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The water stored in Imam Husayn's camp was exhausted by the night of the sixth of Muharram and in the extreme heat of the desert; the whole seventh day and the following night were spent by the children in crying for water. On the eighth day of Muharram, Imam Husayn's brother and trusted friend Abbas (S) tried to dig a well in several places, one after another. Unfortunately, they faced a sheet of solid rock at every place, shattering the hope of providing water to the thirsty children in Imam Husayn's camp. 1

Ali Nazari Munfared and some others write, "Nineteen steps away from the tents facing the Qibla, Imam Husayn (a.s.) dug in the ground and a gush of water erupted from which everybody drank and water bags were filled. After this, the water disappeared without leaving any sign."2

This is quite contrary to the reports received from the infallible Imams (a.s.). Even non–Shia sources do not record any such incident, except perhaps in much later interpolations during the long rule of the Umayyads and the Abbasids. From the Shia traditions, it is established beyond doubt that no water was available in Imam Husayn's camp from the seventh until the night of the tenth of Muharram, 61 AH.

Unable to see small children crying for water, Imam Husayn's companion Yazid bin Hussayn al–Hamadani took the Imam's permission to talk to and persuade Umar ibn Sa'd to allow them to bring water from the river. When he met ibn Sa'd, he did not greet him with the customary salutation. Ibn Sa'd asked, "Why did you not greet me? Am I not a Moslem?" Al–Hamadani replied, "You have assembled to kill the Prophet's grandson. With what excuse will you plead before the Prophet (S) for whose intercession you hope on the Day of Judgement? You have denied water to children that even an infidel will not do. How do you then call yourself a Muslim?" Umar ibn Sa'd said, "For the present, I am not worried about the Day of Judgment. What concerns me is the Governorship of Ray which is waiting for me after I am finished with Husayn."3

Then, Imam Husayn (a.s.) called Abbas (a.s.) and asked him to take some companions and try to fetch water from the Euphrates. Abbas (a.s.) took twenty horsemen, and when they reached the riverbank, they were challenged by al-Hajjaj who was guarding the river with his platoon. On hearing the voice of Hilal bin Nafi', who was his cousin, al-Hajjaj permitted him to go to the river to drink. Hilal said, "When the Holy Prophet's grandson and small children and ladies in his camp are not allowed to drink water, it

is a shame that you allow me to drink it." He then asked his companions to charge forward and collect as much water as possible in the leather bags. However, al-Hajjaj and his soldiers unsuccessfully fought with Abbas (a.s.) and his companions who succeeded in bringing a few leather bags of water, which was not sufficient even to quench the thirst of the children. 4 The thirsty children rushed to take water, and in the melee, the vessel was upturned and water flowed out on the ground. The elder members of Imam Husayn's entourage did not get any water to drink since the seventh of Muharram.

Ibnul Atheer, a well–known Sunni historian, writes in al–Kamil, "A vile soldier, called Abdullah bin Hussayn al–Azdi standing at the banks of the Euphrates, taunted al–Husayn by saying: 'Don't you see the crystal water, as pure and transparent as the sky above? By God, you will not be allowed to taste a drop until your death.' On hearing this, al–Husayn lifted his hands toward the sky and prayed that the wretch might taste the severity of thirst before his death. Thereupon, the said Abdullah was seized by a burning thirst that to quench it he went on gulping water from the river, vomiting it and gulping again and again, until at last his stomach became bloated and he fell and died in the river within a short time." 5 Though several such incidents should have been seen as a warning, the wicked forces of Yazid remained unmoved.

Umar bin Sa'd was greatly enraged to learn that the brave companions of Imam Husayn (a.s.) could face such a large platoon and succeed in getting water, however meager, to Imam Husayn's camp. He ordered that the riverbank should be barricaded more vigilantly and not a drop should reach Imam Husayn's camp. Umar also tightened the circle around Imam Husayn's tents and planned to attack them with his enormous army.

