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BILAL & Other Racial Minorities in Early Islam By Dr. Abdullah bin Hamid Ali

For many Muslims, Bilal b. Rabah, is the typical starting point of conversations about blackness and social marginalization. In the present, however, he is rarely the starting point of discussions about faith, fidelity, and sincerity to the prophetic mission. Perhaps, the reason for underscoring his “race”¹ is that colorism and degenerative reflection² have had increased importance in the lives of people since the onset of the European Enlightenment. Premodern populations generally distinguished themselves by language and shared custom, and far less by skin color. This is not to suggest that Arabs, for instance, ignored the phenotypic differences between themselves and other geo-populations, like the Byzantines, Levantines, and Persians who Arabs classified as “whites” (*hamra*)³ due to their pallid skin tone. They definitely considered the “whiteness” of the aforementioned groups a rarity among Arabia’s population.⁴ However, that did not mean that the “light brown” (*asmar*) and “dark brown” (*adam*) complexions among Arabs described by lexicographers was due to them being a subcategory of “blacks”, like those of Abyssinia, Sudan, and Nubia. As matter of fact, when one reads the phenotypical description of Bilal, one sees no major deviation in his complexion from authentic Arabs, like the Prophet’s cousin Ali,⁵ Zayd,⁶ and Usamah,⁷ since they are all described as “extremely dark brown” (*adam shadid al-udmah*) in certain accounts. Although his mother’s⁸ Ethiopian heritage did not exclude Usamah b. Zayd from authentic Arabness, comparing his nose to that of Bilal’s might lead one to conclude that the latter’s appearance was far less “African” than that of the former’s. Usamah is described as

¹ Colorism became popular during the Enlightenment period when anthropologists like Carl Linneaus (1707-1778) of Sweden begun classifying people into racial groups based upon their putative color, along with stereotypical behavioral traits associated with each group. In Bilal’s time, the notion of a homogenous transnational or pan-African “black” race did not exist. Blacks on the continent of Africa did not consider themselves members of a color-essentialist race. And, intra-“black” xenophobia was just as normative as it was for non-“blacks” since people favored tribal and clan interests and concerns over others.

² By “degenerative reflection” I mean the notion of races degenerating from a state of presumed archetypal perfection, which at one time meant degenerating from “whiteness” in light of the belief that Europeans were the first people.

³ Ibn Manzūr (711/1311) says in his *Lisān al-‘Arab*,

The reds (*al-ḥamrā*) are a reference to the non-Arabs (*‘ajam*) because of their whiteness, since extreme white complexion (*shuqra*) is the predominant of their colors. And the Arabs would call the non-Arabs predominated by whiteness, like the Greeks (*rum*), the Persians (*furs*), and others like them, the “reds” (*al-ḥamrā*).

Ibn Manzūr al-Ifriqī al-Miṣrī. *Lisān al-‘Arab*, Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1882, p. 209.

⁴ The famed Muslim historian and hadith specialist, Ḥāfiẓ al-Dhahabī (748/1348), said in his *Sīyar al-A‘lām al-Nubalā*,

The reds (*al-ḥamrā*) according to the people of the Hejaz are the pale whites (*al-baydā’ bi shuqra*). But this [complexion] is rare amongst them (i.e. the Arabs). An example of this from the hadith is, “...a red man resembling one of the clients (*mawālī*).” The speaker meant that he was the color of the clients who were captured among the Christians of the Levant (Shām), Byzantium (Rūm), and the Persians (*‘ajam*).

Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ‘Uthmān Al-Dhahabī. *Sīyar al-A‘lām al-Nubalā*, Jordan; Saudi Arabia: Bayt al-Afkar al-Dawliya, 2004, p. vol. 1/2084.

⁵ Ibn Sa’d relates a report attributed to Muhammad b. ‘Ali al-Baqir, the father of Imam Ja’far al-Sadiq, that ‘Ali b. Abi Talib was extremely dark brown (*adam shadid al-udmah*).

Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa’d b. Mani’. *Kitāb al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/25.

⁶ According to Ibn al-Jawzi,

Zayd was short and extremely dark brown (*adam shadid al-udmah*). There was flatness (*fatas*) in his nose. God’s Messenger manumitted him and married him to his freedslave Umm Ayman who was God Messenger’s caretaker (*hadinah*). And, she gave birth to Usamah...who was black (*aswad*).

Ibn al-Jawzi, ‘Abd Al-Rahman. *Tanwir al-Ghabash fi Fadl al-Sudan wa al-Habash*. Marzuq Ali Ibrahim Ed. Riyadh: Dar al-Sharif, 1998, p. 131.

⁷ According to Ibn al-Athir, “Zayd was wheatish white (*abyad ahmar*), and his son Usamah was very dark brown (*adam shadid al-udmah*).”

Ibn al-Athir, ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma’rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 428.

⁸ Umm Ayman’s name was Barakah bt. Tha’labah b. ‘Amr. She was Muhammad’s caretaker or custodian (*hadinah*) at birth. He was placed in her charge by his mother Aminah. Ayman’s father was a man name ‘Ubayd b. ‘Amr or ‘Ubayd b. Zayd. Umm Ayman was the young maidservant (*wasifab*) of Muhammad’s father Abdullah. Once she was set free, she remained attached to Muhammad’s household. She is usually described as an Abyssinian woman. But, her pedigree gives the impression that she may have been an Arab, since Tha’labah, her father’s name, and ‘Amr, her grandfather, are common Arabic names.

Al-‘Asqalani, Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-‘Asriyyah, 2012, p. 1982.



having a pudgy or flat nose (*aftas*), like his father, in some accounts. Bilal, on the other hand, is described as having an aquiline (*ajna*) or hook nose.⁹

Despite all we hear and read of Bilal and other historical Islamic personalities, one must be careful not to put too much trust in the details reported about the lives of individual people. The reason is that early Muslim historians were far less scrupulous about history than they were about authenticating the laws, practices, and sayings of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.¹⁰ In other words, while one can be relatively certain of the broad outline of Islamic history and the major events happening in the Prophet's life, especially when corroborated by the Qur'an, one has less reason to uncritically accept the minutia related about the lives of individual characters. One exception to this rule, however, may be when the individual being spoken of is as popular as Bilal, especially when countless people have related their stories. Naturally, the challenge is to distill the points where each account diverges from its sister story, and to pursue those facts which help us to formulate a coherent tale.

