

MUHAMMAD'S BIOGRAPHY (PART 7 OF 12): A NEW STAGE IN MEDINA

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Description: The challenges of establishment a new city state in Medina.

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Prophet Muhammad's main meal was usually a boiled gruel, with dates and milk, his only other meal of the day being dates and water; but he frequently went hungry, sometimes even binding a flat stone against his belly to alleviate his discomfort. One day a woman gave him a cloak - something he badly needed - but the same evening someone asked for it to make a shroud, and he promptly gave it as charity. He was brought food by those who had a small surplus, but he never seemed to keep it long enough to taste it, as there was always someone in greater need. With diminished physical strength - now fifty-two years old - he struggled to build a nation based upon the true religion of Islam out of the varied assortment of people God had given him as his raw material.

By force of character combined with extraordinary diplomatic skill, Prophet Muhammad began to reconcile the warring factions of Medina. With his other companions also emigrating, a support system for the newcomers was of essential importance. To unite the 'emigrants' (*Muhajirun*) with the local Muslims, the 'helpers' (*Ansarun*), he established a system of personal relationships: each 'helper' took an 'emigrant' as his brother, to be treated as such under all circumstances and to stand in order of inheritance along with members of the natural family. With a few exceptions, the 'emigrants' had lost everything they possessed and were completely dependent upon their new brothers. The Helpers sometimes went so far as to give their Emigrant brothers half of whatever they possessed in the form of houses, assets, lands and groves. Such was the enthusiasm of the Helpers to share everything with their brothers-in-faith that they divided everything into two parts to draw lots for allocating their share. In most cases, they tried to give the Emigrants the fairer portion of their property.

One is tempted to describe as a 'miracle' the fact that this situation seems to have caused no resentment whatever among those who were so suddenly obliged to take complete strangers into their families. This bond of brotherhood broke all ties of ancestry, color, nationality and other factors previously regarded as a standard of honor. The only ties which now mattered were religious. Seldom has the power of religious faith to change men been more clearly demonstrated.

The Meccan Muslims, however, had not forgotten their old skills. An 'emigrant' who when his new brother said to him, 'O poorest of the poor, how can I help you? My house and my funds are at your disposal!' replied: 'O kindest of kind friends, just show me the way to the local market. The rest will take care of itself.' This man, it is said, started by selling cheese and clarified butter, and soon became rich enough to pay the dower of a local girl and, in due course, was able to equip a caravan of 700 camels.

Such enterprise was encouraged, but there were also those who had neither the ability to do so nor did they have family or property. They would spend the day in the Mosque and at night, the Prophet would place them with various individuals of the Helpers.

They came to be known as '*Ahl us-Suffa*.' Some were fed at the Prophet's own table, when there was any to spare, and with roasted barley from the community chest.

In the first year of his reign at Yathrib, the Prophet made a solemn covenant of mutual obligation between his people and the Jews tribes of Medina and its surrounding areas, in which it was agreed that they would have equal status as citizens of a state and full religious liberty, and that each would defend the other if attacked.

But their idea of a Prophet was one who would give them dominion, and a Jewish prophet, not an Arabian one. The Jews had also profited greatly from the infighting between Arab tribes, as it was through this instability of the region that they had gained the upper hand in trade and commodities. Peace among the tribes of Medina and its surrounding areas was a threat to the Jews.

Also, from among the inhabitants of Medina were those who resented the newcomers, but held their peace for the time being. The most powerful of them, Abdullah ibn Ubayy ibn Salool, was extremely resentful of the arrival of the Prophet, as it was he who was the de facto the leader of Yathrib prior to the Prophet. He accepted Islam as a matter of formality, though he would later betray the Muslims as the leader of the 'hypocrites.'

Due to this common hatred of the Prophet, the Muslims, and the new state of affairs of Yathrib, the alliance between the Jews and the 'hypocrites' of Medina was almost inevitable. Throughout the history of Muslims in Medina, they tried to seduce the followers of the new religion, constantly plotting and planning against them. Due to this, there is frequent mention of the Jews and hypocrites in the Medina chapters of the Quran.

The Qiblah

The Qiblah (the direction toward which the Muslims pray) until this point had been Jerusalem. The Jews imagined that the choice implied a leaning toward Judaism and that the Prophet stood in need of their instruction. The Prophet longed for the Qiblah to be changed to the Kaaba. The first place on earth built for the worship of God, and rebuilt by Abraham. In the second year after the migration, The Prophet received command to change the Qiblah from Jerusalem to the Kaaba at Mecca. A whole portion of Surah al-Baqara relates to this Jewish controversy.

The First Expeditions

The Prophet's first concern as ruler was to establish public worship and lay down the constitution of the State: but he did not forget that the Quraish had sworn to make an end of his religion. Enraged that the Prophet had succeeded in migrating to Medina, they increased their torture and persecution of the Muslims who stayed behind in Mecca. Their evil plots did not stop there. They also tried to make secret alliances with some polytheists of Medina, such as Abdullah ibn Ubayy previously mentioned, ordering him to kill or expel the Prophet. The Quraish often sent threatening messages to Muslims of Medina warning of their annihilation, and so much news of the plots and plans of the polytheists reached the Prophet himself that he requested the positioning of security guards around his house. It was at this time that God had given the Muslims permission to take arms against the disbelievers.

For thirteen years they had been strict pacifists. Now, however, several small expeditions were sent, led either by the Prophet himself or some other of the emigrants from Mecca for the purpose of reconnoitering the routes which led to Mecca, as well as forming alliances with other tribes. Other expeditions were led in order to intercept some caravans returning from Syria en route to Mecca, a way that Muslims could place economic pressure on the Quraish in order to quit their harassment of the Muslims, both in Mecca and Medina. Few of these expeditions ever saw actual battle, but through them, the Muslims established their new position in the Arabian Peninsula, that they were no longer an oppressed and weak people, but rather their strength had grown and were now a formidable force not easily reckoned with.

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