

History of Masjid al-Aqsa

Khutbah Series:

03. The Sahaabah 
and Masjid al-Aqsa

The Sahabah (RA – May Allah be pleased with them) and Masjid al-Aqsa

In the Name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Beneficent.

Although our Prophet (SAW) visited Masjid al-Aqsa during his journey of Mi'raj, most Sahabah did not get to see Masjid al-Aqsa until it was peacefully surrendered to Muslim control during the caliphate of Umar ibn al-Khattaab (RA).

After our beloved Prophet (SAW) passed away, his successor Abu Bakr (RA) became the “leader of the faithful,” the first caliph. Abu Bakr (RA) mobilised the Muslim armies to face the two neighbouring superpowers, the East-Roman Empire and the Sassanid Persians. Having further grasped the situation, he prioritised the war against the Romans in Greater Syria (Shaam), which included the land of Palestine.

Under the tactical leadership of the “Sword of Allah,” the brilliant Khalid ibn Walid (RA), they defeated the Romans in battle after battle. The smaller Muslim army faced far greater numbers in each battle they faced; scoring remarkable successive victories in Qaryatayn, Bosra, Ajnadayn, Damascus, and Fahl (Pella).

This alarmed the Romans so much that they set up a “last stand” at Yarmouk in 636 CE. In this battle a Muslim army of 25,000 utterly defeated a vastly larger army of around 150,000.

After the battle, the Muslim army marched to Jerusalem unopposed, to claim the holy land. At its gate, however, the patriarch of the city, Sophronius, bravely prevented their entry despite not having the numbers to do so. He made them wait outside, leaving them to besiege the city; as they awaited the arrival of the new Caliph Umar (RA) – on whose hands only, would Sophronius surrender the city. From November 636CE (14AH) to April 637CE (15AH), the Muslim army patiently besieged the city, sent word to Umar (RA) all the way in Madinah, and waited for him to come to Jerusalem.

The Muslim army had the means of easily capturing the defenceless city by force – remember, after their defeat at Yarmouk, there was no Roman army left, as the emperor had fled the lands all the way back to Constantinople. But because of their respect for the holy city, the Muslims agreed to these terms without protest, and had Umar (RA) come to accept the completely peaceful surrender of Jerusalem.

Umar (RA) accepted the surrender of Jerusalem and wrote a treaty of surrender called "The Assurance of Umar (RA)". In this treaty, Umar (RA) promised:

1. To protect the people.
2. To protect every person's right to his/her faith.
3. To guarantee the safety of their property and places of worship.
4. (Umar t wanted to allow the Jews and all worshippers of God to be allowed access to the Holy Land; but the Christians had a historical feud with them and did not want them in their area. So, in order to promote peace, he promised...) to not force the Christians to accommodate the Jews in their area (but instead, to allocated for them a separate Jewish Quarter).
5. That those who did not wish to live under Muslim rule would be allowed to reap their harvesting crops in full, and will be offered safe passage to whatever place they wish to go, without being extorted or ransomed.

The Assurance of Umar (RA) is significant because it is one of the first examples of such a treaty in the world where guarantees and rights were given – and this was in spite of the fact that the people of Jerusalem had nothing to offer, no protection, and no army to defend itself – all of these assurances were given by the victors, despite nothing forcing them.

After the treaty was signed, it was Salaah time. Sophronius had invited Umar (RA) to the most holy place of the Christians, the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, so he offered a place for Umar (RA) to perform his Salaah. Umar (RA) politely declined, and explained that he did not want future generations of Muslims to either trouble the Christian worshippers by continually requesting to perform prayer there, or even claiming the location outright due to his performing prayer there.

Instead, Umar (RA) went to the church's courtyard and performed his prayer there. This land was later sold by the Christians for the Muslims to build a Masjid there. This Masjid, that survives till today, was built during the Ayyubid Dynasty, by Sultan Afdal – the son of Salahuddin. This "Masjid of Umar" can be visited in the "Old City" to the North-West of the Masjid al-Aqsa compound.

Patriarch Sophronius was impressed by Umar's (RA) sincerity and consideration, and because he realised that Umar (RA) was a man of great wisdom, he made the surprising decision to give him the key to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre.

Sophronius saw that the many different churches and factions of Christians in the holy city were always fighting against each other. He did not want any single denomination, in their enmity, to control the church or deny access to others. So he gave the control of access of the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to the neutral Muslims, who would treat everyone fairly.

Umar (RA) accepted the key and gave it to one of the companions. With the instruction that they must open and close the church every day to allow all worshippers fair access.

This tradition of a Muslim family being entrusted with the key to the most holy church continued all the way to the Crusader period, wherein the Crusaders took the key and only allowed access to European Christians – blocking Christians from Turkey, Armenia, Levant (local Arabs) and Africa. Thereafter, when Salahuddin liberated Jerusalem, he gave back the key to the family and reopened the church to all Christians.

