

CONTENTS

World History
And Slavery.....2

The Old Testament
And Slavery.....4

*As Predicted By
Noah*4

*As Practiced By
The Patriarchs*6

*As Regulated
In Israel*.....10

The New Testament
And Slavery22

*As Tolerated By Jesus
And The Apostles*22

*As Undermined By Their
Example & Teaching*25

Church History
And Slavery28

*As Ignored
Until AD 313*28

*As Tolerated From
AD 313 Until
AD 1700*29

*As Abolished By
Christian Leaders*.....31

The Heart Of
The Matter32

HOW CAN WE TRUST A BIBLE THAT TOLERATED SLAVERY?

Behind race relations in America lies an ugly historical fact. Some people still believe the Bible justifies slavery. They cite passages like, "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear" (Eph. 6:5). They also point out that church leaders during the middle 1800s used the Bible to defend slavery.

How can we trust a book that was used to justify the terrible evil of buying, breeding, and selling humans like animals? I hope the answer to these questions will become clear as we review together what the Bible really says about slavery.

Herb Vander Lugt

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WORLD HISTORY AND SLAVERY

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*: “Slavery is the condition in which one human being is owned by another. A slave was considered in law as property and was deprived of most of the rights ordinarily held by free persons. Generally, slaves were outsiders, being of a different race, ethnicity, nationality, or religion from that of their owners. . . . Regardless of the slave’s origin, he was usually a marginal person in the society in which he was enslaved, and he was often an object of contempt, neglect, abuse, or brutality” (*Micropedia*, Vol.10, p.874).

Slavery has existed throughout most of recorded history. When or where it began is a mystery. At some point in time, groups of

people must have decided that making slaves of captives of war and certain law-breakers was more advantageous than killing them. Why kill them when they could be of service? The same logic probably also led most primitive societies to decide that making slaves of a family hopelessly in debt was a logical and profitable solution to a perplexing problem.

Slavery conditions varied widely. In some cultures, slaves were treated like work animals, even sacrificed to the gods and eaten. In other cultures, men and boys from a defeated tribe were executed immediately, but the females were taken and gradually assimilated into the new tribe through intermarriage. In Greco-Roman society, slavery was cruel and heartless in earlier years but became far more humane under Roman law.

One of the ugliest

features of slavery was the international slave trade. African blacks who had been capturing their less-powerful neighbors for their own purposes found a new market in the 15th century. Europeans were sending ships to the coast of West Africa to buy primarily adult males. This worked to the advantage of slave traders. Up until this time they had killed the adult males they captured because the African slaveholders wanted only women and children. The captured men were sold to white dealers. Thousands of crew members and captured blacks died on the ocean voyage, but the slave traffic went on unabated. By 1867 more than 7 million Africans (predominantly men, but including many women and children) were slaves in the New World.

The story of slavery in North America is a sad chapter in American history.

Slaves were sold at auction to the highest bidder with little or no regard for their family ties. Many were owned by church people who didn't see the intrinsic evil of the practice. The religious revivals of the

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Great Awakening (1725-1770), however, brought about a radical change in the prevailing attitude toward slavery. By 1804, most northern states had outlawed it. Yet it wasn't until Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in January of 1863 and the end of the Civil War that this grave evil took the road to its national demise.

THE OLD TESTAMENT AND SLAVERY

Slavery was an integral part of the social, economic, and institutional life of the ancient Middle East. The Bible writers refer to it repeatedly as a fact of life. They neither endorsed nor condemned it. It was so intricately woven into the fabric of society that neither the patriarchs nor the nation of Israel could avoid being caught up in it. It was probably more humane than other alternatives people would have chosen at that time. Most of the people taken as slaves would have otherwise been slaughtered. Yet the Old Testament does not endorse it. On the contrary, it teaches principles which, had they been put into practice, would have led to its abolition.

Let's examine the Old

Testament references to slavery in three distinct, historical eras:

1. Slavery as predicted by Noah
2. Slavery as practiced by the patriarchs
3. Slavery as regulated in Israel

SLAVERY AS PREDICTED BY NOAH

The first mention of slavery in the Bible is found in Noah's declaration, "Cursed be Canaan! The lowest of slaves will he be to his brothers" (Gen. 9:25). He said this after waking up from a naked, drunken stupor and learning that he had been mocked by his son Ham. Although Ham was the guilty party, Noah's statement was directed at Ham's youngest son Canaan. If he was involved with his father in this act of disrespect, the statement can be taken as the

pronouncement of a curse,
“Cursed be Canaan.”

