

Introduction

What follows is an answer to a question put to me by a member of the Legislative Council standing committee into the Religious discrimination and equality bill. I elected to take the question on notice and now provide a more detailed response. The question was whether or not religious people who believed in the Bible could own slaves, because the Bible apparently condoned slavery. In order to adequately address this question I have examined what the Bible actually says about 'slavery' and whether it is indeed analogous to the practices that previously occurred in the British Empire and the United States. The term 'Antebellum South' refers to the southern states of the US who were attempting to secede from the union and their practises before the end of the Civil War.

I have examined what both the Old and New Testaments say on the issue. In order to provide as clear and accurate a picture as possible, I have prefaced any scriptural analysis with an overview of the historical context.

Slavery in the Old Testament

Historical Context

Both in ancient times and more recently there has existed the concept of indentured servitude. This was to address a problem that has plagued humanity from the beginning and unfortunately remains with us today and that is **poverty**.

The concept of 'buying' and 'selling' people is not confined to human trafficking. Sports teams, especially in Europe and U.S. are sometimes 'owned' by individuals and these teams 'buy' players from other clubs, 'sell' players to other clubs and even 'trade' one player for another. Despite the terminology what is being discussed is a CONTRACT where one individual (the player) offers their services for money to another individual (the team owner). Again this is like 'indentured servitude' in that one person 'works' for another for money.

In a sense, modern day employees are like indentured servants. They serve one 'master' (the employer) and provide faithful service. In return the 'master' (employer) provides remuneration and the arrangement continues until one or both parties agree to end the contract.

Poverty in the Ancient Near East (ANE) was a family affair, because it was much more difficult for individuals to live alone. They more commonly lived in extended families on land that belonged to the family line. Therefore, if poverty struck this estate, it affected the whole family.

There was no safety net as we have today ie social security. All people had to rely on were their own efforts and whatever the surrounding lands would provide. If the lands were barren, then they would only have themselves to offer. This led to the concept of indentured servitude. Typically the younger and usually stronger were involved in this rather than older individuals. This explains why some people 'sold' their sons and daughters into this kind of servitude

Let's look at what slavery was really like in the ANE and what the OT says about servanthood we see that there really is no comparison. First, we see that in the ANE the characteristics of chattel (or property) slavery were similar to those of the Antebellum south and had three characteristics:

1. A slave was property.
2. The slave owner's rights over the slave's person and work were total and absolute.
3. The slave was stripped of his identity—racial, familial, social, marital.

Therefore before one can say that the Old Testament (OT) supports chattel slavery, we must establish that the OT viewed 'slaves' in this way. If it did not, then the comparison is **not valid**

Paul Copan sums this up very well in his book "Is God a Moral Monster" as follows:
A mistake critics make is associating servanthood in the Old Testament with antebellum (prewar) slavery in the South.... By contrast, Hebrew (debt) servanthood could be compared to similar conditions in colonial America. Paying fares for passage to America was too costly for many

individuals to afford. So they'd contract themselves out, working in the households—often in apprentice-like positions—until they paid back their debts. One-half to two-thirds of white immigrants to Britain's colonies were indentured servants. Likewise, an Israelite strapped for shekels might become an indentured servant to pay off his debt to a "boss" or "employer" ('adon). Calling him a "master" is often way too strong a term, just as the term 'ebed ("servant, employee") typically shouldn't be translated "slave." John Goldingay comments that "there is nothing inherently lowly or undignified about being an 'ebed." Indeed, it is an honorable, dignified term. Even when the terms buy, sell, or acquire are used of servants/employees, they don't mean the person in question is "just property." Think of a sports player today who gets "traded" to another team, to which he "belongs." Yes, teams have "owners," but we're hardly talking about slavery here! Rather, these are formal contractual agreements, which is what we find in Old Testament servanthood/employee arrangements. One example of this contracted employer/employee relationship was Jacob's working for Laban for seven years so that he might marry his daughter Rachel. In Israel, becoming a voluntary servant was commonly a starvation-prevention measure; a person had no collateral other than himself, which meant either service or death. While most people worked in the family business, servants would contribute to it as domestic workers. Contrary to the critics, this servanthood wasn't much different experientially from paid employment in a cash economy like ours."

