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NEW LIGHT ON THE STORY OF BANŪ QURAYZA AND THE JEWS OF MEDINA

By W. N. ARAFAT

IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT at the advent of Islam there were three Jewish tribes who lived in Yathrib (later Medina), as well as other Jewish settlements further to the north, the most important of which were Khaybar and Fadak. It is also generally accepted that at first the Prophet Muḥammad hoped that the Jews of Yathrib, as followers of a divine religion, would show understanding of the new monotheistic religion, Islam. However, as soon as these tribes realized that Islam was being firmly established and gaining power, they adopted an actively hostile attitude, and the final result of the struggle was the disappearance of these Jewish communities from Arabia proper.

The biographers of the Prophet, followed by later historians, tell us that Banū Qaynuqā',¹ and later Banū al-Naḍir,² provoked the Muslims, were besieged, and in turn agreed to surrender and were allowed to depart, taking with them all their transportable possessions. Later on Khaybar³ and Fadak⁴ were evacuated. According to Ibn Ishāq in the *Sīra*,⁵ the third of the Jewish tribes, Banū Qurayza, sided with the Qurashites and their allies, who made an unsuccessful attack on Medina in an attempt to destroy Islam. This, the most serious challenge to Islam, failed, and the Banū Qurayza were in turn besieged by the Prophet. Like Banū al-Naḍir, in time they surrendered, but unlike the Banū al-Naḍir, they were subjected to the arbitration of Sa'd b. Mu'adh, a member of the Aws tribe, allies of Qurayza. He ruled that the grown-up males should be put to death and the women and children subjected to slavery. Consequently, trenches were dug in the market-place in Medina, and the men of Qurayza were brought out in groups and their necks were struck.⁶ Estimates of those killed vary from 400 to 900.

On examination, details of the story can be challenged. It can be demonstrated that the assertion that 600 or 800 or 900⁷ men of Banū Qurayza were put to death in cold blood cannot be true; that it is a later invention; and that it has its source in Jewish traditions. Indeed the source of the details in earlier Jewish history can be pointed out with surprising accuracy.

The Arabic sources will now be surveyed, and the contribution of their Jewish informants will be discussed. The credibility of the details will then be assessed, and the prototype in earlier Jewish history pin-pointed.

The earliest work that we have, with the widest range of details, is Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, his biography of the Prophet. It is also the longest and the most widely quoted. Later his-

¹ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* (ed. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen, 1860), 545-7; (ed. Saqqa *et al.*, Cairo, 1955), II, 47-9. See also al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī* (ed. M. Jones, London, 1966), II, 440 ff.; Suhayli, *al-Rawḍ al-unuḥ* (Cairo, 1914), I, 187 *et passim*; Ibn Kathīr, *al-Sīra al-Nabawiyya* (ed. Muṣṭafā 'Abd al-Wāḥid, Cairo, 1384-5/1964-6), II, 5 *et passim*.

² *Sīra*, 545-56, 652-61/II, 51-7, 190-202; Ibn Kathīr, *op. cit.*, III, 145 ff.

³ *Sīra*, 755-76, 779/II, 328-53, 356, etc. More on Khaybar follows below.

⁴ *ibid.*, 776/II, 353-4.

⁵ *ibid.*, 668-84/II, 214-33.

⁶ *ibid.*, 684-700/II, 233-54.

⁷ *ibid.*, 689/II, 240; *Uyūn al-athar* (Cairo, 1356 A.H.), II, 73; Ibn Kathīr, III, 239.

torians draw, and in most cases depend on him.⁸ But Ibn Ishāq died in 151 A.H., i.e. 145 years after the event in question. Later historians simply take his version of the story, omitting more or less of the detail, and overlooking his uncertain list of authorities. They generally abbreviate the story, which appears just as one more event to report. In most cases their interest seems to end there. Some of them indicate that they are not really convinced, but they are not prepared to take further trouble. One authority, Ibn Hajar, however, denounces this story and the other related ones as “odd tales”.⁹ A contemporary of Ibn Ishāq, Mālik,¹⁰ the jurist, denounces Ibn Ishāq outright as “a liar”¹¹ and “an impostor”¹² just for transmitting such stories.

