

Alhassanain (p) Network for Islamic Heritage and Thought

Malik al-Ashtar

Biography of the devoted companion of the Prophet (s)

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Al-Rabathah

Al-Rabathah is a desert between Makkah and Madina. It is a barren land. No one inhabits it. But in the year 30 A.H., there was only one tent. In the tent there were an old man, an old woman, and their daughter.

Why did the old man inhabit that distant area in the middle of the desert?

He did not inhabit it of his own accord - the Caliph banished him to die there.

The old man was ill. And his wife was always in tears. So, he said to her: Dhar's mother; why do you weep?

The old woman said:

Why shouldn't I weep and you're dying in this desert?

The old man said:

One day, my friends and I were sitting with Allah's Apostle (s). And he said to us:

“One of you will die in the desert. And a group of believers will attend his death.”

All my friends passed away in their houses. And no one has remained but I. A person will come to your aid.

The old woman said:

The time of Hajj (Pilgrimage) is over. And no one has passed through this desert.

The old man said:

Don't worry! Go up the hill and look at the road of caravans.

The old woman went up the hill and looked.

A long time passed, in the distance, the old woman saw a caravan coming towards her.

The old woman waved a piece of cloth. The riders wondered and asked each other about that lonely old woman in the desert.

They approached and asked about her condition. She said:

My husband is dying. And no one is beside him.

And who's your husband?

While the old woman was weeping, she said:

Abu dharr , the companion of Allah's Apostle!

The owners of the caravan were surprised. So, they said:

Abu dharr ! The Prophet's companion! Come on! Let's see him!

The men went to the tent. When they came into it, they saw Abu dharr sleeping in his bed. They said:

Assalamu Alaik, companion of Allah's Apostle!

Wa Alaikum al-Salam, who are you?

One of them said:

Malik bin al-Haarth al-Ashtar. And there are some men with me from Iraq. We're going to Madina to tell the Caliph about the persecution we suffer from.

Abu dharr said:

My brothers, be cheerfull! Allah's Apostle (s) has told me that I'll die in the desert and that some believers will attend my death.

Malik and his friends rejoiced at that Prophetic good news. They sat down in Abu dharr 's tent. Malik al-Ashtar felt sorry for him. And he was sad to hear that the Umayyads mistreated the great companion, Abu dharr .

Al-Ashtar

Malik bin al-Haarth al-Nakhay belonged to an old Yemeni tribe. He became a Muslim in the time of the Prophet (s). He was loyal to his Islam.

He took part and fought bravely in the Battle of Yarmook. He had brave attitudes in stopping the Romans' attacks against the Muslim Army. So, his eye was split by a sword, namely, its lower lid was split. Thus, he was called al-Ashtar.

In 30 A.H., the Muslims in Kufa and other Muslim cities were angry with their rulers' behaviour. For example, al-Waleed bin Akabah, the Caliph Uthman's brother, the ruler of Kufa, behaved contrary to Islam - he drank alcohol and spent his time in amusements.

One day, al-Waleed entered mosque drunk. He prayed four Raka'as during the morning prayers. Then he turned to the worshipers and said sarcastically:

Shall I increase my prayers?

People were displeased with his behaviour. They criticized him in markets, houses and mosques.

People asked each other:

Has not the Caliph found a good ruler to replace this bad one?

He drank alcohol openly. He violated the teachings of the religion and the Muslims' rights.

So, people thought about a way to solve the problem. Finally, they decided to ask the advice of the good people. So, they went to Malik al-Ashtar. Malik al-Ashtar said to them:

First we'd better advise him. Then we'll tell the Caliph about his bad behaviour.

Malik and some good people went to the ruler's palace. When they got into the palace, they saw him drinking as usual. They advised him to behave well. But he scolded and dismissed them.

So, they decided to go to al-Madina al-Munawwara to meet the Caliph and to tell him about the problem.

The delegation met the Caliph and told him about his ruler's bad behaviour. It was unfortunate that he scolded and dismissed them. Besides, he refused to hear their complaints. So, they became disappointed.

They thought about going to Ali bin Abu-Talib, our Master Muhammad's cousin, because he was the only hope to reform the situation.

