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## The Conquest of Khyber

Khyber is a township 90 miles north of Medina, in a *harra* or volcanic tract, well-watered with many springs issuing forth from its basaltic rocks. It has an excellent irrigation system and produces rich harvests of dates and grain.

Long before the time of the Prophet of Islam, the valley of Khyber and other valleys in its north and south, were colonized by the Jews. As noted before, these Jews were not only the best farmers of the country, they were also its leaders in industry and business, and they enjoyed a monopoly of the armaments industry.

In the times of the Prophet, the best arsenals of Arabia were all in Khyber. Those Jews who had been banished from Medina, had also resettled in Khyber, and they were noted for their skills in metallurgy.

### Betty Kelen

The Qaynuqa were banished from Medina. Chiefly they were metalworkers, having learned the art of beating out the splendid shining armor, the moon-curved swords and sun-catching helmets that glorified warfare in the desert. They made fine bronze armor, beaten and burnished, with helmets to match and gleaming swords whose swift cut could make the very air whistle. (*Muhammad – the Messenger of God*)

The Jews of Khyber also heard about the Treaty of Hdaybiyya and its terms. Just as the Quraysh in Makkah and Umar bin al-Khattab and some other “hawks” among the Muslims in Medina had interpreted the treaty as the “surrender” of the Muslims, so also did the Jews of Khyber consider it a symptom of the incipient decline of the power of the State of Medina.

Banking on this theory of “decline,” they began to instigate the Arab tribes between Khyber and Medina to attack the Muslims. One of these tribes was the Ghatafan, the allies of the Jews of Khyber.

They began to send their raiding expeditions into the pastures around Medina. One of these pastures belonged to the Prophet himself. On one occasion, the son of Abu Dharr el-Ghiffari was grazing the camels of the Prophet when the Ghatafan struck. They killed him, and captured his mother who was with

him, and they drove with them the herd of camels. The Muslims, however, were able, just in time, to overtake the marauders and to rescue the wife of Abu Dharr el-Ghiffari.

Muhammad decided to put an end to these gratuitous provocation. He thought that it would not be prudent to wait until the Jews and their allies laid another siege to Medina, and that it would be better to forestall them. He, therefore, ordered the Muslims to mobilize, and to march on Khyber.

In September 628 the Prophet left Medina with 1600 soldiers. Some Muslim women also accompanied the army to work as nurses and to give first aid to the wounded and the sick.

Khyber had eight fortresses. The strongest and the most important of them all was the fortress of al-Qamus. The captain of its garrison was a famous champion called Merhab. He had, under his command, the best fighting men of Khyber, and they were the best-equipped soldiers of the time in all Arabia.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

The campaign of Khaybar was one of the greatest. The masses of Jews living in Khaybar were the strongest, the richest, and the best equipped for war of all the peoples of Arabia. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

The Muslims, however, were able to capture all the fortresses of Khyber except al-Qamus which proved to be impregnable. Muhammad send Abu Bakr on one occasion, and Umar on another, with hand-picked warriors, to attempt the conquest of al-Qamus. Both made the attempt and both failed. Some other captains also tried to capture the fortress but they also failed. These repeated failures began to undermine the morale of the army.

Muhammad realized that something dramatic had to be done to restore the wilting morale of the Muslims, and immediately. And when one more attempt to capture al-Qamus had also aborted, his mind was made up, and he declared: "Tomorrow I shall give the banner of Islam to a hero who loves God and His Apostle, and God and His Apostle love him. He is one who attacks the enemy but does not run, and he will conquer Khyber."

The companions knew that the prediction of the Messenger of God would come true, and that Khyber would be conquered on the following day. Everyone of them, therefore, became a candidate for the glory and honor of conquering it. Many of them were kept awake all night by the ambition to become "the beloved of God and His Apostle," and to become the hero who would capture Khyber.

On the following morning, the companions gathered in front of the tent of the Prophet. Each of them was decked out in martial array, and was vying with others in looking the most impressive figure.

