

## **The Background of the Event of Karbala**

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In the month of Rajab of the 60<sup>th</sup> year of Hijra, Mu'awiya died. Yazid became the khalifa of the Muslim Kingdom. The people of Makkah and Madinah, who had been approving the khilafa for the last fifty years, accepted Yazid's accession to the throne without a word of protest.

The last sentence above poses a question. Why would the people have protested at all? What was wrong with Yazid?

To elaborate this point further, we present to the reader a discussion on a chapter from the book titled: *The Origin and Early Development of Shi'a Islam*, written by Husain M. Jafri, published by Longman, London, 1979.

The book is based on Mr. Jafri's Ph.D. thesis. He received his degree in 1976 from the American University of Beirut.

We would like to emphasize two major points here. This book was written before the Iranian Revolution of 1979; and even though the word Shi'a is mentioned as part of the title of the book, it is written in a very non-sectarian and rational style.

We will look at the chapter: Yazid's Accession to the Throne of Damascus – A Pretext to the Event of Karbala. This is chapter 7 from Jafri's book.

The chapter begins with the following passage:

“On Mu'awiya's death, his son Yazid assumed the caliphate in accordance with the former's unprecedented testament in Rajab 60/March 680. A true representative of the way of life common among the pre-Islamic youth of the Umayyad aristocracy, Yazid commanded no respect in the community. His anti-Islamic behaviour and openly irreligious practices were well known throughout the Muslim world and earned for him contempt and disfavour,

especially among those who cared for religion. Even those few writers who attempt to hush up some of the information unfavourable to the Umayyad house could not refrain from reporting that Yazid was the first among the caliphs to drink wine in public and that he sought out the Worst company, spending much of his time in the pleasures of music and singing and amusing himself with apes and hunting-hounds. He himself had no use for religion, nor had he any regard for the religious sentiments of others. Addicted to wine-bibbing, attracted to singing-girls, and exposed to all sorts of vices, Yazid has never been presented in good terms by any Muslim writer of any period or by any school of thought.” (Jahiz).

Jafri then continues to explain that Yazid was openly flouting the laws of Islam and the community was fully aware of his misdeeds. The community was even more concerned that a person claiming to be the khalifa of the Prophet would go so wrong so soon after the passing away of the Prophet and after the *Rashidun khalifas*.

Jafri adds: “Nevertheless, Mu’awiya's meticulous arrangements, coupled with his formidable military grip on the Muslim world, ensured the smooth succession of his son. Yazid was thus hailed as the ‘Commander of the Faithful’ by all the tribes and the provinces; yet his title was not secure until he could receive homage from the four most notable personalities of Islam, whom Mu’awiya, in spite of his utmost efforts, could neither buy nor coerce as he had done with all other men of prominence and the chiefs of the tribes.”

There were four people who had not accepted Yazid as the *khalifa*, and they were: Husayn b. Ali, Abd Allah b. az-Zubayr, Abd Allah b. Umar, and Abd ar-Rahman b. Abi Bakr. They were the sons of the most prominent Companions of the Prophet who were held in great respect by the community. Husayn, being the only surviving grandson of the Prophet, enjoyed greater regard than the other three. It was therefore obvious that without their recognition Yazid's authority could not be firmly consolidated, and Yazid too, knew it very well. Jafri continues to

explain that Yazid's father also knew that fact. To safeguard against any active opposition, he had advised his son as follows, on his deathbed:

O my son, I have arranged everything for you, and I have made all the Arabs agree to obey you. No one will now oppose you in your title to the caliphate, but I am very much afraid of Husayn b. 'Ali, 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar, 'Abd ar-Rahman b. Abi Bakr, and 'Abd Allah b. az-Zubayr. Among them Husayn b. 'Ali commands great love and respect because of his superior rights and close relationship to the Prophet. I do not think that the people of Iraq will abandon him until they have risen in rebellion for him against you. As far as is possible, try to deal with him gently. But the man who will attack you with full force, like a lion attacks his prey, and who will pounce upon you, like a fox when it finds an opportunity to pounce, is 'Abd Allah b. az-Zubayr. Whenever you get a chance, cut him into pieces.(2)

Jafri concludes from this that Mu'awiya's advice, commonly reported by many sources, confirms the reports that Mu'awiya's efforts to secure the approval of these grandees of Islam for Yazid's succession had not been successful. Jafri then continues the narrative:

“In order to secure undisputed possession of the caliphate, the first task Yazid undertook was to order the governor of Medina, Al-Waleed b. 'Utba, to exact homage from the refractory, especially from Husayn and Ibn az-Zubayr. In his letter to the governor, he gave strict orders that they should not be allowed to delay, and if they refused, that Waleed should behead them at once. Some sources include the name of Ibn 'Umar as also having been specifically mentioned in this letter. (3) Waleed b. 'Utba accordingly sent for Husayn and Ibn az-Zubayr at an unusual hour of the night to oblige them to pay homage to the new caliph. Both of them realized that Mu'awiya was dead, and both had decided to stand by their refusal to pay homage to Yazid. Ibn az-Zubayr did not go to the palace and fled to

Mecca the following night. Husayn went to see the governor, but was accompanied by a strong band of his supporters in case of a serious confrontation.