It must be remembered that historians and authors of the Prophet’s biography did not apply the strict rules of the “traditionists”. They did not always provide a chain of authorities, each of whom had to be verified as trustworthy and as certain or likely to have transmitted his report directly from his informant, and so on. The attitude towards biographical details and towards the early events of Islam was far less meticulous than their attitude to the Prophet’s traditions, or indeed to any material relevant to jurisprudence. Indeed Ibn Ishāq’s account of the siege of Medina and the fall of the Banū Qurayza is pieced together by him from information given by a variety of persons he names, including Muslim descendants of the Jews of Qurayza.

Against these late and uncertain sources must be placed the only contemporary and entirely authentic source, the Qur’ān. There, the reference in Sūra XXXIII, 26 is very brief: “He caused those of the People of the Book who helped them (i.e. the Quraysh) to come out of their forts. Some you killed, some you took prisoner.” There is no reference to numbers.

Ibn Ishāq sets out his direct sources as he opens the relevant chapter on the siege of Medina. These were: a client of the family of al-Zubayr and others whom he “did not suspect”. They told parts of the story on the authority of ‘Abdullāh b. Ka’b b. Mālik, al-Zuhri, ‘Āṣim b. ‘Umar b. Qatāda, ‘Abdullāh b. Abī Bakr, Muḥammad b. Ka’b of Qurayza, and “others among our men of learning”, as he put it. Each of these contributed to the story, so that Ibn Ishāq’s version is the sum-total of the collective reports, pieced together. At a later stage Ibn Ishāq quotes another descendant of Qurayza, ‘Atiyya¹³ by name, who had been spared, and, directly, a certain descendant of al-Zabir b. Baṭā, a prominent member of the tribe of Qurayza who figures in the narrative.

The story opens with a description of the effort of named Jewish leaders to organize against the Muslims an alliance of the hostile forces. The leaders named included three from the Banū al-Naḍir and two of the tribe of Wā’il, another Jewish tribe; together with other Jewish fellow-tribesmen unnamed. Having persuaded the neighbouring Bedouin tribes of Ghaṭafān, Murra, Fazāra, Sulaym, and Ashja’ to take up arms, they now proceeded to

⁸ In his introduction to *‘Uyūn al-athar*, I, 7, Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (d. 734 A.H.), having explained his plan for his biography of the Prophet, expressly states that his main source was Ibn Ishāq, who indeed was the chief source for everyone.

⁹ *Tahdhib al-tahdhib*, IX, 45. See also *‘Uyūn al-athar*, I, 17, where the author uses the same words, without giving a reference, in his introduction on the veracity of Ibn Ishāq and the criteria he applied.

¹⁰ d. 179.

¹¹ *‘Uyūn al-athar*, I, 12.

¹² *ibid.*, I, 16.

¹³ *Ṣira*, 691-2/II, 242, 244; *‘Uyūn al-athar*, II, 74, 75.

Mecca where they succeeded in persuading the Quraysh. Having gathered together a besieging force, one of the Naḍir leaders, Ḥuyayy b. Akḥṭab, in effect forced himself on the third Jewish tribe still in Medina, the Banū Qurayẓa, and, against the better judgement of their leader, Ka'b b. Asad, he persuaded them to break faith with the Prophet in the hope, presented as a certainty, that the Muslims would not stand up to the combined attacking forces and that Qurayẓa and the other Jews would be restored to independent supremacy. The siege of Medina failed and the Jewish tribes suffered for their part in the whole operation.

The attitude of scholars and historians to Ibn Ishāq's version of the story has been either one of complacency, sometimes mingled with uncertainty, or at least in two important cases, one of condemnation and outright rejection.

