



The Theological Fault Line

Tracing the 1,700-year fracture of slavery through the Christian doctrine of the Imago Dei—from Gregory of Nyssa to English Common Law.

The Monolith of Antiquity

The Aristotelian Baseline

The deeply ingrained pagan philosophical belief that specific classes of humans were simply "slaves by nature."

Talking Tools

Slaves categorized legally as agricultural implements or portable livestock, devoid of personal agency.

Absolute Ownership

Master's power was total and absolute, extending to arbitrary execution without legal consequence.

The Scale of Servitude

At the dawn of the Middle Ages, 10% to 20% of the Anglo-Saxon population existed in this lowest tier of absolute subjection.

Chattel (peows)

The Seed of Spiritual Subversion

The Genesis Mandate

The Text: Genesis 1:26.

The Implication:

Humanity is explicitly granted dominion over irrational creatures (fish, birds, cattle)—but never over other human beings.

The Teachings of Jesus

The Text: The Gospels.

The Implication:

A radical upending of cultural stratification. A theology that exalts the poor, commands servant-leadership over domination, and breaks hierarchical norms.

Chattel (peows)

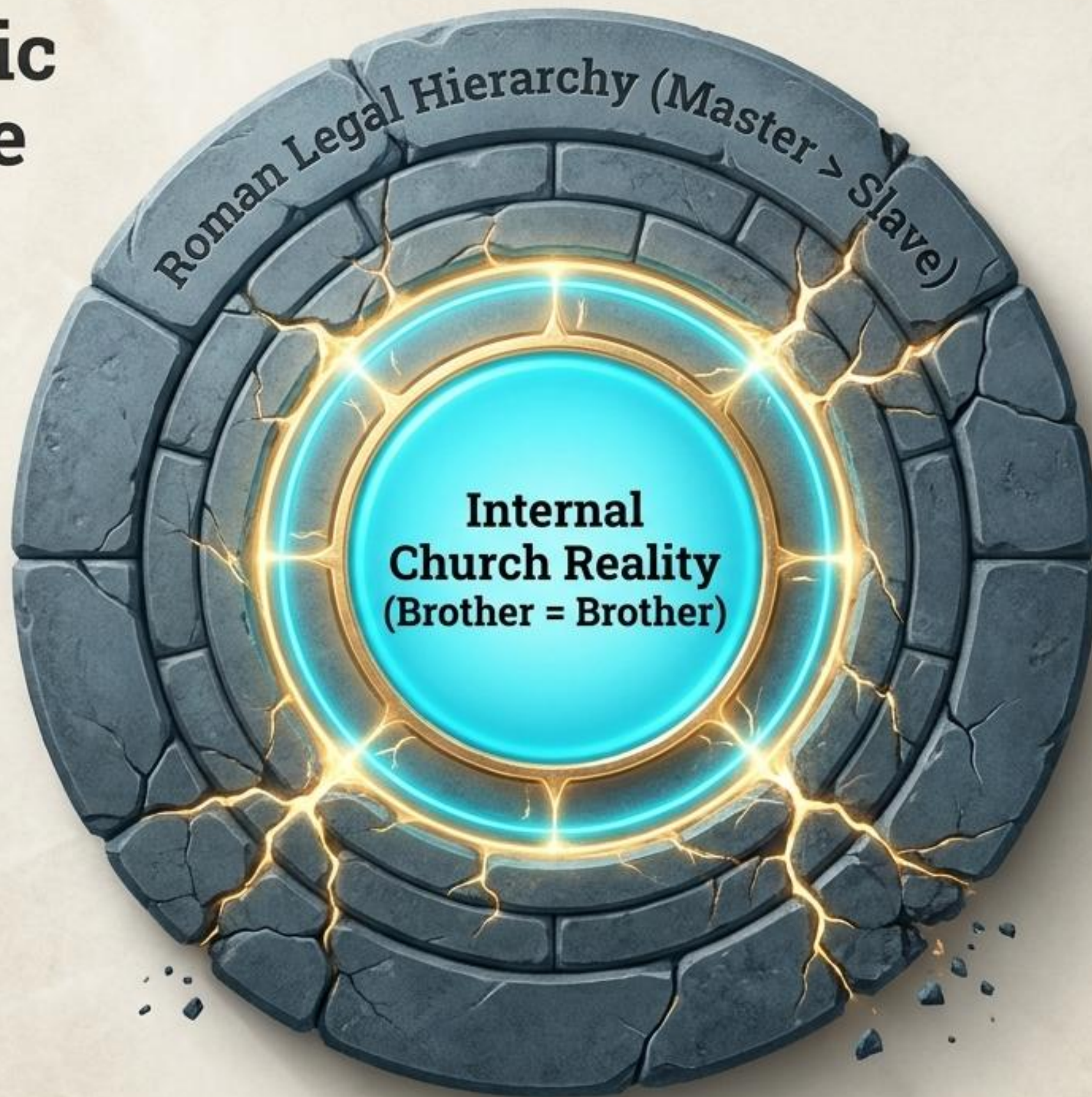


The Apostolic Trojan Horse

Theological Leveling

Galatians 3:28: Paul declares that "slave and free are all one in Christ Jesus."

The Effect: Established a spiritual equality that internally subverted traditional Roman hierarchies without issuing a call for bloody political overthrow.



The Philemon Dynamic

The Application: Paul urges a Christian master to receive his runaway slave Onesimus "no longer as a slave... but as a beloved brother."

The Outcome: An intentional accommodation that planted a subversive seed—making the psychological continuation of Christian slaveholding impossible in the long term.

The Patristic Crossroads

Basil of Caesarea

View of the Institution:

A tragic consequence of a fallen world
(though rejecting the 'slave by nature' concept).

The Primary Critique:

Denounced luxury ownership, excess,
and brutal, flesh-ripping physical punishment.

The Proposed Framework:

Ascetic regulation and humane
slave management.

Gregory of Nyssa

View of the Institution:

An inherent, blasphemous defiance of
God's absolute sovereignty.

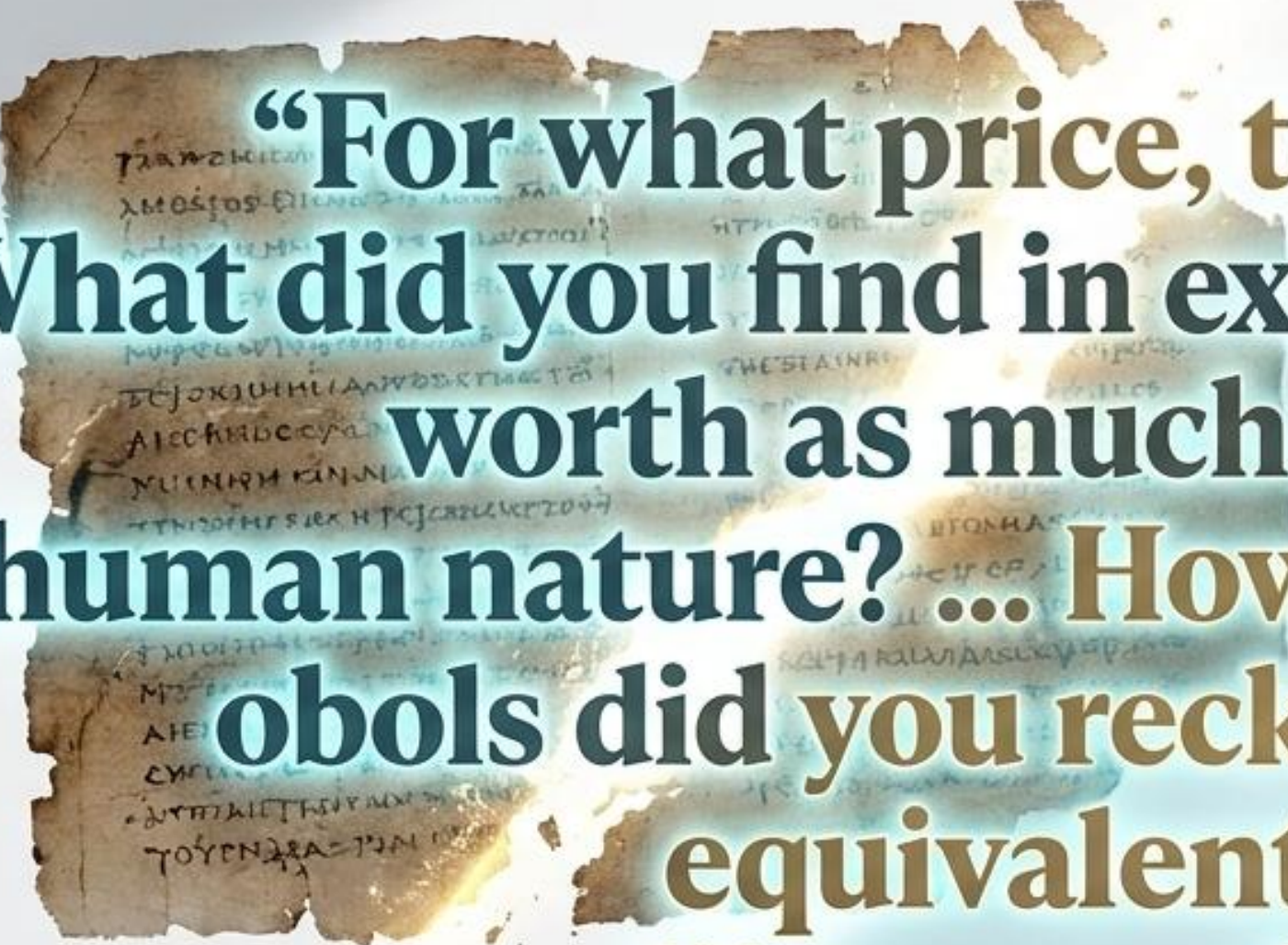
The Primary Critique:

