

The Bible and Slavery

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[NOTE: During the February 12, 2009 Darwin Day debate with Kyle Butt, Dan Barker listed 14 alleged Bible discrepancies as evidence against God's existence. He demanded (nine minutes and 30 seconds into his opening speech) that the Bible gives contradictory descriptions of God's attitude toward slavery. His allegation is refuted in the following article written by Kyle Butt in 2005.]

Through the millennia, some of the worst atrocities perpetrated on humans have been linked to the institution of slavery. Historically, slavery has not designated one particular ethnic group as its singular victim. The Hebrews were slaves to the Egyptians during the days of Moses. During the reign of King David, the Moabites were subjected to slavery (2 Samuel 8:2). Alexander the Great forced almost the entire inhabited world to cower and serve him. Truth be told, practically every nationality of people that exists today could point to a time in its past history when it fell victim to slavery. Hitting closer to home, the pages of history dealing with the formative years of the United States are despoiled with gruesome stories of ships carrying slaves sold to the Americas by their fellow Africans (and others, e.g., Arabians). These slaves frequently were packed so densely in lower ship decks that many of them died of disease or malnutrition. Those who lived to see the States soon learned that their fate hinged upon those who purchased them. Some slaves were ushered into homes with kind masters, decent living facilities, good food, and freedom to worship. Other slaves were purchased by cruel, greedy people who overworked them, abused them, underfed them, and allowed them no freedom.

Friction soon arose between those who wanted to maintain slavery, and those who wanted to outlaw the practice as inhumane and unjust. It can be argued convincingly that the American Civil War was fought primarily over this very issue. Politicians raged on both sides of the matter. Interestingly, so did religious people. Abolitionists, as well as pro-slavery advocates, went to the Bible to marshal arguments for their particular view. Abolitionists armed themselves with verses such as: "Therefore whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them: for this is the Law and the Prophets" (Matthew 7:12); or "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you all are one man in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:28). Religious pro-slavery activists fired impressive scriptural guns by quoting passages such as: "Servants, be submissive to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the harsh" (1 Peter 2:18); and "Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of your heart, as to Christ" (Ephesians 6:5). Can we determine with accuracy what the Bible **really says** on the topic of slavery? Does the Bible condemn it as a social injustice? Does the Bible condone the practice? And how does the Bible's position on slavery mesh with the idea of a loving God?

For years, skeptics have railed against the written Word, insisting that its pro-slavery tendencies should alert any reader who has a scrap of common sense to the idea that an all-loving God could not have inspired such atrocious material. Morton Smith and R. Joseph Hoffman, in a book titled *What the Bible Really Says*, commented:

[T]here is no reasonable doubt that the New Testament, like the Old, not only tolerated chattel slavery (the form prevalent in the Greco-Roman world of Paul's time) but helped to perpetuate it by making the slaves' obedience to their masters a religious duty. This biblical morality was one of the great handicaps that the emancipation movement in the United States had to overcome. The opponents of abolition had clear biblical evidence on their side when they argued (1989, pp. 145-146, parenthetical item in orig.).

Following a similar line of thinking, Ruth Green wrote that "it was the Old and New Testaments of the Bible that were the authority for keeping humanity in serfdom for centuries and for legitimizing slavery in America, making a bloody civil war necessary to give slaves human rights under our Constitution" (1979, p. 351).

Has the Bible been responsible for the oppression of slaves in the past? No, it has not. In fact, an in-depth look into the biblical account that reveals God's attitude toward slavery shows just the opposite.

SLAVERY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In Matthew 19:3-10, the Pharisees came to Jesus, attempting to trap Him with questions about the Old Law. They asked: "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for just any reason?" Jesus informed them that divorce was not in God's plan from the beginning. Thinking they had trapped Him, they inquired: "Why, then, did Moses command to give a certificate of divorce and to put her away?" If it was in the Old Law, they suggested, then it must be God's ideal will. But Jesus' answer quickly stopped that line of thinking. He responded:

Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but

from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery.

Jesus' point was crystal clear—some things **permitted** in the Old Testament did not necessarily represent the ideal. Due to the hardness of ancient Israel's heart, God tolerated (and regulated) some things under the Old Law that He did not endorse. As He did so, however, He progressively revealed His divine will to mankind, clarifying that will more fully through Christ.

