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The Messenger

A Tale Retold

Translated from the Dutch by
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1 Zayd, the Chronicler

Kindly let me introduce myself, my name is Zayd ibn Thalith.

I was the chronicler of the messenger Muhammad, his personal scribe.

The messenger did not have a son of his own. He adopted me when I was about seven years old.

Everyone called me Zayd ibn Muhammad—Zayd, the son of Muhammad.

I must have been five years old when my mother took me to visit family in the city of Ta'if.

I do not actually remember anything about that trip, but many years later my mother told me about the journey, 'We rode through the desert in a caravan of twelve camels. I always had you on my lap. High up on the saddle, you sat still and took in the surroundings, but whenever the caravan stopped to rest, I had difficulty keeping you with me. You ran in every direction and went off with anybody who asked. At the marketplace in Ta'if, you pulled your hand loose from mine and disappeared behind a stand. I ran after you but couldn't find you. I looked behind other stands—no Zayd. I cried, shouted for you, ran back and forth, but you were nowhere to be found. When the market day ended, and everybody had gone, I was left there ... alone and empty handed. I didn't dare go home to your father. I had lost his favourite son.'

Thus you understand that I, Zayd, was stolen, but I am not sure how it happened. I cannot remember my mother or that mar-

ketplace either. But I do have a clear image of myself exposed and dirty, squatting in a cage with other naked boys like a pack of monkeys.

I later heard I was sold from one person to another for two years.

When I was seven years old, a small-time slave owner from Mecca purchased me at the market in Jandal and took me home with him.

This merchant's name was Hakim ibn Hizam. His belly was big and round.

From that moment on, I can remember almost everything; it was a turning point in my life.

I knew I originally came from Mecca, and I kept hoping I would run into my parents on the street or at the slave market. I recited their names under my breath the entire day, lest I forget them.

My father's name was Sabit bin Sharasil.

My mother's name was Sadi bint Salab.

I dreamt of the moment I would see my mother at the marketplace and shout, 'Sadi bint Salab, it's me, your son Zayd!'

Though the mother and father I had imagined would not be the same in reality. Besides, they would never recognize me. I had changed so much. The sun had baked my skin a deep shade of brown.

Yet, nothing is as unpredictable as fate.

The slave owner Hakim ibn Hizam took me home and let me loose in his courtyard, much like you would a wild goat. Shortly afterwards, I was allowed to set foot in the house.

On the very first day, I heard a loud knocking, and my mas-

ter shouted, 'Zayd, open the door!'

Of course, I did what was asked of me. An older woman came inside. I thought she was my master's wife.

'What do we have here?' she kindly said.

I stared at her in silence.

Then she asked, 'What's your name?'

'His name is Zayd,' my master shouted from his workroom, 'I bought him at the market in Jandal.'

The woman was my master's aunt. They talked for a while, and when she came out of his office she said, 'Come along, you're going with me.'

I looked at my master questioningly. 'You're in luck, Zayd. My aunt doesn't have a son, and she just bought you. She's your new owner now. Her name is Khadija. Be a good boy.'

Khadija grabbed my hand, and we went on our way.

Although I was only a child, I immediately sensed I had ended up somewhere wonderful. In comparison to other houses in Mecca, Khadija lived in a small palace. She had me wash and change my clothes. I became a person again, a normal boy.

As evening approached, her husband arrived home.

'Look! I have a surprise for you,' she said, pointing at me smiling.

Her husband's name was Muhammad ibn Abdullah. Many years later, he would become the messenger of Allah.

The next morning Muhammad shouted, 'Zayd, time to go!'

He was my new master. So of course I did not ask where we were going. I just followed along behind him.

I had no idea he was intent on finding my parents.

And, as fate would have it, he actually found them. They could not believe their eyes. Was I really their son? So tall, so well groomed, dressed in such fine clothing. My mother was clutching the wall for support, speechless from the shock. My father dropped to the floor at Muhammad's feet to thank him, but Muhammad graciously helped him up.

I spent a week in my father's small, ramshackle house, but on Friday he brought me back to Muhammad and said, 'His destiny is in your hands. If he's happy, we're happy.'

That is how I became Muhammad's son.

Khadija was Muhammad's first wife.

She taught me to read and write, but Muhammad was my master. I shadowed his every move, until the day he died.

