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Slavery

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A Historical Matter	4
Never Racist.....	4
Slavery before Islam and in Other Religions	4
Islam's Answer to the Dilemma of Slavery.....	5
The Gradual Depletion of the institution of Slavery	6
Islam's Encouragement of the Emancipation of Slaves	6
Islam's Enjoinment of the Excellent Treatment of the Slaves	7

The issue of slavery may be of the hardest issues to discuss. Our collective conscience as a global community is extremely averse to the discussion because of a variety of factors, not least of which is the cruel treatment slaves suffered for centuries. Many preachers find it difficult to talk about the issue, particularly when they are asked why Islam did not take an immediate and absolute abolitionist stance from it. Furthermore, reference books of Islamic law have extensive discussions of the rulings pertaining to the slaves, which cause many educators discomfort when they have to address them. In the following article, I will attempt to highlight some of the facts about Islam's stance from slavery.

A Historical Matter

To begin with, any discussion of slavery in Islam that doesn't put the issue in its proper historical context will be flawed. No heavenly religion sought to deplete the institution of slavery more than Islam. Islam would, therefore, welcome the current state of abolishment of slavery worldwide, and it would be certainly keen on maintaining it by all nations of the world. A central credo of Muslim conduct is that when they engage in any agreement, they must make good on their agreement. To this point Allah said:

﴿يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَوْفُوا بِالْعُقُودِ﴾

"O ye who believe! fulfill (all) obligations." (Q:5:1)

This article's defense of the Islamic stance on slavery and its mention of the excellent treatment of the slaves in Islam is only a matter of historical importance.

Never Racist

The second most important point to highlight is that slavery in Islam has never been a racist practice. There were slaves of all nations in the early history of the Muslim state. Even before Islam, the Arabs had slaves of all races. The most famous slaves in the history of Islam are: Salman, the Persian, Bilal, the Abyssinian, and Suhayb, the Roman. Indeed, as British historian S.H Leeder writes, the issue of color was irrelevant to the early Muslims: "Take away the black man! I can have no discussion with him," exclaimed the Christian Archbishop Cyrus when the Arab conquerors had sent a deputation of their ablest men to discuss terms of surrender of the capital of Egypt, headed by Negro 'Ubaydah as the ablest of them all. To the sacred Archbishop's astonishment, he was told that this man was commissioned by General 'Amr; that the Moslems held Negroes and white men in equal respect judging a man by his character and not by his colour." [Leeder, S.H., Veiled Mysteries of Egypt (London, 1912), p.332.]

Slavery before Islam and in Other Religions

Slavery existed before Islam, and it spanned nearly every culture, nationality, and religion. While it may have not been known among hunter-gatherer populations, it was a part of every ancient civilization. In both a sociogeographic and religious context, slavery was both normalized and tolerated worldwide, including pre-Columbian America. Upon further research it becomes apparent that no religion encouraged the ending of the practice as much as Islam did. Moreover, no religion encouraged the beneficent treatment of the slaves as much as Islam did.

Here are some mentions of slavery in the Bible (Note that the new translations changed the word "slave" to "servant," to be politically correct!):

Numbers 31:17

"Now kill all the boys. And kill every woman who has slept with a man, but save for yourselves every girl who has never slept with a man." This is a clear communication attributed to Moses (peace be upon him) allowing the enslavement of concubines and having sex with them.

Leviticus 25 44-46

"Both thy bondmen, and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids. Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession. And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondmen forever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour."

EXODUS 21:2-11

"If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve... If his master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. And if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him forever."

Will Durant describes the position of the Church as follows: "The Church did not condemn slavery. Orthodox and heretic, Roman and barbarian alike assumed the institution to be natural and in-destructible. Pagan laws condemned to slavery any free woman who married a slave; the laws of Constantine [a Christian emperor] ordered the woman to be executed, and the slave to be burned alive. The Emperor Gratian decreed that a slave who accused his master of any offence except high treason to the state should be burned alive at once, without inquiring into the justice of the charge." [Lecky, W.E., History of European Morals, vol. II (New York, 1926), p.61, as quoted by Will Durant, op. cit., vol. IV, p.77.]

