

The life of a slave was rarely interesting to an ancient historian. Much of what we know about the personal lives of slaves was written in passing. It seems to me that there is still a lot of debate between scholars about the level of dehumanization in ancient slavery practices, which can be seen in these two different definitions of ancient slavery:

“A person bound in servitude to another human being as an instrument of labour; one who is no longer free and has no rights.” - Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Dictionary (1995) page 1185

“Slavery is holding a person in servitude by violence, natal alienation and personal dishonor as the chattel of another. Slavery is neither simply the loss of freedom, nor the same as coerced labor, nor equitable with the loss of civil rights.” - Dictionary of New Testament Background (2000) page 1124

Both definitions include slaves being in servitude, but one speaks of violence, separation from one's culture, and dishonor—it is more than the loss of basic civil rights. To become a slave, by this second definition, is to be shamed, a social outcast, dead to society.

For those studying the slavery practices in the Bible, which definition of slavery should we apply? You will have to decide.

Who could become a slave in Rome and Greece?

Slavery in the ancient world was not racially motivated. If you were in the unfortunate position of being a slave, it was likely due to one of these reasons: (2)

- You were a captive of war, either a soldier or a citizen of the defeated country. (Julius Caesar was reported to have shipped one million slaves from his war in Gaul between 58 and 51 BC.)
- You were a criminal.
- You were poor and sold yourself into slavery so you could have food, shelter, and clothing.
- You were sold by your family to pay a debt.
- You were unwanted at birth and rescued from infant exposure or abandonment.
- You were born to slave parents.

What rights did a slave have in Rome and Greece?

The life a slave could expect was dependant wholly on position (a slave in a mine had a very different experience than a slave in a rich household) and on the treatment given by his or her master. There were a few governing principles regarding the rights and treatments of slaves: (2)

Slavery in Ancient Greece (5th and 4th centuries BC)

- Slaves were denied citizenship.
- Slaves were not permitted to hold political offices or serve as magistrates.
- They could not own land or hold a mortgage loan.
- Their children were born slaves.

Slavery in the Republic of Ancient Rome (200 BC to 235 AD)

- Slaves were not segregated from any type of work. They could be trained and work as doctors, artists, poets, teachers, philosophers, shopkeepers, architects, and more.
- Slaves who were freed could move up social and economic ranks. Felix, the Judean governor that Paul met in Acts 24:22-27 was an imperial freedman.
- Educated slaves were highly valued.
- Slaves were given a small amount of money, their *peculium*, which gave them the incentive to work hard so they could purchase their freedom (years or decades later).
- A slave could be sold to a god, giving them their freedom while they worked for their master under contract.
- The children of slaves were born as slaves.
- Slaves usually lived in the master's home.
- Slaves could be violently beaten or killed at their master's discretion.
- A slave had no sexual rights.

Who could be a slave in Ancient Israel?

- Slaves could be captives of war (Numbers 31:9) but kidnapping men to sell was forbidden (Exodus 21:16) as was deporting foreign populations to sell into slavery. (Amos 1:6)
- Slaves could be foreigners. (Leviticus 25:44)
- Slaves could be fellow Hebrews. (Exodus 21:2)
- Children born to slave parents were also slaves. (Genesis 17:13)
- The poor could sell themselves into slavery. (Nehemiah 5:1-5)

- Children could be taken into slavery as payment of debts. (2 Kings 4:1-7)

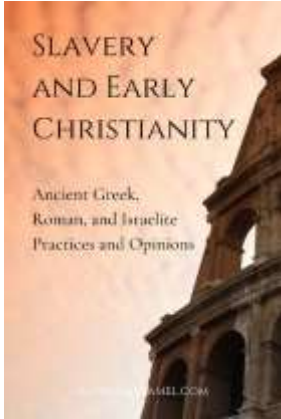
What were the laws about the treatment of slaves by Hebrews?

These scriptures may have affected how a first-century scholar, like Paul, viewed the position of slavery. As a Roman citizen, living in and traveling to various cities around the Roman world, Paul had likely seen pagan slavery all around him and might have noted the differences.

