

Muhammad's (SAW) Treatment of the Jewish Tribes: A Critique of Robert Spencer's Views

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Abstract

It is incontrovertibly true that Islam advocates peaceful coexistence with the adherents of other creeds. The holy Qur'an, the primary source of Islamic Shari'ah, vividly recommends freedom of conscience and religion. Similarly, the prophet (SAW), being the perfect role model for the entire humanity, preached and practiced the lofty ideals propounded by the holy Qur'an and peacefully coexisted with the followers of Judaism and Christianity. Furthermore, the four rightly guided caliphs exhibited tolerant attitude towards their Jews and Christian subjects. In the presence of these models, nonetheless, many contemporary critics of Islam are disinclined to admit this explicit reality. Robert Spencer also sees eye to eye with them. Robert Spencer is an American author and he has published twelve books. He is a member of Melkite Greek Catholic Church. He looks on Islam as a highly intolerant religion. In this connection, he singles out Muhammad's (SAW) treatment of various Jewish tribes. He maintains that all Jewish tribes viz. Banu Naḍhir, Banu Qai'nūqā' and Banu Quraidāh "received the wrath of Muhammad". This brief study aims to prove that the treatment meted out to the Jews was not founded on religious prejudice and malice; it was rather commensurate with their wicked demeanor.

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Spencer observes that Muhammad (SAW) treated the Jews in a ruthlessly harsh manner. After the victory of Badr, “flushed with victory, Muhammad stepped up his raiding operation.”¹ He adds “Muhammad’s attitude hardened toward the Jewish tribes of the region” and his “prophetic calls to them began to emphasize earthly chastisement more than punishment in the next world.”² About the guilty Jews of the tribe of Nadir, Spencer remarks, “rather than appealing to the Nadir leaders to turn over the guilty men, Muhammad sent word to the Nadir: “leave my country and do not leave with me, you intended treachery.”³ Spencer wants to create the impression that Muhammad (SAW) imposed war on people and shifted the responsibility of the declaration of war to the Jews. As he remarks: “with the displacement of responsibility onto the enemy that would become characteristics of jihad warriors throughout the ages Muhammad told the Muslims, “The Jews have declared war”.⁴ Persisting in the same vein, Spencer concludes his chapter viz. war is deceit with following words: “the remaining Jews of Medina were to receive the wrath of Muhammad.” As for the Jews of Quraidāh are concerned, Spencer believes that Muhammad meted out the same unjust treatment. He says: “the Quraidāh Jews tried to soften his wrath, saying: “O Abu’l Qasim [Muhammad] you are not a barbarous person.” But the prophet of Islam was in no mood to be appeased.” He further adds: “After some deliberations Muhammad decided to put the fate of the tribe into the hands of the Muslim Warrior Sa’d bin Mu’adh.”⁵

Spencer has told half-truths, if not blatant lies. He conceals the dark aspects and dimensions of the Jewish community. As a result of such a prejudiced portrayal the prophet (SAW) appears to have treated the Jews in a degrading manner. However, the historical truth delineates and an altogether different picture. A glimpse of their mischievous conduct is captured in the Spirit of Islam. In words of Syed Amir Ali, “not satisfied with insulting the women of the believers and reviling the prophet, they sent out emissaries to the enemies of the state, the protection of which formally accepted. The Quraish, who has sworn Muhammad’s (SAW) death, were well acquainted, thanks to the party of Abdullah Ibn Ubai and the faithless Israelites, with the exact strength of the Muslims. They also knew that the Jews had accepted Muhammad (SAW) alliance only from motives of temporary expediency and that the moment they showed themselves in the vicinity of Madinah the worshippers of Jehovah would break away from him and join the idolaters.”⁶

The prophet (SAW) was bound by his duty to his subjects to suppress a party that might have led, and almost did lead to the sack city by investing armies. The safety of the state required the proscription of the traitors, who were either sowing the seeds of sedition within Madinah or carrying information to the common enemy.

He who never in his life had wielded a weapon, to whom the sight of human suffering caused intense pain and pity, and who against all the canons of Arab manliness, wept bitterly at the loss of his children and disciples, whose character remained so tender and so pathetic as to cause his enemies to call him womanish –this man was compelled, from the necessities of situation, and against his own inclination, to repel the attacks of the enemies by force of arms, to organize his followers for

purpose of self-defense, and often to send out expedition expeditions to anticipate treacherous and sudden onslaughts.⁷

Jewish Hatred against Muslims.

