

Home > History of Shi'ism: From the Advent of Islam up to the End of Minor Occultation > Part 2: The Manner of Emergence of the Shi'ah > Lesson 6: The Role of the Quraysh in the Event of Saqifah > Lesson 6: Questions

Lesson 6: The Role of the Quraysh in the Event of Saqifah

In spite of the event in Ghadir Khumm and the efforts of the Prophet (S) for the succession of 'Ali (‘a), the gathering in Saqifah took place. The command of God was not executed and the family of the Prophet (S) was confined at home. In this event, the role of the Quraysh must be pointed out. It is because the Quraysh were the people who wanted and succeeded in trampling upon the right of the Prophet's (S) progeny.

On many occasions, the Commander of the Faithful 'Ali (‘a) emphasizes the acts of oppression and injustice of the Quraysh and their endeavors in gaining access to the caliphate.¹ In one of his correspondence with Mu'awiyah, Imam al-Hasan (‘a) also described in detail the role of the Quraysh in the Saqifah event, saying:

After the demise of the Prophet (S), the Quraysh considered themselves as the tribe and the most nearest to him, and with this proof, they sidetracked the other Arabs and took hold of the affair of caliphate. When we, the *Ahl al-Bayt* of Muhammad (S), advanced the proposition to them, they did not behave justly with us and they deprived us of our right.²

Imam al-Baqir (‘a) thus also says to one of his companions:

What should we say about the oppression and injustice of the Quraysh against us, and our Shi'ah and supporters? The Messenger of Allah (S) passed away while the people were asked, "Who are the most preeminent of people?" Yet, the Quraysh turned away from us to such an extent that they changed the course of caliphate. They utilized our argument against the *Ansar* and assumed the caliphate one after the other. When it was returned to us, they broke their oath of allegiance and waged war against us...³

Yes, the Quraysh had behaved this way since long time ago, so much so that the people knew they would take possession of the caliphate. For this reason, the *Ansar* rushed to the Saqifah so as to

prevent the Quraysh from obtaining power because they were a monopolistic people.

The Reasons behind the Quraysh's Enmity toward the Family of the Prophet (S)

Now, this question is posed: Why did the Quraysh have enmity toward the family of the Prophet (S)? Did they not owe their religion and the worldly life to this family? Was it not through the blessings of this family that they had attained salvation from perdition? In answering these questions, we shall indicate some points:

1. The Quraysh's Ambition for Leadership

During the period of *jahiliyyah* {pre-Islamic ignorance} the Quraysh had an excellent position among the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula. In this regard, Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani says: "The Arab tribes used to consider the Quraysh as superior in everything except poetry."⁴ This status was attained through two means:

a. Economic Clout

From the time of Hashim, the great grandfather of the Prophet (S), Quraysh had already started trading with neighboring lands such as Yemen, Sham, Palestine, Iraq, and Abyssinia. The Quraysh nobles had amassed legendary wealth under the aegis of this trade.⁵ God, the Exalted, described this commerce as the source of the Quraysh's welfare and comfort, saying:

﴿لِإِيلَافِ قُرَيْشٍ * إِيلَافِهِمْ رِحْلَةَ الشِّتَاءِ وَالصَّيْفِ * فَلْيَعْبُدُوا رَبَّ هَذَا الْبَيْتِ *
الَّذِي أَطْعَمَهُمْ مِنْ جُوعٍ وَآمَنَهُمْ مِنْ خَوْفٍ﴾

*"{In gratitude} for solidarity among Quraysh, their solidarity during winter and summer journeys, let them worship the Lord of this House, who has fed them {and saved them} from hunger, and secured them from fear."*⁶

b. Spiritual Position

Due to the existence of the *Ka'bah*, the pilgrimage site of the Arab tribes in their territory, the Quraysh occupied a special spiritual position among the Arabs. Especially after the event of the Companions of the Elephant and the defeat of Abrahah⁷ the honor of the Quraysh, the custodians of the *Ka'bah*, was further enhanced and this event turned to be in their favor.

