

Hijrah is primarily this essential teaching at the heart of the Prophet's experience: a trust in God that entails, without arrogance, absolute independence from people, as well as the humble recognition of absolute dependence upon God.

Abu Bakr had enlisted the services of a non-Muslim Bedouin, Abdullah ibn Urayqat, to guide them to Yathrib by an inconspicuous, unfamiliar route. At the time appointed for departure, ibn Urayqat came to meet them at the cave with the camels, and they headed west, then south, before eventually going north toward Yathrib. It was a very perilous journey, and were the Quraysh to catch up with the three travelers, they were sure to kill them so as to put an end to Muhammad's subversive activities. The Prophet and his Companion had entrusted themselves to God, yet they had not hesitated to enlist the help of a Bedouin who, although he shared their enemies' polytheistic beliefs, was well known to them for his trustworthiness (he was proudly true to his word) and his abilities as a guide (he knew better than anyone else the steep, out-of-the-way paths they took). Again, such an attitude is present throughout the Prophet's life: the women and men he surrounded himself with might not share his faith, but they were known to him for their moral qualities and/or their human abilities. Muhammad, like those who came after him, would not hesitate to rely on them.

Mosques

The journey to Quba lasted twenty days. The Messenger and Abu Bakr eventually reached the little village of Quba, which lay outside Yathrib. The people were waiting for them and gave them a warm welcome. They spent three days in the village and began construction of a mosque there, the first of the emigration period.⁴ The Prophet was to proceed in this way at each of the three stages of the journey to Yathrib. When he left Quba, the Prophet headed toward Yathrib and halted at noon, prayer time, in the Ranuna valley, where he performed the first Friday prayer with his Companions: there again, construction of a mosque was begun. He then headed for the center of the city. Many people stopped him, inviting him to reside with them. He asked them to let Qaswa, his camel, go unhampered, for she would indicate the exact spot where he would settle.

She moved back and forth through the crowd, then at last stopped near some land belonging to two orphans. As mentioned previously, the Prophet paid the price due to them. On this spot, building of his dwelling place and a mosque immediately began.

In building these three mosques, the Prophet was pointing to the importance and centrality of the mosque in the relation to God, to space, and to human communities. The building of a *masjid* (the place where one prostrates oneself) institutes a specific sacralized space within the primary and essential sacrality of the universe as a whole; as the Prophet said, "The whole earth is a *masjid*, a mosque."⁵ Once built, the mosque becomes the axial space of the Muslim spiritual community in which it is situated, but it also expresses the reality of settlement, of acceptance of the hosting space, which is then turned into a space for oneself, a home. Indeed, the presence of the mosque reveals that a place has been adopted as home, and that the believing conscience is "at home" because the place of worship, a reminder of meaning, has been set up. The Prophet's repeated act is in itself a teaching: whatever the exile or journey, whatever the movement or departure, one must never lose sight of meaning and direction. Mosques tell of meaning, direction, and settlement. Yathrib had become Medina.

Exile: Meaning and Teachings

The Prophet and all his Companions had had to leave Mecca because of persecutions and adversity from their own brothers and sisters within their respective clans. The situation had become unbearable: women and men had died, others had been tortured, and the Quraysh had finally decided to set upon Muhammad himself and get rid of him. The emigration is first of all the objective reality of believing women and men who were not free to practice their faith and who decided to make a clean break for the sake of their beliefs. Because "God's earth is spacious," as the Quran puts it, they decided to leave their homeland, to break with their universe and habits, and to experience exile, all for the sake of their faith.⁶ Revelation was to praise the courage and determination of those believers who, by taking such a difficult and humanly costly step, expressed their trust in God:

To those who leave their homes in the cause of God, after suffering oppression, we will assuredly give a goodly home in this world; but truly the reward of the Hereafter will be greater, if they only realized [this]! Those who persevere in patience, and put their trust in their Lord.⁷

Exile is, then, another trial of trust. All prophets have intensively experienced this trial of the heart, as all believers have after them. How far are they prepared to go, how much are they prepared to give of themselves and of their lives, for the One, His truth and His love? Those are the eternal questions of faith, which accompany every temporal and historical experience of the believing conscience. *Hijrah* was one of the Muslim community's answers at the dawn of its existence.

In effect, exile was also to require that the first Muslims learn to remain faithful to the meaning of Islam's teachings in spite of the change of place, culture, and memory. Medina meant new customs, new types of social relationships, a wholly different role for women (who were socially far more present than in Mecca), and more complex intertribal relations, as well as the influential presence of the Jewish and Christian communities, which was something new to Muslims. Very early on, the community of faith, following the Prophet's example, had to distinguish between what belonged to Islamic principles and what was more particularly related to Meccan culture. They were to remain faithful to the first while learning to adopt a flexible and critical approach to their original culture. They even had to try to reform some of their attitudes, which were more cultural than Islamic. Umar ibn al-Khattab was to learn this to his cost when, after he had reacted most sharply to his wife answering him back (which was unthinkable in Mecca), she retorted that he must bear with it and accept it just as the Prophet did. This was a difficult experience for him, as it was for others, who might have been tempted to think that their habits and customs were in themselves Islamic: *hijrah*, exile, was to reveal that this was not the case and that one must question every single cultural practice, both to be faithful to Islamic principles and to open up to other cultures and gain from their wealth. For instance, having learned that a wedding was to take place among the Medina Muslims (the Ansar), the Prophet had two singing maids sent to them, for, he said, the Ansar enjoyed singing.⁸ Not only did he thereby recognize a cultural feature or taste that was not in itself opposed to Islamic principles, but he integrated it as an enrichment

of his own human experience. *Hijrah* was also, then, a trial of intelligence, spurring the need to distinguish between principles and their cultural manifestations; moreover, it implied opening up and confidently welcoming new customs, new ways of being and thinking, new tastes. Thus, the universality of principles merged with the necessity of recognizing the diversity of ways of life and cultures. Exile was the most immediate and profound experience of this, since it implied uprooting oneself while remaining faithful to the same God, to the same meaning, in different environments.

Hijrah is also the experience of liberation, both historical and spiritual. Moses had liberated his people from Pharaoh's oppression and led them toward faith and freedom. The essence of *hijrah* is of exactly the same nature: persecuted because of their beliefs, the faithful decided to break away from their tormentors and march to freedom. In so doing, they stressed that they could not accept oppression, that they could not accept the status of victim, and that basically the matter was simple: publicly speaking the name of God implied either being free or breaking free. This same message had already been conveyed by the Prophet, then by Abu Bakr, to all the slaves in Mecca: their arrival in Islam meant their liberation, and all the teachings of Islam pointed to the ending of slavery. Henceforth, a broader call was addressed to the Muslim spiritual community as a whole: faith requires freedom and justice and one must be prepared, as was the case with *hijrah*, to pay the personal and collective price for it.

The spiritual dimension of those teachings is near at hand; indeed, it underlies them and endows them with meaning. From the very first Revelations, Muhammad had been invited to exile himself from his persecutors and from evil: "And have patience with what they say, and keep your distance from them in a good exile."⁹ Then: "And all abomination [sin, evil] shun."¹⁰

Abraham, whose nephew Lot was one of the few people to believe and recognize him, adopted the same attitude when he addressed his people in the following terms:

And [Abraham] said: "For you, you have taken [for worship] idols besides God, out of mutual love and regard between yourselves in this life; but on the Day of Judgment you shall disown each other and curse each other. And your abode will be the Fire, and you shall have none to help." But Lot

believed him. [Abraham] said: "I will leave home for the sake of my Lord [*inni muhajirun ila Rabbi*], for He is almighty and wise."¹¹

Hijrah is the exile of the conscience and of the heart from false gods, from alienation of all sorts, from evil and sins. Turning away from the idols of one's time (power, money, the cult of appearances, etc.); emigrating from lies and unethical ways of life; liberating oneself, through the experience of breaking away, from all the appearances of freedom paradoxically reinforced by our habits—such is the spiritual requirement of *hijrah*. Later on, questioned by a Companion about the best possible *hijrah*, the Prophet was to answer: "It is to exile yourself [to move away] from evil [abominations, lies, sins]."¹² This requirement of spiritual exile was to be repeated in different forms.

Thus, the Muslims who performed *hijrah*, emigrating from Mecca to Medina, in effect experienced the cyclical dimension of Islam's teachings, since they had to achieve a new return to themselves, an emigration of the heart. Their physical journey to Medina was a spiritual exile toward their inner selves; in leaving their city and their roots, they came back to themselves, to their intimacy with God, to the meaning of their lives beyond historical contingencies.

Physical *hijrah*, the founding act of the first Muslim community's and the axis of its experience, is now over and will not happen again, as Aishah forcefully explained to those in Medina who wanted to relive the experience. Umar ibn al-Khattab was later to decide that this unique event would mark the beginning of the Islamic era, which begins in 622. What remains, and is open to everyone through the ages and for eternity, is the experience of spiritual exile, which brings the individual back to him- or herself and frees him or her from the illusions of self and of the world. Exile for the sake of God is in essence a series of questions that God asks each individual being: *Who are you? What is the meaning of your life? Where are you going?* Accepting the risk of such an exile, trusting the One, is to answer: *Through You, I return to myself and I am free.*

Settlement and Covenants

The Prophet's first words on arriving at Quba informed the Muslims of their basic responsibilities: "Spread peace [*salam*], feed the hungry, honor

kinship ties, pray while people sleep, you shall enter paradise in peace [*bisalam*].”¹³ The two references to peace, at the beginning and at the end of his address, point to how the Prophet wished his Companions to understand their settlement in their new city. Caring for the poor and honoring kinship ties appear as reminders of the ethical basis of the Muslim presence, which each believer must pledge to permanently respect. Night prayer—“while people sleep”—makes for the spiritual exile mentioned above, and thereby provides the heart with the strength and serenity in faith that make it possible to fulfill the requirements of respecting ethics and of spreading peace. This quest for inner peace (alone, but in the warm light of one’s family’s love) is the path the believer must follow to be able to spread peace in the world and serve the poorest people.

Those teachings were present throughout the Prophet’s life, including at each stage of his settlement in Medina. On arriving in Medina, he already possessed a symbolic and political power that none of the city’s dignitaries could ignore. Many of Yathrib’s inhabitants had converted to Islam and recognized him as God’s Messenger; those converts came from both the Aws and Khazraj clans, which had been at war for ages. The message of Islam had been powerful enough, as had been the case in Mecca, to transcend former divisions and unite women and men from different clans, different social classes, and different origins. This new presence could not but be seen as a threat by all those who had enjoyed some power before the Prophet arrived. Similarly, the Jewish and Christian tribes, long settled in the area, could only take a wait-and-see attitude, as they were divided between recognizing the similarity of Islam’s monotheistic message and wondering about the intentions of the new Prophet, whom they naturally did not recognize as such (Jewish leaders had spoken out on this even before he arrived). Muhammad was of course aware of the complexity of the situation and of the religious, social, and political stakes his settlement in Medina involved.

He immediately drew up a mutual assistance agreement between the Muslims and the Jews who lived in the oasis.¹⁴ The terms of the covenant were primarily based on the recognition of diverse affiliations and did not demand any conversion. The principles of justice, equality, and equal dignity for all the signatories (whether Jewish or Muslim, Medina natives or immigrants from Mecca, Aws, or Khazraj) were mentioned in it. Referring to the Jews, the text stipulates: “They have the same rights and the same

duties" (*lahum ma lana wa alayhim ma alayna*), which in effect implied that they fully and equally belonged to the local community (*ummah*).¹⁵ It stated that the rights of each person would be defended by all, and should a conflict with the polytheists break out, they were all to stand together and not enter into separate alliances or peace agreements.¹⁶ The text stipulated that in case of dispute, the Prophet would be answerable for the strict and equitable implementation of this agreement. The Prophet's recognition of the value of such contract-based relationships, which he came to in the light of Revelation, was a constant throughout his life and teachings. A contract determines a framework; it asserts the autonomy and recognition of the parties involved (provided its essence is respected) and makes it possible, a posteriori, to set up means of regulation and evaluation. The contract (*al-ahd*) was to become central in Islam, from marriage contracts to social or commercial contracts and those drawn up to settle conflict or war situations.¹⁷ Revelation clarified the importance of contracts and the need to stand by their conditions: "For every engagement will be inquired into."¹⁸ The Prophet said in this respect: "Muslims must stand by the terms of their contracts."¹⁹

With the Jews

Revelation, the terms of the covenant, and the Prophet's attitude toward the Jews from the moment he arrived in Medina were the factors that determined the general framework of the relationship between the faithful of the two religions. There was first of all the acknowledgment of a link: the same God had sent both Moses and Muhammad. The Jews are, with the Christians, "the people of the Book" (*ahl al-kitab*), those who received a revealed message from God. The Quran clearly states this recognition: "God! There is no god but Him, the Living, the Supporter of all. It is He who sent down to you step by step, in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel before this, as a guide to humankind."²⁰

When he settled in Medina, the Prophet did not require anybody to convert, and he made it clear that he wanted relations within the new society to be egalitarian. Later, when conflicts arose and alliances were betrayed, the situation decayed and relations with one or another of the

Jewish tribes deteriorated greatly. Nevertheless, those developments by no means affected the principles underlying the relationship between Muslims and Jews: mutual recognition and respect, as well as justice before the law or in the settlement of disputes between individuals and/or groups.

For instance, a few years later, at a time when the Muslims were in latent conflict with a Jewish tribe whom they suspected of double dealing and treason, a Muslim thought he might escape responsibility for a theft he had perpetrated by laying the blame on a Jew. An eight-verse Revelation denounced the serious treachery committed by the Muslim culprit and revealed the Jew's innocence.²¹ The Muslim's culpability is explicit: "But if anyone earns a fault or a sin and throws it onto one who is innocent, he burdens himself with a false charge and a flagrant sin."²²

Whatever conflict may occur with other groups, the inalienable principles of respect and justice remained and transcended historical realities, requiring that the Muslim conscience not yield to blinding passions and hatred. The Quran states that any hatred that may incidentally arise from a war cannot obviate the principles to which believers must remain faithful:

O you who believe! Stand out firmly for God, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you depart from justice. Be just: that is next to piety; and fear God [be intimately conscious of God]. For God is well acquainted with all that you do.²³

Muhammad kept distinguishing between situations and the people involved in them, and he showed the utmost respect toward individuals and their beliefs. For many years, a young Jew was his companion and followed him everywhere, for he loved the Prophet's company. The Prophet never asked him to abandon his faith. Eventually the boy fell seriously ill, and on his deathbed he asked his father to allow him to embrace Islam, but during all his time by the Prophet's side he had remained what he was and enjoyed the Prophet's love and regard.

Later on, as the Prophet was with a group of Muslims, a funeral procession passed by, and the Prophet stood up to show his respect for the deceased. Surprised, the Muslims informed him that this was a Jew's funeral. The Prophet answered with clarity and dignity: "Was this not a human soul?" The teaching was to remain the same in spite of difficulties, treason, and wars: no one was compelled to convert, differences were respected, and all were to be treated equally. This is Revelation's key mes-

sage and the heart of its Prophet's action; all the later verses of the Quran that refer to conflicts, killing, and fighting must be read in the context of their Revelation (Muslims being in a situation of war and needing to defend themselves) and by no means alter the essential contents of the message as a whole.

Hypocrites

In spite of this covenant, in spite of Muhammad's efforts to reassure the different tribes and the different religious leaders, the situation was far from simple. It involved dealing with some people's jealousy, greed, and struggle for power, and with others' frustration. The Prophet was confronted with attitudes he had had little opportunity to know in Mecca, where conversion required such sacrifices in human terms that it could spring only from sincere and deeply believing hearts. Henceforth, things were to be different. The social configuration in Medina, the different power centers there, and the very nature of the Prophet's role—exerting such obvious influence over hearts and social affairs alike—entirely transformed the situation: some individuals saw an opportunity to gain power (a quasi-political interest) in publicizing their conversion to Islam. The Quran refers, in the first surah revealed in Medina, to this troubling apparition of the *munafiqun*, the “hypocrites,” who are a major danger since they attack the Muslim community from within.²⁴ As Ibn Kathir points out in his commentary on the Quran, four verses at the beginning of the surah “Al-Baqarah” (The Cow) speak of sincere believers, and only two mention unbelievers, but thirteen long verses describe the hypocrites' attitudes and speech, laden with duplicity and treachery:²⁵

Of the people, there are some who say: “We believe in God and the Last Day”: but they do not believe. They attempt to deceive God and those who believe, but they only deceive themselves, and realize it not!²⁶

Then further on:

When they meet those who believe, they say: “We believe,” but when they are alone with their evil ones, they say: “We are really with you, we were only jesting [when pretending to believe].”²⁷

The danger was real, and it was to become permanent. Some of those people stirred up ancient quarrels between the Aws and the Khazraj, and one of those attempts would almost have succeeded if one member had not, just in time, reminded them of the superior nature of their brotherhood in Islam. One member of the Khazraj clan, Abdullah ibn Ubayy, had converted to Islam but appeared to many believers as a troublemaker, the typical figure of the hypocrite as described in Revelation. Abu Amir, of the Aws clan, was perceived in the same way, so much did he spread the venom of strife. No particular measure had been taken against them, but people were wary of them and took care not to fall into the snares that could cause division in Muslim ranks.

The Pact of Brotherhood

In order to tighten the bonds between Muslims, and in particular between those Muslims who were from Medina (the Ansar) and those who had emigrated from Mecca (the Muhajirun), the Prophet decided to set up a formal pact of brotherhood (*al-muakhbah*) between the Muslims. This meant that each Muhajir was bound by a pact to an Ansar, who was to help him settle down, share his belongings with him, and enable him to live in Medina in the best possible circumstances. On a broader level, their relationships were based on brotherhood, sharing, and mutual spiritual assistance (the Muslim exiles from Mecca would teach their sisters and brothers in Medina what they knew). This pact was to provide the new Muslim community settled in Medina with particular strength and unity. Extremely deep relationships were created between believers who were later to attest to the intensity of their mutual love in God. In a *hadith qudsi*, the Prophet had presented this love as the pinnacle of brotherhood in faith, and his Companions strove to achieve it in their daily actions and commitments: "On the Day of Resurrection, God will say: 'Where are those who loved one another for the sake of My grace [My glory]? Today, I shall shade them with My shade, on a day when there is no shade but Mine.'"²⁸

The way the Muslims dealt with the many painful, difficult, and dangerous situations they encountered show that they had achieved a degree of brotherhood and trust that no adversity could ever manage to destroy.

Those bonds constituted the Muslim community's spiritual and social strength, and in this lay the secret of their success before God and among men: faith in God, love for parents, fraternity among people, and ethics at the service of the universe and of all beings.

The Call to Prayer

As months went by, ritual practices had been gradually instituted: fasting in the month of Ramadan and a more precise imposition of *zakat* (the purifying social tax), were added to the profession of faith and to prayer. The Muslims met in the mosque at precise times and prayed together.

