

Slavery

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The Question

It is nearly impossible to develop an understanding of slavery apart from cultural presuppositions within historical moments. The historical oppression of people outside the church throughout the millennia has profoundly affected the treatment of people inside the church, leading to significant confusion concerning which institutions of slavery were based in Scripture and which are based in culture, with some proof-texts from Scripture used as support.¹ As a result, it has led many people inside the church and outside of it to come to a similar conclusion about slavery, mainly that Christianity supports the oppression and enslavement of people. This paper will offer a brief summary of the question, *why would anyone want to follow a God who endorses slavery?* As well as propose a thoughtful and compelling response.

The beginning of nearly every civilization, stretching over thousands years, has been built upon the backs of enslaved people. Included in these civilizations is the Israelite nation, and consequently, the Christian community. Many people believe the God of the Bible endorses and approves slavery based off the similarities of society's history of slavery and Christianity's history of slavery. There are numerous verses in Scripture where the biblical authors encourage the people to take other humans as slaves, as owned possessions (Ex. 21:1-11; Lev. 25:35-46), prompts slaves not to pursue freedom (1 Cor. 7:20-21), and supports runaway slaves to return to their masters (Philem. 12). Throughout church history, these verses were not just read in people's homes, they are preached and taught from the pulpit to congregations.

Up until the very recent 19th century, slavery has dominated the western culture founded upon Judeo Christian values. There is no better story that illustrates the sad and wayward state of societies disposition towards human life than Frederick Douglass. Before Douglass became a

¹ Josh Chatraw, and Karen Prior. *Cultural Engagement: A Crash Course in Contemporary Issues*. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2019), 100.

renowned statesman, writer, and abolitionists, he was a slave. In his autobiography, Frederick Douglass tells the story of one of his masters, Captain Auld, who was one of the most cruel owners he had. Because there was morally only one way Captain Auld could go (up), Douglass was hopeful of Captain Auld when he “experienced religion” one day while attending a Methodist camp meeting. Unfortunately, to Douglass’ demise, becoming a Christian made his captor an even worse of a person, stating that “Prior to his conversion, [Auld] relied upon his own depravity to shield and sustain him in his savage barbarity; but after his conversion, he found religious sanction and support for his slaveholding cruelty.”² There have been far too many Captain Aulds in the world, who have used Scripture to support their complete and total disregard for human life. As a result, many people today blame Christianity for strengthening the institution of slavery in the United States.³

In my specific cultural context, the deep south of Georgia, there are still many lingering effects of slavery. One of the most prominent, subcultural discords, is the spiritual-racial division amongst the community. Sunday morning remains the most segregated hour. There is an unstated sentiment that the Jesus of the slave owners is very different than the Jesus of the slaves. Even for those who are openly against Christianity, Christian tradition grasps just enough influence that there still remains an underlying notion that Christianity is a religion of slavery, causing many to ask the question *why would anyone want to follow a God who endorses slavery?*

The Response

Slavery in the New Testament

² Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York, Ny: Barnes & Noble, 2003), 55-57.

³ E Randolph Richards and Brandon J. Obrien, *Paul Behaving Badly : Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 75.

Greco-Roman Slavery vs American Chattel Slavery

When we talk about slavery in relation to the New Testament, it is important not to project our experience and understanding of American Chattel slavery onto the biblical authors. This is in no way a means to condone or sympathize slavery, but attending to the cultural contexts of the biblical authors is important as it sheds light on the conversation of slavery in the New Testament. First, slavery in a Greco-Roman world was not based off of race. New Testament theologian, Carolyn Osiek, wrote that that in a first century Greco-Roman world, “Latins, Greeks, dark-skinned, Syrians, black Ethiopians, and blond, blue-eyed Germans could be slaved together under one owner.”⁴ Similar to the Ancient Near Eastern culture of the Old Testament, people in the New Testament era became slaves as captives of wars, while others sold themselves into slavery in order to pay off debts, none of which was based off a prejudice against skin tone or ethnicity.

