

Biblical Argument Against Slavery

The following essay is by Colin Green at <https://gettingtothetruthofthings.blogspot.com/2020/07/gods-complaint-against-slavery-in.html>, which is copied here:

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This is a crazy title for a blog post. The subject of the Bible's attitudes on any number of things is massive, not least on slavery. I originally called it "God's complaint against slavery" knowing full well that the variety of subject matter in the Hebrew Scriptures and canonical Christian Scriptures makes this an almost impossible brief to cover. So, I'm just highlighting a few things in the Scriptures that often escape people's notice.

Articles like this usually have titles like "Does the Bible condone slavery?" Some people search for that because they want to know if there is a biblical case against slavery, and what it is. I've considered longer titles, such as 'How to discuss slavery in the Bible without being a slavery apologist.' This post will hopefully help the reader to understand a bit more about it.

God's attitudes to slavery in the Hebrew Scriptures

Read between the lines to get a sense of the biblical God's attitude to slavery.

1. If it's not too obvious to say, there was no slavery in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1-2), and there is no hint that this was ever meant to happen.^[1] It is given to humanity to be in the image of God and have authority over creation, not to be under subjugation or a yoke like animals (Gen 1:27). It is given to Adam to subdue the land, not to subdue people (Gen 1:28). Adam and Eve are given the possibility of self-determination, not given it to deprive others of the same (Gen 2:16-17). Their descendants are to multiply "to fill the earth," not to provide slaves (Gen 1:28). It is Adam's job to till the ground in the garden, not a slave's job (Gen 2:5; 15). Food being naturally abundant there, the ancient "business case" for slavery is not remotely valid even in ancient terms (Gen 1:29-30). Paradise is a slavery-free zone. Slavery would upset God's hierarchy for creation which prefers his image-bearers at the top, not at the top and bottom. This is the ideal world that Jesus appealed to when he was asked a question about divorce. Not until Genesis 9 are slaves mentioned. Indeed, there is no hint in the Garden of Eden that even the Law of Moses (Torah) would ever be necessary...
2. ... until Adam and Eve sin, upon which all kinds of dire outcomes unfold. After this, Adam is told "By the sweat of your brow, you will eat your food" (Genesis 3:19). By the time of Genesis 9, this had more or less degenerated into, as it were, "By the sweat of your slave's brow, you will eat your food." (Noah's dreadful curse on some of his family in Genesis 9:24-29 is the Bible's first mention of slavery – though there is no suggestion that this curse had God's sanction. This is a wildly misused verse, misused in a way resulting in great harm in church history, and wildly re-interpreted in different eras.^[2])
3. A slave's point of view peeps through in the book of Job. Job wishes he were dead and in the grave, where "the weary are at rest. Captives also enjoy their ease; *they no longer hear the slave-driver's shout*. The small and the great are there, and the slave is freed from his master" (Job 3:16-19). Nothing radical about that so far as ancient thought goes. Everyone would have agreed that it is not desirable to be in slavery, and it was a sad fact that for some slaves it was only at death that they would be freed. But the hint of a slave's perspective is rare in the writings of antiquity, and its appearance suggests that slaveholders could not bank on God being on their side. (Jewish tradition has noted Job for its anxiety [about treatment of slaves](#).)
4. The foundational story of Israel is that God rescued the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and led them to "the Promised Land" (Exod 2:23-25). This sense of being a once enslaved people is hardwired into their story, written again and again to remind them that as a freed people their slavery laws had to be less inhumane (Deut 15:15 and other examples). But slavery still existed.

And slavery was still an evil. The stories say that it can come upon a people as a dreadful punishment for sin (it's not a blessing obviously). In this way, the institution of slavery condemns itself. As a national people, they were said to be in slavery in Egypt as a consequence of their own sin (Ezek 20:8), which might well shock us, and it should. Slavery is not morally neutral. It is degrading, and in the Old Testament it sometimes comes upon a people as a terrible consequence of sin. (The rabbis had [interesting discussions about this](#).) When the Israelites were later exiled as a nation to Babylon, this was again seen as a consequence of sin (2 Chron. 36:15-20; Lamentations 1), and this sense of the wrongness of being enslaved lasted after their return from exile (Neh 9:36-37). But the prophets don't leave it there. Nations who devastate Israel are held responsible for the harm they cause, and where they sell Jews including boys and girls into slavery, they face God's judgement (Joel 3:3-6). In these Old Testament passages, you have in effect a statement that slavery is a social evil that condemns itself. If something is so awful that it comes as a consequence of sin, it does not turn around and become good when you do it to someone else. The idea of a divine penalty on a sinful nation was not seen as a fixed given though.

Slavery was man-made in practice, and could be remedied. The American abolitionists were keen to point out that the Old Testament command to "love your neighbor as yourself" confronts slavers with the question of why they are inflicting on someone else what they would not want done to themselves. And the abolitionists could call on Paul in Gal 5:13-14 which says the Christian way "to love your neighbor as yourself" is to be only "slaves to each other," removing slave-masters from the equation. (More on Paul below.)

