

Muslim ibn Aqeel: Principle, Loyalty and Sacrifice

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Whenever mention is made of Muslim ibn Aqeel (a), one is immediately reminded of loyalty, courage and sacrifice. Integrity, valour and steadfastness still shine upon the pages of time with pride at the achievements of this great personality. Indeed, he stands as an eternal symbol of fortitude, faith and virtue for millions across the world.

Meanwhile, when mention is made of Kufan society one thinks of treachery, deceit and cowardice. Worldly covetousness, wavering belief and compromise in the face of oppression are seen as hallmarks of a community which through word and deed betrayed their Imam, and ultimately their own souls.

From this simple preface, one can begin to appreciate the true extent of the alienation and solitude experienced by Muslim in his final hours. It was not merely physical solitude as he wandered through the alleys of Kufa in search of an aid or a helper, but rather, his alienation was a restatement of the fundamental divergence in two contradictory understandings of life and living that existed within the Ummah.

Due to their separation from the values of the Islamic message, Kufan society - by way of their treatment of Muslim ibn Aqeel - gave testament to the famous prophecy of the Holy Prophet (s):

"Islam will again be a stranger among men, as it was in the beginning, but blessed is the state of the stranger."

After sending thousands of letters to Imam Husain (a), the heads of tribes and noble men of Kufa - each of whom represented thousands - sent a message urging the Imam to make haste in coming to Kufa. One of their final communications read:

"Come to us and make haste in it as people are waiting for you and they do not want anyone else. So please hurry up. Hurry up!"

A critical decision had to be made. For decades, the Imam had intimately followed the affairs of Kufan society. At first during the caliphate of Imam Ali (a) who set the headquarters of the Islamic state in Kufa, and later during the brief rule of his elder brother Imam Hasan (a). In both instances, the ending was tragic as the Kufans turned on their backs, and made empty words of their pledges of allegiance.

On the other hand, tensions were high even in the safety of the holy sanctuary in Makkah. Times had changed. Yazid had responded with a firm hand to news of the Imam's safe

departure from Medina to Makkah by instating a repressive, brutal governor. On his way to Makkah, the Imam encountered Abdallah bin Muti' who pleaded with the Imam: "be wary of proceeding to Kufa for it is an unlucky city where your father was killed and your brother abandoned and struck by a blow that almost killed him"

The Kufans however had declared their rejection of Yazid's claim to the caliphate. Some one hundred thousand individuals had signed letters urging the Imam to come to Kufah to lead the community on the path of the Messenger of Allah (s) from which they had diverted. As noted by Shaheed Mutahhari, the Imam had no choice but to accede to the calls of the Kufans due to: "his sense of responsibility [that] made it incumbent on him to respond to their call ... [for] had he chosen to ignore the plea of the Kufans, we would have stood today criticising him for "not doing so""

With the weight of history bearing down on the mission of the Imam to reform the community of his grandfather (s), the Imam had to resort to a capable individual for the sensitive task of surveying the affairs of Kufa. An individual who could command the respect of the masses was the need of the moment. Further, the task required an individual with clarity of vision; one who could penetrate the mere surface in order to uncover where the loyalties of the Kufans truly stood - simply, one who was able to accurately study and evaluate the political situation in Kufa. But perhaps even more importantly, the task required an individual with the character and strength to remain firm in the face of adversity; one who would continue to act with principle and integrity should the expected treachery of the Kufans come to pass.

This was the foremost concern of the Imam. For at stake here was nothing less than the very objective behind the Imam's uprising against Yazid. A representative to Kufa who lost his bearings in the heat of the moment was tantamount to failure of the entire mission.

For this critical task, the Imam turned to his trusted cousin Muslim ibn Aqeel. Along with instructions for the people of Kufa, the Imam reminded his cousin of piety, God-consciousness and the need to adopt the path of caution and discreetness before bidding him farewell.

Muslim ibn Aqeel surged forward towards Kufa with full knowledge of the importance of the task that stood before him in this mission to reform the Ummah of Muhammad (s); to awaken it from its drunken state by returning it once again to the standard of truth and justice. Destiny followed his every step towards Kufa where one of the most luminous chapters of loyalty and sacrifice was to be written by a man driven by duty towards the Almighty.