Secondly, in a Greco-Roman world slaves were the equivalent of the working class in our modern society. The ancient workforce was not made up of employees and employers like in a capitalist culture. Rather, it was masters and slaves, patrons and clients. The institution of slavery was a normal part of Roman life and was accepted as morally appropriate.⁵ Also, slaves could buy their way out of slavery. Debtors were free when the debt was paid as per Roman law. Contrary to slavery in the antebellum South, slaves in a first century Greco-Roman world were permitted to work a second job and use their earnings to buy their freedom.⁶ Lastly, under Greek law, slaves were able to own property and live separately from their masters.⁷ It was even

⁴ Carolun Osiek, “Slavery in the New Testament World.” *Bible Today* 22:3 (May 1984), 151.

⁵ E Randolph Richards and Brandon J. Obrien, *Paul Behaving Badly : Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 78.

⁶ Scott S Bartchy: *First-Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf And Stock Pub, 2003), 41.

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries* (New York: Harperone, 1997), 115.

common for slaves to be married to other slaves, freed slaves, and freed people.⁸ Although Roman slavery was quite different than American Slavery, it does not mute the condemnation of slavery, nor negate any deeper analysis of Scripture on the topic. Rather, it does mean we need not to impose our cultural presuppositions of American slavery on the Greco-Roman world of slavery in which the biblical authors lived. In order to hear and see what Scripture is really doing and saying, we must exam it through the lens of its cultural context.

All People are Salves

The biblical authors had an even more profound understanding of slavery and the human condition than most do today. The Bible makes it clear that everyone is enslaved to someone or something, not necessarily physically, but spiritually, which to the biblical authors is the truest sense of reality. The Apostle Paul makes this clear in his letter to the house churches in Rome, saying “Don’t you know that when you offer yourselves to someone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or [God], which leads to righteousness” (Rom. 6:16). He writes to the Galatian church that before they believed in Jesus, they were slaves to everything else that was not God (Gal. 4:8). Likewise, Paul writes in a letter to Titus, a shepherd to the Christians in Crete, that before the Cretans new life in Jesus, they (along with all mankind apart from relationship with Jesus) were enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures that manifested in foolishness, disobedience, malignment, envy, and hate (Tit. 3:3). In other words, anyone who does not believe in King Jesus is a slave to the evil one (1 John 5:9). With this understanding, Paul writes to the church of Corinth that they must no longer recognize anyone according to their flesh (2 Cor. 5:16). The reality is that for a person who does

⁸ R H Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (London: Methuen, 1928), 170-171.

not follow the way of Jesus, although they may not be a slave to a master in the physical sense, they are in fact still slaves.

Logically, one could conclude that by believing in Jesus, they are free, not enslaved to anyone or anything. Yes, and no. To be sure, Scripture is clear that anyone who believes in Jesus is free and that there is absolute freedom in Jesus (John 8:36 ; 2 Cor. 3:17). In one of the most culturally pertinent writings, Paul says that anyone who believes in Jesus has died to their old, sinful natured self and has actually been given a new, Spirit filled life. As a result, the new life in Christ means they are no longer a slave to sin. Sin and its consequence, death, no longer reign as a master over them. On the contrary, they have become a slave to God which gives true life, holiness and righteousness (Romans 6). The freedom all Christians now experience in Jesus makes them slaves, but this time to the greatest, wisest, most loving, enduring, and life-giving master, God. It is so upside-down to the enslaving powers of the world that slaves to God not only can experience life to the fullest, but they are able to joyfully *serve* others (Gal. 5:13-14).

This concept is not new to the New Testament authors. In the Old Testament, Moses is seen as having a similar understanding of a universal enslavement, either to God or to the evil powers of this world. Moses repeatedly asked Pharaoh, who held the Israelite nation captive as slaves in his land, to release the Israelites from bondage in order for them to serve (*‘āḥaḍ*) God (Ex. 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3). Moses’ use of *‘āḥaḍ* is significant because throughout the Old Testament this word was constantly used of slaves serving masters (Ex. 6:5; Lev. 25:39, 46; Jer. 25:14; 27:7; 30:8; Ez. 34:27). In other words, Moses was stating that instead of being slaves to Pharaoh, they wanted their freedom to become slaves of God. When the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, translated *‘āḥaḍ*, it used the Greek word, *latreuō*, which is slave/servant language. The Apostle John picks up on this word, revealing that even in new

creation (a life free from anything that diminishes a perfect union of the Creator and His creation) all who believe in Jesus will be enslaved and serving God (Rev. 22:3). In summary, slavery is a presupposed reality of every person. With the truest sense of reality being in the spiritual realm, every person is enslaved to something or someone. And the truth is that Jesus made a way to be enslaved to freedom, life and righteousness.

