

CHAPTER- IV

AL-MAMUN: AN OUTLINE OF HIS LIFE

Abu Jafar Abdullah al-Mamun bin Harun (September 786 – 9 August 833) was an Abbasid caliph who reigned from 813 until his death in 833. He succeeded his brother al-Amin who was killed during the siege of Baghdad in 813. Al-Mamun was born in Baghdad, on 15 September 786 A.D. to the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid and a Persian woman called Marajil.

Al-Mamun & Abbasid Civil War:

In 802 A.D. Harun al-Rashid, father of al-Mamun and al-Amin, ordered that al-Amin succeed him, and al-Mamun serve as governor of Khurasan and as caliph after the death of al-Amin. In the last days of Harun's life his health was declining and saw in a dream Musa ibn Jafar sitting in a chamber praying and crying, which made Harun remember how hard he had struggled to establish his own caliphate. He knew the personalities of both his sons and decided that for the good of the Abbasid dynasty, al-Mamun should be caliph after his death, which he confided to a group of his courtiers. One of the courtiers, Fadl ibn Rabi' did not abide by Harun's last wishes and convinced many in the lands of Islam that Harun's wishes had not changed. Later the other three courtiers of Harun who had

sworn loyalty to Harun by supporting al-Maʿmun, namely ʿIsa Jarudi, Abu Yunus, and Ibn Abi Umran found loopholes in Fadl’s arguments, and Fazl admitted Harun had appointed al-Maʿmun after him, but, he argued, since Harun was not in his right mind, his decision should not be acted upon. Al-Mamun was reportedly the older of the two brothers, but his mother was a Persian woman while al-Amin’s mother was a member of the reigning Abbasid family. After al-Rashid’s death in 809, the relationship between the two brothers deteriorated. In response to al-Mamun’s moves toward independence, al-Amin declared his own son Musa to be his heir. This violation of al-Rashid’s testament led to a succession struggle. Al-Amin assembled a massive army at Baghdad with ʿIsa ibn Mahan at its head in 811 and invaded Khorasan, but al-Mamun’s general Tahir ibn al-Husayn (d. 822) destroyed the army and invaded Iraq, laying siege to Baghdad in 812. In 813 Baghdad fell, al-Amin was beheaded, and al-Mamun became the undisputed Caliph.¹

Internal Strife:

There were disturbances in Iraq during the first several years of the reign of al-Mamun, while the caliph was in Mery. On 13 November 815, Muhammad ibn Jafar al-Sadiq (Al-Dibal) claimed the Caliphate for himself

¹ . Hasan. Dr. Syed Mahmudul, Islamer Itihas, P- 332

in Mecca. He was defeated and he quickly abdicated asserting that he had only become caliph on news that al-Mamun had died. Lawlessness in Baghdad led to the formation of neighborhood watches.

In A.H. 201 (817 AD) al-Mamun forced Imam Reza to move from Madina to Merv. Imam Reza, the Eighth descendant of Muhammad, was named his heir. This was not easily accepted by the Abbasid leaders but was widely seen as a political move by al-Mamun since he was fearful of the widespread sympathy towards the Ahl al-Bayt. Al-Mamun's plan was to keep watch over Imam Reza. However, his plans did not succeed due to the growing popularity of Ali Al-Rida in Merv. People from all over the Muslim world travelled to meet the prophet's grandson and listen to his teachings and guidance. After a debate Al-Mamun had set up with the greatest scholars of the world's religions to humiliate the Imam, the victorious Imam informed Al-Mamun that his grand vizier, Fazl ibn Sahl, had not been informing him of everything. In Baghdad, the people believed that al-Mamun was unseated, because of rumours spread by Fazl ibn Sahl. Because of this the people of Baghdad were giving their allegiance to al-Mamun's uncle Ibrahim ibn Mehdi. Al-Mamun set out for Baghdad in 12 April 818. At Tus, he stopped to visit his father's grave. Al-Mamun was troubled by the widespread support for the prophet Muhammad's

descendant Imam Reza and the betrayal of his grand vizier. With the aim of gaining Abbasid support and the establish of a new base for his rule in Baghdad, Al-Mamun went on to depose of Ali Ar-Rida by administering poison, and arranging the murder of Fazl ibn Sahl. On the last day of Safar in 203 AH Imam Reza died. Imam Reza was buried beside Al-Mamun's father Harun al-Rashid. Following the death of Imam Reza a great revolt took place in Khurasan, Persia. Al-Mamun tried to show him innocent of the crime but for all he did, he could not get himself acquitted and prove his innocence.²

