

The Bible and Slavery

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Introduction: Two Issues

The Issue of Contemporary Slavery

The Issue of Slavery and Biblical Interpretation

A Categorization of Interpretation:

Position 1: Slavery is evil. The Bible affirms slavery. Therefore, the Bible is evil.

Sam Harris

In assessing the moral wisdom of the Bible, it is useful to consider moral questions that have been solved to everyone's satisfaction. Consider the question of slavery. The entire civilized world now agrees that slavery is an abomination. What moral instruction do we get of Abraham on this subject? Consult the Bible, and you will discover that the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves.¹

Position 2: Slavery is evil. The Bible affirms slavery (at least to some degree). Therefore, the Bible is not a *sufficient* resource for ethics.

Kevin Rudd (Homosexuality)

'the human condition and social conditions change'²

William Webb (Male-Female Relationships)

Scripture does not present a 'finalized ethic' in every area of human relationship. God challenges his covenant people to act redemptively in the area of slavery [...] The text takes us on a journey that clearly involves restoration of the society to which it was given. However, to stop where the Bible stops (with its isolated words) ultimately fails to reapply the redemptive spirit of the text as it spoke to the original audience. It fails to see that further reformation is possible and that further reformation must happen in order to fulfill the spirit-based component of meaning within the text's words. [...] There are still aspects of the biblical scene that require further redemption (e.g., treatment of human beings as property, non-release of foreign slaves, the use of slaves for reproductive purposes, inequality in rape legislation for slaves).³

¹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 14.

² <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-09-06/kevin-rudd-slavery-bible/4934162>.

³ Webb, *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Leicester: IVP, 2001), 247-8.

Position 3: Slavery is evil and the Bible condemns it outright.

C.H. Spurgeon

I do from my inmost soul detest slavery anywhere and everywhere, and although I commune at the Lord's Table with men of all creeds, yet with a slaveholder I have no fellowship of any kind or sort. Whenever one has called upon me, I have considered it my duty to express my detestation of his wickedness, and would as soon think of receiving a murderer into the church or into any sort of fellowship as a man stealer.⁴

Frederick Douglass

What do you do when you are told by the slaveholders of America that the Bible sanctions slavery? Do you go and throw your Bible into the fire? Do you sing out, "No Union with the Bible!"? Do you declare that a thing is bad because it has been misused, abused, and a made a bad use of? Do you throw it away on that account? No! You press it to your bosom all the more closely; you read it all the more diligently; and prove from its pages that it is on the side of liberty—and not on the side of slavery.⁵

Position 4: The Bible affirms slavery. Therefore, slavery is not evil.

C.H. Hodge

Slaveholding [...] in the New Testament is nowhere forbidden or denounced but on the contrary, acknowledged to be consistent with the Christian character and profession (that is, consistent with justice, mercy, holiness, love to God and love to man), to declare it to be a heinous crime is a direct impeachment of the word of God.⁶

Position 5: The Bible certainly mitigates the effects of human slavery, but it is ultimately *more* concerned with spiritual slavery *from* sin and *to* God.

Position 6: ??

⁴ Cited in Lewis Drummond, *Spurgeon: Prince of Preachers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1992), 481.

⁵ Frederick Douglass, Speech in New York, New York, 12 May 1859, in John W. Blassingame, *Frederick Douglass Papers*, 258 cited in J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 177-178.

⁶ C.H. Hodge, 'The Bible Argument on Slavery', in E.N. Elliot (ed.), *Cotton is King* (Augusta: Pritchard, Abbot & Lomis), 870 cited in John Byron, *Recent Research on Paul and Slavery* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2008), 3.

Definition of Slavery

Oxford English Dictionary:

One who is the property of, and entirely subject to, another person, whether by capture, purchase, or birth; a servant completely divested of freedom and personal rights.

Macquarie:

Someone who is the property of and wholly subject to, another.

Andreau and Descat:⁷

A slave is a man, a woman, or a child who is considered to be the property of a master (or mistress). [...] Legally and politically the slave is considered to be an object that belongs to the patrimony of his owner, in the same way that a house of livestock does. Nonetheless, even from a legal point of view his humanity is recognized, and from very early on. [...] This situation creates and reflects a very powerful domination of slaves by their masters: as an object, the slave can be disposed of by his master at the latter's discretion, like any other commodity; as a man, on the other hand, he can be manumitted – but always in accordance with the will of the master or, in exceptional cases, through the intervention of the political community.