All those years, I never thought about why I stayed with him.

In hindsight, however, I do understand. I had a passion for poetry, and I could completely lose myself in the tales Muhammad told.

When he began his mission as the messenger, my life completely changed as well. Unless he sent me off somewhere, I never left his side.

Whenever a text was revealed to him, he shuddered uncontrollably, dropped to his knees, knelt pressing his head to the ground like a horse, and uttered incoherent words.

We were usually alone when this happened, and of course it was frightening the first few times. I did not know what to do, so I rushed off to get Khadija.

As time passed, I did this less and less. I realized it was my task to stay by Muhammad's side. I needed to work out how best to handle the situation.

I would patiently wait as he received a revelation, until he collapsed on the ground, exhausted. Then I quickly covered him with a blanket and let him rest.

By the time Muhammad died, I was a grown man. My hair was black, but my moustache was already streaked with grey.

I was still deep in mourning when a rider on a brown Arabian horse stopped at my gate.

‘Zayd,’ the man cried. Umar had sent his courier.

I did not hesitate. I knew why I was being summoned. I mounted my horse and went with him.

After Muhammad, Umar was the most important leader of Islam. When Muhammad died, Umar was the one who took over the reins. He was also a shrewd leader and a ruthless warlord.

I knelt before him in a cold sweat.

‘Zayd ibn Thalith!’ Umar exclaimed, ‘Muhammad is gone, yet we don’t have his revelations. Gather up his texts. Now! It’s a matter of urgency.’

I knew Umar well, he knew me, no other words were necessary.

I kissed the back of his hand, went outside, jumped on my horse, and rushed out of town into the countryside. I was so overjoyed with the task bestowed upon me, I had trouble finding my way home.

That night I could not sleep. Oh, what a splendid night, what a magnificent undertaking! How best to proceed now? I had witnessed the revelation of some of his texts myself. However, I would have to rely on the memory of his followers for the rest.

I went over to the open window and gazed at the boundless, clear night sky above the desert.

I, Zayd ibn Thalith, would be the one to commit the words of the Qur'an to writing.

A man who receives such an honour must fight back tears not to die of happiness.

As soon as the first rays of light struck my window, I packed my bags and saddled my horse.

And I set out to fulfil my glorious task!

2 In Search of the Qur'an

First, I visited Muhammad's wives. They kindly gave me verses that had been written down long ago, embroidered on their nightgowns, and engraved in precious gold coins.

'Is there nothing more?' I asked.

Aisha, the beautiful, young, redheaded widow of Muhammad unlatched a gold pendant and handed it to me. Finely engraved on the back were the words:

'He holds up the stars lest they fall to the ground ...'

I then travelled day and night looking for other texts in all corners of the realm.

I listened and noted down everything I came across.

After seven months, I returned with three camels weighed down with parchments inscribed with Qur'an texts, broad camel bones and pieces of wood carved with verses, and cloth colourfully embroidered with the words of the Qur'an.

Back home, I went into my room and shut the door behind me. I did not set foot outside for a year, until I had completed the Qur'an.

When I had finished, the sun shone in my heart. I put on clean clothing and my best leather shoes. I tucked the brand new Book under my arm and rode like a prince to Umar's house.

I knelt before him and proudly said, 'The Qur'an!'

I had accomplished my task.

3 Umar, the Second Successor to Muhammad

However, it was not that simple.

Those who objected to my Qur'an voiced their opinions. They represented six powerful Islamic movements, each with a different interpretation of Muhammad's teachings. They claimed I had written my own Qur'an, which had nothing to do with Muhammad's original tellings.

It was not my place to speak on the matter. It was Umar's decision.

Unity was necessary in those days.

Umar decided that the Qur'an I had compiled would not be made public but would be kept within the circles of power as a foundation—as a source of inspiration.

Later, when Umar was killed and Uthman succeeded him, the discussion about this Qur'an flared up again.

Early one morning, representatives of the six powerful Islamic movements appeared at Uthman's gate. Their camels were loaded down with writings.

Uthman had the camels led into the walled courtyard. Then the gate was locked behind them.

The camels were unloaded and the writings stacked in piles. 'Zayd, go through it all, add what's necessary and remove what's unnecessary. Take all the time you need!' said Uthman. And off he went.