

An open Bible with a bookmark, set against a dark red background. The text is overlaid on the image.

Will the Truth REALLY

Set You Free? The Bible and Slavery

Neighborhood Church of Dorchester
Sunday, February 11, 2018

Belief in God Has Brought More

**S
L
A
V
E
R
Y**



**F
R
E
E
D
O
M**



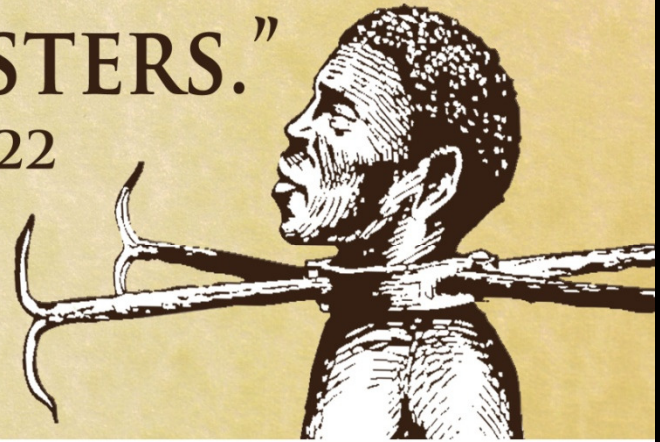
Moral Foundation for Abolition: Christian Faith?

“SLAVES, OBEY YOUR MASTERS.”

- COLOSSIANS 3:22

This lesson in Bronze Age ethics
brought to you by

THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE *and*
the House of Representatives.



paid for by AmericanAtheists.org • PAnonbelievers.org

Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution



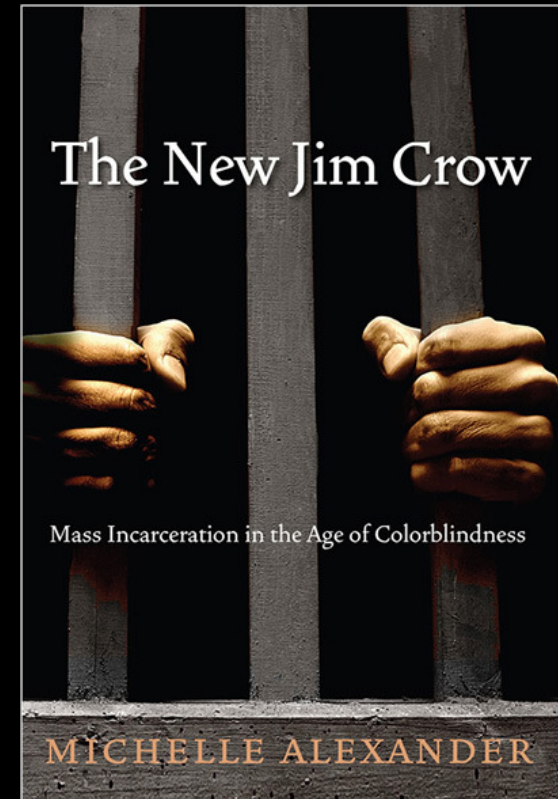
Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution
2. Child soldiers



Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution
2. Child soldiers
3. Prison, criminal justice



Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution
2. Child soldiers
3. Prison, criminal justice
4. Debt, bonded labor



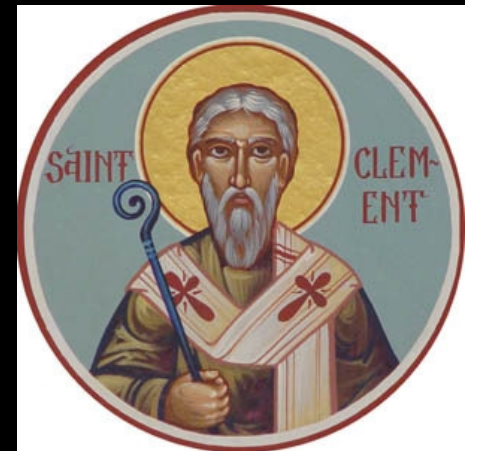
Moral Foundation for Abolition: Christian Faith?

1. What if I feel anxious or avoidant every time I see “slavery” in the Bible?
2. If the Bible is ambiguous at best, can we do better?
3. Do I need to interpret the Bible metaphorically?

