



MUHAMMAD, THE FOUNDER OF ISLAM.*

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MUHAMMAD, the son of 'Abdallah and Aminah, of the noble family of Kuraysh, was born at Mecca in the year 570 of the Christian era, a few months after his father's death. It is said that his mother had learned in a dream the name to be given the child, and that this was the reason why 'Abd-al-Muttalib called his orphan grandson Muhammad—the Praised. Grief having dried up the widow's breasts, the infant, according to custom, was handed over to a foster-mother—Halimah, a woman of the Bani Sa'd family; and for this nurse Muhammad, when he had grown to be the spiritual and temporal monarch of Arabia, entertained the greatest gratitude and affection, which he extended to her offspring. After five years the child was restored to his mother, but had the misfortune to lose her when he was but six, and the care of the orphan devolved first upon his aged grandfather, and two years later, when 'Abd-al-Muttalib also died, upon Abu Talib, Muhammad's uncle and the father of 'Ali. The Prophet thus had but little experience of parental love; yet in after life he always urged his followers to the greatest filial piety, reminding them, with one of his happy expressions, that "Paradise lies at the feet of mothers." Muhammad, who grew up very strong and healthy, is said to have taken no interest, even as a child, in frivolous pursuits, telling his companions, on one occasion, that man was made for a higher object. He soon won the love and admiration of his fellow-townsmen, who, as has been said, named him the Trusty. At the age of twelve he had accompanied his uncle to Syria, and in his twenty-fifth year he was given charge of the goods sent to Damascus by Khadijah, daughter of Khuwaylid, of the house of Kuraysh; a lady fifteen years the senior of the Prophet. He showed great aptitude for business, and brought back large sums

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to Khadijah, whose appreciation of his ability and personal charm led to their marriage. Her love grew day by day as she became better acquainted with his sterling qualities, while he was no less fondly attached to her. As her husband he was less successful in the management of her interests than he had been as her agent, but this did not in the least diminish the harmony between them.

When thirty-five he saved his country from a bloody war, which was on the point of arising out of the fixture of the sacred Black Stone; but with this exception his life, though spent usefully, did not bring him into prominence. It was not until his fortieth year that he began that public career which has left its mark upon the history of the world. He was in the cave at Hira', in the month of Ramadan, when he received the command:

“Read! in the name of thy Lord, the Creator, Who hath created man from a clot of blood. Read, for thy Lord is most generous, Who hath taught the use of the pen, and teacheth man what he knew not. . .”

The above is the first of the series of revelations that were made from time to time to the illiterate prophet, the first step towards preparing his spirit for the gigantic task which was to be allotted him. This, when the mandate of the Almighty came, he accepted with humble submission, and set himself heart and soul, with an iron will, to carry it out.

As charity begins at home, Muhammad told his own family, before all others, of the light that had been vouchsafed him, with the result that those who first believed in his Mission were those that knew him best, his wife Khadijah and his affectionate servant Zaid, Ali his cousin, the son of Abu Talib, and his friend Abubekr who was destined to succeed the Prophet. By the persuasion of Abubekr who was as wealthy as he was moderate and truthloving, ten citizens of Mecca were introduced to the primitive lessons of Islam; they yielded to the voice of reason and enthusiasm and repeated the fundamental creed, “There is but one God, and Muhammad is his apostle.”

Not once during the lifetime of Muhammad or of these early believers did any shadow of doubt cross their mind as to the truth of what their great Teacher had told them, or as to his sincerity. The more they knew him the more they believed in him.

Well may Ameer Ali argue, from such facts, that “If these men and women, noble, intelligent and certainly not less educated than the fishermen of Galilee, had perceived the slightest sign of earthliness, deception or want of faith in the Teacher himself, Muhammad’s

hopes of moral regeneration and social reform would all have been dashed to pieces in a moment."

For the next few years Muhammad was subjected to constant insults by his fellow-citizens, and his handful of followers was tortured and persecuted, so much so, indeed, that some of them had to fly to Abyssinia. Thus Bilal, afterwards the first muezzin of the Muslims, was stripped naked by his master and laid upon the burning sand with a heavy load of stones over him, and commanded to recant if he wanted his sufferings put an end to, but so strong was the influence of his faith that "*Ahadun, Ahadun*" (One, One) was the only word heard to issue from his parched lips.