Upon his arrival in Kufa after an arduous journey, Muslim took residence at the home of Mukhtar whose wife was the daughter of the governor of Kufa. A calculated move that provides further testament of the detailed awareness that the Imam's camp had of the socio-

political circumstances of the time.

From that point onwards, Muslim began to receive the Kufans who had previously sent messenger after messenger to the Imam with, in effect, one message: 'Come to us O our Imam, the Kufans have no leader except you. We wholly pledge our allegiance to stand by your side and turn away from the rule of tyrants and oppressors'.

Thousands streamed to Muslim during his stay in Kufa to renew their pledges of allegiance with tear-filled eyes as the message of the Imam was read out to them. Kufa had become full of incident, and with every passing day the pace of developments was leading towards a climax.

At this point, the elites of Kufa who had benefitted immensely from the reign and injustice of the Umayyads became anxious of the widespread following enjoyed by Muslim. In a last gasp attempt to keep firm the pegs of a system of exploitation that had allowed them to multiply their wealth and power at the expense of the masses, the home-grown Yazids of Kufa sent out a letter to their caliph in Damascus underlining the weakness of the presiding governor in the face of an existential threat, and urged him to immediately send in his place a man who would rule with an iron fist.

On the order of Yazid, Ubaydullah ibn Ziyad - a man renowned for his ruthlessness and blood-shedding - was dispatched to Kufa with immediate effect from the nearby Iraqi city of Basra. The orders were clear: 'get a grip of the situation in Kufa with whatever force it takes, and send me the head of Muslim ibn Aqeel'.

This was the moment of trial, in earnest, for the Kufans who had pledged allegiance to the Imam. Would they hold firm to their oaths, and refuse to submit to the sword at the expense of their consciences? Or would they pay the ultimate compromise, and succumb to a life of humiliation under rulers who silenced the spirit of Islam with their swords and lashes? As we all now know, the Kufans failed miserably in their test. By forsaking the emissary of the Imam, they forever branded their souls with haunting shame and regret. However, it is important to pay close attention to the conduct of Muslim ibn Aqeel when all those around him turned on their heels. For this was the crucial litmus test of success and failure in his mission. It is important to scrutinize the conduct of Kufan society on the one hand, and to identify the causes that led to their historic crime; from worldly covetousness and treachery to their shaky commitment to truth and justice. Yet on the other, it is equally necessary to monitor the conduct of Muslim ibn Aqeel in his moment of trial. Indeed, for those who aspire to join the ranks of the Final Proof, Imam Al-Mahdi (atf), one must learn from the mannerisms of Muslim ibn Aqeel and the sources of strength that he turned to for succour when he was surrounded

by social conditions that betrayed the message of Islam.

During Muslim ibn Aqeel's stay in Kufa, an interesting episode occurred at the home of his close associate Hani ibn Urwah. Having received Yazid's orders to head to Kufa with haste, Ubaydullah ibn Ziyad left Basra with a small entourage which included Shareek ibn A'war; a man with strong inclinations towards the Imam who acted as a secret channel of information

to disclose the Umayyad's vile plots

Whilst in Kufa, Shareek had become bed-stricken with illness at Hani's home where Muslim ibn Aqeel was also residing. In one of those strange moments of fate, the Umayyad governor Ubaydullah decided to visit Shareek. Upon receiving knowledge of the governor's intent to visit him, Shareek urged Muslim to seize the opportunity, and thus pave the way for the Imam's

arrival in Kufa:

"Tonight the wicked man will be coming to meet me, and when he sits down you may come from behind and kill him. Then you may go to the palace and take the reins into your hands

while no one will stop you from doing so."

It was at this moment that Muslim displayed his integrity and principle. Through his actions, the trusted representative of the Imam established the true basis for the uprising against Yazid. Had he been a follower of blind worldly pragmatism, Muslim could easily have found

pretext to lunge at the oppressor; after all did any doubt the ruthlessness of Ibn Ziyad?!