Presently, the Messenger of God came out of his tent, and the vast throng began to show signs of restlessness. Each of the companions tried to make himself more conspicuous than others in the hope

of catching the eye of the master. But the latter didn't appear to notice any of them and only posed one question: "Where is Ali?"

Ali at this time was in his tent. He knew that if he was the "beloved of God and His Apostle," then he, and no one else would capture the fortress of al-Qamus. The Prophet sent for him.

When Ali came, the Prophet solemnly placed the banner of Islam in his hand. He invoked God's blessings upon him, prayed for his victory, and bade him farewell. The young hero then advanced toward the most formidable fortress in all Arabia where the bravest of the Hebrew warriors were awaiting him. He fought against them all, overcame them, and planted the banner of Islam on its main tower.

When the conqueror returned to the camp, the Messenger of God greeted him with smiles, kisses and embraces, and prayed to God to bestow His best rewards upon His lion.

### **Ibn Ishaq**

Burayda b. Sufyan b. Farwa al-Aslami told me from his father Sufyan b. Amr b. Al-Akwa: the Apostle sent Abu Bakr with his banner against one of the forts of Khyber. He fought but returned having suffered losses and not taken it. On the morrow he sent Umar and the same thing happened. The Apostle said: "Tomorrow I will give the flag to a man who loves Allah and His Apostle. Allah will conquer it by his means. He is no runaway." Next day he gave the flag to Ali. (*The Life of the Messenger of God*)

### **Edward Gibbon**

North-east of Medina, the ancient and wealthy town of Khyber was the seat of the Jewish power in Arabia: the territory, a fertile spot in the desert, was covered with plantations and cattle, and protected by eight castles, some of which were esteemed of impregnable strength. The forces of Mohammed consisted of 200 horse and 1400 foot: in the succession of eight regular and painful sieges, they were exposed to danger and fatigue, and hunger; and the most undaunted chiefs despaired of the event.

The Apostle revived their faith and courage by the example of Ali, on whom he bestowed the surname of the *Lion of God*, perhaps we may believe that a Hebrew champion of gigantic stature was cloven to the chest by his irresistible scimitar; but we cannot praise the modesty of romance, which represents him as tearing from its hinges the gate of a fortress and wielding the ponderous buckler in his left hand (sic). (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*)

### **Washington Irving**

The city of Khyber was strongly defended by outworks, and its citadel, Al-Kamus, built on a steep rock, was deemed impregnable. The siege of this city was the most important enterprise the Moslems had yet undertaken. When Mohammed came in sight of its strong and frowning walls, and its rock-built citadel, he is said to have prayed for Lord's succor in capturing it.

The siege of the citadel lasted for some time, and tasked the skill and patience of Mohammed and his troops, as yet little practiced in the attack of fortified places. Mohammed directed the attacks in person; the besiegers protected themselves by trenches, and brought battering-rams to play upon the walls; a breach was at length effected, but for several days every attempt to enter was vigorously repelled.

Abu Bakr at one time led the assault, bearing the standard of the Prophet; but, after fighting with great bravery, was compelled to retreat. The next attack was headed by Omar ibn Khattab, who fought until the close of day with no better success.

A third attack was led by Ali, whom Mohammed armed with his own scimitar, called Dhu'l-Fiqar, or the Trenchant. On confiding to his hands the sacred banner, he pronounced him "a man who loved God and His Prophet; and whom God and His Prophet loved; a man who knew not fear, nor ever turned his back upon a foe."

And here it may be well to give a traditional account of the person and character of Ali. He was of the middle height, but robust and square, and of prodigious strength. He had a smiling countenance, exceedingly florid, with a bushy beard. He was distinguished for an amiable disposition, sagacious intellect, and religious zeal, and, from his undaunted courage, was surnamed *the Lion of God*.

