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Al-Husayn's journey to al-Kufa and his death

Al-Husayn set out from Mecca shortly after the arrival of Muslim's letter urging him to come. He had with him most of his family and household retainers, some of the Kufan messengers and some pilgrims. On the way he gathered more support mainly from Bedouin tribesmen. Before he left 'Abd Allah b. 'Abbas had warned him against going, stressing the fact that the Shi'a had not yet revolted on his behalf. It would be different, he argued, if he was going to a city already under the control of men loyal to him; as it was, he was acting only on a promise of revolt which might not be fulfilled, and which, even if fulfilled might not be successful.

Later, when he saw that al-Husayn was determined to embark on an active policy, he urged him to go to al-Yaman which would be much further from the Syrian forces and where he would have strong support to begin his revolt against Yazid. 'Abd Allah b. al-Zubair, who also had ambitions towards the caliphate, was pleased to see al-Husayn leave as he expected disaster.

On his way, al-Husayn met the poet, Farazdaq, who also warned him against going. 'Abd Allah b. Ja'far b. Abi Talib wrote to him warning him not to go: "If you are destroyed now, the light of the land will be put out. You are the guiding symbol of the rightly-guided, the hope of the believers." A message also came from the Umayyad governor of Mecca guaranteeing him security if he returned to Mecca¹.

When al-Husayn reached al-Hajir, he sent a message to al-Kufa by Qais b. Mushar alSayyadawi one of the earlier Kufan messengers to him. In it he told the Kufans that he was on his way and they should begin to revolt. However Qais b. Mushar was stopped at al-Qadisiya by Husayn b. Tamim and sent as a prisoner to 'Ubaid Allah. The latter, now in complete control of al-Kufa, wanted to give a further demonstration of his power and he ordered Qais b. Mushar to go up on the *minbar* and curse al-Husayn and 'Ali. Qais went up on the *minbar* but instead of cursing al-Husayn and 'Ali, he said:

"O people, al-Husayn b. 'Ali is the best of God's creatures, the son of Fatima, notable in his pro-Umayyad position. But even he had not wanted to lead the army against al-Husayn and had only accepted the task when 'Ubaid Allah had threatened to dismiss him from his newly-appointed post as governor of al-Rayy². The real spirit behind 'Umar's army was Shimr b. Dhi Jawshin. When 'Umar began

to waver before the battle, it was Shimr who put purpose in him and by using the threat of the authority of 'Ubaid Allah he was able to make 'Umar act³.

Before the Battle of Karbala¹, al-Husayn and his followers spent the night in prayer and worship. There were few of them. In one passage, it is reported that there were 32 horsemen and 40 foot-soldiers⁴. They were facing an army of over 4,000. Al-Husayn encouraged all those with him to make good their escape then. But they all stayed with him. On the morning of the battle, they were joined by some of 'Umar's forces. Al-Hurr b. Yazid was not satisfied with the justice of the situation and crossed over to al-Husayn's side⁵. Each member of al-Husayn's forces bravely took up the battle, went out, fought and was killed.

Finally there was only al-Husayn left. The forces wavered for a moment, hesitant about killing the grandson of the Prophet. However, Shimr b. Dhi Jawshin led a group against him. Zur'a b. Sharik al-Tamimi and Sinan b. Anas al-Nakha'i actually delivered the death blows. It was Sinan who cut off al-Husayn's head. Altogether al-Husayn was stabbed 33 times and struck 34 times. The camp was given over to plunder. Bahr b. Ka'b took al-Husayn's *sarawil*; Qais b. Ash'ath his *qatifa*. The men even took some of the clothes from the women. However they did not harm the women. They also found the sick son of al-Husayn, 'Ali, and wondered whether they should kill him. 'Umar b. Sa'd ordered that he should not be killed nor the women touched⁶.

He sent the women to al-Kufa under guard. The head of al-Husayn was taken to 'Ubaid Allah and it is reported that he carved on the head with a stick⁷.

An alternative version makes Yazid do this when al-Husayn's head reached him⁸.

The heads of all the 72 supporters of al-Husayn were cut off and carried by the tribes.

1. Tabari, II 273-281.

2. Tabari, II 308.

3. Tabari, II 315-6.

4. Tabari, II 326.

5. Tabari, II 333-5.

6. Tabari, II 365-7.

7. Tabari, II 360.

8. Tabari, II 383.

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