

Degradation but the message lives on

Look at refugee camps and the number of displaced people in the world today; so often women and children are over-represented there. The humiliation and degradation that follow war affect women and children the most. How helpless must one feel to be taken captive and to face an uncertain future? How deeply must one believe in a cause to be willing to remain defiant in the face of the victorious enemy? Such faithful witness can touch the hearts even of brutes! It was women who bore and nurtured the martyrs: how often is it the faith of women that keeps the martyrs' message alive? One cannot know the future but one must persevere in a cause that one knows to be right. Could the medical researcher Alexander Fleming ever have guessed the importance of penicillin over the last century? Consider Thomas Guy, whom people spoke of as a miser and yet he was saving to endow Guy's Hospital for the poor of London!

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After Hussain was dead his head was cut off. It was displayed as though a trophy of war to the Umayyad army and as a symbol of the utmost humiliation and despair for the women and children who remained of Hussain's company. The body of Hussain was plundered for mementos of the one who had been defeated and killed. Men ablaze with the fire of battle went to pillage the tents of Hussain's camp and to terrorise the women. Cloaks were torn from them and they clung together in dread of what might happen next. There were even those amongst the soldiers who wanted to attack and kill the one surviving son of Hussain, Zayn al-Abidin, who lay wracked with fever in the tent. When Umar ibn Sa'd reached the tents, he put a stop to the looting, ordered that the women should be respected and that Zayn al-Abidin should not be harmed. He placed guards outside the women's tents to ensure that his orders were obeyed. We can deduce that, as the commander of the army, he was ashamed that his men had treated women and children in this way.

Volunteers were sought to make their horses trample over the body of Hussain, both front and back. It is a fundamental Islamic principle in warfare that bodies of the dead should not be mutilated and yet the body of Hussain was broken and pulped under the horses' hooves. A detachment was dispatched to carry the severed head of Hussain to Ibn Ziyad in Kufa as proof that the deed had been done. All the other dead bodies of the companions and family of Hussain were also beheaded. Their heads were distributed amongst leaders of the various clans represented in the Umayyad army as a way of sharing in the responsibility for, and the honour of, the killing of these men. Likewise, these heads were dispatched, mounted on spears, to be paraded through the streets of Kufa and taken to the palace of Ibn Ziyad.

True to their agreement with Hussain, the men of Banu Asad buried the body of Hussain where he fell. His two sons were buried at his feet and the bodies of the other companions and members of his family were buried close to the grave of Hussain. Only

Abbas, who had died in a valiant attempt to bring water to relieve the suffering of the women and children, was buried a little distance away where he had fallen.

The next day the women and children and Zayn al-Abidin were bound and transported in triumph to Kufa. They were taken to the governor's palace where the heads of Hussain and the other martyrs were already on display. All the citizens of Kufa were summoned to attend the palace, to view the severed heads and to learn the lesson of what happened to those who opposed the might of Yazid. When the citizens had assembled, Ibn Ziyad began to mock the head of Hussain. He took a cane and poked the teeth with it. At this an old man in the crowd objected strongly. He proclaimed that often he had seen the Prophet Muhammad kiss the lips of Hussain and they should not now be disrespected in this way. He was told that only his old age saved him from the most severe punishment and he removed himself from that gathering immediately. The realisation of what the men of Kufa had been involved in caused considerable shame and dismay amongst many.

At this time the captives from Karbala were brought into the courtyard of the governor's palace. Zaynab, the sister of Hussain, made herself inconspicuous and went to sit in a corner. Nevertheless, Ibn Ziyad noticed her and enquired as to her identity. She made no response but one of the women who accompanied her spoke up and said, 'This is Zaynab, daughter of Fatima, the daughter of the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace.' Realising that she was the daughter of Ali, at one time the caliph of the Muslims with the seat of his caliphate in Kufa, Ibn Ziyad said in response, 'Praise be to God who has disgraced you, killed you and revealed the false nature of your claims.'

Zaynab immediately retorted, 'Praise be to God who has favoured us with his Prophet, and has purified us completely from sin. He only disgraces the great sinner and reveals the false nature of the profligate. Such men are not among us, praise be to God.'

'How do you consider God has treated your family?' asked Ibn Ziyad.

To which Zaynab replied, 'I didn't see anything but the favour of God. I saw people for whom God had decreed martyrdom and they went forward bravely to their resting places. God will gather you and us together. You will plead your excuses to God and we will be your adversaries before God.'

Anger flared in the heart of Ibn Ziyad but he was restrained by some people in the assembly. He told Zaynab, 'God has healed my soul from the rebel Hussain and the disobedient ones from amongst your family.'

Zaynab cried out, 'By my life, you have killed the head of the clan of the Hashemites, you have pierced my family, you have cut down my young branches and you have pulled out my root. If this heals you, then you have been healed.'

The attention of Ibn Ziyad was drawn to Zayn al-Abidin and he was asked to give his name. He replied with his family name, Ali ibn Hussain. The governor queried, 'Didn't God kill Ali ibn Hussain?'

'I had a brother who was also called Ali and the people killed him', replied Zayn al-Abidin.

