

The Prophetic Biography:

The Meccan Period

Lesson 7



Migration to Abyssinia

- For about four years, the Prophet and his followers barely survived the rising tide of persecution in Mecca. In the fifth year, Surat al-Zumar hints at the possibility of emigrating from their homeland in search of religious asylum:

قُلْ يَا عِبَادِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمْ لِلَّذِينَ أَحْسَنُوا فِي هَذِهِ الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةٌ وَأَرْضُ اللَّهِ وَاسِعَةٌ إِنَّمَا يُوَفَّى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

“Say, “O My servants who have believed, fear your Lord. For those who do good in this world is good, and the earth of Allah is spacious. Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without account.” Quran 39:10

Migration to Abyssinia

- The Prophet remained safe from the torment of the pagans because of Abu Talib's protection, but he could not protect the Muslims, so he advised them to emigrate from Mecca to Abyssinia.
- The Prophet describes the King of Abyssinia as a just ruler.

إنه "ملك لا يظلم عنده أحد".

“There is a king there before whom no one is wronged”

Migration to Abyssinia

- First migration to Abyssinia:
- In Rajab of 5 AB, 11-13 men and 4 women fled Mecca and headed for the port city of al-Shu‘aybah
 - The leader of the group was Uthman ibn Madh’un who was accompanied by the following notable individuals:
 - Uthman ibn Affan and his wife Ruqayyah bint Muḥammad
 - al-Zubayr ibn al-Awwam
 - Abdul Rahman ibn Awf
 - Abu Salamah and Umm Salamah

Migration to Abyssinia

- By God's grace, they found two merchant boats in al-Shu'aybah that agreed to carry them to Abyssinia for half a dinar.
- By the time the Pagan forces reached the port, there was no sign of anyone.
- After a few months, they heard a rumor that the pagan leaders of Mecca had all accepted Islam, so they returned.
- The rumor was false, and they were tormented more severely than before for leaving.

Migration to Abyssinia

- A second group of about 70 people departed under the leadership of Ja'far b. Abi Talib.
- Other people in this wave of migration were:
 - Asmā' bint 'Umays (Ja'far's wife)
 - Umm Habibah bint Abi Sufyan
 - al-Miqdad ibn al-Aswad

Migration to Abyssinia

وَالَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا فِي اللَّهِ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا ظَلَمُوا لَنُبَوِّئَنَّهُمْ فِي الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَلَآجِرُ الْآخِرَةِ أَكْبَرُ لَوْ
كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَعَلَىٰ رَبِّهِمْ يَتَوَكَّلُونَ

“Those who emigrate for the sake of God after they have been wronged, we shall settle them in a good place in this world, and their reward in the hereafter is greater still, if only they knew, those who persevere and trust in their Lord.” Quran 16:41-42

Migration to Abyssinia

- Why did the early Muslims emigrate?
 - 1. to escape the unbearable torment of the pagans
 - 2. to diffuse the tensions between the Muslims and pagans in Mecca
 - 3. to have a back-up plan in case the Muslims in Mecca and then in Medina were wiped out.

Migration to Abyssinia

- Why did the Prophet choose Abyssinia as a refuge for his followers?
- 1. It was known to the Arabs since they regularly traded there
- 2. Najashi was known to be a fair king
- 3. He was confident he would not force them to return to Mecca.

Migration to Abyssinia

- After Quraysh realized that some of the Prophet's followers had emigrated to Abyssinia, they immediately dispatched two mercenaries led by Amr ibn al-'As, to bring back the runaways.
- The two men bribed Najashi's generals before approaching Najashi himself. But the king swore that he would continue to protect the Prophet's followers as long as they sought his protection.
- He then summons the Muslim emigrants to his court to hear their case.

