

The *Khutba* of Sayyida Zaynab at Yazid's Court in Damascus: An Annotated Reading

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Sayyida Zaynab (d. 62/682) is a well-known figure in Islamic history. Daughter of Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib and Sayyida Fatima al-Zahra, she was the first granddaughter of the Prophet Mohammad. She is best known for her courageous role supporting her brother, Imam Husayn, at the time of his martyrdom in Karbala, for protecting his family in the following months of Umayyad imprisonment, and for her eloquent and heartfelt speeches narrating the injustices and suffering of Karbala. Shi'a poets and writers characterize Zaynab as the pre-eminent female orator of Islam, "*khatibat al-Islām*". In my presentation today I will give an annotated reading of the speech (or: *khutba*) she delivered at the court of the Umayyad caliph Yazid in Damascus.

Zaynab (and her sister Umm Kulthūm's) speeches are reminiscent of their mother Fāṭima's famous *khutba*. Fāṭima, it is said, had delivered a *khutba* "from behind a curtain" in Abū Bakr's court, asserting her right to the inheritance of the Fadak lands and Ali's right to the caliphate. Orations by women are uncommon in this milieu. The *khutbas* by Fatima, Zaynab, and Umm Kulthum were delivered at a time of distress that necessitated these otherwise veiled females to discourse in a public male arena. Moreover, *khutbas* were normally delivered by people of authority. Fāṭima, Zaynab, and the few other female speakers that we have reports of, did not hold official leadership positions in the community, but they were women of rank and clout. Their authority was derived from their lineage, and supported by their learning and eloquence.

After the killing of Husayn and his family at Karbala (in Muharram 61H), the Umayyad army looted his camp and set off with his women and children for Kufa, the major nearby city, from which the Umayyad governor Ubaydallah Ibn Ziyad had orchestrated the massacre. The killing of Husayn had shocked the Muslim community. The Kūfan shi'a personally witnessed the

shackled women and children from the Prophet's family paraded in their streets, and his grandson's head raised on a spear; they heard Zaynab and Umm Kulthūm's anguished speeches chastising them; and they were roused to grief and repentance for their role in Ḥusayn's death.

Stepping back to the immediate aftermath of Karbala: From Kufa, the prisoners were sent to Yazīd's court in Damascus (some 500 miles away), where Zaynab is reported to have delivered an oration that shook the foundations of the Yazidian empire. The khutba was addressed overtly to Yazīd, but simultaneously to all people present in his court; denouncing Yazid for killing her brother Ḥusayn at Karbala, and his cruel treatment of the women of the Prophet's family. The historical report I use in this presentation is from an early literary compilation, the *Balāghāt al-Nisā'* by the 3rd/9th century writer Ibn Abi Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr:

[Ibn Abi Tahir reports that] when Husain's womenfolk and remaining family members were brought to the court of the Umayyad caliph Yazid in Damascus, Yazid had them stood before him. He then had Husain's decapitated head placed in a basin. Grasping a cane, he struck Husayn's mouth with it, saying mockingly, Husayn, you have such beautiful teeth!" Then Yazid recited some verses (and I paraphrase the verses here) "Would that my forebears at the Battle of Badr could witness the killing of Husayn. I have avenged my elders whom Muhammad killed at Badr. I have quenched their thirst for vengeance. I have killed Muhammad's sons."

Zaynab stepped forward to challenge Yazīd's actions, denouncing him in an excoriating *khutba*. The text of her speech commences as follows (and this is in my translation):

God and his messenger spoke truth, O Yazīd: "Evildoers will attain an evil end, because they have rejected and ridiculed God's signs."

صَدَقَ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ يَا يَزِيدُ، "ثُمَّ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ أَصَاؤُوا السُّوءَى أَنْ كَذَّبُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَكَانُوا بِهَا يَسْتَهْزِئُونَ"

This is a quote from the Qur'an, and with such a beginning, Zaynab grounds her arguments that will follow firmly in the Sacred Book.

Next she continues with a question, a rhetorical question meant not to elicit information, but to drive home her point, to show that Yazīd's worldly power and her own apparent helplessness are not the real measure of their worth at all:

Do you think, Yazīd, that because we [she means here the womenfolk from the family of the Prophet, after Karbala] have been forced to traverse the wide spaces of the earth, under the open sky,

driven as prisoners are driven—do you think that it shows our littleness in God’s eyes and your honor? Do you think this happened because you are so important to Him?