According to Ibn Khaldun,

Narrative and factual errors are often committed by historians, exegetes, and leading transmitters due to their reliance upon mere narration, both *unreliable* and *reliable*, without judging them by their sources and analogues. They do not probe them with the scale of wisdom and acquaintance with the norms of sentient life nor the employment of critical analysis of reports. Consequently, they deviate from the truth, wander in the desert of delusion and error, especially concerning the calculation of [the amount of] wealth [owned] and the numbers of soldiers [in a battle] whenever they are presented in narratives, since they are the most likely place of falsehood and the platform of pointless excessive talk (*badhar*). So, they must be measured by their sources and foundations.¹¹

Bilal was neither the only “black” Companion of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ nor the only “racial” minority among them. Bilal's brother Khalid and sister Ghufayrah were also Muslims of Abyssinian descent. Salman the Persian was another anomaly in Arabia. It must be kept in mind, though, that what is meant to be “racial minority” in the premodern world was not the same as we understand it today. Firstly, conceptions of race were far less biologically determinative than moderns often perceive. Cultural factors like language and shared history played a major role in group affiliation and solidarity. Xenophobia is not the exclusive province of any particular race. All societies have their share of xenophobia, a fact borne out by the close study of history.

Bilal, by most accounts, was both an “ethnic” outsider¹² to Arabia and a freed slave. And, both tribalism and slave status played a major role in social marginalization and vulnerability in 7th century Arabia. This is an important fact so as to curb the impulse to blame all marginalization and social exclusion on color, “systemic racism”, or some other form of bigotry.

The aim of this article is to feature alongside Bilal a number of other “minorities” in the early life of the pioneer Muslim community in Arabia. And though their minority status isn't always racially distinct from their tormentors, their status, nevertheless, operated in the way it would in a society which excludes minorities from important roles and rights which contribute to their security and social enfranchisement. As in other societies in the premodern world, minorities—especially ethnic minorities—enjoyed limited protection from physical harm and limited participation in government. It is true that Bilal and other Abyssinians were not deemed fit to occupy the office of caliph. However, the same was also true of all non-Arabs and Arabs who were not members of the Quraysh tribe. Roles less influential than head of state were, nevertheless, available for others to occupy. This had far less to do with color than it had to do with the rules of tribalism and other practical concerns. As stated before, most Arabs were light and dark brown anyway. So, any claim of “blacks”, which generally includes the brown and “light-skinned”, being denied political and socioeconomic privilege can only be defended at a cost.

There were, undoubtedly, many Abyssinians/Ethiopians in Arabia by the time of the Prophet's advent. And, a number of them embraced the message of Islam. While the sociopolitical contributions of most of them were marginal, the Prophet ﷺ did, indeed, adopt a policy of inclusion. Bilal, as we will see, had multiple roles, not merely, as some imagine, “a nice singing voice.” While many of the personages showcased in the forthcoming

⁹ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 131.

¹⁰ Al-Khatib Al-Baghdadi relates that Ahmad b. Hanbal said,

When matters pertaining to the lawful, the prohibited, the prophetic norms, and laws, were conveyed to us, we strictly verified sources (*tashaddadna fi al-asaniid*). And, when matters pertaining to meritorious acts and things that neither institute nor abolish a law, we went easy on sources (*tasahalna fi al-asaniid*).

Al-Baghdadi, Ahmad b. 'Ali al-Khatib. *Kitab al-Kifayah fi 'Ilm al-Riwayah*. Hyderabad, India: Dar al-Ma'arif al-Uthmaniyyah, 1938, p. 134.

¹¹ Ibn Khaldun, 'Abd Al-Rahman. *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, p. 8. The sources and foundations in Ibn Khaldun's view are: 1) the nature of custom, 2) of politics, 3) of urbanization, 4) the nature of human social interaction, 5) analogizing the present with the past, and 6) the seen with the unseen.

¹² Bilal may have only been considered an ethnic outsider in light of the belief that his father was Abyssinian. But, there is good reason to believe that he was more culturally Arab than east African.



were Abyssinians, I will also include others who were, similarly, persecuted and barred from political office who were Arabs. These examples will corroborate my thesis that tribalism and slave status were the main contributing factors to limited social protections and power sharing in Arabia, as in other premodern societies, rather than skin color.

Bilal's Story

His name was Bilal, son of Rabah. His surname was Abu 'Abd Allah or Abu Abd Al-Karim or Abu 'Amr. There is discrepancy about his place of birth and the year of his death. While there is agreement that he was born in Arabia, some say his birthplace was in the region of As-Sarrah in Eastern Arabia, while others say he was born in Mecca among the Jumah clan.¹³ As for the year of his demise, opinions are numerous ranging from 17, 18, 20, 23, and 25 AH having passed away in his mid to late 60's.¹⁴ He is believed to have been buried in Darayya, Syria at the *Kisan* gate or the *Saghir* gate. But, according to Ibn Mandah he was buried in *Halab*.¹⁵

He was described as tall, dark, thin, with a lot of hair, an arched back, with an aquiline nose, thin-bearded with numerous grey hairs that he never dyed.¹⁶ He participated in all the major battles including Badr which earned for him the special status among the elite Companions. Unlike certain Arab notables like 'Uthman b. 'Affan¹⁷ and Hassan b. Thabit¹⁸, he never missed a battle. Nor was he treated like the hypocrites who were not allowed to participate in battles due to their treachery in Uhud (Q 9:83).

His mother was an Abyssinian woman named Hamamah, nicknamed Sukaynah.¹⁹ There is little to no known material about Bilal's father, Rabah. Some say Bilal was a child from Banu Jumah, which suggests that his father was actually an Arab rather than Abyssinian.²⁰ But, the more widely accepted view is that Rabah was an Abyssinian prison of war who became a slave. There is no mention of him ever meeting Muhammad ﷺ either before or after his advent as God's emissary nor of him accepting Islam. There is likewise no information concerning whether or not he divorced Bilal's mother, Hamamah, or if he died leaving her a widow and Bilal an orphan. Baladhuri states that his parents were both enslaved as war captives, married, and then gave birth to Bilal.²¹ Pursuant to a rule predating Islam and upheld by Muslim jurists, a child of slave parents is judged *de facto* to be a slave from birth.

