

THE PRINCE OF MARTYRS

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THE PRINCE OF MARTYRS

A brief account of the Imam Husayn

By Abu'l-Qasim Faizi

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...For no warrior could be found on earth more excellent and nearer to God than Husayn, son of 'Ali, so peerless and incomparable was he. 'There was none to equal or to match him in the world.' Yet, thou must have heard what befell him. 'God's malison on the head of the people of tyranny!'

Furthermore, call to mind the shameful circumstances that have attended the martyrdom of Husayn. Reflect upon his loneliness, how, to outer seeming, none could be found to aid him, none to take up his body and bury it. And yet, behold how numerous, in this day, are those who from the uttermost corners of the earth don the garb of pilgrimage, seeking the site of his martyrdom, that there they may lay their heads upon the threshold of his shrine! Such is the ascendancy and power of God! Such is the glory of His dominion and majesty! Think not that because these things have come to pass after Husayn's martyrdom, therefore all this glory hath been of no profit unto him. For that holy soul is immortal, liveth the life of God, and abideth within the retreats of celestial glory upon the Sadrih of heavenly reunion. These Essences of being are the shining Exemplars of sacrifice. They have offered, and will continue to offer up their lives, their substance, their souls, their spirit, their all, in the path of the Well-Beloved. By them, no station, however exalted, could be more dearly cherished. For lovers have no desire but the good-pleasure of their Beloved, and have no aim except reunion with Him.

Should We wish to impart unto thee a glimmer of the mysteries of Husayn's martyrdom, and reveal unto thee the fruits thereof, these pages could never suffice, nor exhaust their meaning. Our hope is that, God willing, the breeze of mercy may blow, and the divine Springtime clothe the tree of being with the robe of a new life; so that we may discover the mysteries of divine Wisdom,

and, through His providence, be made independent of the knowledge of all things. We have, as yet, descried none but a handful of souls, destitute of all renown, who have attained unto this station. Let the future disclose what the Judgment of God will ordain, and the Tabernacle of His decree reveal. In such wise We recount unto thee the wonders of the Cause of God, and pour out into thine ears the strains of heavenly melody, that haply thou mayest attain unto the station of true knowledge, and partake of the fruit thereof. Therefore, know thou of a certainty that these Luminaries of heavenly majesty, though their dwelling be in the dust, yet their true habitation is the seat of glory in the realms above. Though bereft of all earthly possessions, yet they soar in the realms of immeasurable riches. And whilst sore tried in the grip of the enemy, they are seated on the right hand of power and celestial dominion. Amidst the darkness of their abasement there shineth upon them the light of unfading glory, and upon their helplessness are showered the tokens of an invincible sovereignty.

BAHA'U'LLAH

from The Kitab-i-Iqan [pp. 126, 128-130]

<p1>

To write about a man whose martyrdom fortified the foundations of the Islamic Faith, whose blood cleansed the religion of his Grandfather of the detrimental traces of the spirit of the Age of Ignorance,[1] the mere mention of whose name creates waves of poignant sorrow in the hearts of his followers, whose personality towers above even the best of the Imams, and whose station is so exalted that the hopes and aspirations of the true believers are centred on his "return", is a difficult undertaking. It is particularly difficult, since so little is known in the West of this incomparable figure, and that little vitiated by prejudicial accounts devoid of true judgement.

[1 Jahiliyyah, before the advent of Muhammad.]

Like the waves of a stormy sea and the turbulent events of history constantly surge and swirl, and we are astounded to witness that, amidst the manifold historical episodes associated with the early days of Islam, the most ardent believers, avowed supporters and staunch defenders of the new Faith of Muhammad were put to the test, fell and vanished in that tempestuous ocean. "In a distant age and climate the tragic scene of the death of Hosein will <p2>awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader",[2] and indeed, even in that bitter first century of Islam, his death evoked the greatest feeling of sorrow. The martyrdom of Husayn did not occur as a sudden and spontaneous combustion. Nor should we consider it as a simple act of the murder of an individual. It took place as the consequence of deep-rooted animosities and prolonged struggles between the powers of darkness and the army of light.

[2 Gibbon, The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ch. 50.]

One must study this tragedy with much devotion and patience. To obtain just a fragmentary outline of the decisive events which so altered the development of Islam, one must look back to the Age of Ignorance, gather the ends of as many

threads as possible, and trace their course through the history of Arabia and Islam before and after the Prophet Muhammad, thus detecting various causes of many of the events recorded. One must also stand at an adequate distance to see how deeply-rooted human weakness are manifested, how swords are substituted for words, how conquests lead to decline and everlasting fall, and how the sacred blood of devoted adherents is shed to open the way to the ultimate victory of the Word of God.

Though this deathless chapter of world history, which revolves around the central figure of Imam <p3> Husayn, is unlimited in scope and fathomless in depth, it is nevertheless worthwhile to attempt a study of one who merits both our reverence and love. Baha'u'llah, the Bab, and 'Abdu'l-Baha[3] all made numerous references to the acts of devotion and sacrifice of Imam Husayn, and we find a special visitation prayer revealed for him by Baha'u'llah.

[3 Baha'u'llah (1817-92) was the Founder of the Baha'i Faith, the Bab (1819-50) its Forerunner, and 'Abdu'l-Baha (1833-1921) its Exemplar.]

This essay is not intended to be exhaustive in scope. It is only a humble attempt to facilitate the study of the Imam's life and achievements. In these events will be found great feats of spiritual ardour and acts of self-sacrifice, the contemplation of which cannot but consolidate one's own faith.

The following outline of persons and happenings will, it is hoped, aid the reader to identify the individuals who played prominent parts in this tragedy and to follow the events in their proper order.

Persons and Events

1. The two outstanding clans of the Quraysh tribe in Mecca
 - (a) The clan of Hashim
 - (b) The clan of Umayyah <p4>
2. The first four Caliphs (A.D. 632-61)
 - (a) Abu-Bakr
 - (b) 'Umar
 - (c) 'Uthman
 - (d) 'Ali
3. Mu'awiyah, Governor of Syria, in Damascus, and the first Umayyad ruler (A.D. 661-80)
 - (a) He stood against 'Ali.
 - (b) After the assassination of 'Ali he caused 'Ali's son, Hasan, to withdraw and retire, and himself became head of the Islamic Community.
 - (c) He tried to obtain an oath of allegiance for his son Yazid to succeed him, instead of Hasan's younger brother Husayn, to whom he had promised the succession.
4. Husayn, the third Imam (after 'Ali and Hasan)
 - (a) On the death of Mu'awiyah, he refused to acknowledge Yazid's succession.
 - (b) He was promised support by the people of Kufah in Mesopotamia ('Iraq).

- (c) with a small band of about seventy followers and his family, he set out from Mecca in Hijaz for Kufah.
 - (d) Ibn Ziyad was the newly-appointed Governor of Kufah.
 - (e) Husayn's way was blocked by Hurr, a cavalry commander who, at Karbala, joined <p5> Husayn's small company.
 - (f) Ibn Sa'd commanded the army of 4000 sent against Husayn.
 - (g) On the plain of Karbala Husayn pitched his tents.
5. Husayn's martyrdom, the 10th day of Muharram, 61 A.H. (October, A.D. 680)
- (a) In the ensuing battle, Husayn lost all the male members of his family and companions except his invalid son 'Ali, known as Zaynu'l-'Abidin.
 - (b) Shimr was the shameless enemy who decapitated the Imam.
 - (c) Husayn's body was trampled by horses.
 - (d) His son 'Ali, and the women and children, were taken captive and conducted, with the heads of their martyrs carried aloft on spears, to Kufah from whence they were sent to Damascus.
 - (e) Yazid sent the family from Damascus to Medina with the heads of their martyrs, which they buried in Karbala forty days after the battle.
 - (f) This tragic event marked the final separation of the spiritual and administrative centres of the Islamic Faith. <p6>

The Ka'bah was the first house of worship ever erected in Arabia. It was built by Abraham, aided by his son Ishmael.[4] When they had finished the construction of this cube-like building, they prayed that God would accept their act of service. In the course of centuries, the House became a centre where many idols were placed and preserved by the tribes, each of which had several gods or goddesses to worship. To make the pilgrimage to Mecca was indeed for the sole purpose of worshipping the idols. This pilgrimage had many different stages to be performed over a number of days, and each stage was characterized by rituals, customs and habits which reflected the barbarous life of the Age of Ignorance prevalent in much of the Arabian peninsula.

There were several clans of the Quraysh who were responsible for the care of the pilgrims. The most prominent of their responsibilities were two: (1) The custodianship of the Ka'bah and the keeping of its key; and (2) The administration of Mecca and the provision of water for the pilgrims. Both responsibilities had been vested, in the latter half of the fifth century, in Qusayy, but on his death authority was divided, the second responsibility <p7> going to his grandson, 'Abd-Shams, the progenitor of the Umayyads, then passing to his brother Hashim, founder of the Hashimites. This transfer of authority, which engendered ill feelings of rivalry and jealousy between the two clans, became the starting-point of accusations, calumnies, petty strifes and skirmishes which were to stain the pages of Muslim history.

[4 Tradition has it that Adam built the Ka'bah, which was rebuilt in a later age by Abraham and Ishmael.]

Hashim (d. 510) had been wealthy, generous and of good breeding, as were most of his descendants. But Abu-Sufyan, a merchant in olives and wool, and head of the Umayyads at the time of Muhammad, was notorious for his infamous character.

