

Slavery in Islam¹

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Slavery traces back to human history long before Islam and there are many books published about its history.

It can be seen throughout history that how slaves launched revolutions and caused revolts and the most noticeable ones are of Spartacus and the divine revolution of Moses (AS). The Spartacus Revolt failed because they did not strongly believe in the righteousness of their requests. They failed because they believed the slavery, but they said why their owners had behaved so badly with them. No doubt, this failure had other reasons, too. We are not going to compare these two revolutions here, but how the revolutionists believe in their revolution leads to victory. The revolt of Moses was backed by the divine will and power and besides, all sons of Israel knew that they were the descendants of a prophet and that they were not slaves at all. They believed in this revolution and then they gained victory. Therefore, if some revolutions during history had failed to gain complete victory, the reason would have been that they did not believe much in the righteousness of what they said. Take the African people for instance; they were gradually convinced that they were of the inferior race. To remove the features of this inferiority, in some countries, they imported bleaching drugs in order to change the color of their skin. Later on, importing those drugs were banned and known against the human dignity by one of the current states of Africa after its independence.

In the United States of America, when Abraham Lincoln, out of magnanimity, realized that slavery was against humanity, he made the Emancipation Proclamation. In fact, factory owners even small factories (in north of America), benefited from this emancipation and protection of slaves because employing workers was costly so that some factories had no workers. But farm owners of south of America (in slave states) produced crops easily, costing little, as they had many slaves and exploited them like animals. The factory owners took advantage of Abraham Lincoln's decision and recruited the emancipated slaves and in this way, they established another type of slavery. They pushed the slaves to the limits until the labors found it out and there were revolts throughout the world and they could reserve some rights. The problem was, a large number of slaves who belonged to their masters like a property (the masters provided food, clothes, medicine and all necessities just the same as how they raised their cattle) were freed and since they lost these privileges, they had to find a job and bear with a meager salary to lead a difficult life, but that feeling of freedom was very important to them.

Have you ever noticed that being pleased with having a privilege reveals a more positive effect than enjoying that privilege? For example, imagine you are told you cannot leave Toronto because it is surrounded or something. It probably makes no difference in your life. But the feeling that you cannot leave the city and that your freedom has been denied bothers you. If

¹ Slavery in Islam has been widely criticized. This article is part of a reply to a letter in which a professor of York University in Canada had asked about it. (May 2, 2003). This paper is the translation of His Honorable Haj Dr. Nour Ali Tabandeh's letter published in *Irfan-e-Iran*, Vol. 19, 2004, edited by Dr. Sayed Mustafa Azmayesh, Haqiqat Publishing, Tehran-Iran.

this prohibition notice lasts for a year or two, this period will feel like a century. However, if there is no such an order, you may willingly stay inside Toronto for more than two years- even for ten years. If you compare these two feelings, you may notice that aside from freedom, the feeling of freedom is also more effective. When Islam emerged, slavery had existed there in the world. Slavery has a humane aspect via which the religion interfered and it reads in the Quran: **“O you men! Surely we have created you of a male and a female, and made you tribes and families that you may know each other”**. It means He has created this categorization just to “know each other”. He (God) continues: **“surely the most honorable of you with Allah is the one among you most careful (of his duty)”**². It is obvious that He addresses all the humankind as they are all equal. In another part of the Quran, He says: **“Surely we have honored the children of Adam”**³. Although he defines **“we have honored”** but the basic principle is **“surely we have honored the children of Adam”**.

One of the clear definitions of **“we have honored”** is freedom or liberty. Therefore in Islam, the principle is based on freedom. Although there were limited freedom for non-Muslims those days, Islam ordered the Muslims to treat the slaves humanely and not mercilessly so that the slaves would not feel imprisoned or slaved, and so behaved the Muslims. But if Islam had stated that all slaves must be freed, on the one hand, there would have been a flood of slaves running away from their holders toward Islam and they would have entered into Islam without any credence given to Islam. This insincere belief could probably do a lot of damage at the emergence of Islam as it gained victory due to the pioneering Muslim’s strong faith in Islam as they were ready to risk their lives for that. On the other hand, slavery, apart from its humane aspect, had some economic aspects too. If the slaves had been freed all at once, firstly, all the economic activities would have been suspended and the society would have been in peril, secondly, the newly-freed slaves could have not been able to earn a living either; they would not have been able to provide food- no one gave them any money. Therefore, they might have revolted and endangered the society.

Islam decided to gradually free the slaves. Emancipating slaves, in some cases, was not only a compensation for sins and offences, but also was generally considered a blessing. The Prophet’s disciples would purchase those slaves and then free them if they converted to Islam. For example, Salman Farsi or as nicknamed Salman al Muhammadi who was an exemplary character in Islam was first a slave. Abu Bakr purchased him and then freed him. Bilal, too, was a slave. The Prophet’s adopted child; Zaid, had been a captive before the Prophet purchased and freed him. So many of the disciples and well-known people of the Islam were slaves and then were freed. It is highly considerable how the Prophet of Islam (AS) planned to gradually free the slaves and to dissolve them in free-men societies. Imagine that, if a lot of people enter a city all of a sudden, like 5000 people with no food enter Mecca at that period in which its population was about 5 or 10 thousand, even if they wanted to stay for a day or two, they would endanger the condition of the city. Moreover, if they wanted to stay for a long time or permanently, the danger would be multiplied. God’s order is that no man shall ever be assumed as a slave. Individual liberty is a principle for humankind, unless one is proved to be a slave based on religious laws. There were some holy wars taken place during the Prophet’s period, not in Mecca

