

Is The Bible Pro Slavery from Gavin Ortlund Excerpts of his YouTube Video

[1] The following are excerpts of Gavin Ortlund from his brief video on YouTube at

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Etr0rmexOqs>

[2] Related to that is the following: <https://gavinortlund.com/2018/05/25/is-the-bible-pro-slavery/>

[3] General Reference: [www.Slavery.Bible](http://www.Slavery.Bible)

The following excerpts have slight edits for brevity and flow.

### **Begin Excerpts:**

Is the Bible proslavery? This is one of the most challenging and pressing objections that we face as a criticism of scripture and of Christianity. So how should Christians respond to this? One thing right out of the gate we need to be is directed away from a minimizing of this problem. We make things worse for people if we act like it doesn't even need to be taken seriously or minimize the concern.

[Then] in the other direction some Christians [affirm] that the Bible is proslavery. You hear this in progressive Christian contexts sometimes, where people will say, yes, the Bible is proslavery and then this will be used as part of a hermeneutic that often will result in a lower view of biblical authority. You can Google the words redemptive, trajectory, hermeneutic and do some reading on in in that way of thinking about things. [In] some conservative contexts, you'll find Christians who just say, "...Yeah, the Bible's proslavery, it's there, you got a problem with that? The problem was with you deal with it..." And I think that response is not helpful either.

To defend scripture against this charge I want to point out three problems, or at least complexities with this charge that the Bible is proslavery.

Number 1 has to do with the definition of slavery, 2 is the principle of accommodation, and 3 is the book of Philemon.

The first point I want to make is about the definition of slavery. This is not an answer to the question, but it just helps us more accurately frame what we're talking about when we read verses like Ephesians 6:5, Colossians 3:22, 1 Peter 2:18. We in the United States and many other places in the West hear this word in light of our own historical context. And so we typically think of race-based chattel slavery, in which the slave is the legal property of the master and usually permanent property and lacks any basic legal rights. That kind of slavery is manifestly one of the most despicable institutions ever to disgrace human civilization. It is not what is in view in these texts and New Testament or in the Old Testament. Now let me say upfront, in trying to make careful distinctions one could take this as trying to minimize the problem, and that's not the intent. I want to be clear on that. In a perfect world there is no slavery or servanthood of \*any kind, except perhaps the servanthood of love or something like that. So any form of slavery reflects the fact that we are in a fallen world and it is not God's ideal for human beings. Having said that, we need to make basic distinctions between different kinds of because the word \*slavery can encompass so many different things.

The Greek word translated slave is often translated servant or bond servant or something like similar, and, in the first century Greco Roman world it often referred to people who had a surprising level of legal and social status.

Again that is complicated but a good case can be made that the vast majority of slaves in the Greco Roman world were not slaves from birth or necessarily for their whole life or because of their race. For example, there's a passage in the Roman jurist Gaius and his writings from the 2nd century where he talks about how many slaves were prisoners of war, and basically they were made into slaves because they would have been slaughtered if not. Again, we're not saying that is all great, but we're saying we need to understand what we're talking about here first. Similarly, in the Old Testament, slavery was not organized by race, it was organized by circumstance and economics. Israelite regulations freed slaves in the 7th year, the year of Jubilee, you can see Exodus 21:2 for that. There was a command of the death penalty for man stealing in Exodus 21:16, and many of the passages dealing with slavery are seeking to curb against abuses of the institution. None of that means slavery in the ancient world wasn't ever harsh, and there are still difficult passages we have to deal with. We're just creating conceptual space for the important distinctions we have to go through because we at least need to be aware of the difference between, for example, chattel slavery and Abraham's relationship with his top servant.

"But why does any form of slavery have approval in scripture?"

That brings the Second Point, the principle of Accommodation:

Christians believe that God accommodates his revelation to particular historical contexts, and even to fall into social structures within those contexts. To put it colloquially, God tells people how they are to behave even when they're living in imperfect contexts. That makes some sense unless you require that God refrain from giving people instruction on what to do in every particularized situation until all social evil has been removed. An ethical exhortation in a document like an epistle or even the laws of the Old Testament don't actually tell you everything you need to know about God's will and character with respect to this issue. For that, you have to look at the whole of Scripture.

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Those passages are going to give you mostly a picture of day-to-day life in a certain context. For example:

[1] Suppose I said to my friend, go vote in the next election. Does that mean that my overall ideal philosophy of how society should be run is that it should be a democracy? Not necessarily. I'm telling them what they should do if they live in a democracy.

[2] What if I tell a soldier's father who sends a letter to his son who is in the military, and in the letter the father tells his son to obey his commanding officers. Does that mean that the dad is not a pacifist? Does that tell you the full range of his ideal expectations and desires for the world? Of course not; he's telling his son what to do while he's in the military.

[3] Similarly, practices like slavery, polygamy, and divorce were everywhere in antiquity, so biblical instruction that allows for them in certain contexts isn't necessarily saying this is the biblical ideal.

