

Suhayb ar-Rumi

About twenty years before the start of the Prophet's mission, that is about the middle of the sixth century CE, an Arab named Sinan ibn Malik governed the city of al-Uballah on behalf of the Persian emperor. The city, which is now part of Basrah, lay on the banks of the Euphrates River. Sinan lived in a luxurious palace on the banks of the river. He had several children and was particularly fond of one of them who was then barely five years old. His name was Suhayb. He was blond and fair-complexioned. He was active and alert and gave much pleasure to his father.

One day Suhayb's mother took him and some members of her household to a village called ath-Thani for a picnic. What was to be a relaxing and enjoyable day turned out to be a terrifying experience that was to change the course of young Suhayb's life forever.

That day, the village of ath-Thani was attacked, by a raiding party of Byzantine soldiers. The guards accompanying the picnic party were overwhelmed and killed. All possessions were seized and a large number of persons were taken prisoner. Among these was Suhayb ibn Sinan.

Suhayb was taken to one of the slave markets of the Byzantine Empire, the capital of which was Constantinople, there to be sold. Thereafter he passed from the hands of one slave master to another. His fate was no different from thousands of other slaves who filled the houses, the palaces and castles of Byzantine rulers and aristocrats.

Suhayb spent his boyhood and his youth as a slave. For about twenty years he stayed in Byzantine lands. This gave him the opportunity to get a rare knowledge and understanding of Byzantine life and society. In the palaces of the aristocracy, he saw with his own eyes the injustices and the corruption of Byzantine life. He detested that society and later would say to himself:

"A society like this can only be purified by a deluge." Suhayb of course grew up speaking Greek, the language of the Byzantine Empire. He practically forgot Arabic. But he never forgot that he was a son of the desert. He longed for the day when he would be free again to join his people's folk. At the first opportunity Suhayb escaped from bondage and headed straight for Makkah which was a place of refuge or asylum. There people called him Suhayb "ar-Rumi" or "the Byzantine" because of his peculiarly heavy speech and his blond hair. He became the halif of one of the aristocrats of Makkah, Abdullah ibn Judan. He engaged in trade and prospered. In fact, he became quite rich.

One day he returned to Makkah from one of his trading journeys. He was told that Muhammad the son of Abdullah had begun calling people to believe in God alone, commanding them to be just and to do good works and prohibiting them from shameful and reprehensible deeds. He immediately enquired who Muhammad was and where he stayed. He was told.

"(He stays) in the house of al-Arqam ibn Abi al-Arqam. Be careful however that no Quraysh sees you. If they see you they would do (the most terrible things to you). You are a stranger here and there is no bond of asabiyyahi to protect you, neither have you any clan to help you."

Suhayb went cautiously to the house of al-Arqam. At the door he found Ammar ibn Yasir the young son of a Yemeni father who was known to him. He hesitated for a moment then went up to Ammar and said: "What do you want (here), Ammar?" "Rather, what do you want here?" countered Ammar. "I want to go to this man and hear directly from him what he is saying." "I also want to do that." "Then let us enter together, ala barakatillah (with the blessings of God)."

Suhayb and Ammar entered and listened to what Muhammad was saying. They were both readily convinced of the truth of his message. The light of faith

entered their hearts. At this meeting, they pledged fealty to the Prophet, declaring that there is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah. They spent the entire day in the company of the noble Prophet. At night, under cover of darkness, they left the house of al-Arqam, their hearts aglow with the light of faith and their faces beaming with happiness.

Then the familiar pattern of events followed. The idolatrous Quraysh learnt about Suhayb's acceptance of Islam and began harassing and persecuting him. Suhayb bore his share of the persecution in the same way as Bilal, Ammar and his mother Sumayyah, Khabbab and many others who professed Islam. The punishment was inhuman and severe but Suhayb bore it all with a patient and courageous heart because he knew that the path to Jannah is paved with thorns and difficulties. The teachings of the noble Prophet had instilled in him and other companions a rare strength and courage.

When the Prophet gave permission for his followers to migrate to Madinah, Suhayb resolved to go in the company of the Prophet and Abu Bakr. The Quraysh however found out about his intentions and foiled his plans. They placed guards over him to prevent him from leaving and taking with him the wealth, the gold and the silver, which he had acquired through trade.

After the departure of the Prophet and Abu Bakr, Suhayb continued to bide his time, waiting for an opportunity to join them. He remained unsuccessful. The eyes of his guards were ever alert and watchful. The only way out was to resort to a stratagem.

One cold night, Suhayb pretended he had some stomach problems and went out repeatedly as if responding to calls of nature. His captors said one to another:

"Don't worry. Al-Laath and al-Uzza are keeping him busy with his stomach."

