

Ubayy ibn Kab

"O Abu Mundhir! Which verse of the Book of God is the greatest?" asked the Messenger of God, may God bless him and grant him peace. "Allah and His Messenger know best," came the reply. The Prophet repeated the question and Abu Mundhir replied.

"Allah, there is no god but He, the Living the Self-Subsisting. Neither slumber overtakes him nor sleep. To Him belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on earth, ..." and most likely he went on to complete the Verse of the Throne (Ayat al-Kursi).

The Prophet smote his chest with his right hand in approval on hearing the reply and with his countenance beaming with happiness, said to Abu Mundhir. "May knowledge delight and benefit you, Abu Mundhir."

This Abu Mundhir whom the Prophet congratulated on the knowledge and understanding which God had bestowed on him was Ubayy ibn Kab, one of his distinguished companions and a person of high esteem in the early Muslim community.

Ubayy was one of the Ansar and belonged to the Khazraj tribe. He was one of the first persons of Yathrib to accept Islam. He pledged allegiance to the Prophet at Aqabah before the Hijrah. He participated in the Battle of Badr and other engagements thereafter. Ubayy was one of the select few who committed the Quranic revelations to writing and had a Mushaf of his own. He acted as a scribe of the Prophet, writing letters for him. At the demise of the Prophet, he was one of the twenty five or so people who knew the Quran completely by heart. His recitation was so beautiful and his understanding so profound that the Prophet encouraged his companions to learn the Quran from him and from three others. Later, Umar too once told the Muslims as he was dealing with some financial matters of state:

"O people! Whoever wants to ask about the Quran, let him go to Ubayy ibn Kab..." (Umar went on to say that anyone wishing to ask about inheritance matters should go to Zayd ibn Thabit, about questions of fiqh to Muadh ibn Jabal and about questions of money and finance, to himself.)

Ubayy enjoyed a special honor with regard to the Quran. One day, the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, said: "O Ubayy ibn Kab! I have been commanded to show or lay open the Quran to you."

Ubayy was elated. He knew of course that the Prophet only received commands from on high. Unable to control his excitement, he asked:

"O Messenger of God...Have I been mentioned to you by name?" "Yes," replied the Prophet, "by your own name and by your genealogy (nasab) in the highest heavens."

Any Muslim whose name had been conveyed to the heart of the Prophet in this manner must certainly have been of great ability and of a tremendously high stature.

Throughout the years of his association with the Prophet, Ubayy derived the maximum benefit from his sweet and noble personality and from his noble teachings. Ubayy related that the Prophet once asked him:

"Shall I not teach you a surah the like of which has not been revealed in the Tawrah, nor in the Injil, nor in the Zabur, nor in the Quran?" "Certainly," replied Ubayy.

"I hope you would not leave through that door until you know what it is," said the Prophet obviously

prolonging the suspense for Ubayy. Ubayy continues: "He stood up and I stood up with him. He started to speak, with my hand in his. I tried to delay him fearing that he would leave before letting me know what the surah is. When he reached the door, I asked: "O Messenger of God! The surah which you promised to tell me..." He replied:

"What do you recite when you stand for Salat?" So, I recited for him Fatihatu-I Kitab (the Opening Chapter of the Quran) and he said: "(That's) it! (That's) it! They are the seven oft-repeated verses of which God Almighty has said: We have given you the seven oft-repeated verses and the Mighty Quran."

Ubayy's devotion to the Quran was uncompromising. Once he recited part of a verse which the Khalifah Umar apparently could not remember or did not know and he said to Ubayy: "Your have lied," to which Ubayy retorted; "Rather, you have lied."

A person who heard the exchange was astounded and said to Ubayy: "Do you call the Amir al-Muminin a liar?" "I have greater honor and respect for the Amir al-Muminin than you," responded Ubayy, "but he has erred in verifying the Book of God and I shall not say the Amir al-Muminin is correct when he has made an error concerning the Book of God." "Ubayy is right," concluded Umar.

Ubayy gave an idea of the importance of the Quran when a man came to him and said, "Advise me," and he replied: "Take the Book of God as (your) leader (imam). Be satisfied with it as (your) judge and ruler. It is what the Prophet has bequeathed to you. (It is your) intercessor with God and should be obeyed..."

After the demise of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, Ubayy remained strong in his attachment to Islam and his commitment to the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet. He was constant in his ibadah and would often be found in the mosque at night, after the last obligatory Prayer had been performed, engaged in worship or in teaching. Once he was sitting in the mosque after Salat with a group of Muslims, making supplication to God. Umar came in and sat with them and asked each one to recite a dua. They all did until finally Ubayy's turn came. He was sitting next to Umar. He felt somewhat over-awed and became flustered. Umar prompted him and suggested that he say: "Allahumma ighfir lanaa. Allahumma irhamnaa. O Lord, forgive us, O Lord, have mercy on us."

Taqwa remained the guiding force in Ubayy's life. He lived simply and did not allow the world to corrupt or deceive him. He had a good grasp of reality and knew that however a person lived and whatever comforts and luxuries he enjoyed, these would all fade away and he would have only his good deeds to his credit. He was always a sort of warner to Muslims, reminding them of the times of the Prophet, of the Muslims' devotion to Islam then, of their simplicity and spirit of sacrifice. Many people came to him seeking knowledge and advice. To one such person he said.

"The believer has four characteristics. If he is afflicted by any misfortune, he remains patient and steadfast. If he is given anything, he is grateful. If he speaks, he speaks the truth. If he passes a judgment on any issue, he is just."

Ubayy attained a position of great honor and esteem among the early Muslims. Umar called him the "sayyid of the Muslims" and he came to be widely known by this title. He was part of the consultative group (mushawarah) to which Abu Bakr, as Khalifah, referred many problems. This group was composed of men of good sense and judgment (ahl ar-ray) and men who knew the law (ahl al-fiqh) from among the Muhajirin and Ansar. It included Umar, Uthman, Ali, Abdur Rahman ibn Awf, Muadh ibn Jabal, Ubayy ibn Kab and Zayd ibn Harith. Umar later consulted the same group when he was Khalifah. Specifically for fatwas (legal judgments) he referred to Uthman, Ubayy and Zayd ibn Thabit.

Because of Ubayy's high standing, one might have expected him to have been given positions of administrative responsibility, for example as a governor, in the rapidly expanding Muslim state. (During the time of the Prophet in fact he had performed the function of a collector of sadaqah.) Indeed, Ubayy once asked

"What's the matter with you? Why don't you appoint me as a governor?" "I do not want your religion to be corrupted" replied Umar. Ubayy was probably prompted to put the question to Umar when he saw that Muslims were tending to drift from the purity of faith and self-sacrifice of the days of the Prophet. He was known to be especially critical of the excessively polite and sycophantic attitude of many Muslims to their governors which he felt brought ruin both to the governors and those under them. Ubayy for his part was always honest and frank in his dealings with persons in authority and feared no one but God. He acted as a sort of conscience to the Muslims.

One of Ubayy's major fears for the Muslim ummah was that a day would come when there would be severe strife among Muslims. He often became overwhelmed with emotion when he read or heard the verse of the Quran." "Say: He (Allah) has power to send calamities on you, from above and below, or to cover you with confusion in party strife, giving you a taste of mutual vengeance, each from the other." (Surah al-An'am, 6: 65)

He would then pray fervently to God for guidance and ask for His clemency and forgiveness. Ubayy died in the year 29 AH during the caliphate of Uthman.

[View Page](#)

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