Arabian writers dwell with fond exaggeration on the exploits of Khyber, of this their favorite hero. He was clad, they say, in a scarlet vest, over which was buckled a cuirass of steel. Scrambling with his followers up the great heap of stones in front of the breach, he planted the standard on the top, determined never to recede until the citadel was taken. The Jews sallied forth to drive down the assailants.

In the conflict which ensued, Ali fought hand to hand with the Jewish commander, Al-Hareth, whom he slew. The brother of the slain advanced to revenge his death. He was of gigantic stature; with a double cuirass, a double turban, wound round a helmet of proof, in front of which sparked an immense diamond.

He had a sword girt to each side, and brandished a three-pronged spear, like a trident. The warriors measured each other with the eye, and accosted each other in boasting oriental style. "I," said the Jew, "am Merhab, armed at all points, and terrible in battle." "And I am Ali, whom his mother, at his birth, surnamed Al-Haider (the rugged lion).

The Moslem writers make short work of the Jewish champion. He made a thrust at Ali with his three pronged lance, but it was dexterously parried; and before he could recover himself, a blow from the scimitar, Dhu'l-Fiqar divided his buckler, passed through the helm of proof, through double turban, and stubborn skull, cleaving his head even to his teeth. His gigantic form fell lifeless to the earth.

The Jews now retreated into the citadel, and a general assault took place. In the heat of the action the shield of Ali was severed from his arm, leaving his body exposed; wrenching a gate, however, from its hinges, he used it as a buckler through the remainder of the fight.

Abu Rafe, a servant of Mohammed, testified to the fact: "I afterwards," says he, "examined this gate in company with seven men and all eight of us attempted in vain to wield it."

(This stupendous feat is recorded by the historian Abul Fida. "Abu Rafe," observes Gibbon, "was an eye-witness; but who will be witness for Abu Rafe?" We join with the distinguished historian in his doubt yet if we scrupulously question the testimony of an eye-witness, what will become of history?) (*The Life of Mohammed*)

### **Sir William Muir**

The Jews rallied round their chief Kinana and posted themselves in front of the citadel Camuss, resolved on a desperate struggle. After some vain attempts to dislodge them, Mohammed planned a general attack. "I will give the eagle," he said – the great black eagle – "into the hands of one that loveth the Lord, and His Apostle, even as he is beloved of them; he shall gain the victory. Next morning the flag was placed in Ali's hands, and troops advanced.

At this moment, a soldier stepped forth from the Jewish line, and challenged his adversaries to single combat: "I am Merhab," he cried, "as all Khyber knows, a warrior bristling with arms, when the war fiercely burns." Then Ali advanced saying: "I am he whom my mother named the Lion; like a lion of the howling wilderness. I weigh my foes in a giant's balance."

The combatants closed, and Ali cleft the head of Merhab in two. The Moslem line now made a general advance, and, after a sharp conflict, drove back the enemy. In this battle, Ali performed great feats of prowess. Having lost his shield, he seized the lintel of a door, which he wielded effectually in its stead. Tradition, in its expansive process, has transformed this extemporized shield into a gigantic beam, and magnified the hero into a second Samson. The victory was decisive, for the Jews lost 93 men; while of the Moslems only 19 were killed throughout the whole campaign. (*The Life of Mohammed, London, 1877*)

### **R.V.C. Bodley**

He (Mohammed) began the campaign (of Khyber) by reducing individually the minor strongholds. When this was done, he marched against Al-Kamus, the main fortress of Khaibar. It was a formidable looking place with frowning walls built out of the living rock. All accesses were strongly fortified, and within the ramparts was a well-equipped and well-provisioned garrison.

Siege warfare was unfamiliar to these nomads accustomed to desert raiding. However, Mohammed had a number of improvised siege engines put together on the spot. The most effective of these were palm-trunk battering rams which, eventually, made a small breach in the walls.

Into this Abu Bakr led a heroic attack, but he was driven back. Then Omar tried, but while he reached the mouth of the breach, he had to retire, losing most of his men. Finally, Ali went up against the wall,

bearing the black standard. As he charged, he chanted: "I am Ali the Lion; and like a lion howling in the wilderness, I weigh my foes in the giant's balance."

