

The Battle of Badr

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The Quraysh always felt their trade route to Syria under serious threat because of the Muslim concentration in Madina. They first threatened the Madinans, in a letter addressed to 'Abd Allah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul, to kill their males and enslave their females unless they expelled God's Messenger from Madina. The Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, put a timely end to the mischief which Ibn Ubayy inclined to cause.

Besides, when Sa'd ibn Mu'adh went to Makka to perform minor pilgrimage (Umrah), he was stopped at the entrance of the Ka'ba and prevented from performing circumambulation. Also, the Makkans quite regularly sent invading parties. In such circumstances, the Muslims were left no choice but to gain and consolidate control over that trade route in order to force the Quraysh and other tribes unfriendly to the Muslims to reconsider their hostile policy. It was also time for the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, to give a lesson to the Quraysh and the tribes allied to them, as well as the Jews and hypocrites in Madina, that it was impossible for them to bar the spread of Islam, let alone eradicate it from the hearts of people and the surface of the earth. The front or pact of polytheism and unbelief would undoubtedly surrender to the light of Islam.

It was, at last, at the beginning of 624, two years after the Hijra that a large caravan of the Quraysh, escorted by no more than 40 security guards en route to Makka from Syria, arrived at a place within reach of the Muslims. Fearing that the Muslims would attack their caravan, Abu Sufyan, the leader of the caravan, rushed a messenger to Makka and sought help and reinforcements.

This caused an uproar through Makka. The leading chiefs of the Quraysh decided to wage war on the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, and about 1000 fighters moved out of Makka with much pomp and show. They had decided to deal a crushing blow to the rising power of the Muslims. They also wanted, as always, to terrorize the neighbouring tribes so as to ensure the safety of their trading caravans in the future.

God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, who always kept himself abreast of developments which had any bearing on his mission, realized that if an effective step was not taken right then, the preaching of Islam might suffer a blow from which it might be very difficult for it to recover. Had the Quraysh taken the initiative and launched an attack on Madina, it might have put an end to the existence of the small Muslim community in that town. Even if the Quraysh restricted themselves to taking their caravan to Makka safely by dint of their military strength, this would have adversely affected the political and military prestige of the Muslims. Once their prestige had been undermined, their lives, property and honour would have been jeopardized.

Having decided to use the resources available to him, the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings, left Madina. Although he may have been intent upon a decisive battle with the Quraysh, most of the Muslims desired to capture the caravan. In order to inform his Companions of the situation, the Prophet gathered them and told them that the trading caravan of the Quraysh was in the north whereas the invading Quraysh army was in the south and moving towards Madina. He also informed them that God had promised the Muslims that they would be able to seize any of the two parties they wished (al-Anfal, 8.7) Now it was for them to make the choice whether they wished to attack the trading caravan or the approaching army. Aware of the Prophet's intention, Miqdad ibn 'Amr, one of the Emigrants, replied as follows:

O Messenger of God! Proceed as God has commanded you to. We are with you wherever you go, even as far as Bark al-Ghimad. We shall not say as the Children of Israel said to Moses: 'Go forth, you and your Lord, and fight, We shall remain here sitting!' We rather say: 'Go forth, you and your Lord, and fight, and we shall fight on your side as long as the eyelid of any one of us keeps moving.' (1) I. Sa'd, Tabaqat, 3.162.

Until the Battle of Badr, God's Messenger had not sought help from the Helpers in military expeditions. This was the first occasion when the Helpers would prove their commitment to support Islam. Without addressing them directly, God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, again put the same two alternatives before his audience. Realizing that God's Messenger aimed to ascertain the views of the Helpers on the question, Sa'd ibn Mu'adh rose and spoke as follows:

O Messenger of God! I think your question is directed to the Helpers. We have believed in you, affirmed the veracity of your claim to be the Messenger of God, and borne witness to the truth of your teachings. We took the oath of allegiance to you that we would hear and obey you. O Messenger of God! Do as you wish! By the One Who has sent you with the truth, if you were to take us to the sea and plunge into it, none of us should remain behind. So take us along to the battlefield with God's blessings. (2)

The decision was given in favour of fighting. This was also the decree of God:

God promised you that one of the two hosts would be yours, and you wished that the one with no power should be yours. But God willed to establish the truth through His words and to annihilate the unbelievers to the last remnant, that He might prove the truth to be true and falsify falsehood, even if the sinful are averse. (al-Anfal, 8.7-8)

The Makkani army consisted of 1000 fighters, including 600 soldiers in coats of mail, and 200 cavalry. They were accompanied by singers and dancers. Whenever the army halted, dancing and drinking parties were held. Also the army arrogantly vaunted its military power and numerical strength before the tribes and localities which fell on the way, and boasted of its invincibility. (3) What was even worse was that they were not fighting for any lofty ideal.

