

THE MIGRATION TO ABYSSINIA

THE HISTORY OF THE MIGRATION TO ABYSSINIA

The Migration to Abyssinia was one of the most important events in the early history of Islam. It took place during the early years of Prophet Muhammad's mission, when the first Muslims in Mecca faced increasing persecution because of their belief in one God and their rejection of the religious traditions of the Quraysh. The migration provided a refuge for members of the growing Muslim community and demonstrated the importance of religious freedom, protection, and justice.



The event is also known as the First Hijrah, or the first migration of Muslims. It involved a journey from Mecca, in the Arabian Peninsula, to Abyssinia, a Christian kingdom associated with the historical Kingdom of Aksum in parts of present-day Ethiopia and Eritrea. The Muslims sought protection under a ruler traditionally known in Islamic sources as the Negus, or *Najashi*, who is remembered for granting them refuge.

According to traditional Islamic accounts, Prophet Muhammad advised his followers to migrate to Abyssinia because its ruler was known for his justice. The migration is generally dated to around 615 CE, approximately five years after the beginning of Muhammad's

prophetic mission. It occurred before the later migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE, which became a major turning point in the development of the Muslim community.

The Migration to Abyssinia remains significant because it represents an early example of Muslims seeking safety outside their homeland while preserving their religious beliefs. It also highlights the historical connections between the Arabian Peninsula and the Horn of Africa, regions linked by trade, travel, and cultural exchange across the Red Sea.

THE JOURNEY TO ABYSSINIA

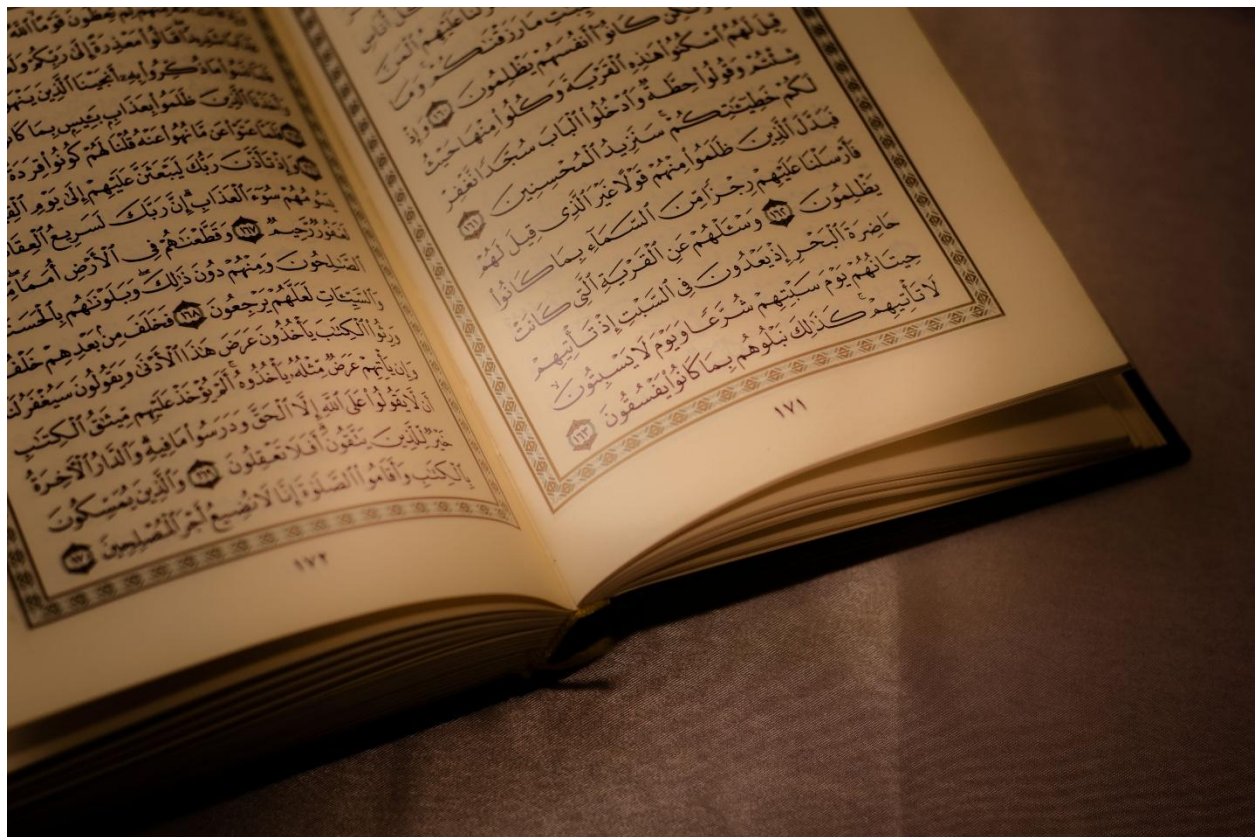
During the early years of Islam, Prophet Muhammad began preaching the worship of one God and calling the people of Mecca to abandon idolatry. His message challenged established religious customs and the influence of leading members of the Quraysh, the powerful tribal group that controlled Mecca. As the Muslim community grew, some of its members experienced hostility, intimidation, and physical persecution.



