



One of the ugliest parts of the history of the New World is the use and treatment of slaves to make its growth happen. People were kidnapped, families torn apart, workers beaten, women raped, and countless other atrocities.

Many practitioners of New World slavery often cited the Bible as their authority to own slaves. Today, many of Christianity's detractors will point to the passages on slavery to say how immoral and outdated the book is. It's as if they are saying "that book condones slavery! How can you follow *anything* it says?"

What Was New World Slavery?

When we in America read or hear the word "slavery" we almost all immediately think of the same thing; we think of a practice where people from Africa were kidnapped, sold as property, and transported across the Atlantic Ocean to various ports up and down the North, Central, and South American continents. Families would be separated. People were forced into labor. Slaves were not human, they were property. Because they had no rights, slaves could be beaten with impunity and the slave owners had no fear of repercussions. Women were raped, illegitimate children were born and ignored by their fathers. If a slave ran away, the law said he or she needed to be returned. If the slave was captured and returned, he or she was likely beaten and possibly maimed in order to keep them from escaping again.

Slaves had no rights or possessions. They were also not paid a wage and had no way to earn their freedom. There was no contract between the slave and the master. The slave worked for the master until he or she died or was traded.

Slavery In The Old Testament

Slavery in the Old Testament was not like slavery in the New World. It was more like indentured servitude. In fact, the word used in the Old Testament ('ebed') can either be translated as slave or servant.

The fact that you were under someone else's authority is about where the similarities between Old Testament slavery and New world slavery end. As we will see, all of the ugliness we think of regarding slavery was outlawed by Scripture

First off, biblical slavery was voluntary. People chose it as a way of survival. If they had no food or resources, it was either starve or become a servant in order to get back on your feet. This practice of debt repayment was common across many cultures of the time.



Old Testament slavery wasn't racially motivated, either. New World slavery was. The Old Testament doesn't say "go make these people over here your slaves because they are bad". People went into slavery because of their economic situation.

In the Old Testament, people's servitude was a contractual agreement entered into by two parties. And, it had a time limit of 7 years. At the end of the 7 years, the servant had to be set free. They were also to be thought of as hired help, and given a wage. If they earned enough money to pay back their debt, they, or one of their relatives, could buy back their freedom (Leviticus 25:47-55). There were no such agreements in New World slavery.

One of the terrible practices of New World slavery was the use of female slaves as sex objects. This would never fly to the Hebrews, though, because rape was a crime punishable by death. Also, there was no sex outside of marriage. If a master fell in love with a servant girl, he needed to marry her and give her full wife status.

Old Testament slavery was voluntary. New World slavery was kidnapping and forced labor. Exodus 21:16 forbade the Hebrews from kidnapping others or receiving kidnapped people. This was a crime punishable by death. This passage alone puts an end to New World slavery.

African slaves suffered all manner of physical abuse and violence. But, in Exodus 21:26-27, it says that if you hit a slave and caused permanent damage, the slave needed to be set free.

In the South, if a slave escaped, it was the law that he or she should be returned to their master. In the Old Testament, if a slave ran away, you were not to return him (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

Slavery In The New Testament

By the time the New Testament rolls around, the Jews are all under the rule of the Roman Empire. The Roman concept of slavery was closer to what we are familiar with in America's past. Slaves had no legal rights, they were physically and sexually abused, tortured, and forced into labor through kidnapping.

The New Testament teachings regarding slavery are mostly guidelines on the relationship that slaves and masters should have with one another. God doesn't lay down any laws here because He is not starting a nation as He did with the Israelites. The guidelines set forth are given so that the early Christians could both live in Roman law and be an example to others on how masters and slaves should relate to one another.



Ephesians 5:5-8 instructs people who are slaves to “be good slaves”. It tells them to work hard and obey their masters. This sounds kind of like being pro-slavery, I know. But, the following verse (Ephesians 5:9) tells masters to treat their slaves kindly because God shows no favoritism between master and slave. Both are equal in His eyes. Just because your brother is going through hardship on earth - and you aren't - doesn't make you better. Black, white, brown, free, slave, male, female - we are all equal in God's eyes (Galatians 3:26-29).

As for New World slave traders using the Bible to justify their actions, they don't have much to stand on. Because in 1 Timothy 1:10 Paul calls kidnapping/slave trading a detestable act.

Does The Bible Condone Slavery?

“OK, Dave,” you may say “the Bible never calls for the outright ban of slavery. Doesn't that mean God approves of slavery then?” It's a fair question. Jesus does not give a direct command of “Christians, free your slaves”. It sounds like He is OK with it.

Keep in mind, though, that the Bible is a story of spiritual redemption and not a handbook of social reform. The good news is that redemption *leads* to social reform. The point of Scripture is to change our hearts into better people so we don't need regulation.

See, Jesus and the Apostles knew that the outright abolition of slavery would bring violence and bloodshed (and it did in the US 1800 years later). They knew the Roman armies would execute all of the rebels. Also, the Romans had laws in place that only allowed for a certain number of slaves to be freed per year. In many cases, if a slave was freed before they were 30, they could not become a Roman citizen anyway. So, rather than call for a revolt, Jesus and his apostles set down the principles of human dignity that would eventually lead to slavery's abolition.

There are many things that we do that God does not approve of but he allows to happen. Take divorce, for instance. God wants a man and a woman to be together for life. But, he allowed for divorce in certain circumstances because he knows how imperfect we are (Matthew 18:1-9). Rather than outright forbid it, he gave us regulations and encouraged us to be pure so that we would *not want* to divorce our spouses in times of turmoil.

It is the same with slavery. In the Old Testament times, a great number of cultures used slave labor. For the Israelites, it was as if God told them “you are going to treat slaves better than any other society and be my example to all other nations on how it should be done.” God set down the ideas that all men and women are created equal and have value to



Him (Leviticus 19:34-35). Then, He gave the Israelites regulations to make sure they would see (and show) the value in everyone.

Same with the New Testament. Although, in this case, God wasn't creating a new nation; He was telling the followers of Jesus how others should be treated regardless of the nation they lived in.

The Abolition Of Slavery

All of the foundational work Jesus and the Apostles set down in the New Testament came to fruition in the 1780s finally when men in England, led by William Wilberforce, fought to first abolish the slave trade and then slavery altogether in the UK and West Indies. Slavery was finally completely abolished in the UK and West Indies in 1833. The Abolitionist Movement was a Christian Movement. They based their mission on what Scripture teaches - that all nations come from one man (Acts 17:26) and that we are all created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26). Based on this idea, there is no superior race because we have the same origin. Therefore, no person should be kidnapped and forced into labor. It goes against God's will.

This idea took a little longer to trickle into America. Many of the founding fathers were against slavery, but knew that in order to get the colonies to unify, they could not outright abolish it from the start. So, they laid the foundation in the Declaration of Independence ("We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. "). Eventually, America also abolished slavery, although it took us over a hundred years and a bloody civil war to make that happen. But, the foundations for everyone to be free were there since the beginning.

As you can see, people's issue with slavery in the Bible usually boils down to definition. The slavery in the Bible isn't like the slavery we think of from our past. And, it was the redemptive message found in Scripture that ultimately led to its abolition.

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