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Lesson 15: The Shi'ah and 'Alawi Uprisings during the Period of Umayyad Caliphate

The Shi'ah uprisings and armed confrontations commence at Karbala' and the 'Ashura' movement, but we shall not touch on the topic of Karbala' for the meantime.

After the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (‘a) in the 60s AH, two Shi'ah uprisings—that of the *Tawwabun* and Mukhtar—took place whose leaders were not 'Alawis but rather common pious Shi'ah. (We discussed them at length earlier.)

As these two uprisings were staged by Shi'ah, they boasted a completely Shi'i nature. There is no difference of opinion concerning the leaders of the *Tawwabun* that they were from among the companions of the Prophet (‘a) and Shi'ah of the Commander of the Faithful (‘a).¹ We have also stated in detail the view of leading Shi'ah figures and *rijal* scholars who unanimously believed in his good intention and the authentic narrations identified the slander against him coined by his opponents.

With respect to the impact of the movements in the spread of Shi'ism, it must be said that the *Tawwabun* movement was short-lived and as such, it had no opportunity to propagate Shi'ism though it was important in terms of the qualitative spread of the Shi'ah faith, deepening the love for the *Ahl al-Bayt* (‘a) in the hearts making the Shi'ah more devoted and firm in their beliefs.

The uprising of Mukhtar, however, was effective in the spread of Shi'ism and Mukhtar was able to add non-Arabs in the ranks of the Shi'ah as it was not like that earlier.² Since that time, Shi'ism spread in the eastern part of the Muslim territories, and we could see its peak in the movement of the black-wearing ones and the 'Abbasids.

The chain of 'Alawi uprisings which took place during the latter part of the Umayyad rule had a sort of relationship with the movement of the 'Abbasids because Banu Hashim—including both the 'Alawis and the 'Abbasids—were united during the period of the Umayyad caliphate and there was no conflict

between them. In fact, the first two ‘Abbasid caliphs, Safah and Mansur, had earlier paid allegiance to Muhammad Nafs az-Zakiyyah who was one of the descendants of Imam al-Hasan (‘a).

After the victory of the ‘Abbasids, however, the same Muhammad along with a number of his family members was killed by the ‘Abbasid caliph Mansur. Throughout the second century AH, the ‘Alawi uprisings were related to one another more on the basis of the Zaydi ideology though the ‘Abbasids capitalized greatly on the uprising of Zayd. As Amir ‘Ali, one of the contemporary historians, says in this regard:

The death of Zayd strengthened the ‘Abbasid campaigners and confirmed the campaigns in full swing at the time for the caliphate of the descendants of ‘Abbas. That barrier of probable competition was removed from their way and it turned well suitable with the trend of the events related to Abu Muslim such that it was built for the overthrow of the Umayyads.[3](#)

a. The Uprising of Zayd

Zayd, the noble son of Imam as-Sajjad (‘a) and brother of Imam al-Baqir (‘a) rose up and staged an uprising against the cruelties of the Umayyad caliph Hashim and his agents. Zayd who went to Damascus to complain against Yusuf ibn ‘Amru, the then governor of Iraq, was belittled and reproached by Hashim, and upon his return from Sham, he was surrounded by the Shi‘ah in Kufah, urging him to rise up against the Umayyads. But because of the wound he suffered at the heat of his fight, his uprising did not succeed and he himself attained martyrdom.[4](#)

Regarding the personality and uprising of Zayd, various narrations have been transmitted with a group of narrators who reproach him. The Shi‘ah scholars and authorities, however, are of the opinion that Zayd was a noble and meritorious man and strong evidence fails to prove his deviation. Shaykh al-Mufid has this to say concerning him:

Many of the Shi‘ah regard him as Imam and the reason for this is that Zayd rose up and called on the people for the pleasure of Muhammad’s progeny. The people thought that he was referring to himself though it was not the case because he knew that his brother, Imam al-Baqir (‘a), was the rightful Imam and the Imam also introduced to him the Imamate {*imamah*} of his son, Imam as-Sadiq (‘a).[5](#)

After reporting the narrations related to Zayd, ‘Allamah Majlisi also writes, thus:

Be it known that the reports concerning the status of Zayd are varied and contradictory but there are more reports expressing his dignity, grandeur and merit and that he had no incorrect assertions and most of the Shi‘ah ‘*ulama*’ have praised him. Therefore, it is appropriate for us to regard him positively and avoid reproaching him.[6](#)

Ayatullah al-Khu‘i thus says about Zayd: “The narrations praising Zayd and indicating his dignity and grandeur and that he rose up to enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil are much benefited while the

narrations vilifying him are weak *{dha'if}*.⁷

Ample proof and evidence bear witness to the fact that Zayd's uprising had the secret permission and tacit approval of Imam as-Sadiq (‘a). One of these proofs was the statement of Imam ar-Ridha (‘a) in response to Ma'mun, when the Imam said:

