

WHY DOES THE BIBLE CONDONE SLAVERY?

By Terran Williams

A book that supports slavery is ethically and culturally regressive. Yet the Bible seems to do just that. This has led many sincere seekers and arsenal-gathering skeptics to reject the Bible as a gift to humanity, as well as the Christian gospel it articulates.

Sam Harris talks of slavery and the Bible in Letter to a Christian Nation, calling it "an abomination." He quotes from the law of Moses to show the Bible's condoning of it...

Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves. You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property. You can bequeath them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly. (Lev 25:44-46)

It's not only the Old Testament that seems to say as much:

"Slaves, obey your earthly masters." (Eph 6:5)

"Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters." (Col 3:22)

"Slaves, be subject to your masters." (1 Pet 2:18)

What we find is that nowhere is slavery explicitly forbidden. Nowhere is anyone commanded to release slaves. Whatsmore, slaves are told to submit.

Yet, we (with our modern sensibilities) know that slavery is wrong. In which case the biblical texts approve of something that is wrong.

How does the Bible-affirming Christian respond to this apparent inconsistency?

When one is troubled by a text in the Bible, instead of reacting, slow down and make sure that you really do understand what it is saying. We bring many assumptions to the text we are reading. As one gets out a decent commentary, or tries to read this in the context of the whole Bible, one might find that the passage that is disturbing you might not even be teaching what you think it is teaching. You might find that the text you are reading is indeed part of a much more nuanced, rich and complex biblical teaching on the matter.

The Bible's nuanced teaching about slavery.

1. Ancient slavery was something very different to the African 'chattel' slavery that we think of when we read the word 'slave'.

This point does not argue that the slavery of the ancient world was good, only that it was far less shocking than the slavery of the New World colonization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where African slaves were kidnapped and taken to the Americas.

This is an example of ignoring the distance between our world and the world of the writers and original readers of the biblical texts.

Let's go back to the first-century Roman Empire when the New Testament was written. "There was not a great difference between slaves and the average free person. Slaves were not distinguishable from others by race, speech or clothing. They looked and lived like most everyone else, and were not segregated from the rest of society in any way. From a financial standpoint, slaves made the same wages as free labourers, and therefore were not usually poor. Also, slaves could accrue enough personal capital to buy themselves out. Most important of all, very few slaves were slaves for life. Most could reasonably hope to be manumitted within ten or fifteen years, or by their late thirties at the latest. By contrast, New World slavery was much more systematically and homogeneously brutal. It was 'chattel' slavery, in which the slave's whole person was the property of the master – he or she could be raped or maimed or killed at the will of the owner. In the older bond-service or indentured servanthood, only slaves' productivity – their time and skills – were owned by the master, and only temporarily. African slavery, however, was race-based, and its default mode was slavery for life." (Tim Keller, *The Reason for God*)

How did people become slaves? Not on the basis of race. Rather heavy debt forced many into slavery. Also, the fact that the Roman empire grew through military conquest meant many would be slaves. The second-century Roman jurist Gaius claimed that most slaves were prisoners of war who actually would have been slaughtered if not made slaves.

2. Slavery was a universal reality.

Slaves were ubiquitous in the ancient world. We overlook the fact that, in the ancient world, everyone was someone's slave. In a kingdom, for example, there was the king and then everyone else was his slave. The flat culture pioneered by modern liberal democracy did not exist. Slavery was reality – like taxes and dying one day. These were unquestioned aspects of life in the

ancient world. People were born into a world where other people ruled over them.

Though the Bible engages a diversity of nations and cultures – Ethiopian, Egyptian, Canaanite, Assyrian, Babylonian, Persian, Greek, and Roman – yet in all some people owned the rights to others.

Think of Rome for example. Of the million people who lived in this first mega-city, between one-third and one-half were slaves! The Roman Senate once even considered requiring slaves to wear marks, but they decided not to when they realized that such a large portion of the populace would be able to identify each other, and collaborate to overthrow the city!