² The Quran, Al-Hujuraat (The Private Apartments), 13:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

³ The Quran, Al-Isra (Isra'), 70: وَلَقَدْ كَرَّمْنَا بَنِي آدَمَ

and not for years in Medina. But later, when Muslim had to do *jihad*, if the captives converted to Islam, they would not be considered as slaves, but if they did not, they would be treated as slaves. The wars of Islam were considered the real *Jihad* only when they took place at the Prophet's period, in addition, the Shiite believe that the holy wars taken place at the proceeding caliphs' reigns also were considered *jihad* because Ali verified them. But after the Umayyad came, as the Sunnite admit, the caliphate changed into kingdom and there were no *jihads*, there were wars but they were not Islam wars unless they were verified by Imam. The Shiite have always believed that the wars the kings; so-called caliphs, made after the disappearance of the 12th Imam in the 3rd century, were no longer religious wars because there were no innocent Imam to issue any *jihad*. Therefore, based on the religious law, the captives were free.

This way, God has opened the gate of slavery very tight so that a small number of people might be slaves. But on the other side, the gate of emancipating and unchaining the slaves is wide open. If you pay attention to the verses of the Quran and the verdicts of all jurists of Islamic sects regarding the atonement laws, the compensation for many sins, wrongdoings and offenses was to free slaves. This way, slaves were freed gradually and when they are freed like this, they become dissolved in the society and there will be no economic turmoil. Aside from the atonement, if a bondwoman became pregnant by her owner, the baby would be emancipated and then the mother would, too, be freed by the owner, in other words, the free baby would bring freedom for the mother; this mother was called Om-ol-Valad (the mother of the child). Freeing slaves was a gate for any individual to go through slavery towards freedom.

There was another way to free slaves in Islamic jurisprudence; that is if a slave were talented and skillful so that s/he could earn a living on their own, they could offer their skill to their owners and sign contracts with them for a specified period of time and then they would be freed; it means the total price was the price of their freedom. However, during that period, they were considered slaves and the owners were responsible for their cost of living, so they were not worried and they could easily purchase themselves.

In the chapter of "Emancipating the Slaves" in Islamic jurisprudential books, there is also another method of freeing slaves. One of the Muslims' obligations is to free slaves conditioned that those slaves to be freed must not be disabled or handicapped. They need to be capable and skillful. In ancient times, the slaveholders considered the slaves as their livestock; therefore they compared freeing the slaves with sacrificing their sheep, but in fact the purpose of freeing slaves was that the slaves could be able to earn a living. The slave owners should have taken care of those disabled and senile slaves and did not have the right to free such slaves.

Thus, as Islam clarifies, the slaves of the last two centuries were not considered as slaves because no men remained as slaves and they were all considered freemen since a century or two after Islam. But unfortunately, the Islamic laws were executed only when the kings (so-called caliphs) wanted to, and for other cases, they were not. If you take a look through history of Islam, you will notice that many decisions were against Islam. I am not a historian and I have not read a lot of history books but I am pretty sure no one has spoken a word about freeing slaves during history save what I just said. The jurists have written laws of slaveholding in their books based on the verses of the Quran. The only thing I remember is the declaration of the late well-known gnostic jurist; Haj Mullah Ali; known as Nour Ali Shah the Second, addressed to the disciples in about 1914, in which he asserted that there were doubts and uncertainties over the validation of all bondmen and bondwomen by the time, thus, on the basis

of freedom, they were all considered as freemen.⁴ But I have not come across any other verdicts. The other decisions made in the world announced as solemn declarations had both advantages and disadvantages. The disadvantage was, the developed countries made those decisions only for political purposes and not for humanitarian purposes. According to what has been mentioned above, slaves are considered as freemen based on the above-mentioned verse of the Quran. In terms of communication with other humans, they are also humans included in the verses “**surely we have created you of a male and a female**” and “**surely we have honored the children of Adam**”, so that no one can hurt them. Even punishing them must be as fairly as a father punishes his child so justly, and not more than that.

If you pay attention to the pioneering righteous men’s and especially the twelve Imam’s (AS) life, you will find their behavior humanely with slaves and freemen, for example, they ate together with the slaves and showed no superiority. It is said in history that when Jerusalem was conquered in the second caliph’s reign; Omar, people of Jerusalem went to welcome the conquerors as they had the habit of bowing before the kings. They saw a man riding on a donkey along with another person going on foot entered into the city. The welcoming people did not take any notice of them and went on their way until they saw the Islam army. “Where is the caliph?” they asked. The soldiers answered: “He went into the city.” The welcomers said: “we saw no men except a man riding on a donkey together with another man walking”. “They were them, the man going on foot was the caliph and the man on the donkey was his servant”, the army men answered. The people of Jerusalem were astounded. It was like whenever the servant became tired, he rode on the donkey and Omar came off it, so there was no difference between them from this level. Therefore, since there were no differences between the slave and the slave owner, harming slaves would absolutely be considered the same as harming freemen. Although there are some jurisprudential laws saying that the blood money paid for slaves are less than that of paid for freemen and things like that. But that is because blood money is a financial issue and in that case, there should be differences between slaves and slave owners. Anyhow, at the moment, the slavery and the slave are totally meaningless terms.

⁴ His instruction was: “At the moment, selling or purchasing humans is against religiousness and civilization. The prevalent bondmen and bondmaids are all free, just like other citizens of all countries.”