THE CALL OF MUHAMMAD

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A page from the early history of Islam

Some of the leading men of Mecca went to Abu Tálib, the aged uncle of Muhammad, and said: "O Abu Tálib, your nephew has insulted our gods and religion, mocked our way of life, and accused our forefathers of error; either you must stop him or you must let us get at him, for you yourself are in the same position as we are in opposition to him and we will rid you of him."

Muhammad's father had died before Muhammad was born and his mother when he was four years of age, and his grandfather, who took charge of him, two years later. Thereafter it was Abu Tálib who looked after him and became fond of him just like his own son. At the age of forty Muhammad received a message from God to rise and warn his people. He was known and respected as trustworthy and righteous among his countrymen. But they refused to accept his call. They only ridiculed him in the beginning but became rather concerned about his activities as he gained a number of disciples. When the Meccans came to Abu Tálib complaining about his nephew he gave them a conciliatory answer and sent them back.

Muhammad, in the meantime, carried on with his mission. So they went to his uncle again. "Unless you rid us of him," they threatened, "we will fight the pair of you until one side perishes."

This set Abu Tálib thinking. He feared for the safety of his nephew. He called for him and explained to him what he had been told.

"Spare me and yourself," he said. "Do not place on me a burden greater than I can bear."

Muhammad did not have many helpers among his people, and those who had accepted him were weak and defenceless. And now, he thought for a moment, he was going to lose the support of his beloved uncle as well.

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1 Text of a talk given to a youth group at the Shah Jehan Mosque, Woking, Surrey, England.
“O my uncle,” he said after he had heard his story, “if they put the sun in my right hand and the moon in my left on condition that I abandoned this cause. I would not abandon it until God has made it victorious, or I perish therein.” Then he broke into tears and got up.

His uncle was deeply moved at the faith and determination of his nephew. “All right, go and say what you please,” he said, “for, by God! I will never give you up on any account.”

A third attempt of the Meccans to give another young man to Abu Tálíb in exchange for Muhammad — so that they might kill Muhammad and be spared of the tribal retaliation at the same time — also failed. The situation worsened, the quarrel became heated and the people were sharply divided.

On certain days of the year fairs were held at Mecca and visitors came from far off places. At the next fair the Meccans had to do something to prevent the influence of Muhammad from growing. Should they denounce him as a káhin (soothsayer), a sorcerer, a poet or one possessed? It was hard to come to a conclusion because they knew all these charges were false. But they agreed at last to warn everyone about Muhammad that he was a sorcerer who had brought a message by which he separated a man from his father, from his mother, from his wife, or from his family. Thus the Meccans tried to stir up hostility against the Prophet. They succeeded, however, after the fair was over, in making the whole of Arabia talk about Muhammad.

Emigration to Abyssinia

Even at the fifth year of the call, when there was no sign of relief from the ruthless tortures of his townsfolk, and Muhammad was unable to protect the life and honour of the new members of his faith, he sent some of them to Abyssinia. When the Quraysh, the tribesmen of Muhammad, came to know that some Muslims had found refuge in that far-off land, two of their determined men went to the Negus, the King of Abyssinia, to incite him against the Muslims and to get them returned to Mecca. After hearing their version the Negus asked the Muslims what was the religion for which they had forsaken their land and people. The answer of Ja’far Ibn Abi Tálíb, one of the Muslims, was:

“O King, we were an ignorant people, given to idolatry. We used to eat corpses even of dead animals,
and to do all kinds of disgraceful things. We did not make good our obligations to our relations, and we ill-treated our neighbours. The strong among us would thrive at the expense of the weak till, at last, God raised a prophet for our reformation. His descent, his righteousness, his integrity and his piety are all well-known to us. He called us to the worship of God, and exhorted us to give up idolatry and stone worship. He enjoined us to speak the truth, to make good our trusts, to respect ties of kinship, and to do good to our neighbours. He taught us to shun everything foul and to avoid bloodshed. He forbade all manner of indecent things, telling lies, misappropriating orphans' belongings, and bringing false accusations against the chastity of women. So we believed in him, followed him, and acted upon his teachings. Thereupon our people began to do us wrong, to subject us to tortures, thinking that we might thus abjure our faith and revert to idolatry. When, however, their cruelties exceeded all bounds, we came out to seek an asylum in your country, where we hope we shall come to no harm.”