The Prophet was looking for a means to call the faithful to prayer. He had been considering the possibilities of imitating Jewish or Christian practices, with bells or with a horn. One day, however, Abdullah ibn Zayd, an Ansar who had taken part in the second covenant of al-Aqabah, came to him and told him of a dream in which a man taught him the manner in which he was to call others to prayer. The Prophet listened to him and immediately recognized that the vision was genuine. He sent for the former slave Bilal, whose voice was extraordinarily beautiful, and had him stand on top of the highest house near the mosque and call the people to prayer.

This same, never-changing call, based on the affirmation of God's greatness ("*Allahu Akbar*"), the profession of faith ("I bear witness that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is God's Messenger"), and an invitation to prayer and success in this world and the next, has for almost fifteen centuries been resonating through Muslim towns and cities. In all its different intonations, rhythms, and voices, this call in its musicality expresses the union of faith and beauty, of spirituality and aesthetics—just as the Prophet had wished it when he chose Bilal as a muezzin. It is a reminder of the One God who loves beauty, and who, five times a day, welcomes those who answer the beautiful call that invites them to meet the Most Beautiful (*al-Jamil*).²⁹



CHAPTER NINE

Medina, Life, and War

The Prophet and his Companions who had come from Mecca were gradually settling down in Medina, and they were beginning to find their marks in this new environment. For the first seven months, Muhammad stayed at Abu Ayyub's; he was his guest until the mosque and the two adjoining dwellings were built. The Prophet eventually moved into his own quarters and was joined by his wife Sawdah and then, a few months later, by Aishah, whose wedding was celebrated in Medina. Muhammad's daughters also arrived during the following weeks.

A society was being constituted under particularly difficult circumstances. Intertribal and power conflicts often complicated the relationships between Muslims and members of different clans, in spite of the covenants and alliances. Sometimes among the faithful themselves old reflexes acquired in pagan times would resurface and cause tensions between individuals. The Companions' religious and spiritual education nevertheless went on, and the Prophet was always available to remind them of the principles to which believers must henceforth remain faithful.

In Mecca, resentment was high, and the success of the emigration was perceived not only as a humiliation but also as a threat to the balance of power in the Arabian Peninsula as a whole. For decades, the Quraysh had been naturally acknowledged as the unchallenged leaders on account not only of their past but also of the fact that they were in charge of the city of Mecca, the idols' sanctuary and the site where all the tribes converged once a year to trade. The news of Muhammad's secession and settlement in Medina had spread all over the area, and this significantly affected the Quraysh's reputation and actual power. Muhammad and his Companions

knew it and were expecting some imminent reaction from the clan and family members they knew so well.

Dispute with the Quraysh

Not all the Muslims had emigrated; those who had stayed behind were treated all the worse by the Quraysh leaders, as the latter were obviously most upset by Muhammad's success. Indeed, some had stayed in Mecca without publicizing their conversion to Islam, and they now feared the fierce reprisals that would inevitably ensue if that fact became known.

Some of the Quraysh went further and even decided, in violation of the honor code respected by all the clans in the peninsula, to seize the property and belongings the emigrants had left behind in Mecca. When they heard of this behavior, which was considered shameful and cowardly, the Prophet and the Muslims who had settled in Medina were angry. It was decided, six months after their exile, that they would attack the Meccan caravans passing near Medina in order to take back the equivalent of their belongings expropriated in Mecca.

In the months that followed, the Prophet organized no fewer than seven expeditions (in which he did not always take part).¹ These included only Muhajirun, since only they were the victims of Quraysh usurpation. The Ansar were left out, as they were not involved in the conflict. In those expeditions, no fighting or killing occurred: the merchants gave up their goods, then were free to move on. The Muhajirun occasionally arrived too late at the spot where the Meccans were supposed to have stopped; the caravans had already left, and the operation failed. Generally, however, they were successful, and the exiles managed to obtain significant compensation in the form of booty.

Over the same period, the Prophet also sent out missions whose main purpose was to gather intelligence about the Quraysh's movements and activities, their intentions (or possible war preparations), and the new alliances they might set up in the area. Watchfulness was essential, as the Quraysh's hostility was intensifying and becoming increasingly open and widespread. However, one of those missions took a bad turn: Abdullah ibn Jahsh and a small group had been ordered to get very near to the Quraysh clans in the Nakhlah valley (between Mecca and Taif) and gath-

er intelligence about their leaders' intentions. Coming upon a caravan, Abdullah ibn Jahsh and the members of his group decided to attack it despite the fact that it was the last night of Rajab, one of the four sacred months during which all the tribes considered war to be forbidden. A Quraysh man was killed, another managed to escape, and two members of the caravan were taken prisoner. When they went back to Medina, the Prophet reacted very angrily to this action, which was totally at variance with his instructions. This event marked a turning point in the relations between Medina and Mecca.

For more than a year, the Prophet had been setting up pacts with some tribes along the Red Sea coast, on a route generally taken by Mecca caravans traveling north, beyond Medina, to Iraq or Syria. This was bound to inconvenience the Quraysh, who had to find new routes to the east. Tensions were growing steadily, and the Quraysh, who wished to tarnish the exiles' reputation and mobilize the area's tribes against them, found an excellent pretext in the attack on the caravan, which had taken place during the sacred month. The intelligence gathered here and there by Muhammad's envoys pointed to the fact that a clash was imminent.

Revelation

During this same period, the Prophet received two successive Revelations, totally different in nature, but whose consequences were equally to constitute a break with the past. For more than thirteen years, Muslims had been called upon to exercise patience and passive resistance in the face of the persecution and terror they suffered at the hands of the Quraysh leaders and other clans. They had endured, persevered, then emigrated, without responding to aggressions, avoiding confrontation.

Once the Muslims had settled in Medina, it had become obvious that the Quraysh were going to step up their opposition and find other means to put an end to the Prophet's mission, which now no longer threatened only the political balance in Mecca but also the order of powers throughout the Peninsula. What was at stake was the Quraysh's position with regard to all the other tribes and clans; their religious and military standing was at risk. *Hijrah*, which was liberation, also meant conflicts and struggles to come.

Then the Prophet received a Revelation that left no room for doubt:

Permission [to fight] is given to those against whom war is being wrongfully waged—and verily, God has the power to succor them—those who have been driven from their homelands unjustly for no other reason except that they say: “Our Lord is God!”²

Abu Bakr was later to say that when he heard this verse, he immediately understood that it announced impending conflict and war, and so did the Prophet and his other Companions. Henceforth, the Muslims were no longer required to resist passively; rather, they were to defend themselves against enemy aggression. To the *jihad* of spirituality and intelligence, which had consisted either in resisting the darkest attractions of the ego-centric, greedy, or violent self or in answering the pagan contradictors’ arguments through the Quran, a new possible form of *jihad* was now added: *al-qital*, necessary armed resistance in the face of armed aggression, self-defense against oppressors.

All the forms of *jihad* are, as can be seen, linked to the notion of resistance. On the level of *qital*, armed fighting, it is so as well. At the end of the verse fighting is presented as a necessity in order to resist human beings’ natural propensity for expansionism and oppression:

Had God not checked one set of people [the oppressors] by means of another, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, in which the name of God is commemorated in abundant measure, would surely have been destroyed. God will certainly aid those who aid His cause; for verily God is most powerful, almighty.³

The need for a balance and regulation of forces is presented as an objective necessity given human nature. Absolute power for one individual, one nation, or one empire would result in the annihilation of diversity among people and the destruction of the various places of worship (the list ending with mosques), which here symbolize the pluralism of religions determined and willed by God. Hence, the confrontation of forces and resistance to human beings’ temptation to war are presented, in an apparent paradox, as the promise of peace among human beings. This is what the other verse confirms on a more general level: “And had God not

checked one set of people [the oppressors] by means of another, the earth would indeed be full of mischief.”⁴

At the origin of creation, the angels had asked God about His intentions in creating humans as His vicegerents: “Will You place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood . . . ?”⁵ They thereby recalled that humans are, by nature, greedy for power and inclined to spread evil and to kill: the other aspect of humans, their love of good and justice, must resist and, by reaching a balance, produce the conditions for peace—the fragile fruit of a balance between opposite forces and tendencies. Thus, both *jihad* and *qital* are the ways that, by resisting the dark temptations of the inner self as well as human beings’ proclivity for war, will make it possible to reach peace, the fruit of an ever-renewed effort to overcome temptations as well as oppressors. The essence of *jihad* is the quest for peace, and *qital* is, at times, the necessary path to peace.

A new era was opening for the Muslim community in Medina. They were to face the aftermath of wars, their toll of death and suffering intensified by the fact that their enemies were from the exiles’ own clans, their own relatives. Such was the cost of their survival.

The Change of Qibla

The Muslims had been settled in Medina for about a year and a half when the Prophet received the second Revelation mentioned above. *Qibla*, or the direction in which Muslims had prayed, had hitherto been toward Jerusalem, but Revelation suddenly ordered:

We see the turning of your face [for guidance] to the heavens: now shall We turn you to a *qibla* that shall please you. So turn your face in the direction of the Sacred Mosque! Wherever you are, turn your faces in that direction! The people of the Book know well that [this commandment] is the truth from their Lord, and God is not unmindful of what they do.⁶

This verse carried several messages and was to have consequences for the Prophet’s relations with Jewish and Christian tribes, as this change established a distinction, and a distance, between the monotheistic traditions. Although Jerusalem’s place remained essential at the heart of Muslim

tradition, the new orientation of prayer restored a direct ritual and spiritual link between Abraham, who built the first house for the worship of the One, and Islamic monotheism. Muslims rejoiced in this and understood it as a return to the origin. "Turning one's face" meant turning one's being, one's heart, toward the Source, the Origin, the One God, the God of Abraham, of the universe, and of humankind. The Kaba thereby resumed its primary function: on earth, it was the House of God, the center toward which all hearts, from all peripheries, would now turn.

Jewish tribes by no means shared in this satisfaction. From the beginning of the Muslims' settlement in Medina, the Jews and the Muslims had had differences involving recognition of the One God and the signing of covenants. But also, more covertly, some Jews had doubts about the new religion and feared that its expansion constituted a threat; Muhammad had heard of contacts established between some Jewish tribes and some of the Quraysh's allies. Because of this distrust, Revelation of this verse could not have been expected to comfort Medina's Jewish dignitaries, since the monotheism professed by Muhammad now seemed to clearly stand apart from the message of Judaism.

Furthermore, the change of *qibla* sent just as strong a message to the inhabitants of Mecca. The central place that the city was acquiring in the message of the new religion led its inhabitants to fear future Muslim designs on the city and the Kaba. This the Quraysh could not accept, and it was now clear that only the termination of Muhammad's mission could protect them and ensure the continuation of historical privileges they had so arduously obtained.

A Caravan

The Prophet had just learned that a caravan led by Abu Sufyan was on its way back from Syria with a large quantity of goods and that most of the Quraysh clans had a share in this trading venture. Muhammad decided to intercept the caravan. One reason was the same as the one that had propelled him to attack the earlier caravan: the wish to recover the wealth appropriated by the Quraysh when they had usurped the exiles' belongings after their departure for Medina. The second reason was that it would serve as a show of power to impress the inhabitants of Mecca, who were increasingly plotting against Medina.

Muhammad set off at the head of 309 (or 313, according to some accounts) of his Companions, including both Muhajirun, the exiles from Mecca, and Ansar, the Muslims from Medina. They were carrying with them substantial weapons—considering the importance of the caravan they planned to attack—even though they were not really fitted out for war. The Prophet had asked Uthman ibn Affan, one of the Meccan exiles who would normally have been a part of the expedition, to stay behind to look after his wife Ruqayyah, the Prophet's daughter, who was seriously ill.⁷

The Prophet intended to intercept the caravan at Badr, but Abu Sufyan had been warned of the impending attack by his own spies; he sent an envoy to the Meccan leaders to inform them of the danger he was in and ask for help. He immediately changed his route as well, and once he was sure that he had managed to avoid the attack, he sent a new envoy to the Quraysh leaders to tell them that the danger was over and that he no longer needed help. However, by this time the Quraysh leaders had already set off with more than a thousand men, and they decided, at Abu Jahl's insistence, that the expedition must go on in spite of the apparent lack of danger. Even though the confrontation might be avoided, they in their turn intended to stage a show of strength against their enemy. The Prophet and his Companions, who had set up their camp near Badr, heard that a mighty army had set off from Mecca. This meant a total change of plans: they had left Medina intending to lay their hands on a caravan of goods (which they had failed to do), and now an army three times the size of their own force was marching toward them, with its leaders seemingly intent on fighting it out. This was war, and the Muslims were not really ready for it.

Consultations

Muhammad was wondering whether he should move forward and try to catch up with the caravan or stop and go back to Medina in order to avoid risking a clash with the mighty Quraysh army. He decided to consult his Companions and find out what they thought about the matter. Abu Bakr and Umar spoke first and confirmed their readiness to move forward and risk a full-scale confrontation. Another exile, al-Miqdad ibn Amr, spoke next: "Go ahead, you and your Lord, and fight; and with you we shall also fight, to the right and to the left, in front of you and behind you."⁸

This attitude comforted and pleased the Prophet, but this was what he could naturally have expected from the Muhajirun. It was from the Ansar that he needed explicit support, since they were not directly involved in the conflict with the Quraysh and had signed an assistance agreement binding them only in case of war in Medina, not outside the city. Sad ibn Muadh, speaking on behalf of the Ansar, said with determination: "Do what you will, and we are with you. By He who has sent you with the truth, were you to order us to cross the sea and dive into it yourself, we would dive in with you. Not one of us would stay behind."⁹ Having thus obtained the assent of both groups, Muhammad decided to move forward without allowing the Quraysh's maneuvers to intimidate him.

Throughout his mission the Prophet sought his Companions' advice, encouraging them to express their opinions and paying them careful attention. Furthermore, the Prophet had evolved a genuine pedagogy through which he allowed the Muslims to develop their critical faculties, express their talents, and mature in his presence. He would often ask questions on various subjects and give the answers only after his Companions had thought by themselves and expressed different conjectures. Sometimes, more subtly, he would utter a judgment in a paradoxical form, thereby prompting his listeners to consider the matter more deeply. For example, he once said: "A strong man is not a man who overcomes his enemy!" The Companions mulled this over among themselves, then asked him: "Then who is a strong man?" The Prophet surprised his audience and led them to a deeper understanding of the question with his answer: "A strong man is a man who controls himself when he is angry!"¹⁰ He would sometimes speak figuratively: "Wealth does not lie in the riches you possess!" After the Companions pondered this, Muhammad would elaborate: "True wealth is the wealth of the soul."¹¹ On occasion the Prophet's statement appeared to contradict common sense or ethics: "Help your brother, whether he is just or unjust!" The Companions could not but wonder about the nature of the help they were to give an unjust brother: how could that be? The Prophet, inverting the perspective, would add: "Prevent him [the unjust brother] from acting unjustly, such is the way for you to help him!"¹²

Both by asking questions and by formulating paradoxical or seemingly contradictory statements, the Prophet stimulated his Companions' critical

sense and their ability to go beyond mere blind obedience or mechanical, mind-destroying imitation. This method developed the intellectual capacities necessary for consultations to be effective. Indeed, if they were to give useful advice, the Companions had to be intellectually awake, bold, and independent, even in the presence of a Prophet whose personality and status must have impressed them. By stimulating their intelligence and giving them opportunities to speak, he exercised a type of leadership that made it possible for his Companions to learn to assert themselves and take initiative.

Hubab ibn al-Mundhir was the most outstanding example of this at the particular time we have been discussing. When he arrived at Badr, the Prophet set up his camp near the first wells he found. Seeing this, Ibn al-Mundhir came to him and asked: "Was this place where we have stopped revealed to you by God, so that we must not move either forward or backward from it, or is it an opinion and a strategy of yours, linked to war expedients?"¹³ The Prophet confirmed that it was his own personal opinion; Ibn al-Mundhir then suggested another plan that consisted of camping near the biggest well, the nearest to the way from which the enemy was to arrive, then blocking the other wells in the area so that the enemy could not get to the water. During the battle, the Muslims' opponents were thus bound to find themselves in difficulty. Muhammad carefully listened to the explanation of this strategy and accepted it straightaway: the camp was moved and Hubab's plan was implemented.

This example shows that the Companions made a distinction between Revelations the Prophet received, which they obeyed without a second thought, and the opinions of Muhammad the man, which could be debated, improved on, or even rejected outright. The Messenger's authority in human affairs was neither autocratic nor unrestricted; he allowed his Companions a substantial role in consultation, and his teaching, as we have seen, developed the conditions for acquiring those critical and creative faculties. The Prophet gave his Companions, women and men alike, the means and confidence to be autonomous, to dare to address and contradict him without his ever considering it as lack of respect for his status. Through this attitude, he showed them his deep respect for their intelligence and for their heart: as for them, they loved their Prophet, their leader, for this attention, this availability, and this demand to use their abilities to the fullest.

The Battle of Badr

When it had become clear that the caravan had escaped and that a full-scale war lay ahead, Muhammad tried to discourage the Quraysh from choosing war. He sent Umar ibn al-Khattab to suggest to the Quraysh that they should turn back and thus avoid confrontation. Among the Quraysh, some also wanted to avoid war, and Utbah, one of the Meccan leaders, even offered to pay blood money for their ally who had been killed during the sacred month. Nothing helped, however: the advocates of war among the Quraysh were determined, and they knew that the numbers were clearly in their favor. Indeed, they considered Umar's attempt a sign of weakness. This was a great opportunity for them to destroy the Muslim community and get rid of Muhammad.

The Prophet had, for his part, had a number of inspirations and dreams. He understood that war was going to result from this encounter with the Quraysh and that the outcome would be in his favor. He kept praying to God and encouraging his Companions to persevere and remain determined. He announced to them: "By He who holds Muhammad's soul between His hands, nobody will be killed today, fighting in the firm hope of a reward, going forward and not turning back, but God will directly make him enter His Paradise."¹⁴ He again prostrated himself for a very long time, praying to God to keep His promise, protect his community, and grant the Muslims victory, until Abu Bakr invited him to stop, convinced that God could not let them down.

The battle was going to take place in the month of Ramadan, on the seventeenth, in the second year of *hijrah* (624 CE). On the road to Badr, the Prophet reminded the Muslims who wished to fast that this was not compulsory when traveling: "Piety does not consist in fasting when traveling; it is your duty to make good use of the permissions [*rukhas*, sing. *rukhsa*] granted to you by God. Accept them!"¹⁵ Each circumstance of life was useful to remind the Muslims of their religion's teachings, and the Prophet kept insisting on the permissions granted to the faithful, who must make the practice of their religion easy and bring good news rather than cause repulsion: "Make things easy, and do not render them difficult! Bring good news [which cheers the heart], not bad news [which puts off and displeases]!"¹⁶ The Prophet drank water conspicuously on that occasion to set an example for his Companions.