Islam's Answer to the Dilemma of Slavery

It may be said that Islam did not take an absolute abolitionist stance from the institution of slavery. To some extent this is true. However, one must remember that during the time of the ministry of the Prophet, not only was the immediate abolitionist approach not proposed by any religious or secular order, it would have been infeasible. Furthermore, it could have resulted in much social and economic turmoil, not only for the communities at large, but firstly for the many slaves who would have not been able to fend for themselves. In addition to this, the dilemma of the war captives and what to do with them made slavery the surest path to the preservation of their lives. In the past, due to the scarcity of resources, armies could not keep the captives in prisons and feed them, etc. It was also not always possible to free them because then they would regroup and go back to fighting. Finally, since the enslavement of the captives was a common practice of all armies, it would have been unexpected of the Muslims to be taken as captives if they lost and be mandated to free all the captives if they won.

Hence, Islam's answer to the dilemma of slavery can be summarized into two major points:

1. Gradual depletion of the institution by cutting off its tributaries and widening its runoffs
2. The enjoinder of the excellent treatment of the slaves as long as the institution survives In the following paragraphs, I will address these two points.

The Gradual Depletion of the institution of Slavery

When one wishes to deplete a river of its water, there are two ways one could do this: either cut off its tributaries or increase its runoffs. Relating this analogy to slavery, in terms of the cutting off of tributaries, before Islam a person could be condemned into slavery through various means, including a man selling his own wife or child, child abandonment, debt-slavery, captivity in war, kidnapping, or as a punishment for certain crimes. Islam cut off all of those tributaries feeding into the river of slavery except for the captives of war, for, as aforementioned, it was a logistical necessity at times, and more importantly, enslavement helped protect the captives' lives. However, despite that, Islam recommended freeing those captives. The Prophet said:

"فُكُّوا الْعَالِيَّ يَغْنِي الْأَسِيرَ وَأَطْعِمُوا الْجَانِعَ وَغُدُّوا الْمَرِيضَ"

"Free the captives, feed the hungry and visit the sick." [Al-Bukhari]

Islam's Encouragement of the Emancipation of Slaves

The emancipation of slaves is considered one of the greatest virtues and sources of the Lord's pleasure in Islam. Listed here are some pieces of evidence to this effect from the Quran and the Sunnah:

Allah said:

﴿وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ ۚ فَلَا أَفْئَحَمَ الْعُقَبِ ۚ وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْعُقَبُ ۚ فَكُ رَقَبَةً ۚ﴾

"We pointed out to him[man] the two conspicuous ways [of good and evil]? But he would not attempt the uphill road [to righteousness]. What will make you comprehend what the uphill road is? It is the setting free of a slave...." (Q:90:11-13)

﴿لَيْسَ الْبِرَّ أَنْ تُولُوا وَجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ وَءَاتَى الْمَالَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ ذَوِي

الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ﴾

"It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness- to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves..." (Q:2:177)

Abu Huraira narrated: The Prophet said,

"مَنْ أَعْتَقَ رَقَبَةً مُسْلِمَةً أَغْتَقَ اللَّهُ بِكُلِّ غُضُو مِنْهُ غُضُوًّا مِنَ النَّارِ..."

"Whoever frees a Muslim slave, Allah will save all the parts of his body from the (Hell) Fire as he has freed the body-parts of the slave." Said bin Marjana said that he narrated that Hadith to `Ali bin Al-Husain and he freed his slave for whom `Abdullah bin Ja'far had offered him ten thousand Dirhams or one-thousand Dinars. [Al-Bukhari]

Abu Huraira also narrated: The Prophet said,

"مَنْ أَعْتَقَ شِقْصًا لَهُ فِي عَبْدٍ أُغْتِقَ كُلُّهُ إِنْ كَانَ لَهُ مَالٌ وَإِلَّا يَسْتَسْعَىٰ غَيْرَ مُشْفُوقٍ عَلَيْهِ"

"Whoever frees his portion of a common slave should free the slave completely by paying the rest of his price from his money if he has enough money; otherwise the price of the slave is to be estimated and the slave is to be helped to work without hardship till he pays the rest of his price." [Al-Bukhari]

Islam also made the expiation of many sins by the freeing of slaves, (a much more conducive way of redemption than giving money to a religious institution).

