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NEW MIDDLE EASTERN REVIEWS

As if Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East

Ehud R. Toledano

New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 2007, xi + 273 pp., £35.00, Hardback
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Ehud R. Toledano should require little by way of introduction to anyone who has ever so much as dipped a foot into the history of slavery and enslavement in the context of the Ottoman Empire. His previous monographs on the subject, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression* (1982) and *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (1998), are essential reading even for those working on earlier centuries. In his newest contribution to the subject, Toledano builds on his earlier books in an attempt to

go back to the evidence that has been uncovered thus far, bring out a sample of the many stories of slave experiences, and devise a method for gleaning from them some insights into the lives of enslaved Africans and Caucasians – people from the Caucasus – in the Empire. The stories themselves, rich and fascinating, will form the core of this work (p. 55).

Rather than of slaves and slaveholders, the author prefers to speak of the enslaved and slavers, ostensibly in an attempt to emphasize the transitory nature of such statuses as well as the fact that slaves were not usually born but made.

In the first chapter of *As if Silent and Absent*, Toledano engages with the extensive theoretical and empirical literature on slavery in the Ottoman Empire, the Middle East, and the world more generally. Precisely because this discussion prepares the ground for his subsequent argument, this is by far the most important part of the book. In particular, Toledano rejects what he calls the 'good-treatment thesis' which holds that slavery in Muslim societies was far milder than elsewhere, a view that seems to be based especially on the curious status of *kul* and *harem* slaves who, unlike African plantation slaves, could and did enjoy a considerable degree of freedom, wealth, and honour. While acknowledging that there were differences between these types of slaves and others, Toledano concludes that these are merely differences in degree, not kind. Rather, the various types of enslavement are seen as interrelated, forming a '*continuum* of varying origins, cultures, functions and statuses' (p. 14), an idea already found in *Slavery and Abolition*. In this chapter, Toledano also introduces the reader to his methodology which, to judge from one of the section headings, he himself regards as primarily 'another way to read the sources' in contrast to the way they have thus far been used by economic historians. Although he, perhaps somewhat grandly, gives the 'patchwork required by [his] approach' the labels 'voice recovery' and 'experience reconstruction' (all quotations from pp. 34-35), his method is only too familiar to social and cultural historians who are used to reading their sources against the grain, requiring thorough contextualization, 'human empathy' (p. 37), and naturally, as Toledano himself acknowledges, a good deal of educated guessing.

Throughout the book, Toledano argues that enslavement is best understood as a patronage relationship between slavers and the enslaved which requires at least a modicum of mutual respect and trust. In so doing, he restores a measure of agency to those traditionally

viewed as absolutely powerless. In this context he also reiterates the importance in Ottoman society of attachment to social groups such as elite households and religious associations which provided individuals with 'a sense of belonging and an identity, both social and political' (p. 29). Unattached individuals were 'marginalized', an important point whose implications for the lives of the enslaved as well as the freed and for the Tanzimat state's involvement in conflicts between the enslaved and their masters are fully explored in chapters three and four.

Absconding, as Toledano prefers to call the act of slaves running away from their masters, forms the central theme of chapter two. The sources suggest that doing so seems to have been a response to a fundamental and often prolonged violation of the 'bond' between the enslaver and the enslaved, for example through excessive cruelty, attempts to induce abortion in a pregnant slave, or sale which was regarded as a breach of the not unreasonable expectation of manumission after a certain number of years in the master's service. Notably, absconding seems to have been used as a form of protest which would induce slavers to reconsider their behaviour. On the other hand, absconding could also serve as a means by which the authorities might be alerted to abuses, which might then lead to the forced manumission of the enslaved person in question.

In chapter three, Toledano illustrates how, during the Tanzimat, the state became increasingly involved in slaver–enslaved relations. As such, this chapter represents an important contribution to the ongoing debate on Ottoman modernization efforts. Not only did the authorities become increasingly sensitive to the plight of abused slaves, who now more successfully than ever could call on the state for redress, but as the reforming state sought to permeate the lives of its subjects to an extent unprecedented in previous centuries, it was only natural to curtail the slavers' proprietary rights over the enslaved. Crucial in this respect was the view, gaining a foothold from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, that criminal law was to be applied to all subjects regardless of whether they were free or unfree. Previously, the *şeriat* had vested the right and duty to punish slaves in their owners, who were, nonetheless, liable for any damages caused to third parties. In the process, the Ottoman state became what Toledano calls a 'patron state' which 'gradually assumed the role of a patron vis-à-vis the enslaved' (p. 109), taking care to 'reattach' forcefully manumitted slaves, who were particularly vulnerable to re-enslavement and sliding into a life of crime, to other professions and/or elite households. The role of crime in the lives of the enslaved – as both a form of protest and a means of subsistence – as well as the state's role as a patron are further developed in chapter four. Toledano here discusses various types of crime and defiant behaviour, such as theft, arson and even rebellion.

Finally, focusing on *Zar*, crudely speaking a number of spirit and healing cults practised by enslaved and freed Africans in the Ottoman Empire, chapter five explores the ways in which cultural practices from the enslaved people's original homes were fused with elements of Ottoman culture(s). Toledano even speaks of '*Ottoman cultural creolization*' (p. 204), a clear tribute to the work of his colleagues working on African slaves in the New World. The author does not only try to show how Africans forcibly transplanted into the Ottoman Empire adopted and adapted Ottoman elements in their ritual practices – most striking in this respect is Toledano's plausible thesis that the name of one of the central spirits of these cults as practised in the Empire, Yavroubé, is not a corruption of *Yavru Bey*, as Hakan Erdem has argued, but derives from the title *Yaver Bey*, a rank in the Ottoman military – but also how such practices helped cope with the traumata of displacement and dependency. As such, this chapter is the most anthropological – and, one might add, 'transcultural' – of the entire book.

Toledano's newest monograph significantly contributes to reconstructing the experiences of enslaved persons in the Ottoman Empire during the Tanzimat era. If the

Ottoman state at times looms larger than one would expect given the book's aim to privilege the perspective of the enslaved, this can easily be excused with the need to clarify the framework in which these persons operated and the state's new-found role as a protector of all its subjects, even those who were unfree. Alas, the reader is left feeling that Toledano could have teased more out of the stories he painstakingly reconstructed. Often enough, examples seem to have been strung together to illustrate a more general point made earlier, appearing more like an adjunct rather than providing the argument with additional punch. This is not to say that his arguments are unconvincing, though.

On the whole, *As if Silent and Absent* is an important book which manages to make itself relevant not only to students of Ottoman slavery in the nineteenth century, but also in earlier periods and other geographical regions. Those working on the Ottoman state's modernization efforts in the nineteenth century, too, would do well to read its third chapter to help more fully appreciate the breadth of the Tanzimat state's attempts to intervene in its subjects' lives. On top of everything else, Toledano's book is highly readable.