Martyrdom of Muslim Ibn Aqil in Kufah

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Imam al-Husayn chose Muslim ibn 'Aqil, son of his uncle and the husband of his sister Ruqayyah, to take back the reply to the letters of the people of Kufah.

Muslim ibn 'Aqil together with his companions set off for Kufah and arrived there on the 5th Shawwal, 60 A.H. Muslim ibn 'Aqil stayed at the house of Mukhtar ibn Abi 'Ubaydah Thaqafı, better known as the house of Salim ibn Musayyib. In another account given by Tabari, he stayed at the house of Muslim ibn 'Awsajah. A large number of the Shi'ah gathered at the house and Muslim ibn 'Aqil read to them the letter of the Imam. Upon hearing the contents of the letter, they wept. The letter read: "In the name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate, from al-Husayn ibn 'Ali to the Muslim believers. Hani' and Sa'id have conveyed your letters to me. These were your last messengers to me. After reading your letters asking me to come to you in order for Allah to guide you, I have chosen to send to you my brother and my cousin, Muslim ibn 'Aqil, who enjoys my confidence and trust. If Muslim ibn 'Aqil advises me that the views and the opinions of your wise and learned men are in accordance with what you have stated in your letters, then, by the Will of Allah, I will soon be with you. By my life! An Imam is only one who rules by the Book, stands with justice, adheres to the true religion and restricts himself to what is pleasing to Allah."

(Kitab al-Irshad)

The Account of Muslim ibn Aqil's Martyrdom

Gradually the people started to visit Muslim ibn 'Aqil and pledged allegiance to him on behalf of Imam al-Husayn. Eighteen thousand people gave the pledge of allegiance to Muslim ibn 'Aqil. He then sent the news of this to the Imam in a letter.

At that time Nu'man ibn Bashir was the governor of Kufah. The supporters of Yazid were concerned that Nu'man had not been sufficiently watchful and wrote to Yazid informing him of the state of Kufah. When Yazid received this report, he consulted his advisors. After taking their advice, Yazid decided to designate 'Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad, who was already the governor of Basrah, as the governor of Kufah as well. Yazid wrote a letter to 'Ubayd Allah informing him of the events in Kufah and giving him full authority in order for him to regain full control of the town and to repress the rebellion of Muslim ibn 'Aqil and his followers.

Ibn Ziyad's Deception

Ibn Ziyad immediately upon receiving the letter appointed his brother 'Uthman ibn Ziyad as his

deputy in Basrah while he himself set off for Kufah. As he approached Kufah he put a black turban on his head and veiled his face so that he resembled a Hashimite. In this state he entered Kufah with his entourage. The people of Kufah, anticipating the coming of the Imam, mistook Ibn Ziyad as the Imam due to the way he was dressed. As a result they welcomed him chanting, "Welcome! O son of the Prophet! We are with you. Allah is the greatest!" The people who thought that it was the Imam who had arrived, grew in numbers until they reached forty thousand. Muslim ibn 'Amr, one of the party that had come with Ibn Ziyad, ordered the people to disperse and informed them that it was Ibn Ziyad, the new governor of Kufah, that had arrived and not the Imam. On hearing this, some of people who had gathered dispersed while others remained still thinking that it was the Imam who had arrived. As evening approached, Ibn Ziyad reached the governor's palace. Nu'man ibn Bashir, the governor of Kufah, bolted the doors of the palace thinking the Imam had come to take control of the palace. When he was ordered to open the doors, Nu'man stretched out his head from high in the palace and said, "O son of the Prophet! I will not hand this office, which has been entrusted to me, over to you and there is no need for a battle to take place between us." At this Ibn Ziyad drew nearer to the palace. He introduced himself to Nu'man and ordered the doors to be opened. Hearing the voice of Ibn Ziyad, the rest of the people of Kufah finally realized that this was the son of Marjanah (i.e. Ibn Ziyad) and not the Imam. Ibn Ziyad entered the building and shut the doors in the faces of the people outside. At this point the gathering finally dispersed.

The next morning 'Ubayd Allah ibn Ziyad addressed the people saying: "The blood and wealth of anyone who opposes us will become lawful for us. I inform the heads and the chiefs of the communities that anyone who knows the whereabouts of the enemies of Yazid and does not inform us will be crucified on their own door and their monthly income will be discontinued."

(Kitab al-Irshad)

It is also reported that when Ibn Ziyad entered into Kufah, the people thought that it was the Imam and they flocked to him crying out, "We are with you." Their numbers were said to be more than forty thousand. A woman shouted out, "Allah is great! O son of the Messenger!" And the people chanted the same.