أَظَنَنْتَ يَا يَزِيدُ أَنَّهُ حِينَ أُحْدِثَ عَلَيْنَا بِأَطْرَافِ الْأَرْضِ، وَأَكْنَافِ السَّمَاءِ، فَأَصْبَحْنَا تُسَاقُ كَمَا يُسَاقُ الْأَسَارَى، أَنْ بِنَا هَوَانًا عَلَى اللَّهِ، وَبِكَ عَلَيْهِ كِرَامَةً، وَأَنَّ هَذَا لِعَظِيمِ خَطَرِكَ

In the following lines, she uses Arabian camel metaphors to portray Yazid’s glee at this moment that he sees as a moment of triumph for the Umayyad clan:

You raise your nose and look around yourself gay and happy when you see this world gathered to you, all its affairs, like a herd of camels, flocking to you. Beware! This is but a respite, these are the few moments you can breathe easy, before the punishment descends. God has said [and this is another quote from the Qur’an] “Let disbelievers not think that our giving them a respite is a good thing for them, indeed we give them a respite so that they may increase in trespass; and a crushing punishment awaits them.”

فَشَمَخْتَ بِأَنْفِكَ، وَنَظَرْتَ فِي عِطْفَيْكَ، جَدْلَانَا فَرِحَا، حِينَ رَأَيْتَ الدُّنْيَا مُسْتَوْسِقَةً لَكَ، وَالْأُمُورَ مُتَسِقَةً عَلَيْكَ. وَقَدْ أَمَهَلْتَ وَتَقَشَّتَ، وَهُوَ يَقُولُ "وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ تَنْصِلِي لَهُمْ خَيْرٌ لَأَنْفُسِهِمْ إِنَّا تُنصِلِي لَهُمْ لِيَزْدَادُوا إِثْمًا وَلَهُمْ عَذَابٌ مُهِينٌ."

This section of the *khutba* evokes for us the drama playing out at the Umayyad court. Zaynab stands as a prisoner in front of Yazid, while he sits in all his pomp and might on a caliphal throne, surrounded by guards and attendants. “raising his nose, and looking around himself gay and happy.” On the face of things, Zaynab is totally in Yazid’s power; he has already killed Husayn and many of her kin, and subjected her and her sisters and nieces to abject suffering. He could potentially do even more harm. But she is not cowed. Her words express conviction that she is on the side of truth, that there will be a reckoning for the oppressor, and that God is with her always.

In the next section of her speech, Zaynab chastises Yazid for his dishonorable treatment of the Prophet’s daughters:

O son of Freedmen, [Freedmen or tulaqā’ is a derogatory term, referring to those members of the Quraysh tribe who remained committed enemies of Islam until forced to capitulate upon the Muslim conquest of Mecca, and these freedmen included Yazid’s grandfather Abu Sufyan] [Is it justice, O son of Freedmen] that you veil your wives and concubines, while you drive forward the Messenger’s daughters [like captured slave women], having torn off their veils and hoarsened their voices [with weeping]. They grieve, as speeding camels carry them forth, and their enemies herd them from town

to town, unguarded without any protector (wali), undefended, all kinds of people addressing them to their face? How do we stop those who look at us with coveting and rancor, with hatred and malice!

أَمِنَ الْعَدْلِ يَا بِنَ الطَّلَقَاءِ تَحْدِيثِكَ نِسَاءَكَ وَإِمَاءَكَ وَسَوْفُكَ بَنَاتِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ قَدْ هَتَكَتْ سُؤْرَهُنَّ، وَأَصْحَلَتْ صَوْتَهُنَّ، مُكْتَنِبَاتٍ تَحْدِي بِهِنَّ الْأَبَاعِرَ، وَيَجْدُو بِهِنَّ الْأَعَادِي مِنْ بَلَدٍ إِلَى بَلَدٍ، لَا يُرَاقِبْنَ وَلَا يُؤَوِّينَ، يَنْشَوْفُهُنَّ الْقَرِيبُ وَالْبَعِيدُ، لَيْسَ مَعَهُنَّ وِلِيٌّ مِنْ رَجَالِهِنَّ، وَكَيْفَ يُسْتَنْطَأُ فِي بَعْضَتِنَا مَنْ نَظَرَ إِلَيْنَا بِالشَّنَقِ وَالشَّتَاتَانِ، وَالْإِخْنِ وَالْأَضْعَانِ.

