

# What Does the Bible Say About . . .?

March 26, 2007

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## Slavery Approved? Part 1 - Old Testament

- I. Introduction
  - A. Announcements
    - 1. Open with prayer
    - 2. Any new people? If so, summarize need to bring paper, pen, and Bible (various versions OK for comparison, but NRSV will be main one for reading, NASB for studying).
    - 3. Get list of names and how to contact (email preferred)
    - 4. 90 minutes on 4th Mondays at 7 p.m.
    - 5. Need volunteers to read passages (listed in bold.)
  - B. Does anyone have any questions/topics for us to consider for next time?
    - 1. .
    - 2. .
  - C. Last time we met I mentioned a website that called Jesus a “liar,”<sup>1</sup> because the author of the website didn’t understand what Jesus was really saying about answering prayer.
    - 1. I suspect that the author didn’t really want to understand Jesus. There is a lot of anger and cynicism on his website.
    - 2. But I thought, “who better to ask challenging questions about what the Bible says than someone who has devoted so much energy and time to trying to show that the Bible is wrong?”
  - D. The website accuses God and the Bible of promoting slavery, murder, rape, and human sacrifice among other things. We won’t take on all the charges tonight, but I’ve selected a sampling of the accusations raised on the website <evilbible.com> to see how we can answer them in this and future studies.
    - 1. I want to assure you, I didn’t just pick the easy ones! But the truth is there certainly are answers to every one of the accusations raised on that website.
    - 2. Tonight we will look at one that involves a concern increasingly in the news these last few years: slavery.
    - 3. The accuser’s charge—and our question—is: Does the Bible condone or even promote slavery?
    - 4. This is a serious charge, and it is made not only by this one website. So as Christians, we need to know how to answer it for ourselves and for the sake of others who want to know the truth.
  
- II. In 1993 I preached a sermon based on the small New Testament book of Philemon in which I said, “Today slavery is rare in the world and exists only where it is able to remain hidden in the shadows, protected by ignorance and surrounded with shame.”

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.evilbible.com/>

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- A. In the years since then, we have all learned that, in fact, slavery is not rare at all.
  - 1. In fact, many who keep such statistics tell us that there are more people in slavery today than at any other known time in human history.
  - 2. From the year 1450 to 1850 there were 12 million Africans who were shipped as slaves to the Americas. In a similar period, from 1500-1900, another 17 million Africans were enslaved by Muslim traders and sent to the Middle East and North Africa. Yet another 5 million were shipped to other parts of the world.<sup>2</sup>
  - 3. That's 32 million people enslaved over the 4 centuries known as the "Black Holocaust."
  - 4. Today, more than a century after we thought slavery was ended, the group "Free the Slaves" and others tell us there are currently 27 million people in the world who are slaves.<sup>3</sup> That's not over 4 centuries; that's right now.
  - 5. It is a hidden plague, and because it is done in secret, the slaves have no rights and virtually no way to get help.
- B. So it is a serious matter to us today that the Bible's accuser says, "The Bible clearly approves of slavery in many passages. . ." We are going to closely examine the evidence he cites, because it matters not just for history, but for millions in our world today too.

### III. Background info.

- A. When we think of slavery, we have in mind the sordid history of it in the U.S. or the even more degrading modern forms such as sex slavery or human trafficking.
  - 1. This is not the same as the slavery of the ancient world.
  - 2. Slavery then was an open, very real, integral part of the over-all economy of the ancient Near East and elsewhere.
    - a. It was a way for the owners to have reliable labor, and for the poor it was a way to survive. It is still harsh by today's best standards, but it was a universal fact of life then, not a hidden crime.
    - b. True, it was not as big a factor in the ancient Near East, as it became later in classical Greece and Rome, where there could be more slaves than free people, but it had a long history.
    - c. In ancient Mesopotamia (later to become Babylon, now Iraq), the Hammurabi Code was written several centuries before the time of Moses and the Exodus. It had its own rules for slaves and slave owners, though they were considerably less generous to the slaves than what we find in the Bible. (See "Slavery in the Ancient Near East", Mendelsohn, 1949)

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<sup>2</sup> <http://web.cocc.edu/cagatucci/classes/hum211/timelines/htimeline3.htm#THE%20HOLOCAUST>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.freetheslaves.net/>

