

Who Killed Al-Ḥusayn?

Unmasking the other villains of Karbalā'

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Transliteration key

أ-'	ض - ḍ
آ - ā	ط - ṭ
ب - b	ظ - ḏ
ت - t	ع - ʿ
ث - th	غ - gh
ج - j	ف - f
ح - ḥ	ق - q
خ - kh	ك - k
د - d	ل - l
ذ - dh	م - m
ر - r	ن - n
ز - z	و - w, ū
س - s	ه - h
ش - sh	ي - y, ī
ص - ṣ	

Who Killed Al-Ḥusayn?

Unmasking the other villains of Karbalā'

Retelling the tragedy of Karbalā' has traditionally been an important feature of Shī'i spirituality. The passion plays of Iran and the Indian subcontinent, the literature, both prose and poetry, composed upon the subject of the martyrdom of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn عليه السلام and the general atmosphere of mourning that reigns amongst the Shī'ah during the month of Muharram, all bear eloquent testimony to importance of that event in the Shī'ī calendar. To the Shī'ah, 'Āshūrā is probably the most important day of the year.

However, it is regrettable that despite the huge amount of attention the subject of Karbalā' enjoys, the event is persistently portrayed as two-sided. It is always depicted as Ḥusayn against Yazīd, Right rising up against Wrong, the Quest for Justice against the Forces of Oppression. Many an opportunist has even gone to the extent of superimposing upon the event the theme of Shī'ah against Ahl as-Sunnah.

In this partial retelling that concentrates upon what actually happened at Karbalā', and conveniently draws attention away from the other guilty party in the 'Āshūrā tragedy, lies another tragedy in itself. For while Ḥusayn's martyrdom has been oft commemorated, and his physical opponents and killers identified, cursed and eliminated, no one has spared a moment's anger for those who deserted him at the crucial hour. It is these men in the shadows, who squarely deserve to be called the real villains of Karbalā', upon whom this article seeks to cast light.

It was in Ramaḍān 60 AH that the letters from Kūfah started to arrive at the house of 'Abbās ibn 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib in Makkah where Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī was staying after his flight from Madīnah, letters urging him to lead the Kūfah fans into revolt against Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiyah, and assuring him of their loyalty and allegiance. Mu'āwiyah died two months earlier, and there was much resentment for his son Yazīd for whom the bay'ah was taken as his successor. The people of Kūfah

especially were looking at Ḥusayn for leadership, and soon there was stream of letters coming in from Kūfah. On certain days there would be as many as 600 letters, with messengers who enthusiastically described the support he would receive from the Kūfans.

Kūfah was a unique place, and the Kūfans a peculiar people. In 37 AH Sayyidunā ‘Alī عليه السلام shifted his capital from Madīnah to Kūfah, and ever since that city became the home of those who claimed partisanship of the Ahl al-Bayt. After the reconciliation between Hasan and Mu‘āwiyah in 41 AH many of those who had been in Sayyidunā Hasan’s army settled in Kūfah. At the time of Mu‘āwiyah’s death in 60 AH pro-‘Alid sentiments were still to be found in abundance in Kūfah. At the time of Mu‘āwiyah’s death in 60 AH Kūfah was still very strongly pro-‘Alid. Thus when the opportunity arose the Kūfans, who still regarded themselves as the *Shī‘ah* (supporters) of the Ahl al-Bayt, turned to Ḥusayn عليه السلام to lead them against Yazīd.

Sayyidunā Ḥusayn عليه السلام decided to send his cousin Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl to investigate the situation in Kūfah. If he found it feasible he would write to inform Ḥusayn, who would depart with his family from Makkah to join him in Kūfah. Muslim arrived in Dhū al-Qa‘dah. The Kūfans, when they learnt of his arrival presented themselves at the residence of Muslim ibn ‘Awsajah al-Asadī where he was staying. Soon there were 12 000 Kūfans who had given their solemn pledge to support and protect Ḥusayn with their lives and all they possessed. When this number rose to 18 000 Muslim felt confident enough to dispatch a messenger to Ḥusayn informing him of the bay‘ah of the Kūfans, and urging him to proceed from Makkah.

