

The disaster

Soon afterwards Mu`awiya left for Iraq along with one hundred and twenty thousand men and encamped near the bank of the Euphrates in the valley of Siffin near Raqqa. He marched on and occupied an open and even tract of land. Siffin is a valley near the Euphrates. During those days there were many water springs in that valley as well as a large number of trees between it and the Euphrates.

Ali also left Kufa along with his army and reached Siffin after having passed through Mada`en and Raqqa. His intention was to prevent Mu`awiya from rebellion by means of advice and kindness and to resort to fighting only if he showed stubbornness. When he reached Siffin he saw that a huge army which had encamped on the bank of the river had blocked the way of his own army to have access to water. Ali sent a message to Mu`awiya saying: "We have not come here to fight for water. If we had arrived here earlier than you we would not have prevented you from taking water".

Amr ibn al-Aas advised Mu`awiya not to block the way of Ali's army to the water. He said: "Ali's courage and valour is well-known to the world and he is accompanied by a large army of brave warriors. It is not possible that they will accept the present position and remain thirsty". Mu`awiya replied: "By God this is my first success. May God not satiate me from the fountain of Kauthar if these people drink the water of the river. In case, however, they are victorious the matter will be different". The companions of Mu`awiya had been so much emboldened that they told Ali to his face! "You will not get a drop of water until you are dead".

Strategically the position of Ali was very weak. He, however, sent Malik Ashtar to acquire control of the bank of the river. He put Mu`awiya's men to flight with his unusual valour. Now the bank was under the control of Ali's forces. According to Allamah Ibn Qutaibah Amr ibn al-Aas felt happy over this defeat of Mu`awiya and said to him: "O Mu`awiya! Just tell me one thing: Suppose they also stop water for your army as you stopped it for them, can you fight against them to get the control of the bank of the river? However, it is certain that Ali will not allow the same thing which you considered permissible".

Some of the companions of Ali wanted to pay Mu`awiya and his army back in their own coin and to stop the supply of water to them, but that great man turned down their suggestion and allowed free use of the water to the enemies. His companions insisted very much saying: "O Commander of the Faithful. Stop

water for them as they had done for you. Don't let them drink a drop of water. Let them die of thirst. There will be no need for fighting. You can catch them with your own hands". Ali replied: "I can't do what they did. Let them have access to water".

Had Mu`awiya's supporters been of noble character they would have understood the difference between Ali and Mu`awiya and would have realized as to who was on the right path and who was on the wrong. They would then have known that to assist Mu`awiya against Ali was just like helping a thief or a dacoit, or one who was fighting against a Prophet.

Whatever faith Amr ibn al-Aas had he had already sold it to Mu`awiya for the Governorship of Egypt. Otherwise there could be no justification for his helping Mu`awiya when he knew that he stood no comparison with Ali.

In the Battle of Siffin the Syrians abused and imprecated on Ali. Mu`awiya was delighted to hear all this. Most probably he himself instigated and ordered them to do so in the same way in which he had ordered during the period of his own rule that Ali should be abused from the pulpit. This villainous act is an indelible mark of disgrace on his fate, and for that reason he will be looked down upon by others for ever.

When the Iraqis heard the Syrians using such abusive language they also wished to reply in the same manner. But when Ali came to know about it he considered it a slur on the nobleness and good name of his army. He, therefore, delivered before his men a speech, which made a brilliant addition to the lofty principles of his government. He told them to behave honourably towards everyone – whether he was a friend or an enemy.

He said: "I don't like that you should begin abusing them. If you point out their misdeeds and mention the true facts about them it will be something justifiable and you will have done your duty. Instead of using abusive language you should say: 'O Lord! Protect our faith as well as theirs. Make our reconciliation possible and guide them from ignorance to wisdom so that they may be able to distinguish between truth and falsehood and forsake deviation and rebellion'".

As was usual with Ali he made his best efforts to avoid bloodshed and bring about reconciliation, but he did not succeed in this task. He kept the door of goodwill and generosity open for quite some time but the Syrians were so muddle-headed that they did not develop the capacity of distinguishing between good and evil.

