

DOES THE BIBLE ENDORSE SLAVERY?

Slavery encompassed the world in Bible times, and virtually every empire in human history until the last 200 years included slavery. What does Scripture say about slavery and how does it apply in our time? This resource is meant to help provide a framework for thinking about slavery and some suggestions for further investigations as we go through Paul's letter to Philemon. Is the Bible old news to be discarded? Or does Scripture — all of it — speak of Good News, even when slavery is mentioned? Four points to consider:

ANCIENT NEAR EAST ≠ ROMAN ≠ NEW WORLD

First, not all forms of 'slavery' are equal. Using the same terms (slave/slavery) can lead to confusion. What exactly is being described? Generally, the term has a sense of ownership associated with it, but the nature of the 'owner' and the context of the relationship inform the slavery being discussed. Slavery varies greatly between, and even within, the Ancient Near East (Old Testament times), the Roman world (the New Testament times), and even more recently in Western and Eastern cultures (including the British Empire and the United States, who together with the East built the infamous Transatlantic Slave Trade). Rebecca McLaughlin notes that there are:

... three differences between ancient slavery and its more modern incarnations. First, ancient slavery was not yoked to racial hierarchy. Hagar was an Egyptian slave to Hebrews; Joseph was a Hebrew slave to Egyptians. Second, it was common for people to sell themselves into slavery, as it represented a form of employment and was preferable to destitution. Third, while many slaves in the ancient world undoubtedly suffered the kinds of brutality and exploitation experienced by many enslaved Africans in America, advancement was also possible within the slave status and beyond — even to the point of becoming a senior civil servant. (McLaughlin, 177)

In the ancient world, 'slavery' was often woven into the fabric that knit societies together (see Naselli). In a harsh world, some even chose slavery as a merciful alternative to fending for themselves without the means to do so. But, with the ethic of God's love through Jesus, new fabric is available; a new society — seeking a new Kingdom — is possible.



Second, during the Old Testament, God humanized ‘slavery’ by its regulation in the Ancient Near East. Kidnapping, one of the more horrific practices of slavery, was explicitly forbidden in the Old Testament. God’s regulations made such ‘man stealing’ a capital offense (Ex 21:16). Also, slaves had certain rights and were to be provided for: slaves had the Sabbath off from work (Ex 20:10); Israelite slaves were freed in the seventh year and were provided additional goods to make a fresh start (Ex 21:2; Deut 15:12-16); slaves had protections from physical abuse (Ex 21:26); and there was a refugee system for escaped slaves — unheard of in the ancient world — in place through God’s Law (Deut 23:15-16). Indeed, the roots of human rights reach all the way back to the Garden of Eden, where humanity — male and female — is made in the image of God. Reflecting God, people are to love and serve Him. He is Lord. He is King. Stealing people who are ultimately God’s is part of the scandal of slavery. If the image is vandalized, it dishonours the One to whom the image is pointing.

In summary, the Old Testament bans slave catching [‘stealing a person’], provides for slaves, and invites us to see the world through enslaved eyes: from Hagar, to Joseph, to the whole people of Israel at the exodus from Egypt. (McLaughlin, 178).

But doesn’t the acknowledgment of slavery, even if regulated, endorse slavery? Not necessarily. For example, when Jesus says to give to Caesar what is Caesar’s (when a trap about taxes is set), Jesus is not campaigning for the Roman Emperor. While Jesus is acknowledging the current system, an even greater campaign is at work: ‘Give to God what is God’s’ (Mt 22:15-22).



