

# Reconsidering the Fate of Banū Qurayṣa Captives

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## Abstract

The fate of the captives of Banū Qurayṣa remains one of the most challenging issues in the Prophetic tradition. Sa'd b. Mu'adh was responsible for issuing a sentence for the captives of Banū Qurayṣa, which is stated in many sources of Islamic history as follows: all men were to be executed, while women and children were to be taken captive. This article delves into the historical background of Jews in Hijaz to examine the reports of narrators who witnessed the enforcement of Sa'd's sentence on Jewish captives. It also scrutinizes various reports of this sentence, assessing the context surrounding the sentence, and questions the accuracy of the number of those executed according to historical sources, which range from four-hundred to nine-hundred people. While historical records confirm that some Banū Qurayṣa Jews were executed, it could be argued that only their leaders faced the death penalty.

**Keywords:** Banū Qurayṣa, Jews in Hijaz, Jewish-Muslim relations, Islamic sources, Prophet Muḥammad, fate of captives.

## Introduction

There are historical events that cannot be limited to their own times due to their continued effects that make them subject to various interpretations. In the early Islamic history, the case of the Qurayṣid captives is one such instance. According to reports, when Banū Qurayṣa allegedly breached the covenant that had been concluded between them and Prophet Muḥammad, they promised the Meccan polytheists to support them in the Battle of the Trench (*al-Khandaq*), but never had an opportunity to practically cooperate with them during the battle. After the battle, Prophet Muḥammad commanded the Muslims to besiege Banū Qurayṣa, who soon surrendered themselves to the judgment of Sa'd b. Mu'adh. Sa'd reportedly ruled that "All their men must be massacred, with their women and children being taken as captives" (Wāqidi 1409 AH, 2:505-507; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:236-37; Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 2:57; Balādhuri 1417 AH, 1:149; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:586).

The case of Banū Qurayṣa has been the subject of various studies by scholars of early Islamic history. The second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* includes an article on Banū Qurayṣa, which claims that the sentence decided on for them was to

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massacre all their men, numbering around 600-900 people, leaving only a couple of young men alive (Watt 1986, 5:436). Almost the same view is found regarding Banū Qurayza in the *Encyclopedia of the Quran*.

Moreover, some have claimed that this episode has left a negative impression on Western scholars regarding early Islamic history. However, at the end of the article in the *Encyclopedia of the Quran*, there are names of certain Muslim learned men and hadith scholars from the Banū Qurayza tribe, which serves as a counter-evidence to the massacre of all the men during that event. It is possible that they might be then amongst the children who were spared from execution due to their age (Scholler 2004, 4:334).

This event has been depicted tragically in the *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, where it is claimed that despite having a non-aggression pact with Prophet Muḥammad and even lending their tools to Muslims to help them dig the trench around the city of Medina, hundreds of their men were massacred, and women and children taken as captives simply for selling corns and grains to the polytheists amidst the tumult of the battle when Medina was surrounded. The *Encyclopedia of Jews in the Islamic World* mentions that between 400 to 900 men were massacred and buried in a trench while Prophet Muḥammad was watching. The same entry claims that the Islamic sources/authorities never tried to reduce the bitterness of this mass crime. There is also a reference to al-Zabīr b. Bāṭā, who is “the last of Qurayza,” mentioned in a famous poem by Saul Tchernichowsky (d. 1943) (Lecker 16:776, 2007), which is mentioned in this entry (Lowin 2010, 1:338-39).

Certain books and articles attempt to document and verify the reports pertaining to the massacre of Banū Qurayza. In a paper, W. Montgomery Watt disputes Leone Caetani’s remarks that Prophet Muḥammad personally oversaw massacre. Montgomery Watt questions the claim that Sa’d b. Mu’adh issued the verdict, arguing that it was fabricated much later. He scrutinizes the sources, documents, and texts of these reports, concluding that the reports of Sa’d b. Mu’adh alone issuing the verdict are historically accurate and reliable. Therefore, Caetani’s claim is baseless and unreliable.

Montgomery Watt’s focus is on the historical accuracy of the claim that Sa’d b. Mu’adh alone was in charge of issuing the verdict regarding the fate of the Banū Qurayza captives, confirming that all male members of the tribe were executed (Watt 1990, 1-12). Through a textual analysis of the relevant documents, he tries to date the relevant reports. Based on the studies, it is concluded that such reports were prevalent in the first half of the seventh century and were later transmitted to Kufa in the second half of the eighth century. Furthermore, it is also demonstrated how tribal and political affiliations influenced the retelling of the details of this event (Ajmi and El-Sharawy 2010, 7-34).

It is noteworthy that not all efforts aim to authenticate the historical records concerning the alleged bloody fate of the Banū Qurayza male captives. Some contemporary scholars have conducted studies and published work in English that cast doubts on the historicity of this event or its details. For instance, in his book, *Muhammad and the Believers: At*

*the Origins of Islam*, Fred Donner raises serious doubts about the occurrence of such a brutal massacre, encouraging readers to investigate the matter further (Donner 2010, 47).

In his book, Omid Safi delves into the relationship between Prophet Muḥammad and the Jews and polytheists in the context of Banū Qurayza. Given the social and military challenges faced by Muslims and Jews in the twentieth century, he underscores the importance of uncovering the truth behind the event. While acknowledging doubts about the accuracy of historical reports on the matter, Safi refrains from making definitive claims about whether that such a massacre did or did not occur, echoing the sentiments of many other Muslims. Finally, he asserts that the ultimate knowledge of this event rests with God (Safi 2014, 39-40).

