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Ali Enters Basra

The Battle of Basra (the battle of Camel)

The Second Civil War in Islam

The Muslims had already fought one civil war during the khilafat of Abu Bakr, the first khalifa. Within the same generation, they now faced the grim specter of fighting another. The first civil war was waged by the government against some of its dissident subjects; the second civil war was waged by some of the dissident subjects against their government.

Professors Sayed Abdul Qadir and Muhammad Shuja-ud-Din, write in their *History of Islam*, Part I (Lahore, Pakistan):

“Ayesha was returning to Medina from Makkah after Hajj when she heard the news of the assassination of Uthman, and the accession of Ali to the throne of khilafat whereupon she decided not to go to Medina, and to return to Makkah. Talha and Zubayr also arrived in Makkah. Uthman's governor in Makkah was Abdullah bin Aamir Hadrhami. Marwan and other members of the Banu Umayya were staying as his guests.

All of them held a meeting and resolved that they would seek vengeance for the blood of Uthman. They raised an army in Makkah of 3000 warriors, and decided, after some discussion, to march on Basra. They occupied Basra, seized the treasury, and they killed 600 Muslims whom they suspected to be opposed to them, and spread terror in the city.”

The quest of vengeance for Uthman's blood was only a pretext for war. It was a mask not only for the ambitions of the rebel leaders but also for their crimes. There was no way for them to disguise their intentions, ambitions and resolutions as well as their complicity in Uthman's murder except by claiming that they were his paladins.

One thing that was clear to everyone was that if Ali was able to consolidate his government, one of the first things that he would do, would be to institute investigations into the murder of Uthman, and it was inevitable that the trail of criminal prosecutions would lead to the rebel leaders themselves. The role they

had played during the siege of the palace of Uthman, was not hidden from anyone. The eye-witnesses were all present in Medina and they would have testified under oath what they had seen.

For the rebel leaders, there was, therefore, only one way to forestall Ali and his inexorable justice, and that was to raise the cry of vengeance before he could set the apparatus of law in working order. This is precisely what they did. Some among them even admitted that what they were doing, was to atone for their sins, and there was no better way to atone for sins than to “wash blood with blood.” They had killed one caliph, and now they were going to kill another. This was the only way, they argued, for them to win “salvation.”

No one knows by what right Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr were seeking vengeance for Uthman's blood. None of them bore any relationship to Uthman. Each of them belonged to a different clan. Uthman's next of kin were his widow, Naila, and his sons and daughters, and they were not seeking any vengeance from anyone. It was only after his assassination that Uthman found self-appointed paladins of both sexes, ready and eager to “protect” him!

Ayesha could not see Ali on the throne of khilafat. Her hatred of Ali was overpowering. If someone other than Ali had become khalifa, she might not have embarked upon the cynical adventure in which tens of thousands of Muslims were killed.

Whereas, the real casus belli in her case was her undiluted hatred of Ali, she also found another reason to press the campaign against him with vigor. In the event of her success in removing Ali from the center of power, she was going to make her nephew and adopted son, Abdullah bin Zubayr, the new khalifa.

Three of Uthman's governors who had been dismissed by Ali were Abdullah bin Aamir Hadhrami of Makkah; Ya'la bin Umayya of Yemen; and Abdullah bin Aamir bin Kurayz of Basra. After their dismissal, the first one stayed in Makkah, and the other two also came to Makkah. They brought the treasury with them. Some citizens of Makkah also made generous contributions to the coffers of the rebels. In this manner, the latter found the funds necessary to underpin their war.

The rebel leaders held a meeting at the house of Abdullah bin Aamir Hadhrami, the ex-governor of Makkah, to decide what they had to do. An invasion of Medina, and a march to Syria, were considered but were not found practicable for various reasons. Finally, Abdullah bin Aamir bin Kurayz, the ex-governor of Basra, suggested that they should go to Basra. This suggestion appealed to everyone, and was accepted by all. Talha eagerly welcomed it, and said that many families of his clan were living in Basra, and that he could count upon their support.

The rebel leaders then worked out their strategy: first they would take possession of Basra; with Basra as their base, they would occupy Kufa where Zubayr had many supporters. With Basra and Kufa in their hands, they figured, it would be possible for them to isolate Ali in Hijaz, invade his territories; defeat him, and wrest khilafat from him.

The professed aim of the rebels was to kill those men who had killed Uthman. The men who had killed Uthman, were all in Medina but his self-appointed champions were marching upon Basra – 800 miles to the east, in Iraq!

Talha and Zubayr requested Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab also to accompany them to Basra but he refused to go.

Ayesha pressed Hafsa bint Umar bin al-Khattab and the other widows of the Prophet who were still in Makkah after Hajj, to go with her to Basra, and to take part in the war against the caliph. All of them refused except Hafsa. She was willing to go with Ayesha but her brother, Abdullah bin Umar, forbade her to do so.

Umm Salma was one of the widows of the Prophet. Ayesha sent her a letter in Medina inviting her to take part in her campaign. Umm Salma replied to her as follows:

“O Ayesha! Have you forgotten that the Messenger of God had ordered you to stay at home and not to transgress the limits imposed by our Faith? The jihad of women is in restraint. Their eyes should not be bold, and their voice should not be loud. Do you think that if the Messenger of God were to catch you racing camels in the desert, he would be very pleased? If I were to disobey my husband, I would never be able to face him again. Therefore, fear God at all times. It would be in your own interest to stay at home, and not to go on a wild adventure.”

Ayesha had claimed that she was going on a mission of peace. If she was, then it was the strangest of all missions of peace. She was escorted to Basra by 3000 warriors, bristling with deadly weapons, and thirsting for the blood of innocent Muslims!

At length all preparations were completed, and the army of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr, marched out of Makkah, with great fanfare, toward its distant destination – Basra.

As the Makkan army was marching toward the east, someone raised the question who would become khalifa in the event of victory over Ali. Talha's son said his father would become khalifa but Zubayr's son countered him by asserting that his father alone would become khalifa.

An animated argument began which might have led to an exchange of blows between the two young men when Ayesha arrived at the scene. She interposed between them, and their supporters, and dismissed the uncomfortable question as being untimely.

Though Ayesha suppressed the question of leadership at the time, she nevertheless decreed that her nephew, Abdullah bin Zubayr, would lead the army in prayer. This ordinance had special significance in the context of the times. On one occasion, during the last sickness of the Prophet, Ayesha's father, Abu Bakr, had led some Muslims in prayer. The fact that he had led them in prayer, was used, immediately after the death of the Prophet, both as an “argument” in his (Abu Bakr's) favor, and as his (Abu Bakr's)

“qualification” to become khalifa.

Ayesha loved her nephew, Abdullah bin Zubayr, more than his own mother did, and she was determined to make him the next khalifa. Upon her insistence, even Zubayr had to stand behind his own son to say his prayers. As Ayesha saw it, in the light of her own father's precedent, no one in the rebel army could claim that he had the same “qualifications” to become khalifa as her nephew had since he and he alone had led the army in prayer.

The question of leadership was bugging Saeed bin Aas also. He took it up with Talha and Zubayr and the following exchange took place between them:

Saeed: If you win the war against Ali, who will become the next khalifa?

Talha: Whoever is chosen by the Muslims, would become their khalifa.