My father Musa ibn Ja'far narrated that he heard his father Ja'far ibn Muhammad to have said: "...Zayd consulted me about his uprising and I said to him, 'My dear uncle, if you like to be that person who shall be hung in Kinasah,⁸ then that is your way'." When Zayd left Ja'far ibn Muhammad, Ja'far said: "Woe to him who will hear the call of Zayd but will not respond to it."⁹

Yes, Zayd was a true Shi'ah and one of those who believed in the Imamate of Imam as-Sadiq (‘a). As he used to say,

In every period, one person from among us, *Ahl al-Bayt*, is the proof *{hujjah}* of God and the proof at our time is my nephew, Ja'far ibn Muhammad. He who follows him shall never be misled and he who opposes him shall never be guided.¹⁰

Concerning the fact that Zayd was not regarding himself the Imam and not calling the people toward himself, Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) says:

May God have mercy upon my uncle Zayd. If he only emerged victorious, he would remain faithful (to his promise). My uncle Zayd was calling the people toward the leadership of the person chosen from among the progeny of Muhammad and I am that person.¹¹

In particular, Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) assumed the guardianship of the family of Zayd after his martyrdom,¹² and he used to attend to the families of those who were martyred alongside Zayd and once distributed one thousand dinars among them.¹³

It can be said, therefore, that Zayd's uprising, like that of the *Tawwabun* and Mukhtar, was completely Shi'i and justifiable; that it was against oppression and for the purpose of enjoining that which is good and forbidding that which is evil; and that his method was separate from that of the Zaydi sect.

b. The Uprising of Yahya ibn Zayd

After Zayd's martyrdom in 121 AH, his son Yahya continued his father's struggle. He went to Khurasan through Mada'in and remained in disguise for sometime in the city of Balkh until he was arrested by Nasr ibn Sayyar.

He was imprisoned for sometime until he was able to escape after the death of the Umayyad caliph Hashim, and many people from among the Shi'ah of Khurasan gathered around him. He headed toward Nayshabur and engaged in a battle with its governor, 'Umar ibn Zurarah al-Qasri and defeated him. But, at last, in 125 AH at Jawzjan, he was wounded in the forehead and was killed at the battle arena while

his forces dispersed. [14](#)

In contrast to Zayd's uprising, his son Yahya's uprising was tainted by Zaydism. This fact can be discerned from the dialogue that took place between him and Mutawakkil ibn Harun, one of the companions of Imam as-Sadiq (‘a), in which he somehow expressed his belief in the Imamate of his father while regarding himself as his father's successor. In addition to other requisites, he considered fighting by sword as a requisite of Imamate. [15](#)

It is at this point that the Zaydi sect takes form and its way becomes separate from that of the Shi'ah Imamiyyah and Ithna Ash'ari. The followers of the Zaydi sect do not even refer to the infallible Imams (‘a) on juristic questions {*masa'il al-fiqhiyyah*}.

Lesson 15: Summary

The uprisings of the Shi'ah begun with the movement of 'Ashura'. The uprisings of the *Tawwabun* and that of Mukhtar were obviously staged to take vengeance for the martyrdom of Imam al-Husayn (‘a). None of the leaders of these two uprisings was an 'Alawi. Rather, they were distinguished Shi'ah and they had a great impact on the spread of Shi'ism.

The uprising of Zayd ibn 'Ali was against the cruelties of Hashim, the tyrant Umayyad caliph. Zayd was a noble and meritorious person, and he rose up in order to enjoin what is good and forbid what is wrong. Imam as-Sadiq (‘a) has validated him.

Yahya ibn Zayd went to Khurasan after the martyrdom of his father and rose up there against the Umayyads, but he, like his father, was wounded in the battle and died. The uprising of Yahya, in contrast to that of his father, was completely Zaydi in nature.

Lesson 15: Questions

1. When did the Shi'ah uprisings commence?
2. What motivated the uprising of Zayd?
3. How did the uprising of Yahya differ with that of Zayd?

[1.](#) See Dr. Sayyid Husayn Ja'fari, *Tashayyu' dar Masir-e Tarikh*, trans. Sayyid Muhammad Taqi Ayatullahi, 9th edition (Tehran: Daftar-e Nashr-e Farhang-e Islami, 1378 AHS), pp. 268-273.

[2.](#) Rasul Ja'fariyan, *Tarikh-e Tashayyu' dar Iran az Aghaz ta Qarn-e Hashtum-e Hijri*, 5th edition (Qum: Shirkat-e Chap wa Nashr-e Sazman-e Tablighat-e Islami, 1377 AHS), p. 76.