The popularity of Hashim's descendants could not be endured by Abu-Sufyan. As the years went by, strong feelings of jealous rivalry mounted in his heart. Once such loathsome seeds are sown, they begin to grow and gradually become a deep-rooted tree the bitter fruits of which are consumed by the members of the tribe. Not only did the elders of Abu-Sufyan's family carry grudges against the Hashimites, but their children also began to hate them. At first, such differences remained within the small circle of Meccan life, but before long their frustrations and ill feelings gushed forth like a flood, inundating all aspects of Muslim life in Arabia and the neighbouring countries. <p8>

Now it happened that Muhammad was singled out by God to act as His Messenger to mankind, and He was of the Hashimites. As His mission began to win adherents, the other clans of the Quraysh, fearing the ultimate victory of the Prophet, rose to persecute Him, His family, His followers and His nascent Faith. The members of Abu-Sufyan's family, under the direction, instigation and evil plotting of their chief, stood impervious to the truth and remained firm against the progress of Islam. So unbearable became the conditions for Muhammad and His followers that some were forced to leave their country for Ethiopia, and soon thereafter the Muslims had to retire to a solitary valley outside Mecca, while the Meccans were commanded by their leaders to abstain from all trade with them. This state of affairs lasted for three years.

Eventually the Prophet decided to change His place of residence from Mecca to Medina, where He was welcomed by a band of followers. With the zeal and enthusiasm of new recruits, the believers won many to His side and soon the Prophet had an army of adherents under His command.

At length He decided to cleanse the House of God in Mecca, to awaken the Meccans to recognize the dawn of a new day, and to help them understand <p9> the truth of Islam and the influence it would have in the world, especially in Arabia which was still under the sway of the abhorred Age of Ignorance.

As the Prophet and His followers approached Mecca in an alarming march of triumph, the very first to embrace Islam was Abu-Sufyan; he was soon followed by the members of his family and a majority of the tribe of Quraysh.

Thus the germ of dissension, which had actively opposed the progress of the Faith of Islam, now entered the body of the Cause of God. It remained hidden but ever ready to emerge, like a virulent disease, to sap the spiritual vitality and strength of the religion of God -- that tender young tree, drain enthusiasm and weaken religious affiliation, affect many of the pillars of Islam, put to the test groups of courageous adherents causing them to fail and, above all, to divide the all-commanding and united power of the newly-established Faith of God. Its evil spell, once cast upon the divine institutions, brought many incorrigible individuals to absolute and ruthless power. Hypocrites found a ready arena for their wicked and arrogant schemes. Military conquests were substituted for spiritual conquests. The exhortations of Islam gave way to the spirit and the <p10> rules of life prevalent in the Age of Ignorance. And the religion of God became as a dead body deprived even

of burial.[5] There was need of a supreme sacrifice to create those mysterious energies which draw people near to their Creator and closer to His religion and His plan for mankind.

Husayn, the grandson of the Prophet, was destined to give the blood of his family and himself for such a spiritual regeneration.

At the death of the Prophet, that poisonous germ began to manifest its evil effects, and its contamination weakened the faith of even the most renowned champions of Islam. It is related that the Prophet, returning home from His last pilgrimage, had gathered His followers together and orally but emphatically designated 'Ali as their master. His mission, He had told them in Mecca, was completed. When He became ill and was bed-ridden, His closest and most stalwart supporters were in his room. He asked for paper and pen to dictate that which would keep them united. "The man is in delirium," said one of them; "sufficient to us is the Book of God." These words were to cause a disastrous schism in the religion of God that remained irreparable and continually widened as the years went on.

[5 See 'Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, ch. XI. (Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, rev. edn. 1964.)]

The moment the Prophet laid His head to rest, 'Ali -- His cousin and the husband of His illustrious daughter Fatimah, who was the second to believe in Him and was the embodiment of nobility, audacity and justice -- was left alone to arrange the burial of the Prophet, while those who had heard the penetrating voice of the Prophet on the day He announced 'Ali as their master gathered in another place to initiate their own plan, not according to His words, but in accord with the rules of the tribes. Thus the positive forces were robbed of their powers and prerogatives, while the negative ones ruled throughout the decades and centuries.[6] Heedless of this event, which is recorded by almost all the chroniclers of the birth of Islam, many outstanding historians, even those who are Muslims, have disregarded this critical point, creating so many doubts with their own interpretations that the mirror of historical fact has become obscured and darkened.

[6 See Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, section XXIII. (Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, rev. edn. 1952.)]

The tumultuous and heated discussion which ensued, in the effort to choose a successor to their Prophet, was appeased by the disinterested resolution of 'Umar, who, "suddenly renouncing his own pretensions, stretched forth his hand, and declared himself the first subject of the mild and venerable" [7] Abu-Bakr. This act was described by Gibbon as an "illegal and precipitate measure".

[7 Gibbon, op. cit.]

Abu-Bakr, after a rule of two years, designated 'Umar as his successor. 'Umar conquered and ruled for ten years and, before his death, nominated six men from whom one should be chosen to succeed him. 'Uthman was named by that council.

When 'Uthman took the reins of affairs in his feeble hands, he appointed the members of his family to be governors of states and judges of provinces. He was a descendant of Umayyah like Abu-Sufyan, and thus the most important office of the Islamic world came under the sway of the Umayyads. 'Uthman, because of his practice of nepotism, was disliked by the people, and his "feeble temper and declining age ... were incapable of sustaining the weight of conquest and empire". From many parts of the Islamic world delegations were sent to 'Uthman, to plead with him to exercise justice. Failing to do so, he was assassinated in his own house. "A tumultuous anarchy of five days was appeased by the inauguration of Ali: his refusal would have provoked a general massacre," although <p13> though 'Ali "declared that he had rather serve than reign". Twenty-four years after the death of the Prophet, the Islamic world acclaimed Imam 'Ali as its leader, and he "was invested, by the popular choice, with the regal and sacerdotal office".[8]

[8 The passages quoted in this paragraph and the next are from Gibbon, op. cit.]

"The birth, the alliance, the character of 'Ali, which exalted him above the rest of his countrymen, might justify his claim to the vacant throne of Arabia," Gibbon has observed. "The son of Abu Taleb was, in his own right, the chief of the family of Hashem, and the hereditary prince or guardian of the city and temple of Mecca. The light of prophecy was extinct; but the husband of Fatima might expect the inheritance and blessing of her father;" who spoke of him as "vicegerent" and even referred to him as the "Aaron of a second Moses". His two sons, Hasan and Husayn, had been very often on the lap of the Prophet receiving special love and were called "the chief of the youth of paradise". "He united the qualifications of a poet, a soldier, and a saint: his wisdom still breathes in a collection of moral and religious sayings;[9] and every antagonist, <p14> in the combats of the tongue or of the sword, was subdued by his eloquence and valour."

[9 The collection is called Nahju'l-Balaghan, and is referred to by the great teachers of Islam as "not the words of the Creator, but heaven above the words of man".]

In the words of Professor Hitti: "Valiant in battle, wise in counsel, eloquent in speech, true to his friends, magnanimous to his foes, he became both the paragon of Moslem nobility and chivalry ... and the Solomon of Arabic tradition, around whose name poems, proverbs, sermonettes and anecdotes innumerable have clustered. He had a swarthy complexion, large black eyes, bald head, thick and long white beard, and was corpulent and of medium stature. His sabre dhu-al-Faqr (the cleaver of vertebrae), ... has been immortalized in the words of the verse found engraved on many medieval Arab swords ... 'No sword can match dhu-al-Faqr, and no young warrior can compare with 'Ali!'"[10]

[10 Philip K. Hitti, History of the Arabs, p. 183. (Macmillan and Co. Ltd, London, 10th edn. 1970; also St. Martin's Press, Inc., New York.)]

The people knew him as a true believer in Islam, one who would keep to its spirit and never deviate even a hair's breadth from the right path of God. His

way of life was simple; he despised the vanities of the world. He showed no favouritism. Even his own brother abandoned him when he received no extra share from the revenues, for 'Ali spared no effort to protect the treasury of the Faith from plunder by covetous individuals.

With the vigour of an undaunted hero and ruler, and the unsurpassed determination of a spiritual leader, he began to purify the administrative institutions of Islam and to dismiss those who were unworthy of position. He wrote beautiful letters to the governors, breathing into them the true spirit of the Faith, and reminding them of the Prophet's lofty standard of justice and tolerance towards the followers of all religions. By such firm steps in the purification of all the channels of affairs, 'Ali conquered the hearts of the people of Mecca; and when they were agitated by the activities of his opponents, he recited the verses of God with so much strength and calmness and in such a spirit of self-sacrifice that they came to know his magnanimity in war. On many hazardous occasions, he manifested such determination and truthfulness that the cunning plots of his adversaries were averted and frustrated.

But the Quraysh, in the words of Gibbon, "could never be reconciled to the proud pre-eminence of the line of Hashem: and the ancient discord of the tribes was rekindled." Indeed, in all the phases of the history of Islam, we observe the traces of discord and animosity which started in the Age of Ignorance, penetrating into the very core of the Muslim institutions and dividing the loyalty of the rank and file of its adherents. Like the deadening winds of autumn, disunity swept through all domains and caused the weakening, failure and fall of many of the followers of Islam. "The mischiefs that flow from the contests of ambition are usually confined to the times and countries in which they have been agitated. But the religious discord of the friends and enemies of 'Ali has been renewed in every age" of Islamic history.[11] Periodical clashes of an intense nature between the army of light and the powers of darkness were one by one unfolded and in all of them we find 'Ali and his illustrious descendants victims in the merciless clutches of the Umayyads. [11 Passages quoted in this paragraph and the next are from Gibbon, op. cit.]

