


# Slavery in the Bible


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During the Civil War both the Confederates and the Unionists used the Bible to back their position. Evangelistic atheists are posting memes mocking the God of the Bible; one says, "Could have banned slavery or shellfish... Shellfish. He chose shellfish." These are serious accusations. We all agree that slavery is evil, even in ancient times when they didn't think it was evil. If God approved slavery, then it would seem that He approved evil, which would seemingly make Him evil. This question goes to the very heart of the nature of God. Does the Bible endorse or condemn slavery?




First, we need to define slavery, which is more difficult than one might think. In the Hebrew the word most often used for a slave is *eved*, which can also be translated “servant.” Moses is even called the *eved* of God in Deuteronomy 34:5. *Eved* has a wide range of usage, so context is important. When we read our modern thinking back into the ancient Hebrew thought, we can make assumptions that are not true. What matters is what did the original writer mean to say to the original audience. The Hebrew language in general is simplistic compared to modern languages. The ancient Hebrew did not think in the complex precision that we are used to. This doesn’t mean that slavery isn’t talked about in the Bible; it certainly is referred to, but Hebrew slavery might have different connotations than the modern concept of slavery. Slavery in the Ancient Near East (ANE) was different than Greco-Roman or antebellum slavery. In the ANE there were two major types of slavery, debt slavery and chattel slavery. Debt slavery is when someone sells himself to pay off a debt. It is voluntary and often only for a set time length. In the Bible Hebrew debt slavery was to last seven years or to the year of Jubilee, whichever came first. According to the law of Hammurabi a debt slave was to work for three years. Chattel slavery was when someone was forced into slavery by another and typically was for life. The Bible condemns all forms of chattel slavery. Exodus 21:16 states, “Whoever kidnaps a person must be put to death, whether he sells him or the person is found in his possession” (see also Amos 2:6). In the New Testament, 1 Timothy 1:9-10 condemns all forms of slave trading as “ungodly and sinful.” The only kind of slavery allowed in the Old Testament is debt slavery. We might think that even debt slavery is evil, but we don’t understand the situation in ancient times, which brings us to our second point.






Second, we need to understand the situation of humanity in the ANE. Slavery was not God's original intention for humans. He created us in His image to be treated with full respect and dignity. Humans rebelled and eventually invented slavery. God never endorses slavery. He never approves and supports the institution of slavery. He allowed it for a time as an accommodation to our sinful nature, but it was never His plan. God allowed certain things under the old covenant because of the hardness of the Jewish people's heart. Divorce is another case in point. In Deuteronomy 24:1-4 God allowed divorce, but Jesus explains why in Matthew 19:8: "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because of the hardness of your hearts, but it was not like that from the beginning." Jesus takes us back to the original intention of God - no divorce. Notice God did not advocate divorce or endorse it; He simply permitted it for a time due to the hardness of the Jewish people. This is also true of slavery. The first person to ever condemn all slavery was the Cappadocian Father Gregory of Nyssa in the fourth century. He based his belief on the original intention of God to create all humans as equal in His image. The Bible was written by God with what is called progressive revelation; God gradually reveals who He is and what His plan is throughout the Old Testament, culminating in the full revelation of God in Christ. Jesus is God and He is the plan of God. Throughout the Old Testament, God regulates slavery, and in the New Testament virtually abolishes it as we will see. We might complain that God should have been more forceful in the Old Testament, but we don't understand God's full plan. We see dimly. God didn't have to do anything. He could have just let the people back then go their own way, or He could have destroyed them again like He did in the flood. God's accommodation was mercy. He gradually worked with the stubborn Israelites, allowing them to continue in their sinful ways, but gradually revealed who He is and what His plan is, all the while keeping them healthy and preserved through the laws of Moses, that appear somewhat strange to us, but definitely had a purpose.



