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CHRISTIANITY CROSS-EXAMINED

IS IT RATIONAL, RELEVANT, AND GOOD?



Covina, CA

Chapter 8

Why Doesn't the Bible Condemn Slavery?

When Christians and non-Christians read about slaves or slavery in Israel, they often think along the lines of antebellum slavery with its slave trade and cruelties. This is a terrible misperception, and many—including the New Atheists—have bought into this misperception.

—Paul Copan, “Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery? An Overview”

One of the most appealing aspects of the biblical God is the special place in his heart for the down and out. He cares for the powerless and the needy. Scripture declares that “he raises the poor from the dust and lifts the needy from the ash heap” (1 Samuel 2:8a) and “secures justice for the poor and upholds the cause of the needy” (Psalm 140:12). The Mosaic laws are filled with instructions intended to ease the plight of the poor and protect them from injustice. God also promises to reward those who defend the powerless and show generosity. World religions specialist Huston Smith contrasts Yahweh with the Greco-Roman gods: “Whereas the gods of Olympus tirelessly pursued beautiful women, the God of Sinai watched over widows and orphans.”¹

Slavery has been an oppressive evil for the entirety of human civilization. The Mosaic law sought to protect people who lived at the very bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. Later, the gospel of Jesus Christ transformed culture and society in a way that led to the abolition of slavery in the Western world. As the world's Savior, Jesus frees people from the bondage of their sin, and the values he embodies and conveys to his people eliminate societal bondage as well. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus explained, “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,

because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to set the oppressed free" (Luke 4:18).

In the West today, slavery is considered a great moral evil. Thus, the Bible's lack of a categorical condemnation of the practice can be confusing. Critics even insist that the Bible (both Old and New Testaments) condones, if not promotes, slavery. For example, Sam Harris writes, "Consult the Bible, and you will discover that the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves."² The late Christopher Hitchens concurred, "The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans."³

On this basis, many secularists argue that the Bible can't serve as a basis for morality because it fails to condemn the primitive and barbaric practices of humanity's past—especially slavery. Rather, they insist that secularism should be credited with improving human rights. Richard Dawkins claims the twenty-first century's moral beliefs (women's rights, abolition of slavery, etc.) "are all things which are entirely recent" that "have very little basis in biblical or Koranic scripture." Dawkins believes we have outgrown the backward thinking of previous centuries "because of secular moral philosophy and rational discussion."⁴ Likewise, an atheist blogger insists, "It is the secular state, not the Bible, which we have to thank for ending slavery."⁵

The truth about the Bible's stance on slavery is far more nuanced than atheists give it credit for. It is true that nowhere does the Bible call for the formal overthrow and total abolition of slavery. To account for this, several important points warrant careful consideration. This chapter covers multiple points to develop an appropriate Christian response to the issue of the Bible and slavery.⁶

Hebrew Indentured Servitude Differed from Traditional Slavery

Today, when people (especially those in the West) picture slavery, they usually imagine the transatlantic slave trade with its inhumane shipboard conditions, or the antebellum American South with race-based, chattel slavery. A superficial reading of Scripture may lead one to conclude, as stated above, that the Bible condones, even promotes, slavery. However, a careful examination of the matter indicates that the forms of servitude described in the Bible bear little resemblance to the brutal and cruel transatlantic slave trade practiced from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries. It even differs greatly from the slavery generally practiced in other parts of the ancient world (such as is described in the Code of Hammurabi, Babylonian law recorded c. 1754 BC).