Against the force of the Makkani army, the Muslim army was made up of 313 fighters. Of these, 86 were Emigrants and the rest, the Helpers. Such was the scarcity of resources that only two or three Muslims had horses. The number of camels was no more than 70 so that three or four persons took turns on each camel. God's Messenger himself took turns with two persons. When they asked him to ride the camel to exclude themselves from the turns, God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, answered: You are no better in strength than me. Concerning the reward, I am not in less need of it than you. (4)

The Muslim soldiers were fully devoted to the cause of Islam and were fired with the zeal to sacrifice their lives for their cause. In order to accomplish what He had already decreed, God made the Makkani army appear as small in number in the dream God's Messenger had, just as He made the number of the Muslims appear smaller in the eyes of the Makkans (al-Anfal, 8.44).

The two armies finally encountered each other at Badr. The Makkani army outnumbered the Muslims by three to one. Moreover, the Muslims were scantily equipped. However, they would fight for the most sublime of causes, to establish God's religion based on belief, good morals and justice. They were deeply convinced of the truth of this cause and accordingly ready to sacrifice their lives. They had reached the battlefield earlier than their opponents and been positioned around the wells. Apart from that, the heavy downpour which had come the previous night, was to the advantage of the Muslims. It had provided them with an abundant water supply which they quickly stored in large reservoirs. Rain had also compacted the loose sand in the upper part of the valley where they had pitched their tents. This helped the Muslims plant their feet firmly and facilitated their movement. But in the lower part of the valley, where the Quraysh army was stationed, the ground had turned marshy. In addition to all those Divine blessings, God brought on them drowsiness and gave them a feeling of peace and security (al-Anfal, 8.11).

God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, positioned his army in the upper part of the valley overlooking the whole of the battlefield, and divided them into three parts, one centre and two flanks. The central force consisted of the leading figures among the Emigrants and Helpers, who were foremost in devotion to God's Messenger. Mus'ab ibn 'Umayr was carrying the standard of God's Messenger. Mus'ab belonged to one of the richest families of Makka. He had accepted Islam as an adolescent. He was very handsome, and when he used to go out, before his conversion, in silken clothes, the Makkani girls used to stare at him from the windows of their houses. However, after he embraced Islam, he became a whole-hearted follower of God's Messenger. He sacrificed whatever he had in the way of God and finally died a martyr at the Battle of Uhud, during which he was again the standard-bearer of the Prophet, upon him be peace and blessings. When he lost his right arm, he took the standard in his left hand, and when a blow of an enemy sword took it away too, he was left with a 'head' to protect God's Messenger, before whom he was finally martyred. (5)

2. Muslim, Kitab al-Jihad, 83; I. Hisham, Sira, 2,266; I. Kathir, al-Bidaya, 3.322.
3. Tabari, Tarikh al-Umam wa l-Muluk, 2.430.
4. I. Hanbal, 1.411, 418.
5. I. Sa'd, Tabaqat, 3.120.

The flanks were commanded by 'Ali and Sa'd ibn Mu'adh. 'Ali was famous for his courage and deep devotion to God's Messenger. He was only nine or ten years old when he answered God's Messenger, 'I will help you', when the Messenger gathered his kinsmen to call them to Islam at the outset of his mission and asked them: 'Who among you will help me in this affair?' (6) Again, on the night of the Prophet's Emigration, he slept on the Prophet's bed in order that God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, might be able to leave Makka in safety. (7) Those who surrounded the house of the Prophet had thought that it was God's Messenger who was sleeping in the bed and waited until daybreak. By the time they rushed into the house only to find 'Ali in the Prophet's bed, God's Messenger had already reached the Cave of Thaur outside Makka. 'Ali was a man wholly dedicated to the cause of God.