Where the Israelites were allowed to buy slaves from surrounding nations, this has to be seen in a similar light. Israel's God is still one who hears the cries of slaves for release from their oppression, and multiple Mosaic laws tighten restrictions on what Israelites might think they can get away with in treatment of foreign slaves.^[3] The lower treatment of non-Jewish slaves should not pass us by without reflection, and on this a couple of things should be said. The Law of Moses was not read by the rabbis merely in a literal sense, but as part of Israel's story and always needing skilled interpretation, and this is one area where rabbis saw to soften things, but that would be a whole other post.

When Stephen tells of Israel's slavery in Acts 7:6, 19, 34, we see how hardwired this story is into Israel's life. Stephen includes God saying this to Abraham: "Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and ill-treated for four hundred years." This was in Egypt, where Pharaoh "dealt treacherously with our people and oppressed our forefathers." And God says to Moses, "I have indeed seen the oppression of my people in Egypt. I have heard their groaning and have come down to set them free." The message of this is that here is a God who pays attention to the unjust suffering of slaves, and prefers them over their oppressors.

5. The business of slavery seems to have been unstoppable in the Bronze Age. The Law of Moses tried to get to grips with it by licensing it only under tight regulations.

Perhaps the most radical of these laws is **the one that would have abolished slavery** (or left it as voluntary only) if everyone had stuck to it unhindered:

"If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose. Do not oppress them" (Deut 23:15-16).

That is, a runaway slave was guaranteed freedom from slavery upon reaching refuge. If every slave took up this rule unhindered, that would be the end of slavery, without having to pass a law to abolish it.

This is startling in the context of the ancient world. In contrast, in the Roman Empire, being a runaway slave was treated as criminal, and bounty hunters made a living by hunting down runaway slaves; also, assisting a runaway slave was a serious criminal offence. But in the Law of Moses, running away to freedom was a slave's right. This is the nearest thing to a statement in favor of abolition of slavery.

Make no mistake, we are not asked to approve of people being owned like property (although you could scarcely be called 'owned' in the case of Israelite slaves in ancient Israel when they could demand freedom after six years or run away to asylum for guaranteed freedom earlier); nor asked to approve of people being bought like property (non-Jews in Torah). Not asked to approve because there is a difference between trying to regulate something and condoning it. This is no Garden of Eden. This is historically contingent, and not in a good way. We should be careful about thinking about Torah's more humane aspects as if that is a trajectory towards abolition. It was in some ways more progressive than the laws of other nations at the time, but that does not really entail abolition. It only fits into the story towards abolition as part of a bigger story – that it sits in-between the Garden of Eden and Jesus' return, the two eras of paradise. Morally, it's a big step down from Eden to Torah, and a big step back up to Jesus' return. The abolition of the slave trade also sits in-between Eden and Jesus' return, and as many people will testify, it was nowhere near the end of prejudice or injustice, but a big step forward.

6. A few more indications in the Law of Moses of the underlying sense that, down to its roots, slavery is evil include the following.

Kidnapping Hebrew people and selling them into slavery was a crime that carried the death penalty (Deut 24:7). In Amos 1:6, God vows vengeance on slave-traders who took people captive. That is not too radical though. No-one liked kidnapppers. (Taking kidnap victims, or even prisoners of war, into slavery is also not the stuff of paradise, obviously!) The point is this. All examples of the institution of slavery – except voluntary slavery – *must have started out in those sorts of ways if you could trace it back far enough*. So the tree of slavery was being chipped away down at its base by condemning kidnapping. (On Israelites owning foreign slaves, see above, and there is an interesting discussion on it [here](#).)

Voluntary Hebrew slaves (a route out of destitution, not a punishment) were not to be treated as slaves (Lev 25:39). But we find that the biblical God still found this deeply distasteful since Israelites should not be on the verge of destitution in the first place (Amos 2:6). This brings back to mind a higher standard and that the Law merely licenses undesirable things to tighten regulations around them.

And, unlike ancient slavery norms, no-one was allowed to sell a voluntary Hebrew slave to another owner like property, or take any as captives to enslave them (2 Chronicles 28:8-15). They serve their six years and then are released and not sold. To make this stick legally, the Law says that when God rescued the Israelites from Egypt, God made them his own slaves, and is not going to sell. This Law makes people unsellable (Lev 25: 39-43).^[4] The strange idea of being God's slaves actually works as a legal protection against being sold into slavery. And that means protection from notorious slave-owner Egypt. Israel had a new owner who was not an oppressor and not a slave-seller: God.

But in any case, the idea of making a brother into a voluntary slave was virtually put out of sight by Deut 15:7ff, which makes it a law that a "brother" be lent whatever he needs instead. Interesting to say that later (in centuries after Jesus), Jewish rabbis' case-law came up with re-interpretations of this that might not be so simple!^[5]

If a slaveholder causes grievous bodily harm to a slave through violence, the slave goes free, and the slaveholder loses his entire "investment" (Exod 21:26-27).