P124-125

What do the Old Testament Scriptures say about 'slavery'?

First, one must appreciate that much of the narrative of the Pentateuch or the Torah ie the first 5 books of the OT revolves around Yahweh actually delivering His people FROM slavery in Egypt rather than instructing His people TO enslave others. It is not logical that the same God that spends most of the Torah freeing slaves and taking them to the 'promised land' would then promote slavery.

Second, one must clarify what one means by 'slave'. The word rendered 'slave' in the OT is the Hebrew word 'ebed'. This word has multiple means, just like most Hebrew words. The Biblical Hebrew vocabulary is much smaller than the modern English one and the same word usually had many different meanings depending on context and type of literature. The most common usage for this word was in the context where a 'servant' or 'employee' type relationship would be described.

When one examines the Hebrew text in detail, it is very clear that the Bible speaks of a master-servant relationship where the servant is to be well-treated, released after 6 years and even blessed with material possessions after release. Let us look at Deuteronomy 15:1-18. I have placed emphasis on parts that highlight this.

““At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release of debts. And this is the form of the release: Every creditor who has lent anything to his neighbor shall release it; he shall not require it of his neighbor or his brother, because it is called the LORD's release. Of a foreigner you may require it; but you shall give up your claim to what is owed by your brother, except when there may be no poor among you; for the LORD will greatly bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you to possess as an inheritance— only if you carefully obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe with care all these commandments which I command you today. For the LORD your God will bless you just as He promised you; you shall lend to many nations, but you shall not borrow; you shall reign over many nations, but they shall not reign over you. “If there is among you a poor man of your brethren, within any of the gates in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart nor shut your hand from your poor brother, but you shall open your hand wide to him and willingly lend him sufficient for his need, whatever he needs. Beware lest there be a wicked thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of release, is at hand,’ and your eye be evil against your poor brother and you give him nothing, and he cry out to the LORD against you, and it become sin among you. You shall surely give to him, and your heart should not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your works and in all to which you put your hand. For the poor will never cease from the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall open your hand wide to your

brother, to your poor and your needy, in your land.' **"If your brother, a Hebrew man, or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and serves you six years, then in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed; you shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress.** From what the LORD your God has blessed you with, you shall give to him. 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 thing today. And if it happens that he says to you, 'I will not go away from you,' because he loves you and your house, since he prospers with you, then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his ear to the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also to your female servant you shall do likewise. It shall not seem hard to you when you send him away free from you; for he has been worth a double hired servant in serving you six years. Then the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do."

Deuteronomy 15:1-18 NKJV

Third, the Hebrew text actually had a whole series of complex laws that ensured that servants in Israel had significant rights. These included:

A. Dignity as people created in the image of God.

"You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the LORD, and it be sin to you."

Deuteronomy 24:14-15 NKJV

Paul Copan notes on page 129 that Muhammed Dandamayev's addresses this in his essay on slavery and the Old Testament for the Anchor Bible Dictionary "We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their masters."

Protection from abuse or harm

"And if a man beats his male or female servant with a rod, so that he dies under his hand, he shall surely be punished.

Notwithstanding, if he remains alive a day or two, he shall not be punished; for he is his property.

Exodus 21:20-21

The word rendered 'punish' actually means to take vengeance, to avenge and was often associated with the death penalty.

