

SLAVERY

Jeremiah 34:8-24, Philemon

By Raymond White

Slavery in ancient Israel was a very different thing than what we normally think of as slavery; as for instance, in the Roman empire where a slave owner could do whatever he wanted with his slaves including crucify them on a whim.

Slavery in Israel was not that, not absolute ownership over another person. There were rules, and slavery was part of a legal system, the Torah, which outlined in detail certain punishments for certain crimes. Capital crimes, for instance, required a capital punishment — simple enough. For crimes of personally injury, retribution was brutal (“an eye for an eye”) but effective, and certainly more fair than other legal system which required, for instance, a hand for a loaf of bread. Crimes which involved monetary damage, like theft, required monetary recompense.

But what about crimes that were none of those? Like for instance, you accidentally killed your neighbor’s cow and you didn’t have the money to pay for it because you were dirt poor? Or you borrowed money for an investment that went bad and you couldn’t repay the loan? How would the law deal with that?

England had its debtor’s prisons, which they somehow thought was fair. But ancient Israel had no prisons other than the self-imposed cities of refuge. So how could a debtor pay off a debt? Temporary slavery was the answer, and it made sense.

Roman slavery, and also slavery in general, was not only unfair because one person had absolute right over another, but was also unfair because it was life-long, there was no relief. In fact, it was longer than life-long because the child of a slave was also a slave, so the misery was passed on from generation to generation.

Hebrew slavery was not that. It was more like indentured servitude for the debtor to pay off his debt as best he can, then freedom, unless he chose to remain a slave.

We do similar things today. Are convicted prisoners slaves? We don’t call it slavery (because the word is so unsavory), but we think it not unreasonable for prisoners, convicted felons, to be pressed into chain gangs to build railroads and other civil projects. Or make license plates. Or any other such productive work that makes their time in prison at least useful. And why not? They’re in prison to “pay their debt to society,” so why shouldn’t they work and be productive rather than lay in their cells watching TV? Besides, most prisoners, I think, would rather be doing something rather than nothing.

Is that slavery? By any meaningful definition it is. But we don’t call it that today. And then there was indentured servitude in Colonial America which was very much like biblical slavery. But again, we wouldn’t call it slavery. It was a debt bondage by agreement. If someone wanted to immigrate from Europe to America and had no money for passage, then that person could sale himself, some specified number of years, to a plantation owner to pay off his passage.

Is that slavery? Some would say yes. Others would say that demanding payment for a contracted debt is fair enough, and is not slavery.

How about a contract that you can never get out of? Frank Sinatra, when he was young and not yet famous, signed such a life-long contract with Tommy Dorsey. Then when Frank got famous he wanted out of that contract but he couldn’t get out of it. How did he get out of it? His good friend Lucky Luciano walked into Tommy’s dressing room

one day, put a pistol barrel in Tommy's mouth said, "I'm buying Franky's contract from you for one dollar." Tommy sold it, and Lucky gave it to Frank. It was a friendship thing. Contracts like that do amount to slavery, do they not? So gangsters are good for some things, in Frank Sinatra's case, a little abolitionist violence was helpful.

What about American soldiers? A soldier enlists for four years, and during that four years if he's off base without proper leave he is AWOL and can go to the brig or face court marshal. And if he leaves during wartime, that's desertion and he can be shot! Well, in theory anyway. American deserters were not shot during World War II. But British, German, and Russian soldiers *were* shot for desertion. Stalin said, "It takes a brave man to be a coward in the Red Army." Indeed.

But you get the idea. A soldier is *not* free to leave as he chooses and that makes him, if not actually, then at least something like a slave.

My point is that in modern America we have institutions that are like slavery but are not slavery. And why are they not? Because we very carefully define them not to be.

Slavery was outlawed in America by the 13th Amendment of our constitution. Here are the words: "Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction."

So imprisoned criminals are not slaves. Why? Because the constitution says so. Also, indentured servants are not slaves. Why? Because they indentured themselves voluntarily. Only *involuntary* servitude is slavery. Why? Because the constitution says so. So a young and foolish person could, in theory, volunteer for a life time of servitude without realizing the long term implications — as Frank Sinatra did. The constitution allows it. Is that illegal today? I don't know, for that you'd have to talk to an attorney.

