



Arabic Accounts of  
Al-Husayn's  
Martyrdom

I.K.A HOWARD (PH.D)

# Chapter 1

## Introduction

The importance of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn can be seen in the great attention paid to it by the early Muslim historians whose works have survived to the present day. Most of these historical works are of a general kind but the amount of space which they devote to this event indicates the momentous impact it had on Muslims.

The early historians whose works are my main concern all lived in the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic era. They based their works, in the main, on earlier monographs devoted entirely to the subject which only survived in these later works. Fortunately the bibliographical works of Ibn Nadim, al-Tusi and al-Najashi provide us with evidence of many of these earlier monographs.

We can also deduce them from the writings of later historians. In attempting to describe this historical tradition, I have divided the account into ten phases. In these phases, I will point out what survives from earlier writers and analyze the different presentations.

It will be necessary, first, to give a list of the monographs or lengthy accounts on the martyrdom of al-Husayn which we have some record of or which we can summarize:

- al-Asbagh b. Nubata[1] (d. second half of 1st cent. AH),
- Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju`fi[2] (d. 128),
- Ammar b. Mu`awiya[3] (d. 133),
- `Awana b. al-Hakam[4] (d. 147),
- Abu Mikhnaf[5] (d. 157),
- Hisham b. al-Kalbi[6] (d. 204),
- Al-Waqidi[7] (d. 207),
- Nasr b. Muzahim[8] (d. 212),

Al-Mada'ini[9] (d. 215)

These are all the early works which we know at present but there were certainly many more. We also know of monographs written later, but in the third and fourth centuries more general historical writing flourished and most historians preserved some account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn.

The main works which will provide the material for the investigation of this historical tradition are those of Khalifa b. Khayyat (d. 246), al-Baladhuri (d. 279), al-Dinawari (d. 282), al-Ya'qubi (d. 292), al-Tabari (d. 311), Ibn A'tham (d. 314), al-Mas'udi (d. 346), Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani (d. 356), and al-Mufid (d. 413).

In an attempt to reconstruct the tradition of historical writing about the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn, it seems appropriate to divide the narrative into distinct sections. Naturally differences between different writers may concern only some of these sections and reports if only some of these occur in early writings. I have adopted the following divisions:

- (i) the situation prior to the death of Mu`awiya after the death of the Imam al-Husayn;
- (ii) Yazid's succession and his attempt to get the Imam al-Husayn to pay homage to him, followed by the latter's retreat to Mecca;
- (iii) the letters to the Imam al-Husayn from Knfa;
- (iv) the mission of Muslim b. `Aqil to Kufa and the appointment and activities of Ibn Ziyad as governor of Kufa;
- (v) the Imam al-Husayn's journey to Karbala';
- (vi) negotiations with `Umar b. Sa'd and the Kufan army;
- (vii) the battle and the death of the Imam al-Husayn;
- (viii) the desecration of his head and the treatment of his family.

## Notes:

- [1] Al-Tusi, *Fihrist* (Mashhad, 1348sh), p. 63.
- [2] Al-Najashi, *Rijal* (Teheran, n.d.), p. 100.
- [3] This account was probably not a monograph but it represents a substantial, continuous piece. It is recorded in al-Tabari, *Ta'rikh al-Rusul wa-al-Muluk* (Leiden 1881-3), 11, 227-32, 281-3.
- [4] That he had an account can be assumed from the extracts used by Ibn al-Kalbi in al-Tabari's version.
- [5] On Abu Mikhnaf, see U. Sezgin, *Abu Mikhnaf* (Leiden, 1971).
- [6] Most of his account is preserved by al-Tabari.
- [7] Ibn Nadim, *Fihrist*, tr. Bayard Dodge (New York, 1970), I, 215.
- [8] Al-Tusi, *op. cit.*, p. 347.
- [9] Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, tr. I. K. A. Howard (London, 1981), p. 300.

## Chapter 2

### Account 1 - Al-Asbagh b. Nubata

Al-Asbagh b. Nubata is accredited with the first known account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn.

He was a prominent member of the Shi'i community who came from Kufa. It is claimed that he was in charge of the shurta in Kufa for the Imam `Ali. He seems to have lived well into the second half of the 1st century. All and was contemporary with the events of the martyrdom[10].

It seems that little or nothing of his work survives. However, Ibn al-Kalbi (in al-Tabaris version of his account) and al-Mada'ini (as reported by Abu al-Faraj) give reports emanating from his son al-Qasim. These may, in fact, belong to his father's book.

The account from Ibn al-Kalbi tells how when the Imam's camp was overrun, he attempted to reach the water and was stopped by a tribesman leading a group of his tribe. The Imam al-Husayn calls on God to make him thirsty, and the tribesman's retort is to shoot an arrow into his throat. The Imam catches the blood with his hands after pulling the arrow out. The account then goes on to describe how that man suffered from an illness so that water would not quench his thirst, and eventually the amount he drank of it killed him[11].

The second report tells of the sufferings of the killer of al-'Abbas b. Ali. This killer dreamed of being flung into hell, so that every night he woke up screaming[12].

**Notes:**

- [10] Al-Tusi, op. cit., pp. 62-63; Ibn Hajar, Tadhīb al-Tahdhib.
- [11] Al-Tabari, op. cit., II, 361-2.
- [12] Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, Maqatil al- Talibiyyin (Najaf, 1965), pp. 78-9.