The Muslim world was shocked when it heard the two influential leaders, aided and accompanied by 'A'ishah, the wife of the Prophet, had waged war against 'Ali. Upon their defeat, and the death of the two leaders, 'Ali proved most magnanimous. He mourned the deaths of his brave adversaries and the "venerable captive ... was speedily dismissed to her proper station, at the tomb of Mahomet, with the respect and tenderness that was still due to the widow of the apostle".

But the most formidable of 'Ali's opponents was in Damascus. Mu'awiyah, son of Abu-Sufyan, had been appointed by his relative 'Uthman as governor of Syria. With an insatiable thirst for still higher rank and position, an intense desire to exterminate the last traces of the Hashimites, and motivated by an unmitigated hatred of 'Ali, Mu'awiyah stood resolutely against the man to whom the Muslim world had promised fidelity and obedience. Mu'awiyah's intention was

to establish himself as Caliph of Islam and to secure for his descendants the throne of a dynasty. He moved against 'Ali, who, by his heroic deeds, had almost won the day, when suddenly he was "compelled to yield to a disgraceful truce and an insidious compromise".[12]

[12 Gibbon, op. cit.]

After the assassination of 'Ali, in the mosque of Kufah, Mu'awiyah had a supreme opportunity to widen the range of his perfidious activities throughout the Muslim domains. He retained the name of Islam as an outer garment, while ceaselessly pouring out his venom of rivalry and jealousy against the Hashimites. Emboldened by the gap created by 'Ali's murder, he revealed his own schemes by vilifying 'Ali in the mosques, minarets and markets. Preachers who would invent traditions against 'Ali were promoted and received gifts of immense value. Those who expressed love and loyalty toward 'Ali and his family were put to death in cruel and insidious ways. Honey mixed with poison was often used. Mu'awiyah would always say that the army of God is in honey.

Hasan, the eldest son of 'Ali, was acclaimed as his successor, but soon he was forced by Mu'awiyah to withdraw and retire. He was at last poisoned by a slave girl named Ja'dih who poured diamond powder into the Imam's jar of water. She committed this unforgiveable sin because of Mu'awiyah's promise to give her gold coins and arrange her marriage to his son Yazid, promises which were never fulfilled.

Thus the son of Abu-Sufyan, who had put forth all his efforts to stop the forward progress of the religion of God, was not settled on his throne by ruse and cunning. His nefarious activities were underscored by a now-famous motto attributed to him. "I apply not my sword,' he is reported to have declared, 'where my lash suffices, nor my lash where my tongue is enough. And even if there by one hair binding me to my fellow men, I do not let it break: when they pull I loosen, and if they loosen <p19> I pull.'"[13] By giving the people gold, lands and promises of high position, he drew to his court in Damascus persons who were as pillars of Islam; they were put to tests which many failed. He tried by all means to attract men to his court, and threatened those who showed reluctance to approach. He confiscated properties, gouged out the eyes of those who refused to co-operate, hanged them, buried them alive. Such nefarious acts have led certain historians, lacking in judgement and insight, to acclaim Mu'awiyah as the truest and shrewdest politician of the Arabian eninsula.

[13 Hitti, The Arabs, A Short History, pp. 59-60. (Macmillan, London, 5th edn. 1968; also St. Martin's Press, New York.)]

We come now to the sad story of that matchless soul, the third Imam, Husayn. As long as his elder brother Hasan was alive, Husayn obeyed him as a true believer. But when Hasan died, it was Husayn's right and privilege to protect his succession to the Caliphate, and his function as the third Imam. It was one of his sayings that should the Faith of his Grandfather require blood to

fortify its spiritual foundations, he was ever ready to offer his own.

Mu'awiyah knew very well that his own son Yazid would not easily be accepted by the people of Hijaz and 'Iraq as their Caliph. Therefore, during his own lifetime, he tried to arrange affairs in such a way as to facilitate Yazid's succession to the throne of the Caliphate. His concern was not that there should be a true successor of the Prophet, one who could be the supreme spiritual example to his people. Rather, his sole aim was to establish a powerful dynasty of his own family, whose domains would rival in scope and wealth the Persian and Roman Empires. But his instruction to the governor of Medina, to obtain pledges of allegiance to Yazid from Husayn and several other notables, did not succeed before his death.

Yazid then attempted to obtain submission to his rule, particularly from Husayn and one other notable, and dispatched to Walid, the governor of Medina, strict orders to this effect. Walid had no alternative but to summon them, but only Husayn went to the governor's house. There was a man in Walid's entourage named Marwan. He was an insidious and wicket plotter, who, though a professed Muslim, spied for the infidels. According to the writer of *Muhriqul-Qulub*[14] he was a dangerous element in the province of Hijaz, inspiring evil deeds by his whisperings, promptings and suggestions. As Husayn entered the governor's room, Marwan was sitting there, quiet and malignant as a dead mouse. Husayn asked Walid about the purpose of his invitation. When the governor disclosed to him the orders he had received from Damascus, Husayn frankly and boldly exclaimed that such oaths should be taken in the mosque and in the presence of the Muslim community, never in private. Having said this, he turned to leave. Marwan whispered to Walid to capture the Imam immediately, but Walid ignored this prompting, for he harboured in his heart a certain respect for the family of the Apostle of God.

[14 The book read in the presence of the Bab in the prison of Mah-Ku. See Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 252. (Baha'i Publishing Trust, Wilmette, Illinois, 1932.)]

The idea of obtaining an oath of allegiance from Husayn was pursued by Yazid with unflinching industry and obstinate ignorance. Such an oath of loyalty by Husayn would have wrapped the dead body of the Faith of God in shrouds of oblivion, and rung a death-knell for the hopes and aspirations of the true believers. But the forces of light remain forever victorious and never reconcilable with the powers of darkness.

Husayn had left the governor's house in Medina for his own, but his mind grappled with deeply disturbing thoughts and poignant sorrows, for he realized that the fate of the religion of Islam was hanging in the balance. To save the covenant of God from irretrievable loss, he decided to go from Medina to Mecca.

It was strange indeed that a perverted and corrupt man such as Yazid should presume to claim the mantle of the Prophet when his shoulders were already heavily burdened with sins. Harder still is it to think of a drunkard occupying

the position of the Prophet, leading the believers at times of prayer and inviting them to the path of spiritual accomplishment. So addicted was he to alcoholic beverages that he could not abstain from drinking, even in the few days of his pilgrimage to Mecca.

Yazid was absorbed in the frivolities and luxuries of life and was very keen on hunting. He remained oblivious to the fact that his domains were seething with discontent and on the brink of revolt. Imitating the heinous deeds of his father, he also employed many devilish means to achieve his aims. He used poison and fire and bribes, gifts, gold, positions and properties to corrupt the faithful, sheathe the swords of the brave, and silence those with eloquent tongues. He appointed the ignorant as teachers, the ill-famed as missionaries, and the cowards as commanders. A chilling and striking contrast to Husayn! "The only quality that he lacked," says SÈdillot, "was the spirit of intrigue which characterised <p23> the descendants of Ommeya." [15]

[15 Cited by Syed Ameer Ali in A Short History of the Saracens, pp. 83-4. (Macmillan [and] Co. Ltd., London, repr. 1921.)]

Husayn was aware of the deep-rooted hatred festering in the hearts of the Umayyads. He noticed that they multiplied their chains of control and strengthened them by drawing to their side prominent people in the Islamic world. To enlarge their dominions and to hold them more strictly under their own surveillance, they offered highly-coveted prizes. Even some of the Hashimites joined their ranks, for the temptations were greater than they could resist.

Perplexing news, manifold and magnified, was reaching the court of Yazid. He sent a special envoy to Mecca to control the pilgrimage. But the pilgrims were attracted to Husayn. As the grandson of their Prophet and in his own right a man of irresistible charm and regal dignity, they acclaimed him with love and reverence beyond the measure of expectation. Yazid received this news, and the volcano of hatred and jealousy which smouldered within his heart erupted in a stream of awesome calamities directed at Husayn. The sole aim of the tyrant of Syria was to obtain a pledge of obedience from this unique man who was so highly revered by the Muslim world. <p24>

When the news reached 'Iraq, the Muslims, especially those in the city of Kufah, who in the words of Ameer Ali were "Eager, fierce, and impetuous, [but] ... utterly wanting in perseverance and steadiness", [16] decided to invite Husayn to their own country and to acclaim him as the third Imam to whom all would remain loyal and obedient. They wrote literally thousands of letters and dispatched them to Mecca, promising their absolute loyalty. In the midst of their excitement, there was one man who addressed the people of Kufah, begging them to think well before swearing such oaths of fidelity, and not to stake the precious life of Husayn on the venture. But the streams of signed and sealed letters bearing their promises continued to flow to Mecca.

[16 *ibid.*, p. 84.]