Ali's companions were surprised to see that he was delaying the commencement of the battle, and was not permitting them to fight. To them he said: "As regards your asking whether I am delaying the commencement of the battle because I abhor death and want to avoid it, I swear by God that I do not care at all whether I proceed towards death or death proceeds towards me. And similarly as regards your saying that I am doubtful about the justification of jihad against the Syrians, I swear by God that I have not delayed the battle even for one day except for the reason that I thought some of these people

might join me and be guided through me and see my light with their dazzled eyes. I prefer this to killing them while they are in a state of ignorance, although, to all intents and purposes they themselves will be responsible for their sins”.

When Ali became sure that the Syrians would not at all come to the right path, and fighting was unavoidable, he took his place between the two armies and said: “O Lord! If I had known that You would be pleased if I placed the point of the sword on my belly and bent over it, and pressed it so hard that it might pierce my body and come out of my back, You are well aware that I would have done so. O God! I know only that which You have taught me. Today I cannot think of anything better than performing jihad against these wicked people. If any other act had been more pleasing to You I would certainly not have refrained from performing it”.

Then he said: “O Lord of the earth which you have made an abode for the human beings and the place for roaming about of the reptiles and the animals and other countless visible and invisible beings! O Master of the solid mountains which you have made as nails for the earth and as the means of life for the creation! If you make us dominate over our enemies guard us from injustice and keep us steadfast on the path of truth, and if you make our enemies victorious, grant us martyrdom and protect us from the temptations of life”.

A little before the battle started Amr ibn al-Aas composed some verses and sent the same to Ali. One of them read as follows:

“O Abul Hasan! Do not remain unbothered about us. When we take a matter in hand we make it absolutely firm”.

One of the companions of Ali gave a reply to this in the following words:

“Beware of Abul Hasan who is the lion of the wood of bravery and the father of the lions. He is always wary and extremely vigilant. He will crush you just as something is crushed with a pestle in a mortar. O ignorant man! How foolish you have become that you bite your hands and gnash your teeth!”

Most of the members of the Rabiyya and Mazar tribes were the supporters of Ali. Addressing one another they said: “Woe betide you! Are you not fond of Paradise?” Saying this they attacked the Syrians and dispersed their rows. They killed so many enemies that a considerable reduction in the Syrian army became clearly visible. The entire army was turned topsyturvy. Mahraz bin Saur who belonged to the Rabiyya tribe recited this epic verse:

“I kill the Syrians with my sword, but I do not find Mu`awiya who is squint-eyed and with a big belly. The fire of hell has devoured him. There the barking dogs are his neighbours. He is extremely wicked and misguided”.

The tribesmen of Rabiyya and Mazar were fully convinced that they were supporting truth. One of their

poets said:

“The people of Rabiyya tribe hurried post-haste to support truth. Truth is their highway”.

A fierce fighting took place and many persons were killed. Ali attacked them like sudden death; whoever was attacked by him was sent to hell. He was not using the sword, but Fate was using the sword. When he attacked a revolting leader, the latter saw death on his head and ran away with fear. They were extremely terror-stricken.

The Syrians suffered great losses due to the bravery and the firm faith of the Iraqis. The battle lasted for three months and twenty days during which ninety encounters took place. However, the most fierce fighting took place for two weeks. This very fighting is known as the event of Harir. In this battle one hundred and twenty thousand men belonging to both the sides were killed. Those fighting from the two sides were brothers, friends and relatives of one another and they killed their dear and near ones with their own hands. People of Azd tribe said at this juncture: “We are cutting off our hands with our own hands. These persons whom we are killing are our hands and arms”.

During the battle Ali's soldiers reached the tent of Mu`awiya four times and were about to arrest him. When Mu`awiya saw that his defeat was imminent he became very much afraid. He, therefore, decided to run away and ordered a horse to be brought for him. On the other side Ali continued cutting the Syrians to pieces. However, Mu`awiya ordered his soldiers to fight on, hoping that Satan for him and for Amr ibn al-Aas would be able to find a way of safety.

Terrible fighting started again and continued for three days. Historians say that the loss of life during these three days was unparalleled in any battle in the history of Islam. Ibn Qutaiba says that at midnight Ali got a proclamation made in his army for departure. When the sounds of the camels reached Mu`awiya's ears he called Amr ibn al-Aas and enquired from him as to what the matter was. The latter replied: “I think Ali is preparing to quit the field.