- Hebrew slaves were to be freed after six years, and given generous gifts of provision when they left. (Deuteronomy 12:1-14)
- Hebrew slaves were to be treated as hired men rather than a slave, for both are equals under God. (Leviticus 25:39-40)
- If they were married before slavery, slaves kept their wives when they went free, but if the master gave him a wife, the wife and children belonged to the master. (Exodus 21:3-4)
- A Hebrew daughter sold as a slave was not automatically freed. (This could have been for the protection of herself and any children she had borne in service.) If the master agreed, she could be redeemed by her family. He couldn't sell a Hebrew slave girl to foreigners. If a man gave a female slave as a wife to his son, she must be given the respect he would give a daughter. She must receive the rights of a wife in food, clothing, and conjugal rights, or she is automatically freed. (Exodus 21:7-11)
- On the Year of Jubilee, all Hebrew slaves were freed, along with their sons. (Leviticus 25:40)
- Slaves could buy their freedom, or another could buy it for them. They could not be denied the right to purchase their freedom. (Leviticus 25:47-49)
- If a master harmed a slave, the slave was freed. (Exodus 21:26-27)
- If a slave was freed but chose to remain with their master forever, he or she would be pierced through the ear on the master's door. (Deuteronomy 15:16-17)

One thing to remember as we reflect on the laws of Moses is that what the people were told to do, and what they actually did, could be very different. In Jeremiah 34:8-17 the people freed their slaves but immediately took them back again. So the Lord says if they will not proclaim release to their brother, then He will proclaim release to the transgressors: release to the sword, to pestilence, and famine.

Ancient Opinions on Slavery



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Slavery in the ancient world of Rome was usually considered against nature (every man wants to be free), yet morally right. (3) Aristotle seemed to assert that certain people were naturally disposed for slavery. This disposition wasn't based on race, but on a strong physical build, a compliant personality, etc. (4) No matter how a person felt about slavery, the practice was necessary if Romans wanted to keep living the way they were—and most did.

1 in 4 people in Italy was a slave, maybe more. (5) A Roman depended on slaves to bring in the crops, to provide transportation, to sell them goods, to weave their clothes, to guard their homes, to assist them in their trade or occupation, and so much more.

To propose abolition to Roman society would be the equivalent of the modern suggestion of immediately and permanently cutting off electricity to North America. The protest would be almost unanimous. Without electricity, our society would grind to a standstill and we would experience a devastating collapse before we could rebuild on a new power source. The same would be said of cultures built on slavery when every facet of their society relied on slaves. (Of course, Rome did eventually fall. A society built on abusing others cannot stand forever.)

Seneca on Slavery



A bust of Seneca. [Click the image for attribution.](#)

However, there were some Romans who wished to see slavery abolished and others who wanted to see kindness offered to slaves and who advocated treating slaves as part of the household. One who spoke about improving the lives of slaves was Seneca, a Stoic philosopher that lived and wrote as a contemporary of the biblical Paul. He wrote on slavery in his 47th epistle, and it is a quick and interesting read that shows some of the trials of household slaves and his advice on better treatment. ([You can read Seneca's writings in this document.](#) It is not mine, and I cannot guarantee accuracy.) As a Stoic, he believed that god/divine reason is equal in everybody. A master might feel like a slave, and a slave might feel like a freedman. So he states that the master and the slave are both equal.

“He is a slave.’ His soul, however, may be that of a freeman. ‘He is a slave.’ But shall that stand in his way? Show me a man who is not a slave; one is a slave to lust, another to greed, another to ambition, and all men are slaves to fear.” -Seneca 47th epistle

Seneca had his own version of the golden rule of doing unto others:

“I do not wish to involve myself in too large a question, and to discuss the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are excessively haughty, cruel, and insulting. But this is the kernel of my advice: Treat your inferiors as you would be treated by your betters. And as often as you reflect how much power you have over a slave, remember that your master has just as much power over you. “But I have no master,” you say. You are still young; perhaps you will have one. Do you not know at what age Hecuba entered captivity, or Croesus, or the mother of Darius, or Plato, or Diogenes?” - Seneca, 47th epistle

Seneca's philosophy sounds good and humane, but Seneca doesn't take his advice beyond being considerate and kind. He isn't advocating abolition, but rather that a master should not think it wrong to be a friend to his slave, to eat with him, and to treat him well.