The enmity of the Meccans towards Muhammad increased as time went on. One hundred camels, with a large sum of money, were offered for his head by Abu Jahl, an implacable foe of Islam. 'Omar, son of al-Khattab, pledged himself to kill Muhammad, and set out for the purpose, armed with a naked sword. On the way it was pointed out to him that he had better first look at home, where his own sister had become a convert. Betaking himself thither, he found her and her husband reading the Kur-an. So furious was he that he threw his brother-in-law to the ground, and did not scruple to strike his sister when she interfered to save her husband's life; but she, nothing daunted, owned that she had embraced Islam, and defied him to do his worst. 'Omar, abashed, asked to be told what this new religion was, with the result that he was deeply affected by the words of the Kur-an, went straight to Muhammad to make his profession of faith, and became one of the bulwarks of Islam.

His conversion and that of another leading man and valiant soldier, Hamzah, showed the Kuraysh that matters were growing serious, and greatly added to their fury. Having failed in their endeavors to tempt Muhammad, they now tried, under pain of exterminating him and his followers, to get him silenced by Abu Talib. They were again unsuccessful, and the Prophet, in spite of their threats, went on denouncing idolatry and calling the people to the worship of one God, to righteousness and civilization. The Kuraysh grew ever more enraged, and, as Abu Talib had called upon the whole of the House of Hashim to protect his nephew, they retaliated by putting the family under ban until it should give up Muhammad to be killed. Not only intermarriage, but all social and civil intercourse and even business communications were put a stop to, and the ostracized clan, in order to save itself from violence, had to withdraw to Shi'b, where it endured all the privations of a beleaguered garrison. The children of these people were famishing, their busi-

ness was at a standstill, their sufferings, in a word, were very great: yet they persevered in their friendship to Muhammad, and he himself, whenever the holy months of truce afforded him an opportunity, would sally forth to propagate his faith among the pilgrims. The ordeal lasted three long years; but at last, in the tenth of Muhammad's proclamation of his mission, the steadfastness of the clan had its reward, the excommunication coming to an end. About this time the prophet was bereft of his dearly beloved wife Khadijah and of his generous and powerful protector, Abu Talib. The death of the latter encouraged the enemies of the Prophet to redouble their persecutions, and he was forced to leave Mecca for Ta'if. But the Thakifites were no less bitter against him than the Meccans, and he had ere long to quit their city, bruised and bleeding.

Mut'im, one of those who had obtained the removal of the ban against the Bani Hashim, took pity on the wanderer and brought him to Mecca under his protection. The idolaters now adopted a new device for thwarting Muhammad: they forbade all and sundry to listen to his teaching. A man named 'Abdullah determined, however, to make the Meccans hear the Kur-an, so, placing himself in their midst, he cried out its words aloud.

The Meccans attacked him, but he continued his recitation, in spite of the blows rained upon his face and body, until they threw him out of the holy place, exultant at having forced them to give him a hearing. Such acts, which showed how firm was the conviction of those who had embraced Islam, increased the rage of the Kuraysh, and further fuel was added to the flame when Muhammad, in the course of two successive pilgrimages, obtained the conversion of seventy-five Medinans. A consultation was held and, after much discussion, it was resolved that each of the chief families should choose a representative, and that all of the latter should together plunge their swords into the body of Muhammad, dividing the guilt of his blood. Thus the Hashimites, unable to exact vengeance from the whole city, must content themselves with pecuniary compensation, the burden of which, shared amongst all the families, could be borne with ease. But God did not allow Muhammad, like some of the great prophets before him, to be cut off in the middle of his career: he escaped at night with his bosom friend Abu Bakr, and the conspirators found the person lying on the Prophet's bed, and covered with his own green mantle, to be 'Ali, another of his most devoted followers. The fugitives had to hide for three days in a cavern, an incident thus alluded to by the Kur-an: "God helped him already when he was exiled by the unbelievers, when he was

one of two in the cave, and said to his companion 'Be not downcast! Verily God is with us.' " They were pursued, but the protection of Providence accompanied them and they reached Medina in safety. Such was the Hijrah, or Flight, from which the Muslim era dates.

At Medina a brotherhood was formed between the Muhajirin, who had fled from Mecca, and the Ansar, who gave shelter to the refugees: This tie, which was closer than that of blood relationship, laid the foundation of the wholesome democratic equality that exists in Islam between man and man. Muhammad was now among friends, but his responsibilities had increased. He had to protect his fellow citizens, who had suffered such great trouble and lost so much for the faith, as well as the Medinans who, in giving them hospitality, laid themselves open to the attacks of its enemies; he had to infuse a common national spirit into his divided countrymen, to complete the unfinished work of his predecessor, not only leading people to righteousness, but also giving a concrete form to the "Kingdom of Heaven" and to teach his followers that religion was not merely an abstract mysticism, fit for the ascetic alone, but something that brings with it happiness of mind and comfort of body, but a guide to piety in this world and to its reward in the next. And, in spite of his want of schooling, he proved equal to the tasks demanded of a great general, administrator and statesman, of "the only man mentioned in history who was at once legislator and poet, the founder of a religion and of an empire" (Gilman). He valiantly repulsed the enemy's attacks, made effectual counter-moves, carried out social reforms, established legal discipline and began the fusion of the clans, at the same time that he proclaimed the Unity of God and inculcated the principles of morality.

