

Bilal Ibn Rabah

(part 1 of 2): From Slavery to Freedom

"I was present.... when Mohammad, the Messenger of God, walked the earth. I heard what he said and saw what he did..." So begins a book based on the life of one of Prophet Muhammad's closest companions – Bilal Ibn Rabah.



Bilal was a black slave, almost certainly the son of slaves, and is believed to have been from Abyssinia (now known as Ethiopia). Being born into servitude, he probably never expected life to offer him more than hard work, pain and drudgery. However Bilal walked the earth at a very momentous time. He was a slave in the city of Mecca

when an unlettered man began to call the people to worship One God. This man was Muhammad, the Messenger of God, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, and his message was for all of humanity.

When a person is poor or destitute, hungry or afraid, or beaten bruised and broken, a message infused with the concepts of mercy, forgiveness and justice is very appealing. The down trodden were just the sort of people who flocked to the side of Prophet Muhammad, eager to take comfort in his words, and deeds. Bilal, possibly the first African to convert to Islam accepted the message whole heartedly. Life for Bilal was about to get a great deal worse. Like a drowning man holding the rope that will drag him to safety, Bilal clung to the words of the One God and they were essential in saving his life.

Bilal heard the message of Muhammad, that God is One, the Almighty, All Merciful but he also heard the words of his owner. Umayya ibn Khalaf, a wealthy Meccan, was worried that his livelihood based around idol worship would be disrupted by Muhammad's message. He spoke to others also concerned about the changes to the political and religious landscape of Mecca saying, "Muhammad was never a liar, magician, or mad, but we have to describe him this way until we turn away from him those who rush to his religion."

According to biographer Ibn Ishaq and others^[1], Bilal suffered terribly for his immediate acceptance of Muhammad's message. It is said that he was beaten mercilessly, dragged around the streets and hills of Mecca by his neck,

and subjected to long periods without food or water. His owner Umayya ibn Khalaf reportedly, "would bring him out at the hottest part of the day and throw him on his back in the open valley and have a great rock put on his chest; then he would say to him, 'You will stay here till you die or deny Muhammad and worship al-Lat and al-'Uzza"[2]. Bilal would not renounce Islam, and amidst his suffering he uttered only one word – *Ahad* (meaning One God) [3]

News of the slave who cried out 'God is One!' even in the midst of torture soon reached Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Abu Bakr, Prophet Muhammad's closest friend and a wealthy trader of equal status to Umayya was sent to investigate. He came upon the open field where Bilal was being tortured for amusement. Abu Bakr did not lose his temper, for that was not his way, but he remonstrated with the torturers. He said to Umayya, "Have you no fear of God that you treat this poor man like this?" He replied saying: "You are the one who corrupted him, so you save him from his plight!" Abu Bakr replied: "Then sell him to me, name your price." Umayya, was a businessman and could not give up making a profit, so he sold Bilal for a good price. To humiliate Bilal, he added: "I would have sold him to you even if you had offered me only an ounce of gold." Abu Bakr answered: "I would have bought him even if you had asked for one hundred ounces."

Bilal was cared for and nursed back to health. Upon his recovery he was taken to Prophet Muhammad and he stood by his side giving support and calling others to Islam. At the time of Prophet Muhammad slavery was a worldwide, entrenched institution. The laws of Islam sought to emancipate slaves; God mentions in the Quran the expiation for many sins is to free a slave, and it is regarded as an act of piety.

Bilal loved to be in the company of Prophet Muhammad and became exceptionally close to him. Various traditions mention Bilal having the honour of waking the Prophet each morning and spending as much time as possible in his company. The story of Bilal is often used to demonstrate the importance of pluralism and racial equality in Islam. More importantly it is an example of piety being the measure of a man, rather than race, ethnicity or social status.

In part 2 we will learn more about Bilal, the Muslim migration to Medina and the great honour bestowed on Bilal, the freed slave of Abyssinia.

Footnotes:

[1] Ibn Hisham & Talqih Fuham Alil Athar p61.

[2] Idols worshipped by the people of Mecca.

[3] The Arabic word *Ahad* is used rather than the English *one* or the Arabic *wahad* because of its meaning – not just one the numeral but *One God*.

Bilal Ibn Rabah's acceptance of Islam is a powerful story, involving slavery, conversion, torture, and rescue. It touches on aspects of racism, is a lesson in pluralism, and teaches us that piety is the only way to measure of a person's worth. Bilal's story is also the story of the *adthaan*, or call to prayer, for Bilal was also Islam's first muaddhin[1].

Across the globe, one of the most poignant symbols of Islam is the melodious call to prayer. Its sublime sound rings out across cities and meadows, on beaches, in fertile fields and in barren valleys. Once heard, the sound of the *Adthaan* is never forgotten and many people have entered the religion of Islam simply by hearing this soulful sound. *Adthaan*, which means announcement is mentioned only once in the Quran but never the less, it plays an integral part in the life of a Muslim.