Zaynab sets up a telling contrast here, between the honor accorded to the harem of the Umayyad ruler, and the shame and misery heaped by him on the daughters of the man he acknowledges as the Prophet of God. There could also be a direct reference here to the incident with Husayn's young daughter Fatima al-Kubra. One of Yazid's Syrian followers asked Yazid to give her to him, and Zaynab is said to have come to her rescue and protected her honor.

In the next segment of the speech, Zaynab reminds Yazid that the forefathers he has sought to avenge by killing the Prophet's grandson were Muhammad's bitter enemies. Responding directly to his verses expressing happiness at Husayn's death, she says:

Do you say "Would that my venerable forefathers at Badr had witnessed [Karbala]" without considering it a sin, without thinking it a major concern?

أَتَقُولُ "لَيْتَ أَشْيَاخِي بَدْرٍ شَهِدُوا" غَيْرَ مَتَّامٍ وَلَا مُسْتَعْظِمٍ،

Yazid's Umayyad forebears—among them 'Utbah and Shaybah—had borne arms against the Prophet, and had been killed by the Muslims. (Some of the Meccan Umayyad *mushrikun* were killed in combat by Ali and Hamzah). Zaynab reminds Yazid that he calls himself a Muslim, nay, caliph of the Muslims. He is supposed to be on Muhammad's side; his killing of the Prophet's grandson constitutes a grave sin.

Then, rebuking Yazid for desecrating Husayn's remains, Zaynab continues:

Do you dare to strike [Husayn's] mouth with your cane?! Indeed, why wouldn't you, when you have already picked the wound, extirpated the root, and spilled the blood of the Messenger of God's progeny, stars of the earth, of the line of 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib!

وَأَنْتَ تَنْكُثُ ثَنَائِي أَبِي عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بِمِحْصَرَّتِكَ، وَلَيْمَ لَا تَكُونُ كَذَلِكَ وَقَدْ نَكَتَ الْقَرْحَةَ، وَاسْتَأْصَلْتَ الشَّنَافَةَ، يَا هِرَاقِكَ دِمَاءَ ذُرِّيَّةِ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ، وَنَجُومِ الْأَرْضِ مِنْ آلِ عَبْدِ الْمُطَّلِبِ.

Zaynab's accounting of Yazid's crime leads up to a warning regarding the approaching reckoning:

You shall come before God soon, as they have. And you will wish that you had been made blind and dumb [so you had not been able to do and say what you just did and said], that you had not said "Praise God and shine forth in joy!" [referring again to Yazid's verses]. [Zaynab interjects here a line of prayer addressed to God] O God, grant us our rights; exact justice for us from those who have oppressed us.

وَلْتَرِدَنَّ عَلَى اللَّهِ وَشِيكًا مَّوْرِدِهِمْ، وَلْتَوَدَّنَّ أَنْكَ عَمِيَّتْ وَبَكَمْتِ وَأَنْكَ لَمْ تَقُلْ "فَاسْتَهْلُوا وَأَهْلُوا فَرَحًا." "اللَّهُمَّ خُذْ بِحَقِّنَا، وَانْتَقِمْ لَنَا مَنْ ظَلَمْنَا.

[Then she says:] *By God, you have flayed naught but your own skin [Yazid]; you have gouged naught but your own flesh. [In a variant rendering of the khutba, Zaynab says this in response to Yazid's instructions to his guards to whip her.]*

Now Zaynab turns back to Yazid, offering a different kind of contrast; this time, showing how the tables will be turned on the oppressors, who will face eternal damnation in the hereafter, while Husayn enjoys everlasting bliss in the shelter of his Lord.

You will be brought to task before the Messenger of God despite your desperately wishing the contrary. His children and his family will be with him in the garden of Paradise; that will be the day that God brings them together, gathering them as one after long separation. This is what Almighty God's words mean when he says, [a Qur'anic quote] "Do not think that those who have been killed in the path of God are dead; they are alive and sustained at the feet of their Lord. (Qur'an 3:169)"

وَاللَّهُ مَا فَزَيْتَ إِلَّا جِلْدَكَ، وَلَا حَرَزْتَ إِلَّا فِي لَحْمِكَ، وَسَتَرِدُّ عَلَى رَسُولِ اللَّهِ بِرَغْمِكَ، وَعَتْرُثُهُ وَلُحْمَتُهُ فِي حَظِيرَةِ الْقُدُسِ، يَوْمَ يَجْمَعُ اللَّهُ شَمْلَهُمْ
مَلْمُومِينَ مِنَ الشَّعَثِ، وَهُوَ قَوْلُ اللَّهِ تَعَالَى "وَلَا تَحْسِبَنَّ الَّذِينَ قُتِلُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَمْوَاتًا بَلْ أَحْيَاءٌ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ يُرْزَقُونَ."

