

The Execution of the Jewish Tribe of Banú Qurayẓih: Historical, Religious, and Ethical Considerations¹

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The incident concerning the execution of the Jewish tribe of Banú Qurayẓih in the days of the Prophet Muḥammad (627 CE) has long been among those historical events which certain adversaries of Islam have sought to employ in order to portray the Faith of Islam and its followers as inherently harsh or bloodthirsty. Such presentations are often advanced before audiences unfamiliar with the complex historical, social, and political circumstances of seventh-century Arabia, and are at times expressed in a manner that obscures both the realities of the age in which the event occurred and the broader ethical and spiritual teachings of Islam itself.

Yet this painful and deeply sensitive episode deserves to be approached with fairness, historical care, and moral humility rather than with prejudice, hostility, or polemics. It should neither be used as a means to vilify Islam and the Muslims, nor invoked to foster resentment toward the Jewish people, whose long and distinguished spiritual history forms an inseparable part of the religious heritage of humanity. Indeed, thoughtful and conscientious study calls not for condemnation or provocation, but for a sincere effort to understand the conditions, fears, conflicts, and realities that shaped the decisions of that turbulent period.

To examine such events responsibly requires recognition that religious history unfolded within societies vastly different from our own, governed by conditions of tribal warfare, fragile alliances, and the continual struggle for communal survival. It likewise requires acknowledgment that the central teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad—like those of the great Founders of religion generally—were directed toward the establishment of justice, social order, mercy, and the gradual upliftment and unification of humankind.

For this reason, discussions of the episode of Banú Qurayẓih should be undertaken with dignity, balance, and reverence: dignity toward Islam and its sacred history, respect toward the Jewish people, and awareness that historical tragedies should never become instruments for inflaming hatred, prejudice, or religious enmity in the present age.

The horrifying execution of between four hundred to nine hundred men of that tribe—whatever the underlying causes may have been—undoubtedly appears, from the standpoint of

¹ This article is substantially based upon an unpublished Persian manuscript by the late Bahá'í scholar Dr. Kamran Ekbal, subsequently made available in electronic form through the Bahá'í Library Online. The original work was more extensive in scope and included additional sections that have not been incorporated into the present study. In preparing this article, the present author has drawn upon Dr. Ekbal's work, including the translation of selected portions thereof into English, while also introducing new sections, and undertaking editorial revisions, adaptations, and modifications to parts of the original text, with a view to clarity, coherence, and alignment with the aims and structure of the present article.

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our own age, as an act of severity, harshness, and sorrow. Bahá'u'lláh³ Himself recounts how, in His childhood, before the declaration of His Mission, He had read of this event in a book and from that time onward remained grieved and saddened by it. He states:

“This Wronged One, in His childhood, perused in a book attributed to the late and departed Mullá Báqir Majlisí⁴ the account of the campaign against the people of Qurayzih, and from that moment remained grieved and sorrowful in such wise that the Pen is powerless to describe it. Although whatsoever came to pass had been ordained of God, and the purpose thereof had been none other than the cutting off of the root of the oppressors, yet, as the ocean of forgiveness and bounty was seen to be boundless, We, in those days, besought God—glorified be His majesty—to bring forth that which would become the cause of love, fellowship, and unity amongst all who dwell upon the earth.”⁵

Let us now consider what ‘Abdu’l-Bahá,⁶ according to the narration of Mírzá Maḥmúd Zarqání,⁷ has stated concerning this matter, after which we shall briefly review certain historical aspects of the event:

