Early Converts to Islam and Their Persecution

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Though Abu Lahab frequently succeeded in dispersing the crowds that gathered to hear the Apostle's homilies, word nevertheless spread in Makkah about them. Some people talked about the message of Islam. The thoughtful ones among them posed the question: "What is this religion to which Muhammad is inviting us?" This question showed curiosity on their part regarding the message of Islam, and a few among them wanted to know more about it.

In the days that followed, Muhammad made numerous attempts to preach to the Makkans. Abu Lahab and his confederate, Abu Jahl, did what they could to sabotage his work but they could never deflect him from his aim.

Muhammad, may God bless him and his Ahlul-Bait, realized that his work was not going to be easy. He knew that he would encounter many obstacles, and that he would have to contend with fierce and sustained opposition of the idolaters. But he counted upon God's mercy to enable him to overcome opposition.

It was a strange message that Muhammad brought to the Arabs, and it was unique. No one had ever heard anything like it before. Muhammad, the Messenger of God, told the Arabs not to worship the multitudes of inanimate objects made of stone or wood which they themselves had fashioned, and which had no power either to give anything to them or to take anything away from them.

Instead, he told them, they ought to give their obedience to Allah, the One Lord of the whole universe. He also told them that in His sight, in the sight of their Creator, they were all equal, and if they became Muslim, they would all become brothers of each other.

Muhammad also wished to reorganize Arab society. The new doctrine that he put forward for this purpose, made Faith instead of Blood, the "linchpin" of the community. But the Arabs were bred in the code of pagan custom and convention; they believed in the basic tribal and kinship structures. For them "Blood" was the only basis of social organization. In their perception, if Faith were allowed to supplant Blood in this equation, it would wreck the whole structure of the Arab society.

Muhammad also called upon the rich Arabs to share their wealth with the poor and the under-privileged. The poor, he said, had a right to receive their share out of the wealth of the rich. Such sharing, he further said, would guarantee the equitable distribution of wealth in the community.

Many of the rich Arabs were money-lenders; or rather, they were "loan sharks." They had grown rich by lending money to the poor classes at exorbitant rates of interest. The poor could never repay their debts, and were thus held in economic servitude in perpetuity. Sharing their ill-gotten wealth with the same people they had been exploiting, was for them, tantamount to a "sacrilege." By suggesting to them that they share their wealth with the poor, Muhammad had tampered with a hornets' nest!

For the Arabs, all these were new and unfamiliar ideas; in fact they were revolutionary. By preaching such revolutionary ideas, Muhammad had infuriated the old establishment. Most furious amongst them was the Umayyad clan of the Quraysh. Its members were the leading usurers and capitalists of Makkah, and they were the high priests of the pagan pantheon. In Muhammad and the message of Islam, they saw a threat to their social system which was based upon privilege and force. They, therefore, resolved to maintain the status quo. In the years to come, they were to form the spearhead of an implacable war against Islam, and of die-hard opposition to Muhammad.

But there were also a few individuals who found a strong appeal in the new ideas which Muhammad was introducing, collectively called Islam. In fact, they found them so irresistible, that they accepted them.

Among the earliest converts to Islam were Yasir; his wife, Sumayya; and their son, Ammar. They were the first family all members of which accepted Islam simultaneously, thus making up the First Muslim Family.

Islam held special appeal for the depressed classes in Makkah. When members of these classes became Muslim, they also became aware that as pagans they were despised and rejected by the highly class-conscious and race-conscious aristocracy of Makkah but Islam gave them a new self-esteem. As Muslims they found a new pride in themselves.

Most of the early converts to Islam were "poor and weak." But there were a few rich Muslims also like Hudhayfa bin Utba and Arqam bin Abil-Arqam. And all those men whom Abu Bakr brought into Islam – Uthman, Talha, Zubayr, Abdur Rahman ibn Auf, Saad ibn Abi Waqqas and Abu Obaidah ibn al-Jarrah – were also rich and powerful. They were members of the various clans of the Quraysh.

