

Abu Musa al-Ash`ari

When he went to Basrah as governor of the city, he called the inhabitants to a meeting and addressed them,

"The Amir al-Muminin, Umar, has sent me to you to teach you the Book of your Lord and the Sunnah of His Prophet and to clean your streets for you."

People were taken aback when they heard these words. They could easily understand that one of the responsibilities of a Muslim ruler was to instruct people in their religion. However, that one of his duties should be to clean streets was something new and surprising to them.

Who was this governor of whom the Prophet's grandson, al-Hasan, may God be pleased with him said,

"There was no rider who came to Basrah who was better for its people than he."

His real name was Abdullah ibn Qays but he was and continues to be known as Abu Musa al-'Ashari. He left his native land, the Yemen, for Makkah immediately after hearing that a Prophet had appeared there who was a man of rare insight, who called people to the worship of One God and who insisted on the highest standards of morality.

At Makkah, he stayed in the company of the Prophet and gained knowledge and guidance. He returned to his country to propagate the word of God and spread the mission of the noble Prophet, peace be on him. We have no further news of him for more than a decade. Then just after the end of the Khaybar expedition he came to the Prophet in Madinah. His arrival there coincided with that of Ja'ffar ibn Abi Talib and other Muslims from Abyssinia and the Prophet welcomed them all with joy and happiness.

This time Abu Musa did not come alone. He came with more than fifty persons from the Yemen all of whom had accepted Islam. Among them were his two brothers, Abu Ruhm and Abu Burdah. The Prophet referred to the whole group as the "Asharis". In fact, he sometimes referred to all Yemenis as Asharis after Abu Musa al-Ashari. He often praised the group for their soft and tender-hearted nature and held them up to the rest of his companions as a high example of good behavior. He once said of them,

"If the Asharis go on an expedition or if they only have a little food among them, they would gather all they have on one cloth and divide it equally among themselves. They are thus from me and I am from them."

Abu Musa soon became highly esteemed in the Muslim community. He had many great qualities. He was a Faqih (Jurist) endowed with intelligence and sound judgement and was ranked as one of the leading judges in the early Muslim community. People used to say,

"The judges in this ummah are four: Umar, Ali, Abu Musa and Zayd ibn Thabit."

Abu Musa had a natural, uncomplicated disposition. He was by nature a trusting person and expected people to deal with him on the basis of trust and sincerity.

In the field of Jihad, he was a warrior of great courage and endurance and skill. The Prophet said of him, "The master of horsemen is Abu Musa."

Abu Musa's insight and the soundness of his judgment did not allow him to be deceived by an enemy in battle. In battle conditions he saw situations with complete clarity and executed his actions with a firm resolve.

Abu Musa was in command of the Muslim army traversing the lands of the Sasanian Empire. At Isfahan, the people came to him and offered to pay the Jizyah (in return for military protection) to make peace and avoid fighting. However, they were not sincere in their offer and merely wanted an opportunity to mount a treacherous attack on the Muslims. Abu Musa however saw through their real intentions and he remained on the alert. Thus, when the Isfahanis launched their attack, the Muslim leader was not caught off-guard; he engaged them in battle and before midday of the following day, he had won a decisive victory.

In the major campaigns against the powerful Sasanian Empire Abu Musa's role was outstanding. In the great Battle of Tustar itself, he distinguished himself as a military commander.

The Persian commander, Hormuzan, had withdrawn his numerous forces to the strongly fortified city of Tustar. The Caliph 'Umar did not underestimate the strength of the enemy and he mobilized powerful and numerous forces to confront Hormuzan. Among the Muslim forces were dedicated veterans like Ammar ibn Yasir, al-Baraa ibn Malik and his brother Anas, Majra'a al-Bakri and Salamah ibn Rajaa. Umar appointed Abu Musa as commander of the army.

So well-fortified was Tustar that it was impossible to take it by storm. Several attempts were made to breach the walls but these proved unsuccessful. There followed a long and difficult siege which became even more testing and agonizing for the Muslims when, as we saw in the story of al-Baraa ibn Malik, the Persians began throwing down iron chains from the walls of the fortress at the ends of which were fastened red-hot iron hooks. Muslims were caught by these hooks and were pulled up either dead or in the agony of death.

Abu Musa realized that the increasingly unbearable impasse could only be broken by a resort to stratagem. Fortunately, at this time a Persian defected to the Muslim side and Abu Musa induced him to return behind the walls of the fortified city and use whatever artful means he could to open the city's gates from within. With the Persian he sent a special force of hand-picked men. They succeeded well in their task, opened the gates and made way for Abu Musa's army. Within hours the Persians were subdued.