This was the message of Islam the Prophet had brought. It was a simple message indeed, but his people would not accept it. Their customs, habits, blood-feuds, practices of idolatry, etc., which they called their way of life or civilization, upon which they found their forefathers and upon which they had built a structure that kept them together in their ways of evil and wickedness, were breaking down under the pressure of the Prophet’s message. This is what they called insulting their gods, separating man from his father and mother, or creating dissensions among them. They failed to understand that Islam had come to bring them out of darkness into light, to give them a new life after they were morally and spiritually dead. But the Prophet had to meet the fate of those who had passed before him, for instance, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. “Do men think,” says the Qur’ân, “that they will be left alone, on saying, We believe, and not be tried?” (29:2). It is only by suffering and trials that the best, or worst, in human nature comes up. The coming years were to decide the fate of Muhammad and his companions. The only hope they had was their belief and faith in God, Who had sent them a guidance in the form of the Qur’ân.
Some of the fundamental teachings of the Qur’án

The Qur’án is the book which was given to Muhammad. He knew it by heart, as did many of his companions. It was recited in prayers five times a day and the same practice is still being carried on in all parts of the Muslim world. It is thus the most extensively read book in the world. The Qur’án is the basis of the religion of Islam, professed by 400 million people inhabiting this earth. It was revealed piecemeal, during the twenty-three years of Muhammad’s ministry, so that it might comfort and strengthen the heart of the Prophet in the ups and downs of his life. It talked of the history of the previous nations and Divinely raised messengers. It talked of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Jesus and many others. According to the Qur’án every nation had a warner, and Muslims are expected to believe in them all. With the belief in the Unity of God and all the messengers of God, Islam has laid the foundation for the doctrine of the unity of mankind. There are many things mentioned in the Qur’án which are also found in the Bible, but at times it differs in details and at times it contradicts the biblical version. It holds that all prophets were sinless — thus nothing evil is mentioned about them in the Qur’án. It has again cleared the charges which were laid against the fair names of, for instance, Abraham, Solomon and Jesus.

Muhammad was an unlettered person. He could not have edited the previous scriptures to form a book of his own. The Qur’án was revealed to him through the agency of Gabriel, and, if there are similarities between the Qur’án and the Bible it is because the latter was also originally revealed to the Israelite prophets. The unity and majesty of God is the oft-recurring theme of the Qur’án. Faith in One God should be the pivot of human life. There are no associates with God. One should turn only to Him and serve none else beside Him. But to achieve this end needs constant struggle. The human mind has often been misled to seek easier ways to reach God. The result has been that self-made standards of moral and spiritual life have come into existence, and they have become so deep-rooted that the voice of a man of God sounds jarring to the ears. That is what had happened to the Arabian peninsula in the 6th century. It was not only in Arabia, but “corruption had appeared on land and sea” (30: 41). Moral and spiritual values had broken down everywhere. It was at that time that a man rose to give a message of hope to the whole world. But as has been the case with all the other God-sent reformers, his own people rejected him.
A view of Mount Uhud

The part enclosed in a circle shows the cavern where the Prophet Muhammad rested after having been wounded in the Battle of Uhud in 624 C.E. In the engagement the Prophet Muhammad received injuries to his teeth.
The Prophet's visit to Tá'if

When the hostility of the Quraysh grew the Prophet turned his attention to a nearby place called Tá'if. He went there alone with great hopes and met the three chiefs and invited them to Islam. One of them said: "I would tear up the covering of the Ka'bah, if God had sent you."

The second chief remarked: "Could not God have found someone better than you to send?"

The third said: "By God! don't let me ever speak to you. If you are a messenger from God as you say you are, you are far too important for me to reply to, and, if you are lying against God, it is not right that I should speak to you!"

