

Ramlah bint Abi Sufyan

Abu Sufyan ibn Harb could not conceive of anyone among the Quraysh who would dare challenge his authority or go against his orders. He was after all, the sayyid or chieftain of Makkah who had to be obeyed and followed.

His daughter, Ramlah, known as Umm Habibah, however dared to challenge his authority when she rejected the deities of the Quraysh and their idolatrous ways. Together with her husband, Ubaydullah ibn Jahsh, she put her faith in Allah alone and accepted the message of His prophet, Muhammad ibn Abdullah.

Abu Sufyan tried with all the power and force at his disposal to bring back his daughter and her husband to his religion and the religion of their forefathers. But he did not succeed. The faith which was embedded in the heart of Ramlah was too strong to be uprooted by the hurricanes of Abu Sufyans fury.

Abu Sufyan remained deeply worried and concerned by his daughter's acceptance of Islam. He did not know how to face the Quraysh after she had gone against his will and he was clearly powerless to prevent her from following Muhammad. When the Quraysh realized though that Abu Sufyan himself was enraged by Ramlah and her husband, they were emboldened to treat them harshly. They unleashed the full fury of their persecution against them to such a degree that life in Makkah became unbearable.

In the fifth year of his mission, the Prophet, peace be on him, gave permission to the Muslims to migrate to Abyssinia. Ramlah, her little daughter Habibah, and her husband were among those who left.

Abu Sufyan and the Quraysh leaders found it difficult to accept that a group of Muslims had slipped out of their net of persecution and was enjoying the freedom to hold their beliefs and practice their religion in the land of the Negus. They therefore send messengers to the Negus to seek their extradition. The messengers tried to poison the mind of the Negus against the Muslims but after examining the Muslims beliefs and listening to the Quran being recited, the Negus concluded: "What has been revealed to your Prophet Muhammad and what Jesus the son of Mary preached came from the same source."

The Negus himself announced his faith in the one true God and his acceptance of the prophethood of Muhammad, peace be on him. He also announced his determination to protect the Muslim muhajirin.

The long journey on the road of hardship and tribulation had finally led to the oasis of serenity. So Umm Habibah felt. But she did not know that the new-found freedom and sense of peace were later to be shattered. She was to be put through a test of the most severe and harrowing kind.

One night, it is related, as Umm Habibah was asleep she had a vision in which she saw her husband in the midst of a fathomless ocean covered by wave upon wave of darkness. He was in a most perilous situation. She woke up, frightened. But she did not wish to tell her husband or anyone else what she had seen.

The day after that ominous night was not yet through when Ubaydallah ibn Jahsh announced his rejection of Islam and his acceptance of Christianity. What a terrible blow! Ramlah's sense of peace was shattered. She did not expect this of her husband who presented her forthwith with the choice of a divorce or of accepting Christianity. Umm Habibah had three options before her. She could either remain with her husband and accept his call to become a Christian in which case she also would commit apostasy and - God forbid - deserve ignominy in this world and punishment in the hereafter. This was something she resolved she would never do even if she were subjected to the most horrible torture. Or, she could return to her father's house in Makkah - but she knew he remained a citadel of shirk and she would be forced to

live under him, subdued and suppressing her faith. Or, she could stay alone in the land of the Negus as a displaced fugitive - without country, without family and without a supporter.

She made the choice that she considered was the most pleasing to God. She made up her mind to stay in Abyssinia until such time as God granted her relief. She divorced her husband who lived only a short while after becoming a Christian. He had given himself over to frequenting wine merchants and consuming alcohol, the "mother of evils". This undoubtedly helped to destroy him.

Umm Habibah stayed in Abyssinia for about ten years. Towards the end of this time, relief and happiness came. It came from an unexpected quarter.

One morning bright and early, there was a loud knocking on her door. It was Abrahah, the special maid-servant of the Negus. Abrahah was beaming with joy as she greeted Umm Habibah and said: "The Negus sends his greetings and says to you that Muhammad, the Messenger of God, wants you to marry him and that he has sent a letter in which he has appointed him as his wakil to contract the marriage between you and him. If you agree, you are to appoint a wakil to act on your behalf."

Umm Habibah was in the clouds with happiness. She shouted to herself: "God has given you glad tidings. God has given you glad tidings." She took off her jewelry- her necklace and bracelets - and gave them to Abrahah. She took off her rings too and gave them to her. And indeed if she had possessed all the treasures of the world, she would have given them to Abrahah at that moment of sheer joy. Finally she said to Abrahah: "I appoint Khalid ibn Said ibn al-Aas to act as wakil on my behalf for he is the closest person to me."

In the palace of the Negus, set in the midst of beautiful gardens and luxuriant vegetation and in one of the lavishly decorated, sumptuously furnished and brightly lit halls, the group of Muslims living in Abyssinia gathered. They included Jafar ibn Abi Talib, Khalid ibn Said, Abdullah ibn Hudhafah as-Sahmi and others. They had gathered to witness the conclusion of the marriage contract between Umm Habibah, the daughter of Abu Sufyan, and Muhammad, the Messenger of God. When the marriage was finalized, the Negus addressed the gathering: "I praise God, the Holy, and I declare that there is no god but Allah and that Muhammad is His Servant and His Messenger and that He gave the good tidings to Jesus the son of Mary.

"The Messenger of God, peace be on him, has requested me to conclude the marriage contract between him and Umm Habibah the daughter of Abu Sufyan. I agreed to do what he requested and on his behalf I give her a mahr or dowry of four hundred gold dinars." He handed over the amount to Khalid ibn Said who stood up and said: "All praise is due to God. I praise Him and seek His help and forgiveness and I turn to Him in repentance. I declare that Muhammad is His servant and His Messenger whom He has sent with the religion of guidance and truth so that it might prevail over all other forms of religion even if the disbelievers were to dislike this.

"I have agreed to do what the Prophet, peace be upon him, has requested and acted as the wakil on behalf of Umm Habibah, the daughter of Abu Sufyan. May God bless His Messenger and his wife.

"Congratulations to Umm Habibah on account of the goodness which God has ordained for her."

Khalid took the mahr and handed it over to Umm Habibah. The Sahabah thereupon got up and prepared to leave but the Negus said to them: "Sit down for it is the practice of the Prophets to serve food at marriages."

There was general rejoicing at the court of the Negus as the guests sat down again to eat and celebrate the joyous occasion. Umm Habibah especially could hardly believe her good fortune and she later described how she was eager to share her happiness. She said: "When I received the money as mahr, I sent fifty mithqals of gold to Abrahah who had brought me the good news and I said to her: 'I gave you what I did when you gave me the good news because at that time I did not have any money.'

"Shortly afterwards, Abrahah came to me and returned the gold. She also produced a case which contained the necklace I had given to her. She returned that to me and said: 'The King has instructed me not to take anything from you and he has commanded the women in his household to present you with gifts of perfume.'

"On the following day, she brought me ambergris, saffron and aloes and said: 'I have a favor to ask of you.' 'What is it?' I asked. 'I have accepted Islam,' she said, 'and now follow the religion of Muhammad. Convey to him my salutation of peace and let him know that I believe in Allah and His Prophet. Please don't forget.' She then helped me to get ready for my journey to the Prophet.

"When I met the Prophet, peace be on him, I told him all about the arrangements that were made for the marriage and about my relationship with Abrahah. I told him she had become a Muslim and conveyed to him her greetings of peace. He was filled with joy at the news and said: 'Wa alayha as-salam wa rahmatullahi was barakatuhu and on her be peace and the mercy and blessings of God. "

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