In spite of the fact that Abu Musa was a strong and powerful warrior, he often left the battlefield transformed into a penitent, weeping person. At such times, he would read the Quran in a voice that profoundly stirred the souls of all who listened to him. Concerning his moving and melodious recitation of the Quran the Prophet, peace be on him, had said, "Abu Musa has indeed been given one of the flutes of the people of David."

Also, 'Umar, may god be pleased with him, often summoned Abu Musa and asked him to recite from the Book of God, saying,

"Create in us a yearning for our Lord, O Abu Musa."

As a mark of his dedication to the Quran, Abu Musa was one of the few companions who had prepared a Mushaf - a written collection of the revelations.

Abu Musa only participated in fighting against the armies of Mushrikin, armies which tried to oppose the religion of God and extinguish the light of faith. When fighting broke out among Muslims, he fled from such conflict and never took any part in it. Such was his stand in the conflict that arose between 'Ali and Mu'aawiyah. It is in relation to this conflict and in particular his role as an adjudicator that the name of Abu Musa al-'Ashari is most widely known.

Briefly, Abu Musa's position appeared to be that of a 'neutral.' He saw Muslims killing each other and felt that if the situation were to continue the very future of the Muslim ummah would be threatened. To start off with a clean slate, the Khalifah 'Ali should give up the position and Mu'aawiyah should relinquish any claim to be Khalifah and the Muslims should be given a free choice to elect whoever they wanted as Khalifah.

It was of course true that 'Ali held the position of Khalifah legitimately and that any unlawful revolt could only have as its object the challenging and overturning of the rule of law. However, developments had gone so far, the dispute had become so bloody and there seemed to be no end in sight except further bloodshed, that a new approach to a solution seemed the only hope of avoiding further bloodshed and continuous civil war.

When 'Ali accepted the principle of arbitration, he wanted 'Abdullah ibn 'Abbas to represent him. But an influential section of his followers insisted on Abu Musa. Their reason for so doing was that Abu Musa had not taken part in the dispute from its beginning. Instead he had kept aloof from both parties when he despaired of bringing about an understanding and a reconciliation and putting an end to the fighting. Therefore, they felt, he was the most suitable person to be the arbitrator.

'Ali had no reason to doubt the devotion of Abu Musa to Islam and his truthfulness and sincerity. But he knew the shrewdness of the other side and their likely resort to ruses and treachery. He also knew that Abu Musa in spite of his understanding and his knowledge despised deceit and conspiracies and always wanted to deal with people on the basis of trust and honesty, not through cunning. 'Ali therefore feared that Abu Musa would be deceived by others and that arbitration would end up with the victory of guile over honesty and that the situation would end up being more perilous than it was.

Adjudication nonetheless began with Abu Musa representing the side of 'Ali and 'Amr ibn al-'Aas representing the side of Muawiyah. A possible version of their historic conversation has been recorded in the book "Al-Akhbar at-Tiwal" by Abu Hanifah Ad-Daynawawi as follows:

Abu Musa:

O Amr, what do you think of this suggestion in which there is the common good of the ummah and the pleasure of Allah?

Amr: What is it?

Abu Musa:

Let us nominate 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar as Khalifah. He himself has not intervened at all in this war.

Amr: What do you think of Muawiyah for the position?

Abu Musa:

It is neither opportune to have Muawiyah in this position nor does he deserve it.

Amr: Don't you know that 'Uthman was unjustly murdered?

Abu Musa:

Certainly.

Amr: And that his status among the Quraysh you know (is one of honor), and that Muawiyah is the wali of the blood of Uthman.... And God says in the Quran: "Whoever is killed unjustly, We have given his heir authority...." (The full verse of the Quran is: {Nor take life which God has made sacred except for a just cause. And if anyone is slain wrongfully, We have given his heir authority (to demand Qisas or to forgive). But let him not exceed bounds in the matter of taking life; for he is helped by the Law} Surah 17, verse 33.) In addition to this he is the brother of Umm Habibah, the wife of the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, and he is one of his companions.

Abu Musa:

Fear God, O Amr. Regarding what you have mentioned about the status of Muawiyah, if the position of the Khalifah is based on status, the person most deserving of it is "Abraham ibn Sabbah". He is a descendant of Yemeni kings whose domain extended to the east and the west. And what status has Muawiyah in comparison with 'Ali ibn Abi Talib? Regarding your statement that Muawiyah is the wali of Uthman, the person who has the first right to this is his son, 'Amr ibn Uthman. However, if you agree with me, we could revert to the memory of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and appoint his son 'Abdullah, the pious one.

