

## Umar's Conversion to Islam

### Umar's Conversion to Islam – A.D. 616

The most notable event of the year 6 of the Proclamation was the conversion to Islam of Umar bin al-Khattab, a future khalifa of the Muslims. He was one of the most rabid enemies of Islam and of Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and was a great tormentor of the Muslims. The modern Egyptian historian, Amin Dawidar, says that Umar's hatred of Islam, and his hostility to Muhammad, were matched only by the hatred of, and hostility to them, of his own maternal uncle, Abu Jahl.

It is said that one day in sheer exasperation, Umar resolved to kill Muhammad, and thus to extinguish the flame of Islam itself. He left his home with this intention.

As already noted, the Muslims at this time (the last days of the year 6) still gathered in the house of Arqam bin Abi al-Arqam to say their congregational prayers. They were beginning to assemble when one of them, looking out the window, saw Umar approaching toward the house with a drawn sword. In a state of considerable alarm, he told the other members of the congregation what he saw. Presumably, they too were alarmed.

But Hamza, who was also present in the house of Arqam, reassured them, and said that if Umar was coming with good intentions, then it was all right; but if not, then he (Hamza) would run him (Umar) through with his (Umar's) own sword. But it so happened that Umar had come with the intention of accepting Islam, and he did.

The story is told that Umar was going toward Dar-ul-Arqam with the intention of killing Muhammad when a passer-by stopped him, and informed him that his own sister and her husband had become Muslims, and advised him to put his own house in order before undertaking any other grandiose and chimerical project.

### Muhammad Husayn Haykal

Umar went there (to Dar-ul-Arqam) resolved to kill Muhammad and thus relieve the Quraysh of its burden, restore its ravaged unity, and re-establish respect for the gods that Muhammad had castigated.

On the road to Makkah he was met by Nu'aym ibn Abdullah. Upon learning what Umar was about, Nu'aym said, "By God, you have deceived yourself, O Umar! Do you think that Banu Abd Manaf would let you run around alive once you had killed their son Muhammad? Why don't you return to your own house and at least set it straight?" (*The Life of Muhammad*)

Umar was furious to hear that his sister and her husband had become Muslims. He immediately changed his direction from Arqam's house to her house to investigate the allegation. In reply to his questions, she gave a discreet but evasive answer.

### **Ibn Ishaq**

Umar came to the door (of the house of his sister) as Khabbab (a companion of the Prophet) was studying under her guidance the Sura Taha and also "When the Sun is Overthrown" (81:1). The polytheists used to call this reading "rubbish".

When Umar came in, his sister saw that he meant mischief and hid the sheets from which they were reading. Khabbab slipped away into the house. Umar asked what was the gibberish he had heard, to which she answered that it was merely conversation between them..." (*The Life of the Messenger of God*)

Umar exploded in wrath at what he believed to be a prevarication, and struck his sister in her face. The blow caused her mouth to bleed. He was going to strike again but the sight of blood made him pause. He suddenly appeared to relent, and then in a changed tone asked her to show him what she was reading. She sensed a change in him but said: "You are an unclean idolater, and I cannot allow you to touch the Word of God."

Umar immediately went away, washed himself, returned to his sister's home, read the text of Qur'an, and then went to the house of Arqam where he formally accepted Islam.

Sir William Muir says that Umar's conversion to Islam took place at the close of the sixth year of the Prophet's mission. He adds the following footnote:

It (Umar's conversion) occurred in Dhul Hijjah the last month of the year. The believers are said now to have amounted in all to 40 men and ten women; or by other accounts, to 45 men and eleven women. (*The Life of Mohammed, 1877, p. 95*)

Umar was about 35 years old when he became a Muslim.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

At that time, (when he was converted to Islam) Umar ibn al Khattab was a mature man of thirty to thirty-five years of age. (*The Life of Muhammad*)

Many Muslims claim that with Umar's conversion, Islam recruited new strength, and Muslims were now emboldened to dare the pagans. They could, according to these claims, now come out of their places of hiding, and pray openly in the precincts of Kaaba, or rather, it was Umar himself who brought them out of their hiding places, and they were not now afraid of Abu Jahl or of anyone else.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

The Muslims who returned from Abyssinia did so for two reasons. First, Umar ibn al Khattab was converted to Islam shortly after their emigration. With him, he brought to the Muslim camp the same boldness, determination, and the tribal standing with which he had been fighting the Muslims before. He never concealed his conversion nor did he ever shun the Quraysh opponents. On the contrary, he proclaimed his conversion publicly and challenged the Quraysh openly.

