

## **The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation**

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### **Abstract:**

In this paper, I will give an extended study dealing with a significant event which took place in early Islam. This event, called “The Immigration to Abyssinia”, took place in 615. I will attempt to pinpoint some questions and problems concerning this event which need to be answered, taking into consideration various scholars’ opinions, their interpretations of these questions, and on which basis they built their theories. I will attempt to introduce a new interpretation of some of these problems, and hence, to refute some previous theories.

In order to fully understand this event, its causes and implications, it is necessary to understand the situation in Mecca prior to 615, and therefore, to determine under which circumstances this immigration took place. The year 613 is known as the year in which Prophet Muhammad began to preach publicly. In 614, Prophet Muhammad assigned al-Arqam’s house as the center of his preaching activities. There, he taught the early Muslims their new religion. It seems to me that Prophet Muhammad and his followers, at this point, did not encounter vigorous opposition, but undoubtedly a good deal of ridicule and sarcasm was directed towards him and his followers. The most vehement opponents of Prophet Muhammad, at this point, were his uncle Abd al-Uzza, known as Abu Lahab “whose line of conduct was influenced by his business relations with Abd Shams” (Watt 1953: 120) and Abu Jahl of Banu Makhzum. Many suggestions, (which the scope of this paper is not capable of) were given to why some Meccans (Abu Jahl, for example) were so furious with Prophet Muhammad. Some of these suggestions are acceptable and ought to be taken into consideration, and some are unsubstantiated and are based on unconvincing hypothesis lacking evidence or ground. One reason for this enmity, which many scholars failed

### **The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation**

to recognize, is the competition and rivalry among the Meccan families over prestige and honor. A statement given by Abu Jahl may manifest and clarify this suggestion. He said, “We and Banu Manaf have been rivals in honor. They have fed the poor, and so have we; they have assumed others’ burdens, and so have we; they have been generous, and so have we, until we have progressed side by side, and were alike like two horses of equal speed. They said, “We have a prophet to whom revelation comes from heaven, and when shall we attain anything like that? By God, we will never believe in him and treat him as truthful” (Ibn Hisham. 1965: 142-143).

One of the most difficult questions to answer is how far did the Meccans go in their pressure and persecution? It is very difficult to assess the degree of this persecution, but a statement by Ibn Ishaq may help us understand and estimate the degree of this persecution (Ibn Hisham. 1965: 143). Ibn Ishaq says, “Then the Quraysh showed their enmity to all those who followed the apostle; every clan which contained Muslims attacked them, imprisoning them, and beating them, allowing them no food or drink, and exposing them at the burning heat of Mecca, so as to seduce them from their religion. Some gave way under pressure of persecution, and others resisted them, being protected by God.”

Two reasons may suggest that the persecution was not as severe as Ibn Ishaq described. Tabari (Tabari 1961: (2) 332 – 333) mentioned a tradition in which ‘Amr b al-As (later the conqueror of Egypt) was asked what was the worse thing which Quraysh did to the apostle, and he replied, “I was with them one day in the square outside the Ka’ba and the messenger of God was mentioned. Some of them said that they had never known anything like the trouble which they had suffered from this fellow who had reviled their religion and divided the community against itself. While they were thus discussing him, the apostle came towards them, kissed the black stone and then passed by them as he walked around the temple. As he passed, they

said some injurious things about him. I could see this from his expression. He went on, and as he passed them for the second time, they once again attacked him in the same manner. Then he passed the third time and they did the same. He stopped and said, 'Will you listen to me, O Quraysh? By him who holds my life in His hand, I bring you slaughter'. This word so struck the people that not one but all stood silent and still. Even one of them, who had hitherto been most violent, spoke to him in the kindest way possible, saying: 'Depart, O Abu al-Qasim for by God, you are not a man of violence'.

Another reason which encourages us to believe that the persecution was not severe is the constitution of **Min'a**. This constitution deterred the enemies of Islam from open and violent persecution. Prophet Muhammed himself enjoyed this privilege of protection by his uncle Abu Talib. Abu Talib, being the head of Banu Hashim, played an indirect, though major role in the continuation of Prophet Muhammad's preaching and mission during the first nine or ten years which were years of great importance for the latter's mission. Being the head of Banu Hashim, Abu Talib took upon himself the responsibility to protect his nephew from any harm or abuse which may have come upon him from the hostile Meccans. Enjoying this privilege of protection, Prophet Muhammad continued preaching without fearing any kind of harassment except for verbal insults which were not covered by the code of solidarity. With the death of Abu Talib, Abu Lahab, Prophet Muhammad's uncle and one of his bitterest enemies, became the Sayyid of Banu Hashim. In the beginning, he agreed to protect Prophet Muhammad, but upon being pressured by the Meccans to ask Prophet Muhammad about his father, Prophet Muhammad replied that he is in the fires of hell. As a result, Abu Lahab decided to disown Prophet Muhammad, and therefore, to prevent him from the protection of his clan. Upon losing this institutional support and protection, which was essential for anyone who lived under the