The Hebrew word sometimes translated as "slave" (*'ebed*) is not a distinctly

Table 8.1 Antebellum (Latin: "before the war") South⁷

This period in the Southern section of the United States occurred from the late eighteenth century to the beginning of the American Civil War in 1861 (also called the antebellum period or plantation era). This time in the American South's history was characterized by the economic growth of the region due largely to its heavy reliance on slavery (the outright ownership and forced labor of Black people).

negative term.⁸ Rather, *ʿebed* relates primarily to work or labor. It conveys the idea of a worker being subservient to another and is usually translated as "servant." The compound terms "servant-slave" or "bondservant" best convey the role of servitude described in the Old Testament, specifically in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

Some moderate forms of servitude—for example, indentured servitude—were considered morally beneficial before God under certain circumstances in the Old Testament (see Leviticus 25 and Deuteronomy 15:12–18). Examples of this are seen in voluntary indenturing to earn a living, learn a trade, or especially to pay off debt (known as debt-servitude). It can also include the indenturing of a criminal to render restitution. In none of these cases, nor even the more extreme case of foreigners captured by the Israelites in war (see table 8.3), would the servant-slave be viewed as a mere piece of property without human rights. Nor would the time of servitude be constituted as a life term of bondage. Servant-slaves in the ancient world, and especially those held by the Hebrews, could earn their freedom. Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer explains:

Hebrew slaves were required under the Mosaic law to be set free after six years of service; they could not be made to serve out their entire lives as slaves unless they willingly chose to remain so, out of love for their masters.⁹

There was a critical difference between the indentured servitude practiced in ancient Israel and the chattel slavery carried out throughout much of the

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ted as "slave" (*ʿebed*) is not a distinctly

rest of the ancient world (see table 8.1). Indentured servitude functioned for the most part like an economic agreement, usually motivated by instances of poverty, where the servant-slave worked as a live-in employee and was part of the employer's (or master's) larger household.¹⁰ The person received food, shelter, and clothing. The servant-slave entered voluntarily into a contractual agreement of selling himself (see Leviticus 25:39, 47) to work for a set period of time in the household of the employer.

The servant-slave was also guaranteed an eventual voluntary release, usually after six years, and there were specific laws governing how they were to be treated by their employer. They could also appeal to a magistrate if their rights were infringed upon. After their six-year agreement was complete, many servant-slaves chose to renew their bondservant status because it offered them a level of financial security in life. It might be hard for contemporary people to imagine individuals accepting such subservient conditions, but life in the ancient world was precarious for small landowners and farmers. Bad harvests, illnesses or injuries, and unexpected deaths could plunge people into debt and poverty. Debt-servitude offered a way out from under these financial burdens.

Scholar Paul Copan offers insight concerning how people living today should approach this controversial biblical topic:

Westerners should not impose modern solutions on difficult ancient problems; rather, we need to better grasp the nature of Israelite servitude and the social and economic circumstances surrounding it. We are talking about voluntary servitude in unfortunate circumstances during bleak economic times. Israel's laws provided safety nets for *protection*, not oppression.¹¹

Masters did not own their servant-slaves, so there were laws prescribing how they could treat their subservient workers. There were three specific injunctions within Israel's system of indentured servitude to ensure the fair and dignified treatment of servant-slaves. These laws differed significantly from the various slavery codes of the ancient Near East.¹²

Anti-Harm Laws (Exodus 21:26–27)

Servant-slaves injured while working had to be released from their labor arrangement. This law protected servant-slaves from further injury and curtailed abusive masters, who could be held accountable for infractions. Masters could

Table 8.2 Ten Ways Servant-Slavery in Israel Differed from Chattel Slavery

1. Indentured servitude offered a means to deal with poverty.
2. Racism was not a motivation for slavery.
3. Kidnapping, including for the purpose of slave trading, was illegal.
4. Enslaved people were not treated as mere property.
5. Cruelty was strictly prohibited and punishable by law.
6. Slavery was not operative from birth.
7. Slavery was not a permanent condition.
8. Indentured servitude was entered into and ended voluntarily.
9. Enslaved people had rights.
10. Enslaved people had access to an appeals process.

even potentially receive the death penalty for willfully murdering their work subordinates.

Anti-Kidnapping Laws (Deuteronomy 24:7)

Capture and forced servitude have been regularly practiced in slavery both ancient and modern, but Mosaic law forbade kidnapping and selling servant-slaves. In fact, kidnapping was punishable by death. After prohibiting the practice, Deuteronomy 24:7 emphatically commanded the Israelites, "You must purge the evil from among you." This anti-kidnapping law in effect ruled out the dreaded slave trade.