If Rabah was, indeed, an Arab, Bilal should have easily been accepted as one, since Arabness was determined patrilineally without regard to the race of the mother. Bilal would merely have been akin to famous Arabs like 'Ammar b. Yasir,²² 'Amr b. al-'As and his uterine brother 'Uqbah b. Nafi'²³ who all had Abyssinian mothers but never had their Arabness challenged. That Bilal was severely persecuted provides plenty of fodder for the presumption of his non-indigenesness. What if, however, his dejected state was more due to his own bonded status and that of his father before him, not because of his Abyssinian pedigree? Yasir and his sons were authentically Arab, as were Suhayb al-Rumi and Khabbab b. al-Aratt. However, that did not prevent them from being persecuted and tortured. Khabbab even claimed that his own torture was worse than that of Bilal's, since Bilal had family or a tribe advocating on his behalf, while Khabbab had none. And, what of the report of Bilal belittled by Abu Dharr through mention of his mother's blackness referring to Bilal as, "Son of a black woman"?²⁴ Wouldn't such a statement also disparage Arabs, like the aforementioned who also had Abyssinian mothers? Perhaps, it wasn't the mere factor of his mother's "blackness" that made this comment so offensive. Could it have also been due to the fact that she was also a former slave, while the mothers of the aforementioned were not? That's not to mention the fact that the very Companion accused of disparaging his color was himself described as dark brown (*adam*).

But, even if Rabah was Abyssinian, as is popularly acknowledged, there is good reason to believe that Bilal was more culturally an Arab than he was an east African. He was, after all, born and raised in Arabia. We

¹³ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 129.

¹⁴ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 131.

¹⁵ Al-'Asqalani, Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar. *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995, 1/527.

¹⁶ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa'd b. Mani'. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/220.

¹⁷ 'Uthman missed the Battle of Badr due to nursing his sick wife Ruqayyah, Muhammad's daughter.

Al-'Asqalani, Ibn Hajar. *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995, 5/503.

¹⁸ Ibn Hajar says of Hassan, "He was an early Muslim (*qadim al-Islam*). He did not attend a single military encounter (*mashhad*) with the Prophet—God's blessing and peace upon him. He was cowardly."

Al-'Asqalani, Ibn Hajar. *Tahdhib al-Tahdhib*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1995, 2/231.

¹⁹ Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Ashraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/209.

²⁰ *Ibid*.

²¹ *Ibid*.

²² His biography is forthcoming.

²³ His mother's name is Salma bt. Harmalah. Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 942.

²⁴ In light of the reasonable suspicion that many Arabs had African mothers, calling a person "son of a black woman" may have been more akin to calling a person "white trash" rather than "Nigger."



could reasonably assume from this fact a high fluency in the Arabic language despite the spurious report claiming that Bilal found it difficult to pronounce the ‘sh’ sound of the Arabic letter ‘*sheen*’ and pronounced it as ‘s’ like the consonant ‘*seen*.’ In an apocryphal tradition, Muhammad ﷺ supposedly said, “Verily, Bilal’s ‘*seen*’ is ‘*sheen*’ with God.”²⁵ The famed traditionalist exegete Ibn Kathir said of this report and Bilal, “Bilal had a beautiful resounding voice and was eloquent [in Arabic]. As for what has been related that Bilal’s *seen* is *sheen* with God, it is baseless.”²⁶

Nevertheless, Bilal would eventually serve Abd Allah b. Jad’an, a wealthy Meccan man known for his generosity.²⁷ According to another account, his owner was the cruel Umayyah b. Khalaf.²⁸ After witnessing a miracle of the Prophet ﷺ wherein he caused a goat to lactate without exhausting any of its milk, Bilal accepted Islam. According to the account, the Prophet ﷺ drank from it, and also gave drink to Abu Bakr and Bilal for four days. On the fourth day, Abu Jahl, the chief antagonist of Muslims, noticed an excess of milk in the teats of ‘Abd Allah b. Jad’an’s goats suspecting that Muhammad ﷺ had been by working some of his “sorcery.”²⁹ He cautioned Ibn Jad’an to be on alert regarding Bilal’s suspected conversion. One day Bilal paid a visit to the idols in the Ka’bah and commenced spitting on each of them while invoking God’s curse upon all those who worshipped them. Upon receiving news of this, Ibn Jad’an permitted for Abu Jahl and Umayyah b. Khalaf to commence with Bilal’s torture.³⁰ It is said that Abu Jahl used to lie him supine in the afternoon sun in the Meccan thoroughfare while placing a large stone on his chest. Bilal would eventually get his sweet revenge, killing Umayyah during the first major battle and Muslim victory at Badr.³¹

Biographers are also at variance about the terms of Bilal’s manumission. It was said the Jumah clan had already freed him prior to Umayyah’s torture of him. According to Ibn Sa’d and others, Abu Bakr purchased Bilal’s freedom.³² But according to Suyuti, he traded him for a stronger Abyssinian pagan slave named Fustat. Fustat was a blacksmith and a major source of income for his master Abu Bakr. Umayyah, then, demanded Fustat’s wife, then his two sons, and then 100 dinars from Abu Bakr.³³ Some allege that Abu Bakr borrowed the money from the Prophet’s uncle Al-‘Abbas who still had not yet accepted Islam.³⁴

That Bilal was an Abyssinian is a foregone conclusion for most Muslim historians. And, Abyssinia’s connection to Arabia predates Islam and the birth of the Prophet. Surah 105 *Al-Fil*, though implicitly, is said to refer to an Abyssinian invasion attempted by an angry chieftain known as Abraha which is believed to have happened in the year of the Prophet’s birth. Abraha with an army of elephants endeavored to destroy the Kabah but was vanquished by a miraculous swarm of birds which pelted and decimated his army with stones. It stands to reason that many of the Abyssinian slaves in Mecca during Muhammad’s ﷺ own life became captives during this campaign. Similarly, this might explain why certain Arabs were born to Abyssinian mothers, although according to Al-Jahiz intermarriage between east Africans and Arabians predated Islam.³⁵ But, even though Abyssinia’s story in the life of Islam begins with this dark mark left by Abraha, its redemption is later secured when Muhammad ﷺ directed a number of his early followers to the east African kingdom of Axum to take asylum with its Negus. A second detachment of emigrants would eventually follow, thereby solidifying the positive views held by Muslims of Abyssinian Christians since that time.

