



Question:

When I read the Qur'an I walk away with the general impression that the liberation of slaves is considered to be a moral good. But the Qur'an never seems to categorically condemn slavery. Chattel slavery is considered one of the dark marks in human history, and the West takes great pride in having abolished it. This leaves me to wonder why neither the Qur'an nor the Prophet Muhammad outlawed slavery?

Answer:

There is no easy answer to this question mainly because we have no record of any clear answer to this in Islamic sources. So, anything I can offer as an answer to this challenging question is merely what I personally understand to be the case based on my knowledge of the spirit of the Islamic teachings. That said, I believe it is important to begin with a reminder of certain realities that pertain to colonial slavery, since the grotesqueness and gruesomeness of that system are what typically elicit moral outrage in light of the fact that when most people think of a slave they automatically think of people of African origin and their historical plight. That outrage is well deserved since it was primarily in the “West” where the word “black” became synonymous with “slave” beginning from the 17th century. During the time of the Prophet Muhammad—blessings and peace upon him—most slaves in Arabia were also black Africans, but that was more a matter of coincidence in light of the proximity of Africa to Arabia. Other than that, there is no evidence of there being a general law or understanding that only black Africans could be slaves even though this same trend did develop in the Muslim world around the same time or after it became widespread in the Americas. Slaves in the Americas were generally not allowed to marry. They could not own property. Because they were considered property, they could be bought and sold at will even to the point of being separated from their children. There were no laws protecting slaves from physical abuse. And slave owners had no legal obligation to feed them, clothe them, or to provide them with adequate living quarters. African slaves were treated similar to the way that animals were treated. No! They were treated worse than people treated their blood hounds. The most significant abuse was psychological in nature. Slaves were prevented from learning to read or write. They were forced to relinquish their cultural norms, their religious observances, and beliefs. They were forced to change their names to identify them with being the property of those families to whom they were subservient. They were barred from the knowledge of their past, told that they were worthless, and historically contributed nothing to civilization. Furthermore, they were taught that they were naturally unequal to white people in every way. Those facts notwithstanding, it is difficult at times to judge an earlier period in human history by the moral standards of today. Slavery for much of our history was universal. Not only did whites enslave blacks, blacks enslaved blacks. As a matter of fact, it is well documented that many free blacks living in the Americas prior to Emancipation owned black slaves themselves. Africans enslaved other Africans, Europeans other Europeans, etc. This was all

prior to the spread of the doctrine that solidified the fate of black people as presumptive slaves in both the Americas and other parts of the “civilized” world.

It was a general rule that if any people were defeated in war, the survivors who were not savagely murdered could be enslaved for the remainder of their lives. This appears to have been one of the most common ways of becoming a slave. There were, however, other conditions that led people into bondage. Some of those ways were: 1) raids of villages where its dwellers would be kidnapped, sold, or forced into bondage; 2) deportations that resulted from court judgments of corrupt African governments seeking rewards from slave traders; 3) debt bondage whereas a person would place himself in the debt of his creditors due to lack of funds to defray the debts; and 4) resource scarcity such that families would place themselves at the service of landowners and others in exchange for subsistence.

In the Islamic tradition, the only valid way to become a slave was through becoming a prisoner of war. The Qur’an teaches that the Muslim victors in any battle had the option of freely releasing POW’s or in exchange for a ransom (Q 47:4). In the Prophetic tradition, there were a few cases where POW’s were executed as well. This latter precedent established the right to kill prisoners of war under certain conditions, and when slavery is juxtaposed against this option its severity is mitigated to some degree. For some the question becomes, is it better to take a life or enslave it? A similar debate exists in recent times among penal law philosophers and moralists, and it has found its way into debates about the utility and ethical ramifications of applying the death penalty for certain crimes.

Amazingly when reflecting on this earlier time when slavery was universally accepted, those who were in bondage often would avoid attempts to escape. There are many stories of slave owners sending off their slaves on business ventures only to have those slaves return with the profits they were sent out to return with. Of course, this is not to say that all slaves and that all forms of slavery produced a utopian reality or vision nor is the suggestion that revolts did not occur from time to time. The point is merely that when certain practices are so normative in the collective psyches of people, history has shown over and over that humans possess an ability to endure, tolerate, and overcome adverse and extremely unpleasant conditions.

Then as for answering the question of why neither the Qur’an nor the Prophet Muhammad outlawed slavery, let us first reflect on the following:

1. Like in the Western tradition, slaves were considered the rightful property of their owners even though the Qur’an is less explicit about this than the books on Islamic jurisprudence.
2. A person could only become a slave through capture during a time of war.
3. Only non-Muslim opponents could be forced into bondage even though Muslims did not always live up to this ideal.
4. Anyone could become a slave, not only black Africans.
5. Slaves could be bought or sold but family members could not be separated from one another nor could a family member be the slave of another family member.