The complacent attitude is one of accepting the biography of the Prophet and the stories of the campaigns as they were received by later generations without the meticulous care or the application of the critical criteria which collectors of traditions or jurists employed. It was not necessary to check the veracity of authorities when transmitting or recording parts of the story of the Prophet's life.¹⁴ It was not essential to provide a continuous chain of authorities or even to give authorities at all. That is obvious in Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*. On the other hand reliable authority and a continuous line of transmission were essential when law was the issue. That is why Mālik the jurist had no regard for Ibn Ishāq.¹⁵

One finds, therefore, that later historians and even exegetes either repeat the very words of Ibn Ishāq or else abbreviate the whole story. Historians gave it, as it were, a cold reception. Even Ṭabarī, nearly 150 years after Ibn Ishāq, does not try to find other versions of the story as he usually does. He casts doubt by his use of the words, "Wāqidi alleged (*za'ama*) that the Prophet caused trenches to be dug." Ibn al-Qayyim in *Zād al-ma'ād* makes only the briefest reference and he ignores altogether the crucial question of numbers. Ibn Kathīr even seems to have general doubt in his mind because he takes the trouble to point out that the story was told on such "good authority" as that of 'Ā'isha.¹⁶

Apart from mild complacency or doubtful acceptance of the story itself, Ibn Ishāq as an author was in fact subjected to devastating attacks by scholars, contemporary or later, on two particular accounts. One was his uncritical inclusion in his *Sīra* of so much spurious or forged poetry;¹⁷ the other his unquestioning acceptance of just such a story as that of the slaughter of Banū Qurayẓa.

His contemporary, the early traditionist and jurist Mālik, called him unequivocally "a

¹⁴ Ibn Sayyid al-Nās (op. cit., I, 121) makes precisely this point in relation to the story of the Banū Qaynuqā' and the spurious verse which was said to have appeared in Sūra LIII of the Qur'ān and at the time was taken by polytheist Meccans as a recognition of their deities. The author explains how various scholars disposed of the problem, and then sums up by stating that in his view, this story is to be treated on the same level as tales of the *maghāzī* and accounts of the *Sīra* (i.e. not to be accorded unqualified acceptance). Most scholars, he asserts, usually treated more liberally questions of minor importance and any material which did not involve a point of law, such as stories of the *maghāzī* and similar reports. In such cases data would be accepted which would not be acceptable as a basis of deciding what is lawful or unlawful.

¹⁵ See n. 18 below.

¹⁶ Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, I, 1499 (where the reference is to al-Wāqidi, *Maghāzī*, II, 513); *Zād al-ma'ād* (ed. T. A. Ṭahā, Cairo, 1970), II, 82; Ibn Kathīr, op. cit., IV, 118.

¹⁷ On this see W. Arafat, "Early critics of the poetry of the *Sīra*", *BSOAS*, XXI, 3, 1958, 453-63.

liar” and “an impostor”¹⁸ “who transmits his stories from the Jews”.¹⁹ In other words, applying his own criteria, Mālik impugned the veracity of Ibn Ishāq’s sources and rejected his approach. Indeed, neither Ibn Ishāq’s list of informants nor his method of collecting and piecing together such a story would be acceptable to Mālik the jurist.

In a later age Ibn Ḥajar further explained the point of Mālik’s condemnation of Ibn Ishāq. Mālik, he said,²⁰ condemned Ibn Ishāq because he made a point of seeking out descendants of the Jews of Medina in order to obtain from them accounts of the Prophet’s campaigns as handed down by their forefathers. Ibn Ḥajar²¹ then rejected the stories in question in the strongest terms: “such odd tales as the story of Qurayza and al-Naḍīr”. Nothing could be more damning than this outright rejection.

Against the late and uncertain sources on the one hand, and the condemning authorities on the other, must be set the only contemporary and entirely authentic source, the Qur’ān. There the reference in Sūra XXXIII, 26 is very brief: “He caused those of the People of the Book who helped them (i.e. the Quraysh) to come out of their forts. Some you killed, some you took prisoner.”

Exegetes and traditionists tend simply to repeat Ibn Ishāq’s tale, but in the Qur’ān the reference can only be to those who were actually in the fighting. This is a statement about the battle. It concerns those who fought. Some of these were killed, others were taken prisoner.

One would think that if 600 or 900 people were killed in this manner the significance of the event would have been greater. There would have been a clearer reference in the Qur’ān, a conclusion to be drawn, and a lesson to be learnt. But when only the guilty leaders were executed, it would be normal to expect only a brief reference.

