

The Pledges of 'Aqabah

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This article discusses the three 'Aqabah meetings with special reference to the pacts known as the Bay'at al-Nisa and Bay'at al-Harb.

One of the consequences of the intense persecution of the Muslims was that the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) had to look beyond Makkah for adherents to his message. The annual pilgrimage to Makkah afforded him the opportunity to engage with tribes from all over Arabia. However, most of the tribes he approached either rejected his call, or felt it was too risky to incur the wrath of the Arabs by supporting him. As well as inviting them to Islam, the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam), left vulnerable with the death of Abu Talib, asked the tribal notables to protect him and aid him in propagating Islam.

In the eleventh year of his mission, during the Hajj season, the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) came across six men from the Khazraj tribe of Madeenah in a place known as 'Aqabah. Upon hearing the message of Islam, they replied that he must surely be the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) whom the Jews had spoken about. They embraced Islam, agreed to come back the following Hajj, and in the meantime they would call their people to Islam. It is likely that these six men were aware of the Prophet's (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) mission from a number of sources; firstly from the Jews of Madeenah who had told them that the coming of a Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) who would spell doom for the Arabs, secondly the news of the upheavals in Makkah as a result of the Prophet's (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) call had spread all over Arabia, and thirdly, prior to the battle of Bu'ath, a number of Medeenites had met the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) and expressed interest in his teachings. Unlike the subsequent two meetings, this meeting was unplanned.

In the following year, twelve Medeenese Muslims, ten from Khazraj and two from the 'Aws tribe met the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) at 'Aqabah in a meeting which was known as the first pledge of 'Aqabah. They pledged not to commit the following acts; shirk, murder, theft, adultery, infanticide, and slander. They also agreed to obey the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) in all situations and not to disobey him. In turn, the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) promised them Paradise if they remained true to their oath. Another meeting was agreed for the following year. This pledge is also known as the Bay'at al-Nisaa' as fighting to assist the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) was not mentioned in the pledge. Following the pledge Mus'ab ibn 'Umayr was sent with the twelve men to Madeenah to teach them the doctrines of Islam.

Staying at the house of As'ad bin Zurarah, one of the earliest converts to Islam who had attended the first two meetings at 'Aqabah, Mus'ab began to propagate Islam. Two important individuals, Sa'd bin Mu'aadth and 'Usayd ibn Hudayr, who were initially hostile to Islam, embraced Islam through the calm and intelligent preaching of Mus'ab. Through them, most of the tribe of Khazraj embraced Islam.

The fruits of Mus'ab's work was evident in that in the thirteenth year of the Prophet's (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) mission, 73 Madeenan Muslims, including two women came to Makkah for pilgrimage, and to meet the Prophet (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam), as had been agreed previously. The Prophet's (sall-Allaahu 'alayhi wa sallam) uncle 'Abbaas, advised the Madeenans to carefully

consider the consequences of hosting and supporting the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam). A number of other prominent Madeenans also addressed their people with the same advice and warning; by accepting the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) in Madeenah, they risked possible warfare against all of the Arab tribes. The Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) in turn promised to stay with the Madeenans, even after victory, to fight those who fight them, and he assured them of Paradise if they remained faithful to their oath. Knowing full well the consequences of their undertaking, the Madeenans unanimously pledged to refrain from shirk, to shelter and physically defend the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) and his companions at their own financial expense, to obey the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) in all situations, and to enjoin the good and forbid the evil. Twelve Madeenans were appointed to preach Islam in Madeenah. The entire meeting was conducted in secrecy, although the Makkans later came to know of it. Although the Qur'aanic command for fighting had not yet been revealed, this pledge was called Bay'at al-Harb as the Madeenans had agreed to fight, and if necessary sacrifice their lives for the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam). Thus the Prophet's (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) efforts to find support, both ideological and physical, for his mission bore fruit three years after his initial unplanned meeting with the six men from Khazraj with this historical Bay'at al-Harb.

The second pledge of Aqabah was significant in a number of aspects. It prepared the ground for the migration of the Makkan Muslims to relative safety of Madeenah. There was hardly a Muslim family who were not involved in the Hijrah, either as migrants or as hosts to the migrants. Secondly, it was a forerunner to the treaty of Madeenah in that the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) was recognised by the Ansar as the leader of the Muslims with full religious and political authority. Islam would now have a secure territorial base in the city state of Madeenah through which Islam could be spread to other parts of the Arabian peninsula.

The orientalist theory that the real reason behind the pledges of Aqabah was that the Madeenans, weary of war, asked the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) to come to Madeenah to arbitrate between the Aus and Khazraj, is disproved when one analyses the facts. The Bay'at al-Harb clearly committed the Madeenans to fight and defend the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) and his companions, even if the all of the Arabs were to turn against them. The Aqabah pledges put the lives and wealth of the Madeenans at considerable risk; they were inviting more hardship on themselves, not less. Secondly, given that the devastating wars between Aus and Khazraj was to become a thing of the past with the proposed appointment of `Abdullaah ibn Ubayy as king of Madeenah, there was no need to invite an outside arbitrator.

The main reason behind the pledges of Aqabah was that the Madeenans had wholeheartedly accepted Islam and its creed of Tawheed as the truth; peace between Aus and Khazraj, and the pledge to support the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam) was a necessary corollary of this belief. This does not preclude other reasons behind the pledges. The Bu'aath war had left the Madeenans determined to put an end to the suicidal conflicts between themselves, and to free themselves of the yoke of the Jews who encouraged the conflict between the Aus and Khazraj. Islam provided an ideal opportunity for the Madeenans to unite under the impressive personality of the Prophet (sall-Allaahu `alayhi wa sallam), with the justice of Islam as their way of life.

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