

Slavery (part 1 of 2): A Review

Description: The article discussed three issues: (a) slavery in Judeo-Christian tradition (b) pre Civil War slavery in the US (c) modern slavery.

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First, a knowledgeable Jew or Christian knows full-well that slavery is discussed in the Bible. The Jewish law has much to say about slaves and their treatment. This matter is not open to debate. It is a fact every rabbi and trained pastor is aware of.



Second, just as the Jews and Christians do not discuss slavery in their teachings and sermons, Muslims do not teach much on the subject. Why? The simple reason is that slavery as it existed in ancient times does not exist anymore. To talk of "slavery in Islam" as if the Muslims practice it today is dishonesty.

Every country has laws against slavery. However, experts say that slavery has taken a new form today that we shall discuss briefly.

UN Definition of Slavery

The slave has three defining characteristics: his/her person is the property of another human being, his/her will is completely subject to his/her owner's authority, and his/her labor is obtained by coercion.[1] The international community condemned slavery as one of the worst human-rights violations, and the classic definition of slavery, set out in the Slavery Convention of 1926 is, "The status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the power attached to the right of ownership are exercised." [2] In 1956, several additional definitions of slavery were added: debt bondage, serfdom, the practice of forced marriage, transferring of wives, inheritance of wives and transfer of a child for purposes of exploitation.[3]

Roots of Slavery in the Bible

The Bible, in both Old and New Testaments, endorses slavery.[4] The Bible existed before the Quran.

The Bible states that once Noah awoke and found out that one of his sons, Ham, had seen him naked. Noah cursed his misbehaving son, Ham, and all the descendants of Canaan, the son of Ham, saying: 'a slave of slaves shall you be to your brothers' (Gen 9:25). It must be noted that this story or anything similar to it is not found in the Quran or the teachings of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon

him.

There is a long tradition among Christians that Ham is the father of the black races of Africa, Shem is the father of Semites (that includes the Arabs and Jews), and Japheth is the father of the white people. Therefore, this passage of the Bible is considered to have made the white races supreme and the black race their servants.^[5] This "biblical passage became for many centuries a major justification for black slavery."^[6] Not too long ago, in South Africa, the Reformed Church referred to this "curse" to support the "right" of whites to rule over blacks.

Slavery is twice mentioned in the ten commandments found in the Bible,^[7] but not once in the [ten commandments](#) of the Quran.

Leviticus 25:44-46 (one of the books of present day Torah, the Jewish scripture) is a key text used for the biblical justification of slavery. It says that God told Jews, 'you may also buy male and female slaves from among the nations...you may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever.'

Abraham, 'the one whom God chose for His love,' and 'the father of the faithful,' bought slaves from Haran (Gen 12:50), armed 318 slaves born in his own house (Gen 14:14), included them in his property list (Gen 12:16, 24:35-36), and willed them to his son Issac (Gen 26:13-14). The Bible says that God blessed Abraham by multiplying his slaves (Gen 24:35). In Abraham's household, angels tell Hagar, his slave, to return to Sarah. The angel tells her, 'return to your mistress and submit to her' (Gen 16:9).

At God's command, Joshua took slaves (Josh 9:23), as did David (1 Kings 8:2,6) and Solomon (1 Kings 9:20-21).

Job whom the Bible calls 'blameless and upright', was 'a great slaveholder.' See Job 1:15-17, 3:19, 7:2, 31:13, 42:8 where Job speaks of his slaves.^[8]

Jesus accepted slavery. The present day Gospels do not have a single word attributed to Jesus as saying anything about slavery. Jesus met slaves (Luke 7:2-10, 22:50, etc) and gave parables of slaves (Matthew 13:24-30, 18:23-35, 22:1-14, Luke 12:25-40, 14:15-24, etc), but he never spoke against slavery. Compare it to what the Arabian Prophet of Islam said about slaves in the next article.

In some seventy passages the disciples spoke directly in support of slavery. They told slaves to accept their fate and instructed their masters to treat them kindly (1 Corinthians 7:20-21, Eph 6:5-9, Col 3:22-25, 1 Tim 6:1-2, Tit 2:9-10, Phlm 10-18, 1 Peter 2:18-19). 1 Tim 6:1-3 instructs slaves to accept their position and obey their masters because it is commanded by "Lord Jesus Christ."

Most Christian theologians and scholars until late last century believed that the Bible sanctioned slavery. The list includes Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and others.^[9]

In 1835, the Presbyterian Synod of West Virginia attacked the movement to set slaves free, calling it a belief that goes against "the clearest authority of the word of God."^[10]

Old School (presbyterian) General Assembly Report of 1845 concluded that slavery

was based on 'some of the plainest declarations of the Word of God.'[\[11\]](#)

In 1861, a Jewish Rabbi, Dr. M.J. Raphall of New York, wrote a much publicized pamphlet entitled "The Bible View of Slavery" in defense of slavery.[\[12\]](#)

As late as 1957 John Murray of the Westminster Theological Seminary[\[13\]](#) was still arguing that Bible allows for the institution of slavery and the past Christian scholars were correct in their understanding of the Bible.

