



*A Bedouin caravan crossing the Arabian Desert (above), from a painting by the French artist Jean Leon Gerome (1824-1904). Preying upon the caravan trade became a lucrative source of income for the impoverished early followers of the Prophet.*

## Victory after victory fires the Muslim cause

From bandits to veteran soldiers, in seven short years Muhammad's refugees become a formidable army

**I**t was 623 on the Christian calendar, Year Two on the Islamic one, and Muhammad was about fifty-three years old. His Muslims, settled in Medina, were rapidly taking over the town. As yet they had little thought to spare for Mecca, two hundred miles to the south, their hometown and their enemy in a war as yet undeclared. Muhammad's most pressing problem was the desperate poverty of the refugees who accompanied him to Medina. Unskilled in its basic industry, agriculture, they were hiring themselves out to Medina's landed gentry as laborers.

What these impoverished Meccans understood very well, however, was the caravan business, and how penurious Bedouin tribesmen customarily preyed upon it through bandit raids known as *razzias*. As Muhammad quickly realized, a program of efficiently run *razzias* could convert this Bedouin sub-trade into a kind of Muslim state enterprise, handily solving the refugees' financial problem. Medina was an excellent base for attack and retreat. Moreover, this would constitute a holy mission, performed for God; participants could kill without qualm. If they themselves perished, heaven awaited them. If they survived, they prospered.

The first Muslim *razzias* did poorly, however, probably because people at Medina tipped off the caravans. When Muhammad's towering and tough Uncle

Hamza set an ambush for one particularly enticing shipment, he found it unexpectedly guarded by 250 soldiers, and the next three attempts were similarly foiled. The fifth went worse yet; a Bedouin chief raided the raiders, stealing some of their camels and sheep. The sixth target, a caravan headed by Abu Sufyan, once Muhammad's friend but now an implacable enemy, eluded the ambush on the way north, and on its return trip would set off a battle pivotal to the history of Islam and the world.

In that interim, however, the seventh Muslim razzia gloriously succeeded. Riding far south, the raiders caught a northbound caravan headed for Mecca, loaded with wine, raisins and leather. It was almost unguarded, since the southern routes were considered relatively safe, and since this was the month of pilgrimage when fighting was forbidden. Thus the entire shipment fell to the Muslims.

Troubled at this attack during the sacred month, however, Muhammad berated the razzia leader. All right then, the chastened culprit wondered, should they therefore return the goods? Muhammad hastened to consult Gabriel, who thought not. Warring during a sacred month is "grievous," said he, but "to obstruct the way of God and deny him is more grievous still" (Sura 2:217). This would prove a helpful principle in razzias and other matters too. If accepted moral rules need not apply to the servants of God, Muhammad now discerned, his Muslims could justifiably lie, rob or kill to accomplish any holy purpose, thus confounding an enemy whose mind was still darkened by ignorance and thought himself safe.

Once this matter was resolved, four-fifths of the booty was distributed to the raiders and one-fifth given to Muhammad, which became the customary split. The Prophet used his share not only for his own family, but also for the poverty-stricken refugees. Thus, pillage became an expression of devotion, even charity. "War is ordained for you even if it be irksome," the Qur'an advises (Sura 2:216). Furthermore, it adds: "They that are slain in the way of God, he will not suffer their work to perish. . . . He will lead them into

paradise whereof he hath told them" (Sura 47:4-6).

Several weeks later, Abu Sufyan's return caravan approached the little town of Badr, later to give its name to Islam's first great battle—the first of thousands. Some three hundred Muslims lay in wait as Abu Sufyan rode ahead into the town. Had anyone from Medina been around lately? he inquired. No one, said the townspeople. But beside the oasis, he noticed camel dung containing date seeds—and camels with dates in their diets came from only one place: Medina.

Abu Sufyan therefore instantly rerouted his caravan, and hastily requested help from Mecca. With the fate of the caravan from the south fresh in their minds, nearly all able-bodied Meccan men responded. Towards Badr they marched, their women preceding them and clanging tambourines to raise their courage, an old Arab custom. After the battle, they would embrace their menfolk if they were victorious, or likely become enemy prizes if they lost. Foremost among them was Abu Sufyan's own wife, the fierce and wildly beautiful Hind, who would play a ferocious if unromantic role in the days ahead.

Ultimately nine hundred Meccans, determined to eliminate this trouble-making Muhammad once and for all, camped behind a hill near the Badr oasis. Around the oasis Muhammad and his raiders waited, expecting a lightly defended caravan, but were actually outnumbered three to one. As the Meccans emerged over the hilltop, led by their most distinguished chiefs, Muhammad prayed by name for their destruction. "Mecca has thrown you the best morsels of her liver," he assured his men.

A fast camel was tethered nearby, says one account, in case the day went badly. Events now moved swiftly. A party of Meccans, discerning the numerical frailty of the opposition, charged the oasis, but the huge Hamza cut them down. Two Meccan brothers and a son of one of them, all kinfolk of Hind, then stepped forward and challenged any three Muslims to take them on. Three of Muhammad's immediate family—his foster son Ali, Hamza, and a sixty-five-

*A trading caravan (below) nears the Red Sea in this evocative painting by Alberto Pasini (1826–1899). An attempt by the Meccans to prevent Muhammad's followers from seizing such a caravan led to armed confrontation and the Battle of Badr, the Muslim's first military victory.*





*The battle at the Badr oasis (above), from the Siyar-e-Nabi (Life of the Prophet), a sixteenth-century Turkish-illustrated manuscript by Mustafa Darir. Muhammad can be seen directing his troops (top right), while the angel Gabriel dictates a portion of the Qur'an.*

year-old cousin—volunteered. The three Meccans were soon dead, along with Muhammad's cousin. Hind, who thereby lost her father, uncle and brother, pledged a terrible vengeance. She would not wash nor comb her hair, she vowed, until she had eaten Hamza's liver.

Fighting then became general. Striding sword in hand behind the line according to some accounts, praying fervently according to others, Muhammad urged on his fighters. At the height of conflict, Muslim records agree, a roaring wind blasted the scene. "It is Gabriel!" cried the Prophet. "Attack!" The Muslim warriors rushed forward, driving the Meccans back upon each other.

One Muslim hacked his way to a Meccan chief, a particularly fervid foe of Muhammad, and cut off his head. With his own arm almost severed in the process, this warrior is said to have placed his foot on the dangling limb and torn it from his body—and then continued fighting with his good arm. This one-armed hero would survive into the reign of Muhammad's third successor. The Meccans, with fifty of their warriors dead and fifty more taken prisoner, fled for home.

How greatly the Battle of Badr enhanced the Islamic cause can scarcely be exaggerated. With few casualties of their own, the Muslims had exterminated many leading enemies, and to have fought at Badr became a coveted distinction among the faithful. A theological principle had also been established: Islam's credibility depended upon Islam's ascendancy. It became a case of "We're right because we're winning," which would work splendidly so long as they did indeed win—but reversals would necessitate serious reexamination of this basis for the faith.

Meanwhile, consternation spread through Mecca. Abu Sufyan was now the Quraysh chieftain-elect, nearly every other leader having perished. He banned all public display of grief for a month, foreswore all cooked food himself, and said he would not approach his wives until a counterattack had been made.<sup>1</sup> When the month ended, all Mecca gave over to wild grieving.

At Medina, however, the Hypocrites (the Islamic term for Medina residents who tolerated the Muslims as a practical necessity but scoffed at their religion) remained sullenly skeptical, and the Jews were increasingly alarmed. It behooved Muhammad to find ways to consolidate the power conferred by Badr.

God seemingly had assured the faithful that they could serve him well by killing in battle. But why just in battle, when battles could be avoided, or even won in advance, by selective extermination. Thus assassination became a recognized means to win the favor of both God and his Prophet.

There was, for example, the poetess Asma, whose verses heaped scorn on the entire Muslim movement. Asma's blind husband, who detested her anyway, became a Muslim and stabbed her to death in her bed. Muhammad commended him from the pulpit as "a man who has assisted the Lord and his Prophet." Another enemy, an Arab chief from al-Taif, assembled a force to march on Medina. A Muslim convert won his confidence, cut off his head, and escaped to present this grisly trophy to Muhammad. As reward, the Prophet presented him with his own staff, which the assassin carried all his life.

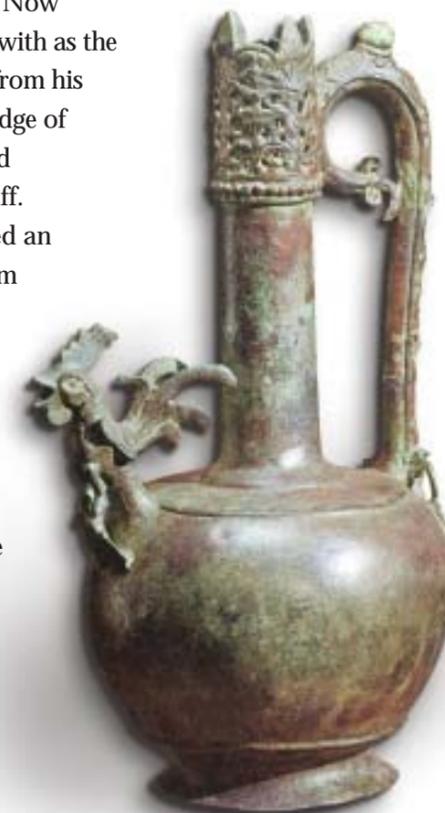
Another problematic poet, half Jewish, was murdered in his marriage bed by his foster brother, secretly a Muslim convert. This man, conscience-stricken later on, confessed to Muhammad that he had had to lie and dissemble. The Prophet told him not to worry about it. The incident further signaled that no Jew was safe in Medina. Indeed, says the Muslim historian, Ibn Ishaq, the Prophet shortly gave orders to kill any who came into Muslim hands—and thus began the Medina pogrom.

Of Medina's three Jewish tribal communities, the most vulnerable was the Banu Qainuqa. Unlike the other two, it lacked territory of its own—its members were artisans and soldiers—but Medina's titular chieftain, although nominally a Muslim, was heavily in debt to this tribe, and had sworn a mutual defence pact. Now Muhammad abruptly demanded that the Qainuqa recognize him forthwith as the Prophet of God. They refused, and warned him not to infer too much from his victory at Badr, which they said was "against men who had no knowledge of war." A war with the Qainuqa would not be another Badr. Muhammad withdrew, and the Qainuqa congratulated themselves on calling his bluff.

But they had misjudged their man. A few days later there occurred an "incident." A Jewish boy was accused of lifting the skirts of a Muslim girl. Her Muslim kinsman killed the lad, and in the resulting uproar was himself slain. That was excuse enough. Muhammad invaded the Qainuqa quarter at the head of his army. The Qainuqa withdrew into their fortified enclosure and appealed to Medina's chieftain to come to their aid. The chieftain seized Muhammad by the breastplate, threatening him. "Let me go, wretch!" shouted Muhammad, but he knew he was not yet strong enough to challenge Medina's old establishment. As a compromise he agreed that the Qainuqa should merely be deported, and their store of arms become Muslim booty.