# Chapter 3

## Account 2 - Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju`fi

The second account is attributed to Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju`fi. He was a well known Shi'i scholar and follower of the Imam al-Baqir. He died in 128[13].

His account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn seems to have been preserved by Nasr b. Muzahim on the authority of Jabir's pupil, `Amr b. Shamir. Extracts from Nasr's work are preserved by Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani. In fact Abu al-Faraj has cited very little of Jabir's account. What little there is are the names of some of the killers of the members of the ahl al-bayt, together with a verse which is included in Abu Mikhnaf's account[14].

The verse tells that the blood shed by the tribesmen will be reckoned against them.

Ibn al-Kalbi also reports one narrative from Jabir. This is also on the authority of Jabir's pupil, `Amr b. Shamir. In this report Jabir's authority is not given but it may well be the Imam al-Baqir again. The report tells us how the Imam al-Husayn was thirsty, and was struck in the mouth by an arrow shot by Husayn b. Tamim. The blood spurting from his mouth, and he brushed it away into the air.

He then prayed: "O God, count their number, destroy their power and do not leave one of them on earth".[15]

### Notes:

[13] Al-Najashi, loc. cit.

[14] Abu al-Faraj, op. cit., pp. 54, 56, 57, 61, 62. Cf al-Tabari, op. cit., p. 360.

[15] Ibid., p. 361

# Chapter 4

## Account 3 - Ammar b. Mu`awiya

From the little that has survived of Jabir's account, it is difficult to assess his work; but what remains does call into question the account of his contemporary, Ammar b. Mu`awiya al-Duhni[16].

This narrative is reported by al-Tabari, and `Ammar claims to be reporting on the authority of the Imam al-Baqir.

The report begins with a vivid introduction in which Ammar says that he asked the Imam al-Baqir to tell him about the death of al-Husayn so that it might be as if he was there himself. What follows is an account which agrees in its basic outline with the version of Ibn al-Kalbi, while being much shorter and briefer.

This version seemingly adds nothing to Ibn al-Kalbi's narrative. It differs only in giving a different house for the one which Muslim b. `Aqil stayed in when he came to Kufa; it does omit some of the things which Ibn al-Kalbi has reported, but nothing of real substance. What, then, is the purpose of this narrative? It is clearly put forward as the authoritative Shi'i account. Ammar was a well known traditionalist who, while being regarded as trustworthy by the general run of traditionalists, was also known for his Shi'i inclinations, and as an adherent of the Imam al-Baqir. He died in 133[17] and is claimed to have a book of traditions on the authority of the Imam al-Baqir.

This account might well be regarded as the official account of the Imam al-Baqir and therefore the one which should be accepted.

**Notes:**

[16] Seen. 3.

[17] Ibn Hajar, Tadhīb al- Tahdhib.

# Chapter 5

## Account 4 - al-Masu'di

In fact, this seems to be what happened in the case of al-Mas'udi. In *Muruj al-Dhahab*, he reproduces the first half almost word for word with a few omissions[18].

He gives a slightly different version of Ibn Ziyad's entry into Kufa and adds some descriptions of the attempt to persuade al-Husayn not to go to Kufa. He then reverts to `Ammar's account and faithfully reproduces it[19].

It seems conceivable that al-Mas'udi got his account from al-Tabari. Nowhere does al-Baladhuri use this account. Nor does Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani use it, although he was aware of it. He uses an isnad with a different intermediary from al-Tabari[20].

Why, then, should this account be questioned? There are two main reasons. The first is that it reports that when the Imam al-Husayn heard of the news of Muslim b. `Aqil's death, he wanted to return; and the second is that it reports that when `Umar b. Sa`d's army came near, the Imam offered three options:

- (i) that he should return,
- (ii) that he should go to the outposts of the empire, and
- (iii) that he should go to Yazid.

It is worth analyzing Abu Mikhnaf's reports of these two incidents to see what they actually say and whether they are firm on these points. As far as Abu Mikhnaf is concerned, the Imam al-Husayn learns of the death of Muslim before al-Hurr arrives. Those who bring the message of Muslim's death urge the Imam al-Husayn to return but, before he can speak, the sons of Aqil intervene and say that they will not return[21].

There is no report of the Imam saying that he would return in this conversation. Thus 'Ammar's version, which uses the words 'he was about to go back', attempts to read the Imam's mind. It also omits the speech that he made in which he encouraged his supporters to leave him, not wanting to endanger their lives on a mission which was now clearly impossible[22].

In a speech to al-Hurr's men from Kufa, the Imam al-Husayn does say that they had given him covenants and promises. If they had kept to them, he would go on to Kufa, but if they had changed their minds, he would return[23].

However, this statement demanded that the Kufans respond and admit that they had been false, and they did not do that.

As for the conversations between 'Umar b. Sa'd and the Imam al-Husayn, Abu Mikhnaf gives three versions. The first clearly states that no one knew what they talked about[24].

The second, preceded by the comment that it is what the majority of reporters hold, is the story of the three options[25]. However, it is followed by a report from 'Uqba b. Sim'an, the Imam al-Husayn's servant who was with him at Karbala' and survived.

