

**Ehud R. Toledano.** *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007. xi + 273 pp. \$24.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-12618-1.

AS IF SILENT  
AND ABSENT  
BONDS OF EN-  
SLAVEMENT IN  
THE ISLAMIC  
MIDDLE EAST  
EHUD R. TOLEDANO

**Reviewed by** Charles Wilkins

**Published on** H-Levant (April, 2011)

**Commissioned by** Amy A. Kallander (Syracuse University)

The historian Ehud Toledano has been a pioneer in the study of slavery in the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim world. His first book, *The Ottoman Slave Trade and Its Suppression: 1840-1890* (1982), focused on the political and social dynamics behind the decline of the Ottoman slave trade, while a second book, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (1998), considered a range of topics, including abolition of the slave trade, agricultural slavery, elite perceptions and images of slavery, and modern historiographies of Ottoman-era slavery. In this, his third book on slavery, Toledano returns to a more monographic approach, focusing on the special predicament of the slave and innovatively adopting his perspective. He compares slavery to a kind of patronage, defining it as “an involuntary relationship of mutual dependence between two quite unequal partners” (p. 33). The master can exercise force, but if the relationship is to function he ultimately must come to terms with the enslaved person on the basis of a constrained reciprocity. Conceptualizing slavery in this way enables Toledano to explore

more easily the voice and agency of the slave as he or she seeks to maximize advantage and minimize disadvantage (p. 8). After a short introduction, the book is organized thematically into five long chapters, each of which is divided into sections on various topics. With respect to primary sources, Toledano notably relies on Ottoman central state records, the reports of European consular officials, especially those of the British, and private papers.

Entitled “Understanding Enslavement as a Human Bond,” chapter 1 provides the interpretive and methodological framework. Toledano elaborates on the key concept of patronage, arguing that the enslaved person’s experience was fundamentally shaped by the fact that s/he was “attached,” and in this context, to a historically specific and contingent institution, the Ottoman elite household. Ottoman slavery has been described as household slavery before, but Toledano goes beyond this to say that from the seventeenth century on, households functioned as the basic building blocks of Ottoman politics and elite society,

and “attachment” to such households was the key mechanism defining the status of the enslaved person and shaping his or her experience. Without attachment, the enslaved person had no means of protection. Hence much of Toledano’s study revolves around the presence or absence of a slave’s “attachment” and the transitions by which a slave was detached from and re-attached to different social units or institutions, through sale, manumission, absconding, etc. Toledano introduces two other conceptual and/or methodological tools in his work. First, in response to the recognized dearth of first-person narratives by slaves, Toledano argues that *actions* by slaves, which are readily found in the available sources, can be used to discern their voices, if interpreted with a measured and reasoned historical imagination. Finally, Toledano advances a modified form of the “creolization” concept used in postmodernist migration studies to address cultural aspects of the slave experience. Accordingly he characterizes the slave identities as fundamentally diasporic, in that they are “syncretic,” “open-ended, constantly ongoing processes” (p. 45).

In chapter 2, entitled “Leaving a Violated Bond,” Toledano examines situations in which the enslaved person seeks to end the relationship and abscond. The author makes it clear that leaving the relationship did not mean that the enslaved person became a free individual with no attachment; but rather would have to find a new patron, either another slaver, the state, or a foreign consul. It is significant that the chances an enslaved person had in leaving bondage appear to have varied greatly with the European consul or Ottoman governor-general serving the relevant geographical area; some officials were far more sympathetic to the plight of slaves than were others. Toledano explores in some depth, and with detailed examples, the various reasons, motives, and circumstances slaves had for absconding: to end abuse, to avoid forced abortion, to stop “unrelenting” abuse, to escape resale, to prevent the family from being broken up, and simply to be free. This

classification is of considerable value to historians of Ottoman slavery as it offers a general typology of the kinds of abuses to which slaves were subject and of the escape motives they harbored. However, one wonders whether the presence of sympathetic European consuls in the nineteenth century, may distort the general historical picture. The presence of foreign agents may have constituted a kind of “pull” factor encouraging slaves to abscond when they otherwise might not have done so. Nonetheless, the adoption by the author of the perspective of the slave is a welcome innovation to the study of Ottoman slavery.

