

6622 - The meaning of enslavement in Islam

the question

Can you please clarify the subject of Slaves in Islam. In The Koran, there are many mentions of this term in particular the instance where man is the slave to his Master Allah, which I fully understand and agree. But in many instances the Koran cites where one man/woman is the slave of another man/woman. In what context has Allah made this permissible, if it is permissible. Your clarification on this subject would be most grateful.

Detailed answer

The enslavement of the Muslim to Allaah, may He be glorified, is what He had commanded in His Book and is the Message with which He sent the Messengers, as He says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And verily, We have sent among every Ummah (community, nation) a Messenger (proclaiming): “Worship Allaah (Alone), and avoid (or keep away from) Taaghoot (all false deities, i.e. do not worship Taaghoot besides Allaah)” [al-Nahl 16:36].

The word ‘Uboodiyah (enslavement) in Arabic comes from the word Ta’beed (enthralment, subjugation). The phrase ‘abbadtu’l-tareeq means “I made the way smooth and easy to walk on.” The enslavement of the slave to Allaah has two meanings, one general and one specific. If by “slave” I mean al-mu’abbad, i.e., one who is subjugated, this is the general meaning which includes every created thing in the both the higher and the lower realms, sentient and otherwise, animate and inanimate, moving and stationary, kaafir and mu’min, righteous and immoral, for every creature is subjugated by Allaah and is subject to His control, and for each of them there is a limit at which it stops.

If by “slave” I mean al-‘aabid, one who worships Allaah and obeys His commands, this meaning applies specifically to the believers to the exclusion of the kaafireen, because the believers are the true slaves of Allaah who attribute Lordship and Divinity to Him Alone and

recognize Him by His Names and Attributes, and do not associate anything with Him. As Allaah says in the story of Iblees (interpretation of the meaning):

“[Iblees (Satan)] said: ‘O my Lord! Because You misled me, I shall indeed adorn the path of error for them (mankind) on the earth, and I shall mislead them all. Except Your chosen, (guided) slaves among them.’ (Allaah) said: ‘This is the Way which will lead straight to Me. Certainly, you shall have no authority over My slaves, except those who follow you of the Ghaawoon (Mushrikoon and those who go astray, criminals, polytheists, and evildoers).’”
[al-Hijr 15:39-42]

With regard to the ‘ibaadah (worship) which Allaah enjoins upon us, this is a word which includes everything that Allaah loves and is pleased with of words and deeds, both open and hidden, and excludes anything that may cancel that out. This definition includes the Shahaadatayn, Salaah, Hajj, fasting, jihaad for the sake of Allaah, enjoining what is good and forbidding what is evil, and believing in Allaah, the angels, the Messengers and the Last Day. The basis for this worship is purity of intention, so that the aim of the worshipper is to seek the Face of Allaah, may He be glorified, and the Home of the Hereafter. Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“And Al-Muttaqûn (the pious) will be far removed from it (Hell). He who spends his wealth for increase in self-purification, And who has (in mind) no favour from anyone to be paid back, Except to seek the Countenance of his Lord, the Most High. He surely, will be pleased (when he will enter Paradise).” [al-Layl 92:17-21]

So purity of intention is essential, as is sincerity, so that the believer strives to follow what Allaah has commanded and to avoid what He has forbidden, prepares himself for the Meeting with Allaah (may He be exalted), gives up feeling helpless and lazy, and refrains from following his own desires, as Allaah says (interpretation of the meaning):

“O you who believe! Be afraid of Allaah, and be with those who are true (in words and deeds).” [al-Tawbah 9:119]

It is also essential to follow the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), so the worshipper should worship Allaah in accordance with what He has prescribed and not in accordance with what created beings desire or innovate. This is the aim of following the Prophet who was sent from Allaah, Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him). Purity of intention, sincerity and following the Messenger are all essential. Once these matters are understood, then it will be clear to us that everything that goes against these essentials is in fact enslavement to people. So showing off is a form of enslavement to people; Shirk is a form of enslavement to people; neglecting Allaah's commands and angering the Lord in order to earn people's approval is a form of enslavement to people. Everyone who puts following his own desires before obeying his Lord has gone beyond the bounds of 'Uboodiyyah (enslavement to Allaah) and has deviated from the Straight Path. Hence the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: "Doomed is the slave of the dinar, doomed is the slave of the dirham, doomed is the slave of fine cloth and doomed is the slave of velvet. If he is given something he is pleased and if he is denied, he is angry. Doomed is he! If he is pierced by a thorn, may he never be able to remove it."

Enslavement to Allaah includes and implies love, fear and hope. The slave loves his Lord, fears His punishment and hopes for His Mercy and reward. These are the three essential pillars of 'Uboodiyyah or enslavement.

Enslavement to Allaah is an honour, not a cause of humiliation, as the poet said:

"What increases me in honour and pride, so that my feet nearly stepped on the Pleiades, is that I am included in Your words 'O My slaves,' and that You made Ahmad my Prophet."

We ask Allaah to make us among His righteous slaves. May Allaah bless our Prophet Muhammad.