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Second Sermon: 'Ashura - History and Popular Legend

In the Name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

All Praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of the worlds and the Maker of all creation, and may Peace and benedictions be upon His servant and messenger, His beloved and elect, our master, our prophet, and our sire, Abu al-Qasim Muhammad, may Allah bless him and his pure, immaculate, and infallible Progeny.

I seek the refuge of Allah from the accursed Satan:

"So for their breaking their compact We cursed them and made their hearts hard; they would pervert the words from their meanings, and they forgot a portion of what they were reminded of." (5:13)

We said that the event of 'Ashura' has been subject to *tahrif* and it has occurred both in its outward form as well as its inner content. A consequence of these distortions has been that this great historic document and this great educative source has become ineffectual or less potent, in our lives, leaving, at times, even an opposite effect.

All of us have the duty to purge it of the distortions that have polluted this sacred document. Tonight we will discuss the general factors responsible for *tahrif*. Thereafter our discussion will focus on *tahrif* in the content and significance of this event.

The Factors of Tahrif

These factors are of two kinds, one of which is of a general nature. That is, there are in general certain factors that lead to the corruption of histories and these are not limited to the event of 'Ashura' alone. For instance, the enemy's motives are themselves a factor that distort an event. In order to achieve their purposes, the enemies bring about alterations in historical texts or misinterpret them. There are many

examples of it which I do not wish to mention here.

All that I would say is that this kind of *tahrif* did play a role in distorting the facts of *Karbala'*, and the enemies did take resort in misrepresenting the uprising of Imam Husayn. As usually happens, the enemies accuse sacred movements of causing conflict and division and of disrupting social harmony and peace. The Umayyad regime also made much effort to give such a hue to the Husayni uprising.

Such propaganda began from the very first day. When Muslim arrived in Kufah, Yazid, while sending an order appointing Ibn Ziyad to the governership of Kufah, wrote: "Muslim, son of 'Aqil, has gone to Kufah and his aim is to disrupt peace and to create social discord and disunity in the Muslim community. Go and suppress him."

When Muslim was captured and brought to the *dar al-imarah*, the governor's residency, Ibn Ziyad said to Muslim: "Son of 'Aqil! What was it that brought you to this city? The people here lived in satisfaction and peace.

You came and disrupted their peace, causing disunity and conflict amongst Muslims." Muslim answered in a manly manner and said: "Firstly, I did not come to this city on my own account. It was the people of this city who invited us.

They wrote a great number of letters, which are in our possession. In those letters they wrote that your father, Ziyad, who ruled this city for years, had killed its virtuous men and imposed its scoundrels over the virtuous, subjecting them to various forms of tyranny and injustice. They appealed to us to help them establish justice. We have come to establish justice!"

The Umayyad regime did wage much propaganda of this kind, but their misrepresentations did not affect the history of Islam. You will not find a single competent historian in the world who might have said that Husayn ibn 'Ali, *naudhubillah*, made an unlawful uprising that he rose to cause conflict and disunity among the people. No.

The enemy could not bring about any misrepresentation in [the history of] the event of Karbala'. Most regrettably, whatever *tahrif* has occurred in the event of Karbala' has been at the hands of the friends.

The Second Factor

The second factor is the human tendency towards myth-making and for turning facts into legends. This tendency has been at work in all the world's historical traditions. There is a tendency in men for hero worship which induces the people to fabricate myths and legends about national and religious heroes.[1]

The best evidence of it are the legends that the people have invented around the figures of some geniuses such as Ibn Sina and Shaykh Baha'i. Ibn Sina, undoubtedly, was a genius and was gifted with extraordinary physical and intellectual powers. But these very gifts have led the people to weave out

legends about him.

For instance, it is said that once Ibn Sina saw a man from a distance of one parasang and remarked that the man was eating bread made with oil. They asked him how he could know that the man was eating bread and that it was made with oil.

He replied that he saw flies circling the bread, which had made him conclude that there was oil in the bread. Obviously, this is a legend. Someone who can see flies from the distance of one parasang will see bread made with oil much sooner than he would see flies!

Or it is said that once during the time that Ibn Sina was studying at Isfahan he complained that when he gets up in the middle of the night to study, he was disturbed by the noise of the hammering of the coppersmiths of Kashan.

They went and made a test. One night they told the coppersmiths of Kashan not to use their hammers. That night, said Ibn Sina, he had slept peacefully and was undisturbed in his study. Obviously this is a legend.

Many such legends have been made about Shaykh Bahi'i as well. Such things are not confined to the event of *'Ashura*. However, let the people say what they would about Ibn Sina. What harm does it do?

