

*KİTAP  
DEĞERLENDİRMESİ*

HOW THE ISSUES OF RACE AND SLAVERY IN ISLAMIC  
SOCIETIES ARE SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF AN  
ORIENTALIST:  
**Review of Bernard Lewis' Book, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East***

Yrd. Doç. Dr. Bülent ÖZDEMİR\*

Abstract

*Race and slavery in Islamic societies has been one of the most neglected issues in the historiography of the Middle East for many years. Bernard Lewis, a distinguished scholar of the Middle East, has dealt with the issue by writing a book Race and Slavery in the Middle East. This paper is going to examine the subject of race and slavery in general sense according to his assertions in this book and his critics in the reviews of the book.*

Key Words: Race, Slavery, Middle East History.

BİR ORYANTALİSTİN GÖZÜNDEN İSLAM TOPLUMLARINDA  
IRK VE KÖLELİK KONULARI NASIL GÖRÜLMEKTEDİR:  
Bernard Lewis'in Kitabı *Ortadağuda Irk ve Kölelik'in* Eleştirisi

Özet

*İslam toplumlarında Irk ve Kölelik uzun yıllar boyunca ihmal edilmiş bir konu olarak karşımıza çıkmaktadır. Belki de ilk defa, seçkin bir Ortadoğu tarihçisi ve Oryantalist olan Bernard Lewis yazdığı **Race and Slavery in the Middle East** kitabında konuyla derinlemesine ilgilenmiş ve bu alandaki çalışmalara öncülük etmiştir. Bu makalede Bernard Lewis'in İslam*

Balıkesir Üniversitesi Fen-Edebiyat Fakültesi Tarih Bölümü Öğretim Üyesi.

*toplumlarında ırk ve kölelik konularını nasıl ele aldığı, hangi iddiaları ileri sürdüğü ve hangi kaynakları kullandığı kritik bir gözle incelenmeye çalışılacaktır.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Irk, Irkçılık, Kölelik, Ortadoğu Tarihi.

As Bernard Lewis mentioned, there are quite contradictory pictures, regarding racism and slavery in Islamic context, in Western literature. The first one, as in Arnold Toynbee's *Study of History*, commented that there is no racial prejudice and discrimination -as opposed to Western Christendom- in the Islamic world. The second one is a great imaginative construction, as in E. W. Lane's *The Thousand and One Nights?* that reveals a familiar pattern of sexual fantasy, social and occupational discrimination, and unthinking identification of lighter with better and darker with worse.

According to Lewis, both versions are impressively documented from Islamic sources. The cause of racial equality is sustained by the almost unanimous voice of Islam. At the same time, the picture of inequality and injustice is vividly reflected in the literature, the arts, and the folklore of the Muslim peoples. Now, one can conclude that there is a sharp contrast between what Islam says and what Muslims -or at least some Muslims-- do.

A. J. Toynbee. (1939) *A Study of History*, Vol. 1, London.

E. W. Lane. (1859) (Trans.) *The Thousand and One Nights*. London.

Here Lewis points out different meanings of the word "Islam" in order to avoid misunderstandings in any discussion of Islam. There are at least three different meanings. "In the first place, Islam means the religion thought by the Prophet Mohammed and embodied in the Muslim revelation known as the Qur'an. In the second place, Islam is the subsequent development of this religion through tradition and through the work of the great Muslim jurists and theologians. In the third meaning, Islam is the counterpart not of Christianity but of Christendom. In this sense Islam means not what Muslims believed or were expected to believe but what they actually did."<sup>3</sup>

At this point, the above explanation is very important to note here, especially, for the people who are not familiar with Islam and the Islamic world that require an extensive research to understand the nature of Islam as a religion and its practices among the people. If one does not know exactly what Islam says about the issue of race and slavery, one can easily reach insufficient conclusions that may affect his ideas either negatively or positively. For instance, Malcolm X, as a Black Muslim leader, changed his attitudes and ideas after his visit to Mecca and some other cities in Muslim countries. After 1964, Malcolm X turned

3

Bernard Lewis, (1990) **Race and Slavery in the Middle East**. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 20.

to Orthodox Islam and revised his understanding of Islam, because it is clear that he understood that he had been misled by the false teachings of Elijah Muhammad.