This windfall was nothing, however, compared with the bonanza that fell to a hundred-man raiding party organized about this time by Zayd, the former Christian slave who served as Muhammad's secretary. Because the old route to Syria was now too

*A bronze water ewer (below)—from New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art—dating from the time of Muhammad, with a spout in the shape of a crowing rooster. Since Arabs ate with their fingers, such pitchers and a basin for washing were common items in all but the poorest households.*

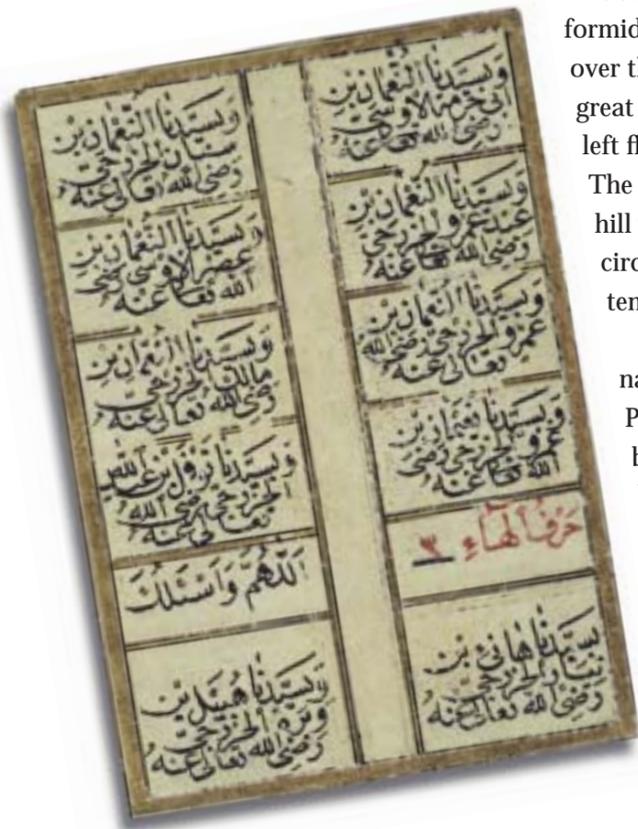


<sup>1</sup> Abu Sufyan's vow not to "approach" his wives is ridiculed by Muslim tradition, because, although he had children, he was by reputation a homosexual. It should be remembered, however, that the early Muslim biographies were largely written by later chroniclers belonging to the powerful Abbasid dynasty, whose primary concern would not be to enhance the reputation of Abu Sufyan, ancestor of the rival Umayyad caliphs.

2. During the fighting, Arab women would perch themselves behind the warriors, shaking their timbrels to accompany their songs of encouragement. A sample verse:

Daughters fair of Tariq are we,  
Attack—we'll give you our kisses free,  
Our perfumed beds will ready be,  
But we'll desert you if you flee,  
Our love for braver men will be.

A list of the names of the fallen in the Battle of Badr (below), from a nineteenth-century manuscript by Muhammad as-Sadi. Islam's first "martyrs" continue to be revered fourteen centuries after the fight.



dangerous for Meccan caravans, an enormous expedition, rich with silver bars and vessels, had decided to follow an arid back route to Iraq, along the east side of the Arabian Peninsula. Word leaked to Medina, and Zayd's raiders easily overpowered its escort. They returned triumphant with eight hundred pieces of silver for each man, and twenty thousand for Muhammad's household. The message was unmistakable. Not only was Islam spiritually comforting—it also paid handsomely.

To survive the reversal they were about to suffer, however, the Muslims would require all the fervor they could command. At Mecca the canny Abu Sufyan, preparing for one gigantic assault upon Medina and Muhammad, appealed to every available ally. Uncle Abbas, Muhammad's chief informant in the enemy camp, sent him word that the force arrayed against him would number three thousand. In January 625, this army set out from Mecca in splendor, led by the customary contingent of timbrel-banging women.<sup>2</sup>

Hind, wife of Abu Sufyan, had an additional plan. She brought along a huge black Ethiopian slave named Wahshi, renowned as an expert with the javelin. He must watch the melee from a distance until he spotted Muhammad's Uncle Hamza, Hind told Wahshi, and bring him down. His reward would be his freedom and a share in any booty. The Muslim force of about seven hundred was outnumbered more than four to one by the advancing Meccans, who encamped in a valley behind a hill called Uhud, three miles north of Medina's outskirts. At dawn, Muhammad placed his men around the hill, keeping it at his back as a refuge should things go badly. This precaution would save the lives of most of his army, and the future of Islam.

Commanding the Meccan cavalry was Khalid ibn al-Walid, a formidable tactician who was destined to convert to Islam, and over the next thirty years would establish himself as one of the great attack generals of history. Khalid noted that the Muslims' left flank might be vulnerable to a concerted cavalry attack. The Prophet had stationed a squad of crack bowmen on the hill with strict orders never to leave their position under any circumstance. In the event, however, an overwhelming temptation would lure them away: sex.

As the armies confronted one another a Meccan fighter named Talha loudly challenged any Muslim to combat. The Prophet's son Ali stepped forward and with a single sword blow sliced through Talha's helmet and skull. Then Talha's brother was struck dead by Hamza, and in the next few minutes Hamza, Ali, and another Muslim put an end to two more brothers and three sons of the perished Talha. These single-combat encounters, though much in the Arab tradition, robbed the Meccans of the benefit of their numerical advantage. Hamza's conspicuous performance made his identity unmistakable, however, and sealed his fate. The Ethiopian Wahshi spotted his

target and hurled his javelin. Hamza fell dead, and Wahshi left. "I had no further business there," he observed.

Meanwhile, the magnificent feats of their champions so cheered the Muslims that, as at Badr, they charged wildly forward. When the Meccan front rank again collapsed, the Muslims broke through to the Meccan camp, and began making free with the women. Rape on the battlefield was within Arab rules and was little mitigated by Islamic morality, which merely ritualized it. This time, however, it brought disaster. The spectacle proved too enticing for the archers, who were missing it all. Forgetting Muhammad's orders, they rushed to join in, and sharp-eyed Khalid ibn al-Walid loosed upon the Muslim flank every available cavalryman. A seeming Muslim victory suddenly became a rout.

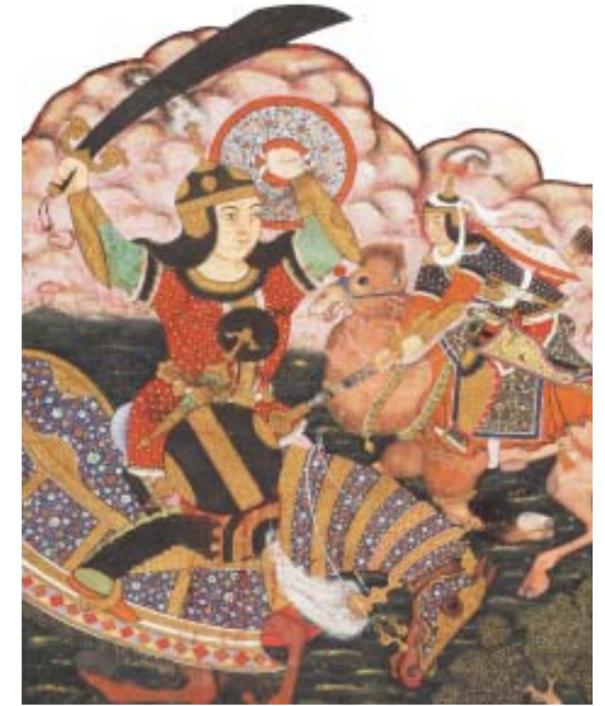
The more fortunate were able to scramble to the safety of the hill above, but Muhammad himself was one of the first to fall. He had stood screaming at his fleeing soldiery: "Come back! I am the Apostle of the Lord! Return!" This proving futile, he hurled rocks at the enemy until a Meccan blow smashed his helmet down onto his head, so hard that the rings of the earpieces sank deep into his cheek.

Neck and forehead gashed, lip cut and a tooth broken, the Prophet reeled backward and disappeared from sight. But then he regained his feet and climbed the hill to safety, and when his men cheered to see him, he quickly silenced them. If the enemy knew he was alive, he warned, they would attack again. Meanwhile, his wounds seemed to enrage him, and he hurled a curse upon his assailants: "Let the wrath of God burn against the men that have sprinkled the face of his Apostle with his own blood!"<sup>3</sup>

With Muhammad presumed dead, the Meccans did indeed call off their attack. If he was gone, Mecca had no quarrel with Medina. Abu Sufyan loudly declared that Badr was avenged, and proclaimed the glory of the Meccan idols. This was too much for the Prophet's stalwart follower Umar ibn al-Khattab. "The Lord is ours, not yours," Umar roared. "Our slain are in paradise; yours are in the fire." Abu Sufyan responded with a challenge for a showdown at Badr one year hence, and when Umar accepted, the Meccan army began moving for home.

One further scene bears mention. Wahshi, the javelin thrower, had conducted the vengeful Hind to Hamza's body. She tore out the liver, nibbled at it, swallowed, and sickened, spat out the rest. Other Meccan women helped her to carve up the body, fashioning armlets, bracelets and anklets from the ears, nose, and, says the record delicately, "other parts."

The Meccans reportedly lost twenty men at the Battle of Uhud, and the Muslims seventy-four, but the principal Muslim loss was in credibility. In Medina, the Jews proclaimed the obvious implications. If victory at Badr proved God was with Muhammad, then surely defeat at Uhud must prove the reverse. Muhammad's interesting answer appears in the Qur'an's third sura.



An incredible oral tradition developed around the imaginary exploits of Muhammad's Uncle Hamza, which over the centuries grew into elaborate tales of fantastic derring-do involving a host of giants, sorcerers, demons and dragons. The young Indian Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605) was so taken with the stories that he ordered them written down. His epic Hamzanama eventually comprised fourteen volumes, accompanied by fourteen hundred unbound paintings. About two hundred of the paintings (including this one, above) have survived.

3. Muhammad's bitter curse upon those who had wounded him in the Battle of Uhud makes an interesting contrast with Jesus' response to those who had nailed him to a cross: "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Lk. 23:34).

Reversals are necessary, it explains, to separate true believers from the merely opportunistic: “This various success we cause to alternate among men, that God may know those that believe . . . and annihilate the infidels. What! Did ye think to enter paradise, while as yet God knew not those that fight for him, and knew not the persevering amongst you?” (Sura 3:139–142).

Nevertheless, something more was needed to allay the hostility of neighboring tribes, now challenging Muhammad. He thwarted one belligerent by attacking first, capturing and enslaving some two hundred women in the process. (Before long, the procession of female captives into Muslim slavery would number in the tens of thousands.) In two other instances, however, the Muslims were the losers.