None! But in respect of individuals who are guides of mankind and whose words and deeds and whose stands and uprisings serve as a model and authority, there should not be any *tahrif* whatsoever in their statements, in their personality, and history.

How many legends have been fabricated by us Shi'is about Amir al Mu'minin 'Ali, many Peace be upon him! There is no doubt that 'Ali (*'a*) was an extraordinary man. No one has doubts about 'Ali's courage which was superior to that of any ordinary human being. 'Ali did not encounter any contestant in battle without felling him to the ground.

But does that satisfy the myth makers? Never! For instance, there is the legend about 'Ali's encounter with Marhab in the battle of Khaybar with all the curious details about the physique of Marhab. The historians have also written that 'Ali's sword cut him into two from the middle (I don't know whether the two halves were perfectly equal!).

But here they found the opportunity to weave out fables which are harmful for the faith. It is said that God commanded Gabriel to go immediately to the earth lest 'Ali's sword when it comes down on Marhab should cut the earth into two halves, reaching right down to the Cow and the Fish.

Gabriel was told to shield the blow with his wings. Gabriel went and when 'Ali struck the blow with his sword, it slashed Marhab into two halves which had they been put in a balance would have turned out to be exactly equal.

However, one of Gabriel's wings suffered injury and he could not ascend to the heaven for forty days. When at last he arrived in heaven, God asked him as to where he had been all these days. He replied, “O Lord! I was on the earth. You had given me an assignment to go there.” He was asked why he had taken so much time to return.

Gabriel said, “O God, the blow of 'Ali's sword wounded my wings and I was busy bandaging and healing them all these forty days!” According to another legend 'Ali's sword flew so swiftly and slickly through Marhab's forehead cutting all the way to the saddle that when 'Ali pulled away his sword Marhab himself did not know what had happened (he thought the blow had gone amiss).

He jeered at 'Ali, “Was that all of your swordsmanship?!” 'Ali' said to him, “Just move yourself a bit and see.” As soon as Marhab made a movement, one half of his body fell on one side of the horse and the other on the other side!

Hajji Nuri, this great man, in his book *Lu'lu wa marjan*, while condemning the practice of fabricating of such legends, writes about legends that some people have put into circulation concerning the valor of Hadrat Abu al-Fadl al-'Abbas.

According to one of them, in the Battle of *Siffin* (in which, basically, it is not known whether he had participated, and even if he did he must have been a boy of fifteen years) he threw a man into the air, then another, and so on up to eighty men, and by the time the last one was thrown up the first one had not yet reached the ground. Then when the first one came down, he cut him into two halves, then the second and so on to the last man!

A part of the interpolations in the narratives of the event of Karbala have resulted from the myth-making tendency. The Europeans assert that one finds many exaggerations in accounts pertaining to the history of the East, and there is some truth in what they say.

Mulla Darbandi writes in his book *Asrar al-shahadah* that the cavalry of the army of 'Umar ibn Sa'd consisted of six hundred thousand horsemen and twenty million infantrymen - in all a force of one million and six hundred thousand plus all the people of Kufah! Now how large was Kufah?

Kufah was a recently founded city and not more than thirty-five years old, as it was built during the time of 'Umar ibn Khattab. It was built at 'Umar's orders as a military outpost for Muslim warriors near the borders of Iran. It is not certain whether the entire population of Kufah during that time was even a hundred thousand.

That a force of one million and six hundred thousand could have been assembled on that day and that Husayn ibn 'Ali' should have killed three hundred thousand of them is not at all reasonable. Such figures cast a shadow on the whole event.

It is said that someone once made exaggerated claims about the largeness of the city of Herat in former

days. He said, 'Herat was a very big city at one time.' 'How big? he was asked. He said, 'At one time there were in Herat twenty thousand one-eyed cooks named Ahmad selling head and totters stew. Now imagine how many men there must be in a city, and how many named Ahmad, and how many one-eyed Ahmads, to have twenty-one thousand one-eyed Ahmads selling head and totters stew!

This myth-making tendency has always been very active; but we must not leave a sacred document to the mercy of myth-makers.

There is amongst us, the *Ahl al-Bayt*, in every generation reformers who purge the faith of the perversions of the extremists, of the false beliefs of the falsifiers, and of the misinterpretations of the ignorant.2

We have a duty here. Now let anyone say anything he likes about Herat. But is it right that such legends as these should find way into the history of the event of *Ashura'*, an event concerning which our duty is to keep it alive and revive its memory every year?