The battle began with three duels involving Hamzah, Ali, and Ubaydah ibn al-Harith: Hamzah and Ali overcame their opponents, but Ubaydah was fatally wounded. Then hostilities began, and the Muslims showed such determination that the Quraysh were fairly rapidly defeated. Although they were three times as numerous, they could not hold back the Muslims' onslaught. Revelation was later to mention God's constant protection at the heart of the fighting, His angels, and the fulfillment of His promise: "God helped you at Badr, when you were helpless. Then fear God [be intimately conscious of His presence]: thus may you show your gratitude."¹⁷ This victory was a turning point: the Quraysh's status and supremacy had been seriously affected and the news of their defeat spread like wildfire throughout the Peninsula.

The Muslims had lost fourteen of their men, while the Meccans had lost more than seventy, including Abu Jahl, who had been one of Islam's fiercest opponents and who had been most eager for that battle to take place. Abbas, the Prophet's uncle (in whom the latter had confided in Mecca, and who had witnessed all the preparations preceding the emigration), was among the seventy Quraysh prisoners.

In Mecca, in Medina

The Quraysh's return to Mecca was painful, as most of the clans had suffered the death of a member. Some were already calling for revenge, such as Hind, who had lost her father, brother, and uncle in the battle. She swore she would drink the blood of Hamzah, who had killed her father and her uncle. The Quraysh leaders wasted no time in reacting, striving to set up alliances with neighboring cities and tribes in order to fight the Muslims, avenge their humiliation, and put an end to the Muslims' presence in the Peninsula.

Abu Lahab, whose ill health had prevented him from taking part in the fighting, had remained in Mecca. He asked Abu Sufyan to tell him what had happened and the circumstances of the defeat.¹⁸ While the latter was giving his account, a slave who was sitting nearby, and who had so far kept his conversion to Islam secret, could not control his joy and was thus discovered. Abu Lahab sprang to him and beat him savagely while holding him down. Um al-Fadl, Abu Lahab's sister-in-law and Abbas's wife, who

was also present and who had also secretly embraced Islam, rushed on her brother-in-law and gave him a violent blow with a tent post. The deep head wound became infected in the following days and the infection eventually spread to Abu Lahab's entire body; he died within a few weeks. Both Abu Lahab and his wife had always given free rein to their hatred of Islam, and in fact the Quran had, years before, announced his fate, as well as his wife's.¹⁹ Unlike some other oppressors who eventually changed their minds, neither Abu Lahab nor his wife ever showed the least sympathy for Muhammad's message. Abu Lahab's death, which occurred in rejection and violence, confirmed what Revelation had announced: both of them would, to the end, remain among those who deny and rebel.

The Muslims had buried their dead and were preparing to go back to Medina. They had seventy prisoners, and a discussion of their fate took place between the Prophet, Abu Bakr, and Umar. Umar wanted the prisoners to be killed, while Abu Bakr disagreed. Muhammad decided to spare their lives, except for two prisoners who had been particularly cruel to the Muslims in Mecca, humiliating them and torturing them to death. Holding prisoners represented an added means of humiliating the Quraysh, who would be compelled to go to Medina and pay a heavy ransom (which would also bring the Muslims considerable profit). However, a Quranic Revelation was to reproach the Prophet for this choice, which indeed was mainly motivated by the desire to acquire wealth.²⁰

Moreover, the Muslim soldiers had already quarreled over the sharing of spoils, and different opinions had been expressed as to the merits of the various groups of soldiers and the way the spoils should be divided. Pre-Islamic customs, in which the quantity of spoils gained after a war contributed to the victors' pride and honor, remained deeply rooted. A Quranic Revelation referred to this dispute and stated that the spoils must go to "God and the Messenger," which implied that the Prophet was to distribute the wealth equitably according to Quranic injunctions, thereby putting an end to such disputes.²¹ Muhammad was again and again to be confronted with such disputes among his Companions, and each time, Revelation or the Prophet himself would repeat that they must ask themselves what their intentions were: did they seek wealth in this world or peace in the hereafter? They remained human beings, with their weaknesses and temptations; they needed reminders, spiritual education, and patience, as does everyone, whether near the Prophet or at any other point

in human history. History teaches us, after all, that nothing and nobody should be idealized.

When they reached Medina, the Prophet was informed of the death of his daughter Ruqayyah, Uthman ibn Affan's wife. He had just lost his first Companions, and now he was given the news that his daughter was gone as he was returning from a victorious expedition. The blending of sorrow and joy reminded him of the fragility of life and, once more, of his essential relationship to the One through hardship or success. Nothing was ever acquired to last. Later on, Uthman was to marry Um Kulthum, another of the Prophet's daughters, while the Prophet was to marry Hafsa, Umar ibn al-Khattab's daughter, who came to live in one of the dwellings near the mosque.

Bargaining with the prisoners' relatives began. Some relatives came to pay their due and returned with their family member. Other prisoners were freed without any ransom, while the poorest were dealt with individually, according to their particular circumstances. For example, those of the captives who could read and write and who could not pay a ransom pledged to teach ten Medina youths to read and write in exchange for their freedom. Once more the Prophet demonstrated the importance of knowledge by means of the message he sent the members of his community: whether in peace or in war, knowledge—learning, reading, and writing—provides people with essential skills and gives them dignity. The knowledge some captives possessed was their wealth and became their ransom.

Banu Qaynuqa

The months that followed the return from Badr brought difficulties on the regional level. Only a few days after returning from Badr, the Prophet had been compelled to lead a force of two hundred men to the villages of the Banu Salim and Banu Ghatafan in the al-Qudr area to put an end to a plot and prevent any harm. The inhabitants ran away. It was now clear that the Muslim community's status had changed. Many cities in the area, as well as those who had not concluded any pact, were afraid of the military, political, and symbolic power Muhammad was acquiring at the heart of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Prophet was constantly getting intelligence about the initiatives and alliance attempts carried out by the Quraysh leaders in order to

quench their thirst for revenge. An inspired dream had enabled him to foil an assassination attempt by Umayr ibn Wahb, who, astonished by how much the Prophet knew about the attempt, converted on the spot. Muhammad knew, however, that the Quraysh would soon undertake a large-scale action with the help of as many tribes as they could mobilize.

After his return from Badr, the Prophet noticed that a number of Medinans were disappointed or worried by the Muslims' success. He had identified a number of hypocrites who had converted to Islam out of self-interest and political calculation. He also knew that some of the signatories to the alliance agreement drawn up when he had first arrived in Medina could not be relied on and would not hesitate to turn against him when the opportunity arose. Muhammad had just received a Revelation inviting him to be watchful: "And if you fear treachery from any group [with whom you made a covenant], cast it back at them in an equitable manner, for God does not love the treacherous."²² For the time being, the Prophet simply kept an eye on the activities of the various groups, while taking the hypocrites' pledges at face value and strictly respecting the terms of the agreement, since Revelation advised him to show prudence and wisdom: "But if they incline toward peace, do you [also] incline toward peace, and trust in God."²³

The Jewish tribe of Banu Qaynuqa was the only one of the three Jewish tribes settled in the Medina area who lived inside the city. They were a signatory to the covenant. Yet alarming news of treason and a possible plot came to the Prophet from within their ranks. To determine the truth of what was going on, and to avoid letting the Banu Qaynuqa think that they could act as they pleased, Muhammad paid them a visit and invited them to ponder the Quraysh's defeat. The Banu Qaynuqa leaders retorted haughtily that if they were to go to war against him, things would not turn out in that way; they would certainly win. This threatening answer was confirmation of Muhammad's suspicions: they had become hostile to the Muslims.

A few days later, a Muslim woman went, as usual, to the Banu Qaynuqa market; there, she was mocked and humiliated by a merchant who tied her garment in her back while she was seated, so that the lower part of her body was exposed when she stood up. A Muslim man who had witnessed the scene wanted to intervene: a fight followed, and both the merchant and the Muslim died as a result of their injuries. According to the terms

of the covenant, such a case should have been dealt with by the Prophet and resolved peacefully according to the principles of justice and honor codes. But the Banu Qaynuqa betrayed the covenant by trying to ally themselves with Ibn Ubayy, a hypocrite with whom they had already been bargaining for some time and who they hoped would help them mobilize their allies in the area in order to fight the Muslims.

Muhammad reacted quickly, gathering an army and immediately besieging the fortress to which the Banu Qaynuqa had rushed to protect themselves. They hoped to receive outside support from Muslim ranks through the hypocrites who had converted to Islam in name only and who had always assured the Banu Qaynuqa that they too hoped for the Muslim community to be wiped out. No support came, however, and after a two-week siege the Banu Qaynuqa surrendered.

The Prophet remembered the Revelation that "it is not fitting for a prophet that he should have prisoners of war" out of a desire for profit.²⁴ He had the option of killing the men of the tribe who had betrayed the covenant and banishing their women and children, as was the usual practice after victory in war. This would have enabled him to send a strong message to neighboring tribes about the fate awaiting whoever betrayed or attacked the Muslim community. He had received a Revelation pointing to this: "If you gain mastery over them in war, deal with them so as to strike fear in those who follow them, that they may remember."²⁵ Muhammad nevertheless received Ibn Ubayy—whose hypocrisy and secret dealings he was aware of—when he came to intercede for the Banu Qaynuqa. Once again, he decided to spare his prisoners' lives, but he demanded that their belongings be confiscated and that they move out of the city. They took refuge with some of the other tribes and colonies in the area, but this did not stop them from plotting against the Prophet. On the contrary, their recent humiliation increased their hatred: the number of Muhammad's enemies kept growing and their resentment deepened. He knew it and kept inviting his Companions to wisdom and patience, as well as watchfulness.



CHAPTER TEN

Teachings and Defeat

Life went on in Medina. In spite of the complexity of relations between tribes and the need to remain watchful, Muhammad went on dispensing his teachings in the light of Revelations he received. Always his distinctive feature was the combination of strict faithfulness to his principles and human warmth constantly radiating from his presence. The Companions were so eager for his company that they would take turns with him, in order to spend as much time as possible with him, listening and learning. Their love for him was deep, respectful, and faithful, and the Prophet kept inviting them to further deepen that affection and to love him in the superior light of God's love.

Gentleness, Caring, and Love

In his daily life, though he was preoccupied by attacks, treachery, and his enemies' thirst for revenge, Muhammad remained mindful of the small details of life and of the expectations of those around him, constantly allying rigor and the generosity of fraternity and forgiveness. His Companions and his wives saw him pray for hours during the night, away from the others, alone with the whispered prayers and invocations that nurtured his dialogue with the One. Aishah, his wife, was impressed and surprised: "Don't you take on too much [worship] while God has already forgiven all your past and future sins?" The Prophet answered: "How could I but be a thankful servant?"¹ He did not demand of his Companions the worship, fasting, and meditations that he exacted of himself.

On the contrary, he required that they ease their burden and avoid excess; to some Companions who wanted to put an end to their sexual life, pray all night long, or fast continuously (such as Uthman ibn Mazun or Abdullah ibn Amr ibn al-As), he said: "Do not do that! Fast on some days and eat on others. Sleep part of the night, and stand in prayer another part. For your body has rights upon you, your eyes have a right upon you, your wife has a right upon you, your guest has a right upon you."² He once exclaimed, repeating it three times: "Woe to those who exaggerate [who are too strict]!"³ And on another occasion, he said: "Moderation, moderation! For only with moderation will you succeed."⁴

He kept striving to soothe the consciences of believers who were afraid of their own weaknesses and failings. One day, the Companion Hanzalah al-Usaydi met Abu Bakr and confessed to him that he was convinced of his own deep hypocrisy because he felt divided between contradictory feelings: in the Prophet's presence, he almost saw paradise and hell, but when he was away from him, his wife and children and daily affairs caused him to forget. Abu Bakr in his turn admitted that he experienced similar tensions. They both went to the Prophet to question him about the seemingly dismal state of their spirituality. Hanzalah explained the nature of his doubts, and Muhammad answered: "By He who holds my soul in His hands, if you were able to remain in the [spiritual] state in which you are when in my company, and remember God permanently, the angels would shake your hands in your beds and along your paths. But it is not so, Hanzalah: there is a time for this [devotion, remembrance] and a time for that [rest, amusement]."⁵ Their situation had nothing to do with hypocrisy: it was merely the reality of human nature, which remembers and forgets, and which needs to remember precisely because it forgets, because human beings are not angels.

In other circumstances, he would surprise them by stating that the sincerity of a prayer, an act of charity, or an act of worship found expression at the very heart of their most human needs, in the humble acknowledgment of their humanity: "Enjoining good is charity, forbidding evil is charity. In having sexual intercourse with your spouses there is charity." The Companions, surprised, asked: "O Messenger of God, when one of us satisfies his [sexual] desire, does he also get a reward?" Muhammad replied: "Tell me, if one of you had had illicit intercourse, would he not have committed a sin? That is why he is rewarded for having lawful inter-

course.”⁶ He thus invited them to deny or despise nothing in their humanity and taught them that the core of the matter was achieving self-control. Spirituality means both accepting and mastering one’s instincts: living one’s natural desires in the light of one’s principles is a prayer. It is never a misdeed, nor is it hypocrisy.

The Prophet hated to let his Companions nurture a pointless feeling of guilt. He kept telling them that they must never stop conversing with the One, the Most Kind, the Most Merciful, who welcomes everyone in His grace and benevolence and who loves the sincerity of hearts that regret their misdeeds and return to Him. This is the profound meaning of *at-tawbah*, offered to everyone: sincerely returning to God after a slip, a mistake, a sin. God loves that sincere return to Him and He forgives and purifies. The Prophet himself exemplified that in many circumstances. On one occasion a Bedouin came and urinated in the mosque; the Companions rushed on him and wanted to beat him up. The Prophet stopped them and said: “Leave him alone, and just throw a bucketful of water on his urine. God has only sent you to make obligations easy, and not to make them difficult.”⁷

Aishah reports that once a man came to the Prophet and told him: “I am lost!” When the Prophet asked why, the man confessed: “I had intercourse with my wife during the fasting hours of Ramadan.” Muhammad answered, “Give charity!” The man replied, “I own nothing!” Then he sat down a short distance from the Prophet. Some time later, a man arrived, bringing a dish of food as a gift for Muhammad.⁸ The Prophet called out: “Where is the man who is lost?” “Here,” answered the first man, the one who had confessed his transgression. Muhammad told him, “Take this food and give it away in charity.” In astonishment, the man cried, “To one poorer than myself? My family has nothing to eat!” “Well, then, eat it yourselves,” the Prophet replied with a smile.⁹

That gentleness and kindness were the very essence of his teaching. He kept saying: “God is gentle [*rafiq*] and he loves gentleness [*ar-riq*] in everything.”¹⁰ He also said: “He gives for gentleness what He does not give for violence or anything else.”¹¹ He declared to one of his Companions: “There are in you two qualities that God loves: clemency [*al-hilm*] and forbearance [*al-ana*, “nobleness,” “tolerance”].”¹² He invited all his Companions to that constant effort of gentleness and forgiveness: “If you hear about your brother something of which you disapprove, seek from one to

seventy excuses for him. If you cannot find any, convince yourselves that it is an excuse you do not know."¹³

A number of new converts to Islam who had no home and often nothing to eat had settled around the mosque, near the Prophet's dwelling. They were destitute (sometimes intentionally, since some of them wished to lead an ascetic life detached from worldly possessions), and their subsistence depended on the Muslims' charity and gifts. Their number kept increasing, and they were soon called *ahl as-suffah* (the people of the bench).¹⁴ The Prophet was most concerned by their situation and showed them continuous solidarity. He would listen to them, answer their questions, and look after their needs. One of the characteristics of his personality and of his teachings, as much in regard to the people of the bench as to the rest of his community, was that when he was asked about matters of spirituality, faith, education, or doubt, he would often offer different answers to the same questions, taking into account the psychological makeup, experience, and intelligence of the questioner.

The faithful felt that he saw, respected, understood, and loved them. Indeed, he did love them, and he told them so. Moreover, he advised them to remember to tell one another of their mutual love: "When someone loves their brother [or sister] let them tell them that they love them."¹⁵ He once took young Muadh ibn Jabal by the hand and whispered: "O Muadh, by God, I love you. And I advise you, O Muadh, never to forget to say, after each ritual prayer: 'O God, help me remember You, thank You, and perfect my worship of You.'"¹⁶ Thus the young man was offered both love and spiritual teaching, and the teaching was all the more deeply assimilated because it was wrapped in that love.

The Najran Christians

The date of the Najran Christians' visit to Muhammad is not precisely known. Some sources, such as Ibn Hisham, situate it even before the Battle of Badr, while others have it take place, according to a text attributed to Ibn Ishaq (and also in reference to some hadiths and the chronology of some verses of the Quran related to the episode), between the Battle of Badr and the Battle of Uhud. The exact date matters little in the end; what remains essential is the nature and objective of the encounter.

A delegation of fourteen religious leaders from Najran (Yemen) had visited the Prophet in order to question him about the new religion, about his faith, and of course about the status of Jesus in Islam.¹⁷ Numerous Christian tribes lived in the Arabian Peninsula, and it seems that most of the Yemeni Christians followed the Melchite Orthodox rite, whose center was in Constantinople. The Prophet answered their questions, pointing out the link between the two traditions, Islam being the continuation of the prophet Jesus's message, but he categorically rejected the dogma of the Trinity. He invited them to worship the One God and accept Islam as the last Revelation. The Quran gives a lengthy account of that encounter as well as of the similarities and differences between Christian and Islamic teachings.¹⁸ The beginning of the third surah, "Ala Imran" (The Family of Imran), establishes the Islamic frame of reference:

Alif, lâm, mîm. God! There is no god but Him, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsisting by whom all things subsist. It is He who sent down to you step by step, in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Torah and the Gospel before this, as a guide to humankind. And He sent down the Criterion [the Quran].¹⁹

Revelation confirms the recognition of the previous Books that came down to humankind through Moses and Jesus, and adds that the Quran is part of the same monotheistic tradition. Further on, the text details the terms of the invitation made to the Christians:

Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms between us and you: that we shall worship none but God; that we shall associate no partners with Him; that we shall not erect, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say: "Bear witness that we have surrendered ourselves unto Him."²⁰

Along with the affirmation of God's oneness and the rejection of the Trinity, this verse also denounces the status and role of priests in Christian tradition. Here, as in other verses or Prophetic traditions, the reference to potential "masters" (lords, authorities) indicates those who place themselves between God and people and might thus claim illegitimate or inordinate religious powers.