It is possible, however, that Canaan did not join his father in making fun of Noah. If so, the statement would be in the form of a prophecy: “Cursed will be Canaan.” (The grammar allows either translation.) Exodus 20:5 and Ezekiel 18:4 clearly declare that God punishes the children for the sins of their parents only when they choose to continue the wicked ways of their parents. So this is the preferred translation if Canaan was not personally involved.

In either case, God gave Noah a prophetic knowledge of the future. The Canaanites developed an advanced society but became involved in despicable moral and spiritual practices, including ritual prostitution, sexual orgies, and child sacrifice. That is why God warned the Israelites against any association with Canaan’s

citizens (Lev. 18:24-30). Because He knew that the danger of spiritual contamination for His people was so great, He commanded the execution of all the Canaanites who resisted their advance and the complete destruction of every trace of their religion (Dt. 7:1-6).

It was the failure of the Israelites to follow God’s directions that brought about the fulfillment of Noah’s prophecy. Their negligence to consult God led to their being tricked into making slaves of the Gibeonites instead of driving them out of the land or killing them (Josh. 9). Later, they did the same with another group of Canaanites (16:10).

Summary. Whether translated “Cursed will be Canaan” or “Cursed be Canaan,” Noah’s statement declares slavery to be a punishment for sin, not a God-established norm for society.

SLAVERY AS PRACTICED BY THE PATRIARCHS

We now arrive at a very important period of time in biblical history—God’s call to a man named Abram (later Abraham) in about 2000 BC. God told him to leave his father’s family in Haran and head for what we now know as the land of Israel. He obeyed, taking with him “his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated, and the people they had acquired” (Gen. 12:5).

The “people they had acquired” undoubtedly included slaves. As a wealthy chieftain, Abraham had a large extended family: “menservants and maidservants” (Gen. 12:16), “herdsmen” (13:5-7), “318 trained men born in his household” (14:14), “Eliezer of Damascus” (15:2), also called “the chief servant in his household” (24:2), and

“an Egyptian maidservant named Hagar” (16:1).

Isaac, son of Abraham and Sarah, acquired even more animals and servants than his parents (Gen. 26:12-14). His son Jacob also possessed slaves, two of whom became his concubines, the mothers of four of his sons (Gen. 29–35).

The book of Genesis does not inform us about the laws regulating slavery during patriarchal times. However, the Middle Eastern legal documents of that time, known as the Nuzi Tablets, detail many of the rights and privileges of slaves and their descendants. And the Genesis narratives portray the slaves as being treated more like family members than as property. Note the following:

1. Abram, when childless, said that one of his slaves, Eliezer of Damascus, would most

likely inherit his estate (Gen. 15:1-3).

2. The slaves were so closely identified with Abraham as sharers of the spiritual blessings of the covenant he had with God that all the males received the sign of circumcision along with him and Ishmael (Gen. 17:9-14).

Genesis portrays slaves as being treated more like family members than as property.

3. The owners and their children worked alongside their slaves. Rebekah, the relative of Abraham who became Isaac's wife, came to the well with a container to draw water (Gen. 24). When Jacob first met Rachel, the girl who became his wife, she was leading sheep to a

well from which she (not a slave) intended to draw water for them (Gen. 29:1-14). And even though Jacob's father was a man of great wealth, Jacob worked for his cousin Laban to the point where he could say he had served "with all my strength" (Gen. 31:6).

4. When Jacob's oldest son Reuben slept with Bilhah, one of his father's concubines (Gen. 35:22), he lost his legal status as the firstborn (49:3-4). According to the laws of that day, he had violated her rights as the wife of his father. She was to be treated with all the respect given to a wife and would be a family member all her life. She could become the wife of the oldest son, but only after Jacob had died.

The story of Hagar being sent away may seem to conflict with this law (Gen. 16; 21:8-20). However, it seems quite clear that she forfeited her rights by her

arrogance. She had shown a haughty attitude toward Sarah before the birth of Isaac. After Isaac was born through God's intervention, she likely became resentful and influenced 13-year-old Ishmael to taunt little Isaac. Even so, Abraham was greatly distressed when Sarah demanded that Hagar and her son be sent away. He did not do it until after he had received the promise from God that He would watch over Hagar and Ishmael and preserve his son to become the father of nations (Gen. 21:8-20).

