

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ISLAM (PART 2 OF 5): THE HIJRAH

Rating: 3.6

Description: The Hijrah, or migration, of the Muslims to Medina, and highlights of the challenges from the early days of the Prophet's residence there.

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After Muhammad had preached publicly for more than a decade, the opposition to him reached such a high pitch that, fearful for their safety, he sent some of his adherents to Ethiopia. There, the Christian ruler extended protection to them, the memory of which has been cherished by Muslims ever since. But in Mecca the persecution worsened. Muhammad's followers were harassed, abused, and even tortured. At last, seventy of Muhammad's followers set off by his orders to the northern town of Yathrib, in the hope of establishing a new stage of the Islamic movement. This city which was later to be renamed Medina ("The City"). Later, in the early fall of 622, he, with his closest friend, Abu Bakr al-Siddeeq, set off to join the emigrants. This event coincided with the leaders in Mecca plotting, to kill him.

In Mecca, the plotters arrived at Muhammad's home to find that his cousin, 'Ali, had taken his place in bed. Enraged, the Meccans set a price on Muhammad's head and set off in pursuit. Muhammad and Abu Bakr, however, had taken refuge in a cave, where they hid from their pursuers. By the protection of God, the Meccans passed by the cave without noticing it, and Muhammad and Abu Bakr proceeded to Medina.

There, they were joyously welcomed by a throng of Medinans, as well as the Meccans who had gone ahead to prepare the way.

This was the Hijrah - anglicized as Hegira - usually, but inaccurately, translated as "Flight" - from which the Muslim era is dated. In fact, the Hijrah was not a flight, but a carefully planned migration that marks not only a break in history - the beginning of the Islamic era - but also, for Muhammad and the Muslims, a new way of life. Henceforth, the organizational principle of the community was not to be mere blood kinship, but the greater brotherhood of all Muslims. The men who accompanied Muhammad on the Hijrah were called the *Muhajiroon* - "those that made the Hijrah" or the "Emigrants" - while those in Medina who became Muslims were called the *Ansar*, or "Helpers."

Muhammad was well acquainted with the situation in Medina. Earlier, before the Hijrah, various of its inhabitants came to Mecca to offer the annual pilgrimage, and as the Prophet would take this opportunity to call visiting pilgrims to Islam, the group who came from Medina heard his call and accepted Islam.. They also invited Muhammad to settle

in Medina. After the Hijrah, Muhammad's exceptional qualities so impressed the Medinans that the rival tribes and their allies temporarily closed ranks as, on March 15, 624, Muhammad and his supporters moved against the pagans of Mecca.

The first battle, which took place near Badr, now a small town southwest of Medina, had several important effects. In the first place, the Muslim forces, outnumbered three to one, routed the Meccans. Secondly, the discipline displayed by the Muslims brought home to the Meccans, perhaps for the first time, the abilities of the man they had driven from their city. Thirdly, one of the allied tribes which had pledged support to the Muslims in the Battle of Badr, but had then proved lukewarm when the fighting started, was expelled from Medina one month after the battle. Those who claimed to be allies of the Muslims, but tacitly opposed them, were thus served warning: membership in the community imposed the obligation of total support.

A year later the Meccans struck back. Assembling an army of three thousand men, they met the Muslims at Uhud, a ridge outside Medina. After initial successes, the Muslims were driven back and the Prophet himself was wounded. As the Muslims were not completely defeated, the Meccans, with an army of ten thousand, attacked Medina again two years later but with quite different results. At the Battle of the Trench, also known as the Battle of the Confederates, the Muslims scored a signal victory by introducing a new form of defense. On the side of Medina from which attack was expected, they dug a trench too deep for the Meccan cavalry to clear without exposing itself to the archers posted behind earthworks on the Medina side. After an inconclusive siege, the Meccans were forced to retire. Thereafter Medina was entirely in the hands of the Muslims.

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