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Methods of Freeing Prisoners in the Era of the Prophet: A Study in Manumission and Ransom

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Abstract

The issue of prisoners of war during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) constituted a unique civilizational model for conflict management. It transcended the traditional view based on oppression, adopting instead a humane perspective grounded in rehabilitation, liberation, and compassion for the captive. God Almighty says, "And they give food, in spite of their love for it, to the needy, the orphan, and the captive, [saying], 'We feed you only for the countenance of God. We

wish not from you reward or gratitude.'" (Quran 76:8-9). This study aims to document the methods used to free prisoners of war during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), and to demonstrate his wisdom in applying the principles of freeing prisoners through ransom and emancipation, depending on the prisoner's circumstances.

Keywords: prisoners, freeing, ransom, raid, Muslims

1. INTRODUCTION

The treatment and release of prisoners constituted an important aspect of conflict management during the Prophetic era. The surviving accounts describe a range of responses that included prisoner exchange, financial ransom, release in return for useful services, and release without compensation. These practices were not applied through a single automatic rule; rather, the method selected in each case reflected the circumstances of the conflict, the condition and conduct of the prisoner, and the interests of the Muslim community.

The subject is significant because it demonstrates the relationship between legal discretion, security, economic need, rehabilitation, and mercy in the management of captives. The cases associated with the Battle of Badr, Banu al-Mustaliq, Hudaybiyyah, the conquest of Mecca, Hunayn, and individual prisoners such as Thumamah ibn Uthal illustrate that release could serve different purposes. In some cases, it recovered Muslim prisoners or provided financial support; in others, it benefited the community through education, encouraged reconciliation, or responded to humanitarian circumstances.

The question of prisoners arose in an emerging community that faced military confrontation, limited economic resources, and continuing concern for Muslims held by opposing groups. Decisions regarding captives therefore had consequences extending beyond the individual prisoner. They could affect the safety of the community, the recovery of Muslim captives, the allocation of property, relations with tribes and families, and the possibility of ending hostility. The historical accounts consequently show that release was connected with a broader assessment of circumstances rather than with only one consideration.

The distinction between ransom and release without compensation is central to the organization of this study. Ransom presupposes a recognized consideration in return for release. That consideration could consist of another prisoner, a monetary payment, or a useful service. Release without ransom, by contrast, did not require an equivalent payment or exchange. It could be granted as a favor, an act of pardon, a response to hardship, or a measure intended to promote reconciliation. The two categories were therefore different in form, but both could serve the public interest when selected in a suitable context.

The historical examples also reveal variation within each category. A prisoner exchange was directed primarily toward recovering Muslims held by an opponent, whereas financial ransom could strengthen the community materially. Educational service made use of knowledge that was scarce in Medina and enabled prisoners who lacked money to provide another form of benefit. Pardon could be individual, as in the cases of Abu al-Aas and Thumamah, or collective, as in the releases connected with Banu al-Mustaliq, Mecca, and Hunayn. These distinctions make it necessary to analyze the purposes and procedures of each method rather than treating all releases as equivalent.

This study addresses the following question: What methods were used to release prisoners during the era of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him), and how were those methods selected in light of the circumstances of the prisoners and the broader interests of the Muslim community? To answer this question, the paper distinguishes between two principal categories: release through ransom and release without ransom. Ransom includes exchange, financial payment, and services, whereas release without ransom refers to pardon or gratuitous release, expressed in the classical sources through concepts such as *al-mann* and *al-'afw*.

The objective is not only to list historical incidents but also to identify the considerations that connect them. The analysis therefore examines the lexical and legal meanings of the principal concepts, organizes the reported cases according to the mechanism of release, and compares their immediate purposes and outcomes. This approach makes it possible to observe recurring concerns such as security, reciprocity, financial capacity, useful knowledge, prior conduct, family circumstances, reconciliation, and the rights of those affected by a release decision.

The study contributes to the historical analysis of prisoner treatment by bringing together lexical definitions, Qur'anic foundations, juristic explanations, and examples from the Prophetic biography. It also compares the purposes and outcomes of the different forms of release rather than treating the narratives as isolated incidents. By doing so, it presents prisoner release in the Prophetic era as a field of contextual decision-making in which firmness, mercy, rehabilitation, and public interest were considered together.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative historical and textual approach. Its source base includes Qur'anic verses, hadith reports, works of Prophetic biography, classical Arabic dictionaries, biographical literature, and Islamic jurisprudential writings. The relevant material was identified and organized according to the principal forms of prisoner release recorded in the sources: prisoner exchange, financial ransom, ransom through services or education, and release without compensation.

The use of several categories of sources serves different analytical purposes. Classical dictionaries and works concerned with unusual or technical vocabulary clarify the lexical fields of *fida'*, *fidyah*, *al-mann*, and *al-'afw*. Qur'anic verses provide the principal scriptural references cited in discussions of ransom and pardon. Works of Prophetic biography and historical narration preserve accounts of particular battles, captives, negotiations, and releases. Biographical dictionaries identify

the persons involved and supply contextual information concerning their social position and later conduct. Jurisprudential works help explain how later scholars understood the legal significance of the reported practices.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the lexical and technical meanings of ransom, pardon, and gratuitous release are clarified. Second, the historical accounts are classified according to the form of release employed and the circumstances surrounding each decision. Third, the cases are compared to identify the purposes served by the different methods, including recovery of Muslim captives, financial benefit, use of prisoners' skills, reconciliation, protection of the community, and encouragement of voluntary affiliation.