Summary. The patriarchs, like the other rich chieftains of their day, owned slaves. But the slaves of the patriarchs were considered more like members of the extended family than property. Their living standard probably was far higher than most of the unattached poor. They enjoyed adequate food and

shelter plus freedom from the fear of marauding nomads. In addition, the legal documents of that day (the Nuzi Tablets) make it clear that slaves had many rights, including recourse to the law when they were mistreated.

Although this slavery was quite humane, it never received God's endorsement. God often permits fallen mankind to do things He does not necessarily endorse. Does God approve of our present situation with one billion of the world's population living in poverty while millions live in unnecessary luxury? Is He pleased to see the prospering one-fifth of the world's population consume 86 percent of the world's wealth while the poorest one-fifth consume just 1.3 percent? To ask these questions is to answer them. Many of us wish these injustices could be remedied, but with all our intelligence we have

not been able to set up an economic system that can bring about a fair distribution of the world's material resources. Under communism and socialism all but the government bureaucrats become poor. A free enterprise system produces great wealth, but the rich keep getting richer and many of the poor keep getting poorer. And when the government brings in controls, some of which are necessary, it inevitably brings with it a new set of evils and injustices.

The responsibility for the wars, injustices, and crime that have marked human history lies with us—our cruelty, our greed, our pride, and our prejudice. Patriarchal society was imperfect because it was made up of imperfect people. But given the conditions of those times in the open areas of the Middle East—periodic drought, sparse

vegetation, and roving bands of robbers—it was probably as conducive to the well-being of the less fortunate as anything devised in later times. It certainly was far better than anarchy.

The patriarchs were not heads of nations and therefore were in no position to change their culture. But through their contact with God they came to realize that all human beings possess an essential equality. Note the eloquent expression of this truth by a man of that time period:

If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account? Did not He who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same One form us both within our mothers? (Job 31:13-15).

When a society reaches this level of understanding, it will inevitably abolish slavery.

SLAVERY AS REGULATED IN ISRAEL

About 500 years after the death of Abraham, his descendants through Isaac were living in Egypt as slaves. Genesis 37 to 50 tells the story of how this came about. The 10 oldest sons of Abraham's grandson Jacob disliked their younger 17-year-old brother Joseph so much that they found a way to sell him to traders who in turn sold him to an Egyptian officer as a slave.

In his new land, Joseph went through a series of ups and downs and eventually became the prime minister of Egypt, the highest official under the king. God enabled Joseph to foresee an approaching time of famine, and used him to store up food and then distribute it

during the famine. His political position made it possible for him to settle his father's family in Egypt's most fertile territory. Here they prospered for many years. However, the time came when the leaders of Egypt began to view the rapidly growing Israelite community as a threat. As a result, they made slaves of the Israelites, treating them with ever-increasing harshness. Finally, desperate because the descendants of Jacob continued to multiply, they issued an order that all their male babies be destroyed at birth.

The first 12 chapters of Exodus tell the story of how the Lord responded to the cries of His people. He miraculously provided Moses to be their leader, sent 10 plagues on the Egyptians, helped the Israelites celebrate their first Passover, and led them out of the land of bondage. It appears that

as they left for Canaan, they had no slaves. The former distinctions between masters and slaves had been wiped out during their own time of bondage. The “many other people” (Ex. 12:38) who accompanied them were Egyptians who for one reason or another were eager to leave their homeland.

It may seem strange that God gave these slaveless people instructions about the eligibility of slaves to eat the Passover immediately after their departure (Ex. 12:43-45). But we must think of the circumstances. He knew that His people could not be a nation in the Middle East of that day without encountering this practice. He knew that on the way to Canaan they would inevitably engage enemies, capture soldiers, and be forced to choose between killing them or mercifully making them slaves. Undoubtedly God

also foresaw the voluntary surrender of non-Canaanite peoples who preferred slavery in Israel to military combat (Dt. 20:10-15).

Remember too, at that time no nation had the ability to deal with people who had gotten themselves hopelessly in debt. So they

God regulated slavery rather than abolish it because He knew that His people could not be a nation in the Middle East of that day without encountering the practice.

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).

Finally, we must interpret the permission of slave purchase as stated in Leviticus 25:44-46 in the light of the culture and accompanying revelation. The situation was such that the Israelites could not abolish the slave trade. Therefore, although God permitted them to buy slaves, He gave them a series of moral-spiritual reminders and a set of civil regulations that were designed to guarantee the humane treatment of all slaves, whether captured or purchased.

