

Negus - the King of Abyssinia

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The Quraysh (of Mecca) intensified their persecutions against Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his followers. Even influential men who now followed the Prophet were not spared.

They were boycotted and several of them were restrained in their own homes. Many of the Muslims with little or no influence were tortured publicly and repeatedly. Finding this continuing situation difficult to bear for his followers, the Prophet allowed some of them to emigrate to Abyssinia in 615 CE. Their total number was about eighty, not counting the small children. They did not all go at the same time. Their flight was secretly planned and carried out unobtrusively in small groups. The emigrants were well received in Abyssinia, and were allowed complete freedom of worship.

The leaders of Quraysh, however, were none the less determined that they should not be left in peace, to establish there, beyond their control, a dangerous community which might be increased tenfold if other converts joined them. So they speedily thought out a plan, and made ready a quantity of presents of a kind that the Abyssinians were known to value most.

Leatherwork they prized above all, so a large number of fine skins were collected, enough to make a rich bribe for every one of the Negus's generals. There were also rich gifts for the Negus himself. Then they carefully chose two men, one of whom was 'Amr ibn al-'As, of the clan of Sahm. Quraysh told them exactly what to do: they were to approach each of the generals separately, give him his present, and say:

"Some foolish young men and women of our people have taken refuge in this kingdom. They have left their own religion, not for yours, but for one they have invented, one that is unknown to us and to yourselves. The nobles of their people have sent us to your king on their account, that he may send them home. So when we speak to him about them, counsel him to deliver them into our hands and have no words with them."

The generals all agreed, and the two men of Quraysh took their presents to the Negus, asking that the emigrants should be given into their hands and explaining the reason as they had done to the generals, and finally adding: "The nobles of their people, who are their fathers, their uncles and their kinsmen, beg thee to restore them unto them." The generals were present at the audience, and now with one voice they urged the Negus to comply with their request and give up the refugees, inasmuch as kinsmen are the best judges of the affairs of their kinsmen. But the Negus was displeased and said:

"Nay, by God, they shall not be betrayed - a people that have sought my protection and made my country their abode and chosen me above all others! Give them up I will not, until I have summoned them and questioned them concerning what these men say of them. If it be as they have said, then will I deliver them unto them, that they may restore them to their own people. But if not, then will I be their good protector so long as they seek my protection."

Then he sent for the companions of the Prophet, and at the same time assembled his bishops, who brought with them their sacred books and spread them open round about the throne. 'Amr and his fellow envoy had hoped to prevent this meeting between the Negus and the refugees, and it was indeed in their interests to prevent it, even more so than they realized.

The Abyssinians were Christians, many of them devout; they had been baptized, they worshiped the One God, and they carried in their flesh the sacrament of Eucharist. As such they were sensitive to the difference between the sacred and the profane, and they were keenly conscious of the profanity of men like 'Amr. So much the more were they receptive - none more than the Negus himself - to the impression of holy earnestness and depth which was made on them by the company of believers who were now ushered into the throne room, and a murmur of wonderment arose from the bishops and others as they recognized that here were men and women more akin to themselves than to such of Quraysh as they had previously encountered. Moreover, most of them were young, and in many of them their piety demeanor was enhanced by a great natural beauty.

Not for all of them had the emigration been a necessity. 'Uthman's family had given up trying to make him (ra) recant, but the Prophet none the less allowed him to go and to take with him Ruqayyah (ra). Their presence was a source of strength to the community of exiles. Another couple very pleasing to look upon were Ja'far (ra) and his wife Asma' (ra).

They were well protected by Abu Talib; but the refugees needed a spokesman and Ja'far was an eloquent speaker. He was also most winning in his person, and the Prophet said to him on one occasion: "Thou art like me in looks and character." It was Ja'far he had chosen to preside over the community of exiles; and his qualities of attraction and intelligence were amply seconded by Musab of 'Abd ad-Dar (ra), a young man whom the Prophet was later to entrust with a mission of immense importance in virtue of his natural gifts.

When they were all assembled, the Negus spoke to them and said: "What is this religion wherein ye have become separate from your people, though ye have not entered my religion nor that of any other of the folk that surround us?"

Ja'far answered him saying:

"O King, we were people steeped in ignorance, worshiping idols, eating unsacrificed carrion, committing abominations, and the strong would devour the weak. Thus we were, until Allah (The One True God) sent us a Messenger from out of our midst, one whose lineage we knew, and his veracity and his worthiness of trust and his integrity.

He called us unto God, that we should testify to His Oneness and worship Him and renounce what we and our fathers had worshiped in the way of stones and idols; and he commanded us to speak truly, to fulfil our promises, to respect the ties of kinship and the rights of our neighbors, and to refrain from crimes and from bloodshed.

So we worship God alone, setting naught beside Him, counting as forbidden what He hath forbidden and as licit what He hath allowed. For these reasons have our people turned against us, and have persecuted us to make us forsake our religion and

revert from the worship of God to the worship of idols. That is why we have come to thy country, having chosen thee above all others; and we have been happy in thy protection, and it is our hope, O King, that here with thee we shall not suffer wrong."