The pressure was particularly difficult for Muslims who lacked the protection of powerful families or influential tribal relationships. Their religious beliefs placed them in conflict with important elements of Meccan society, and the situation threatened the safety of the early community. In response, Muhammad advised some of his followers to seek refuge in Abyssinia, where they could practise their faith without the same level of persecution.

The first group of migrants is traditionally described as a small party of men and women who crossed the Red Sea around 615 CE. Accounts differ slightly about the exact number of people involved. Among those commonly associated with the migration were Uthman ibn Affan and his wife Ruqayyah, the daughter of Prophet Muhammad. The migrants left their homes and possessions behind in search of security in a foreign land.

Abyssinia was a suitable destination because the Kingdom of Aksum was an established regional power with longstanding connections to the Arabian Peninsula. Its Christian religious tradition distinguished it from the predominantly polytheistic religious environment of pre-Islamic Mecca. According to Islamic historical accounts, Muhammad believed that the kingdom's ruler would treat the migrants fairly and allow them to remain in safety.



The journey across the Red Sea was an important step for the early Muslims. They were leaving their familiar surroundings and travelling to a kingdom with a different political and cultural environment. Their migration demonstrated the difficulties faced by a small religious community during its formative years, as well as its determination to preserve its beliefs despite opposition.

The first migration was followed by a larger movement of Muslims to Abyssinia. Among the prominent figures associated with this later group was Ja'far ibn Abi Talib, a cousin of Prophet Muhammad. Traditional accounts describe how the migrants established themselves under the protection of the Negus and were able to practise their religion while remaining away from the persecution in Mecca.

The migration therefore became an important stage in the survival of the early Muslim community. Although the migrants were separated from Muhammad and their families in Arabia, their presence in Abyssinia provided a place of refuge during a period of considerable uncertainty.



THE NEGUS AND THE LEGACY OF THE MIGRATION

The ruler of Abyssinia occupies a central place in traditional accounts of the migration. Known as the Negus, or Najashi, he is remembered in Islamic history for hearing the case of the Muslim migrants and granting them protection. His personal name and precise identification remain uncertain, and historians have not conclusively established which Aksumite ruler was involved.

According to the traditional account, the leaders of the Quraysh were concerned that the Muslims had found protection outside Mecca. They sent representatives to Abyssinia in an attempt to persuade the Negus to return the migrants to their homeland. The representatives reportedly brought gifts and argued that the Muslims had abandoned the religious customs of their people.

The Negus, however, did not immediately accept their demands. Islamic accounts describe him as insisting that the migrants should be heard before a decision was made about their fate. Ja'far ibn Abi Talib is traditionally remembered as the spokesman for the Muslims during this encounter.



Ja'far explained the changes that Islam had brought to their lives, including the call to worship one God, speak truthfully, care for the vulnerable, and abandon unjust practices. He also described the persecution that had driven them from Mecca. In one of the best-known versions of the story, Ja'far recited passages from the Qur'an concerning Mary and Jesus. The account presents this exchange as an important moment of understanding between the Muslim migrants and the Christian ruler.

According to Islamic tradition, the Negus refused to surrender the Muslims to the Quraysh representatives. His decision allowed the migrants to remain in Abyssinia and continue practising their religion. Although the detailed narrative comes primarily from traditional Islamic historical sources and some elements cannot be independently

confirmed, the migration itself is widely recognized as an important episode in early Islamic history.

The migrants did not all return to Arabia at the same time. Some eventually returned to Mecca, while others remained in Abyssinia for an extended period. Members of the group later joined the Muslim community in Medina. Traditional accounts associate a number of the Abyssinian migrants with the return to the Prophet in the later years of his life, illustrating the continuing connection between the early Muslim community in Arabia and those who had sought refuge across the Red Sea.

The Migration to Abyssinia is remembered as an important example of perseverance during the formative period of Islam. It demonstrates how the early Muslims responded to persecution by seeking protection while maintaining their religious identity. The story also highlights the importance of justice and the willingness of a ruler to hear the claims of people seeking refuge.



The event remains significant in the historical relationship between Islam and Christianity. The traditional account of the Negus and Ja'far has become a lasting symbol of peaceful dialogue between communities with different religious beliefs. It also reflects the longstanding connections between East Africa and the Arabian Peninsula, which existed through trade and travel before and during the emergence of Islam.

The Migration to Abyssinia therefore occupies an important place in the history of the early Muslim community. It preceded the migration to Medina and helped establish a tradition of seeking safety when religious practice was threatened. Although some details of the traditional narrative remain uncertain, its enduring significance lies in the story of a vulnerable community finding refuge and the historical memory of a ruler who chose to hear its case before making a decision.