We can assume that at the beginning, the pagan aristocrats of Makkah witnessed the efforts of Islam to win recognition, more with amusement than with irritation, not to speak of the hatred and the hysteria which gripped them a little later. But as the new movement began to gather momentum, they sensed that the ideas which Muhammad was broadcasting, were really "dangerous," and there was nothing funny about them. They argued that their forefathers had

worshipped idols for countless generations, therefore idolatry was right; and they could not allow Muhammad to meddle with their mode of worship.

But Muhammad was not content merely with denouncing idolatry. Far more dangerous and frightening to the all-grasping Umayyads were his ideas of economic and social justice which threatened to pull down the fortress of their privileges; the old structure of authority and hierarchy; and all the fossilized institutions of the past. They made it clear, therefore, that privilege was something they were not going to relinquish – at any cost – come hell or high water.

But the one idea that the self-selected elite of the Quraysh found most outrageous, was the "notion," fostered by Muhammad, that the members of the depressed, despised and exploited classes, many of them their slaves, now converted to Islam, were their equals – the equals of the high and the mighty Quraysh! The staple of their life was conceit and arrogance, and equality with their own slaves, ex-slaves and clients, was utterly unthinkable to them. They were obsessed with delusions of their own "superiority" to the rest of mankind.

By promulgating the "heterodox" doctrine of equality – the equality of the master and the slave, the rich and the poor; and the Arab and the non-Arab; by repudiating claims ofsuperiority of the bloodline, and by teaching that in the sight of God, the status of a believer was infinitely higher than the status of all the unbelievers in the world, Muhammad had committed "lese majesty" against the Quraysh!

The Quraysh worshipped many idols, and race was one of them.

But racial pride is discounted by Islam. According to Al-Qur'an al-Majid, all men have descended from Adam, and Adam was a handful of dust. Iblis (Satan, the Devil) became the accursed one precisely because he argued for the superiority of what he presumed to be his high origins as against what he considered to be the lowly origins of man.

"Man," he said, "was created from dust whereas I was created from fire." Such a sense of exclusivism which also comes to a people purely out of a desire to claim superior quality of blood in their beings, has been denounced by Islam in the strongest terms. Islam has knocked down the importance of race, nationality, color and privilege, and has forbidden Muslims to classify men into groups on grounds of blood and/or geographical contiguity or particular privilege which they might claim for themselves.

In the sight of Qur'an, the most exalted person is the muttaqi – that is, one who loves and obeys God at all times. In Islam, the only test of a person's quality, is his or her love for the Creator. All other trappings of individual life are meaningless.

But as stated above, the Quraysh were not in a receptive mood for such ideas. They were

perhaps intellectually incapable of grasping them. They considered them as rank blasphemy, and therefore, utterly intolerable. It was then that they resolved not only to oppose Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, but also to destroy the "heresy" called Islam itself before it could strike roots and become viable. They were driven by Hubris – the pride that inflates itself beyond the human scale – and by lust for power to make such a resolve against Muhammad and Islam. With this resolution, the Quraysh declared their intention to fight in the defense of their idols and fetishes as well as in the defense of their economic and social system.

Makkah was in a state of war!

The Quraysh opened the campaign against Islam by harassing and persecuting the Muslims. At the beginning, persecution was confined to jeers, jibes and insults. But as time went on, the infidels moved from the violence of words to the violence of deeds. They refrained from inflicting physical injury upon Muhammad himself for fear of provoking reprisals; but they had no inhibitions in hurting the rank-and-file Muslims. For a long time, it were the latter who bore the brunt of the wrath of the Quraysh.

Ibn Ishaq

Then the Quraysh incited people against the companions of the Apostle who had become Muslims. Every tribe fell upon the Muslims among them, beating them and seducing them from their religion. God protected His Apostle from them through his uncle (Abu Talib), who, when he saw what Quraysh were doing, called upon Banu Hashim and Banu Al-Muttalib to stand with him in protecting the Apostle. This they agreed to do, with the exception of Abu Lahab. ((The Life of the Messenger of God

Some victims of persecution:

Bilal, the Ethiopian slave of Umayya bin Khalaf. Umayya and other infidels tortured him in the savage glare of the torrid sun of Makkah, and they tortured him beyond the limits of human endurance. But he was fortified by inner sources of strength and courage which never failed him. Love of God and the love of His Messenger made it possible for him to endure torture with cheer. Abu Bakr bought him from his master and set him free. When the Apostle migrated to Medina, he appointed Bilal the first Muezzin of Islam. His rich and powerful voice rang through the air of Medina with the shout of Allah-o-Akbar (Great is the Lord). In later years,

when the conquest of the peninsula was completed, the Apostle of God appointed Bilal his secretary of treasury.

