

Sūrah 63: al-Munāfiqūn

Period of Revelation

As we shall explain below this Sūrah was sent down either during the Prophet's return journey from his campaign against Bani al-Mustaliq, or immediately after his arrival back at Madinah. And we have established by argument and research in the introduction to Sūrah an-Nur that the campaign against Bani al-Mustaliq had taken place in Sha'aban 6 A.H. Thus, the date of the revelation of this Sūrah is determined precisely.

Historical Background

Before we mention the particular incident about which this Sūrah was sent down, it is necessary to have a look at the history of the hypocrites of Madinah, for the incident that occurred on this occasion was not a chance happening but had a whole series of events behind it, which ultimately led up to it. Before the Prophet's emigration to Madinah the tribes of the Aws and the Khazraj, fed up with their mutual rivalries and civil wars, had almost agreed on the leadership of one man and were making preparations to crown him their king. This was Abdullah bin Ubayy bin Salul, the chief of the Khazraj. Muhammad bin Ishaq has stated that among the people of Khazraj his authority was never contested and never had the Aws and the Khazraj rallied to one man before this.

Such were the conditions when the voice of Islām reached Madinah and the influential people of both the tribes started becoming Muslims. When before the Emigration, invitation was being extended to the Prophet to come to Madinah, Abbas bin Ubadah bin Nadlah Ansāri wanted to defer this invitation for the reason that Abdullah bin Ubayy also might join in the declaration of allegiance and invitation to the Prophet, so that Madinah might become the center of Islām by common consent. But the delegation that arrived in Makkah to declare their allegiance did not give any importance to the proposal of Abbas bin Ubadah, and all its members, who included 75 men from both the tribes, became ready to invite the Prophet in the face of every danger (Ibn Hisham, vol. II, p. 89).

Then, when the Prophet arrived in Madinah, Islām had so deeply penetrated every house of the Ansār that Abdullah bin Ubayy became helpless and did not see any other way to save his leadership than to become a Muslim himself. So, he entered Islām along with many of his followers from among the chiefs and leaders of both the tribes although their hearts were burning with rage from within. Ibn Ubayy in particular was filled with grief, for the Prophet had deprived him of his kingship. For several years his hypocritical faith and grief of being deprived of his kingdom manifested itself in different ways. On the one hand, when on Fridays the Prophet took his seat to deliver the Sermon, Abdullah bin Ubayy would stand up and say "*O people, the Messenger of God is present among you, by whom God has honoured you; therefore, you should support him and listen to what he says and obey him.*" On the other, his hypocrisy was being exposed day by day and the true Muslims were realizing that he and his followers bore great malice against Islām, the Prophet and the Muslims.

Once when the Prophet was passing on the way Abdullah bin Ubayy spoke to him in harsh words. When the Prophet complained of it to Sa'd bin Ubadah; he said: "*O Messenger of God, don't be hard on him, for when God sent you to us we were making a diadem to crown him, and, by God, he thinks that you have robbed him of his kingdom.*" After the Battle of Badr when the Prophet invaded the Jewish tribe of Bani-Qaynuqah on their breaking the agreement and unprovoked revolt, this man stood up in support of them, and holding the Prophet by his armor, said: "*These 700 fighters have been helping and protecting me against every enemy; would you cut them down in one morning? By God, I will not leave you until you pardon my clients.*"

On the occasion of the Battle of Uhud this man committed open treachery and withdrew from the battlefield with 300 of his companions. One should note that at this critical moment when he so acted, the Quraysh had marched upon Madinah with 3,000 troops and the Prophet had marched out with only 1,000 men to resist

them. Of these 1,000 this hypocrite broke away with 300 men and the Prophet was left with only 700 men to meet 3,000 troops of the enemy in the field.

After this incident the common Muslims of Madinah came to realize fully that he was certainly a hypocrite and those Companions also were found who were his associates in hypocrisy. That is why when on the very first Friday, after the Battle of Uhud, this man stood up as usual to make a speech before the Prophet's Sermon, the people pulled at his garment, saying "*Sit down you are not worthy to say such things.*" That was the first occasion in Madinah when this man was publicly disgraced. Thereupon he was so filled with rage that he left the mosque jumping over the heads of the people. At the door of the Mosque some of the Ansār said to him, "*What are you doing? Go back and ask the Holy Prophet to pray for your forgiveness.*" He retorted "*I do not want him to pray for my forgiveness.*"

Then in 4 A.H. the Battle of Banu-Nadheer took place. On this occasion he and his companions supported the enemies of Islām even more openly. On the one side, the Prophet and his devoted Companions were preparing for war against their enemy, the Jews, and on the other, these hypocrites were secretly sending messages to the Jews to the effect: "*Stand firm we are with you: if you are attacked, we will help you, and if you are driven out, we too will go out with you.*" The secret of this intrigue was exposed by God Himself, as has been explained in Sūrah al-Hashr: 11-17 above.