Yet, the most ingenious system Islam legislated was to give the slaves control over their passage into the world of the free by purchasing their freedom with the help of the community that was ordered by Allah to support their cause. Allah says:

﴿وَالَّذِينَ يَبْتَغُونَ الْكِتَابَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَابِتُهُمْ إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا وَءَاتُوهُمْ مِّنْ مَّالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي آتَاكُمْ﴾

"And (as for) those who ask for a writing (an agreement whereby they purchase themselves) from among those whom your right hands possess, give them the writing if you know any good in them, and give them of the wealth of Allah which He has given you..." (Q:24:33)

This was beneficial for the slave who has to be weaned from independence on the master for provisions, which could make them face problems if suddenly found themselves responsible to provide themselves with food, clothes and shelter. (One must not underestimate what this could have meant to the stability and security of the society if the slaves were all freed at once by a mandate). And it was beneficial for the masters who were, to a great extent, dependent on the slaves for their businesses.

This was also favorable for the community which will, as a result, see responsible people who know the value of work and labor move from the ranks of the slaves to those of the free.

Islam's Enjoinment of the Excellent Treatment of the Slaves

The excellent treatment of slaves in Islam is a fact that I will try to highlight by proofs from the textual and historical accounts, including testimonies by non-Muslim historians and thinkers.

In the Quran there are several verses commanding the good treatment of slaves, including:

﴿وَاعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ وَلَا تُشْرِكُوا بِهِ شَيْئًا وَبِالْوَالِدَيْنِ إِحْسَانًا وَبِذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَالْجَارِ ذِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْجَارِ الْجُنُبِ وَالصَّاحِبِ بِالْجَنبِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ وَمَا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ مَن كَانَ مُخْتَالًا فَخُورًا﴾

Serve Allah, and join not any partners with Him; and do good- to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbors who are near, neighbors who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (ye meet), and what your right hands possess [the slave]: For Allah loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious;- (Q:4:36)

The Messenger of Allah commanded us repeatedly to treat the slaves with mercy and compassion. One of his last recommendations to the Muslims prior to his death was to fear Allah regarding their slaves. A quick review of the following ahadeeth will further testify to the excellent treatment of slaves he instructed us of:

"وَلَا يَقُلْ أَحَدُكُمْ عَبْدِي أَمْتِي وَلْيَقُلْ فَتَايَ فَتَاتِي غُلَامِي"

"None of you should say: "My slave" (abdi) and "My slave-woman" (amati), but he should say my boy, my girl" (Muslim), and In a different narration, he added, "for you are all (Allah's) slave and the Lord is Allah, Most High." [Abu Dawood]

Al-Ma'rur bin Suwaid Narrated: I saw Abu Dhar Al-Ghifari wearing a cloak, and his slave, too, was wearing a cloak. We asked him about that (i.e. how both were wearing similar cloaks). He replied, "Once I abused a man and he complained of me to the Prophet. The Prophet asked me, **"يَا أَبَا ذَرٍّ أَعَيَّرْتَهُ بِأَمِيهِ إِنَّكَ أَمَرُوْهُ فَبَيْنَكَ جَاهِلِيَّةٌ إِنْ خَوَّانَكُمْ خَوْلَكُمْ جَعَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ تَحْتَ أَيْدِيكُمْ فَمَنْ كَانَ أَخُوهُ تَحْتَ يَدِهِ فَلْيُطْعِمَهُ مِمَّا يَأْكُلُ وَلْيَلْبَسَهُ مِمَّا يَلْبَسُ وَلَا تَكْلَفُوهُمْ مَا يَغْلِبُهُمْ فَإِنْ كَلَّفْتُمُوهُمْ فَاعَيْنُوهُمْ"**

"Did you abuse him by slighting his mother? You are a man who has 'jahiliyyah' (pre-Islamic ignorance and disbelief)' He added, 'Your slaves are your brethren upon whom Allah has given you authority. So, if one has one's brethren under one's control, he should feed them with the like of what he eats and clothe them with the like of what he wears. You should not overburden them with what they cannot bear, and if you do so, help them (in their hard job)." [Al-Bukhari: 3:46:721]

The Prophet unequivocally prohibited the separation between a mother and her slave child. Abu Musa reported that he (peace and blessings be upon him) said:

"لَعَنَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ - ﷺ - مَنْ فَرَّقَ بَيْنَ الْوَالِدَةِ وَوَلَدِهَا وَبَيْنَ الْأَخِ وَبَيْنَ أَخِيهِ"