For Hebrew slaves, their service was time-limited (to six or seven years maximum) with guaranteed release in the seventh year without them paying anything (Exod 21:2).

And they were not to be sent away empty-handed, but with a golden handshake: "*And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.*" (Deut 15:13-15). Isaiah stresses that the ex-slave should enjoy a clean break with no strings attached ("set the oppressed free and break every yoke," Isa 58:6).^[6] This is more generous than Greco-Roman slavery (of the early church era) which only gave slaves freedom with strings attached to protect the slave-owner's "investment." It is also more freedom than given by Exod 21:2ff, where a freed slave had to be a client of the former owner.^[7] The prophets keep seeing something higher than the Law of Moses,

7. As for all of the above, this still does not make slavery alright. The Law of Moses is no substitute for the Garden of Eden. The slew of slave laws in the Torah do show that even if it couldn't be stopped, more humane regulations could be introduced. Bear in mind we are picturing the Bronze Age, and these were times when slavery was unstoppable. The Torah has an element of *realpolitik*, in trying to stop things only where they were stoppable and regulating things that couldn't be stopped. Besides which, the fact of laws being more humane still does not make slavery moral in itself. It isn't. Remember: no slavery in paradise.
8. Jeremiah 34 reports that God was furious that freed slaves were re-enslaved. God then plans to allow a national judgement for this re-enslaving – the judgement being national defeat at the hands of Israel's enemies in war, and exile abroad in Babylon. A few passages in Jeremiah show a similar heart for the marginalized in Israel, for example 7:5-7, 22:1-5, 22:13.^[8] And although the Law of Moses treated male and female slaves unevenly, Jeremiah says male and female slaves should have been treated equally.^[9] The prophets keep seeing a higher law than the Law of Moses.
9. An interesting story in Nehemiah after the return from exile in Babylon sheds light on the problem of slavery in Babylon and back again in Israel where debt-slavery was seen as an embarrassment and a scandal (Neh 5:1-12). There is a real sense that the presence of slavery among Israelites was a moral crisis in the community. But the regulations in the Law of Moses were not fully complied with, and couldn't be fully complied with while the land was under Roman occupation (in Jesus' day). (The Pharisees came up with ways of spiritualizing much of Torah instead.) In the time of Jesus, the inhabitants of Galilee and Judea, etc., were following the patterns of Greco-Roman slavery. And for many slaves, life under those Roman laws could be horrific. A minority of slaves in the big cities did alright out of it. But for a great many slaves, such as those slaving in the mines in the Roman Empire, life was utter hell. (By the way, slavery had nothing to do with ethnicity. Anyone could become a Roman Citizen, but the Romans could enslave anyone who wasn't a Roman citizen in this or that circumstance.)

God's attitudes to slavery in the Christian Scriptures

10. The first thing to understand is that Jesus and the apostles were in a very different era from when the Law of Moses was written. Whereas the Law of Moses was Israelites' own "law of the land," there was no such possibility of making all their own laws in Jesus' day, because Israel had been colonized by the Roman Empire, their land was under enemy occupation, and they lived under Roman rule. There was no calling all the shots. There was no hope of publishing a manifesto for the end of Hebrew slavery, or anyone else's slavery. Anything of the kind would look like a slave revolt in the making. The Romans would probably, given the chance, round up anyone involved, get the names of their associates, round them up too, and likely crucify all of them. (Some examples of Roman ruthlessness towards slaves here: <https://georgykantorblog.wordpress.com/2020/06/03/empire-slavery-violence-and-roman-politics/>.) The people knew their history. For instance if some gladiator slaves revolted, it reminded people of Spartacus, and the Romans were quick to put

such things down, as told by Tacitus [here](#). The balance of probabilities is that circulating tracts calling for the freedom of slaves would have been a highly unsafe thing to do. The prospect of slave revolts terrified the Romans, just as the Romans used terror to control slaves.^[10] Scholars often note this reign of terror over slaves, and yet wonder why there is no documentary evidence of voices advocating abolition of slavery, as if it isn't obvious that any such call could be construed as a slave revolt in the making and in need of ruthless suppression. It would give the Romans a chance to clamp down on dangerous talk. The Romans were known for crucifying thousands when they suppressed slave revolts. Expecting Jesus to put himself and his audiences at risk of a pogrom of the Jews by publishing a manifesto of abolition would be a mistake on our part, but one easily made by us in the relatively privileged twenty-first century. We are left reading between the lines. It can be compared with the silence of the Essenes and the silence of the Therapeutae. I'll come to that.

It's also worth pointing out that without a law change, a release of all slaves would have been illegal, even if anyone called for it. i.e. to release all slaves would be illegal under Roman law. Firstly, they had laws limiting *how many* slaves could be released; second they had laws that made it illegal to release slaves who were under the age of 30 (with only very specific exceptions). So there was no *legal* release of *all* slaves on the table. Which meant advocating release of all slaves would be advocating an illegal release, which would effectively be a declaration of war against the system. Cue Roman crackdown with lethal force. Even calling for a culture change in the empire explicitly towards abolition would still be dangerous - we wouldn't wish the brutal consequences of such talk on anyone.