Moral-Spiritual Reminders. God always prefers that goodness and kindness on the part of His people arise out of moral choice rather than enforced legislation. So before giving them detailed rules for their treatment of slaves, God appealed to the collective

conscience of the Israelites. He did this by keeping alive among them the remembrance that they were slaves when He miraculously delivered them from Egypt.

The first such reminder appears in His preamble to the Ten Commandments: "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Ex. 20:2). A truly grateful people would want to obey God. Since the essence of the Ten Commandments is to love God above all and to love one's neighbor as one's self (Mt. 22:37-40), proper gratitude would have provided an inner motivation to be kind to all the less fortunate among them.

A second reminder of the past appears in Exodus 23:9. "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt." This reminder provided a spiritual incentive for the

wealthy to obey the laws that focused primarily on protecting the poor. The Sabbath regulations could have been offensive to the wealthy because those laws specifically provided that the “poor,” the “slave,” and the “alien” (vv.11-12) share equally with the landowners the benefits of free food and complete rest from daily toil.

Commenting on Exodus 23:9, the noted scholar Christopher J. H. Wright writes, “Their treatment of aliens within their own society, whether those aliens were the technically free but landless ‘tenant’ workers, or actual bought slaves, was to be marked with compassion, born of the memory of Egypt, where it had been denied to themselves” (*An Eye For An Eye*, IVP, 1983, p.179).

A third reminder appears in connection with the Lord’s instructions concerning the celebration of the Feast of Weeks and

the Feast of Tabernacles:

Count off seven weeks from the time you begin to put the sickle to the standing grain. Then celebrate the Feast of Weeks to the Lord your God And rejoice before the Lord your God . . . you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, the Levites in your towns, and the aliens, the fatherless and the widows living among you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt, and follow carefully these decrees. Celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress. Be joyful at your Feast—you, your sons and daughters, your menservants and maidservants, and the Levites, the aliens, the fatherless and the widows

who live in your towns.
. . . For the Lord your
God will bless you in all
your harvest and in all
the work of your hands,
and your joy will be
complete (Dt. 16:9-15).

This reminder was again
designed to appeal to the
conscience of every wealthy
person to make him glad to
bear the cost this regulation
required.

**Benevolent
Regulations.** We have
already alluded to some
specific regulations for the
treatment of slaves, but
now let's consider others
and examine them more
closely. God provided these
specific regulations because
He knew that even well-
motivated and well-
intentioned people need
authoritative guidelines.

**1. Slave Rights And
The Religious Life Of The
Community.** Owners, as
already noted, had to make
it possible for slaves to join

in the celebration of the
Passover (Ex. 12:43-45),
the weekly Sabbath rest
(Ex. 20:8-11), and the 8-day
festivities of the Feast of
Weeks and the Feast of
Tabernacles (Dt. 16:9-17).
No limitation expressed!
All slaves were included.

**2. Hebrew Slaves And
Their Time Of Servitude.**
A Hebrew who became a
slave (usually because he
was unable to pay his
debts) could not be kept
in bondage for more than 6
years. If he married while he
was a slave, he had to make
a choice when his time for
release arrived. He could
choose to go free and leave
his wife and children with
his master. Or, if he loved his
master and valued his family
more than personal freedom,
he could choose to remain
with him for life (Ex. 21:2-6).

Sometimes an alien living
in Israel would take as a
slave a Hebrew who could
not pay him what he owed.

A relative of the Hebrew had the right to redeem him by paying the debt. Or, if this Hebrew prospered while he was a slave, he could buy instant freedom. In any case, he would be freed after 6 years or in the Year of Jubilee (an every 49th-year event)—whichever occurred first (Lev. 25:47-55).

This regulation is significant because it shows us that even an alien in Israel had enough freedom to become wealthy and had rights that allowed him to make a temporary slave of an Israelite who owed him money he couldn't pay. Furthermore, slavery in Israel was so lenient that some slaves could earn enough money to buy their freedom.

3. *Female Hebrew Slaves And Their Rights.* Sometimes a father in financial difficulty would sell a young daughter to a fellow Israelite to be the wife of a family member when she

came of age. If no family member claimed her, the purchaser could offer her to a friend or relative for the dowry price. If she remained unclaimed, she was to be released with no strings attached (Ex. 21:7-11). She could never be sold on the open slave market.