She includes Yazid's father Mu'awiyah in her condemnation:

The person who put you in this place and gave you charge over the necks of the believers [she means Mu'awiyah], will know—on that day, when the judge is God, your adversary Muhammad, and your limbs bear witness upon you, and [a Qur'anic quote] "What a vile exchange is in store for oppressors!" (Qur'an 18:50)—you will know then [and this is another Qur'anic quote] "which of you possesses the lesser station and the weaker army (Qur'an 19:75).

وَسَيَعْلَمُ مَنْ بَوَّأَكَ وَمَكَنَّاكَ مِنْ رِقَابِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذَا كَانَ الْحَكَمَ اللَّهُ وَالْحَضَمَ مُحَمَّدٌ وَجَوَارِحُكَ شَاهِدَةٌ عَلَيْكَ، "بِنَسِّ لِلظَّالِمِينَ بَدَلًا"، "أَيُّكُمْ سَرَّ مَكَانًا
وَأَضَعُفُ جُنْدًا."

The following section unexpectedly turns personal and introspective, giving us a glimpse at Zaynab’s profound anguish at her loss, and her deep anger at Husayn’s killers. Zaynab is reported to have witnessed Husayn’s killing with her own eyes.

An Indian scholar, the Tayyibi dai Sayyidna Tahir Sayf al-din describes in a moving marthiya the scene of Zaynab embracing her brother’s slain body, her hair stained with his blood, tears streaming down her cheeks. He says:

والهفتاه	لزینب	تبکی أخواها وتندب
من دمه الشعر تخضب		والدمع كالغيث يسكب
وهي بغير رداء		والهفتا يا حسيننا
يا سيد الشهداء		

Zaynab’s distress, as expressed in the following lines of the khutba, is deep. She uses strong language and graphic imagery:

By God—O enemy of God, and son of God’s enemy—I find your significance little, and your striking [of Husayn’s mouth with a cane] an enormous [offense]. [My family’s eyes] and mine are full of tears, our breasts are on fire. And yet, that does not do anything for us. For Husayn has been killed. Satan’s army [those who participated in killing Husayn] has stood us before these uncouth fools [i.e. the Umayyad ruling party]. [Those murderers] hope, in return for their violation of sanctities proclaimed by God, to petition [these fools] for the wealth that belongs to God. Their hands drip with our blood. Their mouths drip saliva from eating our flesh. As for those pure bodies! [of Husayn and his slain companions]—Alas! Wolves of the wilderness approach them in the dusk.

مَعَ أَنِّي وَاللَّهِ يَا عَدُوَّ اللَّهِ وَابْنَ عَدُوِّهِ أَسْتَصَغِرُ قُدْرَكَ، وَأَسْتَعْظِمُ تَقْرِيعَكَ، غَيْرَ أَنَّ الْعِيُونَ عَبْرَى وَالصُّدُورَ حَزَى، وَمَا يُجْزِي ذَلِكَ وَمَا يُغْنِي عَنَّا
 وَقَدْ قُتِلَ الْحُسَيْنُ، وَحَزَبُ الشَّيْطَانِ يَقْرَبُنَا إِلَى حَزْبِ السُّفَهَاءِ، لِيُعْطُوهُمْ أَمْوَالَ اللَّهِ عَلَى اتِّبَاعِكَ مَحَارِمِ اللَّهِ. فَهَذِهِ الْأَيْدِي تَنْطَلِفُ مِنْ دِمَائِنَا،
 وَهَذِهِ الْأَفْوَاهُ تَتَحَلَّبُ مِنْ لُحُومِنَا، وَتَلِكُ الْجُنُثُ الرَّوَاقِي يَعْتَامُهَا عَسَلَانُ الْقَلَوَاتِ.