On knowing this, Imam Husayn (a.s.) came out of his tent accompanied by twenty of his companions and asked Umar ibn Sa'd to come out for a discussion. Umar came with twenty of his companions. The Imam (a.s.) asked his companions to stay back. Umar also left his companions and met the Imam (a.s.) alone. According to some historians, Imam Husayn's son Ali al–Akbar (a.s.) and brother Abbas (a.s.) accompanied him when the others went and stood at a distance. Umar ibn Sa'd was accompanied by his son and one servant. Imam Husayn (a.s.) told ibn Sa'd, "Do you not fear God who will call you to account for my blood? You are aware that I am the grandson of the Prophet (S). Leave the Banu Umayya and keep away from harming me, for that will be more pleasing to God." Umar replied, "I am afraid that all my properties will be confiscated." The Imam (a.s.) said, "I will compensate you with my properties."

According to some narrators, Umar untenably excused himself saying, "I am afraid they will annihilate my kith and kin." Imam Husayn (a.s.) replied, "Soon you will be killed in your bed and you shall have no intercession or clemency. I hope that you shall not eat from the wheat of Iraq except a little after me." Umar sarcastically replied, "Barley shall be enough!" 6

After this, ibn Sa'd ordered his army to surround the camp of Imam Husayn (a.s.) from all sides. This incident took place on the night of eighth of Muharram.

Between the fourth and the eighth of Muharram, ibn Ziyad continued to send additional soldiers as reinforcement. By the morning of the eighth of Muharram, over a lakh and forty thousand armed men were assembled against Imam Husayn (a.s.) at Karbala. Whenever ibn Ziyad's forces arrived in Karbala, there was jubilation and beating drums and blowing of trumpets. Every time this happened, Imam Husayn's sister Zainab (a.s.) inquired if any body had come in response to Imam Husayn's letter. On hearing a negative reply, she used to feel dejected. At last, she remembered Habib ibn Mudhahir who was a childhood friend of Imam Husayn (a.s.). She asked Imam Husayn (a.s.) to write to him. Finding over a lakh of soldiers gathered by the satanic forces of Yazid and his commanders, Imam Husayn's sister Zainab (a.s.) insisted that he should also write to some of his friends. Imam Husayn (a.s.) wrote a letter to his childhood friend, Habib bin Mudhahir in the following words,

"From Husayn bin Ali to the great Jurist Habib. I am now surrounded by Yazid's forces at Karbala."

When Imam Husayn's messenger brought the letter, according to one group of historians, Habib was buying henna in the market place. According to other historians, when Imam Husayn's messenger brought the letter, Habib was having food with his wife. Yet, others contend that the incident of buying henna was on an earlier and entirely different occasion and the conversation was between Habib, Maytham and Kumail.

According to the first version, on seeing the letter, Habib returned the henna to the shopkeeper saying, "Henna is of no use to me now. My white beard will become red with my own blood." According to the second version, on reading the letter, Habib got up from the dinner and told his wife, "I bequeath you all that I posses and I hereby divorce you." His wife sorrowfully asked about the cause for this. Habib informed her that he was leaving in response to Imam Husayn's call to join him as he was surrounded by Yazid's forces. He was sure that he would be martyred and so he bequeathed all that he possessed to his wife and divorced her so that she might, if she chose, go to her mother's house and live there. Habib told her that the wicked and satanic forces of Yazid would not spare even women and children from insults and abuse. The noble wife expressed her determination to serve Imam Husayn's sister Zainab (a.s.) and other ladies of his house during their travails. Habib reached Imam Husayn's camp along with his wife to discharge the obligation to the Imam.

When Habib reached Imam Husayn's camp, he found only a few hundred persons. He asked permission to go to the nearby residents, the Bani Asad tribe, and seek their help, since they were known to be brave and honest people. He went under the cover of night and met the tribe of Bani Asad, who were glad to learn that Habib also belonged to their tribe. Habib said, "I have brought you the best of all presents. I bring good news for you, both in this world and in the hereafter. The Grandson of the Prophet (S) has been surrounded by a vile and cruel army. If you choose to help the Prophet's grandson, you will earn their blessings." Abdullah bin Basheer spoke for the Bani Asad tribe and said, "We will be only too glad to help the Prophet's grandson." On hearing this, ninety warriors from the Bani Asad tribe accompanied Habib ibn Mudhahir and proceeded towards Imam Husayn's camp. Meanwhile, Umar bin

Sa'd learnt about this and sent four hundred men under the command of al-Azraq. A severe skirmish ensued and many people were killed on both sides. Fearing hard reprisal by ibn Sa'd, the remaining persons of the Bani Asad returned back and vacated their village.

