

Muhammad ibn Maslamah

Black, tall and sturdy, Muhammad ibn Maslamah towered above his contemporaries. He was a giant among the companions of the Prophet, a giant in body and a giant in deeds.

Significantly he was called Muhammad even before he became a Muslim. It would seem that his name was itself a pointer to the fact that he was among the first of the Yathribites to become a Muslim and to follow the teachings of the great Prophet. (The name Muhammad was practically unknown at the time but since the Prophet encouraged Muslims to name themselves after him, it has become one of the most widely used names in the world.)

Muhammad ibn Maslamah was a halif or an ally of the Aws tribe in Madinah indicating that he himself was not an Arab. He became a Muslim at the hands of Musab ibn Umayr, the first missionary sent out by the Prophet from Makkah to Madinah. He accepted Islam even before men like Usayd ibn Hudayr and Sad ibn Muadh who were influential men in the city.

When the Prophet, peace be on him, came to Madinah, he adopted the unique method of strengthening the bonds of brotherhood between the Muhajirin and the Ansar. He paired off each Muhajir with one of the Ansar. This arrangement also helped to relieve the immediate needs of the Muhajirin for shelter and food and created an integrated community of believers.

The Prophet was a keen observer of character and temperament and was concerned to join in brotherhood persons of similar attitudes and tastes. He joined in brotherhood Muhammad ibn Maslamah and Abu Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah. Like Abu Ubaydah, Muhammad ibn Maslamah was quiet and pensive and had a strong sense of trust and devotion. He was also brave and resolute in action. He was a distinguished horseman who performed feats of heroism and sacrifice in the service of Islam.

Muhammad ibn Maslamah took part in all the military engagements of the Prophet except the expedition to Tabuk. On that occasion, he and Ali were put in charge of an army which was left behind to protect Madinah. Later in life, he would often relate scenes of these battles to his ten children.

There are many instances in the life of Muhammad ibn Maslamah which showed what a dependable and trustworthy person he was. Before the start of hostilities at the Battle of Uhud, the Prophet and the Muslim force numbering some seven hundred persons spent a night in an open camp. He put fifty men under the command of Muhammad ibn Maslamah and entrusted him with the task of patrolling the camp the whole night. During the battle itself, after the disastrous rout of the Muslims by the Quraysh during which about seventy Muslims lost their lives and many fled in every possible direction, a small band of the faithful bravely defended the Prophet till the tide of battle turned. Muhammad ibn Maslamah was among them.

Muhammad ibn Maslamah was quick to respond to the call of action. He once stood listening to the Prophet as he spoke to the Muslims about the designs of some of the Jewish leaders in the region.

At the beginning of his stay in Madinah, the Prophet had concluded an agreement with the Jews of the city which said in part:

"The Jews who attach themselves to our commonwealth shall be protected from all insults and harassment. They shall have equal rights as our own people to our assistance...They shall join the Muslims in defending Madinah against all enemies...They shall not declare war nor enter in treaty or agreement against the Muslims."

Jewish leaders had violated this agreement by encouraging the Quraysh and tribes around Madinah in

their designs against the state. They were also bent on creating discord among the people of Madinah in order to weaken the influence of Islam.

After the resounding victory of the Muslims over the Quraysh at the Battle of Badr, one of the three main Jewish groups in Madinah, the Banu Qaynuqa was especially furious and issued a petulant challenge to the Prophet. They said:

"O Muhammad! You really think that we are like your people (the Quraysh)? Don't be deceived. You confronted a people who have no knowledge of war and you took the chance to rout them. If you were to fight against us you would indeed know that we are men."

They thus spurned their agreement with the Prophet and issued an open challenge to fight. The Qaynuqa however were goldsmiths who dominated the market in Madinah. They were depending on their allies, the Khazraj, to help them in their declared war. The Khazraj refused. The Prophet placed the Banu Qaynuqa's quarters under a siege which lasted for fifteen nights. The fainthearted Qaynuqa finally decided to surrender and ask the Prophet for a free passage out of Madinah.

The Prophet allowed them to leave and the tribe - men, women and children - left unharmed. They had to leave behind them their arms and their goldsmith's equipment. They settled down at Adhraat in Syria.

The departure of the Qaynuqa did not end Jewish feelings of animosity towards the Prophet although the nonaggression agreement was still in force. One of those who was consumed with hatred against the Prophet and the Muslims and who openly gave vent to his rage was Kab ibn al-Ashraf.

Kab's father was in fact an Arab who had fled to Madinah after committing a crime. He became an ally of the Banu Nadir, another important Jewish group, and married a Jewish lady name Aqilah bint Abu-I Haqiq. She was Kab's mother.

Kab was a tall and impressive looking person. He was a well-known poet and was one of the richest men among the Jews. He lived in a castle on the outskirts of Madinah where he had extensive palm groves. He was regarded as a Jewish leader of importance throughout the Hijaz. He provided means of support and sponsorship to many Jewish rabbis.