He claimed that he was with the Imam al-Husayn all the time and heard everything he said. He goes on: 'By God, he never gave the promise, which the people mention and allege, that he would put his hand in the hand of Yazid b. Mu'awiya, nor that they should send him to any one of the Muslim's border posts. Rather he said: "Leave me and I will go in this broad land so that we may see how the people's affair develops." [26]

With regard to the third report, which Abu Mikhnaf said was the majority opinion of reporters, the evidence for the Imam al-Husayn making such proposals is in a letter written by 'Umar b. Sa'd to Ibn Ziyad. According to this, Ibn Ziyad is about to agree with these terms but is dissuaded by Shamir b. Dhi Jawshan[27].

As Shamir is directly involved in the murder of the Imam al-Husayn, this could be a report which tried to remove as much of the blame from

the authorities and to transfer it to individuals. It could be an attempt to exonerate the authorities and as such could have been put out by supporters of the Umayyads. On the other hand, it might again be an attempt by `Umar b. Sa'd to get a further delay in the operations.

When the reports of Abu Mikhnaf of these two incidents are compared with `Ammar's version, we see that the latter provides interpretations of Abu Mikhnaf's reports. Because they are seemingly reported on the authority of the fifth Imam, al-Baqir, they would seem to provide interpretations which Shi'i supporters must accept.

It seems that this was the purpose of `Ammar's version; while still showing the death of the Imam al-Husayn to be a tragedy it diminishes the stature of the Imam. It does not do so for Shi'is but it does so for non-Shi'is. It seems that its aim is to confirm to those who oppose the Imamate the weakness of individual Imams and to do so by putting this interpretation into the mouth of the Imam. It certainly does so in the case of Wellhausen in his study of this event. He accepts `Ammar's interpretation without even realizing that he has done so[28].

Doubt has been cast on the validity of `Ammar's report from the fifth Imam. This is further confirmed if one examines its brief account of the actual fight. Thus it says: `All the Imam al-Husayn's followers were killed, among whom were more than the young men from his family. An arrow came and struck his son, who he had with him, on his lap. He began to wipe the blood from him saying, "O God, judge between us and a people who asked us to come so that they might help us and then killed us." He called for a striped cloak, tore it and then put it on. He took out his sword and fought until he was killed. A man of the tribe of Madhhij killed him and cut off his head[29].

This is supposed to be a vivid account of the death of the Imam al-Husayn, as told by the Imam al-Baqir to a Shi'i adherent, `Ammar. It is clearly unacceptable. He does not know the exact number of the members of the Imam al-Husayn's family who were killed.

We have reports from Jabir b. Yazid in which the Imam al-Baqir names killers of individual members of the Imam al-Husayn's family; yet, according to Ammar, he does not even identify the killer of the Imam. I have already mentioned an account from Jabir which describes vividly

one attack on the Imam al-Husayn. Ibn al-Kalbi also gives a similar report on the authority of the Imam al-Baqir of the killing of the child with a slightly different prayer[30], but this in no way confirms that `Ammar's report is from the Imam. Rather it lends credence to it by including one report well known to non-Shi'is from the Imam. Furthermore Abu Mikhnaf tells us that the sixth Imam reported that Imam al-Husayn had received thirty-three spear thrusts and thirty-four sword blows on his body by the time he was killed[31]. Yet `Ammar gives us one brief sentence describing how the Imam died.

Ammar's account must be suspect. It almost certainly did not come from the Imam al-Baqir and seems unlikely to be the work of a Shi'i such as `Ammar who was contemporary with Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju'fi and reported traditions from him.

#### Notes:

[18] Al-Mas'udi, *Muruj al-Dhahab* (Beirut, n.d.), III, pp. 53-5.

[19] *Ibid.*, pp. 60-1.

[20] Abu al-Faraj, *op. cit.*, p. 63.

[21] Al-Tabari, *op. cit.*, 11, pp. 292-3.

[22] *Ibid.*, p. 294.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 300.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[25] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[26] *Ibid.*, p. 314.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 315.

[28] J. Wellhausen, *The Religio-Political Factions in Early Islam*, tr. Walzer and Ostle (Amsterdam, 1975).

[29] Al-Tabari, *op. cit.*, II, 282.

[30] *Ibid.*, p. 360.

[31] *Ibid.*, p. 366.

# Chapter 6

## Account 5 - `Awana b. al-Hakam

Ibn al-Kalbi has included some narratives from `Awana b. al-Hakam which supplement the version of Abu Mikhnaf and sometimes provide alternatives for it. Al-Baladhuri also gives quotations from `Awana from different sources than Ibn al-Kalbi[32].

`Awana presents his reports without any further isnad. This suggests that they are taken from a continuous account which `Awana had written.

The first extract which we have from it concerns Yazid's appointment of Ibn Ziyad as governor of Kufa after receiving complaints from his supporters that Nu'man b. Bashir was not acting firm against Muslim b. `Aqil and the Shi'i in Kufa. `Awana seems to be the only source for the story of Yazid consulting his father's Christian advisor, Sergius. Sergius tells Yazid that his father was going to appoint Ibn Ziyad over Kufa and advises him to do the same. Yazid takes this advice and writes to Ibn Ziyad, telling him to go to Kufa and hunt for Muslim. He gives him three choices in his treatment of Muslim: to imprison him, to kill him or to banish him[33].

