

## Corralled at Karbala

*How hard it can be to resist the pressure of the group! Can it ever be right to give in? What about when the bullying tyrant demands that we obey, even though we know it's wrong? Was it really fair to put people on trial at the Nuremberg War Trials? What are the limits of acceptable tactics in war? Can it be right to deprive people of the basic right to water? To starve people into submission? What is it to be a leader when those that one leads are clearly suffering! What about the pressure on parents when they hear their children crying in distress?*

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After Hurr had sent a message to Ibn Ziyad requesting new orders, the party of Hussain and Hurr's soldiers moved forward, keeping a watchful eye on each other. As he rode, Hussain kept repeating a verse from the Qur'an: 'Surely we come from God and to God we will return' (Q. 2:156). This verse is customarily recited by Muslims when they hear of a death. His eldest son, Ali Akbar heard this and asked him why he was repeating it now. Hussain explained that, while riding on horseback he had fallen into a short sleep, during which he had had a dream in which a horseman appeared saying: 'The people travel and death travels to them.' From this Hussain learnt that death would soon be theirs. Ali Akbar responded, 'May God deter any unfavourable incident. Are we not on the right path?' To which, Hussain replied, 'By God! We do not take any step except on the right path.' This prompted Ali Akbar to say, 'In that case, we do not care about death if we are destined to be slain in the right path.' At this, Hussain blessed him, saying, 'May God reward you with the best of rewards.'

Eventually, a horseman arrived from Kufa and handed a letter to Hurr. The letter was from Ibn Ziyad and read: 'As soon as you read my letter, take Hussain to an uncomfortable place, a place without access to water, which has no defences.' Hurr informed Hussain of his new orders, at which Hussain rebuked him and demanded to be allowed to lodge in one of the nearby villages. Hurr replied that he was no longer free to decide; these were the orders, and the messenger was there to make sure that they were carried out and then to report back.

One of the men in the company of Hussain, Zuhayr, suggested that they should attack Hurr and his men as they were relatively few in number. He knew that a huge army would shortly arrive. Once that happened then the odds against a victory would be impossible. Hussain replied that he would not start the fighting. Again, we can see that Hussain was inspired by the example of his father, Ali. At the Battle of the Camel, the forces against Ali attacked twice and killed a large number of his followers. He ordered his men not to retaliate. Instead he ordered them to have a peaceful dialogue with their enemies in the hope of resolving the matter without further bloodshed.

It was now the second day of the new year according to the Islamic calendar, the second of Muharram 680CE. Nearby there was a flat plain where Hurr told them to pitch

their tents. It is reported that Hussain enquired about the name of this place and some locals gave a couple by which it was known but these did not fit the prophecy about the place of his death. When the name of Karbala was mentioned (*karb* meant sorrow and *bala* meant calamity), Hussain recognised it and said, 'This is the land of sorrow and calamity. Stop here and do not move, put down the luggage, do not depart from here; for by God this is our landing site. By God! This is the place where our blood will be shed. By God! This is the place where our families will be arrested as captives. By God! This will be the location of our tombs. By God! Here is where we will be resurrected. This was what my grandfather, the Prophet of God, promised me.'

After they had pitched camp Hussain again reminded his companions of the reason for their stand against Yazid. The things that are right and good were not being promoted and the things that were wrong and bad were not being opposed. This was the message that he wished to bring to the forefront of their minds at this critical time. He continued, 'I do not consider death except with happiness and living together with the oppressors except with misery. People are slaves of the world and religion is but a liquorice on their tongues, preserved so long as their lives go well; however, when they are subject to examination, the believers decrease in number.'

Hurr wrote to Ibn Ziyad to inform him that they had made camp at Karbala. He received a reply addressed to Hussain: 'I have been informed of your arrival in the region of Karbala, and the Commander of the Faithful, Yazid ibn Mu'awiya, has ordered me not to take any rest, or to be satisfied with food, until I kill you, or you obey my order and pledge allegiance to Yazid.' Hussain threw the letter to the floor. When the messenger told him that a reply was expected, he answered, 'His letter has no reply but the punishment of God.'