With this understanding, we can now appropriately read Paul's comments to the people, including slaves, in churches at Corinth, encouraging them to remain in the state they are in and not to fixate on freedom (1 Cor. 7:20-24). It is not that Paul does not want slaves to gain freedom, obviously, because in verse twenty-one he tells them that if they can gain their freedom to do so (1 Cor. 7:21). Rather, Paul encourages slaves that when they become a Christian, they are actually free (1 Cor. 7:22). Ironically, Paul tells the masters and free people that when they become Christians, they become slaves, to Christ (1 Cor. 7:22). Spiritually then, both masters and slaves are equal in Jesus. We were never created to be free agents in the universe. All people are to be slaves of God, not men (1 Cor. 7:23). Said differently, the story of the Bible tells us that although social circumstances may not change (if they do, seek them), the kind of freedom that should be most important to a human is the freedom to escape sin and death and live life in service to Jesus.

Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus

The Bible has an entire letter dedicated to the very topic of slavery. The letter is written to Philemon, a leader of a house church that meet in Colossae and dear friend and disciple of Paul. Paul wrote to Philemon telling Philemon that his run-away slave, Onesimus, had fled to Paul. Knowing that Philemon had all the legal rights to enact harsh punishment, execution, on the runaway slave, Onesimus, Paul asks Philemon to not only accept (without repercussions)

Onesimus back, but to no longer view Onesimus as slave, but rather, an equal, a “dear brother”, claiming the name of Christ as his authority (Philem. 16). Although most modern readers of the Bible wish Paul would have been more blunt about his view of slavery, in his cultural context, Paul was indeed defying the norms of the institution of slavery and suggesting manumission.⁹

Additionally, along with calling Onesimus “my son”, “my very heart”, and “faithful and dear brother” in order to show Onesimus’ equality, Paul writes this very personal letter not only to Philemon, but to the church that meets in Philemon’s house (which Paul expects this letter to be read to) knowing that it would put Philemon in a very pressing position to either openly disobey Paul, possibly causing Philemon’s congregants to fraction from their spiritual father, or obey Paul’s wishes, uncovering a new reality of slaves in the Christian community (Philem. 1). In doing so, Paul was making his stance on slavery very clear. Theologians Randolph Richards and Brandon O’Brien observe that Paul demands “that Philemon and the church of Colossae-and all Christians by extension- prioritize the new social rule of the church over the ‘social rules of their society.’” They continue, “ Onesimus may return to the status of a slave in the broader Roman culture, but [all slaves] social role within the Christian community was radically altered.”¹⁰ This is clearly seen in another one of Paul’s letter, this time to Timothy. In his letter Paul non-discretely lists slave traders among the worst of sins (1 Tim. 1:10). In short, Paul advocates for the emancipation of Onesimus. Although he is not dismantling the entire institution of slavery in the way we in a democratic society could (which would have been a nonexistence category in Greco-Roman world) it is clear that emancipation was on Paul's mind.

⁹ Timothy Brookins, “Paul and Seneca in Dialogue,” ed. Joey Dodson and David Briones, March 13, 2017, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004341364>.

¹⁰ Randolph E. Richards and Brandon J. Obrien, *Paul Behaving Badly : Was the Apostle a Racist, Chauvinist Jerk?* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 88-89.

Slavery in the Old Testament

Seeing The Old Testament Through Jesus

A thorough exegesis of the New Testament revealed that the way of Jesus was radically countercultural, and the Christian communities understood that following Jesus meant going against the grain of the social norms of the Greco-Roman society, including slavery. But how do we remain faithful to God in the Old Testament that seems to endorse slavery with passages like Exodus 21:1-11 and Leviticus 25:44-46 while living in the new life of Jesus under His Covenant that clearly supports the equality of all human life? Said more plainly, how do we hold Jesus' teaching to "love you enemies" and "turn the other cheek" with the slavery we read about in of the Old Testament?

Throughout church history, people have dealt differently with this question. Some have walked away from the faith because they do not know how to reconcile the two, while others have completely discarded the Old Testament for Jesus and the New Testament. Some say if a the Law of Moses is not quoted or repeated in the New Testament then it is not to be obeyed. Sadly, these approaches put roles and responsibilities on the laws in the Old Testament that they were not meant to be. It also does not honor how Jesus embodied the Old and New. If we believe that scripture is the training ground for recognizing God's voice, then there is something profound and fundamental to learning to hear God speak from texts that are not originally written to us.