Third, during the New Testament, God further humanized all relationships, showing the value of all people to the Roman World. The societal contributions of slaves were vast. Surprisingly, slavery was woven into the fabric of the Roman world in a number of contexts. Many slaves were doctors, administrators, professors, civil servants, and some even owned slaves themselves (see Naselli). Despite their potential standing in ancient society, slavery could be sinister. For example, under Roman law, slaves could be brutally punished since they were viewed as mere property. But with Jesus' arrival, Rome was confronted. In Christ, we see more clearly the full dignity of humanity, present since the Garden of Eden and protected in the Old Testament. Through the Gospel, slaves and masters are united as equals (1 Cor 7:22-23). They are co-heirs with Christ in the Family of God, the Church (Rm 8:16-17). Being first and foremost 'brothers and sisters' in the Lord reorients the way all relationships work (Phm 16). The New Testament epistles include addresses to slaves (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22, 1Pt 2:18), which were read at worship gatherings. This shows that slaves were members of the community in equal standing with others. And in these letters we see the Apostles calling slavery sin (1 Tim 1:10, 1 Cor 7:23), rebuking masters (Eph 6:9), telling slaves to escape if they can (1 Cor 7:21), and personally offering to pay to redeem (manumit) slaves (Phm 18). As the relationships are infused with Christ-like love, that reorientation even begins to undermine the very societal structure of 'slavery' in history. Indeed, Jesus escaped the tax-trap question by asking whose image was on the coin. Caesar's image, so it's Caesar's coin. But, whose image is on humanity? The implications of this regarding our treatment of others encompasses all relationships (Mt 22:15-22). Unfortunately, history has not always recognized the inherent dignity of that image in all people. The same Bible that regulated and eventually subverted slavery was misquoted to maintain the institution that was ripe with opportunities for abuse. And some within the Church even quoted the Bible to justify such injustices. This makes the need to read the Bible rightly — understood as the authors intended — all the more pressing.



Fourth and finally, for today, God grants the greatest freedom to all who become ‘slaves’ of Christ. To repeat Bob Dylan’s song, you ‘gotta serve somebody.’ Paul describes himself, and other Christians, as ‘slaves’ of Christ, ‘bond-servants’ of God. But such ‘slavery’ is actually our freedom (Gal 5:1; Rm 6:15-18). And Jesus paved the way. He became a servant to seek and save the lost (Mk 10:45; Phil 2:1-13). Ultimately, we are ‘slaves’ of God, because He first loved us (Rm 5:8). Our love for God is inseparable from our love for people (1 Jn 4:7-12). Frederick Douglas, born a slave in the United States, became a powerful voice for justice; yet, the justice he championed extended beyond mere social abolition to include a heart liberated by the Gospel. Douglas’ own words (referenced by G. Sunshine) recount that liberation:

... though for weeks I was a poor, brokenhearted mourner, traveling through doubts and fears, I finally found my burden lightened, and my heart relieved. I loved all mankind, slaveholders not excepted, though I abhorred slavery more than ever. I saw the world in a new light, and my greatest concern was to have everybody converted. My desire to learn increased, and especially, did I want a thorough acquaintance with the contents of the Bible.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

Alister I. Wilson, ‘Does the Bible Condone Slavery? (Philemon 1)’ (blog): <https://www.crossway.org/articles/does-the-bible-condone-slavery-philemon-1/>

Andy Naselli, ‘Keller and Carson: Greco-Roman Slavery ≠ Race-Based Slavery’ (blog): <http://andynaselli.com/keller-and-carson-greco-roman-slavery-race-based-slavery>

Gavin Ortlund, ‘Why It’s Wrong to Say the Bible Is Pro-Slavery’ (blog): <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/why-wrong-say-bible-pro-slavery/>

Glenn Sunshine, ‘Frederick Douglas (c. 1818-1895)’ (blog): <http://www.breakpoint.org/2016/02/frederick-douglass-c-1818-1895/>

L.T. Jeyachandran, ‘Does the Bible Condone Slavery?’ (blog): <https://www.rzim.org/read/a-slice-of-infinity/does-the-bible-condone-slavery-slice/>

Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*

Rebecca McLaughlin, *Confronting Christianity: 12 Hard Questions for the World’s Largest Religion*