Khabab ibn el-Arat was a young man of twenty when he accepted Islam. He was a client of Banu Zuhra. The Quraysh tortured him day after day. He migrated with the Prophet to Medina.

Suhaib bin Sinan had been captured and was sold as a slave by the Greeks. When he became a Muslim, the Quraysh beat him up savagely but could not shake his faith.

Abu Fukaiha was the slave of Safwan bin Umayya. He accepted Islam at the same time as Bilal. Like Bilal, he was also dragged by his master on hot sand with a rope tied to his feet. Abu Bakr bought him and emancipated him. He migrated to Medina with the Prophet but died before the battle of Badr.

Lubina was a female slave of Mumil bin Habib. Amin Dawidar writes in his book, Pictures From the Life of the Prophet (Cairo, Egypt, 1968), that Umar bin al-Khattab, the future khalifa of the Muslims, tortured her, and whenever he paused, he said: "I have not stopped beating you out of pity. I have stopped because I am exhausted." He resumed beating her after he had rested. Abu Bakr bought her and set her free.

Zunayra was another female slave. When she declared her faith in Islam, Umar ibn al-Khattab, and Abu Jahl, took turns in torturing her until she became blind. Amin Dawidar states that many years later she recovered her sight, and the Quraysh attributed this recovery to the "sorcery" of Muhammad. Abu Bakr bought her and set her free.

Nahdiyya and Umm Unays were two other female slaves who became Muslims. Their masters tortured them for accepting Islam. Abu Bakr bought them and gave them their freedom.

There were some other Muslims who were not slaves but they were "poor and weak." They too endured torture. Among them were Ammar ibn Yasir and his parents. Another member of this group was Abdullah ibn Masood, a young Muslim. He was distinguished among the companions of the Prophet by his knowledge and learning, and he was one of the earliest huffaz (men who knew Al-Qur'an al-Majid by heart) in Islam. As each new verse was revealed, he heard it from the Prophet and memorized it.

It is reported that whenSurah Rahman (the 55th chapter) was revealed, the Apostle of God asked his companions who among them would go into the Kaaba and read it before the infidels. Other companions hung back but Abdullah ibn Masood volunteered to go. He went into the Kaaba and read the new chapter out aloud. Next to the Apostle himself, Abdullah ibn Masood was the first man to read Qur'an in the Kaaba before a hostile crowd of the infidels. .The latter mauled him repeatedly but could not intimidate him into silence

Ibn Ishaq

Yahya b. Urwa b. al-Zubayr told me as from his father that the first man to read the Qur'an loudly in Mecca after the Apostle was Abdullah bin Masud. (Life of the Messenger of God)

Another member of this group was Abu Dharr elGhiffari. He belonged to the tribe of Ghiffar which made its living by brigandage. From travelers he heard that a prophet had appeared in Makkah who exhorted the Arabs to abandon idolatry, to worship only Allah, to speak nothing but the truth, and not to bury their daughters alive. He felt that he was strongly attracted to this Prophet, and traveled to Makkah to verify the veracity of the reports he had heard about him.

In Makkah Abu Dharr was a stranger. He had heard that Muhammad had made many enemies for himself by preaching against Arabian polytheism. He, therefore, hesitated to ask anyone about him. He spent the whole day in the shade of the Kaaba watching passers-by. In the evening, Ali ibn Abi Talib chanced to walk past him. Ali noticed that Abu Dharr was a stranger in town, and invited him to his home for supper. Abu Dharr accepted the invitation, and later appraised Ali of the purpose of his visit to Makkah. Ali, of course, was only too glad to conduct his guest into the presence of his master, Muhammad Mustafa.

Abu Dharr learned from the Messenger of God the meaning of the message of Islam. He found both the messenger and the message irresistible. He was carried away by the power of the appeal of Islam. After accepting Islam, the very first thing that Abu Dharr wanted to do was to defy the infidels. He went into the Kaaba, and shouted:

"There is no God but Allah; and Muhammad is his Messenger."