Although we have to stretch our imaginations from our contemporary vantage point, when something is universal, it is – generally speaking – less awful. It just is. It's for this reason that the word translated 'slave' (Hebrew: ebed) in the Old Testament is often used positively – it relates to one's work. The word identifies someone as dependent on someone else with whom they stand in some sort of relation. Being an ebed could be a position of honour.

For example, in the patriarchal system, Abraham who had had no offspring at the time wanted one of his servants to inherit all he had (Gen 15:3). As such, they were trusted with money, weapons, dignifying responsibility and authority over others.

It is not surprising then that the word 'ebed' is used to describe one's relation to God. Each of us belongs to God. Each of us is given the dignity of representing God. Each of us are provided for and protected by God.

It is for this reason that many English translations opt for the word 'servant' or 'bondservant' rather than 'slave' in most of its occurrences in the Old Testament.

3. The law of Moses was very merciful in contrast to other nations.

The Old Testament laws concerning the treatment of slaves might seem regressive to modern readers, yet we fail to realize how mercy-filled and progressive it was for its time.

Exodus 21, containing laws on how to treat slaves, makes for an interesting study on the matter:

- Verse 2 tells Israelites to free slaves every seventh year.
- Verse 5 gives slaves the option of, out of love for the master and the family, committing themselves to lifelong slavery.

- Verses 7-10 speaks of the possibility of adopting a female slave as a daughter, as well as the need to keep 'faith with her' – meaning to look after her and uphold her rights. If one fails in this, one forfeits his ownership of her – and she is free to go.
- Verse 16 forbids kidnapping, which is the basis for much of the practice of having slaves in the first place.
- Verses 18-19 guides one in the cases of injured slaves.
- Verses 26-27 give the consequences of striking and injuring a slave.

In Exodus 23, Moses commands that Israelites should not oppress foreigners in their midst. The reason is given: Israelites of all people know what it feels like to be oppressed (in Egypt). Rather foreigners are to be treated as citizens, even loved as one of their own.

These provisions present in the law of Moses are absent from the ancient law codes of Babylon and Assyria.

Consider how superior the treatment of slaves was in the Old Testament compared to in Ancient Roman and New World forms of slavery:

Conditions of slaves in different systems			
	Old Testament	Roman	New World
Holiday	Yes	No	Yes
Enough food	Yes	No	No
Legal redress	Yes	No	No
Sexual protection	Yes	No	No
Kidnapped	No	Yes	Yes
Chains	No	Yes	Yes
Torture	No	Yes	Yes
Physical abuse	No	Yes	Yes

Source: Peter Williams

4. God's instructions don't always equate to God's ideals.

This point illustrates the need for nuance and complexity in understanding God's self-revelation in history.

After the fall of the human race in Genesis 3, the world comes undone – it becomes a broken place, filled with broken people, who organize themselves in broken systems. The continued presence of sinful inclination in the human heart perpetuates this brokenness.

The story of redemption is a story of God entering into the mess of humanity, and progressively revealing himself and seeking to bring restoration, first in and through the ancient nation of Israel (the Old Testament records this), then in and through Jesus and his Spirit-filled followers, and finally in his return when God restores all things, purging the world of evil and suffering, injustice and slavery.

All this means that God did not reveal his will and character all at once, but gradually over a long period of time. For this reason we must follow the storyline of biblical revelation – interpreting each part of Scripture within its moment in salvation history, rather than pull out texts here and there, removed from their context.

In short, God has accommodated his revelation to particular historical contexts, and even to fallen social structures within them. The only kinds of people and societies he can reveal himself to are flawed. If one follows the arc of God's self-revelation, one sees that God first seeks to reveal himself before he seeks to give us a vision of a perfect society, also he seeks first to save us before he seeks to reform the world through us.

All that to say, a command within an epistle written to a church in the Roman empire which gives guidance to how slaves should relate to their masters, and how masters should relate to their slaves is not all that God has to say about his long-term plan for the world and his views on institutional and structural evil.