[3.](#) Amir 'Ali, *Tarikh-e Gharb va Islam {History of the West and Islam}*, trans. Fakhr Da'i Gilani, 3rd edition (Tehran: Intisharat-e Ganjineh, 1366 AHS), pp. 162-163.

[4.](#) 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Mas'udi, *Murawwij adh-Dhahab* (Beirut: Manshurat Mu'assasah al-A'lam Li'l-Matbu'at, 1411 AH), vol. 3, pp. 228, 230.

[5.](#) Shaykh al-Mufid, *Al-Irshad*, trans. Muhammad Baqir Sa'idi Khurasani (n.p.: Kitabfurushi-ye Islamiyyeh, 1367 AHS), p.

6. Muhammad Baqir al-Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, 2nd edition (Tehran: Al-Maktabah al-Islamiyyah, 1394 AH), vol. 46, p. 205.

7. Sayyid Abu'l-Qasim al-Khu'i, *Mu'jam Rijal al-Hadith* (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), pp. 102–103.

8. Kinasah had been one of the places in Kufah. See Yaqut ibn 'Abd Allah, *Mu'jam al-Buldan*, 1st edition (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, 1417 AH), vol. 4, p. 153.

9. Shaykh as-Saduq, *'Uyun Akhbar ar-Rida*, 1st edition (Beirut: Ma'assasah al-A'lamī Li'l-Matbu'at, 1404 AH), vol. 1, p. 225, section {bab} 25, hadith 1.

10. Shaykh as-Saduq, *Al-Amali* (Qum: Al-Matba'ah, 1373 AH), p. 325.

11. Shaykh at-Tusi, *Ikhtiyar Ma'rifah ar-Rijal* (Rijal Kashi), researched by Sayyid Mahdi Raja'i (Qum: Mu'assasah Al al-Bayt at-Turath, 1404 AH), p. 2 and see Mahdi Pishva'i, *Sireh-ye Pishvayan*, 8th edition (Qum: Mu'assasah-ye Tahqiqati va Ta'limati-ye Imam Sadiq ('a), 1378 AHS), pp. 407–409.

12. 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, *Maqatil at-Talibiyyin* (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1416 AH), p. 331.

13. *Al-Irshad*, p. 345.

14. Ibn Wadhih, *Tarikh al-Ya'qubi*, 1st edition (Qum: Manshurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1414 AH), vol. 2, pp. 326–327, 332.

15. Mutawakkil ibn Harun says: "I paid a visit to Yahya ibn Zayd when he went to Khurasan after his father was killed. I greeted him and he asked where I come from and I replied that I come from Hajj pilgrimage. Then he asked about the condition of his relatives and cousins in Medina and he particularly asked about the condition of Ja'far ibn Muhammad ('a). I also told him about the condition of the Imam and his lamentation for his (Yahya's) father Zayd. He then said: 'My uncle, Muhammad ibn 'Ali prevented my father from waging war against the Umayyads and relayed to him the would-be end of my father's plan. Did you pay a visit to my cousin, Ja'far ibn Muhammad?' 'Yes,' I retorted. He asked, 'Did you hear him telling something about my activity?' 'Yes,' I responded. He said, 'What did he say about me? Please inform me.' I said: 'May I be your ransom! I do not like to tell you that which I have heard from him.' He said, 'Are you frightening me with death? You tell whatever you have heard.' I said: 'I heard the Imam saying that you shall be killed and be hung in the same manner that your father was killed and hanged.' So, the color of his face changed and said: 'Yamhu'llah ma yasha' wa yuthabbit wa 'inda umm al-kitab. O Mutawakkil! God, the Exalted, confirmed His religion through us and gave us knowledge and sword, and we possess both of them. But our cousins possess knowledge only.' I said: 'May I be your ransom! The people incline more toward your cousin Ja'far than you.' He said: 'My uncle, Muhammad ibn 'Ali and his son, Ja'far, are calling the people toward life while we call them toward death.' I said: 'O son of the Messenger of Allah! Who is more knowledgeable, you or he?' He lowered his head for sometime and then raised it, saying: 'All of us have knowledge. The only difference is that that which we know is also known to them and that which they know is not known to us.' He then asked me: 'Have you recorded something from my cousin?' 'Yes,' I replied. He said: 'Show (them) to me.' I showed to him some of the hadiths of Imam as-Sadiq to him and some of the supplications in *Sahifah as-Sajjadiyyah*..." *Sahifah al-Kamilah as-Sajjadiyyah*, trans. 'Ali-Naqi Faydh al-Islam (n.p.: Intisharat-e Faydh Islam, n.d.), pp. 9–12.

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