

CONTRIBUTION OF HASSAN BIN THABIT DURING ISLAMIC PERIOD

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Abstract

The second stage of life of Hssan bin Thabit begins with the rise of Islam. In Islam he employed his energies exclusively to serve the Prophet Mohammad S.A.S. and the new religion. When the Meccan poets, under the leadership of Abu Sufyan, Abdullah bin Zabara and Amr bin al-As, began to attack the Prophet and the nascent Islam in the bitterest possible language, the Prophet was in search of someone who defended him and the new faith. Hassan offered his services and performed his duties to the greatest satisfaction of the Prophet. He wrote the bitterest satires against the enemies of Islam; composed excellent eulogies of the Prophet and his companions; gave graphic description of various battles fought by the Muslims and produced touching elegies of the Prophet and of those who laid down their lives in those battles. But Hassan himself, like a true poet, never took part in those battles. He was undoubtedly the most popular poet of the rising religion. He is the father of religious poetry in Arabic language. As we know Hassan bin Thabit was one of the Mukhadram poets. After embracing Islam he became the panegyrist of the Prophet. In Islam he devoted all his energies to praise the Prophet S.A.S. and the new religion. Hassan depicted in his poems the Prophet's life, his character, his wars and other historical events of the time. Thus his poems became the true mirror of the contemporary Arabian life. Thus Hassan having acquired the position of the panegyrist of the Prophet went further and depicted the pitiable condition of the Arabian Peninsula and its dwellers before the rise of Islam. He described how the world at that time was devoid of the heavenly message, and how the Holy Prophet came and invited the people to worship the one and only God. Hence while praising the Prophet, Hassan actually praised his mission through which the Prophet guided the people to the right path and weaned them away from the darkness in which they were engulfed. Hassan after embracing Islam gave up other branches of poetry to a large extent and confined himself to eulogies of the Prophet and to the satires directed against the infidels who opposed Islam and Muslims. It is narrated that the Meccan poets, Abu Sufiyan, Abd al-Mttalib, Abdullah b. Zabara, Amr b. al-As and Dirarb. Al-Khattab, who were the supporters of the Quraysh, satirized the Prophet and Islam in the bitterest language. As a result of this the Prophet was in search of a poet who defended him and his faith. Than Hassan bin Thabit said "I am prepared for this task and I will use my tongue for this purpose" He further added "If I am given a tongue which is as large as the distance between Basra and Sana'a, I will not accept it in lieu of my present tongue. Than Hassan went to the Prophet and asked his permission to composed satirical poetry against the enemy. The Prophet replied " Go to Abu Bakr, than satirize them and Gabriel will assist you in it. Three poets from the Ansar were the first to defend the Prophet and Islam against the verbal attacks of the Qurayshite poets and hence they were correctly named as the foremost poets of Islam. These poets satirized the Quraysh so forcefully and effectively that in the long run they embraced Islam and gave up composing poetry against the Muslims. Hassan bin Thabit particularly described the battles of Badr, Uhud and the Ditch etc. He described the great victory of the Muslims against the

superior and numerically stronger army of the Quraysh under the leadership of Abu Sufiyan in the battle field of Badr.

Key Words: Islamic period, Satire, Badr, Uhud, Ditch, Quraysh, Victory, Hija.

Introduction: Hassan bin Thabit occupied an illustrious position among the Mukhadram poets exhibiting a high degree of poetic talent. He is credited with opening a new branch of poetry-praise of the Prophet in which he himself was the master. Reconstructing the life of any historical figure who lived through the period that witnessed the rise of Islam is a daunting task, and Hassan is no exception. Myriad accounts and anecdotes, all of which were recorded long after the poet's death, provide an overwhelming and frequently contradictory array of material on certain events in his life, while the sources yield virtually no information for other periods. Yet, behind all the incongruous details is a fascinating and compelling life story. It is the story of an individual who not only witnessed a dramatic historical transformation, but actively participated in the literary and social life of the jāhilī and early Islamic periods, even playing a key role in the promotion and spread of a religion that drastically altered the balance of power in the Near East and the course of world history.

Hassans contribution to Islam: In light of Hassān's role in early Islamic history and his close relationship to the Prophet Muhammad, it is only natural that most of the scholarly literature, both classical and modern, has focused on this period in his life. As a companion of the Prophet, Hassān's life was considered instructive due to his interactions with the Prophet.