The prophet (SAW) had signed an agreement of with the Jews which inviolably ensured the protection of their life and wealth. Moreover, it granted them perfect religious liberty. But it was one the prime responsibilities of the prophet (SAW) to excoriate immoral acts and to invite his people to the virtuous path of Allah. He was not simply a preacher of Islam; he was also the guardian of the lives and liberties of his people. As a prophet, he could offer to ignore the reviling gibes of his enemies; but as the head of the state, “the general in a time almost continual warfare, “when Madinah was kept in a state of military defense and under a sort of military discipline, he could not overlook treachery.⁸ The holy Qur’an brings to the surface the moral decline of the Jews in the following verses:

سَمَاعُونَ لِلْكَذِبِ أَكَّالُونَ لِلسُّخْتِ

[They are] avid listeners to falsehood, devourers of [what is] unlawful.⁹

وَتَرَى كَثِيرًا مِّنْهُمْ يُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْإِثْمِ وَالْعُدْوَانِ وَأَكْلِهِمُ السُّخْتِ لَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ

And you see many of them hastening into sin and aggression and the devouring of [what is] unlawful. How wretched is what they have been doing.¹⁰

وَأَخَذِهِمُ الرِّبَا وَقَدْ نُهُوا عَنْهُ وَأَكْلِهِمْ أَمْوَالِ النَّاسِ بِالْبَاطِلِ

And their consuming Riba though they were forbidden from taking it, and their devouring men’s substance wrongfully.¹¹

Condemnation of their corruption and immorality is one of those reasons which spread indignation in Jewish community and as a result they put their best foot forward to thwart the spread of Islam. They teased and tortured the prophet (SAW) and his companions by all possible means. Their machinations conspiracies awfully perturbed the Prophet (SAW) but he was consistently advised by Al-Mighty Allah to persevere and bear their mischief.

وَلْتَسْمَعَنَّ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ وَمِنَ الَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا أَذًى كَثِيرًا وَإِنْ
تَصَبَّرُوا وَتَتَّقُوا فَإِنَّ ذَلِكَ مِنْ عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ

*And ye will hear much wrong from those who were given the Scripture before you, and from the idolaters. But if ye persevere and ward off (evil), then that is of the steadfast heart of things.*¹²

The Jews habitually greeted the prophet (SAW) with Assāmu Alaika instead of Assalāmu Alaika, the former means “ may you suffer death”. On one occasion, in the presence of Aāysha (RA) a Jew uttered the same formula of greeting which exasperated her and she cursed him. Seeing this, the prophet (SAW) asked her to be mild and lenient in her attitude. This is mentioned in various chapters of Bukhari.¹³

The prophet (SAW) not only exhibited a tolerant attitude towards their detrimental and hostile conduct but also showed agreement with them over various social issues. Such concord was, in fact, meant to revere their religion.¹⁴ Where there was not a clear Divine directive, the prophet (SAW) observed concord with the people of the Book.¹⁵ Furthermore, when the prophet (SAW) migrated to Madinah, he found that the Jews fasted on the day of Ashura, to observe harmony with them, the prophet (SAW) commanded his followers to fast on the same

day.¹⁶ The prophet (SAW) would stand in reverence, whenever the funeral of Jew passed by him.¹⁷

Abu Huraira reported: Two people, one Jewish and the other Muslim, fell into dispute and began to abuse one another. The Muslim said, “By the one who has chosen Muhammad above the worlds!” And the Jew said, “By the one who has chosen Moses above the worlds!” Then the Muslim slapped the face of the Jew. The Jew went to the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, and told him about the incident. The Prophet said, “Do not say I am better than Moses, for humanity will faint on the Day of Resurrection and I will be the first to recover. Moses at that time will be holding the side of the Throne. I do not know if he would faint and recover before me, or if Allah will make an exception for him.”¹⁸

The verses being revealed at that time vividly articulate deference and encourage social interaction with them.