(A'yan al-Shi'ah)

Ibn Ziyad's Informer

When the news of Ibn Ziyad's arrival and his warnings reached Muslim ibn 'Aqil, he moved from the house of Mukhtar to the house of Hani' ibn 'Urwah, who was an important leader of the tribe of Madhhij. There the Shi'ah secretly went to meet with him.

Ibn Ziyad called for his servant Ma'qal and gave him three thousand dirhams. He told him to

find Muslim ibn 'Aqil and get close to him and his followers and in order to gain their confidence. he was to hand over the money to them and say that it was for fighting their enemies. Ma'qal was told to inform Ibn Ziyad of Muslim ibn 'Aqil's every move and of the people he met. Ma'qal did as he was told to the extent that he would be the first to come to Muslim ibn 'Aqil and the last to leave the gathering. He informed Ibn Ziyad of the affairs of Muslim ibn 'Aqil and his followers.

(Kitab al-Irshad)

The Disloyalty of the People of Kufah

After Ibn Ziyad had received information about Muslim ibn 'Aqil, he summoned Hani'. He demanded that Hani' hand Muslim over to him. Hani' refused to do that and Ibn Ziyad had him thrown into prison. When Muslim got news of what had happened, he realised that his position had been compromised. He summoned the people to attack Ibn Ziyad. Four thousand of them gathered outside the governor's palace. Ibn Ziyad with his entourage remained inside and he summoned the tribal leaders to join him, for he had already won them over to his side by bribery. They began to infiltrate among the people telling them to withdraw because the Syrians would soon arrive. Some of their fellow tribesmen believed them and withdrew. Others were persuaded to withdraw by their frightened wives and mothers.

Gradually the number of the people with Muslim ibn 'Aqil decreased. When it was time for the evening prayer. Muslim ibn 'Aqil went to the mosque and found that there were only a small group of people to pray with. This was a mosque where the congregation used to reach ten thousand people. When Muslim ibn 'Aqil left the mosque, only ten people accompanied him. By the time he reached the gate of the quarter where the tribe of Kindah lived, there was no one with him. Muslim ibn 'Aqil was made a stranger to Kufah. He wandered the streets looking towards right and left. He was in a state of dire confusion not knowing where to go. He went into an alley that he did not know. There he found an old woman by the name of Taw'ah standing outside her house waiting for her son. Muslim ibn 'Aqil asked the woman for some water. She gave him water and after drinking it, Muslim ibn he sat near her door in exhaustion. Although Taw'ah was a member of the Shi'ah and a lover of the family of the Prophet, she did not recognise Muslim ibn 'Aqil. When Muslim sat down, she told him that it was not appropriate for him to stay there. Hearing this, Muslim ibn 'Aqil said, "O maid of Allah! I do not have a place to stay. Will you allow me to stay in your house tonight? If Allah wills, I will pay back the debt." "Who are you?" asked Taw'ah. He replied, "I am Muslim ibn 'Aqil. These people invited me here. Now they have abandoned and driven me away." Learning that the man was Muslim ibn 'Aqil, Taw'ah allowed him inside the house.

When Taw'ah's son Bilal returned home, he enquired about the guest. Taw'ah made him take an oath that he would not tell anyone about their guest nor of his whereabouts. Then unwillingly and with a heavy heart, she told him that it was Muslim ibn 'Aqil. Bilal stayed the night at the house but on the following morning he went to 'Abd al-Rahman ibn Muhammad ibn Ash'ath and informed him of where Muslim ibn 'Aqil was. 'Abd al-Rahman went and relayed this information to his father Muhammad ibn Ash'ath. Muhammad ibn Ash'ath, the tribal leader of Kindah, was a close associate of Ibn Ziyad who went to Ibn Ziyad and informed him of the whereabouts of Muslim ibn 'Aqil.