Christian Emancipation

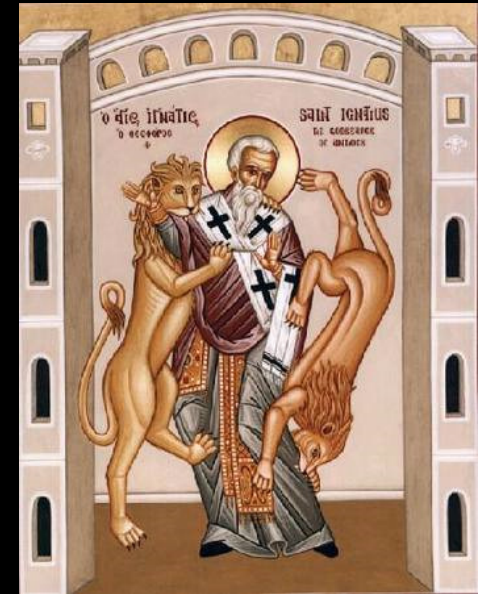
- ~90 AD: Clement of Rome observes, 'We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others.'

(1 Clement 55)



Christian Emancipation

- ~90 AD: Polycarp of Smyrna (69 – 155 AD) and Ignatius of Antioch (~50 – 117 AD), second generation Christian leaders, free their slaves.



Christian Emancipation

- 95 – 135 AD: Ovidius, appointed bishop of Braga (in modern day Portugal) under Pope Clement I in 95 AD, emancipates 5,000 slaves.

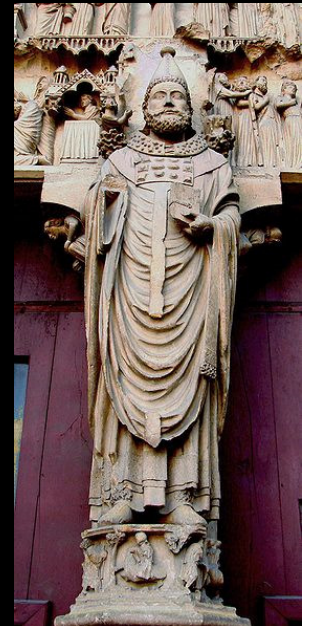
Christian Emancipation

- 98 – 117 AD: A Roman prefect named Hermas received baptism at an Easter festival with his wife, children, and 1,250 slaves. On that occasion, he gave all his slaves their freedom and generous gifts besides.



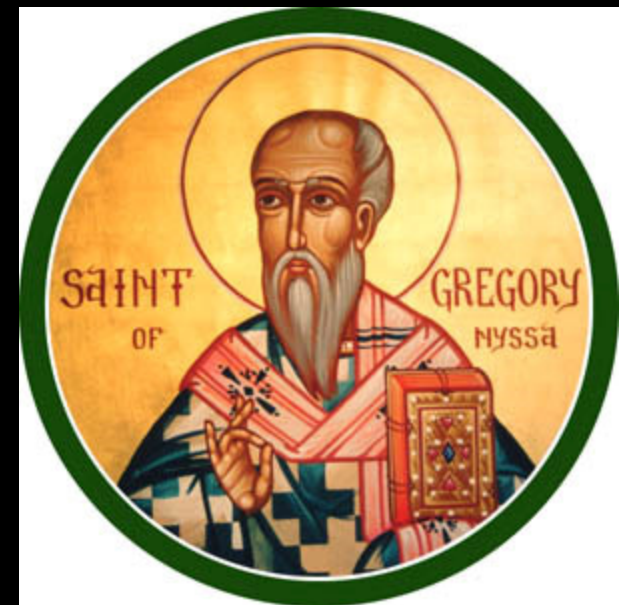
Christian Emancipation

- Epitaphs in the Roman catacombs mention manumission of slaves, exact dates unknown.
- 284 – 305 AD: Chromatius emancipates 1,400 slaves after they are baptized with him



Christian Emancipation

- 379 AD: Gregory of Nyssa, in a sermon during Lent, reminds his audience, *'Since God's greatest gift to us is the perfect liberty vouchsafed us by Christ's saving action in time, and since God's gifts are entirely irrevocable, it lies not even in God's power to enslave men and women.'* He also said God gives the creation to each person, so to possess a slave's belongings is wrong.