Anti-Return Laws (Deuteronomy 23:15-16)

Old Testament law instructed Israelites to offer safe harbor to runaway slaves who faced potential abuse if forcefully returned to their masters. This further protection for the servant-slave differed from other, more oppressive, systems of labor such as chattel slavery, which punished both runaway slaves and the people who helped them. Old Testament scholar Christopher Wright notes the uniqueness of this law:

No other ancient near Eastern law has been found that holds a master to account for the treatment of his own slaves (as distinct from injury done to the slave of another master), and the otherwise universal law regarding runaway slaves was that they must be sent back, with severe penalties for those who failed to comply.¹³

These three critical injunctions set forth in the Mosaic law showed that the Hebrew practice of indentured servitude was fundamentally different from traditional slavery (see table 8.2). These divine laws illustrated God's care for people who had very little power in life.

Slavery in the Ancient World

Critics of biblical morality often fail to recognize that the institution of slavery was entrenched in ancient culture. It could not be dismantled overnight. Old Testament scholar Gleason Archer notes:

As to the moral status of slavery in ancient times, it must be recognized that it was practiced by every ancient people of which we have any historical record: Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Phoenicians, Syrians, Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Greeks, Romans, and all the rest. Slavery was as integral a part of ancient culture as commerce, taxation, or temple service.¹⁴

Slavery was ubiquitous in the world of both the Old and New Testaments. Christian apologist Paul Copan estimates, "During the first century A.D., approximately 85 to 90 percent of Rome's population consisted of slaves."¹⁵ It played a critical economic role and function in society. Even if early Christians had wanted to overturn slavery, they had limited influence and lived under an authoritative Roman rule. Changing cultural and public practices that had been ingrained for thousands of years would have to wait until Christians gained greater influence in society. Yet, as we'll see later in this chapter, less than two millennia after the faith's inception, Christian teachings and values played a significant role in the inevitable abolition of slavery in the Western world. Until then, slavery remained deeply rooted in daily life around the world.

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Table 8.3 Enslaved Foreigners (Leviticus 25:44–46)

When English readers see words in the Old Testament like “slave” and “property,” they unfortunately read into the terms the definitions from the brutal slave trade. Here are four things to remember when thinking about how the Israelites were to treat enslaved foreigners:¹⁶

1. All the prescribed protections extended to Jewish bondservants or slaves were also extended to foreign slaves (Exodus 21:20, 21, 26, 27).
2. The Hebrew word for obtain or acquire (*qanah*) used in Leviticus 25:39–51 need not convey the notion of selling or purchasing foreign servants as property. The word is used in other Old Testament contexts where it does not convey inferiority of persons (see Genesis 4:1; 14:19; Ruth 4:10).
3. Even foreign slaves were able to obtain freedom (Leviticus 25:47–48).
4. In some specific instances, foreign servants could advance and evidently receive the full status of Israelite citizenship (1 Chronicles 2:34–35).

The Mosaic Law Reformed the Brutality of Slavery

Slavery has carried with it the cruelty that too often flows from human sinfulness. Power over others carries great temptations for fallen people to engage in manipulation and abuse. Nevertheless, as we saw earlier in the chapter, the Old Testament Mosaic law limited, regulated, and codified the practice (indentured servitude) and sought to correct its frequent inhumane abuses (Exodus 20:10; 21:20–27). Unlike other cultures (like ancient Egypt), the slave masters in Israel did not have absolute rights over their servant-slaves. Biblical scholar Nahum Sarna makes a powerful point about Israel's unique moral mandate: “This *law*—the protection of slaves from maltreatment by their masters—is found nowhere else in the entire existing corpus of ancient Near Eastern legislation.”¹⁷

This perspective on slavery was unprecedented and truly revolutionary. No

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other culture had extended such protection to the lowest and most vulnerable members of society. Biblical scholar Muhammad Dandamayev notes, "We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as humans for their own sake and not just in the interest of their masters."¹⁸ Yes, the Old Testament permitted forms of servitude and slavery, but it was never considered the moral ideal (Deuteronomy 15:18).