Juan Cole's deep dive into the battle of Banū Qurayza and the alleged verdict by Sa'd b. Mu'adh, in his quest to extract Prophet Muḥammad's *sīra* (practice) from the Holy Quran, has led him to cast serious doubts about whether such a verdict was ever pronounced. Drawing on the Quranic evidence, that is, Sura al-Aḥzāb (Quran 33:26), which references the battle of Banū Qurayza, and Sura al-Qaṣaṣ (Quran 28:4), which rebukes Pharaoh's practice of massacring men and leaving women alive, Cole argues that it is highly unlikely that such a massacre took place. While he never denies the disputes between Muslims and Jews, he surmises that such fabricated reports might have been originated during the Abbasid period when tensions were high between Muslims and Jews (Cole 2018, 53-54).

Some scholars, particularly Muslims, do not outright reject the accuracy of historical reports regarding the fate of Banū Qurayza. Rather, they sharply reject or cast serious doubts about whether such a massacre truly occurred. W.N. Arafat provides twelve hints to show that such a horrific massacre did not take place, drawing on similarities between this event and the event of Masada. However, M.J. Kister refutes the hints provided by Arafat (Kister 1986, 61-96), and Montgomery Watt finds Arafat's hints less than conclusive (Watt 1986, 5:436). Nevertheless, Arafat's contribution to the debate is worthy of consideration, as he makes a detailed comparison between the fate of the Jews of Banū Qurayza and the Jews of Masada. In fact, some of the similarities are so striking that they raise suspicions, including the similarity in the names of these two groups of people (Arafat 1976, 100-107).

In his book, Adil Salahi discusses the fate of Banū Qurayza, acknowledging that the chiefs of Banū Qurayza were executed. However, he casts doubt on the accuracy of the number of executed men reported by Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 AH/ 768 CE). Salahi initially questions the Abū Lubāba incident, based on some internal evidence in the reports, and then considers another report with a more reliable chain of transmitters, concluding that this event was related to the Battle of Tabūk in 9 AH/ 630 CE. Although he accepts Ibn Ishāq's practice of reporting events without referencing their documents for readers, he maintains that this approach undermines the reliability of the reports. Consequently, he seeks out more reliable sources, such as the Holy Quran.

Drawing on Sura al-Aḥzāb (Quran 33: 26-27), he concludes that if the entirety of the Banū Qurayza men had been massacred at the behest of Sa'd b. Mu'ādh, there must have been some mention of it in the Holy Quran.

According to Salahi, a major drawback of Ibn Ishāq's report is his claim that all six hundred to nine hundred men of Banū Qurayza were massacred. This proposition is implausible as it would be impossible to fit such a large number of men in a single house. Furthermore, if such a massacre took place, then one may wonder why historians failed to record the names of those who were supposedly massacred and why no collective tomb was named after them, to mention a few doubts. In contrast, *al-Maghāzī* of al-Wāqidī (d. 207 AH/ 823) reports that only nine men were killed, leading Salahi to estimate that the total number of Jews executed could not have been more than twenty-five.

Moreover, Salahi draws on jurisprudential (fiqh-related) evidence that it is religiously impermissible to retaliate by killing a large number of people for the actions of only a few. Building on this, he concludes that Ibn Ishāq's report is utterly unreliable. Adil Salahi concludes that there is no Islamic jurisprudential ruling similar to what allegedly applied to Banū Qurayza.<sup>1</sup> He also touches upon the similarities between the Banū Qurayza event and that of Masada siege, as noted by Arafat. Ultimately, he concludes by pointing out that Ibn Ishāq's version of events contradicts the ethical practice of Prophet Muḥammad (Salahi 2013, 248-56).

In his analysis of the Constitution of Medina (*Wathīqat al-Madīna*), Sadik Kirazli argues that the Banū Qurayza Jews had openly breached their promise, as evidenced by the contents and terms of the document. However, Kirazli notes weaknesses in the reports of Ibn Ishāq, as well as the absence of corroboration from authoritative Sunni hadith sources, concluding that the number of the executed men were certainly not as high as 600-900. In addition, he indicates that, if proven, such a massacre has not been recorded in any Jewish historical texts. Moreover, Kirazli contends that other contextual factors fail to support such a number of the executed people (Kirazli 2019, 1-17).

While Salahi and Kirazli offer compelling evidence that the contextual and environmental conditions of the time make it unlikely that large number of the Banū Qurayza Jews were executed, their historical scholarship and analyses are not without limitations. In particular, their focus on Ibn Ishāq's account disregards earlier sources recorded in both historical and hadith sources. As such, their findings may not be as precise as expected.<sup>2</sup>

In the current research, I will analyze the accounts given about the fate of the Banū Qurayza captives, as indicated in various hadith and historical sources. I will then

1. Kiester rejects Arafat's stance that is based on a reasoning similar to that of Adil Salahi.

2. This is similar to the conclusion of a paper by al-Ajmi and el-Sharawy.

evaluate the historical value of these accounts and discuss the contextual conditions surrounding the verdict. I demonstrate that the reports do not present the events as they in fact occurred.