Migration to Abyssinia

- Umm Salamah describes their arrival in Abyssinia:

“When we arrived, we sought refuge with Al-Najashi and he granted full amnesty for us to practice our religion and to be safe from all harm. The Quraysh sent two men to convince Al-Najashi to send us back. They brought many fine leather skins as gifts. First they approached each of the bishops in his court and gave him his gift and asked him to speak in their favor in court. Then they approached Al-Najashi gave him his gifts and asked him to return the Muslims to their people...”

Migration to Abyssinia

They said, "Some foolish young men and women of our people have taken refuge in this kingdom. They have left their own religion, not for yours, but for one they have invented, one that is unknown to us and to you. The nobles of their people have sent us to you on their account, that you may return them to us."

The bishops in his court supported them and said, "These two have spoken well. For their people know best what to do with them. So turn them over to them."

Migration to Abyssinia

But Al-Najashi became angry and said, "No, by God, they shall not be betrayed - a people that have sought my protection and made my country their abode and chosen me above all others! Give them up I will not, until I have summoned them and questioned them concerning what these men say of them. If it be as they have said, then will I deliver them unto them, that they may restore them to their own people. But if not, then I shall be their good protector so long as they seek my protection

Migration to Abyssinia

Al-Najashi sent for Ja'far and the other Muslims and narrated the complaints of the Quraysh's emissaries and their request to have the Muslims returned to their people. Ja'far said, "Great King! Ask them if we are their slaves who have run away." 'Amr replied, "No they are free men." Ja'far said, "Ask them if we owe them some debts that they now wish to claim." 'Amr replied, "No they owe us nothing." Ja'far said, "Ask them if we have killed someone among them wrongfully that they now seek retribution." 'Amr replied, "No." So Ja'far said, "Then what do you want from us? You tortured us, so we left your city."

Migration to Abyssinia

'Amr addressed Al-Najashi and said, "Great King, these people oppose our religion, revile our gods, corrupt our youth, and cause upheaval in our society, so send them with us so we can finish this affair.

Ja'far told Al-Najashi: "O King! We were a people steeped in ignorance, worshipping idols, eating unsacrificed carrion, committing abominations, and the strong would devour the weak. Thus we were, until God sent us a Messenger from out of our midst, one whose lineage we knew, and his veracity and his worthiness of trust and his integrity.

Migration to Abyssinia

He called us unto God, that we should testify to his oneness and worship him and renounce the stones and idols we and our fathers had worshipped; and he commanded us to speak the truth, to fulfill our promises, to respect the ties of kinship and the rights of our neighbors, and to refrain from crimes and from bloodshed. So we worship God alone, setting naught beside him. We consider illicit whatever he has forbidden, and permissible whatever he has allowed. For these reasons, our people have turned against us and have persecuted us to make us forsake our religion and revert from the worship of God to the worship of idols. That is why we have come to your country, having chosen you above all others; and have been happy in your protection, and it is our hope, O King, that here, with you, we shall not suffer wrong.”

Migration to Abyssinia

Al-Najashi asked Ja'far, "Do you have anything that your Prophet has brought from God?" Ja'far said that he did and began to recite from the chapter entitled "Mary."

Mention in this book [the story of] Mary, when she withdrew from her family to a place in the east.

Then she concealed herself from them, whereupon we sent to her our Spirit and he appeared before her as a well-proportioned man.

She exclaimed, "I seek protection with the All-beneficent from you, [so stay away from me] if you [truly] fear God!"

He said, "I am but a messenger from your Lord [whom he has sent] that I may give you a pure son."

Migration to Abyssinia

She said, “How can I [possibly] have a son since no man has touched me [in wedlock], and I have never been unchaste?”

He said, “[Nonetheless, the matter is] as I have said. Your Lord says, ‘Such a thing is easy for me.’ [We shall do this for various reasons] and so that we may make it a sign for humankind [to know our power] and a [source of] mercy from us [that they may know their prophet and be guided by him]. It is a matter [already] decided.”

Migration to Abyssinia

Al-Najashi cried until his beard was soaked, and so did his bishops. He said, "This and what Jesus said are two rays from a single lamp." Then he turned to 'Amr and his companion and said, "Leave. I shall not hand them over to you."

