Heraclius' Investigation on Muhammad

Muslim scholars have discussed different ways to consider the claim of prophethood of Muhammad (peace be upon him). There are hundreds of scholars who wrote numerous books devoted to this subject.

Some mentioned Muhammad's miracles, especially the miracle of the Qur'an, as proof of his prophethood. Others pointed to the prophecies of previous prophets about his coming as mentioned in the Bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Some also referred to prophecies in other ancient religious literatures of Hindus, Buddhists, and Zoroastrians. Others based the proofs on Muhammad's own character, teachings, and achievements.

This is quite a vast subject and can be discussed in many different ways. But figuring out the responses of the great kings of the world at the time might give us a clearer picture of what the world thought of Muhammad.

There is a very interesting historical report mentioned by the Muslim scholar Imam Al-Bukhari, among many other scholars of Hadith, from which we learn how a reasonable leader approached this subject. It is mentioned that after the Treaty of Hudaibiyah, 628 CE, Muhammad sent many letters to neighboring chiefs and rulers inviting them to Islam.

He sent Dihyah Al-Kalbi with a letter addressed to the Eastern Roman Emperor Heraclius. Heraclius ruled a vast territory of the Middle East at that time. This letter was probably sent to him in 628 CE. Heraclius was in Jerusalem at that time celebrating his victory over the Persians. The letter was given to the governor of Busra, located South of Damascus, who delivered it to the emperor.

The emperor was intrigued by the letter and wanted to know more about the one who sent him this letter and whether he was truly, as the letter claimed, God's Messenger.

There was a caravan of Arab traders in the city. Heraclius ordered its people to be brought to his court. Abu Sufian ibn Harb, the chief of this caravan, was not a Muslim at that time. Actually, he was then one of the enemies of Islam. Later when he became Muslim, he related the incident to one of his friends, Abdullah ibn Abbas.

Abu Sufian said that Heraclius sent a messenger to him while he was accompanying a caravan from Quraish. They were merchants doing business in the Levant (Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, and Jordan) at the time when God's Messenger had a truce with Abu Sufian and the unbelievers of Quraish [the Treaty of Hudaibiyah].

So Abu Sufian and his companions went to Heraclius at Jerusalem. Heraclius called them to his court, and he had all the senior Roman dignitaries around him.

He called for his translator who, translating Heraclius's question, said to them, "Who among you is closely related to the man who claims to be a prophet?"

Abu Sufian replied, "I am the nearest relative to him (among the group)."

Heraclius said, "Bring him close to me, and make his companions stand behind him."

Heraclius told his translator to tell Abu Sufian's companions that he wanted to ask him some questions regarding Muhammad and that if he told a lie they should contradict him. Relating the story to his friend, Abu Sufian commented saying, "By God, had I not been afraid of my companions labeling me a liar, I would have lied against him Muhammad."

The dialogue then continued like this:

Heraclius: What is his family status among you?

Abu Sufian: He belongs to a noble family among us.

Heraclius: Has anyone else among you before him ever claimed to be a prophet?

Abu Sufian: No.

Heraclius: Was anyone among his ancestors a king?

Abu Sufian: No.

Heraclius: Are the strong and powerful following him or the weak and poor?

Abu Sufian: It is the weak and poor that are following him.

Heraclius: Are his followers increasing or decreasing day by day?

Abu Sufian: They are increasing.

Heraclius: Does anyone among those who embrace his religion become displeased and leave the religion afterwards?

Abu Sufian: No.

Heraclius: Have you ever accused him of telling lies before his claim to be a prophet?

Abu Sufian: No.

Heraclius: Does he ever betray or is he treacherous in his agreements?

Abu Sufian: No, we are at truce with him, but we do not know what he will do in it.

Heraclius: Have you ever had a fight with him?

Abu Sufian: Yes.

Heraclius: What was the outcome of your battles with him?

Abu Sufian: The fighting between him and us was undecided, and victory was shared between him and us by turns.

Heraclius: What does he order you to do?

Abu Sufian: He tells us to worship God alone and not to worship anything along with Him, and to renounce all that our ancestors had said. He orders us to pray, to speak the truth, to be chaste, and to keep good relations with our kith and kin.

Heraclius said to his translator to convey Abu Sufian the following:

I asked you about his family and your reply was that he belongs to a noble family among you. In fact, all the messengers come from noble families among their respective peoples.

I asked you whether anyone else among you claimed such a thing, and your reply was no. If you had said yes, I would have thought that this person is copying the previous person's saying.

I asked you whether anyone of his ancestors was a king. Your reply was no. If you had said yes, I would have thought that the man wants to take back his ancestral kingdom.

I further asked you whether he was ever accused of telling lies before he said what he said, and your reply was no. So I wonder how a person who does not tell a lie about others could ever tell a lie about God.

I then asked you whether the rich or the poor follow him. You replied that it was the poor who followed him. In fact, the poor are always the followers of the messengers.

I asked you whether his followers are increasing or decreasing. You replied that they were increasing. In fact, this is the way of true faith, till it is complete in all respects.

I asked you whether there was anyone who, after accepting his religion, became displeased with and abandoned his religion. Your reply was no. In fact, this is the sign of true faith, when its delight penetrates the depths of the hearts.

I asked you whether he had ever betrayed and your reply was no. Likewise, the messengers never betray.

I asked you what he ordered you to do, and your reply was he ordered you to worship God, and not to worship anything along with Him and forbade you to worship idols and ordered you to pray, to speak the truth, and to be chaste. If what you say is true, he will very soon occupy this place underneath my feet. I knew from the scriptures that he was going to come, but I did not know that he would be from you. If I could reach him, I would go immediately to meet him; if I were with him, I would certainly wash his feet.

Heraclius then asked for the letter addressed by the Prophet Muhammad to him. The letter was delivered by Dihyah Al-Kalbi to the governor of Busra, who forwarded it to Heraclius. The letter read:

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful. This letter is from Muhammad, the Servant of God and His Messenger to Heraclius, the ruler of Byzantines. Peace be upon who follows the right path. I invite you with the call of Islam. Accept Islam and you will find peace. God will double your reward. But if you turn away, then you will have upon you the sin of Arisiyyin (your subjects).

[O People of the Book, come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but God; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than God." If then they turn back, say: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (submitting to God's will.)"] (Aal `Imran 3:64)

Abu Sufian said to Ibn Abbas as he related the story, "When Heraclius finished his speech and read the letter, there arose commotion and many voices in the court, so we were asked to leave.

It is possible that Heraclius accepted Islam secretly, but was unable to declare it because he feared rebellion of his people. Considering all these aspects of the Prophet's life, he became convinced that Muhammad was indeed a great man, if not the Messenger of God.

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