

### THE BATTLE OF KARBALA

The Urdu marsiya as we know it from the works of Anīs and his contemporaries is a lengthy narrative poem devoted to the martyrdom of Husain at Karbala in 679 A.D. and the events leading up to it. Most of the great marsiya writers were Shi'as, and before going on to discuss the nature of the poetry and the role it played in society, it will be well to consider the historical background and the interpretation that the Shi'a marsiya writers put on it. The historical events which led up to the battle of Karbala have been reliably reported by Arab writers and the facts are incontrovertible. In any reasonably unprejudiced account, they will always be the same. The assessment of the events and of the character of the men who played a leading role in them differ greatly in Shi'a and Sunni accounts. The following summary attempts to look at Karbala from a moderate and largely typical Shi'a point of view which is reflected in the works of the 19th century marsiya writers.

During his lifetime, the Prophet Muḥammad, who belonged to the Quraish tribe, had not designated a successor, though many of his kinsmen believed that he intended his cousin and son-in-law 'Alī to take his place when he died. The speech made to the assembly at Khum in which Muḥammad declared that "'Alī is to me what Aaron was to Moses" left no doubt in the minds of some people that this was the case. Once when he was ill, however, Muḥammad asked his great friend and helper Abū Bakr to lead the prayers in his place indicating, perhaps, a different choice. When the Prophet died the question of the succession was undecided. The family of Hāshim (Muḥammad's great grandfather) were in favour of 'Alī. The rest of the Quraish tribe insisted on an election, in keeping with the democratic spirit of Islām. The result was that Abū Bakr (already an old man) was chosen as caliph (Khalīfa - 'successor'). 'Alī, a man with a strong sense of justice, accepted the majority decision without complaint as he did twice more when 'Umar and Uṣmān were subsequently chosen for the caliphate. Not only did he give the first three caliphs his allegiance but did all he could to help them.

Abū Bakr and 'Umar discharged their duties fairly and competently, doing much to consolidate and extend the Islamic faith and dominion. The third caliph, Uṣmān, was too old and weak-willed to govern effectively and is thought by many not to have been fitted for the increasingly responsible position. He appointed his self-seeking nephew, Mirvān, as his minister, giving him almost complete freedom of action. Mirvān appointed Mu'āvia, the son of the Umayyad Abū Sufiān (an old enemy of Muḥammad) to the governorship of the rich province of

Syria (Shām) and the drunkard, Valīd, to the governorship of Kufā in Irāq. It is said that Valīd was often so drunk that he had to be helped to the pulpit and would only begin the prayers when he had had his fill of wine. Mu'āvia tyrannised his Syrian subjects extorting money from them, all the time with his eye on the caliphate which in view of Uṣmān's declining state of health would soon be vacant.

Complaints about the governors began to reach the caliph from Syria and Iraq, and finally a large deputation arrived in Madīna seeking redress. Uṣmān was undecided but 'Alī characteristically came to his aid and promised the deputation that their complaints would be dealt with. He instructed the caliph to give them a written guarantee and they left Medīna happily. In the meantime, Mirvān sent instructions to Mu'āvia to have them massacred as soon as they returned. The party was only a short distance from Medīna when they found out what was in store for them, and angered by the treachery came back and killed Uṣmān. In the ensuing turmoil, 'Alī was unanimously elected to the caliphate and humbly accepted saying that he would gladly stand down if anyone better could be found.

One of his first (and perhaps unwise) moves was to set about removing from office all those whom Uṣmān had appointed. Mu'āvia was naturally reluctant to vacate his lucrative position and revolted. 'Alī's brave and intrepid friend, Mālik ul Ashtar routed Mu'āvia's army several times and was on the point of victory, when Mu'āvia appeared with the pages of the Qurān attached to his spear. In a passionate speech, he appealed to the Arabs not to defeat him, pointing out that the Turks and Persians who stood at his frontiers would take the opportunity to advance against the Arabs. A truce was arranged, Mālik ul Ashtar was recalled and 'Alī accepted that the matter should be put to arbitration. Some of 'Alī's followers (the original Khavārij or Kharijites) disagreed with the principle of arbitration, saying that God was the only arbitrator, and withdrew their support. There was a tacit agreement between the two sides that neither 'Alī nor Mu'āvia should be allowed the caliphate, and this was adhered to by 'Alī's spokesman. 'Alī was thus deposed, whereupon Mu'āvia's henchman, Amr ibn ul Ās strongly urged that Mu'āvia should be made caliph. Some time later, 'Alī was assassinated while saying his prayers in a mosque in Kūfa. With his dying breath, 'Alī asked that his murderer should only be struck once and not tortured.

'Alī's eldest son, the quiet and sweet-voiced Hasan, was raised to the caliphate after his father's death. Mu'āvia once more decided to fight, but in order to end the quarrel Hasan resigned or according to some sources was poisoned presumably on the orders of Mu'āvia, who became caliph in Hasan's place.