Many of the injunctions found in the Old Testament pertaining to slavery fall into the category of regulating something that was "less than ideal." Even in the Old Testament, God desired that all people love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18). Yet, in a time when God used the children of Israel as His arm of justice to punish evildoers, certain questions arose. What was to be done, for example, with the survivors of those wicked nations? What was to be done with a man who was so far in debt that he could not repay his lender? These issues, and others like them, necessitated that God institute some form of humane regulations for "slavery."

Often, those who attack the Bible skirt the real crux of the slavery issue. They point to verses in the Old Testament that offer a particular regulation for slavery. From there, they proceed to argue that the Bible is a vile book that does not condemn, but actually condones slavery. And, they argue, since all slavery is morally wrong, the Bible must not be the product of a loving God.

However, those who take such a position fail to consider that certain types of slavery are not morally wrong. For instance, when a man is convicted of murder, he often is sentenced to life in prison. During his life sentence, he is forced by the State to do (or not do) certain things. He is justly confined to a small living space, and his freedoms are revoked. Sometimes, he is compelled by the State to work long hours, for which he does not receive even minimum wage. Would it be justifiable to label such a loss of freedom as a type of slavery? Yes, it would. However, is his loss of freedom a morally permissible situation? Certainly. He has become a slave of the State because he violated certain laws that were designed to ensure the liberty of his fellow citizen, whom he murdered. Therefore, one fact that must be conceded by anyone dealing with the Bible and its position on slavery is the fact that, under some conditions, slavery is not **necessarily** a morally deplorable institution.

Taking that into account, we also must ask: Who has the right to determine when slavery can be imposed on a certain person or group of people? The answer, of course, is God. In the Old Testament, immoral nations who practiced unspeakable evils surrounded the Hebrews. In order to rid the world of their destructive influence, the children of Israel dealt with them in several ways. One of those ways included forcing the wicked nations into slavery. Many of the slave regulations in the Old Testament deal with the treatment of individuals and nations who had committed crimes against humanity that were worthy of death. The wicked people were graciously allowed to live, but they were subjected to slavery, much like a lifetime prison sentence in modern criminal cases. Let us look more closely at this situation. In Leviticus 18:21,24 we read that the Lord told Moses to instruct the Israelites as follows:

And you shall not let any of your descendants pass through the fire to Molech.... Do not defile yourselves with any of these things; for by all these the nations are defiled, which I am casting out before you.

In order to understand this scenario, it is important that we understand what the phrase, "pass through the fire to Molech," means in verse 21. In brief, it means that the nations around the Israelites were burning their own children as human sacrifices to a pagan god named Molech (for further information on Molech and this practice, see Harrison, 1988, 3:401). Fitting this into our discussion, would it be morally permissible for God to allow a government (e.g., the Israelites) to punish those people who were viciously murdering their own children? We must answer in the affirmative. What punishment would be appropriate for a person who had committed such heinous crimes as to murder his or her own innocent children? The answer to that question rages even in our own society today when instances of child homicide arrive before the courts of our land. Legitimate answers often include the death penalty, or a life in prison in which many freedoms are revoked.

As additional evidence along these lines, in Exodus 22:1-3, the Bible discusses a situation in which a man was caught in the act of thievery. The thief was instructed to restore what he stole, returning four sheep, and five oxen, for every one stolen. The text further states: "He should make full restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft" (vs. 3). Being sold into slavery was often a government-regulated punishment based on a criminal action. One can see, then, that it is morally permissible to revoke the freedoms of certain people or groups of people based on their inappropriate conduct.

Accordingly, many of the slavery regulations in the Old Testament pertained to people who deserved far worse. Dan Vander Lugt commented:

Old Testament laws regulating slavery are troublesome by modern standards, but in their historical context they provided a degree of social recognition and legal protection to slaves that was advanced for its time (Exodus 21:20-27; Leviticus 25:44-46). We must keep in mind that on occasion it was an alternative to the massacre of enemy populations in wartime and the starvation of the poor during famine (2001, p. 1).