“And when He had seated Himself at table, He recounted in detail narratives and matters from the early history of Islam, until His blessed discourse reached this point: notwithstanding that the Jews had entered into a covenant with the Prophet that they should not transgress in the least, so that they might remain secure and protected, yet they joined themselves with the tribes of Quraysh and arrayed themselves against Islam, until such time as they besieged the Prophet and His companions and compelled them to dig the trench. By chance, one of the Jews himself became the cause of dissension between the tribes of Quraysh and the Israelites⁸ and of their flight. Thereupon the opportunity arose to preserve and safeguard Islam from their deceit and mischief, and seven hundred of those covenant-breaking enemies were in one day utterly subdued and destroyed. Had this matter not occurred, they would once more have allied themselves with the tribes and struck at the very root of Islam, and the establishment and protection of the Cause of Islam would have become exceedingly difficult. Yet those who possess no true understanding of divine wisdoms and

³ Bahá'u'lláh (1817–1892), born Mírzá Husayn-‘Alí Núrí, was the Founder of the Bahá'í Faith. The title Bahá'u'lláh is an Arabic designation meaning “Glory of God,” by which He is known to His followers. In the Bahá'í writings, He is regarded as a Manifestation of God for this age, proclaiming the oneness of God, the unity of humankind, and the progressive unfolding of divine revelation. He spent much of His ministry in exile and imprisonment under the Ottoman authorities, during which He revealed a vast body of writings constituting the central scriptures of the Bahá'í Faith.

⁴ Mullá Báqir Majlisí (1627–1699) was a prominent Twelver Shī'ih scholar of the Ṣafavid period, best known for compiling *Bihār al-Anwār*, one of the largest encyclopedic collections of Shī'ih traditions and religious narratives.

⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, vol. 7, p. 130, provisional translation by Mohammad Norozi.

⁶ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (1844–1921), born ‘Abbás, was the eldest son of Bahá'u'lláh and the appointed interpreter and perfect exemplar of the Bahá'í Faith. The title ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is an Arabic designation meaning “Servant of Bahá.” In the Bahá'í writings, He is regarded as the Centre of Bahá'u'lláh's Covenant and the authorized interpreter of His teachings. He shared His Father's exile and imprisonment under the Ottoman authorities and, after Bahá'u'lláh's Ascension, devoted Himself to the expansion and consolidation of the Bahá'í community, as well as to the proclamation of principles such as the unity of humankind, universal peace, and the harmony of religion and science.

⁷ Mírzá Maḥmúd-i-Zarqání (1873–1927) was a Persian Bahá'í who served the Bahá'í Faith by travel teaching across Persia and India and serving as a secretary for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His travels of the west and later as a secretary for Shoghi Effendi.

⁸ This Qur'anic designation, “Baní Isrá'íl” (the Children of Israel), bears, of course, no relation either to the modern State of Israel or to its present-day citizens.

historical events raise the tongue of objection and, out of sheer prejudice and ignorance, censure this affair.”⁹

The explanation of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is naturally fuller and more comprehensive than the brief remarks of Bahá’u’lláh. His understanding of the details and circumstances of this event accords wholly with the findings of historical investigation. Let us now examine the statement of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concerning this matter.

1. “He recounted in detail narratives and matters from the early history of Islam”

This would seem to indicate that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá frequently discoursed, on diverse occasions, upon the events and circumstances of the early days of Islam.

2. “The Jews had entered into a covenant with the Prophet that they should not transgress in the least, so that they might remain secure and protected”

The hostility of Quraysh toward Muḥammad, together with the persecution and torments inflicted upon Him and His followers, constituted one of the principal causes of the Hijrah¹⁰ to Medina, which before that migration had been known as Yathrib. Yet another fundamental cause of the migration was the invitation extended to Him by representatives of the people of Yathrib, who entreated Him to come and govern the city and, as an impartial arbiter, bring to an end the interminable intertribal warfare and bloodshed between the two great tribes of Aws and Khazraj and their allies. They had heard of His new divine teachings; some among them had already embraced Islam and, having overcome their tribal divisions, had attained unto a higher unity.