But in spite of being so exposed the reason why the Prophet was still treating him kindly was that he had a large band of the hypocrites behind him. Many of the chiefs of both the Aws and the Khazraj were his supporters. At least a third of the population of Madinah consisted of his companions, as became manifest on the occasion of the Battle of Uhud. Under such conditions it was not prudent to wage a war with these internal enemies combined with the external enemies. On this very account, in spite of being fully aware of their hypocrisy the Prophet continued to deal with them according to their apparent profession of faith for a long time. On the other hand, these people too neither possessed the power nor the courage to fight the believers openly as disbelievers, or to join hands with an invader and face them in the battlefield. Apparently they were a strong hand but inwardly they had the weakness which God has vividly portrayed in Sūrah al-Hashr: 12-14. Therefore; they thought their wellbeing lay only in posing as Muslims. They came to the mosque, offered the prayers, gave away the Zakāh, and would make tall oral claims to the faith, which the true Muslims never felt the need to do. They would offer a thousand justifications for each of their hypocritical acts by which they would try to deceive their compatriots, the Ansār, into believing that they were with them. By these designs they were not only saving themselves from the disadvantages which could naturally accrue if they separated themselves from the Ansār brotherhood, but also taking advantage of the opportunities to make mischief which were available to them as members of the Muslim brotherhood.

These were the causes which enabled Abdullah bin Ubayy and like minded hypocrites to get an opportunity to accompany the Prophet in his campaign against the Bani al-Mustaliq, and they simultaneously engineered two great mischiefs which could shatter the Muslim unity to pieces. However, by virtue of the wonderful training in discipline that the Muslims had received through the pure teaching of the Qur'ān and the companionship of the Prophet both mischiefs were stopped in time, and the hypocrites themselves were disgraced instead. One of these was the mischief that has been mentioned in Sūrah An-Nur above, and the other which has been mentioned in this Sūrah.

This incident has been related by Bukhari, Muslim, Ahmad, Nasai, Tirmidhi, Baihaqi, Tabari, Ibn Marduyah, Abdur Razzaq, Ibn Jarir Tabari, Ibn Sa'd and Muhammad bin Ishaq through many reliable channels. In some hadith the expedition in which it took place has not been named, and in others it has been connected with the Battle of Tabūk. But the authorities on the battles fought by the Prophet and history are agreed that this incident took place on the occasion of the campaign against the Bani al-Mustaliq. The following seems to be the real story when all the traditions are read together.

When after crushing down the power of Bani al-Mustaliq the Islāmic army had made a halt in the settlement at the well of al Muraisi. Suddenly a dispute arose between two men on taking water from the well; one of them was Jehjah bin Masud Ghifari, a servant of Umar appointed to lead his horse. The other was Sinan bin Wabar al-Juhani, whose tribe was an ally of a clan of the Khazraj. Harsh words between them led to fighting and Jehjah kicked Sinan, which the Ansār, on account of their ancient Yemenite tradition, took as a great insult and disgrace. At this Sinan called out the men of Ansār and Jehjah called the Emigrants for help. Hearing about the quarrel Ibn Ubayy started inciting and calling the men of the Aws and the Khazraj to come out and help their ally. From the other side some Emigrants also came out. The dispute might have led to a fight between the Ansār and the Muhajirin themselves at the very place where they had just fought an enemy tribe jointly and crushing it had halted in its own territory. But hearing the noise the Prophet emerged and said: *“What is this call of paganism? What have you to do with such a call? Leave it: it is a dirty thing.”* Thereupon the leading men of the two sides met and settled the dispute; Sinan pardoned Jehjah and peace was restored.

After this every person whose heart was disaffected came to Abdullah bin Ubayy and they all said to him, *“Until now we had our hopes attached to you and you were protecting us, but now it seems you have become a helper of these paupers against us.”* Ibn Ubayy was already enraged. These words made him burst out, thus: *“This is what you have done to yourselves. You have given these people shelter in your country, and have divided your property among them. So much so that they have now become our rivals. Nothing so fits us and the paupers of Quraysh (or the Companions of Muhammad) as the ancient saying ‘Feed your dog to fatten it and it will devour you.’ If you hold back your property from them, they would go elsewhere. By God, when we return to Madinah, the honourable ones will drive out from it the mean ones.”*

Zayd bin Arqam, a young boy, also happened to be present in the assembly at that time. He heard this and mentioned it before his uncle, and his uncle who was one of the Ansār chiefs went to the Prophet and told him the whole story. The Prophet called Zayd and asked him what had happened and he repeated every word of what he had heard. The Prophet said, *“Zayd, you are perhaps displeased with Ibn Ubayy; you might have been mistaken in hearing; you might have imagined Ibn Ubayy said this.”* But Zayd was sure and firm. He said, *“No, I swear by God I have heard him say this and that.”* Thereupon the Prophet called Ibn Ubayy, and he came and swore that he had not said any such thing. The people of the Ansār also said *“...a boy says this: he might have been mistaken in what he heard. Ibn Ubayy is a venerable old man and our chief. Do not believe what a boy says against him.”* The elderly people of the tribe reproved Zayd also, who became depressed and held his peace. But the Prophet knew Zayd as well as Abdullah bin Ubayy. Therefore, he fully understood what had actually happened.