While this rule gave daughters in Israel more protection than was given in neighboring nations, it troubles us. We are revolted at the idea of a father selling his daughter under any circumstances. We may wonder why God modified this practice instead of eliminating it. But that overlooks the fact that in the Near East culture of that time the absolute rights of parents over their children, especially the daughters, was universally assumed. For example, they arranged the marriages of sons and daughters. Their right to do so was never questioned.

Therefore, it would have been neither possible nor profitable to legislate into that culture regulations that would give children the rights they possess today.

While we can't be fully satisfied with the conditions that prevailed in Bible times in the Middle East, we must recognize that godly people then loved their children just as much as we do today. We have reason to believe that they considered the wishes of their daughters when giving them in marriage.

For example, consider the story of Rebekah and Isaac (Gen. 24). Abraham's servant told Rebekah's father and brother his desire to take her to be Isaac's wife. Notice that they asked her if she were willing to go before they sent her to her new home (vv.57-58).

Few parents would run roughshod over the wishes of their daughters. And for those who might do so, God

provided laws to protect girls from being exploited.

4. *The Civil Rights Of Non-Hebrew Slaves.* The non-Hebrew slaves, though not eligible for release like the Hebrew slaves, did receive considerable protection from inhumane treatment. The law said, "If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished" (Ex. 21:20). While the punishment is not defined, it probably was the death penalty. After pointing out that the Hebrew word translated "punished" means "avenged," Dr. Wright comments, "That is the literal meaning of the verb used, and in any other context 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” (*An Eye For An Eye*, IVP, 1983, p.180).

The regulation that is listed after the severe sentence for the killing of a slave has troubled me for years because it seems too lenient. It reads, “But he [the slaveowner] is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property” (Ex. 21:21). A beating that incapacitated a slave for a day or two was quite severe. But I have come to the conclusion that there may have been other factors to consider. We must realize that the owner may have been providing food and lodging for the captured or purchased slave and had a right to expect some return on his investment. 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.

The law imposed no fine on the owner who punished a slave so severely that he couldn’t work for a day or two. But this doesn’t mean he got off scot-free. He paid a penalty, because he received no work from the slave until he was healed. It cost him financially, the same as if he had injured a free fellow Israelite. Note what Exodus 21:18-19 says:

If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist and he does not die but is confined to

bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff; however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.

The law provided no compensation for emotional anguish, but it made the same demand for the injured person, whether slave or free. The man who inflicted the injury was liable for the money that the injured person lost by his inability to work during the time of recuperation.

The law in Israel afforded the slave further protection from being physically harmed. Exodus 21:26-27 stipulates that if the master destroys an eye of the slave or even knocks out a tooth, he must set the slave free. This law showed God's concern for the personal humanity of the slaves.

He wanted them to be treated humanely, as men and women with basic civil rights like the rest of Israel's citizens. To enforce this law, an injured slave undoubtedly had the right to appeal to the court of elders against his own master.

5. Laws Of Asylum And Extradition. Runaway slaves in Israel were granted asylum. If a slave managed to escape into another town, the authorities there could not force him to return to his owner. They were to allow him freedom to live where he chose and do what he chose to do. Deuteronomy 23:15-16 declares:

If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master.

Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses.

Do not oppress him.

In societies surrounding Israel, runaway slaves received no protection.

In fact, they were treated with great severity. This law was so radically different from that of the other nations that some Bible scholars say it must have applied only to foreign

“If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master. Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him.”
Deuteronomy 23:15-16

slaves who fled into Israel for asylum. They contend that giving all runaway slaves this protection would

have produced a myriad of legal complications.

The law as written, however, expresses no such limitation. It seems best, therefore, to take it as applying to all runaway slaves. After all, Israel was uniquely God’s nation and therefore was to be different from her neighbors. By this law, God showed that though He permitted slavery in Israel because of its inevitability in the world of that day, He did not view the holding of slaves as a basic right to be protected.

This law served another purpose for the owners of slaves. In addition to revealing God’s attitude toward slave ownership, it provided them with an added incentive to be kind to their slaves. If they valued a slave, they would be inclined to treat him with kindness and respect so that he would not want to run away. This law also provided

a way out for a slave who was either grossly mistreated or simply could not live with the idea of being the property of another man or woman.

Although God permitted slavery in Israel because of its inevitability in the world of that day, He did not view the holding of slaves as a basic right to be protected.