The Delegation

In the meantime, all people all over the Muslim cities complained of the rulers' bad behaviour.

The companions went to Imam Ali's house. They told him about the rulers' persecution and corruption.

Imam Ali (a) was sad to hear that. So, he went to the Caliph's palace. He met Uthman and advised him:

Uthman, the Muslims are complaining of the rulers' persecution. And you know that very well I've heard Allah's Apostle (s) saying:

“On the Day of Judgement, the unjust imam will be brought to hell. And no one will support or excuse him. Then, he will be thrown into hell. He'll go round and round it till he gets into its intense heat.”

Uthman thought for a while. He bent his head sadly. He admitted his mistakes. And he promised that he would ask Allah for forgiveness and that he would apologise to the Muslims.

Imam Ali (a) went out to give the Muslims good news. They were all happy.

But Marwan, the hypocrite, said to the Caliph:

You'd better threaten the people so as no one would dare to say bad words against the Caliph.

The Revolution

Uthman broke his promise. He did not behave well and did not change the rulers. In the meantime, he used strict policy against people. Mu'awiyah, the ruler of Shaam, advised the Caliph to banish some companions from the land.

So, the Caliph banished Abu dharr , the great companion, to al-Rabathah Desert where he died alone. He hit the companion Ammar bin Yasir, the son of the first two martyrs in Islam.

The Caliph whipped the companion Abdullah bin Masoud, too. So, people grumbled about Uthman's and his rulers' policy.

Our Master Muhammad's companions sent many letters to all Muslim cities. The letters read as follows:

Muslims, come to us. And save the Caliphate. Allah's Book has been changed. And the Prophet's Sunnah has been changed. So, come to us if you believe in Allah and the Day of Judgement.

The Muslim streamed into al-Madina al-Munawwara from everywhere. Malik al-Ashtar represented the revolutionaries. So, he held a meeting with Uthman to reform the affairs of the Muslim State.

The revolutionaries asked Uthman to leave power. But the Caliph refused that. Imam Ali (a) tried to reform the matters. But all his efforts were in vain.

The reason was that the Muslims were displeased with Uthman's and his rulers' persecution. In the meantime, Uthman stubbornly insisted on his policy.

The revolutionaries besieged Uthman's palace.

The revolutionaries climbed the walls of the palace. They broke into the Caliph's room and killed him. Marwan and other hypocrites ran away.

Talha and Zubair were ambitious to get the Caliphate. So, they helped the revolutionaries. But the people were thinking about only one person to be a Caliph. And the person was Imam Ali (a).

Streams of people came into Imam Ali's house. They asked him to be a Caliph. But the Imam refused.

Malik al-Ashtar and other companions insisted on Imam Ali's Caliphate. Malik addressed the people with enthusiasm:

People, this is the Prophet's Regent. He has learnt the Prophet's knowledge. Allah's Book has mentioned his belief. Allah's Apostle (s) has told him that he will enter al-Ridhwan Garden. His personality is perfect. The people in the past and present are certain of his behaviour and knowledge.

Thus Malik al-Ashtar was the first to appoint Ali bin Abu-Talib as a Caliph. Then the Muslims followed him.

When Imam Ali (a) became the Caliph, a new time began. He dismissed all the unjust rulers. And he appointed good persons.

The Battle of the Camel

Some people were ambitious for the Caliphate. Talha and Zubair were two of them. They went to Makkah and urged A'isha, Abu Bakr's daughter, to revolt against Imam Ali (a).

Marwan took advantage of that situation. He began spending the Muslims' money, which he had stolen, to form a big army. He announced that he would revenge himself on Uthman's killers.

The army headed for Basrah. There they uprooted the ruler's beard and dismissed him. They robbed the Public Treasury.

Amirul Mu'mineen, Ali bin Abu Talib, was facing that mutiny strongly. He advanced towards Basrah to invite its people to strive against the rebels.

The ruler of Kufa was Abu Musa al-Ashary. He discouraged people from striving against the rebels. In the meantime, he ordered people to disobey Amirul Mu'mineen, Ali bin Abu Talib.

Days passed. But al-Hasan and Ammar bin Yasir did not come back. So, the Imam sent Malik al-Ashtar after them.