Slavery in US Constitution

The Three-Fifths Compromise is found in Article 1, Section 2, Paragraph 3 of the US Constitution. The 3/5's Compromise enabled more masters to become lawmakers, even though the 3/5's of the slave population counted, had no voice or vote in the democracy.

The Slave Trade Compromise was an agreement during the Constitutional Convention of 1787, protecting the interests of slaveholders, that forbid Congress the power to act on the slave trade for twenty years. The Slave Trade Compromise stopped slave imports after 1807 encouraging slave breeding within the United States and slave auctions throughout the south.

Slavery in Post Civil War US[\[14\]](#)

The American Civil War was fought, in part, over slavery. During the war, President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed all slaves in rebel states. The North's victory in 1865 brought the end of legalized slavery throughout the United States.

Slavery as practiced in the old south took away any control from blacks over their own lives; they were to be slaves for life, their children were born into slavery, forbidden formal education, were harshly punished for small acts of disobedience, their families split as children were sold off, and women sexually exploited. The America's race-based slave system was designed at every level to take away the humanity of the slave, relying on ideas taken from the domestication of animals. Dehumanization had a special meaning for America's slave system. In America the slaves were marked by the color of their skin. In this, America's slave system was supported by American religion: the Bible informed Christians that slaves weren't fully equal humans but descendants of Canaan, marked by God to be inferior and servants of others.[\[15\]](#)

Slavery Today

Legalized slavery may have ended, but the institution exists today under different names. United Nations Human Rights states, "Slavery was the first human rights issue to arouse wide international concern yet it still continues today."[\[16\]](#) US State Department also recognizes "modern slavery."[\[17\]](#)

Slaves are cheaper these days than they have ever been in about 4,000 years. In 1850, a slave would cost about \$40,000 in today's dollars. Now, a slave costs \$30-\$90. There are 27 million slaves by conservative estimates and more than at any time in human

history.[\[18\]](#)

"...between 14,000 and 17,500 people are trafficked into the United States annually, according to the US government, most forced into the sex trade, domestic servitude, or agricultural labor. At any one time, between 52,000 and 87,000 are in bondage... according to the United Nations, profits from human trafficking rank it among the top three revenue earners for organized crime, after drugs and arms."[\[19\]](#)

Endnotes:

[\[1\]](#) Definition taken from D.B. Davies, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Cultures* (Cornell University Press, 1966), 31.

[\[2\]](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavery.htm) (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavery.htm>)

[\[3\]](http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavetrade.htm) (<http://www2.ohchr.org/english/law/slavetrade.htm>)

[\[4\]](#) Article on Slavery in the OT and NT in the *New Bible Dictionary* (2nd edition, London: IVP, 1986), 1121-1125. It must be noted that the IVP *New Bible Dictionary* has an evangelical emphasis.

[\[5\]](#) Griffith Thomas, *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1953), 95-99.

[\[6\]](#) David Brion Davis, *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* (Oxford University Press, 2006) 5.

[\[7\]](#) Most people are unaware that the Biblical Ten Commandments mention slavery twice, see Exodus 20:17 and Deuteronomy 5:21, requiring that slaves be given a day of rest and prohibiting the coveting of a neighbor's slave.

[\[8\]](#) J.H. Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century*, (New York, 1864), 76.

[\[9\]](#) A. Ruppercht, 'Attitudes on Slavery Among the Church Fathers,' in *New Dimensions in New*

Testament Study (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 261-277; J. Kahl, 'The Church as Slave-Owner,' in *The Misery of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 1971).

[10] H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But...Racism in Southern Religion, 1719-1910* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1971) 172.

[11] J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (London: IVP, 1957), 260.

[12] (<http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>)

[13] ([Westminster Theological Seminary](#)), a Presbyterian and Reformed Christian graduate school located in Pennsylvania with a satellite location in London. See J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (London: IVP, 1957).

[14] Follow the [timeline](#) to learn more about the history of slavery in the US.

[15] "[North American Slave Narratives](#)" is a University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill project that collects books and articles that document the individual and collective story of African Americans struggling for freedom and human rights in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries.

Documents that discuss American slavery can be found in Theodore Weld's *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, 1839, republished in *Slavery In America* (Illinois: Peacock, 1972) and W. L. Rose (ed.), *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (Oxford University Press, 1976). For an authoritative discussion of the history of American slavery see *Inhuman Bondage: The Rise and Fall of Slavery in the New World* by a Pulitzer Prize winner historian, [David Brion Davis](#).

[16] (<http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Slavery/SRSlavery/Pages/SRSlaveryIndex.aspx>)

[17] (<http://www.state.gov/j/tip/what/>)

[18] (www.freetheslaves.net)

[19] "Slavery is not dead, just less recognizable"
(<http://www.csmonitor.com/2004/0901/p16s01-wogi.html>)

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