Husayn decided to accept their invitations. Many close friends and even his

younger brother advised him not to rely on the inhabitants of 'Iraq and their pledges. They proposed that, if he intended to go away, he should choose Yemen where the followers of the Prophet were steadfast and truthful. Some of the tribesmen of the desert also warned him against the people of Kufah, saying, "Their hearts may be with you, but their spears and swords will be against you." A Shaykh asked Husayn where he would go. On <p25> hearing his reply, "To Kufah", in great agony the Shaykh exclaimed, "They will receive you on the points of their lances and the edges of their swords". But Husayn was undaunted by danger, choosing to tread the path most acceptable to his Lord and Creator.

The night before his departure Husayn was in profound meditation, his mind filled with a host of recollections. He knew that he would never look again on the scenes associated with his Grandfather, the Apostle of God; with 'Ali, the ever-conquering lion of God; and with Fatimah, his mother, who had been singled out by Allah as peerless among women in the Islamic Dispensation. In the ominous calmness of that night countless memories overwhelmed his sanctified heart. In the all-enveloping darkness, he balanced the behests of his heart and the formidable commands of destiny. Should he choose to stay in Hijaz, it would mean taking an oath of obedience to the throne of the despot of Damascus. Such an action would carry Islam to utter destruction. He knew that he could never leave the straight path of his destiny, though it be flooded with adversities and surrounded by calamities. In the words of Gibbon, "The primogeniture of the line of Hashem, and the holy character of the grandson of the apostle, had centered in his person, and he <p26> was at liberty to prosecute his claim against Yezid, the tyrant of Damascus, whose vices he despised, and whose title he had never deigned to acknowledge."

Yazid, aware of the imminent dangers smouldering in 'Iraq, could visualize the ruin of himself and his dynasty. He began to prepare his soldiers and commanders to commit the most nefarious deeds in his favour. Next he approached Ibn Ziyad, and sent him to replace the unhappy governor of Kufah. Ibn Ziyad "was at first styled ibn-Abih [the son of his father] because of the doubt which clouded the identity of his father. His mother was a slave and prostitute in al-Ta'if whom Abu-Sufyan, Mu'awiyah's father, had known. Ziyad was pro-'Ali.[17] In a critical moment Mu'awiyah acknowledged Ziyad as his legitimate brother." [18] Upon receiving Yazid's commission, Ibn Ziyad seized his new responsibility with vigour, malice and inflexible cruelty. He entered the city of Kufah with his face covered and wearing a black turban resembling that of the family of 'Ali. At first the inhabitants of Kufah took him for Imam Husayn whose arrival they all expected. But when, in the house of the governor, Ibn Ziyad uncovered his face, they realized they were in the presence of the newly-appointed governor of <p27> the eastern provinces of the Islamic Empire. [17 In favour of 'Ali and his claim to be the first Imam. (A.-Q.F.)] [18 Hitti, History of the Arabs, p. 196.]

On the morrow of his arrival, Ibn Ziyad ascended the pulpit and in a sudden burst of anger uttered such brazen and terrifying words as to fill the hearts of the populace with horror and numbing fear. Brandishing his whip in one hand

and his sword in the other, the new governor threatened to whip to death any who might dare to utter even as much as one word against the prevailing order; and to decapitate those who should venture the slightest gesture of disobedience. He then summoned the notables, the learned and the influential citizens of the town and promised them high positions and costly gifts. Within two days the inhabitants of 'Iraq were utterly overtaken by terror on the one hand and by greed on the other. They wavered, and abandoned their expected guest to the hands of his oppressors. Their hearts were changed, and discord and dissension became manifest in words and uncouth forms. Those who had invited Husayn and assured him of their loyalty faltered and fled.

All these events took place while Husayn was on his way to 'Iraq. Before reaching its hostile and inhospitable confines, he sent his faithful and audacious cousin, Muslim, to examine the situation. Soon Ibn Ziyad came to know of the arrival in <p28> Kufah of the Imam's envoy. His orders were strict and urgent. A slave woman had given shelter and food to Muslim, but how could anyone escape Ibn Ziyad's miserable schemes? Muslim was soon captured and dragged to the governor, who found in his arrest an opportunity to strengthen his rule and to establish in Kufah his reign of terror. At his behest Muslim was taken to the roof of a house, beheaded, and his corpse thrown down to be crushed on the pavement. The action served its purpose. Thereafter none dared even to think of love for Husayn, nor was Muslim able to alert the Imam to the ambivalent attitude and infidelity of the people of Kufah, who had been totally won over to Yazid by his appointed governor in 'Iraq.

This done, Ibn Ziyad dispatched soldiers to obstruct the roads to 'Iraq, Syria and Persia which Husayn might take. He even installed special guards at wells so that Husayn and his companions would suffer from thirst, aggravated by the blazing sun in the endless desert of Arabia.

He then singled out one of the finest and most energetic of his young cavalry officers, by the name of Hurr, and placed him at the head of a thousand skilful soldiers to guard and prevent Husayn from approaching any town or village in 'Iraq, especially the area surrounding Kufah. Knowing the perils of <p29> afflictive thirst, and aware of the scarcity of water in the desert, Husayn had instructed his friends to store and carry as much water as they could. Hurr met the Imam on his way to 'Iraq, stopped him and explained why he and his soldiers were there. Husayn, in turn, told Hurr of the invitations he had received from the people of Kufah, and even showed him the bag containing more than ten thousand signed letters promising support and allegiance. Hurr exclaimed that he knew nothing about such communications and that his mission was to prevent Husayn from advancing into 'Iraq. This marked the beginning of all the calamities which were to be heaped upon the grandson of the Prophet.

Husayn had no desire to wage war. In his dismay and anxiety, he was overwhelmed by a sense of impending storm. He asked the young officer that he and his followers be allowed to settle anywhere in Arabia. Hurr, who had not the slightest desire to be stigmatized as the one to cause difficulties and suffering for the grandson of the Prophet, sent a message to Ibn Ziyad,

informing him of the small band of companions of Husayn and of their expressed desire to settle in Arabia.

By this time, Hurr's own soldiers and horses were threatened by thirst. When the Imam came to know <p30> of this, he immediately provided them with water, generously giving them all that his companions had stored. This magnanimous gesture affected Hurr. When the time of prayer came, the commander and his soldiers stood in rows and followed the Imam in prayer.

Husayn and his companions mounted their steeds and rode on, but Hurr maintained his watch and controlled their movements, never allowing them to take any road which would lead to the villages or towns of 'Iraq. Husayn proceeded on until he reached the plain of Karbila where he pitched his tents and settled. It was the second of Muharram[19] in the year 61 after Hijrah.

[19 The birthday of Baha'u'llah, according to the lunar calendar, is the second of Muharram, in the year 1233 A.H. (after Hijrah).]

When Ibn Ziyad received Hurr's dispatch and realized that he had shown clemency towards and prayed with Husayn, his rage knew no bounds. He immediately summoned 'Umar Ibn Sa'd and ordered him to prepare and equip an army of at least four thousand soldiers to encounter Husayn and force him to sign a pledge of submission and obedience to Yazid. He knew very well that for the early Muslims of Arabia, the promised paradise was the country of Persia. They would undergo endless hardships to reach there and settle in that verdant <p31> region, which offered in abundance rivers, orchards, and a mild and desirable climate. Therefore Ibn Ziyad, after appointing Ibn Sa'd as chief commander of the army, promised him that in the event of success he would go to Persia as governor of Ray, the vast and prosperous province where the capital city of Tihiran stands to-day. Those who had sent letters of invitation to Husayn and sword fidelity to him became the allies of his enemies, rushing to arms in the hope of following their commander to the verdant lands of Persia.

Before the arrival of the newly-recruited and well-armed forces, Husayn arose as a spiritual hero to face the inevitable. He gathered his followers, almost seventy in number,[20] and frankly disclosed to them the hardships and sufferings with which they would be afflicted. He pleaded with them to leave the plain of Karbila for the peace and security of their own homes, and assured them they would never be considered infidels should they follow this counsel. Though filled with zest for life and sharing the common human aspirations for happiness and tranquillity, none of them abandoned the Imam, but remained firm and steadfast. They even expressed their joy at being able to share in the austerity and hardships of his existence, for they <p32> longed to remain in his presence and under his loving leadership. To contribute to the Imam's pleasure and contentment was their highest goal.

[20 This number does not include the women and children.]

The great army under Ibn Sa'd was startled on meeting Husayn's small band. The Imam approached the commander-in-chief and discussed the situation with him. He insisted that he had not the slightest desire to shed the blood of anyone, and

proposed that he should be left free to settle in peace in Arabia, be stationed on the borders of Turkey, or go to Damascus to meet Yazid himself.

Ibn Sa'd, aspiring to become the ruler of Ray, emphatically replied that having entrapped him, they would never allow him out of their sight; his only solution would be to sign a pledge of explicit obedience to Yazid. Well aware of Husayn's irresistible charm and unyielding spirit, Ibn Ziyad sent at this time a contemptible beast in the person of Shimr, to ensure that Ibn Sa'd would not show respect and clemency towards the Imam.

Husayn, in whatever condition he might find himself, would ceaselessly utter words of praise and adoration. Whether in happiness and prosperity, or in the midst of misfortune and adversity, he would offer thanksgiving to his Lord, and he often expressed particular gratitude for being a descendant of the Apostle of God, and enriched by the bounty of the Qur'an. He also thanked his Creator for the members of his family and his friends who, though few in number, demonstrated the most exalted spirit of faith, devotion and steadfastness.