Slavery in Islam required the following from slave owners:

1. The owner of slaves was required to have the material capacity to feed, clothe, and provide shelter to his slaves.
2. The owner was obligated to feed and clothe his/her slaves from the same quality of food and clothing one provided for one's self. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Feed them from what you eat, and clothe them from what you wear" (Muslim).
3. The Prophet Muhammad outlawed the punishment and abuse of slaves, saying in his Farewell Pilgrimage, "If they commit a sin that you deem to be unforgiveable then sell the slaves of God. But do not punish them." (Ibn Sa'd)
4. Slaves could not be forced to change their names.
5. Slaves were allowed to own wealth, and to offer their services to other people with the permission of their owners.
6. Slaves were allowed to marry, and the Qur'an encouraged slave owners to find compatible mates from them (Q 24:32).
7. A believing slave's worth could be made equal to that of a free believer if the slave's freedom was purchased in lieu of the accidental murder of a free believer (Q 4:92).
8. Slave owners could not refer to themselves as "masters" (*asyād*). Rather, they were to refer to themselves as "patrons" (*mawālī*).
9. A slave could buy his/her freedom, and a number of options for manumission existed (Q 24:33).
10. The Qur'an upheld manumission as a moral ideal (Q 90: 12-13).
11. Islam gave incentive to slave owners to free their slaves by giving them the right to inherit the wealth left by their former slaves if the latter died during the life of their former owners. The Prophet Muhammad said, "Patronage is only the right of the one who manumits" (Muslim).

There are other things to consider, but let me say the following in summary. The Prophet Muhammad's ultimate mission—blessings and peace upon him— was to bring salvation to humanity in the Afterlife. In carrying out this mission, he ensured that he gave all the necessary tools and knowledge for every believer to achieve that goal. The most important gift he presented to us was the knowledge that God only accepts good works when they're done with a pure intention. The fact that slaves were considered private property of their owners during pre-modern times posed a significant challenge if he had so proclaimed universal emancipation outlawing the ownership of slaves. The American Civil War reminds us of the potential ramifications of stripping people of their property even if it is deemed to be unlawful for them to own. This is not to depreciate the good that has resulted from Lincoln's bravery and conviction concerning America's slaves. But, one is left to wonder why there has been so much resistance to the upward mobility of blacks since the time of the Emancipation Proclamation until the current day when we reflect on all the government-backed policies, laws, and efforts to undermine black success since the founding of the United States of America. I would argue that it is precisely because property owners were begrudgingly forced to yield over their slaves after over a century of indoctrination that taught them both that their race was superior to all others and that blacks could never be their equals. Lincoln's legislation and executive order only dealt with one part of the problem. To secure a lasting peace and progress in American society, it would have taken a significant amount of introspection and mental realignment which would have included Lincoln abandoning even his own belief in the inferiority of blacks. The other problems that resulted from Lincoln's proclamation were that former slaves were left without guarantees of food, shelter, work, security, and were left at the

mercy of former slave owners infuriated by the new arrangement. Lincoln, furthermore, advocated sending black people back to Africa.

What the Prophet Muhammad—blessings and peace upon him—fundamentally attempted to do was create a society mentally and emotionally mature and prepared enough to receive former slaves in their midst as equal partners in shaping the overall well-being of public and private life. When a slave owner sees himself not as a “master” (sayyid) but as a “patron” (mawla) of his slave, it is easier for one to see ownership of a slave as both a privilege and a responsibility. When one has to share one’s wealth with one’s slave dressing them in similar attire and feeding them with the same quality of food, it’s hard to think that one has the right to abuse him/her. Then, when one is given a share in the wealth of one’s slave, it is hard to imagine that the Prophet Muhammad—blessings and peace upon him—meant nothing more than to create an atmosphere of fraternity and solidarity which would make the transition from slave to non-slave much easier. In doing so, the slave owner guarantees for him/herself a special place in God’s heaven in light of the willingness and willful decision to manumit that bondsperson. The bondsperson on the other hand harbors no resentment in his heart for his former slave owner who liberates him after making use of him in such a relatively dignified manner. So, these are the reasons I believe that neither the Qur’an nor the Prophet Muhammad categorically outlawed slavery. The aim was to create the conditions that would not only ensure a lasting severance of the practice. It was also to teach that all human life is equal at its essence. Slavery according to the prophetic teachings was a more attractive alternative to what we found in the Americas. And, keep in mind that not all slaves were black.

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