

Chapter 46: The Events of the Eighth Year of Migration

The seventh year of migration came to an end and the Muslims were able, according to the terms of the Peace Pact of Hudaibiyah, to perform collectively the pilgrimage of the Ka'bah and to observe lovely and moving rites for the benefit of monotheism in the very centre of idolaters, so as to attract towards Islam the hearts of some chiefs of Quraysh like Khalid bin Walid, 'Amr bin As,¹ and Uthman bin Talhah. Soon afterwards these three chiefs came to Madina and expressed their attachment for Prophet Muhammad and his religion, and severed their connections with Quraysh of Makkah of which nothing more than a lifeless skeleton was left.²

Some biographers say that Khalid and 'Amr As embraced Islam during 5 A.H. It may, however, be stated for certain that adoption of Islam by them took place in 8 A.H., because Khalid was the commander of a unit of the army of Quraysh at the time of the conclusion of the Peace Pact of Hudaibiyah and both of them embraced Islam simultaneously.

In the beginning of 8 A.H., security prevailed in most of the localities in the Hijaz and the call to monotheism had extended to many parts and the influence of the Jews in the north, and attacks by Quraysh from the south, did not threaten the Muslims any longer.

The Prophet now decided to extend his invitation to Syria and to open a spot for the penetration of Islam in the hearts of the people who were then living under the sovereignty of the Roman Emperor. For this purpose he sent Harith Umayr Azdi with a letter to the court of the Ruler of Syria. In those days Harith bin Abi Shamir Ghassani was the despotic ruler of Syria, who ruled in the capacity of a satellite of the Kaiser. The envoy of the Prophet reached the border towns of Syria and continued his journey.

However, Shurahbil, who was the governor of the border areas became aware of the arrival of the envoy. He imprisoned him in a village named Mota and made detailed enquiries from him. The envoy admitted that he was carrying a letter from the Prophet of Islam to Harith Ghassani, the absolute Ruler of Syria. Disregarding all human and universal principles, according to which the life and blood of an envoy

is respected throughout the world, the governor ordered his hands and feet to be tied and that he should be put to death.

The Prophet became aware of the crime of Shurahbil. He was extremely disturbed on account of the murder of his envoy and informed the Muslims of the dastardly act of Shurahbil and asked them to take revenge on the wild governor who had killed the envoy without even obtaining permission from the higher authorities.

A Still More Tragic Event

Simultaneously with this incident, a still more tragic event took place and further confirmed the determination of the Prophet to punish the Syrians who had curbed the freedom of the propagation by the missionaries of Islam and had murdered his envoy and the Muslim missionaries cruelly.

The event referred above was this that in the month of Rabi' of 8 A.H. Ka'b bin Umayr Ghifari was deputed, along with fifteen others, all of whom were proficient missionaries, to proceed to the region of Zat Atlah, situated on the other side of Wadiul Qura' and to invite the people of that place to embrace Islam. They arrived there and performed the duty entrusted to them.

Suddenly they met with severe opposition from those people and all of them were attacked. The missionary party found itself encircled by a large crowd. They defended themselves valiantly and preferred martyrdom to humility. Only one of them, who was wounded and was lying amongst the dead, got up at mid-night and proceeded to Madina. On reaching there he related the entire incident to the Prophet.

The massacre of the missionaries and the execution of so many innocent persons made the Prophet give orders for jihad. An army consisting of three thousand persons was, therefore dispatched to punish the rebels, and those, who obstructed the spread of Islam.³

Orders for jihad were given. Three thousand swordsmen gathered in the military station of Madina (Jurf). The Prophet came to the military station personally and addressed the soldiers saying: "You should go and invite those people again to embrace Islam. If they accept Islam you need not avenge the murder of the envoy, but otherwise you should seek help from Allah and fight against them.

Yes, O soldiers of Islam! Perform jihad in the name of Allah! Punish the enemies of Allah and your own enemies, who live in Syria. Don't interfere with the monks and nuns, who spend their time in monasteries, far removed from the tumult of the world. Destroy all satanic elements, with these very swords. Don't kill women, children and old people. Don't cut trees and don't destroy buildings".⁴

"Yes! O Mujahids! The commander of the army is my cousin Ja'far bin Abu Talib. If he sustains an injury, Zayd bin Harith will bear the standard and direct the army, and if he is killed Abdullah Rawahid will assume the command. And if he too meets an injury, you may choose the chief commander yourselves".

