The Battles of Siffina and Nahrawan

<"xml encoding="UTF-8?>

The battle of Siffeen

Mu’awiyah made preparations for the war and set off towards Imam Ali's area with forty thousand soldiers. They got at a place called Siffeen between Syria and Iraq. Mu’awiyah arrived there earlier than Imam Ali (s) and occupied the bank of the river. He closed the way to the watering place that no one else could get water except his followers.

Imam Ali's army reached the place and they were badly thirsty. They found that there was no any drinking place for them to get water. The enemy controlled the water carefully that getting water was not possible easily.

Imam Ali (s) sent word to Mu’awiyah but he refused to open the way to the watering place. Imam Ali (s) was obliged to say to his men: “Get up and get water by sword.” Those thirsty soldiers attacked the guards, dispersed them away and occupied the watering place.

Now the Iraqis wanted to pay the Syrians in their own coin but Imam Ali (s) did not want to requite evil with evil and said: “Do not prevent any one from getting water.” Hence every one could take water freely.

Then Imam Ali (s) sent some persons to warn Mu’awiyah of the consequences of the war and to reason with him the homage. Some other groups also acted as intermediary to prevent bloodshed but Mu’awiyah used every excuse to declare the war. He pretended that he would not let Uthman's blood be lost. He had hung the bloodstained shirt of Uthman on the pulpit of the great mosque of Damascus, around which thousands of Syrians used to weep for Uthman's innocence and then they had sworn to avenge his blood.

Since Mu’awiyah had accused Imam Ali of Uthman’s murder, the Syrians were in favor of Mu’awiyah to fight against the Iraqis.

Mu’awiyah was really an autocrat in Syria since the reign of the second caliph Umar and he would never submit to Imam Ali (s) to lose the position. Hereon he involved the Muslims in a war that its bad effect has still remained till the present time.

At last the battle raged and Imam Ali's army of ninety thousand soldiers confronted the Syrian army of one hundred thousand soldiers. During the first week some fighters of both parties came forward day after day and fought each other. Some of both sides were killed. In this manner the battle became more widespread and bloodshed increased.

In the eighth day ibn Abbas (the Prophet's cousin) and Malik al-Ashtar, the two courageous men, attacked the enemy's right and left flanks that Mu’awiyah’s forces had to retreat from the

field several times. In the ninth day Imam Ali (s) himself came forward with his men and made such an attack that the whole battlefield rocked and the enemy’s rows broke off under storms of arrows and spears. Imam Ali came and stood where Mu’awiyah could be seen. Imam Ali challenged him saying: “Come towards me. Let the winner of the fight be the ruler.” Although Amr ibn al-Aass, Mu’awiyah’s counselor, encouraged Mu’awiyah but he began to go back.

The historians mentioned that Imam Ali (s) had showed such bravery in Siffeen, that you seldom see its like in the history. Everywhere he appeared, the enemy's lines were confused and they scattered before his sword like ants and locusts. No one dared to face him unless he was killed in the first rush. Therefore he occasionally changed his dress and horse.

Suddenly, in the thick of the fight, a man leaped forward and assaulted Imam Ali (s), who evaded the danger. Then Imam Ali hit the man upon his back with his sword. The man was split into two halves. The people thought that Imam Ali’s hit had missed the man but when his horse jumped two separated halves fell down on the ground. The enemy knew later that he was Imam Ali (s) in disguise.

Some days passed in this manner and the Iraqi army had the advantage over the enemy many times because of the continuous and break-neck attacks. At the night of al-Hareer[1] when the successive rushes of Imam Ali's men reached the highest point and continued till the morning, the killed were more than thirty thousand ones.

In the tenth day Malik al-Ashtar and Ibn Abbas again assaulted the enemy severely and their men showed a high spirit of sacrifice. The spirit of the Syrians was broken and signs of defeat appeared among them.

