

The Battle of Mootah

In 629 the christian arab tribe of ghassan was ruled by Shorhail, a prince who was a vassal of the Byzantine emperor. He was one of those rulers who had received letters from Muhammad Mustafa inviting them to accept Islam. In those days he held court in Mootah, a town east of the Dead Sea. When the Prophet's emissary, Harith bin Umayr, arrived at his court bearing the letter for him, he ordered his execution.

The murder of Harith bin Umayr was an unprovoked outrage, and the killing of an ambassador is considered an unpardonable crime in many nations. The Prophet decided to take punitive action. He equipped an army of 3000 men, and sent it under the command of his friend and freedman, Zayd bin Haritha, to Mootah, to demand reparations. At the same time, he designated a chain of command and responsibility. In the event of Zayd's death, the command of the army was to pass on to Jaafer ibn Abi Talib. If he too were to be killed, then the third general was to be Abdullah ibn Rawaha.

When Shorhail heard that an army was approaching his capital from Medina, he also mobilized his men, and was soon ready to meet it. He deployed his troops on the south-side, out of the walls of Mootah. They were composed of the Roman garrison of Mootah, and the freshly raised tribal levies. When the Muslims arrived and took stock of the situation, they realized that it was going to be an unequal fight as they were heavily outnumbered by the enemy.

The Muslim leaders held a war council. Zayd bin Haritha proposed that they immediately send a messenger to the Prophet apprising him of the imbalance in the strength of the two forces, and requesting him to send reinforcements.

But Abdullah bin Rawaha opposed him, and said that the decision to fight or not to fight did not rest upon their numbers, and if they were outnumbered by the enemy, it was immaterial for them. "We fight to win the crown of martyrdom, and not the laurels of victory, and here is our chance; let us not miss it," he said.

Abdullah bin Rawaha clinched the debate with his powerful argument, and the Muslims advanced to meet the enemy. At the very first clash of arms, Zayd bin Haritha, the first general of the Muslims, was

killed.

Betty Kelen

Zayd took the Apostle's standard and was killed almost at once, the first Muslim to die for the faith on foreign soil. (*Mohammed, Messenger of God*)

The command of the army then passed to Jaafer ibn Abi Talib, the elder brother of Ali. He fought most gallantly and for a long time, killing so many of the enemy that their bodies were stacked like cordwood all around him. But then a Roman soldier crept up from behind, unseen, and struck a blow with his sword at his right arm, and severed it. Jaafer didn't let the banner fall, and kept pressing the enemy.

A little later, another Roman came from behind, and with a blow of his sword, cut his left arm also. The hero, still undismayed, held the banner under his chin, and kept advancing. But with both arms gone, he was unable to defend himself, and in a few moments, a third Roman approached him, and killed him with a blow of his mace on his head. After Jaafer's death, Abdullah bin Rawaha took charge of the army, and he too fell fighting against heavy odds.

Washington Irving

Among the different missions which Mohammed had sent beyond the bounds of Arabia to invite neighboring princes to accept Islam, was one to the governor of Bosra, the great mart on the confines of Syria. His envoy was killed at Mootah by an Arab of the Christian tribe of Ghassan, and son to Shorhail, an emir, who governed Mootah in the name of Heraclius.

Mohammed sent an army of 3000 against the offending city. It was a momentous expedition, as it might, for the first time, bring the arms of Islam in collision with those of the Roman Empire. The command was entrusted to Zaid, his freedman. Several chosen officers were associated with him.

One was Mohammed's cousin, Jaafer, the same who, by his eloquence, had vindicated the doctrines of Islam before the king of Abyssinia, and defeated the Koreishite embassy. He was now in the prime of life, and noted for great courage and manly beauty. (*The Life of Mohammed*)

As Jaafer charged the enemy, he sang a song. Sir William Muir has given the following translation of his song:

Paradise! O Paradise! How fair a resting place!

Cold is the water there, and sweet the shade.

Rome, Rome! Thine hour of tribulation draweth nigh.

When I close with her, I will hurl her to the ground.

When Jaafer was killed, his body was brought into the camp. Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab, who was with the army, says that he counted the wounds on the hero's body, and found more than fifty of them, and they were all in front. Jaafer had dared sword and spear even after the loss of his arms, but had not flinched.

When all three generals appointed by the Prophet had been killed, the Muslims were left leaderless for a time. Then Khalid bin al-Walid who was also fighting in the ranks, seized the banner, and managed to rally the Muslims.