The peoples of the Arabian Peninsula and the Ḥijáz consisted chiefly of Arab Bedouin tribes—wandering and scattered peoples who knew of no order superior to that of clan and tribe, nor were they readily willing to acknowledge any such authority. The highest form of unity in such a society consisted in alliances between one or several lesser tribes and a greater tribe. The sole law capable of restraining unbounded bloodshed in such societies was the ancient principle common to tribal peoples everywhere: “*an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth*” (Exodus 21:24). Yet because vengeance and retaliation were often difficult to pursue amidst those vast deserts and boundless oceans of sand, excessive bloodshed was thereby greatly limited.

Nevertheless, settled populations also existed in Arabia: city dwellers residing in major centres such as Mecca and Ṭá’if, many of whom had grown wealthy through commerce, as well as the semi-settled inhabitants of oases and villages not yet fully developed into cities, such as Yathrib, later known as Medina. The social and legal conditions prevailing in such transitional societies were generally disordered and unstable. In these environments, unlike among the desert tribes, the law of “an eye for an eye” gave rise to interminable bloodshed and civil strife. The murderer no longer vanished into the depths of the desert, and even if he did, members of his tribe remained continually within reach of those seeking revenge. Cycles

⁹ Mírzá Maḥmúd Zarqání, *Badāyi’u l-Áthár*, vol. 2, pp. 130–131, provisional translation by Mohammad Norozi.

¹⁰ The migration of the Prophet Muḥammad from Mecca to Yathrib (later known as Medina) in 622 CE, marking the beginning of the Islamic calendar and the establishment of the first Muslim community-state.

of retaliation thus produced an unbroken chain of violence demanding a more fundamental remedy.

New laws and a new social order were required if peace and stability were to be established. Unity could no longer remain confined within the tribe; it had to advance toward unity and solidarity among many tribes—toward the unity of the inhabitants of a city, a country, an entire nation and community. Step by step, strand by strand. Only in the light of such considerations can the sentence passed upon Banú Qurayẓih rightly be understood.

When the delegates of Yathrib pledged allegiance to Muḥammad and invited Him to Medina, He stipulated that all the inhabitants of the city must accept His leadership and obey His ordinances if their affairs were truly to be settled. Men who until then had acknowledged only the authority of the chief of their own tribe were now required to submit to One who belonged neither to their tribe nor even to that of their rivals and fellow townsmen, but who had come from another and distant city. For all of them this was an exceedingly difficult and undoubtedly burdensome matter.

The people of Medina in those days consisted, in addition to the polytheists who still adhered to their ancient beliefs, of the Anṣár—Muslims from Aws and Khazraj who had transcended their former tribal identities and entered into bonds of brotherhood with the Muhájirún, the emigrants who had come from Mecca with Muḥammad; the hypocrites, who outwardly professed Islam under the leadership of ‘Abdu’lláh ibn Ubayy while awaiting an opportunity to betray the community; and the Jews, who themselves formed numerous larger and smaller tribes allied either with Aws or Khazraj and who, like the others, engaged in warfare and bloodshed among themselves. Thus, one cannot meaningfully speak of a single, unified Jewish community in Medina.

Upon His arrival in Yathrib—or shortly thereafter—Muḥammad concluded a covenant with all the inhabitants of Medina, the very agreement to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá alludes. This covenant, known as the Constitution of Medina, has been described by respected European historians and scholars as the “constitution” or “charter” of Medina. For this reason, the Prophet is often characterized as both “Messenger and Statesman.”¹¹ It should be remembered that the term “constitution” is generally associated with the Constitution of the United States (1787) and especially with that of France (1791) following the French Revolution, and thereafter with the constitutions of modern states.

The Constitution of Medina contained fundamental principles of citizenship: freedom of religion and belief for all, even for the polytheists; equality before the law and equality in the bearing of obligations, whether in war or in peace; and the unity of the Medinan community while preserving and respecting the distinct identities of the Muslims and the various other groups and tribes of Medina—that is, unity in diversity, and this fully a thousand years before

¹¹ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, p. 93; *idem*, *Muhammad at Medina*, pp. 221–228; R. B. Serjeant, “The Constitution of Medina,” pp. 3–16; “Constitution of Medina,” Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Constitution_of_Medina.

such principles became widespread in Europe. Medina thus became the first nucleus of the Islamic state founded upon this covenant.

