

'[Khālid ibn al-Walīd] will not spare any one of those over whom he can prevail. He will torture them with fire, kill them by any means, and capture the women and children. The only thing he will accept from anyone is Islam [submission].'

– Excerpt from a letter of the first Caliph, Abū Bakr, to 'apostate' Arabs in Arabia.

THE APOSTASY WARS

Bloodbaths over 'a camel's hobble'

By Paul Stenhouse

This is the fifth in a series of seven articles



THE 'APOSTASY wars,' or the 'Ridda Wars' were to occupy the greater part of the two years' Caliphate of Abū Bakr. Almost all of the Arabian tribes that originally accepted Islam,¹ apart from the Quraish in Mecca and the Thaḳīf in Ta'īf, had used Muḥammad's death as an excuse to refuse to pay tribute [sadaqah] and the wealth tax [zakat], and were declared to be 'apostate' [murtadd]. The penalty for apostasy was death. They had looked on Muhammad more as a political figure – the prince of Medina – than as a religious leader – a prophet – and when Muhammad died they were unwilling to accept Abu Bakr as their new prince.

They had good reason for looking upon Muḥammad as more a prince than a prophet. 'Umar the second Caliph reported that Muḥammad would have someone killed for the following reasons: if somebody killed somebody unjustly; if a married

person committed adultery, and if someone fought against Allah and His prophet, deserted Islam and became an apostate.²

Anas bin Malik reported that after eight members of the tribe of 'Ukl gave Muḥammad their Islam [submission], they then complained about living in Medina, preferring to return to their nomadic life-style. Muḥammad let them go,

pursued and captured and brought back to Medina. He then ordered their hands and feet to be cut off, and their eyes branded with a hot iron. 'Then he abandoned them in the sun until they died'.³

Many of the so-called 'apostate' tribes were willing to say the ritual prayers – that is, they were willing to remain Muslims – if that would protect them and their families from the Muslim armies; but they would not pay the tribute. At least that was the opening gambit when delegates of the former Muslim tribes, Banū Asad, Ghatafān, Hawāzin and Tayyi' gathered in Medina to put their proposal to Muḥammad's successor, the Caliph Abū Bakr.

'God strengthened Abū Bakr's resolution in the truth,' according to Al-Tabarī's *History of Prophets and*

Kings, 'and he said "If they refuse me even a camel's hobble I will wage a jihad against them for it".'⁴ And as events were to prove, he meant it.

His letter to Khālid ibn al-Walīd ordered him, if God gave him victory,



The amphitheatre of Palmyra where ISIS murdered 25 Syrian soldiers in July and video-taped their killing. On August 18, Khaled al-Asaad, the 83 year old archaeologist-guardian of Palmyra was beheaded by ISIS, and on August 23, the Islamic fanatics destroyed the ancient temple of Baal Shamin in Palmyra.

suggesting that they accompany one of the shepherds who looked after the Medinese camels.

When the tribesmen stole the camels and killed the shepherd, Muḥammad had the eight of them

to execute every man of the Banu Hanifah – supporters of the rival prophet Musaylima in Yamama, Central Arabia – who did not have a beard [‘over whose face a razor had passed’].⁵ The shaving of the beard was taken as indicating that they had renounced Islam. This order to Khālid ibn al-Walīd set a merciless rule of thumb for fighting the ‘apostates’ who refused to pay the tax, even if they were willing to profess Islam to avoid being killed.

‘Islam’ in a religious sense meant then and still means personal *submission* to Allah; in a political sense it meant *submission* to the Islamic State (Caliphate) that enacted laws, waged war and collected taxes in the name of Allah.

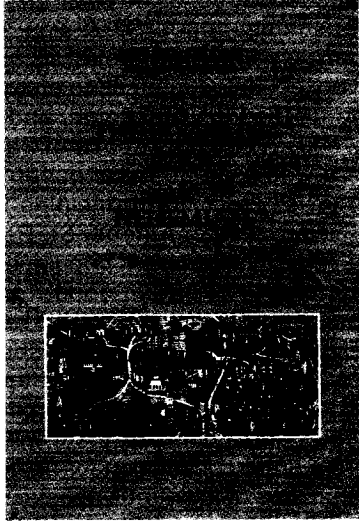
That Abū Bakr’s instructions were followed to the letter by all his army commanders can be judged from this overview by Reinhart Dozy of military activity against the ‘apostates’ in other parts of Arabia:

