



Historical FEATURES

Sarah La Preta: A Slave in Jerusalem

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Slavery existed in Jerusalem during the nineteenth century until its abolition in the 1880s. Some Western travellers to the city noted the presence of slaves in the city and a handful provided detailed descriptions of the slaves. These accounts are limited in scope and it is difficult to create any significant generalizations based on this material. Their sketches of slaves provide limited insight into the purchase of slaves, their treatment, and the relationships between slaves and their owners. This article details the story of an Ethiopian woman – Sarah La Preta – who entered the Valero family as a slave, was manumitted and lived out her life as a servant and cherished member of the family. Our purpose is to draw attention to the particular. With the limited detailed information regarding the lives of slaves in nineteenth century Jerusalem, the sources utilized in this discussion provide a unique portrait of one slave woman. It is unclear whether this story is the unique or the norm.

Sarah La Preta.

Source: Prof. Aaron Valero collection

Slavery in Nineteenth Century Palestine: An Overview

Discussion of slavery in the Ottoman Middle East has mainly been based on Şeriat court documents as found in the extensive research on the subject by Ehud Toledano. This documentation details cases of runaway slaves and alleged offences by enslaved persons. Toledano views the court files as “an excellent source for the social and cultural history of enslavement.” But, he also noted that, “So far, very few studies of Ottoman enslavement have been based on Şeriat court records, the use of which has been a subject of some controversy in the field in recent years.” Moreover, there is a lack of Ottoman slave narratives. And, when the voices of slaves are raised, they are formulated by court reporters, by travellers, explorers, and researchers in their descriptions, and by consular staff, missionaries, and merchants in their reports.¹

In the nineteenth century, there was growing demand for slaves in the Ottoman Empire, particularly during the middle third of the century. Commercial prosperity stimulated demand for Africans – from the Sudan, Senegal, Ethiopia and parts of eastern and south-eastern Africa – and from the Caucasus and central Asia. They were brought to slave markets in cities, of note Cairo, Istanbul and Bursa, and sold to work as urban domestics, in municipal services, in industry, and in other dangerous and disdained occupations. Some were kept in *harems* as slave-girls or concubines. As well, slaves were used to work on farms and as sharecroppers.²

Britain was significantly involved in inhibiting Ottoman slaving. In 1846, a *firman* (Imperial edict) condemned slavery as against Islam law and justice but this did not affect the practice. Bilateral Anglo-Ottoman anti-slaving conventions took effect during the 1880s. In 1880, the Porte conceded to Britain the right to search and seize vessels suspected of carrying slaves to Ottoman territories. The British occupation of Egypt in 1882 ended slavery in this territory and disrupted the flow of slaves to the rest of the Ottoman Empire that had previously passed through the Nile Valley. In 1887 or 1888, the Ottoman Empire outlawed the slave trade and in 1889, the Ottoman Empire manumitted all black slaves under its jurisdiction.³

Slavery in late Ottoman Palestine was not a common occurrence. Slaves could be found in the agricultural sector, as domestics in wealthy urban homes, and in certain services. Most descriptions about the slaves in the area were relayed by men and relate to male slaves. Dixon, in his description of Jerusalem from the 1860s, noted the existence of slaves in the city and their roles. In his depiction of Jaffa Gate, he mentioned “Yon negro dozing near his mule is a slave from the Upper Nile, and belongs to an Arab *bey* who lets him out on hire.” Later he described a coffee house, “Enter this coffee house, where the old sheikh is smoking near the door; call the *cafigeh*, the waiter, commonly a negro slave; command a cup of black comfort, a *narghiley* [water pipe], and a morsel of live charcoal.”⁴



This image was described as a 'Slave Market in Cairo' in the early 1870s. Source: Ebers, Georg, Bell, Clara, and Birch, Samuel. *Egypt, Descriptive, Historical, and Picturesque*. London: Cassell, 1878, vol. 2, p. 35.

Women slaves were usually described by men, but from a distance. Women slaves were often romanticized as the living portrait of a biblical vignette. Robinson wrote of his visit to a home in Jaffa in 1838. "Of the many females it contained, we saw none except the mother of the family, who welcomed us at our entrance, and the Nubian slave who washed our feet."⁵

American southerners took more notice of the terms and conditions of slavery in Palestine. Randal William MacGavock of Tennessee visited former United States Vice Consul in Ramla in the early 1850s. He highlighted issues regarding the progeny of slaves and the bonds between owners and slaves.