'Rather God killed him', affirmed Ibn Ziyad.

This provoked the answer, quoting from the Qur'an, 'God takes the souls at the time of their death' (Q. 39:42). Followed by, 'No soul may die except by God's leave, at an appointed time' (Q. 3:145).

Again, Ibn Ziyad flew into a rage, 'How dare you answer me like that! That answer will be the end of you. Take him away and cut off his head!'

At this Zaynab clung to Zayn al-Abidin and said, 'O Ibn Ziyad, haven't you had enough of our blood? By God, I will not leave him. If you kill him, kill me with him.'

Looking from one to the other, Ibn Ziyad said, 'How strange is this family relationship! I think she wants me to kill her with him. Leave him, for I see that this illness will finish him off.'

Ibn Ziyad now left the palace and went to the mosque. He ascended the raised platform (*minbar*). He praised and glorified God, then said, 'Praise be to God who has revealed the truth and the followers of the truth, and has given victory to the Commander of the Faithful, Yazid, and his party and has killed the liar who is the son of a liar and his followers.' At this the head of an important clan in Kufa who was present stood in front of Ibn Ziyad and the assembly and shouted, 'O enemy of God, you are the liar and your father and the man who appointed you and his father. You killed the sons of prophets and take the place of men of truth on the minbar.' Ibn Ziyad ordered his immediate arrest, but the clan chief gave voice to the battle cry of his clan and immediately seven hundred of his men gathered around him and took him away to safety. That night Ibn Ziyad had him arrested in his house, executed and then his body was crucified and exhibited in public as a warning.

The next morning the head of Hussain, mounted on a spear, was paraded through the streets of Kufa. After this was finished all the severed heads were assembled and the journey began to take them to Yazid in Damascus. The captives were likewise assembled and bound in preparation for the journey ahead of them. Zayn al-Abidin was secured with an iron chain around his neck. The captives soon caught up with the men transporting the severed heads. The journey from Kufa to Damascus took a few weeks because they called at every settlement on the way to display the severed heads and to allow people to see the bound captives. The whole tenor of this exercise was to humiliate and denigrate the survivors and the martyrs of Karbala, and to demonstrate what happens to those who oppose the rule of Yazid.

Eventually, the party comprising severed heads, captives and their guards reached Damascus and entered the presence of Yazid. The head of Hussain was placed on a dish and set before Yazid, who gazed upon it. He then recited a poem: 'The clan of the Prophet [the Hashemites] just sought a kingdom. No revelation was sent to them or any news from heaven...I wish my grandfathers, who were killed in the Battle of Badr [by Ali], could now witness the misery of those who helped the Prophet. Were they present now, they would exclaim with joy applauding my deed.'

He then spoke to Zayn al-Abidin, saying, 'Son of Hussain, your father cut the bond of kinship with me and showed ignorance of my right, trying to deprive me of my position of authority. Now God has treated him in the way that you have seen.'

Zayn al-Abidin responded by quoting a verse of the Qur'an, 'No affliction visits the earth or yourselves but it is in a book before we bring it about, that is indeed easy for God' (Q. 57:22).

Yazid countered him with another verse from the Qur'an, 'Whatever affliction that may visit you is because of what your hands have earned, though God excuses many an offence' (Q. 42:30).

The captive women and children were arrayed before Yazid and made to sit down. All eyes were on them, some with pity and shame and others gloating or apprehensive. Fatima al-Sughra, the daughter of Hussain, who was aged around nine-years-old, reported that a Syrian man looked at her and asked Yazid if he could have her. She clung to her aunt, Zaynab, who spoke out boldly addressing the man, 'By God, you are a liar. By God, you are too lowly-born! Such a thing is not for you nor for him [Yazid] to decide.'

Yazid reacted angrily, 'You are a liar. That is for me to decide. If I wish to do anything, I can do it.'

Zaynab retorted, 'No, by God! God would not let you do that unless you had left our faith and professed belief in another religion.'

'It is me whom you are treating in this way!' screamed Yazid, 'It is your father who has left the religion, and your brother.'

To this Zaynab replied, 'It is by the religion of my father and my brother that you, your father and grandfather are guided if you are a Muslim.'

'Enemy of God, you lie!' he shouted.

Zaynab answered him, 'You are a commander, yet you vilify people unjustly and you have oppressed them with your authority.'

At this Yazid remained silent.

Yazid then ordered that the captives should be taken away and held securely. He realised the enormity of the actions carried out on his orders and feared the consequences. Yazid decided to send the captives back to Medina, according them all due respect, to try to save his face. They remained in Damascus for several days. The captives were then issued with new clothes and a guard was appointed to escort them safely back to Medina. The captives requested their guards to allow them to pass by the graves of the martyrs of Karbala, which they did. They paid their respects there and this is the origin of the tradition amongst Shi'a Muslims to this day to make visitations to the graves of Hussain and the martyrs in Karbala, especially on Arbaeen, the fortieth day after the commemoration of the massacre, the Day of Ashura. They then continued their journey back to Medina. The news of the massacre reached Medina before they did and there was great lamentation, which was renewed when the captives arrived.