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# The Tragic Ending

It was not politically feasible for al-Ma'mun to reach Baghdad accompanied by Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), for that would stir the winds of dissension against him and he might not be strong enough to withstand them. From this standpoint, our belief that al-Ma'mun was the one who plotted to end the life of the Imam (a.s.) by giving him poisoned grapes is strengthened, and the historical environment at the time helps us confirm this belief even when Ibn al-Athir, in his *Tarikh*, thinks that that was not possible. Prominent scholars and historians such as Shaikh al-Mufid and others have also doubted it, while others such as Sayyid ibn Tawoos, Sibt ibn al-Jawzi, and al-Arbili in *Kashf al-Ghumma*, have all dismissed it outright. The latter strongly defended his view, but it was nevertheless no more than a simplistic and superficial defense. Al-Ma'mun's letter to the Abbasides and the residents of Baghdad, which he wrote after the demise of Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), gives such an impression. "He wrote the Abbasides and their supporters and to the people of Baghdad informing them of the death of Ali ibn Musa and that they had resented his nomination of him as his successor, asking them now to go back to their loyalty to him."[1]

This may be understood as a clear admission that the death of the Imam (a.s.) was not natural during those circumstances, and the text Ibn Khaldun provides in expressing the contents of this letter provides even clearer clues to accusing al-Ma'mun of murdering him; he says in his *Tarikh*:

"... And al-Ma'mun sent messages to al-Hasan ibn Sahl, to the people of Baghdad, and to his supporters apologizing for naming him his regent and inviting them to go back to his loyalty."[2]
What can be understood regarding al-Ma'mun's regret and realization of his mistake regarding the regency arrangement is that such regret is meaningless if it had happened after the Imam's death; rather, it must have occurred prior to that, so he paved the way to correct it by assassinating the Imam (a.s.) in order to please the Abbasides, their supporters, and the people of Baghdad. If we are to stay alone with just the political circumstances through which al-Ma'mun was living during that shaky period of his reign, overlooking the historical texts whose contexts lead us to such a conclusion, we would still be able to point the finger to al-Ma'mun regarding the crime of assassinating Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) without being biased to any group or prejudiced against the accused.

Al-Saduq narrates saying, "While ar-Ridha' (a.s.) was breathing his last, al-Ma'mun said to him, `By God! I do not know which of the two calamities is greater: losing you and parting from you, or people's accusation that I assassinated you...'"[3]

In another narrative by Abul-Faraj al-Asbahani, al-Ma'mun said to him, "It is very hard for me to live to see you die, and there was some hope hinging upon your stay, yet even harder for me than that is that people say I have made you drink poison, and God knows that I am innocent of that."[4]

This exciting situation of al-Ma'mun discloses the fact that the accusation of his own murder of the Imam (a.s.) was the subject of argument, maybe even of conviction, even then, for al-Ma'mun asserts people's accusation of him and he tries to extract an admission from the Imam (a.s.) clearing him of it, as Abul-Faraj mentions.

## Simplistic Justification of al-Ma'mun's Situation

It is interesting how some people find it hard to believe that al-Ma'mun would assassinate the Imam (a.s.) simply because of all the grief, crying, abstention from eating and drinking, which he feigned to show his distress at the Imam's death, as if they expected al-Ma'mun to show his happiness and excitement at his death in order to give credibility to the accusation others concealed. But the excuse of these folks is their superficiality in understanding history, and their short-sightedness.

## How the Imam Was Murdered

Stories regarding the method al-Ma'mun employed to kill Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) are abundant. Abul-Faraj and al-Mufid say that he killed him by poisoned pomegranate juice and poisoned grape juice. In his *Al-Irshad*, al-Mufid quotes Abdullah ibn Bashir saying: "Al-Ma'mun ordered me to let my nails grow as long as they could without letting anyone notice that; so I did, then he ordered to see me and he gave me something which looked like tamarind and said, `Squeeze this with both your hands,' and I did. Then he stood up, left me and went to see ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and said to him, `How are you?' He answered, `I hope I am alright.' He said, `I, too, by the Grace of God, am alright; did any well-wisher visit you today?' He answered in the negative, so al-Ma'mun became angry and called upon his servants to come, then he ordered one of them to immediately take the pomegranate juice to him, adding, `... for he cannot do without it.' Then he called me to him and said: `Squeeze it with your own hands,' and so I did. Then al-Ma'mun handed the juice to ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in person, and that was the reason for his death for he stayed only two days before he (a.s.) died.'"