As expected, the infidels fell upon him, and started raining blows upon him. From this brawl he was rescued by Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib, the uncle of the Prophet. He told the Makkans that Abu Dharr belonged to the tribe of Ghiffar whose territory lay astride the caravan routes to the north, and if they did any harm to him, his tribesmen would bar the access of their merchant caravans to Syria.

Abu Dharr el-Ghiffari is one of the most remarkable men in the history of Islam. He was the most fearless and the most outspoken man among all the companions of Muhammad Mustafa who once said that "the sky did not spread its canopy on any man who was more truthful than Abu Dharr." Fear of violence by the Quraysh did not deter these heroic and noble souls from accepting Islam, and each of them left a mark upon it by his or her sacrifices.

Also notable among early Muslims was Mas'ab ibn Umayr, a cousin of the father of Muhammad. Many years later, at the First Pledge of Akaba, the citizens of Yathrib requested the Prophet to send with them a teacher of Qur'an, and the choice fell upon him. This made him the first "official" in Islam. He was also the standard-bearer of the army of Islam in the

battle of Uhud but was killed in action.

If a member of a Makkan family accepted Islam, he was ostracized by it for all time, without any hope for him of rapprochement. Many Makkans saw Islam as a "divisive force" which was breaking up their families, and some of them thought that they ought to check this "divisiveness" from spreading. But beyond the threat of using force to suppress the new movement, they could not think of anything else that would prove more efficacious in halting its progress. They also thought that if they did not act swiftly and resolutely enough, it was not unlikely that every house in Makkah would become a battleground in which the protagonists of the old and the new faiths would be locked up in a sanguinary struggle against each other.

There were some others among the pagans who imagined that Muhammad was prompted by ambition to denounce their ancestral mode of worship and their idols. All of them put their heads together and tried to think of some unconventional solution of the problem. After a long discussion, they decided to send Utba, one of the chiefs of Quraysh, to meet Muhammad, and to try to "talk him out" of his mission. Utba was noted for his persuasive ability.

Utba called on the Apostle of God and said: "O Muhammad! Do not plant seeds of dissension and discord among the Arabs, and do not curse the gods and goddesses our ancestors have worshipped for centuries, and we are worshipping today. If your aim in doing so is to become a political leader, we are willing to acknowledge you as the sovereign of Makkah. If you want wealth, you just have to say so, and we shall provide you with all that we can. And if you are desirous of marriage in some noble family, you name it, and we shall arrange it for you."

Muhammad heard everything that Utba said but instead of showing any interest in rank or wealth or beauty, he read before him Surah Sajda, (32nd chapter of Qur'an), the newest revelation from Heaven. When the recitation was over, Utba returned to the Quraysh and advised them to leave Muhammad alone and not to meddle with him any more. He also told them that if Muhammad failed in his work, then they (the Quraysh) would lose nothing; but if he succeeded in it, then they would share all his power and glory.

But the Quraysh did not accept Utba's advice for restraint in dealing with Muhammad and his followers. They continued to persecute the Muslims as before and kept trying to think of some new wrinkle which would yield better results in halting the progress of Islam than all their violence had done until then.

Muhammad was protected by his uncle and guardian, Abu Talib. As long as Abu Talib was alive, the pagans could not molest his nephew. It occurred to some of them that they ought perhaps to persuade Abu Talib himself to waive his protection of Muhammad in the name of tribal solidarity. After all, tribal solidarity was something much too important to be treated with

levity even by Abu Talib, notwithstanding all his love for his nephew The Quraysh decided to send a delegation, composed of the leading figures of the tribe, to Abu Talib. The delegation called on him, and appealed to him in the name of the tribal solidarity of the Quraysh to waive his protection of Muhammad who was "disrupting" it so recklessly.

Abu Talib, of course, had no intention of waiving his protection of Muhammad. But he mollified the Qurayshi delegates with pious platitudes and placatory words, and they returned to their homes "empty-handed."