Ibn A'tham repeats this account in a somewhat embellished version without giving any reference to `Awana[34] but it is clear that `Awana must be his source, probably in the version of Ibn al-Kalbi. Shaykh al-Mufid also reproduces the account but he says that his version is based on Ibn A'tham[35]; al-Mufid did not realize the implications of this version of `Awana; it removes the responsibility of the appointment of Ibn Ziyad from Yazid and puts it, in effect, not on Mu`awiya, but instead on Mu`awiya's Christian advisor.

Thus Yazid is exonerated to some extent from Ibn Ziyad's conduct. Even the three choices given to Ibn Ziyad for dealing with Muslim are presented in such a way as to lay less emphasis on the killing of Muslim. The first is imprisonment, the last banishment. Ibn Ziyad's choice of the second, killing, put more of the responsibility for that on himself rather than Yazid.

Another report from `Awana of some significance is paralleled by reports from Abu Mikhnaf. It emphasizes the reluctance of `Umar b. Sa'd to go against the Imam al-Husayn and stresses the pressure that Ibn Ziyad put on him by threatening to withdraw the appointment that he had earlier given him. `Umar b. Sa'd suggests that the task be given to a tribal leader in Kufa but Ibn Ziyad refuses.

When `Umar b. Sa'd's army reaches the Imam al-Husayn, he finds it difficult to send a messenger to the Imam because nearly all of them had previously sent messages to the Imam urging him to come to Kufa. The report ends with `Umar b. Sa'd's hope that he will not have to fight the Imam al-Husayn[36].

This account, like others, put the blame for `Umar b. Sa'd's situation on Ibn Ziyad. It also stresses the treachery of the Kufan tribal leaders. In this context, again, we see the blame for the ensuing situation being transferred from Yazid to Ibn Ziyad and the Kufan traitors[37].

A further report from Awana concerns Yazid's behaviour when the head of the martyred Imam and the prisoners of the ahl al-bayt are sent to him by Ibn Ziyad.

In this account we are told that the members of the ahl al-bayt were imprisoned while Ibn Ziyad sent after Yazid. A message was sent to them in which there was a promise to inform them of their fate. When the prisoners are sent to Yazid, he justifies his action and indicates that he was unwilling that such a thing should happen. The report describes his good treatment of the prisoners, and even the praise of his treatment by one of them[38].

This report should be seen in conjunction with another isolated report by Ibn al-Kalbi, which has clearly pro-Yazid tendencies. In it, Yazid

expresses regret for the death of the Imam and puts the blame on Ibn Ziyad.

Awana, in his narrative, seems to be presenting again a slant which diverts the blame for the killing of the Imam away from Yazid and towards Ibn Ziyad. There is no mention of Yazid's desecration of the Imam's head.

A report from `Awana, which has no support elsewhere, describes how Ibn Ziyad tries to get his letter instructing `Umar b. Sa'd to attack the Imam al-Husayn from `Umar b. Sa'd, but `Umar b. Sa'd has already used it as a justification for himself[39].

Thus insofar as the reports from 'Awana which have been included in Ibn al-Kalbi's version may be taken as a sample of `Awana's full account, it would seem that `Awana is presenting an account which reduces the amount of blame attached to Yazid in the affair. He is writing a marginally pro-Umayyad version. In his accounts of the battle of Siffin, it has been noted that `Awana tends to shift responsibility from Mu`awiya to `Amr b. al-As[40].

The same operation appears to be taking place here with `Awana shifting the responsibility away from Yazid to Ibn Ziyad and ultimately to his advisor, Sergius, for suggesting Ibn Ziyad's appointment.

Abu Mikhnaf's account survives in the reports taken by later writers from the recensions of Ibn al-Kalbi, Nasr b. Muzahim and al-Mada'ini. Ibn al-Kalbi's work is given in very full form by al-Tabari. Al-Baladhuri tends to use the collective `they said(*qalu*)`.

But it is clear that the major source is Abu Mikhnaf. Abu al-Faraj uses both Nasr b. Muzahim's version and al-Mada'ini's, but he mainly relies on Nasr b. Muzahim's. It is clear from a comparison of the three texts that the fullest version is Ibn al-Kalbi's, but all three recensions indicate that sometimes narratives are compressed together and summarized. What emerges is a very full account based on numerous sources, where alternatives are put side by side.

**Notes:**

- [32] Al-Badadhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf* (Beirut, 1977), III, 165, 213, 218.
- [33] Al-Tabari, *op. cit.*, II, 239-40.
- [34] Ibn A`tham, *Kitab al-Futuh*, V, 60-1.
- [35] Al-Mufid, *op. cit.*, pp. 307-8.
- [36] Al-Tabari, *op. cit.*, II, 309-11.
- [37] *Ibid.*, pp. 379-83.
- [38] *Ibid.*, pp. 374-6.
- [39] *Ibid.*, p. 385.
- [40] E. L. Petersen, *Ali and Mu awiya in Early Arab Tradition*(Copenhagen, 1964), pp. 32, 48, 53.