The Najran delegation refused to accept the Prophet's message. Before they left, the members of the delegation wanted to perform their prayers inside the mosque. The Companions present thought it fit to oppose them, but the Prophet intervened: "Let them pray!"²¹ They prayed in the mosque, facing east. When they were about to leave, they invited the Prophet to send with them an envoy who would live with them, answer their questions, and, if needed, judge some of their affairs. Abu Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah was chosen; later Umar ibn al-Khattab was to admit that he unsuccessfully tried to attract the Prophet's attention so that he would name him for the task.

The delegation went home. The Christians had come to Medina, inquired about the message, listened to the contents of the new religion, put forward their arguments, prayed inside the mosque itself, then gone back without suffering any harm, remaining Christians and perfectly free. The first Companions were not to forget the Prophet's attitude. They were to draw from it the substance of the respect that Islam demands of its faithful, whom it invites to go beyond tolerance, to learn, listen, and recognize others' dignity. The command "No compulsion in religion" is in keeping with this respectful approach to diversity:²²

O humankind! We created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other. Verily the most honored among you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you [the most deeply aware of God's presence]. And God has full knowledge and is well acquainted [with all things].²³

More than tolerance (which smacks of condescension within a power relationship), the respect required by God is based on an egalitarian relationship of mutual knowledge.²⁴ God alone knows what hearts contain and how deep is the piety of one or another individual. Elsewhere, the Quran mentions and acknowledges the sincerity of their humble quest for the divine, even though it criticizes and rejects the status of priests and religious dignitaries:

You will find the nearest among men in love to the believers [the Muslims] those who say, "We are Christians," because among these are priests and monks, and they are not arrogant.²⁵

This verse from the fifth surah (the last injunction to be revealed) states the terms of a privileged relationship between Muslims and Christians, based on two essential qualities: sincerity and humility. With Christians, as with all other spiritual or religious traditions, the invitation to meet, share, and live together fruitfully will always remain based on these three conditions: trying to get to know the other, remaining sincere (hence honest) during the encounter and the debates, and, finally, learning humility in regard to one's claim to possess the truth. Such is the message the Prophet bore in his relationship with the faithful of other religions. As can be seen, he did not hesitate to question and even contradict the Christians' beliefs (such as the Trinity or the role of priests), but in the end his attitude was based on knowledge, sincerity, and humility, which are the three conditions of respect. They were free to leave, and the dialogue went on with the Prophet's envoy.

A Daughter, a Wife

The Prophet lived very modestly: his dwelling was particularly bare, and he often had nothing but a few dates left to eat. Yet he kept helping the destitute around him, especially *ahl as-suffah*, the people of the bench, who lived near his home. When he received presents, he had them given out, and he immediately freed the slaves who were sometimes sent to him as gifts: he did so with the slave Abu Rafi, whom his uncle Abbas had sent him when he had returned to Mecca after his release. In spite of his increasingly important role in Medinan society and of his many responsibilities, he kept this simplicity in his life and in the way he allowed the members of his community to approach him. He owned nothing, and he let himself be accosted by women, children, slaves, and the poorest people. He lived among them; he was one of them.

His daughter Fatimah was very close to her father. Married to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the Prophet's cousin, she had eventually moved near her father's dwelling and she was most devoted to the cause of the poor, including *ahl as-suffah*. When the Prophet was at home or in public and his daughter came to him or entered the room, he would stand up and greet her, publicly showing her great respect and tenderness. Both the people of Medina and the Meccans were surprised at this behavior toward a

daughter, who in their respective customs did not usually receive such treatment. The Prophet would kiss his daughter, talk to her, confide in her, and have her sit by his side, without paying attention to the remarks or even the criticisms that his behavior could give rise to. Once he kissed his grandson, al-Hassan, Fatimah's son, in front of a group of Bedouins, who were startled. One of them, al-Aqra ibn Habis, expressed his shock and said: "I have ten children and I have never kissed any one of them!" The Prophet answered: "He who is not generous [loving, benevolent], God is not generous [loving, benevolent] to him."²⁶ In the light of his silent example and his remarks, the Prophet taught his people good manners, kindness, gentleness, respect for children, and regard for and attentiveness toward women. He was later to say: "I have only been sent to perfect noble manners."²⁷

Fatimah received that love and the teachings of faith and tenderness from her father and spread them around her through her activities with the poor. One day, however, she told her husband about her difficulties: like her father, they owned nothing, and she felt it increasingly difficult to manage her daily life, her family, and her children. Her husband advised her to go to her father and ask for his help; perhaps he might supply her with one of the slaves he had received as gifts. She went to see him, but she dared not express her request, so deep was her respect for her father. When she came back, silent and empty-handed, Ali decided to go with her and ask for the Prophet's help himself. The Prophet listened to them and informed them that he could do nothing for them, that their situation was far better than that of the *ahl as-suffah*, who urgently needed his help. They had to endure and be patient. They left, sad and disappointed: although they were the Prophet's daughter and cousin, they could not claim any social privilege.

Late in the evening, the Prophet came to their door. They wanted to get up to receive him, but Muhammad entered and sat at their bedside. He whispered: "Shall I offer you something better than what you asked me for?" They assented, and the Prophet told them: "They are words Gabriel has taught me, and that you should repeat ten times after each prayer: 'Glory to God' [*subhan Allah*], then 'Praise be to God' [*al-hamdu liLLah*], then 'God is the Most Great' [*Allahu Akbar*]. Before going to bed, you should repeat each of those phrases thirty-three times."²⁸ Sitting at his daughter's bedside late at night, deeply attentive to her needs, he answered

his daughter's material request by granting her the privilege of a confidence from the divine: a spiritual teaching that has come down to us through the ages and that each Muslim now adopts as his own at the heart of his daily life. Fatimah, like her husband, Ali, was a model of piety, generosity, and love. She lived in the light of her father's spiritual teachings: getting by on little, asking everything of the One, and giving everything of herself to others.

Years later, by her dying father's side, she was to weep intensely when he whispered in her ear that God was going to call him back to Him, that it was time for him to depart. She smiled happily when, a few minutes later, he told her in confidence—loving confidence seems to reveal the essence of this father-daughter relationship—that she was to be the first in her family to join him.

Aishah, the Prophet's wife, was also nurtured by Muhammad's example and conversation. Everything led to spiritual edification, and she was later to be an invaluable source of information about the Messenger's personality, attitude in private life, and public commitments. She has told how Muhammad was attentive to her expectations and wishes when, while still quite young, she arrived in his home in Medina. Play was part of their lives, and Muhammad never refrained from sharing in it or allowing her to satisfy her curiosity, as for instance when a delegation from Abyssinia visited him. The Abyssinians performed various games and traditional dances in the courtyard of the Prophet's house, and the Prophet stood on the doorstep of his dwelling, thus allowing his wife to watch the performance discreetly from behind his shoulder.²⁹ Time and time again, she spoke of the particular nature of his attentiveness to her, of his expressions of tenderness, and of the freedom he allowed her in her daily life. The contents of the Prophetic traditions she later reported shows to what extent Muhammad spoke to her, conversed with her, and expressed his love and tenderness. In her presence, through the example of his behavior toward his wife, he reformed the Muhajirun's and the Ansar's customs.

The two Quranic verses dealing with women's dress were revealed around the second year of *hijrah*.³⁰ The *khimar* was a piece of cloth women wore on their heads, throwing its ends on their backs: the Quran ordered Muslim women to draw the ends forward over their chests, covering their throats. The Prophet's wives, like all other women, respected that injunction; not until two years later was their specific status as "the

Prophet's wives" established, so that they could no longer address men except from behind a protective screen (*al-hijab*). Before Revelation of the verses enjoining the Prophet's wives to remain hidden from men's sight, Aishah behaved like all other women and was most present in Medina's public life. The Prophet involved her and wished his Companions to understand, through her example, the role that women, and particularly their wives, were to assume in their daily and public lives.

A Persian neighbor once invited the Prophet to a meal. The Prophet answered: "What about her?" pointing to his wife Aishah. The man replied negatively, implying that the invitation was meant for him alone. Muhammad then refused the offer. The neighbor invited him again some time later. The Prophet again asked: "What about her?" The Persian answered negatively, and Muhammad once more refused. The Persian invited him a third time, and when the Prophet asked, "What about her?" he answered in the affirmative. The Prophet accepted the invitation and went to the neighbor's with Aishah.³¹ Through steadfastly maintaining a position, the Prophet was reforming customs and practices among the Arabs and Bedouins in the Peninsula without attacking their conventions. Aishah, as well as Khadijah before her, and indeed all of his wives and daughters, were present in his life, were active in public life, and never confused modesty with disappearing from the social, political, economic, or even military sphere.

The Messenger had granted them the means to be and develop, to express themselves and be critical, and to avoid false modesty and speak of delicate subjects linked to their womanhood, their bodies, their desires and expectations. Years later, Aishah was to recall with respect and admiration that intellectual boldness characteristic of Ansar women who, unlike most Meccan women, dared to speak out and ask direct questions: "Blessed be [what excellent women were] the Ansar women: modesty did not prevent them from seeking instruction [regarding their religion]."³² She herself had been trained in the same way by the Prophet: she was present when Revelations took place, and she remained by the Prophet's side when he conveyed the message or gave recommendations and advice, or simply when he was alone and lived his religion in private. She would listen, question, and attempt to understand the reasons and meaning of her husband's choices and attitudes. Thanks to her memory, intelligence, and critical mind, more than two thousand hadiths (Prophetic traditions)

have come down to us through her, and she also repeatedly corrected the accounts given by other Companions.

The love the Prophet and Aishah showed each other was powerful and intense. Aishah has not hesitated to tell of his tender and loving attitude in their daily life and of his warmth and attentiveness, even during the month of Ramadan. She has also told of her questions to the Prophet about the depth of his love, of her jealousy of the deceased Khadijah, and of the Prophet's way of always finding the means to reassure her. Aishah's loving, attentive, and intelligent presence is largely what has made it possible to draw a subtle, in-depth portrait of the Messenger.

Later, in the fifth or sixth year of *hijrah*, she was to experience the most difficult trial in her life. On the way back from an expedition to the Banu al-Mustaliq, noticing that she had lost her necklace, she went to look for it. In the meantime, the convoy moved on without noticing the absence of Aishah, who normally rode in a howdah, hidden from sight. She was eventually taken home by a man, Safwan ibn al-Muattal, who was traveling behind the army. Rumors began to spread about her relations with Safwan, and she was eventually accused of having betrayed and deceived the Prophet. Muhammad was greatly affected, all the more so as some Companions were waging a campaign against his wife, spreading calumny (*ifk*) about her. He kept away from her for more than a month, but Aishah stood firm and repeatedly protested her innocence. Verses were eventually revealed not only establishing her innocence but also condemning slander and slanderers and setting very strict conditions as to the evidence that must be brought in order to judge the behavior of a woman or a man in an ambiguous or doubtful situation.³³

This trial at first upset both Aishah and the Prophet, but it eventually reinforced their love and trust. On a broader level, the Muslim community realized that misfortune could strike the best among them, and Revelation most firmly condemned calumny, slander, and libel, reminding the Muslims to "hold their tongues," as the Prophet was later to put it.³⁴ Aishah recovered her position and became a reference as far as Islamic knowledge and science are concerned. The Prophet advised his Companions: "Seek science from this red-colored young woman."³⁵ Beyond doubts and suspicion, beyond calumny, Aishah remained sincere in her faith and in her love for the Prophet, and she became a model, as much in her piety and devotion as in her intellectual and social commitment. She

was a model in the light of the love shown to her by the Prophet: it was in her apartment that the Prophet wanted to breathe his last, and there he was buried.

Uhud

Beyond his private affairs and his spiritual and social teaching, the Prophet remained watchful of the Medina Muslims' security, and he knew that the Quraysh were preparing their revenge. He received a letter from his uncle Abbas informing him that an army of more than three thousand men had set out toward Medina. Muhammad had only about a week to think up his strategy and organize the resistance. He very quickly decided to organize a consultation meeting (*shura*) to get his Companions' opinions about the matter. They could choose between remaining inside the city and waiting for the enemy to enter, so as to ambush them, and marching out of the city and directly facing the enemy in a nearby plain. The Prophet, like many of his Companions, including the unreliable Abdullah ibn Ubayy, felt that they should wait for the enemy inside the city. Nevertheless, during the debates, his opinion was defeated, particularly through the opposition of the younger Companions and those who had not taken part in the Battle of Badr: they hoped to acquire merit similar to that of the Badr fighters in the impending battle.

The majority had voted in favor of marching out of the city and confronting the enemy face-to-face. Muhammad accepted the decision and promptly went home to put on his battle gear, for they had no time to waste. Feeling guilty and thinking that perhaps it would be better for them to obey the Prophet, some Companions came to him as he was walking out of his home and suggested the decision should be reconsidered and they should act according to his opinion. He refused categorically: the decision had been taken collectively, he had dressed for battle, and turning back was out of the question.

They set out toward Uhud. The army was a thousand strong, about to face an enemy of three thousand. As they were marching on, Abdullah ibn Ubayy decided to desert, followed by three hundred of his men. Ibn Ubayy reproached the Prophet for having allowed young, inexperienced people to influence him, instead of taking the decision—which had been

his own as well—to remain in Medina and wait for the enemy. His desertion was a serious matter, since it reduced to seven hundred the Muslim army, which could no longer change their strategy or turn back. Ibn Ubayy's hypocrisy was well known, and he was suspected of multiple betrayals: that decision, just before the showdown, was additional evidence of his duplicity.

The Muslims moved on, although they were now considerably weakened. On the way, the Prophet noticed that six youths, between the ages of thirteen and sixteen, had mingled with the army. He immediately sent back four of them, who were too young, but agreed to keep two boys of fifteen and sixteen who proved to him on the spot that they were better marksmen and fighters than many grown men. The choice, in such a situation, was a difficult one, but the Prophet repeatedly insisted that children be kept away from battle areas, both as soldiers and as potential victims. He reiterated it forcefully, as we shall see, before one of the last expeditions, and this teaching, pertaining to the ethics of war, always remained uncompromising in his message.

The Muslim army had to find an inconspicuous route to Uhud that would enable the army to approach the battleground without its movements being anticipated or discovered. Once again, the Prophet trusted a non-Muslim guide who answered his call: his abilities were widely known, and he led the army to their destination. They took up their position, and the Prophet explained his fighting strategy to his troops. The archers were to stay on the hillside, while the horsemen and soldiers directly confronted the enemy in the plain. The archers were not to leave their posts under any circumstance, whether the troops below might seem to be winning or losing, in order to prevent the Quraysh from coming round the hill and attacking the troops from behind. This was in fact what one of the Quraysh divisions tried to do at the very beginning of the battle, but they were greeted with a shower of arrows that compelled them to move back. The strategy was working perfectly.

The fighting began and, down in the plain, the Muslim troops were gradually taking control. The Quraysh were losing ground and suffering many losses, while the Muhajirun and the Ansar displayed remarkable courage. Among those fighters, two women stood out for their energy and vigor: Um Sulaym and especially an Ansar woman called Nusaybah bint Kab, who had initially come to carry water and aid the wounded, and

who eventually stepped into the battle, took a sword, and fought the Quraysh.³⁶ The Prophet had never invited or advised women to fight, but when he saw Nusaybah's spirit and energy in the battle, he praised her behavior and prayed to God to protect her and grant her victory and success.

It was becoming clear that the Muslims were winning, in spite of setbacks and the death of some Companions. Hamzah, the Prophet's uncle, had been the target of Hind's vengeance since the defeat at Badr. Wahshi, an Abyssinian spearman, had been set the single task of killing Hamzah, and this was what he concentrated on doing: while Muhammad's uncle was fighting, Wahshi drew near to him and threw his spear with utmost precision, hitting him and killing him instantly. Later on, Hind sought out Hamzah's body on the battlefield, and after chewing on his liver, thereby fulfilling her promise to drink his blood in revenge for her relatives' deaths, she disfigured him, cutting off his ears and nose and hanging them around her neck.³⁷

Nevertheless, as the battle progressed it seemed that victory could not escape the Muslims, who kept pressing forward while the Quraysh pulled back, leaving their mounts and belongings behind them. The archers, posted on the hillside, looked on the favorable turn of events, on victory close at hand, and especially on the booty that lay within reach of the soldiers who were, unlike them, fighting at the front. They forgot the Prophet's orders and the injunctions of their leader, Abdullah ibn Jubayr: only a few archers stayed on the hillside, while about forty of them ran down the hill, convinced that victory was achieved and that they too were entitled to a share in the booty. Khalid ibn al-Walid, a fine tactician who led one of the three Quraysh divisions, noticed the archers' move and immediately decided to sweep round the hill and attack the Muslim troops from behind. He succeeded in launching a pincer attack on the Prophet's Companions that resulted in total confusion, and the Muslim fighters scattered in utter disorder. Some were killed and some ran away, while others kept fighting without really knowing where to strike. The Prophet was attacked and fell off his mount: one of his teeth was broken and the rings of his helmet were driven into the bloody flesh of his cheek. A rumor spread that the Prophet had been killed, which increased the chaos among Muslims. Eventually, some Companions carried him to his mount and protected him, thus enabling him to escape his assailants. The Muslims

managed to pull out of the battlefield, where it was getting increasingly difficult to see what was going on, and gathered to face the enemy again if needed. When the fighting ended, there were only twenty-two dead among the Quraysh, while there were seventy dead among the Muslims, who had clearly been beaten, both on the battlefield and symbolically.

The archers' disobedience had had dramatic consequences. Attracted by wealth and profit, the archers had succumbed to old practices from their pagan past. Despite being nurtured with the message of faith in the One, justice, and detachment from worldly goods, they had suddenly forgotten everything when seeing riches within their reach. War victories were measured, in their ancient pagan tradition, by the amount of booty gained, and that past, that part of themselves and of their culture, had gotten the better of their spiritual education. Consequently, the Muslims had been trapped by the strategy of a formidable man, Khalid ibn al-Walid, who a few years later was to convert to Islam and become the Muslim community's warrior hero. That particular moment of the Uhud encounter is rich with a profound teaching: human beings can never completely overcome the culture and experiences that have fashioned their past, and no final judgment can ever be expressed as to the future of their choices and orientations. The Muslims were caught up by an unfortunate feature of their past customs; Khalid ibn al-Walid was to undergo a future conversion that would wipe out whatever judgments had been pronounced about his past. "Nothing is ever final" is a lesson in humility; "no final judgment should be passed" is a promise of hope.