The primary significance of Deuteronomy 23:15-16 is this: The holding of slaves in Israel, though permitted, was not an inherent right to be protected by law. Wright's comments on these verses include this quotation from D.J.A. Clines' work, *Social*

20

Responsibility In The Old Testament:

Is it not extraordinary—not to say amusing—that the one society in the ancient Near East that had a law protecting runaway slaves was that society that traced its origin to a group of runaway slaves from Egypt? . . . The point is that Israel has experienced God as the one who is sympathetic to runaway slaves. So this law is not just an ethical or legal principle in defense of human rights, but a reflex of Israel's own religious experience—a fundamental characteristic of biblical ethics" (*An Eye For An Eye*, IVP, 1983, p.181).

Summary. Slaves in Israel were usually domestic workers in the homes of the wealthy and were treated as family members. Those in agriculture apparently

worked alongside hired men and women (as in the story of Ruth). Some people who were captured from neighboring nations were made slaves of the state or served in the maintenance of the temple complex (Num. 31:28-30,41; Josh. 9:23; 16:10; Jud. 1:28; 1 Ki. 9:20-21; Ezra 2:43-58; 8:20; Neh. 3:31; 7:46-60). But the biblical record indicates that they were treated well. They probably considered themselves fortunate to be in Israel instead of another country.

Often masters developed such warm affection for their slaves that they gave them positions of influence. One of young Saul's slaves was a trusted advisor (1 Sam. 9:5-10). Gehazi, Elisha's slave, was a valued confidant until he allowed his greed to ruin him (2 Ki. 4-5). Given the fact that even the non-Hebrew slaves participated fully in Israel's religious

observances, they became eligible for marriage to Israelites. In the genealogical list of 1 Chronicles 2 we find: "Sheshan had no sons—only daughters. He had an Egyptian servant named Jarha. Sheshan gave his daughter in marriage to his servant Jarha, and she bore him Attai" (vv.34-35). It's likely that this sort of thing happened quite frequently.

Israel's humane treatment of slaves can undoubtedly be traced back to God's reminders of their own slavery in Egypt. His laws providing protection for them and His legislation about runaway slaves indicated that slave ownership was not sacrosanct. The fact of the matter is that although God permitted and regulated slavery in Israel, He neither endorsed it nor made slave ownership an inviolable right.

THE NEW TESTAMENT AND SLAVERY

Millions of slaves lived in the Roman Empire during the time of Jesus and the apostles. Thousands of them became Christians under the ministry of the apostles. But they did not turn to Jesus expecting emancipation from their social position. They came to Him to receive the forgiveness of their sins and everlasting life.

SLAVERY AS TOLERATED BY JESUS AND THE APOSTLES

Neither Jesus nor the apostles made the emancipation of slaves an issue in their ministry. Jesus healed the slave of a Roman centurion and spoke approvingly of the officer's faith, but He did not rebuke

him for being a slaveowner (Lk. 7:1-10). He referred to the relationship of slaves and their masters in His parables, but He said nothing that indicated He disapproved of slavery (Mt. 18:21-35; Lk. 12:42-48).

Paul and Peter told converted slaves to be obedient, honest, and diligent in serving their masters, and they never offered them hope that their new faith would bring them emancipation in this life (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; 1 Pet. 2:18-21). Paul revealed a remarkable sensitivity to slaves when he told their Christian owners, "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" (Eph. 6:9). Yet, like Jesus, he never denounced slavery.

Why were they silent on such an important issue? Three answers to

this question have been formulated by Christian scholars. First, slavery conditions had become so tolerable by the first century of the Christian era that it did not make sense to stir up the waters by making it an issue. Second, since believers were living in a dictatorship, any efforts to

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abolish slavery would have been an exercise in futility. Third, the primary mission of Jesus and His followers had to do with an individual's eternal salvation from the penalty and power of sin, not social reform.

The Common-Sense Factor. During the time of Jesus and the apostles, slavery in the Roman Empire was quite humane. The Roman leaders, needing huge armies of loyal soldiers to fight their battles and a large populace of satisfied citizens as a tax base, had put into effect laws that made it possible for millions of slaves to obtain their freedom. To keep those who were still in slavery contented, they had given them civil rights that protected them from exploitation, had guaranteed them decent housing, and had made it possible for them to save enough money to eventually obtain their freedom. These wise Roman laws made it relatively easy for decent people to be content with the status quo. Why should they risk getting in trouble for what was then such a minor issue?

The Futility Factor.

A second reason given for the silence of Jesus and His followers about the evil of slavery is that the Roman government was a dictatorship. The emperor might try to please the people for pragmatic reasons, but he would not have taken kindly the efforts of a small group agitating for the abolition of slavery. Fighting slavery would have been an exercise in futility.

