

Uqbah ibn Aamir

After a long and exhausting journey, the Prophet, peace be on him, is at last on the outskirts of Yathrib. The good people of the city go out to meet him. Many crowd the narrow streets. Some stand on roof-tops chanting La ilaha ilia Allah and Allahu Akbar in sheer joy at meeting the Prophet of Mercy and his loyal companion, Abu Bakr as-Siddiq. The small girls of the city come out gaily beating their daffs and singing the words of welcome:

Tala 'a-l badru alaynaa

Min Thaniyaati-l Wadaa' Wajaba-sh shukru alaynaa

Maa da'aa lillaahi daa' Ayyuha-l mab 'uthu finaa

Ji'ta bi-l amri-l mutaa' Ji'ta sharrafta-l Madinah

Marhaban yaa khayra-d daa'.

"The full moon has come upon us. From beyond the hills of Thaniyaati-l Wadaa Grateful we must be. For what to God he calls? O you who has been sent among us? You came with a mission to be obeyed. You came, you honoured the city; Welcome, O best of those who call (to God).

As the procession of the blessed Prophet wended its way, all around there were joyful hearts, tears of ecstasy, smiles of sheer happiness.

Far away from these scenes of jubilation and delight was a young man named Uqbah ibn Aamir al-Juhani. He had gone out to the bawadi, the open expanses of desert, to graze his flocks of sheep and goats on the sparse vegetation. He had wandered far in search of fodder for his hungry flock. It was difficult to find suitable grazing grounds and he was constantly afraid that his flock would perish. They were all he possessed and he did not want to lose them.

The happiness which engulfed Yathrib, henceforth to be known as the radiant city of the Prophet, soon spread to the near and distant bawadi and reached every nook and corner of the land. The good news of the Prophet's arrival finally reached Uqbah as he tended his flocks far away in the inhospitable desert. His response to the news was immediate as he himself relates: "The Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, came to Madinah while I was tending my sheep. When I heard the news of his coming, I set out to meet him without delay. When I met him I asked:

'Will you accept my pledge of allegiance, O Messenger of God?' 'And who are you?' asked the Prophet. 'Uqbah ibn Aamir al-Juhani,' I replied. 'Which do you prefer,' he asked, 'the pledge of a nomad or the pledge of someone who has migrated?' 'The pledge of someone who has migrated,' I said. So the Messenger of God took the same pledge from me as he did from the Muhajirin. I spent the night with him and then went back to my flock.

There were twelve of us who had accepted Islam but we lived far from the city tending our sheep and goats in the open country. We came to the conclusion that it would be good for us if we went to the Prophet daily, so that he could instruct us in our religion and recite for us whatever revelation he had received from on high. I told the others:

'Take turns to go to the Messenger of God, peace be on him. Anyone going may leave his sheep with me because I am too worried and concerned about my own flock to leave them in the care of someone else.'

Each day, one after another of my friends went to the Prophet, leaving his sheep for me to look after. When each returned, I learnt from him what he had heard and benefitted from what he had understood. Before long, however, I returned to my senses and said to myself:

'Woe to you! Is it because of a flock of sheep that you remain thin and wretched and lose the opportunity to be in the company of the Prophet and to speak directly to him without an intermediary?': With this, I left my flock, went to Madinah and stayed in the masjid close to the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace."

Uqbah had no reason to regret having taken this fateful decision. Within a decade, he had become one of the outstanding scholars among the companions of the Prophet, a competent and beautiful reciter of the Quran, a military commander and later on one of the eminent Muslim governors as Islam spread east and west with astonishing rapidity. He could never have imagined as he left his flock to follow the teachings of the noble Prophet, that he would have been among the vanguard of the Muslim forces that liberated fertile Damascus - then known as the "mother of the universe" and that he would have a house for himself among its verdant gardens. He could never have imagined that he would be one of the commanders who liberated Egypt, then known as the "emerald of the world", and that he would be one of its governors.

The fateful decision however was taken. Alone, without possessions. or relatives, Uqbah came to Madinah from the hawadi. He stayed with others like him on the Suffah or elevated part of the Prophet's mosque, near his house. The Suffah was like a reception point where people like Uqbah would go because they wanted to be close to the Prophet. They were known as the "Ashab as-Suffah" and the Prophet once described them as the "guests of Islam".

Because they had no income, the Prophet always shared his food with them and encouraged others to be generous to these "guests". They spent much of their time studying the Quran and learning about Islam. What a marvellous opportunity they had! They were in close and regular contact with the Prophet. He had a special love and concern for them and took care to educate them and look after them in all respects. Uqbah gave an example of how the Prophet trained and taught them. He said:

"One day, the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, came out to us while we were on the Suffah and asked:

'Which of you would like to go out to the open country or a valley every day and fetch for himself two beautiful, black camels?' (Such camels were considered prize possessions.)

'Everyone of us would like that, O Messenger of God,' we all replied.