The Quraysh carried away their dead and all their belongings. Abu Sufyan asked Umar about the Prophet's fate and received confirmation that he was still alive. When the Muslims, in their turn, went back to the battlefield, they saw that the corpses had been mutilated; the Prophet was most affected at the sight of his uncle Hamzah. In his anger, he expressed the wish to take revenge and mutilate thirty enemy corpses in the next confrontation, but Revelation reminded him of order, measure, and patience: "But if you show patience, that is indeed the best [course] for those who are patient."³⁸ The Prophet was to require that the bodies of the living as well as the dead be respected, that no torture or mutilation be ever accepted or promoted, in the name of respect for creation and for human beings' dignity and integrity.³⁹

A Defeat, a Principle

The Muslims had gone back to Medina, wounded, disappointed, and deeply distressed by the turn of events: their dead were many, their defeat was due to disobedience motivated by the lust for profit, the Prophet was wounded, and the Quraysh were of course going to regain their dignity and their status in the Peninsula. Arriving in Medina, the Prophet lost no time asking all the men who had taken part in the Battle of Uhud—even the wounded soldiers—to prepare for another expedition. He refused Abdullah ibn Ubayy's offer to join them, for he had deserted the army just before the battle. But the Prophet had informed nobody of his real intentions. He went to Hamra, camped there, and asked each of his men to prepare ten fires and light them during the night. From a distance, those fires gave the impression that a huge army was on the move.

Muhammad had staged that maneuver to lead the Quraysh to believe that he was preparing immediate retaliation and that it would be dangerous to attack Medina. He sent an envoy (again a pagan) to Abu Sufyan to inform him of this extraordinary deployment of Muslim troops. Abu Sufyan was impressed; though he had initially planned to take advantage of the Muslims' weakness and deal them a final blow at the very heart of Medina, he changed his mind and decided not to attack the city. Things went no further: Muhammad's expedition left Hamra three days later, and life resumed its course.

During the days that followed, the Prophet received a Revelation that returned to the subject of the Battle of Uhud, and in particular the disagreements about strategic choices, the disobedience, the defeat, and then the Prophet's attitude. The Prophet had remained composed and understanding toward the Companions who had been carried away by their desire for wealth and had disobeyed him. Revelation relates the event and confirms what we said at the beginning of the present chapter, about the constant blending of respect for principles and the strength of gentleness in the Prophet's personality:

It was by the mercy of God that you were lenient [gentle] with them, for if you had been severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about you. So pardon them and ask for God's forgiveness for them; and consult them upon the conduct of affairs. Then, when you have taken

a decision, put your trust in God. For God loves those who put their trust in Him.⁴⁰

The string of events leading to defeat had started with the decision taken against the Prophet's opinion; then, of course, there had been the archers' disobedience. The Quran here confirms the principle of *shura*, consultation, whatever the result: this Revelation is of crucial importance and states that the principle of deliberation, of majority decision making, is not to be negotiated and must be respected beyond historical contingencies and human mistakes in decisions. Muslims are, therefore, those who "conduct their affairs by mutual consultation," and that principle must remain even though the ways in which it is implemented cannot fail to change over time and from place to place.⁴¹

As far as the archers' disobedience is concerned, Revelation points out that the Prophet's qualities of heart were what enabled him to overcome the situation and keep his Companions around him. He was neither brutal nor stern, and he did not condemn them for being carried away by the reflexive greed stemming from their past customs. His gentleness soothed their pain and enabled them to draw many lessons from that setback: God accompanied their fate insofar as they themselves felt responsible for it. Just as there was no room for fatalism in revealed teachings, there was no room either for the airy optimism that their path would be easy just because they struggled for God's sake. On the contrary, faith required additional rigor in terms of respect for principles, additional feeling in human relations, and additional caution about the risk of complacency. Uhud had been that lesson in fragility, and the wounded Prophet, after the battle, reminded everyone that anything could happen: his blood expressed and recalled his blatant humanity.



CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tricks and Treason

The situation had become difficult for the Muslim community in Medina. The defeat at Uhud had had manifold consequences, not the least of which was their loss of prestige in the sight of the neighboring tribes, who now viewed them differently and thought them vulnerable. The Muslims were seen as weakened, and many expeditions were being organized against them to try to take advantage of that situation. As for Muhammad, who was sometimes warned of planned attacks on Medina, he would send his men—in groups of 100 to 150—to the various tribes to pacify them or prevent an aggression. The fourth year after *hijrah* (626 CE) was largely taken up with such low-intensity local conflicts, which nevertheless served to modify (and sometimes maintain) the alliances or the balance of power in the area. This amounted to a kind of chess game between the Quraysh and the Medina Muslims, and both parties knew that a full-scale confrontation lay ahead. The people of Mecca did not conceal their desire to eradicate the Muslim community from the Peninsula, and to that end, they kept making pacts with the neighboring tribes. Their situation was all the more difficult because the most direct commercial routes to the north, leading to Syria and Iraq by the coast, were still watched over and controlled by Medina. The Quraysh therefore felt that they had to take swift and radical action in order both to take advantage of the Muslims' fragility after defeat and to liberate the routes that their caravans needed to take to go north.

Banu Nadir

Many Muslims were taken prisoner during those years after falling into ambushes or simply being outnumbered by their enemies. They were often tortured and dreadfully put to death, and tradition reports their courage, patience, and dignity in the face of death. Most of the time they asked, like Khubayb, to be allowed to perform two cycles of prayer before they were executed, and they prolonged them with invocations to God, the One, for Whom they had given their possessions and their lives.

One day, a man from the Banu Amir tribe called Abu Bara came to the Prophet and asked him to send back with him a group of about forty Muslims to teach his whole tribe Islam. Muhammad, who was apprised of local alliances, expressed his fear that they might be attacked by other tribes who were hostile to Islam or had entered into pacts with the Quraysh. He received the pledge that his men would be protected by the Banu Amir, who enjoyed unchallenged prestige and could also rely on many alliances. However, he had not taken into account the internal rivalries in the Banu Amir clan. Abu Bara's own nephew caused the Muslim group's scout (who carried a letter from the Prophet) to be killed; then, when he saw that his clan wanted to remain faithful to the protection pact offered by his uncle, he commissioned two other clans to kill the whole Muslim group near Bir al-Maunah, apart from two men who escaped because they had gone to fetch water.¹ One of them preferred to die fighting the enemy, while the other, Amr ibn Umayyah, went back to Medina to inform the Prophet that his men had been slaughtered. On his way there, he met two members of the Banu Amir, whom he thought to be responsible for the ambush, and he killed them in revenge.

The Prophet was shocked, worried, and deeply grieved by what had happened to his men. It indicated that the situation was getting more and more dangerous and that alliances as well as betrayals were taking on complex and subtle features. The Banu Amir had been faithful to Abu Bara's pledges and were therefore not responsible for his men's death; the Prophet, scrupulously respectful of the terms of his pacts, immediately decided that blood money must be paid for the two men whom Amr had mistakenly killed. He decided to go to the Banu Nadir Jews and ask for their help in paying the blood debt, since this was part of the terms of

their mutual assistance agreement. Muhammad knew that since the Banu Qaynuqa's forced exile, the Banu Nadir had become suspicious, if not hostile to him, and that they had established ties with tribes hostile to the Muslims. He was therefore extremely cautious.

He visited them with his closest Companions, including Abu Bakr, Umar, and Ali. The Banu Nadir's behavior was strange and their chiefs, among them Huyay, suggested no concrete steps to help pay the blood debt; they suddenly disappeared under the pretext of preparing a meal and gathering the sum needed. The Prophet had the intuition that the Banu Nadir leaders were planning some mischief, so he rose and left discreetly, his Companions thinking he was going to come back. When he did not, they also left and followed him to his home, where he told them of his intuitions and disclosed to them that Gabriel had informed him that the Banu Nadir wanted to kill him, which indeed their strange behavior in the delegation's presence confirmed. A betrayal by the Banu Nadir, who lived inside Medina itself, made it impossible for the Muslims to set up a defense strategy. The Prophet had to act fast. He sent Muhammad ibn Maslamah to the Banu Nadir to inform them that they had betrayed the mutual assistance agreement and that they had ten days to leave the place with their women and children and their belongings, or else they would be put to death. The Banu Nadir were afraid and began to prepare to leave, but Abdullah ibn Ubayy, the hypocrite, came to them and advised them not to leave the city, pledging to give them his unfailing support from within. The Banu Nadir chiefs listened to him and informed Muhammad that they would not leave. In effect, this was a declaration of war.

The Prophet immediately decided to besiege the fortress where the Banu Nadir had sought refuge. They were at first surprised at such a rapid response, but they hoped that Ibn Ubayy or their own allies, especially the Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayzah, would come to their rescue. They did not, and after ten days the situation had become quite unbearable for them. This was when the Prophet decided to cut the tallest palm trees, those that were visible from inside, beyond the fortifications; the palm trees were the city's most valuable resource, and in cutting them down Muhammad was trying to convince the Banu Nadir that if they kept up their resistance, nothing of value would be left in the city. Only that once did Muhammad ever damage trees or another part of nature, whether in war or in peace.

The situation was so exceptional that Revelation made express mention of it: "Whatever palm trees you cut down or left standing on their roots, it was by leave of God."² Never again would the Prophet act in disrespect of creation, and he was to repeat again and again, as we shall see, that such respect must be complete, even in wartime. The Revelation of the abovementioned verse is in itself the confirmation of the rule set by that single exception.

The strategy turned out to be most successful. The Banu Nadir, besieged and penurious, surrendered and tried to negotiate the terms of their exile. Before the siege the Prophet had offered to let them leave with all their wealth, but the Banu Nadir had refused, and now they were in a weak position. According to the terms of the Prophet's threat, they ought to have been executed. In any case, allowing them to take away their possessions was now out of the question. Forgetting his threat to execute them, the Prophet demanded that they leave the city, taking only their women and children with them. Banu Nadir's chief, Huyay, nonetheless tried to negotiate, and the Prophet eventually allowed them to leave with all the goods and belongings their camels could carry; they eventually found refuge at Khaybar.³ He not only did not carry out his threat, sparing their lives, but he also allowed them to take away a considerable amount of wealth. Muhammad had always been generous and lenient after battles, despite his enemies' betrayals and ungratefulness; he had found some of the captives he had spared after Badr among his fiercest enemies at Uhud. The same thing would happen this time too: several months after allowing the Banu Nadir to flee, he would find some of the tribe's leaders and other members among the Confederates (al-Ahzab), who were to join against him a few months later.

The Muslims' situation had marginally improved, but the dangers remained considerable and manifold. After Uhud, Abu Sufyan had told Umar and the Prophet that they would meet the following year at Badr. The Prophet had accepted the challenge. He did not want to go back on his word, and he therefore went to Badr with an army of fifteen hundred men. Abu Sufyan set out with two thousand soldiers, but he stopped on the way and turned back. The Muslims stayed on the spot for eight days, waiting for the Quraysh, who did not appear. They had been true to their word, and this display of fidelity to their promise and confidence in the face of challenge both reassured them and reinforced their prestige.

Excellence and Singularity

The Prophet held one of his Companions, called Abu Lubabah, in great esteem, so much so that he had left him in charge of Medina when he had left for the first Badr expedition. Some time later, a young orphan came to Muhammad to complain that Abu Lubabah had taken from him a palm tree that had long been his. The Prophet summoned Abu Lubabah and asked him to explain. Investigations showed that the palm tree did belong to Abu Lubabah, and the Prophet judged in the latter's favor, greatly disappointing the young orphan, who thereby lost his most precious belonging. Muhammad privately asked Abu Lubabah, justice having now been rendered, to give the tree to the young orphan, for whom it was so important. Abu Lubabah adamantly refused: he had gone to such lengths to assert his right of ownership that to concede to this request was inconceivable. This obsession veiled his heart and compassion. Revelation was to recall, on both the individual and collective levels, the singular nature of the spiritual elevation that makes it possible to reach beyond the consciousness of justice, that demands right, to the excellence of the heart, that offers forgiveness or gives people more than their due: "God commands justice and excellence."⁴

It was not a question of giving up one's right (and Abu Lubabah had been justified in requiring it to be acknowledged); rather, it involved learning to sometimes reach beyond, for the sake of those reasons of the heart that teach the mind to forgive, to let go, and to give from oneself and from one's belongings, moved by shared humanity or love. The Prophet was saddened by the reaction of his Companion, whom he held in great esteem: he realized that Abu Lubabah's almost blind attachment to one of Islam's recommendations, justice, prevented him from reaching the superior level of justness of the heart: excellence, generosity, giving. Eventually, another Companion, Thabit ibn Dahdanah, who had witnessed the scene, offered Abu Lubabah an entire orchard in exchange for that single palm tree, which he then gave away to the young orphan. Muhammad rejoiced at that outcome and did not resent Abu Lubabah's attitude. He later entrusted him with other missions, such as conveying to the Banu Qurayzah the terms of their surrender. Abu Lubabah carried out his mission but could not resist speaking too much; ashamed of his behavior, he eventually tied himself to a tree for six days, hoping that God and His Prophet would forgive him his

lapse and his lack of steadfastness. Forgiveness came, and the Prophet himself unfastened Abu Lubabah's ties. This individual experience shows that spiritual edification was never totally accomplished, that consciences were constantly being tried, and that the Prophet accompanied his teaching with strictness but also with benevolence.

Muhammad had, some time before, married a widow named Zaynab, of the Banu Amir clan, who was esteemed for her generosity and her love for the poor. It was through that marriage that he had set up ties with her tribe, which was to remain faithful to him in spite of pressures from both inside and outside the clan. Zaynab, known as *um al-masakin* (the mother of the poor), was most devoted, and she came to live in a dwelling that had been arranged for her near the mosque. However, she died only eight months after her wedding, and she was buried near Ruqayyah, the Prophet's daughter. A few months later, Um Salamah, the widow of Abu Salamah, with whom she had exiled herself in Abyssinia, married the Prophet and settled in the dwelling left empty by Zaynab. Pious, enterprising, and particularly beautiful, she enjoyed a considerable position and role at the Prophet's side, and Aishah confessed that she felt jealous of Um Salamah, both, it seems, because of her beauty and because the Prophet listened to her and was greatly influenced by her opinions.

The Messenger continued, as circumstances warranted and in spite of difficulties, to spread Islam's teachings and illustrate them through his example. A Companion had once taken a fledgling from a nest and suddenly been attacked by the parent bird, which wanted to defend its offspring; the Prophet asked him to put the fledgling back in the nest and told those who were present, "God's goodness [mercy] to you is superior to that of this bird for its offspring."⁵ He taught them to observe the elements, to marvel at and draw teachings from the nature around them and the smallest parts of life. Revelation had repeatedly expressed this invitation:

Whatever is in the heavens and on earth, declares the praises [and glory] of God. For He is the Almighty, the Wise.⁶

Or again:

The seven heavens and the earth, and all beings therein, extol His limitless glory: there is not a thing but celebrates His praise; and yet you do not

understand how they glorify Him. Verily He is Oft-Forbearing, Most Forgiving!⁷

And the bird in the sky elicits this meditative observation:

Do they not observe the birds above them, spreading their wings and folding them in? None can uphold them except the Most Gracious [the Merciful]. Truly it is He who watches over all things.⁸

Revelation was later to confirm the importance of such spirituality, acting through observation, contemplation, and remembrance of God, and linked to the constant reminder of God's infinite goodness toward human hearts. "The sun and the moon follow courses exactly computed," the Quran tells the physical eye and the mind, "and the stars and the trees both alike bow in adoration," it goes on, addressing the heart's eye and faith.⁹ Those two teachings fashioned and molded the Prophet's spiritual strength; he knew where both his vulnerability and his power came from, when so many enemies tried to deceive, lure, or destroy him. God had already reminded him of His goodness and protection in the face of his weaknesses: "And had We not given you strength, you would nearly have inclined to them [those who wish to negate you, your enemies] a little."¹⁰ The signs in creation, his ability to marvel at events or at the seemingly slight details of life, to recognize the heart's charity in a person's generous word ("A benevolent word is charity")¹¹ or through a fellow being's smile ("The smile you offer your brother [your sister] is charity"),¹² gave him that strength to resist and persevere. Being constantly with the One, and remembering His presence through a look or a gesture as the presence of the Friend and Protector rather than that of a judge or a censor—such is the meaning of excellence (*al-ihsan*), of the power of the heart and of faith: "Excellence is worshiping God as though you see Him, for if you do not see Him, He indeed sees you."¹³

His Companions recognized those qualities in him, loved him, and drew their spiritual energy from his presence among them. He taught them to constantly deepen that love: "None of you believes [perfectly, completely] until I am dearer to him than his father, his son, and all humankind."¹⁴ They had to carry on their spiritual and loving quest, love the Prophet, and love one another in God, while the Prophet himself was

reminded that such communion was beyond his own human power: "Not if you had spent all that is in the earth, could you have put affection between their hearts, but God has put affection between their hearts."¹⁵ He was the example, the model, who lived among them and offered his love to them all, to the poor, to the old; he showed courteous regard for women and was attentive to children. He was a grandfather and would carry his grandchildren while praying in the mosque, thus conveying through his daily example that one cannot remember and be close to God without generosity and human attention.

Revelation was to establish his singularity in many spheres. The One demanded of him more rigorous practice, particularly concerning night prayers, and his obligations toward the Angel Gabriel and toward God were equal to none. On another level, the Quran had restricted the number of wives to four for the believers at large, but it had established the Prophet's singularity in this respect; moreover, his wives were reminded that they were "not like any of the other women."¹⁶ Henceforth, they were to cover their faces and speak to men from behind a screen (*hijab*), and they were informed that they could not marry again after the Prophet's death. In the light of the Quran's prescriptions, Muhammad married another woman named Zaynab; she was the divorced wife of Muhammad's former slave Zayd, who had become known as Zayd ibn Muhammad after being adopted by the Prophet, but who had eventually resumed his former name, Zayd ibn Harithah, since he was not the Prophet's biological son. The Quran commented: "Muhammad is not the father of any of your men, but [he is] the Messenger of God and the Seal of the Prophets."¹⁷

The Confederates

A great number of the Banu Nadir people went to settle in Khaybar after their exile from Medina. They nurtured deep resentment toward the Prophet and hoped for quick revenge. They knew, as did all the tribes in the Peninsula, that the Quraysh were preparing a full-scale attack to crush the Muslim community and finally put an end to Muhammad's mission. The Banu Nadir chief, Huyay, went to Mecca with Jewish leaders from Khaybar to seal an alliance with the Quraysh that left no room for doubt:

Muhammad and his community must be attacked and eliminated. To this end, they contacted other tribes to integrate them into the pact; the Banu Asad, Banu Ghatafan, and Banu Sulaym joined in. Only the Banu Amir, one of whose women the Prophet had married, and who had already shown unfailing fidelity (apart from a few individuals who had betrayed their word), refused to be part of the new coalition because they had previously entered into a pact with Muhammad.

The forces assembled were considerable, and when the armies marched off toward Medina, it seemed that the Muslims were no match for them. The Quraysh army and their allies from the south were more than four thousand strong, and another army, coming from Najd in the east, and made up of various tribes, brought together more than six thousand men. The city of Medina was going to be attacked from two sides, then encircled, by ten thousand warriors: one could hardly imagine its inhabitants coming out unharmed. When the armies set out, the Prophet's uncle, Abbas, secretly sent a delegation to Medina to warn the Prophet of the attack. When the delegation reached Medina, the people of Medina had only a week or less left to draw up a resistance strategy. They could not hope to muster more than three thousand soldiers, less than a third of the enemy force.

