



10-1-1994

B. Lewis *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Inquiry*

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Recommended Citation

Bourg, Carroll J. (1994) "B. Lewis *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Inquiry*," *Comparative Civilizations Review*. Vol. 31 : No. 31 , Article 12.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol31/iss31/12>

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TOWARD COMPARATIVE STUDY OF SLAVERY

Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East, An Historical Inquiry*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.

Bernard Lewis reports that the institution of slavery has existed in all the ancient civilizations of Asia, Africa, Europe and pre-Columbian America. Moreover, he notes that it was accepted and even endorsed by Judaism, Christianity and Islam as well as other religions of the world (3). Such a widespread practice would seem a likely candidate for comparative study. But Lewis warns against facile comparisons because the practice of slavery must be clearly identified in the history, customs and religious understandings of the people among whom it occurred.

The historical inquiry into race and slavery in the Middle East is centered in the beliefs and practices among Islamic peoples from the 7th to the 20th centuries. The slave population in that region was recruited in four main ways: capture, tribute, offspring and purchase. Since many slaves were already at the level of skill of the people, they were quickly absorbed into the general population. Most of the unskilled came from outside the region, whites from the north and blacks from the south. When access to white slaves was cut off through Russian capture of land to the north, then there was greater concentration on the slaves from the south.

Military slaves were the aristocrats of the slave population. The most privileged, however, were the performers. Some slaves and their dependents held important positions of military and political power. Race in the modern sense was of little importance in antiquity; nor were there slave races. Yet the advent of Islam created a new situation in race relations. As the first, truly universal civilization, according to Lewis, many new peoples through conquest and conversion became part of Islam. The result was a great mixing of peoples from Asia, Europe and Africa. Color was at first a geographical designation; indeed it was thought to be a result of climate. But color distinctions were gradually reflected in the social positions of blacks who were assigned to menial tasks and excluded from the more prestigious positions.

Still, the predominant attitude toward slaves was religious. Thus slavery did not arise from blackness but from unbelief. According to Lewis, all unbelievers, black or white, may be enslaved; no Muslim, black or white, may be enslaved. Yet references to biblical Ham were cited with respect to black slaves. Negative writings about Africa can be found as early as the 10th century.

Black slaves were brought to Islamic lands from the time of conquest and continued until the 19th century, and in some places until the mid-20th century. Lewis reports that the slave in arms was, with few exceptions, an Islamic innovation; but the slave in authority dates to remote antiquity. In the Ottoman Empire a system of court slavery was fully developed. Yet military and court slaves were mainly white. Black slaves were found for the most part in the Islamic west. The only route to high office among black slaves was in the corps of eunuchs.

Many persons in the Middle East are descendants of slaves. Yet today there seem to be many fewer blacks than whites. Lewis attributes the difference to the high death rate, low birth rate and the large number of eunuch slaves among blacks. Indeed, Islam taught that there are no inferior or superior races. Yet color prejudice came in. Social status was linked to color rather than race. It is found in the language where black is associated with sin, evil, devilry and damnation; while white had the opposite associations. The linguistic idioms link whiteness with joy and goodness; blackness with suffering and evil. Lewis also analyzes Islamic paintings in which most blacks are simply slaves and servants, indicating their primary role as menial.

In a concluding section, Lewis raises the question of comparing the practices in the Middle East with the American slave trade. He argues that at no time in the Middle East was there the racial oppression "which exists in South Africa at present, or which existed until recently in the United States" (99). Yet in abduction, the hardships of journeys, and delivery of slaves there was little difference. Indeed the same intermediaries may have served both regions. "It was in the treatment..." that there were major differences. In addition to noting the difference, Lewis also traces some myths about Islamic innocence with respect to slavery in the Middle East, many of which were created by Europeans to criticize the manner of slavery in the Americas.

Bernard Lewis's careful reading of the historical documents attempts to correct the error, the myth-making, and even the political uses of exaggerated claims about innocence and guilt with regard to race and slavery in the Middle East. I recommend this clearly written and well documented report on practices and justifications of practices which have, at last, almost disappeared from all regions of the world.

Carroll J. Bourg