*Muhammad told his men to uproot the Jewish tribe's date palms, an act forbidden by the Law of Moses. But the Prophet revealed that Muslims enjoyed a special exemption from the rule.*

One tribe professed interest in embracing Islam, then ambushed the seven-man mission sent to instruct them. Only one escaped, four were killed, and two were captured and sold to the Meccans. These men, refusing to recant, perished during torture as true martyrs, evidencing the defiant courage that would characterize Islam for generations to come. “Allah! Count them well,” they shouted, eyeing their torturers, “then kill them all, one by one. Let none escape.”<sup>4</sup>

Another tribe, playing the same trick, ambushed a forty-man Muslim mission and killed all but one. This incident, however, provided Muhammad with an excuse to attack their allies, the Banu al-Nadir, the region's second Jewish community. At a preliminary parley, writes the Muslim historian Ibn Ishaq, the Jews planned to murder Muhammad by dropping a huge boulder on him as he arrived. But Gabriel warned the Prophet, who returned to the town and sent a warning instead: “By your proposing to slay me, you have broken the pact I made with you . . . I give you ten days to depart from my country. Whosoever of you is seen after that, his head shall be cut off.”<sup>5</sup>

What particularly alarmed the Banu al-Nadir was that this message was delivered by a member of the Aus tribe, supposedly their allies. As the Qainuqa had, they barricaded themselves in their fortified community. Muhammad ordered his men to destroy the date palms around their fields, thus instantly depriving them of future earnings. To destroy such trees was specifically prohibited by the Law of Moses, and by later *Shari'a* (Islamic Law); but Muhammad explained that it did not apply to Muslims, to whom Gabriel had provided special dispensation.

The Banu al-Nadir, having nothing left to defend, then surrendered on condition that they could leave safely, with all their possessions except weapons. These possessions proved of significantly greater value than the Muslims had estimated; however, they had to watch in frustration as mesmerizing quantities of gold and goods were taken north to Khaybar, a big Jewish settlement. Also impressive were the beauty and luxury of the women, laden with ornaments

of finest gold set with precious stones. Only one Jewish tribe, the Banu Qurayza, still remained at Medina.

One year after Badr, marking the end of the truce between Mecca and Medina, neither side appeared ready to fight. Muhammad's appeals for recruits reportedly went largely unheeded until he announced he would face the enemy by himself if need be, which brought fifteen hundred volunteers. At Mecca, Abu Sufyan assembled two thousand foot soldiers and fifty horses, who marched north, came within sight of Medina, halted, and returned home. This non-engagement is nevertheless known as “the Second Battle of Badr.”

However, the following year, the Meccans amassed their biggest force ever, reportedly ten thousand men: including four thousand soldiers on foot, fifteen hundred on camels, and three hundred on horseback. Panic seized Medina, which could muster at most three thousand. How could it possibly survive such a siege? But an Iraqi Christian slave, freed upon his conversion to Islam, offered timely advice on defensive warfare, an art unknown to the Arabs.

Deeply scored basalt plains made the city difficult to approach from three sides, he noted. Only from the north did open fields leave it vulnerable. Here they dug a huge trench, too wide for horses to jump, and deep enough that attacking foot soldiers could be shot from above. This chasm did indeed balk Abu Sufyan's horde.

The siege became a mere contest of abuse, all thirteen thousand participants hurling insults and threats for days, but the Meccan besiegers had time on their side. The biggest uncertainty was what the Jewish Banu Qurayza might do. Thus it was, say the Islamic records, that God saved Islam by providing the Muslims with a deliverer, a member of the Christian Banu Ghassan, who was serving with the Meccan army. This man, trusted by both the Meccans and the Qurayza, came to Muhammad secretly to ask how he could serve the Muslim cause. Muhammad's answer was explicit: Sow distrust between the Meccans and the Jews.

*Camel-mounted warriors fighting at the Battle of Uhud (below), from Mustafa Darir's Siyar-e-Nabi (Life of the Prophet). Lack of discipline among the Muslim troops led to a setback at the hands of the Meccan cavalry commander Khalid ibn al-Walid, who after his conversion to Islam would become the greatest general of the Muslim conquests.*



The volunteer secret agent thereupon approached his old friends, the Banu Qurayza. If the Meccans should lose the battle, he suggested, they would simply go home—but the Jews would lose everything. To guarantee their continued participation, therefore, the Jews should demand that they provide significant hostages. This made sense to the Banu Qurayza. Then the agent went to his old friends, the Meccans. He felt it his duty to warn them, said he, that the Jews now regretted opposing Muhammad, and were about to join the Muslims. They even intended to demand high-ranking Meccan hostages, whom they planned to turn over to Muhammad.

Sure enough, a Meccan delegation sought Jewish help in an all-out attack on the Muslim rear—and was appalled when the Qurayza demanded hostages. With all trust lost, no Jewish attack occurred. Disease and discord broke out among the Meccans, fierce winds assailed their camp, Bedouin tribes began pulling out, and after two weeks, Abu Sufyan called off the siege. Muhammad was now considered invincible. If an army of ten thousand could not defeat him, who

*The besieged Jews faced three terrible choices: Embrace Islam, thus betraying God. Or slaughter their own families and fight to the death. Or break the Sabbath with a surprise attack.*

could? The time had come, advised the angel Gabriel (as quoted by the Prophet) to deal with the Banu Qurayza, Medina's last Jews. Muhammad did so with an act of butchery that would permanently poison Islamic–Jewish relations.

The Qurayza were barricaded within their fortress about three miles southeast of the town. As Muhammad's army approached this stronghold, flights of Jewish arrows rained hard upon them. One Muslim ventured to the fortress walls, and was killed by a huge millstone pushed upon him from above by an unidentified Jewess. But the Qurayza sensed themselves doomed.

They had three hard choices, their leader reasoned. First, they could embrace Islam and thereby betray God. Second, they could kill their wives and children to keep them from the infidels, and then fight to the death. Third, they could attack on Saturday, thus violating God's Sabbath law, but catching the Muslims off guard. His people rejected all three. They appealed instead to the Aus tribe, whom on a previous occasion they had saved from destruction. The advice of the Aus chief was unequivocal. To surrender was to perish, he said; they should fight to the death.<sup>6</sup>

The Qurayza nevertheless did surrender twenty-five days later, on condition that their fate be determined by the Aus. Muhammad, having agreed, then announced that the decision would not be made by their friend, the local Aus chief. Instead, he called upon the grand chief of the Aus federation, a merciless man known to deeply despise Jews. This dignitary, a grossly corpulent man, physically supported by his aides, was transported to the Qurayza fort. While his kinsmen pleaded with him to spare their allies, the Muslim army envisioned vast booty within the fortress, and speculatively eyed the Jewish women. Muhammad himself

had set his eye on one particular prize, the beautiful Reihana, aged seventeen.

"Proceed with your judgment," ordered the Prophet. "My judgment," said the gross old Aus chieftain, "is that the men shall be put to death, the women and children sold into slavery, and the spoil divided amongst the army." Wails of agony were silenced by a wave of Muhammad's hand. This, he pronounced, was "the judgment of God."

So all the male Qurayza were dragged into Medina and penned in an enclosure, where they prayed through the night, exhorting each other to remain steadfast in their faith. Muhammad, they reasoned, could not possibly behead some eight hundred men. But next morning, a Muslim soldier led away half a dozen of them, then returned for another half dozen, then another, and another. Even as their numbers dwindled, the survivors could still not bring themselves to believe these men had all in fact been killed—but such was the case. Each group was made to kneel by a deep trench, dug overnight across the town square. As their heads were severed, their bodies were pushed into the pit.

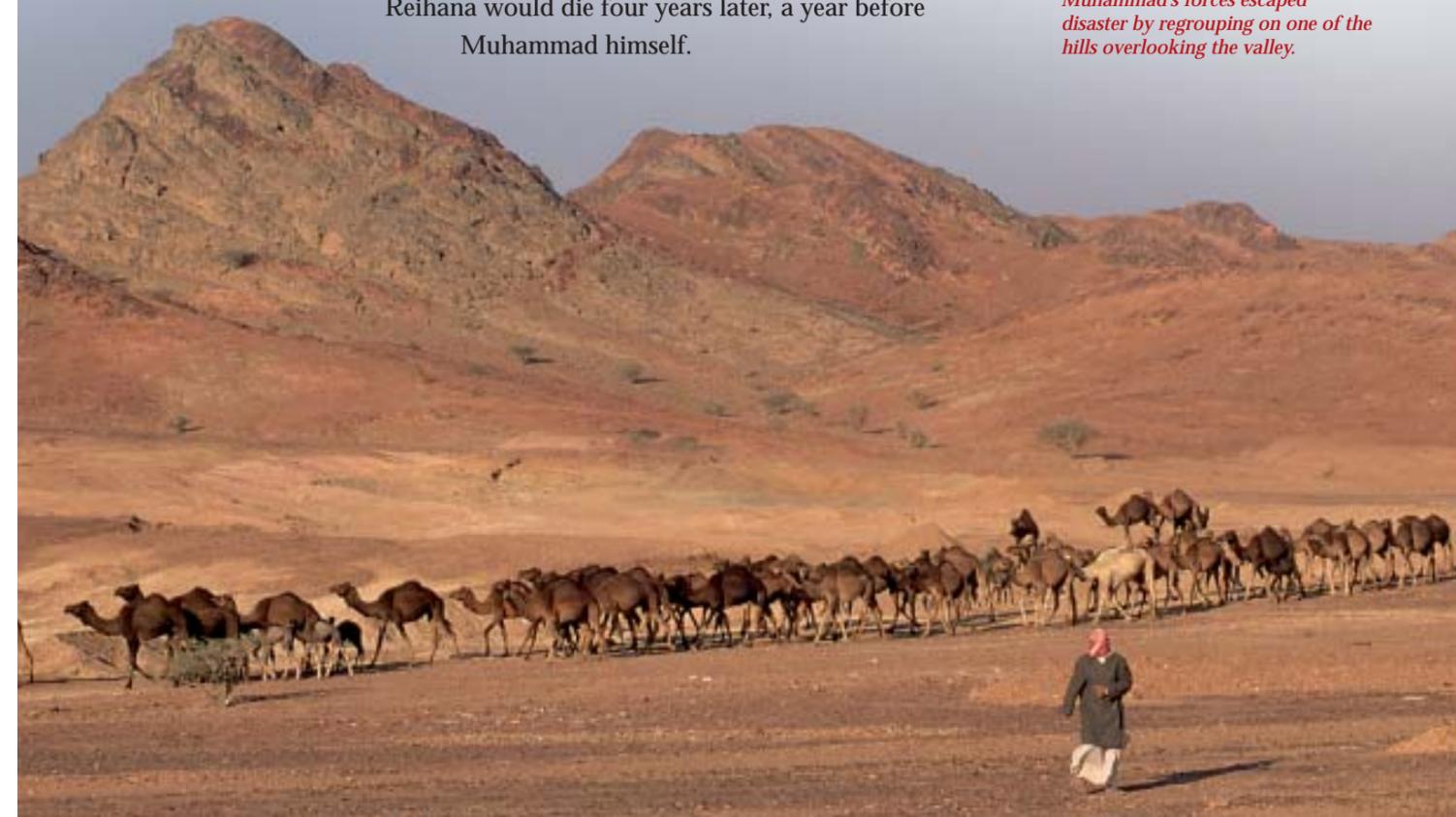
At length, it was time for the booty, and then the women. The numbers were satisfactory indeed: fifteen hundred swords, a thousand lances, five hundred shields and three hundred coats of mail, flocks of sheep and camels, gold and silver vessels, jewels and beautiful household furnishings, and about a thousand women. The four-fifths to one-fifth division was again carried out. Included in Muhammad's share, of course, was the comely Reihana.

