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The Survivors from the Household of Imam Husayn

The survivors of the tragic journey to Karbala' from the household of Imam Husayn can be divided into three groups: servants, a few male relatives and the women who had accompanied Imam Husayn. Of the servants who accompanied Imam Husayn, a few survived. The most notable of these was `Uqba ibn Sim'an who was the personal servant of Imam Husayn. He had come into the Imam's family through the Imam's marriage to Rabab bint Imru' al-Qays1.

He appears to have been an old man who was not able to take part in any of the fighting. When captured at the end of the battle and asked who he was, he answered that he was a servant who was owned, thus indicating that although he was a freed slave he regarded himself very much as in the service of the Imam.

His survival is very important for our account of Imam Husayn's journey. He gives us many details of that journey and in particular he gives us details of the negotiations with the enemies of Imam Husayn which the Imam conducted. `Uqba was close to the Imam during all of these. The enemies of the Imam and the supporters of Yazid later put forward claims and propaganda to try to undermine people's respect for the heroism of the Imam, and also to try to shift the ultimate responsibility for his death away from Yazid by making it all the fault of Ibn Ziyad. They claimed that Imam Husayn was willing to accept the authority of Yazid but could not bring himself to make the pledge to Ibn Ziyad, which Ibn Ziyad insisted on receiving. Thus they try to show that it was Ibn Ziyad's fault, not Yazid's, that the Imam was killed.

`Uqba ibn Sim`an is the man who is able to rebut this wicked propaganda. He says:

I accompanied [Imam] Husayn. I left Medina for Mecca with him and Mecca for Iraq. I did not leave him until he died. There was nobody who addressed a word to him in Medina, in Mecca, on the road to Iraq or in the camp until the day of his death without my hearing the conversation. By God, he did not give the promise which the people claim to recall when they allege that he would put his hand in the hand of Yazid ibn Mu'awiya or that they should send him to anyone of the Muslims' border stations. Rather he said: `Leave me and I will travel this broad land so that we may see how the people's affair develops2.

The witness of `Uqba ibn Sim'an is an important, an essential, rebuttal to the scurrilous propaganda of the opponents of Imam Husayn.

Of the male relations of Imam Husayn who set out on that tragic journey, nearly all died the deaths of martyrs. One or two of the sons of Imam Hasan received guarantees of security from relatives of their mothers and were allowed to leave. In this connection Abbas, `Uthman, Ja`far and `Abd Allah, all half–brothers of Imam Husayn refused such offers of security and preferred to die with the Imam[3].

However, the survivor who was the most significant, the most important, was the young man who became Imam after his father's death; I mean Imam Zayn al–Abidin `Ali ibn Husayn. It seems that God had intervened, for on the day of the battle the future Imam was struck down by an illness so severe that he was unable to raise himself from his bed and take part in the fighting. Otherwise he would certainly have fought and died. Thus God spared his life at that juncture so that the Imamate could pass from his martyred father to himself.

His survival has also added enormously to our record of that fatal journey and the days at Karbala' before the battle. After the battle he was dragged from his sick bed and taken to Ibn Ziyad along with the women members of Imam Husayn's family[4].

There he was almost killed but for the intervention of his aunt, the sister of Imam Husayn, Hazrat Zaynab. The young man, now the new Imam, had in his captivity not only grief for his martyred father, but also responsibility from the grieving women of his family. He had to endure the threats and taunts of Ibn Ziyad and Yazid. Yet his destiny, the destiny for which the illustrious Imam, the martyred Imam, had prepared him, was to carry on the leadership of the *Ahl al–Bayt,* the holy family of the Prophet, and the Shi`a. No one can dispute that he accomplished with great honour the destiny left to him on the blood–strewn plains of Karbala'.

Finally there is the third group of survivors, the women of the family of Imam Husayn. In particular I shall speak of Hazrat Zaynab but although she is the most wondrous, the most tragic of all these women, all of them suffered terribly. Before I go on, I must endeavour to answer the question frequently asked, namely, why did Imam Husayn take, or even allow, these women with him on that tragic journey?

The answer to this question lies in the difference between politics and idealism. As far as the Imam was concerned the Shi'a, the tribal leaders, and nearly all the people in Kufa had asked him to go there. He was going, therefore, not in war but in peace. He expected, at least according to their promises, that there would be no real fighting. His own envoy had sent him word that everything was ready for him.

In his own heart the Imam certainly knew that this was not the case but his generosity of spirit required that those who had voluntarily given him such undertakings should be accepted according to their undertakings; he could not judge them as sinners until they had sinned.

Thus when the Imam set out with his family he was declaring to the Kufans, to the world, his willingness

to give them an opportunity to fulfill their promises. Furthermore, the women of the holy family of the Prophet were special, honoured above other women. They were to symbolize the sufferings of women down through the ages when they have to endure the loss of their good and honourable men at the hands of political and military opportunists. These women also suffered the anxiety of the coming loss as the battle drew near. This is typified by the account of Hazrat Zaynab just before the battle. Imam Husayn recited:

Time, shame on you as a friend!
At the day's dawning and the sun's setting
How many a companion or seeker will be a corpse?
Time will not be satisfied with my substitute,
the matter will rest with the Mighty One
And every living creature will have to journey
along the path.

Hazrat Zaynab, his sister, could no longer control herself. She jumped up, tearing at her clothes and said:

I will lose a brother! Would that death had deprived me of life today! My mother Fatima is dead and my father Ali and my brother Hasan. Oh you are the successor and the guardian of those who remain . . . . May God accept my life for yours!

The Imam tried to pacify his sister but she could not be pacified and eventually, so severe was her grief, that she fell down in a faint. The gentle Imam bathed her face with water and told her,

`Sister, fear God and take comfort in the consolation of God.[5]'

The next day these women had to watch the men of their family struck down one after the other until finally Imam Husayn himself was killed. The grief of that was not enough, their tents were pillaged, their possessions stolen, their very clothes torn from them.

Then, in a pathetic, sad column they were taken as prisoners to Ibn Ziyad together with the new Imam Zayn al–'Abidin. When they were brought before him, he was about to have the new Imam, son of the martyred Imam, killed. Hazrat Zaynab clung to the arm of the young Imam and begged that if Ibn Ziyad killed him, he should also kill her. Realising that she really meant it, Ibn Ziyad was shamed into sparing his life[6].

Their miseries were not yet ended, the tearful procession of women was taken to Yazid and them to Medina. There, Hazrat Zaynab sought to keep the memory of the martyred Imam, Imam Husayn, alive. Such was her influence, the power of her grief, that the Umayyad authorities became disturbed. They knew that the memory of the Imam preserved by the tears of those who loved him, was a threat to their own immoral existence. According to some sources, they sent Hazrat Zaynab into exile in Egypt, where,

grief-stricken, she died in the following year[7].

These survivors from the household of Imam Husayn, whether servant or young Imam or sister, have made the story of Imam Husayn ring out through the ages right up to the present time.

1. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 232.
2. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 315.
3. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 317.
4. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 367.
5. Tabari, op. Cit., pp. 323-4.
6. Tabari, op. Cit., p. 373.
7. M. M. Shams al-Din, The Rising of al-Husayn, English translation by I. K. A. Howard (London, 1981), p. 145.

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