The Priority Factor.

The primary reason Jesus and the apostles did not speak against slavery is that they had a far higher task to perform. Jesus came to reveal the Father and to provide eternal salvation through His death, burial, and resurrection. He made it clear that He did not come to be a social reformer. And just before ascending to heaven, He gave His followers this commission: "Go and make disciples of

all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20).

When slaves became members of the family of God, they received a social status far more valuable than freedom from slavery.

Jesus did not say one word about becoming political activists. Was He indifferent to this and other social evils? Not at all! It was simply a matter of putting first things first. By proclaiming the good news of salvation, the followers of Jesus led thousands of slaves

as well as free people to believe on Him and receive everlasting life. These slaves became members of the family of God, receiving a social status far more valuable than freedom from slavery. The first and primary task of Christians always has been and always will be the proclaiming of God's Word.

SLAVERY AS UNDERMINED BY THEIR EXAMPLE AND TEACHING

Although Jesus and His apostles did not publicly attack slavery or demand that converted slaveowners set their slaves free, their example and teaching brought about its eventual abolition. Jesus, by living as one with no lodging (Lk. 9:58), identified with the poorest of the poor. By giving special attention to those who were despised in society, He made it clear that every human being is

valuable to God. He made the slaves and downtrodden realize that in the eyes of God they were made in His image just as truly as the rich and honored.

The apostles also undermined the institution of slavery without directly attacking it. They welcomed slaves into the church. They led converted slaveowners to see their converted slaves in a new light, as spiritual

*Jesus and
the apostles
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equals, as brothers and sisters in Christ. All learned to revel in the truth of Galatians 3:26-28.

*You are all the sons of
God through faith in*

Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

People often criticize Paul for sending converted Onesimus back to Philemon, the master from whom he had fled after stealing from him (Phile. 12). But it's not accurate to interpret this as an indication that Paul viewed the ownership of slaves as a basic right. He did this for the sake of the spiritual welfare of both Onesimus and Philemon. By returning, Onesimus demonstrated the reality of his faith. The return of Onesimus would also test Philemon. Would he forgive and receive with grace a man who had apparently been a problem slave and had stolen from him? Even beyond that, would he respond favorably

to Paul's suggestion that he free Onesimus so that he could be an assistant to the apostle himself? Notice how the apostle underscored his desire for the complete release of Onesimus: "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (v.21).

Summary. 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.

The principle of spiritual equality taught by the apostles had an immediate impact. The New Testament record shows that already in

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 first century women were treated with respect unknown in the Jewish and pagan world of that day. They served as prophets (Acts 21:9), shared in teaching the Scriptures (Acts 18:26), prayed and spoke in meetings (1 Cor. 11:5), and held such important

leadership roles that they were included with men in Paul's list of highly valued co-workers (Rom. 16:1-16).

Jews and Gentiles who had become Christians worshiped together, suffered together, and became so fond of one another that when the Jerusalem believers were in need, the predominantly Gentile Christians in Macedonia astonished Paul by their surprisingly sacrificial generosity (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

Converted slaveowners did not necessarily free their converted slaves, but they celebrated the Lord's Supper with them as spiritual equals. Consequently they began to treat them with kindness and consideration. Converted slaves undoubtedly began to be more diligent, more honest, and more contented. Their possession of eternal salvation gave them a benefit thousands of times more valuable than mere emancipation from slavery.

CHURCH HISTORY AND SLAVERY

Critics wonder why this good beginning did not take hold in every area of life and become a major factor in church history. They point out that the rights of women to have a voice in church or government affairs, to hold office, and to compete with men in the marketplace were very slow in coming. They remind us that until the 18th century, few Christian leaders spoke out against the evil of slavery.

Their observations are correct. While the lives of thousands of individual Christians were marked by purity and compassion, the record of the institutional church in the area of social concern is dismal.

The attitude of Christian leaders toward the slavery issue in church history can

be summarized as follows: (1) From the time of the apostles until AD 313 it was largely ignored; (2) From AD 313 until the 18th century it was tolerated; (3) From the 18th century to the present it was opposed by the majority and was abolished.

