

Does the Bible condone slavery?

One of the emotional arguments sometimes used by to denounce both the Bible itself, and the God of the Bible, is the argument that in the Bible God endorsed and condoned slavery.

Though this is an emotionally charged argument it does not do justice to the actual teaching of the Bible:¹

1. **Slavery did not exist before the fall.** First of all, slavery was not a part of God's 'good' creation in the beginning (before sin). Thus, from a Biblical standpoint, slavery is clearly a result of the Fall and of sin, not part of God's original plan for mankind.
2. **Secondly, the Bible nowhere demands that people engage in slavery.** The best that can be said of the Bible is that it tolerates slavery and regulates slavery, but there is no command in the Bible *requiring* people to keep slaves. There is no command in the Bible which says "You must keep slaves, and here are the penalties for not enslaving people."

Of course, the Old Testament does include some laws *regulating* the practice of slavery, but this not the same thing as *commanding* or *encouraging* people to keep slaves, rather, these laws were meant to regulate and bring some enlightenment to an evil practice that was deeply rooted in ancient Near Eastern culture. A good parallel for this in Scripture would be divorce; Old Testament Law allowed people to divorce (Deut 24:1-4), but this did not mean that God either liked or condoned it. On the contrary, as Malachi 2:15-16 clearly states, God 'hates' it. Why then the law allowing people to divorce? As Jesus explains in the Gospels, the divorce laws of the Old Testament were a concession that Moses was forced to make because of the 'hardness' of people's 'hearts' (Mt 19:8). In other words, though God loves marriage and detests divorce, wicked people are so capable of ruining the marriage relationship, that in order to protect one (or both) of the parties in a marriage, it is sometimes necessary to allow them to split up (eg. like in extreme cases of adultery, Mt 19:9). Thus, the divorce laws of the Old and New Testaments are examples of God's mercy in working with sinful people, not proof that God likes or condones divorce. The same is true of the laws regulating slavery in the Old Testament. Nowhere in the Old Testament does God condone slavery. Rather, because of the hardness of their hearts and because of the way in which slavery was ingrained in the cultures around them, God out of mercy made laws to regulate the practice and make it more humane.

3. **The purpose of the biblical laws concerning slavery was to regulate an evil practice ingrained in ancient Eastern culture, and to protect slaves from abuse.** Consider the following:
 - (a) Old Testament Law categorically forbade the returning of runaway slaves to their masters (Deut 23:15-16). In fact, the law explicitly commanded that a runaway slave be allowed to live among the people freely "wherever he should choose." This is hardly the kind of law that a God who loves slavery would make;
 - (b) Furthermore, Old Testament Law set free slaves who were abused by their masters (Ex 21:26-27);
 - (c) Old Testament Law prohibited kidnapping people in order to sell them into slavery, on penalty of death (Ex 21:16);

¹ For a more in-depth study, check out William Webb's fantastic and scholarly book *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* which looks very closely at the Bible's teaching about slavery, women and homosexuality.

- (d) Old Testament Law mandated the weekly Sabbath be a day of rest for slaves along with everybody else (Ex 20:8-11);
- (e) Those slaves who came into slavery with a wife and children could take them with them when they left (Ex 21:3).

The above laws were to be applied to both foreigners and Israelites alike. In terms of length of service there was some difference. Foreign slaves could be kept for life, but Hebrew slaves had to be released after six years of service and paid with food and flock (Ex 21:1-11; Deut 15:12-18). Part of the reason for the difference may have been that since foreigners were not allowed to own land in Israel (unless they were converted and circumcised), it would have been next to impossible for them to earn a living on their own; to release such slaves against their will may have been cruel.

Whatever the case, as the laws above make clear, slavery in Old Testament Israel would have been much less severe than the slavery of Africans in the American South in the 1600's to 1800's – think Jacob selling himself to Laban in order to 'earn' his wife Rachel (Gen 29:18) rather than the picture of African people being beaten like animals in the American South. Furthermore, unlike the American South, the Israelite economy was not a slave economy which needed slave labor in order to survive and function.

Of course, this does not mean that the system of slavery in the Old Testament was good. All slavery is bad. My point is only that the Bible nowhere encourages people to practice slavery; rather, like with divorce, God in His mercy provided humane laws to help alleviate the suffering of slaves in a culture full of hard-hearted people who were steeped in the practice of slavery.

4. **Furthermore, in cases like this where the Bible does not explicitly condone or reject a practice, it is important to look at the overall trajectory of revelation within the Bible and see if there is growing support for a particular practice, or growing rejection.** In the case of slavery, the trajectory of revelation within Scripture is very different than the trajectory for same-sex intercourse. In the case of slavery, the Bible shows a clear pattern of increasing rejection for slavery as one moves from the Old Testament to the New; contrast this with same-sex intercourse where the rejection of the Old Testament – worthy of death (Lev 18:22; 20:13) – is exactly paralleled in the New Testament with exclusion from the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9; 1 Tim 1:10), and Paul's statement 'worthy of death' in Romans 1:32 (cf. Rom 1:26-27). Here are three key stages in the trajectory of revelation within the Bible with regards to slavery:
1. Israel is liberated from slavery in Egypt.
 2. Enlightened laws (in comparison to surrounding countries) about slavery are given to the Jews (Exodus – Deuteronomy).
 3. New Testament: Paul writes in Philemon 16 that liberation from slavery is good, and does everything in his power in that letter to get Philemon to liberate his slave Onesimus. In 1 Corinthians 7:21 he exhorts slaves to 'avail' themselves of any opportunities to be free, and then states that Christians should not become slaves of men, since they should be free to serve Christ. In other words, the Gospel and slavery are incompatible because someone else (Christ) has already purchased us.

Clearly, the trajectory of revelation within the Scriptures is towards a rejection of slavery. Some critics, however, will not be satisfied; they fault the writers of the New Testament for not behaving like 'enlightened' 21st century Westerners and writing a blatant emancipation proclamation for the slaves of their day. What these people do not realize however, is that the situation of the day did not allow the New Testament writers

to outright condemn the institution of slavery. First of all, to encourage slaves to revolt in the days of the Roman empire was to encourage mass bloodshed (think of the disastrous slave revolt known as the Spartacus rebellion, which happened less than a century before Paul's time). Secondly, to whom should the New Testament writers have aimed their emancipation directive? To the pagan masters of the slaves? They were not Christians and would have laughed at the writings of any of the apostles to give up what they considered to be their 'property.' Paul's exhortations to them would have been meaningless. To the slaves? They were powerless to bring about their own freedom apart from overt actions (eg. rebellion, running away). Further, such actions hardly comported with the focus of Paul's gospel message: change is to take place primarily from the inside out, not from the outside in (ie. by imposition on social structures).

For more information about slavery in the Old Testament see the message given April 30, 2017 at Southland called 'Moral Laws, Sacrificial Laws, and Slavery.' The second half of the message deals with what slavery in Old Testament Israel would have been like – for the most part, it was a voluntary thing people entered into when they were desperately poor and had no way of taking care of themselves and/or their family:

[http://mysouthland.com/messages#Old Testament/Moral Laws Sacrificial Laws and Slavery.](http://mysouthland.com/messages#Old_Testament/Moral_Laws_Sacrificial_Laws_and_Slavery)