

The Companions of Prophet Muhammad: Bilal ibn Rabah

Description: A brief biography of Islam's first *muezzin*, Bilal ibn Rabah.

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Objectives

- To learn about the life of Bilal ibn Rabah and how his patience and perseverance paid off.

Arabic Terms

- *Sahabah* - the plural form of "Sahabi," which translates to Companions. A *sahabi*, as the word is commonly used today, is someone who saw Prophet Muhammad, believed in him and died as a Muslim.
- *Ahad* " One God.
- *Hadith* - (plural " *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.
- *Adhan* - an Islamic way of calling Muslims to the five obligatory Prayers.
- *Muezzin* - The one who calls the *Adhan*.

Bilal ibn Rabah is the second person whose life we will examine in this series of lessons about the companions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him. Bilal is sometimes referred to as Bilal Al-Habashi paying tribute to his Ethiopian (Abyssinian) heritage. The *Sahabi* Bilal ibn Rabah was one of the men closest to Prophet Muhammad. He began life as a slave, survived many tortuous years, was the first person to make the call to prayer, stood fast in the service of Islam and died at the age of sixty four. Time and time again the story of Bilal is used to demonstrate how the concepts of pluralism and racial equality are imbedded in the religion of Islam.



Bilal was born into slavery; his mother was a slave in the household of Umayyah ibn Khalaf. Bilal had a reputation for being a faithful hardworking slave and we can surmise

that he had no illusions about life. He probably thought that he would live a life of drudgery and die never having tasted freedom. He did however walk the earth at a very significant time in world history. It was the dawning of Islam and an unlettered man was calling the people to worship One God; in Arabic, *Ahad*, the One. Bilal's master was one of the leaders of Quraish[1], thus Bilal was able to hear their opinions about life in Mecca and their discussions about Prophet Muhammad.

The economic life of Mecca was dependent on idol worship and Prophet Muhammad's teachings threatened to destroy that livelihood. Prophet Muhammad was also from the tribe of Quraish and the people could not help but recognize his integrity. Bilal heard the discussions going back and forth and no doubt decided that a message of mercy, forgiveness and justice was a light and a hope worth clinging to. Bilal declared his acceptance of the message of Islam and his life of drudgery and abuse turned into a nightmare of pain. Bilal was attracted to the concept of One God, *Ahad* and it was that word that essentially saved his life.

Biographer Ibn Ishaq informs us that Bilal suffered terribly for his immediate acceptance of Muhammad's message of Islam. He was beaten mercilessly, dragged by his neck around the hills of Mecca and made to suffer long periods of starvation and thirst under the scorching Meccan sun. Ibn Ishaq wrote that Bilal's master Umayyah ibn Khalaf, 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 until you die or deny Muhammad and worship Al-Lat and Al-Uzza'[2]. Bilal would not renounce Islam and uttered only one word " *Ahad* .

The news of the tortured slave whose only word throughout the ordeal was *Ahad* soon reached Prophet Muhammad. He sent Abu Bakr to investigate. Abu Bakr was known throughout Mecca as the man who bought slaves only to free them and Umayyah ibn Khalaf charged an outrageous price. Abu Bakr however bought and freed him. Bilal tried to stay as close as possible to Prophet Muhammad and it was not long before Prophet Muhammad discovered that Bilal had a beautiful voice.

The message of Islam is as beautiful today as it was at the advent of the religion. Those who are downtrodden, marginalised and oppressed are drawn to a way of life that offers justice and mercy for all. Although in this modern world we tend to think of the human race as somehow evolved and separated from the barbarity we read about in our history, a small scratch at the surface reveals that this is not so. Slavery still exists, oppression has been taken to new and insidious levels and many people feel desolate and cut off from any source of comfort. The steady rise, all around the world, of the number of people converting to Islam is testament to the fact that comfort is to be found in the concept of *Ahad*; One God, the Most Merciful and the Most Forgiving.

The story of Bilal however does not end there. In the year 622 CE Prophet Muhammad, Bilal and most of the Muslim community migrated to Medina. Bilal was at his Prophet's side whenever possible and as one commentator said, "Every event in Muhammad's life was an event in the life of Bilal".[3] According to many *ahadith* Prophet Muhammad became concerned with the need to have a way to summon his growing community to

prayer. After listening to the dream of one of the *sahabah*, Prophet Muhammad said, "oe...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..."[4] Thus it can be said that the story of Bilal is also the story of the *Adhan*, the call to prayer because Bilal had the honour of being the first *muezzin*. The story of the call to prayer can be found here:

<http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/4744/>

In the decade after the migration to Medina Bilal was present at all of Prophet Muhammad's military expeditions and on many occasions had the honour of carrying the Prophet's spear. His life after conversion to Islam included many moments of great joy and one moment of devastating sorrow. The death of Prophet Muhammad affected him greatly, as it did all the *sahabah*. Bilal stopped calling the *Adhan* and found life in Medina unbearable without his Prophet and mentor. Many believe that Bilal died in Syria between 638 and 642 CE, others are of the opinion that he died in Medina. The place of his death is really of no consequence as we know that his eternal abode is Paradise because Prophet Muhammad called him "oea man of Paradise".[5]

Endnotes:

[1] Quraish is the name of the most powerful tribe in Mecca at the advent of Islam and the tribe to which Prophet Muhammad belonged. It is also the name of a surah in the Quran.

[2] Al-Lat, Al-Uzza and Manat form a trio of idols that were worshipped in pre-Islamic Arabia.

[3] H.A.L Craig. (<http://www.alhamra.com/Excerpts/BilalExcerpt.htm>)

[4] Ahmad, At-Tirmidhi, Abu Dawood, & Ibn Majah

[5] Saheeh Muslim.

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