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The Visit to al Najaf

One night my friend told me that we were going on the next day, if Allah willed, to al-Najaf. I asked him, "What is al-Najaf?" He said, "It is a centre for learning, also the grave of ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib is in that city."

I was surprised that there was a known grave for Imam ‘Ali, for all our Shaykhs say that there is no known grave for our master ‘Ali. We took a bus to al-Kufa and there we stopped to visit al-Kufa Mosque, which is one of the most celebrated Islamic monuments. My friend showed me all the historical places and took me to the mosque of Muslim ibn Aqeel and Hani ibn Urwa and told me briefly how they were martyred. He took me to the Mihrab where Imam ‘Ali was martyred, then we visited the house where the Imam lived with his two sons, our masters al-Hasan and al-Husayn, and in the house there was a well from which they drank and did their ablution.

I lived some spiritual moments during which I forgot the world and imagined the asceticism and the modesty of the Imam, despite the fact that he was Commander of the Believers and fourth of the Rightly Guided Caliphs.

I must not forget to mention the hospitality and the modesty of the people of al-Kufa, since whenever we passed a group of people they stood up and greeted us, as if my friend knew most of them. One of those we met was the director of the Institute of al-Kufa, who invited us to his house where we met his children and spent a happy night. I had the feeling that I was amongst my family and my clan, and when they talked about the Sunnis they always said, "Our brothers from the Sunna", so I liked their talks and asked them a few questions to test their sincerity.

We continued our journey to al-Najaf, some ten kilometers from al-Kufa, and when we got there I remembered al-Kazimiyyah mosque in Baghdad, for there were golden minarets surrounding a dome made of pure gold. We entered into the Imam's mausoleum after having read a special reading for permission to enter the place, which is customary amongst the Shi’a visitors.

Inside the mausoleum I saw more surprising things than that in the mosque of Musa al-Kazim, and as usual, I stood and read al-Fatiha, doubting whether the grave actually contained the body of Imam ‘Ali. The simplicity of that house in al-Kufa which was occupied by the Imam had impressed me very much to

the extent that I thought, "God forbid, Imam ‘Ali would not accept all this gold and silver decoration, when there are many Muslims dying of hunger all over the world."

Especially when I saw many poor people lying on the streets asking for alms. Then I said to myself, "O Shi’a, you are wrong, at least you should admit this mistake, for Imam ‘Ali was sent by the Messenger of Allah to demolish the graves, so what are all these gold and silver graves, if this is not polytheism then it must be at least an error that Islam does not allow."

My friend asked me as he handed me a piece of dry clay if I wanted to pray. I answered him sharply, "We do not pray around the graves." He then said, "Wait for me until I do my prayers." While I was waiting for him I read the plaque which hung on the grave, I also looked inside it through the engraved gold and silver bars and saw many coins and notes of different denominations thrown by the visitors as contributions to the charitable works which are attached to the mausoleum.

Because of the vast quantity of money, I thought it might have been left there for months, but my friend told me that the authorities responsible for cleaning the place collect the money every night after the evening prayer.

I went out after my friend, astonished by what I had just seen, and wished that they would give me some of that money, or perhaps distribute it among the many poor people. I looked around the place, which was surrounded by a great wall, and saw many groups praying here and there, others were listening to speakers standing on platforms, some of them sounded as if they were wailing.

I saw a group of people crying and beating their chests, and I wanted to ask my friend why should these people behave in such a way, but a funeral procession passed by us and I noticed some men removing a marble flag from the middle of the great courtyard to lower the body there. Therefore I thought that these people were crying for their lost one.

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