A Mutually Beneficial Relationship

Frequently, “slavery” in Bible times was much more of an employer/employee relationship than an owner/slave situation. Even the words used to delineate between a hired servant and a slave are difficult to separate. As Herbert Lockyer noted:

In the ancient world, service and slavery were closely related, so much so that one can scarcely distinguish the one from the other. The original words used for “servants” and “service” carry a variety of meanings between which it is not always easy to determine what is meant (1969, p. 197).

Arndt and Gingrich documented that the Greek word *doulos* meant “slave,” but that it also was used “in a wider sense” to denote “any kind of dependence.” In 2 Corinthians 4:5, the apostles are called the *douloi* (plural of *doulos*) of the Christians. Christ took on the form of a *doulos*, as stated in Philippians 2:7. Paul designates himself as a *doulos* of Christ in Romans 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Galatians 1:10, and numerous other passages (1967, pp. 205-206). The term can describe a person who is obligated in some way, whether voluntarily or involuntarily, to another person. Due to this broad use, various translations have employed a wide range of words to render the meaning of *doulos* in English. Using Romans 1:1 as a case in point, the NKJV has “bondservant,” the New Living Translation has “slave,” the KJV and ASV have “servant,” and the Darby Bible has “bondman.”

The Hebrew word *ebed* is similar to the Greek *doulos*, in that it can be translated as “slave” or “servant.” In Exodus 4:10, Moses referred to himself as the “servant” (*ebed*) of God. Abraham called himself the *ebed* of the angels who came to visit him in Genesis 18:3. In Genesis 39:17-19, Potiphar’s wife described Joseph as the Hebrew *ebed*, and Genesis 24:2 talks about the eldest *ebed* in Abraham’s house, who “ruled over all he had.”

The purpose of including this brief description of the two most common terms for a slave is to show that our modern use of the word slave generally evokes mental images of cruelty, injustice, and bondage against a person’s will. While such ideas could be included in the biblical usage, they do not necessarily fit every time the words are used. Instead, the picture that we often see when the biblical words for “slave” are employed is a mutually beneficial arrangement similar to an employer/employee relationship. Job describes this relationship quite well:

If I have despised the cause of my manservant (*ebed*) or of my maidservant, when they contended with me; what then shall I do when God riseth up? And when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb (Job 31:13-15)?

Obviously, Job’s dealings with his slaves provided a mutually acceptable situation for master as well as slave.

To illustrate further the true nature of much Old Testament slavery, Abraham’s relationship with his slave Eliezer should be examined. In Genesis 15:2-3, Abraham lamented the fact that he was childless. In his dialogue with God, he stated that the heir of his wealth was Eliezer of Damascus. In verse three of chapter 15, Abraham described Eliezer as “one born in my house.” Later, in Genesis 24:2, Abraham’s oldest servant (probably Eliezer) “ruled over all that he had.” Add to this the fact that Abraham armed 318 trained servants (Hebrew *ebed*) to bring back Lot after he had been captured (Genesis 14:14-15). If the slave/owner relationship was anything less than mutually trusting, Abraham most likely would not have intentionally armed his slaves.

Due to the mutually beneficial nature of much Old Testament slavery, some slaves did not even want to leave their masters. Deuteronomy 15:16-17 deals with that very situation:

And if it happens that he [a slave—KB] says to you, “I will not go away from you,” because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your maidservant you shall do likewise.

Do the actions and words of Abraham’s slaves, or those found in Deuteronomy 15, seem like the actions and words of tyrannized, oppressed people? Hardly. Rather, they seem more like the words and actions of people enjoying a mutually beneficial and consensual relationship.

Even during New Testament times, slavery often provided a mutually beneficial relationship to both owner and slave. As Paul Copan remarked:

During Paul’s time, the master-slave relationship provided sufficient benefits and opportunities, such that it dampened any thoughts of revolutionary behavior. One freed slave had inscribed on his tombstone: “Slavery was never unkind to me....” More often than not, it was the **free** workers rather than slaves who were abused by foremen and bosses. (After all, an owner stood to have an ongoing loss if he abused his slave.) [2001, p. 172, parenthetical item and emp. in orig.].

But suppose a master did abuse his slaves in Old Testament times, and those slaves decided to run away. In Deuteronomy 23:15-16, God made it unlawful for runaway slaves to be returned to their

masters. The text states:

You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him.

