

Zayd ibn Thabit

We are in the second year of the Hijrah. Madinah the city of the Prophet is buzzing with activity as the Muslims prepare for the long march southwards to Badr.

The noble Prophet made a final inspection of the first army to be mobilized under his leadership to wage Jihad against those who had tormented the Muslims for many years and who were still bent on putting an end to his mission.

A youth, not yet thirteen, walked up to the ranks. He was confident and alert. He held a sword which was as long or possibly slightly longer than his own height. He went up to the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, and said: "I dedicate myself to you, Messenger of God. Permit me to be with you and to fight the enemies of God under your banner."

The noble Prophet looked at him with admiration and patted his shoulder with loving tenderness. He commended him for his courage but refused to enlist him because he was still too young.

The youth, Zayd ibn Thabit, turned and walked away, dejected and sad. As he walked, in slow and measured paces, he stuck his sword in the ground as a sign of his disappointment. He was denied the honor of accompanying the Prophet on his first campaign. Behind him was his mother, an-Nawar bint Malik. She felt equally dejected and sad. She had dearly wished to see her young son go with the army of mujahidin and to be with the Prophet at this most critical time.

One year later, as preparations were underway for the second encounter with the Quraysh which took place at Uhud, a group of Muslim teenagers bearing arms of various kinds - swords, spears, bows and arrows and shields - approached the Prophet. They were seeking to be enlisted in any capacity in the Muslim ranks. Some of them, like Rafi ibn Khadij and Samurah ibn Jundub, who were strong and well-built for their age and who demonstrated their ability to wrestle and handle weapons, were granted permission by the Prophet to join the Muslim forces. Others like Abdullah the son of Umar and Zayd ibn Thabit were still considered by the Prophet to be too young and immature to fight. He promised though to consider them for a later campaign. It was only at the Battle of the Ditch when Zayd was about sixteen years old that he was at last allowed to bear arms in defence of the Muslim community.

Although Zayd was keen to participate in battles, it is not as a warrior that he is remembered. After his rejection for the Badr campaign, he accepted the fact then that he was too young to fight in major battles. His alert mind turned to other fields of service, which had no connection with age and which could bring him closer to the Prophet, peace be on him. He considered the field of knowledge and in particular of memorizing the Quran. He mentioned the idea to his mother. She was delighted and immediately made attempts to have his ambition realized. An-Nuwar spoke to some men of the Ansar about the youth's desire and they in turn broached the matter with the Prophet, saying: "O Messenger of Allah, our son Zayd ibn Thabit has memorized seventeen surahs of the Book of Allah and recites them as correctly as they were revealed to you. In addition to that he is good at reading and writing. It is in this field of service that he desires to be close to you. Listen to him if you will."

The Prophet, peace be on him, listened to Zayd reciting some surahs he had memorized. His recitation was clear and beautiful and his stops and pauses indicated clearly that he understood well what he recited. The Prophet was pleased. Indeed he found that Zayd's ability exceeded the commendation he had been given by his relatives. The Prophet then set him a task which required intelligence, skill and persistence.

"Zayd, learn the writing of the Jews for me," instructed the Prophet. "At your command, Messenger of

Allah," replied Zayd who set about learning Hebrew with enthusiasm. He became quite proficient in the language and wrote it for the Prophet when he wanted to communicate with the Jews. Zayd also read and translated from Hebrew when the Jews wrote to the Prophet. The Prophet instructed him to learn Syriac also and this he did. Zayd thus came to perform the important function of an interpreter for the Prophet in his dealings with non-Arabic speaking peoples.

Zayd's enthusiasm and skill were obvious. When the Prophet felt confident of his faithfulness in the discharge of duties and the care, precision and understanding with which he carried out tasks, he entrusted Zayd with the weighty responsibility of recording the Divine revelation.

When any part of the Quran was revealed to the Prophet, he often sent for Zayd and instructed him to bring the writing materials, "the parchment, the ink-pot and the scapula", and write the revelation.