'Now,' he said, 'each one of you should go to the mosque and learn two ayats (verses) of the Book of God. This is better for him than two camels; three verses are better than three camels; four verses are better than four camels (and son).'

In this way, the Prophet tried to bring about a change in attitudes among those who had accepted Islam, a change from obsession with acquiring worldly possessions to an attitude of devotion to knowledge. His simple example provided them with motivation and a powerful incentive to acquire knowledge.

On other occasions, the Ashab as-Suffah would ask questions of the Prophet in order to understand their religion better. Once, Uqbah said, he asked the Prophet, "What is salvation?" and he replied: "Control your tongue, make your house spacious for guests and spurn your mistakes."

Even outside the mosque, Uqbah tried to stay close to the Prophet. On journeys, he often took the reins of the Prophet's mule and went wherever the Prophet desired. Sometimes he followed directly behind the Prophet, peace be on him, and so came to be called the redif of the Prophet. On some occasions, the Prophet would descend from his mount and allow Uqbah to ride while he himself walked. Uqbah described one such occasion:

"I took hold of the reins of the Prophet's mule while passing through some palm groves of Madinah.

'Uqbah ,' the Prophet said to me, 'don't you want to ride.?''

I thought of saying 'no' but I felt there might be an element of disobedience to the Prophet in such a reply so I said: 'Yes, O Prophet of God.'

The Prophet then got down from his mule and I mounted in obedience to his command. He began to walk. Shortly afterwards I dismounted. The Prophet mounted again and said to me:

'Uqbah, shall I not teach you two surahs the like of which has not been heard before.?''

'Certainly, O Messenger of God,' I replied. And so he recited to me "Qul a'udhu bi rabbi-l Falaq" and "Qul a'udhu bi rabbi-n nas" (the last two surahs of the Quran). I then said the Iqamah for Salat. The Prophet led the Salat and recited these two surahs. (Afterwards), he said: 'Read both these surahs when you go to sleep and whenever you wake up.'"

The above instances show "continuous education" at its best, at home, in the mosque, riding, walking in the open school of the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace.

Two objectives occupied Uqbah's attention throughout his life; the search for knowledge and jihad in the path of God. He applied his energies totally to these objectives.

In the field of learning, he drank deeply from the fountain of knowledge that was the Messenger of God, peace be on him. Uqbah became a distinguished muqri (reciter of the Quran), a muhaddith (recorder and narrator of the sayings of the Prophet); a faqih (jurist); a faradi (expert on the Islamic laws of inheritance); an adib (literateur); a fasih (orator) and a sha'ir (poet).

In reciting the Quran, he had a most pleasant and beautiful voice. In the stillness of the night, when the entire universe seems peaceful and tranquil, he would turn to the Book of God, and recite its overpowering verses. The hearts of the noble companions would be drawn to his recitation. Their whole being would be shaken and they would be moved to tears from the fear of God which his recitation induced.

One day Umar ibn al-Khattab invited him and said:

"Recite for me something from the Book of God, O Uqbah." "At your command, O Amir al-Muminin," said Uqbah and began reciting. Umar wept till his beard was wet.

Uqbah left a copy of the Quran written in his own hand. It is said that this copy of the Quran existed until quite recently in Egypt in the well-known mosque named after Uqbah ibn Aamir himself. At the end of this text was written: "Uqbah ibn Aamir al-Juhani wrote it." This Mushaf of Uqbah was one of the earliest copies of the Quran in existence but it was lost in its entirety with other priceless documents due to the carelessness of Muslims.

In the field of Jihad, it is sufficient to know that Uqbah fought beside the Prophet, peace be on him, at the Battle of Uhud and in all the military engagements thereafter. He was also one of the valiant and daring group of shock troopers who were tested to their maximum during the battle for Damascus. In recognition for his outstanding services, the commander of the Muslim forces then, Abu Ubaydah ibn al-Jarrah, despatched Uqbah to Madinah to convey the good news of the liberation of Damascus to Umar ibn al-Khattab. Uqbah spent eight days and seven nights, from Friday to Friday, in a continuous forced march to bring the news to Umar.

Uqbah was one of the commanders of the Muslim forces that liberated Egypt. For three years he was the Muslim governor of Egypt after which he received orders from the Caliph Muawiyah to mount a naval expedition to the island of Rhodes in the Mediterranean Sea.

An indication of Uqbah's enthusiasm for jihad is the fact that he committed to memory the sayings of the Prophet on this subject and became a specialist in narrating them to the Muslims. One of his favorite pastimes was to practice the skill of spear throwing.

Uqbah was in Egypt when he became fatally ill. He gathered his children together and gave them his final advise. He said: "My children, guard against three things: Don't accept; my saying attributed to the Prophet, peace be on him, except from a reliable authority. Do not incur debts or take up a loan even if you are in the position of an imam. Don't compose poetry for your hearts might be distracted thereby from the Quran."

Uqbah ibn Aamir al-Juhani, the qari, the alim, the ghazi, died in Cairo and was buried at the foot of the Muqattam hills.

[View Page](#)

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