‘Whilst the fierce Khalid was thus quenching the insurrection in Central Arabia with rivers of blood, the other generals were doing like deeds in the southern provinces. In Bahrein the camp of the Bakrites was surprised during an orgy, and they were put to the sword. A few, however, who found time for escape, reached the sea-coast and sought safety in the island of Darin. But the Moslems were soon upon their track, and slew them all. The like carnage took place in Oman, in Mahra, in Yemen, and in Hadramaut. Here, the remnant of the forces of al-Aswad, after having in vain implored the Moslem general for quarter, were exterminated; there, the commander of a fortress could only obtain as the price of surrender the promise of an amnesty for ten persons – all the rest of the garrison being decapitated; in yet another district an entire caravan route was for a long time rendered pestiferous by exhalations from the innumerable decaying bodies of the rebels.’⁶

Inexplicably, this compelling the rebellious Muslim Arab tribes by force of arms to remain Muslim, and to pay the tribute and tax, or in the case of Christian, Jewish or pagan tribes, to submit to Allah’s will as

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allegedly revealed to Muhammad, or pay the *jizya* or *kharaj* as it was then known, or be killed, is often glossed over and described euphemistically by well-intentioned westerners. For instance,

‘His [Abu Bakr’s] first task was to bring back to the Islamic fold [our italics] a number of Bedouin tribes for whom Muhammad’s death triggered a return to their ancestral ways’.⁷

Before Muḥammad died, another insurrection against the Muslims broke

out in Yemen, in Persian controlled south Arabia, led by al-Aswad al-‘Ansi, mentioned above. He was nicknamed the ‘veiled prophet’ because he wore a veil to hide an allegedly deformed face.⁸ His real name seems to have been ‘Ayhalah.’⁹

In the course of attacks on supporters of al-Aswad in north western Arabia, Khālid ibn al-Walīd reached Buṭāḥ. He deployed units of his army all around, and ordered them to issue the invitation to Islam

Unprecedented rejection of Religion

Christianity has never yet had experience of a world simply irreligious. Perhaps China may be an exception. We do not know enough about it to speak, but consider what the Roman and Greek world was when Christianity appeared. It was full of superstition, not of infidelity. There was much unbelief in all as regards their mythology, and in every educated man, as to eternal punishment. But there was no casting off the idea of religion, and of unseen powers who governed the world. When they spoke of Fate, even here they considered that there was a great moral governance of the world carried on by fated laws. Their first principles were the same as ours. Even among the sceptics of Athens, St. Paul could appeal to the Unknown God. Even to the ignorant populace of Lystra he could speak of the living God who did them good from heaven. And so when the northern barbarians came down at a later age, they, amid all their superstitions, were believers in an unseen Providence and in the moral law. But we are now coming to a time when the world does not acknowledge our first principles. Of course I do not deny that, as in the revolted kingdom of Israel, there will be a remnant. The history of Elias is here a great consolation for us, for he was told from heaven that even in that time of idolatrous apostasy, there were seven thousand men who had not bowed their knees to Baal. Much more it may be expected now, when our Lord has come and the Gospel been preached to the whole world, that there will be a remnant who belong to the soul of the Church, though their eyes are not opened to acknowledge her who is their true Mother. But I speak first of the educated world, scientific, literary, political, professional, artistic—and next of the mass of town population, the two great classes on which the fortunes of England are turning: the thinking, speaking and acting England. My Brethren, you are coming into a world, if present appearances do not deceive, such as priests never came into before, that is, so far forth as you do go into it, so far as you go beyond your flocks, and so far as those flocks may be in great danger as under the influence of the prevailing epidemic.

— Blessed John Henry Cardinal Newman, Sermon 9, *The Infidelity of the Future*, delivered on the occasion of the opening of St. Bernard's Seminary, 2nd October 1873

[i.e. the invitation to submit] and to take the invitation to whoever had not responded. 'And if he resisted, to kill him.'¹⁰

Abū Bakr had written a letter to all the 'apostate' tribes against whom an army was to be sent. Among other things it said,

'God guided with the truth whoever responded to him, and the Apostle of God [Muḥammad], with His permission, struck whoever turned his back to him until he came to Islam [submission] willingly or unwillingly ... I have sent to you Khālid ibn al-Walīd at the head of an army of muhajirūn and *Ansar* ... I ordered him not to fight or to kill anyone until he has invited him to the cause of God ... I have ordered

him to fight those who reject [the invitation] ... he will not spare any one of those over whom he can prevail. He will torture them with fire, kill them by any means, and capture the women and children. The only thing he will accept from anyone is Islam [submission].'¹¹

In Nejd in central Arabia, Tuleyḥah claimed to be a prophet like Muḥammad, and as the death of Muḥammad became known, tribes flocked to Tuleyḥah's standard. His real name was Talḥah; Tuleyḥah was the name he was given by the Muslims. It seems to be a play on the Arabic word for 'evil' and 'depraved'.

