

## A Comparison between Ancient Greek and Early Islamic Understanding and Practice of Slavery

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### Abstract

Slavery is a practice which has been applied since the earliest societies. Though this inhumane practice has been abolished in nineteenth century in the sense of chattel slavery, it still prevails under some other forms. Slavery is one of the worst conditions that human beings have ever experienced. As slaves were deprived of any legal rights and social status, position of a society towards slaves might be a good indicator for the humanly quality and humanistic principles of that society.

This paper compares understanding and practices of slavery in the Ancient Greek society, which is held as the basis of Western civilization, and early Islamic society, which is accepted to have laid foundations of Eastern-Islamic civilization. With this comparison, it has been tested through a critical practice like slavery, whether all democratic standards, individual rights and humanistic principles have been developed by the West, as asserted by Western political establishments.

**Key Words:** Slavery, Human Rights, Ancient Greece, Early Islamic Period

## Kadim Yunan ve Erken İslam Dönemlerinin Kölelikle İlgili Anlayış ve Uygulamalarının Karşılaştırılması

### Özet

Kölelik dünyanın ilk toplumlarından beri uygulanmış bir pratiktir. Bu gayri insane uygulama, bedeni kölelik anlamında on dokuzuncu yüzyılda kaldırılmakla beraber, başka bazı şekiller altında hala varlığını sürdürmektedir. Kölelik insanoğlunun tarihte yaşadığı en kötü şartlardan birini oluşturmuştur. Diğer taraftan köleler her türlü hukuki haktan ve sosyal statüden yoksun oldukları için, bir toplumun kölelere yönelik tavrı onun insane vasıfları ve insane değer verme prensipleri için iyi bir gösterge olabilir.

Bu çalışmada Batı medeniyetinin temeli olarak değerlendirilen Kadim Yunan toplumu ile Doğu-İslam medeniyetinin temellerini attığı kabul edilirken İslam toplumunun kölelikle ilgili anlayış ve uygulamaları mukayese edilmektedir. Bu karşılaştırma ile bütün demokratik standartların, ferdi hakların ve insane prensiplerin, Batılı siyasi yapıların iddia ettiği gibi, Batı tarafından geliştirilip geliştirilmediği kölelik gibi kritik bir uygulama üzerinden test edilmiş olmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler :** Kölelik, İnsan Hakları, Kadim Yunanistan, Erken İslami Dönem

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## 1. Introduction

When you read Western social scientists and politicians, you will see that everything that human beings own today regarding human values like equality, human rights, rule of law, democracy etc. were originated and created by the West. It is Western people who have formed all the present human values step by step during their different periods throughout history, starting from ancient Greece and including even the dark and backward periods of Middle Age. On the other hand, they tend to see the East as the land of despotic societies. People of the East are deprived of the capacity to create advanced human values. They are a characterless crowd, which are ruled by despotic rulers as “a herd” and who consume their lives in a world of superstitions. The Eastern people could never get out of the circle of “barbarism”, which also constituted the viewpoint of ancient Greek people for outsiders.

But an aspect of this approach to the East attracts a special attention: We can see that this sort of biases of the Western people about Eastern peoples in general much more intensify when it comes to the matter of Muslim peoples. The achievements made by Sumerians and Egyptians are often appreciated by Western social scientists. But Muslim peoples, who created societies much more humanistic and civilized than Sumerians and Egyptians are mostly tended to be excluded from the dynamics that have built up the historical development of the human beings.

In addition to that, Western people accept human values only within the framework that they themselves have drafted. Democracy can exist only in the form accepted by them and cannot be valid in any other forms. Human and woman rights are possible only by the Western standards. The authority to fill the content of such values and to determine their structure exclusively belongs to Western people. For example if a woman wants by her free will to live in the decent atmosphere of a man’s home as his second wife, she is considered nothing more than a slave. But if a woman becomes a prostitute by her free will and has to live in an environment improper for human dignity, there is nothing contrary to woman rights.

When Western people monopolize all values developed by human beings and confine the authority to determine their nature and structure to themselves, the Eastern-Muslim societies feel themselves excluded, alienated and scorned. They find two choices before themselves: Either to accept readily everything imposed by the West and to abandon their distinctive personality and identity; or to be alienated completely from the Western people

and values and to attempt a struggle of identity and existence against the West. However, as the struggle they attempt is blocked by all kinds of diplomatic, political and strategical tactics and plots, they get stuck in the quagmire of violence and this causes their societies to go further backward instead of forward. And this event becomes only a part of the trap set to weaken and exploit Muslim societies by Western powers, which are not often honest and consistent even with their own values and principles.

If Western and other people want the societies of different civilizations, cultures and religious identities to compromise and develop in peace, they have to respect different cultures and human values created by those cultures in the past and at present, and to accept that human values and legal standards can become in different forms and natures for different societies.