Zaynab then depicts in a vivid dramatization the scene of Yazid’s retribution at judgment day:

If you consider us booty, indeed, on that day when you possess nothing but the deeds committed by your two hands, you will find that you have taken home [as booty] a grave sin. You will scream for help “O son of Marjāna” [meaning ‘Ubayd Allāh b. Ziyād], and he will shout out your name. You, with your followers, will howl like wolves at the Celestial Weighing Scales of Deeds. There, placed in the Scales, you will find Mu‘āwiya’s legacy, the killing of Muhammad’s progeny! By God, I do not fear anyone but God, and I address my grievances to none but Him. Plot your plot, do your worst, and expend all your efforts! By God, the shame of what you have done to us can never be washed away!

فلئن اتخذتنا مغتماً لتتخذن مغرمات حين لا تجد إلا ما قدّمث يدك، تستصرخ "يا ابن مرجانة" ويستصرخ بك، وتتعاوى وأتباعك عند الميزان، وقد وجدت أفضل زادٍ زوّدتك معاوية فتلك ذرية محمد. فوالله ما اتقيت إلا الله، ولا شكواي إلا إلى الله. فكيد كيدك، وأسع سعيك، وناصب جمدك، فوالله لا يرحص عنك عار ما أتيت إلينا أبداً.

Zaynab concludes her *khutba* with the standard closing formula of praise to God. Yet, the praise she offers is anything but formulaic, for she appositely contextualizes it to the situation at hand. And it segues into a final line of prayer for Husayn:

God be praised! He bestowed upon the chiefs of the youth of paradise [Hasan and Husayn, so named in a hadith of the prophet], [He bestowed upon the chiefs of the youth of paradise] felicity and forgiveness at the end of their earthly lives, and housed them in paradise. I ask God to raise their standing, and to grant them more and yet more of his favors. Truly, God is the most powerful of friends.

والحمد لله الذي حتم بالسعادة والمغفرة لِسَادَاتِ شُبَّانِ الْجَنَانِ، فأوجب لهم الجنة. أسأل الله أن يرفع لهم الدرجات، وأن يوجب لهم المزيد من فضله، فإنه وليّ قدير.

This is the end of the *khutba*.

In addition to Zaynab's explicit professions to righteousness in the text of the oration, and her overt assertions about the heinous nature of Yazid's crime, she tacitly buttressed her claims through the structure and style of her oration. In addition to its political and religious grounding, this speech is also considered one of the outstanding examples of Arabic eloquence or *balagha*. Beginning with the name of God and His messenger, Zaynab linked herself to them, and implied their endorsement of her words. Quotation of apposite sacred texts underscored her claims. Through Qur'ānic verses—one cited as the opening line and four more within the text of the oration—Zaynab grounded her arguments firmly in the Sacred Book. These proof texts drove home the authentically Islamic nature of her words, with the implication that all Muslims should—if they accepted the Qur'ān—accept what she was saying. And by alluding at the end to the Ḥadīth of the Prophet, which proclaimed Husayn and his brother Ḥasan as 'leaders of the youth of Paradise,' she further bolstered her profession of their godliness. Additionally, the format of the sentences in the oration—especially the presence of strong assertions and rhetorical queries—further strengthened her position. For the questions she asked about things Yazid knew very well, forced him to acknowledge—with a resounding silence—Husayn's high stature and his female relatives' sanctity. He could not refute the fact that Husayn was the Prophet's grandson, and that Zaynab was his granddaughter, or that his own forbears had been fierce enemies of the Prophet. The vivid contrast she drew between her family's service to Islam, and his family's disservice to it, brought the past into the present,

connecting her with her family's virtue, and him with his family's iniquity. [Note that Zaynab's line of argumentation in her *khutba* follows the same line of argumentation that Husayn had used at Karbala in his 'Āshūrā' *khutba* addressed to the Umayyad army.] Ending her speech with formulaic praise of God, Zaynab retroactively infused the whole of her text with divine authority.

Over the centuries, Zaynab's name has become linked with her brother's. Whenever Husayn is mentioned, Zaynab is also remembered. Zaynab's speech in Damascus that I just recited to you, her earlier speech in Kufa, and later her speeches in Medina and perhaps also Egypt, raised consciousness of the ungodliness of the Umayyad regime, and helped spread Husayn's message of sacrifice and justice through the Islamic world. Indeed, Zaynab has become a role model for Muslim women, typifying courage, fortitude, leadership, eloquence, devotion and faith.