

The Assassination of Ali

From the second half of 658, Muawiya, the governor of Syria, had been steadily escalating violence against the dominions of Ali. Some of his inroads reached Ain-at-Tamar and Anbar, only 170 miles north of Kufa. The men of Kufa were so unwilling to fight against the Syrians that Ali found it impossible to take effective punitive action.

Muawiya himself led a raid right across the Jazira from Raqqa to Mosul, and met no resistance anywhere. At last, Ali declared in the mosque of Kufa that he would leave the city with the few of his faithful followers in an attempt to halt the Syrian aggression against Iraq, even if it cost him his life. This threat awakened the citizens of Kufa to the specter of being left leaderless if Ali was killed fighting against the Syrians. They were stung into action and they began to mobilize for defense.

The battle of Siffin had been the first trial of strength between Ali and Muawiya. Militarily, the battle had been a near-victory for Ali, but politically, it had become a stalemate. After some time, it began to appear that Ali would take up the challenge of Muawiya. But just then Ali was assassinated in the mosque of Kufa, and the second trial of strength never took place.

According to the historical accounts some of which are quite plausible, three Kharjis met in Kufa (some say in Makkah) to hatch a conspiracy. Each of them volunteered to kill each of the three leading political figures of the Dar-ul-Islam – Ali, Muawiya and Amr bin Aas. By killing them, it is alleged, they hoped to put an end to civil wars in Islam, and to restore peace to the Muslim *umma*.

One of the three conspirators was a certain Abdur Rahman bin Muljam. He stayed in Kufa to kill Ali, and the other two went to Syria and Egypt to kill Muawiya and Amr bin Aas. The plans of the would-be assassins of Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, according to the stories in circulation, went awry, and they were captured and were executed.

The Kharjis had been defeated at Nehrwan, and most of them had perished in the battle but a few had escaped. Abdur Rahman bin Muljam was one of those who had escaped. He was consumed with the desire to kill Ali, and was in quest of an opportunity to do so. By a coincidence, he met a Kharji woman, one Qattama, whose father and brothers had also been killed in Nehrwan, and she too had nursed an

undying hatred of Ali.

Abdur Rahman fell in love with Qattama, and proposed marriage to her. She told him that the price of her hand was the head of Ali ibn Abi Talib. This only strengthened Abdur Rahman in his resolution. He promised his inamorata the moon if she asked for it, but she said that nothing was of interest to her if she could not get the head of Ali ibn Abi Talib!

Abdur Rahman bin Muljam carefully worked out his plans to kill Ali. A few other trusted Kharjis also volunteered their services to him, and together they rehearsed the assassination. Abdur Rahman bin Muljam took one extra precaution – he put his sword in deadly poison, and let it soak in it for three days.

On the morning of the 19th of Ramadan of the year 40 A.H., Ali came into the Great Mosque of Kufa, and called Adhan (the call to prayer). He took his place in the alcove, and moments later, the worshippers began to arrive. They stood behind him in serried ranks, and the prayer began. Standing in the front row, with other worshippers, were Abdur Rahman bin Muljam and his confederates. They were watching Ali's movements. In the folds of their cloaks, they were carrying swords burnished to a high sheen, and soaked in poison.

Just when Ali touched the ground with his forehead for *sajda*, Abdur Rahman bin Muljam stepped out of his row, and crept into the alcove. And just when Ali lifted his head from the ground, ibn Muljam struck the fatal blow at his forehead with such deadly force that it split open.

Blood squirted from Ali's forehead in several jets, and he exclaimed:

“By the Lord of the Kaaba, I am successful!”

The members of the congregation realized what had happened, and as soon as they concluded the prayer, they surrounded him. His sons, Hasan and Husain, carried him to his house. A physician came, and tried to dress the ghastly wound but could not stop the bleeding. The blow of the sword was fatal anyway, but the poison from its blade was also spreading rapidly in his body.

The Arab historians say that it was the second time that Ali was wounded in the forehead, the first time being when, in the battle of the Trench fought in 627, the sword of Amr bin Abd Wudd cut through his shield and helmet, and struck it. His forehead still bore the scar left by the sword of Amr.

This is the account left by the Arab historians of the assassination of Ali, and it has been accepted as authentic by the vast majority of the Muslims.

Though this account has the authority of “consensus” of the historians behind it, its authenticity, nevertheless, is suspect on the grounds of “circumstantial evidence.” There are too many “coincidences” in it.

No one questions the fact that it was Ibn Muljam who killed Ali. But was it his own idea to kill him? It is

quite probable that the idea was planted in his mind by someone else who used subliminal techniques for doing so. Ibn Muljam didn't know that he was only a cat's paw, and he went ahead and killed Ali.

At this time no one in Dar-ul-Islam was more interested in the assassination of Ali than Muawiya. The plot to kill Ali, the skill displayed in its execution, and its success, show the touch of consummate subtlety and a high degree of professionalism which were characteristic of Muawiya alone, whereas Ibn Muljam was nothing more than a bumpkin. Muawiya employed the same "skill" in removing from the scene, real or fancied threats to his own security and power, on numerous other occasions in later times, with the same results.

Muawiya's spies had informed him that Ali was making preparations for the invasion of Syria. In the battle of Siffin, Muawiya had not responded to chivalrous treatment by Ali. This time, therefore, Ali had decided, not to fight a lingering action but a swift one that would quell Muawiya's rebellion, and would restore peace to the embattled empire of the Muslims.