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3. But let's see what the Bible has to say. We begin our study in the Old Testament, especially around the time of Moses.
  - a. It is clear that slavery itself was not outright condemned at this point in the Bible, but definite limits were placed upon it.
  - b. There were ways defined for a slave to become free, and there were limits on how they could be treated.
- B. Let's begin with **Leviticus 25:39-49, 54**.
  1. Here it says Israel may purchase slaves from among those who are not of Israel. And verses 39-43, 47 discuss the additional possibility of an Israelite becoming a slave. **Why might that happen?** (Poverty)
    - a. **Keeping in mind the time and place (historical context), if someone had neither money nor productive land, what options for survival would that person have?** (No unemployment benefits, no cities to find a job in—still nomads, begging—though unreliable, loans possible but then what after that? Possible to be hired, but could be temporary and unreliable.)
    - b. **What's the one thing still available for such a person to sell?** (Self as a slave.)
    - c. Food, clothing, and shelter—the minimum necessities of life—were provided by the slave owner. In a primitive nomadic or agricultural society slavery was the last recourse for keeping body and soul together.
  2. This gives us a clue as to why voluntarily selling oneself into slavery could happen to a foreigner as well, though becoming a slave could also happen as a result of war or other factors.
  3. But there is a difference in status between Israelites who are slaves and non-Israelites. **What is it?**
    - a. Compare vv. 40-42 to vv. 45-46 (temporary vs. permanent)
    - b. Israelites may be redeemed (47-49) and are to be freed in year of Jubilee (54)
  4. The limits on slavery were much tighter for Israelites. **Why would God be so interested in limiting slavery of the Jews?**
    - a. Think about who they were and where they had come from. (e.g., God had just freed them from Egyptian slavery)
    - b. And think about who God wanted them to be. (they were to be a people especially devoted to God—should be free)
    - c. **And what does it say about God's intentions for the relative status of individuals among the faithful?** (Implication for equality: *all* free)
  5. Slavery was not outlawed, certainly, but already we can see a subtle, built-in pressure against the institution of slavery, undermining it from within.
  6. The time limits and the provisions for being redeemed showed that a principle was being established that the people of God shouldn't be slaves, their natural and God-backed status was to be free.

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- C. There are also a number of unexpected rights given to *all* slaves (even foreign ones).
1. (We should note before we read this next group that some of our translations will say “slave” and others will soften it with the terms “servant” or “bond servant.” Even the NSAB does the softening. Make no mistake, the people being referred to are slaves in the Ancient Near East meaning of that term. The translators just kind of shied away from it in some places.)
  2. **Genesis 17:10-14, 27** (Slaves have right to share in the same covenant with Israelites)
  3. **Ex. 12:43-44** (Right to celebrated Passover—a religious festival that celebrated freedom from slavery!)
  4. **Deut. 16:9-14** (Right to participate in other religious festivals)
  5. **Exodus 20:10, 23:12** (Right to enjoyed Sabbath rest—Included in 10 Commandments!)
  6. **Job 31:13-15** (Slaves could file complaints about mistreatment.) **What does Job say about how God views the relative value of Job and his slaves?** (Equality! It’s radical—revolutionary, but without the guns!)
  7. **Deut. 23:15** (Slave escaped from elsewhere had right to safety and freedom among Israelites. Again freedom is being promoted and slavery is being undermined.)
  8. Perhaps the most significant to the slaves themselves was the right to freedom in certain circumstances: **(How did each of these rights protect the slave?)**
    - a. Another look at: **Lev. 25:39-43, 47-55** (freed in year of Jubilee or if redeemed by relative. Note v. 49: can buy/redeem self - implies slave can earn and save own money!)
    - b. **Deut 21:10-14** (freed if married to owner)
    - c. **Ex. 21:26-27** (freed to compensate for an injury)
    - d. **Ex. 21:2** (Israelite slave freed after 6 years)
  9. The accusatory website’s author has a special complaint about the freedom guarantee in **Ex. 21:7-11** (girl freed if she is rejected or not treated properly)
    - a. The accuser complains, “So these are the Bible family values! A man can buy as many sex slaves as he wants as long as he feeds them, clothes them, and [has sexual relations with] them!”
    - b. Let’s look at it another way. **How is this provision in Ex 21 actually a protection for the daughter sold as a slave? How would her chances for marriage be affected by having been a slave?**
    - c. A woman sold as a slave would no longer be considered a good candidate for marriage (her virginity would be doubted for one thing.) That is why she is not freed after 6 years. She would be in a hopeless situation with neither her “owner” nor a husband to provide for her. For that reason, the owner must continue to be her security.