So much for the sources: they were neither uninterested nor trustworthy; and the report was very late in time. Now for the story. The reasons for rejecting the story are the following:

- (i) As already stated above, the reference to the story in the Qur’ān is extremely brief, and there is no indication whatever of the killing of a large number. In a battle context the reference is to those who were actually fighting. The Qur’ān is the only authority which the historian would accept without hesitation or doubt. It is a contemporary text, and, for the most cogent reasons, what we have is the authentic version.
- (ii) The rule in Islam is to punish only those who were responsible for the sedition.
- (iii) To kill such a large number is diametrically opposed to the Islamic sense of justice and to the basic principles laid down in the Qur’ān—particularly the verse, “No soul shall bear another’s burden.”²² It is obvious in the story that the leaders were numbered and were well known. They were named.
- (iv) It is also against the Qur’ānic rule regarding prisoners of war, which is: either they are to be granted their freedom or else they are to be allowed to be ransomed.²³

¹⁸ *Kadhḥāb and Dajjāl min al-dajjāla*.

¹⁹ *‘Uyūn al-athar*, I, 16–7. In his valuable introduction Ibn Sayyid al-Nās provides a wide-ranging survey of the controversial views on Ibn Ishāq. In his full introduction to the Göttingen edition of the *Sira*, Wüstenfeld in turn draws extensively on Ibn Sayyid al-Nās.

²⁰ *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*, IX, 45. See also *‘Uyūn al-athar*, I, 16–7.

²¹ *ibid.*

²² Qur’ān, XXXV, 18.

²³ Qur’ān, XLI, 4.

- (v) It is unlikely that the Banū Qurayẓa should be slaughtered when the other Jewish groups who surrendered *before* Banū Qurayẓa and *after* them were treated leniently and allowed to go. Indeed Abū 'Ubayd b. Sallām relates in his *Kitāb al-amwāl*²⁴ that when Khaybar fell to the Muslims there were among the residents a particular family or clan who had distinguished themselves by excessive unseemly abuse of the Prophet. Yet in that hour the Prophet addressed them in words which are no more than a rebuke: "Sons of Abū al-Ḥuqayq (he said to them) I have known the extent of your hostility to God and to His apostle, yet that does not prevent me from treating you as I treated your brethren." That was *after* the surrender of Banū Qurayẓa.
- (vi) If indeed so many hundreds of people had actually been put to death in the market-place, and trenches were dug for the operation, it is very strange that there should be no trace whatever of all that—no sign or word to point to the place, and no reference to a visible mark.²⁵
- (vii) Had this slaughter actually happened, jurists would have adopted it as a precedent. In fact exactly the opposite has been the case. The attitude of jurists, and their rulings, have been more according to the Qur'ānic rule in the verse, "No soul shall bear another's burden." Indeed, Abū 'Ubayd b. Sallām relates a very significant incident in his book *Kitāb al-amwāl*,²⁶ which, it must be noted, is a book of jurisprudence, of law, not a *sira* or a biography. He tells us that in the time of the Imām al-Awzā'i²⁷ there was a case of trouble among a group of the People of the Book in the Lebanon when 'Abdullāh b. 'Alī was regional governor. He put down the sedition and ordered the community in question to be moved elsewhere. Al-Awzā'i in his capacity as the leading jurist immediately objected. His argument was that the incident was not the result of the community's unanimous agreement. "As far as I know (he argued) it is not a rule of God that God should punish the many for the fault of the few but punish the few for the fault of the many."
- Now, had the Imām al-Awzā'i accepted the story of the slaughter of Banū Qurayẓa, he would have treated it as a precedent, and would not have come out with an argument against Authority, represented in 'Abdullāh b. 'Alī. Al-Awzā'i, it should be remembered, was a younger contemporary of Ibn Ishāq.
- (viii) In the story of Qurayẓa a few specific persons were named as having been put to death, some of whom were described as particularly active in their hostility. It is the reasonable

²⁴ ed. Khalīl Muhammad Harrās, Cairo, 1388/1968, 241.

