

Some Answered Questions, Muḥammad

'Abdu'l-Bahá

Translated. Original Persian



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Muḥammad

Now as to Muḥammad, the people of Europe and America have heard certain tales about the Prophet, to which they have given credence even though the providers of these accounts, many of whom belonged to the ranks of the Christian clergy, were either ignorant or ill-intentioned. Likewise, a number of ignorant Muslims relayed unfounded tales concerning Muḥammad, which in their minds redounded to His glory. Thus some benighted Muslims made His polygamy the object of their highest praise and held it to be a sign of His wondrous powers, since these ignorant souls considered the multiplicity of wives to be a miraculous thing. The accounts of European historians rely for the most part upon the sayings of such ignorant people.

For example, a foolish individual once told a Christian priest that the proof of true greatness lies in surpassing bravery and bloodshed, and that in a single day one of the followers of Muḥammad had beheaded a hundred men on the battlefield! This led the priest to surmise that the proof of Muḥammad's religion consisted in killing, which is nothing but vain imagination. On the contrary, Muḥammad's military expeditions were always defensive in nature. The clear proof is this: For thirteen years both He and His companions endured in Mecca the most intense persecutions and were the constant target of the darts of hatred. Some of His companions were killed and their possessions pillaged; others forsook their native country and fled to foreign lands. Muḥammad Himself was subjected to the severest persecutions and was obliged, when His enemies resolved to kill Him, to flee Mecca in the middle of the night and emigrate to Medina. Yet even then His enemies did not relent, but pursued the Muslims all the way to Medina and to Abyssinia.

These Arab tribes were most barbarous and rapacious, and in comparison with them the wild and fierce natives of America were the Platos of the age, for they did not bury their children alive as these Arabs did their daughters, claiming this to be an act of honour and taking pride therein. Thus many of the men would threaten their wives, saying, "If a daughter is born to you, I will kill you." Even to the present day the Arabs dread having daughters.

Moreover, one man could take a thousand wives, and most husbands had more than ten wives in their household. When these tribes waged war against each other, the victors would take captive the women and children of the vanquished, regard them as slaves, and engage in buying and selling them.



TRANSLATION

If a man died and left behind ten wives, the sons of these women would rush at each other's mothers, and as soon as one of them had thrown his mantle over the head of one of his stepmothers and claimed her as his lawful property, that unfortunate woman would become the captive and slave of her stepson and the latter could do with her as he pleased. He could kill her; or shut her up in a pit; or beat, curse, and torment her day after day until at last she perished. In all this he was, in accordance with the laws and customs of the Arabs, free to do as he pleased. The rancour and jealousy, the hatred and enmity that must have existed between the wives of a man and their respective children are perfectly clear and require no elaboration. Consider then what the life and condition of those wronged women must have been!

Moreover, these Arab tribes subsisted upon mutual pillage and robbery, so that they were perpetually engaged in strife and warfare, killing one another, plundering each other's property, and seizing the women and children and selling them to strangers. How often would the sons and daughters of a prince spend the day in luxury and ease and find themselves at nightfall reduced to utter abasement, wretchedness, and bondage. Yesterday they were princes, today they are captives; yesterday they were honoured ladies, today they are slaves.

It was among such tribes that Muḥammad was sent forth. For thirteen years He suffered at their hands every conceivable tribulation, till at last He fled the city and emigrated to Medina. And yet, far from desisting, these people joined forces, raised an army, and attacked with the aim of exterminating every man, woman, and child among His followers. It was under such circumstances and against such people that Muḥammad was forced to take up arms. This is the plain truth—we are not prompted by fanatical attachment, nor do we blindly seek to defend, but we examine and relate matters with fairness. You should likewise consider in fairness the following: If Christ Himself had been placed in similar circumstances and among such lawless and barbarous tribes; if for thirteen years He and His disciples had patiently endured every manner of cruelty at their hands; if they were forced through this oppression to forsake their homeland and take to the wilderness; and if these lawless tribes still persisted in pursuing them with the aim of slaughtering the men, pillaging their property, and seizing their women and children—how would Christ have dealt with them? If this oppression had been directed towards Him alone, He would have forgiven them, and such an act of forgiveness would have been most acceptable and praiseworthy; but had He seen that cruel and bloodthirsty murderers were intent upon killing, pillaging, and tormenting a number of defenceless souls and taking captive the women and children, it is certain that He would have defended the oppressed and stayed the hand of the oppressors.

What objection, then, can be directed against Muḥammad? Is it this, that He did not, with His followers and their women and children, place himself at the mercy of these lawless tribes? Moreover, to free these tribes from their bloodthirstiness was the greatest gift, and to curb and restrain them was pure bounty. It is like a man who holds in his hand a cup of poison and who is about to drink it. A loving friend would certainly shatter the cup and restrain the drinker. If Christ had been placed in similar circumstances, He would have undoubtedly delivered, through an all-conquering power, those men, women, and children from the claws of such ravenous wolves.