Then, let's find out first, what Islam says about the issue of racism and slavery. In the Qur'an, the ultimate Islamic text, the question of race is not an important issue. There are only two passages in the Qur'an, which have a direct bearing on race and racial attitudes. The first of these is in chapter XXX, verse 22, and reads as follows: "Among God's signs are the creation of the heavens and of the earth and the diversity of your languages and of your colors. In this indeed are signs for those who know."

The second quotation, in chapter XLIX, verse 13, is rather more specific: "O people! We have created you from a male and a female and we have made you into confederacies and tribes so that you may come to know one another. The noblest among you in the eyes of God is the most pious, for God is omniscient and well-informed."

In the interpretation of those quotations, Lewis asserts that "the Qur'an expresses no racial or color prejudice. Qur'an does not even reveal any awareness of such prejudice. The two passages show consciousness of difference; the second of them insists that piety is more important than birth."

It is clear that the Qur'an, like Old and New Testaments, assumes the existence of

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 21.

slavery. It regulates the practice of the institution and thus implicitly accepts it because of the well-rooted character of the institution in the Arab society. According to Lewis, "Qur'anic legislation brought two major changes to ancient slavery. One of these was the presumption of freedom, the other, the ban on the enslavement of free people except in strictly defined circumstances." These regulations made considerable revolutionary changes in the structure of the society that has been divided into tribes. There are several families in one tribe that sometimes may become enemies of each other. Therefore, Islam considers the social structure of the society and is very careful about its teachings that were gradually imposed upon the society.

In the matter of rights, slaves could not enter into a contract, hold property, or inherit. If a slave incurred a fine, his owner was responsible. In Islam a slave was, however, distinctly better off than Greek or Roman slave, since Islamic jurists took account of humanitarian considerations. For example, a master must give his slave adequate upkeep and support him in his old age. The master was forbidden to overwork his slave. If a master defaulted on these or other obligations to his slave, he was liable to a penalty, which was prescribed by law. A slave could enter into a contract to earn his freedom. A slave could marry. Theoretically, a male slave could marry a free woman, but this was discouraged. A

master could not marry his own slave woman unless he first freed her. Abandoned and unclaimed children could not be adopted as slaves. Free non-Muslims who remained faithful to their religions could not, if free, be legally enslaved.

"On the other hand, non-Muslim subjects of the Muslim state were in practice allowed to own slaves. They were not permitted to own Muslim slaves; and if a slave owned by a non-Muslim embraced Islam his owner was legally obliged to free or sell him. Though a free Muslim could not be enslaved, conversion to Islam by a non-Muslim slave did not require his liberation."<sup>6</sup>

In the Islamic world, "slaves were employed in a number of functions —in the home, and the shop, in agriculture and industry, in the military, as well as specialized tasks. The Islamic world did not operate on a slave system of a production, but slavery was not entirely domestic either... The most important slaves, however, those of whom we have the fullest information, were domestic and commercial, and it is they who were the characteristic slaves of the Muslim world...."

Here, the concern should be regarded geographical, because in some parts of the Middle East, such as Basra and around the Arabian Gulf, practice of slavery was on a slave

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. pp. 7-8-9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p. 13.

system of production and could be distinguished from the other parts of the Middle East. In Basra, agricultural production required large slave population and helped to institutionalize slavery that resembled to the American practice of slavery. In like manner, Lewis asserts that until the sixteenth century there are no evidences regarding the economic exploitation of slaves because of the urban characteristic of the Islamic civilization. From the sixteenth century onwards, there are some Ottoman records that show the extensive use of slave labor in the state-maintained rice, cotton, and sugar plantations in some parts of the Empire.<sup>8</sup>

In this sense, there is no evidence and information about the colors of those slaves who had been exploited by the government. Lewis does not mention it. On the contrary, it is a historical fact that in the Anatolian and European regions of the Ottoman Empire, slaves were not black but mostly white and were from the different ethnic origins.

#### **Race and Slavery in the Literature**

Lewis asserts that many prominent figures of the earliest Islamic period had Ethiopian women among their ancestries, because there were many contacts between Arabs and Ethiopians. For instance, a story that is cited in Lewis' book explains that " 'black' is still a personal and relative term describing an individual's complexion rather than an ethnic

Ibid. p. 14.

absolute denoting the distinguishing marks of race." But, in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, according to Lewis, some ample evidences of a racial change can be found. Especially, during the period of great Islamic conquest in the vast areas of Asia and also of Africa, a new situation was created, and many changes can be observed in the literature of the time.

