

‘Āmir ibn Wāthilah narrated that

1

Nāfi‘ ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥārith met ‘Umar at ‘Uṣfān. ‘Umar had appointed him Governor of Makkah. [‘Umar] asked him: “Whom did you appoint over the people of this valley?”

2

[Nāfi‘] said: “Ibn Abzā”. [‘Umar] asked: “And who is Ibn Abzā?” He said: “One of our *mawlas*”.

3

[‘Umar] said: “You appointed a *mawla* as their ruler?”

4

[Nāfi‘] said: “He has learnt God’s Book, the Mighty and Exalted, by heart and he is well versed in the discipline of division of inheritance”.

5

[‘Umar] said: “Your Prophet (peace be upon him) said: ‘God elevates some people by means of this Book and brings down others’”.⁽¹⁾

1 Related by Muslim, 817.

From the Qur’an

﴿Whenever a surah is revealed, some of them say: ‘Which of you has this strengthened in faith?’ It certainly strengthens the believers in their faith, and so they rejoice. (124) But as for those whose hearts are diseased, it only adds wickedness to their wickedness, and so they die unbelievers.﴾ (9: 124-125)

﴿Those who recite God’s Book, attend regularly to prayer, and give in charity, secretly and openly, from what We have provided for them, look forward to a bargain that can never fail, (29) for He will grant them their just rewards, and give them yet more out of His bounty. He is indeed much-forgiving, most-thankful. (30) The Book that We have revealed to you is the truth confirming previous scriptures. Of His servants God is well-aware, all-seeing. (31) We have given this Book to such of Our servants as We choose: among them are some who wrong their own souls, some follow a middle course; and some who, by God’s leave, are foremost in deeds of goodness. That is the greatest favour.﴾ (35: 29-32)

﴿God will elevate, by many degrees, those of you who believe and those who have been given knowledge.﴾ (58: 11)

The Narrator

The story is narrated by ‘Āmir ibn Wāthilah al-Kinānī who was born in Year 3 AH, which witnessed the Battle of Uḥud. He was only eight years old when the Prophet passed away. He was the last of his companions to die, as he died in Year 110 AH, 729 CE.

The narrator of the hadith: ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb belonged to the ‘Adiy branch of the Quraysh tribe. He was the second of the rightly-guided caliphs, and one of the ten companions of the Prophet given the assurance of admittance into Heaven. He was the best of the Muslim community, second only to Abu Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. He was renowned for fairness and justice, as well as firmness, courage and defence of what is right. During his reign, many countries, including Iraq, Syria, Palestine and Egypt, were liberated and became parts of the Islamic State. He became a martyr when he was assassinated in Year 23 AH, 645 CE. He was buried in ‘Ā’ishah’s apartment, next to the graves of the Prophet and Abu Bakr.

Summary

‘Umar met the man whom he appointed Governor of Makkah, which was inhabited by the most honourable of people. His governor told him that he deputized a person who was not of the nobility. ‘Umar expressed disapproval, fearing that this might cause some problem. When his governor told him that the man he deputized knew the Qur’an by heart, ‘Umar no longer disapproved. He confirmed what the governor did and cited the Prophet’s hadith that the Qur’an elevates some people and brings down others.



Message and Meaning

1

The Prophet's companion 'Āmir ibn Wāthilah mentions that 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb appointed Nāfi' ibn 'Abd al-Ḥārith as Governor of Makkah. He travelled from Makkah to meet the caliph, 'Umar, and they met at 'Usfān, a small town about 80 kilometres from Makkah. 'Umar asked him whom he appointed as deputy, to manage people's affairs, lead them in prayers, etc.

2

Nāfi' answered that he appointed a man called Ibn Abzā.⁽¹⁾ Since he was unknown to 'Umar, he asked about him. Nāfi' mentioned that he was a *mawlā*, which means that either he or one of his ancestors was a slave who was subsequently freed.

3

'Umar questioned his choice of a *mawlā* when there were others of better social position and who were companions of the Prophet or *tābi'īn* and well qualified for the task.

This does not mean that it was not permissible to appoint a *mawlā*, or that 'Umar disrespected *mawlās* or slaves or looked down upon them. He was only thinking of the management of public affairs and the prevention of any dissatisfaction. The purpose of appointment to public office is the proper conduct of public affairs in order to ensure that people's interests are well served. Therefore, a governor should be a well qualified person, with sound judgement and firm decision, who could command public respect. He should be well known and of good social standing. Otherwise, he may not be acceptable to people, and they would not obey him.

4

Nāfi' told 'Umar his reason for appointing Ibn Abzā: he had memorized the Qur'an, was well qualified as a scholar and was well versed in the Islamic system of inheritance. As such, this *mawlā* attained his distinction through his learning, and he was well known and highly respected for his scholarship. Hence, there was no doubt that he could carry out his duties and manage people's affairs.

5

'Umar thus approved Nāfi's decision, confirming its validity by citing a hadith in which the Prophet mentions that the Qur'an imparts honour to some people and raises their status both in this life and the life to come. Without it, they would have languished in a low social position. By contrast, the Qur'an brings down those who disbelieve in it or abandon its implementation, even though they may have high public positions.

1 Scholars differ as to whether 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abzā al-Khuzā'ī qualified as a companion of the Prophet, but most historians agree that he met the Prophet, joined him in congregational prayers and narrated hadiths he heard from him. As such, he was a companion of the Prophet.

Implementation



Whoever shoulders a responsibility should be on the alert, aware of every situation. When ‘Umar met the Governor of Makkah, he asked him about his deputy, and why he chose him.



When someone chooses a deputy, he should consider the requirements and conditions of the task assigned to that deputy. If a parent, businessman, contractor or a civil servant wants to assign some task to a subordinate, he must consider whether he is reliable and qualified for the job. If a ruler or a minister wants to appoint a deputy or a governor, he should look for someone who can manage public affairs and serve people’s interests well.



The hadith confirms that a person who knows the rulings stated in the Qur’an and the Prophet’s Sunnah is more suitable for high public office, even if he is a poor freed slave. His appointment must be based on what serves the interests of the Muslim community best and prevents strife and division. ‘Umar sacked some of the leading companions of the Prophet who held public office, such as Sa’d ibn Abi Waqqāṣ and Khālid ibn al-Walīd, because he felt that it was necessary in the interests of the community.



Everyone should question themselves: have I believed in God’s Book and do I recite it regularly to gain a better status through it? Or have I neglected it and I am neglected in return? These are the only two situations. Hence, Qatādah said: ‘Whoever seeks the Qur’an’s company will part with it having either made a gain or incurred a loss’.



A person’s value is commensurate with the knowledge he has. Therefore, a person who seeks to learn should concentrate on useful knowledge which imparts honour to its holder in this life and the next.



The Qur’an elevates the status of whoever learns it, giving him a position of leadership in his community. However, the higher status it gives is really in the life to come. ‘Abdullāh ibn ‘Amr narrated that God’s Messenger (peace be upon him) said: ‘It will be said to the person of the Qur’an: “Recite and rise. Recite in the order you used to do in your first life. Your grade is at the last verse you recite”’.⁽¹⁾

1 Related by Abu Dāwūd, 1464; al-Tirmidhī, 2914.