Some may look at verse 21 and say that it condone treating people as 'property'. A deeper analysis offers an alternative view: that the 'property' being discussed is the money or time lost by the owner because of the injury to his servant. Again Paul Copan discusses this on page 136 *Ancient Near Eastern scholar Harry Hoffner (a Hittitologist at the University of Chicago) rejects the common rendering "he [the servant] is his money" in favor of this one: "that [fee] is his money/ silver." This "fee" reading is based on the context of Exodus 21:18-19 (part of a section on punishments dealing with quarrels and accidental killing): "If men have a quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but remains in bed, if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, then he who struck him shall go unpunished; he shall only pay for his loss of time, and shall take care of him until he is completely healed." Like the modified Hittite law that required masters who had harmed their slaves to pay a physician to provide medical treatment, so here the employer had to pay the medical bills for the servant he had wounded. In verse 21, the Hebrew pronoun hu refers not to the servant ("he") but to the fee ("that") paid to the doctor tending to the wounded servant. Hoffner writes, "The fact that the master provided care at his own expense would be a significant factor when the judges respond to a charge of intentional homicide." Are these Exodus laws perfect, universal ones for all people? No, but in this and other aspects, we continually come across improved legislation for Israelite society in contrast to surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures. As the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna observes about this passage, "This law—the protection of slaves from maltreatment by their masters—is found nowhere else in the entire existing corpus of ancient Near Eastern legislation."*

Were released if injured

“If a man strikes the eye of his male or female servant, and destroys it, he shall let him go free for the sake of his eye. And if he knocks out the tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let him go free for the sake of his tooth.”

26-27 NKJV

Were not sent back to their masters if they escaped

You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him.”

Deuteronomy 23:15-16 NKJV

Were not kidnapped or kept against their will.

““If a man is found kidnapping any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and mistreats him or sells him, then that kidnapper shall die; and you shall put away the evil from among you.”

Deuteronomy 24:7 NKJV

Even foreigners or non Israelites were protected.

There were laws that gave them a similar status as ‘refugees’ or ‘illegal aliens’ in US today. This is vastly different to being treated as a chattel slave.

““And if a stranger dwells with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. The stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God.”

Leviticus 19:33-34 NKJV

““You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”Exodus 22:21 NKJV

““Also you shall not oppress a stranger, for you know the heart of a stranger, because you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”Exodus 23:9 NKJV

““When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. And you shall not glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather every grape of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the stranger: I am the LORD your God.”

Leviticus 19:9-10 NKJV

““If one of your brethren becomes poor, and falls into poverty among you, then you shall help him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you.”

Leviticus 25:35 NKJV

Some of these ‘foreigners’ could actually get very rich and this is not possible if you are a chattel slave.

““Now if a sojourner or stranger close to you becomes rich, and one of your brethren who dwells by him becomes poor, and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner close to you, or to a member of the stranger’s family, after he is sold he may be redeemed again. One of his brothers may redeem him;”

Leviticus 25:47-48 NKJV

Finally, servitude was TEMPORARY not permanent and was VOLUNTARY not involuntary. Every 7 years debts were forgiven and every 50 years, in the year of Jubilee, mortgages were cancelled with land returned to the original owners. Therefore, anyone going into indentured servitude for a debt KNEW that this would be a temporary situation.

“But if he is not able to have it restored to himself, then what was sold shall remain in the hand of him who bought it until the Year of Jubilee; and in the Jubilee it shall be released, and he shall return to his possession.” Leviticus 25:13 NKJV

Leviticus 25:28 NKJV

“As a hired servant and a sojourner he shall be with you, and shall serve you until the Year of Jubilee. And then he shall depart from you—he and his children with him—and shall return to his own family. He shall return to the possession of his fathers.”

Leviticus 25:40-41 NKJV

Conclusion

What is sometimes called ‘slavery’ in the OT is actually much more like ‘indentured servitude’. It was a voluntary and temporary solution to a long term problem ie poverty. It is much like the role of employees today and the OT has what we may regard as the world’s first occupational health and safety (OH&S) code. The treatment of ‘servants in the Old Testaments is nothing like the chattel slavery that applied in the Antebellum South of the US.

Hebrew scholar J.A.Motyer sums this up as follows: *‘Hebrew has no vocabulary of slavery, only of servanthood.* (The Message of Exodus’,2005, p239).Therefore any comparison between the OT and the Antebellum South is a false one and the proposal that protecting religious freedom would allow Christians to own slaves is just as fallacious.

