



Jonathan A. C. Brown.- *Slavery and Islam* (London: Oneworld Academic, 2019), 448p.

Slavery and Islam is a book for those who want to understand how Muslims envisioned, practiced and eventually abolished slavery (*riqq*) in Islam. Slavery can be regarded as one of the most morally unsettling practices. Throughout human history, nobody censured this thorny issue and “moral evil.” Herein lies the slavery conundrum. The book explores how the abolitionist movement has been successful in arguing for uprooting slavery through a discourse that excoriated all its forms hinged on legal definitions. The moral and communal challenges that slavery poses to the traditions of Islam and America are simply strikingly similar. Questions concerning the morality of slavery under the *Sharī‘a* are among the most important questions facing scholars of Islamic ethics today. In this vein, Jonathan A. C. Brown’s *Slavery and Islam* aims to address the previously unresolved philosophical, legal, and theological issues presented by the *Sharī‘a*’s allowance of slavery.

If slavery is a conspicuous and universal evil, the author inquires, why did no one seem to realize this until relatively recently, and what does that mean about our traditions of moral reasoning or divine guidance? Why do our Holy Scripture and the Holy *Qur‘ān* condone slavery and why did our prophets practice it? How can we venerate people and texts – the prophets, Founding Fathers, a scripture or founding document – that considered slavery valid or normal? And, if we see clear and flagrant moral wrongs that those people and texts so obviously missed, why are we revering or honoring them in the first place?

The introduction sets the stage, asking, among others, whether it is appropriate to venerate people and texts that in the past found slavery “valid and normal,” whether changing technologies and advances in world economic systems have contributed to modern condemnations of slavery, and what role “anti- Black sentiments in Islamic civilization” may have played in the history of slavery and slave trading in the Muslim realms. Brown is concerned that the book might read like an apology for the *Sharī‘a*’s allowance of slavery and he is right to have this concern. As we shall see, there are sections of the book that unabashedly seek to explain away and perhaps excuse the omnipresent role that slavery and slave trading have played in Islamic political, economic and legal history. Brown attempts to answer his unease in the introduction, stating: “[a]s I make clear in this book, I believe slavery is wrong. What interests me here is how almost all moral authorities in human history thought it was right, and what this means for our view of history, moral philosophy and theology” (9). His agenda is therefore considerably larger than the narrow focus on slavery and Islam suggested by the title.

Brown looks at the problem of defining exactly what slavery is and whether there is one thing we can call “slavery” across history. Brown devotes one complete chapter to tackling this provocative trope which has raised many controversies

among historians and social scientists regarding its definition. In the first chapter, the author initiates the inquiry with a strong discussion of the difficulties in defining and conceptualizing slavery. To undermine his standpoint, he offers us a variety of instances of certain scenarios that seemingly fit under the definition of slavery but are not categorized as such – like terrorism – and *vice versa*. He postulates that our definition of slavery and where the lines are drawn when defining it are cogently imbued with a political tenor and a construct of liberal Western scholarship and a transatlantic perspective. He argues that the Islamic concept, rendered using the Arabic word *riqq*, is much more varied and complex, sometimes vague or avoiding the concepts of ownership and domination – traditional markers of chattel slavery. Brown points out that defining slavery globally is “a fruitless exercise in semantics,” borrowing the historian Suzanne Miers’s own words.

Brown then accentuates how Islamic law and theology (the *Shari‘a*) approached, conceptualized and envisioned slavery (*riqq*), situating it in the discursive traditions of the *Qur‘ān* and *Sunna*, sayings and actions of the Prophet Mohammed, and emphasizing reforms in the practice of slavery that the *Shari‘a* brought to the Middle East, Africa, Eurasia, and the Indian Ocean world. Relying on his extensive knowledge of the *hadith* corpus in making these points and underpinning what he identifies as Islam’s unique ethical approach toward slavery, one which repeatedly and, in his words, “obsessively” emphasizes the merit of emancipation, Brown comments how Islam extremely pushed for the emancipation of slaves, emphasized kind treatment, and forbade further enslavement with the exception of prisoners of war. He also compares Islam’s view of slavery to different religions and societies, offering a comprehensive perspective of the role slavery played not just in Islam, but also in other faith communities.

