

Slavery in islam

الرق في الإسلام

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First, a knowledgeable Jew or Christian knows fully well that slavery is discussed in the Bible. The Jewish law has much to say about slaves and their treatment. This matter is not open to debate. It is a fact every rabbi and a trained pastor is aware of.

Second, just as the Jews and Christians do not discuss slavery in their teachings and sermons, Muslims do not teach much on the subject. Why? The simple reason is that slavery as it existed in ancient times does not exist anymore. To talk of “slavery in Islam” as if the Muslims practice it today is dishonesty.

Every country has laws against slavery. However, experts say that slavery has taken a new form today that we shall discuss briefly.

UN Definition of Slavery

The slave has three defining characteristics: his/her person is the property of another human being, his/her will is completely subject to his/her owner’s authority, and his/her labor is obtained by coercion.¹ The international community condemned slavery as one of the worst human-rights violations, and the classic definition

¹ Definition taken from D.B. Davies, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Cultures* (Cornell University Press, 1966), 31.

of slavery, set out in the Slavery Convention of 1926 is, “The status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the power attached to the right of ownership are exercised.”² In 1956, several additional definitions of slavery were added: debt bondage, serfdom, the practice of forced marriage, transferring of wives, inheritance of wives and transfer of a child for purposes of exploitation.³

Roots of Slavery in the Bible

The Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, endorses slavery.⁴ The Bible existed before the Quran.

The Bible states that once Noah awoke and found out that one of his sons, Ham, had seen him naked. Noah cursed his misbehaving son, Ham, and all the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham, saying: ‘a slave of slaves shall you be to your brothers’ (Gen 9:25). It must be noted that this story or anything similar to it is not found in the Quran or the teachings of Prophet Muhammad.

There is a long tradition among Christians that Ham is the father of the black races of Africa, Shem is the father of Semites (that includes the Arabs and Jews), and Japheth is the father of the white people. Therefore, this passage of the Bible is considered to have made the white races supreme and the black race their servants.⁵ This “biblical passage became for many centuries a major justification for black slavery.”⁶ Not too long ago, in South

2 (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavery.htm>)

3 (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavetrade.htm>)

4 Article on Slavery in the OT and NT in the New Bible Dictionary (2nd edition, London: IVP, 1986), 1121-1125. It must be noted that the IVP New Bible Dictionary has an evangelical emphasis.

5 Griffith Thomas, Genesis: A Devotional Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1953), 95-99.

6 David Brion Davis, Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World (Oxford University Press, 2006) 5.

Africa, the Reformed Church referred to this “curse” to support the “right” of whites to rule over blacks.

Slavery is twice mentioned in the ten commandments found in the Bible,⁷ but not once in the [ten commandments](#) of the Quran.

Leviticus 25:44-46 (one of the books of present day Torah, the Jewish scripture) is a key text used for the biblical justification of slavery. It says that God told Jews, ‘you may also buy male and female slaves from among the nations...you may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever.’

Abraham, ‘the friend of God,’ and ‘the father of the faithful,’ bought slaves from Haran (Gen 12:50), armed 318 slaves born in his own house (Gen 14:14), included them in his property list (Gen 12:16, 24:35-36), and willed them to his son Issac (Gen 26:13-14). The Bible says that God blessed Abraham by multiplying his slaves (Gen 24:35). In Abraham’s household, angels tell Hagar, his slave, to return to Sarah. The angel tells her, ‘return to your mistress and submit to her’ (Gen 16:9).

At God’s command, Joshua took slaves (Josh 9:23), as did David (1 Kings 8:2,6) and Solomon (1 Kings 9:20-21).

Job whom the Bible calls ‘blameless and upright’, was ‘a great slaveholder.’ See Job 1:15-17, 3:19, 7:2, 31:13, 42:8 where Job speaks of his slaves.⁸

Jesus accepted slavery. The present day Gospels do not have a single word attributed to Jesus as saying anything about slavery. Jesus met slaves (Luke 7:2-10, 22:50, etc) and gave parables of slaves (Matthew 13:24-30, 18:23-35, 22:1-14, Luke 12:25-40,

7 Most people are unaware that the Biblical Ten Commandments mention slavery twice, see Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21, requiring that slaves be given a day of rest and prohibiting the coveting of a neighbor’s slave.