The Third Factor

The third factor is of a particular nature. The two factors that we have discussed above, that is, the hostile ends of the enemies and the human tendency for conjuring legends and myths, apply to all histories of the world, but there is also a factor which is specific to the event of *Ashura'* that has led to fabrication of stories.

The leaders of the faith, from the time of the Noble Messenger and the Pure Imams, have commanded in clear and emphatic terms that the memory of Husayn ibn 'Ali must be kept alive and that his martyrdom and ordeals should be commemorated every year. Why? What is the reason underlying this Islamic ordinance? Why is there so much encouragement for and emphasis on visiting the shrine of Husayn ibn 'Ali?

We should reflect over these questions. Some might say that it is for the sake of condoling with Hadrat Zahra' and offering her consolation! But is it not ridiculous to imagine that Hadrat Zahra' should still need consolation after fourteen hundred years, whereas, in accordance with the explicit statements of Imam Husayn and according to our creed, since his martyrdom Imam Husayn and Hadrat Zahra have been together in heaven?

What a thing to say! Is it correct to think of Hadrat Zahra as a little child that goes on weeping, even after fourteen centuries, and whom we have to go and console? Such kind of belief is destructive for religion. Imam Husayn (*'a*) established the practical ideology of Islam and he is the practical model for Islamic movements.

They (that is the Prophet and Imams) wanted Imam Husayn's ideology to be kept alive. They wanted Husayn should reappear every year with those sweet, sublime and heroic summons of his and declare"

Don't you see that what is right and true is not acted upon, and what is wrong and false is not forbidden? [In such conditions] the man of faith should long to meet his true Lord![3]

They wanted the words:

Death is better than a life saddled with indignity,[4]

To be kept alive forever, and so also the words:

To me death is nothing but felicity, and life with oppressors is nothing but disgrace,[5]

They wanted such other saying of Imam Husayn to be kept alive:

The children of Adam carry the mark of death like necklaces that adorn the neck of damsels![6]

Far from us is disgrace and indignity![7]

They wanted to keep alive the memory of such scenes as that of Imam Husayn's confronting a force of thirty thousand men, in a state when he and his family are faced with a great ordeal and declaring in a manly manner – and the world has never seen such a manly personage!

Indeed, that baseborn son of a baseborn father has left me only two alternatives to choose from: the sword or disgrace. And far from us is disgrace! It is disdainful to God, His Messenger and the faithful that we should yield to anything of that kind, and those born of chaste mothers and high-minded fathers and possessing a lofty sense of honor disdain that submission to vile men should be preferred to honorable death![8]

They wanted to keep alive the formative school of Imam Husayn so that the rays of the Husayni spirit may breathe life into this community. Its objective is quite clear.

Do not allow the event of 'Ashura' to be consigned to oblivion! Your life, your humanity, and your dignity depend on this event!

You can keep Islam alive only by its means! That is why they have encouraged us to keep alive the tradition of mourning Imam Husayn, and very rightly! The institution of mourning Husayn ibn 'Ali has a correct philosophy underlying it, a philosophy which is also extremely sublime.

It is fitting that we should do all that we can to endeavor for the sake of this cause, provided we understand its purpose and goal. Unfortunately some people have not understood it.

Without making the people understand the philosophy of Imam Husayn's uprising and without making them understand the station of Imam Husayn, they imagine that if they just came and sat in mourning assemblies and shed tears, without knowledge and understanding, it would atone their sins.

Marhum Hajji Nuri mentions a point in the book, *Lu'lu' wa marjan.* That point is the belief of some people that the reward (*thawab*) for mourning Imam Husayn is so great that it is justifiable to employ any means whatsoever for this end. Nowadays a group which subscribes to the views of Machiavilli in political thought says that ends justify the means. If the end is a good one, it does not matter what means are used to achieve it.

Now these people also say that we have a sacred and exalted goal, which is mourning Imam Husayn and it does not matter what means are used for this end. As the end is a sacred one, it does not matter what the means are: Is it correct to perform *ta'ziyahs* – even *ta'ziyahs* which are vulgar – for this purpose? They ask, 'Do they make the people cry?

If they do, there is so problem with such *ta'ziyahs*.' So also there is no problem if we blow trumpets, beat drums, commit sinful acts, make men dress as women, conjure a wedding for Qasim, or fabricate and forge episodes. Such things do not matter in the tradition of mourning Imam Husayn, which is something exclusive.

Here lying is forgiven, forgery and fabrication are forgivable, making pictures, and dressing men as women is pardonable. Here any kind of sinful conduct is forgivable as the end is most sacred! As a consequence of such thinking, some persons have resorted to such *tahrif* and misrepresentation that are stunning.

