

The Unwritten Testament of the Messenger of God

Islam was the whole *raison d'être* of Muhammad Mustafa, the blessed Messenger of God. He was sent into this world to promulgate Islam. To spread the message of Islam, he had to fight against impossible odds but he overcame them.

He made Islam viable by dint of the supreme sacrifices which he made for it. Islam's framework and its value-system were to him like a garden which he had nurtured with the blood of his own loved ones.

What can be more logical than to assume that Muhammad would wish to take steps which would guarantee the security and survival of Islam for all time? What could be more natural for him than to wish to see Islam become invulnerable? He, therefore, thought of safeguarding the future interests of Islam, as far as it was in his power to do so, by writing his will and testament.

Can a Muslim imagine that Muhammad Mustafa could neglect such an important duty as writing a will for his *umma*? A will, a testament of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, stating with clarity, precision and finality, his orders regarding the transfer of sovereignty to his successor, was the absolute *sine qua non* of the consolidation of Islam.

Therefore, just before his death, he ordered those companions who were around him to bring pen, paper and ink to him so that he might dictate a manifesto for the *umma* which would protect it from going astray, and would prevent it from splintering.

It was a most reasonable request of a man who was on his deathbed, and who could die any moment.

But he met defiance!

There was a group of his companions which did not want him to write his will.

Imam Bukhari writes in Volume I of his *Sahih*: Umar said, 'The Messenger of God is overcome by pain.

We do not need any testament. We already have the Book of God, and that is enough for us.'(page 25)

Bukhari has recorded the same incident in Volume II of the *Sahih* in the following words:

“The Messenger of God said: 'Bring a piece of paper. I will write something on it for you which will prevent you from going astray.' But the people who were present, began to argue among themselves. *Some of them* said that the Messenger of God was talking in delirium.” (p. 121)

Here Bukhari has made an attempt to conceal Umar's identity behind the screen of the words *some of them*.

But Shaikh Shihab-ud-Deen Khaffaji, a Sunni historian, is less coy in this matter, and says:

“Umar said: 'The Messenger of God is talking nonsense.'“ (*Nasim-ur-Riyadh, Volume IV, page 278*)

For a Muslim to insinuate that the Last and the Greatest Messenger of God was “talking nonsense” was a most wanton and reckless statement. Is it at all possible that the Bringer and the Interpreter of God's Last Message to mankind, could become a “nonsense-talker?” And yet, what was so unreasonable or irrational or reprehensible in his request to let him write his will?

Umar's gratuitous remarks led to an argument among those companions who were present in the chamber of the Prophet. A few of them said that they ought to obey their Master, and bring pen, paper and ink to him. But the others who were in majority, supported Umar and withheld the writing implements from him. The argument became so raucous that the Prophet had to order them to get out of his room, and to leave him alone.

Bukhari further writes in his *Sahih*:

“When the sickness of the Apostle took a serious turn, he said, 'Bring paper so that I may indite for you a will that would prevent you from going astray after my death.' Umar bin al-Khattab said, 'No. This is meaningless talk. The Book of God is sufficient for us.' Another man said: 'We must bring paper,' until there was an argument, and the Apostle said: 'Get out of here.'“

The defiance of the Messenger of God by Umar had polarized the former's entourage into two groups. It was precisely from this moment that schism reared its head in the Muslim *umma*.

It was probably the last time when Muhammad, the Messenger of God and the Sovereign of Muslims, had expressed any wish before his companions. But they defied him. He was shocked but perhaps he was not surprised at their defiance. It was not the first time that they had defied him. Usama's expedition had unmasked them.

Sir William Muir

About this time, recognizing Umar, and some other chief men in the room, he (Mohammed) called out:

'Fetch me hither ink and paper, so that I may record for you a writing which shall hinder you from going astray for ever.' Umar said, 'He wandreth in his mind. Is not the Coran sufficient for us?' (*The Life of Mohammed, London, 1877*)

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

While under a strong attack of fever and surrounded by visitors, Muhammad asked that pen and ink and paper be brought. He said he would dictate something for his followers' benefit, assuring them that if they adhered to it, they would never go astray. Some of the people present thought that since the Prophet – May God's peace and blessings be upon him – was severely ill and since the Muslims already had the Quran, no further writing was necessary.

It is related that that thought belonged to Umar. The people present disagreed among themselves, some wishing to bring writing materials and take down what the Prophet would dictate, and others thinking that any further writing besides that of the Book of God would be superfluous.

Muhammad asked them to leave, saying, 'You must not disagree in my presence.'

Ibn Abbas feared that Muslims might lose something important if they did not bring the writing materials but Umar held firmly to his decision which he based upon God's Own words in His Book: "In this scripture, We have left out nothing." (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

In an article captioned *Iqbal and Islamic Polity*, published in the April 1964 issue of the monthly magazine, *Muslim News International*, of Karachi, Pakistan, the writer, Jamilud-Din Ahmad, says:

"...The question which confronts the Muslim countries is, whether the law of Islam is capable of evolution – a question which will require great intellectual effort and is sure to be answered in the affirmative; provided the world of Islam approaches it in the spirit of Umar – the first critical and independent mind in Islam, who, at the last moments of the Prophet, had the moral courage to utter these remarkable words: *The Book of God is sufficient for us.*"

The writer quoted above apparently is very proud of the "moral courage" of Umar.