²⁵ The hadith with explicit mention of Abu Dharr saying, “O you son of a black woman!” is reported by Al-Bayhaqi and Ibn ‘Asakir with a weak chain. But, the sounder reports of the incident are alluded to in more reliable collections, like Sahih al-Bukhari without mention of the explicit slight nor mention of Bilal’s name.

Al-Bayhaqi, Ahmad b. al-Husayn. *Al-Jami’ li Shu’ab al-Iman*. Mukhtar Ahmad al-Nadwi Ed. Riyadh: Maktabah al-Rushd, 2003, #4772 p. 130.

²⁶ Al-Dimashqi, Abu al-Fida Isma’il b. Kathir. *Al-Bidayah wa al-Nihayah*. Beirut: Maktabah al-Ma’arif, 1993, 7/102. A number of scholars have declared the hadith to be baseless and spurious, including Imam al-Sakhawi in his *Al-Maqasid Al-Hasanah*, Hafiz al-Mizzi in his *Al-Tadhkirah*, and Al-‘Ajuni in his *Kash al-Khafa*.

²⁷ Al-Suyuti, ‘Abd Al-Rahman. *Raf’ Sha’n al-Hubshan*. Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Wahhab Ed. Cairo: Al-Mu’allif, 1991, p. 242.

²⁸ Perhaps, Abd Allah b. Jad’an sold or gave Bilal to Umayyah. The reports in most histories are not explicit about Umayyah being his owner. Some simply say that Bilal fell to his lot or “became” Umayyah’s property, which suggests that Bilal had a former owner who may have been ‘Abd Allah b. Jad’an.

²⁹ This gives the impression that Abu Jahl was either responsible for the management of the estate of ‘Abd Allah b. Jad’an or a family member or, perhaps, both.

³⁰ Al-Suyuti, ‘Abd Al-Rahman. *Raf’ Sha’n al-Hubshan*. Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Wahhab Ed. Cairo: Al-Mu’allif, 1991, p. 242-244.

³¹ Ibn al-Athir, ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma’rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 129.

³² Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa’d b. Mani’. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/213.

³³ Al-Suyuti, ‘Abd Al-Rahman. *Raf’ Sha’n al-Hubshan*. Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Wahhab Ed. Cairo: Al-Mu’allif, 1991, p. 244.

³⁴ Al-Suyuti, ‘Abd Al-Rahman. *Raf’ Sha’n al-Hubshan*. Muhammad ‘Abd Al-Wahhab Ed. Cairo: Al-Mu’allif, 1991, p. 244-245.

³⁵ Al-Jahiz argues in his polemic against Arabs who berate the *Zanj* or “negroes” for their black skin that,

Out of your ignorance, after deeming us to be compatible mates for your women in pre-Islamic times, you deemed that bad once the justice of Islam came.

‘Abd Al-Salam Muhammad Harun. *Rasa’il al-Jahiz*, “Fakhr al-Sudan”, Cairo: Maktaba al-Khaniji, 1964, vol. 1/195.



This, of course, is not to suggest that Arabia was pro-“black” and anti-“white.” Again, let us not forget about how tribalism and premodern race operated. It is, however, a striking example which undermines the assumption of anti-black racism pervading among the early Arabs and Muslims.³⁶ Even the notion of blacks playing a token or marginal role in the management of the early Muslim community is challenged by the fact that Bilal was not only the first assigned the important task of calling people to prayer (*mu'adhdhin*). The Prophet's community elevated faith and piety above all other factors, especially that of race and/or pedigree. So, Bilal's prominence as the first and primary prayer announcer appointed by the Prophet ﷺ himself speaks volumes about notions of inclusion.

Bilal was the first to call the *adhan*. But, he was one of three or four men appointed to do so. The other two most famous were 'Amr b. Umm Maktum³⁷ and Abu Mahdhurah.³⁸ He was also placed over the treasury (*bayt al-mal*) and aided the Prophet ﷺ in securing his daily sustenance and attire. Bilal was the one who would steer the Prophet's sacrificial goat in front of him to the prayer grounds on the day of 'Id. He did the same during Abu Bakr's reign. After him Sa'd al-Quraz³⁹ did the same during the reigns of 'Umar and 'Uthman. Apparently, Sa'd also called the *adhan* for the prophet. 'Umar b. al-Khattab reportedly willed the post to Sa'd and his progeny.⁴⁰

It is said that the last time Bilal called the *adhan* was after the death of the Prophet ﷺ and prior to his burial. After Abu Bakr became caliph, Bilal refused to call the *adhan* for anyone else other than the Prophet.⁴¹ It is also said that he called the *adhan* at the request of 'Umar during a visit to Sham which led all the people to cry upon hearing it.⁴² In one narration, he didn't call the *adhan* for Abu Bakr but did not leave for Sham until the death of the latter in response to his request to remain. According to one account, after his departure from Medina he had a dream wherein the Prophet ﷺ asked him “What is this abrasiveness, O Bilal? Has the time not yet come for you to visit us?” He then set out for Medina and was found sobbing at the Prophet's grave beside his grandsons, Hasan and Husayn. At their request, Bilal alighted upon the roof of the mosque and made the call to prayer. The sound of his voice reverberated throughout the city drawing crowds who all wept due to the memory of the days of God's messenger.⁴³

Of course, none of this means that Bilal's life after becoming Muslim was free of the sort of obstacles that any outsider might face in a society where he finds himself a minority. Harith b. Hisham and Safwan b. Umayyah both objected to Bilal calling the *adhan* on the day of the conquest. The first said, “Look at this Ethiopian.” The latter said, “If God dislikes it, He will change it.”⁴⁴ They were both new converts to the religion. In other versions of the story, similar comments were made by Al-Harith b. Hisham, Suhayl b. 'Amr, and Attab b. Asid, while Abu Sufyan reportedly held his tongue out of fear that God might inform the Messenger. Exegetes like Qurtubi report that it was on this occasion that verse 49:13 stating, “*Verily, the most noble of you to God are those of you who are most dutiful [to Him]*” was revealed.⁴⁵ The Prophet ﷺ

³⁶ According to Bernard Lewis,

The Arabs, that is to say, as swarthy whites, felt superior to the fairer-skinned peoples to the north of them but were entirely free from any feeling of color prejudice directed against their darker southern neighbors.

