

The Battle of the Trench

Hendek Gazvesi (081059)

The Battle of al-Khandaq (the Trench), also known as *ghazwat al-Aḥzāb* (the Battle of the Confederates), took place in (5/627). By all Muslim accounts, in this battle the Believers achieved a significant victory over the confederates, Meccans and Jews.²⁰⁰ It marks a turning point for the Believers after their defeat in Uḥud. It was preceded by another successful raid, Badr al-ākhirā (or al-Sawīq, which is also known as Badr al-maw'id) around the end of A.H. 4.²⁰¹

The Battle of the Trench, according to al-Ṭabarī, was initiated by various wicked schemers of Banū al-Naḍīr, including Ḥuyayy ibn Akḥṭab and Sallām ibn Abī al-Ḥuqayq. These Jews sought revenge against Muhammad for expelling their tribe from Medina, forming a party that marched to the Quraysh at Mecca and calling upon the Meccans to join them in attacking the Believers at Medina. The goal was to eliminate Muhammad once and for all.²⁰² In addition to the Jews, the confederates included the Quraysh, Ghaṭfān, and others.²⁰³ Muhammad, in response to this plot, followed the advice of Salmān al-Fārisī to dig a trench.²⁰⁴ Every capable Muslim, including the Prophet himself, worked diligently to dig the trench in six days.²⁰⁵ It is worth noting that even the Jewish tribe of Qurayza, which was at Medina at the time, supported him in the digging process by providing him with instruments, tools, and money in accordance to its covenant with Muhammad.²⁰⁶ With various other details in this battle, including a failed Jewish conspiracy, the Muslims gained a significant victory at the end, although they were only 3,000 against 10,000 of the confederates.²⁰⁷

Regarding the account of al-Khandaq, it is not surprising that it includes a specific section on the miracles of the Prophet.²⁰⁸ It appears that when the narrators fail to defend, justify, or explain the actions or decisions of the leaders, or where there is not enough support to justify a prophetic office, they resort to interpolating supernatural elements in their narratives.²⁰⁹ Inserting these elements, it seems, provides a more appealing historical account in their view, confirming the superiority of Islam and justifying the supremacy of the Prophet.²¹⁰ Nevertheless, while these supernatural elements are believed by the faithful, they are not realistic to a critical reviewer. In actuality, they create difficult questions about the validity of the Muslim accounts.

Consider, for example, some of the miraculous deeds during the digging of the trench: (1) When a Muslim man complained about the toughness of the rocky ground in which he was digging, the Prophet spat in some water, then sprinkled the water on it, making it as if "it were soft sand"²¹¹; (2) Muhammad fed the multitudes of workers with a handful of dates²¹²; (3) while the Prophet was using a pick on a large rock, the pick gave off three bright flashes of lightning, and thus he declared that "the first [strike and lightning] means that God has opened up to me

the Yemen; the second Syria and the west; and the third the east,"²¹³ and so forth. Undoubtedly, the Prophet is to be respected, revered, and honored by the faithful, but these supernatural elements appear forged and tendentiously added in order to bathe the Battle of the Trench in a religious light. Needless to mention, there are similarities here to the Biblical accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes, which may reflect later Muslim authors' apologetic discourse.²¹⁴

In any case, even the Qur'ān itself does not explicitly mention the miracles of the trench, although it was presumably compiled long before the Muslim histories and *sīra*. Classical Muslim narrators, I contend, resorted to adding these supernatural components for at least three reasons: (1) to emphasize the uniqueness and supremacy of the Prophet, which is a legitimate religious objective; (2) to encourage the Believers who might be disheartened by the various accounts of defeat in battles, when they were supposed to be protected by Allah and his heavenly angels; (3) to make the task of digging the trench and similar future tasks appealing to the Muslim workers as well as to the readers of such accounts. It seems reasonable to argue that these reports of miracles are later interpolations that seek to bolster the *umma's* faith by portraying the Khandaq military victory as Allah's mighty work.

This victory at al-Khandaq does not require all these supernatural elements in order to explain it. On the one hand, according to Muslim accounts, the victory identifies two specific Muslim heroes who were mere mortals: Salmān the Persian, who is to be commended for his remarkable idea of the trench,²¹⁵ and ʿAbdullāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl, who advised the Prophet to stay protected within Medina—advice which was ignored earlier and led in part to the defeat at Uḥud.²¹⁶ On the other hand, classical Muslim sources also reveal, at least seven obvious and natural reasons exist for the victory of the Believers at al-Khandaq: (1) the genius idea of the trench, which protected the Muslims within Medina while the confederates remained outside with no significant protection²¹⁷; (2) the confederates were most likely divided and in disharmony because they represented different tribes and backgrounds, which made them weaker than the Muslims, as evidenced by the disagreement between Abū Sufyān (Pagan of Mecca) and Ḥuyayy ibn Akḥṭab (Jewish Chief of Banū al-Naḍīr)—two crucial leaders among the confederates; (3) the role of Nuʿaym ibn Masʿūd (of the tribe of Ghaṭfān), whose conversion to Islam was not yet announced, as he successfully urged Banū Qurayza to keep their treaty with Muhammad, with the result that they supported the Muslims²¹⁸; (4) Muhammad, in an intelligent move, was able to reach a deal with Ghaṭfān (through giving money to their leaders ʿUyayna ibn Ḥiṣn and al-Ḥārith ibn ʿAwf) and the Bedouins through negotiations, so that they opposed the confederates²¹⁹; (5) the support Muhammad received from Banū Qurayza, through the provision of their tools, helped the Muslims dig the trench very quickly (only six days)²²⁰; (6) the obvious reluctance of Banū Qurayza to support the

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