

QURANIC INJUNCTIONS ON FREEING SLAVES

AN ACT OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Allah lists the freeing of a slave as a crucial act of righteousness, and places this alongside the belief in Allah, the daily prayers, and giving charity.

Surah 2:177

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

لَيْسَ الْبِرَّ أَنْ تُوَلُّوا وُجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ ءَامَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ
وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ وَءَاتَى الْمَالَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ ذَوِي الْقُرْبَىٰ وَالْيَتَامَىٰ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَالسَّائِلِينَ وَفِي
الرِّقَابِ وَأَقَامَ الصَّلَاةَ وَءَاتَى الزَّكَاةَ وَالْمُوفُونَ بِعَهْدِهِمْ إِذَا عَاهَدُوا وَالصَّابِرِينَ فِي الْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَحِينَ
الْبَأْسِ أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ صَدَقُوا وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُتَّقُونَ ﴿١٧٧﴾

“Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west, but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveller, those who ask [for help], and **for freeing slaves**; [and who] establishes prayer and gives zakat; [those who] fulfil their promise when they promise; and [those who] are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous.”

FREEING A SLAVE IS ZAKAT

Zakat is a pillar of Islam, and is both an obligation as well as a means to purification. The freeing of bonded human beings is listed among the eight categories of zakat in the Quran. Accordingly, the freeing of bonded human beings is seen as fulfilling a key obligation in Islam.

Surah 9:60

﴿ إِنَّمَا الصَّدَقَتُ لِلْفُقَرَاءِ وَالْمَسْكِينِ وَالْعَمِلِينَ عَلَيْهَا وَالْمُؤَلَّفَةِ فُلُوقِهِمْ وَفِي الرِّقَابِ وَالْغَرَمِينَ وَفِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَابْنِ السَّبِيلِ فَرِيضَةً مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٦٠﴾

“Zakat is only for the poor and for the needy and for those employed to collect [zakat] and for bringing hearts together [for Islam] and **to free those in bondage [or slaves]** and for those in debt and for the cause of Allah and for the [stranded] traveller - an obligation [imposed] by Allah. And Allah is Knowing and Wise.”

FREING A SLAVE AS ATONEMENT

The importance of freeing a slave is brought home in the verse about the accidental killing of a believer. Here, the atonement for this loss of life is through freeing another life.

Surah 4:92

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَمَا كَانَ لِمُؤْمِنٍ أَنْ يَقْتُلَ مُؤْمِنًا إِلَّا خَطَاً وَمَنْ قَتَلَ مُؤْمِنًا خَطَاً فَتَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ مُؤْمِنَةٍ وَدِيَةٌ مُسَلَّمَةٌ إِلَىٰ أَهْلِهِ إِلَّا أَنْ يَصَدَّقُوا

“Thus, whoever kills a believer by mistake, then **their atonement shall be the freeing of a believing slave...**”

FREING A SLAVE AS EXPIATION FOR BREAKING AN OATH

In Islam, breaking an oath is a serious sin, but expiation of that sin is attained via the liberation of a slave.

Surah 5:90

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

لَا يُؤَاخِذُكُمُ اللَّهُ بِاللَّغْوِ فِي أَيْمَانِكُمْ وَلَكِنْ يُؤَاخِذُكُمْ بِمَا عَقَدْتُمْ مِنَ الْأَيْمَانِ فَكَفَرْتُمُوهَا إِطْعَامُ عَشْرَةِ مَسْكِينٍ مِنْ أَوْسَطِ مَا تُطْعَمُونَ أَهْلِيكُمْ أَوْ كِسْوَتُهُمْ أَوْ تَحْرِيرُ رَقَبَةٍ

“Allah will not impose blame upon you for what is meaningless in your oaths, but He will impose blame upon you for [breaking] what you intended of oaths. So its expiation is the feeding of ten needy/poor people (*masakeen*) from the average of that which you feed your [own] families or clothing them **or the liberation of a slave...**”

HONOURING THE ENSLAVED

The Quran stipulates that those who are enslaved should have rights over their freedom, bodies, and wealth.

Surah 24:33

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالَّذِينَ يَبْنِعُونَ الْكِنَابَ مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا وَعَاثُوهُمْ مِنْ مَالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي آتَاكُمْ وَلَا تُكْرَهُوا فَتَيْتِكُمْ عَلَى الْبِغَاءِ إِنْ أَرَدْنَ تَحَصُّنًا لِنَبْنِعُوا عَرْضَ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا

“...Moreover, if those whom your hands rightfully possess **desire a deed of emancipation, then write it for them**, if you come to know goodness in them. Moreover, **give them of the wealth of God that He has given you**. And **do not compel your slave girls to prostitution**, if they desire chastity, to seek [thereby] the temporary interests of worldly life.”

FREING THE ENSLAVED IS THE HIGHER PATH

These verses enjoin people to take the higher moral path; the freeing of a slave is the first to be stated in this path towards goodness.