Saeed: When you left Makkah, you declared that your aim in waging war against Ali, was to get vengeance for the blood of Uthman. If your aims have not changed, then you ought to make one of his (Uthman's) sons the new khalifa, and both of them are here with us in the army.

Talha: Do you think that we shall bypass the senior Muhajireen and make one of your raw youths our khalifa? Never.

Saeed then understood that the talk of seeking vengeance for the blood of Uthman was only a hoax, and the real aim of the “triumvirs” was to grab power for themselves.

A distinguished visitor to the rebel camp was Mughira bin Shaaba. He talked with Ayesha and Marwan, and advised them to abandon their plan for the invasion of Basra. He said to Marwan:

“...if you are going to Basra to hunt out the murderers of Uthman, then you should know that they are here in your own camp and not in Basra. They are the generals of your army. They killed Uthman because each of them wanted to become khalifa. But they failed, and after their failure, they cooked up this story of seeking vengeance.”

But Ayesha and Marwan had no intention to abandon their grand design of conquest. They did not accept Mughira's advice whereupon he, Saeed bin Aas, Abdullah bin Khalid, and a few others separated themselves from the rebel army, and went to Ta'if.

The rebel army resumed its march toward Basra but a weird incident made it halt once again. As Ayesha rode past a certain well in a village on the highway, some pariah dogs gathered around her camel, and began to bark at her furiously. Ayesha put her head out of the litter, and asked the son of Talha if he knew the name of the village they were passing through. He said that they were passing through a hamlet called *Hawab*.

When Ayesha heard the name *Hawab*, she was thrown into a state of great agitation. She ordered her camel-driver to make the camel sit, and said that she had to return to Medina immediately instead of going any further toward Basra.

This sudden change of direction and destination by Ayesha, surprised the son of Talha, and he asked her why she could not go to Basra. She said that recollection came to her of a prediction of the Apostle of God, and she told him what it was in the following words:

“He (the Apostle) was with his wives one day, and addressing them he said: ‘A day will come when the dogs of *Hawab* will bark at one of you, and that would be the day when she would be in manifest error.’ He then turned toward me, and said: ‘Beware O Humayra! lest you be that wife.’ And now I can hear and see that the dogs of *Hawab* are barking at me. So I am the one in manifest error.”

But Talha's son was not convinced, and said:

“O mother of believers! pay no attention to the barking dogs. We have more important things to do. Let's, therefore, move toward the destination which is beckoning us from the east.”

But Ayesha appeared determined to go back to Medina. Alarmed by her insistence upon returning to Medina, Talha's son called Abdullah bin Zubayr hoping that he would dissuade her from deserting the rebel army.

Abdullah bin Zubayr arrived at the scene and he too heard Ayesha's story. But he had to stop her at any cost. If she were to desert the rebel army, the whole effort of the rebel leaders to seize power, would collapse there and then.

Furthermore, they would have no place to go to. He, therefore, told his aunt that the village the dogs of which had barked at her, and had so visibly shaken her up, was not *Hawab*; it was some other obscure village. Ayesha, however, was not satisfied, and declared that she would not go to Basra.

Abdullah bin Zubayr now had to take desperate measures to reassure his aunt that in going to Basra, she was not going astray, and that the barking of some stray dogs ought not to unnerve her. He then took an oath that the army had left *Hawab* far behind. He also rounded up fifty desert Arabs, brought them before Ayesha, and all of them swore that *Hawab* in truth was very distant from where she was.

Arab historians say that the “testimony” which Abdullah bin Zubayr produced before Ayesha, was the first perjury in Islam.

Tabari, the dean of the Arab historians, has also recorded this incident. He adds that through the efforts of her adopted son, Abdullah bin Zubayr, and his fifty “witnesses,” Ayesha was at last convinced that the dogs barking at her did not belong to *Hawab* after all, but to some other village. She dismissed the incident as a minor contretemps. Her conscience was “salved,” and she was ready to ride toward Basra.

At this time, Ali was occupied in taking stock of the situation. Of all his enemies, he knew, that Muawiya, the governor of Syria, was the most dangerous, and he felt that he ought to give him his first attention.

But then he heard that Talha and Zubayr who had earlier left Medina for Makkah “to perform umra,” had repudiated their oath of loyalty to him, and that they and Ayesha, who was already in Makkah, had raised the standard of rebellion against him. It was also reported to him that the three leaders were already advancing with a well equipped army toward the key city of Basra in Iraq with the intention of capturing it.

Ayesha had never made a secret of her unfriendliness to Ali but he could never imagine that she would go to the extent of waging war upon him. To him, an alliance of Talha, Zubayr and Muawiya had seemed possible but an alliance of Talha, Zubayr and Ayesha never. But here she was, with her allies, posing a more direct threat to the security of the Islamic State than Muawiya himself.

Ali was compelled to suspend everything in order to deal with the challenge of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr. He lamented their unreasonable and unseasonable belligerence, and sought to dissuade them from causing the bloodshed of the Muslims which was inevitable if they revolted against the lawful authority. He sent a letter to Ayesha the purport of which was as follows:

“In the name of God Who is Most Beneficent and Most Merciful.

You have left your home in direct contravention of the commandments of God and His Messenger, and now you are sowing seeds of civil war among the Muslims. Just pause for a moment and think about this: What do you have to do with armies and wars? Is it your job to fight? And fight against whom? Against the Muslims? Your place is in your home. God has commanded you to stay in your home. Therefore, fear Him, and do not disobey Him, and return immediately to Medina.”

Ayesha received Ali's letter but his appeal had no effect upon her, and she did not even acknowledge it.

Ali sent similar letters to Talha and Zubayr and they also did not reply to him.

Ali realized that the rebel leaders were bent on shedding Muslim blood. Wishing to prevent them from doing so, he decided to intercept them. But he could intercept their army only with an army of his own, and he had no army!

The new caliph had to raise an army if he were to prevent the rebel army from reaching and occupying Basra. He went into the mosque, informed the Muslims what the rebels planned to do, explained to them the need for an army to meet their challenge and he called upon them to come forward as volunteers.

Ali was shocked at the response he got to his appeal. No one volunteered to fight against the rebels. He repeated his appeal and the response was the same.

After each prayer, Ali appealed to the congregation to rise in defense of lawfully constituted government.

He reminded them that he had taken charge of their government only upon their own insistence. He also reminded them that he had made his own acceptance of the caliphate contingent upon their pledge to obey him – in peace and in war. The Muslims, apparently, had forgotten their pledge. Ali felt he was immobilized.

After many days, however, one man stood up in the mosque and told Ali that he would obey his orders. Some others, also conscionable like him, followed his example. Soon Ali was able to put together a tiny force of 700 volunteers ready to obey him.

Sir John Glubb

As soon as Ali heard that Zubair, Talha and Aisha had left Mecca, he decided to follow them, but found considerable difficulty in raising a force for the purpose. Only some three months before, the Companions and the people of Medina had begged him to be khalif. Now few would support him although the apparently unscrupulous Zubair and Talha had raised 3000 men from Mecca and the surrounding tribes.