Then orders were given to march and the Prophet himself as well as some other Muslims accompanied the army up to the point of Thaniyatul wida'. There those who had escorted the soldiers bade them good-bye and said according to the old tradition: "May Allah help you return safe and sound and with war booty".

However, Abdullah Rawahid, who was the second assistant or third commander, recited in reply this verse: *I seek forgiveness from Allah and from the hard blows out of which the foams of blood gush out.*⁵

From this verse one can very well assess the strength of the faith and the love for martyrdom of this valiant commander. In the meantime people saw him weeping. When the reason for weeping was enquired from him he said: "I am not at all interested in the world, but I have heard the Prophet reciting this verse: "It is the inevitable decree of Allah that all of you should arrive in Hell" (and from there the pious persons should proceed to Paradise). My arrival in Hell is, therefore, certain but the end of this arrival is not clear and it is not known what will happen thereafter".⁶

Difference Of Opinion About The First Commander

Many biographers have written that the chief commander of the army was Zayd bin Harith, the adopted son of the Prophet and Ja'far and Abdullah were his second and third in command respectively.

However, as opposed to this idea, the Sh'iah research scholars treat Ja'far bin Abu Talib to be the chief commander of the army and the two other persons to be the second and third in command. The question now is as to which of these views is correct.

The real position may be ascertained in two ways:

1. From the point of view of social standing as well as piety and learning Zayd bin Harith did not equal Ja'far Tayyar. Ibn Athir says in Usdul Ghabah about Ja'far: "He resembled the Prophet in temperament and features, and declared his faith in the Prophet only a short time after Ali. One day Abu Talib saw Ali offering his prayers standing on the right side of the Prophet. He then said to his son Ja'far: "You too should go and offer prayers standing on the Prophet's left side".

He was the leader of the people, who abandoned their homes for the sake of their religion and faith and left Makkah, under the orders of the Prophet, to take refuge in Ethiopia. He, in the capacity of the spokesman of the group of migrants, attracted the King of Ethiopia towards Islam with his strong and penetrating logic and proved the falsehood of the representatives of Quraysh, who had come to Ethiopia to arrange the return of the refugees to the Hijaz.

By reciting the verses of the Qur'an relating to the Prophet 'Isa and his mother Maryam he secured the sympathy and protection of the Negus for the Muslims migrants in such a manner that he turned away the representatives of Quraysh from his court.⁷

Ja'far was the same person who returned from Ethiopia at the time of the conquest of Khayber and the Prophet, on hearing of his arrival, went twelve steps forward to receive him, put his hand round his neck, kissed his forehead, wept for joy and said: "I don't know for which event I should feel more happy—for your return from Ethiopia or for the conquest of Khayber, and that too at the hands of your brother, Ali".

Ja'far was the same distinguished person, who was remembered by the Commander of the Faithful after his death for his bravery and valour. When Ali came to know that 'Amr As had taken the oath of allegiance to Mu'awiyah and they had settled that if they gained victory over Ali the Governorship of Egypt would be given to 'Amr, he (the Commander of the Faithful) felt uncomfortable and remembered his uncle, Hamzah and brother, Ja'far and said: "If these two persons had been alive, our victory would have been ensured".⁸

Does it stand to reason that in spite of Ja'far's possessing the distinguished attributes, some of which have been mentioned above, the Prophet should have entrusted the command of the army to Zayd and should have made Ja'far his first assistant?

2. The verses, which the great poets of Islam recited, mourning the death of these commanders, show that the chief commander was Ja'far and the other two persons were his assistants. On hearing about the tragic death of these commanders, Hassan bin Thabit, the poet of the Prophet, recited an elegy which is recorded in the Seerah-i Ibn Hisham.

He says: "May the commanders who were killed one after the other in the Battle of Mota be blessed by Allah. They were Ja'far, Zayd and Abdullah who successively welcomed death. (The word *tanabi'u* used in these verses shows clearly that the three commanders were killed one after the other and the first to be killed was Ja'far).