About ten or fifteen years ago when I was on a visit to Isfahan, I met a great man, marhum Hajj Shaykh Muhammad Hasan Najafabadi, may God elevate his station. I recounted to him a *rawdah* that I had heard recently somewhere. It was something which I had never heard until that time. Incidentally, this man who had delivered that *rawdah*, an opium addict, had made the people weep profusely with that *rawdah* of his.

In it he recounted the story of an old woman during the reign of Mutawakkil (the 'Abbasid caliph who persecuted the Shi'ah). The woman had set out with the purpose of making a pilgrimage to the tomb of Imam Husayn, which was forbidden at that time and they would cut off the hands of the pilgrims. He went on with the narrative until the point when the old woman is taken and thrown into the river. In that state she cries out for help, calling out, “O Abu al–Fadl al–'Abbas!”

As she is about to drown a horseman appears and tells her to catch hold of his stirrup. The woman takes hold of the stirrups but she says, “Why don't you give me your hand?' The horseman says, “I haven't any hands!” At this point the people wept a lot.

Marhum Hajj Shaykh Muhammad Hasan recounted for me the history of this legend. In a place near the bazaar, in the near abouts of Madrasah Sadr, there used to be held a *majlis* which was one of the major *majalis* of Isfahan and which even the *marhum* Hajj Mulla Isma'il Khwaju'i used to attend. One day there had occurred there an incident.

(It had taken place earlier and he had heard its account from reliable persons.) It involved a well-known *wa'iz*; who himself had recounted it in these words: "One day mine was the last turn to speak from the minbar.

Other speakers had come and each one of them had exerted his skills to make the people weep. Everyone that came would try to surpass his predecessor and having delivered his *rawdah* would descend from the minbar to sit among the audience and watch the art of the succeeding *rawdeh-khwan*. This continued until the time of noon.

I saw that everyone had tried his prowess and together they had drawn out all the tears that the people could shed. What should I do? I thought for a while, and then and there I made up this story.

When my turn came, I went up and related the story, leaving all of them behind. In the afternoon, the same day, while attending another *majlis* in the Char-suq locality, I saw that the one who took to the minbar before me related this same story. Gradually it came to be written in books and appeared in print."

The false and wrong notion that the tradition of mourning Imam Husayn is an exception to all norms, that it is justified to use any means to make the people weep, has been a major factor leading to fabrication of legends and *tahrif*.

Marhum Hajji Nuri, that saintly man and teacher of *marhum* Hajj Shaykh 'Abbas Qummi, who as confessed by Hajj Shaykh 'Abbas himself as well as others was superior to his pupils, was an extraordinarily learned and pious man. In his book he makes the point that if it is a correct notion that the end justifies the means, then one may also justify the following line of reasoning.

One of the Islamic precepts is that bringing delight to the heart of a believer and to do something to make him happy is a greatly commendable act. Such being the case, according to this reasoning, it is justifiable to do backbiting in his presence, as he loves listening to backbiting. And should someone say that it is sinful to do so, the answer will be," No! The purpose is a sacred one and the backbiting is being done to make a believer pleased and happy!"

Marhum Hajji Nuri gives another example. A man embraces a non-mahram woman, which is an unlawful act. We ask him why did you do that?He replies, "I have done it for a believer's delight." The same reasoning can be applied to such unlawful acts as adultery, drinking wine, and sodomy. Isn't this an absurd reasoning?

Wouldn't such a notion destroy the Shari'ah? By God, to think that it is permissible to use any kind of means for making people cry in mourning Imam Husayn is a notion that contradicts everything that Imam Husayn stands for. Imam Husayn was martyred to uplift Islam, as we confess while reciting his *ziyarah:*

I bear witness that you established the prayer, gave *zakat* commanded what is right and forbade what is

wrong, and did such *jihad* in the way of God as ought to be done.[9]

Imam Husayn was killed in order to revive Islamic traditions, Islamic laws and regulations, not in order to create an excuse for the violation of Islamic norms. *Na'udhubillah*, we have changed Imam Husayn into a destroyer of Islam: the Imam Husayn that we have conjured in our imagination is a destroyer of Islam.

In his book Hajji Nuri mentions a story that was related to him by one of the students in Najaf, who originally came from Yazd. “One day,” he said, “in my youth I made a journey on foot to Khorasan, going by the road that passes through the desert (*kawr*). In one of the villages of Nayshabur I went to a mosque, as I did not have any place to stay.