### **The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation**

tribal system of solidarity, Prophet Muhammad's life was threatened when he became a target of abuse, and hence, threatened the existence of his cause. The extent and importance of Abu Talib's support is best described by the prophet himself when he said, "Quraysh did not abuse me until the death of Abu Talib" (Ibn Hisham 1965: 30). Another event which may manifest the importance of **Min'a** is when some men of Banu Makhzum went to Hisham b. al-Walid when his brother al-Walid b. al-Walid became a Muslim. They agreed to seize some young men who became Muslims. They were afraid of his violent temper and so they said, 'We wish to admonish these men because of this religion which they have newly introduced; thus we shall be safe in the case of others'. He accepted this, but warned them not to kill his brother. He said, 'Be careful of his life, for I swear by God that if you kill him, I will kill the noblest of you to the last man.' (Ibn Hisham 1965: 145).

Another reason that may suggest that the persecution was not so severe is that if they were sent to Abyssinia in order to avoid persecution, then why did some of them remain there until the year 7 A. H. instead of joining Prophet Muhammad and their co-religionists in Medina where the Muslims were safe and were warmly welcomed by the Medinians. So, the persecution of the early Muslims was not as severe as it was imagined to be. It was mostly psychological which can not be compared to that which was practiced, for example, during the Roman times when victims were crucified, or by Nero under whom the Christians were burned alive or thrown to the lions.

The story which is told by Ibn Hisham is as follows: "When the apostle saw the affliction of his companions and that though he escaped it because of his standing with Allah and his uncle Abu Talib, he could not protect them, he said to them 'If you were to go to Abyssinia (it would be better for you), for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time

as Allah will relieve you from your distress' ” (1965: 145). Ibn Ishaq mentions the names of ten people to go to Abyssinia. Those were: Uthman b. Affan with his wife Ruqayya, daughter of Muhammad; Abu Hudhayfa b. 'Utba, with his wife, Sahla, daughter of Suhayl b. 'Amr; al-Zubayr b. al-Awwam; Mus'ab b. 'Umayr; Abd al-Rahman b. Awf Abu Salama b. Abd al-Asad with his wife Umm Salama, daughter of Abu Umayya b. al-Mughira; Uthman b. Maz'un, Amir b. Rabi'a, with his wife Layla, daughter of Abu Hathma b. Hudhafa; Abu Sabra b. Abu Ruhm b. Abd al Uzza; Suhayl b. Bayda.

Most Muslim historians are in agreement about the account that there were two Hijras to Abyssinia and that certain people took part in both. Some of them returned to Mecca and took part in the Hijra to Medina, and others did not return until the year 7 A. H., the year of the expedition against Khaybar. The only thing that the historians disagree upon is the number of immigrants who took part in each one of the Hijras. Whereas Ibn Ishaq mentioned the names of ten men and four women whom he thought to be the first to go to Abyssinia, we find that most Muslim historians who lived after Ibn Ishaq enumerate them to be eleven men and four women. (Tabari 1961: (2) 333; Ibn al-Athir 1965: (2) 77; Ibn Sa'd 1960: (1) 204). At any rate, the total number of those who immigrated to Abyssinia, apart from their children was 83 if 'Ammar b. Yasir was among them (Ibn Hisham:148; Tabari:330; Ibn Khaldun 1956: (2) 720), but that is doubtful. Western scholars questioned the fact that there were two Hijrahs. Montgomery Watt suggests that the word **taba'a** (followed one another) “suggests that there were not two large parties but a number of smaller groups” (Watt: 111).

The list seems to have included most of the Muslims at that time. Some prominent names which are not included in the list, and hence stayed with Prophet Muhammad in Mecca, are: Ali b. Abu Talib, Zayd b. Haritha and Abu Bakr. It has been said that the Muslims who arrived in Abyssinia

### **The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation**

practiced their religion freely. The fact that they “worshipped God, and suffered no wrong in word or deed” (Ibn Hisham: 150), suggests that there had been freedom of worship in the country.