The Prophet proposed marriage as soon as Reihana's husband, brothers and father had been executed. Muslim tradition naturally omits description of her misery, but does say that she refused to wed him. She preferred to be his concubine, she said, which she immediately became. (Devout Muslims reject this tradition, however. Muhammad, they say, had no concubines.) Some sources say

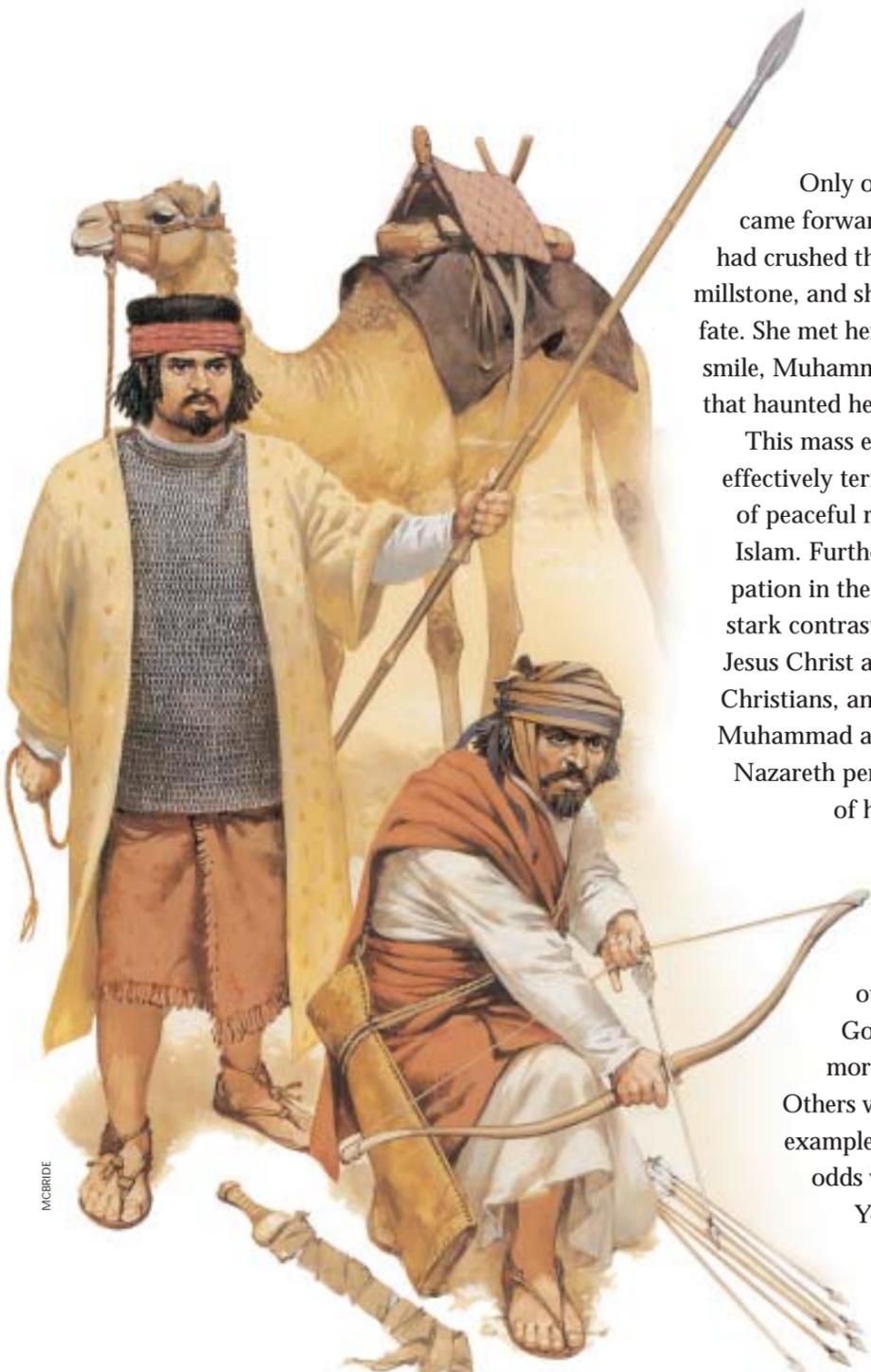
she also refused to convert to Islam, others that she later did so.

Reihana would die four years later, a year before Muhammad himself.

*Bedouin herding camels on the arid valley floor near Medina (below) where the Muslim and Meccan armies clashed at Uhud in 625. Muhammad's forces escaped disaster by regrouping on one of the hills overlooking the valley.*



<sup>6</sup> Abu Lababa, the Aus chief, rushed back to his people, guilt-stricken. He had betrayed the Prophet, he said, by telling the Qurayza the truth. Was not war supposed to be deceit? As penance for his truthfulness, Abu Lababa ordered his daughter to tie him to a post in the mosque, where for some fifteen days he remained until Muhammad, informed by Gabriel that he had suffered enough, ordered him to free himself. The spot is still known as the "Pillar of Repentance."



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*A Muslim archer and Bedouin officer from the time of Muhammad. It was soldiers like these, lightly armed and sandals, who formed the backbone of an army that challenged the great powers of the seventh century.*

Only one woman was put to death. She came forward to announce that it was she who had crushed the Muslim attacker with the millstone, and she demanded to share her husband's fate. She met her death fearless and smiling—a smile, Muhammad's wife A'isha later confessed, that haunted her all her life.

This mass extermination of the Banu Qurayza effectively terminated any possibility thereafter of peaceful relations between Judaism and Islam. Further, Muhammad's personal participation in the slaughter would stand in such stark contrast to anything in the ministry of Jesus Christ as to preclude, in the minds of many Christians, any tolerant recognition of Muhammad as a prophet. To envision Jesus of Nazareth personally presiding over the butchery of his enemies would never be

feasible—nor did he ever provide legitimate grounds for anyone else to do so.

Some Christians would point out, no doubt, that to contrast what God Incarnate did with what any mortal human did is manifestly unfair. Others would reply that, even so, the example set for Christians is shockingly at odds with the example set for Muslims.

Yet this, of course, would render such a deed far worse if perpetuated by Christians than by Muslims, and in the coming wars with Islam, Christians themselves would sometimes rival the Prophet's vicious early venture into genocide.

Cultural historian Martin Lings, a lecturer at Cairo University who himself became a Muslim and who served as Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at the British Museum, points out in defence of the massacre that Muhammad's judgment there was in perfect accord with the Jews' own code for such a situation: "When the Lord thy God hath delivered it unto thy hands, thou shalt smite every male therein with the edge of the sword: but the women and little ones, and the cattle, and all that is in the city, even all the spoil thereof, thou shalt take unto thyself." (Deut. 20:12–14) However, this was pronounced after an offer of peace and forced labor. No such offer was made to the Banu Qurayza.

Historian William Muir (*The Life of Mohammed from Original Sources*) is less understanding. "The indiscriminate slaughter of eight hundred men, and the subjugation of the whole tribe to slavery, cannot be recognized otherwise than as an act of monstrous cruelty," he writes. "The plea of divine ratification or command may allay the scruples of the Muslim; but it will be summarily rejected by those who call to mind that the same authority was now habitually produced for personal ends, and for the justification of even questionable actions. In short, the butchery of the Banu Qurayza casts an indelible blot on the life of Muhammad."

The fate of the rest of Arabia's Jewry was probably settled in August and September 628. Having negotiated a long-term truce with Mecca, Muhammad turned his attention to Khaybar, the Jewish settlement one hundred miles north

*The Muslim army consisted of a mere sixteen hundred men, but Muhammad's gift for strategy, stealth and diplomacy would once again bring his followers success.*

of Medina, haven for many refugees from earlier conquests. Its elimination would provide a solution to the Jewish problem, but it was known to have ten thousand men under arms, drilling daily, and among them were the most accurate archers on the peninsula.

Like Medina, Khaybar was the center of a rich agricultural area. Also like Medina, its Jewish tribes were divided. They occupied separate fortresses atop steep hills, and depended on alliances with such neighboring tribes as the Christian Ghassan to the north. The campaign against them began with a number of strategic assassinations, followed by a direct assault. The Muslim army consisted of a mere sixteen hundred men, but Muhammad's gift for strategy, stealth and tribal diplomacy would again bring success.

All seven Jewish fortresses sealed their gates and prepared for a siege. While Muhammad encircled and took each in turn, however, not once did any one of them come out to aid another. Jewish traitors, on the other hand, allegedly helped the Muslims. One showed them a cache of siege machinery, something the Arabs had scarcely heard of before, but put to immediate use. Another turncoat revealed the source of an underground water supply to one fortress. The Muslims blocked it, forcing the defenders to capitulate.

Looming large and seemingly unassailable was the al-Kamus fortress, citadel of the Banu al-Nadir whom the Muslims had expelled from Medina. Remembering the disastrous siege there, the Jews sallied into the field, their skilled archers repelling repeated Muslim attacks. Neither the veteran Abu Bakr nor Umar could make headway against their defence, say the Islamic traditions. It was Ali, charging like a man gone mad, who led a veritable rampage through their fighters, though reputedly losing only nineteen men to the Jewish ninety-three. Again the Banu al-Nadir surrendered. Again they were to be allowed to

leave—but only after handing over all their weapons, land and wealth.

The wealth they produced proved suspiciously meager, however, for the disappointed Muslims vividly remembered all the fine fabric, jewels and golden utensils they had seen leave Medina. Where was it now? The Jewish chief denied there was more until torture, in the form of a small fire kindled on his naked chest, improved his memory. The remainder was seized, and the chief and a cousin decapitated. Within weeks the other Khaybar forts fell. The Jewish presence in Arabia, from that day to this, ceased to be significant. Within two decades, Judaism, along with Christianity, would be prohibited throughout the peninsula.

