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## Chapter 47: The Battle of Zatus Salasil

From the day the Prophet migrated to Madina and made that city the centre of Islam, he was always watchful of the conditions of the enemies and their enthusiasm and conspiracies, and attached great importance to the collection of information about their activities. He sent skillful and proficient persons to Makkah and to the different tribes of idolaters at various places so that they might inform him in time about the decisions and plots of the enemies.

On becoming aware of their conspiracies he often nipped their plots in the bud. In such cases the warriors of Islam attacked the enemies unawares under the command of the Prophet or some brave officer of Islam and dispersed them before they could even move from their place. As a result of this, Islam remained safe from the danger of the enemies, and much of the bloodshed was also avoided.

In the present times information of the strength and fitness of the enemy and of his secret plans is considered to be one of the greatest factors contributing to victory, and the superpowers of the world possess extensive organizations for the training of spies and their dispatch and utilization.

In Islam initiative in this direction was taken by the Prophet himself, and after him the caliphs of Islam and specially the Commander of the Faithful also entrusted different duties to a number of spies.

As and when he appointed someone as the governor of a locality he ordered some persons to watch his behaviour and activities and to submit reports to him (i.e. to Ali). He has alluded to this matter in a number of letters written to the governors in which they have been reprimanded. (vide letters Nos. 33 and 45 in Nahjul Balaghah)

In 2 A.H. the Prophet dispatched eighty persons from amongst the immigrants, under the command of Abdullah bin Jahsh, with instructions to encamp at a specified place and to inform him about the activities and schemes of Quraysh.

If the Prophet was not taken unawares at the time of the Battle of Uhud and concentrated his forces outside Madina before the arrival of the enemies and if, during the Battle of Ahzab, he dug a dreadful

ditch in front of the enemies before they could reach there, it was entirely owing to the detailed reports which the Muslims, deputed for this purpose, submitted to him, and in this way performed their religious duty to save Islam from downfall.

This wise method adopted by the Prophet is a great example for the Muslims to follow, and on this basis it is necessary that the great leaders of Islam should be fully aware of all types of anti-Islamic conspiracies within the Islamic countries as well as in different parts of the world. By this means they should extinguish the sparks before they turn into flames and should achieve their object. However, during the present times this task cannot be accomplished without necessary equipment.

During the Battle of Zatus Salasil which is the subject of our present discussion, a great mischief was suppressed quite easily by gathering minute details about the plot of the enemy. And in case the Prophet had not resorted to this method (i.e. collecting information in advance) he would have incurred irreparable losses.

Here are the details of this event: The intelligence department of the Prophet reported to him that in the valley of Yabis, thousands of persons had concluded a mutual agreement that they would annihilate Islam with full force and would lay down their lives for the achievement of this object or kill Muhammad and his brave and victorious officer, Ali.

Ali bin Ibrahim Qummi writes: "Divine revelation informed the Prophet about their plots".<sup>1</sup> But Shaykh Mufid, the great research scholar says: "A Muslim submitted a report about this to the Prophet and mentioned the locality of the plot to be the valley of Raml<sup>2</sup> and added that the said tribes had decided to carry out a night attack on Madina and settle the matter finally.

The Prophet considered it necessary to inform the Muslims about this great danger. In those days the code word for calling the people to prayers or to hear some important news was Assalat Jami'ah. Hence, as ordered by the Prophet, the announcer took his place at an elevated spot of the roof of the mosque and uttered the said sentence loudly. Immediately thereupon the Muslims gathered in the mosque. The Prophet mounted the pulpit and spoke *inter alia* thus: "The enemies of Allah are sitting in ambush and have decided to attack you unawares at night. Some of you should stand up to ward off this mischief".

At this moment a group of persons was appointed for the purpose and Abu Bakr was nominated to be its commander. He, along with the special unit, proceeded towards the tribe of Bani Salim. The distance which the soldiers of Islam covered consisted of a peculiar stony path and the area of the valley inhabited by the said tribe was very vast. When the soldiers of Islam tried to enter the valley they had to face Bani Salim and the commander of the army of Islam could think of no other alternative except that he should return the way he had come.<sup>3</sup>

Ali bin Ibrahim writes in his Tafsir; "When the chiefs of the tribe said to Abu Bakr: 'What is the purpose of this military expedition?' he replied: 'I have been appointed by the Prophet of Allah to present Islam to you and to fight against you if you decline to accept it'.

At this moment the chiefs of the tribe terrified him by making him face a large number of men. He, therefore, ordered the soldiers of Islam to return, and brought them back to Madina, notwithstanding the fact that they were inclined to put up a good fight".

