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The Battle of Hunayn

The conquest of Makkah triggered the mass conversion of the Arabs to Islam in many parts of the country. But there were some tribes living in the east and south-east of Makkah which did not wish to abjure idolatry.

They were alarmed at the rapid progress of Islam, and they thought that if it continued to spread at the same speed, they would soon be surrounded by the Muslims, and would become isolated from other pagan tribes. Their leaders figured that it would be unwise on their part to let the Muslims consolidate their recent gains and become too strong.

They, therefore, decided to act immediately by attacking the Muslims in Makkah and destroying them. The leading tribes among them were the Thaqeef, Hawazin, Banu Sa'ad and Banu Jashm, all fierce warriors, jealous of their independence and proud of their warlike traditions.

They had noted that Makkah had surrendered to Muhammad without striking a blow but they attributed the failure of the Quraysh to resist him, to their effeminacy. As for themselves, they were confident that they were more than a match on the battle-field for the warriors of Islam or any other warriors.

In late January 630, the Prophet received intelligence that Thaqeef and Hawazin had left their home base, and were moving toward Makkah. When these reports were confirmed, he too ordered a general mobilization in the newly-conquered city.

The Prophet didn't want Makkah to become a battle-ground. He, therefore, hastily left Makkah on January 26, 630 at the head of 12,000 warriors, to meet the enemy. Out of this force, ten thousand men were from Medina, and the other two thousand were recruits from the newly-converted Makkans.

This new army was the largest force ever assembled in Arabia to that date. As its various formations marched out of the city gate, in full panoply of war, Abu Bakr who was watching, was much impressed, and exclaimed: "We cannot be defeated this time because of lack of numbers."

But very soon he was proven wrong. Muslims were defeated at the beginning even though they were

thrice as numerous as the enemy. Qur'an itself called attention of the Muslims, rather pointedly, that numbers alone were no guarantee that they would be victorious.

Sir William Muir

Four weeks had just elapsed since he (Mohammed) had quitted Medina, when he marched forth from Mecca at the head of all his forces, swelled now, by the addition of 2000 auxiliaries from Mecca, to the large number of 12,000 men.

Safwan, at his request, made over to him one hundred suits of mail and stand of arms complete, and as many camels. The array of tribes, each with a banner waving at its head, was so imposing that Abu Bakr broke forth, as the marshaled forces passed, with the exclamation: "We shall not this day be worsted by reason of the smallness of our numbers." (*Life of Mohammed, London, 1861*)

When the first column constituting the Muslim vanguard, commanded by Khalid ibn al-Walid, entered the valley of Hunayn in the south-east of Makkah, the enemy was already lying in ambush, ready to greet it with his missile weapons. The pass was narrow, the road was very rough, and the Muslims were advancing apparently unaware of the enemy's presence. It was just before dawn when all of a sudden, the Hawazin launched their attack.

The surprise was complete and the charge of the enemy was so impetuous that the Muslims could not withstand it. The vanguard, composed of the tribesmen of Banu Sulaym, broke and fled. The main body of the army was just behind.

Khalid's column ran smack into its face, and struck panic into its men so that they also turned their backs to the enemy, and began to run. Soon everyone in the army was running, and it was not long before Muhammad was left alone with a handful of his faithful followers around him.

The men led by Khalid were the first to run before the charging enemy, and they were followed by the newly-converted Umayyads of Makkah and their friends and supporters. Behind them were the citizens of Medina. Many Muslims were killed in the stampede, and many others were wounded. The Apostle called out the fugitives but no one listened to him.

The army of Islam was in headlong rout with the enemy at full tilt in pursuit. The Apostle, of course, did not abandon his post, and stood firm like a rock. Eight men were still with him, all watching the spectacle of the flight of their army. They were:

1. Ali ibn Abi Talib
2. Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib
3. Fadhl ibn Abbas

4. Abu Sufyan ibn al-Harith ibn Abdul Muttalib
5. Rabi'a, the brother of Abu Sufyan ibn al-Harith
6. Abdullah ibn Masood
7. Usama ibn Zayd ibn Haritha
8. Ayman ibn Obaid

Out of these eight, the first five belonged to the clan of Banu Hashim. They were the uncle and the cousins of the Prophet.

The Prophet asked his uncle, Abbas ibn Abdul Muttalib, to call the fleeing Muslims. Abbas had a very powerful voice, and he shouted: "O ye Muhajireen and O ye Ansar! O ye victors of Badr and O ye men of the Tree of Fealty! Where are you going? The Messenger of God is here. Come back to him."

