MUḤAMMAD’S CURSE OF MUḌAR
AND THE BLOCKADE OF MECCA

BY

URI RUBIN

(Tel Aviv University, Tel Aviv)

Preface

In an article entitled “Mecca’s food supplies and Muhammad’s boycott”, F. M. Donner draws attention to some Quranic passages dealing with “distress” (durr) and “chastisement” (ṣadhāb) inflicted upon the unbelievers (XXIII/74-76), and with “hunger” (jūḥ) suffered by a certain village (XVI/112)1). Most Muslim accounts connect these passages with a famine suffered by the people of Mecca, and according to Donner (p. 259) “these accounts may retain the kernel of an historical event.” Trying to assess the exact nature of the famine suffered by Mecca and Muhammad’s relation to it, Donner (p. 261) presumes that although the famine may have been the result of natural causes (drought), Muhammad’s intervention “was instrumental in creating or augmenting the Meccan famine.” In support of this view Donner (p. 261) adduces Muslim traditions relating that the famine was caused by the behest or curse (duʿāʾ) uttered by Muhammad against Quraysh or against the entire confederation of Muḍar. The prophet reportedly said: “Almighty God, trouble them with seven years of drought like the seven which occurred at the time of Joseph.” It is related that as a result of this prayer, the polytheists suffered a year of drought in which everything was lacking until they came to eat carrion.

The historical situation which gave rise to the traditions about Muhammad’s curse of Muḍar was, according to Donner, a boycott

of Mecca which was carried out by certain groups loyal to Muḥammad, who were encouraged by the prophet to interdict the flow of food-stuffs to Mecca (p. 261-263). The Meccans themselves, according to Donner (p. 263), held Muḥammad primarily responsible for their hardships. Donner draws this conclusion from the traditions relating that after the famine caused by Muḥammad’s behest had become severe, Abū Sufyān, the leader of Mecca, came to Muḥammad to plead for mercy.

Donner’s observations appear to be plausible. It seems indeed that the traditions about Muḥammad’s curse against Muḍar or Quraysh were circulated as a result of a famine in Mecca caused by a blockade under which Mecca was put by some groups acting with Muḥammad’s consent. This blockade was later on raised as a result of the entreaty of Abū Sufyān. But the problem which still remains unsolved is when and how the blockade and the famine occurred, and when did Abū Sufyān plead for Muḥammad’s help.

Donner himself has already tried to establish the time of the blockade by making two tentative suggestions (p. 263-264). The first is 6H/628, in the months preceding the negotiations of the Ḥudaybiyya treaty between Muḥammad and Quraysh. The second possible date is, according to Donner, 8H/630, just before the conquest of Mecca by Muḥammad. In a later article Donner is more explicit. He states that Muḥammad’s consolidation of power over the agricultural and trading towns of the northern Ḥijāz (Khaybar etc.) put him in a position to interrupt the flow of food-stuffs to Mecca, much of which had to be imported from the north. “The result was a severe famine that afflicted Mecca probably in the year 8/629, or 630.” Donner’s view would therefore be that the traditions about Muḥammad’s curse of Muḍar and Abū Sufyān’s entreaty for Muḥammad’s mercy pertain to the situation following the conquest of Khaybar and preceding the conquest of Mecca.

2) Donner, “Consolidation”, 246.