When the Meccans discovered that a large number of Muslims had immigrated to Abyssinia, they sent a deputation to the Negus asking him to send them back. The two men who were sent as delegates were ‘Amr b. al-As and Abd Allah b. Abu Rabi’ah. The two men took with them many gifts (mainly leather) to the Negus and his high officials whom they bribed for the purpose of seeking their help to persuade the Negus on their behalf. Both men told the Negus and his generals that “some foolish fellows from our people have taken refuge in the king’s country. They have forsaken our religion and not accepted yours but have brought an invented religion which neither we nor you know anything about” (Ibn Hisham 1965:150). Despite the efforts exerted by the generals to influence the Negus, he refused to send the Muslims back until he heard what they had to say. When the Muslims came into his presence, they found that the king had summoned his bishops with their sacred books. When asked by the Negus about their religion, Ja’far b. Abu Talib answered, “O King, we were an uncivilized people, worshipped idols, eating corpses, committing abominations, breaking natural ties, treating guests badly, and our strong devoured our weak. Thus we were until God sent us an apostle whose lineage, truth, trustworthiness, and clemency we know. He summoned us to acknowledge God’s unity and to worship Him and to renounce the stones and images which we and our fathers formerly worshipped. He commanded us to speak the truth, be faithful to our engagements, mindful of the ties of kinship and kindly hospitality, and to refrain from crimes and bloodshed. He forbade us to commit abominations and to speak lies, and to devour the property of orphans, and to vilify chaste women. He commanded us to worship God alone and not to associate anything with Him, and he gave us orders about

prayer, alms giving and fasting. We confessed his truth and believed in him, as we followed him in what he had brought from God, and we worshipped God alone without associating anything with Him. We treated as forbidden what he forbade, and as lawful what he declared lawful. Thereupon our people attacked us, treated us harshly, and seduced us from our faith to try to make us go back to the worship of idols instead of the worship of God, and to regard as lawful the evil deeds we once committed. So when they got the better of us, treated us unjustly and circumscribed our lives, and came between us and our religion, we came to your country, having chosen you above all others. Here we have been happy in our protection, and we hope that we shall not be treated unjustly while we are with you, O King” (Ibn Hisham: 151-152). Ja’far then recited a passage from Sura 19 in which is told the story of Zacharias and the birth of John the Baptist, followed by the virgin birth of Jesus. It seems that the Negus, after hearing these verses, was very impressed to the extent that he wept.

‘Amr b. al-As did not give up, and came with another idea to persuade the Negus. His idea was to tell the Negus that they assert that Jesus, son of Mary, is a creature. He went to the Negus the next morning and told him that they said a dreadful thing about Jesus. Summoned to the Negus’ presence again to respond to his comment, Ja’far replied, “We say about him that which our prophet brought, saying, he is the slave of God, and his apostle, and his spirit and his word, which he cast into Mary the blessed virgin” (Ibn Hisham: 152). This event shows the Meccans, Muslims and idolaters alike, to have possessed a considerable knowledge of Christianity. The Negus was pleased with this answer and sent the two Meccans home without accomplishing their mission. Ya’qubi tells a story in which Abd Allah asked Amr to convince his wife to kiss him, to which Amr disapproved. Amr in return told the Negus that Abd Allah had allured the Negus’ wife by making sexual advances towards her (Ya’qubi 1960, (2)73).

### **The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation**

If this story is to be considered authentic, then it may have helped the Muslims because the Negus did not trust the two Meccans.

One of the most important questions which ought to be asked is: why was Quraysh obsessed with the idea of bringing the Muslims back to Mecca? A question like this is difficult to answer, but it seems to me that since the power of tribes depends on men and their number, then the clans of Quraysh resented the departure of their tribesmen who affiliated themselves with other tribes or communities, which caused the weakness of the tribe, and therefore due to its weakness, it may expose it to attacks from other tribes. One of the main reasons which encouraged Banu Hashim to defend their tribesmen Prophet Muhammad is the fact that they were afraid, that by disowning him they would lose one of their most prominent fellows. In this regard Margoliouth says that the reason behind the Meccans' concern "was in part to be found in the institution called Munafara (a sort of contest in which men endeavored to prove their families to be the biggest.) (Margoliouth 1978:159). It might also be true that knowing that the Muslims went to al-Habasha reminded them of the invasion of the Abyssinian army which was led by Abraha al-Ashram a few decades earlier. The fact that the Negus rejected their presents and sent their delegates back empty handed may have been interpreted by the Meccans as a declaration of war.

