

CHAPTER EIGHT



Casting terror into their hearts

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The Battle of the Trench

AFTER THE EXPULSION OF THE QAYNUOA AND NADIR JEWS FROM Medina, some of those who remained approached the Quraysh, offering an alliance against Muhammad and the Muslims. The Quraysh readily accepted and asked them: "You, O Jews, are the first scripture people and know the nature of our dispute with Muhammad. Is our religion the best or is his?"¹ The Jews replied, as might be expected under the circumstances, that of course the pagan Quraysh religion was better. When Muhammad heard of this, Allah gave him a revelation: "Hast thou not seen

should ask for hostages from among the Quraysh leaders, who would be released once Muhammad and the Muslims were defeated. The Qurayzah accepted his suggestion, whereupon Nu'aym hurried to the leaders of the Quraysh and Ghatafan and told them that the Jews were having second thoughts about their alliance, and wanted to reconcile with Muhammad. They had gone to the Prophet of Islam, said Nu'aym, offering him the heads of some of the Quraysh and Ghatafan, and Muhammad accepted. "So," Nu'aym concluded, "if the Jews send to you to demand hostages, don't send them a single man."¹³

Soon afterward, Abu Sufyan, a Quraysh chief, sent word to the Qurayzah that the attack must begin immediately. But the Qurayzah protested that it was the Sabbath and also, "we will not fight Muhammad along with you until you give us hostages whom we can hold as security until we make an end of Muhammad; for we fear that if the battle goes against you and you suffer heavily you will withdraw at once to your country and leave us while the man is in our country, and we cannot face him alone." Of course, this reply only confirmed for the Quraysh the suspicions that Nu'aym had fanned, and they indignantly refused to send any hostages. A strong wind blew up around this time also, making it impossible for the Quraysh to keep their tents up or fires going.

Abu Sufyan had had enough. He said to his men: "O Quraysh, we are not in a permanent camp; the horses and camels are dying; the B. Qurayzah have broken their word to us and we have heard disquieting reports of them. You can see the violence of the wind which leaves us neither cooking-pots, nor fire, nor tents to count on. Be off, for I am going!"¹⁴ The Quraysh began to abandon their positions around Medina, and soon the Ghatafan followed. Nu'aym's deception had broken the siege and saved Islam.

Dealing with the Banu Qurayzah

After the successful resolution of the Battle of the Trench, the Angel Gabriel made sure that Muhammad settled accounts with the Qurayzah Jews. According to Aisha, "When Allah's Messenger returned on the day

(of the battle) of *Al-Khandaq* (i.e., Trench), he put down his arms and took a bath. Then Jibril (Gabriel) whose head was covered with dust, came to him saying, 'You have put down your arms! By Allah, I have not put down my arms yet.' Allah's Messenger said, 'Where (to go now)?' Jibril said, 'This way,' pointing towards the tribe of Bani Quraiza. So Allah's Messenger went out towards them."¹⁵

As his armies approached the fortifications of the Qurayzah, Muhammad addressed them in terms that have become familiar usage for Islamic jihadists when speaking of Jews today—language that also made its way into the Qur'an: "You brothers of monkeys, has God disgraced you and brought His vengeance upon you?" *The Qur'an in three places (2:62-65; 5:59-60; and 7:166) says that Allah transformed the Sabbath-breaking Jews into pigs and monkeys.*

The Qurayzah Jews tried to soften his wrath, saying: "O Abu'l-Qasim [Muhammad], you are not a barbarous person." But the Prophet of Islam was in no mood to be appeased. He told the Muslims who were with him that a warrior who passed by on a white mule was actually Gabriel, "who has been sent to Banu Qurayza to shake their castles and strike terror to their hearts." The Muslims laid siege to the Qurayzah strongholds for twenty-five days, until, according to Ibn Ishaq, "they were sore pressed" and, as Muhammad had warned, "God cast terror into their hearts."¹⁶

Also casting terror in their hearts may have been the choices offered them by their own chief Ka'b ibn Asad, who had made and broken the treaty with Muhammad. The first was to accept Muhammad and Islam, "for by God it has become plain to you that he is a prophet who has been sent and that it is he that you find mentioned in your scripture; and then your lives, your property, your women and children will be saved."¹⁷ The second choice was to kill their wives and children, "leaving no encumbrances behind us," and go fight Muhammad. The third choice was to ambush the Prophet on the Sabbath. The Qurayzah rejected all three, but chose to surrender to the Muslims.