Here, it can be concluded that at the beginning of the spread of Islam, color prejudice was not used by the people as the meaning of the word, racism. But in later times, racial prejudice was intensified by the inclusion of new lands into the Islamic Empires and occurred as a new phenomenon of the Muslim society.

According to Lewis, the reflections of racial attitudes in literature mainly come from two groups of sources. The first two are poetry and anecdote. "In early Islamic period, there were several black Arabic poets who write about suffering from insult and discrimination as showing resentment at this, yet in some way as accepting the inferior status resulting from their African ancestry." For example:

"If my color was pink, women would love me

But the Lord has marred me with blackness"<sup>10</sup>

And another one:

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p. 26.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p. 28.

"Though I am a slave my soul is nobly free  
Though I am black of color my character is white  
Though my hair is wooly and my skin real black  
My hand is open and my honor bright."<sup>11</sup>

The second group of literary sources, according to Lewis, were special essays and writings as the defense of the black people and as an answer to the insults, charges against them. The most famous writing on this issue comes from El-Jahiz of Basra (776-869), entitled 'The Boast of the Black against the Whites.' "The essay purports to be a defense of the dark-skinned peoples —especially for the Zanj, the blacks of East Africa— against their detractors, refuting the accusations commonly brought against them and setting forth their qualities and achievements, with a wealth of poetic illustrations."<sup>12</sup>

Another example of writing, in Lewis' book, comes from the famous statesman and man of letters El-Sahib Ibn Abbad (938-995) who remarks that men may be praised or blamed, rewarded or punished for their deeds, in which they have choice: "But since God created tallness and shortness and the blackness of the Zanj and the whiteness of the

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p. 31.

Greeks, since God neither enjoined nor forbade them." \*

All these examples come from the ninth or tenth century Islamic sources. That means race issue was discussed by the literary people in terms of Islamic concept. This supports that during the time of the Islamic expansion, race issue gained importance and both the society and Islam, as a religion, tried to accommodate or deal with this new phenomenon.

"Another type of information on racial attitudes may be found in religious literature, specifically that which by apt quotation seeks to condemn racial prejudice and discrimination. During the centuries, which followed the death of Prophet, pious Muslims collected vast numbers of what are known as "hadiths", that is to say, traditions concerning Mohammed's actions and utterances. A number of these traditions deal with questions of race and color."

There are some examples:

The Prophet says: "Obey whoever is put in authority over you, even if he be a crop-nosed Ethiopian slave." This combination of qualities, according to Lewis, is clearly intended to indicate the ultimate improbability at one in physical, social, and racial terms.

13 Ibid. p. 33.

14 Ibid. p. 34.

Bukhari, Volume 1, Book 11, Number 662.

In another tradition, an Ethiopian says to the Prophet:

"You Arabs excel us in all, in build, color, and in the possession of the Prophet. If I believe, will I be with you in Paradise?"

The Prophet answers:

"Yes, and in Paradise the Whiteness of the Ethiopian will be seen over a stretch of a thousand years."

These "hadiths", which are traditions concerning Mohammed's actions and sayings, are the second most important written sources of Islam. If a Muslim faces a new situation or a problem that is not in the Qur'an, he first has to look at these "hadiths" to find out or figure out his attitudes. In the mentioned book, Lewis does not take the importance of those traditions into account seriously, which mostly deal with social issues. It is important to note here, for instance, that, in his last speech, Mohammad addressed to the people in present that "neither Arabs nor some other nations are superior to each other; the most superior is the one who has piety in the eyes of God." This tradition is well known among the Muslims who may not know much about what the Qur'an says on this matter but they care what the Prophet said. For this reason, the importance of these traditions should have been emphasized here.

### **The Evolution of Racial Prejudice and Slavery**

Three factors, according to Lewis, caused a change in attitude in which race was not a burning issue in the color-blind nature of the Islamic concept. "The first of these is the fact of conquest —the creation of a vast empire in which the normal distinctions inevitably appeared between the conquerors and the conquered. (...) As conversion to Islam proceeded very rapidly among the different conquered peoples, a new class came into existence. (...) But the Arabs, like all other conquerors before and since, were reluctant to concede equality to the non-Arabs. The struggle for equal rights of the non-Arab converts was one of the main themes of the first two centuries of Islam..."