Ali was no giant, but he made up for his lack of height by his great breadth and prodigious strength. Today he was formidable in a scarlet tunic over which he wore his shining breastplate and backplate. On his head gleamed a spiked helmet encrusted with silver. In his right hand he brandished Mohammed's own scimitar, Dhu'l-Fiqar, which had been entrusted to him with the black banner.

Again and again Jewish veterans rushed at Ali. Again and again they staggered away with limbs or heads severed. Finally, the champion of all the Hebrews, a man called Marhab, who towered above the other warriors, planted himself before Ali. He wore a double cuirass, and round his helmet was a thick turban held in place by an enormous diamond. He was girt with a golden belt from which swung two swords. He did not use these, however, and killed right and left with a long three-pronged spear. For a moment the battle paused and the combatants rested on their arms to watch the duel

Marhab, like Goliath of Gath, had never been defeated. His size alone frightened opponents before they came close to him. His barbed fork disheartened the most skilled swordsman.

Marhab attacked first, driving at Ali with his trident. For a moment, Ali, unaccustomed to this form of weapon gave ground. Then he steadied himself and fenced with the Hebrew. A feint and a parry sent the spear flying. Before Marhab could draw one of his swords, Ali's scimitar had cloven his head through his helmet and turban so that it fell on either side of his shoulders. The Jews, seeing their champion dead, retreated into the city.

Mohammed gave the signal for a general assault. The Moslems surged forward. Ali led the onslaught. He had lost his shield during the duel and, to replace it, had torn a door from its hinges, which he carried before him. (*The Messenger – the Life of Mohammed, 1946*)

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

Realizing that this was their last stand in Arabia, the Jews fought desperately. As the days went by, the Prophet sent Abu Bakr with a contingent and a flag to the fortress of Na'im; but he was not able to conquer it despite heavy fighting. The Prophet then sent Umar bin al-Khattab on the following day, but he fared no better than Abu Bakr.

On the third day, the Prophet called Ali ibn Abu Talib, and, blessing him, commanded him to storm the fortress. Ali led his forces and fought valiantly. In the engagement, he lost his armor and, shielding himself with a portal he had seized, he continued to fight until the fortress was stormed by his troops. The same portal was used by Ali as a little bridge to enable the Muslim soldiers to enter the houses within the fortress... (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

## The Results of the Conquest of Khyber

The conquest of Khyber is a landmark in the history of Islam as it is the beginning of the Islamic State and Empire. The Indian historian, M. Shibli, says in his biography of the Prophet:

Khyber was the first campaign in which non-Muslims were made the subjects of the Islamic State. It was the first time that the principles of government in Islam were defined and applied. Therefore, Khyber is the first successful campaign of Islam.

At Khyber, the nascent Islamic State acquired new subjects and new territories. It was the beginning, not only of the Islamic State but also of its expansion. If the conquest of Khyber is the beginning of the Islamic State, then Ali ibn Abi Talib, its conqueror, is its principal architect.

Before the conquest of Khyber, the Muslims were destitutes or semi-destitutes. Khyber suddenly made them rich. Imam Bukhari has quoted Abdullah bin Umar bin al-Khattab as saying: "We were hungry at all times until the conquest of Khyber." And the same authority has quoted Ayesha, the wife of the Prophet, as saying: "It was not until the conquest of Khyber that I could eat dates to my heart's content."

The Muhajireen in Medina had no means of making a living and therefore had no steady income. They had barely managed to survive until the conquest of Khyber. Once Khyber was conquered, there was a sudden change in their fortunes.

### **Montgomery Watt**

Until the capture of Khyber the finances of the Islamic community were precarious, and the Emigrants lived partly off the charity or hospitality of the Helpers. (*Mohammed, Prophet and Statesman*)

Khyber spelled the difference for the Muslim community between abject poverty and material abundance.