Here's an analogy: when church leaders encourage our people to vote in the next election, we are not saying that democracy is the world's ideal political system. Or when a parent encourages their child on the battlefield to follow the order of their commanding officer, they are not saying war is good. Rather these instructions are attempts to make the best of an un-ideal situation – which is precisely where the millions of slaves in the Roman Empire found themselves.

5. The Old Testament law of Moses especially was a form of divine accommodation in the earlier stages of God's self-revelation.

One of the great themes of the Bible is the relationship between Moses' law to the ancient Israelites, and Jesus' dynamic leadership over a people that come

from all nations. Paul's letter to the Galatians deals specifically with this. In it, Paul makes the startling claim that the 613 commands of Moses were national law to preserve the ancient nation of Israel from self-destruction until such time as the Messiah would come and take God's self-revelation further and wider, as well as doing a deeper work in humanity that would make a higher standard of ethics possible (Galatians 3:19-22).

When one contrasts the law of Moses with the leadership of Jesus, as Jesus himself does in Matthew 5 of his Sermon on the Mount, one notes how radically the Spirit-empowered ways of Jesus outstrip and outclass the relatively low demands of Moses.

God's instructions about slavery are similar to his instructions about polygamy and divorce. These were situational instructions within structures of evil that God planned on eventually overthrowing. We miss the forest from the trees when we fail to distinguish between God's accommodated instructions and God's ultimate ideals. Many of the laws of Moses might permit or regulate something, without implying that the thing itself is good.

Think of divorce for example. When the Pharisees test Jesus on the subject of divorce in Matthew 19, at first he seems to play into their hands, asking what Moses had to say on the subject. When they quote the permission of Moses to divorce one's wife, Jesus says something revolutionary – he says that those laws were concessions to the hardness of the human heart, but were most definitely not a reflection of God's plan for marriage.

So far we have explained why the Bible does not directly take slavery on. But we must acknowledge something else. The Bible does indeed indirectly take slavery on – it gives insights which would lead to transformed ethics in people and societies once those insights, like planted seeds, fully took root...

6. The Old Testament has 'seeds of revolution' in it.

Though not being explicit, the Old Testament promoted two ideas that, given enough time, could overthrow the entire idea of slavery.

The first is creation. Perhaps no idea has taken more root in Western consciousness than the idea that each human has intrinsic value and therefore has rights that should be upheld. But where did this idea come from? We need read no further than the first chapter in the Bible which reveals God's original intent for the human race to be people who bear his image, endowed with dignity and worth. See Genesis 1:26-28.

The second is redemption. One meaning of the word 'redeem' is 'to release from slavery.' Most notably, consider that the primary narrative of the Old Testament is God's great liberation of his people from slavery in Egypt. They had been profoundly oppressed (see Ex 1:10-14 for example). We're told, 'The Israelites groaned in their slavery and cried out, and their cry for help because of their slavery went up to God' (Ex 2:23). In a precursor of what God would later do through Jesus in the liberation of the world (not from a political oppressor, but a spiritual one), God set his people free. Fascinatingly, though hardly used of the Israelites, the Egyptians themselves are described as slaves 'ebed' of Pharaoh no less than 20 times. In contrast, the Israelites were liberated to be a people directly under the Lordship of God – hence the command issued by Moses to Pharaoh: "God says, Let my people go so they may worship me." (The word for worship has the same root as ebed.)

With such a strong narrative of God liberating people from slavery let loose upon the planet, it is no wonder that many of the great revolutions in recent human history have employed this as their text of choice.

But far earlier, this narrative, as well as the command to not kidnap people (Deut 24:7) led at least some sects within Judaism, such as the Essenes, to forbid the owning of a slave.

7. The New Testament has 'seeds of revolution' in it.

Slave-trade is forbidden. The abolitionists in Britain first managed to pass laws that forbade purchasing or kidnapping a slave, and only later passed laws that prevented ownership of a slave. The order was strategic. The first laws cut the artery that fed slavery in the first place.