### The Banū Qurayṣa Event

Banū Qurayṣa was one of the largest Jewish tribes in Yathrib or Medina. They resided to the southwest and east of Medina, close to the eastern Ḥarrah (to the east of Yathrib) and outside the central oasis of the region (Scholler 2004, 4:334). The tribe constructed a vast stronghold named Mu'riḍ that could accommodate all its members (Samhūdī 1993, 1:208-209) and served as a refuge during times of attacks by their enemies. Additionally, some of their prominent members had smaller exclusive forts, such as al-Zabīr b. Baṭā. Like other Jewish tribes, Banū Qurayṣa had formed alliances with Arab tribes in Yathrib, including al-Aws (Watt 1986, 5:436; Lecker 2007, 16:776).

Upon Prophet Muḥammad's arrival in Yathrib, which it has since been known as *Madīnat al-Nabī* (The City of the Prophet) or shortly Medina, he established a pact of good neighborliness with the Jews (Ibn Hishām, n.d., 1:501-4; Ibn Sallām, n.d., 1:260-66; Ibn Zanjiwayh 1406 AH, 1:466-70), which is called the Constitution of Medina. Since there is no mention of the three major Jewish clans, that is, Banū Qurayṣa, Banū a-Naḍīr, and Banū Qaynuqā', some researchers speculate that it might have been after the battle of Banū Qurayṣa in 5 AH/ 627 CE (Watt 1986, 5:436; Buhl, et al. 1993, 7:367; Lecker 2004, 183-90; Lecker 2007, 16:776; Lecker 2012, 101). At any rate, there is evidence of a non-aggression pact between Muslims and Banū Qurayṣa Jews, regardless of whether it was part of the Constitution of Medina or a separate pact (Wāqidi 1409 AH, 2:454, 503-504; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:220; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:571; Miskawayh 1379 Sh, 1:258; Maqrīzī 1420 AH, 1:69; Dhahabī 1413 AH, 2:287).

Here is how the Battle of Banū Qurayṣa is depicted in historical sources: After Prophet Muḥammad exiled the Banū l-Naḍīr Jews to Khaybar, they joined the Banū Qaynuqā' who had already been exiled there. Together with Ḥuyay b. Akḥṭab and others, the Jews went to the Meccan polytheists and incited them to wage a war against the Muslims, with the intention of confronting the entire Muslim community. They pledged to work with the Meccans until they succeeded in uprooting the Muslims from Yathrib (Wāqidi 1409 AH, 2:441-42; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:214; Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 2:50; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:565).

Consequently, the Quraysh tribes collected their confederates, waging the Battle of the Trench against Muslims. Meanwhile, Ḥuyay b. Akḥṭab informed Abū Sufyān that the Banū Qurayṣa were with them and were capable of mobilizing a large number of troops (Wāqidi 1409 AH, 2:454). Thereupon, he went to Ka'b b. Asad, the chief of the Banū Qurayṣa tribe. Initially hesitant, Ka'b finally agreed to join forces with the Quraysh tribe against Prophet Muḥammad. Ḥuyay tore up the pact had been previously signed between Banū Qurayṣa and Prophet Muḥammad. He then spread

the news of his breach to other tribes (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:454-57; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:220-21; Ibn Sa‘d 1410 AH, 2:51; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:570-71).

Upon receiving the news of the Banū Qurayza’s violation of the pact, Prophet Muḥammad immediately dispatched a delegation to verify the report. When the delegation arrived in the region of the Banū Qurayza, they discovered that the tribe was indeed preparing for battle and organizing their forces and horses. The Muslim delegation reminded them of the non-aggression pact that they had concluded with Prophet Muḥammad. However, Ka‘b and other Banū Qurayza Jews declared the pact as invalid and cursed both the delegation and the Prophet. The news of Banū Qurayza’s violation of the pact spread among the Muslims just before the onset of the battle (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:457-59; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:220-22; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:571-72). With enemies on two fronts, the Muslims were gravely concerned. To mitigate the danger posed by Banū Qurayza, Prophet Muḥammad instructed some Muslims who frequented the city to carry weapons for protection (see Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:451).

The Battle of the Trench occurred in 5 AH/ 627 CE, incited by the Banū l-Naḍīr tribe. The Quraysh polytheists played an active role in this battle to eradicate the Islamic faith. Despite their efforts, the Muslims emerged victorious and the polytheists were defeated. The Banū Qurayza Jews could not cause any harm to the Muslims in the course of this battle (see Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:440-96).

After the battle, the Archangel Gabriel descended to Prophet Muḥammad and conveyed to him the divine order to fight the Banū Qurayza clan. Before long, Prophet Muḥammad called on ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and entrusted him with the war banner. Then Bilāl was instructed to announce this to all Muslims. Additionally, Prophet Muḥammad commanded the Muslims not to perform the afternoon ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*) except on the lands of Banū Qurayza. The Prophet himself put on war garments and marched towards the territory of Banū Qurayza. ‘Alī raised the war banner beside the Banū Qurayza’s fort. The Jews began to curse Prophet Muḥammad, which the Muslim forces countered by stating that “the sword will decide the verdict between us” (See Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:497-99; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:233-35; Ibn Sa‘d 1410 AH, 2:57; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:581-83). Both sides started shooting arrows at each another (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:500-501). The Muslims surrounded them for fifteen or twenty days (see Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2: 496; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:235; Ibn Sa‘d 1410 AH, 2:57; Ibn Ḥabīb, n.d., 113; Balādhurī 1988, 30). The siege lasted until Banū Qurayza had to succumb to the inevitable defeat. They dispatched Nabbāsh b. Qays to negotiate with Prophet Muḥammad. Nabbāsh asked the Prophet to allow them to immigrate to the Khaybar region without taking their properties, just like Banū al-Naḍīr, which was rejected by Prophet Muḥammad (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:500-501; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:583).