Seneca considers the master/slave relationship justified by the god/man relationship. If a man is naturally subject to God (his better) then a slave is naturally subject to his master (his better). Seneca doesn't want to change the relationship, just the way it functions. (6)

“Some may maintain that I am now offering the liberty-cap to slaves in general and toppling down lords from their high estate, because I bid slaves respect their masters instead of fearing them . . . Anyone who holds this opinion forgets that what is enough for a god cannot be too little for a master. Respect means love, and love and fear cannot be mingled.” - Seneca 47th epistle

Seneca was ultimately writing as one of those in the ruling class. He would have wanted to be sure there were no slave uprisings, like the one led by Spartacus the century prior. (7) Even so, it does seem as if he had good intentions, and his advice promotes kindness between master and slave, not unlike Paul's writings.

What does Jesus say about slavery?

To modern readers, the New Testament doesn't seem to say enough against slavery. Jesus doesn't touch on abolition at all. He references slaves in his parables (Matthew 21:33-46). That might seem like he doesn't care about slavery, but consider his golden rule:

“In everything, therefore, treat people the same way you want them to treat you.” - Matthew 7:12

Unlike Seneca, there is no class distinction in Jesus' teaching. If a master truly treats a slave the way he wants to be treated, there will no longer be a slave.

Jesus also said a lot about taking on the humbler role. In some cases, he insists that being like a slave is the path to greatness.

“Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave . . .” - Matthew 20:26-27.

Jesus talked about slaves because they were a part of his culture. Did he approve of slavery? Considering his views on humbleness, giving without expecting return, and love, what do you think?

If Jesus was opposed to slavery, he comes at it from a different angle than we might like. Rather than directly attacking a deeply ingrained social institution, Jesus, as he was apt to do, made it personal. He went for the heart. I think that is a vitally interesting tactic. People can wiggle around societal rules, citing culture or circumstance, but you can't wiggle around Jesus' commandments to treat people right.

Like the small seed that grew into a large plant, Jesus' teachings spread throughout the world and laid the moral foundation (even among non-believers) that we fall back on when we declare that all humans are entitled to the same basic rights.

What does Paul say about slavery?

Paul also uses the mental picture of slaves to make his point. He uses the analogy of unbelievers changing from slaves to heirs. (Galatians 4:7, 5:1) Paul speaks of himself as a bond-servant, or slave, of the Lord in Romans 1:1, and calls believers to become slaves to righteousness. He uses the clear mental picture of a slave doing whatever the master wills to show how believers must conform to the will of Jesus.

This language of slaves is not one we enjoy in the modern world. When we think of slavery, we think of trying to escape oppression, rather than being blessed by a master who loves us and wants the best for us. This mental picture requires humbling ourselves. Paul wrote to all classes of people, including many who would consider it shameful to become a slave. Did this analogy make them wiggle the same way we do today?

Like Seneca, Paul makes daring statements like:

“For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus . . . there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus”. - Galatians 3:26, 28

Paul, the slave Onesimus, and the master Philemon



Onesimus and Philemon in Medieval Art

In the letter to Philemon, Paul is appealing to Philemon about a slave (possibly a runaway) named Onesimus. Onesimus was “begotten” or converted by Paul while Paul was in prison, and Paul is sending him back home to deliver this letter. While Paul doesn't flat-out demand that Philemon free Onesimus, Paul calls Onesimus “his heart” and “my child” and asks that Philemon receive him back as “more than a slave” but as “a beloved brother”. Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus as he would receive Paul, who is someone Philemon must respect and admire deeply.

Paul says that he has confidence in Philemon, that he “will do even more than what I say.” Though it is not explicitly spelled out, it seems as if Paul is asking Philemon to consider if it is right to call a Christian brother his slave. He is not dismantling slavery from a political position, but appealing to Philemon's heart and faith. As compared to Seneca, it seems as if Paul is asserting the inappropriateness of the master/slave relationships between brothers/equals. (8) The fact that this letter is addressed not only to Philemon, but to the church, indicates that this is a community issue, not a one time concern of Paul's.

But what about all the verses where Paul seems to permit slavery, just with a moral standard?

“Slaves be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will, render service as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.” - Ephesians 6:5-9

“Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who merely please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of inheritance. It is the Lord Christ whom you serve.

For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality.

Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.” - Colossians 3:22-4:1

These two groups of instructions are a lot alike. They are urging slaves to authentic service of their masters. Why? I believe that part of this is for their own happiness. They are not a slave by choice, and it would be easy to become resentful, bitter, angry, and we wouldn't blame them. But there is no contentment on that path. But there is also one very clear reason for slaves to give authentic service:

“Urge bondslaves to be subject to their own masters in everything, to be well-pleasing, not argumentative, not pilfering, but showing all good faith **so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect.**” - Titus 2:9 (Emphasis mine)

Jesus started the conversation about taking on the humbler role, the slave role, as the path to greatness, and Paul continues it here by showing how the act of servitude can bring glory to God, a good name to Christianity, and perhaps even bring the master to faith in Jesus.

And while more is said to the servants, the masters are not left out. Paul instructs them to be just and fair and reminds them that there is a Master over them as well, and that God is not impartial in judging if a person has acted wrong—a conscience-pricking thought.

Just in case some slave thought that Paul would advise them to remain a slave even when offered freedom, Paul is sure to let them know they should take freedom if offered it.

“Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. For he who was called in the Lord is the Lord's freedman; likewise, he who was called while free, is Christ's slave.” - 1 Corinthians 7:2-22

We wish that Paul would just say “free your slaves”, but for some reason, cultural or otherwise, he doesn't. He is very clear however that freedom is not a prerequisite for salvation through Jesus. Even the lowliest slave is an heir of the kingdom of heaven.

How should we consider biblical slavery, based on the laws of the Old Testament and the references of the New Testament?

Slavery in the Bible feels like a big public relations problem. I wish it wasn't there, because it can easily trip up modern readers—non-believers and believers alike. Our much more recent encounters with slavery as a systematic, racially driven, barbaric practice of abusing and demeaning humans, is a painful memory with repercussions that echo today.

Yet slavery is in the Bible. So what do we do with it?

This is an ongoing debate among people much smarter than me, and one that we are all invited to participate in through careful study. So here are the questions and ideas that I am still pondering in light of the facts. Maybe they will resonate with you or inspire you to ask questions of your own.

Are biblical laws on slavery simply a written record of a societal standard that God allowed for a time because of moral immaturity? (I do believe that humanity, in general, has grown dramatically when it comes to our moral standard, thanks largely to the teachings of Jesus.)

OR, was the institution of slavery among God's people supposed to be a mercy, a way for those who have fallen on hard times to have food and shelter in exchange for work?

The way a slave is described in the Bible is as a worker who works without wages. As opposed to a hired man (who is hired day to day), the slave is part of his master's household and under his authority. It is implied that he would be fed, clothed, sheltered, and protected as part of the master's household. A master could not do whatever he wished with this temporary slave.

What about the commandment to sustain a man who has become poor, and to not charge him interest? (Leviticus 25:35) This seems the biblically recommended method for helping someone temporarily fallen on hard times. The next paragraph is the one that continues, “if a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you . . .” Slavery was not the first option, but the last resort. Why take a

him as a slave and not as a hired worker? Was it because the poor was a debtor (poor *with regard to you*), and this was to pay back/work off what he owed?

How often did this practice of Hebrews taking a Hebrew slave actually come into effect, anyway? The practice of taking each other as slaves seems to be poorly regarded, especially after the return from exile. Nehemiah is very angry when he hears that Jewish nobles and rulers are taking children as slaves. The people were helpless because their lands were already seized as payment of debts. Nehemiah says to them, “We according to our ability have redeemed our Jewish brothers who were sold to the nations; now would you even sell your brothers that they may be sold to us?” They are finally free, why would they subject each other to slavery all over again?

Is our reading of biblical slavery colored by what we have witnessed in cruel and racial slavery in our more recent history? Looking at the practices in the Bible and comparing them to Greek and Roman practices, it seems to me that the way God's people enslaved their own was quite different than the slavery practices of the larger world. So how should we consider ancient Israelite slavery taken on its own and without outside influences?



Conclusion

However you consider slavery in the Bible, it is now part of a culture that no longer exists. Not only do we now have social programs, fund-raisers, and other ways of helping out a financially struggling neighbor, we also live under the new standard as laid out by Jesus. Love your neighbor. Love your enemies. Treat others the way you want to be treated.

In searching for an application for today, please do use the lessons Jesus taught on slaves to remember that your financial and social position has nothing to do with your

place in the kingdom of God. Let no one look down on you because you are poor in some way. Also, those who are in a position of wealth or power must humble themselves if they want to be the kind of leaders that Jesus wants.

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