The voice of Abbas boomed in the narrow valley and almost everyone heard it, and it proved effective in checking the flight of the Muslims.

The Ansar were the first to halt, and to return to the battle. Inspired by their example, others also rallied. Soon they were able to regroup. A fierce skirmish took place. At first, the issue appeared uncertain but then the Muslims began to press the enemy. Once they recovered their morale, they went on the offensive. The enemy still fought bravely but was hampered in his mobility by the vast number of women and children he had brought with him. The Muslims pressed their advantage and then it was the Bedouins who were running in all directions.

Sir William Muir has told the story of the rout and rally of the Muslims in the battle of Hunayn at some length. He writes in his book, *The Life of Mohammed*, (London, 1877):

Very early in the morning, while the dawn was yet gray, and the sky overcast with clouds, the army of Mohammed was in motion. Clad in full panoply, as on the day of Ohod, he rode on his white mule, Duldul, in the rear of the forces.

The vanguard, formed of the Banu Sulaim and led by Khalid, were defiling leisurely up the steep and narrow pass, when on a sudden the Hawazin sprang forth from their ambushade, and charged them with impetuosity.

Staggered by the unexpected onslaught, the Banu Sulaim broke and fell back. The shock was communicated from column to column. Aggravated by the obscurity of the hour, and the straitness and ruggedness of the road, panic seized the whole army; all turned and fled. As troop by troop they hurried past him, Mohammed called out: "Whither away? The Prophet of the Lord is here! Return! Return! – but his words had no effect, excepting that a band of devoted friends and followers gathered round him.

The confusion increased, the multitude of camels jostled wildly one against another; all was noise and clamor, and the voice of Mohammed was lost amid the din. At last, seeing the column of Medina troops bearing down in common flight, he bade his uncle, Abbas, who held his mule, to cry aloud: "O citizens of Medina! O men of the Tree of Fealty! Ye of the Sura Bacr!"

Abbas had a stentorian voice, and as he shouted these words over and over again at the pitch of his voice, they were heard far and near. At once they touched a chord in the hearts of the men of Medina. They were arrested in their flight, and hastened to Mohammed, crying aloud, "Ya Labeik! Here we are at thy call!"

One hundred of these devoted followers, disengaged with difficulty from the camels that jammed the narrow pass, threw themselves upon the advancing enemy and checked his progress. Relieved from the pressure, the army rallied gradually, and returned to the battle. The conflict was severe; and the issue, from the adverse nature of the ground and the impetuosity of the wild Bedouins, remained for some time doubtful.

Mohammed ascended an eminence and watched the struggle. Excited by the spectacle, he began loudly to exclaim: "Now is the furnace heated: I am the Prophet that lieth not. I am the offspring of Abdul Muttalib."

Then bidding Abbas to pick up for him a handful of gravel, he cast it towards the enemy, saying, "Ruin seize them!" They had indeed already wavered. The steadiness of the Medina band, and the enthusiasm of the rest when once recalled, had won the day. The enemy fled, and the rout was complete. Many were slain and so fiercely did the Moslems pursue the charge, that they killed among the rest some of the little children – an atrocity which Mohammed had strictly forbidden.

Betty Kelen

They (the Muslims) camped short of Hunayn Valley and at dawn advanced on the enemy through a defile. Umar's son described what happened then:

"We came down through a wadi, wide and sloping descending gradually in the morning twilight; but the enemy was there before us and had hidden in the by-paths, side-tracks and narrow places. They were in force, fully armed and knowing exactly what to do, and by God, we were terrified when we descended and suddenly the Hawazin came down on us as one man!

The Bedouin attacked with stones, boulders, arrows, lance and sword. Muhammad's van, under General Khalid, broke, the camels jostling and crashing, screeching and tangling up their long legs.

He (Muhammad) saw among the fleeing men his new converts from Mecca, and he called to them as one of their own: 'Where are you going men? Come back! Come to me! I am God's Apostle. I am Muhammad, son of Abdullah!'

Not one of them heeded, and why should they? There was a Hawazin warrior after them on a russet camel, his standard flying from the long lance, and every time he dipped the blade of that lance, it showed up on the other side of someone's chest.