Denounced the very concept of human
ownership in its entirety.

The Proposed Framework:

Radical anthropological equality and
systemic eradication.

The Radical Rupture



**“For what price, tell me?
What did you find in existence
worth as much as this
human nature? ... How many
obols did you reckon the
equivalent of the
likeness of God?”**

Context: Delivered during Lent in 380 AD in his Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes.

Addressed to a wealthy congregation of masters and slaves, Gregory of Nyssa launched the most uncompromising condemnation of slavery surviving from the ancient world.

Dismantling the Economic Delusion



Violation of the Genesis Mandate

Irrational vs. Rational: God granted humanity dominion exclusively over irrational creatures.

Overstepping Boundaries: To enslave another human is to unnaturally raise oneself against a free species, "counting your own kind on a level with four-footed things."

Pricing the Imago Dei



Infinite Value: Every human possesses inherent divine dignity that breaks any economic framework.

The Arrogance of Commerce: Placing a monetary price on a divine creation is a theological absurdity. Human nature cannot be equated to obols.

Tearing Down the Hierarchy



Usurping Divine Sovereignty

Competing with God: Claiming ownership over a person is a direct 'challenge to God' and an attempt to legislate in competition with divine law.

The Irrevocable Gift: God created humanity fundamentally free. Even God Himself does not claim chattel ownership over human beings.

