

UNIT

D

CHAPTER

FOUR

Ja'far and the King of Abyssinia

CHAPTER OUTLINE

- 1 Who was Ja'far Ibn Abi Talib?
- 2 How did he embrace Islam?
- 3 Where did he migrate to from Makkah?
- 4 What did Ja'far say to the King of Abyssinia?
- 5 What were the King's questions to Jafar?
- 6 What did the King do to Muslims in Abyssinia?
- 7 What religion did the King choose before he died?

VOCABULARY

Al-Habashah الحَبَشَة

Negus النَّجَاشِي

Early Childhood in Makkah

Abu Talib, uncle of the Prophet (P), was a noble figure in Makkah but poor. Before becoming a prophet, Muhammad ﷺ said to his other uncle, Al Abbas:

"Your brother, Abu Talib, has a large family. Let us go to Abu Talib and take over responsibility for some of his children. I will take one of his sons and you can take another and we will look after them."

"What you suggest is certainly good," replied Al-Abbas.

Together they went to Abu Talib and said to him: "We want to ease some of your financial burden until things become better for you."

Abu Talib agreed, but said, "Keep Aqeel with me, then you may do whatever you like," So, Prophet Muhammad ﷺ took Ali into his household and Al-Abbas took Ja'far into his.

Did You Know?



There were five men from the Hashim clan who looked so like the Prophet ﷺ that they were often mistaken for him ﷺ, Ja'far was one of them. The others were Abu Sufyan ibn al-Harith and Qutham ibn Al-Abbas both of whom were cousins of the Prophet ﷺ, As-Saib ibn Ubayd, who was the grandfather of the great Imam Ash-Shafi'ee and Al-Hasan ibn Ali, the grandson of the Prophet, who resembled him most of all.

Ja'far Embraces Islam

Ja'far lived with his uncle, Al-Abbas, until he married as a young man. His wife was Asmaa' bint Omays, a sister of Maymounah who later became a wife of the Prophet ﷺ. Ja'far and Asmaa' were among the first people to accept Islam and they did so under the guidance of Abu Bakr as-Siddeeq رضي الله عنه.

The Immigration to Abyssinia

The Quraysh made life intolerable for Ja'far, Asmaa' and other Muslims in Makkah. They tried to obstruct them from observing their acts of worship and other duties. So Ja'far sought the



▲ Skyview of Ethiopia location

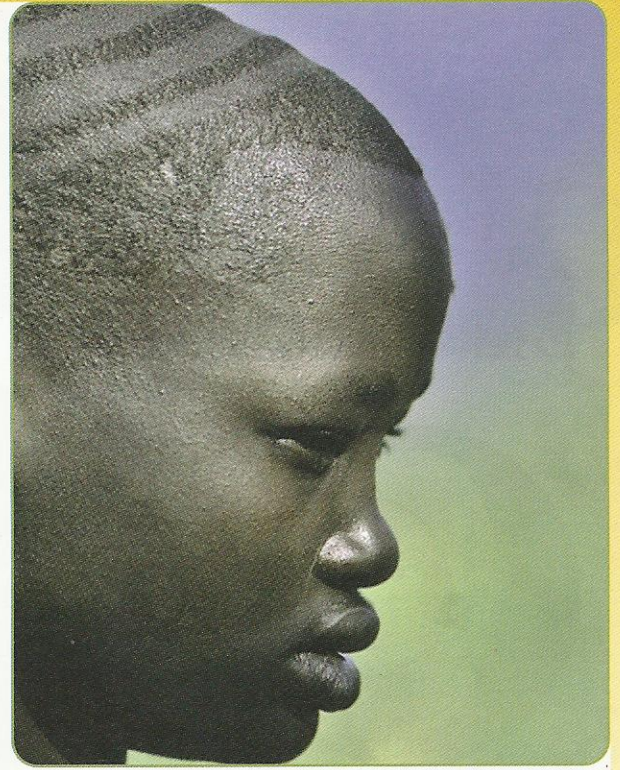
Prophet's ﷺ permission to make hijrah to the land of Abyssinia, now present day Ethiopia. With great sadness, the Prophet granted his permission for them and a group of Sahabah to make hijrah. It pained him that these pure



▲ *A boat from Ethiopia.*

and righteous people should be forced to leave their homes and families and abandon their cherished scenes and memories of their childhood, not for any crime but simply because they said, "Our Lord is One. Allah is our Lord." Muhammad is the messenger."