Rumours of what was happening in Kūfah soon reached Yazīd in Damascus. He immediately replaced Nu‘mān ibn Bashīr, the governor of Kūfah, with the ruthless ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād with orders to find Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl and kill him. Ibn Ziyād entered Kūfah early in Dhū al-Ḥijjah, accompanied by seventeen men on horseback. With the end of his turban drawn over his face he was unrecognisable,

and the people of Kūfah, who were expecting Sayyidunā Ḥusayn, mistook him for Ḥusayn. “Peace upon you, o son of Rasūlullāh,” they hailed him. Thus it was that Ibn Ziyād learnt the truth of the rumours. It was only when one of his mounted men shouted at them, “Stand back! This is the governor ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād!” that the Kūfans realised the seriousness of their blunder.

Soon after reaching the governor’s residence ‘Ubayd Allāh sent a servant of his own with a bag containing 3000 dirhams to pose as a newcomer from the Syrian town of Hims eager to join the imminent revolution, and thereby discover the whereabouts of Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl. He located Muslim in the house of Hānī ibn ‘Urwah, and took the pledge of allegiance at his hands. The money he handed over to Abū Thumāmah al-‘Āmirī who was acting as Muslim’s treasurer. After staying with them for a few days, during which he learnt most of what there was to know about their intrigue, he returned to Ibn Ziyād and informed him. Hānī ibn ‘Urwah was arrested. At first he denied all knowledge of Muslim’s whereabouts, but when the “newcomer from Hims” was brought before him he confessed. But he still refused to reveal where Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl was.

In the meantime Muslim came to hear about the arrest of Hānī ibn ‘Urwah. Realising that the hour for a decisive encounter had arrived, he raised his battle cry “Yā Mansūr”, at which 4000 of the men who had given him their oath of allegiance and loyalty to Ḥusayn gathered around him and proceeded towards the governor’s fort. When he saw Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl with the Kūfans at his gate, ‘Ubaydullāh sent some of the tribal leaders of Kūfah to speak with their people and draw them away from Muslim and warn them of the wrath that would descend upon them when the armies from Damascus arrived. Soon Muslim’s army was set upon by mothers telling their sons, “Come home, there are enough other people here,” and fathers ominously warning their sons, “What will happen tomorrow when the Syrian armies start arriving from Damascus? What will you do?” The resolve of the men who had taken a sacred oath to support and defend the cause of Ḥusayn ﷺ and the Ahl al-Bayt against Yazīd and his Syrian armies, the men upon the strength of whose oaths of allegiance and loyalty Sayyidunā Ḥusayn

was on that very moment making his way to Kūfah with his nearest and dearest, the resolve of those men of Kūfah could not hold in the face of such threats and discouragement. One by one they deserted Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl under the gates of the governor’s fort. At sunset he was left with only 30 men. He led them in Maghrib, and then moved away to the doorway of the Kindah quarter of Kūfah. He went through that door with no more than 10 men, and before he knew it, he was all on his own in the streets of Kūfah. Of all those who had so anxiously and enthusiastically written to Ḥusayn رضي الله عنه to come and lead them in revolt against Yazīd, and out of the 18 000 men who but days before placed their right hands in his, solemnly pledging allegiance to the cause for which they had invited the grandson of Rasūlullāh صلى الله عليه وسلم, not a single one was there to offer Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl the solace of their company or refuge from the night.

Eventually, parched with thirst, he knocked at a door. The occupant, an old lady, took him in when she learnt that he was Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl. She hid him away in her house, but her son, from whom she extracted a promise not to tell anyone of his presence there, waited only till the morning to take the news to the governor’s residence. The next thing Muslim realised was that the house was surrounded. Thrice he managed with his sword to drive the attackers out of the house, but when they started putting fire to the house he was forced to face them outside. It was only when ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn al-Ash‘ath, one of those sent to arrest him, promised him the safety of his life, that he lowered his sword. It was a mistake, for they took away his sword and mounted him upon an ass to be taken to Ibn Ziyād. Muslim knew his death was at hand. Tears flowed from his eyes, not at his own fate, but at the thought of Ḥusayn and his family travelling through the harsh, merciless desert towards a fate much more harsher and merciless, to an enemy firmly resolved to bring an end to his venture, and to the most treacherous of partisans whose desertion at the hour of need had brought his life to this tragic end. He begged Ibn al-Ash‘ath to send someone to Ḥusayn with the following message: “Ibn ‘Aqīl has sent me to you. He says to you: ‘Go back with your family. Do not be deceived by people of Kūfah. They are those same supporters of your father from whom he so dearly wished to part, by death