Muawiya also knew that Ali had, this time, both the ability and the resolution, to bring the conflict to a speedy and successful conclusion. His only hope, therefore, for his safety in future, as in the past, lay in the succor that he could get from his old and trusted "allies" – treachery and intrigue. He, therefore, mobilized them, and they didn't disappoint him.

Muawiya made the act of the assassination of Ali look absolutely spontaneous and convincing by making himself and his crony, Amr bin Aas, the potential and intended "victims" of the conspiracy and fanaticism of the Kharji anarchists. But both of them "escaped" assassination by a rare "stroke of good luck."

One of them "fell ill" on the day he was to be "assassinated," and did not go into the mosque; the other did not fall ill, but went into the mosque wearing his armor under his cloak. He was "attacked" by his "assassin" but was "saved" by his armor. "Falling ill" would have been an indiscreet act, and would have exposed both "victims." In this manner, "illness" and the armor "saved" both Muawiya and Amr bin Aas from the daggers of their Kharji "assassins."

But Ali was not so "lucky." He did not fall ill, and he did not put on his armor when entering the mosque. In the mosque, Ibn Muljam was awaiting him with a sword soaked in poison. When Ali rose from *sajda*, he struck at his forehead, and cleft it. The blow proved to be fatal.

Most of the Arab historians wrote histories which were "inspired" by Muawiya and his successors. He was of course free to inject any account into those histories. He, therefore, managed to save himself and Amr bin Aas from the indictment of history, and it was Ibn Muljam alone who went down in history books as the real and the only villain of the crime.

By a coincidence, the assassination of Ali took place on the eve of his invasion of Syria.

Though the Kharji anarchists had aimed their daggers at all three of the leading political figures of the

Muslim world, viz., Ali, Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, by a coincidence, the latter two escaped the attempts on their lives, and Ali alone was killed.

By still another coincidence, the two men who escaped, i.e., Muawiya and Amr bin Aas, were intimate friends of each other, and both of them were – coincidence again – the mortal enemies of the third, i.e., Ali, who was the only one to be killed.

There are too many mysterious coincidences that saved the lives of Muawiya and Amr bin Aas but took the life of Ali.

Ali spent the time still left to him in prayer and devotions; in dictating his will; in giving instructions to his sons, ministers and generals regarding the conduct of the government; and in urging them all never to forget the old, the sick, the poor, the widows and the orphans at any time.

Ali declared that his elder son, Hasan, would succeed him as the head of the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth, and as the sovereign of all Muslims.

Though Ali was steadily weakening from the loss of blood and from the action of poison, all his faculties were sharp and clear right to the last moment. To all those people who came to see him, he said that they ought to be aware, at all times, of the presence of their Creator in their lives, to love Him, to serve Him, and to serve His Creation.

The poison had done its work, and on the morning of the 21st of Ramadan of 40 A.H., Ali ibn Abi Talib left this world to go into the presence of his Creator whom he had loved and served all his life. He was “God-intoxicated.” His greatest ambition in life was to wait upon his Creator, every moment of his existence, and he realized it, and this is the meaning of his exclamation in the alcove of the mosque when he felt the edge of the sword at his forehead: “By the Lord of the Kaaba, I am successful.”

Hasan and Husain washed the body of their father, draped it in a shroud, offered the funeral prayers for it, and then buried it silently at midnight at Najaf Ashraf, at some distance from Kufa. No markings were placed on the grave, and the grave-site was kept a secret, as desired by Ali himself.

Ali, Islam's greatest saint, hero, statesman, philosopher and martyr, had left this world, and the world was not to find a man sublime like him to all eternity.

Many among the Muslims were the mourners of Ali's death but none mourned him more dolorously than the Dhimmis (the Jews, the Christians, and the Magians). They were utterly heart-broken. And when the sick, the disabled, the cripples, the orphans and the widows in the empire heard that he had died, they felt that their world had collapsed. He had been a father to them all. He had taken them all by the hand. He had taken them all into his prayers. Many among them did not know until after his death that it was he who had fed them and had taken care of them. He had taken all mankind into his grasp.

Whereas Ali was accessible at all times to the poor and the weak, his own greatest anxiety and fear

were lest any of them be inaccessible to him. It was only in his dominion that the Dhimmis (non-Muslims), the powerless and the defenseless enjoyed complete security. No one could terrorize them or exploit them. With his death, their security was gone forever!

It is a truism that exercise of power cannot be combined with saintly purity, since once a man assumes responsibility for public affairs, the moral simplicities within which it is just possible, with luck, to be able to lead a private life, are soon hideously complicated to an extent that precludes all clear distinctions between right and wrong.

This truism, however, has its own exception – in Ali. He upheld principle, in public life as in private, regardless of cost. He invariably put the right thing ahead of the smart thing, regardless of cost. The source of the principles which guided his private and public life, was Al-Qur'an al-Majid as it was also the source of his political philosophy.

Ali has many critics and enemies but they cannot point out a single instance when he deviated from a principle. They cannot point out any conflict between his thought and speech on the one hand, or between his speech and deed on the other. He was consistently consistent in thought, speech and action.

Ali represented the ultimate triumph of character and ideology. He was a rare combination of love of God, devotion to duty, strength tempered with tenderness, symmetry of disposition, and inflexible integrity. His greatest legacy to the world of Islam will remain forever his sublime character.

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