Facing his companions, he prayed for them and supplicated God to grant them His rewards and number them among His near ones. As the eve of the tenth of Muharram approached, he addressed his followers and once more stressed that the army of Ibn Sa'd desired no one except himself. They were free to avail themselves of the darkness of the night to go in safety to their own homes and people. He even assured them that, should they choose to withdraw, they would never be counted among those who had broken the covenant of God.

"But this would leave us alive after you," was the unanimous reply of his devoted friends. "How could we ever pardon ourselves! To leave our beloved in the hands of ferocious beasts and save our own lives is abhorrent to us." And they all refused to abandon Husayn alone in the midst of his foes.

Throughout that night, Husayn could see the flickering shadows behind the screen of arms and he knew that the eventful day would soon dawn. He decided to exhort his adversaries again in the hope of a peaceful settlement. It was the path, he believed, which the Prophet Himself would have taken. Once more he advanced towards the encampment of Ibn Sa'd and addressed him and his soldiers. His words, jewels of celestial truth, conveyed an enraptured vision of the bounty of God and drew to his side certain brave souls, who offered to mingle their blood with that of the Imam's heroic companions, to preserve themselves from breaking the covenant of God.

The most renowned of those repentant souls was the vigorous commander Hurr, who had obstructed all roads to Husayn. His transformation took place in the depths of night, nor could his soldiers believe their eyes when they beheld this man of courage trembling like a leaf in a winter storm. "But we have never seen you in fear, even in the midst of the most terrifying battles," they cried. "I find myself between heaven and hell," was Hurr's reply. "My soul cries out and cannot bear these torments of hell." In the faint light of dawn, he charged his steed towards Husayn, to express his penitence and beg forgiveness. When he had

received the Imam's grace and assurance, he faced the army of Ibn Sa'd and chided them in loud tones, hoping to awaken their dormant souls. But alas! Those who were his comrades and under his command, attacked and killed him in an outburst of despicable ferocity.

Even water was denied to the Imam's small <p35> band. The sight of the glimmering Euphrates in that barren and waterless desert aggravated their sufferings. Whoever approached the river for a drink, or ventured out to bring a container of water, became the target of spears and javelins.

This was the tragic fate of Husayn's brother, 'Abbas, the standard-bearer of the Imam's camp, renowned as the most handsome of the Hashimites, and famed as the lion-hearted man of Arabia. In an audacious quest for water, he reached the Euphrates, filled his skin container, and charged his steed toward the tents where children were dying of thirst. Ibn Sa'd flew into a rage when he saw his orders flouted and challenged. His soldiers pursued 'Abbas ferociously, cut off his right hand, then his left, in which he carried the container, pierced its skin, and attacked and killed the water-carrier of Karbila in a most atrocious way.

With an unswerving rectitude of character, unabated vigour and firmness, Husayn persevered in his readiness to offer all that he possessed as a ransom for the Faith of his Grandfather. Carrying his youngest son who was in the cradle, he held him aloft and asked for water for that suckling child. An arrow lodged deep in the throat of the baby. Husayn tossed the blood [body?] of his infant boy into the air. That precious child, it seems, was the last link <p36> which fastened his father to life on this planet. After sacrificing him, he became free as a bird, light as the breeze of the morning and ready to take his last flight to the celestial domain. Now, "alone, weary, and wounded, he seated himself at the door of his tents [where] he was pierced in the mouth with a dart." [21] This was indeed the bitterest moment of his life. He offered prayers for the dead and reflected upon the losses he had sustained. His sons, the son of his brother Hasan, the sons of his sister Zaynab, his followers and their sons -- all had been killed in the bloom of their youth.

[21 Gibbon, op. cit.]

Vital questions must have flooded Husayn's mind. What would happen to his dear son, Zaynu'l-'Abidin, who was an invalid and confined to bed? What would be the fate of the women of his family at the hands of the merciless and bloodthirsty soldiers? Who could ever arrest the evil tide of events which was staining the soil of Karbila? What path would be destined for the Faith of Islam when it fell totally under the sway of the tyrants of Damascus, the beasts from the desert?

At this, the darkest moment of his precious life, when portents and omens clouded his heart, he was ready to bear whatever blows might descend upon him. In his innermost heart he knew his love for <p37> God and was confident of God's never-failing triumphs, unblurred and unsullied. He arose as a spiritual giant to proclaim: "And verily Our host shall conquer". [22] It was a voice from

the unknown which still resounds in that desert.

[22 Qur'an 37:173.]

The valiant heroes of God advanced one by one and all were put to death. They were so uplifted by spiritual fervour that they longed for nothing but to offer their lives to safeguard the covenant of God.

By noontide of the tenth of Muharram not one of Husayn's fighting-men remained. For his final words with the army of Ibn Sa'd, Husayn advanced towards them and addressed them in his melodious voice. With conviction and love he exhorted the soldiers, reminded them of their letters to him, requested them to cease fighting and emphatically reiterated his appeal to withdraw from the scene of bloodshed. Individual soldiers were moved by his words and scarcely anyone dared to throw even a stone at him. The writer of *Muhriqul-Qulub* says that at this critical moment an arrow sank deep in Husayn's body and then a thundering voice was heard. "Inform Ibn Ziyad that I was the first to shoot an arrow!" Such was the claim of the chief commander, Ibn Sa'd.

How contemptible and disgraceful are often the standards set by men! To take pride in killing the grandson of the Prophet! To hope by this cowardly act to win the approval of Ibn Ziyad!

This first arrow aimed at the Imam opened a dam and released a flood which covered the plain of Karbila -- land of agony and disaster -- and carried off the family and friends of Husayn to captivity and martyrdom. An army of more than four thousand, to please the despots of Kufah and Damascus and to ensure their own share of the booty of war, assailed seventy people and threatened their women and children. The army had every available means; Husayn's companions had none. No supremacy of valour or audacity could be claimed for that victory.

At noon Husayn asked for a truce to say the noon prayers, which was granted. He chanted prayers, sang songs of heroism, and committed his family to the loving care and ever-abiding protection of God. As the hour of his death approached, an unbounded ecstasy transformed his pitiable plight and found expression in words of joy and exultation.

After prayers, he again counselled his opponents in gem-like words, but they surrounded him like beasts of prey, striking so many blows with iron bars, spears and swords that he could no longer support himself on his charger and fell to the ground. His horse galloped towards the tents where the Imam's family had taken shelter, paused there a little, then disappeared into the endless desert.

The full brunt of the wrath of that frantic mob fell heavily on the Imam. His face was streaming with blood. He lifted up his garment to wipe it away. In that moment an arrow sank deep in his chest, causing him to fall to his knees. The wounds were all on his chest and arms, for he never turned his back to his foes. Then a soldier gave the Imam such a severe blow on the head that he fell on his face.

In the confusion, a group of soldiers, headed by the heartless Shimr, started to invade the Imam's tents for the purpose of looting and putting all to death. Husayn shouted at them, "If you do not follow the religion of God, behave, at least, as true Arabs, and spare the women and children!" Shimr turned back at once, ordering his soldiers to withdraw.

The hand of death was not yet on Husayn, and although fallen he inspired such awe in the hearts of the soldiers that no one dared to commit the heinous deed of decapitating him. Some approached but shuddered in fear and rejoined their ranks. "The remorseless Shamer, a name detested by the faithful, reproached their cowardice." [23] Then this envoy of <p40> the governor of Kufah fell like a thunderbolt on Husayn's body and severed his head with nearly ten strokes. This sealed the contemptible victory of four thousand over barely seventy. No historian could rightly attribute it to superior intelligence, bravery or manhood. The episode remains as it was, an irremovable stain upon the history of mankind. Yet, in its exquisite demonstration of the gallantry of a few firm and steadfast adherents, it breathes courage and life even into bare bones, while its example of magnanimity awakens in those who justly consider it a desire to attain new heights of conscious and active devotion.

[23 Gibbon, op. cit.]

The martyrdom of Husayn occurred at midday of Friday, the tenth of Muharram, the first month in the lunar calendar, in the year sixty-one after Hijrah.

The soldiers stripped the Imam of his garments and carried them away as loot of war. Shimr, who was adamant in his determination to kill all the surviving members of Husayn's family and plunder their possessions, hastened again at the head of a group of soldiers to the tents where the Imam's family were sorely lamenting the grievous loss of their dearest one. But Ibn Sa'd noted this and came up to prevent the massacre of those who survived and were captives in his hands. <p41>

The Imam had more than thirty wounds on his body and arms from the swords and spears of his enemies. To leave no trace of the martyrs, the commander ordered his cavalry to trample the corpses with their galloping horses. This done, the heads of the martyrs were raised aloft on long spears. The impoverished members of Husayn's family were roped together and dragged to the bare camels which would carry them to the seat of the governor. Zaynu'l'Abidin was put in chains and treated ruthlessly, though he was ill and weak.

So Ibn Sa'd and his victorious army left the plain of Karbila, which was strewn with the remains of the martyrs, and marched off to Kufah with immense excitement and joy, anticipating the praise and rewards which the governor had promised.