They called themselves as *Al Allah* {Family of Allah}, *Jiran Allah* {Neighbors of Allah} and *Sakkan*

Haram Allah {Residents of the House of Allah} and in doing so, they consolidated their religious position.⁸

As such, on account of sense of power, the Quraysh were inclined to exclusivity and they tried to prove their superiority. Since Mecca was a sort of capital for the Arabs, owing to the presence of the *Ka'bah*, and most of the denizens of the Arabian Peninsula used to come and go there, the Quraysh imposed their customs and traditions to those who came to Mecca.

One example regards the garment used when circumambulating the *Ka'bah* {*tawaf*}, which the pilgrims were required to purchase from them.⁹ Therefore, whenever they sensed, during the advent of the Most Noble Messenger (S), that teachings of Islam are not compatible with their sense of exclusivity and superiority, they refrained from accepting the teachings vehemently opposing these precepts with all their might and utilizing all their power to annihilate Islam.

But the will of God was something else, and in the end, He made His prophet (S) prevail over them. From the 8th year after *hijrah*, a number of the Quraysh nobles went to Medina and joined the ranks of Muslims, but they did not desist from their hostility.

For instance, Hakam ibn Abi'l-'As used to ridicule the Prophet (S) and on account of which the Messenger of Allah (S) exiled him to Ta'if.¹⁰ As the Quraysh were not able to confront the Prophet (S), they conceived a new plot and that was to confront his successor.

Time and again, 'Umar said to 'Abbas: "The Arabs did not want prophethood {*nubuwwah*} and caliphate {*khilafah*} to be confined to the Banu Hashim."¹¹

The Quraysh also said:

If anyone from the Banu Hashim took the reign of caliphate, caliphate will never slip out of this family and it will never be relinquished to us. But if a non-member of the Banu Hashim assumed it, it will move around us and be assigned to all of us.¹²

The people at that time were also aware of this mentality of the Quraysh. As narrated by Bara' ibn 'Azib, "I was sympathetic toward the Banu Hashim. When the Holy Prophet (S) passed away, I was afraid that the Quraysh was thinking of taking the caliphate out of the Banu Hashim and I was at a loss to understand."¹³

The Quraysh's approval of the caliphate of Abubakr and 'Umar was motivated by their own benefits. For, at the time of his death, Abubakr said a number of Quraysh who have come to his support: "I know that each of you imagines that the caliphate shall belong to him, but I chose the best among you."¹⁴

Ibn Abi'l-Hadid says: "Quraysh was displeased by the prolongation of the caliphate of 'Umar, and 'Umar was aware of this issue and he was not permitting them to go out of Medina."¹⁵

2. Tribal Rivalry and Envy

One of the dire spin-offs of the tribal structure was intense struggle among the tribes, and God, the Exalted, points to this issue in some *surahs* of the Qur'an such as *Surah at-Takathur*¹⁶ and *Surah as-Saba'*.¹⁷

Since the period of *jahiliyyah*, there had been a power struggle between the Banu Hashim and the rest of Quraysh tribes. On the event of digging the Zamzam well by 'Abd al-Muttalib, the entire Quraysh tribes rallied together against the Banu Hashim and they were not ready to allow the honor of digging the Zamzam well to go to 'Abd al-Muttalib alone.¹⁸ Therefore, Abu Jahl used to say:

We used to compete with the Banu Hashim over the possession of nobility. They fed people; we fed them too. They gave riding animals to people; we also gave. They gave money; we also gave. It was to such an extent that we closely competed with each other, and we became like two racing horses. Then, they said: "There emerged from among us a prophet who receives revelation from heaven." Now, how could we compete with him? By God! We shall never believe in him or recognize him.¹⁹

