

B I L A L

THE FIRST AFRICAN CONVERT TO ISLAM

Bilal (B)

It was in the year 570 a.d. that Bilal was born in Sorat, a mountainous place in Western Arabia. His father Rebah and mother Hamama had come to Arabia as slaves from ~~Abyssinia~~ Ethiopia.

Omayya bin Khalif was a rich man from the tribe of Quraish. He had ~~many slaves~~ a large family and many slaves. One of the slaves he had purchased was Bilal. He served his master as a housekeeper.

When Omayya and his family went to worship idols, Bilal would pray to one God as taught by Islam. One day his master came to know about this and he asked :

"Oh Bilal i Do you worship and prostrate before the God of Muhammad s.a. ?

" Yes i replied Bilal. I worship and prostrate the one Almighty and Great God.

On hearing this, Omayya got very angry and he started torturing Bilal every time. He forced him to lye down on burning sand under mid-day hot sun. He would then ask him to abandon Islam ~~and~~ ^{and} instead worship "Lat and Uzza" the two great idols. But Bilal who was determined in his belief of one God replied " AHAD - AHAD" meaning God is one - God is one. At times he was tortured with burning hot iron rods but he would not surrender.

Once in a very hot day under a scorching sun, Bilal was forced to lye down and ^{was} tied with a thing. Then a very heavy stone was placed over his chest and this made him unconcious. Later at sunset when he regained his senses, he found that the heavy stone was no more on his chest. He wondered who had come to his help.

On hearing the story of severe torture and sufferings of Bilal, the Prophet of Islam felt pity on him. He arranged for him to be purchased from his master. When this was done, he was set free from slavery. In this way, the Prophet had many slaves set free and set examples of how slaves were to be treated fairly and kindly.

Thus Bilal was the first African to embrace Islam. Because of his staunch faith in One God and his pure character, he soon commanded very high respect. The Prophet liked his melodious voice and made him the first Muezzin- the caller to prayers.

In appreciation of his good qualities, the Prophet told Bilal " When one is remembered for his nobility and high character, your name will be taken as an example"

Bilal remained as a close companion of the Prophet on every occasion. But when the Prophet died, he became much grieved and looked very solemn. He was not happy with the way the Caliphs ruled over Islamic countries. He discontinued giving Azan and migrated to Syria. He lived there for about ten years and died. His grave is still existing in the famous Muslim graveyard in Damascus where people go to pay respect and salute him.

Thus a poor African borne of a slave family, gained an everlasting name and respect because of his staunch faith in Islam and his pure good character.

Over 1300 years have passed since he died but his name is still remembered. The people of our time take pride in naming Islamic religious institution with his name. Bilal Muslim Mission of Tanzania and Kenya is an example of the honour to this great Muslim.