Shimr along with his relative Abdullah bin Mahl requested ibn Ziyad to issue a letter of guaranteeing asylum and safe passage saying, "Our four cousins Abbas, Ja'far, Abdullah and Uthman, who are sons of our aunt Ummul Banin (and Imam Ali) are with al-Husayn. We do not want that any harm may come to them as they are related to us." Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad agreed and gave the letter guaranteeing safe passage and asylum to Abbas, Ja'far, Abdullah and Uthman, the four sons of Imam Ali (a.s.).7 On the night of Ashura, Shimr showed this letter to Abbas (a.s.) and his brothers and asked them to desert Imam Husayn (a.s.) and save themselves. Abbas (a.s.) replied, "How strange! You bring us clemency while the Prophet's grandson is sought to be killed. Damn your asylum and protection! God is our protector and we are safe under the banner of the Imam."8

Imam Husayn (a.s.) came out and addressed the army of Yazid that surrounded him,

"Do you not know that I am the grandson of the messenger of Allah? Do you not know that I am the son of only child of the messenger of Allah Fatima? The martyr Hamza was my father's uncle. The martyr Ja'far was my father's brother. Have not you heard the messenger of Allah declare and stress his love for the Ahlul Bayt, and that the Qur'an and the Ahlul Bayt are the inseparable legacies that the messenger of Allah was leaving behind; and that I and my brother Hasan are the masters of the youths of Paradise? If you do not know all these things, then ask and verify, if you so desire, the truth of what I have said from the surviving companions of the messenger of Allah, such as Jabir bin Abdullah al—Ansari, Abu Sa'eed al—Khudri, Sahl bin Sa'd as—Saa'idi, Zayd bin Argam, Anas bin Malik...etc..."9

Imam Husayn (a.s.) then addressed those who belonged to Kufa and were now in Umar bin Sa'd's army,

"Have you not written to me complaining that you had no Imam and therefore invited me to come to Kufa and guide you in religious matters?"

When they pretended ignorance of such letters, Imam Husayn (a.s.) had the letters brought from his tent and started reading out their contents along with the names of writers. When there was no answer to this, Imam Husayn (a.s.) said,

"Even if you deny writing these letters and assume that the letters are forged, tell me why you have surrounded us and do not allow us to go away."

To this, Qeis ibn Ziyad replied, "First, you acknowledge Yazid as the caliph and sovereign, and then we shall listen to you."

Imam Husayn (a.s.) replied, "I would rather sacrifice my life than to declare allegiance to Yazid who is a

tyrant and oppressor; ho is steeped in worldly, carnal pleasures; brazenly disobeys the Divine Commandments and in the open court makes fun of the Prophet (S). I would prefer to go away from here, but if I am constrained, I will not submit to the threats of a hypocrite and a despot. "

In reply, one from the enemy said, "We will not let you go, nor will we allow you to have even a drop of water until you are slain and your head is presented to Yazid." 10

- 1. Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 148.
- 2. Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 168, Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 310 quoting Madinatul Ma'ajiz.
- 3. Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 310-311, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 169.
- 4. Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 149, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 169–170
- 5. Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 307, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 168, Life of Husayn the Saviour, p. 148.
- 6. Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 315, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 170–171, Life of Husayn the Saviour p. 151–152.
- 7. Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 174, Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 317-318.
- 8. Ansab al-Ashraf, vol. 3 p. 184 quoted in Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 174-175, Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 318.
- 9. Nafasul Mahmoom, p 313, Haeiri's Balaghatul Husayn, p. 156-157.
- 10. Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 150-151.

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