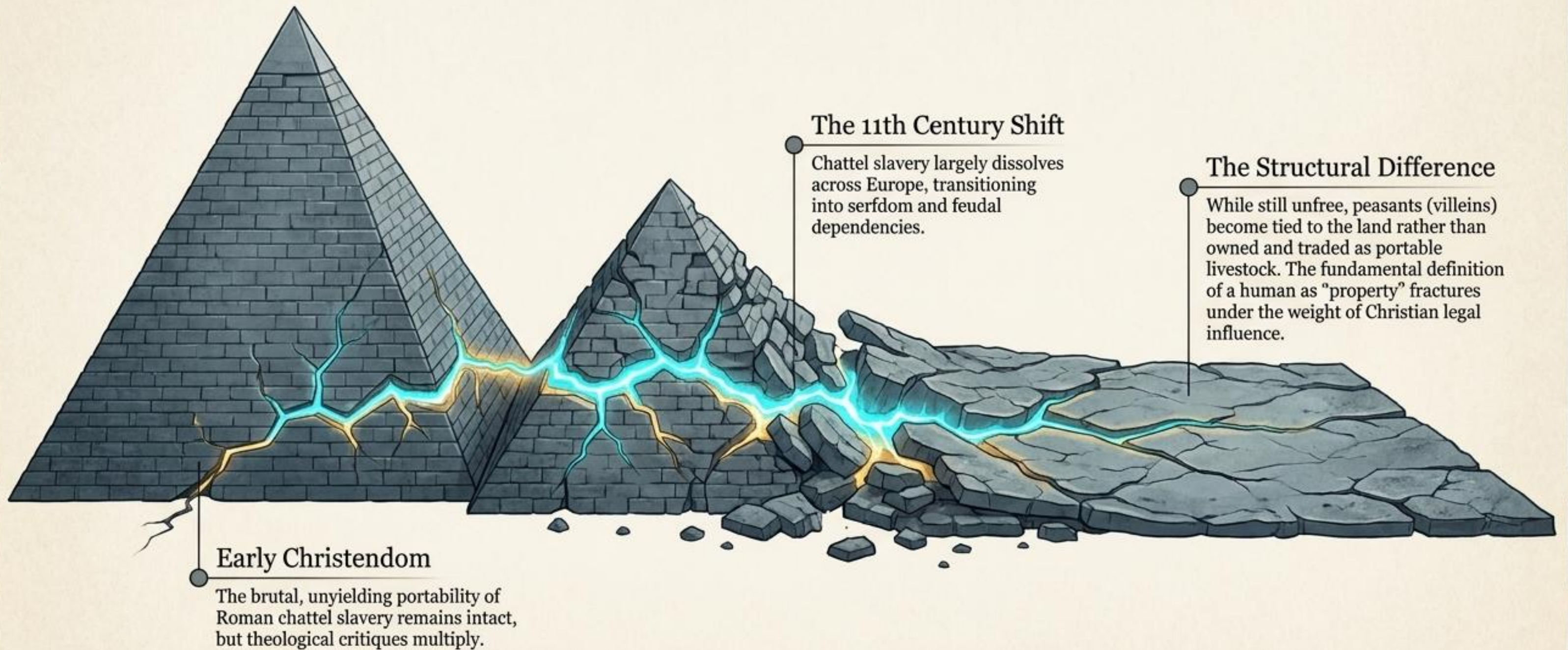


Radical Anthropological Equality

The Delusion of Paper: A legal title is merely a piece of paper that deceives the owner into a delusion of superiority born of pure pride.

Shared Destiny: Masters and slaves share the exact same origins, physical vulnerabilities, emotions, and ultimate destiny.

The Slow Erosion of Absolute Ownership



King Alfred's 'Doombook' (Late 9th Century)

Heavily influenced by biblical law, Alfred consolidated West Saxon customs into a unified code explicitly hostile to absolute ownership.

The Legal Chisel

Absolute Master Power

1. Duration Limits

Adapting Exodus, Christian slaves could only be forced to serve six years; they were freed in the seventh.

2. Trade Curtailment

Heavy penalties imposed for selling English people overseas, starving the profit incentive.

3. Sanctity of Person

Arbitrary killing criminalized, moving slaves from 'mere property' to humans protected under the King's peace.

4. Mandated Rest

Slaves explicitly granted the right to rest on Sundays and Church festivals; masters faced heavy fines for forcing work.

Magna Carta and the Expanding Definition of Freedom

The Seed (Clause 39):
“No free man shall be seized or imprisoned... except by the lawful judgment of his equals or by the law of the land.”