Umayyah ibn Abi's-Salt, one of the nobles and great men of Ta'if and one of the *Hunafa*,²⁰ did not embrace Islam for the same reason. For many years, he had been waiting for the promised prophet to come. But he had been waiting as such so as to acquire this position himself. After becoming aware of the beginning of the Prophet's (S) mission, he refrained from following him identifying the reason for this as shame of the women of Tha'if, saying: "For a long time, I was telling them: 'I shall be the promised prophet.' Now, how could I bear for them to see me following a youngster of Banu 'Abd al-Manaf (referring to the Prophet (S))?"²¹

Yet, despite their will and envy, God lead His Prophet (S) to triumph crushing their pomp. After the 8th year *hijrah*, when most Quraysh nobles had emigrated to Medina, their irritation and envy toward the family of the Prophet (S) were mostly the result of instigation of these "new Muslims".

Ibn Sa'd has narrated thus:

One of the *Muhajirun* said many times to 'Abbas ibn 'Abd al-Muttalib: "Your father 'Abd al-Muttalib and Ghaytalah, Banu Sahm's female fortune-teller, were both in the fire. Finally, 'Abbas was infuriated and slapped him. As a result, his nose bled. That person came to the Prophet (S) and made a complaint against 'Abbas. The Messenger of Allah (S) asked his uncle 'Abbas to explain and 'Abbas complied. Thereafter, the Prophet (S) said to that man: "Why are you annoying 'Abbas?"²²

Due to his special position, 'Ali ('a) was the most envied by them. Imam al-Baqir ('a) says: "Whenever the Holy Prophet (S) mentioned the virtues of 'Ali ('a) or recited a verse of the Qur'an which was revealed concerning him, some of those who were in the assembly would stand up and leave."²³

As such, the Holy Prophet (S) has been reported many times to have said: "He who is envious of 'Ali is envious of me and he who is envious of me is an infidel {*kafir*}."²⁴

Even during the time of the Prophet (S), some would even express their envy and would actively annoy and disturb ‘Ali (‘a). Along this line, Sa‘d ibn Abi Waqqas has thus narrated: “Another person and I were in the mosque and we were abusing ‘Ali. While furious, the Prophet came to us and said: ‘Why do you annoy me? He who annoys ‘Ali annoys me’.”²⁵

3. The Quraysh’s Enmity toward ‘Ali (‘a)

Finally, the most important reason for depriving ‘Ali (‘a) was Quraysh’s opposition and enmity toward him as they had suffered heavy losses from him, for, in battles during the time of the Prophet (‘a), ‘Ali (‘a) had killed their unbelieving fathers, brothers and relatives. As Ya‘qubi writes concerning the events on the initial days of the caliphate of ‘Ali (‘a):

All the people paid allegiance to him except three persons from among the Quraysh: Marwan ibn al-Hakam, Sa‘id ibn al-‘As and Walid ibn ‘Uqbah. On their behalf, Walid said to Commander of the Faithful (‘a): “You have inflicted a blow to all of us. You slaughtered my father after (the Battle of) Badr. You killed the father of Sa‘id in the battle and as Marwan’s father returned to Medina,²⁶ you complained to ‘Uthman.”²⁷

Similarly, during ‘Ali’s (‘a) caliphate ‘Ubayd Allah ibn ‘Umar requested Imam al-Hasan (‘a) to visit him and he has appointment with him. When Imam al-Hasan (‘a) paid him a visit he said: “Your father has inflicted a blow to the first and last person of Quraysh and the people are hostile to him. Help me to depose of him and let you come in his stead.”²⁸

When Ibn al-‘Abbas was asked why the Quraysh are hostile to ‘Ali (‘a), he said: “It is because ‘Ali sent the first among them to the fire {of hell} (by killing them in battles while in a state of unbelief {*kufr*}) and put to shame the last among them.”²⁹

The rivals of ‘Ali (‘a) also kindled the fire of this displeasure of Quraysh toward him thus taking advantage of it. For instance, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab said to Sa‘d ibn al-‘As: “You are staring at me in such a manner as if I killed your father, but I did not. It is ‘Ali ibn Abi Talib who has killed him!”³⁰