This passage is particularly revealing because it shows how costly cruelty to slaves was. It also shows that slaves had the freedom to choose where, and with whom, they wanted to live. Wright noted that this passage proves that

[s]lavery as such is not protected or rendered sacrosanct under Israelite law. At the very least it can be said that such a law probably presumes that runaway slaves will be the exception, not the rule. This lends further weight to the view that normally slavery in Israel was not oppressively harsh. It would certainly not have been, if the spirit of the slavery laws of Exodus and Deuteronomy were put into practice (1983, pp. 181-182).

Add to this the fact that kidnapping a man and selling him as a slave was a crime punishable by death, as noted in Exodus 21:16: "He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death." Certainly, any parallel to slavery in early America can be easily refuted.

Also note that the slavery regulated in the Bible had absolutely nothing to do with race, color, or ethnic background. While it is true that certain nations, as a whole, were captured and enslaved because of their wicked, idolatrous practices, it is not true that they were enslaved due to their allegedly inferior nationality. Leviticus 19:34 states: "But the stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God." Deuteronomy 24:14 reads: "You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren, or one of the aliens who is in your land within thy gates." And, although certain regulations applied only to Hebrews who found themselves enslaved (Deuteronomy 15:12-14; Exodus 21:2), it was not because they were a "superior" race or nationality, but simply because they were citizens of the nation of Israel (a similar concept would be the fact that a person who is born in the USA is not inherently any less or any more valuable than any other person, but, under the law system of the United States, that person would possess certain rights and privileges that a non-citizen would not enjoy). Deuteronomy 10:17-19 illustrates God's impartiality well:

For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great God, mighty and awesome, who shows no partiality nor takes a bribe. He administers justice for the fatherless and widow, and loves the stranger, giving him food and clothing. Therefore, love the stranger; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.

The New Testament further underscores the idea of human equality in passages such as Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one man in Christ Jesus." Job's statement regarding his slave's equality—due to the fact that God formed him in the same way that God formed Job (31:15)—provides a perfect example of the biblical idea that all men possess the same inherent value. The idea that one nation or race is superior to another does not come from the Bible. Racism like that displayed by many during the slavery years of the United States has always been a sin (Acts 17:26-31).

A valid question naturally arises from the comment above, that, on occasion, nations as a whole were enslaved because of their wickedness. What about the children of those wicked men and women? Must they become slaves as well, suffering for their parents' evil actions? First, let us acknowledge that, even today, children often suffer because of their parents' poor decisions. Consider the sad and pitiful plight of a child whose father is an alcoholic or child abuser. That child will suffer physically, emotionally, and financially. Even in modern times, the children who are born in poverty or cruelty often remain slaves of those elements their entire lives. Second, let us ask a more pertinent question: Would it be better for that child to grow up in a country where the slave laws protected him or her, or would it be better for the child to have to "pass through the fire to Molech"? To ask is to answer, is it not? When nations were conquered by the Israelites, what was to happen to the nations' children who remained alive? They could be left to die on their own, or they could be given homes, food, and jobs. Which of the two options is more humane? Again, to ask is to answer. Furthermore, if the child grew up and did not like his master, he or she could simply run away and live wherever he or she wanted (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

As we consider further the situation of slaves in ancient Israel, it is interesting to note that every slave was entitled (by God) to have a part in the Sabbath rest once every week. Exodus 20:10 states:

[B]ut the seventh day is the Sabbath of the Lord your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant, nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates (emp. added).

Along these same lines, every slave also was entitled to partake in the eight-day festivities surrounding the Feast of Weeks and the Feast of Tabernacles (Deuteronomy 16:9-17). The welcome rest provided on these occasions shows that God's regulations for slavery in Israel were humane and fair. Furthermore, the year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:10) provided freedom to "all the inhabitants" in the land of the children of Israel. [This provision included many of the slaves, with possible exceptions such as those slaves who had chosen to stay with their masters and have their ears pierced as a sign of their

situation, and those slaves that were taken from other nations.]

And you shall consecrate the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a Jubilee for you; and each of you shall return to his possession, and each of you shall return to his family.

Certainly, God kindly provided rest and freedom for slaves under the Old Testament in order to quell abuses that might arise.

