

Asmaa bint Abu Bakr

Asmaa bint Abu Bakr belonged to a distinguished Muslim family. Her father, Abu Bakr, was a close friend of the Prophet and the first Khalifah after his death. Her halfsister, Aishah, was a wife of the Prophet and one of the Ummahat al-Mumineen. Her husband, Zubayr ibn al-Awwam, was one of the special personal aides of the Prophet. Her son, Abdullah ibn az-Zubayr, became well known for his incorruptibility and his unswerving devotion to Truth.

Asmaa herself was one of the first persons to accept Islam. Only about seventeen persons including both men and women became Muslims before her. She was later given the nickname Dhat an-Nitaqayn (the One with the Two Waistbands) because of an incident connected with the departure of the Prophet and her father from Makkah on the historic hijrah to Madinah.

Asmaa was one of the few persons who knew of the Prophet's plan to leave for Madinah. The utmost secrecy had to be maintained because of the Quraysh plans to murder the Prophet. On the night of their departure, Asmaa was the one who prepared a bag of food and a water container for their journey. She did not find anything though with which to tie the containers and decided to use her waistband or nitaq. Abu Bakr suggested that she tear it into two. This she did and the Prophet commended her action. From then on she became known as "the One with the Two Waistbands".

When the final emigration from Makkah to Madinah took place soon after the departure of the Prophet, Asmaa was pregnant. She did not let her pregnancy or the prospect of a long and arduous journey deter her from leaving. As soon as she reached Quba on the outskirts of Madinah, she gave birth to a son, Abdullah. The Muslims shouted Allahu Akbar (God is the Greatest) and Laa ilaaha illa Allah (There is no God but Allah) in happiness and thanksgiving because this was the first child to be born to the muhajireen in Madinah.

Asmaa became known from her fine and noble qualities and for the keenness of her intelligence. She was an extremely generous person. Her son Abdullah once said of her, "I have not seen two women more generous than my aunt Aishah and my mother Asmaa. But their generosity was expressed in different ways. My aunt would accumulate one thing after another until she had gathered what she felt was sufficient and then distributed it all to those in need. My mother, on the other hand, would not keep anything even for the morrow."

Asmaa's presence of mind in difficult circumstances was remarkable. When her father left Makkah, he took all his wealth, amounting to some six thousand dirhams, with him and did not leave any for his family. When Abu Bakr's father, Abu Quhafah (he was still a mushrik) heard of his departure he went to his house and said to Asmaa:

"I understand that he has left you bereft of money after he himself has abandoned you."

"No, grandfather," replied Asmaa, "in fact he has left us much money." She took some pebbles and put them in a small recess in the wall where they used to put money. She threw a cloth over the heap and took the hand of her grandfather--he was blind--and said, "See how much money he has left us".

Through this stratagem, Asmaa wanted to allay the fears of the old man and to forestall him from giving them anything of his own wealth. This was because she disliked receiving any assistance from a mushrikeen if it was her own grandfather.

She had a similar attitude to her mother and was not inclined to compromise her honor and her faith. Her mother, Qutaylah, once came to visit her in Madinah. She was not a Muslim and was divorced from her

father in pre-Islamic times. Her mother brought her gifts of raisins, clarified butter and qaraz (pods of a species of sant tree). Asma at first refused to admit her into her house or accept the gifts. She sent someone to Aishah to ask the Prophet, peace be upon him, about her attitude to her mother and he replied that she should certainly admit her to her house and accept the gifts. On this occasion, the following revelation came to the Prophet:

"God forbids you not, with regard to those who do not fight you because of your faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them. God loves those who are just. God only forbids you with regard to those who fight you for your Faith, and drive you from your homes, and support others in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to them (in these circumstances) that do wrong." (Surah al-Mumtahanah 60: 8-9).

For Asmaa and indeed for many other Muslims, life in Madinah was rather difficult at first. Her husband was quite poor and his only major possession to begin with was a horse he had bought. Asma a herself described these early days:

"I used to provide fodder for the horse, give it water and groom it. I would grind grain and make dough but I could not bake well. The women of the Ansar used to bake for me. They were truly good women. I used to carry the grain on my head from az-Zubayr's plot which the Prophet had allocated to him to cultivate. It was about three farsakh (about eight kilo meters) from the town's center. One day I was on the road carrying the grain on my head when I met the Prophet and a group of Sahabah. He called out to me and stopped his camel so that I could ride behind him. I felt embarrassed to travel with the Prophet and also remembered az-Zubayr's jealousy, he was the most jealous of men. The Prophet realized that I was embarrassed and rode on."

Later, Asmaa related to az-Zubayr exactly what had happened and he said, "By God, that you should have to carry grain is far more distressing to me than your riding with (the Prophet)".

Asma a obviously then was a person of great sensitivity and devotion. She and her husband worked extremely hard together until their situation of poverty gradually changed. At times, however, az-Zubayr treated her harshly. Once she went to her father and complained to him about this. His reply to her was: 'My daughter, have sabr for if a woman has a righteous husband and he dies and she does not marry after him, they will be brought together again in Paradise.'