After receiving a fatal blow at Ibn al-Muljim’s hand, ‘Ali (‘a) himself pointed out the magnitude of Quraysh’s enmity toward him in a poetical line:

تكم قريش تمنای لتقتلني فلا وربك ما فازوا و ما ظفروا

“The Quraysh wished to kill me, but they did not succeed to do so.”³¹

Lesson 6: Summary

The role of the Quraysh in the event of Saqifah cannot be overlooked. It is because the Quraysh were the only people who could appropriate from themselves the right of the Prophet's (S) progeny. On many occasions, the Commander of the Faithful ('a) points to the wrongdoings he experienced from Quraysh. Quraysh's enmity toward the family of the Prophet (S) was motivated by the following:

1. Quraysh's ambition for leadership which prompted them to refuse to accept his invitation as such an acceptance was inconsistent with their leadership.
2. The existence of rivalry between Banu Hashim and the rest of Quraysh tribes and the latter's envy toward the former.
3. Quraysh's enmity toward 'Ali ('a) for inflicting major blows to them.

Lesson 6: Questions

1. What was the role of the Quraysh in the event of Saqifah?
2. What were the reasons behind Quraysh's enmity toward the family of the Prophet (S)?
3. Explain the tribal rivalry and envy.
4. What was the nature of Quraysh's enmity toward 'Ali ('a)?

1. For instance, in Sermon 170 of Nahj al-Balaghah, Imam 'Ali ('a) says: "O my Allah! I seek Thy succor against the Quraysh and those who are assisting them, because they are denying me (the rights of) kinship, have lowered my high position, and are united in opposing me in the matter (of the caliphate) which is my right, and then they said, "Know that the rightful thing is that you have it and also that you may leave it." Nahj al-Balaghah (Faydh al-Islam), p. 555.

Similarly, in his reply to the letter of his brother 'Aqil, Imam 'Ali ('a) says: "Do not take to heart the behavior of Quraysh. To talk about their skepticism, their enmity of Islam, their revolt against the cause of Allah and their desire to bring harm to me are a waste of time. They now are as much bent upon doing me injustice and fighting against me, as they were unanimously against the Holy Prophet (S). May Allah punish them for their sins! They have not even paid any consideration to the relationship that existed between them and me. They have deprived me of the estate of my mother's son." Ibid., Letter 36, p. 974.

2. Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, Maqatil at-Talibiyyin (Qum: Mansurat ash-Sharif ar-Radhi, 1416 AH), p. 65.

3. Kitab Salim ibn Qays al-'Amiri (Beirut: Mansurat Dar al-Funun, 1400 AH), p. 108; As-Sayyid 'Ali Khan ash-Shirazi, Ad-Darajat ar-Rafi'ah fi Tabaqat ash-Shi'ah (Beirut: Mu'assasah al-Wafa', n.d.), p. 5.

4. 'Ali ibn al-Husayn Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, Al-Aghani (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), vol. 1, p. 74.

5. Mahdi Pishva'i, Tarikh-e Islam az Jahiliyyat ta Hajjah al-Wida' (1) (Arak: Islamic Azad University (Arak Branch), n.d.), pp. 50-51.

6. Surah al-Quraysh 106:1-4.

7. See Surah al-Fil 105 and its commentary. {Trans.}
8. Mahdi Pishva'i, Tarikh-e Islam az Jahiliyyat ta Hajjah al-Wida' (1), p. 52.
9. Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, At-Tabaqat al-Kubra (Beirut: Dar Sadir, 1405 AH) vol. 1, p. 72.
10. 'Izz ad-Din Abu'l-Hasan 'Ali ibn Muhammad Abi'l-Kiram Ibn Athir, Asad al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah as-Sahabah (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, n.d.), vol. 2, p. 34.
11. Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah (Beirut: Dar Ihya' at-Turath al-'Arabi, 1378 AH), vol. 1, p. 194.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 51.
14. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 310.
15. Ibid., vol. 2, p. 159.
16. Surah at-Takathur 102:1-2:
﴿ أَلْهَاكُمُ التَّكَاثُرُ * حَتَّى زُرْتُمُ الْمَقَابِرَ ﴾

“Rivalry {and vainglory} distracted you until you visited {even} the graves.”