What agony possessed the hearts of the Imam's family remains forever undescribed. Words and phrases fail any writer who attempts to portray such poignant sorrows in the history of man's atrocities. As the family looked back, they could see the desert strewn with the mutilated bodies of their dear ones; and when they cast their eyes to the road ahead, they beheld nothing but a

forest of lances and spears adorned with their heads. Khuli was the carrier of Husayn's head.[24] The only <p42> remaining son of Husayn was in chains, driven along with the rest of his family to an unknown fate and further humiliations. Their prayer was to gain the approval of their Lord and His acceptance of all they had so generously offered at the altar of faith, devotion and sacrifice. [24 See Gleanings from the Writings of Baha'u'llah, section XXXIX.]

Before the arrival of the army, Ibn Ziyad had stationed soldiers at various posts on their path to be on guard lest the disastrous condition of the family of the Prophet should drive the masses to revolt. When the inhabitants of Kufah saw the humiliations heaped upon Husayn's relatives, they wept. Zaynu'l-'Abidin, seeing their tears, reproached them, saying, "You slaughter the members of our family and now you shed tears!" A woman who was watching from the roof of her house as they passed was so bitterly moved that she brought pieces of cloth and veils to cover the barely-dressed bodies of the sisters and daughters of Husayn.

Zaynab, daughter of 'Ali and sister of Husayn, looked pityingly at the people of Kufah and addressed them in a tone as vigorous and eloquent as her father's. "O ye inhabitants of Kufah! O ye people of deceit and dissension! You shed tears, but you do not feel ashamed before the Prophet of God! You raised the worst creature to be your <p43> sovereign and slaughtered the best of all men. You brought upon yourselves such disgrace that its effects will remain with you forever. No power can erase the evil consequences of your shameful deeds. Nothing can ever wash from your hands the stains of the sacred blood of the martyrs. The Imam was shield and shelter to all the believers, and the sole interpreter of the revealed words of God. Through him could we find our way to the religion of God."

One of the daughters of Husayn exclaimed, "They took us captive, forced us to ride on bare camels, exposed us to the burning heat of the sun and allowed us no shelter in the desert."

Again Zaynu'l-'Abidin addressed the watching crowds and, after words of praise and prayer to God, affirmed: "...I am the son of the one who exercised patience to the end of his life; to the time when you severed his head from his body. Woe be unto you, O inhabitants of Kufah! You sent letters of invitation to Husayn. You deceived him and placed him in the hands of his enemies. You helped the oppressors to rule over him. How, then, can you ever face the Apostle of God? What will your answers be when He asks you, 'Why did you kill the members of my family?'"

That fateful day passed. Then Ibn Ziyad invited <p44> the inhabitants of the town to watch the final scene of this tragedy in which he was the chief actor. Crowds of people assembled in his very large house. It is incredible that some of those who had seats of honour in that court of crimes and cruelty were of the most erudite of the region, venerated and famous for their piety. When all were settled in their places, the governor raised his voice to order that the captives be brought into his presence.

But first, the head of Husayn was carried in and placed at his feet. Unable to control his vindictive satisfaction, the governor began to beat the head with the stick he held in his hand. One of the veteran believers, a companion of the Prophet, was present. When he saw the governor's brutal act he was agitated and overcome by grief, and raised his voice in protest, calling out, "O son of Marjanah! Raise your rod from those lips, for many a time have I seen the Prophet's lips caressing that face with tenderest affection, the while He assured us that Hasan and Husayn were His twin trusts to the believers!"

When Zaynab and others of Husayn's family were introduced to the court, not one of them saluted the governor. In anger and contempt, he arrogantly inquired, "Who is that woman?" When told she was Zaynab, the sister of Husayn, he <p45>observed, "I praise God that He has disgraced you all and revealed your lies."

Immediately Zaynab answered him in clearest terms. "Praise be to God who honoured us by our relation to the Apostle of God. It is He who cleansed our hearts from the dust of doubts and sin. Know this of a certainty, that the wrong-doers and sinners are placed in disgrace but we are not of them."

"See what God has wrought for your brother and his men," rejoined Ibn Ziyad.

"It was decreed by God that some of the best and dearest ones should give their lives in the path of His religion. Ere long the supreme Judge will call them and you to His presence, and He is indeed the best of all judges," the girl replied.

With mounting rage Ibn Ziyad retorted, "Now that we have killed your brothers, my heart is calm and appeased."

Quietly Zaynab replied, "O son of Marjanah! You uprooted the tree of prophethood and cut off its branches and boughs. We hope that now your heart rests in peace and that your thirst for the blood of our family is quenched."

Ibn Ziyad's glance then fell on Zaynu'l-'Abidin, and he asked, "Who is he?" The answer came, "'Ali, son of Husayn.'" <p46>

Furiously, Ibn Ziyad exclaimed, "Did not God kill you and your brothers?" And the Imam answered, "The death of each individual is by the decree of God."

In a blaze of wrath the governor ordered that he, too, should be beheaded. Then Zaynab's voice rang through the room: "This is the only male member left to our family. If you desire to kill him, kill all of us together!"

Zaynu'l-'Abidin looked calmly at Ibn Ziyad. "Do you threaten me with death? Do you not know that martyrdom in the path of God is our prerogative and our greatest aspiration?"

Impatiently, Ibn Ziyad shouted an order to place the members of Husayn's family in the prison adjacent to the mosque. To cause them more suffering, he commanded that the head of Husayn be raised on a spear and carried through the lanes and markets of Kufah.

After some days, the governor ordered Shimr, accompanied by soldiers and

helpers, to conduct the captives to the court of Yazid in Damascus.

When Yazid was informed of the approach of the mournful caravan from Mesopotamia he ordered the inhabitants of Damascus to decorate the doors of their homes and shops with all festive ornaments and to prepare themselves to celebrate <p47> the victory of his dynasty over Husayn. Crowds gathered outside the gate of the town to watch the arrival of the dejected and afflicted captives, who were preceded by the severed heads of their martyrs. Then came the invalid son of Husayn in chains, followed by all the others, fastened with ropes on the bare-backed camels. As they approached the seat of the tyrant of Syria, the caravan stopped near the great Mosque of Damascus.

Yazid arranged a very large gathering in his mansion. Seated on his throne and wearing a special crown, he imitated the Persian and Roman Emperors. At his behest the captives were brought into his presence. First came a man who carried the head of Husayn. Reaching the throne of Yazid, he shouted, "Load my horses with gold and silver. We have killed the noblest son of the most exalted parents."

These complimentary words about the vanquished put Yazid into a rage; he ordered the immediate death of the offender. In his hoarse, loud voice, he shouted at the culprit, "If you believed they were the noblest, why did you kill them?"

The heads of the martyrs were placed in a row at the feet of Yazid, with Husayn's in the centre of a glittering tray of gold. The grandson of Abu-Sufyan fixed his gaze upon the heads of Hashim's <p48> descendants. Relief and satisfaction were reflected in his face. The long struggle for power was ended, and the Umayyads were safely settled on the throne of their earthly sovereignty.

Then the members of Husayn's family were brought in. As they entered, one of the audience gave vent to his feelings and shouted, "You did well, Yazid! You exterminated the generation of the Prophet and raised to command the son of an adulteress."

Yazid, intoxicated with his victory over the Hashimites, and remembering the deep-rooted rivalry which the Umayyads had always harboured in their hearts, the jealousy which had always consumed them, could not but express joy at the vengeance his clan had now taken. He wished that his ancestors had lived to behold the avenging sword-strokes on the bodies of the Hashimites, could have viewed with him the members of Husayn's household, now captive in his conquering hands.

Zaynab, watching him, raised her voice fearlessly in exhortation. "Do you realize what you are doing? Though you keep the members of your own family behind curtains and veils, you expose the daughters of the Prophet to public gaze. You carry them from town to town, hold them in bonds <p49> and chains, exhibit their sufferings, look at them in anger, feel no shame in killing them, beat the mouth of Husayn with joy... Are you followers of the Apostle of God?"

You rule with the sword of Muhammad, and are haughty and proud because of this transient sovereignty."

Yazid turned to Zaynu'l-'Abidin and said, "Your father challenged my rule."

The Imam replied with quiet force, "Prophethood and kingship are given to our family. Tell me, in whose house were the verses of God revealed? In yours or ours? Did Gabriel descend to your house or to ours? Do the verses commanding respect and reverence for the divine family refer to yours or ours?"

With this, Yazid attempted to be kind and lenient to the prisoners and sent them into his mansion where all bewailed their condition. He even offered them luxurious hospitality which was not accepted, for scions of the uncompromising Husayn never deigned to curry favour with the despicable tyrant of Syria.

On one occasion, when soldiers began to play their drums and sound their trumpets and bugles, Yazid said to Zaynu'l-'Abidin, "This is our regal music". the Imam did not utter a word, but waited until midday when the adhan was sounded. "This <p50> is the song of our family which will endure forever," he told Yazid.

To win the favour and sympathy of his captives, Yazid often expressed regret at what had taken place in Mesopotamia, asserting that it had not been by his instruction. He even requested them to adopt Damascus as their abode where all their needs would be met. But Zaynu'l-'Abidin and his companions asked to return to Medina, the city of the Prophet, by way of Karbila where they would bury the heads of their dead. As to their needs, they never alluded to any, but asked only that their relics should be returned to them. Those objects of adoration had been entrusted to their grandmother Fatimah, the most exalted woman of the Islamic era. Though seemingly small and insignificant, each one of these silent objects conveyed to them assurance of the ultimate victory of the Faith of God, and would impart to the remaining members of the Holy Family the fragrance of love growing in their midst.