Malik al-Ashtar was a brave, determined man. He realized that the people of Kufa were always supporting the Imam against his enemies. And he understood that only Abu Musa al-Ashary obstructed them.

Malik al-Ashtar arrived in Kufa and began inviting its people to follow him. A numerous army obeyed him. So, he could attack the ruler's palace and to dismiss the guards from it.

At that time, Abu Musa al-Ashary was in the mosque asking the people to stay in their houses and to disobey Amirul Mu'mineen orders. The guards came and told him that Malik al-Ashtar occupied the palace.

Abu Musa al-Ashary asked Malik al-Ashtar for a day's time to leave Kufa. So, Malik accepted that. On the same day, Malik al-Ashtar hurried to the mosque to encourage the people to support Imam Ali (a).

Hence, Malik could form a big army. The army was more than eighteen thousand fighters. Al-Hasan headed nine thousand fighters. They marched by land. The others crossed by river. The purpose of all was to join Imam Ali's army at Dhiqaar in the southern part of Iraq.



Imam Ali (a) headed the army and advanced towards Basrah, where he met A'isha's army. The leaders of the A'isha's army were Talha, Zubair and Marwan bin al-Hakam.

Malik al-Ashtar was the leader of the right wing. Ammar leader of the left wing. Imam Ali (a) stood in the middle of the army. And Muhammad bin al-Hanafiyah, Imam Ali's son, carried the banner.

A'isha's Army began attacking Imam Ali's army. They showered the Imam's Army with arrows. So, some fighters were killed and others were wounded.

The Imam's Army wanted to return like for like. But the Imam stopped them and said:

Who can take this Qur'an and go to them to appeal to it? Surely they will kill him.

A young man said:

Amirul Mu'mineen, I'll take it.

A Muslim headed for the Army of the Camel raising the Qur'an. A'isha shouted:

Throw arrows at him.

So, the bow men threw arrows at him. He fell over the ground and became a martyr.

During those moments, Amirul Mu'mineen raised his hands towards the sky. He prayed for Allah, the Almighty, to grant them a victory. Then he said:

Allah, the eyes are gazing at you! And the hands are extended! Our lord, judge between our nation and us with justice! And you're the best judge!

Then the Imam ordered his fighters to launch a general attack. Malik al-Ashtar advanced. He was fighting bravely. Violent clashes took place around the camel.

The Imam realized that killing the camel would end bloodshed and that it would end the fighting between the two parties.

Malik al-Ashtar launched a violent attack towards the camel. He was fighting bravely and honestly. He did not kill the wounded. He did not chase the runaway.

Malik al-Ashtar copied Imam Ali's good behaviour. He loved the Regent of Allah's Apostle (s). The Imam loved Malik too, for he was God-fearing. And Allah loves those who fear him.

The Victory

After violent fights, the Imam's Army could kill the camel So, the facing army was in low spirits and its fighters began escaping from the battlefield.

The Imam ordered his fighters to stop the war operations. And he ordered them to treat A'isha kindly and to bring her back to Madina.

The Imam released the prisoners of war. He ordered his fighters to cure the wounded. And he forgave them all.

Malik al-Ashtar and Ammar bin Yasir visited A'isha. She said:

Malik, you were about to kill my nephew?

Malik answered:

Yes. I wanted to relieve Muhammad's nation from him. But I did not kill him because I was fasting for three days. And I'm an old man.

In Kufa

After some days stay in Basrah, the Imam headed for Kufa.

Malik al-Ashtar fought as bravely as a lion. So, the enemies were afraid of him.

But on the normal days, he looked a poor man. He wore simple clothing. He walked humbly. Thus most people did not know him.

One day, while Malik al-Ashtar was walking was walking in the street, a foolish person was eating some dates and throwing the stones about.

Malik al-Ashtar passed before the foolish person. He threw a stone at Malik. The stone hit him on the back. The foolish person began laughing at him.

A man saw the foolish person. He said to him:

What are you doing? Do you know that man?

The foolish person answered:

No, who is he?

He's Malik al-Ashtar!

Malik went on walking. He did not pay attention to the foolish person. He remembered how the polytheists treated our Master Muhammad (s) in Makkah. They threw dust and rubbish at him but he kept silent.