11. Early Christians believed in bringing back the Jubilee rules, which would have meant ditching Greco-Roman slavery laws and going back to the Mosaic slavery laws guaranteeing release for slaves (Luke 4:16-21). This was obviously eschatological. But to anyone other than Jews, the coded signals in that would probably have "gone over their heads." Since Jesus was not talking about overthrowing Roman rule, his plans had to be something that God would make happen, starting with Jesus then, and completing on Judgment Day.
12. When Jesus was asked a question about interpreting Moses' law on divorce, Jesus in answering didn't appeal to Moses' Law but to the higher ideal of the Garden of Eden. Like a lawyer appealing to a higher court. Jesus commenting on the Law of Moses suggests that it was not the law that God wanted, not how the world was meant to be "in the beginning," and that people should aspire to higher standards, as it was "in the beginning" (Matt 19:8, see also Mark 10:2-9).^[11] (See the footnote below for the text of the verse.) Jesus implies that Moses would have abolished divorce but could not, so he reluctantly licensed it and regulated it. That is Jesus' explanation for what is found in the Torah. Since slavery, like divorce, had no place in the Garden of Eden, it leaves the institution of slavery on slippery foundations. The Law of Moses is no Garden of Eden. This rule can go for anything which would have had no moral place in Eden "in the beginning." (Not that most of the Christian churches have taken much notice of this for most of their history. There were good notable exceptions -e.g. the Mennonites - which I will come to in another post about church history.) **The point is that Jesus, faced with a question about the Law of Moses, appealed to a higher standard, the Garden of Eden. He was anticipating the world to come, a return of paradise, and he was arguing to bring that ideal forward into the moment,** by trying to push back against divorce. If he had been asked a question such as, "If a slave has had seven masters, whose slave will he be in the next world?" we can imagine Jesus replying something like, "You do not understand because you do not know the Scriptures. They were not masters and slaves in the beginning, and at the resurrection you will be no-one's master."
13. Jesus was accused of having the lowest of the low for dinner pals, probably including prostitutes who were almost certainly slaves (Mark 2:15-17). You have to assume he listened to their point of view on life. His parables often reveal horrific treatment of slaves, possibly reflecting their experiences. (Whereas some people try to claim that slavery in the Roman world wasn't so bad, Jesus' parables lift the lid on that.)
14. Jesus promises that there will be changes in the age to come: "at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne... many who are first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (Matt 19:28-30 / Mark 10:31). I could cite a number of similar passages. We see something similar in Paul's thought; that a time is coming when the world will be put to rights. It's a promise that would have sounded appealing to slaves, albeit it's about fixing things in the world to come, not in the immediate present. Except that...
15. Except that one could quietly do things differently in one's own community. John 13:12-17 has the ground-breaking story of Jesus at meal-time choosing to do a slave's job, bending down to wash the disciples' filthy feet. And then telling them that he was modelling the way they were to be to each other. If they were to do that kind of thing, they wouldn't "need" slaves. It would be their own job from now on. This is quite coded language and actions by Jesus in John's Gospel, as if it wasn't safe to publish the message in an uncoded way. But it really suggests that Jesus was setting up for his followers to be a non-slavery community, and that John's Gospel was originally received in the church in that spirit. (This fits with Mark 10:44 which says that anyone who wants to be first among his disciples must be as a slave. This more or less forbids the disciples from being slave-masters; and suggests that slave-holders will be least in the Kingdom of God in Jesus' thinking.) I think the gospel writers would be aghast at the thought that people in the future would read such things and yet think owning slaves instead was what they were being cued up to do.

16. Indeed, what *could* be done by those who disliked slavery was to form their own community. In Jesus' day, this was done by two Jewish groups, the Essenes and the Therapeutae (according to the ancient Jewish writers Philo and Josephus). Like Jesus and Paul (see below about Paul), the Essenes were anticipating the world of paradise to come, and wanted to live the ideal now. They could not safely publish a manifesto against slavery, but they could quietly run their own community without slavery. And so they did. And what's more, we find in the early church a description of a Christian community that sounds like it may have done something very similar, sharing everything in common. This is the Christian community described in Acts 4:32-35. It doesn't mention whether it kept slaves, but the description of it is so like an Essene community, that it is possible that they kept no slaves amongst themselves. I'm only saying possible, because it is impossible to evidence that. The problem with the picture of the Essenes is that being slavery-free must have meant that they didn't allow slaves to join. This could be a double-blow to Jewish slaves with unkind masters. Slaves who were denied freedom by their masters would also find themselves denied entry to the community of the Essenes. This seems pretty cold and exclusive. The Essenes were just embodying a slavery-free ideal that the privileged could join. The New Testament church was quite different because it did allow slaves to join.
17. Most of the material about slavery in the Christian Scriptures is in the letters under Paul's name. He deeply hoped that worldly structures would be ended soon, and that has to go for slavery.^[12] As it was "in the beginning," so he hoped the world would be a paradise again. Paul did not set himself up as authority to over-rule this or that part of the Law of Moses (Torah). Paul's concern with Torah is that its time was over. It was absolutely basic for him that the end was nigh. He argued that the end had already begun. Christ's death and resurrection were the beginning of the end, and Paul hoped that Christ's return would complete the job of ending the world as we know it, and soon. (That's why Paul was so frustrated with people who hung onto Torah instead of realizing that with Christ the new era had begun - the road that would end in paradise.) So don't expect a radical agenda for re-ordering the world's institutions with him. Instead, he gives us a radical vision for church community, where he sets out to confuse the categories of slave and master to destruction. We get radical and utopian wording like these two verses from him in Galatians:

"...There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28) – in other words, in the ideal world to come, there will be no slaves under human masters, and this is already the case spiritually with freedom "in Christ." Notice Paul doesn't say that "slave and master" are all one in Christ. He says "slave" and "free." It would send out a problematic message to say that "slave and master" are all one in Christ. As we will see in the next point, it's the existence of masters that Paul sees as the moral problem.

"...do not use your *freedom* for self-indulgence... through love become *slaves to one another... love your neighbor as yourself*" (Gal 5:13-14). Here, Paul interprets "loving your neighbor as yourself" as all being one another's "slaves" in mutual kindness. So, in describing his ideal picture of a Christian community, Paul eliminates "masters" from the equation, spiritually to begin with. This is quite a slap in the face to slave-masters. Only by taking the role of fellow slaves do they have a part in this.

This is really significant. It means that the way Paul looked at the world, he knew there was a moral problem with the institution of slavery itself. It's "masters" that Paul removes from the spiritual equation, meaning that the fundamental moral problem with the institution is people being "masters" over other people. And with that insight, he seeks to work out how to apply it.

Thus, if you are loving your neighbor how you love yourself, then you can't be your neighbor's slave-master, because you wouldn't like it the other way round. Being the master is disqualified as a form of loving your neighbor in Paul's argument.

This is resistance to the institution of slavery and its fundamental imbalance. Not in the sense of being a tract against the Roman Empire. Rather in Paul's vision for the church, the idea of people being slave-masters over other people just doesn't make sense. The institution of slavery is radically out of kilter with it.

It also upsets people's ideas of what their freedom is for. (Remember Jesus teaching his disciples about washing each other's feet as if to make a society without slave-masters. Otherwise, Jesus says, they have no part in him.)

This simple instruction erases the worldly distinctions of slave and master in the Christian community; the slaves and the free must act as "slaves" to one another, because this is Paul's interpretation of what it means to love your neighbor as yourself. He wants his community to live like a master-free zone.

I could give many more examples of how Paul turns the status of slaves and free people upside down. Of course, Paul could only promise spiritual freedom; but he couldn't promise to free other people's slaves in this life. Paul like Jesus turned everyone's hopes to the age to come, when all would be put to rights.

This sense only deepens when you look at what Paul says in Phil 2:5-8 which tells us that Jesus Christ was praiseworthy precisely because he chose to adopt "the form of a slave." This is Paul's paradigm for a good Christian, and it effectively excludes being a master from being a paradigm for Christians to base their lives on.

Paul called *himself* a slave of God (2 Cor 4:5 and other places). Why else would anyone glorify being a slave like that? Well, it was also a title given to some of the greatest leaders in Israel's history (such as Jacob and David). It also meant that Paul belonged to God, and God wasn't selling. So Paul couldn't be bought. And he couldn't be sold. It was a statement of belonging. It also tells us that speaking of servitude did not automatically indicate that it was coerced and we cannot tell unless we look at the context.

Paul advised slaves to make use of opportunities to become freedmen. Implicit in this is that Paul expects the co-operation of anyone in the church who had been owning slaves and become Christians, so that nothing obstructs his advice to slaves to become free (1 Cor 7:21).

Paul clearly regards the master-slave hierarchy as something to be challenged. Otherwise these passages would not be there at all.

Ephesians, which some critics doubt Paul wrote, has something truly radical for the ancient world, but people hardly notice because it doesn't seem remarkable in our age. It tells slaveholders "do not threaten them" (Eph 6:9). No threats; therefore entailing no carrying out of any potential threats. This disempowers slaveholders in regard to a fundamental aspect of ancient slavery – it cancels their right to take out their aggression on slaves' bodies. It makes unequivocal an early church teaching not to threaten and not to do the sorts of things that you might threaten to do. It cancels their ancient right to coerce slaves. This injunction amounts to nothing less than an outright ban on the physical abuse of slaves. This doesn't make slavery okay, of course - it is just a part of something Paul's churches were doing to destabilize the institution of slavery. Many slaveholders will have doubted that their slaves would do as asked if they couldn't threaten them. This was revolutionary, it really was.