وَطَعَامُ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ حَلَالٌ لَكُمْ وَطَعَامُكُمْ حَلَالٌ لَهُمْ وَالْمُحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنَاتِ
وَالْمُحْصَنَاتُ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ

*And the food of those who were given the Scripture is lawful for you and your food is lawful for them. And [lawful in marriage are] chaste women from among the believers and chaste women from among those who were given the Scripture.*¹⁹

Their grandeur is generally inculcated at various junctures:

يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَنِّي فَضَّلْتُكُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

*O Children of Israel, remember My favor which I have bestowed upon you and that I preferred you over the worlds.*²⁰

During preaching sessions, all that was demanded from them was:

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا وَلَا يَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُنَا بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِّنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ فَإِن تَوَلَّوْا فَقُولُوا اشْهَدُوا بِأَنَّا مُسْلِمُونَ

Say: "O followers of earlier revelation! Come unto that tenet which we and you hold in common: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and that we shall not take human beings for our lords beside God." 50 And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that it is we who have surrendered ourselves unto Him."²¹

No kindness or generosity, however, on the part of the prophet (SAW) would satisfy the Jews; nothing could conciliate the bitter feelings with which they were animated. Enraged that they could not use him as their instrument for the conversion of the Arabia to Judaism, and that his belief was so much simpler than their Talmudic legends, they soon broke off, and ranged themselves on the side of the enemies of the new faith.²²

The Mischief of the Jews

The graceful and kind conduct of the prophet (SAW), to the great dismay of Muslims, fetched no love from the Jews, they rather turned out to be the sworn enemies of Islam, hell bent on the annihilation of the new Faith. To disparage Islam, they unceasingly informed the polytheists that their religion was head and shoulders above Islam. The holy Quran depicts it in the following verse:

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا نَصِيحًا مِّنَ الْكِتَابِ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْجِبْتِ وَالطَّاغُوتِ وَيَقُولُونَ لِلَّذِينَ
كَفَرُوا هَؤُلَاءِ أَهْدَى مِنَ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا سَبِيلًا

Have you not seen those who were given a portion of the Scripture, who believe in superstition and false objects of worship and say about the disbelievers, "These are better guided than the believers as to the way".²³

And when asked which they preferred, idolatry or Islam, they, like many Christian controversialists, declared they preferred idolatry, with all its attendants' evils, to the creed of Mohammad. They reviled him; they "twisted their tongues" and mispronounced the Qur'anic words and the daily prayers and formulae of Islam, rendering them meaningless, absurd, or blasphemous; and the Jewish poets and poetesses, of whom there existed many at the time, outraged all common decency and the recognized code of Arab honor and chivalry by lampooning in obscene verse the Muslim women. But these were minor offences.²⁴

To lead the people astray and discredit Islam, they would pretend to embrace Islam and would quit turning apostate to give the impression that they would have adhered to the faith, had it been true and divinely inspired.

وَقَالَتْ طَائِفَةٌ مِّنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ آمَنُوا بِالَّذِي أُنزِلَ عَلَيَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَجَهَ النَّهَارِ وَكَفَرُوا
آخِرَهُ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

And a faction of the People of the Scripture say [to each other], "Believe in that which was revealed to the believers at the beginning of the day and reject it at its end that perhaps they will abandon their religion."²⁵

Besides, they undertook pernicious ploys to undermine Islam. They knew that the strength of Islam stems from the harmony and unity of Aus and Khazraj who were formally lived on antagonistic terms with each other. The Jewish community of

conspired to revive their old animosity with a view to shattering the strength of Islam. In Arab society, it was fairly easy to ignite the sparks of old grudge and bitterness.²⁶ One day some people, from both the tribes, were sitting in a gathering, the Jews having found a ripe opportunity began to discuss the old war of Bi'aals which had wreaked havoc on both sides. The discussion stimulated the recollection of primordial antagonism leading the participants to harsh words and then to swords. Fortunately, the news reached the prophet (SAW) in time and he reached the occasion and calmed both parties down with his moving speech.²⁷ The following verse was revealed on this occasion:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَطِيعُوا فَرِيقًا مِّنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ يَرُدُّوكُم بَعْدَ إِيمَانِكُمْ كَافِرِينَ

*O you who have believed, if you obey a party of those who were given the Scripture, they would turn you back, after your belief, [to being] unbelievers.*²⁸