Many thousands died under his 'leadership'.

In what was to prove the deciding battle, he was asked, pathetically, by the trusting tribesmen loyal to him: 'What do you want us to do?' and he said: 'Whoever of you can do as I have, and save his family, let him do so' and fled with his family to Syria leaving his followers to be massacred. He waited till Abū Bakr was dead, and then submitted to 'Umar who said to him: 'You imposter – what is left of your soothsaying?' He replied, 'there is a puff or two in the bellows'.¹²

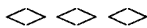
In Yamama, east of the Nejd plateau in central Arabia, a self-styled prophet and magician named Muslim bin Habib – nicknamed Musaylima by the Muslims – had 40,000 men under his command and was wooing the tribes.

At the end of 632 AD not long before Muhammad's death, Musaylima wrote a letter to Muhammad as if he were writing to an equal. When Muhammad asked the messengers if they agreed with what Musaylima wrote, they said 'yes'. Muhammad exclaimed 'By God, were it not that messengers are not to be killed, I would have beheaded you'.¹³

Musaylima's tribe, the Banū Hanīfa, had gathered under his standard. He was married to Sajāh, herself a soothsayer and prophetess of the Banū Tamim, and had defeated two Muslim armies before Khālid ibn al-Walīd – 'the unsheathed sword of Allah' [as-saifallah as-salil] – arrived with a third.

Many battles were fought, and thousands died on both sides. So many of the Muslims who were Qur'an reciters were killed that the preservation of the Qur'an – which had not yet been produced in book form – was in jeopardy.

In the final battle, thousands more died, and when the army of Musaylima fled into a nearby garden, with a thick wall and massive gates, it became for them all a 'Garden of Death'. Of the seven thousand who entered it with Musaylima, none survived the horrific massacre when some of the Muslims climbed the wall, found the key and threw it over to Khālid's army.



I shall leave to Reinhart Dozy, the justly esteemed historian of Spanish Islam, the last word in this overlong glimpse at the background to horrors that are still unfolding in Iraq, Syria, and throughout the Islamic world as I write:

'If the Arabs were not altogether convinced by these torrents of blood that the religion preached by Mohammed was true, they at any rate recognised in Islamism an irresistible ... power. Decimated by the sword, overwhelmed with terror and amazement, they resigned themselves to becoming Moslems – at least ostensibly: and the Khalif, that they might have no time to recover from their dismay, forthwith hurled them against the Roman Empire and Persia – two nations ripe for conquest, because for many years rent by internal discord, enervated by slavery, and cankered by all the vices of decadence. Boundless wealth and vast domains compensated the Arabs for their submission to the Law of the Prophet of Mecca. Apostasy was unknown, it was unthinkable, it meant death – upon this point the law of Mohammed is inexorable – but sincere piety and zeal for the faith were almost equally rare. By the most horrible and atrocious means the outward conversion of the Bedawin had been effected. ... it was indeed all that could fairly be looked for on the part of those unfortunate people who had witnessed the death of their fathers, brothers, and children beneath the sword of Khālid or the other pious executioners who were his rivals.'¹⁴

Next month: Islam, Conquest and Expansion

1. 'From every tribe either a small part or the whole apostatized'. See: *The History of al-Tabari*, State University of New York Press, 1991, vol. x, Trans. Fred M. Donner, p.41.
2. Al-Bukhari, *Sahih*, ed. cit. vol. ix, chapter xxxii, # 37, p.26.
3. *ibid.* p.27.
4. *Tarikh al-Tabari*, Dar Ibn Hazim, Beirut, Lebanon, vol. I, p.873.
5. Al-Tabari, ed.cit. vol. x, p.131.
6. Reinhart Dozy, *Spanish Islam*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1913, p.22.
7. John Renard, *Responses to 101 Questions on Islam*, Paulist Press New York, 1998, #9, p.14.
8. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Brill, Leiden, 1960 vol.1, p.728.
9. Al-Tabari, ed.cit. vol. x, p.28, note⁷².
10. *Tarikh al-Tabari*, ed.cit., vol. I, p.890.
11. *ibid.* p.876. See also Al-Tabari, ed.cit. vol. x, p.57
12. Al-Tabari, ed.cit. vol. x, p.74.
13. *ibid.* vol. ix, pp. 106-107.
14. Reinhart Dozy, ed.cit. pp. 22-23