After some deliberations Muhammad decided to put the fate of the tribe into the hands of the Muslim warrior Sa'd bin Mu'adh. Sa'd was a

member of the Aws tribe that had previously had an alliance with the Jews of Medina, so perhaps Muhammad thought that the Qurayzah would accept his judgment as impartial, or at least that it would appear to be to any of the followers of the Prophet of Islam who might otherwise question his own ruling because of the close ties many of the Muslims had with the Jews of Medina. When Sa'd rode up on his donkey, Muhammad told him, "These people are ready to accept your judgment."

Sa'd replied: "I give the judgment that their warriors should be killed and their children and women should be taken as captives."

The Prophet of Islam was pleased. "O Sa'd! You have judged amongst them with (or similar to) the judgment of the King (Allah)."¹⁸ He confirmed Sa'd's judgment as that of Allah himself: "You have decided in confirmation to the judgment of Allah above the seven heavens."¹⁹ (Later, when Sa'd died, Ibn Ishaq records several early Muslim traditions asserting that the very throne of Allah shook.²⁰)

Sa'd's sentence was duly carried out, with Muhammad himself actively participating. According to Ibn Ishaq, "The apostle went out to the market of Medina (which is still its market today) and dug trenches in it. Then he sent for [the men of the Qurayzah] and struck off their heads in those trenches as they were brought out to him in batches." One of the Prophet's fiercest enemies among the Qurayzah, Huyayy, proclaimed: "God's command is right. A book and a decree, and massacre have been written against the Sons of Israel." Then Muhammad struck off his head.

In light of Sa'd's judgment to kill the men and enslave the women and children, one of the captives, Attiyah al-Qurazi, explained how the Muslims determined who was a man and who wasn't: "I was among the captives of Banu Qurayzah. They (the Companions) examined us, and those who had begun to grow hair (pubes) were killed, and those who had not were not killed. I was among those who had not grown hair."²¹

Ibn Ishaq puts the number of those massacred at "600 or 700 in all, though some put the figure as high as 800 or 900."²² Ibn Sa'd says "they were between six hundred and seven hundred in number."²³ As the Qurayzah were being led to Muhammad in groups, someone asked Ka'b

bin Asad what was happening. “Will you never understand?” replied the distraught leader of the Qurayzah. “Don’t you see that the summoner never stops and those who are taken away do not return? By Allah it is death!”²⁴

This mass killing is amply attested in various ahadith. One summarizes Muhammad’s dealings with the three Jewish tribes of Medina: “Bani An-Nadir and Bani Quraiza fought (against the Prophet violating their peace treaty), so the Prophet exiled Bani An-Nadir and allowed Bani Quraiza to remain at their places (in Medina) taking nothing from them till they fought against the Prophet again. He then killed their men and distributed their women, children and property among the Muslims, but some of them came to the Prophet and he granted them safety, and they embraced Islam. He exiled all the Jews from Medina. They were the Jews of Bani Qainuqa’, the tribe of ‘Abdullah bin Salam and the Jews of Bani Haritha and all the other Jews of Medina.”²⁵

Allah also sent down a revelation referring obliquely to the massacre: “And those of the People of the Book who aided them—Allah did take them down from their strongholds and cast terror into their hearts. (So that) some ye slew, and some ye made prisoners” (Qur’an 33:26). And Muhammad again delivered revelations ascribing victory to Allah alone (Qur’an 33:9-11).