## Account 6 - Abu Mikhnaf

As far as Abu Mikhnaf's reports are concerned, it can be said that he is anti-Umayyad and in favour of the Imam al-Husayn, but whether he was actually a Shi'i is questionable. Certainly, he is hostile to both Ibn Ziyad and Yazid; both poke at the teeth in the head of the martyred Imam in his account.

Because of the nature of al-Tabaris annalistic approach to history, Abu Mikhnaf's beginning of the account is missing, as it does not belong to events of the year 60. Part of it may be preserved by al-Baladhuri by using the collective term *qalu*. When the Imam al-Hasan died the Shi'i in Iraq wrote to the Imam al-Husayn to ask him to come to lead them. He wrote back reminding them of the agreement that his brother had made with Mu'awiya and promising to lead them. Mu'awiya heard that the people thought that the Imam al-Husayn would lead them after his death and wrote to him warning him against this. The Imam al-Husayn wrote back denouncing him. Thus the scene is set for the confrontation on the death of Mu'awiya.

The variety of Abu Mikhnaf's stories and his statement about the majority of the reporters[41] suggest that he was reporting from an existing literature. We have already discussed the accounts of al-Asbagh, Jabir and `Ammar, and it is noticeable that he does not report from them. His work has already been closely examined by Ursula Sezkin; but she did not attempt to reconstruct possible literary sources, despite the thoroughness of her work[42].

### Notes:

[41] Al-Tabari, op. cit., 11, 314.

[42] U. Sezkin, *op. cit.*, pp. 116-22.

## Chapter 8

### **Account 7 - Hisham b. al-Kalbi**

Of the four major monographs by the most distinguished historians of the end of the second century, Ibn al-Kalbi, al-Waqidi, Nasr b. Muzahim and al-Mada'ini, Ibn al-Kalbi is by far the best represented. Al-Tabari has reported what is very probably almost the complete monograph. As we have already noted Ibn al-Kalbi relies very heavily on Abu Mikhnaf but he does use other narratives. He has one one quotation from Jabir b. Yazid and perhaps one from Asbagh b. Nubata and he also uses `Awana. By and large, he follows Abu Mikhnaf in hostility both to Yazid and to Ibn Ziyad. He does however supplement Abu Mikhnaf's reports, which we have already discussed.

## Chapter 9

### **Account 8 - Nasr b. Muzahim**

Nasr b. Muzahim's monograph is reported in a very limited fashion by Abu al-Faraj in *Maqatil al-Talibiyyin*[43].

He seems to have had two main sources: Abu Mikhnaf, whom he reports on the authority of his mentor `Umar b. Sa'd, and Jabir b. Yazid al-Ju'fi, whom he reports through `Amr b. Shamir. Nasr b. Muzahim uses both of these sources in his monograph on the Battle of Siffin. If his full work had survived, we would have had a much fuller Shi'i version of the account, as Nasr was himself a Shi'i, and tended to favour the Shi'i tradition.

**Notes:**

[43] Abu al-Faraj, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-81.

# Chapter 10

## Account 9 - al-Mada'ini

We have no clear idea of the account of al-Mada'ini. It is possible that it is the main source of al-Baladhuri for Abu Mikhnaf, but al-Baladhuri introduces his account with the collective *qalu*. However, this version does not refer to the variation from `Awana which Ibn al-Kalbi has introduced into his account. Al-Mada'ini is used as a source by Abu al-Faraj for a report from al-Qasim b. al-Asbagh which has already been cited, and there are other reports from him which are not from Abu Mikhnaf. So clearly he used other material to supplement Abu Mikhnaf's account.

# Chapter 11

## Account 10 - al-Waqidi

Unfortunately little or nothing survives of the monograph written by al-Waqidi. It is claimed by both Ibn Nadim and his secretary, Ibn Sa'd, that al-Waqidi was a Shi'i[44].

However, Shaykh al-Mufid accuses him of being a member of the `Uthmaniyya[45]. What al-Mufid means by that is that al-Waqidi had strong sympathies with the Zubayrid faction which had supported greater authority for Medina, and seen the family of Zubayr (and in particular his son, Ibn al-Zubayr) as the fittest people for the caliphate. If any of his account had survived, it would have been interesting to examine his treatment of Ibn al-Zubayr. The `Uthmaniyya attitude to Ibn al-Zubayr with regard to this incident is clearly established in the work of Khalifa b. Khayyat, and there is also a similar report in al-Baladhuri's *Ansab al-Ashraf*.

### Notes:

[44] E. L. Petersen, *op. cit.* p. 89.

[45] Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Jamal*.

# Chapter 12

## Account 11 - Khalifa b. Khayyat

Khalifa b. Khayyat is writing annalistic history, and therefore has to mention the death of the Imam al-Husayn. He does so in the briefest form possible and gives a list of the members of the Imam's family who were killed. He devotes much more space to Yazid's request of his governor, al-Walid, that the oath of allegiance should be taken from Ibn al-Zubayr and the Imam al-Husayn[46].

Before discussing his account, it will be necessary to look at the accounts that we have from Abu Mikhnaf. Ibn al-Kalbi's version has unified two separate reports from Abu Mikhnaf; they are given separately by al-Baladhuri. In the first, al-Waqidi's messenger comes to Ibn Zubayr and the Imam al-Husayn, and they make excuses for not attending. Al-Walid concentrates his pressure on Ibn al-Zubayr by sending him messengers, and Ibn al-Zubayr escapes to Mecca. The report adds that al-Husayn arrives there later, but there is no mention of any actual meeting with al-Walid. It suggests that when both men are in Mecca, Ibn al-Zubayr wants the Imam al-Husayn to go to Kufa to get him out of the way because he is jealous of his influence[47].