For those born into Islam it is often the first sound they hear. Immediately after birth, the father or any other important Muslim in the child's life holds the newborn and whispers the words of *adthaan* into his right ear. The time for prayer is announced five times per day, from lofty minarets or from watches and computers. When a Muslim hears the *adthaan*, preparation for prayer begins. Bilal, because of his beautiful voice had the honour of being the first man in the world to call the *adthaan* and call the worshippers to prayer.

"O believers, when proclamation is made for prayer on the Day of Congregation, hasten to God's remembrance and leave business aside; that is better for you, if you did but know." (Quran 62:9)

In the year 622 Prophet Muhammad, Bilal and most of the fledgling Muslim community migrated to Medina. It was here that Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, began the work of setting up the Muslim nation. Bilal was at his side whenever possible and as one commentator said, "Every event in Mohammad's life was an event in the life of Bilal"[2]. It is said that Bilal was so close to Prophet Muhammad he had the duty of waking him in the mornings.[3]

According to authentic traditions Prophet Muhammad was concerned and anxious to find a way to summon the Muslims to prayer. He wanted something unique. It was here that Abdullah ibn Zaid, one of the Companions, informed the Prophet about a dream that he had.

‘There appeared to me in a dream a man who was wearing two green garments, in whose hand was a bell. I said, "O slave of God, will you sell that bell?" he said, "What will you do with it?" I said, "We will call the people to prayer with it." He said, "Shall I not show you something better than that?" I said, "Yes." He said, "Say, Allaahu akbar Allaahu akbar ..."[4]

God is great! God is great! I testify that there is no true deity but God. I testify that Muhammad is the messenger of God. Come to prayer! Come to

prayer! Come to salvation! Come to salvation! God is great! God is great!
There is no true deity but God.[5]

The tradition continues. ‘Prophet Muhammad listened to the description of the dream and said, "This is a true dream, (meaning a dream sent by God). Get Bilal and tell him what you have seen, teach him the words so that he can give the call, because he has a beautiful voice." So I went to Bilal and told him my dream, so he gave the call to prayer. Umar ibn al-Khattab heard the call while still in his house; he rushed out, dragging his cloak behind him, saying, "By the One who sent you with the truth, O Messenger of God, I saw the same dream." Prophet Muhammad was pleased and said "Praise be to God." “[6]

In the decade after the migration Bilal accompanied Prophet Muhammad on all his military expeditions, and had the honour of carrying Prophet Muhammad’s spear. He fought in the Battle of Badr, and in the aftermath he killed his former master, Umayya ibn Khalaf. Bilal was also present at the battle of Uhud and the battle of the Trench.[7]

Bilal’s life after his conversion to Islam contained many moments of great joy however his finest hour must have been in 630 BCE, on an occasion regarded as one of the most hallowed moments in Islamic history. After the Muslim forces had conquered Mecca, Bilal ascended to the top of the Kaba, the house of God, to call the believers to prayer. This was the first time the call to prayer was heard within Islam’s holiest city.

After the death of Prophet Muhammad, Bilal never felt the same again. A day after the Prophet’s death, Bilal went to make the usual *adthaan* for morning prayer. While giving the *adthaan* he broke down and steams of tears began to roll freely down his cheeks. He managed to finish the rest of the *adthaan* in a low voice. After that, Bilal stopped calling the *adthaan* in Madina..

The memories of Madina were too hard for him to live with, and he left for another place. Later, upon his visit to Madina at the behest of the Prophet Muhammad’s grandsons he agreed to give the *adthaan*. Old memories that lay deep down in his heart were revived and those who had experienced the golden days with Prophet Muhammad could not hold back their tears.

It is believed that Bilal died in Syria between 638 and 642 BCE. Imam al-Suyuti in his book ‘Tarikh al-Khulafa’ writes, "He (Bilal) died in Damascus when he was just over sixty years old." Others are of the opinion that he died in Medina. We can be sure that his eternal abode is Paradise for Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, called Bilal "a man of paradise"[8].

Footnotes:

- [1] The one who calls the believers to prayer.
- [2] H.A.L Craig. (<http://www.alhamra.com/Excerpts/BilalExcerpt.htm>)
- [3] Barry Hoberman
(<http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/198304/the.first.muezzin.htm>)
- [4] *Ahmad, At-Tirmidhi, Abu Dawood, & Ibn Majah*
- [5] English translation
- [6] *Ahmad, At-Tirmidhi, Abu Dawood, & Ibn Majah*
- [7] H.A.L Craig. (<http://www.alhamra.com/Excerpts/BilalExcerpt.htm>)
- [8] *Saheeh Muslim*