

MUHAMMAD'S BIOGRAPHY (PART 9 OF 12): THE TREASON OF FORMER ALLIES

Rating: 4.6

Description: Mistakes at Uhud lead to heavy losses of life, and a new tactic reveals victory for the Muslims.

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The Battle on Mt. Uhud

In fact, in the following year, an army of three thousand men came from Mecca to destroy Yathrib. The Prophet's first idea was merely to defend the city, a plan of which Ibn Ubayy, the leader of "the Hypocrites", strongly approved. But the men who had fought at Badr, believing that God would help them against any odds, thought it a shame that they should linger behind walls.

The Prophet, approving of their faith and zeal, gave way to them, and set out with an army of one thousand men toward Mt. Uhud, where the enemy were encamped. Ibn Ubayy withdrew with his men, who were a third of the army, in retaliation. Despite the heavy odds, the battle on Mt. Uhud would have been an even greater victory than that at Badr for the Muslims, but for the disobedience of a band of fifty archers whom the Prophet had set to guard a pass against the enemy cavalry. Seeing their comrades victorious, these men left their post, fearing to lose their share of the spoils. The cavalry of Quraish rode through the gap and fell on the exultant Muslims. The Prophet himself was wounded and the cry arose that he was slain, until someone recognized him and shouted that he was still living: a shout to which the Muslims rallied. Gathering round the Prophet, they retreated, leaving many dead on the hillside. The field belonged to the Meccans, and now the women of Quraish moved among the corpses, lamenting the slain from amongst their own people and mutilating the Muslim dead. Hamzah, the Prophet's young uncle and childhood friend, was among the latter, and the abominable Hind, Abu Sufyan's wife, who bore Hamzah a particular grudge and had offered a reward to the man who killed him, ate his liver, plucked from the still warm body. On the following day, the Prophet again sallied forth with what remained of the army, that Quraish might hear that he was in the field and so might perhaps be deterred from attacking the city. The stratagem succeeded, thanks to the behavior of a friendly bedouin who met the Muslims, conversed with them and afterwards met the army of Quraish. Questioned by Abu Sufyan, he said that Muhammad was in the field, stronger than ever, and thirsting for revenge for yesterday's affair. On that information, Abu

Sufyan decided to return to Mecca.

Massacre of Muslims

The reverse which they had suffered on Mt. Uhud lowered the prestige of the Muslims with the Arab tribes and also with the Jews of Yathrib. Tribes which had inclined toward the Muslims now inclined toward the Quraish. The Prophet's followers were attacked and murdered when they went abroad in little companies. Khubaib, one of his envoys, was captured by a desert tribe and sold to the Quraish, who tortured him to death in Mecca publicly.

Expulsion of Bani Nadhir

The Jews, despite their treaty with the Muslims, now hardly concealed their hostility. They began negotiating alliances with Quraish and the 'hypocrites,' and even attempted to assassinate the Prophet. The Prophet was obliged to take punitive action against some of them. The tribe of Bani Nadheer were besieged in their strong towers, subdued and forced to emigrate.

The War of the Trench

Abu Sufyan must have understood very well that the old game of tit for tat was no longer valid. Either the Muslims must be destroyed or the game was lost for ever. With great diplomatic skill he set about forming a confederacy of bedouin tribes, some, no doubt, opposed to the Muslims, but others merely eager for plunder, and at the same time he began quietly to sound out the Jews in Medina regarding a possible alliance. In the fifth year of the Hijrah (early in 627 C.E.) he set out with 10,000 men, the greatest army ever seen in the Hijaz (the western region of the Arabian Peninsula). Medina could raise at most 3,000 to oppose him.

The Prophet presided over a council of war, and this time no one suggested going out to meet the enemy. The only question was how the town could best be defended. At this point Salman the Persian, a former slave who had become one of the closest of the companions, suggested the digging of a deep ditch to join the defensive strong points formed by the lava fields and by fortified buildings. This was something unheard of in Arab warfare, but the Prophet immediately appreciated the merits of the plan and work began at once, he himself carrying rubble from the diggings on his back.

The work was barely finished when the confederate army appeared on the horizon. While the Muslims were awaiting the assault, news came that Bani Quraidhah, a Jewish tribe of Yathrib which had, until then, been loyal, had defected to the enemy. The case seemed desperate. The Prophet brought every available man to the ditch, leaving the town itself under the command of a blind companion, and the enemy was met with a hail of arrows as they came up to the unexpected obstacle. They never crossed it, but remained in position for three or four weeks, exchanging arrows and insults with the defenders. The weather turned severe, with icy winds and a tremendous downpour,

and this proved too much for the bedouin confederates. They had come in the expectation of easy plunder and saw nothing to be gained from squatting beside a muddy ditch in appalling weather and watching their beasts die for lack of fodder. They faded away without so much as a farewell to Abu Sufyan. The army disintegrated and he himself was forced to withdraw. The game was over. He had lost.

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