Amr: What prevents you from appointing my son 'Abdullah he is virtuous, upright, one of those who were first to perform the Hijrah and who has been a long-standing companion of the Prophet.

Abu Musa:

Your son is a man of honesty and truth. But you have plunged him deeply into these wars. Come let us appoint the Good One, the son of the Good One - 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar.

Amr: O Abu Musa! The only person who can set this matter aright is a man who has two wisdom teeth who eats with one and feeds with the other (referring to the political astuteness of Muawiyah).

Abu Musa:

Woe to you, O 'Amr. The Muslims are depending on us to solve this matter. They have fought with swords and spears. Let us not return them to a state of fitnah (trial).

Amr: What are you suggesting then?

Abu Musa:

I suggest that we leave the two men-'Ali and Muawiyah. Then we set up a shura (council) among Muslims to let them choose from among themselves whoever they like.

Amr: I agree to this suggestion for indeed the common good of the people rests in it.

The above exchange shows Abu Musa to be a man of integrity and intelligence. He showed up the weakness of 'Amr's claims for Muawiyah to be the Caliph of the Muslims on the grounds of honor and status and on the grounds that he was the 'heir' to 'Uthman.

By his suggestion that the son of 'Umar ibn al-Khattab be appointed as Khalifah, Abu Musa showed that he was not prepared to stick uncompromisingly to the side he represented and that he was willing to consider an appropriate companion of the Prophet as an alternative, for the good of the Muslim community.

'Amr finally agreed on Abu Musa's suggestion for a shura and for letting the Muslims decide freely whom they should have as Khalifah. It did not occur to Abu Musa that 'Amr would not honor the agreement they had come to and that he would resort to deceit.

Before the agreement was announced in public, Ibn' Abbas warned Abu Musa saying,

"I fear, by God, that 'Amr might deceive you. If you have both agreed on something, then let him announce it before you..."

Abu Musa, because of the gravity of the situation, felt that 'Amr would honor the agreement. On the following day, before the assembled Muslims, Abu Musa and 'Amr got together. Abu Musa is said to have invited 'Amr to speak first but he declined saying, "I would not go before you for you are more honoured than I am, you performed the Hijrah before I did and you are older than I." With this Abu Musa advanced and spoke:

"O people! We have considered how best God would bring together the Ummah for their common good. It seems to us that the best solution in this regard is that the two men 'Ali and Muawiyah should withdraw and that a shura should be formed so that people could choose for themselves who they want as the Khalifah.

I have agreed that Ali and Muawiyah should withdraw. You now deal with the situation and appoint as you Khalifah whoever you want."

It was now Amr's turn to make the same announcement. He got up and addressed the people, "O People! Abu Musa has said what you have heard. He has abandoned his friend ('Ali). Like him I abandon his friend ('Ali) and I confirm my friend Muawiyah (as Khalifah) for he is the heir to the Amir al-Muminin, 'Uthman, and the one most deserves his position."

Abu Musa was shocked by what he heard. He could not imagine that 'Amr would commit such treachery even though he was warned about it. Filled with anger and disgust, he lambasted 'Amr for his deceit and for ruining the chances of peace and reconciliation among Muslims. 'Amr had thus turned the arbitration process into a farce.

Abu Musa continued to remain neutral in the conflict which was ended by 'Ali when he made a treaty with Muawiyah confirming him as the one responsible for governing Syria and Egypt.

Abu Musa himself left for Makkah and spent the rest of his life near the Sacred Mosque. During his life he had remained devoted to the noble Prophet and his righteous successors. During the life of the Prophet, the Prophet had appointed him and Mu'aadh ibn Jabal as governor of Kufah.

Abu Musa was particularly attached to the Quran, reading it constantly, memorizing it, understanding it and putting it into practice. His advice regarding the Quran is full of wisdom,

"Follow the Quran," he said, "and do not desire that the Quran should follow you."

In 'ibaadah (worship), he showed a great deal of strength and endurance. On days when the heat was intense and almost unbearable, Abu Musa would be found fasting and he would say,

"Perhaps the thirst of the midday heat would prove to be quenching for us on the day of Qiyamah."

As his end drew near, the words which he kept saying were words which he was wont to repeat throughout his life as a believer,

Allahumma antas-Salaam Wa minkas-Salaam

"O Lord, You are the Source of Peace And from You comes Peace..."

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