However, what would have been the net result had he adopted that course of action? The Imam never sought to win the hearts of the Ummah through the use of force and bloodshed, but he rather rose to awaken them to the reality of their sorry state. Martial valour and military victory were not a solution to the deep problems afflicting the Ummah. By slaying Ubaydullah,

nothing would have changed amongst the masses except for their slogans.

Muslim emphatically replied to Shareek that he could not proceed with his suggestion for he had heard the saying of the Holy Prophet (s): 'The faith [Islam] has handcuffed assassination, a

believer does not assassinate'.

Through his actions, Muslim emphasised that the uprising of the Imam was neither for power nor out of worldly longing. The lofty motive of the Imam was one that reverberated in the hearts of his followers such that Muslim ibn Aqeel would, in that determinative instance, choose to let free Ubaydullah rather than unsheathe his sword and thereby compromise the

objective of the Imam's mission.

"I have taken this stand not out of arrogance or pride, neither out of mischief or injustice. I have risen to seek reform in the community of my grandfather. I would like to bid good, forbid evil, and follow the tradition of my grandfather and my father Ali bin Abi Talib." – Imam Husain (a)

In the world of today marked by greed and blind pursuit of self-interest, the integrity of Muslim ibn Aqeel represents a clarion call to all of humanity to hold firm to principle and virtue. There is no price that can be paid in return for righteousness and truth.

Likewise, for those modern-day agitators who label the religion of Islam with vile names, and to those who commit crimes in the name of Islam – through the use of a ‘ends justify means’ mentality or otherwise – the conduct of Muslim in Kufa raises itself as a supreme paradigm of the mujahid in the Islamic tradition.

The shroud of night falls over Kufa where Muslim now wanders through its alleys in silence and solitude. His leading supporters in Kufa are either dead or in the dungeons of Ibn Ziyad. In fright of Ibn Ziyad’s henchmen, those who previously swore their oaths of allegiance have dispersed and forsaken the emissary of the Imam. In this strange town, there is none to hear Muslim’s deepest pains; the dream of establishing the just state of Ali (a) has been destroyed by the treachery of Kufan society.

Uttering the name of Ali in praise is now a crime, supporting his son is a crime, offering sanctuary to his lonely representative is also a crime ...

These are the debased laws of the land; all in the name of Islam! Exhausted by troubles, heartbroken by the deceit of so-called followers and apprehensive of the safety of his Imam.

This is the condition of Muslim ibn Aqeel.

A virtuous woman by the name of Taw’ah offered Muslim her home the very moment she heard this lonely, broken figure was the emissary of the grandson of the Holy Prophet (s). Grateful for the sanctuary, and perhaps even more for witnessing the strong love for the AhlulBayt (a) in the heart of this brave lady, Muslim took shelter in her home – for what proved to be the last night of his life.

Muslim ibn Aqeel spent his final night engrossed in worship. In his whispered prayers, Muslim placed his affairs solely in the Supporter of those who have no support; the Refuge of those who have no refuge; the Friend of those who have no friend.

As was the lofty trait of this noble household, the axis of existence revolved around obedience to the Almighty and seeking His closeness. None other than Him was the source of support and strength, no matter what distresses and calamities befell them.

“Peace be on you, O the pious, obedient servant of Allah, His Messenger, Ameerul Mu’mineen, Hasan and Husain, blessings and greetings of Allah be on them.”

As we commemorate the tragedy of Karbala, we extend our condolences to the Master of our Time (atf) on the martyrdom of Muslim ibn Aqeel.

We also make a firm commitment to work on ourselves, our religiosity, our characters, our

etiquettes; on our families and those around us, in order to build the complete believer. A believer who is true to his cause; who will remain in action; who does not hand over Muslim ibn Aqeel to Ibn Ziyad, nor does he leave Imam Husain for Ibn Sa'ad.

It is a frequent saying amongst many Muslims when they remember the martyrs of Karbala to repeat: "If only we were with you, for surely we would have been victorious." Today we are presented with a similar challenge. We have an Imam in occultation waiting for us to reach out towards him. He is patiently waiting for that time to come where a small group of individuals will truly be of his followers; who will remain by his side in the face of the harshest storms and trials.

Just as it was once the opportunity of Kufan society to make a choice, it is now our moment of decision.

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