### **S. Margoliouth**

When the Muslims came to apportion their spoils they found that the conquest of Khaibar surpassed every other benefit that God had conferred on their Prophet. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, 1931*)

The conquest of Khyber conferred unlimited benefits upon the Muslims; some of them were:

1. Immense quantities of gold and silver that the Jews had been accumulating for many generations.
2. The finest arsenals of Arabia containing the newest weapons of the times such as swords, spears, lances, maces, shields, armor, bows and arrows.
3. Vast herds of horses, camels and cattle, and flocks of sheep and goats.

4. Rich arable lands with palm groves.

### **Sir John Glubb**

The people of Khyber, like those of Medina, made their living by agriculture, particularly the date palm. Even today, the tribes have a saying, "To take dates to Khaiber," which means the same as our expression, "To carry coals to Newcastle." Khyber was said to be the richest oasis in the Hijaz. (*The Life and Times of Mohammed*)

After the surrender of the Jews in Khyber, the Prophet had to make some new arrangements for the administration of the newly-won territories.

### **S. Margoliouth**

Presently Mohammed bethought him of the plan which became a prominent institution of Islam. To kill or banish the industrious inhabitants of Khaibar would not be good policy, since it was not desirable that the Moslems, who would constantly be wanted for active service, should be settled so far from Medina. Moreover, their skill as cultivators would not equal that of the former owners of the soil. So he decided to leave the Jews in occupation on payment of half their produce, estimated by Abdullah son of Rawahah at 200,000 wasks of dates. (*Mohammed and the Rise of Islam, 1931*)

One mighty stroke of Ali's sword solved the economic problems of the Muslim community, and put an end to its poverty forever. He also put an end to the dependence of the Muslims upon a fickle and temperamental nature, to feed them, once he delivered the fertile lands of Khyber to them.

There is yet another sense in which the campaign of Khyber was of immense importance not only to the Muslims of the time of the Prophet but also to the generations of the future. It was a departure, for the first time, from the classical tradition of Arabian warfare. The Arab mode of fighting was often chivalrous but most often inefficient. The Arabs knew less than nothing about strategy, and all that they knew about tactics was hit-and-run. They placed their hopes of victory in their ability to catch their victims by surprise.

For centuries, they had fought against each other, and had consistently followed the ancient pattern of hit-and-run, with no variation in tactics. We have seen how a trench checked an army of ten thousand warriors, and immobilized it at the siege of Medina in A.D. 627. The greatest captains of the idolaters like Khalid bin Walid and Ikrama bin Abu Jahl were baffled by the moat, and became helpless before it.

All this was to change after Khyber. Ali ibn Abi Talib taught the Muslims the art of laying siege to, and of capturing fortified positions. He taught them how to map out the strategy of a campaign, and how to fight pitched and decisive battles like disciplined armies. At Khyber, Ali placed the key to the conquest of the whole world in the hands of the Muslims.

### **The Estate of Fadak**

Fadak was another Jewish settlement near Khyber. The people of Fadak voluntarily sent their representatives to the Prophet offering to negotiate the terms of surrender. He accepted their offer of surrender, and gave them the right to stay on their lands as subjects of the Islamic State. Fadak was acquired in this manner without any effort on the part of the army of the Muslims. It was, therefore, considered to be the private property of the Prophet.

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

The wealth of Khaybar was to be distributed among the members of the Muslim armed forces according to rule because they had fought to secure it. The wealth of Fadak, on the other hand, fell to Muhammad, as no Muslims and no fighting were involved in its acquisition. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

In the early days of the history of Islam, the Muslims, when they were still in Makkah, were very poor, and had no means of making a living. Khadija, the wife of the Prophet, fed and housed most of them. She spent all her wealth on them so that when she died, there was nothing that she could leave for her daughter, Fatima Zahra.