After Arrival in Baghdad:

Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari states that al-Mamun entered Baghdad on 11 August 819 (v. 32, p. 95). He wore green and had others do so. Informed that compliance with this command was despite popular opposition to the colour, on 18 August he reverted to traditional Abbasid black. While Baghdad became peaceful, there were disturbances elsewhere. In 210A.H. (825–826 A.D.) Abdullah ibn Tahir al-Khurasani secured Egypt for al-Mamun freeing Alexandria from Andalusians and quelling unrest. The Andalusians moved to Crete where al-Tabari records their

². Ibid, Pp.- 333-334

descendants were still living in his day. Abdullah returned to Baghdad in 211 Hijri or (826–827 A.D.) bringing defeated rebels with him.³

In 825–826 A.D. there was an uprising in Qum sparked by complaints about taxes. After it was quashed, the tax assessment was set significantly higher. In 212 Hijri or 827–828 A.D., there was an uprising in Yemen. In 214 (829–30) Abu al-Razi who had captured one Yemeni rebel was killed by another. Egypt continued to be unquiet. Sindh was rebellious. In 216 (831–832) Ghassan ibn Abbad subdued it. An ongoing problem for al-Mamun was the uprising headed by Babak Khorramdin. In 214 Babak routed a Caliphate army killing its commander Muhammad ibn Humayd.

Wars with Byzantium:

By the time al-Ma?mun became Caliph, the Arabs and the Byzantine Empire had settled down into border skirmishing, with Arab raids deep into Anatolia to capture booty and Christians to be slaves in the Abbasid Caliphate. The situation changed however with the rise to power of Michael II in 820 AD. Forced to deal with the rebel Thomas the Slav, Michael had few troops to spare against a small Andalusian invasion of 40 ships and 10,000 men against Crete, which fell in 824 AD. A Byzantine

³ . Ibid, Pp- 334-335

counter offensive in 826 AD failed miserably. Worse still was the invasion of Sicily in 827 by Berbers of Tunis. Even so, Byzantine resistance in Sicily was fierce and not without success whilst the Arabs became quickly plagued by internal squabbles. That year, the Arabs were expelled from Sicily but they were to return.

In 829, Michael II died and was succeeded by his son Theophilos. Theophilos experienced mixed success against his Arab opponents. In 830 AD the Arabs returned to Sicily and after a year-long siege took Palermo from their Christian opponents and for the next 200 years they were to remain there to complete their conquest, which was never short of Christian counters. The Caliph Al-Mamun meanwhile launched an invasion of Anatolia in 830 AD. Al-Mamun triumphed and a number of Byzantine forts were taken; he spared the surrendering Byzantines. Theophilos did not relent and in 831 captured Tarsus from the Muslims. The next year, learning Byzantines had killed some sixteen hundred people, Al-Mamun returned. This time some thirty forts fell to the Caliphate forces, with two Byzantine defeats in Cappadocia.

Theophilos wrote to Al-Mamun. The Caliph replied that he carefully considered the Byzantine ruler's letter, noticed it blended suggestions of

peace and trade with threats of war and offered Theophanous the options of acknowledging divine unity, paying tax or fighting. Al-Mamun made preparations for a major campaign and died on the way while leading an expedition in Sardis.

Al-Mamun's relations with Byzantines are marked by his efforts in the translation of Greek philosophy and science. Al-Mamun gathered scholars of many religions at Baghdad, whom he treated magnificently and with tolerance. He sent an emissary to the Byzantine Empire to collect the most famous manuscripts there, and had them translated into Arabic. As part of his peace treaty with the Byzantine Emperor, Al-Mamun was to receive a number of Greek manuscripts annually, one of these being Ptolemy's astronomical work, the Almagest.