While the battle was still raging the, enemy found that winning a victory by sword was impossible. Amr ibn al-Aass, who was prone to mischief and was famed for shrewdness, planned to play a trick. He suggested to Mu’awiyah by saying: “Let us raise some copies of the Qur’an on the spears and then the armies of the two sides are to be called to make the Qur’an as arbitrator. This act will create separation among them. Consequently many soldiers will stop fighting and many others will like to keep on it. The result will be to our privilege because, in this way, we can put off the war for a while to get rid of this distress.

Some pages of the Holy Qur’an were raised on the spears and consequently the form of the war was changed.

When Imam Ali (s) saw that the Holy Qur’an had become the device of their trickery, he said: “Be careful and do not be deceived. They invented this trickery just to get rid of defeat. They are neither interested in the

[1] Hareer is an Arabic word. It means "to howl" and "to whine". The

fallen and wounded soldiers were howling in that livelong night.

Holy Qur’an nor connected with the religion. We are fighting against them to follow the Holy Qur’an's principles. Keep on the war to obtain the victory over the dying enemy.”

But unfortunately a large number of his army began to shout and cry. They said to Imam Ali: “We prefer the verdict of the Qur’an and if you do not respond to the call of Qur’an, we will deal with you as we did with Uthman. You have to stop the war at once.”

Imam Ali (s) did his best to make them understand the trick but they were impervious to his arguments. They had forgotten the Prophet's saying: “Ali is always with the Qur’an and the Qur’an is with Ali. They will never separate until they come to me at Kawthar River (a river in paradise).”[1]

The battle still raged but they made Imam Ali (s) send a word to Malik al-Ashtar[2] asking him to come back from the field. When Malik received the order, he was surprised. He said: “This is not the time to leave the battle. Tell Imam Ali (s) to wait a little until I come back with the tidings of victory.” The message was delivered to Imam Ali (s) but many soldiers shouted and urged upon him that Malik must come back as soon as possible. The messenger came back to Malik and said:

“They are all in chaos. If Imam Ali's life is dear to you, go back to him at once.”

Malik was obliged to go back to Imam Ali (s). After scolding the rebellious soldiers he said: “According to the homage you paid to him, obeying him would be obligatory for you.” But regretfully they paid no attention to his saying. Then it was agreed that each party should nominate an arbitrator to decide the matter of the caliphate according to the Holy Qur’an. Amr ibn al-Aass was nominated by Mu’awiyah’s followers and Abu Musa al-Ash’ari was chosen by Imam Ali’s followers as arbitrators. Imam Ali (s) had in mind to appoint ibn Abbas or Malik al-Ashtar as his agent but army did not listen to him and they stuck to Abu Musa.

Some spies of Mu’awiyah were in rapport with a few heads of Imam Ali's army. They used to aggravate the condition.

The historians mentioned that Abu Musa was a stupid man and that he had not shown confidence and trust in Imam Ali (s). He even prevented the people from joining Imam Ali’s army.

When the rebels insisted on that Abu Musa should be the arbitrator, Imam Ali (s) said: “Now you do not listen to me. Well, choose your own way! It is not far when you will bite your fingers regretting your misdeed.”

Finally Abu Musa and Amr were chosen as arbiters. They put their heads together and decided to depose Mu’awiyah and Ali (s) from the seat of the caliphate and then to let the people

choose an adequate person for that rule. They were to announce their decision to the people. After some formalities, Amr said to Abu Musa: “It is impolite that I precede you. You are older than me. You announce first.” Abu Musa became proud after this flattery and came before the crowed and saying: “We both determined on deposing Mu’awiyah and Ali ibn Abu-Talib and hereupon the Muslims have the right to choose a caliph as they like.” Then it was Amr's turn. He said: “O people, you heard just now that Abu Musa deposed Ali (s) from his position and I approve it. But there is no reason that makes me depose Mu’awiyah so I appoint him as the caliph.”

As soon as Amr ended his words, the Muslims made a protest against the verdict of the arbitrators but no attention was paid to their protest.

Abu Musa cried hoarsely and said to Amr: “You deceived me. You are like a dog. If you attack it, it will bark and if you leave it alone, it will bark.” Amr said to him: “You are like the ass, which bears books.”

wever Amr's trick firmed the authority of Mu’awiyah to some extent more than before.