18. 1 Peter is wonderful for the way that it voices what slaves must often have thought: that their masters often abused them when they had done nothing wrong. The letter says to slaves that they are like Christ when he was wrongly abused, and Peter promises slaves that they are healed by Christ's wounds. This is rare beauty in the ancient world. (1 Peter 2:18-24)
19. Revelation 18:13 condemns Rome for its slave trade that treated the "bodies and souls of men" as "cargo." This is powerful. What makes it a condemnation is that it brackets together body *and* soul. Souls belong to God alone, and no-one has the right to sell them. So, taken together, this is saying that no-one has the right to sell slaves' bodies either. It is a condemnation of buying and selling people, again pointing towards the End Times and the paradise to come.
20. And the book of Revelation ends by renewing the vision of the Garden of Eden. Once again, a vision of a place of abundance, a paradise without slavery. "There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away" (Rev 21:4).
21. Where did the trajectory come from which shows exceptional sympathy for slaves in John 14, Paul, 1 Peter and Revelation? Hebrews 10:5-10 gives another hint. Because like Matthew 19:8, it shows that the Law was not really what God wanted. Verse 8 tells us that Christ said to the Father, "'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them' (although the law required them to be made)." So, why would the Law have required what God did not desire? Two answers:

Hebrews says Christ's death met the need for sacrifice, and now the law would be a new covenant "in their hearts" (10:16).

But to explain why Moses' Law contains what God did not desire, we need to think about the paradise Eden – a place where God's perfect law is in people's hearts instead. The written Law of Moses is shown to be a temporary compromise that God is pleased to do away with. So where did the trajectory come from to look at the Law this way? Hebrews indicates that this attitude to the Law came from Christ (10:5). (And we can see an echo of that in [Mark 12:32-34](#).) So, we seriously have to consider that the early church saw revolutionary attitudes to slaves as stemming back to the example and words of Christ.

Conclusion

There is something in the story of a crucified savior, who taught his disciples to wash each others' feet - and taught that the last would be first - that altogether changes hearts, and changed the world so much that the default belief today is that people should not be owned, bought and sold. Like Paul, many Christians today live expectant of the world to come. A world without slavery. That is why it is right that people work for the end of slavery now. Just as there was no slavery in the Garden of Eden, there will be no slavery in the world to come. And in Jesus, that new creation has begun, and the world to come can be modelled now. It is in this big story that God's complaint against slavery is framed.

Epilogue

If one were in ancient Rome, you could not necessarily tell by sight who was a slave and who was not. It was not a split on racial lines. In slave America, a white man had no fear that he could become a slave. In ancient Rome, he did. Anyone could be enslaved by the Romans. Even a freeborn Roman Citizen if convicted of a criminal offence might end up enslaved. So, if not on racial lines, how would you know who was a slave? Sometimes it was obvious, sometimes not. Some wealthy households liked to show off by having well-groomed slaves. One might see someone in quite an advanced role in society, helping Cicero with a literary composition for example or doing the accounts for a major household, and not know by sight if this was a slave or not. If a Roman saw someone wearing a tunic without a toga, he might only suspect this was a slave, but merely by enquiring could find out for sure. If a Roman heard a foreign (e.g. Germanic) accent, one might suspect this was a slave, but again could only be sure by enquiring. Some were more obvious, such as if you saw a craftsman at work and his leg was chained to the floor. A desperately poor Roman Citizen might sell his/her own children into slavery for the money. The boundaries between slave and free were scarily precarious, from the point of view of free people. A free Roman general could be captured in war and sold to "barbarians" in Germany. A free family could be taken by pirates at sea and sold on the slave market. If one saw a slave being whipped, you knew who was the slave and who was not. If you saw someone doing the filthiest undesirable jobs, you would confidently assume this was a slave and likely treat them like one. And even though a huge proportion of the Roman population was slaves, there was a lifelong stigma associated with having been a slave, even if one were later freed and became a Roman Citizen, even if one rose up in society.

If one lived in ancient Israel before the time of the Romans, things would be different again. It still was not racial but a matter of ancestry, and it mattered to people to know their ancestry. If you could convince people that you were a descendant of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – or a convert to Israelite religious customs - then the Law of Moses would apply to you differently from anyone else. As in Rome, you might not be able to tell from sight who was a slave and who was not (if you'd never seen them before) – an Israelite's skin and features might not look different to surrounding peoples - but customs such as diet and clothing would show differences between Jews and non-Jews. And the Law of Moses in the area of slavery applied differently to these groups. If the Law of Moses was being applied, Israelites could not buy and sell fellow Israelites. An Israelite could sell themselves into slavery to a fellow Israelite to get out of poverty but could not be sold on to someone else, and could demand release after six years. The Israelites did not perceive this as a "race" issue but as a matter of membership of God's people, and anyone could join, even if not from the family tree of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