Slaves of Debt

Another aspect of Old Testament slavery had to do with severe debt accumulation. In Old Testament times, no bankruptcy legislation held sway over the Israelites. What was to be done for the person who was drowning in a sea of debt? Was his lender simply to wave his hand and forgive the debt? Would that be a fair situation for the lender? Hardly. Therefore, many of the slave situations arose because of such debt. Herb Vander Lugt commented:

Remember too, at that time no nation had the ability to deal with people who had gotten themselves hopelessly in debt. So they were allowed to sell themselves into slavery (often temporarily) in exchange for release from their financial obligations (Ex. 21:2-4; Lev. 25:39-43; Dt.15:12) [1999, p. 11, parenthetical item in orig.].

Leviticus 25:47-49 provides an example of slavery caused by debt:

Now if a sojourner or stranger close to you becomes rich, and one of your brethren who dwells by him becomes poor, and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner close to you, or to a member of the stranger's family, after he is sold he may be redeemed again. One of his brothers may redeem him; or his uncle or his uncle's son may redeem him; or anyone who is near of kin to him in his family may redeem him; or if he is able he may redeem himself.

Would it be fair for a society to allow a person who had accumulated a huge amount of debt to sell his labor to another person to pay that debt? Yes, it would. However, God—aware that abuse might arise in any situation—even regulated debt slavery, and provided for the rights and privileges of the slave to be guarded.

DIFFICULT LAWS TO UNDERSTAND

Admittedly, even with all the humane slave laws contained in the Old Testament, there are certain laws that we, in modern times, have a difficult time understanding. For instance, Exodus 21:20 reads:

And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished. Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished; for he is his property.

In the first place, how could God allow a slave owner to beat his slave at all? To answer this question, we must remember who many of the Old Testament slaves were. They were members of the wicked, sinful nations who had been delivered into the hands of the Israelites because of their immorality. Suppose that a slave from one of those nations had made up his mind to do as much damage to his owner as possible. The slave had the option of running away to a gentler owner whenever he wished (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). However, suppose that he chose to stay and steal from the owner, or break the owner's equipment intentionally, or destroy the owner's crops. What could the owner do to stop such sabotage? Herb Vander Lugt put it like this:

Then, too, no matter how well the slaves were treated, some might have been rebellious and defiant. Forgetting that they were alive because they were taken as war captives instead of being executed, they might have blamed their master for their slave status. They might have shown their resentment by destroying property, abusing fellow slaves, or refusing to work. The master may have had no other way to bring his slave in line than to use physical punishment (1999, p. 17).

As appalling as it is to the sensitivities of most United States citizens, many countries still employ some type of beating or bodily harm to deter crime (some readers may recall the controversy over "caning" in Singapore in the early 1990s). When a modern-day prisoner violates rules while incarcerated, more stringent punishment (such as solitary confinement) often is required. If a slave deserved the death sentence, yet was allowed to live under certain conditions—and then did not comply with those conditions—would it be feasible to suggest that his death sentence could be reinstated? Even though it seems harsh to us, Exodus 21:20 does not militate against the justice of God.

In fact, the more closely the passage is scrutinized, the more it manifests the idea that God was protecting the slave. Concerning the punishment that a master would receive if he did beat his slave to death, Christopher Wright noted that the word "punished" as used here actually means "avenged." And,

in any other context [it] would mean that the guilty party would be liable to death himself at the hands of his victim's family.... This law's natural sense is that the murderous master was

to be executed by the legal community on behalf of the slave, who had no family to avenge him (1983, p. 180).

While not all commentators are as confident as Wright is (that in this passage the death penalty is involved), there is no concrete case which argues that the death penalty is not at least a possibility in this situation. The authors of the *Pulpit Commentary* observed how this fear of punishment would protect the slave.

Involving, as the death of the slave did, criminal proceedings, and, on conviction, severe punishment, the mere **danger** of a fatal result ensuing would be a powerful deterrent from exceptional violence.... The mere **risk** of incurring such a penalty would inspire salutary caution (Spence and Exell, n.d., p. 179).

