

Slavery In The Scriptures

Although the Bible does not universally, explicitly, and absolutely condemn all forms of slavery, we do find explicit rejection of the many types of slavery practiced in modernity. The hope of this paper is to orient the practice of slavery within the context of the Scriptures in order to better understand what they do and do not say about the institution. In doing so, we will find that arguments regarding the Bible's alleged acceptance of slavery are often unfounded and unfair.

Slavery in general is not explicitly condemned in the Scriptures. Instead, we see a pattern of divine regulation of the institution.¹ Within the context of the early nation of Israel and the instructions found within the New Testament, we see parameters and boundaries for the practice, but no absolute prohibition.

This failure to explicitly restrict slavery in general is often used either as justification for the institution or as ammunition against the inspiration and authority of the Scriptures in an attempt to invalidate the exclusive claims of Christianity. Why does the Bible not condemn slavery? If God is good and slavery is evil, why then does He not explicitly denounce the practice? Why does He instead allow it within both ancient Israel and the early Church?

In order to answer these questions, we need to evaluate some modern notions of slavery itself and enter more properly into the world which the Scriptures speak. In doing so, we will find that far from condoning modern conceptions of slavery, the Bible actually rejects quite clearly the injustice and oppression upon which modern slavery is founded.

Types of Slavery

To understand the Scriptural regulation of the institution of slavery, it is essential that we recognize a fundamental distinction between the slavery of the

1. Some argue that regulation is acceptance, but I do not think such is the case. The Old Testament never directly condemns divorce and yet the New clarifies that God accommodated sinful man in this regard (Matthew 19:8-9). Though divorce was regulated in the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), it was not therefore justified by God. God's choice to not condemn divorce does not mean that He condoned it. Is it not possible that slavery is parallel in this regard?

biblical world and that practiced within the 17th-21st centuries. When most of us think of the word "slavery," we immediately conceive of 19th century Western slavery practiced in the Southern U.S. or the sex slave trade of today, conceptions which are only particular evil variants of the practice. Such expressions of slavery are actually quite dissimilar to the institutions regulated within the Scriptures.

The fact that the Bible never explicitly condemns ancient slavery does not at all imply that it has nothing to say regarding modern slavery. Rather, "modern readers must overcome their temptation to read into any ancient Jewish, Greek or Roman text their knowledge of modern slavery. The meanings of any familiar-sounding terms can be determined only by a close investigation of the particular social systems and cultural values the early Christian writers took for granted."²

*Distinctive Elements of Early Types of Slavery:*³

1. An enslaved person generally could not be identified by appearance or clothing; racial or ethnic origins were not reliable indicators of social or legal status.
2. The cultural and religious traditions of slaves were usually those of their owners and other free persons.
3. Education of slaves was encouraged, enhancing their value; some slaves were better educated than their owners. Rome's cultural leadership in the empire largely depended on educated, foreign-born slaves who had been taken there.
4. Partially as a result, many slaves functioned in highly responsible and sensitive positions such as workshop and household managers, accountants, tutors, personal secretaries, sea captains and physicians. An important minority of slaves had considerable influence and social power, even over freeborn persons of lesser status than the slaves' owners.

5. By no means were the enslaved regularly to be found at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. Rather those free and impoverished persons who had to seek work each day without any certainty of employment occupied the

2. Martin, R. P., & Davids, P. H. (2000). *Dictionary of the later New Testament and its developments* (electronic ed.). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

3. Ibid.

lowest level. Some of them sold themselves into slavery in order to obtain job security, food, clothing and shelter.

6. Slaves could own property, including their own slaves. They could accumulate funds that they might use to purchase their own freedom.

7. Because slaves were owned by persons across the range of economic levels, they developed no consciousness of being a social class or of suffering a common plight. Thus no laws were needed to hinder public assembly of slaves.

8. In contrast to New World slavery, ancient owners did not regard their adult slaves paternalistically; they clearly distinguished the roles of parents and of owners and felt no need to justify the institution of slavery.

9. Persons not infrequently sold themselves to pay debts, to escape poverty, to climb socially or to obtain special governmental positions.

10. A large number of domestic and urban slaves, perhaps the majority, could anticipate being set free (manumitted) by age thirty, becoming a freedman or a freedwoman (see Acts 6:9, “the synagogue of the freedmen”). At any moment innumerable ex-slaves throughout the empire were proof that slavery need not be a permanent condition. And even ancient Greek commentators expressed astonishment that slaves freed by Roman citizens usually became Roman citizens themselves at their manumission. Notable in Acts 23–25 is the Roman governor Marcus Antonius Felix, who had been a slave until Antonia, the emperor Claudius’s mother, manumitted him.⁴

Most Modern Forms of Slavery are Explicitly Condemned

In highlighting distinctive characteristics of early slavery in contrast to modern forms, one may notice that certain elements of modern slavery are explicitly forbidden within the Scriptures. For instance, the Western slave trade thrived upon the kidnapping of men, women, and children while such a practice is expressly prohibited in the Bible.