His Islamic compositions have fascinated scholars as examples of poetry composed in the defense of Islam and because of the information his poetry provides on critical battles in early Islamic history. Perhaps the earliest extant work in which Hassān plays a significant role is the biography (sīra) of the Prophet, written by Ibn Ishāq (d. 767) and compiled and edited by Ibn Hishām (d. 834). Here Hassān features prominently as one of the Muslim poets reciting verses on battles, lampooning enemies of Islam, and praising the Prophet. The body of hadīth literature provides reports (akhbār) on Hassān, with an almost exclusive focus on the Islamic period. Hassān's status as one of the Prophet's companions (sahāba) also means that he is included in numerous biographical dictionaries, such as *Usd al-ghāba* by 'Izz al-Dīn ibn al-

Athīr (d. 1233) and the dictionary of the companions of the Prophet al-Istī‘āb fī ma‘rifat al-ashāb by the Andalusian scholar Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 1070).

In 622, the Prophet Muhammad and his followers migrated to Yathrib (Medina) to escape persecution in Mecca, and within a short period of time a number of the residents of Medina converted to Islam. Hassan’s brother Aws is listed among the early converts in Medina, but Hassan may have been a more reluctant convert. He does not appear on any of the lists of early converts, nor was he assigned an immigrant brother despite his ownership of a large fortress. Hassan’s strong sense of tribal loyalty and his devotion to a life of pleasure may have initially been obstacles to his embrace of Islam. Darwīsh has interpreted Hassan’s absence from these early events and his apparent lack of interest in the new religion in this way:

As we mentioned, Hassan was preoccupied with the existing hatred between Aws and Khazraj, and he was distracted by the life of pleasure and hedonism to which he was addicted. He was in a beautiful dream-like slumber. In this dream, he conjured up his rich past in al-Shām in the castles of the Ghassānids. That distant past whispered to him that life was fakhr and splendor, enjoyment and pleasure. Love of that life saturated Hassan’s heart to the point that he saw it as the real world. He believed that spoiling it by thinking about the unknown and seeking out trouble by taking part in a conflict, which did not concern him or his tribe, between an old and a new religion wrestling each other was a type of foolishness that people who did not understand fell into. So, he turned his back on them all and kept to himself and to that life.

Hassan bin Thabit embraced Islam: Hassan did eventually embrace Islam and began to employ his poetic skills in the service of the new religion. Following the siege of Medina, a full-scale war of words broke out between the pagan poets of Mecca and the Muslim poets of Medina. Along with two other Medinan poets, Ka‘b bin Mālik and ‘Abdullāh bin Rawāha, Hassan defended the Prophet against the verbal attacks made against him by composing hijā’ directed at the enemies of the Prophet. These poems which were hurled back and forth between the opposing sides were an integral aspect of the military conflict between the Muslims and the pagans. The Prophet recognized the power of Hassan’s hijā’ and is reported to have exclaimed, “What he recited on them the Meccans is worse than falling arrows!”

Hassan's high status as the "poet of the Prophet of God" (shā'ir rasūl Allāh) was directly linked to his poetic prowess in composing hijā'. He drew on the skills he had honed during the pre-Islamic period and generally relied on jāhilī techniques, such as insulting an individual or tribe's behavior in past battles, impure lineage, or even the adulterous ways of the opponent's mother. In contrast, his fellow Muslim poet 'Abdullāh bin Rawāha focused on religious insults, such as accusing the pagans of unbelief (kufr). According to the classical sources, these theological attacks did not have a significant impact at the time, whereas Hassan's approach was highly effective. Not only did Muhammad approve of and encourage Hassan's defense of Islam, he explicitly told Hassan that the angel Gabriel (Jibrīl) would be with him as he composed, implying that even the inspiration for Hassan's poetry was divine.

As a companion of Prophet Mohammad S.A.S.: According to a Hadīth narrator on the authority of Abū Hurayra, a companion of the Prophet named al-Barā' ibn 'Āzib, confirmed that he had heard Muhammad say to Hassan, "Answer them for me and God will support you with Gabriel (rūh al-qudus)." One consequence of Hassan's impressive skill in composing hijā' and of his close relationship with the Prophet is that a number of forgeries were ascribed to him after his death. This is especially true of the hijā' poems allegedly dating from the Islamic period, and many of the lampoons included in the dīwān betray evidence of later composition dates. Despite the possibility that some of these verses may not be authentic; much can be learned about Hassan's personality based on the many targets of his hijā', one of which will be examined here. Hind bint 'Utba was the wife of Abū Sufyān, the leader of the Quraysh and the Prophet's main opponent at the time of the battle of Uhud. As was expected of a woman of the Meccan aristocracy, Hind participated in the early battles between the Meccans and the Muslims by reciting inflammatory poetry (tahrīd) which urged the Meccans to remember their fallen tribesmen and to avenge them. Hind also engaged in ritualistic corpse mutilation on the battlefield at Uhud. These activities are described in graphic detail in the later accounts of Muslim scholars as atrocities representing the excess and ignorance of the jāhilīya. According to Ibn Hishām (d. 834), the editor and compiler of the biography (sīra) of the Prophet, following the battle of Uhud, Hassan, who had apparently been watching the fighting from the safety of his fortress, was sought out by 'Umar who told him about Hind's activities at the battle. 'Umar recited some of her verses for Hassan who then composed