Adding additional weight to the argument that the restriction in Exodus 21:20 was for the benefit of the slave, Burton Coffman wrote:

This was a protective right granted to slaves that they should not be beaten to death! If that seems like a small blessing to us, let it be remembered that under the system in vogue all over the pagan world of that era, and extending down even till apostolical times, the Roman Law, in force all over the world, provided as a penalty against slaves, even for trivial and unintentional violations, that shame of the whole pagan world "*flagellis ad mortem*" (beaten to death), a penalty usually inflicted in the presence of all the other slaves of a master. God here provided that **punishment** should be meted out to a slave-owner for following that pagan custom (1985, pp. 309-310).

By way of summary, then, Exodus 21:20 documents that under certain circumstances, beating could be morally acceptable as punishment. This passage, however, provided rights that did not exist in other pagan cultures for the protection of the slave.

Exodus 21:26-27 provides another example of a law that seems difficult for us, in the present day, to understand as coming from a righteous God.

If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.

Again, let it be noted that physical punishment might be the only solution to an unruly, rebellious slave who should have received the death penalty. However, something else of interest emerges from this verse that, rather than expressing the cruelty of Old Testament laws regulating slavery, shows instead God's care for those enslaved. The text states that the eyes and teeth of slaves should not be knocked out or destroyed. However, the nations around the Israelites did not adhere to any such standards. When the Philistines captured Samson, they "took him and put out his eyes; and brought him down to Gaza. They bound him with bronze fetters; and he became a grinder in the prison" (Judges 16:21). Also, when the Babylonian soldiers raided Israel, capturing King Zedekiah, "they killed the sons of Zedekiah before his eyes, put out the eyes of Zedekiah, bound him with bronze fetters, and took him to Babylon" (2 Kings 25:7). God's regulations for the treatment of slaves provided the slaves with many more rights than they had in the nations surrounding Israel.

Another of the most startling regulations concerning slavery is found in Leviticus 19:20-22:

And whosoever lieth carnally with a woman, that is a bondmaid, betrothed to an husband, and not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her; she shall be scourged; they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass offering unto the Lord, unto the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, even a ram for a trespass offering (KJV).

Of course, skeptics have a heyday with this reading from the King James Version, which seems to indicate that if a free man has sexual intercourse with a slave woman who is betrothed, then the slave woman is to be scourged and the man simply supplies a ram as a trespass offering. However, upon further investigation, it can be seen that this passage says something far different.

In the first place, the translators of the KJV most likely mistranslated the part of the text "she shall be scourged." The ASV translators rendered the passage as follows:

And whosoever lieth carnally with a woman that is a bondmaid, betrothed to a husband, and not at all redeemed, nor freedom given her; they shall be punished; they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass-offering unto Jehovah, unto the door of the tent of meeting, even a ram for a trespass-offering.

The NKJV translators offered this reading:

Whoever lies carnally with a woman who is betrothed to a man as a concubine, and who has not at all been redeemed nor given her freedom, for this there shall be scourging; but they shall not be put to death, because she was not free. And he shall bring his trespass offering to the Lord, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting, a ram as a trespass offering.

A brief look at these three translations shows that the recipient(s) of the punishment is not as clearly delineated as the KJV indicates. Keil and Delitzsch, in their commentary on the Pentateuch, noted that the scourging "referred to both parties, as is evident from the expression, 'they shall not be put to death'" (1981, p. 422). G.J. Wenham has introduced another interesting solution regarding this passage by translating the disputed passage about scourging as "damages must be paid" (1979, p. 270). Concerning this translation he wrote:

This is the most problematic phrase in this law: literally, "there will be a biqqôret." The word biqqôret occurs only here in the OT, and its meaning is therefore quite uncertain.... Other renderings of biqqôret have less to commend them. "An inquiry shall be held" (RSV; cf. NEB) is vacuous: every legal dispute would have involved inquiry. "She shall be scourged" (AV) goes back to an old Jewish interpretation, **probably based on the dubious derivation of biqqôret from bâqâr**, "ox, i.e., an oxhide scourge" (pp. 270-271, emp. added).

Taking these things into account, it appears that the passage does not indicate that the female should be scourged apart from the guilty male. Rather, whatever punishment was inflicted should be applied equally, except for the fact that the guilty male alone shoulders the responsibility of supplying the ram for the trespass offering.