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- d. If she marries the owner's son, she becomes a free person, a wife.
  - e. In addition she cannot be shunted aside by another wife. She still must be provided for or given her freedom. These are all given for her protection, so she will always be in a family where she will be provided for.
- D. The accuser also has a complaint about the provision for a slave to voluntarily remain a slave. **Exodus 21:2-6**
- 1. He says, "Notice how they can get a male Hebrew slave to become a permanent slave by keeping his wife and children hostage until he says he wants to become a permanent slave. What kind of family values are these?"
  - 2. **Do you see how this provision instead can actually protect the rights of the slave?**
    - a. Owner would not give slave a wife if it meant he would lose both when one became free. The slave would lose the right to marry.
    - b. The slave's marriage beforehand is honored by freeing both at the same time. To do otherwise would stress or break the marriage.
- E. **Exodus 21:20-21** "What does the Bible say about beating slaves?" According to the website, "It says you can beat both male and female slaves with a rod so hard that as long as they don't die right away you are cleared of any wrong doing."
- 1. Actually it does *not* say that the attacker would be cleared of all wrongdoing. That is a deceptive misquote. **What does it actually say?** (It says "vengeance" will not be taken.)
    - a. Look at the context. **What is in mind for the vengeance meant here?** (Death.) So it says the owner will not be *killed* if the slave doesn't die right away.
    - b. **Why would the waiting period be important? What concern is being addressed here?** Think about the level of medical expertise and the "CSI" lab available to them. (Maybe death isn't from the beating, but something else. So owner not executed without clear proof of homicide.)
    - c. This is simply a way of making sure of the true cause of death.
    - d. **But is the slave owner accountable if the slave clearly dies from the beating?** (Yes. No exception is made for that.)
  - 2. The surprising thing here is that killing a slave was punishable at all!
  - 3. Not only that, but the penalty was no small one: **Leviticus 24:17-22**
  - 4. The phrase "For he [the slave] is his property" seems a bit callous at first. It could sound like the slave is property and not worth anything.
    - a. But that is not the point.
    - b. The person who did the beating—the slave owner—was the one who "lost" his property. So there was no other owner to be compensated. This isn't about the value of the slave, it's about whether an owner is to be compensated for financial loss.

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- c. This says the owner who beats his slave cannot claim compensation from anyone; he caused his own financial loss and bears those consequences.
- 5. In fact there is even a financial incentive to *not* cause severe injury. Look again a few verses down at **Ex. 21:26-27** (Freedom for loss of eye, tooth)
- 6. Far from letting slave owners off the hook, Exodus 21 protects slaves by guaranteeing their freedom if they suffer serious bodily injury and by punishing owners who clearly have killed a slave.
- F. The whole issue of slavery in the Old Testament (or anything else for that matter) cannot be properly understood out of its context.
  - 1. Israel was a theocracy: It was directly ruled by God and the covenant the people had made with God at Mt. Sinai (10 Commandments et al)
  - 2. That is why there were greater rights for Israelites than for foreigners (pagans by definition). This was even true for slaves.
  - 3. In a sense that differentiation is still true today and always will be. God's salvation is for the faithful.
  - 4. Freedom, a living symbol of that salvation is God's desire for all, but it is the ultimate promise only for those who put their faith in God through Christ.
- G. Also notice already present in the Old Testament the concept of change not by force, but by change of heart.
  - 1. To overthrow slavery would have caused great economic hardship. For some, becoming a slave was the only way to be able to have food and clothing and shelter.
  - 2. It would also have led to violent social upheaval, not only causing hardship for the people, but making God the one to blame for it all.
  - 3. God wanted then as now to change us from the inside with love—a willing change of heart—rather than from the outside with force and fear, changing our public behavior, but not our nature.
- H. Next time: continue with slavery in the New Testament and a new topic.

## IV. Summary

- A. Have we answered today's question satisfactorily? Are there still questions on this topic we need to discuss more?
- B. What questions for next time?
- C. Next meeting: Monday, April 23, 2007. 7:00 p.m.
- D. Closing prayer
- E. **Archives of class notes can be found online at: [www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa](http://www.fumcwa.org/classes/wdbsa)**