Abul-Salt al-Harawi is quoted saying, "I entered the house of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) after al-Ma'mun had already left and he said to me, `O Abul-Salt! They have done it...!' and he kept unifying and praising God." Muhammad ibn al-Jahm is quoted saying, "Ar-Ridha' (a.s.) used to love grapes. Some grapes were said to be prepared for him; needles were pierced inside them at their very tips and were kept like that for several days. Then the needles were taken out, and they were brought to him and he ate some

of them and fell into the sickness we have mentioned about him. The grapes killed him, and it was said that that was one of the most effective methods of poisoning."[5]

Regardless of the method of assassination, what seems to be acceptable, having examined all texts and the historical background of the political circumstances at that time, al-Ma'mun was indeed the one who killed Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), and we do not have the slightest doubt or hesitation about that.

"His death occurred at Toos in a village called Sanabad, of the Nooqan area, and he was buried at the house of Hameed ibn Tahtaba under the dome where Haroun al-Rashid had been buried, and he was buried beside him facing the *qibla*."[6]

"When ar-Ridha' (a.s.) died, al-Ma'mun did not disclose it when it happened, leaving him dead for one day and one night, then he called for Muhammad ibn Ja'far ibn Muhammad and a group of descendants of Abu Talib. When they were present, he showed him to them; his corpse looked alright; then he started weeping and addressed the corpse saying, `O Brother! It is indeed very hard for me to see you in such a condition, and I was hoping to go before you, but God insisted on carrying out His decree,' and he showed a great deal of agony and grief and went out carrying the coffin with others till he reached the place where it is now buried..."[7]

"... So al-Ma'mun was present there before the grave was dug, and he ordered his grave to be dug beside that of his father, then he approached us and said, `The person inside this coffin told me that when his grave is dug, water and fish will appear underneath; so, dig...' They dug. When they finished digging, a spring of water appeared, and fish appeared in it, then the water dissipated, and ar-Ridha' (a.s.), peace be upon him, was then buried."[8]

## Imam is Eulogized

When ar-Ridha' (a.s.) died, poets composed eulogies and mourned in him the hope that entertained the conscience of the nation that one day he would be the caliph so that equity might restore its shining light after being put out by the caliphs who employed cheating and deception as their methods to mislead and confuse the nation. When they set the limits of conduct for others, they themselves at the same time trampled upon them by committing every act prohibited by God in His Book and by His Prophet (S), far from the eyes of the people, and maybe even in public. Among those who eulogized him was Da'bal ibn Ali al-Khuza'i, the renown poet of the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and their advocate. He composed many eulogies about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.). Among them is what Abul-Faraj quotes:

"Ali ibn Sulayman al-Akhfash recited verses for me by Da'bal ibn Ali al-Khuza'i in which he mentioned ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and the poison he was given and mourning one of his sons and chastising the Abbaside caliphs:

Unwillingly did you part with Ahmed, and the earth
Engulfed a building, sublime and dignified,

You housed him in a place mean in wares
And I against my wish compromised,
A fugitive just for loving him...
Had I not been consoled by the Prophet
And by his near in kin, I would have
Poured my tears for him abundantly;
I loved myself, but I loved even more
The family of Muhammad whose love resides
In my heart, living with me, being in me.
The Prophet's legacy availed them naught,
For Death in it with them has a share,
And a share for the hope for death...
Hunted and pursued for many a year
By foxes from Umayya, time and again.
Banu Abbas played havoc with the creed,
Reaping oppression, miserliness and greed.
Named `Rashid' who was never to wisdom keen,
Named this `Ma'mun' and named that `Amin'!
Never did I accept them to be for
Wisdom a name, but for guidance a shame.
Nor to their trusts were they ever true,
Their `Rashid' is misguided and his sons
One with sins more than the other's impudence.
O grave in the foreign land of Toos!
Mourned are you by caravans shunning daylight...
I am in doubt... Should I offer a drink
Of water to one, so I remember you and cry?
Or is in the cup my remedy so I die?
Either I meant, when I say a drink,
If it is death, then let it be swift.
How marvelous they call you Pleased!
For they never made your life eased.
Is it odd when rogues distort the light
Of God's Creed, though it is bright?
Your favors miracles made for them and me,
But who is among them that can ever see?"

Thus does Da'bal expose in these verses the memories of horrible tragedies to which Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) were exposed, and the woes they suffered from at the hands of the governments of both Umayyads and

Abbasides, chastising al-Rashid and both his sons, then going after that to eulogize Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.) in a style which shows genuine distress and agony, including the same accusation that al-Ma'mun had murdered him.

Among others who eulogized him was Amr al-Salami who says in his eulogy:
O you, caravan singer, singing at the reins!
Listen, and let others tomorrow listen to thee...
Recite Salam on a grave at Toos and do not
Recite Salam or wish well the people of Toos,
Terror did the hearts of Muslims fill,
And fear of Iblis now has hatched at will,
For silence now is the best man that lived
So, what a loss, and what a loser!
Should Death come to rule the throne,
He will face men with faces of stone.
Away with Toos for never were its homes
Telling of misery to come and to be
A wedding for the dead, not a life for the doer.
How long the flute, how merry the wedding!
Fates reached him with the claws,
While troops throng and hard to count
Death found the most gentle cub in his den,
And death meets the father of cubs in the den.
Still deriving light from his father,
Reaching the Prophet, light without fire.
In soil their branches stood tall and high
Of lofty trunk, in the King's land thrives.
Branches stand when roots are firm
And the world by sure faith lives.
No day is more fit for grief
For beating, for tearing the sleeve
For wounding cheeks, for cutting the nose
More than the day of Toos
When mourners mourned, scribes cried,
`Is it really true ar-Ridha' died?'
Death takes only the envied away.
That who lived for two minutes or a day
Is lying like one who will join and stay
Maybe in two days..., who can say?