Bernard Lewis. *Race & Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, p. 19.

³⁷ The strongest view is that his name was 'Amr b. Qays b. Za'idah. He was the most popular of Muhammad's blind Companions who was appointed to call the *adhan*.

Al-'Asqalani, Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-'Asriyyah, 2012, p. 1132-1133.

³⁸ The strongest view is that his name was Aws b. Salamah. He was taught the *adhan* by the Prophet. According to some of his biographers, he did not emigrate to Medina. Rather, he was among those who remained in Mecca as a Muslim.

Al-'Asqalani, Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-'Asriyyah, 2012, p. 1762.

³⁹ Sa'd b. 'A'idh al-Quraz was the freedslave of 'Ammar b. Yasir who was appointed by Muhammad as the official prayer announcer in the Quba mosque and in the absence of Bilal. Bilal would also deputize him in his absence as he did upon the death of Muhammad and his subsequent relocation to the Levant.

Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, pp. 467-468.

⁴⁰ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa'd b. Mani'. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/217.

⁴¹ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa'd b. Mani'. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/218.

⁴² Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Ashraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/219.

⁴³ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 130.

⁴⁴ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa'd b. Mani'. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/215.

⁴⁵ Imam Qurtubi relates this in his exegesis on Q 49:13. The three men are 'Attāb b. Asīd, Ḥārith b. Hishām, and Suhayl b. 'Amr. These were all members of the Meccan elite who accepted Islam on the day of the Meccan conquest. Abū Sufyān is also reported to have participated in this conversation but refrained from commenting beyond saying, “I will say nothing. I fear that the lord of Heaven will give news of it.” Muhammad b. Ahmad Al-Qurtubi. *Al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'an wa al-Mubayyin limā taḍammanahu min al-Sunnah wa Āy al-Furqān*, Beirut: Mu'assassa al-Risala, 2006, vol.



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Muhammad ﷺ then gave a speech wherein he mentioned that, “Each of you is from Adam, and God created Adam from dirt”, apparently suggesting that Bilal more resembled their forefather than anyone of them. And, fathers meant the world to Arabs.

Both Bilal and his brother Khalid’s attempts to marry were sometimes undermined. When proposing marriage to a Yemeni family he said, “I am Bilal and this is my brother; two slaves from Abyssinia. We were lost and God guided us. We were slaves and God freed us. If you marry to us, then praise belongs to God. And, if you reject us, then God is greater.”⁴⁶ Although it was sometimes difficult for Bilal to marry the woman he wanted, certain Arab Companions broke with the social norms of only marrying one’s daughters to Arab men of repute. So, Bilal had at least two Arab wives, Halah bt. ‘Awf and the daughter of Al-Bukayr.

AMIR B. FUHAYRAH

Though he was not Abyssinian, ‘Amir b. Fuhayrah was a black-skinned Arab (*aswad*) from the Azd tribe of Yemen⁴⁷ who was persecuted upon accepting Islam. Like many others in Arabian society, his torment appears to have had a lot to do with his former slave status. ‘Amir was owned by Tufayl b. ‘Abd Allah b. al-Harith al-Azdi, uterine brother of ‘Aishah and ‘Abd Al-Rahman b. Abi Bakr through their mother Umm Ruman. Like numerous freed slaves, Abu Bakr b. al-Siddiq purchased ‘Amir’s freedom once witnessing his persecution.

‘Amir was one of the few people aware of the Prophet’s location when he and Abu Bakr emigrated from Mecca to Medina, and he accompanied and served them during the great journey. He tended to Abu Bakr’s estate and livestock during the day and would set out at night to the cave in Mount Thawr where the latter and the Prophet ﷺ took refuge. ‘Amir would come accompanied with lactating ewes to give the two of them drink. He would at times be accompanied by Abu Bakr’s son Abdullah. ‘Amir would cover Abdullah’s tracks with the ewes ensuring the Meccans would not find the direct path to the Prophet’s location.

At the age of 40 in the 4th year after the emigration, ‘Amir accompanied a delegation of approximately 40 Muslim missionaries⁴⁸ sent by Muhammad ﷺ to a place in the Hijaz called *Bi’r Ma’unah* (or Ma’unah’s well). During this expedition the teachers were ambushed by one of the local tribes. As a consequence, Muhammad ﷺ reportedly prayed an entire month for their destruction in light of the treachery. During this incident, ‘Amir b. Fuhayrah was martyred. His martyrdom narrative includes a miraculous account of his body being taken by angels after being speared by Jabbar b. Salamah al-Kila’i⁴⁹ who later accepted Islam due to what he witnessed. According to the story, after stabbing ‘Amir and removing his spear, Jabbar saw his body disappear into thin air or saw no traces of ‘Amir. In one version, the reason his body wasn’t found was that the angels buried his corpse.⁵⁰ Another account says that the earth swallowed ‘Amir’s body. In another the angels lifted his body to heaven. Whatever the truth may be, according to claims, his body was never recovered among the dead.⁵¹

YASAR OR AFLAH ABU FUKAYHAH

Another tormented soul in light of his slave status was Yasar or Aflah the freedslave of the clan of ‘Abd al-Dar.⁵² His surname was Abu Fukayah, and he was reportedly a slave of ‘Safwan b. Umayyah al-Jumahi,⁵³ the same clan that owned Bilal b. Rabah. Fukayah was a daughter of his who also accepted Islam. Abu Fukayhah and Bilal allegedly accepted Muhammad’s ﷺ message in the same period. He was possibly an Abyssinian, although some say he, like Ibn Fuhayrah, was an Arab from Azd.⁵⁴ He was subjected to the same sort of torture as Bilal by Umayyah and the latter’s brother Ubayy. Abu Fuhaykah was reportedly lied supine in the scorching heat on the burning hot ground with a boulder on his chest until his tongue lolled from his mouth due to exhaustion and near death. But, he refused to grant his tormentors their wish to have him renounce Islam and the Muslim god. As with Bilal and Ibn Fuhayrah, Abu Bakr is credited with having purchased his freedom.

