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Book Review

Jonathan A.C Brown. *Slavery and Islam*. London: Oneworld Academic, 2019.

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Humanity today feel moral repugnance towards the idea of slavery; we lament at the thought of slavery and the amount of suffering, pain, torment, and death the innocent people had to endure in chains. Slavery has left deep scars upon our societies, stinging to this very day. How, then, do we react to the fact that many societies, civilizations, and religions, including prominent and respectable figures of moral authority, have engaged in some form of slavery in one way or another? Georgetown scholar Jonathan A.C. Brown touches on this sensitive and timely topic as the Middle East is trying to heal the scars of ISIS's futile attempt of to bring slavery back and the US is dealing with the outcomes of its slavery legacy.

Brown reminds his readers that nobody's hands were clean, "...[a]lmost the entirety of mankind's philosophical, legal and religious heritage either endorsed slavery, condoned it or, at the very least, saw it as morally tolerable," (p. 182). It may be tempting to ignore this fact and blame others for this dark chapter of history or accept this dark past without declaring all humanity of the past morally deficient so that we learn lessons to not to repeat the mistakes of past. Brown suggests that a frank in-depth discussion of this issue can be more fruitful. He forefronts the question, which he called, "the slavery conundrum"; how do we reconcile our veneration of the past with our moral abhorrence of slavery in the present? By systematically separating the issue of slavery into major chapters of discussion, he intelligently draws the reader into a compelling dialogue to shed light on this controversial topic.

Understanding slavery requires a comprehension of its meaning so in his first chapter, Brown breaks down the definition of the word "slavery." He shows how it can be difficult to pinpoint, whether it be as a status, a set of relationships, or a condition. To demonstrate, he cleverly gives examples of certain scenarios that seemingly fit under the definition of slavery but are not

categorized as such, and vice versa. He notes that our definition of slavery and where the lines are drawn when defining it are heavily influenced by a Westernized worldview.

The second chapter discusses how Islamic law and theology approached slavery. Brown notes that both the Quran and Sunnah, sayings and tradition of Muhammad, acknowledged slavery while attempting to regulate and reform it; in particular, he comments how Islam exceedingly 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 such intricate details, Brown transitions into his third chapter by discussing how the Islamic civilization practiced slavery. He first aptly defines what constitutes an Islamic civilization to begin with, then lists several examples of failures, when the ruling elite failed to uphold 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. The chapter concludes with examples of different roles that slaves took on in the Islamic societies throughout history, such as poets, scholars, and even elite administrators.

In the fourth chapter Brown launches the main discussion: the slavery conundrum. He splits this concept into three axioms and ventures into an in-depth analysis of each concept. He then discusses how different religions, including Islam, have dealt with this. His fifth and sixth chapters take an even deeper dive 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, Brown 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." (p. 264). In his final chapter, he tackles the moral issues of slavery today and offers interesting insights and explanations.

It is difficult to summarize and do justice to all of Brown's excellently organized and well-articulated points in one small review. However, one segment perhaps best captures his thesis:

...We cannot condemn as intrinsically morally evil all those various institutions and relationships in humanity's past or present that we have labeled at one time or another as 'slavery'... Looking back on human history, the solution to the Slavery Conundrum is simple: not everything in history that we've termed 'slavery' was intrinsically, grossly morally wrong. (p.269).

Whether we should condemn our past for the sake of a bright future is certainly a debate starting question. By opening this discussion, Brown made his book a hallmark for the ongoing discourse on slavery. Through his thought-provoking and entertaining writing style, the author engages the reader on an intellectual level; while reading, one can almost imagine having a back-and-forth dialogue with Brown. Some parts of his book may be painful for us to acknowledge, but it is a necessary read for those looking to understand slavery outside of the Western mindset.

The comparative approach of this book makes it extremely beneficial and interesting not only for Muslims, but also for the adherents of various faiths, who find slavery morally repulsive

and yet adore their religion and seek to understand it better. We understandably shy away from acknowledging 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.