

Al-Faruq ... Stern yet Gentle

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It is among the easiest things for a skilled sculptor to fashion a statue of Umar ibn al-Khattab — may God be pleased with him — that joins truth to splendor, and precision that satisfies fact to beauty that satisfies the imagination; for history has preserved of Umar a precise, truthful likeness that admits no doubt and no dispute, such that all who read his history see it alike, neither differing over it nor parting ways in their admiration and veneration of it, however their temperaments and natures may differ, however their opinions and schools of thought may differ, however their ways of thinking, judging, and feeling may differ.

This precise, truthful, splendid likeness that history has preserved of Umar does not represent his physical person alone, but represents his moral person too, and represents his moral person in all its aspects: it represents his heart, it represents his mind, it represents his will, and it represents his sensibility as well. And it is truthful in all of this beyond the reach of doubt, because it is too plain and too evident for doubt to touch it or for opinions to differ over it.

I know of no instance in which the history of the Muslim caliphs and kings was as truthful in depicting the character of any one of the caliphs and kings as it was in depicting the character of Umar ibn al-Khattab.

And the strange thing is that this character was not an easy or simple one in itself, but was rather a difficult, complex one, as you will see shortly — yet it was so very powerful, powerful to the degree that history was powerless to resist it, and was thus compelled to accept it as it was, unable to add to it or take from it, but rather received it whole and passed it on to the generations whole, and the centuries have gone on passing after the centuries, and it remains as it is, time unable to touch it with addition or diminishment.

Had a skilled sculptor read what history has preserved of Umar's likeness, and then wished to render this by his craft's own means, and to fashion this statue of Umar, he would have combined two strange qualities at once: he would have been a copyist and not an originator, and he would at the same time have been splendid and admirable, dazzling minds, captivating hearts, and filling eyes and hearts alike.

But Umar was the second of the caliphs of the Muslims, and so his religious standing, his rank with the Prophet, and his place within Islam itself all raise him above being a subject for the craft of the painter or the sculptor.

Let us then strive to call upon the craft of words to render his likeness for the young people of today, for Umar, in our view, is the greatest character that can be set before the young, since in him they find the best of what we wish them to find among the examples we hope they will long gaze upon, reflect upon, and be moved by, that they may perhaps rise somewhat toward it.

The first thing that concerns us about Umar is that he was a meeting-place for a set of contradictory qualities, each denying the other most emphatically, each repelling the other most forcefully — yet God had reconciled them and brought their measures into a strange harmony, until they met without clashing and without turning away from one another, and none of them spoiled the trace of another. Rather they combined in the finest combination and blended in the most wondrous blend, as discordant voices combine and as distant melodies blend in a splendid musical piece, until Umar's person became an eternal sign among the signs of music that the history of the Muslims sings, and will go on singing as long as Islam endures and as long as Islam has a history.

And stranger still than all this is that some of these qualities were not newly created in Umar's own person, but had existed, scattered, in his household and his nearest kin before Umar himself existed.

This Qurayshite youth grew up, then, and came to inherit something of these qualities, for his father al-Khattab ibn Nufayl was a harsh, coarse man who, if he was distinguished among his people by anything, was distinguished by severity and violence, by attachment to the inherited old order, and by a strange zeal in defending and guarding this inherited old order. And his cousin Zayd ibn Amr ibn Nufayl was a gentle, tender man, of delicate feeling, pure of heart, clean of nature, ready for sincere faith, hating the old ways, fiercely eager for renewal. He doubted the idolatry of his people, then rejected it outright, and sought a pure religion and an unmixed faith, and set about denouncing to Quraysh what they practiced, so that Quraysh would listen to him and then turn away, paying no heed to what he said; but al-Khattab ibn Nufayl stood firm against him, then opposed him, then pressed his persecution of him until he made him wretched, then imprisoned him in Mecca, then incited the young men

against him until he was forced to go into hiding and to contrive his escape from Mecca, that he might seek, among the Jews and the Christians, what he loved of religion. And Zayd fled with his new faith, or with his readiness for the new faith, and set about seeking what he loved now among the Jews, now among the Christians, until he despaired of both, and so returned to Mecca, but was murdered by treachery somewhere along the way.