8 J.H. Hopkins, A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century, (New York, 1864), 76.

14:15-24, etc), but he never spoke against slavery. Compare it to what the Arabian Prophet of Islam said about slaves in the next article.

In some seventy passages the disciples spoke directly in support of slavery. They told slaves to accept their fate and instructed their masters to treat them kindly (1 Corinthians 7:20-21, Eph 6:5-9, Col 3:22-25, 1 Tim 6:1-2, Tit 2:9-10, Phlm 10-18, 1 Peter 2:18-19). 1 Tim 6:1-3 instructs slaves to accept their position and obey their masters because it is commanded by “Lord Jesus Christ.”

Most Christian theologians and scholars until late last century believed that the Bible sanctioned slavery. The list includes Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and others.⁹

In 1835, the Presbyterian Synod of West Virginia attacked the movement to set slaves free, calling it a belief that goes against “the clearest authority of the word of God.”¹⁰

Old School (presbyterian) General Assembly Report of 1845 concluded that slavery was based on ‘some of the plainest declarations of the Word of God.’¹¹

In 1861, a Jewish Rabbi, Dr. M.J. Raphall of New York, wrote a much publicized pamphlet entitled “The Bible View of Slavery” in defense of slavery.¹²

As late as 1957 John Murray of the Westminster Theological Seminary¹³ was still arguing that Bible allows for the institution

9 A. Ruppercht, ‘Attitudes on Slavery Among the Church Fathers,’ in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 261-277; J. Kahl, ‘The Church as Slave-Owner,’ in *The Misery of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 1971).

10 H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But... Racism in Southern Religion, 1719-1910* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1971) 172.

11 J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (London: IVP, 1957), 260.

12 <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>

of slavery and the past Christian scholars were correct in their understanding of the Bible.

Slavery in US Constitution

The Three-Fifths Compromise is found in Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the US Constitution. The 3/5's Compromise enabled more masters to become lawmakers, even though the 3/5's of the slave population counted, had no voice or vote in the democracy.

The Slave Trade Compromise was an agreement during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, protecting the interests of slaveholders, that forbid Congress the power to act on the slave trade for twenty years. The Slave Trade Compromise stopped slave imports after 1807 encouraging slave breeding within the United States and slave auctions throughout the south.

Slavery in Post Civil War US¹⁴

The American Civil War was fought, in part, over slavery. During the war, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in rebel states. The North's victory in 1865 brought the end of legalized slavery throughout the United States.

Slavery as practiced in the old south took away any control from blacks over their own lives; they were to be slaves for life, their children were born into slavery, forbidden formal education, were harshly punished for small acts of disobedience, their families split as children were sold off, and women sexually exploited. The America's race-based slave system was designed at every level to take away the humanity of the slave, relying on ideas taken from the domestication of animals. Dehumanization

13 ([Westminster Theological Seminary](#)), a Presbyterian and Reformed Christian graduate school located in Pennsylvania with a satellite location in London. See J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (London: IVP, 1957).

14 Follow the [timeline](#) to learn more about the history of slavery in the US.

had a special meaning for America's slave system. In America the slaves were marked by the color of their skin. In this, America's slave system was supported by American religion: the Bible informed Christians that slaves weren't fully equal humans but descendants of Canaan, marked by God to be inferior and servants of others.¹⁵

Slavery Today

Legalized slavery may have ended, but the institution exists today under different names. United Nations Human Rights states, "Slavery was the first human rights issue to arouse wide international concern yet it still continues today."¹⁶ US State Department also recognizes "modern slavery."¹⁷

Slaves are cheaper these days than they have ever been in about 4,000 years. In 1850, a slave would cost about \$40,000 in today's dollars. Now, a slave costs \$30-\$90. There are 27 million slaves by conservative estimates and more than at any time in human history.¹⁸

