

THE WHOLE BIBLE: Philemon

The Problem of the Bible and Slavery

- the Bible supports slavery, therefore Bible is morally compromised
- if the Bible is wrong on slavery, then also wrong on gender roles and homosexuality | also called, “trajectory hermeneutics”

The differences between Atlantic slave trade and ancient world

- the Atlantic slave trade was based on race
- African slaves were not seen as human beings (chattel slavery)
- Atlantic slavery was particularly brutal and dehumanizing

Slavery and the Old Testament

Matthew 19:3-9 | analogy of divorce

³ And Pharisees came up to Jesus and tested him by asking, “Is it lawful to divorce one’s wife for any cause?” ⁴ He answered, “Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵ and said, ‘Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh’? ⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate.”

⁷ They said to him, “Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?” ⁸ He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”

Genesis 1:26-27 | the *imago Dei*

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Exodus 1:13-14 | slavery in Egypt

¹³ So the Egyptians ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

Deuteronomy 15:12-15 | debt-slavery in Israel

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. [See also Ex. 21:1-11, Lev. 25:39-43]

Exodus 21:16 | forced slavery is forbidden

Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death. [See also Deut. 24:7, 1 Tim. 1:10]

Deuteronomy 20:10-18 | enslavement of foreigners

¹⁰ When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. ¹¹ And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. ¹² But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. ¹³ And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, ¹⁴ but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you.

¹⁵ Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. ¹⁶ But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, ¹⁷ but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, ¹⁸ that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.

Psalms 2:8-11 | The Davidic king will rule the nations

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.
⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.
¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.
¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.

Leviticus 25:44-46 | slavery of foreigners is perpetual

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 23:9 | do not oppress the foreigner

You shall not oppress a foreigner. You know the heart of a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:33-34 | love the foreigner

³³ When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.

³⁴ The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.

Slavery and the New Testament

Ephesians 6:5-9 | instructions to Christian slaves

⁵ Bondservants, 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 bondservants 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 bondservant 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.

[See also Col. 3:22-4:1, 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18-25]

1 Corinthians 7:17, 21-24

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ... ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Philemon 1:8-20 | the gospel and slavery

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you – I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³ I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord.

¹⁵ For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother – especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷ So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

¹⁸ If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹ I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it – to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

The logic of the gospel makes slavery impossible

- Christians reading their Bibles fought for the end of slavery
- Martin Luther King Jr. fought for racial justice citing the Bible

The Bible's two words on slavery:

- Genesis 1:26-27 – all human beings are made in image of God
- Philemon 1:16-17 – the gospel transforms slaves into brothers

Paul's Letter to Philemon

- shortest of Paul's letters, but enormously important
- issue of slavery | written to slave-holder about runaway slave

The problem of the Bible and Slavery

- 2 modern critiques that cast doubt on moral authority of Bible:

(1) Bible supports slavery, therefore Bible is morally compromised

- OT contains numerous passages that permit slavery
- NT commands slaves to submit to their masters
- nowhere in Bible does it advocate abolition of institution of slavery

- therefore, the Bible approves of slavery, or at least tolerates it
- but we know that slavery is one worst evils in history
- therefore, Bible is morally corrupt book, reflecting ancient mores

(2) Trajectory hermeneutics

- we can read the Bible as bound by the morality of its time
- thus, while Bible tried to soften it, ultimately, it permitted slavery
- then, 150 years ago, society realized that slavery was wrong
- thus, our moral standards shouldn't be bound by the Bible

- 100 years ago, society likewise realized women are equal to men
- and therefore, gender roles in Bible reflect an outdated morality

- now, new stage of moral development – homosexuality
- Bible contains strong language condemning homosexuality
- but use “trajectory hermeneutic” to help us

Both of these arguments undermine moral authority of Scripture

- one of major arguments against Christianity today – morality of Bible
- idea that Christianity has an outdated morality

- need to think about this in very deep way
- my goal – show moral beauty of Scripture | transcendent morality

Part of problem, when think of slavery – Atlantic slave system

- slave trade to Brazil and Caribbean islands and US | 17th – 19th c
- most heinous and brutalizing system of slavery in world history