However, when the sun rose they saw that Ali had reached quite near them. Mu`awiya then said to Amr: “You told me that Ali was planning to run away but the position is quite the reverse of that”. Amr laughed and said: “This was also a part of the war strategy of Ali”. Mu`awiya then became sure that his death was imminent. In the meantime, however, the Syrians shouted: “There is the Book of God between you and us”.

The Syrians had become very much demoralized and had no competence left to fight. They tied copies of the Qur'an on the spears, ascended a hill and began crying: “O Abul Hasan! Do not reject the Book of God. You are more entitled to act upon it and to obey its judgment”. This scheme had been engineered by Amr ibn al-Aas. Ali's companions hated that man very much because he had sold his faith for material gains and had preferred Mu`awiya to Ali.

Ali knew very well that this scheme had been acted upon by the Syrians to save their lives, because

otherwise they had nothing to do with the Qur'an. He, therefore, rejected this offer of arbitration but differences appeared between his followers on this point. Some were of the view that as the battle was being fought to ensure obedience to the Book of God and the Syrians were putting forward that very Book to decide the point at issue, their offer might be accepted and fighting stopped forthwith. Others had, however, realized that an effort had been made to deceive them when they were going to be victorious.

They, therefore, insisted that fighting should be continued. None of the two groups was prepared to abandon the stand taken by it.

Ali suffered more troubles at the hands of his friends than at the hands of his enemies. As Jibran Khalil says he was like a Prophet sent for a nation other than his own and during a period other than that to which he belonged, because even his closest companions could not understand him properly. There were always some rough and hot-tempered persons in his army who violated the promises made by them and created trouble. Those who were devoted to him and those who had joined him half-heartedly were alike in this matter. One such person was Ash`ath bin Qais. He was very greedy and treacherous at heart. He betrayed Ali many times but the betrayal committed by him at Siffin was the worst.

When Mu`awiya's soldiers raised the Qur'an on the spears and said that the Book of God was between them, and it should decide the point at issue, this man (i.e. Ash`ath) approached Ali and said: "It appears that these people are ready to agree with the Syrians and to accept the Qur'an as the arbiter. If you agree I may go and see Mu`awiya to find out what his intention is".

At this moment the contention between the two groups of Iraqis (i.e. those who wanted to continue the fighting and those who wanted to stop it) became acute. Ash`ath came to Ali again and insisted that the offer of arbitration by the Qur'an should be accepted. Ali and his companions were not ready to accept the proposal, but gradually the number of Ash`ath's supporters increased and some of them became so bold as to threaten Ali saying: "O Ali! You should respond to decision by the Qur'an to which you are being invited, failing which we will kill you with the same swords with which we killed Uthman, or will surrender you to Mu`awiya. Mu`awiya has asked us to act according to the Book of God and we have agreed to do so. By God you too will have to agree, otherwise we shall deal with you in the manner which we have mentioned already".

Now Ali's position became very critical. There were two alternatives before him – either to act in such a way that a split might take place between his followers or to agree to what the rebels said.

The situation became extremely dangerous when the rebels headed by Ash`ath son of Qais asked Ali to call back Malik Ashtar, the Commander of his army, from the battle-field and threatened him that they would depose and assassinate him if he failed to do so. Ali called back Malik Ashtar from the battlefield reluctantly and accepted the proposal of arbitration under coercion.

Mu`awiya and the Syrians nominated Amr ibn al-Aas as the arbitrator from their side. Ash`ath said to

Ali: "We nominate Abu Musa Ash`ari as arbitrator from your side".

Amr ibn al-Aas was a perfect rogue whereas Abu Musa was a mere simpleton – rather a foolish person. Ali knew both of them very well. He, therefore, said: "I don't like Abu Musa Ash`ari. He deserted me at the critical time and prevented the people from helping me. Then he ran away to save his life and it was I who provided him asylum. However, I nominate Ibn Abbas to act as the arbitrator".

Ash`ath and his supporters replied: "We wish the arbitrator to be a person who is neutral and has no inclination either towards you or towards Mu`awiya".

This sentence shows how treacherous these persons had been towards Ali. They were either the agents of Mu`awiya or wanted to help him.