The wealth seized at Khaybar far exceeded that taken at Medina. Riches were increasingly becoming a reward for faith, and desire for plunder played a central role in the conquests that followed. The traditions also indicate that from then on, the Muslims had many slaves. One fifth of the Khaybar booty went to the Prophet's household. He also got half the Jewish lands, the other half being

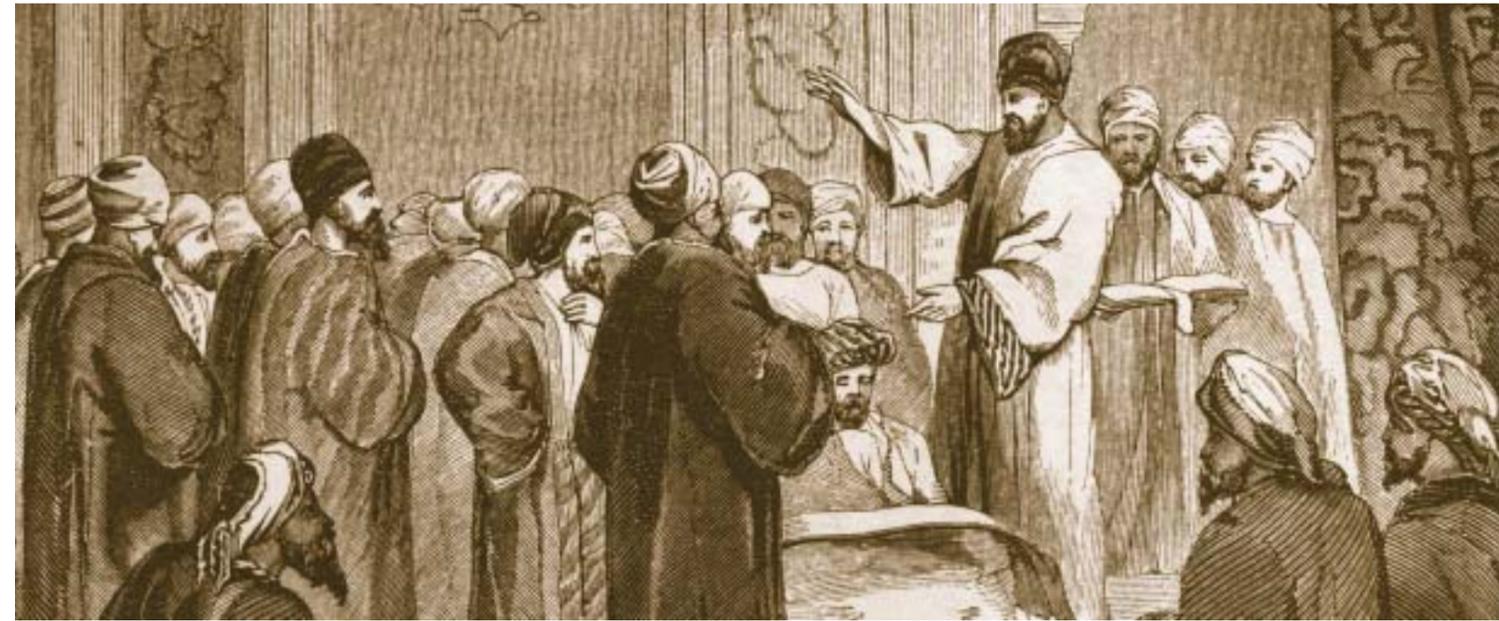
*The Prophet, having eliminated the Jewish threat to the north, could again look south to Mecca, the city that had violently rejected the divine revelation of its native son.*

divided among the soldiers, and a further bonus as well. His quick eye had, as usual, spotted an especially beautiful girl. At a victory banquet that evening, seventeen-year-old Safiyah, widowed in the battle and splendidly garbed, was presented to him.

Unlike Reihana, say the traditions, Safiyah gratefully accepted her fate. She allegedly had been intrigued by Islam since childhood, and was so enamored of its Prophet that her indignant husband had recently blackened her eye for it. The ardent Muhammad consummated his latest marriage that very night, a violation of the rule he tried to impose on his followers, namely that no new wife could be entered until she had completed her current menstrual cycle, so that paternity of children was identifiable.

Zaynab, another young woman bereaved at Khaybar, appeared similarly admiring of the Prophet at the victory banquet. She presented him with a special gift, a young goat beautifully roasted, and as it turned out, thoroughly poisoned—particularly in the shoulder, Muhammad's known preference. Unsuspecting, he helped himself to shoulder, and offered the rest to Abu Bakr and to Bishr, another faithful lieutenant. These two had been first after the Prophet to turn away from Jerusalem, and towards Mecca, when that change was decreed in the mosque. (See previous chapter.)

Before Muhammad had swallowed much, however, he spat out the poisoned meat, grabbing his gut in pain. Bishr, who had wolfed down a hefty portion, collapsed, paralyzed, never to move again. Zaynab, glaring at the company, identified herself as the sister of a slain Jewish soldier. "You have inflicted grievous injuries on my people," she said. "You have killed my father, uncle, and husband.



*A nineteenth-century engraving of Muhammad preaching to the faithful in Medina (above). By 629, after consolidating his hold on Medina and the surrounding region, the Prophet was secure enough to begin a final and ultimately successful campaign against his hometown of Mecca.*

Therefore I said within myself, if he is a prophet he will reject the [goat] kid, knowing it is poisoned. But if he is a mere pretender, then we shall be rid of him, and the Jews will again prosper."

Modern Muslims and their liberal Western apologists, for whom the Prophet's conduct on such occasions can represent insurmountable embarrassment, like to add that he forgave the girl after this valiant confession.

Unfortunately, however, all but one of the records say she was put to death. The effects of the poison were prolonged, and would be blamed by some for Muhammad's death a year later. In any case, Jews were now recognized as implacable enemies of Islam. "Alas for that which they work! Wherefore do their rabbis and their priests restrain them not from uttering wickedness, and eating that which is forbidden. Alas for that which they commit! The Jews say, 'The hand of God is tied up.' Nay, their own hands are tied up, and they are cursed for what they say" (Sura 5:62–64).

Having eliminated the Jewish threat in the north, the Prophet could again look south to Mecca, the city that had so decisively and violently rejected its native son. He had been able to concentrate his forces against Khaybar because he had made a truce with the Meccans following the desultory Battle of the Trench. But Mecca's humiliation on that occasion had caused a political upset back home. The party headed by Abu Sufyan, sponsor of that ignominiously futile siege, had lost influence to a more belligerent younger generation.

Hostilities therefore resumed with raids and counterraid, the Muslims conducting no less than seventeen in a year, and in March 628, Muhammad created a new crisis. He and his followers, he announced, would make the "lesser" annual pilgrimage to the Ka'ba at Mecca. Since the lesser pilgrimage was less widely observed, few other Arabs would be there. This presented Mecca with a dilemma. If it attacked pilgrims, even Muslim ones, all Arabia would be horrified. But if it admitted them, Muhammad might again discover that the old truce rules did not apply to him, and seize power in a sudden coup. The younger set swore to resist him.



A somewhat fanciful nineteenth-century German depiction of a triumphant Muhammad entering Mecca. Muslim history records that the town's streets were, in fact, almost deserted as the Prophet's troops occupied his birthplace. Only eleven citizens were condemned for their resistance, and seven of those were later reprieved.

How many pilgrims accompanied Muhammad is debatable, with estimates varying from seven hundred to sixteen hundred (plus a few women). The Bedouin, seeing few prospects of loot, did not answer the call, which would earn them a Qur'anic rebuke: "Those that stay behind . . . are a people that understandeth little" (Sura 48:11 and following). (But it goes on to promise them more booty in greater wars to come.)

As the extensive company, dressed in pilgrim garb, neared Mecca, they found their way blocked by a squad of horsemen under Khalid ibn al-Walid. Muhammad sent a troop of his own horses to confront them. After much parley, they worked out a ten-year truce named the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, for the locale where it was signed.

The Muslims agreed not to interfere with Meccan caravans, and to send home to Mecca any converts lacking permission from their families. But beginning with the next year, the Meccans would evacuate their city annually to

*'We don't want your food,' said the Meccans. 'Be gone.' So Muhammad left, but he began to prepare his last and decisive move against his native city.*

let Muslim pilgrims in. Muhammad, greatly pleased, readily assented. With Mecca neutralized, he could move against Jewish Khaybar (described above). Moreover, the pilgrimage would signify to all Arabs that Islam had not come to destroy their religion, but merely to purify it from idolatry.

The following year, two thousand Muslims, wearing pilgrim robes and armed only with sheathed swords, arrived for the lesser pilgrimage, leading sixty sacrificial camels into the strangely abandoned city, while the Meccans watched from the surrounding hills. Muhammad touched the Black Stone of the Ka'ba with his staff, and made the seven ritual circuits. His followers did the same. A few began shouting challenges at the hills. Muhammad restrained them, instructing them to shout instead the praises of God.

But when Bilal climbed to the roof of the Ka'ba and sounded the Muslim call to prayer, the listening Meccans began to think they had made a serious mistake. Three days later, Muhammad made his uncle's sister-in-law his tenth wife, and invited the Meccans to a wedding feast. "We don't want your food," said they. "Be gone." So he left, but he also began to prepare his last and decisive move against his native city.

Converts were now multiplying, and new tribes hastening to pledge allegiance. When Meccans arrived at Medina as converts, Muhammad sent them home, as agreed in the treaty, but he knew that many went instead to a razzia-financed settlement of would-be Muslims on the Red Sea. One such convert, fatally injured in a camel accident, before he died sent a letter to his brother in Mecca, urging him to embrace Islam. The recipient of this momentous letter was none other than Khalid ibn al-Walid.

Khalid's disenchantment with the Meccan cause had grown since the Battle of

Uhud, where his own sharp generalship had won Mecca its only victory. Finally he left for Medina, meeting on the way another traveler, Amr ibn As, a poet of devastating skill, whose verses had enraged Muhammad, but who was now ready to change sides. Khalid ibn al-Walid would play a key role in the conquest of Zoroastrian Persia and Christian Syria. Amr would become the conqueror of Christian Egypt.

It was time to tackle Mecca head-on, treaty or no treaty. In any case, a convenient attack by the Mecca-supported Banu Bakr on the neighboring Banu Khoza'a, who were committed to Muhammad, was deemed sufficient cause to repudiate it.<sup>7</sup> The alarmed Meccans sent Abu Sufyan himself to Medina to secure its reaffirmation, but the mission is recorded as a failure.

Unparalleled secrecy attended Muhammad's next move. Messages went out

*Muhammad made the seven circuits around the Ka'ba and then, pointing his stick at each of the 360 idols around the shrine, commanded their immediate and complete destruction.*

to his wide constituency of allied tribes, naming a rendezvous, and the fully assembled army reportedly numbered ten thousand. At the head of the crack horsemen rode the seemingly invincible Khalid, Mecca's former champion, followed by five hundred Meccan refugees. In their midst rode the Prophet, flanked by Abu Bakr and Umar, and escorted by a bodyguard of the best cavalry—a scene intended to stir his followers' hearts. This was the climax, and God's fearsomely armed Prophet would triumph. (Here, too, the Christian equivalent provides an interesting contrast: Jesus, riding on a donkey amidst the palms and hosannas of the poor, destined through a hideous death to gain victory for humankind.)