Now when the estate of Fadak was acquired by the Prophet, he decided to make it a gift to his daughter as a recompense for the great sacrifices her mother had made for Islam. He, therefore, gave the estate of Fadak to his daughter, and it became her property.

The Jews of Wadi-ul-Qura and Tayma, other oases in Hijaz, also agreed to surrender to the Prophet on the same terms as those of Khyber and Fadak, and stayed on their lands.

### **Jaafer ibn Abi Talib**

Muhammad, the Messenger of God, was still in Khyber when his cousin, Jaafer ibn Abi Talib, returned from Abyssinia after an absence of nearly fourteen years. When Jaafer learned in Medina that his master was in Khyber, he at once headed there. By a coincidence, his arrival in Khyber, synchronized with the capture of the fortress of Al-Qamus by his brother, Ali. Muhammad loved Jaafer as his own son. He threw his arms around him and said: "I do not know what makes me more happy; the conquest of Khyber or the return of Jaafer."

### **Muhammad Husayn Haykal**

Muhammad was so pleased to be reunited with Ja'far that he said he could not tell which was the greater: victory over Khaybar or reunion with Ja'far. (*The Life of Muhammad, Cairo, 1935*)

### **The Umra or the Lesser Pilgrimage – A.D. 629 (8 A.H.)**

One year after the Treaty of Hudaibiyya, Muhammad, the Messenger of God, visited Makkah to perform the pilgrimage. He was accompanied by two thousand Muslims. As per the terms of the Treaty, the polytheists vacated Makkah for three days. The Muslims entered the city from the north, and hardly saw

any Makkah. The Messenger of God rode his she-camel, al-Qaswa. His friend, Abdullah ibn Rawaha, held her reins as he entered the precincts of the Kaaba. He was reading the verses of the chapter called, *Victory*, from the Qur'an. Other Muslims were chanting "At Thy command, O Lord! At Thy command, O Lord!"

When all Muslims had assembled in the concourse of the Kaaba, Bilal went on top of the building and called *Adhan* (the Muslim call to prayer) – the first one in the House of Allah, and two thousand believers responded to his call.

The polytheists were witnessing the scene from the heights of the hills surrounding the valley of Makkah. They had never seen such discipline before, when high-born Muslims were tamely obeying the call of a former slave nor they had seen such a demonstration of equality and unity. The vast mass of the Muslims moved as one body, and the Quraysh could see with their own eyes that it was a body in which there were no distinctions between rich and poor, high and low, black and white, and Arab and non-Arab.

The Quraysh could also see that the brotherhood, equality and unity of men which Islam fostered, were not theoretical concepts but were very real. It was a most impressive sight and could not have failed to touch the hearts of even the most hard-bitten idolaters.

The deportment of the Muslims was exemplary. They were most anxious not to do anything that was forbidden, and they were most eager to do only one thing – to obey the commandments of Allah.

And yet this demonstration in the Kaaba of discipline by the Muslims, was so unrehearsed, so spontaneous. To nothing in this world was the Arab more allergic than to discipline; but he was transformed, within a few years, by the magic of Islam. The "touch" of Islam had made him a model of discipline among the nations of the earth.

M. Shibli, the Indian historian, writes in his *Sira-tunNabi* (Life of the Prophet), Volume I, page 504, 11th printing (1976), published by the Maarif Printing Press, Azamgarh, U.P., India, that at the end of three days, the leaders of Quraysh called on Ali ibn Abi Talib, and said to him: "Please inform Muhammad that the stipulated time has passed and he and his followers should, therefore, leave Makkah." Ali gave the message to the Prophet. The latter immediately complied, and ordered the Muslims to vacate Makkah whereupon they left Makkah and began their long march toward home.

The Muslims had performed the *Umra*, and then they returned to their homes in Medina. It was at this time that Khalid bin al-Walid and Amr bin Aas decided to accept Islam. They went to Medina, accepted Islam and joined the ranks of the Muhajireen. They were both destined to become famous in later days as the generals of Abu Bakr and Umar bin al-Khattab respectively.

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