They reached the plain of Karbila on the fortieth day after the martyrdom of Husayn. To their great satisfaction, they found that the devoted members of a tribe called Banu-Asad had courageously gathered the bodies of the martyrs and interred them. Having buried the heads, they <p51> offered prayers and resumed their way towards Hijaz.

They took the same path as Husayn had followed to Mesopotamia. They paused to watch the rippling Euphrates hasten towards the south, and they remembered those who had thirsted for even one cup of its water. Every pebble of the desert spoke to them of the days just past, and of Husayn, whose brave march across the desert had led him to an apex of glory and spiritual conquest so exalted that none, even of the immortal heroes amongst the Imams, could ever approach it.

As was said before, to attempt to recount the true story of Husayn resembles

the excavating of ancient towns from beneath layers of stone, sand and soil heaped upon them by time and by man. For centuries the pure and stainless life of Husayn has been buried and obliterated under mountains of false judgement on the part of the enemies of his cause, and by exaggerated accounts from the immature and ignorant among his followers. The little written here falls within the light shed upon Husayn's life by the intense love shown for him by Baha'u'llah. This account is short, and very limited in scope, but the hope is that it will frame worthily <p52> a picture so exquisite and divine in beauty and grandeur.

Amongst the grandchildren of the Prophet Muhammad, the one who resembled Him most was Imam Husayn. He was of medium height, with an olive complexion. Dignity coupled with charm made him a magnet to whom all were drawn, even unbelievers. The most attractive of all his qualities and heavenly gifts were his bold and resolute eyes and his warm, penetrating and resonant voice which inspired awe and commanded respect. "Hussain, the second son of Ali, had inherited his father's virtues and chivalrous disposition." [25]
[25 Syed Ameer Ali, op. cit., p. 83.]

Like the Prophet, he loved the poor and destitute. Whatever gifts were brought to him by the believers were distributed among the poor and needy. In fact he was often seen in their humble abodes, sitting with their families in an attitude of natural and sincere love that made every pain-racked soul relieved, happy and proud.

He was the essence of piety. It was his noble and pious life which enhanced his judgement and authority.

Husayn's fame as the most generous man of the Arabian peninsula spread far and wide. If his children were taught verses of the Qur'an, Husayn <p53> would make a gift of one thousand dinars to their teacher.

Once a man approached Husayn and requested his financial help. He gave the man enough to sustain himself and his family. He then counselled him with words even more valuable than the coins, asking the man to come to him whenever he stood in further need; and should he choose to approach another, to make sure that his benefactor believed in God, loved his kind, and, above all, was honest and true.

From early childhood Husayn demonstrated such remarkable feats of chivalry, undaunted courage and erudition that people took pleasure in sitting at his feet to learn the heavenly lessons he was endowed to offer. His words were plain and he expressed truth in uncompromising terms. His addresses were concise, cogent and timeless: they stand forever as standards of truth and examples of genuine eloquence.

Many people wrote to Husayn and took pride in receiving his answers to their inquiries. When asked about God, the Imam explained that God could never be comprehended by our senses, nor should He ever be compared with man. God is very near, he explained, but free of attachment. He is remote and aloof, but

inseparable from His <p54> creation. He is known by His own proofs and identified by His own signs.[26]

[26 The Persian mystic poet Rumi says, "The sun rose. Its rays are its own proofs and its light its own sign."]

He defined the people of the world and their religious beliefs by saying that they are in thralldom to their possessions, riches and luxuries. For many, religion is a word uttered by their tongues; and even when they profess belief, their real interest is to procure and secure a livelihood. When tested, the true believers are very few indeed.

When Abudhar, one of the early believers in the Prophet Muhammad and His staunch supporter, was exiled from Medina by order of the third Caliph, 'Uthman, 'Ali became very sad and, accompanied by Hasan and Husayn, went to bid him farewell. 'Ali asked his two sons to say goodbye to their "uncle". Husayn, in that sorrowful moment, said to the exiled believer, "the people withheld their luxuries from you, and you did not sell them your faith. How detached you are from that which was not given you; and how needful they are of what you did not sell them."

When the agent of Mu'awiyah endeavored to take the oath of allegiance in favour of Yazid, he used words as sweet as honey, but, as usual, his words were mixed with the venom of violation of <p55> the covenant of God. Husayn with characteristic audacity and frankness warned the inhabitants of the city of the Prophet against the deeds of those who would lead them away from the true path of God. He declared that they attempted to cover falsehood with the garment of truth. To follow them, one would win this world and all its transient joys, but would surely lose the everlasting life in the Kingdom on high. This is indeed the greatest of all losses that man can sustain.

Husayn made an eternal statement about prayer, the gleaming truth of which will be understood increasingly by mankind as it approaches the age of maturity. He claimed that we should never pray to our Lord and Creator for fear of the tortures of hell, nor because we covet the joys and comforts of paradise. We must worship God, Husayn said, because He is worthy of our praise and adoration.

Some of the believers, more than others, came to realize the magnitude of his rank as the spiritual leader of mankind; they devoted their lives and consecrated their wealth in service to him and sought always to be in his presence. Ibn 'Abbas was one of the most erudite men of his time, but he used to walk holding the stirrup of Husayn's saddle while the Imam was riding.

Abu-Hurayrah was another of the pious and <p56> learned people of his age. He used to clean the Imam's shoes with his own shirt, saying, "Should the people know what I know of him, they would certainly carry him on their shoulders."

The story of Bilal and his love for Husayn is indeed touching. Bilal was one of the earliest to believe in the Prophet Muhammad. When the Prophet decided to call the believers to the prescribed prayers, He asked Bilal to go up on the

roof and chant the verses of the adhan. After the passing of the Apostle of God, he left Hijaz for Jerusalem where he made his home. Once Imam Husayn sighed and expressed a wish to hear once more the far-reaching, vibrant and vigorous voice of Bilal. Bilal saw the Prophet of God in his dream summoning him and remonstrating with him as to why he had forsaken His family. On the morrow, Bilal was on his way to Medina. The moment he arrived in the city of his Beloved, he hastened to His resting-place. No sooner had he reached there than he threw himself on that sacred tomb. Overwhelmed with sorrow and drowned in memories of the past, he pressed himself against the grave, crying and shedding bitter tears. When the Imam came to know of his arrival, he immediately went to the holy precincts where he found this faithful friend of his Grandfather. He lifted him up, embraced <p57> him with much affection, and surrounded him with compassion and tenderness. He wiped his tears, strengthened and consoled his heart and asked him to go to the mosque and sound the adhan. When the believers heard the golden voice of Bilal chanting the first verses of the adhan their hearts leaped in their breasts. The middle verses brought them out of their houses; and by the time Bilal had concluded the call to prayer, they were already hastening to the mosque.

In the course of this short account of the Imam's life we have come to know that he never ceased to guide people to the right path of God. Even in that moment when he had fallen from his horse, with his own death fast approaching, when he beheld Shimr and his unruly soldiers about to sack his tents where his family shrank in terror, he called out to them to behave as Arabs, even if not as Muslims.

On this day of his martyrdom, he addressed his friends and foes, urging them to safeguard themselves against the world and its manifold temptations. The world is always encircled by multifarious disasters, he told them. Its bounties vanish soon. Its joys grow dim and clouded. The best of all fortunes in this transient life is to be virtuous, to have the fear of God in one's heart, and to be faithful <p58> to God's Messengers, the worthiest and noblest Beings of the whole creation.

Not only did Husayn, in his lifetime, firmly and compellingly exhort his friends and followers in beautiful and eloquent language, but he has remained an ever-glowing, ever-burning beacon of guidance, a fount of heavenly qualities and spiritual utterances.

Our account will not be complete without a tribute to Zaynab, the sister of Husayn. Even now we can hear the echoes of her lamentations on the episode of Karbala ringing throughout the centuries. When the terrible butcheries enacted on that plain were ended, what emotions must have surged in the heart of that great and noble lady! In the hours of loneliness, might she not have whispered to her own soul such words as these: "I followed by brother and trudged the path of suffering and sacrifice. He had an inherent gift which, like a magic spell, commanded respect and admiration. We followed him and walked in his

shadow and under his shelter. I bore the loss of my own sons, the loss of my nephews, the loss of my brother 'Abbas, and the loss of many of the young believers who, intoxicated by the love of God, <p59> hastened to tear the veils asunder in order to behold the beauty of their Lord and Creator. All these losses could be tolerated, by the loss of Husayn is one which cannot be measured. He was the Imam and we were his followers, enthralled by his love. His grievous loss is a wound so deep that nothing will give us rest or peace.

"I remember the blazing heat of Arabia, the burning thirst of the children, the swift storms which swept sand into our eyes and dust across our parched lips. The winds were sometimes so ravaging that the tents, our flimsy shelters, would be shaken and often nearly swept away. In the stillness of the night, I heard voices of a ferocity no mortal has ever experienced, the howling of rapacious soldiers who could not wait for dawn to break. I saw with my own eyes young enthusiastic youths who offered their souls when embraced and caressed by my beloved brother.

"These giants of spiritual strength were cast down by pygmies moved by lust and greed. How can these weaklings ever fill their places? I was captive in Kufah and Damascus and saw with my own eyes their tottering earthly rulership. Their triumph came not from a heavenly revelation, nor was it due to any supremacy of courage and devotion. No gentle and continuing effort sustained it; <p60> rather, it was a spiritual disaster that ravaged the whole of the Muslim world.