The New Testament does something similar. 1 Timothy 1:8-10 unconditionally condemns kidnapping and trafficking in slaves. "Slave-traders" are listed among those who are "ungodly and sinful" and are in the same category as those who kill their fathers or mothers, murderers, adulterers and perverts, and liars and perjurers.

In Christ, the church was to be a new society. Christians, consisting of people of many tribes and nations, and of masters and servants in the very same household, were commanded to love others as Christ loved us. In their letters, Paul and Peter mention Christians exchanging a holy kiss. This took a family practice (in general culture, kissing was a family greeting) and told masters to apply it to their slaves. The gospel was a radical equalization of people – as Paul stated its effect: "There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). So

doing, the gospel effectively challenged the class distinctions that had been part of human society for time memorial.

More than that, the New Testament specifically links the redeeming work of Jesus in the cross to the removal of all society's barriers (Eph 2:11-22), making it possible for a people to exist "from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages" (Rev. 7:19) who dwell together in perfect harmony.

The letter to Philemon especially shows the power of the Gospel to rupture power-structures. It is Paul's letter to a slaver owner (Philemon) about his runaway slave (Onesimus). In fact, the whole occasion for Paul's writing is that Onesimus, since running away from Philemon, has become a Christian.

Strikingly, Paul instructs Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave but as more than a slave, a beloved brother ... both in the flesh and in the Lord" and he appeals to Philemon to "receive him as you would receive me" (v16-17). So doing, Paul dissolves the slave/master relationship – and is bestowed with family status and high dignity.

The point is that, though Paul did not attack the actual institution of slavery, he nevertheless showed that the gospel abolishes the assumptions and prejudices that make slavery possible in the first place.

Wonderfully, one famous campaigning tactic of the abolitionists in Britain was to create badges with a picture of a slave on his knees with the words, 'Am I not your brother and your friend?' It was inspired by Paul's letter to Philemon.

All of these 'seeds of revolution' tended to impact the earliest church. For example, some Christians literally sold themselves into slavery to purchase the freedom of others (1 Clement 54:4-5), while some churches collected money to buy slaves' freedom (Ignatius to Polycarp 4:8-10; Shepherd of Hermas 38.10; 50.8).

So far we have discovered that a deeper, more nuanced reading of the the Bible shows that it did not condone slavery, but rather put in place what was needed for its eventual dismantling. But still the question remains, Why did the New Testament stop short of directly forbidding slavery?

8. The initial priority of the New Testament era church was not the moral reformation of society, but the formation of a redeemed, countercultural people.

Though Christianity would, over centuries, grow to be the largest religion in the Roman Empire, by the end of the New Testament era (AD 90), it consisted

of about 30 or 40 mainly small churches. It was one religious group among 100s.

The surest way for one of these sects to self-destruct would be to try overthrow Roman law itself. If the emperor heard of a small sect that was trying to do overthrow the very economic and social system of Rome itself, he would quickly root out and destroy them. Simply commanding Christians to free their slaves would, likewise, been illegal and would have attracted Rome's discipline. According to Roman law, one's identity as a slave was established by Rome itself, not necessarily one's master, so the slaves would still not be free. Also, what of their security – slavery was the way people secured a place to live and food to eat, and when lucky, a master who cared for you.

The alternative would have been to provoke a slave rebellion. This would have done no good for the slaves themselves – a slave rebellion would have led to the execution of the rebels. Those slaves who were scheduled for release and citizenship in Rome at a later stage would have forfeited their future security.

The New Testament put the emphasis on the formation of a people who are redeemed – rescue not from Roman oppression first and foremost, but rather rescued from even more terrible enemies: the guilt and power of sin, the accusation and control of Satan, the terror and inevitability of death, the prospect of judgment and hell. Jesus' battle and victory against these enemies treats Moses' 1300BC battle and victory against Pharaoh as a mere foreshadowing.

As people are liberated from slavery to these powers, are brought into liberating ownership by God who purchased their freedom with his own life, they are now dignified as servants, sons and daughters of God.