Az-Zubayr eventually became one of the richest men among the Sahabah but Asmaa did not allow this to corrupt her principles. Her son, al-Mundhir once sent her an elegant dress from Iraq made of fine and costly material. Asmaa by this time was blind. She felt the material and said, "It's awful. Take it back to him".

Al-Mundhir was upset and said, "Mother. it was not transparent . "

"It may not be transparent," she retorted, "but it is too tight fitting and shows the contours of the body."

Al-Mundhir bought another dress that met with her approval and she accepted it.

If the above incidents and aspects of Asmaas life may easily be forgotten, then her final meeting with her son, Abdullah, must remain one of the most unforgettable moments in early Muslim history. At that meeting she demonstrated the keenness of her intelligence, her resoluteness and the strength of her faith.

Abdullah was in the running for the Caliphate after the death of Yazid ibn Muawiyah. The Hijaz, Egypt, Iraq, Khurasan and much of Syria were favorable to him and acknowledged him as the Caliph. The Umayyads however continued to contest the Caliphate and to field a massive army under the command of Al-Hajjaj ibn Yusuf ath-Thaqafi. Relentless battles were fought between the two sides during which Abdullah ibn az-Zubayr displayed great acts of courage and heroism. Many of his supporters however

could not withstand the continuous strain of battle and gradually began to desert him. Finally he sought refuge in the Sacred Mosque at Makkah. It was then that he went to his mother, now an old blind woman, and said:

"Peace be on you, Mother, and the mercy and blessings of God." "Unto you be peace, Abdullah," she replied. "What is it that brings you here at this hour while boulders from Hajjaj's catapults are raining down on your soldiers in the Haram and shaking the houses of Makkah?"

"I came to seek your advice," he said.

"To seek my advice?" she asked in astonishment. "About what?"

"The people have deserted me out of fear of Hajjaj or being tempted by what he has to offer. Even my children and my family have left me. There is only a small group of men with me now and however strong and steadfast they are they can only resist for an hour or two more. Messengers of the Banu Umayyah (the Umayyads) are now negotiating with me, offering to give me whatever worldly possessions I want, should I lay down my arms and swear allegiance to Abdul Malik ibn Marwan. What do you think?"

Raising her voice, she replied: "It's your affair, Abdullah, and you know yourself better. If however you think that you are right and that you are standing up for the Truth, then persevere and fight on as your companions who were killed under your flag had shown perseverance. If however you desire the world, what a miserable wretch you are. You would have destroyed yourself and you would have destroyed your men."

"But I will be killed today, there is no doubt about it."

"That is better for you than that you should surrender yourself to Hajjaj voluntarily and that some minions of Banu Umayyah should play with your head."

"I do not fear death. I am only afraid that they will mutilate me."

"There is nothing after death that man should be afraid of. Skinning does not cause any pain to the slaughtered sheep."

Abdullah's face beamed as he said: "What a blessed mother! Blessed be your noble qualities! I have come to you at this hour to hear what I have heard. God knows that I have not weakened or despaired. He is witness over me that I have not stood up for what I have out of love for this world and its attractions but only out of anger for the sake of God. His limits have been transgressed. Here am I, going to what is pleasing to you. So if I am killed, do not grieve for me and commend me to God."

"I shall grieve for you," said the aging but resolute Asmaa, "only if you are killed in a vain and unjust cause."

"Be assured that your son has not supported an unjust cause, nor committed any detestable deed, nor done any injustice to a Muslim or a Dhimmi and that there is nothing better in his sight than the pleasure of God, the Mighty, the Great. I do not say this to exonerate myself. God knows that I have only said it to make your heart firm and steadfast. "

"Praise be to God who has made you act according to what He likes and according to what I like. Come close to me, my son, that I may smell and feel your body for this might be the last meeting with you."

Abdullah knelt before her. She hugged him and smothered his head, his face and his neck with kisses. Her hands began to squeeze his body when suddenly she withdrew them and asked:

"What is this you are wearing, Abdullah?"

"This is my armor plate."

"This, my son, is not the dress of one who desires martyrdom. Take it off. That will make your movements lighter and quicker. Wear instead the sirwal (a long under garment) so that if you are killed your awrah will not be exposed.

Abdullah took off his armor plate and put on the sirwal. As he left for the Haram to join the fighting he said: "My mother, don't deprive me of your dua (prayer)."

Raising her hands to heaven, she prayed: "O Lord, have mercy on his staying up for long hours and his loud crying in the darkness of the night while people slept... "O Lord, have mercy on his hunger and his thirst on his Journeys from Madinah and Makkah while he fasted... "O Lord, bless his righteousness to his mother and his father... "O Lord, I commend him to Your cause and I am pleased with whatever You decree for him. And grant me for his sake the reward of those who are patient and who persevere."

By sunset, Abdullah was dead. Just over ten days later, his mother joined him. She was a hundred years old. Age had not made her infirm nor blunted the keenness of her mind.

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