The reign of Al-Mamun:

Al-Mamun conducted, in the plains of Mesopotamia, two astronomical operations intended to determine the value of a terrestrial

degree. The crater Almanon on the moon is named in recognition of his contributions to astronomy.

Al-Mamun's record as an administrator is also marked by his efforts toward the centralization of power and the certainty of succession. The Bayt al-Hikma, or House of Wisdom, was established during his reign. The *ulama* emerged as a real force in Islamic politics during al-Mamun's reign for opposing the *mihna*, which was initiated in 833, only four months before he died.⁴

The *mihna* is comparable to Medieval European inquisitions only in the sense that it involved imprisonment, a religious test, and a loyalty oath. The casualties of the 'Abbasid inquisition were only a fraction of those executed in Europe in similar circumstances. This is because the people who were subject to the *mihna* were traditionalist scholars whose social influence and intellectual quality was uncommonly high. Al-Mamun introduced the *mihna* with the intention to centralize religious power in the caliphal institution and test the loyalty of his subjects. The *mihna* had to be undergone by elites, scholars, judges and other government officials, and in consisted of a series of questions relating to theology and faith. The central question was about the createdness of the Qur'an, if the interrogatee stated

⁴ . Ibid, p- 334

he believed the Qur'an to be created, he was free to leave and continue his profession.

The controversy over the mihna was exacerbated by al-Mamun's sympathy for Mu'tazili theology and other controversial views. Mu'tazili theology was deeply influenced by Aristotelian thought and Greek rationalism, and stated that matters of belief and practice should be decided by reasoning. This opposed the traditionalist and literalist position of Ahmad ibn Hanbal and others, according to which everything a believer needed to know about faith and practice was spelled out literally in the Qur'an and the Hadith. Moreover, the Mu'tazilis stated that the Qur'an was created rather than coeternal with God, a belief that was shared by the Jahmites and parts of Shi'a, among others, but contradicted the traditionalist-Sunni opinion that the Qur'an and the Divine were coeternal. The fact that the Mu'tazili school had its foundations in the paganism of Greece further disenchanted a majority of Islamic clerics.

During his reign, alchemy greatly developed and the pioneers of the science were Jabir Ibn Hayyan and his student Yusuf Lukwa was patronized by Al-Mamun, although he was unsuccessful in his attempts

regarding the transmutation of gold, his methods greatly led to the patronization of pharmaceutical compounds.

Caliph al-Mamun was a pioneer of cartography having commissioned a world map from a large group of astronomers and geographers. Many geographers, many astronomers, many mathematics scholars made this map. Historians of geography knew of this map, but by its name only. The map is in an encyclopedia in Topkapi Sarai [Museum in Istanbul]. The map shows large parts of the Eurasian and African continents with recognizable coastlines and major seas. It depicts the world as it was known to the captains of the Arab sailing dhows which, with planks secured by palm-fiber ropes rather than nails, used the monsoon wind cycles to trade over vast distances. Western historians recognize that by the 9th century, Arab sea traders had reached Canton, in China. The Caliph al-Mamun map illustrates how far the Muslim cartographers departed from earlier world views. The maps of the Greeks and Romans reveal a good knowledge of closed seas like the Mediterranean but little understanding of the vast ocean expanses beyond.⁵

Although al-Mahdi had proclaimed that the caliph was the protector of Islam against heresy, and had also claimed the ability to declare

⁵ . Mahmudunnasir Syed, Islam Its Concepts & History, Pp.- 202-204

orthodoxy, religious scholars in the Islamic world believed that al-Mamun was overstepping his bounds in the mihna. The penalties of the mihna became increasingly difficult to enforce as the ulema became firmer and more united in their opposition. Although the mihna persisted through the reigns of two more caliphs, al-Mutawakkil abandoned it in 848. The failure of the mihna seriously damaged Caliphal authority and ruined the reputation of the office for succeeding caliphs. The caliph would lose much of his religious authority to the opinion of the ulema as a result of the mihna.