Malik came into mosque. He began praying for Allah to forgive the foolish person. The man ran quickly. He came into the mosque. He embraced Malik apologizing and saying:

I want to apologize to you for my bad behavior! So, accept my apology.

Malik answered with a smile:

Brother, don't worry. By Allah, I've entered the mosque to pray for Allah to forgive you.

The Battle of Siffeen

The Imam chose the good persons to rule the cities. So, he appointed Malik al Ashtar ruler over Mousal, Sinjar, Naseeben, Heet, and Anat. They are areas on the borders of Shaam.

Mu'awiyah disobeyed the Caliph. He became a dictator in Shaam.

The Imam tried to persuade Mu'awiyah to obey him. He sent him several letters, sent some delegates to talk with him. But all the Imam's efforts were in vain.

Thus the Imam formed an army and gave its leadership to Malik al-Ashtar.

The army advanced towards Shaam. It arrived in Kirkeesya, where it clashed with the Shamian Army headed by Abi al-Awar al-Salmy.

Malik al-Ashtar tried to persuade the leader of the army to end the mutiny and to obey Amirul Mu'mineen, but he refused.

At night, the Shamian Army took advantage of time and launched a surprise attack. That action was contrary to the religion and politeness because the two parties were in negotiations.

The Caliph's Army resisted the surprising attack. It killed and wounded many attackers and forced the others to withdraw to their original places.

Again Malik al-Ashtar showed his bravery. He sent a man to Abi al-Awar to invite him to duel with swords.

The man said:

Abi al-Awar, Malik al-Ashtar is inviting you to duel with him!

The leader of Mu'awiyah's Army became afraid and with cowardice said: I don't want to duel with him!

Mu'awiyah headed a big army to join the Shamian Army.

The two armies met in the plain of Siffeen on the banks of the Euphrates.

Some units of Mu'awiyah's Army occupied the banks and besieged the river.

That action was also contrary to the laws of Islam and the laws of war.

The Imam sent Sasaah bin Suhan, one of the companions of the Prophet (s), to Mu'awiyah to talk with him.

Sasaah came into Mu'awiyah's tent and said:

Mu'awiyah, Ali says:

“Let's take some water. Then we'll decide what's between you and us, otherwise we will fight each other till the victor drinks.”

Mu'awiyah kept silent and said:

I'll answer you later on.

The Imam's representative went out. Mu'awiyah asked the advice of some men. So al-Waleed said with spite:

Prevent them from drinking water to force them to surrender.

They agreed on this opinion.

Mu'awiyah gathered all the evil persons around him. They violated the laws of Islam and of human rights.

Malik al-Ashtar was watching the military movements on the river banks. He saw military supplies. So, he realized that Mu'awiyah would tighten the siege.

The Imam's soldiers became thirsty. Malik became thirsty, too. So, a soldier said to him:

There's only little water in my water-skin, please drink it.

Malik refused that and said:

I won't drink till all soldiers drink!

Malik went to the Imam and said:

Amirul Mu'mineen, our soldiers are very thirsty. We've nothing but fighting.

The Imam answered:

Yes.

The Imam gave the soldiers a speech and urged them to fight bravely.

Then he said:

Death is that man is pleased with abasement. And life is that man who dies and becomes a martyr.

Malik led the first attack at the Battle of Siffeen. And he began fighting bravely. So, he advanced towards the banks of the Euphrates.

After violent clashes, Malik could recapture the river banks and force Mu'awiyah's Army to withdraw.

Mu'awiyah's Army became far from water. So, they thought of a trick to recapture its places on the River Euphrates.

On the following day, an arrow fell among the Imam's soldiers. There was a letter tied to the arrow. The soldiers read the letter carefully. They passed on the news quickly to each other. The news was:

From a loyal brother in the Shamian Army, Mu'awiyah is going to open the river to drown you. So, be careful!

The soldiers believed the news and withdrew. The Shamian Army took advantage of the situation and recaptured the river banks.

But the Imam's Army launched a general attack and dismissed the Shamian Army from the region.