This brings me to perhaps the worst slavery in human history. If one were a white person in north America from the 17th to the 19th century, and one saw a black-skinned person, in most circumstances the white person's default assumption was that this was a slave, and the property of a white person, just on the basis of skin-color. This was markedly different from Greco-Roman slavery which was in turn different from ancient Israel's slavery. It is really quite important to say that not all these historical systems are equivalent. American negro-slavery was chattel slavery, meaning the slaves were categorized like livestock, and their own children belonged to the slave-owner, their births adding to the master's property wealth. (Greco-Roman slavery had similar elements, but the American experience was qualitatively worse not least for its ethnically-based system.) Not all things that may be called slavery are chattel slavery, and conflating different systems serves dubious agendas. The problematic likening (by some authors) of Irish people's indentured servitude (in America) to the chattel slavery experienced by Africans and their children is a case in point. It is wrong historically and morally to count these as the same, and dubious agendas are to be countered. For the same reasons, it is quite important not to count the experience of the Israelites under the law of Moses as chattel slavery or equivalent to the American experience. It wasn't, and if we do not keep these things in mind, we can lose sight of what is worse about chattel slavery and especially the trans-Atlantic slave trade.

During the terrible centuries of slavery in America, African-American slaves took for themselves a message of freedom from their Bibles, and made the story very much their own story of hope. Just as they read of a God who had listened to the cries of the oppressed Israelites enslaved in Egypt, they saw a God who could rescue them from slavery too. It speaks volumes that slaveholders tried to make sure that such passages were missing in African-American slaves' copies of the Bible.

For much of church history, the biblical ideas in my 21 points have not been acted upon by powerful churches, especially those that practiced and defended slavery in north America. (There were exceptions such as the Mennonites who spoke out against it from the 17th century, and those who joined the anti-slavery movement.) But slave-owners would cherry-pick Bible passages to try to authorize slavery and all kinds of abuses (which ought to question their Christian credentials altogether). That would be a whole other post, and this one is long enough. One part of the battles in America on the way to abolishing slavery were two sides using Bible verses against each other.[\[12\]](#) One crumb of comfort from that is this: if it were not for Christianity's long-term influence, it would probably have been all sides agreeing to keep slavery in America, because in most places in most of human history, that is what people would have expected.

To repeat, despite the worst misuses of the Bible, there is something in the story of a crucified savior, who taught his disciples to wash each others' feet - and taught that the last would be first - that altogether changes hearts, and changed the world so much that the default belief today is that people should not be owned, bought and sold. Like Paul, Christians live expectant of the world

to come. A world without slavery. That is why it is right that people work for the end of slavery now. Just as there was no slavery in the Garden of Eden, there will be no slavery in the world to come. And in Jesus, that new creation has begun. It is in this big story that God's complaint against slavery is framed. I thought it was worth repeating that bit!

Footnote on Matt 19:8

This is the law Jesus is debating in Matt 19:1-8. It's from Deut 24:

"...If a man marries a woman who becomes displeasing to him because he finds something indecent about her, and he writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, 2 and if after she leaves his house she becomes the wife of another man, 3 and her second husband dislikes her and writes her a certificate of divorce, gives it to her and sends her from his house, or if he dies, 4 then her first husband, who divorced her, is not allowed to marry her again after she has been defiled. That would be detestable in the eyes of the Lord. Do not bring sin upon the land the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance. Jesus is effectively faced with the issue of whether that is the perfect example of divine justice. Jesus' answer in Matthew 19: 8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning."

Now, Christian belief (based on the Sermon on the Mount for example) is that Jesus' words are the perfect expression of divine justice, so what is Jesus claiming about Deut 24? He is saying that Deut 24 falls short of the perfection of divine justice. Jesus says God's perfect justice is how it was in "the beginning" in the Garden of Eden. Here's the Matthew passage more fully, to show it:

"...When Jesus had finished saying these things, he left Galilee and went into the region of Judea to the other side of the Jordan. 2 Large crowds followed him, and he healed them there. 3 Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" 4 "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,'[a] 5 and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'[b]? 6 So they are no longer two, but one flesh. Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate." 7 "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" 8 Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. 9 I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another woman commits adultery."

So that is Jesus' position. His Sermon on the Mount in Matthew makes some striking claims: that Jesus' own words are an expression of perfect divine justice; that Jesus has the right to say what he wants to say about Moses' law; that the Law of Moses is divinely inspired. And Matt 19:8 adds that the Law of Moses is God's justice for the fallen world Moses had all around him in his time. And there Jesus is clear about it being for Moses' time and not forever, because Jesus says "it was not this way from the beginning." God's perfect justice is found in Jesus words and in "the beginning" in Eden before the fall. Deut 24:1-4, Jesus holds, is divinely inspired justice for hard hearts, not forever.

That the Law of Moses is training for judges who are learning to reason about justice, not an exact set of laws to be followed rigidly without thinking, is exemplified in exactly what Jesus is doing in Matt 19:1-8. The rabbis followed the same principle. There is a good deal of academic literature on the rabbis working out of it.