In this charter the Prophet addressed the Jews in particular terms. First, He emphasized to every group, clan, and tribe that they were equal both among themselves and with the Muslims. Second, invoking the principle, “*There is no compulsion in religion*” (Qur’án 2:256), He declared: “*The Jews of Banú ‘Awf are one community with the believers; to the Jews their religion, and to the Muslims theirs.*”¹² That is, the Jews of Banú ‘Awf constituted one community together with the Muslims, the Jews possessing their own religion into which none might interfere, and the Muslims likewise possessing their own religion free from interference. Third, He reminded the Jews, as He did the others, that they were obliged—especially in times of war—to aid the common cause. Fourth, they were forbidden to enter into relations with the enemy. Fifth, they were never to violate the covenant, for such conduct would deprive them of their rights.

It is evident that this covenant differed in no essential respect from the rights enjoyed by citizens in a modern state today. As ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains, its purpose was that the Jews might “remain secure and protected,” provided that they did not “transgress.”

During the first two years after the Hijrah, relations between the Muslims and the Jews were exceedingly cordial. The qiblah of the Muslims was still Jerusalem, and they practised many Jewish customs. Yet the Jews mocked the Messenger and ridiculed His claim to prophethood. The Prophet’s efforts to establish at least a minimum basis of unity—“*Say, O People of the Book! Let us come to common terms: that we will worship none but Allah, associate none with Him, nor take one another as lords instead of Allah*” (Qur’án 3:64)—proved fruitless. It was shortly before the Battle of Uḥud¹³ that these relations began to deteriorate. At that stage verse 144 of Súrih al-Baqarah¹⁴ was revealed, and the qiblah was changed to the Sacred Ka‘bah.

3. “Yet they joined themselves with the tribes of Quraysh and arrayed themselves against Islam”

Even after the migration of the Prophet, Quraysh did not desist from enmity and hostility. The battles of Badr (624 CE),¹⁵ Uḥud (625 CE), and the Trench (627 CE)¹⁶ soon followed one after another. At Uḥud, the hypocrites betrayed the Muslims and inflicted grievous losses upon the forces of Islam. Conditions within Medina itself were likewise difficult, while the Jewish tribes persisted in their provocations and opposition.

¹² Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah*, p. 149.

¹³ A battle between the Muslims of Medina and the Quraysh of Mecca, in which the Muslims suffered a setback after initial success.

¹⁴ Indeed, We see you turning your face towards heaven. Now We will make you turn towards a direction that will please you. So turn your face towards the Sacred Mosque (in Mecca)—wherever you are, turn your faces towards it. Those who were given the Scripture certainly know this to be the truth from their Lord. And Allah is never unaware of what they do.

¹⁵ The first major battle between the early Muslims and the Quraysh of Mecca, resulting in a decisive Muslim victory.

¹⁶ Also known as the Battle of the Confederates (al-Aḥzāb), a siege of Medina in which the Muslim community successfully defended the city by digging a defensive trench.

Only a few days after the Battle of Badr, an incident occurred which led to the banishment of the Jewish tribe of Banú Qaynuqá‘ from Medina. A Muslim slew one of the Jews of that tribe, whereupon Banú Qaynuqá‘, acting in accordance with tribal custom, put the Muslim to death and thereafter withdrew into their fortresses. Their retreat into those strongholds was regarded as a declaration of war and a violation of the covenant. Their fortresses were accordingly besieged, and after two weeks they surrendered. They were expelled from Medina, together with their women and children, on condition that they abandon their weapons and the implements of their goldsmith trade.

Ka‘b ibn Ashraf, a Jewish poet belonging to Banú al-Naḍír, who had fled Medina, sought refuge among Quraysh, and engaged in mocking and vilifying Islam, was later slain in Mecca by Muslims belonging to tribes formerly allied with Banú al-Naḍír. Such an act would have been inconceivable in pre-Islamic Arabia, and constitutes a further indication that the tribal alliances of the Age of Ignorance were gradually disintegrating and yielding to a new supratribal consciousness and order.