The Banū Qurayza Jews requested Prophet Muḥammad to dispatch Abū Lubāba b. ‘Abd al-Mundhir to them. Abū Lubāba was a man from the al-Aws clan, and in the battles between al-Aws and al-Khazraj, particularly in the Battle of Bu‘āth, Banū Qurayza were

confederates of al-Aws clan. Ka'b b. Asad reminded Abū Lubāba that Banū Qurayza were confederates of al-Aws. He implored him to intervene in their favor before Prophet Muḥammad to allow them to migrate either to Khaybar or to the Levant. Abū Lubāba pointed out that Prophet Muḥammad would never give them such permission and that they had to acquiesce to the verdict of Prophet Muḥammad. Abū Lubāba indicated to them that their fate was execution. Soon after this, Abū Lubāba realized that he had just committed a treason to Prophet Muḥammad. He returned to the Prophet's Mosque without being noticed by other companions of the Prophet. In the mosque, he tied himself to a column in the mosque so that Allah would accept his repentance. Upon this incident, the Prophet remarked, "You had better wait until Allah accepts your repentance; had he come to me, I would have beseeched Allah for his repentance" (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:502-507; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:236-37; Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 2:57; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:584-85).

Upon realizing that they had no other option but accepting Prophet Muḥammad's decision, Banū Qurayza submitted to it. The Prophet ordered that the men and women of the Banū Qurayza tribe to vacated the fort with all of their possessions, including 1,500 swords, 300 shields, 200 spears, 1,500 helmets, as well as a considerable number of camels and cattle. Following this, senior members of al-Aws clan approached Prophet Muḥammad and raised concerns, stating, "O Prophet of Allah! Banū Qurayza are our confederates. Would you not treat them as you treated Banū Qaynuqā'? They are deeply remorseful for their actions. Could you please entrust them to us?" The Prophet paused briefly, during which the people of al-Aws also discussed the matter. Subsequently, Prophet Muḥammad ask, "Would you consent if I appoint one of you to make a decision regarding them?" Upon receiving their consent, Prophet Muḥammad declared, "I appoint Sa'd b. Mu'adh in charge of issuing the verdict." At that time, Sa'd was bedridden due to injuries sustained in the Battle of the Trench (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:505-507; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:239; Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 2:57; Balādhurī 1417 AH, 1:249; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:586). Afterward, Prophet Muḥammad summoned Sa'd b. Mu'adh and authorized him to pronounce a verdict. Sa'd decreed that their adolescent men should be executed and their women taken as captives. The Prophet instructed his followers to bring the captives to Usāma b. Zayd's residence, while the captive women and children, as well as the possessions of the Banū Qurayza, were to be taken to the residence of Ḥārith's daughter (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:512; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:240; Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 2:57; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:587-88).

### **Historical Accounts on the Fate of the Banū Qurayza Captives**

In what follows, I provide an account of the fate of the Banū Qurayza captives and the number of the executed people as recorded in various sources.

#### **1. Historical sources**

There are different estimates in various historical sources as to the fate of the Banū Qurayza captives and the number of their executed men. As for those executed, the

following statistics are given: 400 people (Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:59), 600 people (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:517; Dhahabī 1413 AH, 2:315), between 600 and 700 people and 750 people (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:518; Ya‘qūbī, n.d., 2:52; Mas‘ūdī, n.d., 217; Maqdisī, n.d., 2:220; Maqrīzī 1420 AH, 2:251). These accounts have been rendered by such people as Ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68 AH/ 687 CE) (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:518), Abū ‘Amr al-Madanī (d.?) (Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:59), ‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Bakr b. Ḥazm (d. 135 AH/ 752-53 CE) (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:517), Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir (d. 130 AH/ 747 CE) (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:518), and Mūsā b. ‘Uqba (d. 141 AH/ 758 CE) (Dahabī 1413 AH, 2:315). In the same vein, in an account of Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 AH/ 768 CE) it is indicated that the earlier reporters estimated at least a number between 600 and 700 and at most between 800 and 900 people (Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:241; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:588).

Sources of history differ as to whether all the Banū Qurayza men were subject to Sa‘d’s verdict or only their warriors. Some of these sources rely on reports by Ja‘far b. Maḥmūd (d.?) (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:512) and Ibn Ishāq (Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:240; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:588), but other do not specify the source of their reports (Ibn Sa‘d 1410 AH, 2:57; Maqdisī, n.d., 2:220; Ibn al-Jawzī 1412 AH, 3:239-40; Maqrīzī 1420 AH, 2:251) it is believed that this verdict applied to all their men. However, in some other historical records on the authority of Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī (d. 74 AH/ 676 CE) (Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:587) and Mūsā b. ‘Uqba (Dahabī 1413 AH, 2:315), the verdict applied only to the Banū Qurayza warriors. Yet, in certain cases, this is mentioned without a precise documentation (Mas‘ūdī, n.d., 217).

