

Chapter 56: Eradication of Idol-Worship in Arabia

In the end of the ninth year of migration the initial verses of Surah al-Tawbah (Bara'at) were revealed and the Prophet was ordered to send a person to Makkah during Haj season so that he might read out those verses along with a proclamation consisting of four articles.

In these verses security granted to the polytheists has been withdrawn and all the treaties made with them (except those which the parties had acted upon faithfully and had not violated them in practice) have been annulled and the chiefs of polytheism and their followers have been told that they should clarify, within a period of four months, their position vis-a-vis the Islamic Government which is based on monotheism and if they do not give up polytheism and idol-worship, the immunity provided to them would terminate.

As and when the orientalist reach this stage of the history of Islam they violently attack this religion and consider this severity to be opposed to the principle of 'freedom of faith'. However, if they undertake an unbiased perusal of the history of Islam, and study the motive which prompted this action mentioned in the historical texts, as well as in Surah Tawbah, they will probably realize their misunderstanding and will confirm that this action was not at all opposed to the principle of 'freedom of faith', which is respected by all the wise men of the world. Here are the causes for the issuance of this manifesto:

1. During the Age of Ignorance a custom prevailed among the Arabs that a person who performed the pilgrimage of the Ka'bah, gave away to an indigent person the dress with which he performed tawaf (circumambulation). If a person had only one dress he usually borrowed another and performed tawaf with it so that he might not have to give away his own dress to a poor man. And if it was not possible to borrow a dress the tawaf was performed naked!

One day a fat and beautiful woman entered the mosque. As she did not possess more than one dress she was obliged, in observance of the superstitious custom of that time, to perform tawaf with a naked body. It is evident as to what a bad effect the tawaf by the naked woman in the most sacred place

amidst a crowd must have produced!

2. When Surah al-Tawbah was revealed, more than twenty years had passed since the appointment of the Prophet to the prophetic mission, and during this period the strong logic of Islam, regarding the prevention of idol-worship, had reached the ears of the polytheists of the Peninsula. In case, therefore, an insignificant group still persisted in polytheism and idol-worship, its reason was only their fanaticism and obstinacy.

Hence, the time had now arrived that the Prophet of Islam should use the last remedy for the reformation of the society, destroy all images of idol-worship by force, consider it (i.e. idol-worship) a transgression against humanity and annihilate the source of hundreds of other indecent habits in the society.

However, the orientalist, who consider this action to be opposed to the principle of freedom of faith, which is the basis of Islam and the foundation of modern culture, have ignored one point, that is, the principle of freedom of faith is respectable only so long as it does not harm the prosperity of the individual and the society. Otherwise, in accordance with the dictates of reason and the course adopted by the thinkers of the world, it should be opposed to the utmost extent.

For example, in modern Europe, on account of some wrong ideas, some sensual men support the movement of nudism in the society and on the basis of an idea and a logic which is only childish (viz. covering of a part of the body is a source of excitement and, therefore, corrupts the morals) they form secret clubs and become naked there before others!

Does human intellect permit that these people should be allowed to continue their activities on the plea of 'freedom of faith' and should it be said that their 'faith' must be respected? Or is it necessary that, to protect the welfare of these people as well as of the society, we should fight against this way of thinking which is totally foolish?

This method (i.e. prevention of corruption by force) is not employed by Islam only, but intelligentsia of the world put up a tough fight against all movements and ideas which result in harm to the interests of a society, and, in fact, such a fight is a war against the foolish beliefs of the depressed people.

Idol-worship was nothing more than a handful of superstitions and ridiculous beliefs, which brought hundreds of abominable habits in its train, and the Prophet had paid sufficient heed towards the guidance of the idolaters. Time had, therefore, arrived that he should, as a last resort, use military force to destroy this source of corruption.

3. Haj is one of the greatest articles of Islamic worship and religious rites, and till the day of the revelation of this Surah the conflicts and battles with the chiefs of polytheism had not permitted that the Prophet should practically teach the Muslims the ceremonies connected with Haj in a correct and simple manner. It was, therefore necessary that the Prophet should participate personally in this great Islamic congregation and give practical training to the Muslims for the performance of this great worship.

However, the Prophet could take part in it only when the Holy Ka'bah and its precincts had been vacated by the polytheists, who had surrendered it to the wooden and stone idols, and when the House of Allah was opened primarily for the worshippers of Allah and His real servants.

In view of the above-mentioned three factors the Prophet called Abu Bakr and taught him some initial verses of Surah al-Tawbah and ordered him to proceed to Makkah along with forty other persons¹ and to recite on Eid al-Adha day the verses, which comprise estrangement from and disgust towards the polytheists.

As ordered by the Prophet, Abu Bakr proceeded to Makkah. In the meantime the Archangel Jibreel came and brought a message from Allah to the effect that disgust towards the polytheists should be proclaimed either by the Prophet himself or by one from him.²

Hence, the Prophet called Ali and informed him of the position. He then placed his special animal for riding at Ali's disposal and ordered him to leave Madina as early as possible so that he might contact Abu Bakr on the way and take the verses from him and recite the same along with the requisite proclamation on the day of Eid al-Adha before the grand gathering in which people from all parts of Arabia would be participating.