When the Prophet returned from Tá'if after staying there for a few days he returned a much sadder man than before. He was followed by the hooligans of the town and his legs were pelted with stones. For three long miles he was not allowed to rest anywhere. The louts and the slaves of Tá'if shouted against him and insulted him. At last his persecutors left and he found a place of safety in a vineyard.

The Prophet had expected better treatment from the people of Tá'if, but he was sadly mistaken in his expectations. He felt tired, in despair and afflicted. He found his strength failing. He opened his heart to the Lord thus:

"O my Lord! To You do I complain of the feebleness of my strength, of my lack of resourcefulness and of my insignificance in the eyes of the people. You are the most Merciful of all the merciful. You are the Lord of the weak. To whom are You to entrust me, to an unsympathetic foe, who would sullenly frown at me, or to a close friend, whom You have given control over my affairs? Not in the least do I care for anything except that I may have Your protection for me. In the light of Your face do I seek shelter — the light which illumines the heaven and dispels all sorts of darkness, and which controls all affairs in this world, as well as in the hereafter. May it never be that I should incur Your wrath! Or that You should be angry with me! There is no strength, nor power, but through You."

The owners of the orchard took pity on him and sent a bunch of grapes by their Christian slave ‘Addas. When ‘Addas heard the message of the Prophet he accepted it, and bent over him, kissed his head, his hands and his feet.
"You rascal," his master asked him when ‘Addas returned, "why were you kissing that man's head, hands and feet?"

"He is the finest man in the country," the slave replied, "who has told me things that only a prophet could know."

"You rascal," the master said again, "don't let him seduce you from your religion, for it is better than his."

A view of the road to Medina from Badr

The flight to Medina

After his return from Tá'if the life at Mecca became more difficult for Muhammad. Someone assured him of protection before he could enter Mecca again. There did not seem to be any future for Islam in this town. When he met some pilgrims from Medina who were visiting Mecca
he preached the message of Islam to them and they immediately embraced the new faith. These new disciples helped to bring more people to the fold of Islam in Medina. The next year a dozen of them went to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage and they swore allegiance to the Prophet that they would follow him in anything that was right. Next year more people who had accepted Islam at Medina came to Mecca. They invited the Prophet to go to Medina and took an oath to defend him as they defended their wives and children. The Medinite Muslims thus came to be known as Ansar, or Helpers in the history of Islam.

The plant which was being stifled at Mecca took a new lease of life at Medina. The Muslims gradually emigrated to this new post of Islam, and the last of all was Muhammad himself.

“Verily, He that has enjoined the Qur’án upon you,” so came the revelation of God to the Prophet, “shall bring you back to Mecca” (28 : 85). If those who disbelieved did not aid him, God certainly did. The prosperity of Islam was indeed bound with this Flight or Hijra, after which the Muslim calendar is named. When the helplessness of the Prophet reached its climax there shone a new light out of darkness. Islam was born again, never to die as long as the world existed.

Islam, essentially a religion of peace

The meaning of Islam is “to enter into peace”. A Muslim (a follower of Islam, wrongly called a Muhammadan in Christendom) is he who makes his peace with God and man. Peace with God means a voluntary surrender or submission to God’s will and command and peace with man signifies an active attitude of brotherliness towards one’s fellow beings. “Whoever submits (aslama) himself entirely,” declares the Qur’án, “to God and he is the doer of good (to others), he has his reward from his Lord, and there is no fear for such nor shall they grieve” (2 : 112). At another place the ultimate goal to which Islam leads is called the abode of peace (10 : 25).

Muslims greet each other with assalamu ‘alaikum!, which means “peace be upon you”. According to the Qur’án Islam is not a new religion. It was the religion of Abraham and Jacob and the prophets who were raised among their descendants (2 : 132); it was the religion of the Israelite prophets, who judged the Jews by the Torah which
contained guidance and light (5:44). Entire submission to the will of God was the religion of Jesus Christ and of all the prophets of God who were raised among different nations. "And there is not a people but a warner has gone among them" (35:24). The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of God be upon him!) was not the founder of Islam but its last exponent. Muslims are those who believe in the revelation which was given to the Prophet and that which was given before him (2:4). At another place the Qur’án says:

"Say: We believe in God and (in) that which has been revealed to us, and (in) that which was revealed to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and (in) that which was given to Moses and Jesus, and (in) that which was given to the prophets from their Lord; we do not make any distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit" (2:136).