In October 656, four months after the murder of Othman, Ali set out after Zubair and Talha. He had with him only 700 men. Too weak to proceed, he camped on a desert well in Nejed. (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p. 318, 1967)

Before leaving Medina, Ali called on Umm Salma, one of the widows of Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and bade her farewell. Umm Salma said to him:

“In the name of God, I deliver you into His protection. By His power and His majesty, you alone are with truth, and all your enemies are in error. If it were not the command of God to the wives of His Messenger to stay at home, I would have accompanied you in this campaign.” (*Abul Fida*)

Umm Selma had a son by her first marriage. She offered him to Ali, and said:

“He is my only child. He is all that I have in this world. I offer him to you. He will, if necessary, sacrifice his life for you.”

Ali was deeply moved by Umm Salma's gesture. He thanked her, and took a heart-breaking leave from her not knowing if he would ever return to Medina. Her son accompanied him to Iraq.

Ali appointed Sehl ibn Hunaif Ansari the governor of Medina in his absence, and he sent Qathm ibn Abbas to Makkah to take charge of that city as its governor.

The last thing that Ali did in Medina, was to visit the graves of Muhammad Mustafa, and of Fatima Zahra – the father and the daughter. Muhammad was his guide, benefactor and friend, and Fatima was his wife. He bade farewell to both of them with a heart full of sadness and eyes full of tears.

Upon his arrival in Iraq, Ali and his small force encamped at a place called Dhi-Qaar. Abdullah ibn Abbas, his cousin, reports the arrival, in the camp, of a new friend, as follows:

“We were in Dhi-Qaar when one afternoon, we saw a man coming toward the camp. He was very old, and very frail. His only possessions were a small bag of rations and a goat-skin of water. Presently he entered the camp, and sought audience with Ali. When he was taken before Ali, he identified himself as Oways Qarni from Yemen. As soon as we heard his name, we knew that he was the unseen friend and beloved of our master, Muhammad, the Messenger of God. He asked Ali to extend his hand which the latter did. He then put his hand on Ali's hand, and took the oath of allegiance to him.”

Ali greeted the friend and beloved of his master, Muhammad, as cordially as the latter himself would have done, if he were present in person.

The venerable Oways was duly inducted into the army of Medina.

For Ali, the arrival of Oways Qarni in the camp was a rare counterpoint to the grim and ominous scenario of sedition, treason, treachery and rebellion which dominated the Dar-ul-Islam. For a few moments, he forgot the present and was lost in a reverie of the times past; the times of his master, Muhammad.

Those were the really “good old days;” those were the truly ideal times. How he wished he could return to those times when, as the right arm of Muhammad, he had defended Islam and his umma from the idolaters. Now in a shocking counterpoint, that *umma* had challenged his authority, and appeared to be thirsting for his blood. He was roused out of his contemplation of a beautiful and a glorious past by a hideous and a disjointed present.

Ali's initial efforts to eschew war, made from Medina, had failed but he was most anxious to avert the civil war of the Muslims. Therefore, as soon as his soldiers were billeted, he launched his peace offensive, and made a series of new diplomatic overtures to the rebel leaders to come and to negotiate the terms of peace with him rather than appeal to the arbitration of arms. He sent some of the leading companions of the Prophet to plead with Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr not to violate peace but to no avail.

Edward Gibbon

A life of prayer and contemplation had not chilled the martial activity of Ali; but in a mature age, after a long experience of mankind, he still betrayed in his conduct the rashness and indiscretion of youth. In the first days of his reign he neglected to secure either by gifts or fetters, the doubtful allegiance of Talha and Zubeir, two of the most powerful of Arabian chiefs. They escaped from Medina to Mecca, and from thence to Bassora; erected the standard of revolt; and usurped the government of Irak, or Assyria which they had vainly solicited as the reward of their services.

The mask of patriotism is allowed to cover the most glaring inconsistencies; and the enemies, perhaps the assassins, of Othman now demanded vengeance for his blood. They were accompanied in their

flight by Ayesha, the widow of the Prophet, who cherished to the last hour of her life an implacable hatred against the husband and the posterity of Fatima. (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

In neglecting to secure, either by gifts or fetters, the doubtful allegiance of Talha and Zubayr, Ali was not betraying the rashness and indiscretion of youth, as Gibbon claims. Ali knew that Talha and Zubayr had treachery in their hearts. Giving presents to them would only be a bribe, and Ali was not the man to bribe anyone for anything.

In Medina, Abdullah ibn Abbas had advised Ali to appoint Talha and Zubayr governors of Basra and Kufa. Judging by their character and subsequent conduct, appointing Talha and Zubayr as governors, would have been a fatal blunder on the part of Ali. If he had done so, he would have to fight, not against one but against three Muawiyas!

As for fetters, again Ali was not the man to arrest anyone for a crime contemplated but not committed yet. When Talha and Zubayr came to him asking for permission to go to Makkah to perform umra, he let them go but told them that it was not to perform a pilgrimage that they were going to Makkah.

As noted above, Ali had been able to muster in Medina not more than seven hundred men. With such a small force, he could not take up the challenge of the rebels. He, therefore, sent Muhammad ibn Jaafer and Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr to Kufa to bring reinforcement from there. The governor of Kufa at this time was Abu Musa al-Ashari, and he opposed them. When reinforcements were late in coming, Ali sent first Abdullah ibn Abbas and Malik ibn Ashter, and then Imam Hasan and Ammar ibn Yasir to Kufa, to recruit soldiers.

Imam Hasan ignored Abu Musa's opposition, went into the great mosque, addressed the Muslims of Kufa in a speech in which he reminded them what their duties and obligations toward God and His Messenger were.

The arrival of Hasan – the darling of Muhammad – in Kufa, created a sensation. His speech was not over yet when the people began to shout: we obey you; we are at your service.

In the meantime, Malik ibn Ashter entered the governor's palace. He drove out Abu Musa's slaves and took possession of the building. Abu Musa fled from Kufa at night, and sought refuge with Muawiya in Damascus.

Imam Hasan, Ammar Yasir, Abdullah ibn Abbas and Malik ibn Ashter returned to Dhi-Qaar with 12,000 warriors of Kufa with them.

Ali's governor in Basra was Uthman ibn Hunaif Ansari, the same companion of the Prophet whom Umar had appointed the Financial Commissioner of Iraq. When he learned that the army of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr was in the environs of Basra, he sent one of the friends of Ali – Abul Aswad ad-Du'ali – to see them and to find out the reasons why they came. Abul Aswad called on Ayesha, and the following

exchange took place between them.

Abul Aswad: O mother of believers, what is your purpose in coming to Basra with an army?

Ayesha: I came to seek vengeance for the murder of Uthman who was killed in his own house even though he had not committed any sin.

Abul Aswad: Whoever killed Uthman, is not in Basra.

Ayesha: Yes, I know. But to get vengeance, I need the cooperation and the support of the people of Basra.

Abul Aswad: I hope you have not forgotten that the Messenger of God had ordered you to stay at home. In any case, it is not your business to meddle in politics and war. It is most unworthy of a widow of the Prophet to leave his home, and to fight against the Muslims.

Ayesha: Will any Muslim dare to fight against me?

Ayesha believed that if she went into the battlefield at the head of her army, the soldiers of the enemy host, upon seeing her confronting them, would either come over to her side, or would abandon the battle, and desert their master.

Abul Aswad next went to see Talha and Zubayr, and asked them what were their intentions in coming to Basra in battle array.

T & Z: We want vengeance from Ali for the murder of Uthman.