After a day's ride, the army bivouacked above Mecca. With thousands of campfires blinking from the hills, all Arabia seemed arrayed there. Out of the city stole Uncle Abbas to formally join his nephew at last. A day later, Abbas met the Meccan chieftain Abu Sufyan on the road, and led him to Muhammad. It was a historic meeting. "Out upon thee, Abu Sufyan," declared the Prophet. "Have you not yet discovered that there is no God but the Lord alone?" Replied Abu Sufyan: "Noble and generous sir, had there been any God beside, verily he would have been of some avail to me."

So Muhammad pushed the next and critical question: "And do you not acknowledge that I am the Prophet of the Lord?" But Abu Sufyan was not quite ready for this. "Noble sir, as to this thing there is yet in my heart some hesitancy." Abbas groaned. "Woe to you," he exclaimed. "This is no time for hesitancy. Believe and testify forthwith the creed of Islam, or your neck shall be in danger!"

So Abu Sufyan thereupon acquiesced, and Muhammad's terms followed swiftly. He returned to Mecca, proclaimed the hopelessness of resistance, and guaranteed the safety of anyone who stayed inside, behind closed doors, or who

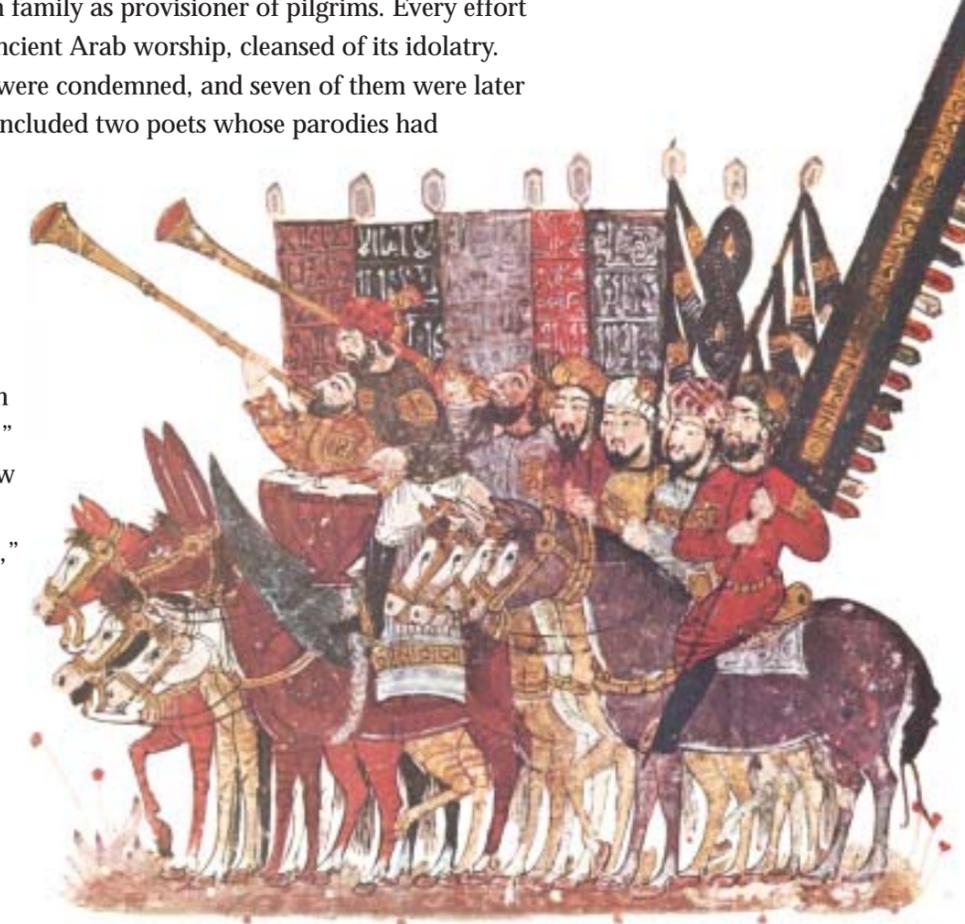
took refuge in the mosque. His capitulation roused the jeers and scorn of his own wife, the inimitable Hind, who demanded his immediate execution. "Kill this fat and greasy bladder of lard," she screamed at the Meccans. "Don't let her lead you astray," expostulated Abu Sufyan. "We are confronted with the unprecedented." The panic-stricken Meccans believed him, and ran in terror for their homes. Only on the city's south side was resistance offered, by young dissenters determined to fight it out.

Three of the four columns of Muhammad's army entered the city and rode through its silent streets of shuttered houses. On the south flank, where the clatter of battle broke forth, Khalid and a Bedouin force made short work of the holdouts. One of their three leaders surrendered; the other two made good their escape to the Red Sea coast.

Muhammad formally made the seven circuits around the Ka'ba, and then pointed his stick at each of the 360 idols surrounding it, and commanded their destruction. "Truth has come!" he shouted as the great image of the god Hubal crashed down. "Truth hath come and falsehood gone. For falsehood vanisheth away." These became the words of the seventeenth sura (verse 81).

Uthman, the keeper of the Ka'ba and now a convert, opened its doors. Muhammad entered, and reportedly ordered the destruction of all but two of the images within it, one being of Abraham, the other of Mary and the child Jesus. Uthman's family was reaffirmed as keepers of the Ka'ba, as it had been for generations, and Muhammad's own family as provisioner of pilgrims. Every effort was made, that is, to preserve the ancient Arab worship, cleansed of its idolatry.

Only eleven of Mecca's citizens were condemned, and seven of them were later reprieved. (The four not pardoned included two poets whose parodies had particularly irked Muhammad.) Among the many new Muslim converts came a long line of women, one of them veiled. "O Messenger of God," said she from beneath the veil, "praise be to him who hath made triumph the religion which I herewith choose for myself." She said the Muslim creed and threw back the veil. "Hind, daughter of Utbah," she proclaimed. "Welcome," said Muhammad.



*"There is no god but Allah" proclaim the banners carried by mounted musicians from this thirteenth-century illustration (right), by Mahmud al-Wasiti, of the annual pilgrimage to Mecca. Muhammad's subjugation of his hometown meant that Mecca inevitably eclipsed Medina to become the spiritual center of Islam.*

8 Muslim history, much to its own discomfort, had not heard the end of Hind. Why the Prophet accepted her insolence is not explained. Some say he could not afford to offend Abu Sufyan whose support was now vital, and Hind, however ferocious, was deeply loved by her husband. In another tradition, Muhammad asked that a pot of water be brought before him. Both he and the women plunged their hands into it, thereby cementing the pledge.

This, at any rate, is the version of Hind's embrace of Islam that modern-day Muslims prefer to tell. Another version, that of Ibn Ishaq, is both older and more convincing. By his account, Muhammad charged the assembled women not to associate any created "thing" with the Deity. "By God," said a voice from beneath a veil, "you lay on us something you have not laid upon the men. But we will carry it out."

"And you shall not steal," charged Muhammad. But this, protested the same woman, would mean giving up her habit of helping herself to a little of her husband's money. Abu Sufyan, who was standing by, observed that he had never regarded this habit as morally wrong.

Muhammad continued with his charge. "Do not commit adultery," he said. "Can a free woman commit adultery, Apostle of God?" demanded the female heckler. Muhammad ignored the question. "And do not kill your children," he continued. "Indeed, I did not," said Hind. "I brought them up when they were little. Who killed them was you, on the field of Badr. So you should know all about killing children."

"You shall not disobey me in carrying out orders to do good," continued Muhammad. "Would we be sitting here like this," countered Hind, "if we were of a mind to disobey your orders?" Muhammad, who never would accept directly the pledge of a woman, then commissioned Umar to admit Hind and the other women to the faith. "Go," Muhammad commanded. "I have accepted your homage."<sup>8</sup>

The virtually unopposed triumph over Mecca, however, ended on a prophetically bloody note. Khalid was dispatched to subdue the Banu Jadhima, south of Mecca, enemies of his family for generations. On his approach, they laid down their arms and professed allegiance to Muhammad. Their men were thereupon bound, and Khalid and his Bedouin began a systematic annihilation, killing one after another. Only the intervention of the Medina Muslims prevented their complete annihilation.

Ibn Ishaq's description of this incident relates a touching scene in which one victim, his hands tied behind his head, asked to be taken to a group of women who stood wailing nearby. One was his wife. "May you fare well, Hubaysha," he said, "though for me my life is at an end." He was dragged back to his comrades and his head struck off. The frantic wife threw herself upon the body, kissed it frantically, and suddenly fell still. The executioners turned her over. She was dead.

The fate of the Banu Jadhima seems to have gravely distressed Muhammad. Stripping his arms bare in the Ka'ba, he cried to the heavens, "O God! O God! I am innocent before thee of what Khalid has done." He had few other regrets, however, because all Arabia now lay open before him, and beyond Arabia lay the world. ■

## The Prophet's women

From fiery A'isha to Christian Mary and Jewish Safiyah, Muhammad's domestic life has a profound and lasting impact on Muslim attitudes towards sex and marriage

Managing his empire and keeping peace among the Arabs may have weighed less heavily upon Muhammad than another more intimate problem, namely managing his harem and keeping peace among his wives. He ventured throughout the last decade of his life into what the devout describe as a series of diplomatic marriages, though the early Muslim historians regarded these unions as merely evidence of a healthy and robust virility.

Muhammad remarried soon after the death of his first and probably most influential wife, Khadeja, mother of his four daughters and the only wife to bear him children, though a Christian concubine would, in his advanced years, produce a son. Khadeja's immediate successor was Sauda, middle-aged, dowdy, but well able to raise his daughters. With that done, he divorced her. But she pleaded to be retained so that she could be "numbered with his wives" on the day of resurrection. He agreed and reinstated her as wife.