After dwelling upon how the high religious tradition of Islamic law and ethics conceptualized and regulated *riqq*, Brown moves on to probe the following two questions: what about the reality of *riqq* as it was practiced by the Muslims who supposedly lived according to high religious tradition? What about slavery in Islam? He first aptly defines what constitutes an Islamic civilization to begin with, then lists several examples of failures, when the ruling elite failed to defend the regulations and standards of slavery that Islam had put in place. He highlights that Islamic civilization did not associate skin color with slavery but clearly some did not follow this Islamic advice; some Islamic scholars had to write numerous pages to show that color, slavery, and inferiority are not associated. He admits that Muslim slavers “truly ‘consumed’ masses of human beings” and that blackness became a major factor in determining who was enslaved and how they were enslaved, with anti-Black racism often driving the decision-making. He establishes that the practice tracked “classic slavery zones” around the Muslim world; he provides a well-written taxonomy of “Islamic” slavery and slave trading and acknowledges the cruelty and turpitude of the slave trade conducted by Muslims in many places and across time.

Brown launches the crux of the book in the fourth chapter, which he terms “The Slavery Conundrum.” He divides this trope into three axioms and ventures into an in-depth analysis of each concept. Axiom 1 affirms that slavery is an intrinsic

and gross moral evil. Axiom 2 asserts that “slavery is slavery.” Full stop. Axiom 3 affirms that our past has moral authority over us and, because of this, it cannot be overlooked or declared to be anachronistic. Brown argues that slavery has not always been the binary opposite of freedom and that cultural traditions make our understandings of the concept blurred. He demonstrates that Islam’s approach to the topic illustrates this point, given the great variety of circumstances Muslims employed in enslaving others. He concedes that the *Shari‘a* did not see *riqq* as an intrinsic grave moral wrong but instead viewed the condition as a form of misfortune that might happen to anyone, or a condition imposed on people because of unbelief, or as a convenient and ancient way to extract labor and services, or perhaps a combination of all three. He brings to the fore two causes for abolitionism: (1) an anti-slavery “moral awakening” among all human beings including Muslims, coupled with the Enlightenment-based assertion that there must be moral progress in history, and (2) a change in the economic structure and organization of society, leading to a worldwide pragmatic disapprobation of slavery primarily because it is bad policy. He pessimistically concludes that these explanations are not helpful in solving the conundrum for Muslims, given their allegiance to their religious texts. The rest of the book is, to some extent, an effort to solve the conundrum.

Brown takes an even deeper search into the Islamic tradition and how various scholars viewed both the practice and abolition of slavery. After his comprehensive presentation of multiple perspectives and arguments, the author ultimately concludes that because “God wishes freedom” for people, then “abolition is the best means to make that wish a universal reality. If doing so is within our means, Islam can give no reason this should not be done” (264).

Besides, Brown tackles the moral issues of slavery today and offers interesting insights and explanations on the historical legacy of concubinage. Brown is again intransigent in reiterating that slavery was not always a “gross, intrinsic moral evil at all points in history” (269). He suggests that moral disgust at slavery today is instead the result of changes in our views of right and wrong resulting from changes in custom and, because of this, ending slavery is now a sincere moral priority for Muslims just as it is for others. He relates this assertion to a discussion of the issue of consent in historically evaluating the behavior of owners of concubines, arguing that the modern view that consent in sexual relations is a necessity, and the related view that the primacy of a woman’s autonomy is virtually indisputable, are both additional reasons for concluding that concubinage is a dead letter in Islamic relationships and why it should now be a dead letter in Islamic law and ethics as well.

Whether we should criticize our past for the sake of a bright future is certainly a debate starting question. By opening this discussion, Brown made his book a feature for the ongoing discourse on slavery. Through his challenging and entertaining writing style, the author engages the reader on an intellectual level. Some parts of his book may be painful for us to acknowledge, but it is necessary for those searching to comprehend slavery outside of the Western outlook.

Because of the smart comparative approach the author adopts in tackling this thorny issue, Brown makes *Slavery and Islam* a very useful and interesting piece

not only for Muslims, but also for the followers of various faiths, who find slavery morally repugnant and yet laud their religion and seek to understand it better. We shun from avowing the presence of slavery in the beliefs and philosophies of those whom we have lauded. However, as Brown asserts in his book, it is much more productive for us to have discussions on such matters and research them rather than ignore or change the past in order to reconcile any dissonance we have. Brown's arguments, analogies, or conclusions, along with his diligent, sincere, and distinguished efforts are certainly commendable and a pleasure to read. Readers with some background knowledge on Islam can understand the topic better but overall it can be highly recommended for scholars of Islam and general readers curious about slavery's historical role in religion.

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