In the second report, Abu Mikhnaf speaks of a meeting between al-Walid and the Imam al-Husayn in the presence of Marwan b. al-Hakam in which the Imam puts off pledging allegiance to Yazid and gets angry with Marwan for threatening to kill him[48].

The Uthmaniyya view of this event is somewhat different. Khalifa b. Khayyat gives an account from Wahb b. Jarir on the authority of Abu Bakr Juwayriyya b. Asma' al-Hudhali, who says that he heard from so many scholars of Medina that he cannot count them. According to this, Yazid's letter comes to al-Walid. He sends for Marwan who advises him to make Ibn al-Zubayr and the Imam al-Husayn pledge allegiance to

Yazid immediately. Ibn al-Zubayr arrives first and there follows a conversation which is almost identical with the one Abu Mikhnaf reported to have taken place with the Imam al-Husayn.

Al-Walid orders them both to leave. The Imam al-Husayn arrives, but nothing is said to him until both men return. The narrative is interrupted at this point by the omission of something, and then goes on with Marwan advising al-Walid to appoint spies to watch Ibn al-Zubayr. Ibn al-Zubayr then makes his escape to Mecca and is followed later by the Imam al-Husayn. In Mecca, he asks the Imam al-Husayn why he has not gone to his supporters, adding that if he had such supporters, he would go to them[49].

Al-Baladhuri has another report from Wahb b. Jarir which purports to come from a servant of Mu'awiya[50].

Khalifa b. Khayyat reports the first half of it but prefers Abu Bakr al-Hudhali's account of the actual meeting with al-Walid[51].

In this report, Zurayq, the servant of Mu'awiya, brings the message to al-Walid from Yazid. It is a very colourful account which gives details of the clothes all the main characters are wearing. Al-Walid is full of bitter grief at the death of Mu'awiya and sends for Marwan. Marwan advises that the men should be sent for.

The Imam al-Husayn arrives first, followed by Ibn al-Zubayr; then a new character arrives, Abd Allah b. Muti', who is a supporter of Ibn al-Zubayr. Al-Walid announces the death of Mu'awiya and calls upon them to pledge allegiance. It is Ibn al-Zubayr who takes it on himself to answer and he persuades al-Walid to let them delay it until the morning. Al-Walid does so and they all escape.

Clearly these two 'Uthmaniyya accounts are meant to build up the reputation of Ibn al-Zubayr at the expense of the Imam al-Husayn. They seem like propaganda. Abu Bakr al-Hudhali gives us as his authority countless scholars of Medina but does not name one of them. When compared with Abu Mikhnaf's tradition, it is obvious that one of them is based on the other and it seems probable that Abu Mikhnaf's account is the earlier. The second account is full of such great detail with regard to the clothes people were wearing as to suggest that it was written by a

fashion critic. Clearly, these details are meant to establish its authenticity, but they rather tend to suggest that it is a fabrication.

**Notes:**

[46] Khalifa b. Khayyat, *Ta'rikh* (2nd ed., Beirut, 1977), pp. 231-6

[47] Al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf* (Beirut, 1979), IV/2, 299-301

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 302-3; cf. al-Tabari, *op. cit.*, pp. 216-19.

[49] Khalifa b. Khayyat, *op. cit.*, pp. 232-3.

[50] Al-Baladhuri, *op. cit.*, pp. 309-10.

[51] Khalifa b. Khayyat, *op. cit.*, pp. 232.

# Chapter 13

## Account 12 - al-Baladhuri

Other fragments of the `Uthmaniyya version of events survive in the *Ansab al-Ashraf* of al-Baladhuri. In the first, Wahb b. Jarir describes briefly the coming of Ibn Ziyad to Kufa and his demanding Hani b. `Urwa to hand over Muslim. When he refuses, he has him executed and then seizes Muslim. He takes Muslim out on the balcony and demands that Muslim say: `I am Muslim b. `Aqil, the leader of rebels.' Muslim says it and then Ibn Ziyad executes him[52].

This isolated report manages again to undermine the bravery of such men as Muslim, and by implication the *ahl al-bayt*, by making Muslim repeat such words. Such a story is not to be found elsewhere in the sources.

Another report, again from Wahb b. Jarir, concerns the Imam al-Husayn addressing the army of `Umar b. Sa`d before the battle. It is not surprising that even this tries to undermine the Imam al-Husayn. He is reported to have asked the Kufans: `Shall I submit to the rule of Yazid?' To which the reply came: `You must submit to the rule of Ibn Ziyad.' This the Imam al-Husayn refused to do, and the battle took place. The implication of the report is that the Imam al-Husayn was prepared to submit to Yazid. This seems to attempt to undermine his stature and to make an unfavourable comparison with Ibn al-Zubayr, the hero of the later `Uthmaniyya resistance to Yazid[53].