Though his first step beyond monogamy came with his marriage to the nine-year-old virgin child A'isha, his taste thereafter was distinctly for previously married women. A'isha was followed by and forced to share him with eight other wives and two or more concubines. (Two other

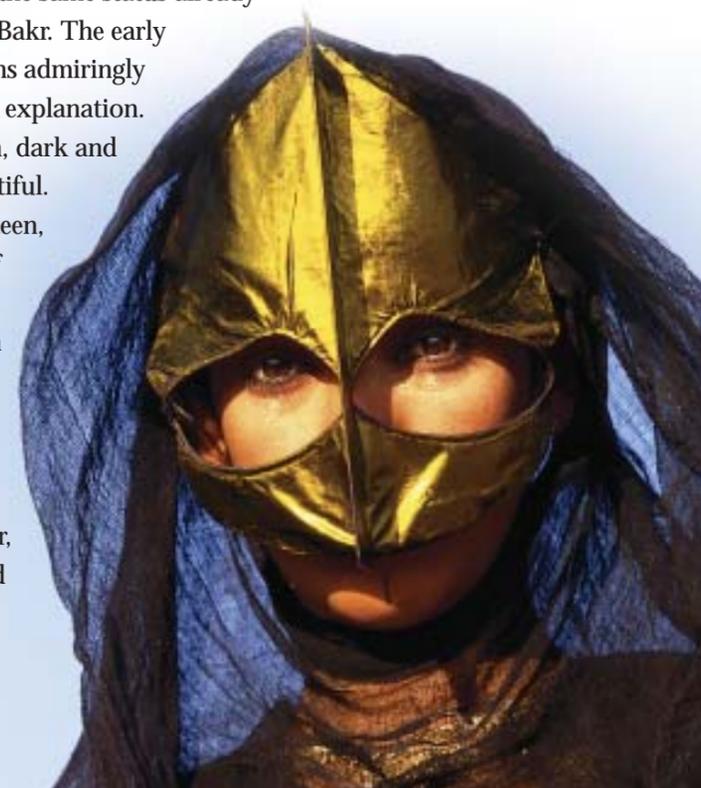
candidates for marriage shocked the faithful by turning him down.) Though A'isha remained queen of the harem, she would turn treacherously conspiratorial after his death, helping to create a permanent schism in Islam. Since she is also the chief historical source for the affairs of his inner household, most of the countless anecdotes about it are stamped with A'isha's perspective.

A'isha's first rival on the scene was his third living wife, Hafsa, daughter of Umar. Hafsa's first husband, an early convert, had been dead for six months. Umar, keen to see her remarried, offered her to the recently widowed Uthman, who did not yet want to remarry, and to Abu Bakr, who preferred his one wife. Chagrined, Umar brought the problem to Muhammad, who offered himself as a husband. Purely, say the devout, to confer on Umar the same status already enjoyed by Abu Bakr. The early Muslim historians admiringly advance another explanation. She was eighteen, dark and ravishingly beautiful.

A'isha, now thirteen, confessed herself instantly jealous. But as the harem grew more crowded and political, Hafsa became her ally.

Within a year, Muhammad had

*The striking covered face of a Bedouin woman from Oman (below). Muhammad's complex home life with his ten wives and various concubines heralded increasing restrictions on the lives of Muslim women.*





A traditional camel-mounted howdah (above). For highborn Arab women such as Muhammad's third wife A'isha, the tent-like covering offered protection from the elements and a degree of privacy while traveling.

acquired two more wives, both from the tribe of Abu Jahal, Muhammad's chief adversary slain at Badr, a family he was at pains to appease. But again the women, both widows, were young and attractive (although one, Zaynab, died soon after). For A'isha, a far graver challenge was posed by wife number five, the startlingly beautiful Um Salema, a woman of wild passion, about thirty, and already noted for her devotion to the faith. Her husband had been wounded at Uhud and died eight months later. She at first resisted Muhammad's marriage proposal, then

agreed, and he spent the next three days exclusively with her, a favor that Muslim husbands would thereafter confer on new brides added to their harems. A'isha, Hafsa and Um Salema became the Prophet's favored companions on the march, each taking turns with him in his red leather tent.

A'isha was a forgetful young lady. On the road with the army, she lost a necklace, and the whole contingent stood by while she searched for it and found her camel had been lying on it. Since it was then too late to move on, the army had to make camp where there was no water for drinking, washing or for the evening prayer ablutions.

The necklace caused a worse problem on another march. Having lost it when she left the camp "to fulfill a need," A'isha went back to recover it, and when she returned, found the column gone. Her slaves had assumed her asleep inside when they lifted her curtained howdah onto her camel, and still asleep when they reached Medina and took it down. The next morning, she arrived in Medina atop a camel led by a Muslim soldier who had fallen behind the column, and hastening to catch up, had come upon her.

The result was a stupendous scandal. A'isha, the gossips said, was unable to have a baby by Muhammad and therefore was seeking a substitute father. Such talk, says A'isha, reached all ears but her own. She could not understand it, she said, when the Prophet suddenly became cool towards her, scarcely comforting her even when she was sick. Then one

day, she learned what was being said from another woman in the Arab equivalent of a ladies' room discussion.<sup>1</sup> "I could not even finish what I was about," she wrote. "I could not stop crying until I thought my liver would burst with my sobs."

When Muhammad consulted his aide Osama and his foster son Ali, the former vouched for A'isha's unassailable fidelity. Ali was less reassuring. "Come now, Prophet," he said, "there's no shortage of women, and you wouldn't have trouble finding a substitute." That remark, later repeated to A'isha, would lead to his assassination twenty years later. Muhammad eventually terminated the gossip by denouncing it from the pulpit. The angel Gabriel assured him of his wife's innocence, he said later.

But if A'isha was innocent, that meant the gossips must be guilty. The outcome appears in the sections of suras 4 and 24 of the Qur'an, setting out the penalties for adultery (death, as the Qur'an was subsequently interpreted), for fornication (one hundred lashes), and for slandering innocent married women (eighty lashes). Adultery and fornication, however, can only be established if four witnesses testify to it, and Muslim courts later declared all four had to have actually seen it taking place. Unless, therefore, it was virtually a grandstand performance, proof is impossible, and the law usually ineffective.

A'isha's cousin Mistah and a servant girl got the lash for their slander. So did the loathsome poet

Hassan, who had done much to spread the rumors. He is described as a propagandist, much favored by the Prophet for his verse, but otherwise dirty-mouthed, too cowardly to go into battle, fat, and given to combing his black hair in his eyes and dying his moustache scarlet. After the thrashing, Hassan went blind and suffered further at the hands of the now exculpated soldier who had saved A'isha. He went at Hassan with a sword, and wounded him grievously. The poet survived, however, and Muhammad compensated him with an estate outside

*The veil and seclusion within their homes would circumscribe life for millions of women.*

Medina, and with a little Coptic Christian girl presented to Muhammad as a gift by the Christian ruler of Egypt. To thoroughly ingratiate himself, Hassan wrote a verse lauding the virtue, charm, wit and slenderness of A'isha, who heckled him as he recited it with jeers about his own absence of slenderness.

In the next affair of the harem, it was the Prophet himself whose virtue was brought into question. Zayd, the male Christian slave given him by Khadeja, though pug-nosed and physically repulsive, had proved exceedingly useful. He taught himself Aramaic so that Muhammad would not have to use a Jewish secretary, and was adopted by the Prophet as a son. Since in the Arab tradition an adopted son had the same status as a natural son, Zayd's wife had the full status of daughter-in-law, which was much the same as that of daughter. To cohabit with a daughter-in-law,

1. "We are Arabs," Muhammad's wife A'isha explains in her memoirs, "and do not have in our houses such closets for the relief of nature as foreigners have. We loathe and we abhor them. We go out into the empty places of Medina. The women go out together every evening to relieve themselves."

therefore, was incestuous.

Zayd had married Muhammad's cousin, another Zaynab, who though in her mid-thirties had preserved a great beauty. Visiting Zayd one day, Muhammad found him absent, but Zaynab at home. On what happened next, the records disagree. Some say she dashed scantily clad from the room as he entered; others, that the wind blew aside the curtain to reveal her almost naked. Either way, the Prophet's mental turmoil is much described. "Gracious Lord! Good heavens," he said. "How thou dost turn the hearts of men." When Zayd heard about it, he offered to divorce his wife so she could marry Muhammad.

"Keep your wife to yourself and fear God," the Prophet replied. Zayd divorced her anyway.

That the incident concerned Muhammad is made evident in the Qur'an where Gabriel, in Sura 33, berates him for fearing the condemnation of men. Hereafter, it says, the status of adopted sons will not be quite the same as that of real sons.<sup>2</sup> He should therefore take Zaynab as his sixth wife. A great banquet in the mosque celebrated the wedding.

The diplomatic or social objective of his next recruit is obscure. The beautiful seventeen-year-old Jewish girl Reihana refused the role of wife and remained a concubine. It might have been argued that the union improved relations with her tribe, were it not for the fact Muhammad had just exterminated it. Wife number seven was also acquired through a conquest, this time

the Prophet's suppression of the Banu al-Mustalik, whose forces surrendered almost without a fight. Their two hundred women were among the prizes taken by the Muslim soldiers.

One of the two hundred was Juweiraya, about twenty, a pert and forthright young woman who was the chief's wife. She was awarded to a Muslim officer who, considering her status, demanded nine ounces of gold for her return. Knowing no one in the tribe could afford that, Juweiraya asked him to take her promissory note. Refused, she took her case directly to

the Prophet. "I had scarcely seen her before I detested her," said A'isha, noting her husband's fascination.

Rather than take her note, Muhammad had another idea. "And what," she asked coyly, "might that be?" That he should pay the ransom and take her himself, came the reply. Juweiraya enthusiastically agreed. "Nobody ever did more for her tribe than Juweiraya," observed A'isha. Since they were now related to the Prophet, the remaining prisoners were returned without ransom.

The eighth wife was the Jewish girl Safiyah, claimed after the fall of Khaybar—a marriage, the apologists explain, purely intended to pacify Arabia's remaining Jews. It did little to pacify A'isha, however, whose share of the Prophet's much-taxed physical estate diminished with each new acquisition. "How did you find her?" asked Muhammad, after wife number two had met wife number eight. "A Jewess," replied A'isha drily, "like all

Jewesses." The Prophet was hurt, for this Jewess had become a Muslim.

Diplomacy is a more probable motive for Muhammad's marriage to wife number nine, Um Habiba, a daughter of the Meccan leader Abu Sufyan. She was in her mid-thirties, the widow of a Muslim refugee who had died as a Christian in Abyssinia. At Muhammad's request, she was married to him in absentia by Ethiopia's Christian king, who provided ships to send her and the remaining refugees home. Negotiations were then proceeding for the capitulation of Mecca, where Abu Sufyan's attitude would be crucial.

She did little herself to win her father over, however. "Don't sit on that carpet," she ordered Abu Sufyan when he visited her in Medina. "My dear daughter," he replied, "I hardly know whether you think the carpet is too good for me or I am too good for the carpet." She responded testily, "It's the Apostle's carpet, and you are an unclean polytheist." She outlived the Prophet by thirty years, into the era of her formidable brother, Mu'awiya, first of the long line of caliphs descended from her family.