And Umar inherited these two qualities from his household, and so was at once severe and tender, extreme in severity and extreme in tenderness alike, and his conversion to Islam was itself a manifestation of these two contradictory qualities. He went out one day — a young man just past twenty, bound to intensify his fury against the Muslims, to scheme against them and strike at them — searching for the first opportunity that would let him fall upon these innovators, and he met a man among the Muslims and fell into talk with him about Islam, meaning to bring this talk around to violence and assault, when this man informed him that Islam had invaded his own household and settled within it, and that his sister had become a Muslim, as had her husband; whereupon Umar set out against his sister, resolved upon assaulting her and her husband, and when he reached the house he heard a recitation, and when he knocked at the door those within were seized with alarm, and the household's reciter hid himself, and Umar went in to his sister and questioned her, and she hid nothing from him, so he fell upon her and her husband, and they stood firm against him and showed him the page from which they had been reading, and no sooner had he recited a few verses of the Qur'an than his violence and his fierceness departed from him, and he turned to gentleness, tenderness, mercy, and compassion.

And he asked after the Prophet's whereabouts, and when he was directed to the place, he went to where the Prophet and his companions were gathered, and when the Prophet's companions sensed his approach they recoiled from him and feared him, save one man alone, Hamza ibn Abd al-Muttalib, who was no less fierce or forceful than he, and who awaited him standing firm, meeting him with the same violence and force the Muslims had supposed him to be approaching with; but the Prophet met him with a meeting both firm and gentle, and it was no time at all before Umar embraced Islam and the Muslims cried out in triumph, and knew that God had strengthened His religion with the dearer to Him of the two men: Umar ibn al-Khattab, and Amr ibn Hisham ibn Abi Jahl — as the Prophet used to ask after each, each day.

And from that day the Muslims were able to perform their prayers openly, when before they had concealed them, and to take the mosque as their gathering place, when before they had appeared in it only one by one.

This utter severity and this wondrous tenderness portray Umar throughout the whole of his life. They portray him as companion to the Prophet, as counselor to Abu Bakr, and as leader of the Muslims; they portray him when the Prophet wished to conclude the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah and Umar objected to this treaty, saying to the Prophet: how can we accept humiliation in our religion?! And they portray him when he saw the earnestness of God and His Messenger in this treaty, and so submitted to it, content and believing, with the truest contentment and the purest faith. They portray him when it was announced that the Messenger of God had died, and he denied this most vehemently and threatened those who announced it with the sword, until he heard the word of God, exalted is He: "Muhammad is not but a messenger. [Other] messengers have passed on before him. So if he was to die or be killed, would you turn back on your heels? And he who turns back on his heels will not harm God at all; but God will reward the grateful" — and then he submitted to the decree of God, content with it, believing in it, with the truest contentment and the purest faith. They portray him when he set himself earnestly to resolving the affairs of the Muslims, and took the pledge of allegiance for Abu Bakr, extending his own hand for it before the consultation had been completed, until, when matters had settled and hearts had grown calm and the community's word had become one, he recognized in himself this haste and said of the pledge to Abu Bakr: it was a trial from which God spared the Muslims its harm.

They portray him in all you read of his positions, whenever he found the moment in earnest and the matter required resolve and determination, and then, once matters had settled and the storm had subsided — and history has distilled these strange and wondrous images into what it has related: that Umar was the most quick-tempered of men when he was angered, and that when he was roused nothing and no one could stand before him, yet when God was mentioned or the Qur'an recited, he softened until he became gentleness itself.

And history has distilled this wondrous image too, in what it related of him when the people gathered to him at the pilgrimage season and he asked after the conduct of his agents in the provinces, and one of the Muslims rose and claimed that his agent had struck him, and Umar would

accept nothing but that this man exact retribution from the governor before an assembly of the Muslims, and the governors set about picturing to him the harm this would do in weakening authority and emboldening the subjects against their governors, but he paid no heed to any of that, for the Messenger of God himself had submitted to retribution against his own person, until the agents were driven to appease this man and buy back his right from him with gold coin — and but for that, the company of the Muslims would have seen a man of the common people laying his whip upon the body of a governor, one of the governors of the provinces.