Third, though God doesn't abolish slavery in the Old Testament, He seriously curtails it, putting in humanitarian regulations that virtually make slavery a form of voluntary servitude. Old Testament slavery was more than simply selling your labor, but it wasn't chattel slavery. I liken it to volunteering in the military. Once you sign the papers, the government owns you for a certain period of time; in times of war, you can even be forced to serve in the military where they own you. They are not allowed to physically harm you, but they can punish you while you are in the military. In the Old Testament a slave owner was allowed to punish his servant, but he wasn't allowed to hit him in the head or kill him (Ex 21:20-21, 26-27). Though some have tried to argue that chattel slavery was sanctioned in the Old Testament, it appears that even for foreigners they voluntarily sold themselves and could leave (Ex 21:16). Amos 2:6 warns, "The LORD says: I will not relent from punishing Israel for three crimes, even four, because they sell a righteous person for silver and a needy person for a pair of sandals." It was an evil sin to sell someone as a slave. Deuteronomy 23:15-16 says, "Do not return a slave to his master when he has escaped from his master to you. Let him live among you wherever he wants within your city gates. Do not mistreat him." This was unheard of in the ANE; all other law codes demanded the return of the slave. But the Old Testament is different because God rescued His people out of the slavery of Egypt and wanted them to treat people differently. This slave was probably a foreigner, because he would have simply returned to his allotted land if a Hebrew. But it doesn't say whether the slave owner was a foreigner or a Hebrew; no matter what, if the slave wanted freedom he could leave. He could *natzal* translated "escape," but simply means "deliver himself" to you. Another benefit unheard of in any other place in the ANE was the law of Sabbath that was also given to the slave/servant. In every other slave context, the slave worked every day, but according to Deuteronomy 5:13-15 everyone had a day of Sabbath rest from all work, including the slave/servant. Slavery was harsh in the ANE, though not typically as bad as Greco-Roman, Islamic or Antebellum slavery. But God's people were supposed to have a different attitude, even toward foreigners. Leviticus 19:33-34 commands, "When an alien resides with you in your land, you must not oppress him. You will regard the alien who resides with you as the native-born among you. You are to love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God." This doesn't mean the alien couldn't sell himself if he was in a destitute situation, but it does mean that he must be treated fairly. David Baker calls these laws "The humanization of slavery," including provision for rest and holidays (Dt 5:13-15; 12:12, 18; 16:11, 14; Ex 20:9-11), protection from abuse (Ex 21:20, 26-27 more on this passage later), asylum for fugitives (Dt 23:15-16), prohibition of kidnapping (Dt 24:7; Ex 21:16), and that only voluntary slavery was acceptable (Dt 15:12). In light of what has been said above, I think we can agree with Thomas Schirrmacher who states:

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*A slave/servant in the Old Testament was not a possession of his or her master without rights as was the case in Greek, Roman, Islamic or the varieties of modern colonial slavery. Rather, the servant was a person with full rights in the presence of a judge. As Job made clear [Job 31:13-15], this is the case because the servant is just as much created by God as every other person.*

Fourth, the New Testament virtually abolishes slavery without calling for the overhaul of the Roman law. It must be said that the New Testament writers were not social revolutionaries and did not believe overhauling social structures would transform culture; therefore, they did not call for the abolition of slavery. Those who think politics and education are what are needed to cure the ills of the world are sorely mistaken, because they underestimate the depravity of humanity. If people are mostly good with a little bad in us, then politics and education would suffice. But if we are corrupt to the core of our very nature, then only a born-again experience through Jesus Christ one at a time can eventually affect society. It is true that Paul told slaves to obey their masters (Eph 5:5-8), but he also told masters in verse 9 to “treat your slaves the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him.” Paul put the slave and master on equal ground. This was especially true with the Lord’s Supper, which can be called the “meal of shame,” where everyone was treated equally and partook together. In the book of Philemon, Paul writes to Philemon about his slave that ran away and ended up getting saved by Paul’s witness. Paul sends Onesimus (the slave) back to Philemon with a request. Paul sends a letter with Onesimus to Philemon that begins in verses 8-9, “For this reason, although I have great boldness in Christ to command you to do what is right, I appeal to you, instead, on the basis of love.” He then goes on to request that Philemon set Onesimus free and allow him to help Paul while he is in prison. He suggests in 15-16 that “perhaps this is why he was separated from you for a brief time, so that you might get him back permanently, no longer as a slave, but more than a slave - as a dearly loved brother.” Christianity changes everything. In the New Testament slaves are encouraged to seek freedom (1 Co 7:20), fair treatment is demanded (Col 4:1), and slave traders are condemned (1 Tim 1:9-10). Without calling for emancipation of slavery in the Roman Empire, which would not have done any good anyway, the Bible undermines slavery in such a way that virtually calls for the end of slavery. Once Christianity took hold in Europe and the United States, the abolition of slavery was called for based on these principles found in the Bible and God’s original plan of equality for humanity. William Wilberforce almost singlehandedly brought down slave trade in England through prayer and Parliament. Abraham Lincoln ended the evil practice in the United States some thirty years later.