This family, who are the keepers of the key, is called the Nusaybah family. They still fulfil this duty even today. They are named after their ancestor Nusaybah bint Ka'b (RA), an illustrious lady Sahabiyah (companion) who fought alongside and even protected our beloved Prophet (SAW) in the Battle of Uhud.

If you visit the old city, you can see the daily “church opening” and even meet this family and hear about their history in Jerusalem.

Even before his meeting with Sophronius and the city's leaders, Umar (RA) only wanted to go to Masjid al-Aqsa – to visit the first Qiblah and perform Salaah where all the Prophets (AS) had performed salaah behind our beloved Prophet (SAW). So Umar (RA) called for Ka'b al-Ahbaar (RA). Ka'b (RA) was a Jewish scholar who accepted Islam in Madinah at the hands of the Prophet (SAW). Ka'b (RA) showed Umar (RA) to the holy site and told him about its history.

When they reached the site of Masjid al-Aqsa, they saw that the Christians had not only neglected it, but because of their anger at the Jews (who had taken the side of the Persians against them), they had converted it to a rubbish tipping site.

Umar (RA), with his own hands, started cleaning the site. As soon as the other companions saw him do this, they joined him. The Muslim conquerors of the city, were its cleaners – all for the “House of Allah”, Masjid al-Aqsa. This all

happened in front of the leaders of Jerusalem, who were waiting for Umar (RA) to sign the peace treaty.

Here, Umar (RA) instructed a wooden structure to be put up so that the Muslims had a place to pray. This was on the southernmost side of the compound. It has since become part of the main Masjid al-Qibli, but to commemorate it, there is a small Mehrab, called the Mehrab of Umar (RA), where this structure was built. Today, Salaah can still be performed there.

Other Companions

Many Sahabah (RA) have travelled to or lived in Jerusalem for a while. Of course, there were many great generals and warriors from the armies which freed Jerusalem (e.g. Khalid ibn Walid (RA), Abu Ubaydah (RA), Zubayr ibn Awwaam (RA), and perhaps as many as 20,000 others), but there were also some who were given roles and responsibilities to serve the people there.

Bilal (RA)

Bilal (RA) was well known for being the main Mu'azzin of the Prophet (SAW). He would give Adhan multiple times a day in Madinah. During the conquest of Makkah, the Prophet (SAW) gave him the honour of being the first Mu'azzin at the holy Ka'bah.

Upon the conquest of Jerusalem, Umar (RA) requested Bilal (RA) to give the Adhan once more. Even though, Bilal (RA) because of grief, had stopped giving the Adhan with the passing away of our Prophet (SAW), he agreed to Umar's (RA) request and gave the Adhan once again. Upon hearing his voice calling the Adhan, all the companions of the Prophet (SAW), who were in the army, started crying, remembering their time with the Prophet (SAW).

With this, Bilal (SAW) was not only the first person to call the Adhan in Masjid al-Aqsa's history, but he was also the first person to call the Adhan in all three holy Masjids.

Being able to give Adhan in Masjid al-Aqsa is not a small achievement.

Jabir (RA) relates that the Prophet of Allah (SAW) was asked, "Who will enter Paradise first?" The Prophet (SAW) replied, "The Prophets." The man then asked, "Who next O Prophet of Allah?" The Prophet

(SAW) replied, “The martyrs.” The man then asked, “Who next O Prophet of Allah?” The Prophet (SAW) replied, “The callers of Adhan at the Ka’bah.” The man then asked, “Who next O Prophet of Allah?” The Prophet (SAW) replied, “The callers of the Adhan at Bayt al-Maqdis (Masjid al-Aqsa).” The man then asked, “Who next O Messenger of Allah?” The Prophet (SAW) replied, “The callers of the Adhan at my masjid.” The man then asked, “Who next?” The Prophet (SAW) replied, “The rest of the callers of the Adhan according to their deeds.”

(Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra)

If you can give the Adhan well and you happen to visit Masjid al-Aqsa during quiet times, and get to know the Imam and Mu’addhin there, if you ask, it might even be possible for you to call the Adhan there.

Ubadah ibn Samit (RA)

Ubadah (RA) was a Sahabi whose knowledge and wisdom was respected by his peers. He was one of very few Sahabah who were acknowledged as worthy of giving Islamic rulings – putting him in the auspicious company of Umar (RA), Ali (RA), Aishah (RA), Abdullah ibn Mas’ud (RA), and Mu’az ibn Jabal (RA).

He had not only participated in the conquest of Syria and Palestine, but continued to serve and was later involved in the conquest of Egypt and even in Islam’s first naval expeditions to Cyprus.

Once retired, he returned to Jerusalem and served as its Judge.

This amazing Sahabi is buried in Bab al-Rahmah Cemetery to the immediate East of Masjid al-Aqsa.