or by being killed. The Kūfans have lied to me and have lied to you, and a liar has no sense.”

Later that day —the Day of ‘Arafah, the 9th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah— Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl was taken up to the highest ramparts of the fort. As he was being led up, he recited the tahlīl, tasbīh, takbīr and istighfār. His last words reflect his intense disappointment with the people of Kūfah, “O Allāh, You be the Judge between us and our people. They deceived us and deserted us.” From high upon the ramparts his head fell down in the dust, in full view of those whose invitations and oaths of allegiance had given him so much to hope for, but whose cowardice and treachery had left him with nothing but despair. And Ḥusayn was on his way...

‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād had entered Kūfah with only seventeen men. For each man that came with him there was over a thousand who had taken the oath of allegiance at the hands of Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl. Yet not a single sword was raised in his defence. Not a single voice had the courage to protest his execution. And these were the same men who had been telling Ḥusayn, “Come, we are with you.”

Upon receipt of Muslim’s letter, Sayyidunā Ḥusayn started making arrangements to travel to Kūfah. He immediately despatched a messenger, Qays ibn Mus-hir, to inform the Kūfans of his imminent arrival. This messenger was captured by ‘Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, who ordered him to mount the walls of the fort and publicly curse Ḥusayn and his father. Instead he praised Sayyidunā ‘Alī and Sayyidunā Ḥusayn, telling them that Ḥusayn was on his way, and exhorting them to assist him as they had promised. He ended his brief address by imprecating curses upon Ibn Ziyād. Upon the order of Ibn Ziyād he was flung from the ramparts and killed. Despite this impassioned plea, the men of Kūfah were unmoved.

In Makkah, a number of the eminent Ṣaḥābah and children of Ṣaḥābah tried to dissuade Ḥusayn from going to Kūfah, and reminded him of the fickleness of the Kūfans with both his father and his brother. ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar, Jābir ibn ‘Abdillāh, Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī, his own brother, Muhammad, and his brother-in-law and cousin, ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ja‘far all remonstrated with him

and tried to persuade him not to go to Iraq. His mind, however, was made up. He set out from Makkah on the 8th of Dhū al-Ḥijjah, not knowing of the sad end of Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl.

After an arduous journey of almost a month, his party reached Iraq. It was there that he first heard of the treachery of the Kūfans and the death of Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl. Later he also learnt of the death of Qays ibn Mus-hir. A large number of desert Arabs had by that time attached themselves to his party, thinking that Kūfah was already practically his. Ḥusayn addressed them, saying, **“Our Shī‘ah have deserted us. Therefore, whoever wants to leave is free to do so.”** Soon he was left with only those who left Makkah with him. With them he continued towards Kūfah.

Meanwhile Kūfah was placed under heavy surveillance by Ibn Ziyād. When news of Ḥusayn’s approach reached him, he despatched a 4000 strong contingent, which was on its way to fight the Daylamites, to stop Ḥusayn. This contingent was put under the command of ‘Umar ibn Sa‘d. There can be little doubt that the Kūfans witnessed the departure of this force from Kūfah with their own eyes. This would be their last chance to honour the oaths of allegiance to Ḥusayn which they had taken upon the hands of Muslim ibn ‘Aqīl. This was the final opportunity to rush to the side of the grandson of Rasūlullāh ﷺ. It was after all their invitations and assurances of support that encouraged him to abandon the safety of Makkah for the precarious battlefields of Iraq. But once again faithfulness, courage and commitment was found lacking in the people of Kūfah. Only a handful emerged to join Ḥusayn at Karbalā’.