"Did I endure all these ordeals? Did my eyes behold and my ears hear? How can I live? How am I able to sustain all these tempests of tests and trials? Why am I alive? Why?"

It was decreed by God that Zaynab should live to protect the fourth Imam and thus assure the continuation of the Imamate until the year 260 A.H. She was the one who raised the cry of "Ya Husayn!", and rallied the friends who were faithful, addressing them in a language so eloquent and stormy that it reminded them of Imam 'Ali. Had it not been for her forbearance in adversity and her incessant efforts to recount the events of those first ten days of Muharram, we should not have a full story of the radiant Husayn, the "Prince of Martyrs".

A dramatic and marked contrast exists between the Imam and Yazid, who left no stone unturned in his efforts to subjugate Husayn. Yazid was tall, well-built, and had a robust constitution. His hoarse voice when raised in anger created fear in his palace and capital. He was absorbed in luxuries and frivolities and frequently engaged in idle pastimes, displaying a great affection for games and hunting. <p61>

In the words of Syed Ameer Ali, "Yazid was both cruel and treacherous; his depraved nature knew no pity or justice. His pleasures were as degrading as his companions were low and vicious. He insulted the ministers of religion by dressing up a monkey as a learned divine and carrying the animal mounted on a beautifully caparisoned Syrian donkey wherever he went. Drunken riotousness

prevailed at court, and was naturally imitated in the streets of the capital." [27]

[27 op. cit., p. 83.]

When Husayn rose in defence of the covenant of God and chose the path of sacrifice with longing and enthusiasm, some of the believers, instigated by agents of the Umayyad capital, dared to send him letters of protest, criticizing his action and interrogating him as to why he had become the cause of dispersion by creating innovation in the Faith of God. They even exhorted him to be silent, else he would ignite the fire of mischief.

Ibn Ziyad was, in the beginning, one of the followers of 'Ali; but his appointment by Yazid as governor of the eastern provinces of the Empire caused him to forget 'Ali and his family and to commit atrocities beyond description.

Ibn Sa'd was the son of an avowed supporter of Islam, the commander who had conquered Persia <p62> under the flag of Islam. The promise of the rulership of Ray caused Ibn Sa'd to violate the covenant of God, and to pride himself on having discharged the first arrow to strike Husayn.

Those who signed the death-warrant of the Imam were numbered among the judges, religious leaders and potentates of the mosques. But as Gibbon has clearly explained, the temptations were too great for people to resist; they could not stand firm and unmoved. Shorayh, the chief judge, was one who was seated in the government-house of Kufah when the heads of the martyrs were brought into the presence of Ibn Ziyad. With him was the leader of the congregational prayers, who had won the admiration of the populace by his reading and study of the Qur'an, and his prayer vigils at night. The news of the ignominious death suffered by the grandson of the Prophet awakened in him no prick of conscience. As usual, he led the congregation in prayers and took not the least trouble to ponder upon what had taken place, nor to understand the station of the one who had accepted these afflictions in the path of God.

Shimr, the heartless beast whose mere name creates waves of horror in the hearts of the faithful, was one of the religious judges and so apparently pious that he would pick up thorns from the roads <p63> lest they prick the feet of the pedestrians. Yet it was he who stepped forward in a display of heroism to decapitate the Imam with ten strokes of his heavy sword.

When Ibn 'Uqbah and his Syrian mercenaries reached Medina, the soldiers' greed for the riches of the people, their butcheries, their voluptuousness and unbridled lust proved unlimited. Even the most revered believers, including the veteran companions and helpers of the Prophet, were mercilessly put to death by them. Their horses were tethered and fed in the great Mosque, the ornaments and relics of the shrines were confiscated, and having disastrously ruined the city of the Prophet, they hastened to the Qiblah of Islam in Mecca and caused severe damage to the most holy spot in the Islamic world. These uncontrolled savageries were stopped only by the news of the sudden death of Yazid. The mercenaries rushed home, but the bitter remembrance of their cruelties remained as a permanent thorn in the hearts of the believers.

This insolent and disrespectful spirit, and this heedlessness towards Islam and its resuscitating powers prevailed throughout the Umayyad dynasty. Exceptions were rare indeed. Al-Walid II, one of the Umayyad caliphs, was so intoxicated with his worldly power that he tore the Qur'an <p64> into pieces, and while singing poems addressed the Book of God in mocking terms: "If God asks you as to who tore His Book, tell Him Walid".

In the light of these comparisons, let us refer to the statements of 'Abdu'l-Baha about the destructive influence of the Umayyad caliphs. He gave these explanations at the time of His incarceration in the prison-city of 'Akka (Acre), then governed by rulers many of whom were not less cruel. When asked about the "beast" mentioned in the eleventh chapter of the Revelation of St. John, He replied:

"The beast that ascendeth out of the bottomless pit shall war against them, and shall overcome them, and kill them": -- this beast means the Bani-Umayyih[28] who attacked them from the pit of error, and who rose against the religion of Muhammad and against the reality of 'Ali -- in other words, the love of God. [28 Dynasty of the Umayyads.]

It is said, "The beast made war against these two witnesses"[29] -- that is to say, a spiritual war, meaning that the beast would act in entire opposition to the teachings, customs and institutions of these two witnesses, to such an extent that the virtues and perfections which were diffused by the power of those two witnesses among the peoples and tribes would be entirely <p65> dispelled, and the animal nature and carnal desires would conquer. Therefore, this beast making war against them would gain the victory -- meaning that the darkness of error coming from this beast was to have ascendancy over the horizons of the world, and kill those two witnesses -- in other words, that it would destroy the spiritual life which they spread abroad in the midst of the nation, and entirely remove the divine laws and teachings, treading under foot the Religion of God. Nothing would thereafter remain but a lifeless body without spirit.

[29 These two witnesses were the Prophet Muhammad and Imam 'Ali. (A-Q.F.)]

"And their dead bodies shall lie in the street of the great city..."

"Their bodies" means the Religion of God, and "the street" means in public view....

...the nations, tribes and peoples would look at their bodies -- that is to say, that they would make a spectacle of the Religion of God: though they would not act in accordance with it, still, they would not suffer their bodies -- meaning the Religion of God -- to be put in the grave. That is to say, that in appearance they would cling to the Religion of God and not allow it to completely disappear from their midst, nor the body of it to be entirely destroyed and annihilated. Nay, in reality they would leave it, while outwardly preserving its name and remembrance.[30]

[30 'Abdu'l-Baha, Some Answered Questions, pp. 60-62 Note: 51-53 in newer eds.]

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These words epitomized the centuries of the Islamic Era and the disastrous blows the Muslim community suffered throughout its history. Following the sack of Medina, we are told, "Paganism was once more triumphant, and 'its reaction', says a European historian, 'against Islam was cruel, terrible, and revolting'... The colleges, hospitals, and other public edifices built under the Caliphs were closed or demolished, and Arabia relapsed into a wilderness!"[31]

[31 Syed Ameer Ali, op. cit., p. 88.]

Little did Yazid know how futile his ephemeral sovereignty would be! Steeped in viciousness, he could not have a clear vision of the future. Gradually the small dim light he had in his heart grew weaker and weaker and was finally extinguished. By his own deeds he rang the death-knell of his own rulership which lasted about four years. Ere the ending of his days and before the lusty songs were terminated, his image was hidden under the pall of death, forever shrouded in shame.

History reversed the tide of events to favour the one who had been so mercilessly wronged. In the course of decades and centuries, Husayn snatched victory from the dreadful jaws of the "beast" which, gradually losing vigour and its hold over the hearts and souls of the people, was left abandoned. <p67>

Great indeed was Husayn's undertaking and hard was the path he had to pursue amidst his ferocious enemies. It was a time of foolish and unfounded beliefs, which proliferated in the favourable climate prepared by the Umayyad dynasty. But to safeguard the faith of his Grandfather, Husayn accepted all atrocities.

As we review the history of those eventful years, we reach a page wherein we behold Husayn's sacrifice emerging to cleave a path through the debris of cruelties and massacre. His figure comes forth from the mist of the past. His story re-echoes in sad and heavenly song. Minstrels wandering from tent to tent and from town to town sing tales of those intrepid souls who severed all their ties with the world, suffered with great tenacity, composure and dignity, and marched on and on, higher and higher, towards an apex which touches the zenith of the heavens of Glory. <p68>

POSTSCRIPT

Because of the treacherous acts of those who dared to flout the words of the Prophet Muhammad, the two centres of Islam -- the spiritual and the administrative -- were forever separated. While the spiritual centre remained in Hijaz where the Qiblah of Islam is fixed, the administrative centre drifted away, shifting from Hijaz to Damascus, Mesopotamia, Egypt, and finally, the Ottoman Empire.

This factor, and the attitudes and actions of the caliphs, drained the vitality of the Faith. To retain the caliphate in their own hands, and hereditary in their lineages, they spared no efforts to keep the Muslim world under their sway.

It is not the aim nor is it a part of this essay to analyze the spiritual

damage resulting from their deeds, but the writer desires to draw the attention of readers to the fact that such innovations undermined the religion of God and its institutions, thus causing a gradual decline in the morale of its adherents and bringing the institution of the caliphate to its close in the year AD 1924, at the hands of that "audacious man", Mustafa Kemal Atatürk.

— THE PRINCE OF MARTYRS