²⁵ Significantly, little or no information is to be found in general or special geographical dictionaries, such as al-Bakrī's, *Mu'jam mā 'sta'jam*; Yāqūt's *Mu'jam*; al-Fairūzābādī's *al-Maghānim al-muṭāba fi ma 'ālim tāba* (ed. Hamad al-Jāsir, Dār al-Yamāma, 1389/1969); *Six treatises (Rasā'il fi tārikh al-Madina*, ed. Hamad al-Jāsir, Dār al-Yamāma, 1392/1972); al-Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-wafā' bi-akhbār dār al-Muṣṭafā* (Cairo, 1326), etc. Even al-Samhūdī seems to regard a mention of the market-place in question as a mere historical reference, for in his extensive historical topography of Medina he identifies the market-place (p. 544) almost casually in the course of explaining the change in nomenclature which had overtaken adjacent landmarks. That market-place, he says, is the one referred to in the report (*sic*) that the Prophet brought out the prisoners of Banū Qurayẓa to the market-place of Medina, etc.

²⁶ p. 247. I am indebted to my friend Professor Mahmud Ghūl of the American University, Beirut, for bringing this reference to my attention.

²⁷ d. 157/774. See *EI*², *sub nomine*.

conclusion that *those* were the ones who led the sedition and who were consequently punished—not the whole tribe.

- (ix) The details given in the story clearly and of necessity imply inside knowledge, i.e. from among the Jews themselves. Such are the details of their consultation when they were besieged, the harangue of Ka'b b. Asad as their leader: and the suggestion that they should kill their women and children and then make a last desperate attack against the Muslims.
- (x) Just as the descendants of Qurayza would want to glorify their ancestors, so did the descendants of the Madanese connected with the event. One notices that that part of the story which concerned the judgement of Sa'd b. Mu'adh against Qurayza was transmitted from one of his direct descendants. According to this part the Prophet said to Mu'adh: "You have pronounced God's judgement upon them [as inspired] through Seven Veils."²⁸

Now it is well known that for the purposes of glorifying their ancestors or white-washing those who were inimical to Islam at the beginning, many stories were invented by later generations and a vast amount of verse was forged, much of which was transmitted by Ibn Ishāq. The story and the statement concerning Sa'd are one such detail.

- (xi) Other details are difficult to accept. How could so many hundreds of persons be incarcerated in the house belonging to a woman of Banū al-Najjār?²⁹
- (xii) The history of the Jewish tribes after the establishment of Islam is not really clear at all. The idea that they all departed on the spot seems to be in need of revision, as can be seen on examining the sources. For example, in his *Jamharat al-ansāb*,³⁰ Ibn Hazm occasionally refers to Jews still living in Medina. In two places al-Wāqidi³¹ mentions Jews who were still in Medina when the Prophet prepared to march against Khaybar—i.e. after the supposed liquidation of all three tribes, including Qurayza. In one case ten Madanese Jews actually joined the Prophet in an excursion to Khaybar, and in the other the Jews who had made their peace with him in Medina were extremely worried when he prepared to attack Khaybar. Al-Wāqidi explains that they tried to prevent the departure of any Muslim who owed them money.

Indeed Ibn Kathīr³² takes the trouble to point out that 'Umar expelled only those Jews of Khaybar who had not made a peace agreement with the Prophet. Ibn Kathīr then proceeds to explain that at a much later date, i.e. after the year 300 A.H., the Jews of Khaybar claimed that they had in their possession a document allegedly given them by the Prophet which exempted them from poll-tax. He said that some scholars were taken in by this document so that they ruled that the Jews of Khaybar should be exempted. However, that was a forged letter and had been refuted in detail. It quoted persons who were already dead, it used technical terms which came into being at a later time, it claimed that Mu'āwiya b. Abī Sufyān witnessed it, when in fact he had not even been converted to Islam at that time, and so on.

²⁸ *Sira*, 689/II, 240; al-Wāqidi, *op. cit.*, 512.

²⁹ *Sira*, 689/II, 240; Ibn Kathīr, *op. cit.*, III, 238.

³⁰ e.g., *Nasab Quraysh* (ed. A. S. Hārūn, Cairo, 1962), 340.

³¹ *op. cit.*, II, 634, 684.

