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See also: ABSTINENCE; AL-ANṢĀR; CALIPH; CAVE; COMPANIONS OF THE PROPHET; COMPILATION OF THE QUR’ĀN; CLIENTS; CONSULTATION; FALSEHOOD;

FAMILY OF THE PROPHET; HIJRA; MADINA; MAKKA; AL-MUHĀJIRŪN; OCCASIONS OF REVELATION; QURAYSH; YATHRIB.

MUZAFFAR IQBAL

ABŪ LAHAB

Literally “the father of flame,” Abū Lahab was the epithet given to ‘Abd al-‘Uzzā b. ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib (d. 2/624), a paternal uncle of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, because of his glowing countenance or the redness of his face (Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī*, sub Q 111:1; Zamakhsharī and Rāzī, sub Q 111:1). His name is mentioned once in the Qur’ān in the opening verse of Sūrat al-Masad (also known as Sūrat Tabbat yadā and Sūrat al-Lahab): *Broken be the hands of Abū Lahab and may he perish*. Some commentators are of the opinion that the patronymic *abī* used in Q 111:1 (*Abī Lahab*) indicates that he is “one destined for Hellfire,” in the same manner in which one who kindles the fire of wars is called “father” or “brother of wars”, *abā* or *akhā al-ḥarb* (Rāghib, sub *l-h-b*) or one who is extremely evil is called *abū al-sharr* (“father of evil”) and one extremely good is called *abū al-khayr* (“father of good”) (Zamakhsharī). Abū Lahab is the only one of the Makkan opponents of the Prophet mentioned in the Qur’ān by name.

Historical Background

When the Prophet was commanded to warn his near relatives (Q 26:214), he ascended Mount Ṣafā and called out: “Be warned [O people!],” in the manner of those who seek to gather people to announce a great event or to warn them about danger from an enemy (Ṭabarī, sub Q 111:1). When the people gathered around him, the Prophet addressed them, calling each tribe and family by name (“O children of ‘Abd Manāf, O children of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib,” and so on): “If I were to inform you that mounted troops will imminently attack from behind this mountain, would you believe me?” They said: “Indeed, we have never encountered falsehood from you.” The Prophet then said: “I warn you of the great impending punishment,” meaning thereby the fate of those who deny his Prophethood.

At this, Abū Lahab got up and said: “May you perish! Is this why you have gathered us?” (Bukhārī, Tafsīr, Sūra

Tabbat yadā Abī Lahabin wa-tabb; Muslim, Īmān, fī qawlih ta‘ālā *wa-andhir ‘ashīratak al-aqrābīn*; Tirmidhī, Tafsīr al-Qur’ān, wa-min Sūrat Tabbat yadā). This is cited as the occasion of revelation (*q.v.*) of this sura by al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273), who adds, citing ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd: “Once Abū Lahab came to the Prophet and asked: ‘If I were to accept your religion, what would I get?’ The Prophet said: ‘That which all Muslims receive.’ He said: ‘Is there no degree of superiority for me?’ The Prophet asked: ‘What do you expect?’ He said: ‘May this religion perish, in which I am equal to all others.’ Thereupon Allah Most High sent down *Broken be the hands of Abū Lahab*” (*sub* Q 111:1).

The Meaning of *broken be the hands*

In accordance with classical Arabic usage, the metonymic expression *broken be the hands* refers to the destruction of Abū Lahab’s immense authority and power and to the lack of his success against Islam. Neither his wealth nor his children were of any avail to him, as all but one of his children embraced the very message he so fiercely opposed (Ṭabarī, *sub* Q 111:2). When his daughter Durra migrated to Madina and accepted Islam, she was warmly received by the Prophet, who once admonished people for calling her ‘Daughter of the Fuel of Hellfire’, saying: “What is wrong with certain people who harm me by harming my relatives? Whoever harms my relatives harms me, and whoever harms me has harmed Allah!” (Ibn Ḥajar, *al-Iṣāba*, *sub* “Durra” 7:634-635).

‘Utayba, the son of Abū Lahab who did not accept Islam, was, like his father, extremely rude and abusive toward the Prophet. Once when he was about to depart for a trip to Syria, he said to his father: “Let me go and torment Muḥammad by abusing his Lord.” When he met the Prophet, he used verses of the Qur’ān (Q 53:8-9) in his typical manner and said: “I deny the one who drew near and came close until he was but two bow-lengths away, or even nearer.” The Prophet sought Allah’s help and supplicated: “O my Lord, unleash against him one of Your dogs.” When ‘Utayba returned to his father and told him what had transpired, Abū Lahab feared for his son’s life, certain as he was that the Prophet’s supplication would not go unanswered. When they camped by a monastery in Syria and were told that there were wild animals around the monastery, Abū Lahab asked his fellow travelers to take extra care of his son and had him sleep in a hammock, well-surrounded by other sleepers. But that night, ‘Utayba was mauled to death by a desert

lion (Ibn Kathīr, *sub* Q 53:8-9).

Abū Lahab’s Enmity

Abū Lahab was one of the four richest men in Makka and a neighbor of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace. He was the only child of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib who joined the Quraysh in their social and economic boycott of the family of the Prophet during the years of the confinement of Banū Hāshim and Banū ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib in the narrow valley of Shi‘b Abī Ṭalib. “Have I not helped Lāt and ‘Uzzā by leaving those who left Lāt and ‘Uzzā?” he said to Hind bint ‘Utba b. Rabī‘a (Ibn Hishām, 1:219).

He and his wife, Umm Jamīl bint Ḥarb, forced their two sons, ‘Utba and ‘Utayba, to divorce Ruqayya and Umm Kulthūm—may Allah be pleased with them both—the two daughters of the Prophet who had been married to two sons of Abū Lahab before the commencement of the public mission of the Prophet (although the marriages had not yet been consummated). “My life and my company are forbidden to you, if you do not divorce his daughters,” Abū Lahab or his wife told them (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī‘āb* 2:747-748).

Abū Lahab’s Wife

His wife, mentioned in *Sūrat al-Masad* as the carrier of slanderous tales; upon her neck will be a rope of twisted strands (Q 111:4), used to throw thorns in the path of the Prophet (Ibn Hishām, 1:221; Ṭabarī). When she heard what Allah, Exalted be He, had revealed concerning her husband, she went to the Ka‘ba in search of the Prophet with a stone in her hand with the intention of hitting him. The Prophet was sitting with Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, but try as she might, she could not see him. She asked Abū Bakr, may Allah be pleased with him: “Where is your friend? I have heard that he is lampooning me (*yahjūnī*)! By Allah, if I had found him, I would have struck his mouth with this stone. Verily, I too am a poetess.” Then she recited a couplet indicating her hatred for the Prophet and Islam. When she left, Abū Bakr asked the Prophet: “Did she see you, O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet said: “She did not see me, for Allah averted her eyesight from me” (Ibn Hishām, 1:221).

Abū Lahab’s End

Abū Lahab contracted *‘adasa*, a contagious pustular disease, shortly after the defeat of the Quraysh in the Battle of Badr—a decisive battle in which he did not