The delegates also realized that they had come home from a "phantom-chase;" but they were unfazed by their failure, and sometime later, they made another attempt to break up the "alliance" of Abu Talib and Muhammad. A new delegation went to see Abu Talib, and this time, its members took with them a handsome young man, one Ammarra ibn Walid, whom they offered to Abu Talib for a "son" if he surrendered Muhammad to them.

Abu Talib must have laughed at this new gambit of the Quraysh. Did they really believe that he would give them his own son for them to kill him, and that he would rear one of their sons as his own? The idea was most ludicrous but once again, Abu Talib handled the situation with his customary finesse, and they went back.

The second attempt of the Quraysh to coax Abu Talib into giving up Muhammad, had also failed. When the meaning of this failure sank into their minds, they realized that peaceful attempts to solve the problem had all been fruitless. They decided to try something more drastic. In sheer exasperation and frustration, the policy-makers of Quraysh adopted a tougher stance and sent their third and the last delegation to Abu Talib. Its purpose was to compel him to surrender Muhammad to them. The leaders of the delegation presented an ultimatum to Abu Talib: either he had to surrender Muhammad to them or else he would have to face the consequences of his refusal to do so.

Abu Talib was a man of cheerful temperament and sunny disposition, but it was a somber day in his life. The Quraysh, he knew, were not bluffing. He therefore called Muhammad and appraised him of the purport of the Qurayshi representation, and then added: "O life of your uncle! Do not place a burden upon me that I may find beyond my strength to carry."

Muhammad answered: "O my uncle! If the Quraysh place the sun on my right hand and the moon on my left, I shall not refrain from proclaiming the Oneness of God. In the execution of this duty, either I shall succeed and Islam shall spread; or, if I fail, I shall perish in the attempt."

Abu Talib was not the one to dissuade Muhammad from preaching Islam. But he was testing his resolution. Muhammad's forthright answer convinced and satisfied him that he would not falter, and he said: "Go my son, and do whatever you like. No one will dare to do any harm to

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Sir William Muir

...but the thought of desertion by his kind protector (Abu Talib) overcame him (Muhammad). He burst into tears, and turned to depart. Then Abu Talib called aloud: "Son of my brother! Come back." So he returned. And Abu Talib said: "Depart in peace, my nephew, and say whatever thou desirest. For by the Lord, I will not, in any wise, give thee up ever." (The Life of (Mohammed, 1877

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

Abu Talib said: "Go forth, my nephew, and say what you will. By God I swear I shall never betray you to your enemies." Abu Talib communicated his resolution to Banu Hashim and Banu al-Muttalib and spoke to them about his nephew with great admiration and deep appreciation of the sublimity of Muhammad's position. He asked them all to protect Muhammad against the Quraysh. All of them pledged to do so except Abu Lahab who declared openly his enmity to him and his withdrawal to the opposite camp.

.....Quraysh inflicted upon Muhammad's companions all sorts of injuries from which he was saved only through the protection of Abu Talib, Banu Hashim, and Banu al-Muttalib. The Life of Muhammad)

Foiled and checkmated repeatedly in this manner by Abu Talib, the patience of the idolaters reached the breaking point. After the failure of their third embassy to Abu Talib, they resolved to let loose all their frustrations and pent-up fury on the unprotected Muslims. They hoped to crush the new faith with terror and cruelty.

The first victims of pagan attrition and aggression were those Muslims who had no tribal affiliation in Makkah. Yasir and his wife, Sumayya, and their son, Ammar, had no tribal affiliation. In Makkah they were "foreigners" and there was no one to protect them. All three were savagely tortured by Abu Jahl and the other infidels. Sumayya, Yasir's wife, died while she was being tortured. She thus became the First Martyr in Islam. A little later, her husband, Yasir, was also tortured to death, and he became the Second Martyr in Islam.

Quraysh had stained their hands with innocent blood! In the roster of martyrs, Sumayya and her husband, Yasir, rank among the highest. They were killed for no reason other than their devotion to Allah and their love for Islam and Muhammad Mustafa. Those Muslims who were killed in the battles of Badr and Uhud, had an army to defend and to support them. But Yasir

and his wife had no one to defend them; they bore no arms, and they were the most defenseless of all the martyrs of Islam. By sacrificing their lives, they highlighted the truth of Islam, and they built strength into its structure. They made the tradition of sacrifice and martyrdom an integral part of the ethos of Islam.