## 2. Hadith Sources

There are not many references to the number of the executed captives after the battle against Banū Qurayza. According to a report by Ḥanash b. ‘Abd Allāh (d. 100 AH/ 718-19 CE), they consisted of seventy men (Mālik b. Anas 1415 AH, 1:503). Some of these reports indicate that Sa‘d’s verdict applied in the case of only the Banū Qurayza warriors; these accounts were reported by ‘Ā’isha (d. 58 AH/ 678 CE) (Qāsim b. Sallām, n.d., 1:171; Ibn Abī Shayba 1409 AH, 7:373; Sulamī 1419 AH, 56; Bukhārī 1422 AH, 5:112), ‘Amr b. Shuraḥbīl (d. 63 AH/ 682-83 CE) (Qurashī 1384 AH, 27), Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī (d. 74 AH/ 674 CE) (Ibn Zanjawayh 1406 AH, 1:342-43; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1421 AH, 17:259, 18:215; Kashshī 1408 AH, 307; Bukhārī 1422 AH, 4:67, 5:112, 8: 95; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, n.d., 3:1388), ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 95 AH/ 713 CE) (Qāsim b. Sallām, n.d., 1:172), ‘Āmir al-Sha‘bī (d. 105 AH/ 724 CE) (Ibn Abī Shayba 1409 AH, 7:380), and Ibn Ishāq (Abū Yūsuf, n.d., 219-20). In contrast to these sources, there are accounts that all men of Banū Qurayza were subject to the execution. These accounts were reported by ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar (d. 73 AH/ 693 CE) (Ṣan‘ānī 1403 AH, 6:54, 10:358; Bukhārī 1422 AH, 5:88; Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj, n.d., 3:1387; Abū Dāwūd, n.d., 3:157; Bazzār 2009, 12:219), Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī (d. 78 AH/ 697 CE) (Qāsim b. Sallām, n.d., 1:172-73; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1421 AH,

23:90; Dārimī 1412 AH, 3:1631; Tirmidhī 1998, 3:196), and Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124 AH/ 742 CE) (Qāsim b. Sallām, n.d., 1:146).

According to another report, the Banū Qurayṣa youths were examined to see if they reached the age of puberty, so that the execution verdict would apply to them. Such reports were handed down by Saʿd b. Abī l-Waqqās (d. 54 AH/ 674 CE) (Dawraqī 1407 AH, 57; Kashshī 1408 AH, 79; Bazzār 2009, 3:301), Saʿd b. al-Musayyib (d. 94 AH/ 713 CE) (Ṣanʿānī 1403 AH, 5:371), and ʿAṭīyya al-Qurazī (d.?) (Yaḥyā b. Salām 1425 AH, 2:712; Ṭayālisī 1419 AH, 2:613; Qāsim b. Sallām, n.d., 1:173; Kashshī 1403 AH, 2:138; Saʿd b. Manṣūr 1403 AH, 2:396; Ibn Abī Shayba 1409 AH, 6:483, 542; Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1421 AH, 31:67, 32:163, 37:330; Ibn Zanjawayh 1406 AH, 1:343; Dārimī 1412 AH, 3:1602; Ibn Māja 1430 AH), 3:577-78; Abū Dāwud, n.d., 4:141; Tirmidhī 1998, 3:197; Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim 1411 AH, 4:205) who cited a great majority of such reports. Some reports rely on “*Abnāʾ Qurayṣa*” or “*Ibnā Qurayṣa*” (Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal 1421 AH, 31:340, 38:231; Ibn Zanjawayh 1406 AH, 1:343-44; Nasāʾī 2001, 5:264) as the reporter of this event. In another report, Miqṣam b. Bajara (d. 101 AH/ 719-20 CE) is mentioned as the one who was in charge of examining the youths (Ibn Abī ʿĀṣim 1411 AH, 4:205).<sup>1</sup>

### Evaluation of the Reports

These reports can be evaluated from two perspectives. The first involves analyzing their texts and chains of transmitters as well as the contextual conditions. As to their contextual evaluation, the social, historical, and geographical conditions of Medina will be the parameters against which the reports of the Banū Qurayṣa massacre will be evaluated.

### Textual and Reliability Evaluation

The reports that provide information on the number of the Banū Qurayṣa men who were executed are flawed and unreliable, both in terms of their texts and in terms of their chains of transmission. Many of these problems stem from issues with their reporters or transmitters. As previously mentioned, estimates of the number of the executed people ranges from seventy to nine hundred people. These accounts are reported by Ibn ʿAbbās, Ḥanash b. ʿAbd Allāh, Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir, ʿAbd Allāh b. Abī Bakr b. Ḥazm, Mūsā b. ʿUqba, Muḥammad b. Ishāq, and Abū ʿAmr al-Madāʾinī. Of these, Abū ʿAmr al-Madāʾinī cannot be identified. Moreover, part of the hadith’s chain of transmission that goes from Ibn Hishām to Abū ʿUbayda is not identifiable. If Abū ʿUbayda could be identified as al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224 AH/ 838 CE), it might be possible to take Abū ʿAmr al-Madanī as Marwān b. Shujāʿ al-Khuṣayfī (d. 184 AH/ 800-801 CE), but this is extremely improbable.<sup>2</sup> Considering this probability, Abū

1. In what follows, I show why such a report seems unreliable.

2. This argument is flawed in several respects: In the first place, Qāsim b. Sallām has the patronymic (kunya) Abū ʿUbayd, not Abū ʿUbayda. Secondly, Ibn Hishām died in 214 AH/ 829 CE and was older than Qāsim

‘Amr’s account is of little historical value, as he recounts it with an interval of over a hundred years after the time of the incident. By this criterion, the reports made by Muḥammad b. al-Munkadir, ‘Abd Allāh b. Abī Bakr b. Ḥazm, Mūsā b. ‘Uqba, and Ibn Ishāq are defective and of little historical value. Ḥanash b. ‘Abd Allāh (d. 100 AH/ 718 CE) was born most probably after the Banū Qurayṣa event. Moreover, it is improbable that he was in Medina (if it is assumed that he was born before 5 AH/ 626 CE), he was from Ṣan‘ā (*Ṣan‘ānī*), and hence he was one of the followers (*tābi‘ūn*) not companions (*ṣaḥāba*) of Prophet Muḥammad (Mizzī 1980, 7:429-31).