Muhammad was forced to have recourse to the sword in order to defend his followers and their common faith; had he not done so, his disciples, to all seeming, would have been annihilated, his religion suffocated in the cradle and he himself treated in the same manner as his illustrious predecessor. Nothing appears more natural, if God in His mercy meant to humanize the barbarous inhabitants of Arabia and raise them from the abyss of immorality and superstition into which they had sunk down, than that His choice should fall upon a man full of determination and of unswerving fidelity to the task with which he was entrusted, a man endowed with a genius equal to every change of circumstances, capable of enduring hardships and of serving others without regard for his own interests, and ready to resist the oppressor even physically, if necessary, on behalf of his people.

Gibbon reminds us that "in the state of nature every man has a right to defend, by force of arms, his person and his possessions, to repel, or even to prevent the violence of his enemies, and to extend his hostilities to a reasonable measure of satisfaction and retaliation." In the case of Muhammad it was not to defend himself, but his followers and their freedom of conscience, that he had to use the sword; and this appears from the following passage, amongst others, in the Kur-an: "Permission [to fight] is given to those who are fought against, because they are wronged. . . . who are turned out of their dwellings without other reason than that they say: God is our Lord."

Muhammad was soldier, lawgiver, president of the commonwealth of Medina, but he was above all a prophet, appointed to put an end to the worship of idols, to turn men towards the one and only God, to lead them into the path of righteousness; and in fulfilment of this mission he sent embassies to Abyssinia, Syria, Persia, Egypt, Damascus and Yamamah, inviting rich and poor, kings and their subjects, to embrace Islam. And it was this duty which was again foremost in his mind when at length, as the Kur-an expresses it, truth came and falsehood, being perishable, disappeared; when, eight years after he had been forced to fly from Mecca, he re-entered it at the head of ten thousand devoted followers, according to the Kur-anic text:

"When the help of God cometh, and victory, thou seest men enter the religion of God in troops."

His first act in this hour of triumph was to proclaim the Unity of God and to destroy the idols which defiled the temple.

The conquest was also remarkable for his magnanimity towards the vanquished foe. The haughty chiefs who had sought to destroy his religion, who had persecuted its adherents and ill-treated and attempted to murder himself, were now completely in his power. "What can you expect at my hands?" he asked them. "Mercy, Oh generous brother and nephew!" they besought him. Tears came into the eyes of the Prophet when he heard them: "I will speak to you," he continued, "as Joseph spoke to his brethren. I will not reproach you to-day: God will forgive you, for He is merciful and loving. Go; ye are free!"

Two years later the Prophet, who out of gratitude for the kindness shown him at Medina in the day of his tribulation, had gone back to live there, performed the pilgrimage, it is said, with a hundred thousand Muslims; for the soul-stirring *Kalimah* was now heard

far and wide, echoing among the mountains as well as the plains, in the desert and the pasture-ground as well as in cities.

His work was now finished. He had weaned Arabia from idolatry, infanticide, legalized vice, drunkenness, gambling and a host of other evils: the simple creed of Islam was that of the whole country, the God of Muhammad was the God of its people. Hence tears filled the eyes of his disciples when they heard the verse:

"This day have I perfected my ordinances for you and accomplished my grace in you, and chosen Islam for you as your religion," for they felt that the Prophet's mission was ended and that the time for him to leave them was come. Of this he himself was also fully convinced, and warned them of it during his farewell pilgrimage, telling them that he knew not if he should ever be able to speak to them in the same place again, urging them to treat one another as brothers, and bequeathing to them the law of the *Kur-an*, which, he said, would always preserve them from error. Moreover, at the end, he exclaimed: "Oh Allah! I have fulfilled my mission": then, as the mighty shout "Yea, verily thou hast fulfilled it," went up from the multitudes, he added, "Oh Allah, bear witness, I beseech Thee!"

He was in his sixty-third year, the tenth of the Hijrah and the 632d of the Christian era, when the end came. He had seen it draw near without anxiety, for he had nothing to fear from death, he enjoyed the satisfaction of having given his work its finishing touch, and he left behind him a people of whom he had no reason to be ashamed. Up to his last hour the leading traits of his character were selflessness, magnanimity, sincerity and a humility not forced upon him by circumstances, but adopted by him of his own free will, when all Arabia was at his feet. "If there be any man," said he a little before his death, "whom I have unjustly chastised, I submit my own back to the scourge. If I have aspersed the character of any one, let him put me to shame in the presence of all. If I have taken what belongs to another, let him come forward and claim his own."