For a comparison to be made between the Western and Eastern-Islamic civilizations with regard to human rights and values, perception and practice of 'slavery' might be a good criterion. Because slavery was substantially established, accepted and widespread in the societies before the emergence of these two civilizations. So perpetuating the practice would not cause any reaction from the social environment. In other words, maintaining the inferior status and bad conditions of slaves would not cost those societies any economic or political loss. Therefore, if the members of a society take any positive or negative steps pertaining to slaves, this step would naturally reflect their value judgments and moral standards.

As for the place and significance of the periods studied here for the Western and Eastern-Islamic civilizations, it is obvious that the first century AH was a period in which the foundations of Islamic civilization had been laid and which presents the most original and purest model of that civilization. Similarly, the ancient Greek thought and practice forms a historical setting which harbors, for most of Western people, the roots of Western civilization.

While comparing the chief personalities, it is certain that the Prophet of Islam played a prominent role in drafting the ideal model for Islamic civilization; and Aristotle, along with Plato, played such a role in designating an ideal model for Greek society as well as for the Western civilization. Actually, Aristotle's position that justified and even advocated slavery influenced the political structures in the West in the later centuries (Kenny, 2006: 76).

Before seeing the practices and understandings in Ancient Greece and Early Islamic Period, it will be better to look briefly at the applications of the former societies and states in this matter.

## **2. Slavery in the History**

Although slavery intensified in the pre-modern period in which Western powers and merchants bought and sold thousands of African black people like commercial goods and exploited them in America and Europe to increase their commercial profit, it was a practice which came from the earliest societies of the history.

Throughout the history, slavery has often rested on the event that a people defeats another one and puts it under its own control. In such a case, the victor could impose all of their demands and law structure on those defeated and captured. Those who were defeated had to accept everything imposed on them and to recognize an inferior status of slavery which blocks the path to the upper classes of the society (Ennals, 2007: 42).

Although slavery over the earlier periods was a practice commonly accepted and incessantly perpetuated, it had not shown a consistency and regularity in terms of its legal and moral foundations(Ennals, 2007: 41).

However, in the course of time people came to perceive slavery as a normal practice. Now both enslaving and enslaved people accepted this practice as a normal part of the life and even of the natural order (Drescher 2009: ix).

When we look at its course until present time, we can find out some phases of development from chattel slavery to serfdom and to some other social and economic forms, though it has not shown a certain line of development (Ennals, 2007: 41).

### **2.1. Slavery in the Ancient Societies**

The first communities who lived in Mesopotamia started using irrigation system and became the first community to advance to settled agriculture. But that change also led the settled communities to go frequently to war with each other for water and land and to enslave the people captured from the enemy. The increase in the agricultural works resulted in the employment of the captives in agricultural area as slaves, instead of being killed as before (Sylvester, 1999: 49).

Furthermore, during Sumerian period, new occupations emerged, such as building new houses, temples and other places, and working in larger farms and workshops, which required additional labor force. So this was another factor which caused the enslavement to spread further (Sylvester, 1999: 51).

Although enslavement during the Sumerian period occurred mostly due to wars, in the case of default in paying a debt, the debtor could become the slave of the creditor. Even the debtor could give his son or daughter instead of himself as a slave (Sylvester, 1999: 51).

The social structure for Sumerians is hierarchically as follows: The highest class consisted of royal aristocracy, clergy, rich merchants and landlords. At the lowest level stood slaves consisting of outsiders, war captives or the children sold by their families. In between those two classes was a middle class of peasants, artisans, fishermen and scribes (Lopez, 2008: 39).

Babylonia, a powerful ancient state in Mesopotamia, also accepted and perpetuated slavery practice. Hammurabi, who came to throne in 1780 BC as the sixth king of that empire, regulated slavery too in his famous Code. In these regulations, slaves were held as private property: they could be traded, given away, exchanged, inherited or rented. Also, slave-owners are allowed to use their female slaves as prostitutes. Although Hammurabi Code recognized some ways to manumit the slaves, releasing of a permanent slave was a rare occasion (Sylvester, 1999: 54).

During the Old and Middle Kingdom of Egypt, slavery did not spread much, because there wasn't an imperialist and militarist foreign policy as well as peasants could be forced to work when needed. Whereas during the New Kingdom, those captured from the Hyksos when they were expelled from Egypt, and those captured in the imperialist battles of the state increased the number of slaves dramatically. During this period, slaves were traded in slave markets and private persons along with the state could easily buy and use slaves (Sylvester 1999: 61-62). Quran tells that Prophet Joseph was sold in a slave market in Egypt when he was a young boy (Quran, 12/20).