Abul Aswad: Ali did not murder Uthman nor did he have any share in his murder, and you know it.

T & Z: If he did not, then why is he protecting the murderers?

Abul Aswad: Does this mean that you have broken the pledge of loyalty which you gave to Ali?

T & Z: The pledge was taken from us on the point of sword. It was, therefore, invalid.

Abul Aswad could see that the rebel leaders were obsessed with war, and that further parleys with them were useless. He therefore, returned to Basra, and reported to Uthman ibn Hunaif what Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr had told him.

The rebel leaders had made no secret of their intentions but Uthman ibn Hunaif did not have a strong army, and knew that he could not defend the city against them. Therefore, when they appeared at the city gates, he opened negotiations with them. The two parties agreed that until the arrival of Ali, the rebels would not do anything to disturb the existing arrangement, and Uthman ibn Hunaif would continue to act as governor of Basra.

But hardly two days had passed when the rebel leaders violated the truce. Their army attacked the city at night, and took it by storm, and once it was within its walls, it appeared to go berserk. The soldiers spread into the city and killed 600 Muslims including 40 in the Great Mosque itself.

Talha and Zubayr forced their way into the governor's house where they captured Uthman ibn Hunaif, and killed those who tried to defend him. They wanted to kill him also but he told them that if they killed him, then his brother, Sehl ibn Hunaif, who was the governor of Medina, would kill all their relatives living in that city, in reprisal.

They, therefore, had to curb their urge to kill the venerable friend of Muhammad. But they beat him up, plucked out all the hair on his head, his eye brows and his beard, and drove him out of Basra. He managed, somehow, to reach the camp of his master, and staggered into his presence, more dead than alive!

Ali was deeply aggrieved to see Uthman ibn Hunaif in the state in which Talha and Zubayr had sent him. He could hardly recognize him. He tried to comfort the old friend of Muhammad Mustafa with his tears.

The rebel army was now in possession of the city of Basra. It had succeeded in realizing its first aim. Its leaders expelled all friends and supporters of Uthman ibn Hunaif from the city if they did not kill them.

Ali had no choice now but to order his army to advance on Basra. Halting at Zawiya, in the north of Basra, he sent letters once again to each of the rebel leaders suggesting that both sides iron out their disagreements through negotiations rather than fight against each other and kill each other.

The rebel leaders had no desire to acknowledge Ali's letters. Not to leave any doubt in his mind that they had discarded peace as an instrument of their policy, they decided to meet him outside the ramparts of the city.

Sir John Glubb

As the khalif's army approached Basra, the rebels marched out to meet it, led by Zubair and Talha. Not all Basra was with them. Beni Bekr, the tribe once led by the gallant Muthanna, joined the army of Ali. Beni Temeem decided to remain neutral. Ali's army was now slightly stronger. In the days of Ignorance, women mounted in litters on camels, frequently accompanied their tribes into battle, to urge on the warriors. Aisha, "Mother of the Faithful," accompanied the rebel army in her camel-litter." (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p. 320, 1967)

When the two armies confronted each other, Ali rode out of his line and called Talha and Zubayr to come out and to meet him. Dr. Taha Husain of Egypt says that both generals rode out of their lines in full panoply of war so that the only part of their bodies that could be seen, was their eyes. When Ayesha saw them going, she was alarmed at what might happen to them if they met Ali in battle.

But she was informed that Ali was unarmed, and was not, in fact, wearing even an armor, and she was

reassured. Ali asked them why they had broken the pledge of loyalty which they had voluntarily given to him, and why did they want to fight against him.

In reply, Talha and Zubayr reeled off the litany of old accusations that he was protecting the murderers of Uthman, and that they were seeking justice for the latter's murder. Ali told them that they knew only too well that he had nothing to do with Uthman's murder or his murderers.

He then added: "Since you do not want to listen to reason, I suggest that we try a new wrinkle to resolve this dispute. You will remember that our master, Muhammad, the blessed Messenger of God, had once held a *Mubahala* (religious meeting) with the Christians of Najran. Let us imitate his example, and hold a *Mubahala*, and pray as follows:

"O Lord of all Creation! I seek Thy Mercy. Thou art aware of all that I feel or think or do. Nothing is hidden from Thy sight. If I have taken part, directly or indirectly, in the murder of Uthman, or if I have abetted those men who murdered Uthman, or if I was secretly happy when he was killed, show Thy displeasure to me. But if I am innocent of all guilt of complicity in the murder of Uthman, then show Thy displeasure to all those people who allege that I am an accomplice in the crime against Uthman."

Talha and Zubayr did not accept Ali's invitation to hold *Mubahala*, and openly declared: "We do not consider you worthy of caliphate, and we are in no way less qualified or less deserving to become khalifa than you are." (Tabari, *History*, vol. III, p. 519).

One thing Talha and Zubayr had done, was to discard the pretense of seeking vengeance for the murder of Uthman; they were going to fight against Ali so they could become khalifas.

Another attempt to save peace had failed but Ali still did not want to see Muslims killing Muslims. He, therefore, called Zubayr who after all was his cousin, to a private meeting, and reminded him of the days when both of them were young comrades-in-arms, and had fought against the enemies of faith under the banner of the Messenger of God. Were they not, he asked Zubayr, such wonderful days, and now, he, Zubayr, his cousin, wanted to fight against him; how was it possible; how could Zubayr fight against him, his own cousin?

Ali also reminded Zubayr of a prediction of the Apostle. "Do you remember the occasion," he asked Zubayr, "when the Apostle of God told you, in my presence, that someday you would fight against me, and that you would be in error in doing so?" "Oh yes," exclaimed Zubayr, "I remember what the Apostle had said. But I had forgotten the prediction, and now I shall not fight against you."

Recollection also came to Zubayr of another prediction of the Messenger of God who had said that his bosom friend, Ammar ibn Yasir, would be killed by a band of wicked men. Now Zubayr suddenly realized that Ammar was in Ali's army.

Zubayr turned the reins of his horse and rode back into his own lines, his face showing signs of inner

conflict and deep stress. In reply to the anxious queries of Ayesha and his ambitious and bellicose son, he said that Ali had reminded him of a prediction of the Messenger of God himself, and he had, realizing that he was in error, given him (Ali) another pledge not to fight against him. His fire-eating son said that the real reason for his withdrawal from the battle was not the prediction of the Apostle but the fear of Ali.

Zubayr bridled at this aspersion. He said that he had sworn not to fight against Ali, and added that the choice before him was clear: either he had to lose face among the Arabs for retreating from the battle as a coward, or he had to brace himself for eternal damnation, and he figured that losing face as a coward was the lesser of the two evils.

Zubayr left the battlefield probably with the intention of returning to Medina. He had traveled a few miles when he noticed that he was being shadowed by a stranger. This stranger was a man of Basra, one Amr bin Jermoz. Though Zubayr's suspicions were roused, he kept riding until he reached a village. There he dismounted to wash himself, to say his prayers and to rest. But he had come to the journey's end. When he was saying his prayers, Amr bin Jermoz attacked him and killed him.

Zubayr was eliminated from the equation but Talha and Ayesha were determined to fight even without him. Ali, however, still hesitated to fight, and decided to make one more attempt to rescue peace. He sent a young man, one Muslim ibn Abdullah who was noted for his piety, with a copy of the Qur'an, to appeal to the enemy to submit the dispute to the Judgment of God, and to uphold peace in the name of the sanctity of Muslim blood.