The classification of the cases is functional rather than merely chronological. Accounts involving the transfer of captives between opposing parties are treated as prisoner exchange. Cases in which money or valuable property secured release are classified as financial ransom. The teaching of reading and writing is examined as ransom through service because the prisoner's release was linked to a defined benefit provided to the community. Cases without a required counterpayment are treated as release without ransom, even when the wider circumstances included kinship, intercession, reconciliation, or a change in political relationship.

Within each category, the study considers the identity and circumstances of the captive, the interests of the Muslim community, the procedure followed, and the reported consequence of release. For example, the discussion of Badr considers consultation and the economic situation of the early community; the account of Abu Azza considers both poverty and a later breach of undertaking; and the treatment of the Hunayn captives considers the rights of persons who held shares in the captives. This comparative procedure prevents the analysis from reducing the accounts to a single moral or legal factor.

Where the cited sources preserve extended dialogue, the account is presented in a condensed and academically coherent form while retaining its central meaning. Long genealogies or repeated expressions are included only where they assist in identifying a person or explaining the significance of a case. Qur'anic quotations are presented in English translation, while technical Arabic terms are transliterated and explained when they carry meanings not fully conveyed by a single English equivalent.

The study analyzes the reports as transmitted in the cited works and does not undertake a separate hadith-authenticity assessment or a comprehensive comparison of all variant chains of transmission. It likewise does not attempt to reconstruct every juristic disagreement concerning the treatment of prisoners. Its conclusions are therefore limited to the historical and legal patterns reflected in the selected sources and to the ways those sources describe the purposes and circumstances of release.

This limitation is important because the cited materials differ in genre and date. A lexical definition, a Qur'anic verse, a biographical narrative, and a later jurisprudential interpretation do not provide the same kind of evidence. The analysis therefore uses each source according to its function: definitions clarify terminology, narratives describe reported events, and legal works explain the interpretation developed around those events. The conclusions are based on convergence among these forms of evidence rather than on treating every source as historically identical.

3. CONCEPTUAL AND LEGAL FOUNDATIONS

The historical cases can be understood more clearly after distinguishing the two principal legal and linguistic concepts that organize the study. Ransom concerns release through an exchange or compensating benefit, while pardon concerns release without such compensation. The terms overlap in their common objective of ending captivity, but they differ in the procedure by which release is obtained and in the considerations immediately attached to the decision.

The meaning and legal basis of ransom

The Arabic term *fida'* refers to the release or rescue of a captive through the provision of something in exchange. Classical lexical usage includes forms meaning that a person paid a ransom, rescued another person, or offered himself or something he possessed as the means of release. The related term *fidyah* denotes the ransom itself [1]. Classical lexicographical sources also distinguish several verbal forms associated with paying ransom, exchanging captives, and securing release through compensation [2].

The range of verbal forms is significant because it shows that ransom was not limited to the payment of a fixed amount of money. The terminology can express the act of redeeming another person, providing a substitute, negotiating a reciprocal exchange, or giving something of value to remove captivity. The common element is that release is connected to an identifiable consideration accepted by the party holding the prisoner.

In its technical sense, ransom is the act of securing a person's release from harm or captivity through payment, exchange, or another recognized form of compensation. The Qur'anic expression, "Then either release them as a favor or by ransom," establishes release by favor and release through ransom as recognized alternatives [3]. Another verse refers to the practice of ransoming captives [4]. Juristic and lexical discussions consequently describe ransom as the recovery of captives held by an opposing party through an agreed form of exchange or compensation [5].

These scriptural and technical definitions place ransom within a broader framework of release rather than presenting it as the only permissible outcome. The pairing of favor and ransom indicates two different procedures that can follow the end of active fighting. Ransom requires a countervalue, whereas favor does not. The existence of alternatives also helps explain why the historical accounts do not show one uniform method applied to every captive.

During the Prophetic era, ransom took several forms. It could involve the exchange of prisoners held by opposing parties, the payment of money, or the performance of services that benefited the community. Each form placed value on a different object: the return of a Muslim captive, a monetary contribution, or useful knowledge. This variation demonstrates that the consideration attached to ransom could be adapted to actual circumstances rather than confined to one material formula.

The meaning and legal basis of pardon

The term *al-mann* denotes granting a favor without expecting payment or compensation in return [34]. The concept of *al-'afw* refers to overlooking an offence, refraining from punishment, and erasing or setting aside liability [35, 36]. Although the two concepts are not identical in every linguistic or legal context, both are relevant to the release of prisoners without ransom.

The distinction between these terms is analytically useful. *Al-mann* emphasizes the favorable act granted to the captive, whereas *al-'afw* emphasizes the abandonment of punishment or blame. In the context of prisoner release, both can result in freedom without payment, but the language highlights different aspects of the decision. One emphasizes generosity and the other emphasizes forbearance.