Some time later, when two groups journeying to Medina for the purpose of embracing Islam were ambushed and slain, the Prophet went to Banú al-Naḍír in order to demand the blood money stipulated by the covenant. There He perceived that they intended to cast down a large stone upon Him and thereby put Him to death. It was therefore decided that this tribe likewise should be banished. At first, they were permitted to retain possession of their date groves. Yet Banú al-Naḍír also fortified themselves, were besieged, and after two weeks were compelled to surrender. This time, however, they forfeited their rights to their groves and property, which were distributed among the emigrants. Banú al-Naḍír departed for Khaybar,¹⁷ allied themselves with Quraysh, conspired against the nascent Islamic state, fought against the Prophet during the campaign of Khaybar, and were once again defeated.¹⁸

4. “One of the Jews himself became the cause of dissension between the tribes of Quraysh and the Israelites and of their flight”

This appears to refer to the affair of Ka‘b ibn Ashraf and to the two groups who were slain while on their way to embrace Islam, events already mentioned above.

5. “Thereupon the opportunity arose to preserve and safeguard Islam from their deceit and mischief”

The intrigues and stratagems of the Jewish tribes of Medina against the Muslims were continual. Yet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá here refers in particular to the designs and machinations of Banú Qurayẓih during the siege of the Trench (627 CE), when they sought to guide the forces of Quraysh into the city. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the decision to put the men of the tribe to death became a matter of vital necessity for the preservation and protection of Islam.

¹⁷ A fortified oasis north of Medina inhabited principally by Jewish tribes, and the site of a major conflict between the Muslims and the Jewish strongholds in 628 CE.

¹⁸ Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyyah*, vol. 2, pp. 211–212; vol. 3, pp. 199–202.

6. “Until such time as they besieged the Prophet and His companions and compelled them to dig the trench”

On 31 March 627 CE, Quraysh, resolved once and for all to destroy Medina, and having succeeded in forming a vast coalition of tribes against Islam, advanced upon the city with an army numbering ten thousand warriors. Yet the Prophet had ordered a trench to be dug around Medina, thereby preventing the cavalry of Quraysh from crossing into the city. This measure is said to have been proposed by Persian companions such as Salmán the Persian, who, unlike the Arab tribesmen, were acquainted with the methods of trench warfare.

Despite the intrigues and machinations of Banú Qurayẓih, the assault of Quraysh was frustrated and gradually turned into a siege of Medina. After two weeks, the great alliance forged by Quraysh and the allied tribes began to disintegrate, thereby paving the way for the eventual conquest of Mecca in 630 CE.

7. “Seven hundred of those covenant-breaking enemies were in one day utterly subdued and destroyed”

After the defeat of Quraysh, the Prophet dispatched the Muslim forces against Banú Qurayẓih and compelled them to surrender. Yet the judgment was entrusted to Sa‘d ibn Mu‘ádh, who had been grievously wounded in battle. Banú Qurayẓih had formerly been allied with Aws during the civil wars of Yathrib, and Sa‘d himself had been their confederate and ally. Thus it was Sa‘d—their former associate and long-standing ally—who pronounced sentence that the men of the tribe should be put to death, and that their women and children should be taken captive and sold. This, likewise, constitutes a further indication that allegiance to Islam had come to be preferred over loyalty to tribal order and to the alliances of the Age of Ignorance.

Despite the protests of many among their former allies, the men of Banú Qurayẓih were beheaded, and the Prophet Muḥammad Himself supervised the execution of the sentence.¹⁹

8. “Had this matter not occurred, they would once more have allied themselves with the tribes and struck at the very root of Islam, and the establishment and protection of the Cause of Islam would have become exceedingly difficult”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that, had the men of Banú Qurayẓih not been condemned to death, they would once again have joined forces with the enemies of Islam and inflicted irreparable injury upon the Faith. His account accords fully not only with the historical sources of Islam, but likewise with the conclusions reached by respected modern Western scholars and specialists in Islamic studies.