Standing in front of the enemy host at close range, Muslim ibn Abdullah opened the Qur'an, and said: "I will read a passage from the Book of God so that you will know what are His commandments and Prohibitions." His speech, however, was interrupted by the archers of the enemy who shot arrows at the copy of the Qur'an he was reading. While he was trying to protect the copy of the Qur'an, one of the slaves of Ayesha crept up toward him, attacked him and killed him.

The body of Muslim ibn Abdullah was brought before Ali, and was placed on the ground. Ali was lamenting his death when another body, that of one of his warriors who was shot and killed with arrows by the army of Basra, was brought before him. He tried to remove the arrows from the corpse but he had not removed many when more bodies of his soldiers, riddled with arrows, arrived and were stacked before him in full view of the two armies. The rebels were practicing archery at Ali's army.

Tabari says in his *History*, (vol. III, p. 522) that when Ali saw these bodies in front of him, he said:

"Now it is lawful to fight against them."

Then Ali lifted his hands toward heaven, and prayed:

"O Lord! Be Thou a Witness that I have left nothing undone to preserve peace among Muslims. Now there is no choice left for me but to allow my army to defend itself from unprovoked attacks. We are Thy

humble slaves. Bestow Thy Grace and Thy Mercy upon us. Grant us victory over the enemy but if it is Thy pleasure to grant it to him, then grant us the crown of martyrdom.”

Ali concluded his prayer, and then turning toward his troops, addressed them thus just before giving them the signal to fight:

“O Muslims! do not be the first to strike at your adversary; let your adversary be the first to strike at you. Once he does, then you have to defend yourselves. If God gives you victory over your enemies, then remember that they are also Muslims. Therefore, do not kill the wounded among them. If they run from the field, do not pursue them, and let them save their lives. If you capture prisoners, do not kill them. Do not mutilate the dead, and do not rob them of their armor or weapons or other valuables which you may find on their persons. Do not plunder their camp, and do not molest their women even if they use foul and abusive language against you or your leaders. But above all things, do not be unmindful, at any time, of the presence of your Creator in your life. You are in His sight every moment.”

The two armies then charged at each other. The rebels had already lost Zubayr, one of their two generals, through desertion. The other general, Talha, was also destined to meet a fate similar to Zubayr's. Abul Fida, the historian, says that Marwan asked his slave to cover him so that he would not be seen. When the slave covered him, he strung an arrow to his bow, aimed it at Talha, and said to his slave:

“I saw this man (Talha) during the days when Uthman was besieged in his house. He was inciting and urging the crowd to enter the house, and to kill him. But today he wants vengeance for his blood. How touching! He truly loved Uthman. Here, I will give him a reward for that love. He richly deserves a reward. After all, such love must not go unrewarded.”

Marwan released the arrow. It was a fatal shot that caught Talha in the thigh, and he limped to his death in the rear of the army.

Ibn Saad

In the battle of the Camel, Talha was on his horse beside Ayesha when Marwan shot an arrow at him which transfixed his leg. Then Marwan said: “By God, now I will not have to search for the man who murdered Uthman.” (*Tabaqat, vol. III, p. 223*)

Hakim

Ibrahim ibn Muhammad ibn Talha said that Marwan bin al-Hakam killed his grandfather (Talha) with an arrow in the battle of the Camel. (*Mustadrak*)

Sir John Glubb

Zubair was a first cousin of the Prophet. His mother had been the sister of Mohammed's father. Zubair and Ali had known one another and worked together all their lives. When they now met between the lines of their respective armies, Ali asked Zubair if he remembered this and that occasion when they had both been young, and when both were filled with passionate religious zeal and personal devotion to Mohammed; how the Apostle of God had said this and Ali or Zubair had said that. What wonderful times those had been. Zubair was moved to tears and swore that he would never oppose Ali with force. Ali had the reputation of being a persuasive speaker.

When the fighting was joined, Zubair, in compliance with his oath, withdrew from the battlefield. Wandering in a desert valley, a little way from the battle-field, he was apparently encountered and killed by some passing straggler.

Thus futilely and ignominiously died one of the great early heroes of Islam. Meanwhile, Talha had been wounded by an arrow and was carried back to Basra where he died soon after. (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p. 320, 1967)

Zubayr and Talha perished for the most dubious of causes. It appears that they were aware that the cause for which they were going to fight, was not theirs, and it was not just. Both of them had been among the leading heroes of the early days of Islam but in the battle of Basra, their heroism abandoned them. They showed no heroism, and they died like sheep. The only explanation for this can be that their morale had collapsed, and they were defeated even before the battle began. Theirs was a moral defeat.

Actually, Talha and Zubayr had walked into an impasse. At one time, they were very eager to get rid of Uthman. They cast the die and they lost. After the death of Uthman, sojourn in Medina would, in fact, be very perilous for them. They could find no exit from the impasse except by shouting that they were seeking vengeance for the blood of Uthman.

Arresting the murderer(s) of Uthman was the duty of the lawfully constituted authority which was existing, and which had declared that it was going to investigate the case. But this is precisely what Talha and Zubayr were afraid of. They did not want any investigation. Their only chance of saving their own necks was to throw the state into turmoil, and to keep it in turmoil.

In this attempt they were successful. They "succeeded" in the sense that they did not allow Ali to investigate the murder of Uthman, and instead, they compelled him to grapple with their rebellion.

It's amazing that Talha and Zubayr, early converts to Islam and companions of the Prophet that they were, could break their solemn pledge so casually as they did. If they really believed that Ali was implicated in the murder of Uthman, they ought to have said so in the Prophet's Mosque in the assembly of all Muhajireen and Ansar instead of taking the oath of loyalty to him.

But they did not, and they took the oath of loyalty. As long as they had hope that Ali would appoint them governors, they kept quiet. But as soon as they lost that hope, they broke their pledge, and rose in

rebellion. A rebellion was the only way in which they could prevent Ali from investigating the murder of Uthman.

If Talha and Zubayr had been sincere in seeking vengeance for the murder of Uthman, there is one thing they could have done. They could have told Ali that they were going to set a deadline for him to investigate the case of Uthman, and he had to apprehend the criminals before that deadline. But they didn't set such a deadline; instead, they rose in rebellion behind the screen of seeking vengeance for the murder of Uthman.

Some historians say that Ali lamented the death of both Zubayr and Talha. If he did, recollection must have come to him of the glorious beginning and the inglorious end of these two heroes of primitive Islam. Talha and Zubayr paid a rather high price for their unprincipled ambition, and as the modern Arabic expression goes, they “choked on their own frustration.”

With Talha and Zubayr thus eliminated, the camel on which Ayesha rode, became the rallying point of the army of Basra. Her soldiers fought fiercely and with determined bravery, and they made themselves a living rampart around her camel. One warrior held its reins in his hand. Ali's famous captain, Malik ibn Ashter, cut his arm at the elbow. Immediately, another warrior took the place of the first, and held the reins of the camel in his hand. Malik cut his arm also. A third champion stepped in, and he too lost his arm. This went on until the severed arms were piled high in front of the camel.