And when the sun set on the 10th of Muharram, it was too late for the faithless Shī‘ah of Kūfah to make amends, for the sands of Karbalā’ was stained red with the blood of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn and his seventy-one followers.

Four years later the Shī‘ah of Kūfah attempted to make amends for their desertion of the family of Rasūlullāh ﷺ. There emerged a group of Kūfans calling themselves the *Tawwābūn* (Penitents) who made it their duty to wreak

vengeance upon the killers of Ḥusayn. On their way to Syria in pursuit of Ibn Ziyād they passed by Karbalā', the site of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn's grave, where they raised a great hue and cry, and spent the night lamenting the tragedy which they allowed to happen four years earlier. Had they only displayed that same spirit of compassion for Ḥusayn when he was so much in need of it the history of Islām might have taken a different course.

There have been attempts by certain writers to absolve the Shī'ah from the crime of deserting Ḥusayn. Some find an excuse for them in Ibn Ziyād's blockade of Kūfah. S. H. M. Jafri writes in his book *The Origins and Early Developments of Shi'ah Islam*:

...it should be noted again that the blockade of all the roads coming into Kūfah and its vicinity made it almost impossible for the majority of those Shī'īs of Kūfah who were in hiding, and also for those residing in other cities like Basra.²

This explanation of their desertion does not seem plausible when one considers the large number (18 000) of those who had taken the bay'ah at the hands of Muslim ibn 'Aqīl. Ibn Ziyād, as we have seen, entered Kūfah with only 17 men. Even the force that he dispatched to engage the party of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn at Karbalā' consisted of only 4000 men.³ Furthermore, that force was not recruited specifically for Karbalā'; it was only passing through Kūfah on its way to fight the Daylamites. It is not at all credible to assume that Ibn Ziyād was able to cow the Kūfans into submission with forces such as these, whom they outnumbered by far. It was rather their own treacherousness and fickleness that led them to abandon Sayyidunā Ḥusayn. This can be clearly seen in the manner they deserted Muslim ibn 'Aqīl.

There is also the tendency of claiming that those who deserted Sayyidunā Ḥusayn were not of the Shī'ah. Jafri writes:

... of those who invited Ḥusayn to Kūfa, and then those 18,000 who paid homage to his envoy Muslim b. 'Aqīl, not all were Shī'īs in the religious

sense of the term, but were rather supporters of the house of ‘Alī for political reasons - a distinction which must be kept clearly in mind in order to understand the early history of Shī‘ī Islam.⁴

Jafri’s motive in excluding the deserters of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn from the ranks of the “religious” (as opposed to the “political”) supporters of the house of Sayyidunā ‘Alī is quite transparent. He is clearly embarrassed by the fact that it was the Shī‘ah themselves who abandoned their Imām and his family after inviting him to lead them in revolt. What leads us to reject this distinction between “religious” and “political” supporters is the fact that Sayyidunā Ḥusayn himself, on more than one occasion, referred to the Kūfans as his Shī‘ah. There are also the numerous references to the people of Kūfah as the followers (albeit capricious followers) of his father and brother. And were we to assume that many, or even most of them were not Shī‘ah in the “religious” sense, the question which next presents itself is: Where were the real Shī‘ah when their Imām required their help? Were they only that handful who emerged from Kūfah? It is strange that while there is so much reluctance on the part of the Shī‘ah to accept the deserters of Kūfah as their own, they are quite proud and eager to identify themselves with the movement of the Tawwābūn. The speeches made at the inception of the movement of the Tawwābūn very clearly prove that they were the same people who invited Sayyidunā Ḥusayn and then deserted him.⁵ Their very name is indicative of their guilt in this regard. The attempt by the Shī‘ah to absolve themselves from the crime of deserting Sayyidunā Ḥusayn is therefore at best nothing more than pathetic.