The simple-minded people, who forced Imam Ali to accept the arbitration, thought highly of the two arbitrators and thought that their verdict would be according to the Holy Qur’an but they had not paid attention to the Holy Qur’an, whereas some verses of the Holy Qur’an had praised Imam Ali and had urged the Muslims to follow him. The Holy Qur’an says: (O you, who believe! be careful of (your duty to) Allah and be with the true ones) 9:119.

Many of the great Sunni commentators mentioned that “the true ones” were Mohammad (s) and Ali (s) and “be with them” meant that the Muslims should follow them.[2]

The arbitrators had forgotten the Prophet's words: “Ali (s) is the wisest, the best judge and the most superior to all of you. Opposing his sayings and judgments is opposing me and opposing me is opposing Allah and that is blasphemy.”[3]

Could this short sketch of arbitration be a guide to the Muslims or the Qur’an and the Prophet's Sunnah in order not to be trapped by the enemy’s tricks and not to go after the worldly transient desires?

It is much regrettable that some authorities make use of deceitful devices to exploit the poor nations unfairly under the name of humanism.

Imam Ali (s) believed that both science and religion should be adopted to serve the human beings. He said: “Allah has not made it obligatory for the ignorant to learn until He has made it obligatory for the learned to teach.” He also said: “Whoever trades and does not know the rules of religion, will fall in usury.”

The battle of Nahrawan

After appointing the arbitrators, the people, who insisted on Imam Ali (s) to accept arbitration, began to say that it was heresy to appoint some one as arbitrator except Allah. The Holy Qur'an says: (The judgment is only Allah's; He relates the truth and He is the best of deciders)[4] and since Imam Ali (s) had accepted the arbitration then he turned heretic. Of course they have distorted the meaning of the verse and hereby they caused the simple-minded people to separate from Imam Ali's army. When Imam Ali knew the conspiracies, he sent some of the great companions towards them and then he himself went to their camp and finally they dispersed after hearing convincing evidences. When they arrived at Kufa they began to tell a lie again that Imam Ali (s) had broken the agreement of arbitration and that he was going to fight against the Syrians once again.

Imam Ali (s) refuted their allegation and hereupon these people rebelled against him. They encamped in a place named Nahrawan near Baghdad. These people were called (Khawarij) the Kharijites.

When Imam Ali (s) heard the verdict of the two arbitrators, he wrote to the Kharijites that the verdict was according to the arbitrators' own wishes and not according to the Holy Qur'an. He said that he had not accepted it; therefore he had decided to fight the Syrians and that the Kharijites should support him this jihad.

They replied: "Since you had accepted the arbitration, you turned heretic. If you confess your fault and repent, we will think over the matter and then we will inform you of what we will do." This letter indicated their insisting on rebellion.

Imam Ali (s) had formerly prepared and equipped an army to march towards Syria, but his men expressed their desire to deal with the Kharijites first because they had killed the wali of Nahrawan and his maid, who was pregnant, and they also had butchered three other innocent women. Another man, who was sent for investigation, was killed too.

Consequently Imam Ali (s) turned towards Nahrawan and sent the Kharijites a word that the murderers of the wali and the killed women should be mhanded over to him to be punished. They replied: "We altogether killed them."

Imam Ali (s), as usual, did not want to begin the war; therefore he sent a man with a word of peace to them. As a result of this meeting, many groups separated from the Kharijites and joined Imam Ali's army. Those, who remained, were four thousand persons. They did not care for killing or being killed.

Imam Ali prevented his men from beginning any attack but they put their arrows in the bows and drew out their swords from the sheaths. In this critical situation Imam Ali (s) warned the

Kharijites that the war would be hard for them, but they were so enthusiastic that they rushed suddenly against Imam Ali's men and caused a bloody fight. As Imam Ali (s) had foreseen formerly, they all were killed except nine persons, who fled away to save their lives. Only eight persons of Imam Ali's army were martyred.

Surprising it was! Who had suffered from oppression more than Imam Ali (s)? Those who encouraged people to kill Uthman, after killing him, they accused Imam Ali of being the guilty and tried heir best to avenge.