The Jews, one of the oldest peoples of the Middle East, were both enslaved by others and they enslaved other people. They were enslaved in 1570 BC by Egyptians and in 597 BC by Babylonians. For the Jews, enslavement of non-Jewish people was permanent and children of slaves were born as slaves. They enslaved people mostly in battle fields, but enslaving the debtors in default was also a common practice. Though enslavement seemed temporary in the latter case, it often continued for rather a long time (Sylvester, 1999: 62-63).

Hittites, prominently a militarist people, consisted of a military aristocracy and a middle class of artisans, merchants, peasants and horse-breeders. But at the lowest level of the social pyramid, stood slaves (Lopez, 2008: 44).

In the Ancient Middle East sale of children into slavery was not uncommon. Even parents of a child could sell him/her for money (Mendelsohn, 1978: 15).

## **2.2. Slavery Practice in the Ancient Greece**

Slavery existed throughout the history of Ancient Greece and slaves did a large proportion of physical labor in all social areas (Nardo, 2006: 307).

Chattel slavery in Greece became so widespread after 600 BC that they were cheap enough to be purchased by even middle class people... By 5th century BC, number of slaves increased in some city-states to a level to cover the one third of the total population (Vernant, 1990: 66).

Greek people accepted slavery as a part of the natural order and a condition which is completely approved by gods (Nardo, 2006: 307).

Development of the idea for personal freedom in Greece under the transformation of the city-states into a new political structure, encouraged paradoxically development of chattel slavery as a complementary element. Also, probably rise in the economic activities encouraged import of slaves by increasing demand for labor force (Martin, 2000: 65).

Democratic citizen structure in Ancient Greece consisted only of adult male citizens and those people covered merely a small part of the total population (perhaps between % 10 and % 20) (Raaflaub et al., 2007: 11). For instance in Athens, which comprised half a million population, number of citizens was twenty or thirty thousand. Majority of the population were slaves. Slaves were possessed property and they did not have any role in the social and political life of the polis. Practice of slavery was regarded as a natural institution in the life and political thought of the polis and people did not need to consider and discuss over it. Slaves were a necessary and important element for the life of polis; it was a means of production, but it was nothing more than a tool in political, social and economic life (Göze, 2011: 5).

For our today's way of thinking, there is an obvious contradiction between some people's freedom and some other's servitude. But Greek way of thinking was different: freedom of some people could not be imagined without other's slavery and these two extremes were not seen contradictory, but complementary and independent facts (Austin and Vidal, 1986: 19).

That Greek people classified the outsiders as "metics" or slaves and accordingly deprived majority of the people of civil and /or political rights stemmed from a principle of racial exclusiveness (Lerner, 1988: 138).

As the Greek labeled outsiders as "barbarians" in an alienating and insulting manner, they regarded foreign-origin slaves as barbarians too and treated them accordingly (Coleman, 2000: 34).

The Greek believed that Greek language, religion and trade was superior compared to other peoples. They did not like living together with outsider “barbarians”. And they grudgingly accepted non-Greek slaves just to do undignified works (Ackermann, 2008:xxxiii).

Greek people regarded slaves as dishonest, lazy and naturally deficient creatures lacking complete mental and moral capacities. Therefore they thought slaves could not be trusted and had to be supervised wherever possible (Nardo, 2006: 307).

For Greek, if one was defeated in a battle field, he/she would not allow to be captured and enslaved, as life was not worth living at all costs. So if a person, even if a woman or a child allowed to be enslaved, he/she was considered to display a slavish mentality (Coleman, 2000: 34).

Exact number of slaves at the hands of Greek people is not clear, but a household of moderate means might have two or three and a well-to-do family might have between fifteen and twenty slaves (Nardo, 2006: 307).

Many Athenian public slaves worked in silver mines of the state. These workers were treated with cruelty. They were always shackled, were forced to work in extremely bad conditions and they did not have any hope to be released (Nardo, 2006: 309).

In Greece slaves were property of their masters. They did not have right to apply to any legal authority even when they were treated badly. They were subject to heavy bodily punishments when they committed a crime. But, citizens, even when they broke laws, could compensate it with their property or they could appear before courts (Coleman, 2000: 35).

Slave-owners could punish their slaves without fear of punishment. Although a master’s killing his slave was an improper act in Athena, its punishment was not more than a ritual of purification (Vernant, 1990: 66).

All over Greece, it was a common practice to torture slaves who would give evidence before courts. The reason for this was that if slaves were not corrected by oppression, their dishonesty by nature might drive them to lying (Nardo, 2006: 309; Jones, 2008: 62).

Female slaves in Aphrodite shrine in Corinth worked as sacred prostitutes and their earnings were considered a contribution to the temple (Vernant, 1990: 67).

As there was no effort to prevent male extramarital sexual activity, full burden of monogamy fell upon the wife. Married men enjoyed sexual relationship with their lovers (male or female) and so females had to foist upon the role of a gatekeeper in the privileged circle of citizens(Jones, 2008: 95).