Leaving his supporters at the gate, Husayn went into the palace alone. Waleed read to him Yazid's letter and asked for immediate recognition of the new caliph. Husayn replied uncommittedly that the *bay'a*, in order to be valid, must be made in public and that the governor should arrange a public gathering in the mosque where he would also be present. With this reply, when Husayn rose to leave the palace, Marwan b. al-Hakam, who was present there as well, rebuked the governor, saying: "By God, if you allow Husayn to leave without paying the homage now, you will never be able to get it from him; so arrest him and do not free him until he pays the homage, or behead him."(3)



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In fact, Marwan had already advised Waleed to call these two for the *bay'a*, and if they refused, to kill them at once before the news of Mu'awiya's death became known to the people. Waleed, however, did not accept this advice.

Jafri then quotes some words that Waleed had said to Marwan. These statements actually show the thinking of Imam Husayn very clearly:

"Do not reproach me for this, O Marwan. You have advised me to do something in which there lies complete destruction and the ruin of my religion. By God, if the entire wealth and treasures of the whole world were given to me I would not kill Husayn. Should I kill him only because he refuses to pay homage, I would suffer total destruction on the Day of Judgement, for in the sight of God there cannot be anything more accountable than the blood of Husayn. (4)

Jafri then adds a comment about Waleed's thinking too:

The reply of Waleed to Marwan, so commonly recorded by the sources, reflects that particular regard and respect with which the grandson of the Prophet was held not only by his followers, but by a great number of Muslims in general.

Husayn, however, succeeded in avoiding the demand for the *bay'a* for two days and finally escaped at night with his family and most of the Hashemites to Mecca. Waleed b. Utba paid for his lenient attitude towards the grandson of the Prophet: he was shortly thereafter dismissed from his post as governor of Medina.

Ibn az-Zubayr, who had reached Makkah before Husayn, had already set about gathering people around him against Yazid, and there are reports which point to the fact that he had been harbouring secret ambitions for the caliphate himself. But it was natural that as soon as Husayn arrived in the city, the people abandoned Ibn az-Zubayr and gathered around Husayn. This was because all early sources of history and hadith tell us that "Husayn was much dearer and far more respected by the people of the Hijaz than Ibn az-Zubayr, who knew that the people there would never follow him as long as Husayn was in Mecca."<sup>5</sup>

Suddenly Muslims were seen in assemblies with Imam Husayn in Salat as well as in *tawaf* of the Kaaba.

We continue with Jafri's narrative:

"Husayn, like his brother Hasan, combined in his person the right of descent both from the Prophet and from 'Ali; and now after the death of Hasan he was the only candidate from the Prophet's family. But in the preceding years he had done very little to support his rights, restricting himself to a negative attitude towards Yazid's nomination. Nor, due to Hasan's treaty with Mu'awiya, was it possible for him to act as long as Mu'awiya was alive. This he explained to the Shi'is of Kufa whenever they approached him concerning an uprising. The death of Mu'awiya

changed the situation. On the one hand, Husayn was now free from the treaty obligations of his brother and, on the other, the demand for active guidance and leadership from the Shi'is of Kufa became increasingly pressing. As soon as this group received word of Mu'awiya death, they held a series of meetings expressing their renewed and enthusiastic support for Husayn. They sent out numerous letters and a succession of messengers urging Husayn to come to Kufa to take their leadership, as they had no Imam other than him. The first letter Husayn received on 10 Ramadan 60/15 June 680; it was signed by Sulayman b. Surad al-Khuza'i, Al-Musayyab b. Najaba, Rifa'a b. Shaddad, Habib b. al-Muzahir, and Muslim b. Awsaja in the name of the Shi'is and Muslims of Kufa,

(6)

We will discuss the contents of those letters, their replies, as well as many of the speeches that Imam Husayn made during those days, in a separate chapter.

The various letters, signed by important men in Kufa, must have given a major incentive to Husayn to proceed to Kufa immediately, for the signatories had been trusted followers of his house from the very beginning and had proven their loyalty at the battles of Al-Jamal and Siffeen with Ali. However, indications are that Husayn did not take any hasty decision on that. Though these letter writers were extremely disappointed by Imam Hasan's abdication in favour of Mu'awiya, they nevertheless remained loyal to the House of Ali/Fatima and hostile to the Umayyads. Jafri notes that in addition to those from the early Shias, a great number of other Kufans also wrote letters to Husayn, each signed by numerous individuals for the same purpose; additionally letters arrived from the people living in the city of Basra. (7)

Jafri concludes that: "Not all of them, however, had the same degree of religious motivation: some had political aspirations, hoping to throw off the yoke of Syrian domination."