The imam of the mosque came and led the prayers. Afterwards he went on the *minbar* to make a *rawdah* I was amazed to see the mosque attendant bring a pile of stones which he handed over to the imam. When the *rawdah* started, he ordered the lamps to be put out. When the lamps had been put out, he pelted the stones at the audience and there arose cries from the people. When the lamps were lighted, I saw bleeding heads.

Their eyes were tearful as they walked out of the mosque. I approached the imam and asked him why he had done such a thing. He said, 'I have tested these people. There is no *rawdah* in the world that will make them weep. As weeping for the sake of Imam Husayn has a great reward and *thawab*, I have found that the only way to make them cry is to throw stones on their heads.

This is how I make them weep.' “ He believed that the end justifies the means. The end was to mourn Imam Husayn though it should involve emptying a pile of stones on the people's heads.

Accordingly, this is a particular factor which is specific to this historic event and it has led to much fabrication and *tahrif*.

When one studies history one finds what they have done to this event. By God, Hajji Nuri is right when he says that if we were to weep for Imam Husayn today, we should mourn for him on account of these falsehoods, fabrications and *tahrif*!

There is a well-known book called *Rawdat al-shuhada'*. whose author was Mulla Husayn Kashifi. According to Hajji Nuri, he was the first to write in his book the stories of Za'far the Jinn and the one about Qasim's wedding. I have read this book.

I used to imagine that it contained only one or two of such cases. But afterwards when I read it I saw that the matter was very much different. This book, which is in Persian, was compiled about five-hundred years ago.

Mulla Husayn Kashifi was a scholar and learned man. He has authored several books including the *Anwar suhayli*. His biographical accounts do not indicate whether he was a Shi'i or a Sunni. Basically he was a Chameleon: among the Shi'ah he would pose as an outright Shi'i, while amongst the Sunnis he

would pass as a Hanafi.

He was a native of Sabzawar, a Shi'i centre whose people were staunch Shi'is. In Sabzawar he would act as an out and out Shi'i, and at times when he would go to Herat ('Abd al-Rahman Jami was the husband of his sister or sister-in-law) he would give sermons for the Sunnis in the Sunni style. But in Sabzawar he narrated the tragedies of Karbala'.

His death occurred around 910/1504, that is, either at the end of the 9th or the beginning of the 10th century. This was the first book, compiled about five hundred years ago, to be written as an elegiac narrative (*marthiyah*).

Earlier the people used to refer to the primary sources. Shaykh Mufid, may God be pleased with him, wrote the *Irshad* and how sound is his narration! If we were to refer to the *Irshad* of Shaykh Mufid we would not stand in need of any other source.

Tabari, among Sunni authors, has also written about it. Ya'qubi, Ibn 'Asakir and Khwarazmi have also written. I don't know what this unjust man has done! When I read this book I saw that even the names are spurious. He mentions names among Imam Husayn's companions that never existed. He mentions names of the enemy's men which are also spurious. He has turned the factual accounts of the event into fables.

As this was the first book to be written in Persian, the orators in mourning assemblies, who were mostly illiterate and could not use the Arabic texts, would take this book and read from it in the mourning sessions.

That is why the gatherings that are held nowadays to mourn Imam Husayn are called *rawdeh-khwani*. *Rawdeh-khwani* was not in vogue during the time of Imam Sadiq or Imam Hasan 'Askari, nor it was prevalent during the times of Sayyid Murtada [d 436/1044] or even Khwajah Nasir al-Din al-Tusi [d. 672/1273].

Rawdeh-khwani came into vogue since the last five hundred years and it came to be called as such. *Rawdeh-khwani* meant reading from the book *Rawdat al-shuhada'*, a pack of lies. From the time that this book fell into the hands of the people, no one has bothered to study the actual history of Imam Husayn.

Then, about sixty or seventy years ago, there appeared another man, the *marhum* Mulla Darbandi. He took all the contents of the *Rawdat al-shahuda'* and compiled them together with other material, collecting it all in a book called *Asrar al-shahadah*. The contents of this book make one lament for the fate of Islam.

Hajji Nuri writes, “We used to attend the lectures of Hajj Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn Tehrani (who was a very saintly man) and benefited from his teaching. A sayyid from Hillah, who was a *rawdeh-khwan*,

came to meet him and he showed him a book written about the events of Imam Husayn's martyrdom (*maqtal*, plural: *maqatil*) to see whether its contents were reliable.

This book did not have any beginning or end. Only at one place in it was mentioned the name of a certain mulla of Jabl al-'Amil who was among the pupils of the author of the *Ma'alim al-usul*. Marhum Hajj Shaykh 'Abd al-Husayn took the book to examine it.