Immediately Ibn Ziyad ordered Muhammad ibn Ash'ath to arrest Muslim ibn 'Aqil and bring him from the house of Taw'ah. Muhammad ibn Ash'ath set off for the house of Taw'ah with 'Amr 'Ubayd Allah ibn 'Abbas al-Sulami and seventy soldiers

During the night, Taw'ah had brought supper for Muslim ibn 'Aqil but he had refused to eat anything. He had slept only a little and then he had got up to spend the rest of the night in prayers and devotion. When dawn was approaching, Taw'ah brought water for Muslim ibn 'Aqil to perform the ablutions for prayer. She said to him, "My master! You have not slept the whole night." Muslim ibn 'Aqil replied, "I slept a while and in my sleep I saw my uncle, the Commander of the Faithful. He was saying to me, 'O Muslim! Hurry and quickly come to us.' I fear that the last day of my life has approached." Then Muslim ibn 'Aqil had performed the ablutions. After he had finished the prayer and was making prayers of supplication, he heard the sounds of the approaching soldiers. Muslim ibn 'Aqil quickly finished the supplications and started to put on his armour saying, "Go and face death from which there is no escape." Taw'ah asked him, "O master! Have you submitted to death?" "I have no escape save death. May the Prophet of Allah intercede for you for the favour that you have shown," Muslim ibn 'Aqil replied.

A party of up to three hundred soldiers forced their way into the house of Taw'ah to arrest Muslim ibn 'Aqil. Who took his sword in hand and drove them back into the street. When he looked out Muslim ibn 'Aqil saw that some soldiers had climbed on the rooftops of neighbouring houses and were throwing stones and flaming torches at the house. Fearing that the soldiers would set fire to the house, he went out to fight them. Muslim ibn 'Aqil fought single handedly even though he was surrounded and being pressed from all directions. It is reported that as he fought Muslim ibn 'Aqil unhinged the door of the house and used it as his shield. So fiercely did he fight that he killed a hundred and eighty of those who were on horses. On two occasions Muhammad ibn Ash'ath had to send to Ibn Ziyad for help. On both occasions Ibn Ziyad responded by dispatching soldiers. At the third request, Ibn Ziyad replied, "May your mother weep at the sorrow of your death! Can you not overpower a single person?

What will become of you when faced with an opponent stronger then him?" By this he meant the Imam. To this Muhammad ibn Ash'ath replied, "Are you not aware that this man is the sword of the Prophet, a brave lion and a warrior, not a farmer or a grocer of Kufah?" Ibn Ziyad sent a further five hundred men with instructions that Muhammad ibn Ash'ath should grant safe-conduct to Muslim ibn 'Aqil in order to secure the lives of his men.

(Maqtal al-Husayn Abu Mikhnaf)

As Muslim ibn 'Aqil was continuing gallantly to fight the fierce battle, Muhammad ibn Ash'ath called out to him, "O Muslim! Do not destroy yourself. We grant you safe-conduct. Stop fighting." Muslim ibn 'Aqil was not convinced and continued to fight. Muhammad ibn Ash'ath called out again, "O Muslim! It is not a lie or a trick. This is the son of your uncle (meaning Ibn Ziyad) and he has given you his word that no harm will come to you."

Muslim ibn 'Aqil was now was covered in wounds from the constant hail of stones and arrows. Due to intense fatigue, he paused to rest and sat with his back to the wall of Taw'ah's house. Once again Muhammad ibn Ash'ath shouted and asked Muslim ibn 'Aqil to cease fighting and take the offer safe-conduct. At this Muslim ibn 'Aqil asked, "Will you truly spare my life?" "Yes! Your life will be spared," came the reply from the host that surrounded him.

Muslim ibn 'Aqil no longer had the strength to fight and was forced to agreed to the offer of safe-conduct. A mule was brought for him. No sooner had he mounted the mule than the soldiers surrounded him, took his sword away and made him their prisoner. Tears rolled down his blessed cheeks as he said, "This is the first deception."

(A'lam al-Wara')

Muslim Ibn Aqil's Encounter With Ibn Ziyad

When Muslim ibn 'Aqil was brought into the palace as a prisoner, he did not salute Ibn Ziyad with the greeting of peace. The guard standing at the door said to Muslim ibn 'Aqil, "Salute the commander and chief." Muslim ibn 'Aqil replied, "Silence! May sorrow be your lot! He is not my commander."

At this Ibn Ziyad declared, "It is all the same whether you salute me or not. You will be executed." Muslim ibn 'Aqil retorted, "It will not be the first time that worse than you have killed better than me." Ibn Ziyad shouted, "O recalcitrant opponent! You have risen against the ruler and caused discord and disunity within the community." Muslim ibn 'Aqil answered, "O Ibn Ziyad! It was Mu'awiyah and his son Yazid who have caused disunity within the community and it was you and your father that have spread corruption in it. I am hopeful that Allah will grant me martyrdom by the hands of the worst of his creatures." Ibn Ziyad admonished him, "You were desirous of something (i.e. the Caliphate) that Allah did not bring to fruition in you but

placed with people who deserve it." Muslim ibn 'Aqil asked, "O Ibn Ziyad! And who is worthy of that?" Ibn Ziyad replied, "Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah." Muslim ibn 'Aqil said, "Praise be to Allah! We are pleased with His pleasure! May He decide between you and us!" Ibn Ziyad, now in a state of fury, abused Muslim ibn 'Aqil, Imam 'Ali, Imam al-Hasan and Imam al-Husayn. To this Muslim ibn 'Aqil replied, "O enemy of Allah! Do what you will. You and your father are worthier of this abuse."

