

Composing Poetry in Their Memory

What is obvious beyond the shadow of doubt is that composing poetry about anyone means introducing him to others, keeping his name alive, and publicizing for him. Men's legacy, no matter how highly esteemed by others and how great, may lose its glow as time goes by.

Such legacy, therefore, will eventually be overlooked and its great significance forgotten. Poetry is faster to steal people's attention and appreciation. People disseminate it, tongues articulate it, hearts memorize it and pass it on from one generation to another, from one nation to another.

Arabic literature has preserved a great deal of this nation's history, biographies and wars, during the period of *jahiliyya* and since the dawn of Islam. Among what Du'bal al-Khuza'i has said about poetry's perpetuation across the centuries are these lines:

If I compose a line, its composer will die, yet I
Am quoted: one whose verse shall never die.
'Urwah Ibn Uthaynah has said,
I was told about men who did fear
That I vilify them, and I do not vilify.
If they are innocent, my poetry shall not come near
Them, nor shall they be censured thereby.
But if they are in esteem less than that,
And utter something with an effect to last,
It will mean to these men
Many a book and many a pen.

Since remembering Ahl al-Bayt (‘a) is the pillar of the creed and the spirit of reform, and through it are their teachings taught and footsteps followed, the Infallible Imams (‘a) kept urging their followers to publicize their abundant merits, the calamities they underwent, and their suffering as they tried to keep the creed alive.

Publicizing the tragedies that befell them and the agonies they had to withstand will keep their cause alive. May Allah have mercy on all those who keep their memory alive and who invite others to remember them.

Imam Abu Ja'far al-Baqir ('a) said the following to al-Kumait when the latter recited for him his poem which starts with "Who shall solace a heart suffering from overflowing passion?": *"May you always be supported by the Holy Spirit."*¹

When al-Kumait once sought permission of Imam as-Sadiq ('a) during the days of *tashriq* to recite his poem to him, the Imam ('a) thought it was quite a serious offence to recite poetry during such great days. But when al-Kumait said to him,

"It is composed about you (Ahl al-Bayt [as])," the father of 'Abdullah ('a) became quite relaxed because doing so is obligatory due to its resulting in keeping the traditions of Ahl al-Bayt ('a) alive. Then he called upon some of his family members to join them both, whereupon al-Kumait recited his poem. There was a great deal of weeping when he recited the verse saying,

Shooters hit thereby the mark the others are missing:
O last one led to misguidance by the first: Do listen!

It was then that Imam as-Sadiq ('a) raised his hands and supplicated saying, *"O Allah! Forgive al-Kumait's sins, the ones he committed, and the ones he will commit, the ones he hid, and the ones he revealed! And grant him, O Lord, of Your favours till he is pleased!"*²

Abu Ja'far Imam al-Jawad ('a) permitted 'Abdullah Ibn al-Salt to eulogize him and mourn his father Imam al-Riḍā ('a).

Abu Talib once wrote the Imam ('a) seeking his permission to eulogize his father Imam al-Riḍā ('a), so he cut the parchment in which the poem was written and kept it with him, then he wrote him saying, "An excellent job you have done, and may Allah reward you with goodness."³

Imam Abu 'Abdullah, as-Sadiq ('a), said to Sufyan Ibn Mis'ab, "Compose for me poetry about al-Husayn ('a)," then he ordered Umm Farwa and his own children to be brought near them. Once they all gathered, Sufyan started his poem by saying,

"O Farwa! Be generous with your over-pouring tears." It was then that Umm Farwa cried loudly, and so did the other women with her, whereupon Abu 'Abdullah ('a) shouted: "The door! (Close) the door!" The people of Medina assembled, so Abu 'Abdullah ('a) sent them a child who fainted (having become overwhelmed by emotion).⁴

This is one good method of disseminating awareness (of the tragedy of Karbala') among the public. Indeed, their children did faint during the Battle of al-*Taff*, and I do not know which one of them the Imam ('a) had then in mind. Was it 'Abdullah, the infant, or was it 'Abdullah Junior son of Imam al-Hasan ('a) who was killed with an arrow while in al-Husayn's lap? Or was it Muhammad son of Abu Sa'id son of 'Aqil son of Abu Talib?

Ja'far son of 'Affan⁵ came once to see Imam as-Sadiq ('a). The Imam ('a) said to him, "*You compose poetry about al-Husayn ('a), and you do a good job, don't you?*" He answered in the affirmative, whereupon the Imam ('a) asked him to recite some of it for him. Ja'far did. The Imam ('a) cried so much that his tears ran profusely on his cheeks and beard.