Here, I think the struggle for equal rights points out mainly political struggle. In social level, inequality regarding color or race was not the issue. Arab conquerors, especially in the time of Umayyad Caliphate, did separate themselves from the rest of the society as the rulers. But, on the other hand, newly concurred peoples from different ethnic origins were relatively free to find out positions in the society as religious and military leaders. Even in the high ranks of government, there were several Persian and Turkish military commanders and civil servants. Therefore we have to be careful about the assertions that Lewis does here.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid. pp. 37-38.

"A second factor of importance was the wider range of experience that conquests brought to the Arabs... Advancing on the one hand into Africa and on the other Asia and Southern Europe, the Arabs encountered fairer-skinned people who were more developed and darker-skinned peoples who were less so. No doubt as a result of this they began to equate the two facts."

A third major development was the expansion of slavery and slave trade. "Inevitably, the large scale importation of African slaves influenced Arab (and therefore Muslim) attitudes to the peoples of darker skin whom most Arabs and Muslims encountered only in this way.... The attitude to black Africans remained on the whole negative.... As Muslim power and Islamic religion advanced farther into black Africa and a succession of black Kingdoms became an accepted part of the House of Islam, ancient stereotypes of African manners and customs became less and less frequent. But the perception remained, widespread but disputed, that African Muslims were somehow different, and that Africa was a legitimate source of Slaves...."

All those assertions above are well documented from the Islamic sources. If one wants to say something about those statements, as Lewis does, he has to go into the sources

17 Ibid. p. 41.

18 Ibid. pp. 41-52-53.

first. But, one important point to mention is that there are no official government documents, any law or regulation, regarding color prejudice among the available sources. Mainly Lewis uses some literary sources or personal writings, which reflect the realities of the society to some extent but taking those documents as the only criteria for his assertions might create misunderstandings.

The Arab expansion, and the creation of a far-flung empire in which the Arabs were a dominant but small minority within the vast non-Arab population changed the situation and gave way to the new kind of literature containing a classification of ethnic groups. "It was inevitable, in a society of such acute ethnic awareness, that attention should be given, by scholars and other, to ethnic relationships, characteristics, differences, and presumed aptitudes.... In time, certain conventional descriptions emerged, which became the common stereotypes for various national groups. Arabs had generosity and courage; Persians, statecraft and civility; Greeks were philosophers and artists; Indians, magicians and conjurers; while the dexterous Chinese were makers of furniture and gadgets. Blacks were hardworking and somewhat simple but gifted with exuberance and a sense of rhythm. Turks were impetuous fighting men..."

I think the real concern of the Middle Eastern society is that not the racism— in

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. pp. 44-47.

terms of present meaning- but ethnicity is a prevailing problem. It was not surprising in this society that people produce literary writings based on ethnicity and each other's characteristics and origins. In the present Middle Eastern society, this ethnic diversity shows up in every social event. In political level, it creates even more important problems in the society. For this reason, for example recently emerging Islamic movements in the Middle East countries emphasizes the religious togetherness regardless of ethnic diversity, because Islam is seen as the only catalyst that can bring the entire society together and heal ethnic wounds.

Also, "There is a considerable body of writing, written in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, offering what one might call consumer guidance for those who deal in slaves and those who buy them.... For example, Ibn Butlan, an eleventh century Christian physician in Baghdad, wrote this kind of a book. In this book, he reviews the range of slaves available in the markets of the Middle East, and considers the different kinds, black and white, male and female, classifying them according to their racial, ethnic, and regional origins and indicating which groups are best suited to which tasks." These facts are also not surprising, because if we take them into account in the tenth or eleventh century realities of the Islamic society.

20 Ibid. p. 48.

Slavery was an accepted institution of the Islamic society so that there could be byproducts of this institution as the above remarks. I think, development of the literature on slavery might have been affected by the nature of slavery in the Middle East as the domestic sort. Unlike economic use of slaves in agriculture and some other areas, domestic use of slaves may have required good selection of slaves for certain tasks.