17. Surah as-Saba' 34:35-37:

﴿ وَقَالُوا نَحْنُ أَكْثَرُ أَمْوَالًا وَأَوْلَادًا وَمَا نَحْنُ بِمُعَذَّبِينَ * قُلْ إِنَّ رَبِّي يَبْسُطُ الرِّزْقَ لِمَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَقْدِرُ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ * وَمَا أَمْوَالُكُمْ وَلَا أَوْلَادُكُمْ بِالَّتِي ﴿ تَقْرَبُكُمْ عِنْدَنَا زُلْفَىٰ إِلَّا مَنْ آمَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا

“And they say, ‘We have greater wealth and more children, and we will not be punished!’ Say, ‘Indeed my Lord expands the provision for whomever He wishes and He tightens it, but most people do not know.’ It is not your wealth, nor your children, that will bring you close to Us in nearness, except those who have faith and act righteously.”

18. Ibn Hashim, As-Sirah an-Nabawiyyah (Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifah, n.d.), vol. 1, pp. 143-144.
19. Ibid.
20. Hunafa (sing. Hanif): those Arabs during the period of pre-Islamic ignorance {jahiliyyah} who were not worshipping idols. {Trans.}
21. Abu Muhammad 'Abd Allah ibn Muslim ibn al-Qutaybah, Al-Ma'arif, 1st edition (Qum: Mansurat ash-Sharif ar-Rida, 1415 AH), 60; Mahdi Pishva'i, Tarikh-e Islam az Jahiliyyat ta Hajjah al-Wida' (Arak: Islamic Azad University (Arak Branch), n.d.), p. 88.
22. Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, At-Tabaqat al-Kubra, vol. 4, p. 24.
23. Ibn Shahr Ashub Mazandarani, Manaqib Al Abi Talib (Qum: Mu'assasah Intisharat-e 'Allameh, n.d.), vol. 3, p. 214.
24. Ibid., pp. 213-214.
25. Ibid., p. 211.
26. Due to certain grave offenses, Marwan's father, Hakam ibn al-'As, was among the people of Banu Umayyah who were banished from Medina at the Prophet's (S) orders. During the 'Uthman's caliphate, a relative of his, he was allowed to return to Medina and rally around him. For details, see inter alia Mustadrak al-Hakim, vol. 4, p. 481; Tafsir al-Qurtubi, vol. 16, p. 197; Tafsir al-Fa'iq Zamakhshari, vol. 2, p. 352; Tafsir Ibn Kathir, vol. 4, p. 159; Tafsir al-Kabir, vol. 7, p. 491; Asad al-Ghabah of Ibn Athir, vol. 2, p. 34, An-Nihayah of Ibn Athir (Egypt), vol. 3, p. 23; Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 2, p. 55; Tafsir Nayshaburi on the marginal note of Tabari, vol. 26, p. 13, Sawa'iq al-Muhriqah, p. 108. {Trans.}
27. Ahmad ibn Abi Ya'qub ibn Wadhih, Tarikh al-Ya'qubi, 1st edition (Qum: Mansurat ash-Sharif ar-Radi, 1414 AH), vol. 2, p. 178.
28. Ibn Abi'l-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 1, p. 498.
29. Ibn Shahr Ashub Mazandarani, Manaqib Al Abi Talib, vol. 3, p. 220.
30. Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, At-Tabaqat al-Kubra, vol. 5, p. 31.
31. Ibn Shahr Ashub Mazandarani, Manaqib Al Abi Talib, vol. 3, p. 312.

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