Another serious threat to posed to the existence of Muslims and Islam was the connivance of Abdullah Ibn Ubai with the Jews. He was an ally of Banu Nadir. Ostensibly a Muslim, Abdullah ibn Ubais was the sworn enemy of Islam and Muhammad (SAW). The Jews won his sympathy with little effort and they jointly orchestrated a strategy to do away with Islam. Before the occurrence of Badr, the Qurāshite polytheists tried to make common cause with Abdullah Ibn Ubai, however, having failed in their endeavor, they dispatched a letter to the Jews to help them wipe out Muslims and Islam. “Your possess both weapons and fortified castles.[Being so well equipped] fight our foe , Muhammad (SAW).Nothing would stop us from reaching the bangles of your women, if you did not comply with our command”.²⁹

Abu Dāwud has specifically singled out Banu Nadir otherwise the letter for the entire population of the Jews irrespective of their communal and tribal affiliations.³⁰ The circumstances took a turn for the worse. The prophet (SAW) could not go out at night without jeopardizing his life. The menace went on increasing so much so that the companion of the prophet, Talha bin Bar'a, bequeathed his will to the effect that if he died during night, the prophet (SAW) should not be informed as he feared that the Jews might kill him.³¹

The victory at the battle of Badr added considerably to the fear and anxiety of the Jews. They witnessed that Islam was rapidly emerging as an invincible power. Being the bravest of all the Jewish tribes, Banu Qainuqā took the lead to declare war against Islam.³² They were the first to the pact. Ibn Hishām and Tabari have narrated from Asim bin Qatada Ansari the following report: Banu Qainuqā were the first to breach the pact, willing endorsed by them. And they waged battles against Muslims during the period after the battle of Badr and before the battle of Uhud. Ibn Asad remarks about the Banu Qainuqā that they, during the battle of Badr, expressed overt rebellion and jealousy. And they violated the pact.³³

The Banu Qainuqa was notorious for their extreme laxity of morals.³⁴ Once a young girl happened to visit the heir market place. The Jewish youths obscenely treated her and insulted her grossly. A Muslim, passing by them, sided with the girl and the Jew was murdered in the scuffle. It provoked the Jews and they slaughtered the Muslim. Hearing the news of their brother's murder, the Muslims rushed to the place and a general riot ensued. At the news of the threatening event, the prophet (SAW) hastened to the spot. He warned them to abandon such course and fear Allah otherwise they would meet the same

destiny as the polytheists of Makkah already met on the occasion of Badr.³⁵ They defiantly answered the prophet (SAW): “do not be elated with thy victory over thy people. Thou hast had an affair with men ignorant of the art of war. If thou art desirous of having dealings with us, we shall show thee that we are men”.³⁶ The prophet (SAW) thoroughly observed the events and circumstances and realized that disastrous consequences would ensue if such disorders and seditions were left uncurbed. Madidah would turn into an “amphitheatre” in which antagonistic communities might slaughter one another without compunction.³⁷

After having hurled defiance at Muhammad (SAW), they took refuge in their fortress. Teaching the traitors a good lesson was the absolute duty of the head of the state so he accordingly besieged the fortress. The siege lasted for fifteen days until they surrendered. They deserved severe punishment but the mercy of the prophet’s (SAW) nature “overcame the dictates of justice”³⁸ and the culprit band was let off with mere banishment.

Banu Nzir, much like Banu Qainuqa, indulged exactly in the same treacherous acts.³⁹ Their treacherous and rebellious demeanor, when delved thoroughly, reduces to the following reasons: their fortified and unconquerable castles, trust in Banu Quraiza’s succor and the pledge made by Abdullah Ibn Ubai to provide them military assistance in the form of two thousand soldiers.⁴⁰ the holy Qur’an states:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَخْرَجَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مِنْ دِيَارِهِمْ لِأَوَّلِ الْحَشْرِ مَا ظَنَّتُمْ أَنْ يَخْرُجُوا وَظَنُّوا أَنَّهُمْ مَانِعَتُهُمْ حُصُونُهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ فَأَتَاهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ حَيْثُ لَمْ يَحْتَسِبُوا وَقَدَفَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الرُّعْبَ يُخْرِبُونَ بُيُوتَهُمْ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ وَأَيْدِي الْمُؤْمِنِينَ فَاعْتَبِرُوا يَا أُولِي الْأَبْصَارِ

It is He who expelled the ones who disbelieved among the People of the Scripture from their homes at the first gathering. You did not think they would leave, and they thought that their fortresses would protect them from Allah ; but [the decree of] Allah came upon them from where they had not expected, and He cast terror into their hearts [so] they destroyed their houses by their [own] hands and the hands of the believers. So take warning, O people of vision.⁴¹