19/411.

⁴⁶ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa’d b. Mani’. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/218. Ibn Sa’d relates that Bilal married the daughter of a man named Al-Bukayr. One version simply says that he married an Arab woman from Banu Zahrah (*Ibn Sa’d* 219). Al-Bukayr’s family according to Baladhuri were members of the Kinanah clan (*Ansab* 215).

⁴⁷ According to Ibn Hajar, ‘Amir b. Fuhayrah was from Banu Tamim (*Isabah* 758).

⁴⁸ Al-Matlabi, Muhammad b. Ishaq b. Yasar. *Al-Sirah Al-Nabawiyyah*. Ahmad Farid al-Mazidi Ed. Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2004, 379. According to Ibn Ishaq, 40 Muslim missionaries were sent by Muhammad.

⁴⁹ Also called Jabbar b. Salma and Jabbar b. Sulma al-Kilabi instead of Kila’i. (*Tabaqat* 212, *Usd* 170)

⁵⁰ Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Asbraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/220.

⁵¹ Ibn al-Athir, ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma’rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 619.

⁵² Ibn al-Athir, ‘Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma’rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 59.

⁵³ Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Asbraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/220.

⁵⁴ Al-‘Asqalani, Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-‘Asriyyah, 2012, p. 1745.



LUBINAH, ZINNIRAH, AND UMM ‘UBAYS

Neither persecution nor the rescue from torment by Abu Bakr was limited to men. The most vulnerable of all people were brave women who risked everything by following the dictates of their conscience. Among them were women like Lubinah, Zinnirah, and Umm ‘Ubays.⁵⁵ According to Ibn Sa’d, Lubinah was the maidservant of the clan of Al-Mu’ammil b. Habib b. Tamim. She accepted Islam prior to ‘Umar b. al-Khattab, who used to torture and choke her until she fell unconscious. Lubinah reportedly would threaten ‘Umar with divine reprisal if he did not accept God’s message.⁵⁶ There is very little information available about her. So, it isn’t possible to conjecture about her race or color.

Zinnirah, on the other hand, was a Roman/Greek slave who also received similar mistreatment from ‘Umar.⁵⁷ According to her biographers, she lost her vision after accepting Muhammad’s ﷺ message. The Meccans attributed the misfortune to their chief gods, Lat and Uzza. She rebuked them and vehemently repudiated this assertion, and God restored her vision according to Muslim historians. The pagans then attributed the restoration of her sight to Muhammad’s ﷺ alleged “sorcery” (*sibr*). Abu Bakr as many times before rescued both Lubinah and Zinnirah from their captivity by purchasing their freedom.

Umm ‘Ubays was the mother of ‘Ubays b. Kurayz, the wife of Kurayz b. Rabi’ah b. Habib.⁵⁸ She was among seven slaves freed by Abu Bakr after witnessing their torture.⁵⁹ According to some, she belonged to the clan of Taym b. Murrah, while others claim that she was the slavegirl of the clan of Zuhrah.⁶⁰ Her ethnic origin and real name are both indeterminate.

THE FAMILY OF YASIR B. ‘AMIR AL-‘ABSI

According to a tradition ascribed to the Companion ‘Abd Allah b. Mas’ud,

The first to make their Islam public were seven: God’s messenger—God’s blessing and peace upon him, Abu Bakr, ‘Ammar and his mother Sumayyah, Suhayb, Bilal, and Miqdad. God protected God’s messenger—God’s blessing and peace upon him—with his paternal uncle Abu Talib. God protected Abu Bakr with his people. The rest of them were seized by the pagans who adorned them with iron coats and anointed them in the sun. And, every single one of them complied with their demands except for Bilal. He cared not for his life in service to God, and he was trivial in his owners’ eyes. So, they seized him and handed him over to the youths who would parade him on the narrow Meccan roads while he repeated, “One...One.”⁶¹

In another version of this tradition by the Successor Mujahid b. Jabr, Khabbab [b. al-Aratt] is listed in place of Miqdad [b. ‘Amr].⁶² Despite that discrepancy, these traditions provide a good starting point of reflection upon the type of people who were persecuted in early Islam and why.

Returning to the tradition of the seven people who first made their Islam public knowledge, we showcase the illustrious Companion ‘Ammar b. Yasir. Although there is no reported discrepancy about ‘Ammar being an Arab, he still occupied minority status. His minority status, however, was not the result of his skin color. It had everything to do with his parents’ lack of noble status in Arabia. As with ‘Amir b. Fuhayrah and Abu Fuhaykah, ‘Ammar’s father Yasir was of Yemeni descent i.e. a Qahtani Arab rather than ‘Adnani like those who predominated politically in the Hijaz.

‘Ammar was tall and dark brown, broad shouldered, grey breasted, and balding on top. He had dark blue eyes mixed with red (*ashbal*). He had a brother named Abdullah b. Yasir who was apparently from a different mother.⁶³ His mother Sumayyah was an Abyssinian freedslave of Banu Makhzum who was martyred by Abu Jahl thereby becoming Islam’s first martyr.⁶⁴ She is sometimes referred to as “The seventh of seven in Islam.” This, however, is a matter of dispute in light of the many people known to have accepted Islam before her whose number exceed seven. His father Yasir was a Qahtani Urani Arab from Yemen and an ally of Banu Makhzum. Abdullah and his father would later die in Mecca. They were among the early Muslims who were

⁵⁵ She was also called Umm ‘Unays.

⁵⁶ Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Ashraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/221.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ Al-‘Asqalani, Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-‘Asriyyah, 2012, p. 2019.

⁵⁹ The others are Bilal, ‘Amir b. Fuhayrah, Lubinah, Zinnirah, ‘Umm ‘Ubays, and the maidservant of the clan of Nahd b. Zayd and her daughter. If we add Abu Fukayhah, this would equal eight.

⁶⁰ Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Ashraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/222.

⁶¹ Al-Baladhuri, Ahmad b. Yahya b. Jabir. *Ansab al-Ashraf*. Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1996, 1/210.