"May he be cursed, he who separates a mother from her child or a brother from his sibling" (At-Tirmidhi)

And for one who humiliates his slave by beating him or slapping him, the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) said,

"مَنْ لَطَمَ مَمْلُوكَهُ أَوْ ضَرَبَهُ فَكَفَّارَتُهُ أَنْ يُعْتَقَهُ"

"He who slaps his slave or beats him, there is no expiation for this but to free him." (Muslim)

Because of the aforementioned examples of the divine and prophetic instructions regarding slavery, no other nation or religious group in the world treated slaves better than the Muslims did, and here are the testimonies of the non-Muslim historians and leaders regarding this very fact: (quotations from www.al-islam.org/slavery)

On the attitude of the Muslim master with his slaves, Will Durant says, "...he handled them with a genial humanity that made their lot no worse - perhaps better, as more secure - than that of a factory worker in nineteenth-century Europe." [Hurgronje C., Mohammedanism, (N.Y., 1916), p. 128 as quoted by W. Durant, The Story of Civilization, vol. IV (N.Y., 1950), p. 209.]

At the end of the 18th century, Mouradgea d'Ohsson (a main source of information for the Western writers on the Ottoman Empire) declared: "There is perhaps no nation where the captives, the slaves, the very toilers in the galleys are better provided for or treated with more kindness than among the Muhammedans." [As quoted in The Encyclopaedia of Islam, vol.I, p. 35.]

P. L Riviere wrote: "A master was enjoined to make his slave share the bounties he received from God. It must be recognised that, in this respect, the Islamic teaching acknowledged such a respect for human personality and showed a sense of equality which is searched for in vain in ancient civilization" [Riviere P.L., Revue Bleaue (June 1939).]

Napoleon Bonaparte is recorded as saying about the condition of slaves in Muslim countries: "The slave inherits his master's property and marries his daughter. The majority of the Pashas had been slaves. Many of the grand viziers, all the Mamelukes, Ali Ben Mourad Beg, had been slaves. They began their lives by performing the most menial services in the houses of their masters and were subsequently raised in status for their merit or by favour. In the West, on the

contrary, the slave has always been below the position of the domestic servants; he occupies the lowest rug." [Cherfils, Bonaparte et l'Islam (Paris, 1914).]

With regard to the question of concubines and having sex with the slave girls, we must begin by saying that the Prophet encouraged the masters to free their female slaves and marry them. He said:

"وَرَجُلٌ كَانَتْ لَهُ أَمَةٌ فَغَدَاَهَا فَأَحْسَنَ غِدَاءَهَا ثُمَّ أَدَبَهَا فَأَحْسَنَ أَدَبَهَا ثُمَّ أَعْتَقَهَا وَتَزَوَّجَهَا فَلَهُ أَجْرَانِ"

"He will be doubly rewarded,...the man who had a slave girl, and he fed her well, taught her manners and educated her, and then freed her and married her" [Al-Bukhari and Muslim.]

Secondly, this system was not new or introduced by Islam; all the prophets before Islam acknowledged it and used it. There is no argument between the Jews, Christians and Muslims that Hagar was the concubine of Prophet Abraham; in the Old Testament, there are countless stories about concubines, including those of the prophets such as David and Solomon (peace and blessings be upon them all).

We can never view having sex with the female slave nowadays from the same perspective of those who lived during those times. It is illogical to deal with historical matters without understanding their context; judging a practice as good or bad is not an abstract, separate from its context and the norms of the time. Prostitution refers to sex outside of the socially acceptable context, and in the ancient times, the concubine, like the wife, was allowed to have sex with the master as a legitimate partner. No woman would ever be allowed to have two partners at any time, so this concubine was not a sex tool to be enjoyed by the master and his relatives and friends. Additionally, she was to be only wed to one person, and her rights and the rights of her children, akin to any legitimate children of the master, were all preserved. Ultimately, sex with the female slave was not only a way of fulfilling her needs, she was also given a special status once she delivered a child. She would become unsellable, and was freed upon the death of the master.

I would conclude by emphasizing that Islam was keen on the emancipation of the slaves, and enjoined this throughout its teachings. The original and natural state in which God created his servants is the state of freedom, and He desires a return to that freedom. Let us all pray for the deliverance of all people from all forms of disguised slavery that exist in our world today and the end of all manifestations of subjugation of people by others.