Kab was openly hostile to Islam. He lampooned the Prophet, besmirched in verse the reputation of Muslim women, and incited the tribes in and around Madinah against the Prophet and Islam. He was particularly distressed when he heard the news of the Muslim victory at Badr. When he saw the returning army with the Quraysh prisoners of war, he was bitter and furious. He took it upon himself then to make the long journey to Makkah to express his grief and to incite the Quraysh to take further revenge. He also went to other areas, from tribe to tribe, urging people to take up arms against the Prophet. News of his activities reached the Prophet, peace be on him, who prayed: "O Lord, rid me of the son of Ashfar, however You wish."

Kab had become a real danger to the state of peace and mutual trust which the Prophet was struggling to achieve in Madinah.

Kab returned to Madinah and continued his verbal attacks on the Prophet and his abuse of Muslim women. He refused, after warnings from the Prophet, to stop his dirty campaign and sinister intrigues. He was bent on fomenting a revolt against the Prophet and the Muslims in Madinah. By all these actions, Kab had openly declared war against the Prophet. He was dangerous and a public enemy to the nascent Muslim state. The Prophet was quite exasperated with him and said to the Muslims: "Who will deal with Kab ibn al-Ashraf? He has offended God and His Apostle."

"I shall deal with him for you, O Messenger of God," volunteered Muhammad ibn Maslamah.

This, however, was no easy undertaking. Muhammad ibn Maslamah, according to one report, went home

and stayed for three days without either eating or drinking, just thinking about what he had to do. The Prophet heard of this, called him and asked him why he had not been eating or drinking. He replied: "O Messenger of God, I gave an undertaking to you but I do not know whether I can accomplish it or not." "Your duty is only to try your utmost," replied the Prophet.

Muhammad ibn Maslamah then went to some other companions of the Prophet and told them what he had undertaken to do. They included Abu Nailah, a foster brother of Kab ibn al-Ahshraf. They agreed to help him and he devised a plan to accomplish the mission. They went back to the Prophet to seek his approval since the plan involved enticing Kab from his fortress residence through some deception. The Prophet gave his consent on the principle that war involved deceit.

Both Muhammad ibn Maslamah who was in fact a nephew of Kab by fosterage and Abu Nailah then went to Kab's residence. Muhammad ibn Maslamah was the first to speak: "This man (meaning the Prophet, peace be on him) has asked us for sadaqah (charitable tax) and we cannot even find food to eat. He is oppressing us with his laws and prohibitions and I thought I could come to you to ask for a loan."

"By God, I am much more dissatisfied with him," confessed Kab. "We have followed him but we do not want to leave him until we see how this whole business will end. We would like you to lend us a wasaq or two of gold," continued Muhammad ibn Maslamah.

"Isn't it about time that you realize what falsehood you are tolerating from him? asked Kab as he promised to give them the loan. "However," he said, "you must provide security (for the loan)."

"What security do you want?" they asked. "Give me your wives as security," he suggested. "How can we give you our wives as security , " they protested, "when you are the most handsome of Arabs?"

"Then give me your children as security," Kab suggested. "How can we give you our children as security when any one of them would thereafter be ridiculed by being called a hostage for one or two wasaqs of gold. This would be a disgrace to us. But we could give you our (means of) protection (meaning weapons) since you know that we need them."

Kab agreed to this suggestion which they had made to disabuse his mind of any notion that they had come armed. They promised to come back to him again to bring the weapons.

Meanwhile, Abu Nailah also came up to Kab and said: "Woe to you, Ibn Ashraf. I have come to you intending to mention something to you and you do not encourage me." Kab asked him to go on and Abu Nailah said: "The coming of this man to us has been a source of affliction to our Arab customs. With one shot he has severed our ways and left families hungry and in difficulties. We and our families are struggling." Kab replied: "I, Ibn al-Ashraf, by God, I had told you, son of Salamah, that the matter would end up as I predicted." Abu Nailah replied: "I wish you could sell us some food and we would give you whatever form of security and trust required. Be good to us. I have friends who share my views on this and I want to bring them to you so that you could sell them some food and deal well towards them. We will come to you and pledge our shields and weapons to you as security." "There is loyalty and good faith in weapons," agreed Kab.

With this they left promising to return and bring the required security for the loan. They went back to the Prophet and reported to him what had happened. That night, Muhammad ibn Maslamah, Abu Nailah, Abbad ibn Bisr, Al-Harith ibn Aws and Abu Abasah ibn Jabr all set off for Kab's house. The Prophet went with them for a short distance and parted with the words:

"Go forth in the name of God." And he prayed: "O Lord, help them." The Prophet returned home. It was a moonlit night in the month of Rabi al-Awwal in the third year of the hijrah.

Muhammad ibn Maslamah and the four with him reached Kab's house. They called out to him. As he got out of bed, his wife held him and warned: "You are a man at war. People at war do not go down at such an

hour." "It is only my nephew Muhammad ibn Maslamah and my foster brother, Abu Nailah..." Kab came down with his sword drawn. He was heavily scented with the perfume of musk.

"I have not smelt such a pleasant scent as today," greeted Muhammad ibn Maslamah. "Let me smell your head." Kab agreed and as Muhammad bent over, he grasped Kab's head firmly and called on the others to strike down the enemy of God.