Slaves could seldom get freedom especially in some crucial occasions like fighting in a battle. But even in those cases, they could not be a citizen of Greek city-state; they could only join in ‘metics’, the outsiders living in the country. They were also expected to help their former masters when they were called (Vernant, 1990: 67; Coleman, 2000: 34).

Despite their miserable living conditions, slaves had never embarked upon a large scale revolt; because they came from quite different origins and ethnicities and lived so scattered not to be organized in a revolt (Vernant, 1990: 67).

Modern scholars “could hardly believe that so “extraordinary a culture”, concerned as it was with justice, equality and freedom, could adhere to so evident an abuse” (Coleman, 2000: 34).

### **2.3. Aristotle’s Approach to Slavery**

Aristotle writes in his *Politics* about partnerships between wife and husband, slave and master and ruler and subjects. For him, ruler and master are naturally they are as they have an advanced mind capacity, whereas status of subjects and slaves are also natural because they have only a bodily capacity to do what the former foresee (Aristotle, 1958: 5). For Aristotle, as slave persons cannot rule themselves, they are natural slaves of the reasonable to guide them with rationality (Sheldon, 2001: 276).

Aristotle assumed that there are differences between slave and master determined by the nature just as between child and adult, male and female, animal and human being. However there is no objective evidence to prove an innate and natural difference between slave and master (McClelland, 1996: 59)

“In essence, the natural slave is said to suffer from a deficiency of the reasoning part of the soul. This has moral and intellectual implications: it means that he is incapable of living a life of autonomy and independence, in other words, the life of a free man. His best hope of fulfilling his (limited) potential is to serve a natural master, who can guarantee him security, while harnessing his capacities, essentially for bodily service, to his own ends and those of the household. Such service is useful and beneficial for the slave.” (Garnsey, 1999: 38)

It should also be noted that Aristotle was in agreement with conventional understanding of his time by his argument justifying slavery as a natural fate. And people stating opposite views were rare in Greek society (Vernant, 1990: 184).

In fact, a line of thinking emerged at the end of fifth century which asserted that there was no fundamental difference between the Greek and outsiders and slavery could not be justified theoretically and in principle. Aristotle set out to refute this view and tried to

demonstrate that antithesis between master and slave was a natural reality and some were master by nature, whereas others were naturally slaves (Austin and Vidal, 1986: 19).

Aristotle was not ideologically and intellectually democrat as many other well-known Greek intellectuals. When Aristotle presented his views against equality and in favor of natural slavery, actually he tried to find logical explanations to his prejudices regarding the society he lived. For him, if common people are given equality and freedom, this would lead to anarchy, disorder and lawlessness (Rauflaub et al., 2007: 160).

Aristotle not only thought like earlier societies that slavery was rooted in a natural order, but also that there was a group of people fitted naturally to slavery. Just at this point moral considerations and especially injustice of reducing people to slavery come into reckoning (Garnsey, 1999: 38).

As Aristotle tried to advocate and justify inhumane and unfair a practice, he could not avoid many contradictions despite that he was the founder of 'logic' and 'law of non-contradiction'. "Aristotle's defense of natural slavery is deemed incoherent because it is full of inconsistencies. Aristotle says that slaves lack the deliberative element (Politics 1254b22–23, 1260a12–13) but also that if they did not participate in reason they would not be able to execute their masters' orders (Politics 1254a23–24). He says that slaves are not capable of self-rule (Politics 1254b16–21) but also that they have the excellence necessary to fulfill their functions (Politics 1259b22–28, 1260a1–3, 1260a35–36). He distinguishes slaves from children on the ground that children possess the deliberative element (albeit in an immature form) (Politics 1260a13), but then insists that the proper response to slaves, even more than to children, is admonition rather than command alone (Politics 1260b5–7). He says that slaves are simply matter or bodies waiting for minds as form to impose order on them (Politics 1252a31–34, 1254b15–20) but also that, as human beings, they are constituted by matter and form (Politics 1254a32–34), and share in the capacity to reason (Politics 1259b29)". (Frank, 2006: 183)

Aristotle refuses slavery arising from war captivity on the ground that excellence in power does not mean excellence in human value and that war might not be fair. But the philosopher, who rejects historical source of slavery, tries to rationalize and justify this institution with much more controversial arguments (Copleston, 1993: 353). That is, putting aside a reason that slavery is necessitated by the balance of power between combatting forces, he based his thesis on a much more unfair and inhumane argument that some people are

inferior and brutish and so they had better live under the control of wise masters(Kenny, 2006:76).