Mu'āvia was a tyrant and murderer, stopping at nothing to reach his goal. During his brief reign, nepotism and oligarchy replaced the newly established democracy and the old pagan practices gradually returned. Before his death, he nominated his son Yazīd to succeed him, breaking his promise to reserve the caliphate for 'Alī's younger son, Husain.

All Muslims - Sunni or Shi'a - are united in their condemnation of Yazīd. "His depraved nature knew no pity or justice. He killed and tortured for the pleasure he derived from human suffering. Addicted to the grossest of vices, his boon companions were the most abandoned of both sexes. Such was the Caliph - the Commander of the Faithful".<sup>1</sup>

At last the people of Kufa, tired of the excesses of Yazīd, sent messages to Husain asking for his help against the wicked caliph. Husain decided to respond and sent his cousin Muslim, the son of 'Aqīl, to Kufa to assess the situation. Muslim sent a letter to Husain assuring him that the majority of the Kufans were on his side. On receiving the letter Husain made preparations to depart. Meanwhile, the governor of Kufa, 'Ubaidullāh ibn Ziyād, discovered Muslim's intentions and had him arrested. One by one his frightened supporters at Kufa deserted him.

Husain, accompanied by his valiant half-brother 'Abbās and a number of his family - mostly women and children - had crossed the Arabian desert and entered Iraq when he heard what had happened to Muslim. Although he realised that he would receive no help from the Kufans and if he met Yazīd's army he would be hopelessly outnumbered, he continued his advance, desiring only that right and justice should be done.

On the 3rd of Muḥarram (the first month of the Muslim year) Husain and his pathetic band of friends reached a place called Karbala on the banks of the Euphrates and was soon overtaken by the brutal and ferocious 'Ubaidullāh ibn Ziyād. Although the Umayyad army numbered thousands they still would not dare come within the reach of 'Alī's miraculous sword, Zulfiqār, but lay in ambush, finally cutting Husain off from the water. In this intolerable situation, Husain offered the option of three conditions: that he should be

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1. Ameer 'Alī - The Spirit of Islam, Calcutta, 1902, p.272.

allowed to return unmolested to Madīna, or to be sent to the frontier against the Turks or that he should be conducted safely to Yazīd for talks.<sup>1</sup> Ibn Ziyād, however, insisted that Husain acknowledge his guilt and stand in front of the Caliph as a rebel against the Umayyad rule. As a last resort, Husain begged the enemy to kill him but to spare the lives of his family and friends. Overcome by pity for Husain and horrified at the thought of making war on the grandson of the Prophet, Ḥur, the leader of Yazīd's cavalry, crossed the battle lines and joined Husain, pleading with the enemy to do the same. Ibn Ziyād was unaffected and ordered his men to prepare for battle. Fighting began after the morning prayers on the 10th of Muharram and continued until only Husain was left to defend his helpless family. He entered his tent and as he took his small son, 'Ali Asghar, in his arms, an arrow came from the enemy side and pierced the baby's neck. Wounded and bleeding, Husain made one last attempt against the enemy who fell back as he rushed upon them. When he could do no more he fell down; the cowardly army led by Sinān surrounded him, cut off his head and carried it triumphantly on a pole to Kufa. The women were rounded up and sent off to Syria where Yazīd awaited them. All the male members of Husain's family perished except a small son, 'Alī Zain ul Ābidīn, whom Zainab (Husain's sister) saved from the massacre. Zain ul Ābidīn (born to the daughter of Yazdjard, the last Sassanian king of Persia) is recognised as the fourth Imām (spiritual head) by the Shi'as.

The Umayyads ruled from Damascus for almost a century committing the most terrible and revolting atrocities. Those who had helped Husain were murdered or driven into exile and Madīna was sacked. 'The city which had sheltered the Prophet from the persecution of the idolaters, ...the hallowed ground he had trod in life, and every inch of which was sanctified by his holy work and ministry, was foully desecrated.... The public mosque was turned into a stable, the shrines demolished for the sake of their ornaments. During the whole period of Umayyad dominations the holy city remained a haunt of wild beasts. The paganism of Mecca was once more triumphant'.<sup>2</sup>

This account of Karbala is of course written from a Shi'a point of view. Many Sunnis would not accept the account of Uṣmān's reign outlined above nor the assessment of Mu'āvia's character, though would perhaps agree that he was wrong in making Yazīd his heir. 'Alī is revered by Sunnis and Shi'as alike and the death of Husain is universally deplored. According to some Sunni accou...

1. This is denied by some Shi'a writers who believe that no compromise was necessary.

2. Ameer 'Alī, op.cit., p.275.

Yazīd was also sorry to hear that Husain had been murdered and cursed Ibn Ziyād for so ill-treating him. On the other hand, many Shi'as go farther in condemning the first three caliphs who are regarded as usurpers of 'Alī's right. Some look upon the caliphs and their Sunni followers as their implacable enemies, hardly recognising them as true Muslims. In general the Urdu marsiya writers see no good whatsoever in Yazīd, his followers and successors and no wrong in Husain and those who succeeded him to the infallible Imamate.

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