The group of Muhajireen, led by Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, left Makkah bound



▲ *An Ethiopian boy.*

for the land of Abyssinia looking forward to enjoying freedom of religion there. Soon they settled down in this new land under the care and protection of Negus, the King of Abyssinia. Negus was a just and righteous ruler, just as Prophet Muhammad ﷺ described him. Now Abyssinia became the first land outside Arabia to experience Islam.

Fast Facts



Abyssinia is the old name for the East African horn that includes the present countries of Ethiopia, Somalia, Eritrea and parts of Sudan. The Arabic name of Abyssinia is Al-Habashah الحبشة .



▲ *A mosque in Ethiopia*

The Quraysh Chases Muslim Immigrants to Abyssinia

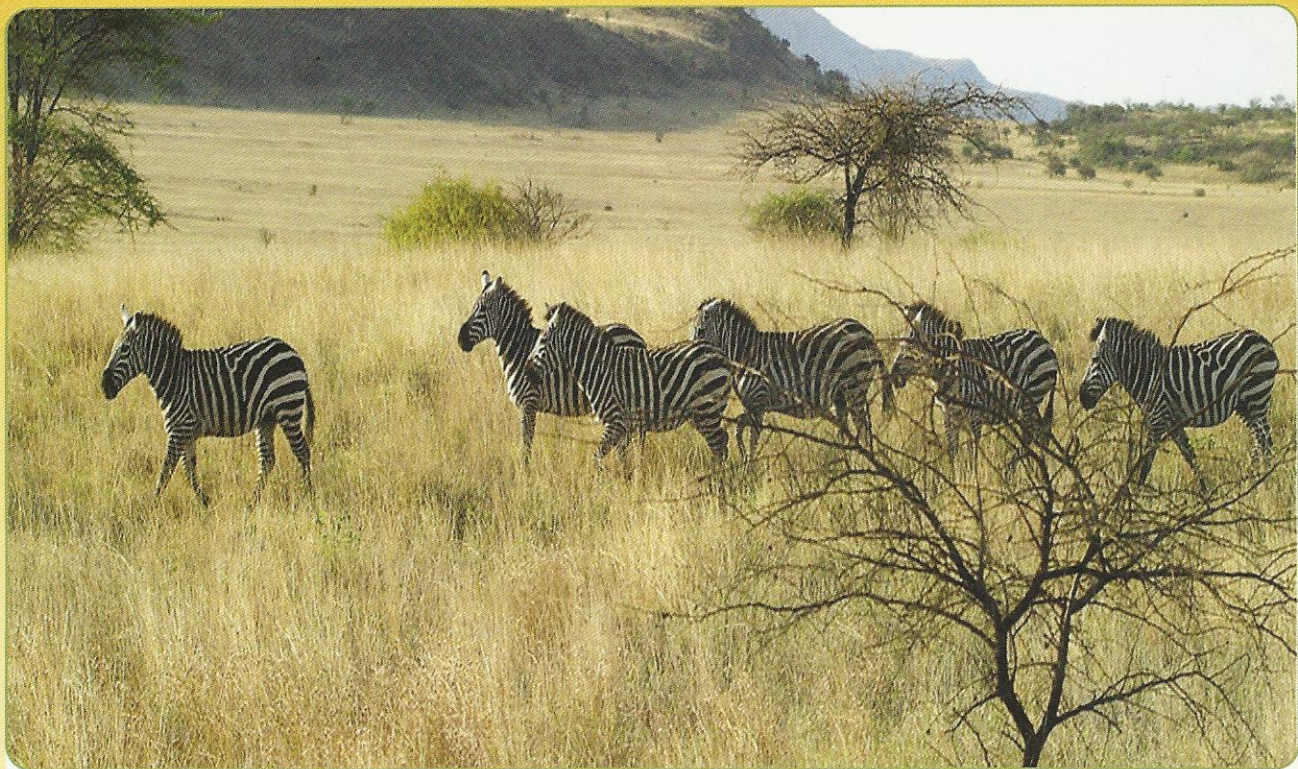
The Quraysh promptly found out about the Muslims' migration to Abyssinia and the situation became a popular topic of discussion among the people of Makkah. The leaders of the Quraysh planned to drag the Muslim defectors back to Makkah using two of their most formidable men to accomplish this task, Amr ibn al-Aas and Abdullah ibn Abi Rabiah. They dispatched them on their mission with valuable and highly sought after presents for the Negus and his bishops in order to buy their favor.