In the technical terminology of prisoner treatment, *al-mann* means releasing a captive without receiving anything in return [37]. It is therefore a gratuitous release that permits the captive to return without financial payment, exchange, or another compensating service [38]. The Qur'an repeatedly associates pardon with reconciliation, righteousness, and the deliberate abandonment of punishment: "But whoever pardons and makes reconciliation" [39]; "And to pardon is nearer to righteousness" [40]; "Then We pardoned you" [41]; and "So pardon them" [42]. Lexically, pardon signifies turning away from an offence and leaving its punishment [43].

Release without ransom should not be understood as the absence of judgment. The historical reports indicate that the decision could consider prior kindness, poverty, responsibility for dependants, the possibility of reconciliation, or a newly established social relationship. It could also follow the removal of an immediate threat. In these circumstances, the absence of compensation did not mean that the release lacked a purpose; rather, the expected benefit was social, political, humanitarian, or reconciliatory rather than financial.

The accounts considered here therefore show that pardon could be individual or collective. It was sometimes extended to a single captive whose circumstances were specifically considered. In other cases, it affected families, tribal groups, or a population after victory. The practice was nevertheless contextual rather than unconditional, as shown by cases in which a previous undertaking was later violated. Ransom and pardon thus represent two complementary legal mechanisms whose application depended on the facts and expected consequences of each case.

4. RANSOM AS A METHOD OF RELEASING PRISONERS

Ransom was not a single procedure but a group of related methods united by the presence of an agreed consideration for release. The principal forms recorded in the selected sources are exchange of captives, payment of money, and provision of services. The practical value of each form differed. Exchange restored persons held by the opposing party; financial ransom supplied material resources; and service-based ransom converted a prisoner's knowledge into a public benefit.

The existence of these alternatives allowed the response to be matched to the resources and needs present in a particular case. A party holding Muslim captives could be approached through reciprocal exchange, a wealthy captive could provide financial payment, and a literate prisoner without sufficient money could contribute through instruction. The value of ransom was therefore assessed through function and consequence rather than through one uniform object of payment.

The procedure also required attention to negotiation and security. Release could be postponed until missing Muslims were accounted for, guaranteed through the temporary presence of another person, or arranged at an amount reflecting financial capacity. At the same time, the examples show that control over a captive did not permit mutilation or unrestricted retaliation. The following subsections examine first the principal forms and purposes of ransom and then their application in the central cases connected with the Battle of Badr.

4.1. FORMS AND PURPOSES OF RANSOM

Prisoner exchange

Prisoner exchange involved releasing captives held by one party in return for captives held by the other. In contemporary terminology, this method corresponds to a prisoner swap. An early example concerns al-Hakam ibn Kaysan and Uthman ibn Abdullah, who were captured during the expedition led by Abdullah ibn Jahsh at Nakhla. When Quraysh sought to ransom them, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) delayed the arrangement until Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqas and Utbah ibn Ghazwan, who had remained behind while searching for a lost camel, returned safely. The delay reflected concern that the two Muslims might themselves have been captured [6]. After their return, the ransom arrangement proceeded. Al-Hakam ibn Kaysan subsequently embraced Islam and remained with the Prophet until his death at Bi'r Ma'una, whereas Uthman ibn Abdullah returned to Mecca [7].

The sequence of this incident is important. The request from Quraysh was not rejected, but the release of their captives was made dependent on certainty concerning the missing Muslims. The decision therefore placed the security and possible recovery of Muslim companions before completion of the opposing party's request. Once that concern ended, the arrangement could proceed.

The legal literature also records the exchange of non-Muslim captives for Muslim prisoners. A report concerning Imran ibn Husayn states that the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) exchanged one captive from Banu Aqil for two Muslim men [8]. Another account concerns Sa'd ibn al-Nu'man, an elderly Muslim captured by Abu Sufyan ibn Harb. He was recovered in exchange for Amr ibn Abi Sufyan, who was among the prisoners of Badr [9]. These examples indicate that prisoner exchange was used primarily to recover Muslims held by an opposing party and could be adapted to the number and circumstances of the captives involved.

The unequal number in the Banu Aqil report also shows that exchange did not necessarily require numerical identity. What mattered was the value attached to recovering the Muslims and the agreement reached between the parties. Exchange therefore operated as a practical mechanism of reciprocity directed toward ending captivity on both sides.

Financial ransom

Financial ransom served both as a method of releasing prisoners and as a source of material support during a period when the Muslim community possessed limited resources [10]. After the Battle of Badr, some prisoners were released in return for monetary payments. Abu Aziz was among those for whom a financial ransom was arranged. According to the cited account, his mother asked about the highest ransom paid by Quraysh and sent four thousand dirhams. The amounts accepted for prisoners at Badr reportedly ranged from one thousand to four thousand dirhams, depending on their circumstances and financial capacity [11].

The range of payments suggests that financial ransom was not administered as a uniform charge detached from the prisoner's situation. Difference in wealth and ability to pay could be taken into account. The payment secured the prisoner's release while also transferring resources to a community that had recently endured conflict and possessed limited material capacity.

The same principle was applied to al-Abbas and other members of his family. The sources report that one hundred ounces of gold were required as ransom for al-Abbas, Aqil, and Nawfal, and that they were not released without payment [12]. The juristic discussion further distinguishes between providing money and transferring resources that would directly strengthen an opposing military force. Where Muslim prisoners could be recovered through financial payment, the cited legal opinion regarded money as less harmful than surrendering Muslim fighters, horses, or weapons [13].