Al-Baladhuri's account, which is split up into sections in his life of Muslim, his life of Yazid, and his life of the Imam al-Husayn, gives the impression of being the most historically balanced, in the sense of presenting all possible versions. The kernel of the account is presented with a collective *qalu* (= they said) but if the earlier surmise is correct, it is probably based on al-Mada'ini's monograph, which, in turn, was based

on Abu Mikhnaf. However, al-Baladhuri also gives the more hostile reports of Wahb b. Jarir, as well as other sources. As already noted, he gives some reports from `Awana, but not through Ibn al-Kalbi. He also uses a brief account from Husayn b. `Abd al-Rahman[54].

This account is also used by al-Tabari. This account is brief and adds nothing to our knowledge of the historical tradition. It does present the view that the Imam al-Husayn was prepared to submit to Yazid but refused to submit to Ibn Ziyad. It also reports that Yazid wept when the head of the dead Imam was brought to him.

From the point of view of historiography, al-Baladhuri's version is very useful. It is, however, questionable whether al-Baladhuri was just being an unbiased historian reporting all the accounts available to him. On occasions al-Baladhuri is known to mention two accounts and say which one is correct. Nowhere in his presentation of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn does he do this.

The use of the collective *qalu* makes much of the account sound very unverifiable, whereas the alternatives to the general account are given with full chains of authority. This makes them look more authentic. Thus accounts which undermine the stature of the Shi'i Imam are included in a way that seems to be intended as a correction of the general account.

This in no way means that he is not sympathetic to the plight of the Imam. He clearly is, but he is concerned to undermine the Shi'i conception of the Imamate, and this will be the case if he brings forward accounts which in some way undermine the stature of the man. A particularly good example of that is his report of the three options the Imam al-Husayn is said to have offered `Umar b. Sa'd and the Kufans. He reports that fully, but ignores Abu Mikhnaf's earlier report that no one knew what `Umar b. Sa'd and the Imam al-Husayn talked about.

He merely adds a paragraph of the third account, without giving it the authority of `Uqba b. Sim'an, the Imam's servant. In fact, he reports that 'it is said' that Ibn Ziyad only asked the Imam to return to Medina. The very use of the words 'it is said' implies that this should not be accepted as a truthful report, but rather should be considered as an unidentified and unlikely claim.

At the end of his account al-Baladhuri includes some of the reports of the sky raining down blood, but these reports would suggest that the tragedy of the death of the Imam al-Husayn was such because of his blood relation with the Prophet rather than because of his status as an Imam[55].

**Notes:**

[52] Al-Baladhuri, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, (Beirut, 1974), II, 86.

[53] Al-Baladhuri, *op. cit.*, III, 227.

[54] Al-Baladhuri, *op. cit.*, III, 173.

[55] Al-Baladhuri, *op. cit.*, III, 182.

### Account 13 - Al-Dinawari

Al-Dinawari gives us a fairly full account[56].

In the main, it seems to follow the traditional account, but it was probably based on a later recension of Abu Mikhnaf's work. On two points in the account he introduces material that differs from what has been reported earlier. He presents an account of Ibn al-Zubayr trying to persuade the Imam al-Husayn not to go to Kufa but to carry out his resistance to Yazid from the Hijaz[57].

This may be a survival of a Zubayrid Medinan tradition which supported Ibn al-Zubayr, but did not want to denigrate the Imam al-Husayn. The other point is that al-Dinawari does not mention the three options often alleged to have been offered by the Imam to `Umar b. Sa`d. As far as he is concerned, the Imam only said that he was willing to go back, but Ibn Ziyad insisted that he pledge allegiance to Yazid[58].

In effect, al-Dinawari's version is basically presenting the standard version with a high degree of sympathy and support for the Imam al-Husayn.

**Notes:**

[56] Al-Dinawari, *al-Akhbar al-Tiwal* (Cairo, 1960), pp. 229-62.

[57] *Ibid.*, p. 244.

[58] *Ibid.*, p. 254.

# Chapter 15

## Account 14 - al-Ya'qubi

It is surprising that al-Ya`qubi, who was almost certainly a Shi'i, has devoted little space to the account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn in his history[59].

It seems to be a mere summary of Abu Mikhnaf's account, with the addition at the end of a miraculous tradition. According to this, the Prophet had given Umm Salama some soil which he had received from the angel Gabriel. This would turn red when the Imam al-Husayn was killed. When that happened, Umm Salama tearfully announced the death of the Imam in Medina, at the time that it had happened at Karbala'. [60]

He strays slightly from Abu Mikhnaf's account in suggesting that both the Imam al-Husayn and Ibn al-Zubayr went to see al-Walid together when he summoned them to pledge allegiance to Yazid[61].

Generally al-Ya'qubi's account gives the impression of being a rather hurried summary of Abu Mikhnaf and it does not add appreciably to our knowledge of the historical tradition.

Al-Tabari's account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn has long been regarded as the definitive account. He gives the *isnad* of the account that he uses, and interrupts the narrative to give other alternative or confirmatory traditions. In the main he relies on Ibn al-Kalbi and `Ammar b. Mu`awiya al-Duhfi. Al-Tabari seems to be using `Ammar's version as a means of interpreting Ibn al-Kalbi's.