The Importance of Imago Dei

Israel's view of humankind allowed for an equality that extended from the man in power to the man under the power. As we discussed in the previous chapter, from the beginning the Scriptures taught that God created people in the imago Dei, his express likeness and image (Genesis 1:26-27). Throughout the Mosaic law, God urges humane treatment of slaves and kindness to foreigners by reminding the Israelites of the brutality they suffered in Egypt. Yahweh's compassion and justice were explicitly extended to all the disadvantaged—the widows, the orphans, the immigrants, and the servant-slaves (Deuteronomy 24:17-19).

Unlike virtually all other ancient cultures, and certainly unlike the antebellum South, the servant-slaves in the Old Testament were recognized as full human persons who possessed dignity, basic rights, and moral worth (Deuteronomy 5:14; Job 31:13-15). Abusing one's servant-slaves was viewed as imprudent, immoral, and even an attack against God's nature and character (Genesis 1:26-27; Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Isaiah 3:14-15 reveals God's view of those who trample on the rights of others:

The LORD enters into judgment
against the elders and leaders of his people:
"It is you who have ruined my vineyard;
the plunder from the poor is in your houses.
What do you mean by crushing my people
and grinding the faces of the poor?"
declares the LORD, the LORD Almighty.

Biblical scholars rightly point out, "Nowhere was the institution of slavery as such condemned" as it was in the Bible, "But then, neither did it have anything like the connotations it grew to have during the days of those who traded human life as if it were a mere commodity for sale."¹⁹ The outrageous crime of slavery is that it treats divine image bearers as though they are disposable property without rights and dignity.

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New Relationships between Slaves and Masters

The New Testament, while affirming the Old Testament concept of *imago Dei* (James 3:9), indicates that in God's sight there is "neither slave nor free" among his people (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Both slave and free are equally part of Christ's church and equally accountable to God (Ephesians 6:5–9). In fact, in the apostolic church, slaves were granted all the rights and privileges of those who were free.

This is powerfully illustrated in Paul's letter to Philemon. Philemon is Paul's dear friend and a Christian slave owner whose runaway slave, Onesimus, had encountered Paul while they were in prison together. Through interacting with Paul, Onesimus had become a believer in Christ. Paul sends Onesimus back with a letter telling Philemon to accept Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a dear brother in Christ (Philemon 1:15–17):

Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back forever—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a fellow man and as a brother in the Lord. So if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

Slaves and masters were considered brothers in the Lord and encouraged to respect one another (1 Timothy 6:1–2) and even relate to one another with brotherly affection (Romans 12:10; 2 Peter 1:7). Both slave and free serve one ultimate Master—Jesus Christ (Ephesians 6:9). In Christ, all believers are slaves (Greek: *doulos*) to the Lord and all believers are also free in the same Lord (Colossians 4:1). Scripture even presents Jesus's coming to earth to redeem humankind as his taking the form of a servant-slave. We see this metaphor in Philippians 2:5–11, which scholars believe reflects an early Christian hymn:

In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is

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above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

It is hard to overestimate how revolutionary and countercultural this approach to spiritual union with Christ was at the time. Christians who were enslaved under Roman rule lived as brothers and sisters with their masters in the Christian church. Christianity had, in effect, begun to dismantle slavery from the bottom up.

Spiritual Transformation Led to Societal Reform

The likely reason that the apostolic authors of the New Testament did not categorically condemn slavery was because they placed the preaching of the gospel and the redemption of lost souls ahead of societal reform. Yet that very biblical teaching about humankind and their relationship to God through Christ was the inevitable moral and spiritual force that revealed the fundamental injustice of slavery. Christianity affirmed the value of all people in God's eyes.

God's providential way of addressing slavery was to allow the biblical teachings (the Good News of the gospel) to spread throughout all cultures. Indeed, contrary to the claims of twenty-first-century atheists, it was the Judeo-Christian concept of humanity's God-given dignity that brought an end to legal slavery. Many in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century abolitionist movements of England and America were Protestant evangelical Christians—these included politician William Wilberforce, writers Hannah More and William Lloyd Garrison, orators Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, Underground Railroad conductor Harriet Tubman, and many within the Quaker denomination. These men and women were motivated, in large part, by the understanding that slavery is fundamentally inconsistent with the historic Christian view of humanity's creation and redemption.