#### **2.4. Slavery Practice in Pre-Islamic Arab Society**

There are various reasons for slavery in pre-Islamic societies: 1. Wars; 2. The understanding that some people are slave by nature, resulting from race and class discrimination; 3. Committing a felony; 4. One's selling himself, his children or relatives as slaves due to poverty; 5. Sale of waifs and strays as slaves; 6. Enslavement of debtor in default by creditor; 7. Being born from slave parents or mother; 8. Enslavement for trading and profiting; 9. Enslavement through piracy and banditry (Akgündüz, 2000: 118).

Arabs during pre-Islamic period perceived society as divided along the lines such as property, race and gender. Economic and political spheres were prominently controlled by members of wealthy and noble families. According to many historical records, a son of a wealthy and healthy man from a dark-skinned woman could be a slave (Souaiaia, 2008: 119).

As in Mecca in pre-Islamic period there was no central law and authority, people could protect themselves from other people's attacks and harassments by protection of the tribes. During the first days of Islamic revelation, especially the destitute and slave Muslims had to endure harassments of people hostile towards Islam(Hodgson, 1993: 110).

Although all Muslims suffered great troubles during first days of Islam, conditions of slaves were rather worse. They were, man and woman, beaten, abandoned naked on the hot sands of the desert, were dragged in the streets with a rope around their necks. These tortures were intolerable. Abu Bakr, a close friend of the Prophet, purchased some of these male and female slaves and manumitted them. And some others were not sold by their masters despite his paying a great amount for them (Hamidullah, 1959: 77).

#### **2.5. Understanding and Practice of Slavery during Early Islamic Period**

Prophet Muhammad lived a modest life in a small and simple house during his glorious days as well as his troubled and distressed times. He repaired his garments during his daily life, on the other hand he was considered among the elite of his community (Hitti, 2011: 170). For this reason, attitude of the Prophet was neither influenced by the elitist and insulting manner of a haughty aristocrat nor was it distorted by the reactionary psychology of a person who experienced the humble and scorned life of lower classes.

As Islam aimed to correct the unfair order of the former society which was based on economic, social and political privileges, it attracted the discriminated classes; and therefore new Muslims of the earlier period were mostly from slaves and lower classes (Hitti, 2011: 163).

One of those converted to Islam during this early period was Zaid b. Haritha, servant of the Prophet himself. Subsequently he was manumitted and became foster son of the Prophet. Later on, he became one of the chief commanders of Islam (Hodgson, 1993: 107).

Quran advises slave-owners to help slaves to earn money and to gain their freedom... The Prophet was also narrated to have advised people to treat slaves kindly and to release them. Although slavery continued in Islamic community, their conditions increasingly improved and they gained some religious and social status and legal rights. The first caliphs ruling the Islamic society after the Prophet also made humanistic reforms. Enslavement of free Muslims was prevented and ultimately prohibited. Free people's selling themselves, their children or relatives was forbidden and trading of the debtors in default was completely prohibited. (But these practices remained in Roman lands and continued at least until sixteenth century in Christian Europe.) Later on, matter of freedom was examined more in Islamic society and it became one of the principles of Islamic jurisprudence, which prescribed that everyone not recognized as slave was accepted free (Lewis, 2006: 15-16).

Conditions of slaves in Islamic societies were better than those in Greek and Roman societies; because Muslim jurists put more emphasis on humanistic matters. For instance, if a slave becomes ill, the master has to help his/her treatment and he has to give aid during his/her old age. If a master does not treat his slave kindly and does not do what is required, the judge can force him to sell or release his slave. Slave-owner cannot oppress his slave by excessive work, otherwise he will be punished (Lewis, 2006: 17).

The fundamental references of the Islamic society shaping and determining its understanding concerning slavery have been Quranic verses and the Prophet's words and deeds.

In many Quranic verses, "manumission" is encouraged especially in the contexts of prescribing people ways of charity and benevolence, and of compensating some mistakes and offences.

"It is not righteousness that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness— to believe in God 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; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which ye have made; and to be firm and patient in pain (or suffering), and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the God-fearing.” (Quran, 2/177)

In this Quranic verse, highest virtues and principles prescribed by Islam for an ideal Muslim have been summarized, among which is helping the manumission of slaves.

“Never should a Believer kill a Believer; but (If it so happens) by mistake, (compensation is due): If one (so) kills a Believer, it is ordained that he should free a believing slave, and pay compensation to the deceased's family, unless they remit it freely. If the deceased belonged to a people at war with you, and he was a Believer, the freeing of a believing slave (is enough). If he belonged to a people with whom ye have a treaty of mutual alliance, compensation should be paid to his family, and a believing slave be freed. For those who find this beyond their means, (is prescribed) a fast for two months unning: by way of repentance to God: for God hath all knowledge and all wisdom.” (Quran, 4/92)

Here for the moral compensation of killing a Believer by mistake, freeing a believing slave is required as if to save the life of a slave as a compensation for the life damaged by mistake.