Amongst the reports and accounts at hand, that of Ibn ‘Abbās may deserve consideration, for he was born three years before the Prophet Muḥammad’s migration to Medina (Balādhurī 1417 AH, 4:27), and so must have been around eight years old at the time of the Banū Qurayṣa event. Despite this, it is unknown whether he was present in Medina at the time, since his father, ‘Abbās, went to Medina shortly before the Conquest of Mecca in 8 AH/630 CE, and was a resident of Mecca afterwards (Mizzī 1980, 3:3-4). It follows that Ibn ‘Abbās’s reports cannot be historically much trustworthy. As a result, the historical reports concerning the number of the executed men of Banū Qurayṣa are very much doubtful. On the other hand, in both Shia and Sunni hadith sources, there is hardly any unflawed account in terms of historical reliability and accuracy as for its chain of transmitters.

In certain Sunni sources of history and hadith, the execution verdict is said to be confined to the Banū Qurayṣa warriors. In some of these accounts, the name of the original reporter of the event is omitted. The same holds true of the reports by Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī and Mūsā b. ‘Uqba. In the Sunni sources, the same accounts are reported as transmitted by people other than Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī; namely, ‘Ā’isha, ‘Amr b. Shuraḥbīl, ‘Urwa b. al-Zubayr, ‘Āmir al-Sha‘bī, and Ibn Ishāq. Of these, only ‘Ā’isha and Abū Sa‘īd al-Khudrī may be regarded as eye-witnesses, and hence their accounts may be of historical value.

According to other sources, all the Banū Qurayṣa men are said to be subject to execution. Such an account was transmitted via Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī, ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar, and Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī. Of these, only the report by Jābir b. ‘Abd Allāh, who accompanied Prophet Muḥammad in all his battles except those of Badr and Uḥud (‘Asqalānī 1325 AH, 2:43), and that by ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Umar, who was ten years old at the time of the Prophet’s migration to Medina, and hence was fifteen at the time of the Banū Qurayṣa incident (‘Asqalānī 1415 AH, 4:156), could be of historical value. Since these accounts involve the phrase “the Banū Qurayṣa men (*rijāl Banū*

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b. Sallām, hence it is improbable for Ibn Hishām to transmit hadiths from Qāsim b. Sallām. Thirdly, the geographical contexts of the traditions related by Ibn Hishām mainly includes Egypt, whereas Qāsim b. Sallām was from Baghdad, hence the place where he received and transmitted a great majority of his hadiths and accounts. Finally, in the list of those who transmitted hadiths from Qāsim b. Sallām there is no trace or record of Ibn Hishām (see Mizzi 1980 AH, 23:355; ‘Asqalānī 1325 AH, 8:315).

*Qurayza*”), it may be interpreted as referring to their “warriors”. Hence, the phrase could refer to only their “warriors”, not all of their “men.”

The interpretation of the “the Banū Qurayza men” as their “warriors” is contradicted by the report that the condition for their execution was their having reached the age of puberty. As mentioned earlier, whenever there was any ambiguity, the Banū Qurayza adolescents underwent tests to determine whether or not they had attained puberty. Such reports can be found in various historical and hadith sources, including those attributed to ‘Aḫyā al-Qurazī, Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ, and Sa’id b. al-Musayyib.

One account mentions Miqṣam b. Bajara as a person who was in charge of examining the Banū Qurayza adolescents. However, this report seems highly unlikely and incredible mainly due to two reasons. Firstly, Miqṣam died in 101 AH/719-20 CE, which makes it unlikely that he was born at the time of the Banū Qurayza event. Secondly, he never quoted any piece of hadith directly from Prophet Muḥammad.

Other reports recount this event via “the sons (or descendants) of the Banū Qurayza (*abnā’ Qurayza*)” or “two sons of the Banū Qurayza (*ibnā Qurayza*)”. Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ was a participant in all the military expeditions (*ghazawāt*) of Prophet Muḥammad (Ibn ‘Abd al-Birr 1412 AH, 2:607), and ‘Aḫyā al-Qurazī himself underwent this examination. From this perspective, the accounts of these two persons should be subjected to closer historical scrutiny. An important point to note regarding the account rendered by ‘Aḫyā al-Qurazī is that there are no other accounts available apart from the one just quoted from him (Aḫmad b. Ḥanbal 1421 AH, 31:67). Furthermore, the only other accounts available are those of his and Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ. If this event had really occurred, there would have been numerous reports about it, since there must have been many more adolescents who were examined and survived.

In addition, there are doubts about the account given by Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ, as it first appeared in the book *Musnad Sa’d b. Abī Waqqāṣ* authored by Aḫmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Dawraqī (d. 264 AH/ 860 CE), with no other trace or precedent in hadith and historical sources. Based on these two observations, both these accounts fall short of being trustworthy. Even if one overlooks the historical flaws of these two accounts, it may still be inferred that puberty was the main criterion for the verdict of killing the Banū Qurayza warriors, and the verdict never applied to all of their men.