The ulema and the major Islamic law schools became truly defined in the period of al-Mamun and Sunnism, as a religion of legalism, became defined in parallel. Doctrinal differences between Sunni and Shi'a Islam began to become more pronounced. Ibn Hanbal, the founder of the Hanbali legal school, became famous for his opposition to the mihna. Al-Mamun's simultaneous opposition and patronage of intellectuals led to the emergence of important dialogues on both secular and religious affairs, and the Bayt al-Hikma became an important center of translation for Greek and other ancient texts into Arabic. This Islamic renaissance spurred the rediscovery of Hellenism and ensured the survival of these texts into the European renaissance.

Al-Mamun had been named governor of Khurasan by Harun, and after his ascension to power, the caliph named Tahir as governor for his military services in order to assure his loyalty. It was a move that al-Mamun soon regretted, as Tahir and his family became entrenched in Iranian politics and became increasingly powerful in the state, contrary to al-Mamun's desire to centralize and strengthen Caliphal power. The rising power of the Tahirid dynasty became a threat as al-Mamun's own policies alienated them and his other opponents.

The shakiriya, which were to trigger the movement of the capital from Baghdad to Samarra during al-Mu'tasim's reign, were raised in al-Mamun's time. The shakiriyawere military units from Central Asia and North Africa, hired, complete with their commanders, to serve under the Caliph.

Al-Mamun also attempted to divorce his wife during his reign, who had not borne him any children. His wife hired a Syrian judge of her own before al-Mamun was able to select one himself; the judge, who sympathized with the caliph's wife, refused the divorce. Following al-Mamun's experience, no further Abbasid caliphs were to marry, preferring to find their heirs in the harem.

Al-Mamun, in an attempt to win over the Shi'a Muslims to his camp, named the eighth Imam, Ali ar-Rida, his successor, if he should outlive al-Mamun. Most Shi'ites realized, however, that ar-Rida was too old to survive him and saw al-Mamun's gesture as empty; indeed, Al-Mamun poisoned Ali ar-Rida who then died in 818. The incident served to further alienate the Shi'ites from the Abbasids, who had already been promised and denied the Caliphate by al-Abbas.

The Abbasid Empire grew somewhat during the reign of al-Mamun. Hindu rebellions in Sindh were put down, and most of Afghanistan was absorbed with the surrender of the leader of Kabul. Mountainous regions of Iran were brought under a tighter grip of the central Abbasid government, as were areas of Turkestan.

Shortly before his death, during a visit to Egypt in 832, the caliph ordered the breaching of the Great Pyramid of Giza looking for knowledge and treasure. He entered the pyramid by tunneling into the Great Pyramid near where tradition located the original entrance.

Characteristics of al-Mamun:

Famous historian Al-Tabari (v. 32, p. 231) describes al-Mamun as of average height, light complexion, handsome and having a long beard losing

its dark colour as he aged. He relates anecdotes concerning the caliph's ability to speak concisely and eloquently without preparation, his generosity, his respect for Muhammad and religion, his sense of moderation, justice and his love of poetry.⁶

Death of al-Mamun:

Al-Tabari (v.32, pp. 224–231) recounts how Al-Mamun was sitting on the river bank telling those with him how splendid the water was. He asked what would go best with this water and was told a specific kind of fresh dates. Noticing supplies arriving, he asked someone to check whether such dates were included. As they were, he invited those with him to enjoy the water with these dates. All who did this fell ill. Others recovered, but Al-Mamun died. He encouraged his successor to continue his policies and not burden the people with more than they could bear. This was on 9 August 833.

Al-Mamun died near Tarsus. The city's major mosque (Tarsus Grand Mosque), contains a tomb reported to be his. He was succeeded not by his son, Al-Abbas ibn al-Mamun, but by his half-brother, al-Mu'tasim.

⁶ . Hasan. Dr. Syed Mahmudul, Islamer Itihas, P- 336