Umar was severe until he feared God within his severity, and was gentle until he feared God within his gentleness, and he made use of both his severity and his gentleness together upon the people; but with himself and his own household he made use of nothing but severity, and gentleness never once found its way to his heart. And Umar was fiercely jealous for the wealth of the Muslims, calling his agents and governors to account in a reckoning the mildest description of which is that it was harsh; he would not choose a governor for any post without first reckoning his wealth before his governorship, and would then track it afterward to see how his wealth had increased, and from what source this increase had come, and what connection it bore to what he had been granted in stipend. Nor did he scruple, after dismissing a governor, to divide his wealth with him, leaving him half and returning the other half to the Muslims.

And he was generous with the wealth of the Muslims to the utmost limits of generosity; no sooner had the moneys that came to him from the provinces and the regions gathered to him than he distributed them among the Muslims in a truly wondrous manner, leaving out no man, no woman, no boy, no girl, in any household near to him or far from him, without apportioning to each his share of this wealth, rendering to him his due, and rendering to him besides his due a further measure of bounty. Nor would he ever entrust this to anyone else, but saw to it himself, and tracked the affairs of the people not to know them for their own sake, but to know whether the people had any complaint of him, whether the people found anything in him to object to — for he trusted neither himself nor the people to secure this justice unwatched.

And the Muslims were struck by drought in the land of the Arabs for a year; read, then, the accounts of Umar in that year, and you will read the most wondrous thing that letters and history have preserved in any nation, in any generation, in any age, portraying tenderness toward the

subjects and solicitude for them, compassion for them, severity toward the strong and mercy toward the weak.

He charged his agents in the provinces to send him food and clothing for the people, and dispatched his messengers throughout the reaches and regions of the peninsula, to distribute food and slaughter livestock and clothe the people, and he himself took charge of this in Medina and its surroundings, and refused to be fed in his own house whenever the Muslims gathered for the public meal.

Butter grew scarce and meat grew scarce, and so he forbade himself butter and meat and imposed upon himself bread and oil, that the Muslims might find relief. And the heat of the oil troubled him, so he instructed his freedman to cook it for him to temper its heat, but this availed nothing, and his stomach began to rumble, so he said to it: "Rumble as you will — you shall taste nothing but oil until the Muslims find relief."

And Umar was the boldest of men toward men, so that the strong feared him and dreaded meeting him, and the great among the Companions would send intermediaries to ask him for gentleness toward the people, since they themselves were too much in awe of him to lay their own needs before him; yet at the very same time he was the most fearful of men before the weak, the helpless, and the destitute. The humblest of men, the least of consequence, could make bold against him and meet him with words he disliked, and he would listen, and then apologize, and then weep, and then ask forgiveness.

And the most wondrous of the qualities you encounter in Umar's character is this conception he formed for himself of the caliphate, from the day he took it up to the day he died, which he himself portrayed most wondrously in its brevity, its precision, and its fierce candor, when he addressed the people for the first time after the pledge of allegiance, saying: "O people, you have been tried by me, and I have been tried by you."

For the caliphate, to Umar's mind, is a trial for the caliph and for the subjects alike, each tried by the other, each bound to bear the trial firmly, patiently, and to emerge from it and pass through its difficulties sound and unblemished, unmarred in himself, in his character, in his faith, in any of these many intricate faculties that make up the conscience of the honorable man.

And if the caliph is always under trial, always being tested by his subjects, then it is a duty upon him, for his own sake and for the people's sake, and a duty upon him for the sake of God who has charge of his affairs and the people's affairs, to call himself constantly to account over great matters and small, and never to undertake any matter, small or great, without knowing what he undertakes and what moves him to undertake this matter or that, without reckoning that he shall be questioned about what he has done and preparing his answer to that question when it is put to him — he shall be questioned about it on the Last Day, when God questions him about the great and the trifling among his deeds, and he may be questioned about it at every moment and by every human being, for in rising to this charge he exposed himself to this questioning, since he had taken up a trust in whose reckoning all people share, and whose reckoning, in the end, is his alone before his Lord, who placed the affairs of the people in his hands on condition that he render to Him an account of what he did and what he left undone.