⁶² “The first to make their Islam public were seven: God’s messenger, Abu Bakr, Bilal, Khabbab, Suhayb, ‘Ammar, and Sumayyah. As for God’s messenger and Abu Bakr, their people protected them. As for the others, they were adorned with iron coats of mail and basked in the intense heat of the sun. And, Abu Jahl came to Sumayyah and stabbed her with a spear, killing her. (*Usd* 1535)

⁶³ Abdullah is not mentioned in Sumayyah’s biography as one of her sons.

⁶⁴ She was tortured for her faith by Banu al-Mughirah b. ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Umar b. Makhzum. Abu Jahl stabbed her in her vagina with a spear. Abu Jahl was later killed by Abdullah b. Mas’ud.



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tortured in God's way. Sumayyah's master was named Abu Hudhayfah b. al-Mughirah al-Makhzumi. Abu Hudhayfah was Yasir's handler (*halif*) who married Sumayyah to him.

After his mother, 'Ammar was set free as well. He was one of the first 30-40 Muslims. His father Yasir originally came to Mecca along with his brothers Harith and Malik in search of a fourth missing brother of theirs. Harith and Malik returned to Yemen. But, Yasir remained and was led to subscribe into Banu Makhzum for limited protection. His acceptance of the Prophet's message was considered a sign of betrayal which led to his protected status being removed even though this happened after the death of Abu al-Hudhayfah, his former patron of the aforementioned clan. The same was the case with Ammar and his mother Sumayyah.

Q 16:106 which permits recanting one's faith under duress was revealed in his regard. He was forced to revile the Prophet ﷺ under torture. His mother on the other hand refused as did Bilal even though the aforementioned tradition by Ibn Mas'ud claims that Bilal is the only of those tortured who refused to renounce Islam. 'Ammar and his entire family were tortured and had no recourse to protection like so many others in spite of being authentic Arabs. What made this possible was the fact that his father Yasir's tribe in Yemen were too far away to ensure his safety. His pact with Banu Makhzum was broken once their acceptance of the Prophet's message was discovered. Muhammad ﷺ passed by them one day while observing their torture and said, "Endure, O family of Yasir! You have an appointment in Paradise."

In one account, 'Ammar was accosted by the Companion Khalid b. al-Walid in the presence of the Prophet. To this the Prophet ﷺ responded that, "Whoever shows enmity towards 'Ammar shows enmity towards God. And, whoever angers 'Ammar angers God." On another occasion someone said to him, "O you severed ear slave!" 'Ammar lost his ear on the day of al-Yamamah fighting the army of the false prophet Musaylimah.

Despite his struggles, 'Ammar b. Yasir has the honor of having been the first person to build a mosque in Islam. He founded the Al-Quba' Mosque, which started as a special arrangement of stones put together by him designating the place where the Prophet ﷺ would pray once he arrived on his long journey from Mecca during the emigration. The Caliph Umar also made him governor of Kufah for a time.

SUHAYB B. SINAN AL-RUMI

Another presumed racial minority was Suhayb b. Sinan, known as Suhayb al-Rumi i.e. Suhayb the Roman. Suhayb⁶⁵ is among a number of early people persecuted for his adoption of Islam and due to his former slave status which did not provide him with the sort of protection that free Arabs generally enjoyed due to their strong tribal ties. He is often assumed to have been of Roman stock when in fact he was an ethnic Arab. His father Sinan and paternal uncle were feudal lords allied with the Persian emperor who governed areas bordering Arabia near the Euphrates. The Byzantines invaded the area and took Suhayb into captivity when he was a young boy. So, he was raised in Rome which resulted in him losing his Arabic fluency and developing an accent.

According to an account of a visit to Suhayb's estate by the second caliph Umar b. al-Khattab and his Abyssinian freedslave Aslam Abu Zayd, upon their approach, Suhayb cried out "Ya Nas! Ya Nas!", which sounded like an atypical way of saying "O people! O people!" Umar found it so odd that he asked, "Why does he call out to the people?" Aslam responded, "No! He's calling his servant, *Yuhannas*." Umar would later question Suhayb about why he claims to be Arab even though he spoke with a foreign tongue and foreign accent to which he responded explaining the story of his youth when he was captured by the Romans. This story is fascinating not only because of how it proves that Suhayb was actually a stand-in for an actual Roman Muslim since he was an ethnic Arab. It is also because it shows that even though Bilal himself was not an Arab, his linguistic abilities in Arabic were far superior to those of Suhayb. If anything, there is little reason to believe that Bilal did not have native speaker proficiency. The same can be said of Aslam who accompanied 'Umar on this visit.

Their biographers state that both Suhayb and 'Ammar b. Yasir accepted Islam on the same day. And, like Bilal, Suhayb, according to most reports, was formerly owned by the Arab slaver 'Abdullah b. Jad'an. Suhayb is described as mid-range in height, very pale skinned, with a lot of hair.⁶⁶ There is little reason to believe that his being a slave had anything to do with his skin color. And, his persecution, like Bilal, seemed to have had more to do with his former slave status, rather than his race. Remember that the Arabs were largely brown people, neither "black" like Bilal nor "white" like Suhayb. One might assume better treatment for Suhayb than Bilal once his Arab roots were discovered. This, however, had little bearing on his treatment, in the same way that Yasir's southern Arabian roots did little to protect him.

⁶⁵ Ammar and Suhayb accepted Islam at the same time when the Prophet ﷺ was still in Dar al-Arqam.

⁶⁶ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 575.



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MIQDAD B. 'AMAR AL-BAHRAWI

Miqdad b. 'Amr b. Tha'labah al-Bahrawi or al-Bahrani is probably best known for his famous speech preceding the Battle of Badr emphasizing his blind allegiance to the Prophet ﷺ wherein he told the latter, "We will not say as the Children of Israel said to Moses: "You and your Lord go fight!"...We say, rather, "You and your Lord go fight. Indeed, we are fighting along with you."

According to his biographers, Miqdad was an Arab adopted as son by Al-Aswad b. 'Abd Yaghuth al-Zuhri until the practice of claiming paternity to one's non-biological offspring was prohibited by the Qur'an (Q 33:5). It is said that after murdering a man from Banu Kindah, Miqdad fled to Mecca where he sought asylum and the protection of Al-Aswad. From that time, he was referred to as Miqdad b. al-Aswad.