Karbala’ was not to be the last act of treason by the Shī‘ah against the Family of Rasūlullāh ﷺ. Sixty years later the grandson of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn, namely Zayd ibn ‘Alī ibn Ḥusayn, led an uprising against the Umayyad ruler Hishām ibn ‘Abd al-Malik. He received the oaths of allegiance of over 40 000 men, 15 000 of whom were from the very same Kūfah that deserted his grandfather. Just before the battle could start they decided upon a whim to ask his opinion about Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. Zayd answered: “I have never heard any of my family dissociate himself from them, and I have nothing but good to say about them.” Upset with

this answer, they deserted him en masse, deciding that the true imām could only be his nephew Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq. Out of 40 000, Zayd was left with only a few hundred men. On the departure of the defectors he remarked: “I am afraid they have done unto me as they did to Ḥusayn.” Zayd and his little army fought bravely and attained martyrdom. Thus, on Wednesday the 1st of Safar 122 AH another member of the Ahl al-Bayt fell victim to the treachery of the Shī‘ah of Kūfah.⁶ This time there could be no question as to whether those who deserted him were of the Shī‘ah or not.

The fact that the thousands of Shī‘ah who deserted Zayd ibn ‘Alī looked upon Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq as their true Imām shows that by and large they were the same as the Ithnā ‘Asharī, or alternatively Imāmī or Ja‘farī Shī‘ah of today. Why then, if he had so many devoted followers, did Imām Ja‘far not rise up in revolt against the Umayyads or the ‘Abbāsids? The answer to this question is provided in a narration documented by Abū Ja‘far al-Kulaynī in his monumental work al-Kāfī, which enjoys unparalleled status amongst the ḥadīth collections of the Shī‘ah:

Sudayr al-Sayrafī says: I entered the presence of Abū ‘Abdillāh عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام and said to him: “By Allāh, you may not refrain from taking up arms.” He asked: “Why not?” I answered: “Because you have so many partisans, supporters (Shī‘ah) and helpers. By Allāh, if Amīr al-Mu‘minīn (Sayyidunā ‘Alī) had as many Shī‘ah, helpers, and partisans as you have, Taym (the tribe of Abū Bakr) and ‘Adī (the tribe of ‘Umar) would never have had designs upon him.” He asked: “And how many would they be, Sudayr?” I said: “A hundred thousand.” He asked: “A hundred thousand?” I replied: “Yes, and two hundred thousand.” He asked again: “Two hundred thousand?” I replied: “Yes, and half the world.” He remained silent.

Then he said: “Would you accompany us to Yanbu‘?” I replied in the affirmative. He ordered a mule and a donkey to be saddled. I quickly mounted the donkey, but he said: “Sudayr, will you rather let me ride the donkey?” I said: “The mule is more decorous and more noble as well.” But he said: “The donkey is more comfortable for me.” I dismounted. He

mounted the donkey, I got on the mule, and we started riding. The time of ṣalāh arrived and he said: “Dismount, Sudayr. Let us perform ṣalāh.” Then he remarked: “The ground here is overgrown with moss. It is not permissible to make ṣalāh here.” So we carried on riding until we came to a place where the earth was red. He looked at a young boy herding sheep, and remarked: “Sudayr, by Allāh, if I had as many Shī‘ah as there are sheep here, it would not have been acceptable for me to refrain from taking up arms.” We then dismounted and performed ṣalāh. When we were finished I turned back to count the sheep. There were seventeen of them.⁷

It seems from this narration that the tragedy of Karbalā’ taught Imām Ja‘far al-Ṣādiq something about those who claimed to be his followers which the Shī‘ah of today are still refusing to come to terms with: that in the trials and misfortunes of the Family of Rasūlullāh ﷺ the role of the Shī‘ah was as great, if not greater, than that of their physical enemies. It therefore does not come as a surprise that none of the supposed Imāms after Ḥusayn ever attempted an armed insurrection against the rulers of their times. Karbalā’ had taught them the fickleness and treacherousness of those who claimed to be their Shī‘ah. It is about them that Imām Ja‘far is reported to have said:

No one bears us greater hatred than those who claim to love us.⁸

Imām Ja‘far is also reported as having said:

No verse did Allāh reveal in connection with the Munāfiqīn, except that it is to be found in those who profess Shī‘ism.⁹