First he studied the biographical accounts of that scholar and found that such a book had not been attributed to him. Then he read the book itself and found it to be full of falsehoods. He said to that sayyid, 'This book is a pack of lies.

Don't circulate this book and don't quote anything from it, for it is unlawful to do so. Basically this book has not been written by that scholar and its contents are spurious.' " Hajji Nuri says that the same book fell into the hands of the author of *Asrar al-shahadah* and he copied all its contents into his book, from the beginning to the end!"

Hajji Nuri relates another episode, which is rather touching. Once a man came to author of the *Maqami'*[10] and said to him, "Last night I saw a horrible dream." "What was it?" he asked him. He said, "I saw that I am biting away flesh from the body of Imam Husayn." The scholar trembled on hearing these words.

He lowered his head and thought for a while. Then he said, "Perhaps you are a *marthiyeh-khwan*?". "Yes, I am," he replied. He said, "Hereafter, either abandon *marthiyeh-khwani* altogether or draw your material from reliable books. You are tearing away the flesh Imam Husayn, with these lies of yours. It was God's grace that He showed this to you in a dream."

If one studies the history of 'Ashura' one will find that it is the most vivid and well-documented of histories with plenty of sources. The marhum Akhund Khurasani used to say, "Those who are ever after 'new' *rawdahs* should go and read the true accounts, for no one has ever heard them"

One should study the addresses of Imam Husayn (*'a*) delivered in Makkah - in the Hijaz as a whole - at Karbala', during his journey, as well as the sermons addressed to his companions, the questions and answers that took place between him and others, the letters that were exchanged between him and other people, the letters that were exchanged between the enemies themselves, in addition to the accounts of those (from among the friends as well the enemies) who were present on the occasion of 'Ashura'.

There were three or four persons from among Imam Husayn's companions who survived, including a slave named 'Uqbah ibn Sam'an, who had accompanied the Imam from Makkah and lived to write the accounts pertaining to the Imam's troops.

He was captured on the day of 'Ashura' but was released when he told them that he was a slave.

Humayd ibn Muslim was another chronicler who accompanied the army of 'Umar ibn Sa'd. Of those present on the occasion was Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (*'a*) himself who has recounted all the events. There is no blind spot in the history of Imam Husayn (*'a*).

Hajji Nuri refers to a spurious story that relates to Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (*'a*). According to it when there remained no companion with Hadrat Abu 'Abd Allah (*'a*), the Hadrat went into the tent of Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (*'a*) to bid him good-bye. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (*'a*) asked him, "Father! How did things come about between you and these people? (that is, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin was unaware of what was happening until that time).

The Imam said to him, "Son, this matter has ultimately led to a battle." 'What happened to Habib ibn Mazahir?, asked Imam Zayn al-'Abidin. "He was killed," replied the Imam. "How about Zuhayr ibn Qayn?"

"He was also killed," replied the Imam. "What happened to Burayr ibn Hudayr?" "He was killed," said Imam Husayn (*'a*). Imam Zayn al-'Abidin continued naming each of his father's companions one after another and the Imam's reply was the same.

Then he asked concerning the men of Banu Hashim. "What happened to Qasim ibn Hasan?" What happened to my brother 'Ali Akbar?" "What happened to my uncle Abu al-Fadl The answer was the same: "He has been killed." This is a fabrication and a lie. Imam Zayn al-'Abidin, *na'udhubillah*, was not so sick and unconscious as not to know what was going on.

Historians have written that even in that state of illness he rose from his bed and said to Zaynab, "Aunt, bring me my staff and give me a sword." In any case, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (*'a*) was one of those who were present on the scene and related the accounts of events.

Truly, we should be penitent for these crimes and treacheries that we are guilty of in respect of Abu 'Abd Allah al-Husayn (*'a*), his companions, comrades and members of his family, and for effacing all their achievements. He should do penance and then make effort to derive benefit from this most educative source.

Is there any inadequacy in the life of 'Abbas ibn 'Ali as recounted in the reliable *maqatil* (accounts of martyrdom)? The single point that there was no danger to his own life is enough to be a matter of pride for him. Imam Husayn had also told him, "They are only after me, and if they kill me, they will not have anything again anyone else."

At Kufah, when Shimr ibn Dhi al-Jawshan was departing for Karbala', one of those who were present said to Ibn Ziyad that some of his relatives on the mother's side were with Husayn ibn 'Ali. He requested Ibn Ziyad to write a letter granting them amnesty, and Ibn Ziyad wrote it. Shimr belonged to a clan that had remote ties with the tribe of Umm al-Banin (the mother of Abu al-Fadl). Shimr personally brought this letter of amnesty on the night following the ninth day of Muharram.