The next day 'Amr returned to Al-Najashi and told him that the Muslims insult Jesus by calling him a slave. So Al-Najashi called Ja'far and asked him what his Prophet said about Jesus. Ja'far replied, "We say about him what our Prophet has told us: that he is the servant of God, and his messenger, and a spirit created by him, and his word, which he cast into the Virgin Mary."

Migration to Abyssinia

- *At hearing this, Al-Najashi knelt down and pounded the earth. He picked up a splinter of wood and said, "Jesus son of Mary did not surpass what you have described more than this splinter's weight." Then he addressed the Muslims and said, "Go freely. Anyone who derides you shall pay. I would not take even a mountain of gold to see one of you harmed.*

Migration to Abyssinia

وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُمْ مَّوَدَّةَ لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصَارَى ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ مِنْهُمْ قِسِيَّسِينَ وَرُهَبَانًا
وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ

“You will find those with the most love for the believers to be those who say, “We are Christians” That is because among them there are bishops and monks and because they are not arrogant.” Quran 5:82

Migration to Abyssinia

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَى أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا
أَمَّا فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

“When they hear what is revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes well up with tears because of the truth that they knew. They say, “Lord, we hereby believe, so record our names with those who have testified.” Quran 5:83

وَمَا لَنَا لَا نُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَمَا جَاءَنَا مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَنَطْمَعُ أَنْ يُدْخِلَنَا رَبَّنَا مَعَ الْقَوْمِ الصَّالِحِينَ

“And they say, “Why would we not believe in God and in what truth has come to us, when we want our Lord to include us among the righteous?” Quran

5:84

Migration to Abyssinia

فَأْتَابَهُمُ اللَّهُ بِمَا قَالُوا جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَذَلِكَ جَزَاءُ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

“For what they said, God rewarded them with forests through which rivers flow, in which they will reside forever. That is the reward of the righteous.” Quran 5:85

The Faith of Al-Najashi

- The Prophet not only sent his followers to seek refuge with Najashi, he also invited the latter to Islam.
- ‘Amr ibn Umayyah al-Ḍamrī, the Prophet’s envoy to al-Najashi.
- He said, “I must speak and you must listen. Accept Islam and you will have attained all good and virtue. If you do not, then you have behaved with this Prophet as the Jews behaved with Jesus son of Mary.”

The Faith of Al-Najashi

- Al-Najashi replied, “I testify that he is the Prophet awaited by the people of the book, and that the prophecy of Moses concerning the one who will ride a donkey is like the prophecy of Jesus concerning the one who will ride a camel. I know that nothing is like seeing [him with my own eyes]. But my supporters in Abyssinia are few. Give me some time so I can gather more supporters and soften their hearts. If I can, I will come to him.”

The Faith of Al-Najashi

- The people accuse al-Najashi of betraying their religion and insulting Jesus by calling him a slave of God.
- Al-Najashi puts the Muslims on boats and sends them off telling them, “If I am ousted, go wherever you can, and if I win then you may stay.”
- Al-Najashi writes on a piece of paper, “He testifies that there is no god but Allah and that Muḥammad is his servant and messenger. And he testifies that Jesus son of Mary is the servant of God, and His messenger, and a spirit created by Him, and His word, which He cast into the Virgin Mary.” Then he placed this in his breast pocket near his heart.

The Faith of Al-Najashi

- He entered his public court and addressed his people saying, “O people of Abyssinia, am I not the most worthy ruler for you?” They replied that he was. He asked, “How has my character been?” They replied that he has the best character. Then he asked, “Then what is the matter?” They said, “You have abandoned our religion and you think that Jesus is a servant.” He asked, “What do you all say about Jesus?” They said, “That he is the son of God.” Al-Najashi placed his hand over his breast pocket and said, “I testify that Jesus son of Mary is nothing more than *this*.” He thus satisfied his people and affirmed his faith at the same time.