Before Sayyidunā Ḥusayn, his elder brother Sayyidunā Hasan was the victim of the treacherousness of the Kūfans. In his book al-Iḥtijāj the prominent Shī‘ī author Abū Mansūr at-Ṭabarsī has preserved the following remark of Sayyidunā Hasan:

By Allāh, I think Mu‘āwiyah would be better for me than these people who claim that they are my Shī‘ah.¹⁰

When Sayyidunā Hasan eventually became exasperated at the fickleness of his so-called Shī'ah, he decided to make peace with Mu'āwiyah. When someone protested to him that he was bringing humiliation upon the Shī'ah by concluding peace with Mu'āwiyah, he responded by saying:

By Allāh, I handed over power to him for no reason other than the fact that I could not find any supporters. Had I found supporters I would have fought him day and night until Allāh decides between us. But I know the people of Kūfah. I have experience of them. The bad ones of them are no good to me. They have no loyalty, nor any integrity in word or deed. They are in disagreement. They claim that their hearts are with us, but their swords are drawn against us.¹¹

Imām Mūsā al-Kāzim, the son of Imām Ja'far, and the seventh of the supposed Imāms of the Shī'ah, describes them in the following words:

If I had to truly distinguish my Shī'ah I would find them nothing other than pretenders. If I had to put them to the test I would only find them to be apostates. If I were to scrutinise them I would be left with only one in a thousand. Were I to sift them thoroughly I would be left with only the handful that is truly mine. They have been sitting on cushions all along, saying: "We are the Shī'ah of 'Alī."

If today 'Āshūrā will be commemorated as a day of struggle and sacrifice, let it also be remembered as a day of treachery and desertion. When the names of Yazīd ibn Mu'āwiyah, 'Ubayd Allāh ibn Ziyād, 'Umar ibn Sa'd and Shimr ibn Dhil Jawshan are mentioned and curses invoked upon their memories, then let us not forget the treachery of the Shī'ah of Kūfah. The time has long been due for the Shī'ah to reintroduce into their 'Āshūrā ceremonies an aspect that was in fact part of the very first commemoration ceremony of the Tawwābūn. That lost aspect is the admission of their own guilt, along with that of Ibn Ziyād, Yazīd and others, in the shedding of the holy blood of Sayyidunā Ḥusayn ibn 'Alī عليه السلام.

Notes And References

1. The historical material for this study has been taken largely from *al-Bidāyah wan-Nihāyah* of Ibn Kathīr. The Shīʿī source *Maqṭal al-Ḥusayn* by ʿAbd ar-Razzāq al-Mūsawī al-Muqarram (5th edition published by Maktabah Basīratī, Qum in 1382) was also consulted.
2. See S. H. M. Jafri, *The Origins and Early Development of Shīʿah Islam* p. 198 (Ansariyan Publications, Qum, n.d.)
3. The figure of 80 000, given in certain Shīʿī sources, and quoted recently on local radio, is clearly fictitious. Apart from contradicting reliable historical sources, its origin in the emotionally charged hyperbolism of the Shīʿah is self-evident.
4. Jafri, p. 195
5. *ibid.* p. 223
6. Muhammad Abū Zahrā: *Tārīkh al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyyah*, p. 613 (Dār al-Fikr al-ʿArabī, Cairo, n.d.)
7. Al-Kulaynī: *al-Kāfī* (Uṣūl) vol. 2 p. 250-251 (Dār al-Adwā, Beirut 1992)
8. ʿAbd Allāh al-Māmaqānī: *Miqbās al-Hidāyah* vol. 2 p. 414 (Muʿassasat Āl al-Bayt li-Ihyāʾ at-Turāth, Beirut 1991) quoting from *Rijāl al-Kashshī*.
9. *ibid.* vol. 2 p. 407
10. Abū Mansūr at-Tabarsī: *al-Ihtijāj* vol. 2 p. 290-291 (Muʿassasat al-Aʿlamī, Beirut 1989)
11. Al-Kulaynī: *Rawḍāt al-Kāfī* vol. 8 p. 288