Another marriage to emerge from the Meccan negotiations was the tenth and last, this one to Meimunna, sister of old Uncle Abbas's wife, but herself only twenty-five years of age. Muhammad married her when he was under a deadline to get out of the holy city, then used the marriage as a pretext for prolonging the visit. "How would it harm you if you were to let me stay, and we prepared a [wedding] banquet, and you could come, too?" he asked the Qurayshite leaders. "We

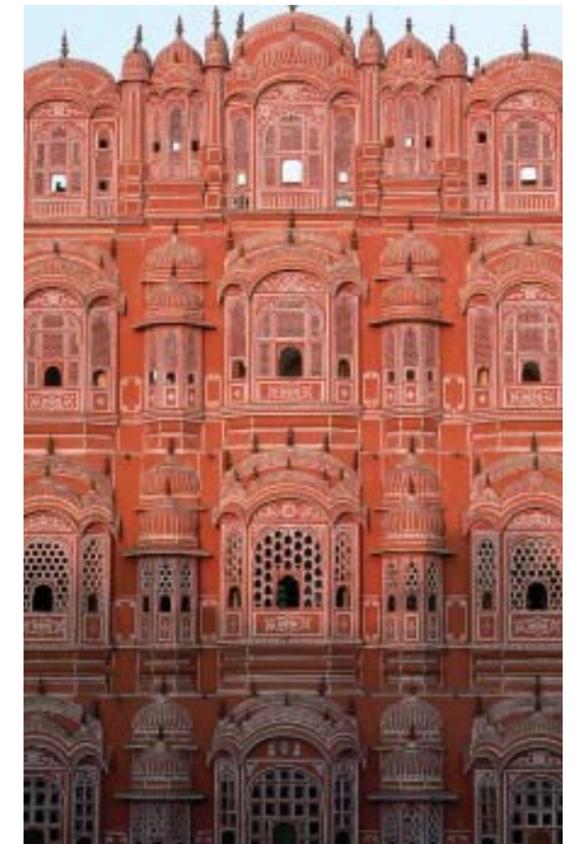
don't need your food, so get out," they replied, and he did, consummating the marriage at the first halt.

It was Gabriel who finally halted the Prophet's matrimonial endeavors at ten. "No more women are lawful unto thee after this; nor that thou shouldest exchange any of thy wives for others, even though their beauty fascinate thee, excepting such as thy right hand may possess [i.e., slaves], and God observeth all things" (Sura 33:52).

He was also exempted from the daily grind of attending to each wife in turn: "Postpone the turn of such as thou mayest please; and admit unto thyself her whom thou chooseth, as well as those whom thou mayest desire of those whom thou hadst put aside; it will be no offense to thee. This will be easier, that they may be satisfied, and not repine, and be all content with that thou gavest unto them" (Sura 33:51).

Reports of endless jealousies and tearful complaints recur throughout the traditions. The chief source of them was A'isha, to whom a distinct favoritism is always shown [though it must be remembered that many of the accounts of harem life originate with her]. She likened herself to an ungrazed and verdant pasture, much in

*The angel Gabriel halted the Prophet's marital endeavors after his tenth wife.*



*The windows of the harem of the Palace of the Winds (above), at Jaipur, India. The harem, overlooking the city's main bazaar, is a maze of almost one thousand small openings providing ventilation and privacy, but which also allowed the women of the harem an opportunity to view the bustling outside world from which they were sequestered.*

2. The intention of the verses in Sura 33, say some modern writers, was purely to revise the restrictive Arab adoption laws. That a man of fifty-six should be carried away by a woman of thirty-five is "most unlikely," writes the historian Montgomery Watt in his biography, *Mohammed: Prophet and Statesman*. Moreover, the story of Muhammad's attraction to Zaynab does not appear in the earliest sources.

contrast to the heavily worked pastures of her rivals, a reference of course to her initial virginity. Her vicious tongue once sent the Jewish wife, Safiyah, into the Prophet's arms in a tearful rage.

Muhammad himself perhaps enjoyed the rivalry. In one revealing story, he holds a necklace before them all and says he will give it to "her whom I love the most." They murmur that it will inevitably go to A'isha. Instead, he gives it to his granddaughter Umamah. A'isha's reaction is not recorded.

The greatest crisis in harem affairs, however, was created

by one of the concubines. This was Mary, Mariya in Arabic, one of two Coptic girls given Muhammad by the Roman governor of Egypt. (Her sister went to the repulsive Hassan.) She was young, delicate of feature, her fair-skinned face wreathed in curly black hair, and she immediately fascinated the Prophet, though she refused to abandon the Christian faith. She soon, however, gained a distinction not one of the wives could acquire. She became pregnant.<sup>3</sup>

The child would be called Ibrahim, the Arabic form of Abraham, and a special house was built for Mary that has been preserved until this day. The wives' jealousy of the young Copt knew no bounds. Muhammad, who had produced no children in twenty-five years, doted on the infant, carrying him once to show off to A'isha. "Look how much he looks like me," said the Prophet. "I do not see it," she replied

coldly. "What! Can't you see the similarity, how fair and fat he is?" She replied that any baby would be fat who drank as much milk as this one. A special herd of goats had been established to provide him with milk.

But Ibrahim fell gravely ill at about fifteen months, reducing the father to abject sorrow. In deep and bitter grief he wept over the child's sickbed, others gently reminding him that he had warned that grief must be controlled. He had meant, he sobbed, the sort of

loud ritualistic wailing that attended Arab funerals. Grief felt from the heart was permissible of expression.

"Ibrahim, O Ibrahim," he prayed, "if it were not that the promise is faithful, and hope of resurrection sure, if it were not that this is the way to be trodden by all, and that the last of us shall rejoin the first, I would grieve for you with a grief sorer than this." The child died in his arms. Muhammad followed the little bier to the graveside, and lingered over it. A solar eclipse that day darkened the earth, ascribed immediately to the Prophet's sorrow, but he repudiated the conclusion. The sun and the moon reflect the affairs of heaven, not earth, he said.

This was not the last that Muslim history hears of Mary. The story that follows has been curiously ignored by the Prophet's biographers, but western historians like Sir William Muir (*Life of Mohammed from Original Sources*) and Maxime Rodinson (*Mohammed*) derive it from the curious 66th sura of

*According to tradition, jealousy and complaint recurred endlessly among the ten wives.*

<sup>3</sup> Even in their prior marriages, Muhammad's wives were a surprisingly infertile lot. Though nine of the ten had had previous husbands, only Um Salema and Um Habiba had borne children to them.

the Qur'an. Muhammad, they say, carried on with his concubine not only in her little house, but even in the sacred precinct of the mosque. Wife number three, Hafsa, returned unexpectedly and found the Prophet in her bed with his concubine. Moreover, it was to have been her day.

Hafsa flew into a rage, threatening to tell the other wives what had happened. Her embarrassed husband implored her to keep the matter quiet, and promised he would see no more of Mary. Hafsa, however, was too angry to remain silent, and told A'isha, who, fevered with indignation, told all the others. All now became cold to him. The Prophet, apparently frantic, besought Gabriel, who told him to warn them all that if they didn't behave themselves, he would divorce the lot. Thus, according to historians Muir and Rodinson, the outcome of this

domestic spat became part of the eternal Qur'an. Devout Muslims must therefore recite the details:

"O Prophet! Why hast thou forbidden thyself that which God hath made lawful unto thee [i.e., continuing to sleep with Mary], out of a desire to please thy wives; for God is forgiving and merciful? Verily God hath sanctioned the revocation of your oaths; and God is your master. He is knowing and wise. And when he had



*Muslim women crowd the narrow streets outside a small mosque (above) at Nebi Musa in the Judean Desert, a short distance from Jericho. Worshipers make an annual pilgrimage to the site (pictured left in an aerial view), which is traditionally believed to be the burial place of A'isha, Muhammad's third wife. Moses, venerated by Muslims as well as Christians and Jews, is also said to have been buried nearby, in the hills overlooking the Jordan Valley.*



Afghan girls at a school near Quetta, Pakistan, in November 2001 (right). The school catered to girls aged six to eighteen, refugees from Afghanistan's fiercely Islamic Taliban regime, which prohibited the education of women and their involvement in public life. In addition to running this school, Shuhada, a Muslim aid organization, also secretly operated fifty-six others inside Afghanistan. Mere weeks after this photo was taken, the Taliban government, which provided a safe haven for Islamic terrorists, was ousted by an American-led international force.



women were becoming unruly. His own wife had taken to answering back, declaring that the Prophet's wives all did the same, and that their daughter, Hafsa, was in the same habit. Muhammad blamed the sinister influence of Persia and Byzantium. Affluence, he said, was making women harder to handle. To resolve all this, Muhammad served notice on his wives that he would not see them for a full month.<sup>5</sup>

When he returned to them, they said it was only day twenty-nine. He reminded them that it was, in fact, a twenty-nine-day month, and he recited to them a special revelation for the wives of the Prophet, enjoining them to live exemplary lives, refrain from exhibitionism and dedicate themselves wholly to God (Sura 33:28 and following). All was thereupon forgiven, and the incident was over—but not the problems. Harem intrigue, politics, rebellion

and conspiracy would continue as a permanent aspect of imperial Islam for the next twelve centuries. ■

5. The freedom of Western women would long remain offensive to strict Muslims. Speaking in the year 2002 at a Riyadh mosque, Sheikh Fahd bin Abd al-Rahman al-Abyan, for example, deplored the "putrid ideas (about women) spread by the infidel West," which he blamed for rampant crime, adultery, family breakdown, and illegitimacy. It is "a society in which the woman does as she pleases, even if she is married." In the West, "the woman leaves the home whenever she feels like it, goes where she wants, and wears what she wants, without her husband's permission." In fact, "in some homes, the situation has reached the point where the woman gives the orders, and that is that." (Middle East Media Research Institute, Special Report Number 10, September 26, 2002.)

4. The Muslim historian Sahih al-Bukhari, in the memoirs of A'isha, reports that Muhammad thought he had sexual relations with his wives that he did not actually have. These fantasies were the effects of magic worked on him, says A'isha, by an Arab who was an ally of the Jews (Bukhari, volume 7, book 71, number 600).

acquainted her [presumably Hafsa] with this, she said, 'Who hath told thee this?' He replied: 'He told it to me, the Knowing and the Wise. If ye both [i.e., A'isha and Hafsa] turn with repentance unto God [for verily the hearts of you both have swerved], well and good. But if ye combine with one another against him, surely God is his master; and Gabriel and all good men of the believers, and the angels, will

thereafter be his supporters. Haply, his Lord, if he divorce you, will give him in your stead wives that are better than ye, submissive unto God, believers, pious, repentant, devout, fasting. Both women married previously and virgins'" (Sura 66:1 and following).<sup>4</sup> This threat of divorce spread consternation not only throughout the harem, but also throughout the top echelon of the Muslim establishment,

for the two women at the center were the daughters of Umar and Abu Bakr, his senior lieutenants. Al-Bukhari tells how Umar went to see the Prophet about it, three times being denied an audience, until Muhammad finally let him in. The Prophet would not divorce his wives, much to the relief of Umar who then unburdened himself of his own problems.

In his household, too, he said, the

and conspiracy would continue as a permanent aspect of imperial Islam for the next twelve centuries. ■