But their expectations dashed to ground when Banu Nazir refused to succor them and the hypocrites of Madinah could not have the audacity to confront Muslims overtly. As the promised succor did not come hence in high frustration, they implored the prophet (SAW) for terms. After a siege of fifteen days, terms were decided and accordingly the members of Banu Nazir were allowed to carry their moveable properties, however, they were forbidden to carry their arms with themselves.⁴² To prevent Muslims from occupying and using their houses, they razed them to the ground before departure.⁴³

Meanwhile the adversaries incessantly continued their struggle to demolish the grand edifice of Islam. The idolaters sent around their agents to stir up uprising against Muslims. The Jews played an exceedingly significant role in the stirring. Their efforts triumphed beyond their expectation. Soon a formidable coalition was formed and well equipped army of ten thousand soldiers marched toward Madinah. The Muslim army, on the other hand, consisted of three thousand soldiers. Being unable to encounter such a numerically preponderant army, the Muslims dug a moat to protect themselves the ferocious assaults of the enemy. Banu Qurāida, beings the signatory of the mutual pact, was duty bound to succor Muslims against invaders. The

idolaters of successfully persuaded Banu Quraiza to violate their pledge and side with the Quraish. On getting the news of their hypocrisy, the Prophet (SAW) immediately sent Sa'd Ibn Mu'az and Sa'd ibn Ubada to beseech them return to their pledge and duty. They defiantly replied: "who is Muhammad, and who is the apostle of God that we should obey him? There exists no bond or compact between him and us".⁴⁴

Under such circumstances, the consternation and anxiety of Muslims was great. The Jews being fully acquainted with the ins and outs of the city could easily assist the invaders by showing them the vulnerable points of Madinah.⁴⁵ The holy Quran portrays their dismay in the following verses:

وَالَّذِينَ جَاءُوا مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا غِلًا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا رَبَّنَا إِنَّكَ رَؤُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ () أَلَمْ تَرِ إِلَى الَّذِينَ نَافَقُوا يَقُولُونَ لِإِخْوَانِهِمُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ لَئِنْ أُخْرِجْتُمْ لَنَخْرُجَنَّ مَعَكُمْ وَلَا نُطِيعُ فِيكُمْ أَحَدًا أَبَدًا وَإِنْ قُوتِلْتُمْ لَنَنْصُرَنَّكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَشْهَدُ إِنَّهُمْ لَكَاذِبُونَ

"And [there is a share for] those who came after them, saying, "Our Lord, forgive us and our brothers who preceded us in faith and put not in our hearts [any] resentment toward those who have believed. Our Lord, indeed you are Kind and Merciful." Have you not considered those who practice hypocrisy, saying to their brothers who have disbelieved among the People of the Scripture, "If you are expelled, we will surely leave with you, and we will not obey, in regard to you, anyone - ever; and if you are fought, we will surely aid you?" But Allah testifies that they are liars."⁴⁶

The siege lasted for twenty days, the restless tribes who expected an easy victory and spoils began to show signs of weariness. Nature came to help the helpless Muslims: a furious

storm and torrential rain uprooted the tents of the invaders and completely blew out their lights. In no the impending catastrophe vanished into thin air and the formidable coalition got ruined. Muhammad (SAW) had already prophesied the dispersion of the invaders and the next morning saw the fulfillment of the prophecy.⁴⁷

The fruition of victory required a necessary step, deciding the destiny of the perfidious Banu Quraiz. They showed unforgivable perfidy during the battle and had the invaders succeeded in assaulting Madinah, their success would have resulted in wide scale massacre of the Muslims.⁴⁸

As a religion, Islam does not regard Judaism as a foreign and alien faith. Both are monotheistic and advocate worshiping the same God; Muslims call him Allah and Jews call him Yahweh. Jews always received graceful treatment at the hands of Muslims, Arabs or Ottoman, as long as they avoided treacherous and seditious course. It is apt to conclude it with Karabel's statement: "for a millennium and a half, until the world war II, Jews under Muslim rule enjoyed more safety, freedom, and autonomy than they ever did under Christian rule. Muslim states over the course of fourteen centuries have allowed for religious diversity and not insisted on trying to convert those who follow a different creed."⁴⁹

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