- slavery in ancient world was significantly different
- but that doesn't completely absolve the moral problem of slavery

(1) Atlantic slave system was based entirely on race

- slavery restricted to black Africans | white person could not be slave
- ancient world – slavery was not based on race or ethnicity
- anyone could become a slave – warfare and debt-slavery

(2) Atlantic system viewed slaves as sub-human property

- chattel slavery – slaves had no rights as human beings

As result, produced most brutal form of slavery in history

- most slaves worked in large plantations, under slave-drivers
- sugar cultivation required very intensive labor

In ancient world, wide variance in practice

- brutal forms – mining, galley slaves | often condemned criminals

- but also much less brutal forms
- slaves included in household, lived with masters (part of family)
- slaves often earned money | often purchase or given freedom
- some slaves had high status, education, rose to great prominence
- slavery was not perpetual across generations

This is not to say slavery in ancient world was not unjust

- but closer to modern-day low-wage workers
- slavery and forms of slavery universal in world history
 - serfs, domestic servants who receive room and board
- that still doesn't get Bible off hook | but put in perspective

Slavery in ancient world was just part of reality of life

- never been a culture or civilization without slaves until 19th C
- almost inconceivable to think of a world without slaves
- in ancient world, strong eat weak
 - as long as there was warfare and poverty, there would be slaves

Slavery and the Old Testament

- OT has about a dozen passages about having slaves
- argument – these are accommodations to fallenness of man
- slavery is result of injustice, poverty and violence
- OT laws mitigate and regulate practice so that worst abuse is avoided

Analogy to divorce

- Pharisees argued from Deut. 24:1-4 that divorce was approved
- v. 8 – “b/c of your hardness of heart, Moses allowed you to divorce, but from beginning it was not so”
- then goes back to first principles in Genesis (v. 4)
- marriage was designed to be unbreakable
- divorce limited to only cases of infidelity | and due process
- therefore, Genesis not Deuteronomy shows God’s intention
- when it comes to slavery, need start with doctrine of *imago Dei*

Genesis 1:26-27

²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Human beings have an inerasable dignity and equality

- slavery is not way it was supposed to be

Exodus 1:13-14

¹³ So the Egyptians ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves ¹⁴ and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.

2nd foundational text on slavery

- story of Israel begins with people in bondage
- story of salvation is story of emancipation
- this story guides how people of God are to treat others

Deuteronomy 15:12-15 | debt-slavery in Israel

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. [See also Ex. 21:1-11, Lev. 25:39-43]

Ancient world did not have bankruptcy laws

- if deep poverty w/ insurmountable debts – sold yourself into slave

Bible mitigates this tragedy in two ways:

- limited time – maximum of 6 years | 7th year is sabbatical year
- humane treatment – God’s people remember the Exodus
 - when slave is set free, provide him means to restart his life

Bible is not commanding slavery

- regulations are not expressions of approval

Exodus 21:16 | kidnapping to enslave is forbidden

Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death. [See also Deut. 24:7, 1 Tim. 1:10]

Forced slavery was forbidden

- in other words, slavery had to be *consensual*
- this explicitly and unmistakably condemns Atlantic slave system
- commandment is repeated in NT in 1 Timothy

Deuteronomy 20:10-18 | enslavement of foreigners

¹⁰ When you draw near to a city to fight against it, offer terms of peace to it. ¹¹ And if it responds to you peaceably and it opens to you, then all the people who are found in it shall do forced labor for you and shall serve you. ¹² But if it makes no peace with you, but makes war against you, then you shall besiege it. ¹³ And when the LORD your God gives it into your hand, you shall put all its males to the sword, ¹⁴ but the women and the little ones, the livestock, and everything else in the city, all its spoil, you shall take as plunder for yourselves. And you shall enjoy the spoil of your enemies, which the LORD your God has given you.

¹⁵ Thus you shall do to all the cities that are very far from you, which are not cities of the nations here. ¹⁶ But in the cities of these peoples that the LORD your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, ¹⁷ but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the LORD your God has commanded, ¹⁸ that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the LORD your God.