At night the armies disengaged, and this gave him the opportunity to reorganize his men. He is said to have fought a defensive action on the following day but realizing that it was impossible to win a victory, ordered a retreat from Mootah, and succeeded in bringing the remnants of the army back to Medina.

When these warriors entered Medina, they got a "reception" that must have made them forget the "reception" that the Romans gave them in Mootah. They were greeted by jeering crowds which cast dust in their faces and garbage on their heads, and taunted them for fleeing from the enemy instead of dying like men if not like heroes. Eventually, the Prophet himself was compelled to intervene on their behalf to rescue them from indignity and molestation.

Sir William Muir

The ranks of the Muslims were already broken; and the Romans in full pursuit made great havoc among the fugitives. So, distinctly, in the secretary of Wackidi. Some accounts pretend that Khalid rallied the army, and either turned the day against the Romans, or made it a drawn battle.

But besides that the brevity of all the accounts is proof enough of a reverse, the reception of the army on its return to Medina, admits of only one conclusion, viz. a complete, ignominious, and unretrieved discomfiture. (*The Life of Mohammed, London, 1861*)

Sir John Glubb

In the battle of Mootah, Jaafer ibn Abu Talib, the brother of Ali, seized the banner from the dying Zaid and raised it aloft once more. The enemy closed in on the heroic Jaafer, who was soon covered with wounds. Tradition relates that when both his hands were cut off gripping the banner, he still stood firm, holding the staff between his two stumps, until a Byzantine soldier struck him a mortal blow.

When the defeated Muslims approached Medina, the Prophet and the people of the town went out to meet them. The citizens began to throw dirt at the crestfallen warriors, crying, "You runaways, you fled from the way of God!" But Mohammed, with that kind paternalism which he knew well how to use, interposed on their behalf.

Next morning in the mosque, the Prophet announced that he had, in a vision, seen the martyrs of Mootah in Paradise, reclining upon couches, but Jaafer was there in the guise of an angel with two

wings, stained on their feathers with the blood of martyrdom. It was as a result of this vision that the martyr has since been known as Jaafer the Flyer, Jaafer at-Tayyar. (*The Great Arab Conquests*)

Betty Kelen

When the army came riding home, he (Mohammed) went out to meet them, Jafer's son on the saddle before him. It was a terrible homecoming for these men who had returned from battle alive, following Khalid, while the Prophet's own relatives and beloved companions had fallen. The people of Medina picked up sand and dirt along the way to throw at the returning force, shouting, "Cowards! Runaways! You fled from God." (*Muhammad, the Messenger of God*)

Some Muslim historians have made desperate efforts to "prove" that Mootah was a Muslim victory which it was not. It is not clear why a defeat is being dished out by them as a victory. The attempt to prove that Muslims won the battle, may have been prompted by their desire to present the Muslim soldiers as invincible. But will they smother truth merely to prove that Muslims were invincible. After all, the Muslims were defeated in the battle of Uhud!

Abul Kalam Azad, the Indian biographer of the Prophet, says that the Muslims inflicted a crushing defeat upon the Romans at Mootah. He takes notice of the reception that the citizens of Medina gave to the "victors" when they came home, but he attributes it to their "ignorance," and says that they had received wrong reports of the outcome of the battle.

But if the citizens had received wrong reports, then it is curious that no one among the warriors tried to correct them. No one among them, for example, said to the citizens: "Is this your way of welcoming the heroes of Islam, with dirt and garbage? Do you reward the defenders of the Faith by booing them and insulting them?" But they did not pose any such questions.

Even if the citizens of Medina had been misinformed that the Muslims were defeated at Mootah, as Azad claims, then how long it ought to take them to learn the truth? In the first place, the soldiers themselves did not protest when the citizens covered them with garbage, as already noted. In the second place, some among them were too embarrassed to go out of their homes.

They did not want to be seen in public for fear of being upbraided or even rough-handled by the citizens for the abject cowardice they had shown before the enemy. Their greatest desire was to hide themselves from everyone else.

D. S. Margoliouth

The survivors of this disastrous fight (Mootah) were greeted by the Moslems as deserters, and some were even afraid to appear in public for some time. Such Spartans had the people of Medina become in their eight years of warfare. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, 1931*)

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

As soon as Khalid and the army reached Medinah, Muhammad and the Muslims went out to meet them, Muhammad carrying on his arm, Abdullah, the son of Ja'far, the second commander of the Muslim force. Upon learning the news, the people flung dust in the face of the Muslim soldiers and accused them of fleeing in the face of the enemy and abandoning the cause of God.

