

The Muslims and the Jews

In A.D. 70, the Roman general, Titus, captured Jerusalem and put an end to the Jewish rule of Palestine. Following the Roman conquest, many of the Jews left their homeland and wandered into other countries. Some Jewish tribes crossed the Syrian desert and entered the Arabian peninsula where they settled in Hijaz. In course of time they built up numerous colonies in Medina and between Medina and Syria. They are also said to have converted many Arabs to Judaism.

At the beginning of the seventh century A.D., there were three Jewish tribes living in Medina (Yathrib). They were Banu Qainuka'a, Banu Nadhir and Banu Qurayza. All three tribes were rich and powerful, and also, they were more civilized than the Arabs. Whereas the Arabs were all farmers, the Jews were the entrepreneurs of industry, business and commerce in Arabia, and they controlled the economic life of Medina (Yathrib). The two Arab tribes – Aus and Khazraj – were debt-ridden to the Jews perennially.

Besides Medina, the strong centers of the Jews in Hijaz were Khyber, Fadak and Wadi-ul-Qura. The lands in these valleys were the most fertile in all Arabia, and their Jewish cultivators were the best farmers in the country.

The migration of Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam, from Makkah to Medina (then Yathrib), brought him into contact with the Jews for the first time. At the beginning they were friendly to him. He granted them the famous Charter of Medina, and they acknowledged him the ruler of their city, and agreed to abide by his decisions in all disputes. They also agreed to defend the city in the event of an invasion by an enemy.

But, unfortunately, this friendship did not last long. It soon became obvious that the Jews had given their friendship to Muhammad with many reservations. In their own interest, they ought to have acted their part of the agreement faithfully but they did not. For this change in their attitude, there were many reasons, among them:

1. When Muhammad arrived in Medina, he reformed the life of the Arabs or whoever became a Muslim. He taught them to be temperate and moderate in everything, and taught them the value of discipline in life. They stopped drinking and gambling both of which were the causes of their ruin in the past; and they

gave up taking loans at high rates of interest from the Jews.

When the Arabs stopped taking loans and paying interest on them, a rich source of revenue suddenly dried up for the Jews, and they bitterly resented this. They could now see that their grip on the economic life of Medina was beginning to loosen.

2. The Jews also realized that Islam was an enemy of the system of exploitation, and of the capitalist system. They began to see Islam as a threat to their economic interests.

3. The Jewish priests hated Muhammad as much as the Jewish money-lenders. He had shown to the Jews how their priest followed deviant interpretations of their scriptures, and how they distorted their text. The priests, on their part, tried to convince their flocks that Muhammad did not have knowledge of their scriptures, and they tried to point out to them the “errors” in the Qur’an.

The Jews also believed that they were safe only as long as the two Arab tribes of Medina, the Aus and the Khazraj, were fighting against each other. Peace between the Aus and the Khazraj, they thought, would pose a threat to their survival in Arabia. For this reason, they were always fomenting trouble between them.

Of the three Jewish tribes of Medina, the Banu Qainuka'a and the Banu Nadhir had already been expelled after the battles of Badr and Uhud respectively, and they had left with all their baggage, and herds of animals, and had resettled in Khyber.

The third and the last tribe of the Jews in Medina was the Banu Qurayza. According to the terms of the Charter of Medina, it was their duty to take an active part in defending the city during the siege of A.D. 627. But not only they did not contribute any men or materials during the siege but were actually caught conspiring with the enemy to compass the destruction of the Muslims. Some Jews even attacked a house in which many Muslim women and children had taken refuge as it was considered a safer place for them than their own houses.

If Amr ibn Abd Wudd had overcome the resistance of the Muslims, the Jews would have attacked them from the rear. Between the pagans of Makkah and the Jews of Medina, the Muslims would have been massacred. It was only the presence of mind of Muhammad and the daring of Ali that averted such a disaster.

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The Jews were not at first inclined to listen to Abu Sofian's proposal (to attack Muslims from the rear), but after a while they compromised and agreed to betray the Moslems when the time seemed opportune. (*The Messenger – the Life of Mohammed*)

The conduct of the Jews during the siege of Medina was high treason against the State. Therefore, when the confederate army broke up and the danger to Medina was averted, the Muslims turned their

attention to them.

The Jews shut themselves up in their forts and the Muslims besieged them. But some days later, they requested the Prophet to raise the siege, and agreed to refer the dispute to arbitration.

The Prophet allowed the Jews to choose their own arbitrator. Here they made a very costly blunder. They should have chosen Muhammad himself – the embodiment of mercy – to be their judge. If they had, he would have allowed them to depart from Medina with their baggage and their animals, and the incident would have been closed.

But the Jews didn't choose Muhammad as their judge. Instead, they chose Sa'ad ibn Muadh, the leader of their former allies, the Aus. Sa'ad was a man who was utterly reckless with life – his own as well as that of others.

Sa'ad had received a mortal wound during the battle of the Trench, and in fact died soon after he had passed judgment on the fate of the Jews. He declared treason to be an unpardonable offense, and his verdict was inexorable. He invoked the Torah, the Scripture of the Jews, and sentenced all men to death, and women and children to slavery. His sentence was carried out on the spot.

The Jews of the tribe of Qurayza were massacred in the spring of A.D. 627. From this date, the Jews ceased to be an active force in the social, economic and political life of Medina.

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