God's Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, had not neglected to take all the necessary precautions and perfect all the preparations for the war. He had mobilized all the resources available to him and chosen his best and most qualified men as commanders. He had stationed his army at the upper part of the valley and pitched his tent at a place

from where he would be able to see the whole of the battlefield and have all his commands conveyed to his soldiers instantaneously. And, as the final prerequisite, for the desired result, he outstretched his arms and prayed with great earnestness and humility:

O God! Here are the Quraysh who in their vainglory seek to deny and cry lies against Your Messenger. O God! Support us with the help You promised me. O God! Were this small group of Muslims to perish, none in the whole earth would remain to worship You. (8)

After the prayer, he threw a handful of dust at the enemy saying: May their faces be scorched! (9)

The Battle of Badr was a severe test for all the Muslims. They would either gain the victory or be martyred. They were not to flee the battlefield. Although they were not forbidden to retreat in orderly fashion under strong pressure from the enemy provided the retreat was resorted to as a stratagem of war – for example, seeking reinforcements or regrouping with another party in the rear (al-Anfal, 8.15) – any disorderly flight because of cowardice and defeatism was strictly forbidden. That kind of retreat takes place because the deserter holds his life dearer than his cause, and such cowardice has been characterized as one of the major deadly sins.

The battle began. In the first frontline of the Quraysh were ‘Utba ibn Rabi‘a and his brother, Shayba, and his son, Walid. They challenged the Muslims to single combat. Three young men of the Helpers went forward against them. ‘We will not fight with the farmers and spherherds of Madina,’ ‘Utba shouted out of an arrogance which would cause their perishing. This was, in fact, what God’s Messenger expected. He ordered ‘Ali, Hamza and ‘Ubayda ibn Harith to go forth for single combat. Hamza, may God be pleased with him, advanced against ‘Utba and killed him. ‘Ali killed Walid with two blows. ‘Ubayda, who was old, marched against Shayba. They exchanged blows, and the sharp edge of Shayba’s sword struck ‘Ubayda’s knee and cut it. However Hamza and ‘Ali rescued him from Shayba. They killed Shayba and carried ‘Ubayda away. (10)

The Quraysh were shocked at the beginning of the war. The belief and sincerity of the Muslims won them God’s help. The Quraysh, who had exulted in their power, suffered a decisive defeat at the hands of the ill-equipped Muslims. Seventy of the Quraysh were killed. The two young brothers, ‘Awf and Mu‘awwidh, from the Helpers, together with ‘Abd Allah ibn Mas‘ud, killed Abu Jahl, who had been described by God’s Messenger as the Pharaoh of the Muslim Ummah. (11) Almost all the leaders of the Quraysh, including Abu Jahl, Walid ibn Mughira, ‘Utba ibn Rabi‘ah, ‘As ibn Sa‘id, Umayya ibn Khalaf, and Nawfal ibn Khuwaylid were killed. Prior to the battle, God’s Messenger, upon him be peace and blessings, had indicated the spots where they were killed, saying: ‘Utba will be killed here; Abu Jahl here, Umayyah ibn Khalaf here, and so on. (12)

Another seventy of the Quraysh were taken as war prisoners. God granted the Muslims permission to accept ransom for them. God’s Messenger released some of them in return for ransom, and the others who knew how to read and write, on the condition that they should teach the unlettered Muslims how to read and write.

Such treatment of the captives proved very beneficial for the Muslims. For those people who had expected execution welcomed the chance to pay ransom and paid it. Second, the rate of literacy in Madina was very low, and, in order to propagate Islam, the Muslims had to know how to read and write. Besides, the Muslims had to be culturally superior to the polytheists. Third, those who were kept in Madina to teach the Muslims how to read and write would be able to learn Islam better than before and find the opportunity to be in close contact with the Muslims. This was certain to soften their hearts toward Islam and accelerate their conversion, together with that of their families. Fourth, the families and relatives of those captives had despaired of their lives. But, when they saw them before them unexpectedly, their enmity to Islam was considerably lessened or broken.

The decisive victory gained at Badr made Islam a force to reckon with across all of Arabia, and many hardened hearts were inclined to accept the message of Islam.

6. I. Hanbal, 1.159.
7. I. Hisham, 2.127.
8. I. Hisham, 1.621
9. I. Hisham, 1.668; I. Hanbal, 1.368.
10. I. Hisham, 2.277.12. I. Sa‘d, Tabaqat, 3.120.
11. I. Hisham, 2.280–7; I. Kathir, al-Bidayah, 3.350.
12. Abu Dawud, 2.53; Muslim, 5.170.