Finally, we need to discuss some difficult passages that if read wrong seem to advocate chattel slavery among foreigners (Lev 25:39-46), beating slaves to an inch of their life (Ex 21:20-21, 26-27) and fathers being able to sell their daughters in slavery (Ex 21:7). First, Leviticus 25:39-46 must be understood in the whole context of the Pentateuch. Liberal scholars who deny Moses' authorship of the first five books of the Bible, claim there is a progression over centuries on the treatment of slaves in the Pentateuch. But if Moses wrote the entire Torah (Pentateuch), then we need to understand each passage in the greater context. Verses 39-42 make a clear statement of how to treat Hebrew slaves; they are not to even be considered slaves and are not to be treated harshly. The Hebrew who voluntarily sold himself to someone was to be considered "A hired worker" rather than a slave (40). The passage then states in verse 44-45, "Your male and female slaves are to be from the nations around you; you may purchase male and female slaves. You may also purchase them from the aliens residing with you, or from their families living among you - those born in your land. These may become your property." Since in verse 46 it says that they can be slaves for life and even be passed on as an inheritance to the Hebrew's children, it seems like they can be treated differently than the Hebrew slaves. How are we to understand this? First, we know that these foreigners are selling themselves. All kidnapping for slavery is condemned (Ex 21:16). This slavery cannot be considered chattel slavery. Some have suggested that perhaps it was chattel slavery due to captives of war, but according to Old Testament law peace was to be offered before war and then all males killed if war was chosen (Dt 20:10-18). If all the males were killed, the males couldn't be made slaves. Also, the Hebrews were not allowed to go to war with the surrounding nations unless it was self-defense, because God only gave them the land of Canaan (Nu 34). The only possibility for foreigners becoming slaves to the Hebrews was if they voluntarily sold themselves to avoid starvation. In our day, we are rightly appalled at the thought of someone selling themselves, but at this point in time this was the common practice of the day. Social systems gradually evolved from debt slavery to feudalism to capitalism with eventual freedom for all. Debt slavery was under the permissive will of God; nowhere does He sanction slavery in the sense of advocating it. This passage is drawing out the special treatment of the people of God. Unless one enters into covenant with the one true God, he or she will suffer the consequences. Non-Israelites were allowed to become Israelites and experience the full privileges of that union. Once again, God is taking a depraved system and gradually transforming it.



*What about Exodus 21:20-27? Is this advocating beating your slave? It is allowing punishment if the worker refused to do his or her job. Beating with rods was a common punishment even for one's children (Prov 13:24). People today might call this child abuse, but we don't know the specifics of how this was practiced. We do know that harsh treatment wasn't allowed. Exodus 21:26-27 indicate that there were parts of the body that were not appropriate for the beating. There is no indication that the Jewish people were child abusers. This is probably not much more than a spanking or the use of a switch without leaving marks if done appropriately. We can suggest we know better how to raise our children, but it should be admitted that since we don't know exactly how this was being practiced, we don't have enough information to call into question God's ethics by allowing it with the parameters given. It is not advocating beating him within an inch of his life; if the slave died the owner died. Sandwiched in between verses 20-21 and 26-27 are the verses on what is called lex talliones. These laws describe how the punishment must fit the crime; they naturally include the issues concerning slavery because they are placed in between the slavery passages and then punishment for the slave owners is discussed. The slave is treated like any other human being concerning how he or she is punished by his or her master. This passage is speaking out against the abuse of a slave, not advocating for abuse just so long as the slave doesn't die. We might argue that punishing a servant is unjust, but then we must argue that punishing a child is unjust because both were considered a part of the household. We must also consider that those in the military can't be punished either. We are better off admitting that we can't relate to these customs, because we are living in a vastly different culture. We could practice chronological snobbery, or we could admit that we don't have all the facts and give God the benefit of the doubt, who is simply allowing such practices for a time, though they were not a part of the original plan.*





Finally, did God allow fathers to sell their daughters according to Exodus 21:7? The CSB Study Bible gives a note on this verse: "These verses [7-11] deal with the status and rights of a woman who had been sold with the expectation of becoming a second-class wife, somewhat like Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah, who bore children for Abraham and Jacob." We cannot imagine selling our children, but once again we don't understand the situation. If a father was in a situation of starvation and wanted to take care of his daughter by her marriage to someone who was better off than they were, he was allowed to do this. This is not much different than the dowry system in the middle ages. The girl had the full rights of a wife as the passage goes on to declare. She was not considered a slave. The situation of polygamy, dowries, etc. was a part of a broken system God was in the process of restoring. Jesus made it clear that it wasn't the original intention of God. God could allow His creation to live in its corrupt state without being the author or advocate of that state. In His grace, He began to change things, ultimately climaxing in the sending of His own Son to die for our sins. If we ever doubt the goodness of God, we simply need to look at the nail-scars in His hands to see that He really does care. His plan is the best. When we think we can improve on it, we simply reveal our arrogance. God has reasons that sometimes surpass our ability to comprehend (Dt 29:29; Ps 131; Isa 55:8-9). It is those times that we should practice faith and trust in God and His word. Real faith is trusting God in the dark, especially when He has shed so much light. So, I conclude that the Bible condemns slavery; it does not endorse it. God may not have condemned slavery the way we would have liked, but He nonetheless denounced it; it was not His original plan; it was our sinful plan as sinful humanity. If we want to blame someone, we should blame ourselves and then do something about it. Slavery is still alive and well today in the form of human trafficking and must be stopped.