

Historical and Theological Study about Slavery in Christian Ethics

Introduction

Slavery is one of the most contentious issues in the Bible. The interpretations of slavery in the Bible have been misunderstood too often and misused too severely. In this paper, I want to examine and search the reality of the slavery system from the antiquity to the contemporary era and the perspectives on the slavery of the ancient Jewish people and present Christians. As an example of the application of the biblical interpretations about slavery, I want to look into the institution of slavery of the antebellum South in North America and the contemporary Christian response toward human trafficking. Through this process, I hope I would be able to learn the right biblical insight into slavery and to obtain a robust Christian ethical view to have faithful responsibility as a Christian to convey God's justice and to actualize His righteousness in this world.

The Greek and Roman Slavery System

In the ancient Greco-Roman period, slave labor was an essential and pivotal power to maintain their culture and society. Slaves were subordinated to the absolute dominance and oppression of their owners. Their owners totally controlled them through unrestricted brutal treatment and sexual exploitation. Physical violence against slaves by their owners was regarded as right and proper. Slaves were subjected to beating, torture, and death to reinforce social hierarchy. They were separated from their families, tribes, and identities as a human. They could not have honor and dignity in society and self-determination over their bodies and time. As slaves, they experienced a kind of social death. The representative Greek philosopher Aristotle had defined a

Greek slave as “a living tool” and insisted that they were “slaves by nature”¹. As we can understand through this Aristotle’s saying, slaves were treated as subhuman and mere property. There were some significant differences between the Greek and Roman slavery system. In the Greek world of classical Athens, Athenian freedmen were denied citizenship and excluded from political life. They were forbidden to own land, and their children must be remained as non-citizens, unlike the Roman freedmen.² On the other hand, there were several notable differences in the slavery system in the Roman Empire compared to the slavery of the modern age. Neither skin color nor ethnic/racial origins indicated slave status in the population of the Roman Empire. Ancient slavery was not based on race and racism. The Roman slaves could own property and could accumulate a fund to purchase their own freedom from their owners. The education of slaves was encouraged to increase their value. So, some slaves were better educated than their owners. Many slaves functioned in highly responsible positions, and some of them could have considerable influential power in society. Interestingly, slaves as a group were not at the bottom of the socioeconomic pyramid. Rather impoverished free persons made up the lowest level of society. Slaves usually derived their sense of identity from that of their responsible owners. Also, urban slaves could anticipate being set free, often by the age of thirty, according to Lex Aelia Sentia, the law proclaimed by Emperor Augustus.³ Social decorum encouraged humane treatment, and the extreme abuse or killing of slaves was prohibited by law.⁴ But despite these differences, the ancient slavery was not more humane than modern slavery, and many pieces of evidence prove that the ancient slaves had been far more severely treated than the slave society

¹ Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 169-70.

² Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1125.

³ Joel B. Green and Lee Martin McDonald, *The World of the New Testament: Cultural, Social, and Historical Contexts* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2013), 172-74.

⁴ Mark Allan Powell, *Introducing the New Testament: A Historical, Literary, and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009), 418.

of Brazil, the most brutal of the modern world. Historians estimate that about sixteen to twenty percent of the entire population of at least sixty million were enslaved in the Roman Empire. The main sources of ancient slaves were warfare, piracy, brigandage, international trade, kidnapping, infant exposure, natural reproduction of the existing slave population, and the punishment of criminals to the mines or gladiatorial combat. Above all else, warfare remained throughout antiquity, an important supplier of slaves.⁵

The Ancient Jewish Views on the Slavery System

The ancient Judea did not have an institutional system of slavery similar to that in ancient Greece and Rome. In the Greek and Roman Empires, slavery was regarded as their gods' provision and ordinance for their wealth and prosperity. On the contrary, Israelites considered slavery as a wicked and evil system that was not derived from God. Israel's origin in liberation from the harsh conditions of oppressive forced labor in Egypt became the basis for strong objections to the slavery system. They believed that God wants to save and liberate people from the disastrous condition of slavery. They taught people of Israel that they must not treat or be treated as mere human properties and objectives of exploitation. Rather, they emphasized that they are God's possession, and all the people of Israel, including the kings, are God's servants who must not become human slaves.

Exodus 21:2

“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.”

⁵ Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1125.

If a person was placed in the situation of the debt slavery, Israelite law provided a fair period of labor service to the creditor as well as time limits on servitude for the debt slave. No one could serve more than six years, and when they were freed, they went out debt-free. Israelite slave laws tend to be more humane than those found elsewhere in the ancient countries.⁶

Leviticus 25:39-40

“If any of your fellow Israelites become poor and sell themselves to you, do not make them work as slaves. They are to be treated as hired workers or temporary residents among you; they are to work for you until the Year of Jubilee.”

Regulations also restricted the sale or the enslavement of Israelites by other Israelites. Ancient Israel considered permanent slavery as the most miserable condition possible. They tried to deal with the victims of the poverty nonviolently as possible as they could.⁷

Deuteronomy 23:15-16

“If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose, Do not oppress them.”