The Prophet's voice was drowned in the uproar of men, the clamor of camels. He asked his uncle Abbas, a man with a mighty lung, to take up the cry, 'O comrades, remember the acacia tree...' And Ali, so quiet in peace but in battle like a demon, lunged viciously about him, fighting to get behind the Hawazin leader's camel and hamstringing it..." (*Muhammad, Messenger of God*)

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

The Muslims arrived at Hunayn in the evening and camped at the entrance of the valley until dawn. At dawn the following day the army began to move, and Muhammad, riding his white mule, was in the rear while Khalid ibn al-Walid, commanding a group of soldiers from Banu Sulaym, was in the vanguard.

As the Muslims passed through the canyon of Hunayn, Malik ibn Awf ordered his army to attack in the darkness before dawn, first with arrows and then with a general charge. The Muslims' ranks broke up and were stricken with panic. Some of them ran out of the canyon as fast as they could in search of safety. Witnessing what had befallen the Muslims, Abu Sufyan felt no little pleasure at the defeat of his previous enemies who until now had been celebrating their victory over Makkah. He said, "The Muslims will not be checked until they are thrown into the sea." (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

The pagan tribesmen were defeated but they were able to regroup, and are said to have retreated in good order from the valley of Hunayn.

D. S. Margoliouth

The general, Malik son of Auf, is said to have rallied his horsemen sufficiently to make them hold their ground till the weaker members of the party were covered, and then to have brought them safely to an eminence whence they could make their way to Taif. There apparently some of the women were saved, though others fell in the hands of the Moslems. Khalid son of al-Waleed, whose savagery had already won a rebuke from the Prophet, earned a fresh one by thinking it his duty to kill these amazons; an act which was totally against the Prophet's ideas of gallantry.

Just as he found it necessary to rebuke others who had thought it their duty to slaughter the children of the unbelievers. "What are the best of you," he asked, "if not the children of unbelievers?"

A highly important success was gained, and the Prophet's fortune proved constant at a time when a reverse would have had serious consequences; for Abu Sufyan might have been equal to taking advantage of a disaster, though not sufficiently energetic to have caused one. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London, 1931*)

Hunayn was the last battle led personally by Muhammad Mustafa, the Messenger of God. The battle

began with the rout of the Muslims, and they fled every which way to save their own lives, utterly oblivious of the presence, in the battlefield, of their Prophet. In the end, however, they were victorious, thanks to the courage and resolution of the Prophet himself and a few of his kinsfolk.

M. Shibli, the Indian historian, writes in his biography of the Prophet:

Instead of victory (of the Muslims) one could see their rout (in the battle of Hunayn). The Prophet looked around and found no one with him except a handful of his friends. Abu Qatada, a Companion, who was present in Hunayn, says that when the army was on the run, he saw Umar bin al-Khattab, and asked him: "What is the state of the affairs of the Muslims?" He said: "Such is the Will of God." (*The Life of the Prophet (Seeratun-Nabi, Vol. I, pp.535-536), 1976, Azamgarh, India*).

Sir William Muir

The reverse sustained at the opening of the day, was attributed by the Prophet to the vainglorious confidence with which the believers looked upon their great army. The subsequent success was equally ascribed to the aid of invisible hosts which fought against their enemy. The engagement is thus alluded to in the Coran:

Verily God hath assisted you in many battlefields: and on the day of Honein, when indeed ye rejoiced in the multitude of your host. But their great number did not in any wise benefit you: the earth became too strait for you with all its spaciousness. Then ye turned your backs and fled. (The Life of Mohammed, London, 1877, p. 143)

The "invisible hosts" which assisted the Muslims, means, in this context, high morale. At the beginning of the battle, they were defeated and routed. But they were inspired by the example of the Prophet himself whose courage restored their morale, and they fought the enemy with new zeal and vigor.

The battle of Uhud had begun with the victory of the Muslims and had ended with their defeat; the battle of Hunayn began with their defeat and ended with their victory. There was a great slaughter of the Muslims at the beginning which was caused by their own panic and irresolution.

Muhammad Husayn Haykal

Victory was not gained cheaply. The Muslims paid a very high price. They could have done it at much lesser cost had they not fallen back at the beginning and occasioned Abu Sufyan's derisive remark that they would be thrown into the sea.

Although the primary source books have not listed all the casualties of the battle, they did mention that two Muslim tribes were almost totally annihilated, and that the Prophet held a funerary prayer for them.