On their arrival in Abyssinia, the two Quraysh emissaries first presented

their gifts to the bishops and to each of them they said: "There are some wicked young people in the King's land. They have attacked our religion and caused disunity among our people. When we speak to the King about them, advise him to surrender them to us." The bishops agreed.

Amr and Abdullah then went to the Negus himself and presented him with gifts which he greatly admired. They said to him:

"O King, there is a group of evil persons from among our youth who have escaped to your kingdom as defectors.



▲ *Scenery from Ethiopia*

They practice a religion which neither we nor you know. They have left their fathers' religion and have not entered into your religion. Our respected leaders, who are their own parents and uncles, have sent us to you to request you to return them. They know best what trouble they have caused."

The Negus looked towards his bishops who said: "They speak the truth, Our Lord. Their own people know them better. Send them back."

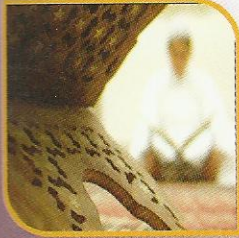
The Negus wisely said: "No. By God, I won't surrender them to anyone until I myself hear their side of the story. If what these two men have said is true, then I will hand them over to you. If

however it is not so, then I shall protect them so long as they desire to remain under my protection."

Amr and Abdullah became very worried. They were afraid that the King would be influenced by the Muslims' account of their story. They tried to prevent the King from hearing the Muslim version of events, but none could change the King's decree.



Fast Facts



The King's title in Abyssinia was Negus. The Arabic word for Negus is An-Najashi النجاشي .

Da'wah, in the Royal Court of Abyssinia

The Negus then summoned the Muslims to meet him so that they could put forward their case. They knew that this was probably their only chance to maintain their asylum in Abyssinia. So before the meeting, they consulted with one another within the group and together they came up with a good plan. They agreed that Ja'far ibn Abi Talib should be their spokesperson, so he prepared a beautiful and sincere address to the King and his advisers.

In the court of the Negus, the bishops, and the Qurayshite emissaries were seated when the Muslims entered and took their seats. The Negus turned to them and asked:

"What is this religion you follow which divided you from the religion of your people? You also did not enter my religion nor the religion of any other community that we know of."

Ja'far ibn Abi Talib then approached and made a speech that was moving

and eloquent and which is still one of the most compelling descriptions of Islam. He said:

"Oh King, we were a people in a state of ignorance and immorality. We were worshipping idols and eating the flesh of dead animals. We were committing all sorts of sins and shameful deeds. We were also breaking the ties of kinship, treating guests badly and the strong among us oppressed the weak.

We remained in this state until Allah sent from among us a Prophet. His lineage, truthfulness, trustworthiness and integrity were well-known to us. He called us to worship God alone and to renounce the idols which we and our ancestors used to worship besides Allah.