True to his custom, the Prophet gathered his Companions and consulted them about the situation and the plan of action they should adopt. Some felt that they must go out and meet the enemy, as they had done at Badr. Others thought that only by waiting inside the city would they have a chance to succeed, and that lessons must be drawn from the Uhud defeat. Among the Companions present was a Persian named Salman (Salman al-Farisi), whose story was singular in many ways. He had long been in quest of the truth and of God, and he had traveled toward Mecca in the hope of living in proximity to the Prophet. Circumstances had not been favorable, and he had eventually been sold as a slave in the Banu Qurayzah tribe. The Prophet and his Companions had gathered the amount needed to set him free, and he had for some time been a free Companion. He took part in their meetings and stood out by his fervor and devotion. When he rose to speak, he suggested a strategy hitherto unknown to the Arabs: "O Messenger of God, in Persia, when we feared an attack from a cavalry, we used to dig a moat around the city. Let us dig a moat around us!"¹⁸ The idea was unexpected, but all the Companions

liked it and they decided to implement it. They had to act fast, having only a week to dig a moat sufficiently wide and deep to prevent horses from jumping over it.

This was the third major confrontation with the Quraysh, and it was also, in effect, the third strategy the Muslims adopted. Badr, with the gathering around the wells, and Uhud, with the strategic use of the hill, had nothing to do with the present technique of waiting and keeping the enemy at a distance, which seemed to be the only means available to withstand the attack and possibly, if the siege lasted, to give those sheltered inside the city a chance to resist. Such inventiveness in military strategy is revealing of the manner in which the Prophet taught his Companions both deep faith and the exploitation of intellectual creativity in all circumstances: they had not hesitated to borrow a foreign war technique, suggested by a Persian, and adapt it to their situation in Medina. The genius of peoples, the wisdom of nations, and healthy human creativity were integrated into their mode of thinking, without hesitation or timidity. As the Prophet forcefully stated: “[Human] wisdom is the believer’s lost belonging; he is the most worthy of it wherever he finds it.”¹⁹ This was an invitation to study the best human thoughts and products and adopt them as part of humankind’s positive heritage (*maruf*, what is acknowledged as the common good). On a broader level, it meant showing curiosity, inventiveness, and creativity in the management of human affairs, and this appeared not only through his approach to war and its strategies but also, as we have seen, through his way of considering the world of ideas and culture.

The Moat

Work started immediately, and the whole city joined in. They determined where the moat was to be dug, and where rocks or the topography of the area would prevent the enemy from getting through and so a moat was unnecessary. Working days were long, and the Companions labored from dawn prayer to sunset.

Muhammad took part in the work, and his Companions would hear him sometimes invoking God, sometimes reciting poems, sometimes singing songs in which they would all join. Such moments of communion

through work molded their fraternity and sense of belonging, and also made it possible to give collective expression to feelings, aspirations, and hopes. Through his invocations, poems, and songs, the Prophet enabled the women and men in his community—beyond their communion in faith and ritual prayer—to commune through the voicing of emotions and the musicality of hearts articulating their belonging to a common expression of the self, a collective imagination, a culture. They were united not only by what they received from the One—and in which they had faith—but also in their manner of speaking about themselves, of articulating their feelings and of considering their place in the universe. Communion in faith, in the intimacy of meaning, cannot remain purely conceptual; it can maintain its vivifying energy only if it associates with communion in speech and action within a common space of social and cultural references. Faith needs culture. Thus, when he needed to unite his Companions' energies, Muhammad summoned up all the levels of their being in the world in order to perfect the unity of his community: deep faith in the One, the poetic phrasing of feelings, the musicality of the song of emotions. From within his community, sharing their daily lives, he attested that while he was indeed at the One's service, beyond time and space, he also experienced their history and partake of their culture: he was one of them.

The moat that was emerging as the work progressed was a great success: it would be impossible for enemy horsemen to cross it in any spot, and the Muslim archers would without difficulty be able to prevent them from undertaking any bold attempt. Before settling inside the city, the Medina people gathered all the crops in the oasis so that the enemy would have to rely on their own food reserves. The enemy armies were now approaching, and the Muslims hurried back inside the city, behind the moat, to wait for them.

The Siege

To the south and east of Medina, the armies arrived and settled around the city. They were surprised to see the moat, which thwarted their plan to encircle the city and invade it in a joint attack from all sides. The moat was indeed a war technique unknown to the Arabs, and the Confederates therefore had to find another plan of action to defeat the Muslims.

Consultations began between the various tribes to find the best means of shortening the siege and taking possession of the city: without any other provisions than their own, protracted hostilities could not be considered. They decided that a majority of forces would gather to the north in order to mobilize the Medina forces on that side, while the rest tried to cross the moat from the hence unguarded south, where access seemed easier near the rocks. The Jewish tribe of Banu Qurayzah mainly lived in that area; they had signed an assistance agreement with Muhammad, but they might constitute the weak point in Medina's unity. Huyay, the chief of the Banu Nadir clan, insisted on going to the Banu Qurayzah fortress to speak to their chief, Kab ibn Asad, and try to convince him to break his alliance with Muhammad. Kab ibn Asad initially refused to receive Huyay, but the latter insisted so strongly that the Banu Qurayzah chief let himself be convinced, first to listen to him, then to betray the covenant. This defection meant that the whole strategy of the Medina people collapsed, since the Banu Qurayzah's alliance with the enemy opened a breach from inside and gave the enemy access to the city, which meant certain defeat and no less certain extermination for the Muslims.

By no means were all the Banu Qurayzah satisfied with their chief's decision, and tensions developed within the group, but the vast majority agreed to join forces with the Quraysh and their allies. In the meantime, the Prophet's observations of the movements of enemy troops in the north led him to anticipate a trick, so he decided to check the reliability of his alliances in the south, for he knew the Banu Qurayzah were far from being all favorably inclined toward him. Meanwhile, he heard rumors that the Banu Qurayzah chiefs had one-sidedly broken the covenant. If the news turned out to be true, not only would the Muslim army's morale collapse, but they would have little chance of winning the battle. He sent two scouts whom he asked to gather intelligence and act judiciously: if the rumor was groundless, they were to announce it loud and clear to reassure the troops and restore their courage; if it was true, they were to let him know discreetly. The news was true, the scouts reported, and Muhammad had to react immediately. He sent Zayd to the southern front with three hundred men in order to prevent any enemy attempt to get through with the Banu Qurayzah's support.

The siege was getting increasingly difficult to bear, and the Muslims had to be constantly on alert. One day, the attacks were so numerous and

came from so many fronts that the Muslims could not perform the early afternoon and midafternoon prayers (*az-zuhr* and *al-asr*) at their respective times, nor after that the sunset prayer (*al-maghrib*). The Prophet was annoyed, and the siege was beginning to affect the Companions' morale. Revelation tells of their feelings:

When they came on you from above you and from below you [from all sides], and when the eyes swerved and the hearts gaped up to the throats, and you imagined various thoughts about God! In that situation, the Believers were tried: they were shaken as by a tremendous shaking.²⁰

The trial was a difficult one, and it also revealed the sincerity and fidelity of tribes as well as individuals. Not only had the war brought to light the Banu Qurayzah clan's double-dealing, but it had also, once again, exposed the hypocrites, who were quick to think of reconsidering their commitment or even surrendering. The Quran says: "And when the hypocrites and those in whose heart is a disease [doubt] say: 'God and His Messenger promised us nothing but delusions!'"²¹ Some wanted to return to their families, saying, "Truly our houses are bare and exposed."²² Others merely wanted to escape the fighting and protect themselves, since it seemed obvious to them that the Muslims' defense would shortly give way. Resisting for days in this manner appeared impossible.

The majority of Muslims, however, were faithful to the Prophet and his example and shared his determination. It is in relation to this crisis, which brought to light the depth and sincerity of faith and of commitment to the One, that the verse about the Prophet's exemplarity was revealed: "You have indeed in the Messenger of God an excellent example for he who hopes in [aspires to get close to] God and the Final Day and who remembers God intensely."²³

The meaning of the verse far transcends the circumstances of that battle. It tells of the Prophet's role and status in and for the life of every Muslim individual, but it takes on an even more powerful dimension when one remembers the circumstances of its Revelation: a besieged community, shaken, unable within the scope of human sight and intelligence to see any way out of the impending disaster, whose ranks dwindle away through desertion and treason, and who unite around the Messenger, his faith, and his trust. Revelation confirms this:

When the Believers saw the Confederate forces, they said: "This is what God and His Messenger had promised us, and God and His Messenger told us what was true." And it only added to their faith and their zeal in obedience.²⁴

At the heart of the turmoil, the Prophet had been most upset at not being able to perform the various prayers at their appointed times. That consciousness of discipline in prayer never left the Messenger; he was scrupulous about his daily religious worship. "Prayer is enjoined on believers at stated times."²⁵ Neglecting the time of a prayer had touched his heart and bred deep resentment against those who had compelled him to such a lapse. All his Companions had witnessed, in all the circumstances of his life, that seemingly surprising blend of infinite generosity of heart, unambiguous determination in adversity, and strict management of time. At another time Ibn Abbas was to report seeing the Prophet join the two afternoon prayers and the two evening prayers for no obvious reason, and Muslim scholars have recognized the lawfulness of such arrangements on a journey or in an exceptional situation, but the teaching that remains, in the light of the Prophet's life, is the need for strict respect of prayer, which is both a reminder of a privileged relationship with the One and the experience of that relationship.²⁶ This is what the Quran confirms when it tells of God's call to Moses: "Verily, I am God: there is no god but I: so worship Me [only], and establish regular prayer for My remembrance."²⁷

A Trick

The Muslims were in serious difficulty, but as the days went by the Confederates also found themselves in a difficult position, since they did not have much food left and the nights were bitterly cold. The Prophet tried to negotiate the defection of two Ghatafan clans by offering them a third of Medina's date crop; they informed his envoy that they wanted half, but the Prophet kept to his offer and they eventually accepted. Before sending Uthman to seal the deal, the Prophet consulted the leaders of the two main Medina clans, the Aws and the Khazraj, because of their knowledge of the neighboring clans. They asked whether his action was the result of Revelation or personal choice. When they heard that it

was a personal initiative meant to protect them, they refused the terms of that treaty and informed the Messenger that in view of the situation, the only way out was to fight.

At that moment, the Prophet received a visit from Nuaym ibn Masud, a prominent elder from the Quraysh who was well respected by all the tribes in the Peninsula, who came to tell Muhammad that he had converted to Islam but that nobody knew it so far. He placed himself at the Prophet's disposal. Nuaym was well known and respected by all the chiefs who were besieging Medina. Muhammad knew it and told him, "Do what is necessary to stir up discord among them!" Nuaym asked if he could lie, and the Prophet answered: "Do what you want to loosen the grip on us; war is deceit!"²⁸ Nuaym came up with an efficient stratagem. He first went to the Banu Qurayzah and warned them about their new allies' intentions. If things took a bad turn, he said, the Confederates would not hesitate to let them down, and they would be given over to Muhammad without any protection. He advised them to demand that the other tribes send some of their men as hostages, as a guarantee that they would not forsake the Banu Qurayzah. They liked the idea and decided to send an envoy to the Quraysh leaders to explain their request. Nuaym then hurried to Abu Sufyan to warn him that the Banu Qurayzah were deceiving him and were in fact Muhammad's allies. He declared that they were going to ask him for men as a pledge of his fidelity, but that in reality they intended to give them up to Muhammad as evidence of their good faith. When the Banu Qurayzah envoy came to Abu Sufyan and told him about the request for hostages, Abu Sufyan was convinced that Nuaym had spoken the truth and that the Banu Qurayzah were indeed deceiving him. He immediately summoned Huyay, the Banu Nadir chief, and questioned him about that betrayal. Huyay, surprised and taken aback, at first did not know what to say, and Abu Sufyan thought he could see in this an acknowledgment of treachery.

The first signs of division were appearing in the Confederate camp. Mutual trust reigned among some clans, while others were wary of each other. The news greatly weakened the resolution of the fighters in league with the Quraysh. Weariness and lack of food only heightened the atmosphere of discouragement. Then a strong, bitter wind beset the plain and convinced them that it had become impossible to overcome Medina's resistance. Muhammad had been informed of the enemy troops' morale,

and so he sent Hudhayfah to gather intelligence during the night. Hudhayfah came back with the good news of their total disarray: chaos reigned in the enemy ranks, and the cold had paralyzed them. The men were breaking camp, and many fighters had already left. The Prophet told his Companions the good news after morning prayer, when daylight confirmed that the enemy was gone. The siege, which had taken place in the fifth year of *hijrah* (627 CE), had lasted twenty-five days, and the Confederates were going home beaten without having fought, bearing the burden of a real as well as symbolic defeat.

The Banu Qurayzah

The Prophet released his men and allowed them to visit their homes. The enemy was gone and the siege had been lifted; the exhausted Medina people, who had lost hope and reached the limits of their resistance, rejoiced at the outcome. Muhammad went home immediately and rested until the first afternoon prayer. After he had prayed, the Angel Gabriel came to him and informed him that God commanded him to go immediately to the Banu Qurayzah, whose betrayal had almost led to the extermination of the Muslim community, and besiege their fortress.

The Prophet at once addressed his Companions and the whole audience present in the mosque, requesting them to get ready immediately in order to go to the Banu Qurayzah. As the Muslims set off in groups, the Prophet ordered: "Let none of you perform the second afternoon prayer [*al-asr*] until you reach Qurayzah territory."²⁹ Time was short, and the Muslims, who had hoped to have some rest at last, had only enough time to gather their equipment, put on their battle gear, and start out. In one of the groups heading toward the Banu Qurayzah, an argument took place. It was time to pray *al-asr*, and some of them, literally repeating the Prophet's order, maintained that they must not pray on the way but must wait until they reached the Banu Qurayzah.³⁰ The others argued that the Prophet's intention was that they must hurry there, but that when prayer time came they must of course pray on time. So part of the group did not pray, keeping to the literal meaning of the Prophet's words, while the other part prayed, referring to the spirit of the recommendation. Later on, they asked the Prophet which was the correct interpretation, and he

accepted both. This attitude was to have major consequences for the future of the Muslim community, as after the Prophet's death two main schools of thought appeared: the *ahl al-hadith*, who after Abdullah ibn Umar and in the spirit of the first group mentioned above kept to the literal meaning of the sayings reported in Prophetic tradition (*sunnah*), and the *ahl ar-ray*, who with Abdullah ibn Masud tried to understand the purpose of the saying, its spirit, and its occasionally figurative meaning. Both approaches had been accepted by the Prophet, and both were therefore correct and legitimate ways of remaining faithful to the message.

About three thousand men now encircled the Banu Qurayzah fortresses. Trapped, with little food, the Banu Qurayzah nevertheless resisted for twenty-five days, so strong was their fear of the fate they expected them after such serious treason. The Prophet sent Abu Lubabah, a man from the Aws (who had formerly sealed a pact with the Banu Nadir and had in effect remained close to the Banu Qurayzah), to discuss the terms of their surrender. At the sight of the desolation inside the fortress walls, Abu Lubabah could not help hinting to the Banu Qurayzah that death would be their fate if they surrendered. He later bitterly regretted his attitude, which could have led the Banu Qurayzah not to surrender or to seek a way out through other alliances. However, they decided to open the doors of their fortresses and acknowledge their defeat.

The women and children were placed in the custody of a former rabbi, Abdullah ibn Sallam, and the seven hundred men were tied up and kept aside in a field. Their belongings, riches, and weapons were collected to be taken back to Medina. The Aws immediately sent a delegation to the Prophet requesting him to deal with the Banu Qurayzah with the same clemency he had shown so far to the other groups that had joined against him. Muhammad asked the Aws: "Would you be satisfied if I asked one of you to pronounce the judgment about them?"³¹ They answered most positively, convinced that one of their own could not forget past alliances, and the Prophet sent for Sad ibn Muadh, who was still wounded and was being nursed in the Medina mosque. A delegation went to fetch him.

The Prophet had so far spared his prisoners' lives. As previously noted, he had found some of the Badr captives among his fiercest enemies at Uhud, and the same had happened with the Banu Nadir: he had allowed them to leave with their women and children and their wealth, and later their chief, Huyay, led the Confederate plot. Among the Banu Qurayzah

prisoners, many had also been exiled from the Banu Nadir. Thus, his clemency had had no effect on most of those who had enjoyed it, and it sent a confusing message throughout the Peninsula: Muhammad, people thought, never killed his prisoners, contrary to Arab or even Jewish customs.³² His clemency, repeatedly betrayed, was seen as a sign of weakness, if not madness. Besides, the Banu Qurayzah's treason was so serious that if their plans had been successful, it would have led to the extermination of the Muslims, betrayed from within and crushed by an army of more than ten thousand.

Sad ibn Muadh eventually arrived among the Banu Qurayzah. He first wanted to make sure his verdict would be respected by all. He turned to the leaders of the various groups, who one by one pledged to abide by his decision. He finally addressed the Prophet, who confirmed that he would not oppose the judgment. Ibn Muadh judged that the men were to be executed while the women and children were to be considered as war captives. Muhammad accepted the sentence, which was carried out during the following days. A number of captives were ransomed by the Banu Nadir, and Rayhanah, a Banu Qurayzah captive originally from the Banu Nadir, became the Prophet's slave. She embraced Islam, but accounts differ as to what became of her. According to some sources, the Prophet set her free and married her; others merely report that he married her, while some have it that she refused marriage and remained his servant for five years, until he died.³³

The news of the Muslims' twofold victory spread through the Peninsula and radically transformed perceptions and power balances. Not only had the Muslims resisted an army more than ten thousand strong, but they had also shown unfailing determination. The fate meted out to the Banu Qurayzah men delivered a powerful message to all the neighboring tribes that betrayals and aggressions would henceforth be severely punished. The message had been heard: such a situation never occurred again while the Prophet was alive.

Zaynab and Abu al-As

The Prophet's daughter Zaynab had been married to Abu al-As, who had not accepted Islam. She had initially stayed with him in Mecca, until the

Prophet asked her to join him in Medina with her small daughter Umamah. Zaynab deeply loved her husband, but their different life choices had eventually caused them to part. However, neither of them had remarried.