And I know of no caliph of the Muslims, nor any king among them, granted what Umar was granted of this sensitive conscience, to the utmost that conscience can feel. This showed in all his dealings with the people so powerfully, so convincingly, that they likened him to the precise scale that can never tilt or cheat; and I know of no caliph of the Muslims, nor any king among them, in whom the reckoning of God was so present at every moment — waking and sleeping, working and at rest, taking up the gravest of matters or the slightest of them — as it was in Umar.

He would go in to his daughter Hafsa, Mother of the Believers, and she would set before him bread and broth into which she had put oil, and he would turn away from it, saying: "Two condiments in a single dish?! No, by God, I shall not taste them." And he went in to a man of the Muslims and asked him for a drink, and the man brought him a drink, and he asked: what is it? And when he learned it was honey, he turned away from it, saying: "No, by God — shall God call me to account for it?!" And he gave one of the Persians a shirt of his to make up, and pressed him for haste in it, and the Persian brought him two shirts he had made, and Umar asked him: is there nothing of the treasury's wealth in them? And the Persian answered: nothing but the thread. And Umar rebuked him, saying: begone, and return me my own shirt — and the Persian returned him his shirt, not yet dry.

For he saw God when he rose in the morning and saw Him when he lay down at night, and pictured himself standing before Him, rendering to

Him an account of what he had done and said.

And he had, in this regard, marvels, every one of them wondrous, and many of them moving one to tears outright. He fitted out a caravan for Syria — for he traded to live — and needed three thousand dirhams, and so sent to Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf to borrow this sum from him, and Abd al-Rahman said to the messenger: let him borrow it from the treasury instead. And when Umar later met Abd al-Rahman, he asked him: did you say this? He said: yes. Umar said: were I to borrow these dirhams from the treasury, and death were then to overtake me, the Muslims would say, set it down against the Commander of the Believers and leave it to the family of the Commander of the Believers — and God would question me about it on the Day of Resurrection; but were I to borrow it from a tight-fisted man such as yourself, and death were then to overtake me, it would not be set down against me, nor left to my family, until it was repaid to him.

And when he was stabbed and roused from his first swoon, the first thing that concerned and troubled him was to know whether his assailant had been one of the Muslims; and when he learned that his assailant had been the slave of al-Mughira ibn Shu'ba, he was content and his mind was set at ease, for he knew that his killer could not call him to account before God for any wrong he had done him or any harm he had brought upon him.

And from this it follows that Umar was not severe toward the people only through the resolve with which he met them, but was severe toward them also through the severity he imposed upon himself. And many of the Muslims, seeing in their leader this harsh, coarse manner of living, were ashamed to ease their own way of life, or to show that they had done so, and would sometimes send his daughter Hafsa, Mother of the Believers, as an intermediary, to ask him to be gentler with himself, and to allow her some small measure, however little, of life's good things, to which he answered her: "You have counseled well for your own people, and been disloyal to your father!"

And so too was his conscience, delicate of feeling, rigorous in its watchfulness, questioning him about every matter before the people questioned him, and before God questioned him. And so he discharged his trial throughout his caliphate — yet the one thing beyond doubt is that his subjects did not discharge their own trial as he discharged his, nor stand firm under the ordeal as he stood firm.

And this watchfulness of conscience is not granted to all people alike, but is granted only to the best of them and the most distinguished among them, and in the measure that Umar knew it, is scarcely granted even to the rare, singular man once in a while — or say, once across long ages and long ages again.

And when the Muslims of the Arabian peninsula were tried with drought and the year pressed hard upon them, the watchfulness of conscience showed itself in Umar's life and in his words and deeds alike, for he would say to the people: God has tried you with me and tried me with you; and I know not whether it is a fault of mine, or a fault of yours, or a fault that has become general among us, for which the chastisement has become general upon us all.

And he led the people in the prayer for rain, and his prayer was all supplication for forgiveness, so that the people thought he would ask God for nothing but pardon, but at the very end of the prayer he asked God to send the people rain.