Christian Emancipation

- 390 – 400 AD: The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a summary of Christian teaching to that point, directs Christians, 'As for such sums of money as are collected... designate them to be used for the redemption of the saints and **the deliverance of slaves and captives.**'



Christian Emancipation

- 395 AD: Augustine (bishop of Hippo from 395 – 430 AD) notes that the Christian community regularly used its funds to redeem kidnapped victims; they had recently purchased and freed 120 slaves whom the Galatians were boarding onto their ships.



Christian Emancipation

- 400 AD: Acacius, bishop of Amida, in modern day eastern Turkey, ransoms 7,000 Persian prisoners being held by Romans
 - 'When the war [between Byzantium and Persia] ended in 422, it may have been this generous gesture of Acacius that speeded the negotiations for peace and brought an end to persecution in Persia. The peace treaty contained the remarkable stipulation that freedom of religion was to be granted on both sides of the border, for Zoroastrians in the Byzantine Empire and for Christians in Persia'
 - Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume 1 (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1998), p.160. This incident was surely unusual in its magnitude, but probably not in its character.

Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 313 AD: Constantine's conversion
- 315 AD+: Constantine's laws
 - Death penalty for kidnapping & enslaving children
 - Forbade separating slave families
 - Forbade branding
 - Legalized manumission at church services
- Why: strong antislavery position in the Church already



Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 595 AD: A council at Rome under Gregory the Great says a slave can become a monk without any consent from his master



Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 649 AD: Clovis II, king of the Franks, frees and marries his British slave Bathilde
- Queen Bathilde frees all slaves on the soil of the Franks



Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 1000 AD: King Stephen I of Hungary abolishes slavery



Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 1102 AD: The London Church Council forbids slavery and the slave trade, which abolishes both throughout England. This decree emancipates 10% of England's population.

Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 1117 AD: Iceland abolishes slavery
- ~1300 AD: The Netherlands abolishes slavery
- 1335 AD: Sweden (which included Finland at this time) makes slavery illegal

Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- So how did these Christians understand the Bible?

OT: No Kidnapping

- ‘He who kidnaps (steals) a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death’ (Ex.21:16)



OT: No Kidnapping

- ‘Slavery is the highest possible violation of the eighth commandment. To take from a man his *earnings*, is theft. But to take *the earner* is compound, superlative, perpetual theft. It is... the giant robbery, that towers among other robberies, a solitary horror, monarch of the realm.’

Theodore Dwight Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery*, 1837, p.9

OT: No Forcing People to Stay

- ‘You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him.’

(Dt.23:15 – 16)



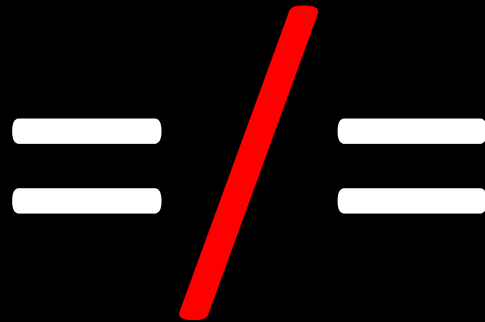
OT: No Forcing People to Stay

- ‘A slave could also be freed by running away...This provision is strikingly different from the laws of slavery in the surrounding nations and is explained as due to Israel’s own history of slavery. It would have the effect of turning slavery into a voluntary institution.’

Raymond Westbrook, *History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, 2003, p.1006

“Slavery”

Biblical slavery



American slavery

Other Differences

<i>Source of Slaves</i>	<i>Ancient World</i>	<i>Old Testament (Hebrews)</i>
War captivity	Common	No
Kidnapping, piracy	Common	No
Purchase from slave trade	Common	No
Perpetual involuntary servitude (birth to slaves)	Common	No
Sale by parents	Common	No
Indentured servitude: misfortune	Common	Very limited
Indentured servitude: debt	Common	Very limited
Voluntary servitude	Common	Possible
Political vassalage	Common	No

OT: No Slave Trade

- 'For they are **My** servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt; they are **not to be sold in a slave sale.**' (Lev.25:42)
- Debts were personal, not transferable



OT: Avoid Indebtedness

- Loan money with **no interest** (protects the poor from exploitation):
 - ‘You shall not charge him interest’ (Ex.22:25)
 - ‘Do not take usurious interest from him’ (Lev.25:36)
 - ‘You shall not charge interest to your countrymen’ (Dt.23:19)

OT: Avoid Indebtedness

- Loan money freely:
 - ‘If there is a poor man with you... you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but **you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.**’

