

Bilal the Great African Muslim

Bilal is very lovingly remembered by all Muslims of the world as one of the earliest great African Muslim.

He was born in a village in a mountainous place in Western Arabia. Bilal's father was called Rebah and his mother was known as Hamama¹. They had come to Arabia as slaves from Ethiopia. The father and mother were slaves of Ummayya bin Khalaf, a rich man from the tribe of Quraish. Bilal was therefore born in slavery and served as a housekeeper. His master Ummayya bin Khalaf was not a Muslim.

When Bilal was about the age of 40, it was the time when Prophet Muhammad started teaching the new religion of Islam, Bilal was attracted by the teaching of Prophet Muhammad. He accepted the religion of Islam and became a Muslim.

When Ummayya bin Khalaf and his family went to worship idols, Bilal would pray to Allah as taught by Islam.

In the early days of Islam the tribe of Quraish who were strong and many and lived in and around Makkah, disliked Islam.

They also disliked Prophet Muhammad and his new teachings. If any person accepted the new religion, they oppressed and harassed him.

One day Ummayya bin Khalaf came to know of Bilal's secret prayers. He called Bilal and asked,

“Oh Bilal, do you worship and bow down to the God of Muhammad?”

Bilal was not afraid. He replied,

‘Yes Master, I do worship Allah, the only God.’”

The reply angered Ummayya greatly. He began to torture Bilal. He was tied with ropes and made to lie on the burning hot desert sand at mid-noon. He was then asked to forget the God of Islam and worship the 'great' idols known as LAT and UZZA. But Bilal was strong in his new belief. He refused to worship idols and kept crying “AHAD-AHAD”, meaning “One God, One God.” The tortures continued and were

increased. Hot iron rod were stamped on his pained body. Yet Bilal would not yield.

On one hot day Bilal lay on the burning hot sand tied to the ground. A very heavy stone was placed over his chest. Bilal could no longer bear the heat and the load so great. He had also grown weak. In that tied condition even water was denied to him. In the condition he lay and lost his senses. As the day neared its end, it became cooler; he regained his conscious (senses). He found that the heavy stone was no more on his chest. He wondered who had come to free him from pain. His heavy eyes slowly opened only to look at the bright smiling face of Prophet Muhammad.

Prophet Muhammad had heard of and seen the torture of Bilal. It pained him extremely to learn that a true believer should suffer in such a manner. He also felt pity for the poor man He told Abu Bakr to purchase Bilal from Ummayya and set him free. This was done. In similar ways the Prophet had many slaves set free. He insisted that slaves be treated fairly and kindly. By his own conduct he also set such examples.

When Bilal first came before the Holy Prophet, he praised the Holy Prophet in two poetic lines of his native language. The Prophet asked Hassan bin Thabit to translate it in Arabic. He translated it in words which means:

“When in the world, the virtues are described, thou art mentioned as the model of virtues in our midst.”

Among the slaves from Africa, Bilal was the first to accept Islam. He had a strong faith in Allah and a great love for the Prophet. He had a pure character. Soon he earned high respect of the Prophet and other great Muslims of the time. The Prophet liked Bilal's sweet voice and made him the first Muazzin – The Caller To The Prayers.

All through his life Bilal remained a close companion of Prophet Muhammad and was with him at every occasion. When the Prophet died he was very saddened. Thereafter all his life he looked grieved and very solemn. He had gone to Madina when the Prophet had migrated. After the death of the Prophet he did not feel happy to stay in Madina. He sadly discontinued giving 'adhan' and migrated to Damascus, Syria. He died there after about eight (or ten) years. His grave is still existing in the famous Muslim graveyard in Damascus. People still go to his grave to pay respect and salute him.

¹. In some books the name of his father is given as “Riyah” and of his mother as “Jumana”.

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