He commanded us to speak the truth, to honor our promises, to be kind to our relations and to be helpful to our neighbors. He ordered us to avoid all forbidden acts. He prevented us from bloodshed, obscenities, lying and false witness, stealing orphan's

property and slandering chaste women.

He ordered us to worship Allah alone and not to worship anything with him. He ordered us to pray, to give charity and fast in the month of Ramadan.

We believed in him and what he brought to us from Allah. We follow him in what he has asked us to do and we keep away from what he forbade us from doing.

Thereupon, oh King, our people attacked and tortured us. They put the harshest punishment on us to make us renounce our religion and take us back to immorality and the worship of idols.

They oppressed us, made life intolerable for us and obstructed us from observing our religion. So we left for your country, choosing you over anyone else, desiring your protection and hoping to live in justice and in peace in your midst."

The Negus was impressed and was eager to hear more. He asked Ja'far: "Do you have with you something of what your Prophet brought from God?"

"Yes," replied Ja'far.

"Then read it to me," requested the Negus. Ja'far, in his rich, beautiful voice recited for him the first portion of Surat Maryam which deals with the story of Jesus and his mother Mary.

The King's Soft Heart

Upon hearing the Qur'an, the Negus and his bishops were moved to tears. The King then said to the Muslims: "The message of your Prophet and that of Jesus came from the same light..." To Amr and his companion, he said: "Go, I will never surrender them to you." That, however, was not the end of the matter. The wily Amr said to his companion "I will go to the King tomorrow. I will mention something which will certainly destroy them". Next day, Amr went to the Negus and said:

"O King, these people say something terrible about Jesus the son of Mary, that he is a slave. Send for them and ask them what they say about him."

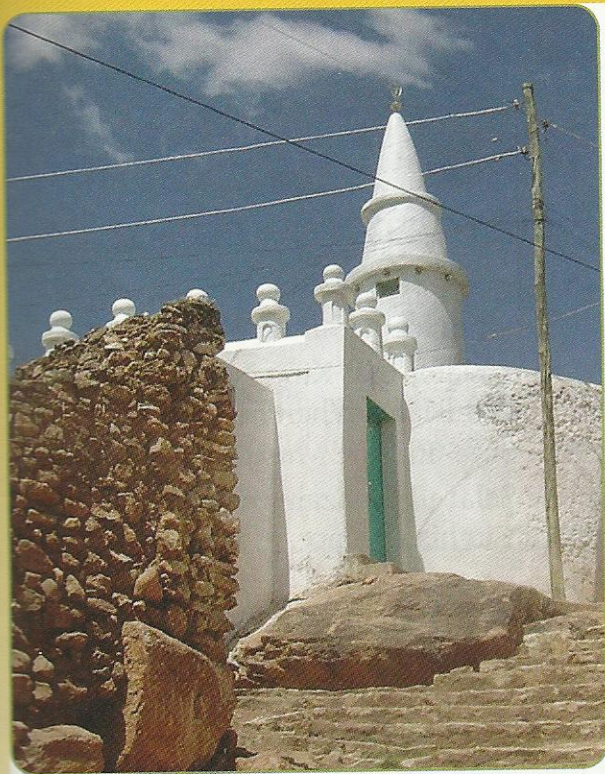
The King summoned the Muslims once more and Ja'far spoke on their behalf once more. Negus put the question: "What do you say about Jesus, the son of Mary?"

"We only say what has been revealed to our Prophet," replied Ja'far.

"And what is that?" enquired the Negus.

"Our Prophet says that Jesus is the servant of God and His Prophet. He is God's spirit and His word which He cast into Mary the Virgin."