(Details of this incident vary somewhat. Some reports state that it was Abu Nailah who gave the command to strike down Kab and this was done after Kab had emerged from his house and walked with them for some time.)

The elimination of Kab ibn al-Ashraf struck terror into the hearts of those, and there were many of them in Madinah, who plotted and intrigued against the Prophet. Such open hostility as Kab's diminished for a time but certainly did not cease.

At the beginning of the fourth year of the hijrah, the Prophet went to the Jewish tribe of Banu Nadir on the outskirts of Madinah to seek their help on a certain matter. While among them, he found out that they were planning to kill him then and there. He had to take decisive action. The Banu Nadir had gone too far. Straight away, the Prophet went back to the center of the city. He summoned Muhammad ibn Maslamah and sent him to inform the Banu Nadir that they had to leave Madinah within ten days because of their treacherous behavior and that any one of them seen after that in the city would forfeit his life.

One can just imagine Muhammad ibn Maslamah addressing the Banu Nadir. His towering stature and his loud and clear voice combined to let the Banu Nadir know that the Prophet meant every word he said and that they had to stand the consequences of their treacherous acts. The fact that the Prophet chose Muhammad ibn Maslamah for the task is a tribute to his loyalty, courage and firmness.

Further details of the expulsion of the Banu Nadir from Madinah do not concern us here: their plan to resist the Prophet with outside help; the Prophet's siege of their district and their eventual surrender and evacuation mainly to Khaybar in the north. Two of the Banu Nadir though became Muslims - Yamin ibn Umayr and Abu Sad ibn Wahb. All this happened exactly one year after the elimination of Kab ibn al-Ashraf.

Both during the time of the Prophet and after, Muhammad ibn Maslamah was known for carrying out any assignment he accepted exactly as he was ordered, neither doing more nor less than he was asked to do. It was these qualities which made Umar choose him as one of his ministers and as a trusted friend and guide.

When Amr ibn al-Aas requested reinforcements during his expedition to Egypt, Umar sent him four detachments of one thousand men each. Leading these detachments were Muhammad ibn Maslamah, az-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam, Ubadah ibn as-Samit and al-Miqdad ibn al-Aswad. To Amr, Umar sent a message saying, "Let me remind you that I am sending Muhammad ibn Maslamah to you to help you distribute your wealth. Accommodate him and forgive any harshness of his towards you."

Ibn Maslamah went to Amr in Fustat (near present-day Cairo).. He sat at his table but did not touch the food. Amr asked him: "Did Umar prevent you from tasting my food?" "No," replied Ibn Maslamah, "he did not prevent me from having your food but neither did he command me to eat of it." He then placed a flat loaf of bread on the table and ate it with salt. Amr became upset and said: "May God bring to an end the time in which we work for Umar ibn al-Khattab! I have witnessed a time when al-Khattab and his son Umar were wandering around wearing clothes which could not even cover them properly while Al-Aas ibn Wail (Amr's father) sported brocade lined with gold..."

"As for your father and the father of Umar, they are in hell," retorted Muhammad ibn Maslamah, because they did not accept Islam. "As for you, if Umar did not give you an appointment, you would have been pleased with what you got from their udders," continued Ibn Maslamah obviously disabusing Amr's mind of

any ideas he might have of appearing superior because he was the governor of Egypt.

"Assemblies must be conducted as a form of trust," said Amr in an attempt to diffuse the situation and Muhammad ibn Maslamah replied: "Oh yes, so long as Umar is alive." He wanted to impress upon people the justice of Umar and the egalitarian teachings of Islam. Muhammad ibn Maslamah was a veritable scourge against all arrogant and haughty behavior.

On another occasion and at another end of the Muslim state under his caliphate, Umar heard that the famous Sad ibn Abi Waqqas was building a palace at Kufa. Umar sent Muhammad ibn Maslamah to deal with the situation. On reaching Kufa, Muhammad promptly burnt the palace down. One does not know whether people were more surprised by the instructions of Umar or by the humiliation of Sad ibn Abi Waqqas, the famed fighter, conqueror at Qadisiyyah, and the one praised by the Prophet himself for his sacrifices at Uhud.

Sad did not say a word. This was all part of the great process of self-criticism and rectification which helped to make Islam spread and establish it on foundations of justice and piety.

Muhammad ibn Maslamah served Umar's successor, Uthman ibn Allan, faithfully. When, however, the latter was killed and civil war broke out among the Muslims, Muhammad ibn Maslamah did not participate. The sword which he always used and which was given to him by the Prophet himself he deliberately broke. During the time of the Prophet, he was known as the "Knight of the Prophet". By refusing to use the sword against Muslims he preserved this reputation undiminished.

Subsequently, he made a sword from wood and fashioned it well. He placed it in a scabbard and hung it inside his house. When he was asked about it he said: "I simply hang it there to terrify people." Muhammad ibn Maslamah died in Madinah in the month of Safar in the year 46 AH. He was seventy seven years old.

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