Jafri then makes an extremely profound comment. This comment actually highlights the basic meaning and purpose of the sacrifice that was made at Karbala in the 61<sup>st</sup> year of Hijra.

The actions of Husayn, however, show that from beginning to end his strategy was aimed at a much higher goal than simply accession to the caliphate. There is no evidence that he tried, while at Mecca, to enlist active supporters from among the people who gathered around him or to propagate his cause among the great numbers of people who were coming to Mecca for the Hajj; there is also no evidence that he attempted to send his emissaries to stir up any rebellion in provinces such as Yemen and Persia, which were sympathetic to his house, even though advised by some of his family members to do so. And above all, had he acted promptly on the invitation of the Kufans, while the governorship of the city was in the hands of the weak Nu'man b. Bashir, he might have had a fair chance of success. His speedy arrival would not only have forestalled any effective action on the part of the Umayyad government, but would also have stirred real enthusiasm among the Kufans. (8)

Jafri then quotes a letter written by Imam Husayn himself, which makes this point even more clear:

From Husayn b. 'Ali to the believers and the Muslims [note that the word Shi'a is not used]. Hani and Sa'id came to me with your letters, they being the last among your messengers and delegations to come to me. I have understood what you said and that you have invited me to come to you because you have no Imam to guide you, and that you hope my arrival there will unite you in the right path and in the truth. I am sending my cousin and the trusted one from my family [Muslim b. 'Aqil] to report to me about your affairs. If his report conforms with what you have written, I will soon come. But you must be clear about the fact that the Imam is only one who follows the Book of God, makes justice and honesty his conduct and behaviour, judges with truth, and devotes himself to the service of God. Peace. (9)

Jafri emphasizes here the significance of Imam Husayn explaining the duties of an Imam in his letter.

We will quote and analyse the texts of other letters that Imam Husayn receives and replies to, later on.

Jafri's concluding passages in this analysis are also worth quoting here.

However, Husayn decided to respond to the call. Two obvious factors inspired him to act. Firstly, being the grandson of the founder of Islam, he must have felt it his duty to respond to the repeated appeals of these Muslims; and secondly, Yazid's pressing demand for homage was such that Husayn's filial piety and pride could not allow him to accept. It was a difficult situation. Acceptance of the authority of Mu'awiya as the head of the Muslim state was an entirely different matter from the acceptance of Yazid. Mu'awiya, in spite of his worldliness and indifferent attitude towards religion, did not totally violate the norms of Islam, at least not outwardly. Yazid not only violated Qur'anic norms and Prophetic *sunnah*, but also openly subjected them to contempt and ridicule, as has been the consensus of Muslim writers of all times. Even Mu'awiya's own agents, in implementing the plan for Yazid's nomination, were concerned about the latter's character. Thus when Mu'awiya asked Ziyad to prepare the people of Basra and Kufa to accept Yazid's nomination, the governor advised Mu'awiya to try to mend the ways of his son before asking people to swear allegiance to him.

As we have been pointing out all along, the purpose of this work is not to give a detailed narrative on the tragedy of Karbala. The main purpose of this study is to reflect on the Karbala Paradigm and make an effort to understand the influence of the event of Karbala on the Muslim thinking as well as on the world at large.



The background to the story was necessary here so that the readers can fully comprehend the political, economic and spiritual forces working in the society at that time. Therefore, we presented a discussion above on Jafri's text. Given below is Jafri's original bibliography that he appended to that chapter in his book. This is to keep the integrity of Jafri's text intact. It will also help the interested reader to find greater details on the various topics discussed.

**Notes to Chapter 7 (in Jafari's Book) from the original sources:**

Jahiz, *"Risala fi Bani Umayya"*, pp.294ff.; Baladhuri, IVB, pp. 1-11.

Baladhuri, IVB, pp.122 f.; 'Iqd, IV, p.226; Tabari, II, pp.196; Dinawari, p.226

Baladhuri, IVB, p.12; Ya'qubi, II, p.241; Tabari, II, p. 216;'Iqd IV, p.227; Bidaya, VIII, pp.146

Tabari, II, p.219; Baladhuri, IVB, p. 15; Dinawari, p.228;

Bidaya, VIII, p.147

See Tabari, II, pp.233, 276; Baladhuri, IVB, p.13; Dinawari,p.229; Mas'udi, *Muruj*, III, p. 55

*Bidaya*, VIII, p. 151

Tabari, II, pp.233 f.; *Maqatil*, p.96

Tabari, II p.234; Dinawari, p.229; *Bidaya*, VIII, pp. 151

Tabari, II, pp.234 f.; Ya'qubi, II, p.242

Tabari, II, p.235; Mufid, *Irshad*, II, pp.35