According to God, the Israelites did not have absolute control over their slaves, as is evinced by the instructions in Exodus 21:20,26-27 and Leviticus 19:20. This idea was a departure from the generally accepted notions of slavery in the Near East during the Israelites' day. "Any demeaning or oppressive treatment of slaves was condemned as wrong by biblical writers" (Copan, 2001, pp. 173-174). God's laws in the Old Testament not only regulated slavery (so that those enslaved would be given many rights that they otherwise would not have had), but they also supplied the means whereby fairness could be meted out with regard to criminal activity and debt. Every regulation of slavery in the Old Testament can be shown to be in harmony with the principles of justice and fairness.

SLAVERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

As we look into the New Testament, we see a strikingly different picture with regard to the biblical injunctions pertaining to slavery. The New Testament does not contain the specific regulations dealing with slavery that can be found in the Old Testament. In fact, for the most part, the New Testament says very little in its regulation of slavery. And herein lies one of the skeptic's primary challenges to the New Testament's stance on slavery. If the New Testament is supposedly a book inspired by an all-loving God, why does it remain virtually silent on slavery? Smith and Hoffman, in their attack on the Bible, stated:

Slave-owning was the order of the day and, so far as we are told, Jesus never attacked the practice. He took the state of affairs for granted and shaped his parables accordingly.... If Jesus had denounced slavery, we should almost certainly have heard of his doing so (Smith and Hoffman, 1989, p. 143).

The other challenge to the New Testament's stance on slavery centers on the passages that teach slaves to be humble and obedient servants to their masters. In Colossians 3:22, Paul commanded: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord" (NRSV). Although several modern translations insert the word "servants" at the first of this verse, "slaves" is probably a better translation of the Greek word *douloi* in this passage (Arndt and Gingrich, 1967, p. 205). Other similar passages include 1 Peter 2:18-20, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, and Ephesians 6:5-9. Ruth Green, after presenting her case to suggest that the Bible condones slavery, wrote:

Those who deny my contentions about the Bible should turn to the Epistles to see what Paul and Peter have to say about "servants" and masters. Here are only two examples: "Servants, be subject to your masters in all fear" (1 Peter 2:18). "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters . . . with fear and trembling" (Ephesians 6:5). There are many more instructions about slavery in the Christian Holy Book (1979, p. 352).

Does the New Testament remain silent in its condemnation of all slavery? And why does it specifically instruct slaves to be obedient to their masters?

First, it must be acknowledged that many of the types of servanthood or slavery in the New Testament are identical to the morally permissible types discussed earlier in this article. For instance, much first-century slavery discussed in the Bible centered on the fact that a person had accrued massive debt, and thus had become a slave or servant due to this debt. As an example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "Agree with your adversary quickly, while you are on the way with him, lest your adversary deliver you to the judge, the judge hand you over to the officer, and you be thrown into prison. Assuredly, I say to you, you will by no means get out of there till you have paid the last penny" (Matthew 5:25-26). From Christ's comments, it can be ascertained that the person in this text who does not make the effort to agree with his adversary could risk being thrown into prison until that person "paid the last penny." This situation involved a revoking of individual freedoms due to the fact that the individual owed an unpaid debt—a debt that originally was owed to the adversary, or one that resulted from a fine imposed by a judge.

In Matthew 18:21-35, Jesus told a story about a servant who owed his master ten thousand talents. A talent was a huge sum of money that would be the modern equivalent of many thousands of dollars. It could easily have been the case that this servant had become a servant due to this enormous debt, or was being kept a servant because of the debt. Debt slavery was still a very real form of restitution in New Testament times. Such a condition absolutely cannot be used to argue that God is an unjust God for letting such take place.

Furthermore, it is a false notion that God condones something just because He mentions it without an immediate condemnation of it in the surrounding verses. Skeptics point to verses like 1 Peter 2:8 and Ephesians 6:5, and then insist that God condones abusive slavery because He instructs servants to be obedient to their masters. But, let us analyze that line of thinking. In Matthew 5:39, Christ instructed His listeners: "Do not resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also." Because Jesus told His listeners to be kind and turn the other cheek, does that mean that He condones the actions of the one who did the slapping? Absolutely not! Or what about the fact that Paul, through divine inspiration, instructed his readers to be subject to civil governments and to pay taxes to those governments. Was Paul condoning **all** practices of **all** governments to whom his readers would be subject and pay taxes? Certainly not. God never has condoned such unjustified behavior on the part of any individual or group.