They became relaxed and sleep got the better of them. Suhayb quietly slipped out as if he was going to the toilet. He armed himself, got ready a mount and headed in the direction of Madinah.

When his captors awoke, they realized with a start that Suhayb was gone. They got horses ready and set out in hot pursuit and eventually caught up with him. Seeing them approach, Suhayb clambered up a hill. Holding his bow and arrow at the ready, he shouted: "Men of Quraysh! You know, by God, that I am one of the best archers and my aim is unerring. By God, if you come near me, with each arrow I have, I shall kill one of you. Then I shall strike with my sword." A Quraysh spokesman responded: By God, we shall not let you escape from us with your life and money. You came to Makkah weak and poor and you have acquired what you have acquired.."

"What would you say if I leave you my wealth?" interrupted Suhayb. "Would you get out of my way?" "Yes," they agreed.

Suhayb described the place in his house in Makkah where he had left the money, and they allowed him to go.

He set off as quickly as he could for Madinah cherishing the prospect of being with the Prophet and of having the freedom to worship God in peace. On his way to Madinah, whenever he felt tired, the thought of meeting the Prophet sustained him and he proceeded with increased determination. When Suhayb reached Quba, just outside Madinah where the Prophet himself alighted after his Hijrah, the Prophet saw him approaching. He was over-joyed and greeted Suhayb with beaming smiles.

"Your transaction has been fruitful, O Abu Yahya. Your transaction has been fruitful." He repeated this three times. Suhayb's face beamed with happiness as he said: "By God, no one has come before me to you, Messenger of God, and

only Jibriil could have told you about this." Yes indeed! Suhayb's transaction was fruitful. Revelation from on high affirmed the truth of this:

"And there is a type of man who gives his life to earn the pleasure of God. And God is full of kindness to His servants." (The Quran, Surah al-Baqarah, 2:207).

What is money and what is gold and what is the entire world so long as faith remains! The Prophet loved Suhayb a great deal. He was commended by the Prophet and described as preceding the Byzantines to Islam. In addition to his piety and sobriety, Suhayb was also light-hearted at times and had a good sense of humor. One day the Prophet saw him eating dates. He noticed that Suhayb had an infection in one eye. The Prophet said to him laughingly: "Do you eat ripe dates while you have an infection in one eye?" "What's wrong?" replied Suhayb, "I am eating it with the other eye."

Suhayb was also known for his generosity. He used to give all his stipend from the public treasury *fi sabilillah*, to help the poor and those in distress. He was a good example of the Quranic verse: "He gives food for the love of God to the needy, the orphan and the captive." So generous was he that Umar once remarked:

"I have seen you giving out so much food that you appear to be too extravagant." Suhayb replied: "I have heard the Messenger of God say: 'The best of you is the one who gives out food.'"

Suhayb's piety and his standing among Muslims was so high that he was selected by Umar ibn al-Khattab to lead the Muslims in the period between his death and the choosing of his successor.

As he lay dying after he was stabbed by a Magian, Abu Lulu, while leading the Fajr Salat, Umar summoned six of the companions: Uthman, Ali, Talhah,

Zubayr, Abdur Rahman ibn Awf, and Sad ibn Abi Waqqas. He did not appoint anyone of them as his successor, because if he had done so according to one report "there would have been for a short time two Khalifahs looking at each other". He instructed the six to consult among themselves and with the Muslims for three days and choose a successor, and then he said:

"Wa-l yusalli bi-n nas Suhayb - Let Suhayb lead the people in Salat."

In the period when there was no Khalifah, Suhayb was given the responsibility and the honor of leading the Salat and of being, in other words, the head of the Muslim community.

Suhayb's appointment by Umar showed how well people from a wide variety of backgrounds were integrated and honoured in the community of Islam. Once during the time of the Prophet, a hypocrite named Qays ibn Mutatiah tried to pour scorn and disgrace on sections of the community. Qays had come upon a study circle (halqah) in which were Salman al-Farsi, Suhayb ar-Rumi and Bilal al-Habashi, may God be pleased with them, and remarked:

"The Aws and the Khazraj have stood up in defence of this man (Muhammad). And what are these people doing with him?" Muadh was furious and informed the Prophet of what Qays had said. The Prophet was very angry. He entered the mosque and the Call to Prayer was given, for this was the method of summoning the Muslims for an important announcement. Then he stood up, praised and glorified God and said:

"Your Lord is One. Your ancestor is one. Your religion is one. Take heed. Arabism is not conferred on you through your mother or father. It is through the tongue (i.e. the language of Arabic), so whoever speaks Arabic, he is an Arab."