Based on the aforementioned points, one may argue that the phrase “the Banū Qurayza men” only refers to their warriors, not all the men of that tribe. It is worth noting that listing the chain of transmitters is not much accurate in historical sources. This could be the reason why al-Ṭabarī only quotes Ibn Ishāq’s report in his report of the Banū Qurayza event, while he is a historian who tries to collect and provide various accounts by different chains of transmitters (Ṭabarī 1378, 2:587-88). This suggests paucity of sources in this regard, indicating the unreliability of the details attributed to it.

In addition to the historical significance of the accounts given by historical and hadith sources about the fate of the Banū Qurayṣa tribe, there is a Quranic verse that refers to this episode. Apart from the sacred and revelation-oriented value of this Quranic verse, it is the closest in terms of having been revealed near the time of this incident. The verse is as follows: “And He [Allah] dragged down those who had backed them from among the People of the Book from their strongholds, and He cast terror in their hearts, [so that] you killed a part of them and took captive [another] part of them.” (Quran 33:26). A great majority of Quranic exegetes hold that this Quranic verse refers to the battle of Banū Qurayṣa (Muqātil b. Sulaymān 1423 AH, 3:484-85; Qummī 1404 AH, 2:189; Farrā’, n.d., 2:340; Ṭabarī 1412 AH, 21:95; Jaṣṣāṣ 1405 AH, 5:225; Ṭūsī, n.d., 5:332-33; Ṭabrisī 1372 Sh, 8:551; Zamakhsharī 1407 AH, 3:533).

There are several points that must be considered in a historical analysis of this verse. Firstly, the historical sources pertaining to the Banū Qurayṣa event do not mention any battle. Secondly, all members of the tribe, including men and women, were held captive in the fortress. Thirdly, apart from the lack of a convincing reason for their execution, certain hadiths suggest that such an execution is not religiously permissible (see e.g., Mālik b. Anas 1406 AH, 2:448; Abū Yūsuf, n.d., 219-20; Ṣan’ānī 1403 AH, 5:218-19, 407; Qāsim b. Sallām, n.d., 31, 271).<sup>1</sup> Given these considerations, it can be concluded that the individuals referred to in the Quranic verse were only the men of Banū Qurayṣa, some of whom were killed and others taken captive. The language used in the verse, stating that some were killed and others taken captive, suggests the falsity of the claim that all the men of Banū Qurayṣa were executed. Likewise, the large number of the executed people makes this claim unlikely. These points are also supported by certain Quran exegeses (see e.g., Muqātil b. Sulaymān 1423 AH, 4:281; Ṭabarānī 2008, 5:187; Zamakhsharī 1407 AH, 3:533; Ṭabrisī 1412 AH, 3:311).

There are several points of similarity between the destiny of Banū Qurayṣa and the Jews of “Masada,” who were executed *en masse* in the year 73 CE. In this incident, which occurred during the first wave of clashes between the Jews and the Roman Empire (between 66-73 CE), extremist Jews who had been evicted from their homes by inhabitants of Jerusalem in 70 CE sought refuge on the Masada highlands on the western coast of the Dead Sea. This was the last region to be captured by the Roman army. The inhabitants of the area put up resistance for three months before they were ultimately executed (Stiebel 2007, 13:593-99). There are several similarities between the event of Banū Qurayṣa and that which occurred at Masada, including the number of people executed, ranging from 600 to 960 people. Additionally, both groups were under siege before being killed. Another striking parallel is the suggestion to kill women and children, which is similar to

1. In a Quranic verse (Quran 2:49), it is stated that one of heinous and oppressive acts committed by Pharaoh was killing men while sparing women. Given this clear statement, how could such a criminal act be considered feasible in the Islamic era?

the proposal made by Ka‘b b. Asad to the Jews (see Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:502; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:235; Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:584). A similarity can be even be seen in certain personal names: such Āzar b. Āzar, a staunch enemy of Prophet Muḥammad in Medina, who sounds very similar to “Eleazar,” the leader of the besieged Jews at Masada (Stiebel 2007, 13:593).

On the other hand, Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 AH/ 768 CE) met with the descendants of Jews who had fought against Prophet Muḥammad. He did so in order to gather information about such battles of the Prophet. Since many people believed that it was inevitable for the surviving Jews to side with their own ancestors, they criticized Ibn Ishāq for consulting them (Ibn Ḥibbān 1393 AH, 7:382; ‘Asqalānī 1325 AH, 8:315). On the other hand, by comparing and contrasting the accounts of some of the battles fought during the time of Prophet Muḥammad to those provided the descendants of the Jews involved in these battle, as chronicled by Ibn Ishāq, in addition to several similarities between these two accounts and the fact that many descendants of Masada Jews later on emigrated to Yathrib, some researchers trace such a bloody account of the fate of the Banū Qurayza Jews to a confusion by the Jews, chiefly due to creeping of ancient history of Jews into the minds of their later generations (Arafat 1976, 100-107).