The contents of the proclamation were as under:

1. The idolaters have no right to enter the House of Allah.
2. Performing tawaf with naked body is prohibited.
3. No idolater will participate in the ceremonies of Haj.
4. If some people have concluded non-aggression pacts with the Prophet and have carried out their obligations under those pacts faithfully, the pacts made with them would be honoured and their lives and property would be respected till the expiry of those pacts. However, the polytheists who have not concluded any pact with the Muslims or have violated practically any such pact are hereby given four months time from today (the tenth of Zil Haj) to explain their position vis-a-vis the Government of Islam. They should either join the monotheists (the Muslims) and give up every sort of polytheism or get ready for war.³

The Commander of the faithful left for Makkah, riding the special animal provided to him by the Holy Prophet. He was accompanied by some other persons including Jabir bin Abdullah Ansari. He met Abu Bakr at Juhfah and conveyed the message of the Prophet to him and he thereupon placed the verses at Ali's disposal.

The Shi'ah as well as many Sunni traditionalists quote Ali as saying to Abu Bakr: "The Prophet has given you the choice either to accompany me to Makkah or to return from here to Madina". Abu Bakr preferred to return to Madina, and after reaching the Prophet, he said: "You considered me fit to accomplish a task

which others were also keen to accomplish and thus earn glory, but when I had covered some distance you relieved me of the responsibility. Has anything been revealed about me?"

The Prophet replied affably: "Jibreel came and brought a Divine message to the effect that none except myself or one belonging to me is competent to accomplish this task".⁴

However, it appears from some narratives of Ahl Sunnah that Abu Bakr held the office of supervisor of Haj ceremonies whereas Ali was appointed only to recite the Divine verses and the proclamation of the Prophet before the people on Mina day.⁵

The Commander of the Faithful arrived in Makkah. On the tenth day of Zil Haj he mounted Jamrah 'Aqabah and recited the first thirteen verses of Surah Bara'at. He also read out the proclamation of the Prophet with a heart overflowing with valour and strength and with a loud voice which could be heard by all those present, and made it clear to the polytheists who had not concluded any pact with the Muslims that they had only four months' time at their disposal, within which they should purify their environments from all types of corruption and perverse thinking, and should give up polytheism and idol-worship, failing which the privileges granted to them would be withdrawn.

The effect of these verses and proclamation was that the prescribed period of four months had not yet expired when the polytheists embraced Islam in groups, and idol-worship was completely eradicated from the Peninsula by the middle of the tenth year of migration.

Unfair Bias In The Assessment Of This Event

Divesting Abu Bakr of the responsibility to read out the verses of Surah al-Bara'at and appointing the Commander of the Faithful in his place and that too in compliance with the Divine command is no doubt one of Ali's positive and undeniable distinctions. However, a group of fanatical writers adopt a perverse view in the assessment of this event.

While assessing this event Alusi Baghdadi says in his Tafsir: "Abu Bakr was known for his compassion whereas Ali was his reverse because of his bravery and strength. As the recitation of the verses of Surah Bara'at and threatening the polytheists needed bravery and strength of mind more than anything else and Ali possessed these elements more than Abu Bakr, he was appointed in his place".⁶

This explanation, which is based on fanaticism, does not conform to the words of the Prophet, because he said in reply to Abu Bakr: "Divine revelation has ordered that these verses should be recited by me myself or by one who belongs to me". Kindness or bravery have, therefore, nothing to do with the matter.

Furthermore, the Prophet himself was a perfect manifestation of kindness. In the light of the above explanation, therefore, the Prophet, too, should not have been asked to communicate the verses of Surah al-Bara'at himself to the people because the Divine order was that either he himself or someone from his Ahl al-Bayt should discharge this responsibility.

While commenting on the same Surah, Ibn Kathir Shami, following the views of Maqrizi, has explained the matter in another way in Al-Imta'a. He writes: "The custom amongst the Arabs with regard to the violation of agreements was that someone who is a party to the agreement, or one of those related to him, should take the initiative in violating the agreement. Failing this the agreement remained valid. And as Ali was one of the nearest relatives of the Prophet, he was made responsible to recite these verses".

However, this explanation, too, is not valid because, amongst the relatives of the Prophet there was also Abbas, his uncle, whose relationship with him was in no way lesser than that of Ali. The question would, therefore, remain as to why this task was not assigned to him.

If we are asked to give an unbiased judgement about this historical event we should say that this dismissal and appointment was not due to Ali's strength of heart or his relationship with the Prophet, but the real purpose of this change was that the suitability of the Commander of the Faithful with regard to matters related to Islamic Government should become evident in a practical manner, and the people should come to know that from the point of view of personal qualities and capability he is the associate and companion of the Prophet.

And in case, after some time, prophethood comes to an end, the political affairs and the matters connected with the authority of the caliphate should be handled by him and none is more suited for them except he himself and after the demise of the Prophet the Muslims should not feel any difficulty, because they have seen with their own eyes that Ali has been appointed under the orders of Allah to nullify the agreements and such nullification is the prerogative of the ruler and his vicegerent only.

1. Waqidi has stated their number to be three hundred (Mughazi, vol. III, page 1077).

2. In some narratives the words "or one from your Ahl al-Bayt" occur. (Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. VI, page 545 and Bihar, vol XXI, page 267).

3. Furu' Kafi, vol. I, page 326.

4. al-Irshad Mufid, page 33.

5. Seerah-i Ibn Hisham, vol. II, page 546.

6. Ruhul Ma'ani, commentary of Surah al-Tawbah.

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