Those, who insisted on him to stretch his hand to pay homage, broke their homage and waged the battles of al-Jamal (the camel) and Nahrawan. They even threatened him with death if he would not accept the arbitration and when he accepted it, he was charged with heresy and then they wanted him to repent. Above all, he was the first man in Islam, whose certain right was usurped by political collusions.

At the same time Mu'awiyah decided to extend his domain; therefore he sent his armies to different cities of Imam Ali's domination. He, hereby, created disorder and confusion so that Imam Ali (s) could find no peace of mind. He sent many groups of marauders and killers to put down the opposition and to obtain homage by force.

The Prophet (s) had said to Imam Ali before: "After me you will fight against the perfidious (those who fought in the battle of al-Jamal), the oppressors (Mu'awiyah's followers) and the apostates (the Kharijites)."

Mohammad, the great educator, trained the people of that time so that they could make the civilized world of those submit to them days within half a century because they could control their personal desires easily by virtue and abstinence.

As a result of the social and moral education, those people never thought of achieving their own aims. They just thought of the benefit of the ummah. Really, the successive victories of the Muslims at the first age of the Islamic state were due to their principles and morals.

At the days of Abu-Bakr and Umar these principles were still protected but at the reign of Uthman, the people did not pay much attention to those principles. On the other hand, the Muslims obtained victory over many countries and consequently they gained a lot of goods and spoils which led them to laze in luxury.

They practiced the luxurious and splendid life of the Romans and the Persians and made the new generation understand that no one could live at ease without riches. Hereupon the policy of the Islamic caliphate was changed into monarchy and tyranny.

This atmosphere was quite favorable for a man like Mu'awiyah, who was ambitious and wanted to found a hereditary sultanate instead of the Islamic caliphate. But Imam Ali (s)

wanted to restore the Prophet's Sunnah and the simplicity of the life during the time of the two caliphs; Abu-Bakr and Umar and this made him face troubles that at last he was martyred. The people gathered in Syria to firm Mu'awiyah's rule.

The historians mentioned that Imam Hasan, the elder son of Imam Ali (s), who defended the religion, declared the war against Mu'awiyah. In the thick of the battle, some commandants of Imam Hasan's army received a bribe from Mu'awiyah. They left Imam Hasan and joined Mu'awiyah.

Imam Hasan, facing many difficulties, was obliged to come to terms with Mu'awiyah. Contrary to the agreement, Mu'awiyah decided to appoint his son Yazid as his successor. Yazid was dissolute and ignominious. He was a mass of sins and faults. Mu'awiyah poisoned Imam Hasan to clear clearing the way for his son. Finally he managed to appoint Yazid by force or by bribing the oppositionists when necessary.

The brave rising of Imam Hussein, the other son of Imam Ali(s), which had a regretful consequence, was also the result of immorality spread among the people and the loss of the favorable atmosphere of the divine caliphate. It showed that people would prefer material concerns to principles.[5]

Since Imam Hussein (s) was the greatest fighter against tyranny, I deem it my duty to remind the readers briefly how he sacrificed himself for defeating injustice and oppression.

After the death of Mu'awiyah, all the Muslims, willy-nilly, paid homage to Yazid except four persons. Imam Hussein was one of them.

The people of Kufa invited Imam Hussein to reform the bad political and social situations and to guide them to the right path. They sent him more than twenty-five thousand letters inviting him to set out towards Kufa. In the meanwhile he was offended by the wali of Medina to force him to pay homage to Yazid but he left Medina for Mecca at night with his household. The Umayyads pursued their adversary even in Mecca. They intended to remove this obstacle by killing Imam Hussein. Imam Hussein, because of the reverence of Kaabah and that he did not want any bloodshed to be committed inside it, left Mecca towards Kufa. He confronted a host of one thousand soldiers on the way to Kufa. The commander of them asked Imam Hussein to pay homage to Yazid; otherwise he would not be allowed to enter the city. He refused the proposal and then he had to pitch tents in a torrid place named Karbala.