### Evaluation of Contextual Conditions

Apart from the fact that the verdict in question is incompatible with the spirit of the religious rules (*sharī‘a*) of Islam and that there is no other similar case in Islamic history, there are some other flaws, beyond what appear in the reports, which include:

1. According to certain historical sources, the captives were later given shelter Usāma b. Zayd. Usāma’s house. However, since Usāma was not a wealthy man like ‘Uthmān b. ‘Affān, his house would have been a small edifice (see Samhūdī 1404 AH, 2:732). Therefore, it seems unlikely that one hundred people, let alone four hundred to nine hundred, could be accommodated in such a small space men. The same holds true for the women and children, along with their belongings, that allegedly were placed in the house of Ḥārith’s daughter.
2. When evaluating the reports and accounts, it was observed that there were not many reporters who were eyewitnesses to the event. Therefore, only a limited number of reports have reached us about it. In fact, if such a massacre had occurred in Medina at that time, in which between 600 and 900 men were killed, its news would have been reported frequently (*mutawātir*), instead of there being just a few reports.
3. It is difficult to believe that such a large group of combatants surrendered themselves to the swords of Muslims without any resistance, when they could have easily saved themselves from being killed by pretending to have converted to Islam. Even if one assumes that they were ready to be captured by Muslims, it is still puzzling how the Jewish inhabitants of Hijaz remained silent in the face

of such a genocide and did nothing to prevent it. Moreover, why have Jewish sources remained silent about such a horrific event, without making even the slightest reference to it?

4. It is worth pondering where the blood of the executed Jews went. There is just one report, stating that the blood of those killed reached Ahjār al-Zayt,<sup>1</sup> there are no other reports to confirm this (Dhahabī 1413 AH, 2:315).
5. As for the graves of the Banū Qurayza victims, it is reported that a large trench was dug for this purpose near the central market of Medina; that is, in the city center (Ṭabarī 1378 AH, 2:593). However, considering that a long and vast trench had just been dug around the city of Medina, it would have been pointless to dig another trench. Even if there was such a mass grave, there is no reference to it in sources of the history and geography of Medina. This is surprising since it was customary among Arabs to name places after major events that took place there.
6. If we assume that the verdict issued by Sa'd b. Mu'adh was to be applied to all Banū Qurayza men, then how to explain the cases of two men, Rafā'a b. Samu'al and al-Zabīr b. Bāṭā, who were granted amnesty at the intercession of two Muslims? Rafā'a appealed to Umm Mundhir to intervene on his behalf before Prophet Muḥammad, and the Prophet granted Umm Mundhir's request, as a result of which Rafā'a escaped execution (Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:244). Similarly, another man from Banū Qurayza, called al-Zabīr b. Bāṭā, appealed to Thābit b. Qays to intercede on his behalf before Prophet Muḥammad, asking for clemency for himself, his family members, and his property. The Prophet accepted Thābit's request, but al-Zabīr b. Bāṭā declined the pardon and chose to accept the death penalty instead (Wāqidī 1409 AH, 2:518-20; Ibn Hishām, n.d., 2:243).
7. If a mass execution of Banū Qurayza had occurred, and all their men were killed, it would significantly reduced the number of Qurayzids among the Muslim community. However, some of them were among the Muslim hadith-transmitters. Moreover, if such a devastating massacre had occurred in Islamic history, many of them might have opposed Islam, while some of those from Banū Qurayza went on to become Muslim scholars and hadith-transmitters (see Scholler 2004, 4:334; Lecker 2007, 16:776). They include: Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī (d. 113 AH/ 731-32 CE) ('Ijlī al-Kūfī 1405 AH, 2:251; Mizzī 1980, 26:340-48), 'Uthmān b. Ka'b al-Qurazī (d.?) (Bukhārī, n.d., 6:247; Mizzī 1980, 19:477-78), Tha'laba b. Abī Mālik al-Qurazī (d.?) (Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 5:58-59; 'Ijlī al-Kūfī 1405 AH, 1:261), al-Mīswar b. Rifā'a al-Qurazī (d. 138 AH/ 755-56 CE) (Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 5:433), and Zakariyyā b. Manzūr al-Qurazī (d.?) (Ibn Sa'd 1410 AH, 5:502).

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1. An area in the vicinity of the Prophet's Mosque in Medina.

## Conclusions

Drawing on the above discussions, we can infer that:

1. The number of those executed, as recorded in historical sources, cannot be deemed reliable due to the significant time gap between the actual event and the recording its details. Moreover, the problem is exacerbated by their unreliable chains of transmitters.
2. Hadith sources do not provide a historically reliable account of the events. On the contrary, the accounts that historically reliable make no reference to such a large number of victims.
3. Given the Quranic reference to the battle against the Banū Qurayza tribe, it cannot be denied that some of their men were killed and some were held captive. However, it can be argued that the death penalty was only applied to their leaders, who had breached their earlier covenant with Prophet Muḥammad and the Muslim community. The exact number of these Jewish leaders is certainly much smaller than the reported figure of 400 to 900 people.
4. If we assume that the fate of Banū Qurayza was as described Ibn Ishāq's account, then the verdict issued by Sa'd b. Mu'adh would not have been unusual for the Jews. Rather, he was certainly aware of their faith and religious laws, hence his verdict was consistent with what is indicated in the Old Testament and Jewish religion (Deut. 20:13-14).
5. Finally, one could consider Juan Cole's interpretation, which suggests that reports containing very large numbers of executed Jews were fabricated in the Abbasid period. The accuracy of this possibility can be assessed by examining the relationship between the Abbasids and the Jews during the Abbasid caliphate (Cole 2018, 53-54).

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