And Umar was the first of the caliphs to be rigorous in learning the conditions of the people, as I have said, that he might learn what wrong he might have done them or what harm he might have brought upon them. Whenever night fell he would pray, prolonging his prayer, then go out in disguise to seek out the news of the people and listen to their talk — and this served him well, and set right a great many of the people's affairs.

He had decreed the stipend for men and women, for young men and young women, and for children once weaned, and one night he heard a child crying bitterly, and asked its mother the cause of this crying, and she answered him an answer that did not satisfy him, and the child returned to its crying, and Umar returned to his questioning, and this was repeated between the child and Umar until the woman grew weary of this insistent questioner, and said to him: "You have pressed me hard tonight — do you not know that the son of al-Khattab gives nothing to children before they are weaned? I am hurrying this child's weaning, that we may have his stipend from the treasury." And Umar turned away from the woman grieved and sorrowful, saying: "Woe to Umar — how many of the sons of the Muslims has he killed!" Then he ordered the criers to proclaim among the people: "Complete the suckling of your children, for they have their stipend from the day they are born."

Umar never knew the systems of democratic government as the Greeks and the Romans knew them in certain of their ages, but his sensitive conscience, his upright instinct, his quick heart, his concern for justice, and his fear of injustice, all of this led him toward something not far removed from democratic order. And perhaps, had Umar lived longer, he would have brought the Muslims an Arab democratic order of their own making.

He would consult those about him among the Companions of the Prophet and the leading men of the people in every difficulty that arose for him, but he was most rigorous in his insistence on leading the pilgrimage himself every year, and attending the season in which the people of the provinces gathered, and he would order his agents to present themselves to him at the head of those under their charge; and when the season came and these delegations were present, he would hear from the agents concerning the subjects, and hear from the subjects concerning the agents, and establish justice and fairness between the one and the other.

And so the pilgrimage season, to Umar, became a political season in which he reviewed the affairs of the provinces in full view of the rulers and the ruled alike. And who can say, had God prolonged his life, what this organized political gathering might have come to be?!

And another of Umar's qualities was his hatred of affectation, and his contempt for those who affected it. He would be somewhat late for prayer, and when he came out he would sit upon the pulpit and apologize to the people, saying: my shirt has delayed me — his shirt had been washed, and he had waited for it to dry, and then came out to the people once he had what he wanted. And once the word of God, exalted is He, was read before him: "and fruit, and herbage" — and someone asked: what is this herbage? And Umar said: this is affectation — what harm is it to you not to know what this herbage is?!

And were I to set about enumerating Umar's wondrous qualities and his distinguished traits, I should fear to exhaust this entire volume of al-Hilal without satisfying my own need of it, or the readers' — but you will agree with me, I think, that what I have set before you of his likeness is fully sufficient to establish what I claimed at the opening of this piece: that it is among the easiest things to fashion for Umar a precise and wondrous statue, without the sculptor needing to call upon his imagination for help.

And history has preserved Umar's physical likeness just as it preserved his moral likeness, for Umar was tall, taller than all other men, and was broad and heavily built, and when he walked he walked quickly, and he was fair of complexion save in the year of the drought, when, having confined himself to eating oil, his stomach was spoiled and his complexion darkened somewhat — and it is most likely that those who described him as dark had seen him only in that year.

And there is another quality with which I close this chapter, for Umar closed his own life with it: tenderness, refinement, modesty, and reverence for the sanctity of households. Umar was most anxious to be buried beside his two companions when he died, and so when he was stabbed and felt death upon him, he called for his son Abdullah and said to him: "Go to Aisha, Mother of the Believers, and say to her: Umar ibn al-Khattab sends you his greeting — and do not say, the Commander of the Believers, for I am no longer commander of the believers — and ask her leave that he be buried beside his two companions." And Abdullah went and said this to Aisha, and returned to his father with her leave, and Umar said to his son: "When I die, carry me upon a bier, and when you reach Aisha's house, do not enter until you have asked leave." And Umar's bier was carried, and when they reached Aisha's house they said: Umar ibn al-Khattab asks the leave of Aisha, Mother of the Believers, and did not bring the bier in until Aisha had given her leave. And there Umar ibn al-Khattab was buried beside his two companions, Muhammad, Messenger of God, and Abu Bakr, first of the caliphs of the Muslims.