The Bible's purpose is not to provide the ultimate comprehensive manual that God wants readers in the 21st century (or anyone outside of who they were originally given to) to follow. While it is true that Ancient Israel and Moses would have had some sort of ancient constitution of laws, including the address of slavery, we do not have them. We only have pieces of what the

biblical authors selected to pass on and felt important to insert into the story of the Bible in order to reveal God's wisdom to His people for all times and all generations. Using Scripture to make ethical decisions, especially about topics such as slavery, requires a deep-rooted moral compass that takes wisdom, meditation, and cross-cultural tools to train oneself not to need a rule book or behavioral manual but an internal compass.

I exposited the New Testament's clear stance on slavery first because for many people, once they begin to understand Jesus as the same God of the Old Testament (John 1:1-18), they are better able to experience God's heart, words, and laws how Jesus did. Clearly, Jesus believed the texts of the Old Testament to be a true and reliable medium that God used to address humanity. He saw Himself engrained in every word of the Old Testament, and the full expression and fulfillment of the storyline of the Bible. After Jesus' death, before His ascension to heaven, He told His disciples that, "Everything must [have been] fulfilled that is written about me in the Law of Moses, the Prophets and the Psalms.' Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures" (Luke 24:44-45).

Jesus interacted with the Laws of Moses and demonstrated how He discerned the wisdom about loving God wholly and respecting others dignity. For example, Matthew records how Jesus took one of the Ten Commandments, "do not murder", and turned it into addressing issues of contempt, pride, superiority and anger in one's heart (Matt. 5:21-26). For Jesus, the divine wisdom within "do not murder" was really about respecting humans as made in God's image. In fact, it was never really about not taking someone's life (though, at the very least, practically, it was), rather, it was about having a transcendent set of values of which the written law code is an expression of as it becomes intrinsic to every person. For followers of Jesus, this is the same process we are called to undergo with all of the 613 laws, especially those pertaining to slavery.

We are called to seek the divine wisdom that transcends the particular wording or situation of Scripture in its ancient setting and apply it to us today.

Exodus 21:1-11 and Leviticus 25

Exodus 21 covers the topic of Hebrew slaves and comes immediately on the backend of the Ten Commandments. This section of Exodus offers forty-two “judgments” provided as a sample of the divine judgments that Moses gave to the Israelites. Old Testament Theologian, John Sailhamer, says that “By studying the specific cases of the application of God’s will in the concrete situations, the reader of the Pentateuch could learn the basic principles undergirding the covenant relationship.”¹¹ It is easy to read Exodus 21:7 that states “If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do” and think that God is mandating slavery. Even in the context of verse two which prefaces that Hebrew’s are only to remain slaves for six years, women are still left as slaves. But we must remember that this section of the Bible comes immediately after God delivered Israel from centuries of slavery and He is not mandating some to go right back into oppression. What purpose then does Exodus 21:1-11 serve?

The commands and prohibitions regarding slavery in Exodus 21 are not a way to condone slavery, but rather, they way in which God would begin to redemptively shape and distinguish Israel, a nation that the Bible has shown to be rebellious to the ways of God, apart from its idolatrous and evil neighbors. Similar to how the famous laws of “eye for eye” and “tooth for tooth”, that come verses later, serve as a means to digress revenge and retaliation in hopes of eradicating it from His people, the slavery laws of Exodus 21 were meant to humanize people who sold themselves into slavery in order to repay a debt (Ex. 21:23-25). Especially, in a time

¹¹ John H Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 290.

when society was run by and passed down to men, letting a women out on her own was a death wish. It seems like God truly desired for His people to come alongside a slave and help them live into a protective community that they never had experienced before.