The master-slave relationship that Toledano studies must be understood within the political, legal, and social context of the Ottoman Tanzimat reforms, which the author defines as falling in the period of the 1830s through 1880s. In chapter 3, entitled “Turning to the ‘Patron-State’ for Redress,” Toledano evaluates the role of what he calls the “Tanzimat-state” in the master-slave relationship. Arguing that this period marks a fundamental change in state slavery policy, the author tries to show that in cases of abuse or mistreatment state authorities from the 1840s on increasingly ruled in favor of slaves at the expense of slave owners and their property rights. In this chapter, Toledano examines the newly established councils and their partial displacement of the conventional Ottoman law courts (shari’a courts) in the adjudication of slave-generated complaints; the creation of new documents and procedures that protected the rights of manumitted slaves; the mixed response of owners and officials to these initiatives; the impressive efforts by slaves or freed persons to apply to state authorities to obtain newly legislated rights; and the programs, including half-way houses, by which the state sought not only to shelter, feed, and protect manumitted slaves in their new status as free persons, but also to “re-attach” them to private households or public institutions like the army. The growing assertion by the Ottoman state of its responsibility to protect slaves’ rights, and the

erosion of slave-owners' rights as property owners and masters, leads the author to conclude that the Ottoman state had become a "patron-state" and slaves, its "wards." This chapter constitutes a more forceful demonstration of an argument Toledano made in *Slavery and Abolition*.

Toledano makes it clear that Ottoman reforms in the regulation of slavery had a mixed success. Many slaves and freed persons appealing to the state during and after the Tanzimat process were denied redress. In chapter 4, "Opting for Crime in Order to Survive," the author examines the acute predicament—social, psychological, and legal—of slaves by exploring actions undertaken by them that the Ottoman state defined as "criminal." In this chapter more than any other, Toledano uses speculative reasoning to address gaps in the historical record, with an intent "to assess the variety of options available to the enslaved in each case, the presence or absence of choice, the significance of the action chosen by the alleged offenders, and the social meaning that the action did or did not have" (p. 156). Drawing on Ottoman state documents, Toledano narrates in poignant detail many stories of slaves who, left in situations of vulnerability and exposure, engaged in theft, sexual crimes, arson, and murder. Interpreting the reports of the slaves' actions as constituting their voices, the chapter plausibly presents a broad range of human emotion, from frustration and despair to anger and rage. Equally important, it narrates acts of deliberation, defiance, ingenuity, and leadership among groups of slaves, demonstrating ways in which slaves were not simply passive victims but rather persons who gave shape to their own futures.

In the fifth and final chapter, "Taming the Unknown with the Familiar," Toledano considers the cultural orientation of slaves and freedmen, and more specifically the religious practices by which they coped with their dislocation in a foreign society. He examines what he calls, "Ottoman cultural creolization," a process in which slaves of African

and Circassian origin preserved elements of their native cultures, which mixed with local Ottoman cultures, producing synthetic cultures that spread throughout Ottoman societies (p. 204). A major part of the chapter focuses on the implantation of Zar, a type of African possession cult involving "trance and healing rituals," which, Toledano argues, fused with Sufi and other localized Islamic elements (p.212). Here, as with other cases of creolization in the chapter, Toledano does not uncover new primary sources; rather, he synthesizes the existing secondary literature, especially on Zar, to arrive at new interpretive conclusions and comparisons. The retention of Zar traditions by Ottoman-Africans and the attempts by Ottoman authorities to suppress them, Toledano argues, suggest agency and defiance, a pattern that might be applied to Circassian slaves, about whom much less is known.

As a point of criticism, Toledano leaves somewhat ambiguous how widely his concept of attachment is to be applied historically. In chapter 1, he situates the attachment of slaves to households (the dominant form of attachment) in a Ottoman social structure that emerges in the seventeenth century, and in chapter 3, he seems further to delimit temporally his empirical analysis by examining how in the nineteenth century the Tanzimat-era Ottoman "patron-state" intervened ever more frequently in the master-slave relationship, and increasingly in favor of the slave. Yet in chapter 4, on the resorting of slaves to crime, he includes isolated stories of slaves from earlier periods, notably from the eighteenth and even the sixteenth century. These early anecdotes distract the reader from the temporally focused argument on the late Ottoman patron-state. Indeed, one could argue that a well-developed Ottoman "patron-state" may have given rise to a distinctive ethos in which masters treated their slaves differently than before, given the increased chances their slaves would seek redress from state authorities. From the perspective of accessibility, the book would have benefited from a more detailed index,

especially for the foreign terms that appear in the text. Minor criticisms aside, this book constitutes an important contribution to the study of slavery in the Ottoman Empire and the Muslim world. It will find a ready audience among students of Islamic history and of comparative slave systems.

likens

to

the

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

**Citation:** Charles Wilkins. Review of Toledano, Ehud R. *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*. H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. April, 2011.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33062>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.