³² *op. cit.*, III, 415.

So then the real source of this unacceptable story of slaughter was the descendants of the Jews of Medina, from whom Ibn Ishāq took these "odd tales". For doing so Ibn Ishāq was severely criticized by other scholars and historians and was called by Mālik an impostor.

The sources of the story are, therefore, extremely doubtful and the details are too diametrically opposed to the spirit of Islam and the rules of the Qur'ān to make the story credible. Credible authority is lacking, and circumstantial evidence does not support it. This means that the story is more than doubtful.

However, the story, in my view, has its origins in earlier events. It can be shown that it reproduces similar stories which survived from the account of the Jewish rebellion against the Romans, which ended in the destruction of the temple in the year A.D. 73, the flight of the Jewish zealots and *sicarii* to the rock fortress of Masada, and the final liquidation of the besieged. Stories of their experience were naturally transmitted by Jewish survivors who fled south. Indeed one of the more plausible theories of the origin of the Jews of Medina is that they came after the Jewish wars. This was the theory preferred by the late Professor Guillaume.³³

As is well known, the source of the details of the Jewish wars is Flavius Josephus, himself a Jew and a contemporary witness who held office under the Romans, who disapproved of certain actions which some of the rebels committed, but who nevertheless never ceased to be a Jew at heart. It is in his writings that we read of details which are closely similar to those transmitted to us in the *Sira* about the actions and the resistance of the Jews, except that now we see the responsibility for the actions placed on the Muslims.

In considering details of the story of Banū Qurayẓa as told by the descendants of that tribe, we may note the following similar details in the account of Josephus:

- (i) According to Josephus,³⁴ Alexander, who ruled in Jerusalem before Herod the Great, hung upon crosses 800 Jewish captives, and slaughtered their wives and children before their eyes.
- (ii) Similarly, large numbers were killed by others.
- (iii) Important details of the two stories are remarkably similar, particularly the numbers of those killed. At Masada the number of those who died at the end was 960.³⁵ The hot-headed *sicarii* who were eventually also killed numbered 600.³⁶ We also read that when they reached the point of despair they were addressed by their leader Eleazar (precisely as Ka'b b. Asad addressed the Banū Qurayẓa),³⁷ who suggested to them the killing of their women and children. At the ultimate point of complete despair the plan of killing each other to the last man was proposed.

Clearly the similarity of details is most striking. Not only are the suggestions of mass suicide similar but even the numbers are almost the same. Even the same names occur in both accounts. There is Phineas, and Azar b. Azar,³⁸ just as Eleazar addressed the Jews besieged in Masada.

³³ A. Guillaume, *Islam* (Harmondsworth, 1956), 10-11.

³⁴ *De bello Judaico*, I, 4, 6.

³⁵ *ibid.*, VII, 9, 1.

³⁶ *ibid.*, VII, 10, 1.

³⁷ *Sira*, 685-6/II, 235-6.

³⁸ *Sira*, 352, 396/I, 514, 567.

There is, indeed, more than a mere similarity. Here we have the prototype—indeed, I would suggest, the origin of the story of Banū Qurayẓa, preserved by descendants of the Jews who fled south to Arabia after the Jewish Wars, just as Josephus recorded the same story for the Classical world. A later generation of these descendants superimposed details of the siege of Masada on the story of the siege of Banū Qurayẓa, perhaps by confusing a tradition of their distant past with one from their less remote history. The mixture provided Ibn Ishāq's story. When Muslim historians ignored it or transmitted it without comment or with cold lack of interest, they only expressed lack of enthusiasm for a strange tale, as Ibn Ḥajar called it.

One last point. Since the above was first written, I have seen reports³⁹ of a paper given in August 1973 at the World Congress of Jewish Studies by Dr. Trude Weiss-Rosmarin, in which she challenges Josephus' assertion that 960 besieged Jews committed suicide at Masada. This is highly interesting since in the story of Qurayẓa the 960 or so Jews refused to commit suicide. Who knows, perhaps the story of Banū Qurayẓa is an even more accurate form of the original version.

³⁹ *The Times*, 18 August 1973; and *The Guardian*, 20 August 1973.