“God will not call you to account for what is futile in your oaths, but He will call you to account for your deliberate oaths: for expiation, feed ten indigent persons, on a scale of the average for the food of your families; or clothe them; or *give* a slave his freedom. If that is beyond your means, fast for three days. That is the expiation for the oaths ye have sworn. But keep to your oaths. Thus doth God make clear to you His Signs, that ye may be grateful.” (Quran, 5/89).

Here among the acts to expiate one's broken oath, we see again ‘giving a slave his freedom’.

“Alms are for the poor and the needy, and those employed to administer the (funds); for those whose hearts have been (recently) reconciled (to Truth); for those in bondage and in debt; in the cause of God; and for the wayfarer: (Thus is it) ordained by God, And God is full of knowledge and wisdom.” (Quran, 9/60)

Here it is meant by ‘alms’ a special category of charities, not alms in common. This category is ‘zakat’ in Islamic terminology. Zakat is obligatory for every well-to-do Muslims and if there is a state ruled by Islamic law, it must collect zakat itself and distribute it to people in need. The rates for this special alms-giving is all determined by Islamic law and also

the groups of people who can receive ‘zakat’ are listed here, including manumitting ‘those in bondage’.

“Marry those among you who are single, or the virtuous ones among your slaves, male or female: If they are in poverty, God will give them means out of His grace: For God encompasseth all, and He knoweth all things.” (Quran, 24/32)

Here another important step is prescribed for the adaptation of slaves within the society. It is quite clear that Quran considers slaves as perfect human individuals and evaluates them in terms of their personal virtues.

“But those who divorce their wives by Zihār, then wish to go back on the words they uttered,— (It is ordained that such a one) should free a slave before they touch each other: This are ye admonished to perform: and God is well-acquainted with (all) that ye do.” (Quran, 58/3)

Again to expiate an oath regarding one’s separation from his wife, following a pre-Islamic tradition, ‘freeing a slave’ is prescribed.

Here some words and deeds of the Prophet regarding slaves and slavery will be mentioned as Prophetic traditions are one of the two fundamental references of Islamic understanding, along with Quran. (The reference book, Bukhari, is the most trusted collection of Hadith, accepted by both Eastern and Western scholars.)

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "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." (Bukhari, Book: 46; Hadith: 693)

Narrated Asma' bint Abu Bakr: The Prophet ordered us to free slaves at the time of solar eclipses. (Bukhari, Book: 46; Hadith: 695)

Solar eclipses gave the Prophet the impression that the order in the universe is exposed to failure, so during solar or lunar eclipses he prayed or did charities to exalt God’s power.

Narrated Abu Musa: Allah's Apostle said, "He who has a slave—girl and educates and treats her nicely and then manumits and marries her, will get a double reward." (Bukhari, Book: 46; Hadith: 720)

Here we can see many aspects of a humanistic and egalitarian approach to slaves: First of all, the slave here is a girl, so she needs more care and affection. She will be treated kindly. She will be educated, which shows the same responsibility that one feels towards his own children. She will be manumitted and finally she will be married. All these steps show that the

Prophet accepted no discrimination at all towards enslaved human beings on the human, race, gender and individual grounds.

Narrated Al-Ma'rur bin Suwaid: 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, 'Did you abuse him by slighting his mother?' 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, one should feed them with the like of what one eats and clothe them with the like of what one wears. You should not overburden them with what they cannot bear, and if you do so, help them (in their hard job). (Bukhari, Book: 46; Hadith: 721)

Feeding slaves with the like of one eats and clothing them with same garments one wears is a high standard of egalitarian approach, which even today some masters would fail to show towards their servants.

Narrated Ibn `Umar: Allah's Apostle said, "If a slave is honest and faithful to his master and worships his Lord (Allah) in a perfect manner, he will get a double reward." (Bukhari, Book: 46; Hadith: 722)

This is an approach to compensate the slave's lack of freedom and living comfort with extra divine gifts. That is just the same consolation he gave to diseased people when they lacked a healthy, comfortable life.

Narrated Abu Huraira: Allah's Apostle said, "A pious slave gets a double reward." Abu Huraira added: By Him in Whose Hands my soul is but for Jihad (i.e. holy battles), Hajj, and my duty to serve my mother, I would have loved to die as a slave. (Bukhari, Book: 46; Hadith: 724)

Narrated Anas bin Malik: Allah's Apostle said, "You should listen to and obey, your ruler even if he was an Ethiopian (black) slave whose head looks like a raisin." (Bukhari, Book: 89; Hadith: 256)

Here he abolishes some firmly established biases towards slave and black people and opens all levels of social and political status to those centuries-old oppressed and insulted classes.