Perpetual slavery did exist as well, but that involved foreign captives and Israelites who had made the decision to accept that condition. Israel’s fugitive slave law is unusual in the context of the ancient world, and it was tied to Israel’s former condition as slaves in Egypt and thus was based on a national hatred of the slavery system.⁸

Leviticus 25:42-43

“Because the Israelites are my servants, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as slaves. Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear you God.”

⁶ John H. Walton, Victor Harold Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 99-100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 140.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 196-97.

Slaves were considered human beings like their owners and thus had certain rights. They were considered a part of the family. In Hebrew scripture, slaves have often been translated as “servant”. Even patriarchs and monarchs were servants of God, and all the inhabitants of both Israel and Judah were servants of the king, including the members of the royal family.⁹ So, they all believed that they were serving God as His covenant people.

The Views on Black People in Slavery of America

Like the ancient Greco-Roman slavery, the history of the modern slavery in the United States is filled with the ruthless physical violence such as kidnapping, rape, torture, and murder, along with the psychological violence of terror, brainwashing, and the extermination of personality. During the practice of slavery, proslavery Christian apologists massively influenced in the center of white Christian society. Slaveholders knew that in order to keep racial slavery viable that in addition to legal, economic, and political mechanisms, they needed religious legitimation within the white society. The biblical hermeneutics of proslavery apologists met the needs of the slavocracy, and the majority of white Christians engaged in acceptance of their ideology. Proslavery apologists asserted that black people were not members of the human race. To justify their enslavement, they denied the dignity and value of black people as human beings. Black people were regarded as an inferior species of humanity between animals and humans. They taught the Ham story in Genesis 9:25-27 as the biblical justification for their assertion. They explained that Ham was the progenitor of the black race. Many churches preached that black people were indebted to white Christians, and enslavement was a blessing to African peoples because they could be Christianized through enslavement. The New Testament instruction that slaves should be obedient to their masters was interpreted as unqualified support for their slavery

⁹ John H. Walton, Victor Harold Matthews, and Mark W. Chavalas, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: Old Testament*(Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 571.

system.¹⁰ Proslavery apologists approached the texts of the Bible under the influence of European ethnocentrism and white supremacist thinking.

The Realities of Contemporary Human Trafficking

According to the United Nations Protocol¹¹, human trafficking is defined as the recruitment, transportation, harboring, or receipt of persons by means of force, fraud, or coercion. Generally, human trafficking refers to the wide variety of processes by which individuals become physically enslaved. An individual is said to be physically enslaved when she or he is unable to leave a situation without fear of violence and is forced to work while paid nothing or next to nothing for any duration of time.¹² Human trafficking is the enslavement of the contemporary era by the enactment of violent control of one person by another.¹³ This illegal slavery in our days is affecting nearly all countries in every region of the world as a global crime. Astonishingly, there are more slaves in the United States today than at any time in history. About 100 thousand youngsters are trafficked annually, and 244 thousand to 325 thousand American children are at risk for sexual exploitation and sex trafficking every year.¹⁴ The United States, along with Mexico and the Philippines, was ranked one of the world's worst places for human trafficking in 2018.¹⁵ The United Nations reported statistics about human trafficking in 2012.¹⁶ Between 2007 and 2010, victims of 136 different nationalities were detected in 118 countries across the world. Trafficking for the purpose of sexual exploitation accounts for 58 percent of all cases detected

¹⁰ Katie Geneva Cannon, "Slave Ideology and Biblical Interpretation," *Semeia* 47 (1989): 9-23.

¹¹ UN General Assembly, "Protocol to Prevent, Suppress and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children", Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organization Crime, 15 November 2000.

¹² Yvonne C. Zimmerman, "Christianity and Human Trafficking," *Religion Compass* 5, no. 10 (2011): pp. 567-578)

¹³ Kevin Bales, *Understanding Global Slavery: a Reader* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2005.)

¹⁴ Nita Belles, *In Our Backyard: a Christian Perspective on Human Trafficking in the United States* (United States: Free River, 2011))

¹⁵ James Pasley, "20 Staggering Facts about Human Trafficking in the US," Business Insider (Business Insider, July 25, 2019), <https://www.businessinsider.com/human-trafficking-in-the-us-facts-statistics-2019-7>)

¹⁶ *Global Report on Trafficking in Persons, 2012* (Vienna: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012))

globally while trafficking for forced labor accounts for 36 percent. Women account for about 60 percent of trafficking victims, and children 27 percent (two-thirds of them girls). Removal of organs, begging, forced marriages, illegal adoptions, participation in armed combat, and the commission of petty crimes are some of the other reasons for human trafficking. According to the report of the International Labor Organization in 2012¹⁷, there are an estimated 20.9 million individuals living in slavery today globally. Of the estimated 20 million victims of trafficking and human slavery worldwide, 9.1 million victims (44 percent) have been trafficked internally and internationally, and 11.8 million are subjected to forms of modern slavery in their place of origin or residence within their own national borders. Nearly 1.5 million victims are currently laboring in conditions of forced labor, sexual exploitation, and servitude in the United States, Canada, and developed countries of the EU. Fifty-five percent of forced labor victims are women and girls, as are 98 percent of sex trafficking victims. Children aged 17 years and below represent 26 percent of total victims, representing a total of 5.5 million child victims worldwide. In May 2014, the International Labor Organization found that forced labor in the global private economy generates illegal profits of 150 billion dollars a year and almost two-thirds of the total profits, approximately 99 billion dollars came from commercial sexual exploitation, and about 50 billion dollars was derived from forced economic labor, such as domestic work, construction, and mining.¹⁸