But my point is that any discussion about biblical slavery and its fairness or unfairness has to first deal with what exactly do we mean by slavery. Our constitution insists that prisoners and voluntarily indentured servants are legally not slaves although in fact they are.

Well, if those folks are not slaves, legally I mean, then what are we to make of the "slaves" of Hebrew law?

Here's what I'm saying, or at least what I think I'm saying. What Hebrew law calls slaves is not at all like what Romans (or other ancient peoples or American plantation owners) called slaves. What the Torah calls slaves is much more like what we call prisoners or what we call indentured servants. And with that clarification, biblical slavery is not the evil that we fought the civil war to end.

With that very long introduction, let's get to it and find out what "slavery" in the Old Testament was all about. Here are the biblical rules of slavery.

[1] DURATION

Deuteronomy 15:12 And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee.

The maximum sentence for a man or a woman in slavery was six years, tops. That's it. The seventh year was the Jubilee year and all slaves (well, Israelite slaves, foreigners didn't get the same respect) were freed. It doesn't matter the size of the debt.

[2] KIDNAPPING

One thing was absolutely forbidden: man stealing. Kidnapping someone to make him (or her we presume and infer from *Jeremiah 34:9*) a slave was a capital crime.

Deuteronomy 24:7 If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you.

You can't just kidnap someone and make him (or her) your slave. That is a capital crime.

[3] ESCAPE

Even good slavery is bad, and a slave has a legal right to try to escape and you have a legal obligation to help him.

Deuteronomy 23:15 Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee.

Wow! So the underground railroad was legal in Israel. This gives us permission and a commandment to be abolitionists. It appears that the Apostle Paul was in violation of this verse when he wrote Philimon. Except that they lived under Roman law and not under Jewish law, and an escaped slave could easily end up on a cross, which is what happened to Spartacus and his 50,000 slave rebels. So Paul, I believe, was not defending slavery, he was probably protecting the life of this escaped slave who had come to him.

[4] JUST THE WAY THINGS WERE

2 Kings 5:2 And the Syrians had gone out by companies, and had brought away captive out of the land of Israel a little maid; and she waited on Naaman's wife.
:3 And she said unto her mistress, Would God my lord were with the prophet that is in Samaria! for he would recover him [Naaman] of his leprosy.

Unfortunately, 3000 years ago slavery was so taken for granted that the Bible doesn't even bat an eye at the injustice done to this girl. This young Jewish girl had been kidnapped into slavery — foreign, not Jewish — and had no hope of deliverance. She even seemed resigned to it and devoted herself to her masters. The rest of the story is important, but it was just the captive slavery that I wanted to show you.

Another dark aspect of slavery, beyond the forced servitude is the cheapness of life, is the complete lack of respect for another person's life.

Amos 8:6 That we may buy the poor for silver, and the needy for a pair of shoes...

Not only are people bought and sold, but they are bought and sold cheaply, and that's the final insult.

Albert Switzer, that noble doctor who devoted his life to serving the poor and the sick in Africa, talked about “reverence for life.” Slavery is the exact opposite of that. Slavery has no reverence for life.

Not even Christianity changed this view of things. Even after Rome became Christianized, there was still slavery. The Spanish and the Portuguese took captured Indians as slaves and even Christopher Columbus took slaves from the West Indies. I'm only pointing out that slavery was so pernicious, and seems to always have been, that it just didn't occur to anyone, not even bible authors, that it ought to end.

It took the industrial revolution to change things. Actually it made things worse — (Eli Whitney's cotton gin grew the cotton industry and also the slave industry) — but eventually it became obvious that machines did the hard work so who needed slaves?

To give the devil his due, maybe it was the other way around. Maybe people's growing dislike of slavery was the catalyst *for* the industrial revolution. If the “good life” thrived on the backs of slaves, then ending slavery meant ending that good life. So, what was the alternative? The answer: machines. So maybe abolition did us a second good thing. Not only did it end slavery, but perhaps it also gave us this new, technological good life that is so much better and without the pain of conscience.

[5] BACKLASH

Conscience was not the only motivation to end slavery. Personal safety was another. Slavery was always hazardous and the world's great abolitionists (Moses, Spartacus, and John Brown for instance) worked hard to increase that hazard. Pharaoh did not want to free his Israelite slaves, and at Moses' word, Egypt paid a heavy price.