All around Ayesha's camel, men were attacking each other, and were dying. Ayesha, sitting in the litter on top of the camel, was urging her warriors to defend her, and to attack and kill the enemy who had killed their innocent khalifa, Uthman. Each time, they heard her voice, they were inspired to make a greater effort. They were striking deadly blows at the enemy not only to defend the Mother of the Faithful but also to avenge the death of Uthman.

Malik was still playing his little game of cutting the arms of all those men who held the reins of Ayesha's camel. Presently he spotted Abdullah bin Zubayr, the fire-eater of the Makkan army, and the darling of Ayesha, brandishing his sword. He was the “prime mover” of the battle of Basra in which thousands of Muslims were killed. If it were not for his incendiaries, the battle of Basra might never have been fought.

Malik forgot Ayesha's camel, and lunged viciously at Abdullah bin Zubayr, knocking him down on the ground. As he pointed his sword toward his throat, an anguished cry escaped from Ayesha who thought that he (Malik) was going to kill him (her nephew). In panic, she screamed: “O save Abdullah or else Malik will kill him.”

But who was there in the rebel army who could save Ayesha's nephew from Malik? Whoever came close to save him, was himself killed. There was only one man who could save Abdullah, and that was Malik himself. When he heard Ayesha's agonized cry, he said to Abdullah: “I am tempted to run you through with my sword but I give you your life because of your kinship with the Apostle of God.”

Malik spared the life of Abdullah bin Zubayr more in contempt than in pity. The latter stood up from the dust, and unnerved as he was by this brush with death, rapidly put himself out of the range of Malik's sword, with the resolution of never to be caught by him again.

Malik returned to the sport of severing the arms of the rebels. But they were not dismayed by the fear of losing their arms to him. Ayesha was encouraging them as she kept shouting: "Be blessed, my sons! glory to you for defending your mother so gallantly."

Eventually Malik got tired of cutting the arms of men, and he decided to put an end to the game which had lasted much too long. He planted his feet at the bodies of the dead, aimed a blow of his irresistible sword, and killed Ayesha's camel.

The camel fell bespattering all around it with its blood, and Ayesha's howdah fell to the ground with it. But she was not hurt. Ali immediately sent Ayesha's brother, Muhammad ibn Abu Bakr, and Ammar ibn Yasir, to put the howdah on the ground, and told him to escort his sister to the house of the widow of a certain noble of Basra.

Ayesha's camel was the visible emblem for which the army of Basra was fighting. When it was killed, the "emblem" disappeared. Suddenly the army of Basra had nothing for which to fight, and it began to come apart – visibly. Everyone in it began to flee every which way.

In their flight, the soldiers forgot even Ayesha for whom they were fighting so heroically only a little earlier. Soon nothing was left on the battlefield except the dead and the wounded. Since Ali had forbidden his army to pursue the fugitives, most of the rebels were able to escape, and the battle was practically over.

Ali promulgated once again the orders he had issued before the battle that the dead were not to be robbed or mutilated; the enemy camp was not to be plundered; and those combatants who had surrendered, were not to be killed. He maintained that his own army must set an example of gentleness, restraint, decency and uprightness as the basic values underpinning a genuinely Islamic military organization.

Sir John Glubb

The battle of the Camel was fought in December 656. As soon as the enemy withdrew, Ali gave orders that there should be no pursuit and that killing should immediately cease. When Ali entered Basra, he endeavored to conciliate all parties. The defeated army was treated with generosity. Ali urged that bygones be bygones, for he was of a mild and generous, perhaps an easy-going nature and wished to reunite the empire rather than revenge himself upon his enemies." (*The Great Arab Conquests*, p. 322, 1963)

Ali was generous, and he wanted to reunite the empire and the umma (people) of his master,

Muhammad; but he was not “easy-going” as Sir John Glubb imagines. The reason he did not chastise the rebels was that he had an extreme hatred of bloodshed in general, and of intra-Muslim bloodshed in particular.

He also forbore from destroying the rebel city of Basra for the same reason, viz., his belief in the sanctity of the Muslim blood. Incidentally, no one else among his contemporaries shared this belief with him. They were not squeamish like him about shedding Muslim blood; they shed it, and torrents of it.

Ayesha interceded with Ali for her nephew and adopted son, Abdullah bin Zubayr, and begged him to pardon him. Ali said: “Pardon Abdullah bin Zubayr alone? There is pardon for everyone.”

Ali released not only Abdullah bin Zubayr but also such unconscionable enemies as Marwan bin al-Hakam, Walid bin Aqaba, Abdullah bin Aamir, and all the other Umayyads.

Nowhere in the entire history of the world has a conqueror treated his defeated enemy as generously as Ali, before or since. In granting amnesty to the rebels, he was, once again, imitating his late friend and master, Muhammad, the blessed Apostle of God, who had also pardoned the polytheists of Makkah, among them his most rabid enemies, when he conquered that city. Ali walked in the footsteps of Muhammad, and he lived in imitation of his sainted life.

A few days later, Ayesha was ready to travel. Upon her request, Ali sent her to Makkah. Her brother, Muhammad, went with her. In Makkah, she performed Umra, and then she went to Medina.

Ayesha has the reputation of being highly knowledgeable in matters of religion, and she was also a *muhaditha*, i.e., a narrator of the traditions of the Prophet. Being so knowledgeable, is it possible that she did not know that she had no right to seek vengeance for Uthman's blood?

Vengeance-seeking is the business of the injured party, and imposing penalty upon the offender(s) is the duty of the government. Ayesha was neither related to Uthman in any way nor she was a representative of the government of the Muslims. And yet she challenged the lawful government in the name of vengeance, and pushed an immense number of Muslims into the flames of war. Her obsession with war made thousands of children orphans, and thousands of women widows.

A certain woman, one Umm Aufa al-Abdiyya, once asked Ayesha: “O mother of believers, what is your opinion about a woman who kills her own child?” Ayesha said that such a woman would be thrown into hell. Umm Aufa further asked: “What will happen to a woman who killed more than 20,000 of her children at one time and one place?” Ayesha was incensed at the insinuation, and yelled scream at Umm Aufa. (*Iqd-ul-Farid*, vol. III, p. 108).

Some members of Ayesha's own family wished she had never led armies and fought battles. On one occasion, she sent a messenger to her nephew, Ibn Abil-Ateeq, asking him to send his mule to her for riding. When her nephew received the message, he said to the messenger:

“Tell the mother of believers that by God, we have not washed the stains of the blood shed in the battle of the camel yet. Does she now want to start a battle of the mule?” (*Baladhuri in Ansab al-Ashraf, vol. I, page 431*)

Ibn Abil Ateeq's remark was prompted in jest. But in 669 the day actually came when Ayesha rode a mule in another “campaign.” When the coffin of Imam Hasan was brought to the mausoleum of his grandfather, Muhammad Mustafa, for burial, Marwan bin al-Hakam and other members of the Banu Ummaya appeared on the scene, in battledores. They were going to prevent the Banu Hashim from burying Imam Hasan beside his grandfather. The Umayyads were not alone; Ayesha, the mother of believers, came with them, riding a mule!

Ayesha may have lost the battle in Basra but she “won” the “battle” in Medina. Hasan could not be buried with his grandfather because of her and Umayyad opposition, and he was buried in the cemetery of Jannat-ul-Baqi.