As communities of the redeemed are formed, they are directed and empowered by the Spirit and the teachings of Jesus and the apostles to form their communities around countercultural values – the least is the greatest, enemies are forgiven, giving is more blessed than getting, the outcast is brought into the family.

Jesus envisioned that as more and more of his disciples and churches live as salt and light, distinct from the values of society, and yet as servants of the worlds they found themselves in, they will begin to influence the larger culture.

This is precisely what sometimes happened, although (owing to sinfulness in Christians) did not always...

Christ-defying Christians.

The church once it had numerically grown to be in a place to bring significant societal influence, continued to drag its feet. There are many reasons for this: inward-looking churches who were unconcerned about issues outside of their immediate periphery, the (unbiblical) platonic view that implies that the goal of salvation is to escape this world, rather than 'bring God's kingdom down'. Tragically, the African-American theologian Howard Thurman recalled how his illiterate formerly enslaved grandmother would not allow him to read Paul to her. Slave owners, she said, constantly employed Paul's letters to promote docility among the slaves.

This is lamentable. But before we despair that God ever committed to human instrumentality, there are wonderful exceptions.

Christ-led Christians.

For all the Christians who have got it terribly wrong, thank goodness there have been some who refused the status quo and allowed the biblical seeds of revolution to grow into a forest of societal change.

Says historian and sociologist Rodney Stark, 'Anti-slavery doctrines began to appear in Christian theology soon after the decline of Rome and were accompanied by the eventual disappearance of slavery in all but the fringes of Christian Europe. Even though slavery in some form was virtually universal in every human culture over the centuries, it was Christians who first came to the conclusion that it was wrong.'

The clash between kingdom values and society's ways came to a head when later Christians faced New World-style slavery, which could not be squared in any way with biblical teaching.

Tim Keller, in his Reason for God, is here quoted at length:

A deep stain on Christian history is the African slave trade. Since Christianity was dominant in the nations that bought and sold slaves during that time, the churches must bear responsibility along with their societies for what happened.

Christians began to work for abolition not because of some general understanding of human rights, but because they saw it as violating the will of God. Older forms of indentured servanthood and the bond-service of biblical times had often been harsh, but Christian abolitionists concluded that race-based, life-long chattel slavery, established through kidnapping, could not be squared with biblical teaching either in the Old Testament or the New.

Christian activists such as William Wilberforce in Great Britain, John Woolman in America, and many, many others devoted their entire lives, in the name of Christ, to ending slavery. The slave trade was so tremendously lucrative that there was enormous incentive within the church to justify it. Many church leaders defended the institution. The battle for self-correction was titanic. When the abolitionists finally had British society poised to abolish slavery in their empire, planters in the colonies foretold that emancipation would cost investors enormous sums and the prices of commodities would skyrocket catastrophically. This did not deter the abolitionists in the House of Commons. They agreed to compensate the planters for all freed slaves, an astounding sum up to half of the British government's annual budget. The Act of Emancipation was passed in 1833, and the costs were so high to the British people that one historian called the British abolition of slavery 'voluntary econocide'.

Rodney Stark notes how historians have been desperately trying to figure out why the abolitionists were willing to sacrifice so much to end slavery. He quotes the historian Howard Temperley, who says that the history of abolition is puzzling because most historians believe all political behaviour is self-interested. Yet despite the fact that hundreds of scholars over the last fifty years have looked for ways to explain it, Temperley says, 'no one has succeeded in showing that those who campaigned for the end of the slave trade . . . stood to gain in any tangible way . . . or that these measures were other than economically costly to the country'. Slavery was abolished because it was wrong, and Christians were the leaders in saying so.

The work of overcoming slavery continues.

We must resist the tendency to treat slavery as a thing of the past. It is estimated that there are today over 27 million people in the world who are subject to slavery: forced labour, sex trade, human trafficking, and inheritable property.

The compassion of Christ, the presence of the kingdom, the lessons of church history, the seeds of revolution – all of these should propel Christians to do what they can to overcome this great evil. A through reflection of Scripture's teaching about slavery leads one to conclude that God wills it.