The wali of Kufa dispatched an army of thirty thousand persons to Karbala within four days to surround Imam Hussein and his household. They occupied the watering places in order to force Imam Hussein to surrender when suffering thirst. They were so hard-hearted that they did not pay any attention for the children's crying because of thirst.

There were one thousand persons with Imam Hussein when he got at Karbala. He told them that they had the option to leave or to stay, because he would be killed in that journey. They left him in groups and only seventy-two persons, including his sons, brothers and nephews accompanied by their wives and children, remained to support him. Every one of those devoted men made a short speech showing his sincerity.

At any rate they all were terribly thirsty. The worse of it was that the enemy did not have any pity even for the suckling babies and the old persons. It was three days that water was not found in the tents and the all were terribly thirsty especially the children. Next day early in the morning, the enemy put arrows in the bows and shot at Imam Hussein's tents. They hereby declared the war.

Some of Imam Hussein's companions were martyred in this attack. The companions then began, one by one, to attack the enemy and each one killed a good few of the enemy.

Then it was Imam Hussein's turn to sacrifice himself. It was the sacrifice that made the world think with great respect and admiration of this nonesuch hero.

Try to think about a man, who was thirsty, tired and faced many terrible difficulties since early in the morning till the noon. He mounted and dismounted his horse many times to bring the dead bodies of the martyrs to the tents and exactly at this critical moment the enemy proposed again that he had no option but to be killed or pay homage to Yazid.

Imam Hussein said: "That bastard (ibn Ziyad, the wali of Kufa) made me choose one of two things, the death or the shame of submission. I will never prefer living with ignobility to being killed for the sake of God. Martyrdom is an honor in our family." Then he came towards the women's tents to say goodbye for the last time. They surrounded him and mourned over his forlornness and loneliness. He heartened them with soft words and said to them that they should be patient with calamities. Then he set to the battlefield.

According to the traditions of fighting in those days, it was man to man challenge. When Imam Hussein killed many of their brave heroes, no one else dared to fight him alone.

The enemy altogether made assaults. Imam Hussein beat them constantly. When they saw that they were not a match for him, they began to shoot at him with showers of arrows and spears.

Thurayh ibn Shurayk struck his right shoulder with a sword. A poisoned arrow hit his heart and then he fell down on the ground.

The enemy began to rush towards the women's tents. Imam Hussein shouted at them loudly: "If you have no faith, be at least freemen in this world according to your tribal traditions." They returned and martyred him.

There is an article, written by an English learned woman under the title of "Three Martyrs". She says briefly: “In the history there were three praiseworthy men, who sacrificed themselves for exalting the word of "rightness" and for spreading justice and liberty among the people. They excelled all the other devotees in the world. The first one was Socrates, the philosopher of ancient Greece. The second one was Jesus Christ and the third was Imam Hussein, the son of Imam Ali (s) and the Prophet's grandson from his daughter.” She added: “If you study their lives deeply, you will know that Imam Hussein’s devotion is more important than the first two persons. He was forced to emigrate and was involved in many difficulties. His companions were killed, while being thirsty, before his eyes. He himself was put to death tragically, while he knew that his wives and children would be taken as captives to Kufa.”

That was a summary of the sad story of the greatest fighter, who fought against tyranny and autocracy and who denied himself before all the pleasures and he did not want to submit to abjectness and debasement.

Let us return to the main subject.

After the process of the arbitration, Mu’awiyah began to attack various places of Imam Ali's domination. He spread killing and marauding all around and caused fear for the people of the far quarters of Kufa.

Imam Ali (s) summoned the people to chase the enemy but the people did not respond to him. It seemed that the people were unwilling to fight. He encouraged them again to take part in the war at least for protecting their country.

At last a force of four thousands, headed by Hijr ibn Adiy, rose to chase the enemy. There was a short encounter between the two parties but the enemy ran away.

A few days before his martyrdom, Imam Ali summoned the commanders and after scolding them for their idleness and listlessness, he said: “I have decided to fight against Mu’awiyah. If no one comes to help me, I will go to Siffeen with my own relatives only.”

They knew that he would practice what he said. Hereon they collected the people and said: “It will be disgraceful for us, if he is killed alone.”