During our visit the subject of slavery was suggested by the appearance of a likely negro boy bearing coffee and pipes, which resulted in my gaining some information that I would have otherwise. When two slaves intermarry belonging to different masters, the owner of the man claims the male issue [progeny], and the owner of the woman the female issue; whereas with us the owner of the woman is entitled to both. Quite a strong attachment exists between the master and slave, and it is not unfrequently the case that they marry and live happily together.⁶



Yoseph Moshe Valero in Paris in 1902 with a portrait of his late mother Simha. Source: Raya Ashkenazi collection.

Mary Eliza Rogers and Sarah Barclay Johnson are important sources of information regarding female slaves, as well as eunuchs, in domestic service of the urban elite – wealthy Muslims and Ottoman officials – during the middle of the century. They sojourned in Palestine for a number of years and visited areas reserved exclusively for women in homes, harems, and baths, joining in various celebrations. However descriptive of the women slaves' outward appearance and performance of their duties, these accounts provide few narratives of the personal lives of slave women and their relationship with their owners. They highlighted the external. Rogers wrote: "A black slave girl, with short scarlet cloth trousers and scarlet jacket, silver necklace, armllets and anklets, stood by me, holding a silver saucer in her hand."⁷

The American consul in Jerusalem, Selah Merrill, provided an important account of the situation of slaves in Jerusalem following their emancipation. He reported on the labour market in Palestine, and Jerusalem in particular in 1885:

As to house servants it must be remembered that there is a considerable class here who have been held as slaves. They are black people from Nubia, and having been brought up as slaves and knowing no other kind of life, they, in many cases, remain with their old masters. Practically, some of them are still slaves, although they are not bought and sold; such persons get nothing besides their clothing, shelter, and food.⁸



Interior of the Valero Synagogue. Source: Lavi Shai, 7 August 2002

An area in which limited information has been found is the ownership of slaves by minorities and foreigners. Rogers' provides one example, "Subsequently, a young Arab girl in our service was taught the art [of ironing] by an Abyssinian slave, the servant of a European neighbour, and she became very skilful."⁹ A small number of Jews owned slaves during the nineteenth century.

Sarah La Preta in the Valero Household¹⁰

According to family tradition and historical sources, the forefathers of the Valero family in Palestine were Marranos (forced converts) who took the name "Valero" when converting to Christianity. Some of them were expelled from Spain or left for Italy, where they returned to the fold of Judaism, and later moved to Turkey. Some members of the family settled in Palestine, coming from Turkey over 300 years ago.

The father of Ya'akov Valero (1813-1874), another forerunner of the family in Jerusalem – according to one family tradition – came to Jerusalem from Thessalonica in the early 1800s, and established a bakery in the city. According to a number of unsubstantiated lexicon sources (e.g. Moshe David Gaon), it was Ya'akov himself who came from Istanbul around 1835. In 1848, Ya'akov, a ritual slaughterer at the beginning of his career, established Jacob Valéro & Co., the first private bank in Palestine. From then onwards, the economic history of the Valeros in Palestine concentrated mainly in banking and real estate. By the late nineteenth century, the family was considered one of the city's wealthiest.

The Valeros were members of Jerusalem's Jewish elite. They held leadership roles in the Sephardi community and were engaged in various philanthropic endeavours.

The Valero households were supported by domestic servants and slaves. The 1875 Montefiore census of Jews in the Holy Land detailed the Valero households as having five servants: one in the employ of the widow of Ya'akov, Bechora (1818-1880), one male and one female in the employ of Ya'akov's elder son, Yoseph Moshe (1836-1879), and one male and one female in the employ of Haim Aharon (1846-1923), Ya'akov's second son. The census records did not differentiate between slave and servant and it is unclear what was the status of these five persons.

According to family tradition, around 1880, Haim Aharon purchased a ten-year-old Ethiopian girl from Arabs in the market of the Old City. The price of a slave during the second half of the century was between 1,000 and 2,200 piastres (between £7 and £16). According to Raya Ashkenazi (b. 1920), the family had at least two Ethiopian servant girls.¹¹

Haim Aharon's black servant is described in several sources. She was brought up in his house as a Ladino-speaking Jewess and when slaves were freed in the Ottoman Empire in 1889, she chose to stay with the family. She was converted to Judaism and took the name 'Sarah'. After that she was known to pray and mumble "Amen" in the courtyard of the Valero synagogue. She wore a head cover like a pious Sephardi woman.