Another question which cannot be avoided is: why did Prophet Muhammad choose Abyssinia as a refuge for his followers? And why did he not choose al-Sham, al-Hira or one of the Arab tribes? The reasons may have been varied, but it is impossible to be entirely positive about the subject. Answering the second part of this question is easier than the first part. I think that the reason behind Prophet Muhammad not choosing one of the Arab tribes lies in the fact that they rejected his mission vehemently during the seasons of pilgrimage when he used to call them to believe in his mission. This rejection was in part due to their amicable relations with

Quraysh whose anger they tried to avoid because Quraysh symbolized their prosperity. Another reason for their rejection was due to their adherence to their pagan religions which they inherited from their adored and revered fathers.

As for al-Sham, al-Hira, and Yemen, they were all important market centers for Quraysh's trade. Quraysh also had very strong relations and mutual interests with them.

Once again, the question which baffled most historians is: why did Prophet Muhammad choose Abyssinia to be his followers' refuge? Many suggestions were given in this regard. The scholar Tor suggested that the reason behind making the Abyssinians Prophet Muhammad's natural friends, after he had despised them because of their unsuccessful attack upon al-Ka'ba, was "that he felt that Christianity was most closely related to his own belief; and the Christians on their part, seemed to show sympathy and understanding for the new message" (Tor: p. 127). What may support this theory is the fact that the Muslims who went to Abyssinia practiced their religion freely. This theory is weakened by Tor's failure to explain why Prophet Muhammad did not send them to other Christian countries. D.S.Margoliouth, in his book *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (1978:159) suggests that, "Mohammed perhaps was looking forward to seeing them return at the head of an Abyssinian army". Margoliouth arrived to this conclusion because the Abyssinians harboured feelings of contempt towards the Meccans. The Negus, in the sixth century, sent effective aid to the persecuted Arab Christians and that may suggest that mistrust existed between them.

Montgomery Watt (1953:115) suggests that "there was a sharp division of opinion with the embryonic Islamic community". Watt says that Uthman b. Maz'un was a leader of a group within the Muslim community which rivaled

### **The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation**

another group led by Abu Bakr. Watt believes that this conflict in the Islamic community forced Prophet Muhammad to separate the two parties by sending the leader of one of them to Abyssinia. Watt gives the impression that Uthman was resentful of Prophet Muhammad and that the Prophet sent him to Abyssinia to get rid of him. This belief of Uthman's resentment and disobedience is absolutely untrue. As a matter of fact, Uthman was a very pious man who loved the Prophet and his co-religionists. This love is manifested by the story told about him in which Uthman renounced the protection offered to him by al-Walid b. al-Mughira, because he could not bear that he should "be perfectly safe under the protection of a polytheist while his friends and co-religionists were afflicted and distressed for God's sake" (Ibn Hisham: 169). Another reason which causes us to believe that Uthman obeyed Prophet Muhammad's orders is the fact that the Prophet, according to some traditions, assigned Hatib b. Amr (who did not play an important role in Islamic history) as the leader of those who immigrated to Abyssinia, preferring him over Uthman b. Maz'un who willingly complied and accepted his order. Other traditions argue that the Prophet appointed Uthman b. Maz'un as their leader.

As for the suggestion that there were two parties in the Islamic community, the leader of the first being Abu Bakr, and the leader of the second being Uthman b. Maz'un, and that Prophet Muhammad sent Ibn Maz'un to Abyssinia to avoid conflict and confrontation between the two parties, this suggestion can be refuted because of the fact that some traditions mention that Abu Bakr took permission from the Prophet to immigrate to Abyssinia, and that after one or two days after his departure he was met by Ibn al-Dughunna who took him under his protection (Ibn Kathir 1965: (2)94).

Others have suggested that Prophet Muhammad had visited Abyssinia and was satisfied with the conditions of life there, and was encouraged to send

his followers there. I did not find any one single tradition which may suggest that he had been in Abyssinia.

The majority of those who immigrated to Abbysinia, based on the list of names given by Ibn Ishaq, were of the clans of Abd Shams and Makhzum. These two families were considered the richest families in Mecca, and the leaders of Prophet Muhammad's opposition belonged to both of them. It may be concluded from this fact that the Muslims who converted from these clans met with persecution from their families. Members of the Islamic community who were from less influential clans, such as al-Muttalib or Zuhra, met with less opposition, resulting in fewer of them going to Abbysinia. My suggestion is that the Prophet did not want to lose these Muslims who belonged to the richest and most influential families. Prophet Muhammad may have thought that, by having them on his side, his position could be stronger. He thought that if they remained in Mecca exposed to family pressure, they might easily deny their new faith.

## The Immigration to Abyssinia: A New Interpretation

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