Ibn Ziyad ordered Bukayr ibn Humran to take Muslim ibn 'Aqil to the top of the palace and to behead him. As Muslim ibn 'Aqil was being lead to his execution, he praised and glorified Allah and invoked His blessings and benedictions upon the Prophet and his family saying, "O Allah! You be the final judge between us and these people who have summoned us, lied to us and betrayed us."

Earlier that day Bukayr ibn Humran had been one of the men who had fought against Muslim ibn 'Aqil. During the fight Muslim had struck him with a fierce blow and wounded him. He was filled with a deep hatred of Muslim and showed himself to be utterly merciless as he carried out Ibn Ziyad's orders. He took him to the roof of the palace and ordered him to kneel and stretch his head over the edge of the wall of the palace. Then he mercilessly beheaded him. When the axe split his neck, Muslim ibn 'Aqil's head fell from the top of the palace to the ground. After this the soldiers were ordered to throw his body to the ground. In this way Muslim ibn 'Aqil's blessed soul departed from his wounded body to Eternal Bliss and the Abode of the Hereafter.

(Al-Luhuf & A'lam al-Wara')

Muslim Ibn Aqil's Last Will and Bequest

The following is an account of Muslim ibn 'Aqil's final encounter with Ibn Ziyad as reported in Kitab al-Irshad: Muslim ibn 'Aqil was extremely thirsty as he was brought wounded to the palace. A group of people was standing at the door waiting for the permission to enter. Standing with them was 'Amr ibn Hurayth and next to the door was placed a pitcher of water. Muslim ibn 'Aqil asked 'Amr ibn Hurayth for some water as he sat at the door resting his back against the wall. 'Amr ibn Hurayth ordered his servant to give Muslim ibn 'Aqil some water. Water was brought to him but when Muslim ibn 'Aqil tried to drink it, the dripping blood from his wounded mouth and lips poured into the water. New water was brought and again the same thing happened. At the third time when Muslim ibn 'Aqil attempted to drink the water his front teeth, that had been broken during the battle fell into the vessel. Muslim ibn 'Aqil spilt the water and said, "All praise is due to Allah! Had provision been granted me, I would have surely drunk it."

Ibn Ziyad's men led Muslim ibn 'Aqil to him and after an exchange of words Ibn Ziyad mercilessly said, "You will surely be killed." Muslim ibn 'Aqil replied, "If you are determined to kill me, then allow me to make my last will?" Ibn Ziyad agreed that Muslim ibn 'Aqil could do that.

Muslim ibn 'Aqil called to 'Umar ibn Sa'd who was standing nearby, "O Ibn Sa'd! There is kinship between us. For the sake of that, I ask you to give me an oath of secrecy and to honour my last will." Ibn Sa'd refused to listen. Seeing this, Ibn Ziyad ordered Ibn Sa'd, "Listen to what the your cousin has to say."

Under the eyes of Ibn Ziyad, Ibn Sa'd went to Muslim ibn 'Aqil and they both retreated to a corner where they sat down. Muslim ibn 'Aqil told Ibn Sa'd, "I borrowed seven hundred dirhams in Kufah. Sell my coat of mail and my sword and pay off my debt. After I am executed, take my body from Ibn Ziyad and bury me. Send word to Imam al-Husayn to not to come to Kufah. I have sent a letter to him informing him of the loyalty of the people of Kufah and their eagerness to be led by him. I fear he has commenced his journey towards Kufah."

Fearing Ibn Ziyad may suspect him of something, Ibn Sa'd went to him and informed him of Muslim ibn 'Aqil's last will. Ibn Ziyad taunted Ibn Sa'd for his actions and said that a trustee does not betray a secret when it is entrusted to him. By this he meant that if Ibn Sa'd been a trustworthy person, he would never have divulged what Muslim ibn 'Aqil had told him in confidence. However, despite that, he ordered Ibn Sa'd, "As for his debt, pay it off after his death if you wish. As for his burial that too I will allow if you wish to bury him. But as far as al-Husayn is concerned, we have no quarrel with him if he does not interfere with us."

