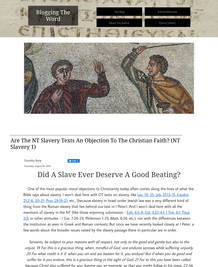

Are The NT Slavery Texts An Objection To The Christian Faith? (NT Slavery 1)

Timothy Ross
Thursday, August 22, 2019

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Did A Slave Ever Deserve A Good Beating?

One of the most popular moral objections to Christianity today often comes along the lines of what the Bible says about slavery. I don't think that's fair. Off I start my series. Mar 24, 29, 31, July 2019 (Exodus 21:2-6, 20-21; Psalm 29:2-4)

Because slavery is local under specific laws (which Jewish law was a very different kind of thing from the Roman slavery that lies behind our text in Peter) And I want the reader to see all the mentions of slavery in the NT (Now enjoying subscribers! - Feb. 6/15, Feb. 22/2-41; Tim. 6/1-Now (Eh, or other reasons) I'll do a 2015 Philemon (Tim. Mar. 15/16) and a 2016 Colossians (Philemon) the institution as seen in Greek and Roman contexts. But since we have recently looked closely at 1 Peter, a few words about the lessons that were raised by the slavery passage there in particular are in order.

Servants, be subject to your masters with all respect, not only to the good and gentle but also to the harsh. For this is a gracious thing when, mindful of God, one endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it if you sin and are beaten for it, you endure it? But if when you do good and suffer for it you endure it, this is a gracious thing before God. For you were called for this, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. 23 When he was reviled, he did not revile in return, when he suffered he did not threaten but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. 24 He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. 25 For you were straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.

1 Peter 2:18-25 (Exodus 21:2-6, 20-21; Psalm 29:2-4; Tim. 6/1-Now (Eh, or other reasons)

When modern readers come to passages in the Bible like 1 Peter 2:18-25, they almost inherently think of the institution of slavery. We modern people are shocked. It's gross and of the deepest sin. Some people can make passages like this extremely troubling to readers today. And in fact, this passage and others like it were often used by those who wanted to argue about slavery as justifiable in the Bible. Some people in my day took a dim, "biblical" support for their actions, and for the institution of slavery as a whole. We don't. Slavery is a sin. It's a sin against God and man. It's a sin that we can see in our day and age, from slavery to Gas Station employees (I'm speaking of the ongoing "Biblical" I think we need to have, and unfortunately seem to have, those who are supposed to be our spiritual shepherds and overseers based on texts like this one in the Bible.

Ancient And Modern Slavery

Differences Between Ancient and Modern Slavery

But first, we need to see some important differences. We usually think of the American slave trade and the slavery of the first century world. There is something unimaginably retrograde and horrifying about the dehumanizing institution. Jesus and about all people, as being on the back of the human race, and that such dehumanization is abhorrent to God, opposed to the Gospel, and should be condemned, repented of, and forsaken by all who want to be saved. But there are some very important differences. The slave trade in the Bible was very different, and in some ways could be seen as more humane. Some of the most significant differences could be noted, and the fact that the Bible never does even slips those and well-educated, and even well-meaning people into thinking that by themselves, the institution of slavery became slavery by being born to slave parents, or by being taken as prisoners of war. But whenever the slave of a slave's mother, or being sold into slave as a result of being born to slave parents, or being taken as a prisoner of war, or being sold into slavery because of a law, or being taken into slavery because of a law, or being sold into slavery because of a law, or being taken into slavery because of a law, or being sold into slavery because of a law, or being taken into slavery because of a law

(as in Luke 12:46). Plutarch records in his Lives about Cato, for example,

> "...when his circumstances were improved and he used to entertain his friends and colleagues at table, no sooner was the dinner over than he would flog those slaves who had been remiss at all in preparing or serving it. He was always contriving that his slaves should have feuds and dissensions among themselves; harmony among them made him suspicious and fearful of them. He had those who were suspected of some capital offence brought to trial before all their fellow servants, and, if convicted, put to death." (Plut., Cat. Ma. 21.3–4)

Slaves usually could marry and have children, but these children immediately became the property of the slave-owner, who could then sell or trade them at will (see Plato, Leges, 930d-e). They thus were commonly separated from their family members. They were, without doubt, in many or even most cases, subjected regularly to terrible and inhumane abuse (see for example, Matt. 18:34; 25:30; Luke 12:47-48, etc. See also the excellent Excursus on "Slaves And Slavery" in Craig Keener's Acts Commentary, Vol. 2, for more details from an author deeply conversant with the primary sources, or the standard articles in the IVP Dictionaries, or the relevant sections of commentaries like those by McKnight, Marshall, and others. There are also several major monographs/book length treatments which I don't recommend here simply because I haven't finished them.)