The Definitional Funnel

1215:
Wealthy
Barons



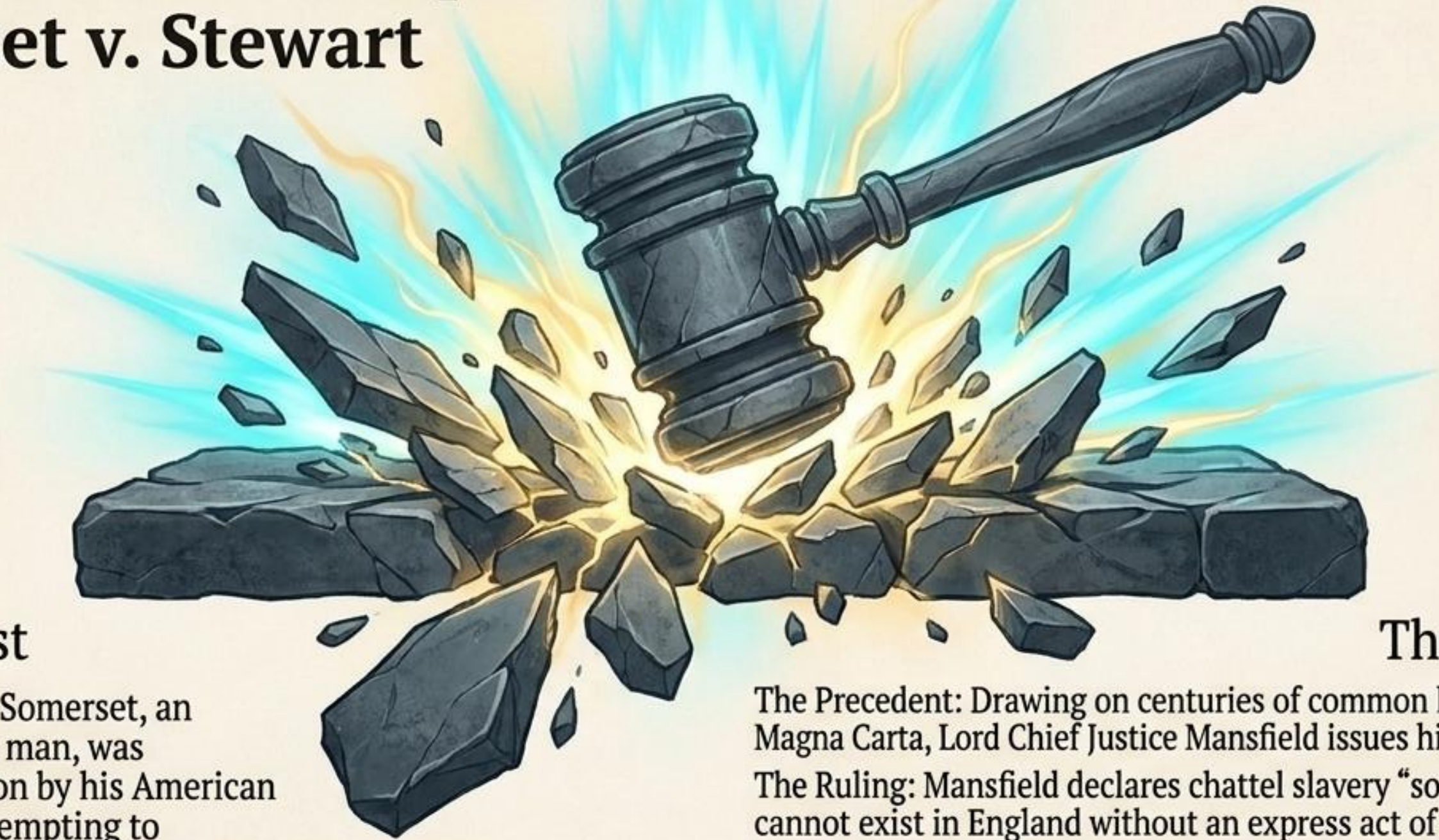
Universal
English
Subjects

1215: “Free men” refers only to a tiny minority of the population (barons).

1300s-1400s: English common law courts fundamentally favor liberty over servitude. Judges progressively expand the legal definition of “free man.”

The Black Death & Beyond: As economic shifts collapse serfdom, Magna Carta’s protections evolve into a blanket safeguard of due process, ensuring the Crown cannot arbitrarily strip personal liberty from any subject.

The Structural Collapse: Somerset v. Stewart (1772)



The Catalyst

The Case: James Somerset, an enslaved African man, was brought to London by his American master. Upon attempting to escape, he was recaptured and forced onto a ship bound for Jamaica.

The Judgment

The Precedent: Drawing on centuries of common law rooted in the Magna Carta, Lord Chief Justice Mansfield issues his landmark ruling.
The Ruling: Mansfield declares chattel slavery “so odious” that it cannot exist in England without an express act of Parliament.
The Result: Because no such law existed, the court decreed that any slave setting foot on English soil became instantly and irrevocably free.

The Enduring Echo of Antiquity

18th Century Abolition

The Quakers: Deployed the exact same theological arguments regarding the Imago Dei to build the intellectual and moral framework against the transatlantic slave trade.

19th Century Pushback

Institutional Decrees: Formal denominational pushback culminated in documents like Pope Gregory XVI's *In Supremo Apostolatus* (1839), explicitly condemning the slave trade.

The Present

Active Eradication: Modern Christian coalitions universally reject historical complicity as a moral failure and spearhead global movements against contemporary human trafficking and forced labor.

Ancient

Modernity

The Arc of Abolition



Stage 1: Spiritual Subversion (1st Century)

Key Actor: Paul

Action: Subverts the Roman hierarchy internally by declaring absolute spiritual equality in Christ.



Stage 2: Moral Condemnation (4th Century)

Key Actor: Gregory of Nyssa

Action: Attacks the institution of ownership as a blasphemous affront to God's sovereignty and the Imago Dei.



Stage 3: Legal Restriction (9th-13th Century)

Key Actors: King Alfred & Common Law Judges

Action: Translates biblical theology into law, chipping away absolute ownership and expanding the rights of "free men."



Stage 4: Institutional Eradication (18th Century)

Key Actor: Lord Mansfield (Somerset Case)

Action: English Common Law totally rejects chattel slavery, causing the legal bedrock of the institution to collapse.

The Defeat of the Edifice

The institution of slavery was defeated not by the sword, but by a seed—the uncompromising theological conviction that the Image of God cannot be priced, owned, or mastered.