Then Ibn Ziyad turned towards Muslim Ibn 'Aqil and began to insult him. After a heated exchange of words in which Muslim ibn 'Aqil was accused of disuniting the people, Ibn Ziyad said to Muslim ibn 'Aqil, "What concern is the unity of the people to you? Why did you not concern yourself with that when you were drinking wine with the people in Medina?" At this Muslim retorted, "By Allah! You are lying! You, who lap the blood of Muslims and murder those whose life Allah has deemed sacred, are more correctly described as drinking wine than me." Ibn Ziyad could no longer contain him self and ordered Muslim ibn 'Aqil to be beheaded and his body to be thrown to the ground from the top of the palace.

(Kitab al-Irshad)

The Martyrdom of Hani ibn Urwah

Hani' ibn 'Urwah has already been mentioned as the person that Muslim ibn 'Aqil went to stay with after the arrival of Ibn Ziyad in Kufah. He was among the renowned personalities from the Shi'ah and belonged to the tribe of Madhhij. According to one report, Hani ibn 'Urwah had

witnessed the era of the Prophet and was considered to be among his Companions. At the time of his martyrdom, he was eighty-nine years of age. According to Ya'qubi, Hani' enjoyed a high social status and had four thousand mounted soldiers and eight thousand foot soldiers under his command.

(Muntaha al-Amal)

As has been mentioned, Hani' allowed his house to be used by Muslim ibn 'Aqil and supported him. Hani' was arrested by Ibn Ziyad and imprisoned when he refused to hand over Muslim ibn 'Aqil. After the death of Muslim ibn 'Aqil, Ibn Ziyad ordered his servant Rashid to behead Hani' in the market. According to Muthir al-Ahzan the eighty-nine year old man was dragged to the Kunasah Square where he was killed and later crucified on a door.

According to a report cited by Sayyid Ibn Tawus, Hani' was dragged from prison to be executed. He repeatedly cried out, "O tribe of Madhhij! Why do you not come to my aid?" At this the executioner, Rashid a Turkish retainer of Ibn Ziyad, ordered Hani' to compose himself for the execution. Hani retorted, "By Allah! I will not aid you in my killing." Rashid struck at Hani"s head but could not kill him. Hani' cried out as he fell to the ground, "To Allah is the final return! O Allah! To your mercy and pleasure do I return." Rashid once again struck at Hani' and his blessed head was severed from his body.

Ibn Ziyad sent the severed heads of Muslim ibn 'Aqil and Hani' ibn 'Urwah to Yazid together with a letter were explaining the situation in Kufah. Yazid wrote back to Ibn Ziyad thanking him and instructing him to prepare himself for the coming of the Imam al-Husayn. Yazid also gave orders for the heads to be hung on the gate of the city of Damascus.

'Abd Allah ibn al-Zabir recited the following verses concerning Muslim ibn 'Aqil and Hani' ibn 'Urwah:

If you do not know what death is,
Then look at Hani' and Ibn 'Aqil in the marketplace.
Look at a hero whose face the sword has covered with wounds
And at another who fell dead from a high place.
The command of the governor struck them down,
And they became legends for those who travel on every road.
You see a corpse whose colour death has changed
And a spattering of blood, which has flown abundantly.

(Kitab al-Irshad)

Two men, Aradil and Awbash, tied the headless bodies of Muslim ibn 'Aqil and Hani' ibn 'Urwah behind their horses with ropes and dragged them through the streets of Kufah. The tribe of

Madhhij, after learning about the fate of Hani' ibn 'Urwah and Muslim ibn 'Aqil mounted their horses and fought with Aradil and Awbash until they reclaimed the two bodies. Then they washed, shrouded and buried the bodies.

(Ma'ali al-Sibtayn)

An Arab poet recites in the lamentation of Muslim ibn 'Aqil

They threw your body from the palace after tying you.

Has any limb remained intact?

You were tied and dragged through their streets.

Were you not their commander until yesterday?

Will you die without the wailing women crying for you?

Do you not have anyone to weep for you in this city?

Even if you were mercilessly killed, cries of grief were heard

As news of your death reached [the people of] Zarud

It is also reported that Ibn Ziyad ordered the headless bodies of Muslim and Hani' to be tied by their feet behind horses and dragged through the streets. Then their bodies were crucified upside down on the gate of Kunasah and were sent off to Yazid. Yazid had the two heads mounted on the gates of Damascus.