Thus he gives the first half of `Ammar's version first, and then follows it with Ibn al-Kalbi's fuller version. He then presents the second half of `Ammar's version, followed by the second half of Ibn al-Kalbi's. On two occasions he interprets Ibn al-Kalbi with differing reports from `Umar b.

Shabba[62], and he concludes his account with the brief version of Husayn b. `Abd alRahman-similar to that of al-Baladhuri. What emerges looks at first glance to be the authoritative version of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn.

However, this is not quite the case. As already mentioned, the annalistic nature of the work means that the agreement made by Mu`awiya with the Imam al-Hasan, and the death of the Imam al-Hasan and the letters of the Kufans, are not reported. The surprising thing is that, in what purports to be a comprehensive history, they are not reported elsewhere in the text.

The other annalistic historians, al-Ya'qubi, al-Dinawari, and Ibn A'tham do not report them. These omissions must make us question al-Tabari's motive. The answer to this problem will lie in a more comprehensive study than this, which is limited to the account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn.

We have already noted that the use of 'Ammar's version is intended to be an interpretation of Ibn al-Kalbi's, and thus weakens the stature of the Imam. This is probably deliberately done by al-Tabari. However, he ignores, at least in this account, material from the `Uthmaniyya.

**Notes:**

[59] Al-Ya`qubi, Ta'rikh (Najaf, 1964), II, 229-33.

[60] Ibid., p. 233.

[61] Ibid., p. 229.

[62] Al-Tabari, op. cit., II, 242-6, 272.

# Chapter 16

## Account 15 - Ibn A'tham al-Kufi

Ibn A'tham al-Kufi gives us the most embellished account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn. He prefaces his account by including lists of isnads, which he claims are his sources[63].

These lists are muddled, and seem like an attempt to show that this is indeed an authoritative account. Ibn A'tham's exaggeration in his authorities sets the tone for the rest of the account. It is based on what has become the standard version, but it is that standard version in a very embellished form. Each individual battle is prefaced by verses, most of which are not reported by any other source.

The prowess in the battle of the Imam al-Husayn's followers and the Imam himself is such that one is surprised that they were not victorious. In his partisan approach, Ibn A'tham forgets that it is a tragedy which is taking place. The same tendency to exaggerate is a feature also of the account attributed to Abu Mikhnaf. Such treatment diminishes the real story of the Imam's sufferings and places it in the realm of a peculiar kind of hagiography. Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani deals with the martyrdom of al-Husayn in his *Maqatil al-Talibiyyan*.

The work, as its name suggests, is a survey of the persecution of the descendants of Abu Talib. His account is brief in comparison with al-Tabari and al-Baladhuri, but he does give a useful account[64].

His main authority is Nasr b. Muzahim but he also uses al-Mada'ini. A third authority of Abu al-Faraj and one he uses throughout his book is Yahya b. al-Hasan. The latter is also an authority of al-Mufid for his *Kitab al-Irshad*, and he seems to have written a The other annalistic historians, al-Ya'qubi, al-Dinawari, work on the descendants of the Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib. The account supplements the reports of Abu Mikhnaf, but by

and large it acts as confirmation that al-Tabari's use of Ibn al-Kalbi is authentic.

**Notes:**

[63] Ibn A`tham, *Kitab al-Futuh* (Hyderabad, 1971), IV, 209-10. The whole narrative is IV, 209-24, and V, 8-252.

[64] Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-81.

# Chapter 17

## Account 16 - al-Mufid

The last writer in the list of authorities is Shaykh al-Mufid. In his work *Kitab al-Irshad*[65], he presents an account of the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn. He claims that his authorities are Ibn al-Kalbi and al-Mada'ini. In fact, he seems mostly to have used Ibn al-Kalbi in al-Tabari's recension. On one occasion he uses an alternative to Ibn al-Kalbi which al-Tabari has provided concerning Ibn Ziyad's entry into Kufa[66], but without indicating a different source. Al-Mufid does, however, make the beginning of the story clear by giving those events prior to Mu`awiya's death which al-Tabari has omitted.

The historiographical study of this event shows how the martyrdom of the Imam al-Husayn became an important subject for historians from an early time. Despite attempts by some to diminish the stature of the Imam, the historical tradition has, by and large, preserved the general picture of heroism and sacrifice. The reality, in the simpler stories, has conveyed a more profound effect than the embellishments of some later writers. It was the martyrdom that gave rise to the historical writings, and the historical writings have carried on the tradition of the martyrdom to inspire men throughout the years since the tragic event.

### Notes:

[65] Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, pp. 299-372.

[66] Al-Mufid, *Kitab al-Irshad*, p. 308.

### **From the same author on Feedbooks**

Events and Circumstances Surrounding the Martyrdom of al-Husain b. Ali (2012)

This account is based principally on the account of Abu Mikhnaf (d. 132 A.H.) as it has been preserved in the writings of al-Tabari. It discusses the events that culminated in the murder of the Prophet's grandson.

islamicmobility.com

Published by: al-Serat Journal, Selected Articles 1975-1983 Specific

Article: Vol I, 1975, no. 2, pp. 3-13

The Muhammadi Trust of Great Britain

ISLAMICMOBILITY.COM  
IN THE AGE OF INFORMATION  
IGNORANCE IS A CHOICE

*"Wisdom is the lost property of the Believer,  
let him claim it wherever he finds it"*

*Imam Ali (as)*