Narrated Ibn `Umar: When the earliest emigrants came to Al-`Usba, a place in Quba', before the arrival of the Prophet (to Medina)-Salim, the slave of Abu Hudhaifa, who knew the Qur'an more than the others used to lead them in prayer. (Bukhari, Book: 11; Hadith: 661)

Leading Muslims in prayer is an important religious as well as social position. In fact such a position represents the Prophet himself. Muslims in that instance did not hesitate to give that position to a more knowledgeable slave.

Narrated Ibn `Umar: Allah's Apostle made it incumbent on all the slave or free Muslims, male or female, to pay one Sa' of dates or barley as Zakat-ul-Fitr. (Bukhari, Book: 25; Hadith: 580)

This is a small amount of alms one is expected to give once a year as a gratitude for his life. All members of the society, male or female, slave or free, are independent, conscious and responsible individuals before the same God.

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "If a slave-girl commits illegal sexual intercourse and it is proved beyond doubt, then her owner should lash her and should not blame her after the legal punishment. And then if she repeats the illegal sexual intercourse he should lash her again and should not blame her after the legal punishment, and if she commits it a third time, then he should sell her even for a hair rope." (Bukhari, Book: 34; Hadith: 362)

The punishment prescribed for a slave is slighter than a free woman. The slave should not be blamed after the punishment. This is civilized and progressive an attitude, which prevents insulting and excluding a slave for his guilt, which will lead to punish her more than what she legally deserves.

Narrated Anas bin Malik: Abu Taiba cupped Allah's Apostle and so Allah's Apostle ordered that a Sa of dates be paid to him and ordered his masters (for he was a slave) to reduce his tax. (Bukhari, Book: 34; Hadith: 412)

The Prophet showed a polite and grateful attitude towards a slave, who did him a favor.

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "Allah says, 'I will be against three persons on the Day of Resurrection: 1. One who makes a covenant in My Name, but he proves treacherous. 2. One who sells a free person (as a slave) and eats the price, 3. And one who employs a laborer and gets the full work done by him but does not pay him his wages.' " (Bukhari, Book: 34; Hadith: 430)

Here the Prophet prohibits selling a free person as slave.

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet prohibited the earnings of slave girls (through prostitution). (Bukhari, Book: 35; Hadith: 483)

That is another improvement for the dignity and honor of female slaves, compared to some former societies including the Greek.

Narrated `Ammar: I saw Allah's Apostle and there was none with him but five slaves, two women and Abu Bakr (i.e. those were the only converts to Islam then). (Bukhari, Book: 57; Hadith: 12)

Narrated Usama bin Zaid: That the Prophet used to take him (i.e. Usama) and Al-Hassan (in his lap) and say: "O Allah! Love them, as I love them..." (Bukhari, Book: 57; Hadith: 81)

Usama was the son of the Prophet's slave Zaid bin Haritha and Hassan was the Prophet's grandson. The Prophet shows a great affection for the son of a slave and feels the same concern as he does for his own grandson.

Narrated Bilal bin Rabah, the freed slave of Abu Bakr. The Prophet said (to Bilal), "I heard the sound of your shoes in Paradise just in front of me." (Bukhari, Book: 57; Hadith: 97)

Narrated Jabir bin `Abdullah: `Umar used to say, "Abu Bakr is our chief, and he manumitted our chief," meaning Bilal. (Bukhari, Book: 57; Hadith: 98)

Abu Bakr and Umar were the first two caliphs of Islam. They were also among the leading figures of the first Islamic society. Bilal was a slave who was converted to Islam during the first and hardest days of the Islamic revelation. The point here is that Umar, the second famous caliph of Islam and prominent and influential figure of Islamic society calls a manumitted black slave "our master/lord", "sayyiduna" in Arabic.

Narrated Qais: Bilal said to Abu Bakr, "If you have bought me for yourself then keep me (for yourself), but if you have bought me for Allah's Sake, then leave me for Allah's Work." (Bukhari, Book: 57; Hadith: 99)

Abu Bakr bought Bilal to save him from the cruelties of his former infidel master. Bilal's courage and expression addressing a man who manumitted him and who is a prominent figure of both pre-Islamic and Islamic period is remarkable. He should have received that courage and self-confidence from the Prophet and Muslims around him.

Narrated `Abdullah bin `Umar: We used not to call Zaid bin Haritha the freed slave of Allah's Apostle except Zaid bin Muhammad till the Qu'anic Verse was revealed: "Call them (adopted sons) by (the names of) their fathers. That is more than just in the Sight of Allah." (Bukhari, Book: 60; Hadith: 305)

Calling a freed slave as 'son of the Prophet' doesn't make a problem for Prophet or Muslims.