poetry against her. Ibn Hishām quotes only one verse of Hassan’s poetry. In a note, he adds that Hassan composed other poetry against Hind, but these poems had been excluded from the *sīra* because of their obscene nature (“*li-annahu aqdhā‘a fihā*”). The recessions of the *dīwān*, however, include three poems directed at Hind. These verses revile Hind as an adulteress guilty of illicit relations with her slave. Graphic imagery is employed to develop the twin motifs of sexual impurity and illegitimacy. This focus on Hind’s alleged promiscuity and the illegitimacy of her children suggests that these particular poems were later additions to the *dīwān*, probably composed during the Umayyad period by someone hoping to discredit the ruling family.

All of the poems against Hind are among a group of twenty-eight poems that appear at the end of the *Dīwān* preceded by a note from al-Sukkarī, the scholar who transmitted Hassān’s poems directly from Ibn Habīb (d. 860). The note reads: “This is the last of Hassan’s poetry dictated by Ibn Habīb. The remainder I copied out of his books. He did not dictate it.” Walid ‘Arafat has suggested that this comment indicates that of the Community, trans. W. Montgomery Watt (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987), Authenticity of these poems was doubted by Ibn Habīb himself. Additionally, a note in the one of the manuscripts comments that these lines were composed by Hassan’s son, ‘Abd al-Rahmān, during the reign of Yazīd and ascribed falsely to Hassan. Nonetheless, the likelihood that these poems were composed after Hassan’s death does not imply that the poet did not compose slanderous poems against Hind; it is very likely that he did. It is telling that the forgers or later poets chose to ascribe these obscene poems to Hassan and not to Ka‘b bin Mālik or ‘Abdullāh bin Rawāha. Hassan’s reputation as a poet who excelled in composing stinging *hijā’* must have been a factor in their choice. And, perhaps, his personality was not viewed to be inconsistent with such poems.

Hassan’s life during the Islamic period was not without controversy. On several occasions, the classical sources depict Hassan as being drawn into squabbles related to the old tribal boundaries that Islam sought to erase. The most famous incident occurred around the year 627 when tensions within the nascent Muslim community were mounting, especially between the two major groups within the community, the *ansār* and the *muhājirūn*. The *ansār* were

Madinans from the tribes of Aws and Khazraj who aided the Prophet after his immigration to their city, while the muhājirūn were kinsfolk of the Prophet and others who emigrated with him from Mecca. Many of the ansār, including Hassan, felt that the muhājirūn were receiving preferential treatment, especially in the division of spoils. ‘Abdullāh bin Ubayy ibn Salūl, a Khazrajī and the outspoken leader of the “hyprocrites” (munāfiqūn) who felt threatened by the newcomers, is reported to have expressed his frustrations and complained explicitly about the Qurashī “tramps” who had become numerous and powerful. The exact wording of Ibn Ubayy’s complaint is echoed in a poem composed by Hassan in which he lashes out at the recent arrivals in Medina, especially those from the tribe of Quraysh. The tramps have become powerful and numerous and the son of al-Furay’ a Hassan has become insignificant in the town. Notes in the scholia of the manuscripts explicitly make clear that the somewhat ambiguous term jalābīb, in some readings jalābīs, refers to the newcomers or strangers in Medina. This poem directly links Hassan to Ibn Ubayy and the growing sentiment of discontent and resentment among the ansār.