This wretch approached the camp of Husayn ibn 'Ali and shouted, “Where are my nephews!” (*ayna banu ukhtina*?!).[11] Abu al-Fadl, along with his full brothers, was sitting with Hadrat Abu 'Abd Allah (*'a*). He remained silent and did not reply, until the Imam said to him, “Answer him, though he be an evil man (*ajibuhu in kana fasiqa*). At the Imam's leave, he answered Shimr, saying, “What do you want?” (*Ma taqul*?). Shimr said, “I have come with some good news for you.

I have brought a letter of amnesty for you from the emir, 'Ubayd Allah. You are now free, and you will be safe if you leave now.” Abu al-Fadl said to him, “May God damn you and your emir, as well as the letter that you bring. Do you think we will abandon our Imam and brother for the sake of our own safety?”

On the night of 'Ashura', the first person to declare his loyalty towards Abu 'Abd Allah was his brother Abu al-Fadl. Aside from the foolish exaggerations that are often made, that which is confirmed by history is that Abu al-Fadl was a very wise person, valiant and courageous, tall and most handsome. He had been nicknamed 'The Moon of the *Hashimis*.'[12]These things are true. To be sure, he had inherited Ali's courage.

The story is also true regarding his mother, that Ali' had asked 'Aqil, his brother, to propose a woman born of a heroic descent (*waladatha al-fuhulah*)[13] who might give birth to son who would be a warrior and man of valour (*li-talidani farisan shuja'ah*).[14] 'Aqil had suggested Umm al-Banin. So much of it is true. 'Ali's wish was fulfilled in Abu al-Fadl.

According to one of two reports, on the day of 'Ashura' Abu al-Fadl came to the Imam and said, “Dear brother, now give me the permission. This breast of mine is suffocated and I can bear it no more. I want to sacrifice my life for your sake.”

I don't know the reason why Imam responded to Hadrat Abu al-Fadl's request in the manner that he did. Abu 'Abd Allah himself knows better. He said, “Brother, now that you want to leave, try to get some water for these children.”

Hadrat Abu al-Fadl had already come to receive the nickname *Saqqa* (water carrier), as earlier, on one or two occasions, at nights he had been able to pass through the enemy's ranks to fetch water for the children in Abu 'Abd Allah's camp. It was not the case that they had not drunk any water for three days and nights.

Access to water had been closed for three days and nights, but during this time they had been able to get some water on one or two occasions, including the night of 'Ashura', when they had taken bath and washed their bodies. Abu al-Fadl consented.

Now note this majestic scene! What greatness! What valour! What a spirit of understanding and self-sacrifice! A lone warrior, alone by himself, advances against a host. The number of men who guarded the river bank was four thousand. He descends along the river bank and leads his horse into the water (all historians have written this).

First, he fills the waterskin that he has brought and lays it on his shoulder. He is thirsty. The air is hot and has been fighting. But as he sits on the back of his horse and the horse stands in water reaching up to its belly, he lowers his hands into water, takes water into them and raises them somewhat towards his sacred lips.

Those who were watching from a distance report that he hesitated for a while. Then they saw that he threw the water back and came out of the river without drinking any. No one knew why Abu Al-Fadl did not drink water there. But when he came out he recited *rajaz* verses which were addressed to himself. Now from these verses they understood why he had not drunk water:

O soul of Abu al-Fadl!

My wish is that you live not after Husayn!

Will you have a drink of cold water,

While there stands Husayn, thirsty, near the tents,

And about to drink the cup of death!?

Such is not the way of my faith,

Nor that of one who abides in conviction and truth![15]

What would become of manliness? Of honour? Of caring love? And of sharing in the hardship of one's dear ones? Isn't Husayn your Imam, and you his follower?

While Husayn is about to drink the cup of death,

Will you have a drink of cold water?

Never! My faith does not permit me to do that! My loyalty does not allow me to do such a thing! Abu al-Fadl changed his route while returning and now he came through the palm groves. Earlier, he had come by the direct way, but he knew that he now carried a precious trust with him.

So he changed his route and all his concern now was to get the water safely to the camp, for it was possible that a single arrow may pierce the waterskin and fail his task of bringing the water to its destination. In the mean while they heard that Abu al-Fadl had changed his *rajaz*. It appeared that something had happened. Now he cried out:

By God!