This distinction shows that the form of ransom was assessed in relation to future consequences. Money could be transferred without directly restoring combat capacity, whereas weapons, horses, or experienced fighters could strengthen the opponent in a more immediate way. The public interest therefore included not only the value received but also the possible harm created by the means of exchange.

Financial ransom was consequently not merely a fixed price placed on every prisoner. The reported differences in payment and the consideration of military consequences indicate that the form and amount of compensation were connected to financial ability, public interest, and the relative benefit or harm associated with the exchange.

Ransom through services and education

The accounts of Badr also describe release in return for useful services. Some prisoners were unable to provide a financial ransom, while the Muslim community could benefit from skills that they possessed. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) therefore accepted educational service as a form of compensation in selected cases [14].

Literacy was more widespread among the people of Mecca than among the population of Medina. A prisoner who lacked the means to pay could secure his release by teaching a group of children from Medina to read and write. The cited

report states that teaching ten children to an acceptable level of proficiency could constitute the prisoner's ransom [15]. Zayd ibn Thabit is identified among those who learned writing through this arrangement [16].

The educational arrangement demonstrates that the value of ransom could be non-monetary but still concrete and measurable. The service had a defined beneficiary, an expected level of completion, and a clear connection with release. It was therefore not an indefinite obligation but an alternative means of satisfying the requirement of ransom.

This form of ransom transformed the prisoner's knowledge into a social benefit. It also demonstrates that compensation was not restricted to money: an educational service could be accepted when it met an identifiable community need. The arrangement combined release with capacity building and converted a wartime consequence into a contribution to literacy.

Taken together, the three forms show a consistent concern with utility. Exchange recovered persons, money supplied resources, and education created human capacity. The mechanisms differed, but each connected the prisoner's release with a benefit considered appropriate to the situation.

4.2. APPLICATIONS OF RANSOM AFTER THE BATTLE OF BADR

The Battle of Badr occupies a central place in the study of ransom because it produced a substantial number of captives and required an explicit decision regarding their treatment. The cases associated with the battle illustrate consultation, financial capacity, negotiation, and protection from mutilation. They also provide the historical material upon which later juristic discussions frequently relied.

Consultation concerning the prisoners

The prisoners captured at Badr became a foundational case in later juristic discussions because of their number and because the decision concerning them was made directly by the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) [17]. The Muslims, despite their limited numbers and equipment, achieved victory and captured approximately seventy members of the opposing force. The Prophet consulted his Companions concerning their treatment [18].

Abu Bakr al-Siddiq recommended accepting ransom. He emphasized the prisoners' kinship with the Muslims, the financial strength that ransom could provide, and the possibility that some might later be guided. Umar ibn al-Khattab proposed a stricter response directed particularly at leading opponents, suggesting that close relatives among the Muslims should carry out the punishment so that kinship would not override loyalty to the community [19]. The Prophet adopted Abu Bakr's recommendation and accepted ransom [20].

The consultation reveals that the decision involved competing assessments of public interest. Abu Bakr focused on financial need, kinship, and the possibility of change among the prisoners. Umar focused on deterrence and the danger represented by leading opponents. The adoption of ransom did not mean that security concerns were absent; it meant that the competing considerations were weighed and a particular course was selected.

The Qur'anic verses revealed in connection with the episode state: "It is not for a prophet to have captives until he has thoroughly subdued the land. You desire the fleeting gains of this world, while God desires the Hereafter. And God is Exalted in Might and Wise. Had it not been for a prior decree from God, you would have been afflicted for what you took by a great punishment" [21]. The cited interpretations connect the "prior decree" with the permissibility of ransom, spoils, or divine forgiveness for the people of Badr, while also explaining that the rebuke concerned the timing and circumstances of taking captives rather than the infliction of mistreatment upon them [22, 23].

The verses therefore add a further dimension to the episode. They do not transform ransom into an unrestricted preference; instead, they connect the treatment of captives with the condition of the conflict and the need to secure the community. The permissibility of ransom remained linked to a broader assessment of the military and political circumstances.

The ransom of al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib

Al-Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib, the Prophet's uncle, participated in Badr with Quraysh and was taken captive, although the sources report his claim that he had already accepted Islam and had been compelled to accompany them [24]. Quraysh sent representatives to arrange the ransom of its prisoners, with each group seeking the release of its own members [25].

When al-Abbas asked that the gold taken from him be counted toward his ransom, the Prophet replied that the property had become part of what had been obtained from the opposing force and required him to ransom himself. Al-Abbas then stated that he had no money. The Prophet referred to funds that al-Abbas had privately left in Mecca with Umm al-Fadl and had allocated among his sons in the event of his death. Al-Abbas regarded this knowledge as confirmation of the Prophet's mission. He subsequently paid for his own release and that of his two nephews and ally [26].

The case shows that kinship with the Prophet did not automatically remove the ransom requirement. It also distinguishes property already taken in the conflict from property later paid to obtain release. The procedure therefore maintained the general arrangement while addressing al-Abbas's individual claims and circumstances.

The Qur'an addressed the captives by stating that, if God knew good in their hearts, He would give them something better than what had been taken and forgive them, while also warning against betrayal [27]. The cited historical account states that al-Abbas returned to Mecca after the ransom, concealed his Islam for a period, and later publicly joined the Muslims shortly before the conquest of Mecca [28].

