazid's rule. This demand to be permitted to go out of Yazid's dominion was repeatedly made by Imam Husayn (a.s.) till his last moments, signifying that he had no political aspirations and that his only intent was to preserve and propagate the faith in its true form, as revealed by his grandfather the Prophet (S).[1](#)

For those who believe in miracles, numerous instances of the Divinely inspired foresight of Imam Husayn (a.s.) and several miracles performed by him are found in Karbala. Collecting water, in advance for al-Hurr and his army, long before they arrived thirsty; the sudden shying of the horse and throwing the taunting enemy soldier into the burning ditch; the fountain of water which gushed when Imam Husayn (a.s.) struck his toe on the ground to show his daughter Sakina (a.s.) that he had the supernatural power to procure water; the intense and valiant fight by Imam Husayn (a.s.), a man fifty-eight years old, before whose eyes his friends and children were slain; the reciting of Qur'an by the severed head of Imam Husayn (a.s.) throughout its long journey from *Karbala* to *Kufa* to Damascus and

back; the radiant light that was witnessed by hundreds, which emanated from the niche wherever the severed head of Imam Husayn (a.s.) was kept during night and many more such instances of supernatural events are recorded in history. The recitation of the Qur'an by the severed heads carried on lances or slung in the necks of horses and camels provide the only proof of the Qur'anic verse that declares that those who are martyred in the way of God, are not to be counted among the dead, but that they are very much alive and are sustained by God.[2](#)

Even today, one can witness Husayn's miracle, when mourners inflict themselves with blades, pieces of broken glass bottles picked up from the ground, chains and swords, and exchange those articles without even cleaning before using them in the *Muharram* processions. Their wounds are cured without recourse to medicine. Another unique and miraculous feature is that, even to this day, the processions consist of heart patients, diabetic patients, and those who suffer from severe hypertension. None of them is known to have died from the self-inflicted injuries or breast beating in the religious processions during the commemoration of Imam Husayn's martyrdom, anywhere in the world. All these are signs of Imam Husayn's continuing miracles. While self-flagellation is considered in Christianity as a means of expiating for sins, it is practiced only by highly revered priests. Among the *Shias*, it is a common practice during *Muharram*.

Curiously, it is called a 'battle', but there were no two armies waging war at *Karbala*. On one side was Imam Husayn (a.s.) with a few tens of persons, including an infant six months old and several teenagers. Opposing this small group was a huge army of infantry, cavalry, and other regiments. The nobility and intensity of purpose and the vigour and valour with which the small band of people fought a huge army, gave it the shape of an unforgettable epic battle. Today, Imam Husayn (a.s.) and his small band of supporters are universally acknowledged as innocent martyrs, while Yazid and his huge army are disgraced for their abominable acts of large-scale massacre and torture of men, women and children.

Yet, Imam Husayn's battle at *Karbala* is often distorted by prejudices created over centuries of adverse propaganda carried on by suppressive regimes. The consequent mutilation of real facts led to the dilution of knowledge of the historic events, resulting in an unfounded belief that it was a battle between two powers for succession fought between the Umayyads represented by Yazid son of Mu'awiya, and the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) represented by Imam Husayn (a.s.).

The Shrine of Imam Husayn (a.s.) was razed to the ground at least on eight occasions. Even the lote tree that marked the grave was cut down and the soil tilled, so the people may not be able to identify the spot. Yet after every demolition, a new and more elaborate structure came up. How did people identify the spot in the absence of any trace? It is reported that the aroma and fragrance emanating from the spot left people identify the spot. In the famous *Hadith* of *al-Kisa*, Imam Ali, Imam Hasan, and Imam Husayn (a.s.) detected the presence of the Prophet (S) from the aroma and fragrance that emanated from the body of the Prophet (S). On another occasion, the Noble Lady Fatima (a.s.) wanted to give a

present to one of her friends who was getting married. The Prophet (S) took out a few drops of his sweat that was applied to the bride. Not only the bride but also seven generations among her children carried the incense of the Prophet's sweat. Jabir ibn Abdullh al-Ansari was blind when he visited the shrine at Karbala soon after *Ashura*. He identified the grave by the aroma and fragrance that emanated from it.