Slavery in the New Testament

Context

The New Testament (NT) is different to the OT in that there is no Theocracy and the Christians are not the ruling class. They are outcasts and operating within a pagan, pluralistic society. They are also operating under a government system that condoned and promoted slavery. Some have estimated that in the first century 85-90% of the population of Imperial Rome consisted of slaves (A. A Ruprecht, A dictionary of Paul and his letters, 1993)

Therefore, what the early Church could or could not do about slavery living in the Roman Empire would have been very different to what the people of ancient Israel could do living under the law of Moses under a king anointed by Yahweh.

What does the New Testament say about ‘slavery’

The New Testament is very clear in stating that all men are equal before God and that all disciples of Jesus are equal ‘in Christ’. This is summed up very well by the following verses:

“There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Galatians 3:28 NKJV

“Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord’s freedman. Likewise he who is called while free is Christ’s slave.”

I Corinthians 7:20-22 NKJV

Nonetheless, the early Christians had to accept that the ‘law of the land’ under Rome allowed for slavery. Just as the Bible is ‘counter-cultural’ on other ethical matters, it promotes treating ‘slaves’ and ‘servants’ very differently than the way they would be treated under the average pagan Roman. The Bible exhorts Christians to actually be kind to servants and slaves and to give them

the same justice that Christians would want, because The Lord is watching their conduct. We see this in the following verses.

“Bondservants, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in sincerity of heart, as to Christ; not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as bondservants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart, with goodwill doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good anyone does, he will receive the same from the Lord, whether he is a slave or free. And you, masters, do the same things to them, giving up threatening, knowing that your own Master also is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.”
Ephesians 6:5-9 NKJV

“Masters, give your bondservants what is just and fair, knowing that you also have a Master in heaven.”

Colossians 4:1 NKJV

In Paul’s letter to Philemon he encourages Philemon to be kind to a ‘runaway slave’ and to receive him as a ‘brother’.

“For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave—a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

Philemon 1:15-16 NKJV

In Paul’s first letter to Timothy, we see Paul stating that kidnapping or taking people into forced slavery listed among a number of behaviours that were contrary to the teachings of Christ.

*“knowing this: that the law is not made for a righteous person, but for the lawless and insubordinate, for the ungodly and for sinners, for the unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, for fornicators, for sodomites, for **kidnappers**, for liars, for perjurers, and if there is any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine,”*

I Timothy 1:9-10 NKJV

At the end of Paul’s letter to the Romans he mentions individuals who were ‘co-workers’ or ‘fellow slaves’ for the sake of Gospel with Paul. Their names were Andronicus and Urbanus and those were ‘common slave names’ according to Paul Copan (p 153)

“Greet Andronicus and Junia, my countrymen and my fellow prisoners, who are of note among the apostles, who also were in Christ before me.

Greet Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ, and Stachys, my beloved.”

Romans 16:7, 9 NKJV

Conclusion

When one examines the text of the NT regarding slavery, the position of the NT writers becomes clear: whilst they could not prevent slavery from occurring, they categorically condemned it as behaviour worthy of a disciple of Jesus Christ.

Despite this, while the NT authors could not eliminate slavery in the Roman Empire they did the best they could which was to exhort and encourage Roman citizens to treat their slaves well. In this sense they were truly ‘counter-cultural’ and true ‘social revolutionaries.’

Does the Bible Condone Slavery?

Much has been made of the fact that slave owners in the Antebellum South of the US used the bible to condone their ownership of slaves. Some in the modern era have used this to argue that bible is therefore somehow ‘archaic’ and ‘outdated’ and has no relevance to modern life.

Unfortunately, the southern slave owners were being disingenuous when they did this as even a superficial reading of the entire bible ie not simply taking one verse out of context shows that the Bible condemns chattel slavery. Equally unfortunately, this was not the first time that someone has ‘**twisted the scriptures**’. The Apostle Peter warned about people doing this as far back as the first century (2Pet 3:16) so it come as no surprise that people were still doing it 1800 years later.

Hopefully the above explanation has clearly shown that the Bible does NOT condone slavery. Indeed it was actually those who ***faithfully followed*** the teachings of the NT that eventually ended the slave trade in the UK (William Wilberforce) and freed the slaves in the US (Abraham Lincoln)