The royal interpreters translated all that he had said. The Negus then asked if they had with them any Revelation that their Prophet had brought them from God and, when Ja'far answered that they had, he said: "Then recite it to me," whereupon Ja'far recited a passage from the Surah of Mary, which had been revealed shortly before their departure:

"And make mention of Mary in the Book, when she withdrew from her people unto a place towards the east, and secluded herself from them; and We sent unto her Our Spirit, and it appeared unto her in the likeness of a perfect man. She said: I take refuge from thee in the Infinitely Good, if any piety thou hast. He said: I am none other than a messenger from thy Lord that I may bestow on thee a son most pure. She said: How can there be for me a son, when no man hath touched me, nor am I unchaste? He said: Even so shall it be; thy Lord saith: It is easy for Me. That We may make him a sign for mankind and a mercy from Us; and it is a thing ordained."
[Maryam; 19: 16-21]

The Negus wept, and his bishops wept also, when they heard him recite, and when it was translated they wept again, and the Negus said: "This hath truly come from the same source as that which Jesus brought."

Then he turned to the two envoys of Quraysh and said: "Ye may go, for by God I will not deliver them unto you; they shall not be betrayed."

But when they had withdrawn from the royal presence, 'Amr said to his companion: "Tomorrow I will tell him a thing that shall tear up this green growing prosperity of theirs by the roots. I will tell him that they aver that Jesus the son of Mary is a slave."

So the next morning he went to the Negus and said: "O King, they utter an enormous lie about Jesus the son of Mary. Do but send to them, and ask them what they say of him."

So he sent them word to come to him again and to tell him what they said of Jesus, whereupon they were troubled, for nothing of this kind had ever yet befallen them. They consulted together as to what they should reply when the question was put to them, though they all knew that they had no choice but to say what God had said.

When they entered the royal presence, and it was said to them: "What say ye of Jesus, the son of Mary?" Ja'far answered:

"We say of him what our Prophet brought unto us, that he is the slave of God and His Messenger and His Spirit and His Word which He cast unto Mary the blessed virgin."

The Negus took up a piece of wood and said: "Jesus the son of Mary exceedeth not what thou hast said by the length of this stick." And when the generals round him snorted, he added: "For all your snorting." Then he turned to Ja'far and his companions and said: "Go your ways, for ye are safe in my land. Not for mountains

of gold would I harm a single man of you"; and with a movement of his hand towards the envoys of Quraysh, he said to his attendant: "Return unto these two men their gifts, for I have no use for them." So 'Amr and the other man went back ignominiously to Makkah.

Meantime the news of what the Negus had said about Jesus spread among the people, and they were troubled and came out against him asking for an explanation, and accusing him of having left their religion. He thereupon sent to Ja'far and his companions and made ready boats for them and told them to embark and be ready to set sail if necessary. Then he took a parchment and wrote on it:

"He testifieth that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is His slave and His Messenger and that Jesus the son of Mary is His slave and His Messenger and His Spirit and His Word which He cast unto Mary."

Then he put it beneath his gown and went out to his people who were assembled to meet him. And he said them: "Abyssinians, have I not the best claim to be your king?" They said that he had. "Then what think ye of my life amongst you?" "It hath been the best of lives," they answered. "Then what is it that troubleth you?" he said. "Thou hast left our religion," they said, "and hast maintained that Jesus is a slave." "Then what say ye of Jesus?" he asked. "We say that he is the son of God," they answered.

Then he put his hand on his breast, pointing to where the parchment was hidden and testified to his belief in "this", which they took to refer to their words. So they were satisfied and went away, for they were happy under his rule, and only wished to be reassured; and the Negus sent word to Ja'far and his companions that they could disembark and go back to their dwellings' where they went on living as before, in comfort and security.

In 628 CE, a few months before Hudaybiyah, news had come from Abyssinia of the death of 'Ubayd Allah ibn Jahsh. His wife Umm Habibah (ra) was Abu Sufyan's daughter. When four months had elapsed after the death of her husband, the Prophet sent a message to the Negus, asking him to stand proxy for himself and to ratify a marriage between him and the widow, if she were willing.

To her the Prophet sent no message directly; but she had a dream in which someone came to her and addressed her as "Mother of the Faithful", and she interpreted this as meaning that she would become the wife of the prophet. The next day she received the message from the Negus which confirmed her dream, whereupon she chose her kinsman Khalid ibn Sa'id to give her in marriage, and he and the Negus solemnized the pact between them in the presence of Ja'far and others of the brethren. Then the Negus held a wedding feast in his palace, and all the Muslims were invited.

The Prophet's letter to Negus inviting him to proclaim Islam was sent at this time. The Prophet had also sent word to Ja'far that it would please him if he and his community would now come to live in Madinah.