

# MUHAMMAD'S BIOGRAPHY (PART 4 OF 12): PERSECUTION IN MECCA

**Rating:** 4.5

**Description:** The early days of the Prophet of Islam's mission and persecution of the adherents of Islam.

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**By:** IslamReligion.com

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## First Converts

For the first few years of his Mission, the Prophet preached to his family and his intimate friends. The first women to convert was his wife Khadija, the first child his first cousin Ali, whom he had taken under his care, and the first bondsman was his servant Zayd, a former slave. His old friend Abu Bakr was the first adult free male to convert.

Many years later the Prophet said of him: 'I have never called anyone to Islam who was not at first hesitant, with the exception of Abu Bakr.'

Later, the command came to him to preach openly and to speak out against idolatry. At first, the elders of Quraysh had been able to ignore this strange little group, treating Muhammad as a sad case of self-deception, but now they began to realize that his preaching, which was attracting adherents among the poor and the dispossessed (and could therefore be seen as subversive), presented a threat both to the religion and the prosperity of Mecca. Open conflict, however, would have been against their interests. Their power depended upon their unity, and with the example of Yathrib - torn asunder by tribal conflict - as a grim warning of what could happen in their own city, they were obliged to bide their time. Moreover, the clan Hashim, whatever it might think privately of its rogue member, was bound by custom to defend him if he was attacked. They confined themselves for the time to mockery, perhaps the most effective weapon in the common man's defense against the in break of truth, since it does not involve the degree of commitment inherent in violence. His former guardian Abu Talib give up his call so not as to jeopardize his safety and the safety of the clan. 'O my uncle,' he said, 'even if they set against me the sun on my right and the moon on my left, I will not abandon my purpose until God grants me success or until I die.' Abu Talib answered with a sigh: 'O



my brother's son, I will not forsake you.'

Tension in the city increased gradually, month by month, as Muhammad's spiritual influence spread, undermining the hegemony of the elders of Quraysh and bringing division into their families. This influence became even more dangerous to the established order when the content of the successive revelations was broadened to include denunciation of the callousness of the Meccan plutocracy, their greed for 'more and more' and their avarice. The opposition was now led by a certain Abu Jahl, together with Abu Lahab and the latter's brother-in-law, a younger man who was more subtle and more talented than either of them, Abu Sufyan. Returning one day from the hunt, Muhammad's uncle Hamza, who had so far remained neutral, was so angered on being told of the insults heaped upon his nephew that he sought out Abu Jahl, struck him on the head with his bow and announced then and there his conversion to Islam.

## **Beginning of Persecution**

At the end of the third year, the Prophet received the command to "arise and warn," whereupon he began to preach in public, pointing out the wretched folly of idolatry in face of the marvelous laws of day and night, of life and death, of growth and decay, which manifest the power of God and attest to His Oneness. It was then, when he began to speak against their gods, that Qureysh became actively hostile, persecuting his poorer disciples, mocking and insulting him. The one consideration which prevented them from killing him was fear of the blood-vengeance of the clan to which his family belonged. Strong in his inspiration, the Prophet went on warning, pleading, and threatening, while Quraish did all they could to ridicule his teaching and deject his followers.

## **The Flight to Abyssinia**

The converts of the first four years were mostly humble folk unable to defend themselves against oppression. So cruel was the persecution they endured that the Prophet advised all who could possibly contrive to do so to emigrate, at least temporarily, to Abyssinia (now Ethiopia), where they would be well received by the Christian Negus, 'an upright King.' About eighty converts fled there in 614 CE to the Christian country.

This apparent alliance with a foreign power further infuriated the Meccans, and they sent envoys to the Negus demanding the Muslims' extradition. A great debate was held at Court and the Muslims won the day, first by demonstrating that they worshipped the same God as the Christians, and then by reciting one of the Quranic passages concerning the Virgin Mary, whereupon the Negus wept and said: 'Truly this has come from the same source as that which Jesus brought.'

Still in spite of persecution and emigration, the little company of Muslims grew in number. The Quraish were seriously alarmed. Idol worship at the Kaaba, the holy

place to which all Arabia made pilgrimage, ranked for them as its guardians, as first among their vested interests. At the season of the pilgrimage, they posted men on all the roads to warn the tribes against the madman who was preaching in their midst. They tried to bring the Prophet to a compromise, offering to accept his religion if he would so modify it as to make room for their gods as intercessors with God. In return, they offered to make him their king if he would give up attacking idolatry. Prophet Muhammad's constant refusal frustrated their efforts at negotiation.

## Conversion of Umar

More important still was the conversion of one of the most formidable young men in the city, Umar ibn al-Khattab. Infuriated by the increasing success of the new religion - so contrary to all that he had been brought up to believe - he swore to kill Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, regardless of the consequences. He was instructed that, before doing so, he had better look into the affairs of his own family, for his sister and her husband had become Muslims. Bursting into their home he found them reading a Chapter called 'Ta-Ha', and when his sister acknowledged that they had indeed embraced Islam, he struck her a harsh blow. More than a little ashamed of himself, he then asked to see what they had been reading. She handed him the text after insisting he made ablution before handling it, and as he read these verses of the Quran, he underwent a sudden and total transformation. The sweet potency of the words of Quran changed him forever! He went directly to Muhammad and accepted Islam.

Men such as these were too important in the social hierarchy to be attacked, but most of the new Muslims were either poor or in slavery. The poor were beaten and the slaves tortured to make them renounce their faith, and there was little Muhammad could do to protect them.

A black slave named Bilal was pegged down naked under the scorching sun with a heavy stone on his chest and left to die of thirst. He was taunted by the pagans to renounce his religion in return for remission of torture, but his only reply was '*Ahad! Ahad!*' ('God is One! God is One!'). It was in this state, on the point of death, that Abu Bakr found him and ransomed him for an exorbitant fee. He was nursed back to health in Muhammad's home and became one of the closest and best-loved of the companions. When, much later, the question arose as to how the faithful should be summoned to prayer, Bilal became the first *mu'ezzin* (the call to prayer announced with a loud voice from the Muslim place of worship, called masjid) of Islam: a tall, thin black man with a powerful voice and, so it is said, the face of a crow under a thatch of grey hair; a man from whom the sun had burned out, during his torment, everything but love of the One and of the messenger of the One.

## Destruction of the Saheefah

Frustrated on every side, the Meccan oligarchy, under the leadership of Abu Jahl, now drew up a formal document declaring a ban or boycott against the Hashim clan as a whole; there were to be no commercial dealings with them until they outlawed Muhammad, and no one was to marry a woman of Hashim or give their daughter to a man of the clan. Then, for three years, the Prophet was constrained with all his kinsfolk in their stronghold, which was situated in one of the gorges which ran down to Mecca.

At length some kinder hearts among Qureysh grew weary of the boycott of old friends and neighbors. They managed to have the document, which had been placed in the Kaaba, brought out for reconsideration. When it was found that all the writing had been destroyed by white ants, except the words Bismika Allahumma ("In thy name, O God"). When the elders saw that marvel, the ban was removed, and the Prophet was again free to go about the city. Meanwhile, the opposition to his preaching had grown rigid. He had little success among the Meccans, and an attempt which he had once made to preach in the city of Taif was a failure. His mission was not proceeding how he expected,, when, at the season of the yearly pilgrimage', he came upon a little group of men who heard him gladly.

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