Mu'awiyah was so worried that he asked Amru bin al-Aas:

Do you think Ali will prevent us from drinking water?

Amru bin al-Aas answered:

Ali doesn't do as you do!

The Shamian soldiers were worried, too. Immediately, the soldiers heard that Imam Ali (a) allowed them to come to the river to drink water.

Some people from Shaam realized the difference between Mu'awiyah and Ali. Mu'awiyah did every evil action for victory. But Ali did not think about that at all. He conformed to the human, good, ideal behaviour.

Thus, the soldiers of the Shamian Army left Mu'awiyah's front secretly at night. They joined Ali's front because it was always representing truth and humanity.

Mu'awiyah

Mu'awiyah was displeased with Malik al-Ashtar, for his bravery made Ali's Army fight with enthusiasm. In the meantime it dismayed the Shamian soldiers.

So, Mu'awiyah decide to kill Malik in a face-to-face duel with swords. He ordered Marwan to duel with him. But Marwan was afraid of Malik. Thus he apologised to Mu'awiyah and said:

Let bin al-Aas duel with him because he's your right arm.

Then Mu'awiyah ordered Amru bin al-Aas to duel Malik. He reluctantly agreed to Mu'awiyah's plan.

Ibn al-Aas invited Malik to duel with him. Malik advanced towards him holding his spear. He hit him violently on the face. So, Amru bin al-Aas escaped with alarm.

Ammar's Martyrdom

The clashes became intense. Ammar was leading the left wing of the Imam's Army. He, though an old man, was fighting bravely.

When the sun was about to set, Ammar, may Allah be pleased with him, requested some food to break the fast.

A soldier brought him a cup full of yoghurt. Ammar became cheerful and said:

Tonight, I may be martyred because Allah's Apostle (s) has said to me:

Ammar, the unjust group will kill you, and your final drink in the world will be a cup of yoghurt.

The companion broke his fast and advanced towards the battlefield. He fought bravely. Then he fell over the ground and became a martyr.

The Imam came and sat near Ammar's head and said sadly:

May Allah have mercy on Ammar on the day when he became a Muslim, may Allah have mercy on Ammar on the day when he became a martyr, may Allah have mercy on Ammar on the day when he will be raised from the dead! Ammar enjoy your garden!

Ammar's martyrdom in the battlefield affected the course of the battle very much. The Imam's Army was in high spirits. In the meantime, Mu'awiyah's Army was in low spirits.

All Muslims memorized the tradition our Master Muhammad (s) said to Ammar bin Yasir. The tradition is as follows:

Ammar the unjust group will kill you.

All understood that Mu'awiyah and his soldiers were wrong and that Ali and his companions were right.

Thus the Imam's Army attacked Mu'awiyah's Army increasingly. Therefore, Mu'awiyah and his army were getting ready to escape.

A New Trick

Mu'awiyah thought about a new trick to cheat the Imam's Army. So, he asked the advice of Amru bin al-Aas. Amru bin al-Aas said:

I'm sure we can cheat them with the Qur'an.

Mu'awiyah rejoiced at the trick and ordered his soldiers to raise the Qur'an on their spears.

When the Imam's soldiers saw the Qur'an, they thought about stopping the battle. Thus Mu'awiyah cheated many soldiers.

The Imam said:

It's a trick! I was the first to invite them to Allah's Book. And I was the first to believe in It. They've disobeyed Allah and broken His promise.

But twenty thousand soldiers disobeyed the Imam's order and said:

Stop fighting and order al-Ashtar to withdraw!

The Imam sent a soldier to al-Ashtar to stop fighting.

But Malik al-Ashtar went on fighting. Then he said:

We'll get the final victory within few moments.

The soldier said:

But twenty thousand rebels are besieging the Imam. If you go on fighting they'll kill him.

Malik al-Ashtar was forced to withdraw. So, he said:

There's neither might nor power but with Allah.

The Arbitration

Malik al-Ashtar knew that Mu'awiyah's action was only a trick. But he obeyed the Imam's order so as no disaster would happen. He was a brave leader and an obedient soldier.

The fights stopped. And the two parties agreed to the arbitration according to Allah's Book.