The Commander of the Faithful was not at all willing to nominate Abu Musa as arbitrator. He, therefore, said: "All right. If Ibn Abbas is not acceptable to you, you may nominate Malik Ashtar".

However, the rebels did not agree even to this suggestion. Ash`ath bin Qais was very jealous of Malik Ashtar. Malik Ashtar was an embodiment of truth and sincerity. He was a far-sighted person with firm determination. He was a great warrior. Ash`ath did not, however, possess any of these qualities. It was on account of his extraordinary virtues that Ali had so much regard for Ashtar. He did not have such regard for anyone else including Ash`ath. Ash`ath said furiously: "It is Ashtar who has kindled this fire. It is he under whose orders we have been pressed".

Ali and his friends could not prevail upon the rebels, whose number had increased enormously. Possibly one of the reasons for the stubbornness of those persons was that the battle had lasted too long. They had got tired and were no longer in a mood to fight. It was for this reason that they adopted this attitude towards the Commander of the Faithful and supported Ash`ath. When Ali observed their intransigence and also assessed that the number of his supporters had dwindled he said: "Are you bent upon nominating Abu Musa as the arbitrator?" They replied in the affirmative. Thereupon he said: "When I have no say in the matter you may do whatever you like".

In the army of Ali those who had not agreed to arbitration and wanted to continue fighting were very much annoyed that any human being might be appointed as the arbiter in the matter of the Book of God. And why should he be appointed when the matter was quite clear? There was no doubt about the fact that Ali was right and Mu`awiya and his supporters were wrong. This was the basis which the battle had been fought against Mu`awiya. In that battle a large number of the supporters of Ali had been killed. All of them believed that they were supporting truth by fighting from the side of Ali. Hence it was wrong for Ali to entertain any doubt himself about his being on the right and to agree to arbitration.

One of the soldiers coined the slogan: "There is no judge but God". (Later this sentence became the basic slogan of the Kharijites and all their beliefs were contained in it).

This slogan penetrated into the entire army within the shortest possible time. Everyone was shouting: "There is no judge but God". Those who opposed arbitration made it the basic principle of their new religion.

These persons began to oppose Ali openly and demanded that he should admit his mistake, rather his apostasy, because of his having agreed to arbitration, although the decision rested with God. They also demanded that he should forsake the agreement made by him with Mu`awiya. They added that they would support him and fight against Mu`awiya only if he acceded to their demand and failing that they would fight against him (i.e. against Ali).

The Commander of the Faithful did not accede to their demand. An agreement had already been concluded with Mu`awiya and both the parties had agreed to abide by the word of the arbitrators and he was not the person who might have gone back upon his word. He could also not acknowledge his apostasy, because he had been the most faithful Muslim throughout and had not violated any religious law or wronged any person. If he had been like Mu`awiya and Amr ibn al-Aas who never cared for any agreements made by them he too would have agreed to the suggestion of the Kharijites, utilized the support offered by them and eventually gained victory over Mu`awiya.

It was in these circumstances that Ali said with much pain, keeping in view his own helplessness and the disobedience and rebellion of the Kharijites:

"O you people on whom dishonest trick was played and who suffered deceit! You, who were duped in spite of being aware of the deception and fraud of the deceiver. You, who remained intransigent, followed your passions, lost the way and began to wander hither and thither. Truth was fully manifest, but you turned away from it. The path was clear but you abandoned it and went the wrong way. I swear by Him who split the seed and created the soul that had you obtained knowledge from its origin, collected goodness from its proper place, adopted the clear path and traversed the highway of truth, the paths would have welcomed you and the signs of truth would have become clear to you. Then no one would have been victim of indigence and none of the Muslims or non-Muslims would have been oppressed".

The outcome of arbitration is well-known. The Kharijites revolted against the Commander of the Faithful. As was his wont Ali tried his best that those people might forsake rebellion, and fighting should not take place. The Kharijites claimed that Abu Musa and Amr ibn al-Aas had opposed God's orders by acting as arbitrators, and their brothers (i.e. the people of Ali's army) had become infidels by agreeing to arbitration, because they had agreed to the decision by men in the matter of religion. The Kharijites said: "Now we are leaving them and God be thanked that as compared with others we are on the right path"

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