- Exodus 21:16 *Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.*
- Deuteronomy 24:7 *If a man is found stealing one of his brothers of the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die. So you shall purge the evil from your*

4. In distinguishing elements, it is impossible to cover every particular instance. These characteristics present a portrait of early types of slavery in general. Though this list deals primarily with slavery in the New Testament context, similar investigation of the Old Testament context would reveal parallel contrasts.

midst.

- 1 Timothy 1:10 ...*the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers,⁵ liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine...*

Western slavery in former centuries (and the majority of forms now) functioned through a trade built upon and fueled by abduction expressly and strongly prohibited within the Scriptures. Thus, the vast majority of forms of modern Western slavery are explicitly condemned within the Scriptures.

Rather than blindly interpreting the Bible’s regulation of ancient slavery as condoning our modern conception of the institution, we should seek to understand ancient slavery and how the Scriptures function within those particular frameworks. When understood correctly, we begin to see that not only was ancient slavery quite different from modern, but also that the Bible actually has quite a bit to say about the prohibition of such modern variants.

Is Slavery Always and Inherently Unjust?

A fundamental assumption behind the modern criticism of the Bible’s regulation of slavery is that slavery is an innately evil and unjust institution. Since this is the foundational presumption of the argument which rejects the Scriptures for not rejecting slavery, I think it is worth exploring.

Slavery is not inherently unjust or evil. Rather, it is the type or form of slavery which determines the degree to which it is just or unjust. Some forms are absolutely and essentially evil, while others are morally neutral and natural.

Slavery is a universal principle of creation. All creatures are confined to some being or principle. There is no escape from enslavement, no existence in which absolute autonomy and unlimited independence are obtained. All creatures are ultimately enslaved; either to sin, Satan and fleshly desires or to the true God and King, Jesus Christ (John 8:31-36; Romans 6:15-19). True freedom is not found in independence from our Creator, but rather in subjection to His sovereignty. There is no lasting liberty apart from captivity to Christ. It is in this “slavery” that our greatest joy is found.

Therefore, slavery as a concept is neither inherently good nor bad. Judgment of the practice depends on whom the master is and how he treats

5. The word translated “enslavers” literally means “man stealers.”

his slaves. Our Master treats us with compassion and kindness and this is the basis for how the New Testament expects slave owners to treat their slaves (Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:33-4:1). Indeed, it is important to note that even within Old Testament we find counter-cultural instructions on the treatment of slaves admonishing compassion and kindness (Deuteronomy 15:12-15, 23:15).

The Church and Slavery

There is no doubt that the Church has not consistently rejected the practice of slavery in general, nor even of the perverse versions of the past. Rather, Scriptural ambiguity and regulation has often been used to justify all kinds of corruption and oppression. It is certainly and regrettably true that many pastors and priests have argued for the permissibility of slavery on “biblical” grounds. This historical justification of an evil practice is certainly unfortunate, tragic and incorrect.

At the same time, it must be asked upon what principle slavery was officially abolished. What overarching worldview led to the crumbling of the imperial and colonial slave trades? Men like John Newton and William Wilberforce led the charge not on the basis of the “self-evident” equality of all men, but rather the dignity of man as an image-bearer of the Creator God Who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ.

So enormous, so dreadful, so irremediable did the [slave] trade’s wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for abolition. Let the consequences be what they would: I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition.⁶

Never, never, will we desist till we have wiped away this scandal from the Christian name, released ourselves from the load of guilt, and extinguished every trace of this bloody traffic.⁷

Christians who argued for Western slavery on the basis of the biblical text were simply wrong. Perhaps they themselves misunderstood the text, were sinfully motivated to act with hypocrisy, or were fearful of the cultural implications of dissidence. While we can

certainly find fault in these errors, such faults do not invalidate Christianity, the Scriptures, or Christ.

Conclusion

The Scriptures do not explicitly condemn slavery in general, but they do regulate the practice in such a way as to expressly condemn the modern practice of the institution. By expressly forbidding the foundations of modern forms and its unjust expressions, the Scriptures offer a strong and loud word on the subject that we would do well to hear and heed. Not only do we find the clear call for the Church to reject enslaving oppression, but we hear and see an exalted Son Who conquers all injustice and grants true redemption regardless of social status, ethnicity, or gender. In bondage to Him, we find life, liberty, and perpetual joy.

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.¹³ For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:12–13

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.²⁹ And if you are Christ’s, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise.

Galatians 3:28–29

Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Colossians 3:11

6. Galli, M., & Olsen, T. (2000). *131 Christians Everyone Should Know* (283). Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

7. Shelley, B. L. (1995). *Church History In Plain Language* (Updated 2nd ed.) (368). Dallas, Tex.: Word Pub.