In order to avoid this public disgrace, forty thousand persons flew to their arms and got ready for the battle. They promised to fight against Mu’awiyah to the bitter end, but unfortunately the criminal hand of ibn Muljim ended the life of the great leader of the believers.

It was to be regretted too much that his life failed him to reach his goal. When his beard was colored with his head's blood, he said: “I swear by the god of Kaabah that I won.”

Yes, he was troubled with a train of events that he could do nothing but to grieve.

Although many people were fascinated by his high characteristics, some others, who had

heaped monies during the reign of Uthman, could not endure his justice. They often caused seditions and plotted to overthrow his government.

On the other hand, Imam Ali couldn’t be indifferent to the misdeeds of his officers or to the expenditure of the public money for private motives and political purposes. And, above all, he had to resist his relatives' unlawful desires lest they would weaken the pillars of the religion. Some critics criticized Imam Ali and said that it would be much better if he did not accept the caliphate after Uthman in order not to be involved in so many difficulties or at least he should have resigned his post and had left the people alone especially when the spies misguided the people to wrong him in Siffeen. They ignored that the Muslims themselves rushed towards him and begged him insistently to stretch his hand in order to pay homage to him as the caliph. The people knew well that he was that fair man, who would never ignore the interests of the Muslims for the sake of his own interests. Furthermore, according to the divine law when there were enough numbers ready to support the right, then the religious leaders had to rise to get back the lost rights of the oppressed ones from oppressors.

He said: “By Allah, who split grains to grow and created all the creatures, unless the people had not paid homage to me and unless Allah had not put the ulema under obligation that they had not to be silent in front of the oppressors and had not to be away from supporting the oppressed, I would have slackened the reins of the caliphate and I would have done what I had done the first day after the Prophet's death…”

In another part of the same sermon he said: “The crowd of people leapt upon me as thirsty Camels when leaping upon each other at the watering place. They wanted to pay homage to me importunately. They crowded around me from every side in a way that Hasan and Hussein were about to be crushed under feet.”

On the other hand, if Mu’awiyah ruled over an army like the Iraqis, he would have become involved in many troubles, as he himself said to his friends: “I am ruling upon such stupid people, who obey me blindly, but Imam Ali's followers strive hard for the sake of the religious matters and they think over the problems diligently and sometimes they dispute with Imam Ali (s). Consequently there is no secrecy about the state affairs. Imam Ali discloses all the affairs before people but I conceal my affairs. This is the secret of my success.”

Imam Ali (s) said: “Mu’awiyah is not more intelligent than me. He flatters and cheats.”

References

[1] Refer to ibn Mardwayh's Manaqib, al-Haythami's Majma'a, vol.1 p.p.236, al-Hakim's Mustadrak, vol.3 p.p.134 and al-Fakhr ar-Razi's Tafseer, vol.1 p.p.111.

[2] Malik was a very close companion of Imam Ali because of his sincerity and steadfastness in faith. Imam Ali showed great confidence and trust in him. He was Imam Ali's right hand in all the difficulties. In addition to his bravery, he had a great ability to organize and to administer the state affairs. Suffice it to say that Imam Ali had said about Malik: "He was to me as I was to the prophet."

[2] Ath-Tha'labi in his book Kashful Bayan, Jalaluddeen as-Sayooti in his ad-Durr al-Mathoor, Abu Na'eem al-Isfahani in his Hilyatul Awliya', Sheikh Sulayman al-Hanafi in hisyanabee'ul Mawada and Muhamad ibn Yousuf al-Ganji in his Kifayatut Taib.

[3] Refer to Amad's Musnad, al-Khawarizmi's Manaqib, Mir Said ibn Ali Hamadani's Mawaddat al-Qurba and Abu Bakr al-Bayhaqi's Sunan.

[4] Qur'an 6:57.

[5] Nowadays the same condition is prevailing allover the world. The racial discrimination has caused many vagrancies and miseries among the peoples o the world. All these aroused from the unprincipled conducts that became far from morals. Hence many small countries fall victims to the political whims of the great countries.