Among the Twelver Shia, their *Majlises* [meetings], are veritable universities of their theology, where the basic Shiite tenets, conceptual and philosophical teachings of the twelve Imams (a.s.) in addition to scientific and historical facts revealed by the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.) are taught and orally transmitted. An early effort in English, in the detailed study of the life of Imam Husayn (a.s.) and the battle of Karbala, available perhaps only in some libraries, was the pioneering work of my mentor, master and guide, the late Al-haj Moulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali Sahib of Madras. He was a lecturer of the then Government Muhammadan College [Govt. Arts College], Madras. He was well versed in Arabic, Persian, and English. He was also a great orator among the *Twelver Shia* of South India.

In the preface to his book '*Life of Husayn the Saviour*' Alhaj Moulvi Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali wrote: "*Several authors have attempted to give vivid pictures of stories, whose chronology is not yet traceable and whose antiquity has led many to doubt the reality and genuineness of the stories themselves and to suspect them as of the production of intelligent heads for the inculcation of high moral and ethical principles to the common folk in the most appealing and dramatic fashion. But eye witness facts, as true as the day, occurred a thousand years ago among the so called 'most intelligent people of the middle ages', recorded in history by authors of the age, are relegated to darkness and are not compiled to form a readable volume in English literature.*"

S. V. Mir Ahmed Ali Sahib Vafakhani is another great luminary from Madras, which fortunately is also my place of birth. S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali Sahib joined clerical service in the Government Muhammadan College Madras and later obtained his Bachelor's Degree in Oriental languages and also his M.Ed in Psychology. Mir Ahmed Ali Sahib's English translation with commentary of the Holy Qur'an printed by *Tahrike Tarsile Qur'an* from New York in 2002, is quite popular, especially with reference to the Holy Bible. He was a contemporary of Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali Sahib. At page 11[a] of his Introduction to the Translation of the Holy Qur'an, S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali Sahib mentions several contemporary leading Shia scholars of Madras and refers to Alhaj Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali Sahib and his book '*Life of Husayn*', which was first printed in 1931.

It appears that S.V. Mir Ahmed Ali Sahib Vafakhani had first published in the year 1925, a booklet of 25 pages under the title '*The King of Martyrs*' which was reprinted four times by the year 1964. Its popularity prompted him to write a second book '*Husayn – the Savior of Islam*' which was first printed in 1964. Its second edition is printed by Ansariyan Publications, Qum, Iran in the year 2005. This book makes many references to the Bible and Christian dogma in regard to the martyrdom of Imam Husayn (a.s.).

Another book on the subject is the excellent work of Sheikh Abbas al Qummi, under the title '*Nafasul Mahmoom*'. It has been translated into Urdu. Aejaz Ali T. Bhujwala translated it into English. The best

book in Urdu on the subject is 'Akhbar-e-Matam' published in Ramadan, 1947 A.D. It is available in the Salar Jung Library, Hyderabad. A very enlightening, popular and well-researched book on the subject in Urdu is Bilgiramī's 'Zibhe Azeem'.

Ansariyan Publication, Qum, Iran has published in 2002 a very well documented and well-written book of Yasin T. al Jibouri. The book in English bears the title 'Karbala and Beyond' is very useful, particularly with reference to the incidents that took place after *Ashura*. Other books published by Ansariyan Publications are, the English translation of Ali Nazari Munfared's book under the title 'Imam Husayn (a.s.) and the Saga of Karbala' and Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi's book, translated into English by Sayyid Ather Husayn S.H. Rizvi under the title 'Understanding Kerbala'.

The popular source for eyewitness accounts of the battle at Karbala are the 'Maqaatil'³ of Abu Makhnaf, and Hamid ibn Muslim, the latter being a scribe embedded with the army of Yazid. They meticulously recorded not only the events but also the conversation, sermons and challenges in the battlefield called 'Rajaz'.⁴ If anyone of these two chronicles omitted a particular event or a dialogue or sermon, found elsewhere, it may be due to the scribe's absence from that place and time. But, over all, their records are authentic and have never been disputed as the coinage of a fertile imagination.

The chief source for the Twelver Shia are the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) – members of the Prophet's family – who were present at Karbala in Imam Husayn's camp and related the correct versions which was then passed on to successive generations by the Infallible and Immaculate Imams (a.s.). The present book is an attempt to understand the correct facts and philosophy behind the Battle of Karbala, in the *Shiite* perspective.

¹. Biharul Anwar, Vol. 44 p. 329.

². Qur'an, 2:154, 3:169, 3:195.

³. Maqtal literally means the 'Manner (or)and Place) of Massacre'.

⁴. Rajaz is the customary manner in which an Arab warrior addresses his opponent, in single combat, introducing himself, his lineage, his military exploits, combat acumen and success in earlier wars.

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