Haim Aharon's wife, Simha (1850-1888), died three months after the birth of the twins David and Nissim. Sarah played an important role in Haim Aharon's household – she cared for the orphaned infants and four other children aged 12, 6, 4, and 2 years old. (The eldest daughter Esther, aged 18 or 19 at the time of her mother's death, would have probably been married and lived outside the family home). David did not survive his infancy and passed away in 1889.

Nissim (1888-1949) only knew his mother from her photograph, which he hung in his house after he was married. The woman who substituted for his mother was the black servant, Sarah la Preta.

Sarah continued to care for Clara (1907-1949), the blind daughter of Haim Aharon and his second wife, Miriam (1873-1937). Clara grew up mainly in the protective home of her parents, who did their best to compensate her. Aaron Valero (1914-1999), Haim Aharon's grandson, recalled the negative impression he received when watching her being led by her mother or the servant Sarah, or moving slowly on her own.

On summer nights, Haim Aharon Valero would be seen sitting beside his wife on the balcony, with their servant Sarah La Preta standing, waiting to attend to their needs. Kashrut, or kosher food preparation, was an integral part of keeping a Jewish home. Sarah, the converted Ethiopian servant, also observed practices of kashrut. She accompanied the family during their trips abroad.

A very strong bond developed between Sarah and the children and, when they married, Sarah sometimes babysat the grandchildren. Simha Schwartzburg (1917-2005), in a rare and important document, recalls some early childhood memories of her parents' and grandfather's houses in Jerusalem, and their semi-rural surrounding landscape:

My earliest recollection of my house was a solitary house in the middle of rocky fields scattered with olive trees, fig trees, almond trees & a few pomegranates. In early spring there was a stretch of green wheat fields between our home and a cluster of houses around a courtyard, where my paternal grandfather kind of held court. One of the houses was his residence; another was the Valero Synagogue where anyone could pray — no dues, no fees! On the high holidays my father would carry me on his back to the synagogue & hand me to the chocolate-colored Sudanese maid called Sarah, who would look after me while my father was at services.¹²



Sarah La Preta surrounded by the Valero family (left to right: Clara ?, Sarah, unidentified child, Shlomo, Leah Batia), circa. 1919. Source: Valero Family collection, Photograph Archive, Yad Itzhak Ben Zvi.

Sarah lived out her last years in the home of Haim Aharon's eldest son Ya'akov (1876-1928) and his wife, Menuha (1876-1933). She passed away in the Bikur Holim Hospital at the age of 70.¹³ Moshe Valero honoured the memory of Sarah by naming his daughter after her. Raya – Sarah Rachel (b. 1920) – was born in Jerusalem and remembers her name as being 'Raya' since childhood. She thinks she was named 'Sarah' after the Ethiopian servant who raised her father and uncles, who died in the year Raya was born, and that she was not named for her aunt Malka Sarah (1882-1901).

Conclusion

Sarah La Preta was brought as a young girl to Jerusalem around 1880. She was a slave who endured the difficulties of travel from her native Ethiopia to be sold in Jerusalem's market. She toiled in the Valero household and was engaged in cooking, cleaning, childrearing, and many other domestic duties. Sarah was manumitted in 1889 and remained in the service of the Valero family. She adopted the religion of her employers and was described as a devout Jewess.

Sarah played an important role in the Valero family. She became the primary caretaker for five young children who were forever indebted to her. They conveyed to their respective children their warm sentiments towards Sarah. They proudly presented

their young children to Sarah who watched over them like a doting grandmother. The Valeros attended to Sarah in illness and in her last years. They arranged for her burial and mourned her loss. One child was given Sarah's name.

Despite her special place in the hearts of the Valero family, Sarah was relegated to the position of servant. She stood in waiting at the side of Haim Aharon and was ready to fulfil his requests.

We are lacking many details of Sarah's life and do not know her feelings except as they were perceived by members of the Valero family. They conveyed a warm and positive image of their relationship of Sarah. They did not express any regret for Sarah's life in the position of a slave or servant.