Even in the ancient world, the apostles encouraged Christians who were enslaved to seek their freedom (1 Corinthians 7:21) and there are two passages where the apostles Paul and John, respectively, condemn slave trading (1 Timothy 1:10; Revelation 18:13). Had the apostles called for a categorical overthrow of slavery it may have caused people to view the early Christian movement as in opposition to societal norms and supposed good order. A slave revolt would no doubt have been met with overwhelming Roman military force. The movement would have been crushed, surely resulting in a great loss of life and a

serious setback for the Christian church. The historical evidence is clear: the early Christian church was a serious setback for the Roman Empire, a fact that is historically evident in the numerous persecutions of Christians with a Christian

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serious setback for the early Christian church. Instead, the early Christians tactically undermined slavery indirectly and slowly by showing the inconsistencies evident in the Greco-Roman worldview. And they showed a better way, with a Christian church and society that was a model of true brotherhood.

The Ruling

The claim of critics that the Bible endorses slavery is a shallow argument that employs faulty logic and overlooks Scripture's true teachings. The reasoning of such critics goes something like this:²⁰

- The Bible mentions slaves.
- The Old Testament doesn't forbid slavery.
- The New Testament doesn't promote the abolition of slavery.
- Thus, the Bible must approve of slavery.
- Slavery is a great evil.
- Therefore, the Bible approves of an evil practice.

While the Bible doesn't formally and explicitly condemn the practice of slavery, neither does it ignore or condone its practice. It was the unique ethical message contained in the Bible concerning human dignity and redemption that provided the moral and spiritual force that ultimately succeeded in abolishing slavery throughout much of the world and making its official practice illegal. The gospel message of salvation in Jesus Christ remains a powerful force against human evil and social injustice, including slavery. It is also the only antidote for another type of captivity—each human's slavery to sin and death.

Historian Rodney Stark summarizes historic Christianity's relation to and ultimate impact upon slavery:

Just as science arose only once, so, too did effective moral opposition to slavery. Christian theology was essential to both. . . . It is to recognize that of all the world's religions, including the three great monotheisms, only in Christianity did the idea develop that slavery was sinful and must be abolished. . . . Finally, the abolition of New World slavery was initiated and achieved by Christian activists.²¹

In truth, the indentured servitude of the Old Testament bears little resemblance to the modern conception of slavery. The New Testament teaching

about human worth and brotherhood in Christ worked to undermine slavery.

Ephesians 6:5-9

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.

And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.

1 Peter 2:18-19

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God.

Being conscious of God and his ways leads to the betterment of humanity. Every person has been created in God's image, and there's no hierarchy of status before the Creator. The gospel teaches that all of Jesus's followers, regardless of race, gender, and class, are one in Christ and accepted before God.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the three critical injunctions in the Mosaic law that were intended to protect servant-slaves. Just how significant are these principles in the context of other practices of slavery?
2. How did the primitive Christian church undermine the assumptions and prejudices that made slavery possible?
3. State the popular argument that the Bible endorses slavery. How would you respond to it?

4. Considering class issues and charity

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4. Considering society's heightened examination of race, gender, and class issues today, how can Christians encourage greater truth, unity, and charity on such topics?

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24. Lurie, "Uncomfortable Facts" (see chap. 7, n. 11).
25. D'Souza, *What's So Great about Christianity*, 214.
26. In reviewing this book in manuscript form, philosopher Winfried Corduan offered the following comment: "Actually, even though Nazi ideology was thoroughly antagonistic to Christianity, it was not atheistic. There were two strands coming together: (1) A mystical, quasi-pantheistic belief in a divine power that was specifically given to the Aryan race and that imbued the blood and earth of their homeland. (2) A reawakening of ancient Norse mythology as the religious manifestation of the first part. Nazism was definitely anti-Christian, but it shouldn't be classified as atheistic. In fact, atheistic communists in Germany during Nazi rule were severely punished."
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