Shaddaad ibn Aws (RA)

Shaddad’s (RA) father Aws was made a brother to Uthman t, when the latter migrated (Hijrah) from Makkah to Madinah. As such, Shaddad (RA) was like a nephew to the Prophet’s (SAW) son-in-law (RA).

Shaddad (RA) was brought up in an Islamic environment and was known for learning from the Prophet (SAW) and senior companions directly. He followed a very disciplined lifestyle and was admired for his excellent character and dedication to Islam and Islamic knowledge.

Even though he was still a child when the Prophet (SAW) made his Hijrah, senior Sahabah who were known for their knowledge, e.g. Abu Hurayrah (RA) and Abu Darda' (RA) would praise his ability – with Abu Darda' (RA) going as far as saying “Every Ummah has an expert in religious law, and our expert is Shaddad ibn Aws (RA).” (Usdu'l-Ghaba)

Shaddad (RA) had narrated a Hadith from the Prophet (RA),

“Do not feel distressed (O Shaddad)! Damascus will be conquered; Jerusalem will be conquered. You and a group of your descendants will be (Imams) there.” (Isaabah and Tabarani)

Although it isn't known if Shaddad (RA) lead salaah there (although it is highly likely given his seniority), he was well known for performing the Imam's duties of teaching and guiding the people. And his son, became one of the first ordained Imams of Masjid al-Aqsa through the appointment of the Caliph Uthman (RA).

This amazing Sahabi is also buried in Bab al-Rahmah Cemetary, next to Masjid al-Aqsa.

If you visit Masjid al-Aqsa, it will be good of you to visit the cemeteries near it and make du'a for all those who rest there.

Mu'awiyah (RA)

The last Companion of the Prophet (SAW) – who had a major connection to Masjid al-Aqsa – that I wish to discuss is Mu'awiyah (RA).

Mu'awiyah (RA) was an exalted Sahabi and possess an amazing string of achievements in the service of Islam.

Mu'awiyah (RA) was a scribe of the Prophet (SAW) and was one of the few who recorded the Qur'an. Furthermore, he was a brother-in-law of the Prophet (RA) – as his sister Umm Habibah (RA) was the Prophet's (SAW) wife and a “Mother of the Believers.” Mu'awiyah (RA) had access to the Prophet's (SAW) close circles and took plenty of opportunity to benefit from the Prophet's (SAW) wisdom and company.

He was given a place of trust and command early on when it came to battles and expeditions, and took part in the conquest of Syria and Palestine, with his brother Yazid (RA) – who was a major commanding figure in the campaign.

Mu'awiyah (RA) also took part in the first naval expedition to Cyprus. A feat which was foretold by the Prophet r when he reported a dream and blessed the participants saying:

“Some of my followers who (in a dream) were presented before me as fighters in Allah's cause (on board a ship) amidst this sea caused me to smile; they were as kings on thrones.” (Bukhari)

Mu'awiyah's (RA) status was such, that on Umar's (RA) peace treaty for the surrender of Jerusalem (Umar's Assurance) he was one of only four Muslim representatives who co-signed as witnesses to the document.

Furthermore, when Mu'awiyah (RA), who was the Governor of Syria at the time, accepted the Caliphate following the death of Ali (RA), his coronation to this position took place in Masjid al-Aqsa. And during his service as the Caliph, he extended the Masjid, which Umar (RA) built within Masjid al-Aqsa, to accommodate over 3,000 worshippers.

Mu'awiyah (RA) also minted coins with Islamic legends and motifs. And he was the first to mint Islamic inscribed coins in Jerusalem.

Old coins can be found for sale in some of the old markets. If you visit be sure to see if you can find a special piece of history.

May Allah put in our hearts true love and appreciation for Masjid al-Aqsa and its people. And may Allah make us all and reward us all for being among those who seek to protect Masjid al-Aqsa and its people, using every means available to us.

Lastly, please remember three points that we all need to adopt in order to be counted among those who truly want to help Masjid al-Aqsa and its people.

1. Remember Masjid al-Aqsa and the people of Palestine in your prayers – as often as you can.
2. Try to visit Masjid al-Aqsa with your family. Your going there helps defend the Masjid, and gives hope and support to its people.
3. Keep up-to-date with what is happening there, and take part in whatever way you can to get as many people involved in speaking/emailing about the situation in Al-Aqsa.

Remember, no matter how small or insignificant you think such actions are, for you and me, they may be an act which Allah rewards us His mercy, and forgiveness.

اللهم احفظ فلسطين وأهل فلسطين،

والقدس وأهل القدس،

والأقصى وأهل الأقصى،

واربط على قلوبهم وثبتهم،

يا رب العالمين.

O Allah! Protect Palestine and the people of Palestine,
and (protect) Quds and the people of Quds,
and (protect) Masjid al-Aqsa and the people of Masjid al-Aqsa,
and strengthen their hearts and keep them steadfast,
O Lord of the Worlds.