The most explicit of the poems is the elegy written by Ka'b bin Malik Ansari to lament the death of those killed at Mota. In it he specifies that the first commander was Ja'far. This poet was himself a witness to the fact that the Prophet had entrusted the chief commandership to Ja'far. He says: "Remember the time when the soldiers of Islam were placed under the standard of the First Commander viz. Ja'far bin Abi Talib and proceeded to perform jihad".

These verses which were written in those very days and have remained safe from the vicissitudes of time are the most vital and authentic witnesses of the fact that whatever has been written by the Sunni writers on this point does not conform with historical facts and the narrators have forged that version because of some political considerations and the biographers have recorded it in their books without necessary verification. It is, however, surprising that notwithstanding the fact that Ibn Hisham⁹ has quoted these elegies and has treated Ja'far to be the second in command.

Array Of Roman And Islamic Troops

In those days Rome was faced with a strange chaos because of its continuous wars with Iran. Although the Romans were elated by their victories over Iran, they were also aware of the bravery and valour of the soldiers of Islam who had won laurels by means of their personal bravery and strength of faith.

Hence, when the Roman Government received reports about the preparations and movement of the Muslim soldiers, Hercules and the Ruler of Syria set up a formidable force to face the three thousand strong army of Islam. Shurahbil alone collected one hundred thousand soldiers from different tribes of Syria and proceeded to the frontiers of the territory to stop the advance of the Muslim warriors.

Not being contented with this, the Kaiser moved, with advance information, from Byzantium with one hundred thousand soldiers and encamped at Ma'ab which is one of the cities of Balqa'. They stayed there as reservists and auxiliary force.¹⁰

Collection of all this soldiery, to fight against an army which was comparatively much smaller, was on account of the reports which the Roman commanders had received about the conquests by the Muslims. Otherwise even one tenth of this force containing only three thousand soldiers, was sufficient to confront the enemies, however brave they might be.

The notable fact is that, when the strength of the two armies is compared, the army of Islam was many times weaker than the army of Rome in view of their numbers as well as knowledge of war strategy and tactics. On account of their having participated in protracted wars between Rome and Iran, the Roman officers had gained many secrets of military superiority and victory, whereas the knowledge of the young army of Islam in these matters was only elementary.

And then the Muslims were not also at par with the Romans in the matter of military equipment and means of transport. And the most important thing is that the Muslim forces were going to invade a foreign country whereas the Romans, possessing all facilities, were in their own country and had only to defend themselves. In such circumstances it is always necessary that the attacking army should be well-equipped and strong enough to surmount the unfavourable conditions.

Keeping these points in view we shall now see that the commanders of the Muslim army preferred steadfastness and fighting to flight from the battlefield, and thus added to their historical honours, notwithstanding the fact that they could see death at a distance of a few steps only.

After their arrival at the frontiers of Syria, the Muslims became aware of the preparations and the military strength of the enemy. They, therefore, immediately formed a military consultative council to decide the strategy of war. Some persons were of the view that the matter might be reported to the Prophet and further instructions obtained from him.

This view was likely to be confirmed, but in the meantime Abdullah Rawahid, who was the second in

command and had sought martyrdom from Almighty Allah at the time of departure from Madina, rose up and delivered a fiery speech.

He said: "You have been dispatched to achieve an object which you don't like. You have left Madina to achieve martyrdom. In the battlefield, Muslims don't depend upon superiority in numbers. We are going to fight against these people in the path of Allah and Islam – the same Islam which has made us honourable and respectable. If we are victorious we shall have won laurels; and if we are martyred that, too, is one of our wishes".

Abdullah's words changed the thinking of the officers and the members of the consultative council. Hence, it was decided that complying with the orders of the Prophet, fighting should be resorted to at the place specified by him.¹¹

The two armies faced each other at a place called Sharaf. However, on account of some military considerations, a part of the Muslim army retreated and encamped in Mota. Ja'far bin Abu Talib, who was the chief commander of the army, divided it into three divisions and appointed a commander for each division. Single combats commenced. It was now necessary for Ja'far to hold the standard in his hand and guide his soldiers in making the attack and simultaneously being engaged in fighting and defence.