The Muslims at Medina invaded

The enmity of the Meccans to the Prophet had blinded them and they had lost all sense of justice and fairness. They could not find anything good in Islam. They opposed the Prophet tooth and nail when he was at Mecca and now they could not endure to see the small band of Muslims living peacefully and flourishing at Medina. They had tried their best to get the emigrants returned from Abyssinia. How could the Quraysh sit idle when the man whom they wanted to kill had slipped from their hands? Three major attempts were made by them to invade Medina and destroy the growing community of Muslims over there.

The first was at the place of Badr, close to Medina. Numerically the number of the opponents of Islam was three times greater than the Muslims, and they were also superior in every respect. The Prophet became extremely concerned about this state of affairs. "A party of the believers were surely averse. . . . As if they were being driven to death" (The Qur’án, 8:5-6). Islam does not believe in aggressive wars but when Muslims were attacked they had to defend themselves whether they liked it or not. In what precarious situations Muslims were could be judged by the prayer of the Prophet when he prostrated himself for a long time beseeching the help of God, saying:

"O God! Should You allow this small band of believers to perish this day, no one will be left on
earth to worship You and carry Your message to the world.”

As if his prayers were accepted he came out of his hut smiling, reciting loudly the following verse of the Qur'án:

“Soon shall the hosts be routed and they shall turn their back” (54:45).

The Quraysh were defeated. For the first time in their prolonged trials the Muslims saw the promise of God come true that the opposition to Islam would break down.

The Quraysh again prepared an expedition of revenge, and in the third year after the Flight, they marched towards Medina, this time 3,000 in number. The forces met at Uhud, a hill three miles north of Medina. This battle remained rather indecisive. The Muslims suffered heavy casualties, but in the end the Quraysh had to turn back disappointed.

The third main attempt which the Quraysh made is known as the Battle of the Confederates in the history of Islam. It occurred in the fifth year of the Flight when a huge army (estimated between ten to twenty-four thousand) surrounded Medina. Many other tribes of Arabia had joined hands with the Quraysh this time. A greater part of Medina was protected by rocks and stone walls of houses. On the open side a broad and deep trench was dug by the Prophet and his Companions. The enemy had come from all directions and the eyes of the believers had turned dull and the hearts rose up to the throats, this is how the Qur'án describes the whole situation (33:10-11). But, even at that time of dread and terror, they knew in their hearts: “This is what God and His Messenger has promised us, and God and His Messenger spoke the truth; and it only increased them in faith and submission” (33:22).

The siege lasted for about a month, which in itself exhausted the patience of the besiegers. The final blow was given by a violent storm, which the Quraysh and their confederates took as an evil portent, and they withdrew from the battlefield the same night. Never again could they muster such a huge force against Islam.

The Prophet’s return to Mecca

On the 10th of Ramadhan in the eighth year of the Flight the Prophet marched on Mecca with ten thousand of his righteous followers. The Meccans were taken by
surprise and surrendered without resistance. A general amnesty was announced even to those who had been inveterate and implacable enemies of Muhammad and his teachings. "This day there is no reproof against any one of you," said the Prophet. Change of faith was no condition for forgiveness. The Qur'án does not believe in compulsion in religion (2 : 256).

"The truth is from your Lord, so let him who wishes believe and let him who wishes disbelieve" (The Qur'án, 18 : 29).

It was this gesture of kindness, and not the sword, which won for Islam at the end thousands of new adherents.

Muhammad was an orphan and he became the ruler of a State. He saw life in its manifold phases and lived it. He has thus become an ideal example for humanity. He was weak and defenceless but he saw Islam victorious before he breathed his last at the age of sixty-three. May his soul rest in peace, the ultimate goal towards which Islam leads!