Then he said to him, "*Allah's angels who are near to Him have all witnessed what you have said about al-Husayn, and they have all cried just as we here cry. Allah has ordered you to be lodged in Paradise.*" After a while, the Imam ('a) turned to those present there and then to say, "*Anyone who composes poetry in memory of al-Husayn ('a) and he cries and causes others to cry will be forgiven by Allah, and he will be worthy of entering Paradise.*"⁶

This Ja'far is a sincere Shi'a who has earned a great deal of praise and is regarded as a reliable authority by biographers. He is the one who responded to Marwan Ibn Abu Hafsa when the latter said,

Clear the way for people whose customs are
The crushing of flanks whenever throngs jostle,
Accept what the Lord has decreed for you,
And let alone inheriting every protecting knight.
How can it be, and it never will,
That a daughters' son should inherit his uncle?⁷
Ja'far Ibn 'Affan responded by saying,
Why not?! And it surely is:
Sons of daughters shall inherit their uncles,
For the girls have his wealth, while the uncle
Is left without a share. Why should a *taleeq*
Talk about inheritance at all? The *taleeq* prayed
Only out of his fear of the sword.⁸

A group of men came to see Imam al-Riḡā ('a) once and found him looking out of the ordinary. They asked him why. He said to them, "I have spent my entire night awake thinking about what Marwan Ibn Abu Hafsa said," then he quoted the lines cited above.

The Imam (‘a) went on to say, “I later fell asleep. It was then that someone took hold of the door as he said,

How can it be? And it shall not:

Pillars of Islam do not belong to polytheists.
Grandaughters inherit no grandfathers,
While the uncle is deprived of his share.
Why should a *taleeq* about inheritance say a word?
The *taleeq* prayed only out of his fear of the sword.
The Qur’an has already informed you of his worth,
So the judges issued about him and decreed.
Fatima's son to whom reference is made
Earned his inheritance from his cousins,
While the son of the wide shield stands
Hesitant, weeping, only by his kin pleased.”⁹

Marwan stole the theme from verses composed by a slave of Tammam Ibn Ma’bid Ibn al-’Abbas Ibn ‘Abd al-Muttalib who stood to attack with his poetry ‘Ubaydullah Ibn Abu Rafi’, servant of the Messenger of Allah (S). He had come to Imam al-Hasan Ibn ‘Ali (‘a) and said: “I am your servant,” and he used to write down quotations from (the Imam's father) Imam ‘Ali Ibn Abu Talib (‘a). Tammam's slave then said:

Al-’Abbas's offspring denied their father's right
So you in your claim seek no good end;
Since when do the offspring of the Prophet
Behave like an heir who earns, then he,
When opportune, claims linkage to the father?¹⁰

Marwan Ibn Sulayman Ibn Yahya Ibn Abu Hafsa was a Jew who embraced Islam at the hands of Marwan Ibn al-Hakam. Some say that he was taken captive from Istakhar, and that ‘Uthman Ibn ‘Affan bought him and gave him to Marwan as a slave.

He participated in the incident of the Dar on Marwan's side. When Marwan Ibn al-Hakam was wounded (in that incident), he was carried by his slave, Ibn Abu Hafsah, on his shoulders.

He dragged him as he (Marwan) moaned. He kept telling him to remain silent else he should be heard and killed. He was able to bring him to a safe haven inside the tent of a woman who belonged to the tribe of ‘Anzah and treated him till he healed. Marwan freed him and let him participate with him in the

Battle of the Camel and of Marj Rahit. 11

‘Salih Ibn Atiyyah al-Adjam was angry with Marwan's verse “How can it be, and it shall not, etc.,” so he kept company with him for some time serving him till he and his family felt comfortable about him. When Ibn Abu Hafsah fell ill, ‘Salih acted as his nurse. Once those around the sick man had left with the exception of ‘Salih, the latter suffocated him and killed him, but none among his family suspected anything at all. 12

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1. This statement is quoted on p. 5 of ‘Uyun Akhbar al-Riḥā (‘a) by as-Saduq.
 2. This is recorded on p. 118, Vol. 15, of Al-Aghani and also on p. 27, Vol. 2, of Ma’ahid al-Tansis.
 3. This is stated on p. 350 of Rijal al-Kashshi.
 4. This is hadith number 263 on the list of ahadith recorded in Rawdat al-Kafi.
 5. According to p. 8, Vol. 7, and p. 45, Vol. 9, of Al-Aghani, he belonged to the tribe of Tay.
 6. This is quoted on p. 187 of Rijal al-Kashshi. On p. 144, Vol. 2, Chapter 13, of his book Al-Maqtal, al-Khawarizmi quotes two of his poems eulogizing Imam al-Husayn (‘a).
 7. These verses are recorded on p. 17, Vol. 12, of Al-Aghani.
 8. See p. 45, Vol. 9, of Al-Aghani.
 9. Refer to p. 305 of ‘Uyun Akhbar al-Riḥā by as-Saduq. On p. 214 of Al-Ihtijaj, al-Tabarsi, while discussing the biography of Imam Musa al-Kāḍim (‘a), says that the latter Imam heard that voice.
 10. These verses are recorded on p. 15 of Tabaqat al-Shu’ara’ by Ibn al-Mu’tazz.
 11. Refer to p. 34, Vol. 9, of Al-Aghani.
 12. Al-Aghani, Vol. 9, p. 46.

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