Miqdad was one of the first Muslims and accompanied the second delegation of emigrants to Abyssinia⁶⁷ but returned to Mecca where he remained missing the opportunity to emigrate to Medina with the Prophet ﷺ and other believers. Apparently, the pagans prevented him from doing so. Later, during a peaceful encounter in a sortie led by the Prophet's companion 'Ubaydah b. al-Harith, Miqdad and another by the name 'Utbah b. Ghazwan defected from the pagan detachment to the side of the Muslims and headed with the latter to Medina. Miqdad became a distinguished companion of the Prophet, attended all the major conflicts, and was counted among four people Imam al-Tirmidhi reports the Prophet ﷺ said God ordered him to love. The other three are 'Ali b. Abi Talib, Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, and Salman al-Farisi.

He is described as bulky,⁶⁸ tall, and dark brown (*adam*) with a lot of hair and a large belly. He had a beautiful moderate sized beard that he dyed yellow. He had wide black eyes, a unibrow (*maqrūn al-hajibayni*), and an aquiline nose (*aqna*), similar to that of Bilal. He was an archer and is said to have been the first Companion to fight on horseback. When the Companion Abd Al-Rahman b. 'Awf asked him why he wasn't married, Miqdad retorted curtly, "Will you marry me *your* daughter?" 'Abd Al-Rahman became angry and berated Miqdad for the perceived offense. But, Miqdad took the issue to the Prophet ﷺ complaining who in turn married Miqdad to his cousin Duba'ah bt. Al-Zubayr b. 'Abd al-Muttalib. It is more likely that Abd Al-Rahman's reaction was due to Miqdad's social status rather than his color as some might assume. He was, after all, an outsider to Mecca, like Yasir, whose roots could be easily doubted. Add to that, Abd Al-Rahman married his sister to Bilal. Miqdad had a Roman slave himself, which shows that his color did not place him in as disadvantaged a state one might assume. In an attempt to reduce his stomach size, his slave reportedly offered to perform what could be considered a premodern lypo-suction procedure which is said to have led to Miqdad's death.⁶⁹ In another account, he died after drinking oil from the castor oil plant (*khirwa*).⁷⁰

KHABBAB B. AL-ARATT

In place of Miqdad who is mentioned in the hadith of Ibn Mas'ud, the Successor Mujahid mentions Khabbab b. Al-Arat. Khabbab was the first Companion buried in Kufah outside the normal burial grounds,⁷¹ and the first to make his conversion to Islam known according to Ibn Hajar.⁷² Khabbab was a sword maker from Banu Sa'd in the pre-Islamic days. But, in a raid of his village, he was stricken with the misfortune of being taken captive and then later sold into slavery in Mecca. He served a cruel mistress known as Umm Anmar of Banu Khuza'ah who would torture him due to his acceptance of Muhammad's ﷺ message. He later allied himself with Banu Zuhrah.

It is said that he was the sixth person to accept Islam. The same was claimed by Abd Allah b. Mas'ud. But, we've already talked about the problems with defending such claims, although the claim about Ibn Mas'ud appears to be more reliable. Like Bilal and Sumayyah, he refused to renounce the Prophet ﷺ and Islam. Consequently, on one occasion he was forced to press his back against a bed of red-hot stones until the flesh was melted away. His back was permanently scarred with multiple white patches where the color of his skin was never restored.⁷³

He would make swords for his owners, and the Prophet ﷺ would visit him. When his mistress Umm Anmar became aware of this, she would have heated pieces of iron pressed against Khabbab's head. After complaining

⁶⁷ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa'd b. Mani'. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/148.

⁶⁸ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 1164.

⁶⁹ Al-'Asqalani, Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-'Asriyyah, 2012, p. 1458.

⁷⁰ Al-Zuhri, Muhammad b. Sa'd b. Mani'. *Kitab al-Tabaqat al-Kubra*. Dr. Ali Muhammad Umar Ed. Cairo: Maktabah al-Khanji, 2001, 3/150.

⁷¹ Al-'Asqalani, Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-'Asriyyah, 2012, p. 383.

⁷² Al-'Asqalani, Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar. *Al-Isabah fi Tamyiz al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Al-Maktabah Al-'Asriyyah, 2012, p. 382.

⁷³ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 336.



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of his plight to the Prophet, Muhammad ﷺ prayed to God to provide Khabbab with succor. So, one day as his mistress complained of a severe migraine, Khabbab suggested that she cauterize it (apparently, a common treatment). And, guess who was responsible for pressing the heated metal against her head?⁷⁴ Khabbab claimed that no one's torture was worse than his own, not even that of Bilal's, since Bilal had advocates among the idolaters while he had none.

CONCLUSION

The aforementioned stories of persecuted individuals in the early life of Islam corroborate the claim that the single factor of color, especially black skin, had little to no bearing on the severity of mistreatment by the pagan Arabs. It was, rather, the two factors of tribalism and slave status which made these early followers so vulnerable. Either one's tribe was strong and within easy reach or one was required to secure a promise of protection from one of the local tribes. One would, however, need to be certain that he did not do anything the tribe would interpret as seditious, like converting to a religion, like Islam, that rejects the Meccan pantheon. If one did so while being a slave or manumit, it was even riskier.

These facts are important because it is the tendency, especially with the increasing polarization along the lines of race, to interpret events of the past through the lens of the present without considering whether or not reality was interpreted, then, differently. Avoiding this error by acknowledging disparate sociohistorical and cultural contexts, we are granted an opportunity to mend and bridge sociopolitical divides, instead of widening them.

Naturally, it is possible to list many more people from the life of the early Muslim community of the pioneer generation who suffered persecution and isolation due to the factors of tribalism and/or bondage. However, I believe the aforementioned examples provide sufficient evidence to support the stated thesis and to help us better piece together certain broken parts of medieval Arab-Muslim history.

⁷⁴ Ibn al-Athir, 'Ali b. Muhammad al-Jazari. *Usd al-Ghabah fi Ma'rifah al-Sahabah*. Beirut: Dar Ibn Hazm, 2012, p. 335-336.



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