The later history attached to the account is relevant because it shows that payment of ransom did not determine the prisoner's permanent relationship with the Muslim community. A prisoner released through financial compensation could later adopt a different political and religious position. Ransom ended captivity, while subsequent conduct remained a separate matter.

The ransom of Suhayl ibn Amr

Suhayl ibn Amr was a leading Qurayshi figure known for his judgment and oratory. He was captured at Badr and embraced Islam only later, at the conquest of Mecca [29, 30]. Quraysh sent Makraz ibn Hafs to negotiate his release after he had been captured by Malik ibn al-Dukhsham [31]. When the parties reached an agreement, Makraz offered to remain temporarily in Suhayl's place until the agreed ransom was delivered. Suhayl was released and Makraz remained as security for the payment [32].

The substitution of Makraz illustrates a negotiated guarantee. The prisoner could leave before the financial obligation was fully discharged because another person remained to secure performance of the agreement. This arrangement reflects flexibility in procedure while preserving the right to the agreed ransom.

Umar ibn al-Khattab requested permission to damage Suhayl's teeth so that he would no longer be able to speak effectively against the Muslims. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) rejected the request and prohibited mutilation [33]. The case therefore illustrates both the enforceability of a ransom arrangement and the maintenance of physical integrity while the prisoner remained under Muslim authority.

The refusal to mutilate Suhayl is especially important because his eloquence was viewed as a source of political influence. The immediate security concern was acknowledged, but it did not justify bodily mutilation. The response separated lawful control of a captive from retaliatory injury and preserved the prisoner's physical integrity pending release.

Collectively, the Badr cases show that ransom involved more than receiving payment. Consultation determined the general course, individual negotiations addressed specific prisoners, security could be provided through substitution, and limits were maintained in the physical treatment of captives. These features explain why Badr became a principal reference point in later legal discussions.

5. RELEASE WITHOUT RANSOM

Release without ransom covered cases in which freedom was not conditioned on payment, exchange, or service. Such releases could recognize an earlier act of protection, respond to poverty or family circumstances, encourage reconciliation, or restore a wider community after the immediate conflict had ended. The examples also show that pardon did not remove the importance of future conduct or the rights of persons affected by collective release.

Unlike ransom, the immediate value sought through pardon was not a material counterpayment. Its expected benefit could lie in gratitude, fulfillment of an undertaking, restoration of family relations, reduction of hostility, or establishment of a more stable political relationship. The absence of payment therefore did not make pardon purposeless; it shifted attention from material compensation to the social and moral consequences of release.

The cases also differ in scale. Some concern individuals whose conduct, family obligations, or prior relationships were considered separately. Others involve groups whose release depended on kinship, public intercession, voluntary relinquishment of claims, or compensation to those who retained legal rights. For clarity, the material is organized into individual pardons and collective releases, allowing the similarities and differences between these two levels of reconciliation to be examined.

5.1. INDIVIDUAL PARDONS AND RECONCILIATION

Recognition of prior kindness

The sources preserve examples in which prisoners could be released without compensation. Concerning the prisoners of Badr, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) stated that, had Mut'im ibn Adi been alive and interceded for them, he would have released them for his sake [44]. Mut'im had previously granted the Prophet protection when he returned to Mecca after the journey to Ta'if. The statement reflects recognition of an earlier act of protection and indicates that prior kindness could be considered in decisions concerning captives [45]. The cited literature treats such incidents as part of a recurring orientation toward mercy rather than as an isolated symbolic gesture [46].

This statement is important even though the proposed intercession did not occur because Mut'im had already died. It

identifies gratitude and recognition of prior protection as relevant considerations in the exercise of pardon. The authority to release prisoners could therefore be used to acknowledge a moral obligation created before the conflict.

Abu al-Aas ibn al-Rabi'

Abu al-Aas ibn al-Rabi', the husband of the Prophet's daughter Zaynab, was among the captives of Badr. The biographical sources describe his family relationship with the Prophet and later praise his truthfulness and fulfillment of promises [47]. When the people of Mecca sent ransom for their captives, Zaynab included a necklace that her mother Khadijah had given her at the time of her marriage. On seeing it, the Prophet was moved and asked the Companions whether they were willing to release Abu al-Aas and return the necklace. They agreed [48, 49].

The request to the Companions demonstrates that the decision respected the interests of those connected with the ransom. The Prophet did not simply remove the property from their control; he sought their agreement. The release thus joined compassion for Zaynab with voluntary consent from those whose rights were involved.

After his release, Abu al-Aas allowed Zaynab to migrate in accordance with the Prophet's instruction. Zayd ibn Harithah and a man from the Ansar were sent to wait at Ya'jaj, a location near Mecca, and accompany her safely to Medina [50, 51]. The account connects pardon with family circumstances and a voluntary decision by those who held the right to the ransom.

The subsequent fulfillment of the agreement also gives the release a reconciliatory dimension. Abu al-Aas's conduct after freedom is presented as consistent with the trust placed in him. The case therefore differs from one in which an undertaking was later violated.

Abu Azza

Abu Azza Amr ibn Abdullah appealed for release on the grounds of poverty and responsibility for his daughters. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) released him without ransom after he undertook not to support those who fought against the Muslims. Abu Azza then praised the Prophet in verses acknowledging his call to truth and guidance [52].