A few months after the Battle of the Moat, the Prophet sent an expedition to stop a rich Quraysh caravan coming from the north. Zayd, who commanded the Muslim horsemen, seized the caravan's goods and captured most of the men, while others managed to get away. Among the latter was Abu al-As, who decided on his journey back to Mecca to stop at Medina and pay a secret visit to his wife and daughter. This in itself was madness, but his desire to see his wife and child was stronger than his awareness of the risks incurred. He knocked on his wife's door in the dead of night, and Zaynab let him in. He stayed with her, and when dawn drew near, she went to the mosque for prayer as she usually did. She entered the mosque and stood in the first line of women, just behind the men. When the Prophet said the formula announcing the beginning of prayer, she took advantage of the short pause to exclaim in a very loud voice: "O you people! I grant my protection to Abu al-As, son of Rabi!" When prayer was over, the Prophet, who had had no prior knowledge of what had happened between his daughter and her husband, had the audience confirm that they had heard the proclamation as well. He insisted that the protection granted—whether by his daughter or by any other ordinary Muslim—must be respected. He then went to his daughter, who told him about the situation facing Abu al-As, whose goods had all been taken during the recent expedition in the north and who was therefore in debt, for the said goods had been entrusted to him by people in Mecca. Muhammad suggested that the people who had those goods in their possession might give them back to Abu al-As if they wished to, and all of them complied. Some Companions advised Abu al-As to convert to Islam and keep those belongings for himself. He refused, saying that becoming a Muslim and beginning by betraying people's trust would not have been suitable. He took all the goods, went back to Mecca, and gave each owner his due. He then came back to Medina, converted to Islam, and was reunited with Zaynab and their daughter Umamah.

Thus, the first Muslims' generosity and open-handedness were plain for all to see. Like the Prophet, they had required nothing of Abu al-As: he was not a Muslim, he belonged to an enemy clan, and he refused to

convert, but they let him go anyway, allowing him the freedom to choose and the time needed for his spiritual development. He even received—at a critical time in interclan relations—the Muslim community's protection, and it was a woman who spoke out publicly and forcefully on his behalf. Zaynab often went to the mosque, which was a space open to both men and women, and nobody objected to her making a statement there, among men; in fact, it was not at all uncommon for Muslim women to speak up publicly in such a manner. Later, in one such instance that is particularly famous in Muslim history, a woman would address Umar ibn al-Khattab, who had become the Muslims' caliph, and point out an error of judgment that he immediately acknowledged.

Inside the mosque, the women would line up behind the men's ranks, as the postures of prayer, in its various stages, require an arrangement that preserves modesty, decency, and respect. Women prayed, studied, and expressed themselves in that space. Moreover, they found in the Prophet's attitude the epitome of courtesy and regard: he demanded that men remain seated in order to let women leave first and without inconvenience. There was always gentleness and dignity in his behavior toward women, whom he listened to, and whose right to express themselves and set forth their opinions and arguments he acknowledged, protected, and promoted.



CHAPTER TWELVE

A Dream, Peace

The victory over the Confederates and then the expedition against the Banu Qurayzah had changed the situation in the Peninsula, with the power of the Prophet and his Companions acknowledged. Some, such as the Persian and Byzantine empires, were even beginning to speak of Muhammad as the “powerful King of the Arabs,” since they saw him as an unchallenged regional power. As soon as he had intelligence of danger, Muhammad did not hesitate to send expeditions to the nearby tribes in order to forestall any attempt at rebellion or attack and thus make it clear to all neighboring clans that the Medina Muslims remained on alert and were ready to defend themselves.

It was during one such expedition, against the Banu al-Mustaliq, in the fifth or sixth year of *hijrah*, that the episode of Aishah’s necklace took place. That event reminds us, like many others, that life and teachings went on as circumstances warranted and that religious practice was being clarified while the social dimension of Islamic ethics grew in depth. Internal difficulties also remained, particularly because of the actions of a number of hypocrites who tried to take advantage of any situation to cause Muhammad trouble.

A Dream

The month of Ramadan had begun, and the Prophet, as he usually did, intensified night worship and was even more attentive to the well-being of the poor and needy. This was a month of intense spirituality, when

Muhammad recited back to Angel Gabriel all that had been revealed of the Quran, and during which he lengthened ritual prayers and performed the additional prayers of *tarawih*.¹ Invocations (*dua*) were also constant, while women and men were requested to fast during the day, liberating themselves from the characteristics that most directly defined their humanity: drinking, eating, and satisfying their sexual desire. By controlling their natural needs, believers were to strive to get closer to the qualities of the divine and experience His presence through meditation. Beyond the body's fast, Muslims were also expected to "fast" with their tongues (avoiding lies, vulgarity, and indecent remarks) and their hearts (avoiding bad feelings or thoughts). That spiritual discipline, as we have said, went along with additional demands as to the care and attention the poor must receive: the month of Ramadan was both the month of the Quran and that of generosity, giving, and solidarity. Believers, whether women, men, or children, were strongly advised to pay special alms at the end of the fasting month in order to take care of the needs of all the members of the community during the days of celebration they observed. The quest for proximity to the One can only be experienced and perfected through proximity to the poor: respecting, caring for, and serving them bring one closer to God.

During that month, the Prophet had a surprising dream, both perplexing and gratifying. He dreamed that he entered the Kaba sanctuary, his head shaved, holding the key to the sanctuary in his right hand. The vision was powerful, and the Prophet, as he usually did in such circumstances, interpreted it as a sign and a message. The next day, he told his Companions about it and invited them to get ready to go and perform the lesser pilgrimage (*umrah*) in Mecca.² They were both happy and surprised: how could they enter the Mecca territory, how would the Quraysh allow them to, how were they to avoid a conflict? The Prophet's obvious confidence nevertheless soothed them: the journey was to take place during the month of Dhu al-Qidah, which was one of the sacred months during which the Arabs never fought. Moreover, the Prophet's visions had up till then proved truthful: he had so far led them quietly and confidently. They got ready for departure.

Between twelve hundred and fourteen hundred faithful undertook the journey. The danger was considerable, but the Prophet did not allow the pilgrims to carry weapons (apart from the equipment necessary for hunting and other needs of the journey) and took with him his wife Um Salamah as well as Nusaybah and Um Mani, two women who had been present at the

first covenant of al-Aqabah. They set out and, at the first halt, the Prophet himself consecrated the camels that were to be sacrificed during the pilgrimage. As for the Meccans, they very soon heard that a convoy of Muslims was heading for Mecca, intending to visit the Kaba. Visiting the sanctuary had, for decades, been the Peninsula tribes' most legitimate right, but with the Muslims, the Quraysh were faced with an irresolvable dilemma: they did not see how they could either justify barring them from entering (and how could they compel them to comply in the sacred month of Dhu al-Qidah, during which war was prohibited) or, on the other hand, allow their enemy into the city, which would endow the Muslims with unacceptable prestige. Quraysh decided to send Khalid ibn al-Walid with two hundred men to stop the pilgrims from getting near Mecca. The Muslims' scout came to inform them of the fact, and they decided to change their route in order to avoid a situation that would inevitably lead to a clash. The Prophet relied on a Companion's knowledge of the area, and they took a route through which they arrived south of Mecca, on the edge of the sacred territory, in the plain of al-Hudaybiyyah. At that point, the Prophet's camel, Qaswa, halted and refused to go on. As had been the case when he had arrived in Medina seven years before, the Prophet saw this as a sign. He had to stop and negotiate the pilgrims' entry into Mecca with the Quraysh.

The Quraysh were once more totally taken aback by the Prophet's attitude, which did not fit with any of their religious, cultural, or warfare traditions. At the height of his new power, he was coming to Mecca unarmed, and thus in effect vulnerable, even though circumstances could have enabled him to attain even greater supremacy over his enemies. Moreover, he called people to a new religion but did not hesitate to rely on respect of the rules of Arab traditions to protect himself from their attacks, and in doing so he put the Quraysh into a dilemma, since they had to choose between their honor (respecting the rules) and the loss of their prestige (allowing the Muslims to enter Mecca). Muhammad's tactical choices proved rewarding.

Negotiations

The Quraysh were determined not to allow the Muslims to perform the pilgrimage, because of the crucial symbolic stakes involved but also, of

course, because they did not know what Muhammad's actual intentions were. They decided to send an envoy from the Banu Khuzaah clan, Budayl ibn Warqa, who had no quarrel with any of the clans present and could therefore act as a mediator. He went to the Prophet, who assured him that he had no intention of waging war, but only wanted to perform the lesser pilgrimage with his Companions and go home. He added, however, that he was ready to fight anyone who opposed their right to enter the sanctuary freely, like all the other clans and tribes. If, nevertheless, the Quraysh needed time to get ready to let the pilgrims in, they would wait at al-Hudaybiyyah until the Quraysh had finished their preparations. Budayl returned to Mecca and suggested that the Quraysh should let the Muslims in, but his proposal got a chilly reception; in particular, it was flatly rejected by Ikrimah, Abu Jahl's son.

A chief named Urwah decided to meet Muhammad and negotiate, while at the same time taking a closer look at the people with him and the nature of the expedition. He went to the Prophet and began talking with him according to the customs habitual among Arab clans: he addressed him familiarly, on an equal footing, and took hold of his beard, as was usual among tribal chiefs. For this he was firmly taken to task by Mughirah, one of the exiles from Mecca, who threatened to beat him up if he went on behaving like that. Urwah was surprised, but before he left, he stopped to observe and visit the Muslims' camp, and was amazed at the respect and devotion the believers showed their leader, Muhammad. He went back to the Quraysh and told them, as Budayl had done, that it would be wiser to let the Muslims in, since they obviously had no intention of fighting. However, the Quraysh's leaders refused again.

While Urwah was on his mission, two other negotiation attempts had taken place. Hulays, of the Banu al-Harith, had also come to speak with the Prophet. The latter recognized him from a distance and, knowing how much Hulays and his clan respected religious and sacred matters, had the herd of camels consecrated for sacrifice sent out to meet him. When Hulays saw the camels, he understood the message and decided to turn back immediately, certain that Muhammad indeed had no intention other than peacefully performing a pilgrimage. The Prophet himself had not remained inactive: he had sent the Quraysh an envoy named Khirash, but Ikrimah refused to listen to him, cut his camel's legs, and was about to

strike him too when Hulays stepped in to protect him and request that he be allowed to return to the Prophet unharmed.

Four attempts at negotiation had failed, then, and the Quraysh seemed more unyielding than ever. The Prophet decided he must make a last attempt, sending an envoy who enjoyed sufficient respect and protection in Mecca that he would meet another fate than Khirash's and be listened to. He eventually chose Uthman ibn Affan, his son-in-law, who had solid clan connections in Mecca and whom nobody would dare attack. Uthman went and was indeed well received, but met with the same refusal: the Quraysh would not allow the Muslims to perform the pilgrimage. He himself could, if he wished to, perform the circumambulations around the Kaba, but letting in Muhammad and his men was out of the question. Uthman refused the offer. His mission had taken longer than expected, and for three days the Prophet had no news of him. The rumor spread that Uthman had been killed, and this caused the Prophet deep sorrow. Such an action on the part of the Quraysh—killing an envoy during the sacred month and opposing the Muslims' legitimate right to visit the Kaba, as all other tribes were allowed to—could only be seen by the Muslims as a new declaration of war. From then on, they had to prepare for the worst.

The Pledge of Allegiance

The Prophet had all the Companions summoned, and they hurried to him. He sat at the foot of an acacia tree and asked each of the Muslims to pledge allegiance (*bayat ar-ridwan*), swearing him obedience and fidelity. Through that gesture, they explicitly stated that they would remain by the Prophet's side whatever the outcome might be. They had come to perform a pilgrimage, they were unarmed, and now they faced the very high probability of a conflict for which they were not prepared. The affirmation of their fidelity to the Prophet meant to them that they pledged not to run away and to go so far as accepting death, since the balance of forces was heavily against them. The Prophet himself put his left hand in his right hand and told the assembled faithful that this represented Uthman's pledge, since the latter had not given any sign of life and he considered him dead.³

However, just as the last Companions had finished giving their pledge, Uthman suddenly reappeared. The Prophet rejoiced at this: not only was Uthman, his son-in-law, alive, but the Quraysh had not been so rash as to act in disrespect of the custom of nonviolence during the sacred months. A conflict with the Quraysh thus seemed to be less likely, and the Prophet was informed that they had finally sent a new envoy, Suhayl ibn Amr, to seal a formal agreement with the Muslims. He decided to receive him and examine their proposals.

Uthman too had pledged allegiance to the Prophet. Like all the others, he had understood that this expression of faithfulness would be required in a potential war situation. However, the circumstances were now completely different, with Muhammad about to start negotiations on the terms of peace between his community and the Quraysh. They had all pledged allegiance thinking that they were expressing their fidelity in a situation of conflict, and moreover one in which they were in a weak position. Now their fidelity was going to be tested through the implementation and terms of a truce in which they held a strong position. Revelation relates that pledge: "God's good pleasure was on the believers when they swore fealty to you under the tree."⁴ The Muslims were demanding their right, they bore a message that they were certain was true, and they had acquired great prestige after the latest battles, so keeping a low profile was out of the question.

The Covenant of al-Hudaybiyyah

The Prophet received the Quraysh envoy, Suhayl ibn Amr, who came with two other men, Mikraz and Huwaytib. The negotiations began at some distance from the Companions, and each element in the agreement was discussed, sometimes sharply. When the terms of the covenant were at last settled, the Prophet asked his cousin Ali ibn Abi Talib to write them down. The latter naturally began the writing of the text with the usual formula "In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful" (*BismiLLah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*), but Suhayl opposed the phrase, saying that he did not know *ar-Rahman* and that they should use the formula "In Your name, O God" (*Bismika Allahumma*), the only one all the Arabs knew (even polytheists used it to address their main god). Some Companions

immediately retorted that changing the formula was out of the question, but the Prophet intervened and told Ali to write "In Your name, O God."⁵ Then he instructed him to write on: "These are the terms of the truce signed between Muhammad, God's Messenger, and Suhayl ibn Amr." Suhayl again disagreed: "If we had known you to be God's Messenger, we would not have fought you. Write instead: 'Muhammad ibn Abdullah.'" Ali, who had already written the usual formula, refused to give in and maintained that he could do no such thing. The Prophet asked him to show him where the phrase was written, wiped it out himself, then asked him to add what Suhayl had requested, which meant "Muhammad, son of Abdullah." Ali and the other Companions were shocked and could not understand the Prophet's attitude. The terms of the agreement were to alarm them even more, as they looked like a series of compromises highly unfavorable to the Muslims. The treaty was based on four essential points: (1) The Muslims could not perform their pilgrimage that year, but they would be allowed to stay three days the following year. (2) A ten-year truce was to be observed by both sides, and all their members would be free to travel safely in the region. (3) The terms of the agreement would immediately apply to any clan or tribe that entered into a covenant with either side. (4) Any Muslim leaving Mecca for Medina would immediately be delivered to the Meccan leaders, whereas anyone fleeing Medina and seeking protection in Mecca would be granted asylum.⁶

The Companions were beginning to realize that after the signing of a covenant that appeared to them to be a swindle, they would have to return without visiting the Kaba. Their disappointment reached its peak when they witnessed the arrival of Abu Jandal, the youngest son of Suhayl, who had just signed the pact. Abu Jandal had converted to Islam and had run away, his feet still in shackles, after his father had imprisoned him to prevent him from joining the Muslims. When Suhayl saw his escaped son, he reminded the Prophet that according to the agreement he had just signed, he could not keep him and had to give him back. The Prophet admitted this, and Abu Jandal, although he appealed to the Companions for help, was delivered into his father's hands while Muhammad enjoined him to remain patient. His elder brother Abdullah, who had been a Muslim for a long time and was among the pilgrims who witnessed the scene, was revolted by the situation. Another Companion, Umar, could not control himself when Suhayl struck his son's face with his chains. He rushed to

the Prophet and remonstrated sharply, firing at him a series of questions that expressed his total disapproval: "Are you not God's Prophet? Are we not right, and are our enemies not wrong? Why should we so shamefully give in against our religion's honor?"⁷ Each time, the Prophet answered sedately, but that was not enough to satisfy Umar, who, now seething with intense anger, turned to Abu Bakr for help. Abu Bakr advised him to calm down, as he believed the Prophet was right. Umar controlled himself and kept quiet, even though he clearly remained convinced that the agreement was a humiliation.

Suhayl and the other two envoys left the camp, taking with them Abu Jandal, who had collapsed into tears. The Muslims observing the scene felt intense sorrow and deep revulsion: they could not understand the Prophet's attitude. He had taught them courage and dignity, and now he was accepting an unfair deal obliging them to look on helplessly as one of them received degrading, humiliating treatment. When the Prophet asked them to sacrifice the camels that had been consecrated for the pilgrimage, none of the Companions could bring themselves to comply, for the wounds and the bitterness were too deep. The Prophet repeated his order three times, but nobody responded. This was the first time he was faced with disobedience in such a collective, determined manner. The Prophet, startled and saddened, retired into his tent and told his wife Um Salamah about what had just happened and the Companions' refusal to sacrifice the beasts. She listened, then suggested he should act wisely and silently: she advised him to go out without saying a word and sacrifice his own camel, merely setting the example. Muhammad listened to her advice, which turned out to be judicious. He went to his camel, pronounced the ritual formula, and sacrificed it. When they saw this, the Companions rose one after another and did the same. Then the Prophet shaved his head, and some of the Companions did too, while others cut their hair or just a lock of it.

Spirituality and Understanding Victory

The Companions were soon to realize that their first judgments about the treaty had been completely wrong and that they had not sufficiently appreciated the Prophet's deep spirituality, strict rational coherence, extra-

ordinary intelligence, and strategic genius. He listened for signs, and when his camel had stopped and refused to budge, he had the intuition that the Muslims would not move any further than the plain of al-Hudaybiyyah that year. The failure of the first four negotiations and the Quraysh's obstinacy convinced him that he must be patient. He was deeply confident: in his dream, he had seen himself entering the sanctuary, and this would not fail to happen, although for the moment he could not say when. The pledge of allegiance that had initially seemed to unite the Muslims against the enemy was thus, as we have seen, to turn into a pledge of fidelity requiring them to bear with dignity the conditions of a covenant for peace.

Moreover, when Suhayl refused the Muslims' two habitual formulas referring to God and to Muhammad's status as God's Messenger, the Prophet heard his point of view and was able, at that particular moment, to shift his perspective and see things from his interlocutor's standpoint. What Suhayl was saying was perfectly true according to his outlook. It was indeed obvious that if the Quraysh had acknowledged his status as God's Messenger, they would not have fought against him; therefore, an agreement on an equal footing could not possibly state an element that would in effect acknowledge what one side held as truth while contradicting the other's position. The Companions, whose respect for the Prophet was so deep, had been unable to immediately hear the other's truth, but the Prophet's attitude and his reasonable approach to the terms of the covenant were pregnant with spiritual and intellectual teaching. The point was that the heart's relation to the truth—deep spirituality—must never be allowed to turn into emotional, passionate blindness: reason must always be called upon to analyze the situation, temper one's reaction, and help establish an attentive, coherent relation to the other's truth. What appeared as an unacceptable compromise from the sole viewpoint of the believers' faith was fair and equitable from the double viewpoint of the respective rationalities of each of the parties drawing up the peace treaty.