Narrated Haritha bin Wahb: Al-Khuza`i: The Prophet said, "Shall I inform you about the people of Paradise? They comprise every obscure unimportant humble person, and if he takes Allah's Oath that he will do that thing, Allah will fulfill his oath (by doing that). Shall I inform you about the people of the Fire? They comprise every cruel, violent, proud and conceited person." Anas bin Malik said, "Any of the female slaves of Medina could take hold of the hand of Allah's Apostle and take him wherever she wished." (Bukhari, Book: 73; Hadith: 97)

Here we see the Prophet's remarkable affection and kindness for female slaves. Whatever problem they ask for help, the Prophet never refuses.

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet said, "If somebody manumits a Muslim slave, Allah will save from the Fire every part of his body for freeing the corresponding parts of the slave's body..." (Bukhari, Book: 79; Hadith: 706)

Narrated Abu Huraira: I heard Abu-l-Qasim (the Prophet) saying, "If somebody slanders his slave and the slave is free from what he says, he will be flogged on the Day of Resurrection unless the slave is really as he has described him." (Bukhari, Book: 82; Hadith: 841)

Narrated Abu Haraira: Allah's Apostle said, "A lady slave should not be given in marriage until she is consulted, and a virgin should not be given in marriage until her permission is granted..." (Bukhari, Book: 86; Hadith: 100)

This is an attitude that tends to give female slaves the fundamental civil rights and freedoms, instead of imposing them about their private life.

Narrated `Aisha: After the slanderers had given a forged statement against her, Allah's Apostle called `Ali bin AbiTalib and Usama bin Zaid when the Divine Inspiration was delayed. He wanted to ask them and consult them about the question of divorcing me... (Bukhari, Book: 92; Hadith: 462)

The Prophet wanted to consult someone about his very private a matter like divorcing. One of those he consulted was `Ali bin AbiTalib, the Prophet's son-in-law and cousin. The second one was the son of his freed slave.

Narrated `Abdullah bin `Umar: The Prophet sent an army under the command of Usama bin Zaid. When some people criticized his leadership, the Prophet said, "If you are criticizing Usama's leadership, you used to criticize his father's leadership before. By Allah! He was worthy of leadership and was one of the dearest persons to me, and (now) this (i.e. Usama) is one of the dearest to me after him (i.e. Zaid). (Bukhari, Book: 57; Hadith: 77)

Usama was the son of Zaid b. Haritha, freed slave of the Prophet. The Prophet had made the father commander of the Islamic army in a battle. Later on, he appointed Usama, the son, commander of the army, at the age of eighteen, who would command tens of prominent figures of Islamic society.

### 3. Conclusion

It has been seen that there are many differences between Ancient Greek and Early Islamic practice and understanding concerning slavery:

1. Above all Islamic perspective accepts wars as the only necessitating reason for the emergence of slavery; whereas Greek approach recognizes some so-called 'natural' differences between individuals as legitimate reason for slavery.

2. Islamic civilization considers slavery as an undesirable institution, necessitated by war and diplomacy conditions. Therefore it uses all kinds of opportunities and encourages any sort of steps to release the slaves in hand. But Greek civilization holds slaves as tools necessary for the functioning of the economic and social machine and doesn't need to make an attempt to improve the conditions of those people.

3. For Islamic understanding, slaves have exactly and absolutely the equal humanly values and properties as free individuals. Slavery is nothing more than an accidental trouble that a normal human being undergoes for a period in his/her life, like accidents or diseases. Therefore he/she has to be treated in a manner that a dignified human being deserves. However the Greek held slaves as inferior creatures unable to manage himself/herself and they didn't mind to treat them like a machine or an animal.

4. Islamic civilization did not apply a discrimination to slaves based on races and classes; whereas Greek civilization regarded outsiders as 'barbarians' and did not abstain from applying racism by excluding the free outsiders from the political society as well as enslaving the captured outsiders in a permanent status.

5. The freed slaves in the Islamic society could rise to the highest ranks of the political society in terms of their skills and abilities. But in Greek society, even if the slaves were manumitted, which was quite rare an occasion, they could, at best, rise to the level of outsiders, who were excluded ever from the political society.

6. In Islamic law, slaves receive, for many offences and crimes, only half of the punishment prescribed for free people. This is a humanistic attitude aiming to compensate and

alleviate the troublesome situation they endure. As for the Greek practice, the punishments applied to slaves were much more severe and arbitrary than free men.

7. As Islam regarded slavery as an undesired practice necessitated by special conditions, number of slaves in Islamic communities in the later centuries increasingly declined and their conditions considerably improved; Whereas in the West, which was a heir of Greek civilization, conditions of slaves increasingly worsened both throughout Roman era and during the pre-modern period. Emergence of a process in which thousands of Africans were driven by force from their homelands to be sold like commercial commodities and worked in farms and factories with heaviest conditions might be originated from Greek understanding and practices.

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