The initial pardon responded to identifiable humanitarian circumstances. Poverty limited the possibility of financial ransom, and responsibility for dependants increased the consequences of continued captivity. The undertaking not to return to hostilities supplied an expectation that mercy would be followed by peaceful conduct.

The later part of the account demonstrates the limits of this pardon. Abu Azza violated his undertaking, returned to the opposing force, and was captured again at Uhud. When he sought a second release on the same grounds, the Prophet refused to permit him to claim that he had deceived Muhammad twice, and a punitive order was issued [53, 54]. The first release thus illustrates mercy toward a prisoner in financial and family difficulty, whereas the later response reflects the consequences of breaching an explicit commitment and rejoining hostilities.

The contrast between the two stages is analytically important. Pardon was not treated as proof that the prisoner's future conduct was irrelevant. Mercy created an opportunity for reconciliation, but deliberate violation of the condition changed the circumstances and therefore changed the decision.

Thumamah ibn Uthal

Thumamah ibn Uthal al-Hanafi, a leader from Yamamah, was captured and held at one of the pillars of the mosque [58, 59]. The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) questioned him on successive days. Thumamah consistently replied that, if he were killed, a person whose blood would be avenged would be killed; if he were pardoned, a grateful person would receive the pardon; and if money were requested, the requested amount could be paid.

The repeated questioning allowed the prisoner's position to become clear without immediately fixing the result. Thumamah acknowledged the possibility of punishment, payment, or pardon, and identified consequences associated with each. The interval also placed him within the environment of the mosque and the Muslim community before the decision was announced.

After this exchange had been repeated, the Prophet ordered that Thumamah be released without ransom. Thumamah left, washed himself and his clothing, and returned to the mosque. He then declared that the Prophet's face, religion, and land, which had previously been the most hateful to him, had become the most beloved, and he testified to Islam [60].

The account is significant because the conversion followed release rather than coercion. The pardon created an opportunity for Thumamah to reconsider his position after observing the community and its treatment of him. His response is presented in the sources as voluntary gratitude and conviction following gratuitous release.

Taken together, these individual cases show several grounds for pardon: gratitude for earlier protection, compassion connected with family, humanitarian consideration for poverty and dependants, confidence in an undertaking, and the possibility of reconciliation after observation and dialogue. They also show that the outcome depended on subsequent

conduct. Abu al-Aas fulfilled his obligation, Thumamah responded with voluntary affiliation, and Abu Azza's breach led to a different result after recapture.

5.2. COLLECTIVE RELEASE AND COMMUNITY RECONCILIATION

Collective release involved more than the circumstances of one prisoner. It required attention to tribal relations, family ties, the end of immediate hostilities, and, in some cases, the rights of several individuals who held claims in the captives. The cases of Banu al-Mustaliq, Hodaybiyyah, Mecca, and Hunayn illustrate different procedures through which groups were released.

Banu al-Mustaliq

Among the captives taken at Banu al-Mustaliq was Juwayriyah bint al-Harith ibn Abi Dirar, the daughter of her people's leader. According to Aisha's report, Juwayriyah entered into an agreement with the person to whose share she had fallen and sought the Prophet's assistance in fulfilling it. The Prophet offered to discharge the agreement and marry her. When the Muslims learned that Banu al-Mustaliq had become relatives of the Prophet through the marriage, they released the captives in their possession. The report attributes the liberation of approximately one hundred households to this development and describes Juwayriyah as a source of exceptional benefit to her people [55].

This release did not arise from a uniform financial ransom paid for each captive. It resulted from a change in social relationship and from the voluntary decisions of those who held the captives. The case therefore illustrates how reconciliation and kinship could alter the treatment of an entire group.

The scale of the release is also significant. An arrangement concerning one captive produced a broader response because the captives were now regarded as connected to the Prophet by marriage. Social relationship changed the way the group was perceived and encouraged individual holders to relinquish their claims.

Hodaybiyyah

The Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) also released eighty persons who were captured after descending from the mountains of Tan'im with hostile intent during the year of Hodaybiyyah [56]. The Qur'an refers to the restraint of both sides in the valley of Mecca after the Muslims had gained the advantage: "And it is He who withheld their hands from you and your hands from them in the valley of Mecca after He had given you victory over them" [57]. The release demonstrates restraint after the immediate threat had been contained.

Unlike the Banu al-Mustaliq case, this release followed the containment of an attempted hostile action rather than the creation of kinship. The common feature is that continued detention or retaliation was not treated as necessary once a wider purpose could be served by restraint. The case connects pardon with de-escalation during a politically sensitive period.

The general pardon of Mecca

At the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) announced a broad pardon for the Quraysh despite the long history of opposition and harm directed against him and his followers. The people gathered near the Kaaba awaiting his decision [61]. He addressed them by rejecting the pride of the pre-Islamic period and recited the verse: "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you" [62].

When he asked what they expected him to do, they appealed to his nobility and kinship. He then declared, "Go, for you are free" [63]. This was not a conventional ransom arrangement but a collective pardon following military victory. Its importance lies in the replacement of broad retaliation with a general act of release and reconciliation.