### **The Military Slaves**

One of the uncommon features of slavery in the Middle East was the "military slaves." "Between white and black slaves -even where the latter were numerous and powerful— there was for a long time on crucial distinction. Whereas white slaves could become generals, provincial governors, sovereigns, and founders of dynasties, this hardly ever happened with black slaves in the central Islamic lands... The professional slave soldiers, so characteristic of later Islamic empires, were not present in the earliest Islamic regimes. During the great expansion of the Islamic faith, many of the peoples of the conquered countries were captured, enslaved, converted, and liberated, and great numbers

of these joined the armies of Islam. Sometimes, the slave kings were ruled in Cairo, in Delhi, and in other capitals. Even in the Ottoman Empire, most of the sultans were themselves sons of slave mothers."

In this sense, it is hard to explain "the military slaves" which is a special development of Middle Eastern practice of slavery. According to historical documents, the military slaves had everything as freemen, sometimes even better than the free people in terms of material life, but they were slaves. Perhaps, the term "military slaves" is not adequate to use in the Western context of slavery, because it is sometimes confusing. Actually, the military slaves were not slaves, except their subjection to the arbitrary power of the sultan. How a person who is a son of a slave woman can become even the sultan; how can we consider him as a slave. Therefore, in the Islamic society, the perception of slavery is different and could not be understood by looking at it through the Western context.

"Perhaps the most meaningful explanation of the growth of the slave armies is the eternal need of autocratic rulers for an armed force which would support and maintain their rule yet neither limit it with intermediate powers nor threaten it with the challenge of opposing loyalties."

21 Ibid. pp. 59-62.

22 Ibid. p. 64.

Most of the military slaves of Islam were white -Turks, Caucasians, Slavs and other Europeans. There were also black military slaves especially North African dynasties at certain periods of time. Even in the Ottoman Empire, there were liberated black slaves who sometimes occupied high positions of officer ranks.

Finally, Lewis also tries to explain that there is an important question concerning the slave population and its present day status in the Middle East. The question is that though so many black slaves entered the Middle East for many years, why they have left so little trace. It is obvious that there is no great black and mulatto population in the Middle East. In this sense, Lewis argues that there are mainly two reasons for this. "The first one is the high proportion of eunuchs among the black males entering the Islamic lands. Another is the high death rate and low birth rate among black slaves in North Africa and in the Middle East. Also, concubinage at higher, and intermarriage at lower. On the other hand, the slave population in the Islamic Middle East was constantly drained by the liberation of slaves -sometimes as an act of piety, most commonly through the recognition and liberation, by a freeman, of his own offspring by a slave mother. Some other groups of slaves, such as military slaves, were normally liberated at some stage in their career, and their offspring were therefore free and not slaves.

### **Conclusion**

First of all, this book is not a comparative study of the issue of race and slavery between the Western and Eastern practices. Indeed, Lewis avoids making any comparison, because of the distinctive characteristics of the structure and development of the issue between the East and the West. The book gives us a sense of introduction for the future studies on the issue of race and slavery in the Islamic societies.

In his book, from the beginning to the end, Lewis tries to emphasize the fact that there were color prejudice and practice of slavery in the Islamic society though Islam has discouraged Muslims on these issues by regulating or prohibiting them. Also, he rejects the idea that regards the Islamic society as a color-blind society, by emphasizing some evidences from the literature, folklore, and culture of the Islamic society, which are the true reflections of the societal realities.

The reviews of the book point out that the book —102 pages of text— is not satisfactory under this title in the large and continuously growing number of studies of slavery. Most of the scholars agree on the fact that Bernard Lewis would have written a scholarly masterpiece like his some other books in the Middle East history. Another major critic is about Lewis' attitude in dealing with the issue of race and slavery in the Middle

East. One reviewer criticizes even the title of the book and suggests that it should be "Islamic attitude towards race and slavery". On the other hand, though some scholars accept the fact that the political and religious sensitivities involved in writing on slavery and race relations in the Islamic world, they find Lewis' position, especially on the explanation of some of the religious issues, sympathetic to the Muslim people.

The fact is that doing a broad interpretative work based on extensive research is rather complex process. Beyond the political and religious sensitivities, certain languages are required to do this kind of study. In this book, for instance, Lewis uses sources and original documents from several Middle Eastern as well as European countries.