

Prophet Muhammad and the culture of the oppressed

By: Nazim Baksh

Nothing dominated the headlines in last December as much as Muntadhar al-Zeidi's defiant act of hurling his shoes at the President of the United States during a press conference in the Iraqi capital of Baghdad.

Al-Zeidi is an Iraqi who has reported on the carnage his country is currently experiencing. To him the Americans are to blame, and many share his anger. Some even wish it was their shoes. Another was willing to pay a million dollars to acquire them.

Muslims easily forget that Prophet Muhammad, upon him be peace and blessings, experienced oppression at the hands, not of some far off strange enemy, but from members of his own extended family. How he responded during times of extreme hardship provides a clear example to Muslims of how they should behave when facing oppression.

In the initial years of preaching his message of worship and obedience to the one true God, his young companions were ridiculed, beaten and even tortured by the powerful and wealthy leaders of Mecca. Unable to guarantee their safety and security, this caring Prophet granted them permission to migrate to a country of safety. He instructed them to go to the land of Abyssinia (Ethiopia-East Africa) saying:

"There is a King under whom no injustice is done to anyone, and it is a land of truth and righteousness."

That King was Negus and he was a devout Christian. The companions who left Mecca for the sanctuary of Abyssinia were not from the periphery of Meccan society; among them were members of its aristocratic class. Their spokesman was Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, the cousin of the Prophet, whose father protected the Prophet from the terror of his enemies in the early days of Prophesy.

It is reported that Ja'far stood out in eloquence, but more so because of his stunning resemblance to his



cousin in both appearance and manners.

When the leaders of Mecca discovered that Muhammad's followers had fled to Abyssinia they dispatched some of their leaders to convince Negus to deport them.

At the helm of Quraish's diplomatic convoy was the charismatic and highly intelligent 'Amr bin Al-'As. Bearing gifts for Negus, they convinced him to call what would amount today to a national press conference. Standing next to the King were the oppressors from Mecca. Gathering in the court were the vulnerable Muslims.

One imagines that in the relative safety of Abyssinia they could have hurled abuse at 'Amr and 'Abdullah bin Abi Rabi'ah, smug in their conviction that they had the upper hand. When Ja'far addressed the King and his senior advisors, he explained why life had become unbearable for them in Mecca and how the Prophet of God sent them to "a land of righteousness and truth in search of peace and tranquility."

So impressed with the words of Ja'far that the King asked him to recite some of what this Prophet

taught his followers. Adept at the social and religious circumstances of the people he was addressing, Ja'far chose to recite verses from the chapter of the Quran titled "Mary" (Maryam in Arabic), the mother of Jesus.

The verses related the story of a divine miracle when Mary conceived a child without being touched by a mortal "as a sign to her people and a Mercy from God." The verses said that when Mary presented the child to her people they charged her with having done a 'despicable' thing. In her defense, she pointed to baby Jesus, still in his cradle. The Quran says that Jesus defended the honor of his mother. From the cradle he spoke:

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(28) Then she pointed to him. They said: How can we talk to one who is in the cradle, a young boy? (29) He spake: Lo! I am the slave of Allah. He hath given me the Scripture and hath appointed me a Prophet, (30)"

(Maryam: 28)



Those present reported that Negus and his notables were so overcome with emotion that tears welled up in their eyes. Addressing the Muslims and their

detractors, Negus said: **"Indeed, this scripture and what Jesus brought is derived from the same source. Go in peace, for by God, I will never surrender you to them."**

The emigration made things a whole lot worst for the fledgling Muslim community in Mecca. The oppression would have been unbearable had it not been for the mutual support the oppressed offered each other. A dear friend of the Prophet, Abu Bakr, lost his wealth and standing, but refused to abandon the Prophet. Bilal Al-Habashi, was tortured by his master because he pledged fealty to Muhammad. With whatever little he had in his possession Abu Bakr negotiated with Bilal's torturers and secured his release.

During these difficult early years the leaders of Quraish imposed a boycott on Muhammad and his followers. No one was allowed to trade with them nor have any form of social interaction with the Muslims. For two years they were treated as outcasts in their own city, subjected to physical harm and verbal abuse.

During these years the Muslims went days without food and it is reported that

to make themselves feel sated they would strap a stone around their stomach. Once, some of his followers showed off their technique to the Prophet and he lifted his shirt to show them that he had tied two stones around his stomach.

As the oppression intensified with each passing month Prophet Muhammad supplicated to God to strengthen his ranks with influential men and women from the elite of Meccan society. He prayed particularly for the conversion of 'Umar bin Al-Khattab who would later become the second Caliph after his death. 'Umar eventually converted to the religion of Islam and strengthened the community of believers with his prowess. But his actions made Quraish even more determined to destroy the message of Prophet Muhammad. They ratchet-up their torment of the Muslims to the point where Meccan society came precariously close to an internecine war.

Any human being in the Prophet's shoes might have concluded that there was nothing to lose in a physical confrontation with his enemies. And yet it was precisely at this moment that the Quran instructed the Prophet to bear with patience and deal gently with the disbelievers:

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"And bear with patience what they utter, and part from them with a fair leaving-taking. (10) Leave Me to deal with the deniers, lords of ease and comfort (in this life); and do thou respire them awhile."

(Al-Muzzammil: 10)



Failing to convince his people to give up their hostility, Prophet Muhammad embarked on a journey to the town of Ta'if hopeful that his message would get a favorable reception. Instead, he was mocked, ridiculed and chased out of town with sticks and stones. **Bleeding from his wounds, he found**

solace under the shade of a vine tree and prayed to his Lord a prayer that is today a hallmark of the prayers of oppressed people wherever they may be.

"O God, unto Thee do I complain of my weakness, of my helplessness, and of my lowliness before men. O Most Merciful of merciful, Thou art Lord of the weak. And Thou art my Lord. Into whose hands wilt Thou entrust me? Unto some far off stranger who will ill-treat me? Or unto a foe whom Thou hast empowered against me? I care not, so Thou be not wroth with me. But Thy favoring help - that were for me the broader way and the wider scope! I take refuge in the Light of Thy Countenance whereby all darkneses are illuminated and the things of this world and the next are rightly ordered, lest Thou make descend Thine anger upon me, or lest Thy wrath best me. Yet it is Thine to reproach until Thou art well pleased. There is no power and no might except through Thee."

The Prophet of God began his lament by reflecting on his own weakness, his own helplessness. He was not the least bit interested in blaming others for his misfortune. He was firmly convinced that whatever was done to him could not have been possible without God's permission. He pleads with his Lord saying that he cares not whatever happens to him so long as he is not in the displeasure of his Lord. In other words, he would endure whatever was dished out at him so long as God is well pleased with his actions.

As Muslims applaud the actions of al-Zeidi, they might learn something from the examples of sublime grace that their Prophet and his companions embodied when confronted with the ignominious treatment meted out to them by their enemies.

*All excerpts from the holy Koran taken from: www.quranexplorer.com/quran

*All articles can be downloaded from: www.iltezam.org