Muhammad could not humiliate the Quraysh in order to save the Muslims' honor and prestige, or even to take advantage of the new political situation after the moat victory. Agreeing not to enter the sanctuary that year took into account the Quraysh's vulnerability and protected their prestige, and this contributed toward long-term peace. Such peace, which considered the general interests of both camps, was soon to turn to the

Muslims' advantage. The clauses stating that emigrants to Medina should be sent back and Muslims leaving Medina for Mecca given asylum only marginally affected the Muslims' interests: a believer leaving Medina was of no use to the Muslim community, and the Muslim faith of a Meccan sent back to his clan ought not—despite the suffering—to be shaken by this forced exile. Contrary to appearances, which Abu Jandal's plight reinforced, Muhammad had not made any serious concessions on this point.

Trust in God, allied to strict intellectual coherence and an exceptionally acute mind, had enabled the Prophet to establish a ten-year truce with the prospect of a visit to the sanctuary the following year. Most of the Companions, and particularly Umar ibn al-Khattab, considered only immediate results, however, and felt this was a humiliation that could amount to nothing but a defeat. Like many others, he regretted his violent reaction against the Prophet, but he remained convinced that the covenant was a capitulation. On the way back, he was told that Muhammad had sent for him; he was afraid the Prophet was going to blame him for his inappropriate attitude or, worse still, tell him that verses had been revealed disapproving his behavior. He found the Prophet with a beaming face, and Muhammad told him about Revelation of verses quite different from what he might have expected. The Divine Word announced: "Verily We have granted you a manifest victory."⁸ Then it mentioned the pledge of allegiance, saying: "He knew what was in their hearts, and He sent down tranquility [*as-sakinah*] to them; and He rewarded them with a victory near at hand."⁹ All this was recalled in the light of Muhammad's initial dream, which was therefore truthful: "Truly did God fulfill the vision for His Messenger: you shall enter the Sacred Mosque, if God wills, with minds secure, heads shaved or hair cut short, and without fear. For He knows what you do not know, and he has granted you, besides this, a victory near at hand."¹⁰

The events of the recent past were presented in a manner totally at odds with the Companions' perception of them: the pledge of allegiance to prepare for war was in reality a pledge of fidelity for peace, the apparent defeat was presented as "a manifest victory," and a seemingly aborted dream was announced as a certainty in the future: "you shall enter the Sacred Mosque." The vast majority of Muslims had not understood, had not seen, or had been unable to perceive the prospects and hopes the covenant allowed. The signing of the pact was therefore, once again, a

privileged moment of spiritual edification with, moreover, an exceptional lesson about the value of intelligence and perspicacity. Listening, the ability to shift one's point of view, sensitivity to the other's dignity, and foresight were some of the qualities showed by the Prophet, contributing to fashion his role as a model.

He was an example too in another dimension of his life: when his Companions refused to sacrifice the camels, he went back to his wife Um Salamah, who listened to him and comforted him. She showed him her trust and suggested the solution to his problem. That dialogue, that understanding and listening, expresses the very essence of the Prophet's attitude toward his wives. As with Khadijah so many years before, he never hesitated to take the time to confide in the women around him, to consult them, talk with them, and adopt their opinions. At a time when the future of the whole community was playing out through visions, pledges of allegiance, and peace covenants, he returned to his wife's side and, like a simple human being, told her of his need for love, trust, and advice—an example for all human beings.

Respecting Covenants

The Muslims had returned to Medina and daily life had resumed its course, in a far less tense atmosphere than before. The truce allowed them to lower their guard against the outside and give more attention to the community's internal affairs. The number of converts kept growing, and their integration and Islamic education had to be constantly planned and organized. Powerful figures in the Peninsula were to join the anonymous hundreds who accepted Islam in Medina or came to settle in the city. For instance, Aishah's brother Abd al-Kaba emigrated after the death of his mother, Um Ruman, which deeply affected her husband, Abu Bakr. The Prophet changed Abd al-Kaba's name to Abd ar-Rahman: his practice was to modify a name when the original one could have an unpleasant meaning or refer to an attitude Islam considered unlawful. Thus, the name Abd al-Kaba (worshiper of the Kaba) had a meaning opposed to Islam's principle of worshiping God alone. In other situations, the Muslims could decide whether to keep their original name, which the vast majority chose to do. Never did the first Muslims imagine there could be such a thing as

"Islamic names," of exclusively Arab origin. Indeed, what preoccupied them was the opposite: they were to avoid the few names with a meaning clearly contrary to Islamic teachings, and allow an unrestricted choice of all sorts of different names, from all languages and origins. They had extremely varied names, of Arab, Persian, or Byzantine origin, and this was no problem at all for the Prophet and his Companions.

During those months of internal management and organization, the Muslims were faced with a new extradition case. Abu Basir came to Medina from Mecca and asked Muhammad for asylum. The Prophet, scrupulously faithful to the terms of the covenants he signed, could not allow him to stay, and when a Quraysh envoy, accompanied by a slave called Kawthar, came to demand Abu Basir back, Muhammad could not but comply. They left, taking Abu Basir as a prisoner, while Muhammad and the Companions exhorted Abu Basir to be patient. Early during the journey back, Abu Basir took advantage of his guards' momentary inattention and killed the Quraysh envoy. The slave ran away in terror and returned to Medina, where his former prisoner soon joined him. Muhammad wanted to send them back to Mecca again, but Kawthar was so afraid that the Prophet had no solution that would allow him to keep his word other than to send Abu Basir away from Medina (since the pact forbade him to stay). However, he did not have to make sure he actually went to Mecca, since there was now no guard to take him there. The Prophet ordered him to leave as the treaty required, and addressed an elliptical remark to his Companions: "Would that he had other Companions with him!"¹¹ Of course, Abu Basir did not go back to Mecca: he settled on one of the roads to the north, frequently used by caravans, especially the Quraysh's. Other Muslims who had escaped Mecca and had heard about his story soon joined him, and they decided to attack the Meccan caravans traveling on the northern route.¹² The group of Muslims became so numerous and the attacks so frequent and efficient that the Quraysh themselves eventually asked the Prophet to take in Abu Basir and his men as well as all future emigrants from Mecca. Their stratagem had been successful, and the Prophet received them, according to the Quraysh's wish to suspend the enforcement of that clause. It should be noted that Muhammad refused to send back women (for instance, Um Kulthum bint Uqbah) under any circumstances, because the treaty mentioned only men: to this the Quraysh raised no objection.

To All Rulers

In the course of the year following the treaty, the number of Muslims was to double. During those months of truce, the Prophet decided to send letters to all the rulers of the neighboring empires, kingdoms, or nations.

Thus, the Negus of Abyssinia received a new letter from the Prophet before he converted to Islam, and he agreed to represent the Prophet at his proxy wedding with Um Habibah, who, as mentioned earlier, had been abandoned by her husband in Abyssinia. Muhammad also wrote to Chosroes, the king of Persia; to Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor; to Muqawqis, the ruler of Egypt (who sent the Prophet a Coptic slave girl, Mariyah, as a gift);¹³ to Mundhir ibn Sawa, king of Bahrain; and to al-Harith ibn Abi Shirm al-Ghassani, who reigned over part of Arabia up to the outskirts of Syria. The content of the letters was always more or less the same: the Prophet introduced himself as "God's Messenger" to the recipients of the various letters, reminded them of God's Oneness, and called on them to accept Islam. If they refused, he held them responsible before God for keeping their whole people in error.

The kings and rulers reacted differently to those various letters: some (the Negus, Mundhir ibn Sawa) accepted the message, some (Muqawqis, Heraclius) showed respect with no wish to either fight or convert, and others (al-Harith ibn Abi Shirm al-Ghassani, for instance) rejected the message and threatened to attack. Nevertheless, the message was known to all and the Muslim community was henceforth settled in Medina, acknowledged in its religious identity, and respected as a regional power. Its leader, Muhammad ibn Abdullah, was considered either as a prophet whose reign was destined by God to inevitable expansion or as a powerful and fearsome king who was to be respected and dreaded.

The truce of al-Hudaybiyyah was indeed a victory and an opening (*fath*) to the world: the warring had taken up all the energy of the community, who sought to protect themselves, resist, and survive. Things had now changed, and in that peaceful situation, the Prophet was at last able to convey the contents of Islam's message: the principle of God's Oneness (*at-tawhid*), which liberates human beings from possible alienation to temporal interests or powers, in order to direct them toward the respect of a spiritual teaching, an ethic, and values to which they must remain faithful. Colonized by the need to defend themselves, hampered

by the imperative to react, the Muslims had defended their lives and their integrity, but they had not had the means to express the contents and meaning of what they believed. Peace, which now reigned over the whole Peninsula, had transformed the situation: more and more clans could now grasp the essence of Islam's message. Some converted; others respected Islam without embracing it; others fought it but with full awareness, and not merely for matters of domination, wealth, and power relations.

Khaybar

One last stronghold, however, seriously threatened the Muslim community's security after the signing of the al-Hudaybiyyah covenant. This was the city of Khaybar, which had received many refugees from the Muslims' previous conquests. Khaybar was a regional power feared by all, and attacking it seemed unthinkable because its fortresses, weaponry, and riches were far superior to what their enemies, including Medina, could ever hope to fight and overpower. The Khaybar leaders, advised by members of the Banu Qaynuqa, Banu Nadir, and Banu Qurayzah, were hostile to Muhammad's presence in the region and never failed to show it and to harm the interests of his community or of isolated individuals whenever they had a chance.

The Prophet decided to organize an expedition against Khaybar, but he determined to keep it secret until the very last moment, so as not to alert the enemy. While Khaybar and its allies could rely on nearly fourteen thousand men, Muhammad decided to go there with an army of only fourteen hundred (though he could have mobilized more). Nearing the city at night, he called upon a guide who knew the area well, and made his camp between two of the Khaybar fortresses: in that way, he could cut off all communication between the Khaybar people and their Ghatafan allies. When day broke, the inhabitants of the two forts were surprised and impressed, and fear immediately invaded their ranks. The siege lasted several days, during which Muhammad and his men gathered information enabling them to use the best strategy to compel their enemy to give in. They decided to attack the citadels one by one, beginning with the most exposed and vulnerable. The method worked very well, and it was not long before the first fortresses fell. The surrender conditions were dis-

cussed for each individual case, but most of the time the vanquished were required to leave their possessions and exile themselves with their women and children.

The last major fortress, Qamus, resisted for fourteen days but eventually gave in, for the Muslims' siege was choking it and left no hope of victory. Then the last two forts also surrendered and they, in their turn, negotiated the terms of their capitulation. The Prophet agreed to allow the inhabitants to stay and manage their farms and orchards, provided they paid the Muslims a regular tax on their products. With all the fortresses conquered, the Prophet had neutralized his last major enemy in the area.

Among the war captives was Huyay's daughter (Huyay had been responsible for the Banu Qurayzah's treason). Safiyyah in no way resembled her father, and she had long been trying to learn the contents of the Prophet's message. She was pious and did not share her people's animosity toward him. The Prophet had heard of that woman and of her spirituality, and she did not hesitate to tell him about one of her dreams, associating her fate with that of the city of Medina. Muhammad listened to her, then gave her a choice: remain a Jew and return to her people, or become a Muslim and marry him. She exclaimed: "I choose God and His Messenger!" and the wedding was celebrated a short time later.

A new stage was reached in that seventh year of *hijrah* (628 CE). Peace now reigned over the area, and the Muslims no longer had to fear attacks from the north. Agreements regulating tribe or clan relationships, or trade in general, enabled the Muslim community to settle down with maximum security. The Prophet's marriages also had to do with that situation: some of his wives came from clans that had, in effect, become family to Muhammad and so considered themselves his natural allies. Hence, the Muslim community itself seemed to have become invulnerable and unsailable: in the space of eight years, it had not only settled in a new city, Medina, but had secured unparalleled status and regional prestige.



CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Coming Home

The Muslim community in Medina welcomed the women and men who had emigrated to Abyssinia and who had lived there for almost fifteen years, such as Jafar ibn Abi Talib (who came back married to Asma bint Umayy and a father to three children). Um Habibah bint Abi Sufyan, whose wedding to the Prophet had been celebrated with the Negus standing in for Muhammad, also came back and settled in her apartment near the mosque. Daily life went on, and the number of Muslims increased constantly, compelling the Prophet to multiply teaching opportunities and to delegate that task to his most faithful and competent Companions.

Hostility was expressed here and there, and Muhammad was still sending small groups of scouts to settle matters, but it was sometimes necessary to fight tribes that remained determined to challenge Medina's supremacy.

Usamah ibn Zayd

Muhammad had sent an expedition to the northern Bedouin tribes, particularly the Banu Murra, who kept attacking the Jewish farmers working on the Fadak oasis, which was under the Prophet's authority. The Muslims met with strong opposition, and all thirty men sent on that expedition were killed. The Prophet decided to send another troop of two hundred men, including Usamah ibn Zayd, who was only seventeen years old.¹

The battle was difficult, since numerous tribes had joined together, hoping to defeat the Muslim troops and take over the Fadak oasis and its riches. The situation nevertheless turned to the Muslims' advantage. A

member of the Banu Murra tribe mocked Usamah and his young age. Unable to control himself, Usamah decided to fight it out then and there with the man who insulted him. In a weak position, the Bedouin chose to run away. Usamah, in his anger, pursued him, ignoring the expedition leader's order to stay together at all times. He managed to catch up with his enemy, threw him down, and wounded him. The Bedouin cried: "I bear witness that there is no god but God!" (*la ilaha illa Allah*), but Usamah ignored this and killed the man. When he returned to the camp and told his story, the troop leader and all the other soldiers were shocked at his behavior. Usamah realized how serious his mistake was and isolated himself until they returned to Medina.

He promptly went to see the Prophet, who first greeted him most warmly, happy to learn about the victory. When Usamah told him about the duel, however, the Prophet expressed severe disapproval and asked: "Usamah, did you kill him after he had said 'There is no god but God'?" Usamah replied that the Bedouin had only uttered the words to avoid being killed, and the Prophet retorted: "Did you split his heart open to know whether he was saying the truth or lying?" Usamah was horrified and feared his mistake would never be forgiven. The Prophet nevertheless forgave him, after conveying to him an essential teaching about the way one should deal with people and the secrets of their hearts, whether in war or in peace.

The Bedouin's profession of faith required that Usamah should not kill him. If he was sincere, his life should obviously have been spared. If he was not, his exclamation amounted to an appeal for peace and clemency. In such a case, Revelation had already enjoined the Muslims to show discernment and restraint and to seek peace:

O you who believe! When you go out in the cause of God, investigate carefully, and do not say to anyone who offers you peace: "You are not a believer!"—coveting the perishable goods of this life: with God there are abundant gains. You yourselves were thus before, till God conferred on you His favors: therefore carefully investigate. For God is aware of all that you do.²

The Bedouin, when he saw death coming, had appealed for peace, but Usamah, blinded by his determination to defend his honor in this world

(since he had been mocked), had reverted to tribal practices, which his understanding of Islam ought to have reformed. Whatever his interpretation of the intentions behind his enemy's profession of faith, nothing could justify his actions or his attitude. Usamah promised himself he would never again be carried away in this manner and he would henceforth act with discernment and respect. It is to him, as we shall see, that three years later—when he was about to leave this world—the Prophet was to entrust the recommendations and teachings that constitute Islamic war ethics.

What hearts contain lies beyond the limits of men's knowledge, and the Prophet himself was an example of prudence and humility when it came to judging individuals whose sincerity or intentions were doubtful. He was well aware of the presence of many hypocrites around him, but he took no particular action about them. He remained cautious, sometimes wary, but he avoided any final judgment. The most edifying example was that of Abdullah ibn Ubayy, who had lied several times, then had deserted just before the battle of Uhud, and continued to maintain relations with enemies of the Muslim community. The Prophet took no retaliatory measures against him and his friends, except leaving him out of delicate situations or expeditions. He even led the funeral prayer when ibn Ubayy died shortly after returning from the Tabuk expedition, in spite of Umar's strong disapproval. Furthermore, Revelation enjoined him not to pray for notorious hypocrites: "Never pray for any of them who die, nor stand at their grave; for they rejected God and His Messenger, and died in a state of perverse rebellion."³

This verse, seemingly firm and clear-cut as to the attitude one is expected to show hypocrites when they die, conversely conveys a very demanding message as to the way one should deal with them in daily life and until the last moments of their lives. Nothing warrants passing a final judgment on their hypocrisy while they are still alive, and the only suitable behavior is that exemplified by the Prophet, who never allowed himself to utter a judgment about a hypocrite while that individual was still alive, since to the very end everything remained possible as far as conversion and sincerity of heart were concerned. God only enjoined him not to pray for them after they died, when the situation could no longer be reversed and it had become clear that they had lived and died in hypocrisy, treason, and lies.⁴

Mariyah

The Prophet continued to lead a private life that required him to be particularly attentive to his wives, for sharp and troublesome tensions sometimes occurred between the women or with their respective families. He himself remained most conciliating, and he hated to cross one or another of his wives. Aishah reported that the Prophet was very present and engaged in his household, that he was very thoughtful, helped with the housework, "sewed his clothes, [and] repaired his shoes," stopping only when he heard the call to prayer and had to leave for the mosque.⁵ In all circumstances, even during the month of Ramadan, he was gentle, tender, and particularly affectionate. Many accounts, narrated especially by Aishah, stress this aspect of his character, which his wives greatly appreciated and praised.

Life in Medina, where women were far more present and spirited than in Mecca, and the improving economic situation resulted in many changes in the behavior of the Prophet's wives. Umar was concerned by this; he himself, as we have seen, had to face the reproaches of his wife, who did not hesitate to answer back to him, in contrast with the habits of Meccan women. When Umar remonstrated with his wife, she replied that their own daughter, Hafsa, answered in the same way to the Prophet, her husband, who accepted it, and that Umar would have to accept a similar attitude. Umar was shocked and went to inquire of his daughter, who confirmed that she and the other wives never hesitated to express their opinions and argue with the Prophet, that they answered him freely, and that he accepted the situation. Umar went to the Prophet to advise him to set his private affairs right immediately. The Prophet listened to him and smiled but did not react.

Muhammad had accustomed his wives to attention and dialogue; he listened to their advice, and throughout his life he kept the same respectful attitude he had already displayed with Khadijah. His wives could differentiate between Muhammad's role as a prophet and his life as an ordinary husband and human being. Even Aishah, after the calumny affair, had resented the Prophet and his doubts, and when her mother told her to thank the Prophet for obtaining God's forgiveness, she refused and said that she would thank God but not the Prophet, who after all had doubted her. Muhammad had never demanded to be treated in any specific way,