The Negus was obviously excited by this reply of Ja'far and exclaimed: "By



▲ *A mosque in Harar, Ethiopia*

God, Jesus the son of Mary was exactly as your Prophet has described him"

The bishops around the Negus grunted in disgust at what they had heard and were reprimanded by the Negus. He turned to the Muslims and said:

*"Go, you are safe and secure in my land.
Whoever hurts you will be punished.
Whoever hurts you will be punished.
Whoever hurts you will be punished. I
don't like to gain a mountain of gold for
hurting a single one of you"*

Quraysh's Mission to Abyssinia Fails

The king then instructed his bishops: *"Return their gifts to these two men. I have no need of them."*

Amr and his companion left broken and frustrated.

The Muslims stayed on in the land of the Negus who proved to be most generous and kind to his guests.

Muslims Live safely in Abyssinia

Ja'far and his wife Asmaa' spent about ten years in Abyssinia which became a second home for them. There, Asmaa' gave birth to three children whom they named Abdullah, Muhammad and Awn. Their second child was possibly the first child in the history of Islam to be given the name Muhammad after the Prophet (P).

Ja'far Returns to Arabia

In the seventh year of the Hijrah, Ja'far and his family left Abyssinia with a group of Muslims and headed for Madina. When they arrived the Prophet ﷺ was just returning from the successful conquest of Khaybar. He was so overjoyed at meeting Ja'far that he said: "I do not know what fills me with more

happiness, the conquest of Khaybar or the coming of Ja'far."

Father of the Poor

Muslims in general and the poor among them especially were just as happy with the return of Ja'far as the Prophet ﷺ was. Ja'far quickly became known as a person who was much concerned for the welfare of the poor and needy. For this he was nicknamed, the "Father of the Poor". Abu Hurayrah said of him: "The best of men towards us needy folk was Ja'far ibn Abi Talib. He would pass by us on his way home and give us whatever food he had. Even if his own food had run out, he would send us a pot in which he had placed some butterfat and nothing more. We would open it and lick it clean..."

King of Abyssinia Embraces Islam

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ told the Muslims later that King Negus had embraced Islam. When he died, the Prophet ﷺ and the Muslims in Madina made Salat-ul-Janazah, the funeral prayer, in his absence.

From that point in history onwards Islam started to find acceptance in Ethiopia and the continent of Africa. Nearly half of the population of Ethiopia profess Islam as their faith as is the case with Africa as a whole.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Projects and Activities

1. Write a profile about Asmaa' Bint Omays, the wife of Ja'far.
2. Imagine that you are invited to a church to talk for ten minutes about Islam. Prepare a short speech for that occasion and present it to your class or family.
3. Read about Islam in Ethiopia now and write a 700 word essay about it.



Stretch Your Mind



1. The address Ja'far made to the King was described by historians as one of the most eloquent speeches about Islam. Point out three aspects of the speech which make it special and effective.
2. Ja'far, his family and other Muslims stayed for many years in Abyssinia. Why do you think they did not move to Madina right after the Hijrah of the Prophet ﷺ and the Muhajireen?

Study Questions

- 1 Who were Ja'far's father, uncle, brothers and cousin according to the story?
- 2 Who was the person who encouraged Ja'far to embrace Islam?
- 3 Why did Ja'far migrate from Makkah to Abyssinia?
- 4 What did the Quraysh do when they learned about the migration of Muslims to Abyssinia? Who executed their plan?
- 5 What was the strategy of the Quraysh's delegation to get the Muslims back to Makkah?
- 6 Who was the King of Abyssinia? Was he fair? Why or why not?
- 7 List ten points that describe Prophet Muhammad ﷺ and his message which Ja'far mentioned in his speech.
- 8 What was Amr's trick to cause the King to change his positive opinion of the Muslims?
- 9 What was the most important point that caught the attention of the King? And how did Ja'far handle the King's question?
- 10 When did Ja'far return to Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in Madina?
- 11 What was Ja'far famous for in Madina?
- 12 What was the King's religion when he died? And what did Rasoolullah ﷺ do after his death?