His bravery and steadfastness in the cause of his objective is quite apparent from the epic verses which he recited while attacking the enemy. He said: "I am happy that the promised Paradise has become nearer – the same pure Paradise which contains cold beverages. On the contrary the destruction of Rome is also near. It is the nation, which has been guilty of blasphemy according to the creed of monotheism and whose contacts and connections with us have been severed. I am determined to strike a blow on them as and when I face them".¹²

The chief commander of Islam put up a courageous fight against the enemies. However, when he found himself encircled by them and realized that his martyrdom was certain, he, in order that the enemies might not utilize his horse and also they might know that he had now severed his ties with the world, dismounted his horse and struck it a blow which made it incapable of movement, and then he continued to fight.

In the meantime his right hand was cut off. In order that the standard of the Prophet might not fall on the ground he held it in his left hand and when his left hand was also cut off he held it in his arms. Eventually, after having sustained eighty wounds he fell down and breathed his last.

Now the turn of Zayd bin Harith, the second in command arrived. He carried the standard on his shoulder and performed his duty with unparalleled valour and at last succumbed to his fatal wounds. Then Abdullah Rawahid the third in command took the standard in his hand. He mounted his horse and recited his epic verses.

During the course of fighting he felt very hungry. A morsel of food was given to him so that he might get some relief from hunger. He had not yet eaten anything out of it when he heard the noise of the torrent-like swarming of the enemy. He then threw away the morsel of food, advanced towards the enemy and continued fighting till he was martyred.

Army Of Islam In Distress

From then onwards the distress and perplexity of the army of Islam commenced. The chief commander and his two assistants had been killed. The Prophet had, however, visualized this situation beforehand and had authorized the soldiers that if things came to such a pass they might choose their commander themselves.

In the meantime, Thabit bin Aqram picked up the standard, turned towards the Muslim soldiers and said: "Choose a commander for yourselves". All of them said: "You should become our commander". He replied: "I am not at all prepared to assume this office. You should, therefore, select someone else". Then Thabit as well as other Muslims selected Khalid bin Walid, who had embraced Islam recently and was available in the army, to be their commander.

When Khalid was selected as the commander the situation was a very delicate one. Terror and awe prevailed over the Muslims. The commander of the army resorted to military tactics which were unprecedented. He ordered that at mid-night when it was dark everywhere they should engage themselves in transfer and change-over and that too making a hue and cry.

The right wing should give its place to the left wing and vice versa and similarly the front column should come to the centre of the army and vice versa. This change-over continued till dawn. According to one narration he ordered that a unit of the Muslims should move to a distant place at mid-night and then return in the morning and join the army reciting *La ilaha illallah* (There is no god but Allah).

The object of the entire scheme was that the Roman army should think that an auxiliary force had arrived to join the Muslims. By chance it was on account of this impression that they did not attack the Muslims on the following day and said to themselves that when the Muslims had fought so valiantly in the absence of the auxiliary force they would fight more bravely after they had been joined by additional troops.

The calmness of the Roman army provided the Muslims an opportunity to return the way they had come. The greatest success which the Muslims achieved was that they fought against an organized and powerful army for one day or for three days. The military scheme adopted by the new commander was a good one, because it delivered the Muslims from death and made them come back to Madina safely. Hence, it deserves praise. 13

The Soldiers Of Islam Return To Madina

Reports regarding the manner of fighting and retreat of the soldiers of Islam had already reached Madina before they arrived there. The Muslims, therefore, went to meet them as far as Juraf, the military station of Madina.

The action taken by the new commander was a wise tactics, but as it did not accord with the sentiments of the Muslims and with their natural and real bravery, reared up under the auspices of faith, they did not look upon the retreat of the soldiers favourably, and did not consider it to be something graceful.

They, therefore, received them with biting slogans like: "O fugitives! Why did you run away from Jihad?" and by throwing dust on their heads and faces. The behaviour of the Muslims with this group was so rude that some of the persons who had participated in the battle were obliged to remain confined to their houses for quite some time and they did not come within the public view. And, if they did come out, the people pointed to them with their fingers and said: "He is one of the those persons who ran away from jihad".¹⁴

Reaction of the Muslims to the wisely undertaken retreat by the soldiers of Islam is indicative of the spirit of bravery and heroism which the faith in Allah and in the Day of Judgement had created and perfected in them, and on account of which they preferred death in the path of Islam to the insignificant benefit derived from such retreat.