Theological Reflections on Slavery in Christian Ethics

- Offense to the Creator of All Human Beings

“Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness.” (Genesis 1:26)

¹⁷ ILO *Global Estimate of Forced Labour: Results and Methodology* (Geneva: International Labour Organization, 2012))

¹⁸ *Profits and Poverty: the Economics of Forced Labour* (Geneva, Switzerland: International Labour Organization (ILO), Special Action Programme to Combat Forced Labour (SAP-FL), Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work Branch (FPRW), 2014))

God made all human beings in God's image, according to His likeness. Therefore, all human beings are immeasurably and equally valuable and precious regardless of skin color, race, gender, economic status, and education level because all humans are bearing God's divine image (the *Imago Dei*). So, the dehumanization of enslavement is a great sin against God, which is the frontal attacking rebellion against the Creator of all human beings.

- God's Concerns about Slavery

"I have indeed seen the misery of my people in Egypt. I have heard them crying out because of their slave drivers, and I am concerned about their suffering." (Exodus 3:7)

God is seeing and hearing the misery and crying of slaves and concerns about their suffering. God already finished His liberating works by sending His Son Jesus as a slave to free us from the old slave master of sin. God invites us to convey this liberty to captives in the world as His vehicles of justice and righteousness. God is taking a closer look, not only slaves but also slave drivers. Christians must keep in mind that God's liberating works need to both slaves and slave drivers who are captured by sin as well.

- Command to Engage in

"Defend the cause of the weak and fatherless; maintain the rights of the poor and oppressed." (Psalm 82:3)

God commands His people to stand up for the weak and oppressed. God, himself, has been a defense for the helpless and needy (Isaiah 25:4), and as His instrument of righteousness, God gives commands, not a recommendation, to His freed people to be the prophetic voice about slavery and fight against evil systems of slavery as His warriors.

- God and do likewise to inherit eternal life

"Love your neighbor as yourself." (Luke 10:27)

“I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.” (Matthew 25:40)

Jesus taught us in the parable of the Good Samaritan that whoever wants to inherit eternal life, they must love God and their neighbors like the good Samaritan. As inheritors of God’s kingdom, Christians must follow the way of the good Samaritan who willingly sacrificed all he had because whatever we did for one of the least of our brothers is what is doing for Jesus. And undoubtedly, the slaves in our days are the least of one in our neighborhood and all over the world.

Conclusion

While studying slavery from antiquity to the contemporary era, I realized the importance of understanding history and socio-cultural context for the right interpretation and proper application of biblical teachings. Through this study, I could learn the huge differences in the view of slavery between Greco-Roman people and Israelites. On the contrary to the human-centered angle of Greco-Roman slavery, Israelites had God-centered perspectives on slavery by teachings of the Torah. Israelites promoted the universal parenthood of God and the servanthood of all people, including the royal family. They knew the dignity of all persons and emphasized the preservation of freedom and justice in their society. Although the reality was too complicated and discrepant from the ideal, their perception of slavery was consistent from the beginning of their nation. If we understand the teachings of the Old and New Testaments separately, we might also make disastrous mistakes like the Christian proslavery apologists of America. We need integrative insight into the Bible without discontinuation between the Old and New Testaments to apply the instructions according to God’s intention. The biblical interpretation of the proslavery apologists of America has been remained and will be remembered as a poignant

example of the hermeneutical distortion of Christian leaders, who led their listeners to the atrocious crime and heinous offense against innocent people through their ethnocentrism and anachronism. These apologists tried to meet the demand of wealthy and powerful slavocracy and congregation who supported their churches and seminaries. The result of their pursuit to please people left permanent scars in past history and present society. Slavery is evil in all eras, but the most horrible slavery system in human history might be slavery in America, which was systematically committed by white Christians. But the tragedy of slavery was not eradicated in human history, and it has been evolved into a more unexposed form, namely, contemporary human trafficking. Through this study, I felt a great responsibility as a seminary student who is preparing to teach the Bible to people. To be a Christian leader and teacher, we have to have a teachable heart and humility with open-mindedness to be corrected by any person or any resource to get insights into the power dynamics beyond the biblical texts and to penetrate the ideological hegemony of society to apply the biblical truth as our ethics. I hope God grants us the spirit of inquiry to dig into the hidden truth in the Bible and to look into the world, which is veiled by anachronism, ethnocentrism, prejudice, and stereotype. Also, I felt that I should respond to contemporary human trafficking as a Christian to stand up for the victims. Through the convey of the gospel and being a good Samaritan for these captives, Christians would be able to actualize God's kingdom and His will in the territory of contemporary human trafficking.

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