These tensions provide the backdrop for a major scandal in which the Prophet’s wife, ‘Ā’isha, was falsely accused of adultery. In addition to being a significant challenge to the Prophet’s mission, the controversy has been cited as a critical event in shaping Islamic concepts of male honor and its relationship to female shame. According to the traditional recounting of the event, narrated on the authority of ‘Ā’isha, while traveling with the Muslim army during a raid, ‘Ā’isha was inadvertently left behind at a campsite. The army struck camp and the caravan moved on without noticing her absence. ‘Ā’isha remained where she was until a young Muslim named Safwān ibn al-Mu‘attal al-Sulamī, who had not been traveling with the army, found her there. The two attempted to catch up with the rest of the group and were forced to spend the night traveling alone together in the process. Vicious rumors immediately spread about ‘Ā’isha and the young, handsome Safwān. Both Ibn Ubayy, who had previously been complaining about the “newcomers,” and Hassan are listed among those who spread rumors and accused ‘Ā’isha of adultery. Poem 138 may have been composed by Hassan at the end of a lengthy period of gossip about ‘Ā’isha and growing tension between the followers of the Prophet. After ‘Ā’isha’s innocence was confirmed by the revelation of a Qur’ānic sūra, those involved in spreading the slander, including Hassan,

were punished. As mentioned previously, Hassan used to entertain his friends at his fortress Fāri‘ where they would gossip while relaxing on a carpet spread out in the courtyard of the fortress. One day when a number of the ansār were gathered there, Safwān arrived unexpectedly and stabbed Hassan. ‘Arafat suggests that this attack was the legal punishment that Hassan received for his involvement in the slander. In some versions of the account, the Prophet himself encouraged Safwān to attack. After hearing Hassan’s poem, Muhammad requested that someone deal with “the people of the carpet (ashāb al-bisāt) at Fāri‘.” Even if Safwān was not instructed to attack, he was not punished for his actions, nor did public opinion view his actions as unmerited.

Prophet Mohammad S.A.S. award Hassan: After his punishment, Hassan was reconciled with the Prophet who awarded him several gifts, including a piece of land and a Coptic Egyptian slave named Sīrīn, the sister of Muhammad’s concubine Māriya. This event does not seem to have done any long-term damage to Hassan’s relationship with the Prophet; in fact, some scholars have suggested that their relationship became closer following the resolution of the scandal. Hartwig Hirschfeld notes that it was after this event that Hassan’s relationship with the Prophet deepened and his poetry became even more critical to the success of the new community. Based on the classical sources, Muhammad had a genuine affection for Hassan and forgave him even when he did not display exemplary Muslim behavior, as in the incident described above. The Prophet’s respect for Hassan’s poetic ability was unparalleled, and in a number of instances Muhammad singled Hassan out for special tasks, even calling on him to recite poetry from the pulpit (minbar) of the mosque in Madina. In al-Wāqidī’s Kitāb al-maghāzī, after insisting Hassan recite poetry from the minbar Muhammad proclaimed, “Truly, God supports Hassan with Jibrīl (rūh al-qudus) as long as he defends his Prophet.” The account closes with the statement that on that day the Prophet and the Muslims were delighted with the poetry of Hassan. Hassan did not participate in the battles of the period, either due to old age, an unknown disease, or cowardice. Yet, he composed poetry on critical Muslim battles, including one of his most famous odes on the conquest of Mecca in 630. Hassan also mourned the Muslim martyrs and lauded the heroes of each battle in verse. He encouraged the Muslims by commending their victories on the

battlefield, inciting them against their polytheist rivals, and mocking the enemies of Islam. Some scholars have emphasized the significance of his role as “minister of Islamic propaganda” in proclaiming and spreading the new faith. After the conquest of Mecca, the need for hijā’ diminished to a large extent, as many of the targets of Hassan’s hijā’ converted to Islam. Hassan continued to play a key role in the conversion of various tribes who sent delegations to the Prophet around 630/631. In the case of the Tamīm delegation, the tribe’s best poets and orators came to Medina to compete with the Muslims in fakhr poetry and oratory. The Prophet called on Hassan to recite poetry against their best poet al-Zibriqān. According to the classical accounts, the Tamīmī delegation was so impressed with the poem that they immediately converted to Islam.

Hassan receded from public life after 632, composing poetry only rarely and appearing infrequently in the accounts of Muslim historians and scholars. Not only had he lost his status as poet laureate, but he “lost his moorings and was isolated and marginalized.” During the period of the “rightly-guided caliphs” (al-khulafā’ al-rāshidūn) from 632 to 661, the role of poetry diminished and came to be viewed with suspicion. In one incident related in the Hadīth literature, Hassan was reprimanded by ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb, the second caliph, for reciting poetry in the mosque. Hassan defensively responded that he had recited poetry there when someone far greater than ‘Umar was present and reminded the caliph that the Prophet had said that his poetry was inspired by Gabriel (Jibrīl). Another indication of his diminished importance can be seen in the following account found in both Kitāb al-aghānī and Kitāb al-‘umda. One day, al-Zubayr ibn al-‘Awwām, one of the first converts to Islam, was walking by a group of ansār to whom Hassan was reciting poetry, but no one was listening. Al-‘Awwām rebuked them and stated that the Prophet himself used to listen to Hassan and that they should never be too busy to listen to his poetry.