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, was on his deathbed, and perhaps did not have many hours to live. It was this time that Umar chose to demonstrate his moral courage. At Hdaybiyya, Muhammad Mustafa had ordered him to carry a message to the Quraysh in Makkah but he refused to go on the plea that since there was no one in that city to protect him, they would kill him.

Also, when the Treaty of Hdaybiyya was signed, Umar was led, by his "love" of Islam to defy the Apostle of God, and now when the latter was dying, the same "love" asserted itself once again, and forced him to prevent him (the Apostle) from dictating anything that would "impair the authority of the Book of God."

If Umar was prompted to disobey Muhammad Mustafa for this reason, then it means that he (Umar) believed that he (Muhammad) was going to challenge the authority of Qur'an. But how did Umar know that Muhammad would challenge the authority of Qur'an? If the latter had dictated the will, its first few words would have shown, beyond any doubt, if he was, in the words of Umar, "wandering in his mind" and was "talking nonsense."

Perhaps it did not occur to Jamilud-Din Ahmad that Umar was pitting his "critical and independent mind" against the authority of Al-Qur'an al-Majid which says:

It is prescribed, when death approaches any of you, if he leaves any goods, that he make a bequest to parents and next of kin, according to reasonable usage; this is due from the God-fearing. (Chapter 2; verse 180)

But it is possible that Umar was prompted to disobey the Apostle not by his fear that the latter would, in the last moments of his life, undo the work he had done in a lifetime, by overriding the authority of Qur'an; but by his presumption that he (the Apostle) would put into writing what he had said earlier at Ghadeer-Khumm before the multitude of the pilgrims, designating Ali ibn Abi Talib as his successor.

Umar had to block him regardless of cost. A testament bearing the seal and signature of the Prophet, designating Ali as the future head of the State of Islam would be a document that would put caliphate beyond the reach of all other candidates for it.

The Prophet had no illusions about the intentions of his principal companions vis-à-vis Ali's succession as the supreme head of the dominion of Islam. As he grew noticeably weaker, they grew noticeably bolder in defying him.

The expedition of Usama was still hanging fire. In sheer exasperation, the Prophet invoked the curse of God upon those men who did not report for duty to Usama but they did not budge. And they were just as unfazed when he ordered them out of his chamber.

A modern Muslim may find it incredible that any companion of the Prophet of Islam would attribute his commands to "delirium." But there is a Qur'anic parallel for such conduct. It appears that those companions of Muhammad, the Prophet of the Arabs, who said that he was "wandering in his mind," had their own forerunners in the brothers of Joseph, the Prophet of the Israelites. The brothers of Joseph said that Jacob, their father who was also a prophet, was "wandering in his mind." They thought that they were the "smart" ones which he was not. Qur'an has quoted them as follows:

They said: "truly Joseph and his brother are loved more by our father than we: But we are a goodly body! really our father is obviously wandering (in his mind) Slay ye Joseph or cast him out to some (unknown) land, that so the favor of your father may be given to you alone (there will be time enough) for you to be righteous after that." (Chapter 12; verses 8 and 9)

Translator's Note

The ten brothers not only envied and hated their innocent younger brothers Joseph and Benjamin. They despised and dishonored their father as an ignorant fool – in his dotage. In reality Jacob had the wisdom to see that his younger and innocent sons wanted protection and to perceive Joseph's spiritual greatness.

But his wisdom, to them, was folly or madness or imbecility, because it touched their self-love, as truth often does. And they relied on the brute strength of numbers – the ten hefty brethren against old Jacob, the lad Joseph, and the boy Benjamin. (*A. Yusuf Ali*)

Explaining the last line of the second verse, quoted above, the commentator further says:

They (the brethren of Joseph) say in irony, “Let us first get rid of Joseph. It will be time enough then to pretend to be 'good' like him, or to repent of our crime after we have had all its benefits in material things.”

Here a student of history might pose the question: Why didn't Muhammad dictate his will later, after the initial failure; surely, there were occasions when the companions gathered again to see him, and he could have dictated his will to them.

We can assume that Muhammad could have dictated his will at a later time but what was there to prevent Umar and his supporters from claiming that it was dictated in a state of “delirium,” and was “nonsensical,” and was, therefore, not acceptable to the *umma*. Muhammad had not heard anything more ugly since the times of Abu Jahl, and was not very anxious to hear it again, especially when he was on his deathbed. He, therefore, abandoned the idea.

Umar's ploy would have worked even if Muhammad had dictated the will. To rationalize Umar's conduct, his apologists say that religion had been completed and perfected, and a will, therefore, was not necessary.

It is true that religion was now complete and perfect but it didn't mean that the *umma* was perfect, and that it could dispense with guidance since it was in no danger of deviating from the course of Truth. The *umma* could deviate from rectitude and it did. All the civil wars, dissension's and schisms in Islam, were caused by this deviation.

For the *umma* to assert that such a will was not necessary, is to arrogate too much authority to itself. It ought to leave this matter to the judgment of the man whom God selected to be His Messenger to mankind. He alone knew if a will was necessary or not. What right the *umma* has to restrict the freedom of action of the Representative of God on this earth?

Umar's defiance of Muhammad, when the latter was already at the door of death, is one of the most hideous scenes in the history of Islam, and no amount of window-dressing by historians can finesse it

away. The same scene was also the prelude to sustained confrontation between the companions and the members of his (the Prophet's) family.

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