I explain all this not to glorify the evil of sin and sinful institutions, but that the harsh historical realities might be honestly met. We need to hear, and I think, empathize painfully with, those who find passages in the New Testament that relate to slavery deeply troubling. However much we might wish it otherwise, none of the NT authors were abolitionists. It probably never would have even occurred to them to question the inherent morality of a practice that was so ingrained in the warp and woof of the society around them. When Paul and Peter give exhortations to slaves to be submissive to their owners, it is quite easy to understand how they could be accused, from today's perspective, of perpetuating what is undeniably an inherently evil institution.

To speak specifically of our text in I Peter, understand well that some of Peter's readers had almost surely been abused in some of the common ways we have described above. (Peter himself makes this clear when he explains that they are to submit, not only to, "the good and gentle" owners, but also to the "unjust" owners.) While he comes to suggest his own unique approach to the issue, N.T. Wright highlights the problem well,

> "In the ancient world, more or less everything that today is done by electricity, gas and motorized engines was done by slaves. That is not, of course, a defense of the system of slavery. Slavery was a form of systematic, legalized dehumanization. A slave was the 'property' of his or her owner, who would provide enough board and lodging to enable the slave to work the next day, and the one after that. But, as 'property', the slave could be ill-treated, physically and sexually abused, exploited in a thousand different ways...Peter addresses these Christian slaves. Instead of telling them (as we might prefer) that they should rise up in revolt against their masters, he tells them to obey, and to show respect. And he stresses this, not only when the masters in question are kindly and fair-minded, but also when they are unjust.
>
> Here, from our point of view, he sails very close to the wind. Putting up with unjust suffering looks, to us, very much like colluding with wickedness. Many a violent household, many an abusive workplace, has been able to continue acting wickedly because people have been afraid to speak out, and have kept their heads down and put up with the abuse." (Wright, N.T., Early Christian Letters For Everyone, pg. 69-70).

But perhaps more troubling than Peter's urging them to submit, (even to their abusers!) is his logic and statement in verse 20. He explains that when a slave endures injustice for the name of Jesus, he earns a heavenly grace. But, perhaps to avoid the conclusion that all suffering a slave endured was noble, he qualifies, "For what credit is it if, when you sin and are beaten for it, you endure?" Understand that Peter speaks these words directly to slaves, some of whom have almost certainly endured, and will endure again, the common kinds of sexual and physical abuse described above. It is almost impossible to avoid the implication that behind such a sentiment lies Peter's latent (and unchallenged) presupposition that sometimes a slave, because he was a slave rather than a citizen, simply deserved a good beating for his wrongs. In his own time and context, a different attitude could hardly be expected of him. And to the great shame of the Church through the centuries, Peter's words (and others like them in the NT) have at times been used to suggest that God placed his stamp of approval upon horribly inhuman and inherently evil institutions.

So what do we do with these texts? If it is not historically appropriate to pretend that the slavery behind them "wasn't all that bad," and if it is not exegetically appropriate to pretend that the texts condemn or oppose slavery itself (they do not), then how do we read such texts? What is appropriate? In the next blog post I will suggest seven factors we must consider to read such slavery texts well. Stay tuned!

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Timothy Berg
Schaff Writes,
"To Christianity we owe the gradual extinction of slavery.
This evil has rested as a curse on all nations, and at the time of Christ the greater part of the existing race was bound in beastly degradation—even in civilized Greece and Rome the slaves being more numerous than the free-born and the freedmen. The greatest philosophers of antiquity vindicated slavery as a natural and necessary institution; and Aristotle declared all barbarians to be slaves by birth, fit for nothing but obedience. According to the Roman law, "slaves had no head in the State, no name, no title, no regi... See more
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Timothy Berg
Mark Strauss probably goes slightly too far when he writes,

"Slavery was common in the Roman Empire, although the status and privilege of slaves varied enormously. While some first-century Christians kept slaves, the New Testament provides clear indications of the evil of slavery and the need for its abolition."

(4 Portraits, 1 Jesus, pg. 165).
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