Hassan’s loyalty to his friends and his tribe remained strong even at the end of his life. According to al-Tabard, throughout his old age Hassan was a committed supporter of ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, the third caliph. Hassan’s close connection to ‘Uthmān is considered to be a result of the fact that when the muhājirūn first immigrated to Madina each immigrant was paired with a Madinan “adoptive” brother and ‘Uthmān was assigned to Hassan’s brother

Aws. Before ‘Uthmān’s murder in 656, Hassan is reported to have traveled with ‘Alī and other members of muhājirūn and ansār to try to convince the Egyptian rebels not to attack ‘Uthmān. Later, Hassan is listed among the few ansār who were late in acknowledging ‘Alī to be the new caliph following ‘Uthmān’s death. According to Kitāb al-aghānī, Hassan, along with the poet Ka‘b bin Mālīk and al-Nu‘mān ibn al-Bashīr, another ansārī, met with ‘Alī and questioned him directly about the murder of ‘Uthmān. ‘Alī replied that ‘Uthmān had erred by acting selfishly, they had been wrong to be overly anxious, and that only God knew the truth. Hassan and his companions left unsatisfied with this answer and traveled directly to Mu‘āwiya in Damascus who rewarded them handsomely, giving Hassan one thousand dinars. Hassan’s sentimental side seems to have become more prominent in this later period of his life. The classical sources contain numerous reports of Hassan’s intensified affection and nostalgia for the Ghassānids. When he and his son, ‘Abd al-Rahmān, would attend gatherings where Hassan’s poetry on the Ghassānid was being performed, the elderly poet, who had lost his sight and become partially paralyzed, was reported to weep uncontrollably. The poet’s wistful reminiscence of the days of his youth moved him to compose several of his most poignant odes on the Ghassānids, It is possible that these bouts of melancholy and longing were inspired by the poet’s visit to al-Shām to meet with Mu‘āwiya where he would have seen the ruined palaces of his former patrons. Hassan’s affections for the Ghassānids may have been rekindled as a result of his interaction with the exiled Ghassānid king, Jabala ibn al-Ayham. Some accounts allege that Jabala, who led the Ghassānid troops against the Muslims at the battle of Yarmūk, converted to Islam then reverted to Christianity and fled to Constantinople when he discovered the extent of the egalitarian principles of Islam.

Although other sources explicitly deny the conversion, many classical authors narrate an account of an envoy of the Muslim caliph being sent to Jabala in Constantinople. According to Kitāb al-aghānī an envoy of Umar was sent to the Byzantine capital to convince Jabala to return to Islam. The exiled king refused to reconsider his decision, but he entertained the messenger and impressed him with his lavish lifestyle. While listening to Hassan’s poetry performed by singing slave girls, Jabala described to the envoy the Ghassānid locales mentioned in the odes, then inquired about his former poet. Upon hearing that the aged Hassan had lost his sight, Jabala entrusted the messenger with a large monetary gift and fine

robes of silk brocade for the poet. When the messenger returned and told the caliph about Jabala's gift for Hassan, 'Umar sent for the blind poet. Thus Hassan contributed a great contribution to Islamic Period.

Conclusion: After discussing Hassan's contribution to Islamic Period in all its aspects we come to the conclusion that Hassan bin Thabit plays an important role in the history of Islamic literature. He excelled and surpassed his contemporaries in all the branches of poetry indeed he richly deserves the following remark of Abu 'Ubaida' "Hassan surpassed the poets for three reasons: He was the poet of Ansar during the Pre-Islamic period, the poet of the Prophet during his life time and the poet of whole Yemen in Islam." As a satirist he earned great success because the opponents feared his bitter verses. He lowered their position comparing them to monkeys, goats, bucks and foxes. His love poetry is marked by attractive descriptions of feminine beauty. Islamic influence is remarkable in his poetry which comprises terms and ideals and quotations from the Qu'ran. Some critics are of the opinion that his verses composed in Islamic Period reach the high level of excellence.

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