Even if you sever my right arm,

I will persist in defending my faith,

And the Imam, who is the true one, for certain,

the Prophet's grandson, pure and trustworthy! 16

That is, by God even if you cut my right arm I will not flinch from defending Husayn. Not much time passed when his *rajaz* changed again:

O my soul, fear not the faithless,

And receive the good news of Almighty's mercy,

In the company of the Prophet, the Master and the Elect,

Though, insolently, they should slash my left arm! 17

These *rajaz* verses signaled that his left arm too had been severed. They write that with characteristic dexterity he somehow turned the water-skin and bent himself over it. I will not say what happened thereafter as it is most heart rending.

It is a custom to recount the account of the ordeals of this great human being on the night of *Tasu'ah* (9th Muharram). Let me add that Umm al-Banin, the mother of Hadrat Abu al-Fadl was alive at the time of the event of Karbala', though she was in Madinah at the time. She was given the news that all her four sons were martyred at Karbala'.

This saintly woman would go to the Baqi' cemetery and mourn over her sons. They write that her elegies were so full of pathos that they brought tears to everyone who heard them, even Marwan ibn Hakam, who was the staunchest of the enemies of the Prophet's family.

Sometimes she would remember all her sons and, at times, especially Abu al-Fadl, the eldest of them, who was senior most of the brothers, both in respect of age as well as in respect of spiritual and bodily merits.

I remember one of her two elegies and I will recite them for you. These are the elegiac verses that this grieved mother recited in mourning for her sons (in general, the Arabs recite elegiac verses in a very touching style):

You, who have seen 'Abbas make repeated forays against the base hosts,

And following him were the Lion's sons, each a mighty lion!

I have been told, my son's head was struck when his arms were cut,

Alas for my Lion's cub! Did a club fall on his head?

O 'Abbas! None would have dared to approach it,

Were your sword in your hand![18]

That is, 'O observant eye, tell me, you who have been in Karbala' and watched its scenes and observed the moment when Abu al-Fadl, my son of a lion, with my other lion's cubs following him, attacked that cowardly crowd - tell me is it true what I have been told?

They say that when they had cut my son's arms an iron club fell on my dear one's head. Is that true?' Then she says, "Abu al-Fadl! My dear! I know that if you had arms there wasn't a man in the whole world to have the guts to face you! They had the temerity to do that because your arms had been severed from your body.

1. During the nights of the 'id of Ghadir, Dr. Shari'ati delivered an excellent lecture on this general human tendency for hero-worship and making of myths and legends, turning historic figures into legendary heroes with extraordinary and superhuman characteristics.
2. Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi, "kitab fadl al-'ilm", p. 32; al-Saffar, Basa'ir al-darajat, p.10
3. Bihar al-anwar, vol. 44, p. 381; Tuhaf al-'uqul, p. 176; al-Luhuf, 33; al-Khwarazmi's Maqtal al-Husayn, ii, p. 5.
4. Ibn Shahr Ashub, al-Manaqib, iv, p. 110; al-Luhuf, p. 50, Bihar al-anwar, vol. 45, p. 50; al-Irbili, Kashf al-ghummah, ii, p. 32.
5. Bihar al-anwar, vol. 44, p. 381; Tuhaf al-'uqul, p. 176; al-Luhuf, 33.
6. Bihar al-anwar, vol. 44, p. 366; al-Luhuf, p. 25.
7. Al-Luhuf, p. 41; Khwarazmi's Maqtal al-Husayn, ii, p. 7; Ibn 'Asakir, Ta'rikh al-Sham, iv, p. 333; al-Muqarrim's Maqtal al-Husayn, p. 287; al-Harrani, Tuhaf al-'uqul, p. 176; Shaykh 'Abbas al-Qummi, Nafs al-mahmum, p. 149, Mulhaqat Ihqaq al-haqq, xi, pp. 624-625.
8. Ibid.
9. Mafatih al-janan, the ziyarah of Imam Husayn ('a) for the nights of 'Id al-Fitr and 'Id al-Adha.
10. Marhum Aqa Muhammad Ali was the son of marhum Wahid Behbahani and both of them were great men. Marhum Aqa Muhammad Ali migrated to Kirmanshah where he wielded great influence.
11. al-Muqarrim's Maqtal al Husayn, p. 252, Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 44, p. 391, al-Luhuf, p. 37
12. al-Muqarrim's al-Abbas, p. 81; Ibn Shahr Ashub, al-Manaqib, iv, p. 108
13. al-Muqarrim's al-Abbas, p. 69
14. Ibsar al-ayn fi ansar al-Husayn alayh al-salam, p. 26
15. Yanabi al-mawaddah, ii, p. 165; Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 45, p. 41
16. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 45, p. 40
17. Ibid.
18. Muntaha al-amal, I, p. 386.

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