Mu'awiyah sent Amru bin al-Aas to represent him in the negotiations. And the Imam wanted to choose an alert, wise man. A man who had a good knowledge of Allah's Book. So, he chose Abdullah bin Abbas, the religious scholar of the nation.

But the rebels refused him and said:

We'll choose Abu Musa al-Ashary.

So, the Imam advised them and said:

I disagree with you on him. And Abdullah bin Abbas is better than he.

Again the rebels refused him. So, the Imam said:

I'll choose al-Ashtar.

They refused him too. They insisted on Abu Musa al-Ashary.

To avoid a disaster, the Imam said:

Do whatever you like!

Thus the two representatives met to talk. Amru bin al-Aas thought about a way to deceive al-Ashary. He said to him:

Abu Musa, Mu'awiyah and Ali have caused all these troubles. So, let's dispose them and elect another man.

Abu Musa al-Ashary did not like Amirul Mu'mineen, Ali bin Abu-Talib. So, he agreed to the plan. He said before the people:

I'm removing Ali from the Caliphate as I'm removing my ring from my finger. Then he removed his ring.

But Amru bin al-Aas said spitefully:

I'm fixing Mu'awiyah to the Caliphate as I'm fixing my ring to my finger. Then he wore his ring.

The rebels repented of their wrongdoing. But they insisted on disobeying the Imam. In the meantime, they asked him to turn to Allah in repentance and to announce war again.

But the Imam respected the promise and the covenant.

He agreed with Mu'awiyah on the truce and stopping the battle for a year.

The Imam asked his fighters to be patient for the year. But they disobeyed him, too. So, they were called the Kharijities.

Egypt

Mu'awiyah thought about a way to control Egypt. So, he sent a big army to occupy it.

The ruler of Egypt was Muhammad bin Abu-Bakr (the first Caliph's son). He asked Imam Ali (a) to send him urgent military supplies to prevent the invaders from occupying Egypt.

So, the Imam said to Malik al-Ashtar:

Malik, may Allah have mercy on you, go to Egypt. I've absolute trust in you. Rely on Allah! Use gentleness in its places and intensity in its place.

Malik al-Ashtar set out for Egypt.

The Poison and the Honey

Mu'awiyah was worried about Malik's going to Egypt, for he knew that Malik would save it. So, Mu'awiyah thought about a way to kill him.

Mu'awiyah used to mix honey with poison to kill his enemies. Mu'awiyah imported poisons from Rome. The Romans allowed Mu'awiyah to import them because they knew that he would use them to kill the Muslims.

Amru bin al-Aas said:

I know a man. The man lives in al-Qilzim City on the borders of Egypt. He has vast lands. Certainly Malik al-Ashtar will pass through the city and stop in it to rest.

Mu'awiyah said:

Let's send a man to tell him to kill al-Ashtar and we won't tax him for life.

Thus Mu'awiyah's delegate quickly set out for Egypt taking the poisoned honey to persuade the man to kill Malik al-Ashtar.

Martyrdom

The man agreed to Mu'awiyah's plan. He took the poisoned honey. He was looking forward to Malik's arrival.

After only a few days, Malik arrived in al-Qilzim City. The man invited the new ruler of Egypt for lunch in his house. Malik al-Ashtar accepted the invitation thankfully.

The man put the cup of the poisoned honey on the table. The guest took one spoon of the poisoned honey. He felt a severe pain in his stomach. He realized the plot. So, he put his hand on his belly and said:

***In the Name of Allah, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful
We belong to Allah, and we'll come back to Him!***

Malik al-Ashtar received death with the bravery of the certain believer, who knew that his way was Islam and the Paradise.

When Malik al-Ashtar became a martyr, Mu'awiyah was about to fly because of happiness. So, he said:

Ali bin Abu Talib had two hands. I cut off one of them on the day of Siffeen. It was Ammar bin Yasir. And today I've cut off the other hand. It is Malik al-Ashtar.

But Amirul Mu'mineen was very sad. So, he expressed his sorrow:

May Allah have mercy on Malik! He loved and obeyed me as I loved and obeyed Allah's Apostle (s).

Thus, Malik al-Ashtar ended his life in Jihad. His bright behavior will remain as a model for the Muslim young men everywhere!

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