

ABU AYYUB AL-ANSARI AND THE ANSARS OF MADINAH

Dr Muhammad Mujibur Rahman was born in 1936 into a prominent Muslim family of East Bengal (located in present-day Rajshahi district, Bangladesh). After completing his formal madrasah education, he obtained his MA and MOL degrees from Islamia College Lahore, Pakistan. Thereafter, he completed his PhD in Qur'anic Studies from Rajshahi University and served there as a lecturer/professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies for three decades. A prolific writer in Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Bengali and English, he is the author and translator of around fifty books including Ibn Kathir's monumental Qur'anic commentary into Bengali, and currently lives in New York where he works as a Director of the Islamic Centre. The book under review was originally written in Bengal but subsequently translated into English by Abu Ja'far, a Bangladeshi writer and biographer. As the title of the book indicates, it focuses on the Ansars of Madinah with reference to the life and contribution of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari who was one of the most prominent companions of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him). I am not aware of any good books on the history and role played by the Ansars of Madinah in the life of the Prophet of Islam in the English language. For this reason, I was delighted to receive an autographed copy of the *The Ansars of Madinah and Hadrat Abu Ayub Ansari* (Abdullah Enterprise,) from the author himself and as I began to read I realised how valuable this book was in highlighting one of the most important formative periods of Islam.

The Ansars originally lived in the lush Arabian oasis of Yathrib. After preaching Islam in Makkah for around thirteen years, the Makkah leaders not only responded by rejecting the message of Islam but they also conspired to assassinate the Prophet. At this critical junction in early Islamic history, the Ansars (or Helpers) of Yathrib invited the Prophet to their city, located around two hundred and fifty miles to the north of Arabia. In 622CE the Prophet left his native Makkah and moved (hijrah) to

Yathrib which subsequently became known as madinat al-nabi (or the city of the Prophet). The Ansars of Madinah not only accepted the Prophet but also welcomed all of his persecuted followers who lived in Makkah at the time; they became known as the Muhajirun or the Emigrants. Upon his arrival in the new city, the Prophet was hosted by none other than Abu Ayyub al-Ansari. A relatively wealthy member of the new Muslim society in Madinah, Abu Ayyub became one of the foremost champions of Islam and never hesitated to spend his wealth and money for the sake of Islam. Divided into fifteen chapters, in this book, Dr Rahman traces the history, origin and contribution of the Ansars of Madinah to the development of Islam in its formative phase. Based on original Arabic and Urdu sources, the author also provides a detailed account of the life, times and contributions of Abu Ayyub al-Ansari whose real name was Khalid ibn Zayd ibn Kulayb ibn Tha'labah ibn Abd ibn Awf ibn Ghanam although he became famous by his patronymic Abu Ayyub al-Ansari. He hosted the Prophet in Madinah until the latter's house and the masjid al-nabi (Prophet's mosque) was built; indeed, he did everything he could to make the Prophet's stay with him a very comfortable one.

In addition to this, he took part in the early Prophetic campaigns and participated in the conquest of Egypt. He also served as a governor of Madinah during the Caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib and died in 669CE during an expedition to Istanbul. Like Dr Rahman's book, M A J Beg's *Biographical Dictionary of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad* (M A J Beg, 2008) also focuses on early Islamic history. As an Islamic historian and specialist on the lives of the Prophet's companions, Beg is well qualified to write on this subject. His previous books on this subject include *Brief Lives of the Companions of Prophet Muhammad* (2002, revised and expanded, 2003), *A Short Encyclopaedia of the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad* (2007) and *Quiz on the Companions (sahabah) of the Prophet Muhammad* (2008). Like his other works, this book has been published by the author himself and this probably explains why the book is not as widely known or available as it ought to be. Although there are a large number of books available in Arabic on the lives of the sahabah, there are very few such works in English. And even those who can read the original Arabic sources will tell you that most of these works are hagiographical in nature, often devoid of historical context and narrative. Being a historian by profession, Beg has pursued a

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critical and historical approach to the lives and times of the Prophet's companions and for this reason I found his books very informative and beneficial.

Unlike the *Dictionary*, however, the entries in the *Encyclopaedia* are arranged chronologically. This is very helpful from a historical perspective but not so easy to utilise for the purpose of quick referencing. By the same token, since the *Dictionary* is arranged alphabetically it is very user-friendly but not so helpful from a chronological point of view. This means the *Dictionary* and *Encyclopaedia* (along with the *Brief Lives*) need to be read together to acquire the maximum benefit. That said, although Beg's books contain biographical sketches of around five hundred sahabah, they are accompanied by several invaluable introductions/appendixes, useful bibliographies and indexes. Unfortunately, both Drs Rahman and Beg's books contain numerous spelling mistakes and as such the copy editing, layout, design and the production of these books leave a lot to be desired. Nevertheless, by researching and writing these books, the authors have made a valuable contribution to preserving and popularising early Islamic history and heritage. I recommend these books to young Muslims who were born and are currently being educated in the West.

By Muhammad Mojlum Khan