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### **SLAVERY IN BIBLE TIMES**

by David Meager

2007 is an important year in the British calendar as it marks the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the British slave trade. This article will examine the history and practice of the slave trade in the ancient world and compare this with the Bible's teaching on slavery.

#### **Ancient World Slavery**

Slavery seems to have been a common practice in many ancient societies such as Egypt, China and the Middle East. Most slaves originated from the spoils of war, kidnap or voluntarily to pay for debts. The treatment of slaves varied in the ancient world, but in most cases slaves were the property of the master, with little or no rights or status. This meant that many were treated harshly, although most ancient societies had some laws to regulate slavery, such as the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi (1750 BC).

#### **Slavery allowed in the Old Testament.**

Some people are shocked that slavery was an accepted practice in the Old Testament. However, it must be remembered that the slavery sanctioned in the bible is very different to the slavery that occurred in the Americas in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries which is perhaps the popular view of slavery. Old Testament treatment of slaves was also generally more humane than the slavery practiced in other ancient civilizations.

The first possible reference to slavery in the Old Testament could be in Genesis 9 v26 & 27 where Noah cursed Canaan for Ham's sin by prophesying that he would serve his brothers. Both Abraham and Isaac kept servants, but the first clear example of slavery is in Exodus 1 v13 where the Israelites were made to work ruthlessly as slaves and their cry for rescue came up to God (2 v23-24). The kind of slavery the Israelites were subjected to in Egypt was clearly unacceptable to God, judging by their rescue and the regulations regarding slavery in the Mosaic Law.

#### **Slavery in the Mosaic Law**

After the Israelites had fled Egypt they were given the Mosaic Law which allowed them to make slaves of Hebrews and foreigners.

##### **Hebrew Slaves**

The Israelites were to treat their enslaved fellow Hebrews as if they were servants. (Lev 25 v39-40). They were also to give them the option of their freedom in the 7<sup>th</sup> year of their service (Ex 21 v2), and give them the means to make a new start (Deut 15 v12-18), although they could remain a slave if they chose.

Anyone who stole a man and put him to slavery (Ex 21 v16) was to be put to death. There were various laws dealing with physical abuse of slaves (Ex 21 v20 & 26), and slaves who ran away from their masters were to be welcomed and not returned. (Deut 23.15).

##### **Foreign Slaves**

The Israelites were allowed to buy slaves from the nations around them (Lev. 25 v44) and keep them indefinitely as slaves (Lev 25 v44-46), however they were included in the commonwealth of Israel on circumcision (Gn 17 v13), could share in festivals (Deut 16.11), including the Passover (Ex 12 v44) and were given the Sabbath rest (Ex 20 v10).

## **Reasons for slavery**

If an Israelite fell upon hard times they could offer to work for someone else who would in turn look after them (Lev 25 v39). If a thief was caught and could not make restitution then they were to be sold for the theft (Ex 22: v3). Debtors who went bankrupt could be forced to sell their children into slavery (2 Kings 4 v1). These reasons all apply to Hebrew slaves, however, it is difficult to say why the bible allowed them to take foreign slaves. Maybe it was a way of dealing with prisoners of war rather than killing them? Perhaps they needed slaves to prosper as a nation? Both these reasons could apply to David putting the conquered Ammonites to forced labour (2 Sam. 12.31)?

## **Slavery in the New Testament.**

Throughout classical history slavery was taken for granted and the experience of slaves in the Roman and Greek cultures was mixed. The majority of slaves were employed in domestic service in households and could expect an easier life than those slaves working on the land, in mines or on ships. Greek law protected slaves, and though a slave's master had the right to beat him, a number of moral and cultural restraints generally prevented the excessive use of force. Greek slaves had some opportunities for emancipation.

In Roman society the experience of slaves varied depending on their master and the work assigned to them. Some slaves were made to work hard and could be disciplined ruthlessly for minor mistakes, whilst others placed in large villas could have little work to do and were well looked after. Sometimes rich masters kept more slaves than necessary to display their wealth. It is estimated that at the time of Augustus, the richest 5 per cent of Roman citizens owned 1 million slaves, another 2 million slaves were employed elsewhere out of a total population of 7.5 million.