[4] Consider Matthew 19 where the Pharisees come to Jesus. The 1st century Jewish world appears to have been a culture where there was a lot of easy divorce and people abused Deuteronomy 24:1-4 and used that passage to get a divorce for any reason. Jesus is responding to that and indicates that the reason for that law from God and Deuteronomy 24 was their hardness of heart and then He appeals to Creation to say it wasn't always like that.

That's accommodation.

[4.5] Jesus is not denying Deuteronomy 24, nor that it allowed for a certificate of divorce, nor that it was divine instruction, but He is saying that it was Accommodated Divine Instruction. It doesn't show us a timeless ideal and it is not a timeless ideal.

Accommodated Divine Instruction

[5] So there's a Category in scripture for Accommodated Divine Instruction, or a commandment that is (A) genuinely from God and (B) not God's timeless ideal.

So how do we know then what are accommodated laws?

You look at the whole of Scripture.

You look at everything else the scripture has to say.

**[This is not from/in the video but is placed here only for reference on that same theme: [www.Slavery.Bible...](http://www.Slavery.Bible...)]**

Christianity is a religion that is revealed across a time period of centuries, actually across millennia. There are two massive mountain peaks within biblical revelation that we have to look at:

Creation — because that tells us about the world before sin

Jesus — the pinnacle revelation of God

So creation is essential because it tells you what God's original intent was, and the Gospel or the Good News about the work of Jesus is essential because it's the pinnacle expression of God's redemptive work. The doctrine of creation teaches us a radical idea, namely that every human being is a reflection of God made in God's image. Genesis 1 democratizes the idea of creation in the image of God to all human beings. Then in the New Testament we understand that the work of Jesus overcomes all racial, social, and religious divisions as Jesus's death on the cross binds all who are reconciled to God to each other. When we are reconciled to God, we are reconciled to each other, and we exist as brothers and sisters in the gospel.

To see how the gospel changes human relationships consider the book of Philemon. It's surprising that Philemon isn't more talked about in these discussions because it's written to a slave owner named Philemon, and it's about his runaway slave named Onesimus. The whole occasion for this letter is that Paul is writing because Onesimus has run away and then he's become a Christian. Now, if the Bible was proslavery, what might you expect Paul to say here? If the logic of the gospel of Jesus Christ is actually in favor of an institution like slavery, what would you expect? What Paul says is to receive him back no longer as a slave but as a dear brother, and he appeals to Philemon to receive him as you would receive me. In other words, Paul dissolves the master slave relationship and erects in its place a brother-brother relationship in which the former slave is treated with all the dignity of the apostle himself.

In other words, even before the actual institution of slavery is abolished the work of the gospel changes relationships in such a way that undermines it.

Christians have been active in opposing slavery through history and we think of William Wilberforce there but I want to go all the way back to Gregory of Nisa in the 4th century, in 379AD, Gregory gave a thundering sermon against slavery.... going on and on saying how dare you think you can own another human being...One historian called that sermon the most scathing critique of slaveholding in all of antiquity. The reason is lots of people criticize slavery when it was conducted poorly but Gregory didn't merely condemn the abuses of the institution, he condemned the institution as such.

If you want to throw stones at the Bible for allowing for slavery in various ways even while it does so in a very accommodated way that often pushes against it, consider this question:

Where did our opposition to slavery come from in the first place? Slavery, in one form or another, was basically ubiquitous throughout the ancient world. We inherit all of these instincts that incline us to think that slavery is wrong because we believe in things like human equality – but the idea of human equality was not taken for granted in the ancient world – most human beings haven't just assumed that. Think of someone like Aristotle who just assumes we're not equal. Where does this idea of human equality come from? I would make the case that many of the criticisms of the Bible and of Christianity on this score are actually unconsciously borrowing from Christian values in order to make the criticism. Where do we get this idea that slavery is wrong? I would make the case that Christianity has been a great influence to that end.

**[This is not from/in the video but the following is placed for reference – it is a quote from Atheist/Non-Theist Historian Tim O’Neill who comments: “Like most things in history, the abolition of slavery was a gradual process and involved many factors. But if I were to single out one religious tradition that was most influential, it would be Christianity...” <https://historyforatheists.com/2020/01/tom-holland-dominion...>]**

If you'd like to explore that more there's a great book by Tom Holland called Dominion that is this lengthy treatment of it...you could also read a book by Glenn Scrivener called The Air We Breathe...it talks about how we are far more influenced by Christianity than we realize and many of the basic values we take for granted, like equality, have not been taken for granted by most human beings.

Hopefully we have some kind of category for the principle of accommodation. Christians might differ from one another on exactly how to understand that but I don't think anybody can deny that that's a legitimate category of thought as revelation progresses over the millennia. Above all, I find it helpful to come back to the example of Jesus Christ himself, who became a servant for us. The main teaching of Christianity and the core of Christianity is that God himself became a servant in the person of Jesus, and God came down, and He was born as a baby, and He lived a sinless life, and He died and atoning death upon the cross and He rose again from the dead, and doing all of that for the salvation of his enemies, those he did not have to save.

If you come to believe that, and I think there's really good reasons to believe that, then we know we have reasons to trust the heart of God. God is good and that can be the starting point from which we then work through these difficult and complicated topics in the Bible.

**End Excerpts.**