Abū Jahl

Abū Jahl (d. 2/624), the “Father of Ignorance,” was the Qurashi leader of Muhammad’s pagan opponents in Mecca. His actual name was ‘Amr b. Hishām b. al-Mughira of the Makhzum of the Quraysh. This derogatory nickname was reportedly given to him by the Prophet,
Abū Jahl

and was designed to replace his actual kunya, Abū l-Hakam. The Prophet declared that he who calls Abū Jahl Abū l-Hakam commits a grave sin (al-Balādhurī, 1:141; 10:173–4). A verse by Ḥassān b. Thābit, Muhammad’s poet, states that “his kinsmen named him Abū Ḥakam, but God named him Abū Jahl” (Ḥassān, 1:261). His mother was Āsmāʾ b. Mukharrib al-Hanẓaliyya of the Tamīm (see Kīster, 326–30). She met Ḥishām b. al-Muğhrī in Najrān, where he proposed to her, and she agreed to marry him on the condition that he take her to Mecca. There she gave birth to Abū Jahl as well as to al-Ḥārith. Her husband died and she married his brother Abū Rabī’a b. al-Muğhrī and gave birth to ‘Ayyāsh b. Abī Rabī’a, as well as to ‘Abdallāh and Umm Ḥujayr (al-Balādhurī, 10:173; Ibn Sa’d, 8:300). Abū Jahl is often disparagingly referred to in the sources as “son of the Hanẓaliyya” (e.g., al-Waqqāḍī, 1:34, 36, 44). His wife Umm Mujālid gave birth to his son Ikrima (Ibn Sa’d, 5:444).

He is described in the sources as “thin, with stern countenance, sharp tongue and piercing look” (Ibn Hishām, 2:260), or with a squint (al-Balādhurī, 1:145). He had a scar on his knee as a result of a fall he took at a young age during a banquet at the house of ‘Abdallāh b. Juḍān. It was Muhammad who pushed him. The scar helped identify his body in the battlefield of Badr (al-Waqqāḍī, 1:90). He was killed there in the year 2/624 when fighting with the Quraysh against the Muslims, at the age of seventy (al-Balādhurī, 1:147).

Abū Jahl appears to have been a wealthy man who took an active part in the caravan trade between Mecca and Syria (Ibn Sa’d, 2:6; 3:9). His high position as leader of the Makhlīm gave rise to a tradition relating that when Muhammad was making his first steps as a prophet and still hiding his message, he prayed to God to strengthen Islam with one of the two persons whom God loved best, ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb or ‘Amr b. Ḥishām. It was ‘Umar who eventually embraced Islam (Ibn Sa’d, 3:242–3, 267, 269; al-Balādhurī, 10:288). In spite of Abū Jahl’s failure to become a Muslim, tradition has it that when his son Ikrima embraced Islam after the conquest of Mecca (8/630), Muhammad declared that one must never curse Ikrima’s father, because cursing the dead harms the living. The Prophet also prohibited the Muslims from calling Ikrima, “son of Abū Jahl,” so as not to curse the dead (Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, 3:1082).

Abū Jahl is said to have been a bitter enemy of Islam, together with Abū Lahab and ‘Uqba b. Abī Mu’ayyāt (Ibn Sa’d, 1:201; al-Balādhurī, 1:141). He appears to have been even more extreme in his enmity towards Muhammad than al-Walīd b. al-Muğhrī, an older leader of the Makḥzūm and Abū Jahl’s paternal uncle. Some traditions say that al-Walīd was relatively sympathetic to Muḥammad, but Abū Jahl made him change his attitude (al-Waqqāḍī, 250–1). Abū Jahl is said to have been involved in the boycott of Muhammad’s clan of Ḥāshim and he was reportedly opposed to its eventual termination (Ibn Hishām, 2:16). Some reports maintain that the document of the boycott was kept with his aunt (Ibn Sa’d, 1:209). His enmity towards Muhammad appears to have been rooted in traditional tensions within the Quraysh. In a candid confession attributed to him, he admits that Muḥammad is sincere but says that he cannot bear the idea that the clans of the Qūṣayy—his own clan of Makḥzūm—was not one of them—should have all the sacred offices of the Kaʾba as well as the honour of prophethood, leaving nothing to the rest of the Quraysh (al-Waqqāḍī, 123).
Some traditions describe the humility and frustration that occasionally overwhelmed Abū Jahl in Muḥammad’s presence, which caused him to obey the Prophet on certain matters, to the astonishment of his tribesmen (Ibn Ḥishām, 2:28–30; al-Baladhurī, 1:147). He was especially overwhelmed with frustration due to the failure of an attempt on Muḥammad’s life (Ibn Sa’d, 2:13). A relatively lenient aspect of his personality comes out in traditions in which his name occurs among leaders of Quraysh who reportedly tried to come to terms with Quraysh set out to the battle of Badr, against the advice of other Meccan leaders (al-Wāqīḍī, 1:43–4; Ibn Sa’d, 2:13), and to have forced Meccans to participate against their will (al-Wāqīḍī, 1:35–6). Such deeds earned for him the title “the pharaoh of this community,” which Muḥammad reportedly called him (al-Baladhurī, 1:141). When informed of the death of Abū Jahl at Badr, Muḥammad reportedly fell prostrate in gratitude to God (Tottoli, 310–1). Several Companions took pride in having participated in the killing of Abū Jahl, namely Mu‘ādh b. ‘Amr and one of the sons of ‘Afrā’ b. ‘Uhayl, who wounded him, and ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, who finished him off (al-Wāqīḍī, 1:91; al-Baladhurī, 1:147).

However, in most traditions, Abū Jahl figures as an energetic foe of Islam. The sources provide a handful of episodes in which he persecutes Muḥammad and abuses his prophetic message and the Qur’ānic admonitions about the Day of Judgement, etc., while stating his devotion to his own pagan religion and preventing others from becoming Muslims (e.g. al-Baladhurī, 1:141f.). He is even said to have forced his own uterine brother, ‘Ayyāsh b. ‘Abd Rabʿa, to return to Mecca and not complete his hijra to Medina. When ‘Ayyāsh returned to Mecca Abū Jahl arrested him, but eventually he managed to escape and join Muḥammad in Medina (Ibn Sa’d, 4:129). Many of the episodes are recorded in the tafsīr of various Qur’ānic verses (e.g. 6:26, 33, 52, 108, 122; 8:19; 9:113; 17:60; 20:2; 28:56; 38:5; 44:49; 74:11–26). The best-known Qur’ānic passage is perhaps 96:9–19, which deals with a person preventing a “servant” from praying. The commentators say that this passage was revealed after Abū Jahl had vowed to tread on Muḥammad’s neck if he ever saw him prostrating himself.

Abū Jahl is the one who is said to have insisted that the Quraysh set out to the battle of Badr, against the advice of other Meccan leaders (al-Wāqīḍī, 1:43–4; Ibn Sa’d, 2:13), and to have forced Meccans to participate against their will (al-Wāqīḍī, 1:35–6). Such deeds earned for him the title “the pharaoh of this community,” which Muḥammad reportedly called him (al-Baladhurī, 1:141). When informed of the death of Abū Jahl at Badr, Muḥammad reportedly fell prostrate in gratitude to God (Tottoli, 310–1). Several Companions took pride in having participated in the killing of Abū Jahl, namely Mu‘ādh b. ‘Amr and one of the sons of ‘Afrā’ b. ‘Uhayl, who wounded him, and ‘Abdallāh b. Mas‘ūd, who finished him off (al-Wāqīḍī, 1:91; al-Baladhurī, 1:147).

Bibliography

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