The man appointed to lead the Umayyad army on the Field of Karbala was Umar ibn Sa'd. He was someone who owed both his military and his political position, as the Governor of Persia, to the patronage of Ibn Ziyad. We can say therefore, that he was his creature. He arrived at Karbala on the third of Muharram with four thousand men to join with the force commanded by Hurr. This was the vanguard of a much larger force, which was to assemble over the next few days. The initial force comprised professional soldiers who had been diverted from a mission to Persia but those who arrived later were citizens of Kufa, who had been forced to join up. Some of them had managed to escape and flee to hide in villages along the way until the fighting was over. Other men from the surrounding area had likewise been forced to enlist in the army of Ibn Ziyad.

Umar's orders were to contain Hussain and his party at Karbala and to cut off their access to water so as to drive them into submission through thirst. This was achieved by stationing a company of men between the camp of Hussain and the river from which they would draw water. Access was denied from the seventh of Muharram onwards. The suffering in the camp can be imagined: men, women and children in desperate thirst. Mothers unable to quiet the crying of their children!

A handful of faithful followers of Hussain from Kufa came to join his company during these days at Karbala. Hussain gathered together the owners of the land around Karbala and agreed to purchase it. He then endowed it for public use with the request that they should bury the bodies after the massacre that he knew was shortly to happen and that in future they would be willing to direct pilgrims to the place of the graves. The people who buried the bodies of Hussain and his companions belonged to the tribe of Banu Asad.

Hussain sent a message to the camp of Umar to say that he wished to meet him. A tent was set up between the two camps where the two could meet. Hussain addressed him, 'O son of Sa'd! Woe unto you! Do you intend to fight me? Do you not fear God to whom you will return? I am the son of Ali and of the Prophet Muhammad. Do you not want to be with me? This is indeed closer to God, the sublime.' Umar responded by saying that he was anxious about his house in Kufa, that it would be destroyed if he showed disloyalty to the Umayyads. Hussain promised to build him a new house. Then he expressed his anxiety about his garden and date palms. Hussain promised him a better garden. Then Umar said that he was concerned about his family in Kufa, that they might be killed if he refused to obey orders. Finally, Hussain, knowing that they were all feeble excuses, responded, 'May God kill you at your home very soon and not forgive you on the day when you are resurrected.' This encounter probably happened on the eighth of Muharram.

After this encounter, Umar, who was reluctant to fight with Hussain because of his spiritual position, but at the same time, did not want to lose the governorship of Persia, wrote to Ibn Ziyad saying that he thought that Hussain was sincere and that it would be possible to negotiate a solution rather than kill the grandson of the Prophet and members of his family. Hussain would agree to go back and not bring trouble to the people of Kufa. When Ibn Ziyad read this letter, he hesitated and considered such a solution, but his resolve was stiffened by Shimr, one of his advisers. He pointed out to Ibn Ziyad that it would be a grave mistake to let Hussain go now that he had him under his control. Rather he suggested he should demand the oath of allegiance from him, then it would be clear who was the master in the land. Convinced by this advice, he told Shimr that he should go to Umar with a message. If Umar refused to execute his orders, then he, Shimr, was to assume command of the army and do the job himself.

The text of this message, which constituted the final order for the battle at Karbala, read as follows:

I did not send you to Hussain for you to restrain yourself from fighting him, or to idle the time away with him, or to promise him peace and the preservation of his life, or to make excuses for him, or to be an intercessor on his behalf with me. Therefore, see to it that, if Hussain and his followers submit to my authority and surrender, you send them to me in peace. If they refuse, then march against them to fight them and to punish them; for that is what they deserve. If Hussain is killed, make the horses trample on his body, both front and back; for he is a disobedient rebel and I do not consider that this will be in any way wrong after death. It is my view that you should

do this to him if you kill him. If you carry out your command concerning him, we will give you the reward due to one who is attentive and obedient. If you refuse, then we withdraw the command of our province and army from you and give the army to Shimr. We have given him our authority.