He did not approve the Muslims' concealment of themselves, their secret movement from one end of Makkah to the other, and their holding of prayers at a safe distance from any Quraysh attack. Umar began to fight the Quraysh as soon as he entered the faith of Islam, constantly pressed his way close to the Kaaba, and performed his prayer there in company with whatever Muslims decided to join him. (*The Life of Muhammad*)

But these curious claims find little support in evidence. And if the evidence means anything, it appears to run counter to the claims themselves.

Some claims are even more extravagant. For example, the Egyptian historian, Amin Dawidar, says in his book, *Pictures From the Life of the Messenger of God*, that Umar's conversion to Islam was a death blow to the Quraysh.

What actually happened was that Umar's conversion to Islam synchronized with a new and an unprecedented wave of terror that broke over the Muslims. Whereas before his conversion only those Muslims were victims of persecution who had no one to protect them, now no Muslim, not even Muhammad Mustafa himself, was safe from the malevolence of the polytheists.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

In their exile (in Abyssinia), they (the emigrants) heard that upon Umar's conversion the Quraysh had stopped their persecution of Muhammad and his followers. According to one report a number of them had returned to Makkah, according to another, all. On reaching Makkah they realized *that the Quraysh had resumed persecution of the Muslims with stronger hatred and renewed vigor*. Unable to resist, a number of them returned to Abyssinia while others entered Makkah under the cover of night and hid themselves away. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

But this was not all. Much more was yet to come. Now Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God, could not even live in Makkah. In fact, little more than a week had passed since Umar's conversion to

Islam, when Muhammad and all members of his family and clan, had to leave Makkah, and had to go into exile. Therefore, the theory that Umar's conversion to Islam caused Muslims to abandon their caution and defensive posture, and to defy the infidels, is simply not coincident with facts.

### **S. Margoliouth**

.....we have no record of any occasion on which Umar displayed remarkable courage, though many examples are at hand of his cruelty and bloodthirstiness; at the battle of Hunain he ran away, and on another occasion owed his life to the good nature of an enemy. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, 1931*)

Professor Margoliouth has made a reference to the occasion when a good-natured enemy spared Umar's life. He must be referring to the battle of the Trench or the Siege of Medina (A.D. 627). In that battle, Ali ibn Abi Talib killed the Makkan general, Amr ibn Abd Wudd, whereupon his (Amr's) comrades-in-arms hastily retreated across the Trench. When they were retreating, Umar tried to overtake one of them. This knight, who was in retreat, had heard that Ali never pursued a fleeing enemy.

He, therefore, figured that whoever was pursuing him then, could not be Ali. Out of curiosity, he stole a glance backwards and noticed that it was Umar who was bearing down upon him. When he saw Umar, he immediately turned the reins of his horse to face him, and this made him (Umar) stop. The knight who knew Umar, said to him: "If my mother had not made me vow that I would never kill a Qurayshi, you would be a dead man now. Be grateful to her, and do not forget that I have spared your life."

It may be noted that Hamza had accepted Islam one year before Umar became a Muslim, and he had signaled his conversion by striking Abu Jahl, the maternal uncle of Umar, with his bow. One may not expect Umar to emulate Hamza's example by striking his own uncle, but there is no record that he struck any other idolater for showing insolence to the Apostle of God.

Furthermore, when Hamza accepted Islam and bloodied the nose of Abu Jahl, Umar himself was an idolater. It was his duty, in the name of "tribal solidarity," to challenge Hamza, and to defend the honor of the brother of his mother. After all, according to many claims in circulation, he was the most fearless, the most fear-inspiring, the most violent-tempered, and the most headstrong man in Makkah. And who but Umar would dare to challenge Hamza? But the challenge never came.

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