This application makes the most sense in light of Deuteronomy 15, which progresses eradication of slavery, ensuring that the former masters of a freed slave (now including women) must be given gifts, most likely a means to get back on their feet in society, when they are released from their service (Deut. 15:13-14).¹² Furthermore, the biblical authors of Exodus add a section in verses five and six that reveal what to do if their slaves do not want to leave at the time of release because “he loves [his] master” then they are to remain with him forever (Ex. 21:5-6). If this slavery was comparable to the atrocities in Egypt, or even American Chattel slavery, it would seem that no one would want to remain as a slave (It is important to note that while Israel did complain in the wilderness wanting to return as slaves in Egypt, it is always noted as an idealistic abomination). Not to say all who had servants treated them similarly, but it does raise the question that there seems to be more to the relationship of Isreal’s slaves and God’s redemptive laws than catches the eye at first glance.

Leviticus 25:35-46 is another passage of Scripture that seems to promote slavery, telling Israel that their “male and female slaves are to come from the nations around [them]” (Lev. 25:44). The slavery passages in this section must be read in light of the broader context we read them in, specifically, the Seventh Year Sabbath and the Year of Jubilee. These celebrations are all about the restoration of property and debt, including slaves. For Israel, a rag tag nation of fugitive slaves susceptible to attacks and capture from the surrounding nations, calling for protection, complete restoration, and dignity of slaves is unheard of in their cultural setting. With

¹² Ibid., 451.

the heartache and realities of the evilness of slavery still looming over the Israelites, they were to treat slaves/servants in a way that they wanted to be treated. The extreme kindness that God commanded of Israel to display to captures of foreign nations, by taking them under their protection as opposed to immediate execution or letting them suffer in their demise, was often prefaced by a reminder that they too were slaves at the hand of the Egyptians. In short, viewing Old Testament passages through the lens of Jesus helps us see that God is not endorsing slavery, but instead, making a way for His people to love a debtor, slave, or captured enemy as themselves in order to one day bring all nations back to His original design.

Redemptive Movement Hermeneutic

As we have seen with exegeting Scripture, everything must be filtered through its appropriate context. Still, there may remain a huge question that looms in the back of your mind: *how do we know if the Bible is progressing the ethic or if we should follow the biblical ethic exactly how the biblical characters did, no matter what?* In his book, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals*, Theologian Dr. William Webb provides a compelling hermeneutic to aid in one's exegetical quest. He calls it the redemptive movement hermeneutic. He says that in order for a community to live by certain biblical ethics, they must know its trajectory in relation to the entire biblical narrative. It works like this: One must identify how the original culture lived in relation to the ethic; what ethic the Bible presents; how our present culture lives in relation to the ethic; and how the ultimate ethic of new creation is in relation the given ethic. Following this hermeneutic will reveal if the Bible is providing a widening or constricting ethical ideal.¹³

¹³ William J Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals : Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 2003).

Applying this hermeneutic to the biblical view on slavery, we observe that the original cultures of both Ancient Near Eastern nations (Egyptians, Babylonians, and Mesopotamians), and a first century Greco-Roman society, had no category for life outside the system of slavery. In a monarchical civilization with no understanding of democracy, slaves were foundational to society. It is from this hierarchical framework we see the biblical authors liberating, protecting and humanizing slaves to a new level of significance, value, and worth. The ultimate ethic of new creation reveals all humanity, abiding as equals, and serving as the priesthood in ultimate union with Jesus. For us today, Paul's words have widened the trajectory, a path that we are to continue, letting every person find freedom in the reality that "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" as all can partake in the present as brothers and sisters in the hope of new creation (Gal. 3:28).

In conclusion, cultural context within historical moments shape people's understandings and application of slavery. The reality that the United States progressed on the backs of slaves, as well as Judeo Christian values, has left a devastating connection between the Bible and slavery. As a result of a flat reading of the Bible, Christians have oppressed and enslaved many people, hurting those inside and outside the church. The belief that the Bible encourages and supports slavery has left many wondering why anyone would want to follow a God who endorses slavery? I presented that a deeper cultural analysis and fuller contextual reading of prominent "slavery" passages actually reveal God creating an unheard-of reality for humanity as He redeems creation back to union with Him. The Bible does not view certain people as lesser than, but rather, affirms that by following the way of Jesus the people of Jesus would come alongside slaves and help them live into a better, counter cultural freedom that they had never experienced before. It is

clear that the Bible reflects not a slave endorsing God, but a movement that believes wholeheartedly that both men and women have their own right standing in the covenant community of God.¹⁴

¹⁴ Paul Gardner, *1 Corinthians*, ed. Clinton E. Arnold, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2018), 487.

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