Surah 90:8-18

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

⑧ أَلَمْ نَجْعَلْ لَهُ عَيْنَيْنِ ⑨ وَلِسَانًا وَشَفَتَيْنِ ⑩ وَهَدَيْنَاهُ النَّجْدَيْنِ ⑪ فَلَا اقْتَحَمَ الْعَقَبَةَ ⑫
 وَمَا أَدْرَاكَ مَا الْعَقَبَةُ ⑬ فَكُ رَقَبَةً ⑭ أَوْ إِطْعَمٌ فِي يَوْمٍ ذِي مَسْغَبَةٍ ⑮ يَتِيمًا ذَا مَقْرَبَةٍ ⑯
 أَوْ مَسْكِينًا ذَا مَتْرَبَةٍ ⑰ ثُمَّ كَانَ مِنَ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْمَرْحَمَةِ ⑱
 أُولَئِكَ أَصْحَابُ الْمَيْمَنَةِ ⑲

“Have We not made for him two eyes? And a tongue and two lips? And have shown him the two ways? But he has not broken through the difficult pass. And what can make you know what is [breaking through] the difficult pass? **It is the freeing of a slave**. Or feeding on a day of severe hunger an orphan of near relationship. Or a needy person in misery. And then being among those who believed and advised one another to patience and advised one another to compassion. Those are the companions of the right...”

These verses exemplify how great an emphasis the Quran places on the freeing of a human being from bondage, and how it encourages such an action either by making it a part of fulfilling an obligation, as an expiation for a sin, or an act of immense reward.

ABOLISHING SLAVERY

Recognising the fact that many 7th century slave owners would be converting to Islam, the Quran adopted a middle way of reformation that was practical, sustainable, and emphasised ways in which believing individuals could begin to rectify the harm they had done to both themselves and all those enslaved.

It did so by:

1: Emphasising in all its revelations on slavery the emancipation and just treatment of slaves, not on their capture or the continuation of the institution of slavery. Islam made the rescuing of slaves part of *zakat* which is one of the five pillars of Islam.

2: Making NO mention of slave-markets or slave-trading, whilst repeatedly exhorting believers to free their slaves as an exemplification of their piety and belief in God.

3: Heightening the status of slaves, to those deserving of freedom and a share in wealth.

4: Condemning the rape and prostitution of slaves.

5: Highlighting that those enslaved – whether a Prisoner of War or a purchased being – have the right to purchase their own freedom, and that this right be honoured.

6: Empowering the state, other authorities and the public system to play a role in the process of emancipating slaves by encouraging the public that part of their *zakat* be spent in freeing slaves.

It may also be of note that the word '*abd*' (slave) is rarely used, being more commonly replaced by '*ma malakat aimanukum*' ("that which your right hands own"). Classical religious commentators and scholars such as Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari (838–923) and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (1149–1209) hold the view that '*ma malakat aimanukum*' denotes to "women whom you rightfully possess through wedlock" and not to enslaved peoples or women. Later scholars such as W.G. Clarence-Smith and Syed Ameer Ali of the 19th century, amongst others, highlight the fact that the term is also repeatedly used in the past-tense in the Quran, potentially to signify those individuals who were already enslaved prior to the arrival of Islam. This slight change in tense is highly significant, and continues to be used by Islamic scholars to highlight that slavery was never compatible with the commandments of the Quran.

Surah 4.3 states: "If you fear lest you become unfair, then you shall be content with only one, or with what you already have ('*ma malakat aimanukum*')." Many religious scholars suggest the word '*malakat*' is not only deliberately structured in the past tense to signify "What you already have", or "what you already possess" or "what came into your possession", but also structured so as to refer to, and encompass, a neutral gender which is applicable to both male and females, making the interpretation of the term to mean solely captive girls (with whom one is permitted to have sex) as interpreted by some, contradictory to the fundamental laws laid down by the Quran. Other key examples of passages to support the view that the term '*malakat*' does not refer to women and girls held in bondage alone, include:

[Surah 4:36] "You shall regard the parents, the relatives, the orphans, the poor, the related neighbour, the unrelated neighbour, the close associate, the traveller, and your servants ('*ma*

malakat aimanukum')...

[Surah 16:71] “God has provided for some of you more than others. Those who are given plenty would never give their properties to *their subordinates* (*'ma malakat aimanukum'*) to the extent of making them partners. Would they give up God's blessings?”

[Surah 30:28] “He cites for you herein an example from among yourselves: Do you ever elevate *your servants or subordinates* (*'ma malakat aimanukum'*) to the level where they rival you, and to the point that you pay them as much allegiance as is being paid to you? We thus explain the revelations for people who understand.”

In addition to the Quran's specific and consistent emphasis on the God-given duties and methods by which Muslims were to free slaves, Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was an exemplary guide on the freeing of slaves. Following his noble approach, the Prophet's beloved companions also exemplified the many ways in which people could honour the Quranic instruction to help free those trapped in bondage.