The Meccan pardon differed from release of a limited group of battlefield prisoners because it addressed a population after the city had come under Muslim authority. The decision therefore had consequences for the transition from conflict to political order. By declining general retaliation, it opened a path for incorporation rather than continuing collective hostility.

The captives of Hunayn

The victory at Hunayn resulted in substantial spoils and a large number of captives from Hawazin, including women and children. After the battle, a delegation from Hawazin came to the Prophet at al-Ji'ranah, a location between Ta'if and Mecca, after accepting Islam [64]. They appealed to kinship and described the calamity that had affected them [65]. When asked to choose between their wealth and their women and children, they chose the restoration of their families.

The Prophet declared that his own share and the share of Banu Abd al-Muttalib would be returned. He instructed the delegation to present its request publicly after prayer so that he could intercede with the wider Muslim community. The Muhajirun and the Ansar relinquished their shares. Al-Aqra' ibn Habis, speaking for Banu Tamim, initially declined [66]; al-Abbas ibn Mirdas spoke concerning Banu Sulaym [67]; and Uyaynah ibn Hisn stated the position of Banu Fazarah [68]. For anyone who retained a legal claim, the Prophet offered compensation of six shares from the first subsequent booty. The women and children were then restored [69].

The procedure is important because the collective release respected the rights of those who held shares in the captives. The Prophet relinquished what was under his authority, sought voluntary agreement from others, and provided future compensation where consent was withheld. The result combined pardon, consultation, and protection of individual claims.

Hunayn therefore illustrates a structured collective release rather than an unqualified cancellation of private rights. The humanitarian objective of restoring families was pursued through public request, intercession, voluntary relinquishment, and compensation. This procedure distinguishes authority over the Prophet's own share from the claims held by others.

Across these collective cases, release served different immediate purposes. Banu al-Mustaliq involved reconciliation through kinship; Hudaybiyyah involved restraint after an attempted attack; Mecca involved general pardon after conquest; and Hunayn involved restoration of families while respecting individual rights. The common principle was not identical procedure but the use of release to reduce hostility and establish a more stable relationship after conflict.

6. DISCUSSION

The evidence demonstrates that the release of prisoners during the Prophetic era was governed by contextual judgment rather than by one inflexible procedure. Exchange, financial payment, service, and gratuitous release were all available, but they were applied for different purposes. Prisoner exchange prioritized the recovery of Muslims held by an opposing party. Financial ransom provided resources to a community facing material constraints. Educational service enabled prisoners without sufficient wealth to contribute useful knowledge. Pardon, in turn, was employed where reconciliation, humanitarian need, prior kindness, kinship, or a wider social benefit was present.

The conceptual distinction between ransom and pardon helps explain the structure of the cases. Ransom connected release to a consideration that could be identified and agreed upon. Pardon removed the requirement of compensation and instead pursued a benefit expected from reconciliation, gratitude, restraint, or restoration of relationships. The two mechanisms were not competing moral positions in which one represented firmness and the other represented mercy. Each could include both practical and humanitarian considerations.

The cases from Badr demonstrate the interaction of consultation, public interest, and scriptural guidance. Abu Bakr's recommendation emphasized kinship, financial support, and the possibility of future guidance, whereas Umar's position emphasized deterrence and security. The acceptance of ransom shows that mercy and material benefit could be considered, while the Qur'anic rebuke indicates that the decision remained subject to the wider requirements of conflict and public safety.

Badr also shows that a general policy did not eliminate individual assessment. The amounts of financial ransom differed, al-Abbas's family relationship did not automatically remove his obligation, and Suhayl's eloquence did not justify mutilation. Makraz's temporary substitution for Suhayl shows procedural flexibility, while the prohibition of bodily injury establishes a limit on how security concerns could be pursued.

The financial and educational forms of ransom reveal that compensation was evaluated according to utility. Money strengthened the community without necessarily returning military resources to the opposing side, while teaching converted prisoners' literacy into a durable public benefit. The acceptance of services in place of money shows flexibility in responding to differences among prisoners and in identifying forms of compensation appropriate to community needs.

This utility was not narrowly economic. The recovery of Muslim prisoners had personal and communal value, while education created knowledge that could continue to benefit society after the prisoner had been released. Ransom therefore connected the end of captivity with restoration or capacity building. The method selected reflected the kind of benefit that was realistically available in the case.

Release without ransom served a different set of purposes. The cases of Abu al-Aas, Banu al-Mustaliq, Hudaybiyyah, Thumamah, Mecca, and Hunayn connect pardon with gratitude, family circumstances, reconciliation, and the reduction of hostility. Thumamah's subsequent conversion illustrates the potential rehabilitative effect of release after humane treatment. The collective pardons at Mecca and Hunayn demonstrate that release could also operate at a communal level after victory.

The individual cases further show that pardon could be based on a specific moral relationship. Mut'im ibn Adi's earlier protection was remembered as a basis for possible intercession. Zaynab's necklace evoked family memory, but the release of Abu al-Aas and return of the property still depended on the agreement of the Companions. Abu Azza's poverty and dependants supported an initial act of mercy, while Thumamah's release followed repeated dialogue and observation.

At the same time, the Abu Azza account shows that pardon did not eliminate responsibility for later conduct. His initial release responded to poverty and family need, but his breach of the undertaking and return to hostilities produced

a different decision after his recapture. The pattern therefore combines mercy with security and distinguishes between a prisoner who receives an opportunity for reconciliation and one who violates an express commitment.