He considered his sufferings to be a proof of God's mercy and love, which he saw in everything. "By Him in Whose hand is Muhammad's life," said he, "there is not a believer afflicted with calamity or disease, but God thereby causes his sins to fall from him as leaves fall from the trees in autumn."

Tenderly cared for by those he loved, and with the hearts of a whole population beating in sympathy for him, he died full of yearning to meet his Creator: and his last words, spoken after he had for

some time, with uplifted eyes, silently communed with God, were: "Oh Allah! be it so. . . among the blessed on high!"

He wished his followers to say at his death, as they do to this day whenever they hear of a calamity, "Verily we belong to God and verily to him we shall return."

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Muhammad is one of those illustrious figures in history whose personality has withstood the obliterating influences of time; whilst, on the other hand, it has been saved from the super-humanism which credulous man attributes to his past heroes.

We can almost see the man—healthy and sound, of medium height, with broad shoulders, piercing eyes and handsome features—walking humbly in the streets of Mecca, instinctively loved by innocent children, and honored and respected by his countrymen, who surnamed him al-Amin, The Trusty.

The same man, a little ripened in age, may be seen again, on the top of Mount Hira', disgusted with the moral and religious degradation of his people. His soul soars aloft to that Being Who never remains hidden long from pure hearts.

The recluse in the cave of Hira' has become conscious of the existence of the All-Merciful and of the pitiable condition of his countrymen, and we see him, moved by the noblest feelings of which man is capable, proclaim the Unity of God, impart the doctrine of salvation and make strenuous efforts to educate his fellow-citizens and to rescue his country from the dominion of sin and error.

But all at once we see this man, hitherto so respected and honored by his countrymen, persecuted, reviled, exiled and even threatened with death. Because his conscience bade him free himself from the gross immoralities and sins then rampant, because he had the courage to make his convictions known, the benevolence to undertake the direction of his people into the right way, and because he felt that he was commissioned to call mankind towards one God, the Merciful, the Wise, the Just, the Forgiving, the Almighty and the Omnipresent—because of these things his fellow-townsmen, who had once loved him, now took a dislike to him which soon turned into hatred.

A fresh change comes after a time. Truth conquers falsehood, righteousness overcomes sin, and we see the same man, still indefatigable, despite advancing years, in the fulfilment of his mission. The poor shepherd, the recluse of Hira', has become the author of a mighty revolution, the conqueror of Arabia, the "minister of life,"

the source, under God, of the hopes of a whole peninsula. He is now revered more profoundly by his compatriots than were the great monarchs of Persia and Rome by their subjects, he is beloved by his followers above their own parents and children and wields supreme temporal and spiritual power over the Peninsula, leading hosts of men along the path of righteousness, conquest and civilization.

Gibbon characterizes the Prophet thus: "The good sense of Mahomet despised the pomp of royalty; the apostle of God submitted to the menial offices of the family; he kindled the fire, swept the floor, milked the ewes and mended with his own hand his shoes and his woolen garments. Disdaining the penance and merit of an hermit, he observed without effort or vanity, the abstemious diet of an Arab and a soldier. On solemn occasions he feasted his companions with rustic and hospitable plenty; but, in his domestic life, many weeks would elapse without a fire being kindled on the hearth of the Prophet."

We conclude with the words of Stanley Lane Poole, another Western writer, who does not hesitate to recognize the greatness of Muhammad:

"There is something so tender and womanly, and withal so heroic about the man, that one is in peril of finding the judgment unconsciously blinded by the feeling of reverence and well-nigh love that such a nature inspires. He who, standing alone, braved for years the hatred of his people, is the same who was never the first to withdraw his hand from another's clasp; the beloved of children, who never passed a group of little ones without a smile from his wonderful eyes and a kind word for them, sounding all the kinder in the sweet-toned voice. The frank friendship, the noble generosity, the dauntless courage and hope of the man, all tend to melt criticism into admiration. He was an enthusiast, in that noblest sense when enthusiasm becomes the salt of the earth. . . . He was an enthusiast when enthusiasm was the one thing needed to set the world aflame, and his enthusiasm was noble, for a noble cause. He was one of those happy few who have attained the supreme joy of making one great truth their life-spring. He was the Messenger of the One God; and never, to his life's end, did he forget who he was, or the message which was the marrow of his being."