Here's a verse that shows how slaves felt about slavery.

2 Kings 9:32 And he [new king Jehu] lifted up his face to the window, and said, Who is on my side? Who? And there looked out to him two or three eunuchs :33 And he said, Throw her [Jezebel] down. So they threw her down: and some of her blood was sprinkled on the wall, and on the horses: and he trode her under foot.

It's interesting that eunuchs were the most willing to kill Queen Jezebel — “I think we can accommodate that request!”

The downside of slavery, from the master's point of view, is that the master is always surrounded by people who hate him, or her in Jezebel's case, and, given the chance, would gladly slit his throat, or in this case, toss her out of a window. Think about it. Who would hate a slave owner more than the slave owner's eunuchs?

[6] EQUALITY

Here is an excellent argument against slavery.

Job 31:13 If I did despise the cause of my manservant or of my maidservant, when they contend with me :14 What then shall I do when God riseth up? And when he visiteth, what shall I answer him? :15 Did not he that made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?

The point is that servants in general and slaves in particular are on an equal footing with their masters before God. Thomas Jefferson was right, “all men are created equal.” Well, that’s what he wrote anyway. The slaves he owned probably had a different story, but at least the words were right. And in the end, it was the words that mattered.

[7] THE FLIP SIDE

Isaiah 49:24 Shall the prey be taken from the mighty, or the lawful captive delivered?

We don’t believe in slavery. But there are “lawful captives”, for instance prisoners pressed into road gangs, indentured servants who have exchanged a certain period of time of their lives for financial benefit, soldiers who have signed on for four years, long-term contracts where we obligate ourselves to perform some service. Slavery per se is wrong, but those obligations we create for ourselves we consider to be morally acceptable. The difference is willingness, or some willingness anyway at some point.

[8] THE HIGH PRICE OF SLAVERY

Jeremiah 34:8 ... Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people which were in Jerusalem, to proclaim liberty unto them. :9 That every man should let his manservant, and every man his maidservant, being a Hebrew or a Hebrewess, go free; that none should serve him of them, to wit, of a Jew his brother. :10 ... then they obeyed and let them go. :11 But afterwards they turned, and caused the servants and the handmaids, whom they had let go free, to return, and brought them into subjection for servants and for handmaids.

So the Jews had a momentary attack of good conscience and let all their slaves go free. But it didn’t last long. They were soon overwhelmed with buyer’s remorse (seller’s remorse?) and snatched all their slaves back, I suppose when they realized that doing their own cooking and laundry etc. was harder than they thought.

But that’s not the end of the story. God had something to say about it. When God had given the Torah, he had freedom and liberty in mind, that’s why their laws regarding slavery were so circumscribed. And when the people said, “Free our slaves? Why?” they put themselves in the role of Pharaoh and God took a dim view of that.

Jeremiah 34:13 Thus saith the Lord, the God of Israel; I made a covenant with your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondmen, saying, :14 At the end of seven years let ye go every man his brother an Hebrew, which hath been sold unto thee; and when he hath served thee six years, thou shalt let him go free from thee: but your fathers hearkened not

unto me, neither inclined their ear. :15 And ye were not turned, and had done right in my sight, in proclaiming liberty every man to his neighbor; and ye had made a covenant before me in the house which is called by my name. :16 But ye turned and polluted my name, and caused every man his servant, and every man his handmaid, whom he had set at liberty at their pleasure, to return, and brought them into subjection, to be unto you for servants and handmaids.

So God outlines their crime. Liberty should have been their passion, but instead, the good life on the back of slaves was their passion. They misunderstood the whole point of why they were a nation in the first place. It was always about freedom.

And now, the punishment.

***Jeremiah 34:17** Therefore thus saith the Lord; Ye have not harkened unto me, in proclaiming liberty ... behold, I proclaim a liberty for you, saith the Lord, to the sword, to the pestilence, and to the famine; and I will make you to be removed into all the kingdoms of the earth. :18 I will give the men that have transgressed my covenant ,, :19 The princes of Judah ... and all the people of the land, which passed between the parts of the calf, :20 ... into the hand of their enemies ... and their dead bodies shall be for meat unto the fowls of the heaven, and to the beasts of the earth. :21 And Zedekiah king of Judah and his princes will I give ... into the the hand of the king of Babylon's army ... :22 ... and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without an inhabitant.*

And that is exactly what happened. God exacted a heavy price for enjoying the good life on the backs of slaves.