There is no way to rationalize the roles Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr played after the death of Uthman. The fact that they were famous personalities in the history of the Muslims, does not change or affect the roles they played. An error does not become less reprehensible because some important person committed it. An error remains an error regardless of who committed it.

The wives of the Prophet were especially expected to be discreet in everything they said or did. After all, they had to be models before the *umma* of exemplary deportment and decorum. A lapse from excellence may be condoned in the wives of the commoners but not in them. Addressing them, Qur'an says:

O consorts of the Prophet! If any of you were guilty of evident unseemly conduct, the punishment would be doubled to her, and that is easy for God. (Chapter 33; verse 30)

Some historians have made an attempt to cushion the trauma of these events for the future generations, by claiming that the deeds of the “Companions of the Camel” were merely a minor “error of judgment.” Tens of thousands of Muslims perished in the battle of Basra for no reason other than a minor error of judgment on the part of the “Companions of the Camel!”

Reference has already been made, in an earlier chapter, to the mysterious and mythical “Abdullah bin Saba,” who was, according to many Sunni historians, the real “catalyst” in the assassination of Uthman. The same historians found it necessary to explain some other perplexing and uncomfortable events by “recycling” him. This is perhaps the earliest extant example in history of recycling.

According to these historians, Abdullah bin Saba and his followers looked at peace as their nemesis. They were convinced that if Ali's overtures for peace were successful, then they would become its first casualties. Therefore, the only guarantee that they could find for their own safety, was in the civil war of the Muslims.

It was with this understanding, so say the Sunni historians, that Abdullah bin Saba and his party, attacked at night, the two armies, simultaneously. In the darkness, neither side could see or recognize the real agents provocateurs, and each side was convinced that the other had started the battle.

The invention of Abdullah bin Saba was dictated by the pragmatic necessity for the window-dressing of some embarrassing passages in history. An ingenious invention indeed but unfortunately for the window-dressers of history, and for the apologists of the “Companions of the Camel,” Abdullah bin Saba does not answer all the questions on their conduct.

For example, was it Abdullah bin Saba who violated the truce with Uthman ibn Hunaif, and who attacked Basra at night, captured it, seized its treasury, and killed more than 600 Muslims in the city? And was it Abdullah ibn Saba who threatened to kill Uthman ibn Hunaif, brutalized him, drove him out of his home, and banished him from Basra?

And how is it that when Ali sent Abdullah ibn Muslim with a copy of Qur'an to warn the rebels that they would merit the displeasure of God if they chose war in preference to peace, they shot arrows at the Book, and they killed him (Abdullah ibn Muslim, the carrier of Qur'an)? Was it Abdullah bin Saba who killed him?

And who was it who was practicing archery at Ali's army? The archers in the rebel army had killed more than twenty young men in his army before he allowed them to fight. Were these archers killing Ali's soldiers without the knowledge of Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr? If they were, did the “triumvirs” do anything to restrain them?

Ayesha lived for many years after the battle of Basra but she never referred to Abdullah bin Saba and his role as the catalyst of war. She often said that she wished that she had died long before that battle in which many thousands of Muslims were killed. If Abdullah bin Saba had been a historical figure, she would have scourged him for the carnage in the battle of Basra. Abdullah bin Saba was created a long time after the battle of Basra, and the death of Ayesha.

If Abdullah bin Saba had been a historical character, he would have been, very much, in the center of the events and the news of the times, after playing such an “outstanding” role in the early history of Islam. Was he not present in the battles of Siffin and Nehrwan? Didn't he trigger those two battles also after he had had such success in Basra? And didn't Muawiya and the Kharijis also become victims of his intrigues? Whatever happened to such an important, if sinister, character in the history of the Muslims?

Abdullah bin Saba was an entirely synthetic and an *ad hoc* character. He was designed especially by the admirers and partisans of some important personages in the early history of the Muslims. Their aim was to protect the reputation, and also, if possible, to mask the identity, of these personages.

These latter were actually responsible, first, for the assassination of Uthman, the third khalifa; and then, for the outbreak of the Second Civil War in Islam – the battle of Basra or the battle of the Camel. They

hoped that the reputation of the personages in question would become safe from the judgment of history if they could foist the blame for these events upon Abdullah bin Saba.

Abdullah bin Saba, it appears, was a most remarkable man in the history of the Muslims. He succeeded, first, in dragging to Basra, such “unwilling” leaders as Ayesha, and such “peace-loving” generals as Talha, Zubayr, Abdullah bin Zubayr, and Marwan, with their whole army, all the way across the vast Arabian desert, and then, in coaxing them to launch an attack on Ali's army. Muslims were not only eager to obey him; they were also eager to die for him, and many did, in the battle of Basra. He must have been highly charismatic. One cannot help admiring his gumption and his amazing powers.

But notwithstanding all his charisma, and his abilities and capacities, Abdullah bin Saba appears to have been a shy man. This is proven by the fact that he was “allergic” to publicity. Immediately after the battle of Basra, he plunged into obscurity, and never surfaced again. He perhaps died unsung and unmourned. It is even possible that the “midwives” who were present at his birth, were also present at his “funeral,” and they were of the opinion that his mission was accomplished, and that they could give him a burial, never to exhume him again.

The battle of Basra or the battle of the Camel is one of the greatest tragedies in the history of Islam. It struck the death blow to the unity of the Muslim *umma*, and Islam never recovered from its trauma. Many Muslim historians tell the story of the battle of Basra but when doing so they try to soft-pedal some vital issues, and they try to obfuscate the reader. Their reason for doing so is that the rebel leaders in the battle of Basra, were “Companions” of the Prophet, and therefore, they must be exonerated of all guilt or crime. After all, their “special status,” they say, entitles them to such treatment.

But the loyalty of a historian must be to truth, and not to persons, even if they are “Companions” of the Prophet. The duty of a historian is to state facts. He may analyze facts, interpret them, and establish generalizations resting on them but he must never tamper with them. He must enable the reader to judge for himself the merits of a companion of the Prophet on the basis of his “track record” instead of trying to put up a smoke-screen of slick words to hide the “warts” on his face. The failure of a historian to do this means that he is suppressing Truth which is the same thing as broadcasting Falsehood!

If the battle of Basra had not been fought, then the battles of Siffin and Nehrwan also would not have been fought. The seeds of dissension in Islam were sown and they burgeoned in the battle of Basra. If Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr had not challenged the lawful sovereign of the Muslims, the doors of schism in Islam would never have been opened.

The rebel leaders were free agents. Their choice was determined by their own personal blend of ambition, hatred, guilt and jealousy. It was not principle that prompted them but chagrin, self-interest and the lust for power posing as altruism. Their bellicosity proved counter-productive not only for the Muslims but also for themselves.

Did Muslim historians ever pause to reflect what might have happened if the “triumvirs” of Basra had

been victorious in their battle against Ali? Two things would have happened in the event of their victory, viz.,

(1) seething with hatred as they were, they would have done in A.D. 656 in Basra what Yazid the son of Muawiya did in A.D. 680 in Kerbala, i.e., they would have massacred all members of the family of Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God; and

(2) after their victory over Ali, they would have confronted Muawiya bin Abu Sufyan, the governor of Syria, in a new alignment of forces.

In this new alignment, Ayesha, Talha and Zubayr would have been on one side, and Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, on the other. The Muslim world would have been divided into these two hostile camps, and in the following struggle for hegemony, the two sides would have decimated each other.