Myth Instead Of History

As the Commander of the Faithful, Ali bin Abi Talib is known amongst the Muslims with the title of Asadullah (Lion of Allah), some persons have thought it expedient to create, in comparison with him, a commander, who should carry the title of Sayfullah (Sword of Allah) and such a person should not be anyone except the brave commander of Islam, Khalid bin Walid. They, therefore, say that on his return from the Battle of Mota the Prophet gave him the title of Sayfullah.

No doubt if the Prophet had given him this title on some other occasion there could be no question about it, but the conditions and circumstances after the return of the Muslim army from the Battle of Mota did not necessitate that the Prophet should give him such a title. Is it justifiable that the Prophet should give a title like Sayfullah to a person who is at the head of those people, whom Muslims call fugitives and accord them reception by throwing dust on their heads and faces?

And even if he displayed the attribute of being 'the Sword of Allah' in other battles, his achievement in this battle was nothing more than a praiseworthy military scheme, for otherwise he and his subordinates would not have been given the title of fugitives.

Ibn Sa'd writes: "At the time of retreat of the soldiers of Islam, the Roman soldiers pursued them and killed

some of them".¹⁵

The forgerers of the myth of 'Sayfullah' have also added this sentence to support their statement; "When Khalid became the commander, he ordered the soldiers to attack the enemy. He himself attacked bravely and nine swords broke in his hand, and only a shield remained with him".

However, the forgerers of this myth have forgotten one thing that is, if Khalid and his soldiers performed such feats of bravery in the battlefield why did the people of Madina call them fugitives, and why did they receive them by throwing dust on their heads and faces when in that case (i.e. if they had fought as bravely as mentioned above) they should have received them honourably, for example, by slaughtering sheep and sprinkling scent and rosewater in their path?

The Prophet Wept Bitterly On The Death Of Ja'far

The Prophet burst into tears on the death and martyrdom of his cousin Ja'far. He went to the house of Ja'far direct to inform his wife, Asma' daughter of Umayy, about the death of her husband and also to offer condolences to her. Addressing Asma', he said: "Where are my children?" She brought Ja'far's sons, Abdullah, Awn and Muhammad before the Prophet. On observing the Prophet's intense attachment for the children, she realized that her dear husband was dead.

She said: "It appears that my children have become orphans, because you are treating them as such". The Prophet wept bitterly at this moment. Then he asked his daughter, Fatimah, to prepare food and entertain the family of Ja'far for three days. Even after this the Prophet remained sad for Ja'far bin Abu Talib and Zayd bin Harith and as and when he entered his own house he wept bitterly for them.¹⁶

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1. Waqidi has given another version of the stimulant for this chief's inclination towards Islam. (Mughazi, vol. II, pp. 743-745)
 2. Tabaqat-i Ibn Sa'd, vol. VII, page 394.
 3. Tabaqat-i Kubra, vol. II, page 128.
 4. Mughazi Waqidi, vol. II, page 757.
 5. And then he immediately recited another verse: When others see my grave or my corpse, besmeared with blood, they may praise my bravery and self-sacrifice and pray for me. (Biharul Anwar, vol. XXI, page 60 and Tabaqat, vol. II, page 128).
 6. Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. II, page 374.
 7. Usdul Ghabah, vol. I, page 387.
 8. Siffin-i Ibn Muzahim, page 49.
 9. Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. II, pp. 384 - 387.
 10. Mughazi Waqidi, vol. II, p. 760; Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. II, p. 375.
 11. Mughaz-i Waqidi, vol II, page 760; Seerah-i Halabi, vol. II, page 77.
 12. Seerah i Ibn Hisham, vol. II, page 378.
 13. Mughazi-i Waqidi, vol. II, page 763.
 14. Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. II, pp. 382 - 383; Seerah-i Halabi, vol. II, p. 79.
 15. Tabaqat, vol. II, page 129.
 16. Bihar, vol. XXI, pp. 54 - 55 and Mughazi-i Waqidi, vol. II, page 766.

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