The sole cause of the sentence lay in the violation of a covenant and in collaboration with the enemy in time of war. The breach of solemn agreements and cooperation with hostile forces—particularly during periods of conflict—have, in every land and age, been regarded as among the gravest of offences, and have accordingly been punished with the utmost

¹⁹ For a fuller account of the incident, see Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-Nabawīyah*, vol. 3, pp. 244–266.

severity. In both England and Germany during the Second World War, the penalty for such acts was death.

Nor should it be forgotten that the Prophet continually warned those concerned before taking action. He repeatedly called upon them to refrain from covenant-breaking, and only when no other recourse remained did He proceed to act. It should likewise be remembered that, in matters of punishment, He observed a graduated order of admonition in His dealings with the Jewish tribes. First, Banú Qaynuqá‘ were banished; they were neither executed, nor were their women and children reduced to captivity. Second, Banú al-Nađír were likewise spared execution, and were even at first permitted to retain possession of their date groves. Yet they persisted in opposition, fortified themselves, and continued their hostility, whereupon their punishment became more severe than that of Qaynuqá‘, and they lost their property as well. Nevertheless, Banú Qurayzih failed to take warning from these events. During a time of siege and war, they sought to admit the enemy forces into the city by night. Thus it was only at this third stage, and after two prior warnings, that sentence of execution was passed upon Banú Qurayzih. Such a decision was neither taken lightly nor did it proceed from any alleged bloodthirsty disposition of Islam toward non-Muslims, as has so often been asserted by its detractors.

It should further be borne in mind that these events, however severe they may appear to the modern mind, constituted one stage in the gradual transition from the narrow and exclusive solidarity of the tribe among the Arab clans allied with the Jews toward a far broader consciousness of unity and allegiance within a nation and within a religious community.

9. “Yet those who possess no true understanding of divine wisdoms and historical events raise the tongue of objection and, out of sheer prejudice and ignorance, censure this affair”

Such, then, is the concluding word of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá addressed unto the adversaries of Islam, the antagonists of the Jewish people, and the enemies of humankind—the ignorant and heedless souls of yesterday, of today, and of every age.

It would seem fitting to bring this article to a close with the words of Bahá’u’lláh concerning a dream in which He beheld the Prophet Muḥammad. This remarkable vision not only affirms the abrogation of Islamic jihád, or “holy war,” and proclaims Bahá’u’lláh’s mission of peace, reconciliation, and universal fellowship, but likewise serves to remind us that God, in His infinite wisdom, sends forth His Manifestations with laws, ordinances, and teachings suited to the exigencies, conditions, and capacities of the age in which they appear, and destined to endure for such time as He Himself hath ordained.

“One day I saw in a dream that I associated with His Holiness, the Apostle (Muḥammad), may the souls of all else but Him be sacrificed for His sake. Words were revealed and utterances were made manifest from that Dawning-Place of God’s Book. Thereupon He said: Previously I had said: ‘Paradise is beneath the shades of swords. However, if I were manifest in these days, I would say: Paradise is beneath the shade of the tree of friendliness and compassion.’ Upon hearing this blessed and exalted Word, I declared: May the souls of all

men be a sacrifice unto Thy loving-kindness, tender mercy and bounty! Subsequently, the Ocean of utterance spoke that which the Pen was unable to reveal and the ink not capable to make manifest. When I woke up from my sleep, I have found Myself filled with gladness for a time, in such wise that it was beyond description."²⁰

²⁰ Lawḥ-i Ṭabīb, *Má'idih-yi Ásmání*, ed. 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd Ishráq-Khávarí, vol. 8, Tehran, 129 BE/1972–73, p. 78, provisional translation by Necati Alkan.