Notes:

[1] Some of these anti-slavery points on Genesis are found in 4th century Gregory of Nyssa's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*. See Sharon Weisser, "'Philo's Therapeutae and Essenes: a Precedent for the Exceptional Condemnation of Slavery in Gregory of Nyssa'" in K. Berthelot and M. Morgenstein (eds.), *The Quest for a Common Humanity: Human Dignity and Otherness in the Religious Traditions of the Mediterranean*. Leiden: Brill, 2011. 289–310.

[2] History is strewn with different interpretations of ethnicity and geography related to Noah's descendants, and none of this has been consistent over the millennia. See Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods" in *The William and Mary Quarterly*, Vol. 54, No. 1, (Constructing Race), 1997, 103-142.

[3] We are in a realm of troubled thinking framed by eschatology. God's morality would not have allowed divorce "in the beginning," that is, in the Garden of Eden ideal state. It was proscribed in the Mosaic Law, Jesus indicates, only because Moses couldn't stop people doing it, and therefore the Mosaic Law functions to tighten regulations on it. Jesus here seems to understand that the Mosaic Law proscribed things which in God's eyes were not morally good. What surprises his hearers is not that Jesus used this method of exegesis but rather the tough conclusions he drew. It may be comparable to contemporary debates on drug use. Among those who agree that recreational use of class A drugs is a bad thing, there are those who say effectively, "The only right thing is to completely outlaw it"; and those who would say, "We would agree, and we don't condone it, but completely

outlawing it won't stop people doing it, so what we should do is license it but regulate it tightly." That's a debate of *realpolitik* on this contemporary issue. Jesus here seems to do exegesis on an analogous principle. Moses would have completely outlawed divorce ideally, but he couldn't stop people doing it, so he licensed it within regulations. Jesus' justification for his answer is eschatological; he seems to be anticipating a time when things will return to how things should have been "in the beginning"; and on that basis, Jesus speaks out against divorce to a degree that his disciples think is too hard to live with, and Jesus then re-licenses divorce but even more tightly regulated, allowing it only in cases of infidelity. There is an ancient cultural dialogue going on here that is very interesting, in which the Garden of Eden, not the Mosaic Law, was held up as God's best for society. So, a method existed to see beyond the Law to an eschatological paradigm, a sort of "as it was in the beginning, so shall it be in the end." In this way of reading Hebrew Scripture, Jesus indicates that if there is a potential clash between how things originally were in the Garden of Eden and how things are in Torah, paradise trumps Torah, just as plan A is better than plan B. This way of reading allows Jesus to overrule what Torah says on divorce.

[4] Andrew Brown, "Jeremiah 34:8-22: Fresh Life from Ancient Roots". 2015. (Pages unnumbered.) https://www.researchgate.net/publication/309765080_Jeremiah_34_-_Fresh_Life_from_Ancient_Roots Accessed 10 July 2020.

[5] Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. 435-36.

[6] Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. 447.

[7] Niels Peter Lemche, *Biblical Studies and the Failure of History: Changing Perspectives* 3. Abingdon: Routledge, 2014. 29.

[8] M.D. Terblanche, "The Author of Jeremiah 34:8-22 (LXX 41:8-22): Spokesperson for the Judean Debt Slaves?" In *Acta Theologica* vol. 39, Suppl 27:67-78, Bloemfontein 2019.

[9] Meir Sternberg, *Hebrews between Cultures: Group Portraits and National Literature*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998. 448.

[10] Daniel Oudshoorn, *Pauline Eschatology: The Apocalyptic Rupture of Eternal Imperialism: Paul and the Uprising of the Dead*. Cascade Books, 2020. 64-65.

[11] An anti-slavery argument citing Matt 19:8 was deployed by American abolitionist Albert Barnes. (Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery*. Philadelphia, Perkins & Purves, 1846. 114-15.) It was used against slavery in Ellicott's 1905 commentary in dealing with Matt 19:8. (A Bible Commentary for English Readers by Various Writers, ed. Charles John Ellicott. London: Cassell and Company, 1905.) It is also relied on against slavery more recently in a commentary on Exodus 21:2-10. (Tim Stafford, *God's Justice Bible: The Flourishing of Creation and the Destruction of Evil*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016.) Paul Copan briefly uses Matt 19:8 against slavery in his essay "Are Old Testament Laws Evil?" at <http://www.paulcopan.com/articles/pdf/God-is-great.pdf>. Accessed 12 July 2020. Copan applies Matt 19:8 to other questions of God's commands in the Old Testament. (Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?: Making Sense of the Old Testament God*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2011. 60, 64, 189.) Copan uses the same point about Matt 19:8 in a wider ranging way in a book review he wrote, at <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/reviews/crucifixion-warrior-god-greg-boyd/>

[12] Karin Neutel, *A Cosmopolitan Ideal: Paul's Declaration 'Neither Jew Nor Greek, Neither Slave Nor Free, Nor Male and Female' in the Context of First-Century Thought*. London: T&T Clark, 2015. 74. This is a really vital book for understanding Paul's thoughts on slavery.

[13] See Willard M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1983. 31-64.

End. (...from Colin Green at <https://gettingtothetruthofthings.blogspot.com/2020/07/gods-complaint-against-slavery-in.html>...)