Muḥammad never fought against the Christians; on the contrary, He treated them with consideration and accorded them complete freedom. In Najrân there lived a community of Christians, and they were under His care and protection. Muḥammad said: "Should anyone

infringe upon their rights, I myself will be his enemy and will charge him before God." In the edicts He promulgated, it is clearly stated that the lives, property, and honour of Jews and Christians are under the protection of God; that a Muslim husband may not prevent his Christian wife from going to church, nor oblige her to wear a veil; that if she died he must entrust her remains to the care of a priest; and that if the Christians desired to build a church the Muslims must support them. Furthermore, in time of war between Islam and her enemies, the Christians were to be exempt from fighting, unless they desired of their own accord to join and assist the Muslims in battle, in view of the protection they enjoyed. In compensation for this exemption, they were to pay each year a small amount. In short, there are seven lengthy edicts on these subjects, copies of some of which are to this day extant in Jerusalem. This is the very truth and not merely my own assertion: The edict of the second Caliph is still in the custody of the Orthodox Patriarch of Jerusalem, and the matter is beyond doubt. Nevertheless, after a time, rancour and envy arose between Muslims and Christians as transgressions were committed by both sides.

Beyond this truth, whatever Muslims, Christians, or others may say is pure fabrication and proceeds from fanaticism, ignorance, or intense hostility. For example, the Muslims claim that the moon was cleft asunder by Muḥammad and fell upon the mountain of Mecca. They imagine the moon to be a small body which Muḥammad divided in twain, casting one part on one mountain and the other part on another! These tales are prompted by sheer fanaticism. Likewise, the accounts that the Christian clergy provide and the charges that they level are always exaggerated and often baseless.

Briefly, Muḥammad appeared in the desert of Hijáz in the Arabian Peninsula, which was a treeless and barren wilderness: sandy, desolate in the extreme, and in some places, such as Mecca and Medina, exceedingly hot. Its inhabitants were nomads, had the morals and manners of desert-dwellers, and were entirely bereft of knowledge and learning. Even Muḥammad Himself was illiterate, and the Qur'án was originally written upon the blade-bones of sheep or on palm leaves. Infer then from this the conditions prevailing among the people to whom Muḥammad was sent!

His first reproach to them was this: "Why do you reject the Torah and the Gospel, and wherefore do you refuse to believe in Christ and in Moses?" This statement came indeed hard upon them, for they asked: "What then is to be said of our fathers and forefathers, who did not believe in the Torah and the Gospel?" He answered, "They had gone astray, and it is incumbent upon you to renounce those who do not believe in the Torah and the Gospel, though they be your own forefathers."

It was in such a land and amidst such barbarous tribes that an illiterate Man brought forth a Book in which the attributes and perfections of God, the prophethood of His Messengers, the precepts of His religion, and certain fields of knowledge and questions of human learning have been expounded in a most perfect and eloquent manner.

For example, as you know, before the observations of the renowned astronomer of later times, that is, from the first centuries down to the fifteenth century of the Christian era, all the mathematicians of the world were unanimous in upholding the centrality of the earth and the movement of the sun. This modern astronomer was the source of the new theory that

postulated the movement of the earth and the fixity of the sun. Until his time, all the mathematicians and philosophers of the world held to the Ptolemaic system, and whosoever uttered a word against it was considered ignorant. It is true that Pythagoras, and Plato during the latter part of his life, conceived that the sun's annual movement around the zodiac did not proceed from the sun itself but from the earth's movement around it, but this theory was entirely forgotten and the Ptolemaic theory was universally accepted by all mathematicians. But in the Qur'án a number of verses were revealed which contradicted the Ptolemaic system. One of them, "The sun moves in a fixed place of its own", alludes to the fixity of the sun and its movement around an axis. Likewise, in another verse, "And each swims in its own heaven", the movement of the sun, the moon, the earth, and the other celestial bodies is specified. When the Qur'án was spread abroad, all the mathematicians scoffed and attributed this view to ignorance. Even the Muslim divines, finding these verses contrary to the Ptolemaic system, were obliged to interpret them figuratively, for the latter was accepted as incontrovertible fact and yet was explicitly contradicted by the Qur'án.

It was not before the fifteenth century of the Christian era, nearly nine hundred years after Muḥammad, that new observations were made by a famous mathematician, that the telescope was invented, that important discoveries were made, that the rotation of the earth and the fixity of the sun were proven, and that the latter's movement about an axis was likewise discovered. Then it became evident that the explicit text of the Qur'án was in full agreement with reality and that the Ptolemaic system was sheer imagination.

In short, multitudes of Eastern peoples were reared for thirteen centuries under the shadow of the Muḥammadan Faith. During the Middle Ages, while Europe had sunk to the lowest depths of barbarity, the Arabs excelled all other nations of the earth in sciences and crafts, mathematics, civilization, governance, and other arts. The Educator and Prime Mover of the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, and the Founder of the civilization of human perfections among those contending clans, was an illiterate Man, Muḥammad. Was this illustrious Man a universal Educator or not? Let us be fair.