This is not debt-slavery of Israelite slaves, but slaves from conquest

Read in light of God's story for Israel | Redemptive History

- Israel was to totally destroy Canaanites (genocide?)
- conquest of Promised Land was Judgment Day brought forward

Likewise, Israel was called to rule the nations

- this was also preview of New Heavens and New Earth
- earth be filled with glory of God as waters cover the sea

Psalm 2:8-11 | The Davidic king will rule the nations

⁸ Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,
and the ends of the earth your possession.

⁹ You shall break them with a rod of iron
and dash them in pieces like a potter's vessel.

¹⁰ Now therefore, O kings, be wise;
be warned, O rulers of the earth.

¹¹ Serve the LORD with fear,
and rejoice with trembling.

If nations will not submit gladly, then Davidic king will break w/ r

- enslavement was an expression of dominion and rule of king
- not exploitative slavery for personal profit, but kingly rule

Leviticus 25:44-46 | slavery of foreigners is perpetual

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.

This also expression of Israel's mandate to rule nations

- unlike Hebrew debt-slavery, Gentile slavery was lifelong
- to be a Gentile was to be in rebellion against God
- possibility of coming to faith in God of Bible

Meanwhile, as foreigners, they were not to be mistreated

Exodus 23:9 You shall not oppress a foreigner. You know the heart of a foreigner, for you were foreigners in the land of Egypt.

Leviticus 19:33-34

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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.

[See also Col. 3:22-4:1, 1 Tim. 6:1-2, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18-25]

Do these NT passages support and approve of slavery?

Bible tells Christians to bear injustice with patience and joy

- slaves are not to runaway or foment rebellion
- but worked to their best ability, as to the Lord, not for man
- chief motivation is not personal freedom, but glory to God

Christian masters are instructed to treat their slaves humanely

- “do same to them” – reciprocal relationship
- Col. 4:1 – “masters, treat your bondservants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven”
- masters are not to be abusive or use threats of violence
- but with respect, justice and equality
- as Christ is their master, so they are to practice same attitude
- this radically transforms the master-slave relationship
- relationship of mutual respect and love

Also remember 1 Timothy 1:10 | and Revelation 18:11-3

- slave-trading and kidnapping is condemned

1 Corinthians 7:17, 21-24

¹⁷ Only let each person lead the life that the Lord has assigned to him, and to which God has called him. This is my rule in all the churches. ... ²¹ Were you a bondservant when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. ²² For he who was called in the Lord as a bondservant is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a bondservant of Christ. ²³ You were bought with a price; do not become bondservants of men. ²⁴ So, brothers, in whatever condition each was called, there let him remain with God.

Rather than a life of discontent, Paul calls Christians to live for Christ

- highest goal in life is not personal advancement or ambition
- but to live for Christ – to be a slave of Christ, service to Christ
- key: “if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of opportunity”
- good to gain freedom | Paul is not advocating for slavery
- personal freedom is good, but not ultimate | Christ is ultimate

Letter to Philemon

- this is ultimate answer to slavery in Bible
- Paul writes to Philemon, slave-owner, about Onesimus, runaway slave

Philemon 1:8-20 | the gospel and slavery

⁸ Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹ yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you – I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus – ¹⁰ I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.

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²⁰ Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Paul is applying the gospel to master-slave relationship

- gospel transforms our relationships – to self-giving love
- v. 16 – Onesimus is no longer slave, but a brother in Christ
- notice Paul doesn't command Philemon to release Onesimus
- doesn't begrudging compliance – but heart transformed by gospel
- wants Philemon to work through implications of gospel

In body of Christ, old distinctions and power hierarchies don't ma

- there is no slave or masters in the Kingdom of God

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.

The logic of the gospel makes slavery impossible

- early Christians were first people advocate end of slavery
 - Gregory of Nyssa in 4th century
- Christians reading their Bibles fought for the end of slavery
 - abolition movement in England and US led by Christians
- Martin Luther King Jr. fought for racial justice citing the Bible
 - not in spite of Christianity, but because of Christianity
 - calling white supremacists to read their Bibles

The Bible's two words on slavery:

- Genesis 1:26-27 – all human beings are made in image of God
- Philemon 1:16-17 – the gospel transforms slaves into brothers