'Human property'

Translation

Two main words *doulos* (δοῦλος) and 'bd (עַבֵּד)
Servant or Slave?

'bd - used 803 times in the OT.

How many times rendered 'slave'?

KJV:	
NKJV:	40
NIV (1984):	83
NIV (2011):	93
ESV:	79

doulos – used 126 times in the NT

How many times rendered 'slave'?

KJV:	
NKJV:	26
NIV (1984):	34
NIV (2011):	35
ESV:	20

⁷ Jean Andreau and Raymond Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome* (trans. Raymond Descat; Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2011), 10-11.

A (very brief) Biblical Theology of Slavery

Mark 10:45 For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

Gen 15:13 Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be slaves there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. 14 But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions

Exodus 6:5 Moreover, I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold as slaves, and I have remembered my covenant. 6 Say therefore to the people of Israel, 'I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment.

Exodus 20:2 I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery.

Laws for Israelite Slaves

Deuteronomy 15:12 If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. 13 And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed. 14 You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. 15 You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today. 16 But if he says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he is well-off with you, 17 then you shall take an awl, and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same. 18 It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.

Laws for Foreign Slaves

Leviticus 25: 44 As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. 45 You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. 46 You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.

Exodus 21:16 Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.

Exodus 21:20 When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. 21 But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money.

Exodus 21:26 When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. 27 If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

Deuteronomy 23:15 You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. 16 He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him. You shall not wrong him.

Cf. Code of Hammurabi: If anyone take a male or female slave of the court, or a male or female slave of a freed man, outside the city gates, he shall be put to death.

Isaiah 43:14 -21

Cf. Isa. 41:22; 42:9; 43:9; 43:18; 65:17

Isaiah 53

Philippians 2:7 made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant

Luke 4:18 He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed

Romans 6:6, 13, 18

Galatians 3:28 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.

Galatians 5:1 For freedom Christ has set us free; stand firm therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.

NT Texts Discussing Slavery

Philemon

1 Tim 1:9-10

1 Cor 7:21-24

7:21

NIV: Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you--although if you can gain your freedom, *do so*.

ESV: Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. (But if you can gain your freedom, *avail yourself of the opportunity*.)

HCSB: Were you called while a slave? It should not be a concern to you. But if you can become free, *by all means take the opportunity*.

NJB: So, if when you were called, you were a slave, do not think it matters -- even if you have a chance of freedom, *you should prefer to make full use of your condition as a slave*.

‘rather use it’ (μᾶλλον χρῆσαι)

7:23

You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men.

NT Texts Which Address Slaves and Masters

Ephesians 6: 5 Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, 6 not by the way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, 7 rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, 8 knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a slave or is free. 9 Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and that there is no partiality with him

Colossians 3: 22 Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service, as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. 23 Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, 24 knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ. 25 For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality.

1 Timothy 6:1 Let all who are under a yoke as slaves regard their own masters as worthy of all honour, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be reviled. 2 Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful on the ground that they are brothers; rather they must serve all the better since those who benefit by their good service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these things.

Titus 2: 9 Slaves are to be submissive to their own masters in everything; they are to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, 10 not pilfering, but showing all good faith, so that in everything they may adorn the doctrine of God our Saviour. 11 For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, 12 training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,

1 Peter 2: 18 Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the unjust. 19 For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly. 20 For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure, this is a gracious thing in the sight of God. 21 For to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps.

Some principles of interpretation:

1. 1st Century Slavery is not identical to Pre-Civil War Slavery in the Southern US.
2. The NT regulates but does not endorse the practice of slavery
3. Releasing slaves in the 1st Century was not a straightforward matter

Lex Fufia Caninia (2 BC)

Lex Aelia Sentia (4 AD)

Conclusion

Position 6?

Resources

On-line Lecture by Peter Williams: <https://vimeo.com/146454716>

J. A Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (HUZT 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995). Very helpful on 1 Corinthians 7:21.