(Dt.15:7 – 8)

OT: Avoid Indebtedness

- Debts were cancelled every seven years!!
 - ‘At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts’ (Dt.15:1)



OT: Avoid Indebtedness

- Interest-laden loans were the chief cause of people being sold into slavery in many places in the Ancient Near East and contributed significantly to slavery in classical Greek and Roman society



- T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, editors, 'Slavery', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, InterVarsity Press: Downers' Grove, IL, 2003

OT: Avoid Indebtedness

- Furthermore, you help her/him get established:
 - ‘When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.’ (Dt:15:13 – 15)

OT: Avoid Indebtedness

- The poor were to be cared for, left fields for them to glean, not forced to give up basic necessities, honored, and protected (Dt.24:10 – 22) minimizing the need to borrow money

OT: Very Limited, for Debt

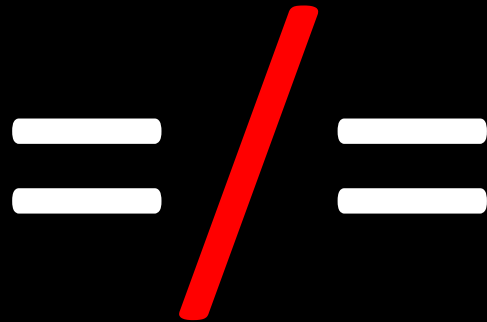
- A thief who couldn't repay a theft could become a 'slave' for a time
 - 'If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it...He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft' (Ex.22:1 – 3).
 - Recall: There were no prison systems in Old Testament Israel

Today's "Debt to Society"

- Note: The U.S. 13th Amendment permits penal servitude, and we do use it
 - 'Section 1. 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.'

“Slavery”

Biblical slavery



American slavery

OT: How You Leave Slavery

- Slaves set free
 - ‘in the seventh year you shall set him free’ (Dt.15:12)
 - or in the jubilee year (Lev.25:39 – 41), whichever happened first



OT: How You Leave Slavery

- Or earlier, if **redeemed by family or self**:
 - ‘or if he prospers, **he may redeem himself**’ (Lev.25:48 – 49)
 - Hebrew slaves owned their own wealth



OT: How You Leave Slavery

- Or **bodily harm**:
 - ‘If a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.’ (Ex.21:27 – 28)

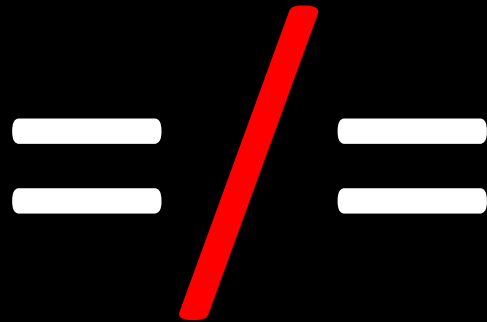


OT: How You Leave Slavery

- Or **escape**:
 - ‘You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him’ (Dt.23:15 – 16).
 - There was no police force in Old Testament Israel so running away was easy

“Slavery”

Biblical slavery



American slavery

OT: Is This Slavery?

- The meaning of the word ‘slave’ (Hebrew *ebed*)— like many other words – has changed dramatically over time. “*Ebed*” meant a form of voluntary indentured service. Your *services, not personhood, nor body, were ‘bought.’*

Context, Context, Context

- Context determines meaning
 - ‘I’m mad about my flat’
 - ‘Matrix’ used to mean *the womb*
 - ‘Defecate’ used to mean *to purify* something
 - ‘Hook up’ ?
 - ‘Jacked’ ?
 - ‘That police oversight was sanctioned’

The Hebrew “Ebed”

- In the Old Testament, being an *“ebed”*
 - was a contract of labor
 - was not giving ownership of one’s body
 - was not sex slavery
 - had limits on physical work and, if needed, punishment

The Big Factor: In God's Garden

- 'I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God.' (Lev.25:38)



Garden of Eden



Garden Land

The Big Factor: For God's Service

- 'For they are **My** servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt.'
(Lev.25:42)



Garden of Eden



Garden Land

The Big Factor: To Be God's Kids

- 'It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family.'
(Lev.25:10)



Garden of Eden



Garden Land

Belief in God Has Brought More

**S
L
A
V
E
R
Y**



**F
R
E
E
D
O
M**