"...between 14,000 and 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States annually, according to the US government, most

15 "[North American Slave Narratives](#)" is a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill project that collects books and articles that document the individual and collective story of African Americans struggling for freedom and human rights in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Documents that discuss American slavery can be found in Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, 1839, republished in *Slavery In America* (Illinois: Peacock, 1972) and W. L. Rose (ed.), *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (Oxford University Press, 1976). For an authoritative discussion of the history of American slavery see *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* by a Pulitzer Prize winner historian, [David Brion Davis](#).
16(<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Slavery/SRSlavery/Pages/SRSlaveryIndex.aspx>)

17 (<http://www.state.gov/j/tip/what/>)

18 (www.freetheslaves.net)

forced into the sex trade, domestic servitude, or agricultural labor. At any one time, between 52,000 and 87,000 are in bondage... according to the United Nations, profits from human trafficking rank it among the top three revenue earners for organized crime, after drugs and arms.”¹⁹

1. Islamic principle: People are born free, slavery is temporary.

The Quran states,

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from a male (Adam) and a female (Eve) and made you into various families and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honored of you in God’s sight is the most pious of you.” (Quran 49:13)

The Prophet of Islam declared,

‘All of you are from Adam and Adam was created from dust.’²⁰

The principle that human beings are born free and slavery is accidental is accepted by all the scholars of Islam. Few important consequences of this principle are:

- Voluntary slavery is not allowed. A free person cannot become a slave even if he wants to.
- A free person cannot be enslaved. The interesting point is that Muslim theologians did not decide it, but the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, declared it to be a sin 1400 years ago. He said, “There are three types of people against whom I shall myself be a plaintiff on

19 “Slavery is not dead, just less recognizable” (<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0901/p16s01-wogi.html>)

20 Abu Daud, Musnad, Baihaqi

the Day of Judgement. Of these three, one is he who enslaves a free man, then sells him, and consumes this money.”²¹

- An unclaimed child with unknown parentage was to be treated as a free person even if the child appeared to have slave parents.

2. A slave was granted respect and human dignity.

The very word “slave” in English has extremely negative connotations of barbaric treatment. Compare it with how the Prophet of Mercy spoke about slaves 1400 years ago,

“Your slaves are your brothers! God has placed them in your care. So, whose brother is under his care, he should feed him what he eats and dress him how he dresses. And do not burden them beyond their capacities; but if you burden them (with an unbearable burden), then help them (by sharing their extra burden).”²²

“When the servant of anyone amongst you prepares food for him and has undergone its hardship of heat and smoke, he should make him (the servant) sit along with him and make him eat (along with him), and if he does not do that, then he should spare some portion for him.”²³

The Prophet of Mercy forbade hitting the slaves. He declared that the atonement of hitting or slapping a slave is to set him free²⁴.

Moreover, a slave is not be addressed with hurtful words. The Prophet of Mercy stated not to address them as, ‘My slave boy or my slave girl.’ He said, “All of you are slaves of God!” Address them with, “O my young man, O my young lady!”²⁵

21 Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Ibn Majah

22 Saheeh Al-Bukhari

23 Saheeh Muslim

24 hadith recorded in Saheeh Muslim

25 hadith recorded in Saheeh Muslim

Umar ibn al-Khattab, the second ruler-caliph of Islam, was so fond of Salim, a freed slave, that he wished to appoint Salim to be the ruler-caliph if he were alive. Salim used to lead the Muslims in prayer, considered an honor in Islamic tradition.

3. Islam did not initiate the system of slavery. It existed in Judaism, Christianity, India, and China before Islam.

Since the earliest times, Islam had opened doors to free slaves and to eventually end slavery. The Islamic paradigm did not ignore the realities of the world, nor did it endorse it. Islam regulated it. As Annemarie Schimmel, a German scholar, noted, "...therefore slavery is theoretically doomed to disappear with the expansion of Islam."²⁶

Shariah Law severely limited the channels in which the number of slaves could multiply. The only source of slavery were captives of legitimate war and the children born to slave parents. In case of war, the captives were not required to be enslaved. The Muslim scripture laid other options of dealing with them as well:

- Unconditional freedom (Quran 47:4)
- Ransom (Quran 47:4)

After limiting the sources of new slaves, Islamic law dealt with the reality of the existing slaves.