God had brought them out of Egypt and into freedom and gave them a law of justice and judges and rules for slavery that made sense. They rejected the judges and demanded a king, and rejected liberty in favor of slavery. And now, since that's what they wanted, that's what they would have. God sold them into slavery.

[9] PAUL

***Philemon 1:1** Paul, a prisoner [slave] of Jesus Christ, and Timothy our brother, unto Philemon our dearly beloved, and fellow laborer. :10 I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds. :11 Which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable you to thee and me. :12 Whom I have sent again: thou therefore receive him. :17 If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. :18 If he hath wronged thee, or owed thee ought, put that on mine account. :21 Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say.*

A chief criticism of the bible (by people who want to criticize the bible) is that Paul is pro-slavery. But that is an unfair characterization.

Onesimus was a slave and also a Christian, owned by Philemon also a Christian. Onesimus, unhappy about his circumstance ran away and came to Paul. What he was expecting Paul to do is not clear. Maybe he thought Paul might help him escape, after all,

Christianity had a lot to say about freedom, and under Jewish law, Paul would even be obligated (*Deuteronomy 23:15*).

But they didn't live under Jewish law, they lived under Roman law, and for a slave to escape or for someone to even help him escape, those were capital crimes. Onesimus was risking his life and maybe even Paul's.

But isn't abolition the moral imperative? Not in the first century Roman empire. Slavery was just part of the sea of injustice that they all swam in. I expect that Paul and his fellow disciples thought about how wonderful the world would be if one day all men were free. But at that time, it could be nothing but a fantasy. The last real freedom fighter was Spartacus, and he had died on a cross with 50,000 of his followers. Is that really what God expected of his fledgling church, to openly oppose this millennia old unjust institution of slavery? Is that really the hill that Christianity wanted to die on?

A much better strategy was: let's first give people a conscience, coming, as it must, from Jesus Christ and the Jewish God. Then we'll see just how far that conscience can take the human race into goodness.

In the meantime, Christianity would have to survive and coexist with slavery if it was to be any good to anyone at all.

So, what to do about Onesimus. To help him escape would only get him killed, and maybe Paul too. To kick him out would be mean, not the kind of thing that one Christian does to another. The only thing that made sense to do was to lecture the young Onesimus on what it meant to be a good slave (as unjust as it was) instead of a rebelling one (which might get him killed) and appeal to Philemon's sense of Christian mercy. And so Paul wrote a letter of recommendation from his own hand filled with every gushy sentiment he could think of.

Notice how carefully Paul begins. I am a slave too, of Jesus Christ. And you and I are brothers in this labor and you are beloved. Therefore...and then Paul makes his plea. Another thing that Paul does is recommend Onesimus. While as he was before "unprofitable" (good for nothing and lazy and a troublemaker), he is now "profitable" (I've lectured him and he now understands that he has to be a team player, putting your interest ahead of his own). And with that recommendation, Paul, risking his own reputation, sends Onesimus with the letter back to Philemon, crossing his fingers and praying that (1) Philemon will be forgiving, and (2) Onesimus will be a better, more loyal, more productive slave.

Unfair? Of course it was unfair, but that was the world they lived in, and that was the circumstance that Onesimus was born to. Sorry, but for real freedom, they would have to wait nearly 2000 more years. And when that happened, when slaves were finally freed, Christianity and the Christian conscience were largely responsible.

So give Paul a brake. Really.

[10] EPILOG

1 Corinthians 7:21 Art thou called being a servant [slave]? Care not for it...

We are all slaves of something: poverty, money, ugliness, fat, food, stupidity, work, laziness, passion, poor health, drugs — the list is long of the things that exist, it sometimes seems, for the single purpose of enslaving us.

Paul here is advising slaves, actual slaves, don't fret about it. Enjoy life and live life rightly in spite of the many leashes that tug at you, and in every situation do the best that you can.

Well, if real slaves could get on with life and be happy, then surely we, who are so bless, can do at least as well.

John 8:32 *And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.*