Bilal, Khabab ibn el-Arat, Suhaib Rumi, and other poor and unprotected Muslims were made to stand in the torrid sun, and were flogged by the infidels. Food and water were denied to them in the vain hope that hunger and thirst will compel them to abandon Muhammad and Islam If the Quraysh found Muhammad alone, they seized the opportunity to molest him. They of course wished to kill him but they had to curb this urge. If they had killed him, they would have touched off vendetta or even civil war.

On one occasion, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, went into the Kaaba to read Al-Qur'an al-Majid. He was reading Qur'an when suddenly he was surrounded by the idolaters. They mobbed him, and they might have done him some great harm but for the intervention of Harith ibn Abi Hala, the nephew and the adopted son of Khadija, who happened to arrive on the scene just then. He entered the melee to defend the Messenger of God from the violence of the polytheists of Makkah.

Harith ibn Abi Hala kicked the infidels and fought with his fists. Most probably, he too was carrying a sword as all Arabs did but he did not wish to draw it, and to cause bloodshed in the precincts of the Kaaba. But in the fracas, one of the idolaters drew his dagger, and stabbed him repeatedly. He fell in a pool of his own blood, and died from multiple wounds in his chest, shoulders and temple. He was the first Muslim to be killed in the precincts of the Kaaba.

Harith was a young man of seventeen, and he made his life an oblation for Muhammad, the Apostle of God. He was the youngest victim of the spiraling and escalating violence of the infidels. He won the aureole of martyrdom to become the Third Martyr in Islam. His death, so early in life, made the Prophet extremely sad.

The Arab historians are silent on this subject but much bitter fighting must have taken place in Makkah between the Muslims and the idolaters during the years before the migration of the Prophet to Medina. Abu Talib protected his nephew as long as he lived. After his death, this duty devolved upon his son, Ali.

Ali was still a teenager when he appointed himself the body-guard of Muhammad, the Apostle of God. After the murder, in Kaaba, of Harith ibn Abi Hala, Ali accompanied his master whenever the latter went out of his house, and stood between him and his enemies. If a ruffian approached Muhammad menacingly, Ali at once challenged him, and came to grips with him.

D. S. Margoliouth

The persons whose admission to Islam was most welcomed were men of physical strength, and much actual fighting must have taken place at Mecca before the Flight; else the readiness with which the Moslems after the Flight could produce from their number tried champions, would be inexplicable. A tried champion must have been tried somewhere; and no external fights are recorded or are even the subject of an allusion for this period. (Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London, 1931)

There were no external fights in Makkah before the Migration of the Prophet to Medina but there were many fights in the streets and open spaces of the city. It was in these "battlefields" that Ali, the young lion, acquired all his martial skills. These "battles" in Makkah were a "dress rehearsal" of the role he was destined to play a few years later in Medina in the armed struggle of Islam and paganism. It was also in these early days, before the Migration of the Prophet to Medina, that Ali became "the first line of the defense of Islam." In fact, he also became, at the same time, the second line and the last line of the defense of Islam. This he and he alone, was to remain for the rest of his life.

Quraysh tortured the bodies of the unprotected Muslims in Makkah in the hope that they would compel them to forswear Islam, but they failed. No one from these "poor and weak" Muslims ever abjured Islam. Adverse circumstances can collaborate to break even the strongest of men, and for the Muslims, the circumstances could not have been more adverse. But those circumstances could not break them. Islam held them together.

For these "poor and weak" Muslims, Islam was a "heady" experience. It had pulled life together for them; had put meaning into it, had run purpose through it, and had put horizons around it. They, therefore, spurned security, comforts and luxuries of life; and some among them like Sumayya and her husband, Yasir, spurned life itself; but they upheld their Faith. They died but they did not compromise with Falsehood.

May God be pleased with these heroic and noble souls and may He bless them. Their faith and morale were, as the Quraysh discovered, just as unconquerable as the faith and morale of their master and leader, Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God. They were diamonds that Muhammad found in the rocks of the world. They were few in number but priceless in value; to be expressed, not by quantity but only by quality, and that quality was sublime.

Source: A Restatement of the History of Islam and Muslims CE 570 to 661

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