Partially offsetting this tremendous loss of human lives, was the unquestioned supremacy the victory brought to the Muslims. Moreover, victory brought more captives and booty for them than they had ever

seen before. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

Ali and the Battle of Hunayn

The hero of the battle of Hunayn was Ali ibn Abi Talib just as he was the hero of all the preceding battles. At a time when all the companions had fled from the battlefield, and only eight men were left with the Apostle, it was Ali who stood between him and the enemy, and defended him. The tribesmen charged repeatedly but he repulsed them each time same as he had done in Uhud. For sometime, it was Uhud again.

Eventually, Ali succeeded in turning the tide of the battle. First he caused Uthman bin Abdullah, one of the leaders of the enemy, to fall from his camel, lose his balance, and be killed; and later, he killed, in a hand-to-hand fight, Abu Jerdel, the Hawazin leader. When these two generals were killed, the enemy lost heart; when he lost heart, he lost the battle.

M. Shibli

Banu Malik of the Thakeef fought with determined bravery but when their leader, Uthman bin Abdullah, was killed, they began to waver... (*The Life of the Prophet, Azamgarh, India, 1976*)

Abu Sufyan, the chief of the Banu Umayya, was present in the camp of the Muslims, as noted above. Though he had "accepted" Islam, he was thrilled to see the flight of the Muslims, and hoped that they would be thrown into the sea. When Hikda bin Umayya, another "Muslim" of the clan of Banu Umayya, saw the rout of the Muslims, at the beginning of the battle, he remarked: "At last the spell of Muhammad is broken." Both of them must have conjured up, in their imagination, pictures of reinstating Hubal, their dynastic god, to his throne in the Kaaba.

Abu Sufyan and other members of his clan, were unable to conceal their pleasure when to them it appeared that the Muslims were defeated by the pagan tribesmen. But their pleasure proved to be too short-lived. Soon there was a reversal in the fortunes of the battle, and then it were the latter who were finally and decisively defeated. This reversal must have caused great heart-burning to Abu Sufyan and his clansmen as they lost the last, best hope they had of reviving "the Times of Ignorance."

The tribesmen had abandoned all their baggage and thousands of their animals. The Apostle ordered the baggage to be collected, the animals to be corralled and taken to Jirana, a place mid-point between Taif and Makkah, and to be kept there pending his own arrival.

In the meantime, he decided to capture Taif which still held out as the last stronghold of the infidels, and ordered the main body of the army to march on that city. The fugitives from the battle had also found sanctuary in the fortress of Taif.

On his way to Taif, the Apostle rode past a small crowd of people who were standing around the body of

a slain woman. Upon enquiry, he learned that she had been killed by Khalid bin al-Walid.

Muhammad ibn Ishaq

One of our companions told us that the Apostle that day (just after the battle of Hunayn) passed by a woman whom Khalid bin al-Waleed had killed while men had gathered around her. When he heard what had happened, he sent word to Khalid and forbade him to kill child, woman or hired slave. (*The Life of the Messenger of God*)

The Apostle laid siege to Taif but it was abortive and was abandoned. Taif, however, voluntarily surrendered some weeks later.

From Taif, the Apostle went to Jirana to distribute the spoils of war which had been amassed at the field of Hunayn. The share he gave to Abu Sufyan and his sons, the leaders of the clan of Umayya, was larger than the share he gave to anyone else in the camp of Islam. The Umayyads could not believe they had such good fortune. Abu Sufyan, who had good reason to expect less than nothing, after his “performance” in the battle of Hunayn, was carried away by the generosity of the Prophet, and gushed forth to him: “You are generous in war no less than you are generous in peace.”

Some Orientalists have suggested that the share which the Apostle gave to Abu Sufyan and his sons, was actually a bribe to keep them Muslims, and that there was no other way he could have won their loyalty. They further say that the Apostle never hesitated to bribe the idolaters if he thought that they would sell their “faith” to him in exchange for camels, sheep, and trinkets and baubles.

We disagree with them. After the conquest of Makkah, Abu Sufyan, his sons and other members of Banu Umayya, were at the mercy of Muhammad. He could have exterminated them, and all the idolaters of Arabia could not have done anything to save them. It was not necessary for him to bribe them or anyone else into accepting Islam.

Of little worth was their acceptance of Islam anyway. In bestowing gifts upon Abu Sufyan and his sons, the Prophet of Islam was only demonstrating his own freedom from vindictiveness. For Arabs, it will be remembered, vindictiveness was second nature. He tried to wear out their hostility to Islam by his kindness and generosity. The gifts were a gesture symbolic only of this attitude.

Abu Sufyan, his sons and other Umayyads – the recipients of the gifts, were called, ever after Muallafa Qulubuhum – those whose hearts were gained over. The Prophet gave his enemies large shares out of the booty only for their Taleef al-Qulub – gaining over their hearts.