The collective releases demonstrate an additional concern with social transition after conflict. At Banu al-Mustaliq, marriage changed the social relationship between the captives and the Muslim community. At Hudaibiyyah, release followed containment of a threat. At Mecca, general pardon replaced a possible cycle of retaliation. At Hunayn, the restoration of families was pursued through consultation and compensation. These cases show that release could help transform relations between groups rather than merely end the detention of individuals.

The different cases also indicate that the Prophet's discretion was not exercised solely in relation to the captive as an isolated individual. The interests of Muslim prisoners, the rights of those holding shares, the safety of the community, the prisoner's resources and skills, and the possibility of reconciliation were all relevant. At Hunayn, for example, the rights of individual holders were addressed through consultation and compensation rather than simply being overridden.

This concern with rights is also visible in the release of Abu al-Aas, where consent was sought from the Companions, and in the distinction between al-Abbas's captured property and the ransom later required for release. Contextual discretion therefore did not mean arbitrary action. The reports describe consultation, agreement, recognition of claims, and compensation as procedural elements in several decisions.

The sources additionally indicate that the result of release was not always known in advance. Some prisoners later embraced Islam or fulfilled their undertakings, while another violated his promise and returned to fighting. The decision to release was based on circumstances and expected benefit, but later conduct remained the responsibility of the released person. This observation prevents the historical outcomes from being treated as automatic consequences of pardon.

Accordingly, the principal finding is that prisoner release in the Prophetic era followed a flexible and purposive approach. Ransom and pardon were not contradictory policies. They were complementary options selected according to the circumstances and the public interest. The resulting model combined recovery, deterrence, economic benefit, education, reconciliation, protection of rights, and mercy within a framework of contextual decision-making.

The study also shows that the humane dimension of prisoner release cannot be separated from institutional and communal considerations. Mercy was expressed through release, protection from mutilation, recognition of hardship, and restoration of families. At the same time, security, agreements, financial capacity, and the claims of others were considered. The historical model is therefore best understood as a balance of considerations rather than as an exclusively punitive or exclusively permissive policy.

7. CONCLUSION

This study identified four principal methods used to secure the release of prisoners during the Prophetic era: prisoner exchange, financial ransom, ransom through services or education, and release without compensation. The examples demonstrate that the selected method varied according to the circumstances of the conflict, the prisoner's position and conduct, the needs of the Muslim community, and the expected consequences of release.

Prisoner exchange was directed toward recovering Muslims held by an opposing party and could be arranged according to the relative circumstances of the captives rather than a rigid numerical formula. Financial ransom provided a means of release while contributing resources to the early community. Its amount and form could reflect capacity to pay and the need to avoid giving the opposing party resources with direct military value. Service-based ransom, especially the teaching of reading and writing, demonstrated that useful knowledge could serve as compensation when money was unavailable.

Ransom could therefore recover Muslim captives, strengthen the community financially, or convert prisoners' expertise into educational benefit. Release without ransom could recognize prior kindness, respond to poverty and family circumstances, promote reconciliation, or restore entire groups after hostilities had ended. The cases of Thumamah, Banu al-Mustaliq, Mecca, and Hunayn show the role of pardon in reducing hostility and opening a path toward voluntary affiliation and social peace.

The individual pardons show that humane consideration could be connected with gratitude, kinship, poverty, responsibility for dependants, or the possibility of a transformed relationship. Thumamah's release is especially significant because his later conversion followed freedom and was presented as voluntary. The Abu Azza account, however, demonstrates that mercy did not remove responsibility for an explicit undertaking or prevent a different decision when the circumstances changed.

The collective cases further show that release could contribute to transition from conflict to reconciliation. The freeing of Banu al-Mustaliq captives followed a new relationship created through marriage. The Hudaibiyyah prisoners were released after their threat had been contained. The pardon of Mecca prevented general retaliation after conquest, and the return of the Hunayn captives restored families through a process that respected the claims of those who held shares.

The evidence also demonstrates that mercy was accompanied by attention to security, agreements, and legal rights. The response to Abu Azza after his breach of covenant and the procedure followed in returning the captives of Hunayn show that pardon did not operate without conditions or regard for the claims of others. Consultation in the case of Badr, consent

in the release of Abu al-Aas, compensation at Hunayn, and the rejection of mutilating Suhayl all indicate that procedure and limits were important elements of prisoner treatment.

The overall approach was therefore neither uniformly punitive nor indiscriminately lenient. It was a flexible model that combined firmness, public interest, rehabilitation, and humane treatment in accordance with the circumstances of each case. Ransom and pardon functioned as complementary mechanisms through which captivity could end while the community's security, resources, educational needs, relationships, and moral obligations were considered.

The main contribution of the study is the demonstration that the Prophetic practice cannot be reduced to one method or one purpose. Its defining feature was contextual selection among several lawful possibilities. This flexibility allowed prisoner release to serve recovery, compensation, education, reconciliation, protection of rights, and the reduction of hostility. Further research may examine the juristic development of these cases across legal schools or compare their interpretation in later historical periods, while maintaining a clear distinction between the source narratives and subsequent legal elaboration.

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