Biblical Principles and Abolition

As a concluding argument, let it be clearly stated that the principles set forth by Jesus and His apostles, if followed, would result in the abolition of all types of abusive relationships. Slavery would have been nonexistent if everyone from the first century forward had adhered to Jesus' admonition in Matthew 7:12: "Therefore, whatever you want men to do to you, do also to them." Any discussion of slavery would be moot if the world had heeded the words of Peter: "Finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another, love as brothers, be tenderhearted, be courteous" (1 Peter 3:8).

Truly, the teachings of the Lord and the apostles would have abolished slavery like no other social reform system ever known. As Herb Vander Lugt accurately observed:

Jesus and the apostles didn't go on an anti-slavery crusade, because doing so would have been futile and a hindrance to their primary mission. The priority of Jesus was the provision of salvation. For the apostles it was the proclamation of the gospel. But both Jesus and the apostles undermined the basis for slavery by making it clear that God equally loves rich and poor, free and slave, male and female. The apostles also welcomed into the church and gave equal status to all who believed, regardless of race, gender, nationality, or social position (1999, p. 26).

Furthermore, an outright condemnation of kidnapping, or slave trading, is found in the New Testament. In 1 Timothy 1:9-10, Paul wrote:

We also know that law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for **slave traders** and liars and perjurers—and for whatever else is contrary to the sound doctrine... (NIV, emp. added).

Other versions render the Greek word *andrapodistais* as "kidnappers," or "menstealers," but it also is translated slave dealers or slave traders (Arndt and Gingrich, 1967, p. 63). Therefore, in keeping with the Old Testament injunction that anyone kidnapping and selling a person involves himself in immoral conduct, Paul certainly distinguished between certain types of slavery practices that were inherently wrong, and others that were not intrinsically sinful.

CONCLUSION

The fact is, certain types of "slavery" not only are permissible, but sometimes necessary to the well-being of a society at large. For the biblical stance on slavery to be condemned as unjust, it must be established that the specific regulations of slavery described in the text are immoral and unfair. However, when closely scrutinized, the biblical stance on slavery aligns itself with true justice. All regulations found therein were established for the just treatment of all parties involved. Many times, slavery as regulated in the Old Testament was a mutually beneficial relationship between servant and master, similar to an employee/employer relationship. Furthermore, slavery often was a substitute for the death penalty—which certain nations deserved. Debt accumulation caused many free persons to sell their labor and become slaves.

The skeptic's criticism that the New Testament does not speak against the abolition of slavery is misguided for any number of reasons. First, an attempt to generalize and condemn all types of slavery fails to take into account prison, personal debt, indentured servanthood, and a host of other morally permissible situations. Bankruptcy laws, prison terms, community service hours, and garnished wages are morally acceptable modern equivalents to certain types of slavery that were prevalent during the time of the biblical writers. Second, Jesus and the New Testament writers always condemned the mistreatment of **any** human being, instructing their followers to be kind, loving, and compassionate, whether they were slaves or masters of slaves.

In *The Social Record of Christianity*, atheist Joseph McCabe wrote: "Slavery is the last word that any Christian apologist ought to mention" (1935, p. 27). But he missed one of the main points in the Bible—that point being that everyone is a slave to something. As the apostle Paul wrote through inspiration:

Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness? But God be thanked that though you were slaves of sin, yet you obeyed from the heart that form of doctrine to which you were delivered. And having been set free from sin, you became slaves of righteousness (Romans 6:16-18).

Some people are slaves to drug addiction, sexual promiscuity, attitudes of pessimism and complaint, or any number of other vices. Others, however, are slaves to righteousness, teaching the Gospel, helping the sick, and taking care of the poor. We each must decide which master we will allow to control our lives. As the psalmist so beautifully stated it many years ago, "I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness" (Psalm 84:10).

God's injunctions and instructions pertaining to slavery have a clear ring of justice, compassion, mercy, and kindness to them. When analyzed fairly and fully, the idea of slavery gives the honest person one more piece of evidence that points to the perfection of the God of the Bible.

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