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah says in his book, *Introduction to Islam*, p. 80, (1977):

Those whose hearts are to be won are of many kinds. The great jurist, Abu Ya'la al-Farra, points out: “As for those whose hearts are to be won, they are of four kinds:

1. Those whose hearts are to be reconciled for coming to the aid of the Muslims;
2. Those whose hearts are to be won in order that they might abstain from doing harm to Muslims;
3. Those who are attracted towards Islam;
4. Those by whose means conversion to Islam becomes possible for the members of their tribes.

It is lawful to benefit each and every one of these categories of 'those whose hearts are to be won,' be they Muslims or polytheists." Abu Sufyan and his clan belong to the second category; their hearts were to be "won in order that they might abstain from doing harm to the Muslims."

The Ansar and the Spoils of Hunayn

Some young men of the Ansar were disgruntled at what they considered to be an "unfair" distribution of the spoils of war. A few among them murmured that when time came to distribute the booty, the Prophet gave "preferential treatment" to the Quraysh. When the Prophet heard this, he ordered the Ansar to assemble in a tent, and he addressed them thus:

"What is it that I hear from you, O Ansar, about the apportionment of booty? Are you roiled up because I gave a larger share of the booty to the Makkans than I gave you? But tell me this: is it not true that you worshipped idols and God gave you guidance through me? Is it not true that you were riven by civil discord and God united you through me? Is it not true that you were poor and God made you rich through me?"

In answer to each question, the Ansar said: "Yes, that is so, and it is the grace of God and His Apostle."

But these questions were merely rhetorical, and the Apostle of God himself answered them.

Sir William Muir

"...but ye might have answered (and answered truly, for I would have verified it myself) – thou camest to Medina rejected as an impostor, and we bore witness to thy veracity; you camest as a helpless fugitive and we assisted thee; an outcast, and we gave thee an asylum; destitute, and we solaced thee. Why are ye disturbed in mind because of the things of this life, wherewith I have sought to incline the hearts of these men (the Quraysh of Makkah) unto Islam, whereas ye are already steadfast in your faith? Are ye not satisfied that others should obtain the flocks and the camels, while ye carry back the Prophet of the Lord unto your homes? No, I will not leave you for ever. If all mankind went one way, and the men of Medina another way, verily, I would go the way of the men of Medina. The Lord be favorable unto them, and bless them, and their sons and their sons' sons for ever." (*The Life of Mohammed, London, 1861*)

When the Ansar heard these words, they were smothered with tears, and they cried: "Let others take the sheep, the cattle and the camels with them. All we want is Muhammad, and nothing else."

The Ansar had also entertained the fear that the Prophet might decide to stay in Makkah, and make it his capital. But he reassured them that he would never leave them or Medina, and that he and they were inseparable forever.

From Jirana, the Muslims returned to Makkah where the Prophet performed the seven circuits of the Kaaba, and carried out the rites of the Lesser Pilgrimage (*Umra*).

The Battle of Hunayn was the last “flash in the pan” of pagan Arabia. When the Muslims won the victory, the curtain finally fell on the savage and pagan prologue of the drama of the Arabian history. But pagan or rather crypto-pagan Arabs were still going to fight a long and bitter rearguard action against Islam.

In Makkah, the Prophet gave finishing touches to matters relating to administration and policy. Before leaving Makkah for Medina, he appointed Akib bin Usayd as governor of the city. This was the first permanent civil appointment in Islam. He also declared Makkah to be the religious capital of Islam.

After spending a most eventful month in Makkah and its environs, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, and his army, returned to Medina.

D. S. Margoliouth

By giving the empire of Islam a religious capital, at no time utilized as a political capital, the founder got for it a mainstay which has secured the continuity of the system amid the most violent convulsions.

The visit to Mecca which had been accompanied by so many vicissitudes was terminated by the Prophet going through the ceremonies of the lesser pilgrimage. Afterwards, Akib, son of Usaid, was appointed governor of Mecca at a salary of a dirhem a day; this was the first permanent civil appointment made in Islam; at Khaibar, the only other city of importance which the Moslems had captured, the local government had been left.

Besides the governor, a spiritual official was left, Mu'adh, son of Jabal, a native of Medina, in whose competence to teach the new religion the Prophet had confidence. The Apostle returned to Medina with the Muslim host after an absence of more than a month. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, London, 1931*)

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