Zayd was not the only one who acted as a scribe for the Prophet. One source has listed forty-eight persons who used to write for him. Zayd was very prominent among them. He did not only write but during the Prophet's time he collected portions of the Quran that were written down by others and arranged these under the supervision of the Prophet. He is reported to have said:

"We used to compile the Quran from small manuscripts in the presence of the Prophet." In this way, Zayd experienced the Quran directly from the Prophet himself. It could be said that he grew up with the verses of the Quran, understanding well the circumstances surrounding each revelation. He thus became well-versed in the secrets of the Shariah and at an early age gained the well-deserved reputation as a leading scholar among the companions of the Prophet.

After the death of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, the task fell on this fortunate young man who specialized in the Quran to authenticate the first and most important reference for the ummah of Muhammad. This became an urgent task after the wars of apostasy and the Battle of Yamamah in particular in which a large number of those who had committed the Quran to memory perished.

Umar convinced the Khalifah Abu Bakr that unless the Quran was collected in one manuscript, a large part of it was in danger of being lost. Abu Bakr summoned Zayd ibn Thabit and said to him: "You are an intelligent young man and we do not suspect you (of telling lies or of forgetfulness) and you used to write the Divine revelation for Allah's Messenger. Therefore look for (all parts of) the Quran and collect it in one manuscript."

Zayd was immediately aware of the weighty responsibility. He later said: "By Allah, if he (Abu Bakr) had ordered me to shift one of the mountains from its place, it would not have been harder for me than what he had ordered me concerning the collection of the Quran."

Zayd finally accepted the task and, according to him, "started locating the Quranic material and collecting it from parchments, scapula, leafstalks of date palms and from the memories of men (who knew it by heart)".

It was a painstaking task and Zayd was careful that not a single error, however slight or unintentional, should creep into the work. When Zayd had completed his task, he left the prepared suhuf or sheets with Abu Bakr. Before he died, Abu Bakr left the suhuf with Umar who in turn left it with his daughter Hafsa. Hafsa, Umm Salamah and Aishah were wives of the Prophet, may Allah be pleased with them, who memorized the Quran.

During the time of Uthman, by which time Islam had spread far and wide, differences in reading the Quran became obvious. A group of companions of the Prophet, headed by Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman, who was then stationed in Iraq, came to Uthman and urged him to "save the Muslim ummah before they differ about the Quran".

Uthman obtained the manuscript of the Quran from Hafsa and again summoned the leading authority,

Zayd ibn Thabit, and some other competent companions to make accurate copies of it. Zayd was put in charge of the operation. He completed the task with the same meticulousness with which he compiled the original suhuf during the time of Abu Bakr.

Zayd and his assistants wrote many copies. One of these Uthman sent to every Muslim province with the order that all other Quranic materials whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies be burnt. This was important in order to eliminate any variations or differences from the standard text of the Quran. Uthman kept a copy for himself and returned the original manuscript to Hafsa.

Zayd ibn Thabit thus became one of the foremost authorities on the Quran. Umar ibn al-Khattab once addressed the Muslims and said: "O people, whoever wants to ask about the Quran, let him go to Zayd ibn Thabit."

And so it was that seekers of knowledge from among the companions of the Prophet and the generation who succeeded them, known as the "Tabiun", came from far and wide to benefit from his knowledge. When Zayd died, Abu Hurayrah said: "Today, the scholar of this ummah has died."

When a Muslim holds the Quran and reads it or hears it being recited, surah after surah, ayah after ayah, he should know that he owes a tremendous debt of gratitude and recognition to a truly great companion of the Prophet, Zayd ibn Thabit, for helping to preserve for all time to come the Book of Eternal Wisdom. Truly did Allah, the Blessed and Exalted, say: "Surely We have revealed the Book of Remembrance and We shall certainly preserve it." (The Quran, Surah al-Hijr, 15:9)

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