Perhaps Lynch's observations from the middle of the nineteenth century explain the relatively mild relationship between owners and slaves perceived in this singular account. He explained, "By an imperial edict (which is, however, disregarded with respect to Nubians), a slave cannot remain in servitude more than seven years; and, by a custom, the most imperative of all laws, a slave, if dissatisfied, can claim to be sold; and if the demand be thrice ineffectually made, before witnesses, he becomes, ipso facto, free. Hence, the treatment of slaves is mild and conciliatory."¹⁴

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Endnotes

- ¹ Toledano, Ehud R. *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007, pp. 55-56. See also: Toledano, Ehud R. *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998.
- ² Erdem, Y. Hakan. *Slavery in the Ottoman empire and its demise, 1800-1909*. London: Macmillan, 1996, pp. 9-57.
- ³ Clarence-Smith, William Gervase. *Islam and the abolition of slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006; Lewis, Bernard. *Race and slavery in the Middle East, an historical enquiry*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1990, particularly chapters 10 and 11; Miller, Joseph C. "The Abolition of the Slave Trade and Slavery: Historical Foundations," in Diène, Doudou. (ed.) *From Chains to Bonds: The Slave Trade Revisited*, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2001, pp. 159-193. Avitsur, Shmuel. *Daily Life in Eretz Israel in the XIX century*. Tel Aviv: Am Hassefer Publishing House, 1972 (Hebrew).
- ⁴ Dixon, William Hepworth. *The Holy City*. London: Chapman and Hall, 1865, Vol. 2, pp. 2, 23. Dixon (Vol. 1, p. 26) also described a slave in Jaffa: "Said is a Nubian, a negro, and a slave; and like the mule and horses is the property of an Arab gentleman, not too proud to let his people and his beasts earn money by trade."
- ⁵ Robinson, Edward and Smith, Eli. *Biblical Researches in Palestine, Mount Sinai and Arabia Petraea*. Vol. 3, Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1841, p. 31.
- ⁶ MacGavock, Randal William. *A Tennessean Abroad; Or, Letters from Europe, Africa, and Asia*. New York: Redfield, 1854, p. 251. MacGavock (1826-1863) was born in Nashville. He served a one-year term as mayor of Nashville because in 1861 he left to join the war efforts. He died during the Confederate defence of Jackson, Mississippi.
- ⁷ Rogers, Mary Eliza. *Domestic Life in Palestine*, 1862; London: Kegan Paul, 1989, pp. 65, 100-105, 228-234, 262-263, 377-378, 381 (quote p. 222); Johnson, Sarah Barclay. *Hadji in Syria: Or, Three Years in Jerusalem*. Philadelphia: James Challen & Sons, 1858, pp. 180-185, 190-192, 204-211, 214-223.
- ⁸ *United States. Labor in America, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and Polynesia: Reports from Consuls of the United States in the Several Countries of America, Asia, Africa, Australasia, and Polynesia on the State of Labor in Their Several Districts, in Response to a Circular from the Department of State*. United States consular reports. Washington, D.C.: G.P.O., 1885, p. 286. For further information on Selah Merrill, see: Ruth Kark. *American Consuls in the Holy Land, 1832-1914*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press and Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1994.

⁹ Rogers, Mary Eliza. *Domestic Life in Palestine*. 1862; London: Kegan Paul, 1989, p. 156.

¹⁰ This section is based on: Glass, Joseph B. and Kark, Ruth. *Sephardi Entrepreneurs in Jerusalem, The Valero Family, 1800-1948*. Jerusalem: Gefen, 2007.

¹¹ Interview with Raya Ashkenazi (Valero), Ramat Hasharon, 24 April 2000.

¹² Handwritten memoir of Simha Schwartzburg (English, no date).

¹³ We are certain of only one fact: Sarah passed away in 1920. The family tradition holds that Sarah died at the age of 70 (i.e. she was born circa 1850). This contradicts the tradition detailed earlier in our discussion that she was purchased at the age of ten around the year 1880 (i.e. she was born circa 1870). As a slave, there are no official records of her birth. Therefore, Sarah was born sometime between the years 1850 and 1870. It is likely that she was older than ten years old when she joined the Valero household, the Valeros purchased her earlier than 1880, and she passed away at a younger age than 70 years old.

¹⁴ Lynch, William Francis. *Narrative of the United States' Expedition to the River Jordan and the Dead Sea*, Philadelphia: Blanchard and Lea, 1853, p. 453.