When the sun shone, his own did set,
The day had come when he was to rest.
Why? Give the garb of death please to me,
Why take him into a grave, woe unto me?
Victim of a day that couldn't dare to be
Victimized. Wrapped him in the garb of death,
Let me be the wearer, please, not he,
Of a garb never sewn or worn before.
Greets you the One you did worship and adore,
On days of heat, nights of chill, in the plains,
Had things in life not stood in contrast
In virtues, none would have ever passed
A judgment in it that could endure.
The Almighty has welcomed thee to a place
That is everlasting with bliss and grace
To His Messenger you are now near,
A place so lovely, a place so dear.

In his *Maqatil*, Abul-Faraj indicated that when this poem won publicity and became well known, Ashja' altered it and made it in praise of al-Rashid![9]
Da'bal al-Khuza'i said: "When the news of the death of ar-Ridha' (a.s.) reached me, I was at Qum and I recited one my poems; some of its verses were:

I see the Umayyads excused if they were to kill,
But I see no reason why the Abbasides should at will;
Sons of Harb, Marwan and their breed
Banu Ma'eet, grudge and hate is their creed.
People whom you had to fight in early days
Of Islam to bring them to His ways.
When they became in charge and did rule,
They reverted to Kufr and left the usool.
Head towards Toos, to the grave site
Of the pure one, of the faith that is right,
If you ever wish to remember Islam like me,
Pristine, Islam of Muhammad and Ali.
Two graves in Toos: one for the best of all,
And the worst man people will ever recall.
No good will reach the villain who is lying nigh
In grave to one whose virtues reach the sky,
Nor will the pure suffer any harm

When near the soul that will never calm.
No indeed! Every soul shall reap what it did earn
So take what you will, or leave it to burn!"

Da'bal composed many eulogies about Imam ar-Ridha' (a.s.), using his poetry as a vehicle to disseminate the mission in whose principles he strongly believed which were: to attract the nation's attention to the injustice done to the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) and to the transgression upon their rights, to the corruption of self-imposed government systems which went beyond all reasonable limits in their iniquity and despotism. Da'bal is considered the greatest poet of that time and the most articulate in defending his beliefs and the principles in which he believed. In his poetry, he provides us with an honest picture of the reality of the oppressive government system which was followed by the Abbaside dynasty then, and of the tragedies the Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.) underwent because of their oppression.
Among others who eulogized the Imam (a.s.) was Ali ibn Abu Abdullah al-Khawwafi who said:

May God's Grace water thee, O land of Toos!
What treasures has your land down deep?!
In the world your lands are called good
Made good by one in Sanabad asleep,
A man whose murder was hard on Islam
A man wrapped and drenched in God's mercy.
O the grave of his! In thee are clemency,
Knowledge, purity, and glory abound.
O envied grave! Angels do thee guard!

Abu Firas al-Hamadani said:
Sinned and killed ar-Ridha' (a.s.) and were not kind,
Men whose hatred of him made them blind.
First pleased then distressed for eternity
A band that perished after its safety.
No allegiance, kinship, or mercy did indeed
Stop the rogues from committing the foul deed.

What the poet mentions here is nothing but the bitter truth about the tragedy which was represented in the regency and the stance taken by the same ones who arranged it, for they were happy with it when they first nominated him as the successor to the caliph, the last step towards caliphate which, according to the Divine Will, was the natural right of Ahl al-Bayt (a.s.), but they became distressed when the rogues deliberately assassinated the Imam (a.s.) despite their oath of allegiance to him and despite the assurances, the promises, and the sacred oaths they had sworn...
There are many eulogies in which the poets mentioned the tragedy the Imam (a.s.) lived due to the oppression of the caliphs of his time suffices us what we have quoted of them because to elaborate

means to unnecessarily prolong the discussion.

1. Tabari, Vol. 8, p. 558, "Events of the Year 203 A.H."
2. Ibn Khaldun, Vol. 3, p. 250
3. Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 2, p. 242
4. Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 380
5. Al-Irshad, p. 297. A similar narrative is mentioned in Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, pp. 377-378
6. Uyoon Akhbar ar-Ridha', Vol. 1, p. 18
7. Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, p. 378
8. Ibid., p. 380
9. Maqatil al-Talibiyyin, pp. 378-380

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