4. Islam granted equal religious rights to the free and the slave and in most civil matters. Their special laws were to make their jobs easier.

Slaves were at the same footing of a freeman in terms of religious obligations, as well as reward and punishment from God. A slave's testimony was considered acceptable in the Hanbali tradition. A slave had right to personal belongings and property.

26 Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam An Introduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 67

Slaves were equal in retribution of blood-money. They were to be helped to legally win their freedom if they so chose through a mechanism known as *mukataba* and *tadbeer*. This mechanism is enshrined in the Muslim scripture by God in 24:33.

5. Islam made freeing slaves an act of worship pleasing to God.

It set freeing of slaves to be an atonement of sins and for specific acts of transgression. Muslims were encouraged to willingly set slaves free to release themselves from the torment of Hell Fire. The state was also a source of setting the slaves free as Islamic Law dictates that *zakah* – obligatory charity given by wealthy Muslims to the state - is to be spend on setting slaves free among other things (Quran 9:60).

6. Islam tried to integrate slaves into the mainstream society.

The issue of integration of freed slaves into the mainstream society has been discussed by some contemporary scholars. The Islamic solution was to integrate them into the society by making them part of the tribes and families. The system was known as “*wala*.” The Prophet of Islam said, ‘Freeing slaves is like establishing relations by blood.’²⁷

Some Historical Observations

1. Abul Ala Maududi writes in his paper, ‘The Position of Slavery in Islam,’ “The Prophet alone liberated as many as 63 slaves. The number of slaves freed by ‘Aishah was 67, ‘Abbas liberated 70, ‘Abd Allah ibn ‘Umar liberated one thousand, and ‘Abd al-Rahman purchased thirty thousand and set them free.”

2. “Zaid, the freedman of the Prophet, was often entrusted with the command of troops, and the noblest captains served under him without demur; and his son ‘Osâma was honoured with the

27 Darimi

leadership of the expedition sent by Abû Bakr against the Greeks. Kutb ud-dîn, the first king of Delhi, and the true founder, therefore, of the Musulman empire in India, was a slave.”²⁸

3. “Even ordinary domestic slaves were often better fed, clothed, and protected than many free men and women.”²⁹

4. “The entire history of Islam proves that slaves could occupy any office, and many former military slaves, usually recruited from among the Central Asian Turks, became military leaders and often even rulers as in eastern Iran, India (the Slave Dynasty of Delhi), and medieval Egypt (the Mamluks).”³⁰

5. “...the exclusivity of the owner-slave relationship that typifies slavery systems was never part of Ottoman realities. The Şariat-based (Shariah-based) court system breached that exclusivity by allowing slaves to complain of ill-treatment, which could lead to forced manumission. Although, as we have seen, the courts were reluctant to intervene in owner-slave relations, and the state was careful not to force owners to manumit slaves involuntarily, an arbitration mechanism was at all times available in the background, able if necessary to step into that relationship.”³¹

6. “As for Saudi Arabia’s slaves, they shared the same food, clothes and homes as their owners and many of them became

28 Ameer Ali, *The Spirit of Islam: A History of the Evolution and Ideals of Islam with a Life of the Prophet* Revised ed., (London: Christophers, 1922), p. 264

29 Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. 6

30 Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam An Introduction* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1992), 67

31 Ehud R. Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), p. 161-162

rulers of vast regions in the land and were active in the running of the state.”³²

7. “...Saudi Arabia’s late abolition of slavery. Slavery in Saudi Arabia was abolished in 1962...that is because Saudi Arabia did not exist as a modern state before 1932, which means it took thirty years after its creation to end slavery, and that without a civil war.”³³

32 Princess Reem Al Faisal, Slavery in US and Other Places: The Vital Difference, published by

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