AS IGNORED UNTIL AD 313

Christians of the second and third centuries, like those of the apostolic age, focused on preaching the gospel of salvation and teaching the spiritual truths of the New Testament. Millions, largely from the ranks of the slaves, became believers during these years. Church historians tell us that even though thousands died as martyrs during periods of intense persecution, they kept growing numerically. Believers made up about one-tenth of the population of the Roman Empire when the persecutions ended with

the Edict of Milan in AD 313. But they had remained a persecuted minority. Moreover, they were so focused on the realm of the spiritual and eternal that they had no inclination to become involved in politics. A scholar, whose article shows that he is unwilling to admit the supernatural elements of the New Testament, nevertheless portrays Christians of the second and third centuries as a fine group of people.

The ancient world did not possess a working-class movement in the modern sense, and Christianity did not create or foster one. After the example of their master, the Christians encouraged humility and patience before wicked men. Even the institution of slavery was not the subject of fundamental Christian criticism before the 4th century. The church,

however, was not lost in pious mysticism. . . . Inheriting a Jewish moral ideal, its activities included food for the poor, orphans, and foundlings; care for prisoners, and a community funeral service (*Encyclopedia Britannica*, Macropedia, Vol.16, p.258).

This quote shows us that although these early Christians focused on the spiritual and avoided politics, they possessed a sensitive social conscience. Most of them had been drawn from the ranks of the poor, yet they sacrificially reached out to the most needy in their world.

AS TOLERATED FROM AD 313 UNTIL AD 1700

With the conversion of Constantine, the church began to experience governmental assistance instead of opposition. While

this brought about a rapid numerical increase in church members, it was a mixed blessing. As allies of the state, church leaders

***There is neither
Jew nor Greek,
slave nor free,
male nor female,
for you are all one
in Christ Jesus.***

Galatians 3:28

tended to be more concerned about pleasing the civil authorities than seeking justice for the poor and the oppressed.

The new situation, however, made it possible for sensitive individuals to express their concern for the disadvantaged. People like Francis of Assisi were able to influence large numbers of Christians to a self-

sacrificial and compassionate ministry to the poor and oppressed. But these efforts made little impact. Most people were so poor, their lives so brutish and brief, that they were hardly aware of the existence of slavery. Those who were more educated and prosperous were generally content to accept the status quo. Some of them expressed their Christian faith by being kind to their slaves, but they accepted slavery as an unfortunate yet inevitable element in society.

Still, the efforts of those who sacrificially organized groups to help the poor and disadvantaged were not totally in vain. They neither abolished slavery nor eradicated injustice, but by feeding the hungry, helping widows and their families, and establishing orphanages they kept the compassion of Jesus alive in the church.

AS OPPOSED AND ABOLISHED FROM THE 18TH CENTURY TO THE PRESENT

The terrible nature of the international slave trade involving blacks was such a monstrous evil that many Christian leaders could not remain silent. John Wesley, Granville Sharp, Thomas Clarkson, Jonathan Edwards Jr., and Theodore Dwight were among the prominent preachers in England and North America who denounced it as an evil to be abolished. Christian statesmen like William Pitt and William Wilberforce in England, after a long struggle, succeeded in outlawing the slave trade in 1807 and abolishing slavery in 1833.

Some American ministers tried to stem the anti-slavery tide by defending the slavery of blacks on the basis of their wrong interpretation of Genesis 9:24-25. But they

were unsuccessful. The passing of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1865 outlawed slavery in all the

The terrible nature of the international slave trade involving blacks was such a monstrous evil that many Christian leaders could not remain silent.

states. The biblical teaching that all human beings are created equal and that no one should be the property of another has prevailed in the church and throughout the Western world.

THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Slavery has been a grave social evil. Thankfully, it no longer exists in most of our civilized world. Terrible economic inequities remain, and as Christians we should do what we can to end them. But this is the task of individual Christian citizens, not of the church. The mandate of the church is to evangelize, to teach the Scriptures, and to provide for believers an atmosphere in which they can grow toward Christlikeness in character and conduct.

In our age, when many boast about their freedom to live their lives as they choose, our primary task is not just to make people aware of moral law. Changing their thinking about moral matters is not enough. Our responsibility is to point them to Jesus

and the freedom He alone can bring. He issued a solemn warning to a group of people who boasted about their freedom: "I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin" (Jn. 8:34). Since "the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23), bondage to sin is the worst of all forms of slavery.

To deliver us from the eternal separation from God in hell, God in the person of Jesus became a member of the human race through a miraculous virgin birth. He lived a sinless life, and then went to the cross where the Father "made Him [the Son] who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor. 5:21). Those who believe on Jesus are set free from the guilt of sin, receive power to overcome sin, and are delivered from the fear of death. Now that's real freedom!

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