Meanwhile, Muhammad’s cool head and trust in Allah when things looked bleakest for the Muslims stood him in good stead. Allah gave him a revelation, telling the Muslims to imitate him: “Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah” (Qur’an 33:21). Befitting his lofty status, Muhammad also received a revelation in which Allah admonishes the Muslims not to be so familiar with their prophet or his wives:

O ye who believe! Enter not the dwellings of the Prophet for a meal without waiting for the proper time, unless permission be granted you. But if ye are invited, enter, and, when your meal

is ended, then disperse. Linger not for conversation. Lo! That would cause annoyance to the Prophet, and he would be shy of (asking) you (to go); but Allah is not shy of the truth. And when ye ask of them (the wives of the Prophet) anything, ask it of them from behind a curtain. That is purer for your hearts and for their hearts. And it is not for you to cause annoyance to the messenger of Allah, nor that ye should ever marry his wives after him. Lo! That in Allah's sight would be an enormity. (Qur'an 33:53)

Finding excuses for a massacre

The massacre of the Banu Qurayzah has been understandably a source of embarrassment to Muslims. Various Muslim apologists have attempted to deny the incident altogether or to minimize the number of casualties. One Islamic scholar, W. N. Arafat, published a lengthy article in 1976 arguing that the massacre never happened, chiefly for the anachronistic reason that it would have violated Islamic law.²⁶ This is rather an odd argument given the fact that Muhammad readily set aside his principles on other occasions, as in the incident when his raiders killed Quraysh during the sacred month, and when he conceived his powerful attraction to Zaynab bint Jahsh. Others point to the treachery of the Banu Qurayzah as justifying Sa'd's sentence and Muhammad's approval of it. Yahiya Emerick, in his biography of Muhammad, says of Sa'd's judgment that "Muhammad did not intervene because he had already given up his right to alter the judgment." He does not repeat Muhammad's words affirming Sa'd's judgment as that of Allah.²⁷

Karen Armstrong argues that "it is not correct to judge the incident by twentieth-century standards" and that "in the early seventh century, an Arab chief would not be expected to show any mercy to traitors like Qurayzah."²⁸ That is true, but Armstrong misses the larger issue; as in all the incidents of Muhammad's life, he is still held up by Muslims around the world as "an excellent model of conduct" (Qur'an 33:21). In July 2006,

as Israeli forces prepared to move into Gaza in the wake of the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier by Hamas, a writer on a British Muslim Internet forum declared: “I’m so fed up with these dirty, filthy Israeli dogs. May Allah curse them and destroy them all, and may they face the same fate as Banu Qurayzah!”²⁹ No one accused him of illicitly importing seventh-century models into the present day.

The women of the Banu Mustaliq

Muhammad was now the undisputed master of Medina, and the Prophet of Islam enjoyed an immediate economic advantage. A hadith records that “people used to give some of their date-palms to the Prophet (as a gift), till he conquered Bani Quraiza and Bani An-Nadir, whereupon he started returning their favours.”³⁰ But challengers to his consolidation of power over all Arabia still remained. He received word that the Banu al-Mustaliq, an Arab tribe related to the Quraysh, were gathering against the Muslims, so he led the Muslims out to attack them. And Allah, according to Ibn Ishaq, “put the B. al-Mustaliq to flight and killed some of them and gave the apostle their wives, children and property as booty.”³¹

There were, according to one of the Muslim warriors, Abu Sa‘id al-Khadri, “some excellent Arab women” among the captives of the Banu Mustaliq. “We desired them, for we were suffering from the absence of our wives, (but at the same time) we also desired ransom for them.” The Qur’an permitted them to have sexual intercourse with slave girls captured in battle—“those captives whom your right hands possess” (4:24)—but if they intended to keep the women as slaves, they couldn’t collect ransom money for them. “So,” Abu Sa‘id explained, “we decided to have sexual intercourse with them but by observing ‘*azl*’—that is, *coitus interruptus*. Muhammad, however, told them this was not necessary: “It does not matter if you do not do it, for every soul that is to be born up to the Day of Resurrection will be born.”³² Conceptions and births were up to Allah alone.

From a twenty-first-century perspective this is one of the most problematic aspects of Muhammad’s status as “an excellent model of conduct”: the