The return of the army of Islam and that too in the said condition touched the Prophet He now entrusted the command of the army to Abu Bakr's friend, Umar. This time the enemies were more alert than before and had concealed themselves at the entrance of the valley behind the stones and the trees. At the time of the arrival of the army of Islam they came out of their hiding places and began to fight valiantly. The commander of the army was, therefore, obliged to retreat and to return to Madina.

'Amr As, the cunning politician of Arabia, who had then embraced Islam recently, came to the Prophet and said: "War is deceit". He meant to say that victory in war does not depend on valour and strength only but is also due to ingeniousness and deceit which should be practiced upon the enemy to achieve success. He added: "If I am allowed to lead the soldiers of Islam I shall be able to do the needful". In view of some good purpose the Prophet accepted his proposal, but he too like the two earlier commanders met the same fate.

## **Ali Is Selected As The Commander Of The Army**

The successive defeats had made the Muslims very sad. Eventually the Prophet organized a force and selected Ali to be its commander and gave the standard in his hand. Ali entered his house and asked his wife Fatimah to give him the piece of cloth, which he used to tie on his head in critical circumstances. The Prophet's daughter wept bitterly to see that her dear husband was proceeding on a very dangerous mission. The Prophet consoled her and cleared up the tears from her eyes.

Then he accompanied Ali up to the Masjidul Ahzab. Ali mounted on a piebald horse, and wearing two garments woven in Yemen, and carrying in his hand a spear, made in Hind,<sup>4</sup> set off. He completely changed his itinerary, so much so that the soldiers began thinking that he was proceeding towards Iraq. The Prophet saw him off saying, "He is an attacking commander who never flees the battlefield".

Associating this sentence specially to Ali, shows that the former commanders had not only been defeated but, contrary to the military principles of Islam, their retreat also meant defeat.

## **The Secret Of Ali's Victory In This Battle**

The secret of the victory achieved by Ali in this battle may be summarized in the following three points:

1. He did not let the enemy become aware of his activities, because he changed his course so that information regarding his tactics might not reach the enemy through the nomadic Arabs and the neighbouring tribes.
2. He acted on an important military principle i.e. camouflage. He travelled during night and concealed

himself at some place during day time and took rest. He had not yet reached the entrance to the valley when he ordered all the soldiers to take rest. And in order that the enemy might not become aware of their arrival near the valley, he also instructed the soldiers of Islam to tie the mouths of their horses lest their neighing should awaken the enemy.

In the morning he offered his prayers along with his companions and then made the soldiers ascend the mountain from the back side, and moved them into the valley from above the mountain. Under the command of a brave and valiant officer, the soldiers proceeded forth like a torrent and attacked the sleeping enemies like lightning. Some of them were killed and others took to their heels.

3. The unmatched bravery of the Commander of the faithful, who killed seven of his opponents, overpowered the enemy. They were so much terrified that finding themselves incapable of further resistance, they ran away leaving a large booty behind them.<sup>5</sup>

The brave commander returned to Madina, crowned with laurels. The Prophet, accompanied by some of his companions, received him. On seeing the Prophet he dismounted immediately. The Prophet, while patting the back of Ali said to him: "Mount the horse. Allah and His Prophet are pleased with you".

At that moment tears trickled down his cheeks on account of excessive joy and the Prophet then uttered his historical sentence about Ali: "If I had not been afraid that a group of my followers might say the same thing about you as the Christians say about Prophet 'Isa, I would have said something about you, as a consequence of which the people would have taken the dust lying under your feet as an article of blessing from wherever you might have passed".<sup>6</sup>

This bravery and self-sacrifice was so valuable that Surah al-Adiyat was revealed about this event and its peculiar and sensational oath aims at appreciating the military spirit and manliness of the valiant soldiers who took part in this battle. Here are some verses of this Surah:

***By the snorting chargers (of the warriors), whose hooves strike against the rocks and produce sparks while running during a raid at dawn, and leave behind a trail of dust which engulf the enemy. (Surah al-Adiyat, 100: 1- 5).***

The above is the summary of the events of the Battle of Zatus Salasil as the Shi'ah exegetes and historians have recorded on the basis of authentic authorities. However, Sunni historians like Tabari, have given another version of this event which differs much from what we have stated above. It is not improbable that two battles bore the name of Zatus Salasil and each group has narrated the events of one of them and has refrained on the basis of certain considerations, from narrating those of the other.<sup>7</sup>

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1. Tafsir-i Qummi, page 733.

2. Possibly the Valley of Raml (the sandy desert) and the Valley of Yabis (the dry desert) are one and the same place.

3. al-Irshad, page 84.

4. Name of a town.
  5. Tafsir-i Furat, pp. 222-226 and Majma'ul Bayan, vol. I, page 528.
  6. al-Irshad, pp. 84-86.
  7. Tarikh-i Tabari, vol. III, page 30; Seerah-i Halabi, vol. III, page 215 and Mughazi Waqidi, vol. II, pp. 769 - 774.
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