It should be borne in mind by the reader that none of the antagonists in this new and theoretical equation, was “handicapped” such as Ali was, by his humanity and restraint, and also by his extreme aversion to bloodshed. Therefore, war between them would have been savage and ruthless, and untrammelled by any “inhibitions” for the sanctity of the Muslim blood. The Muslim world would have been deluged in blood leaving a vast power vacuum. Into this vacuum would have marched the emperor of the Byzantines with his army, and would have snuffed the light of Islam out!

The “triumvirs” had deliberately and recklessly courted war that could escalate into a major catastrophe for the Muslim *umma*. From this possible catastrophe, it was the skill, the vision, the humanity and the statesmanship of Ali that saved the *umma* of Muhammad. May God bless him and all other members of the Ahlul-Bayt of Muhammad.

It is also claimed by some historians that the “Companions of the Camel” regretted what they had done, and they had sincerely “repented;” therefore, they are innocent of all guilt. It is entirely possible that the Companions of the Camel needed catharsis – the ritual of “repentance” – to purge them of their sense of guilt. But no proof of their “repentance” has come down to us. Ali had offered redemption to them, not once but repeatedly, and they had turned it down.

If the Companions of the Camel repented, then it is for God alone to accept their repentance. God will accept their repentance if they were sincere. But acceptance by God of their repentance will not become known to us until the Day of Judgment.

The historian's job, as stated earlier, is only to isolate Truth from the mass of falsehood in which it may be hidden, and then to state it, with clarity and precision. He should interpret facts but he must not suppress them or invent them or distort them out of his fear lest they reflect an unflattering image of his favorite character(s) in the history of Islam.

After the battle, Ali said prayers for the dead of the two armies, and ordered his men to bury all the corpses lying on the battle-field. His orders to them were to show respect to the dead Muslims whether they were friends or foes. It was only when all dead Muslims were given a burial, that he could turn his

attention to other matters.

Ali Enters Basra

The historian, Masudi, “the Herodotus of the Arabs,” has appended, in his book, *The Golden Meadows*, the following vignette of Ali's army when it was entering Basra. It is also a sidelight on his military organization, and the place of the Ansar in it.

A distinguished citizen of Basra told me that when he heard that the conquering army was approaching the main gate of the city, he climbed on top of the ramparts to see it, and this is what he saw:

There were many formations of cavalry and infantry in the army of Medina though the army itself was rather small. Marching at the head of a contingent of cavalry, the first one that entered Basra, was an elderly horseman. A sword was hanging by his side, and he was carrying the standard of the unit he was leading. I inquired from the people around me who he was and they told me that he was Abu Ayub Ansari, the friend and one-time host in Medina, of Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God. His contingent of 1000 cavaliers comprised the warriors of the Ansar.

Behind them, there was another rider. He was wearing a pale yellow turban and a white robe. He carried a bow on his right shoulder, and the standard of his unit was in his left hand. He too rode at the head of 1000 cavaliers, and they too were the Ansar. He was, I learned, Khuzaima ibn Thabit Ansari.

The third officer was riding a powerful bay. He wore a white turban, carried a sword and a bow, and led a contingent of 1000 horsemen. He was Abu Qatada ibn Rabi'i Ansari.

The fourth officer rode a beautiful white charger. His dress was white and his turban was black. He appeared to be a man of great dignity and distinction, and he inspired respect and reverence among all beholders. He was very old but he had a military bearing. He was reading Qur'an as he rode toward the city. A sword was suspended by his side, and a bow hung from his right shoulder. Behind him there were 1000 horsemen. They were mostly elderly men, and they all carried long spears in their hands.

When I inquired who he was, I was told that he was Ammar ibn Yasir, the friend and beloved of Muhammad Mustafa and Ali ibn Abi Talib. Riding behind him were both the Muhajireen and the Ansar, and many of them were the veterans of Badr.

My eye was next caught by a most handsome man. He was riding a spirited roan. His dress was white and his turban was black. He was Abdullah ibn Abbas, the first cousin of Muhammad Mustafa and Ali ibn Abi Talib. With him were his brothers and his nephews.

By this time, most of the cavalry had entered Basra, and it appeared to me that the last two detachments were approaching the city gate. Presently, the first of them came up. At its head rode a horseman of powerful build. He was in full battle-dress, and he struck terror into the hearts of all those who saw him.

He was carrying a black banner in his right hand, and a spear in his left.

He appeared to be the standard-bearer of the army or some other high-ranking officer. My guess was right. He was Malik ibn Ashter, the Chief of Staff of the army of Medina, and the greatest swordsman that the Arabs ever produced. No adversary who ever faced him, escaped him. He led four thousand warriors of both cavalry and infantry.

The last man to pass in review was a cavalier who was radiant like the sun. On his right and left, there were two young men, each radiant like the full moon. All three were dressed in black. The proud and prancing horses they were riding, were also black. Another young man carrying a lance, rode ahead of them.

The man in the center, I learned, was the general of this army – Ali ibn Abi Talib. The two young men on his right and left, were his sons, Hasan and Husain – the apples of the eyes of Muhammad, the Apostle of God. The young man who was riding ahead of them, was also his son, Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah.

Behind them, there were several other formations of men in arms. They were bringing up the rear-guard of the army. Among them were the sons of Jaafer Tayyar, the sons of Aqeel ibn Abi Talib, and the other young men of Banu Hashim. They were the last horsemen to enter Basra.

Ali dismounted from his horse at the gate of the great Mosque of Basra. He went into the mosque, offered his prayers, and thanked God for His bounties, and for the gift of victory.

The citizens of Basra had gathered in the court of the mosque awaiting Ali's arrival. Presently he came out of the mosque to address them. He reproved them for their mindless conduct throughout the campaign, and said to them:

“You were the followers of a beast. When it bellowed you obeyed it; when it was killed, you all fled, and were scattered.”

Then Ali took the pledge of loyalty from the citizens of Basra. He advised them to obey God and His Messenger at all times, and never again to act like dumb sheep.

From the Mosque, Ali went to the treasury. The treasury had been plundered. He ordered all stolen property to be returned to the treasury immediately. When he paid a second visit to the treasury a little later, he noticed pieces of gold and silver piled high on the ground. He looked at these little hills of gold and silver, and said: “Try to tempt someone else.” He then ordered the treasurer to distribute everything to the troops. The treasurer distributed everything, and nothing was left in the treasury.

For some mysterious reason, Ali and the Ansar were en rapport from the beginning. And for reasons just as mysterious, the Ansar could never cotton to the Quraysh. There was little, if any, cordiality between the Quraysh and the Ansar.

It was not until Ali became caliph that the Ansar could play, for the first time since the death of their friend, Muhammad, a meaningful role in the government of the Muslims. Ali appointed them to the highest positions in the empire – both as generals in the army and as governors of the provinces. In both spheres, the Ansar distinguished themselves by their ability and integrity.

Ali offset the “provincial” character of the caliphate by “de-Qurayshisizing” the administration when he restored the rights of the Ansar to them. In his government, a man did not have to be a Qurayshi to rise to high position. Any man – whether or not he was a Qurayshi – could rise to the highest positions during Ali's caliphate, if he could present two “credentials” – character and ability.

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