The condition of slaves gradually improved with time, as both Greek and Roman cultures were probably influenced by Stoicism, which regarded all men as equal, and both were certainly influenced by Christianity. Claudius (Emperor 41 - 54 AD) ruled that if an old or sick slave was abandoned, they became free. Under Nero (Emperor 54 - 68 AD) slaves gained the right to complain against their masters in court. Under Antoninus Pius (Emperor 138 – 168 AD), a slave could claim his freedom if treated cruelly, and a master who killed his slave without just cause could go on trial for murder. It also became more difficult for a person to fall into slavery under Roman law. By the time of Diocletian (Emperor 284 – 305 AD), free men could not sell themselves or their children into slavery. Roman slaves also had opportunities for emancipation and some rose high in the ranks of Roman society.

## **New Testament teaching**

Into this culture the apostle Paul addressed masters and slaves in many of his letters. Again the bible does not condemn slavery, but instead was counter cultural in the way slaves and masters were to treat each other. Rather than masters treating their slaves harshly, or slaves disobeying their masters, both were to act in accordance with their new life in Christ. Slaves were to obey their masters, whilst masters were to treat their slaves fairly.

Paul was not opposed to the freedom of slaves if the opportunity arose (1 Cor 7 v21) but believed that God had called people to different stations in life and they were to live out the Christian life in the situation in which they were called (1 Cor 7). For slaves to disobey their masters would have caused God's name to be reviled (1 Tim 6 v1). Slaves were to please God by their service (Eph 6 v5-8 Col 3 v22) and the brotherly love with a believing master should be another reason for serving him well (1 Tim 6 v2). Masters were to treat their slaves well because they both had the same master in heaven with whom there is no partiality (Col 4 v1).

However, in a list of the lawless and disobedient (1Tim 1v10), the New Testament condemns those who take people captive to sell them into slavery, which is consistent with Old Testament Law.

In Paul's letter to Philemon, he urges Philemon to receive back the runaway slave Onesimus as a brother (v16), but Paul does not command him to be released from slavery.

**The early church teaching on slavery.**

Not surprisingly, the early church followed New Testament teaching on slavery, below are some quotes from some early church fathers.

**To masters:**

*'You will not issue orders with bitterness to your maidservant or your man-servant, who trust in the same God.'* Barnabas c 70-130.

**To slaves:**

*'Let them not long to be set free at the communal expense. Otherwise, they may be found to be slaves to their own desires.'* Ignatius c.105

**To servants and masters:**

*'Servants, when they have believed, should serve their fleshly masters the better. In the Epistle of Paul to the Ephesians, it says: "Servants, obey your fleshly masters with fear and trembling." ... Moreover, masters should be the more gentle. Also in the same place, it says: "And you masters, do the same things to them, forbearing anger."'* Cyprian c.250.

However, they asserted the dignity and equality of each other in God's sight even though slaves:

*'If any Christians have male or female slaves or children and persuade them to become Christians, they are to call them brothers, without any distinction.'* Aristides c.125

*'Domestic servants, too, are to be treated like ourselves. For they are human beings, as we are. God is the same to free and slave.'* Clement of Alexandria c.195.

Christians even willingly offered themselves up as slaves to help other Christians:

*'We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to slavery, in order that they could ransom others. Many others have surrendered themselves to slavery, so that with the price that they received for themselves, they might provide food for others'.* Clement of Rome. c.96

**Conclusion**

Throughout biblical times slavery was a common practice. The bible does not condemn slavery but has clear teaching on how slaves should be treated, which was often counter-cultural to the practices of surrounding nations. Biblical slavery amongst Jews was often an act of mercy to provide for the poor rather than an act of exploitation. The bible condemns the abuse of slaves and the forced enslavement of people and slaves were to be treated well in both Old and New Testaments.

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*The next article will look at the history of slavery since the early church, the founding of the slave trade in the Americas, the abolitionist movement, and slavery today.*