When Umar came to know of this, he came to the Prophet and said: *“Please allow me to put this hypocrite to the sword. Or, if you do not think it is fit to give me the permission you may tell Muadh bin Jabal, or Abbad bin Bishr, or Sad bin Mu’adh, or Muhammad bin Maslamah from among the Ansār, to go and kill him.”* But the Prophet said: *“No, the people will say Muhammad kills his own Companions.”* After this he ordered the people to set off immediately, although it was at a time when the Prophet was not accustomed to travel. The forced march continued for 30 hours at a stretch so that the people became exhausted. Then he halted, and as soon as they touched the ground they fell asleep. This he did to distract their minds from what had happened at the well of al-Muraisi. On the way, Usaïd bin Hudair, an Ansār chief, met the Prophet, and said: *“O Messenger of God, today you ordered the people to set off at a time which was disagreeable for traveling, a thing you have never done before.”* The Prophet replied: *“Have you not heard of what your friend said?”* When he asked who he meant, the Prophet replied: *“Abdullah bin Ubayy.”* He asked what he had said. The Prophet answered: *“He has asserted that when he returns to Madinah the honourable ones will drive out from it the mean ones.”* He answered: *“By God, O Messenger of God, you are the honourable one and he is the mean one; you will drive him out whenever you want to.”*

By and by the news spread among the Ansār soldiers and it enraged them against Ibn Ubayy. The people advised him to go to the Prophet and request for his forgiveness, but he retorted: *“You asked me to believe in him, and I believed in him; you asked me to pay the Zakāh on my property, and I paid the Zakāh too; now the only thing left is that I should bow down to Muhammad.”* This further enraged the believing Ansār and everyone started reproaching and cursing him roughly. When the caravan was about to enter Madinah, Abdullah, the son of Abdullah bin Ubayy, stood before his father with a drawn out sword, and said: *“You had said that when you reached Madi-*

nab, the honourable ones would drive out the mean ones. Now, you will know who is honourable, you or God and His Messenger. By God, you cannot enter Madinah until the Messenger of God permits you to enter.” At this Ibn Uhayy cried out: “O people of Khaḏraj, look, my own son is preventing me from entering Madinah.” The people conveyed this news to the Prophet, and he said: “Tell Abdullah to let his father come home.” Abdullah said, “If this is the Holy Prophet’s order, then you may enter.” Thereupon the Prophet said to Umar: “Now what do you think, Umar? Had you killed him on the day when you asked my permission to kill him, many people would have trembled with rage. Today if I order them to kill him, they will kill him immediately.” Umar replied, “By God, I realize there was greater wisdom behind what the Apostle of God said than what I said.” These were the circumstances under which this Sūrah was sent down most probably after the Prophet’s return to Madinah.

Sūrah 63: al-Munāfiqūn¹⁵⁶⁵

In the Name of God, the Most Compassionate,
the Most Merciful

1. When the hypocrites come to you, [O Muhammad], they say, “We testify that you are the Messenger of God.” And God knows that you are His Messenger, and God testifies that the hypocrites are liars.
2. They have taken their oaths as a cover, so they averted [people] from the way of God. Indeed, it was evil that they were doing.
3. That is because they believed, and then they disbelieved; so their hearts were sealed over, and they do not understand.
4. And when you see them, their forms please you, and if they speak, you listen to their speech. [They are] as if they were pieces of wood propped up¹⁵⁶⁶ - they think that every shout is against them. They are the enemy, so beware of them. May God destroy them; how are they deluded?
5. And when it is said to them, “Come, the Messenger of God will ask forgiveness for you,” they turn their heads aside and you see them evading while they are arrogant.
6. It is all the same for them whether you ask forgiveness for them or do not ask forgiveness for them; never will God forgive them. Indeed, God does not guide the defiantly disobedient people.
7. They are the ones who say, “Do not spend on those who are with the Messenger of God until they disband.” And to God belongs the depositories of the heavens and the earth, but the hypocrites do not understand.
8. They say, “If we return to al-Madīnah, the more honoured [for power] will surely expel therefrom the more humble.” And to God belongs [all] honour, and to His Messenger, and to the believers, but the hypocrites do not know.
9. O you who have believed, let not your wealth and your children divert you from remembrance of God. And whoever does that - then those are the losers.
10. And spend [in the way of God] from what We have provided you before death approaches one of you and he says, “My Lord, if only You would delay me for a brief term so I would give charity and be among the righteous.”
11. But never will God delay a soul when its time has come. And God is Acquainted with what you do.

¹⁵⁶⁵ *Al-Munāfiqūn*: The Hypocrites.

¹⁵⁶⁶ i.e., bodies with empty minds and empty hearts.