The Prophet of God argued with his people that the soldiers did not flee but simply withdrew in order, with God's will, to advance again. Despite this justification on the part of Muhammad of the Muslim army, the people were not willing to forgive them their withdrawal and return. *Salamah ibn Hisham, a member of this expedition, would neither go to the mosque for prayer nor show himself in public in order to avoid being chastised for fleeing from the cause of God.*

Were it not for the fact that these same men, especially Khalid ibn al-Walid, later distinguished themselves in battle against the same enemy, their reputations would have remained forever stained. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

Another "proof" that Abul Kalam Azad has found of the "victory" of the Muslims at Mootah, is that the Romans did not pursue them. He says that if the Romans had won the battle of Mootah, they would have pursued the Muslims to the gates of Medina itself, and beyond.

But the Romans might have had other reasons for not pursuing the Muslims. One of them was that with their cavalry, they could not maneuver in the desert. The desert to them was like the sea, and neither they nor the Persians had any "ships" in which to "navigate" in it. The best they could do, was to operate on the "shores" as "land-powers" which they, in fact, were, and at a decided disadvantage strategically and tactically against a "maritime" nation like the Arabs

If the Arabs retreated into the desert before an active foe, their safety was assured. He was simply not equipped to penetrate the desert. The logistical problems alone of attacking them in their own element discouraged the most enterprising spirits of those days. The desert was the "fortress" which protected the Arabs from the ambitions of all the conquerors of the past, and guaranteed their freedom and independence.

Sir John Glubb

The key to all the early operations, against Persia and against Syria alike, is that the Persians and Byzantines could not move in the desert, being mounted on horses. The Muslims were like a sea-power, cruising offshore in their ships, whereas the Persians and Byzantines alike could only take up positions on the shore (that is, the cultivated area) unable to launch out to "sea" and engage the enemy in his own desert element.

Similarly the Arabs, like the Norse or Danish pirates who raided England, were at first afraid to move inland far from their "ships." Raiding the areas on the "shores" of the desert, they hastened back to their own element when danger threatened. (*The Great Arab Conquests, 1963*)

Joel Carmichael

There is a remarkable resemblance between the strategy of the Bedouin and that of the modern sea power. Viewed from the vantage point of nomads, the desert, which only they could make use of, was like a vast ocean on which they controlled the only vessels. The Bedouin could use it for supplies and communications – and as a haven when defeated. They could appear from its depths whenever they wished and slip back again at will. This gave them enormous mobility and resilience, as long as they were moving against sedentary communities (*Shaping of the Arabs, 1967*)

The battle was fought just outside Mootah. If the Arabs had defeated the Romans and had routed them, then what did they do with the city which lay at their feet? As conquerors they ought to have occupied it. But no historian has claimed that the Muslims entered Mootah and occupied it.

The Arabs were notorious for their love of booty. This is a fact well-known to every student of their history, and historians like Abul Kalam Azad cannot be ignorant of it. The same historian says that the number of the Romans and their allies who fought at Mootah was two hundred thousand. If the Muslims had defeated the Romans, then they ought to have captured thousands of Romans, and they ought to have returned to Medina laden with plunder and the treasures of Mootah. But they did not.

The annals are silent on this point. There is no reference to any booty or to any prisoners of war in the accounts of the battle of Mootah. This silence is the most eloquent proof that the Muslims were not the victors. Actually, they considered themselves lucky to have escaped alive from the battlefield.

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

After the campaign of Mootah, the Muslim army led by Khalid ibn al Walid returned to Medinah neither victorious nor vanquished, *but happy to be able to return at all.* (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

We admire those Muslims who were aware that they had shown cowardice in the battle of Mootah, and were ashamed of it. But there were other Muslims, some of them companions of the Prophet, who fled from battle, not once, but several times, and they were not ashamed of their performance. One may admire them for their brazenness though. To save their own dear lives, they could flee from a battlefield, and then return to it when the scales tilted in favor of the Muslims.

The battle of Mootah was a defeat for the Muslims. As for the Romans, it was nothing more than a minor border skirmish. They drove the Arabs back into the desert, and for them the incident was closed.

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