# Oppression and Slavery in the Ancient Near East and the Bible

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I. An introductory, key contextual text on slavery, liberation, and adoption

Considering all that we will be discussing in this slavery seminar, let us keep this passage in mind from the NT epistle to the Romans:

Rom 8:18-25 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us. 19 For the anxious longing of the creation waits eagerly for the revealing of the sons of God.
20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it, in hope
21 that the creation itself also will be set free from its slavery to corruption into the freedom of the glory of the children of God. 22 For we know that the whole creation groans and suffers the pains of childbirth together until now.
23 And not only this, but also we ourselves, having the first fruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, waiting eagerly for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our body.
24 For in hope we have been saved, but hope that is seen is not hope; for who hopes for what he already sees?
25 But if we hope for what we do not see, with perseverance we wait eagerly for it. 1

II. My thesis and proposal

• Slavery and oppression have been a ubiquitous part of the human experience practically since the beginning. The question I ask here is simple: how does the biblical gospel address this?
• It is my thesis that if the Bible is used as a source for the justification of human enslavement and oppression, then it contains the seeds of its own undoing.
• In contrast to those who claim the Bible justifies human enslavement (and the forms we had in Europe and America), I suggest that the Bible and its laws contain the very ideas that eventually brought about the outlawing of slavery in most parts of the world today.
• Other questions this raises include:
  o How do we understand what happened in our own recent history of slave trade and ownership in Europe and the Americas, and even among many who professed to follow Christ?
  o How do we find healing and reconciliation and unity in a world divided by our history of enslavement and the animosity it generates?
  o How do we overcome the white supremists, or black supremists, or any who claim racial superiority, that so often ends with the oppression, enslavement, and sometimes the genocidal elimination of others?
  o Also very pressing is how do we fight to end the present slave trade in our contemporary world that is taking place under our noses in the United States and abroad, perpetuated by the world’s most wicked captors?
• It is often said that there are more people in slavery today than during the Atlantic slave trade period. Slavery may have been outlawed in England and America, but as we will learn in some painful detail today, it has not been abolished. Similarly to the North Atlantic slave trade, this present-day evil is largely born of greed and avarice for personal gain and power.
• How can we get the courage to address AND FIGHT this colossal reality of kidnapping, entrapment, trafficking, and buying and selling of men, women, and children for exploitive purposes, even in Baltimore?

• We must try to consider the broader historical context of slavery, because we believe the OT law and the gospel of Christ include a radical response, and are a vital answer to the persistence of slavery today.

• The connections between the three very broad historical periods we are considering today are logical connections: in Part I, I want to consider briefly some of the A.N.E. and biblical context as

background for considering the modern Atlantic slave trade that only became illegal only in the nineteenth century.

- Our other presenters will then be considering in Part II the Christian role in fighting to outlaw that trade and human enslavement, in order to set the stage to consider the grim realities of human slavery today that continues relentlessly in our own back-yards.
- You will be encouraged to learn more today about the Christian fight that continues against human slavery, and yes, here in Baltimore.

- Slavery in the Ancient Near Eastern (A.N.E.) world must be properly understood, which is no easy task since it was not so simple for slaves to keep records of their own history, nor did their masters have a habit of writing that history!
- Slavery in the ancient world appears in virtually all cultures, but it was not uniform, and there have been some major revisions in recent scholarship that show its many complexities. Many socio-economic, cultural, political, and religious factors must be considered for a fuller understanding.
- One important fact is that slavery in its many forms in the ancient world was often more humane than the kinds of enslavement we experienced in modern times (of the Atlantic slave-trade period) where people were typically kidnapped, taken from their homes into captivity in chains by others, and then sold to traders from the West. The brutality of this trade is well documented, along with its many tragic fruits that are still very much with us today.
- Further, the contemporary trafficking and enslavement of humans, in fact, involves some of the worst abuses ever observed in the history of slavery, and that is where we will conclude this afternoon.

- In order to set the background to this universal reality in human history, it is important to see our present crisis in the backdrop of the A.N.E., and especially consider the biblical context of ancient Israel and its laws.
- We tend to react to evils without considering their source. And, the evils common to human slavery are not particularly that of one people or another, they are intrinsic to the nature of humanity. A difficult truth to keep in mind is that all of us have in us the potential for cruelty, oppression, and the enslavement of other humans. The roots of this are found at the heart of the story of the human race itself.
- For theological starters, the origins of slavery cannot be properly understood apart from human rebellion against the moral law of God the Creator and his subsequent curse on the ground and our bodies. The biblical account gives us a record of the consequences of that rebellion, all of which we cannot address here (you will have to come take our Genesis course, and our Systematic Theology courses, at the Seminary for that discussion!). It is our understanding that since the introduction of sin into the human experience, one of the key consequences was the brokenness of human relations alongside the related brokenness of human economies.
- Typically, throughout history, [it is an obvious truism] that these two realities can be considered the twin forces that govern history and in many ways define it. Therefore, when we consider human oppression and enslavement of other humans in all the ages including our own, these factors must always be considered. Oppression, exploitation, slavery, and servitude in the world are the result of both the brokenness of sin-cursed human relations and the economic distrainaries resulting from war, captivity, poverty, droughts, and all sundry other disasters of living in a sin-cursed world.
- Further, since creation there has only been one human “race,” and it is divided into only two classifications, biblical speaking: those who are in Adam and those who are in Christ. One of the greatest falsehoods of our generation is that we are divided by something called “race.” Yet, the idea of races is a grand mythology that even the geneticists know is altogether unfounded. It is
one of the many operational presuppositions (unprovable assumptions) of junk-science that depends largely on the evolutionists’ theoretical hypotheses.

- Further, the central thrust of the gospel from the Old and New Testaments is that we are all born in Adam guilty and needing deliverance, needing liberation from slavery (that is, from the curse of the law and captivity to sin). This deliverance results in adoption by God himself into one family of equals, in what the NT calls the “priesthood of all believers (1 Pet 2:5). We proclaim not only liberty and liberation, but adoption of all who are liberated!

- In light of all this, it is the people of God, who claim Christ and follow him, who must exemplify the unity of the one human race in Adam and the unity of the one people of God in Christ. This is the heart of the biblical story of the gospel.

### III. The A.N.E. practice of slavery

- “Slavery” in the ancient world most often meant the ownership of other humans; it is typically called “chattel slavery,” in which the ownership of humans is equivalent to that of other property. This has been one of the most common forms of slavery in ancient (and modern) societies. Even though there were various classes of slaves and servants (in terms of the complexities mentioned), there were also in some ancient law-codes humane laws for the treatment of such slaves. Nevertheless, chattel slaves were not considered differently than personal property.

- This paradigm of enslavement as property was particularly rejected in the OT law. For example, some of the confusion about slavery in the Bible results when the Atlantic slave trade is considered analogous to slavery in the Biblical law. This is often caused by English translations of the Bible that use the word “slave” for what we would more properly understand as “indentured servants.”

- It is important to understand that there were different kinds of slaves/servants in the ancient world, and in the case of Israel all were to be regulated by strict and humane laws. Most frequently the “slave” in the OT was a debt-slave who became such through economic distraint (Lev 25:35-38; 2 Ki 4:1). They either sold themselves into servitude (Lev 25:39-43) or were sold by their parents (Neh 5:5). This relationship was a kind of collateral in which the goal was satisfying a creditor, not as a chattel (property) slave but as a “hired worker” under financial, legal obligation.

- The closest analogy we have today in the US is the “contracted worker” (also, credit card servitude!) who is legally bound by contract to satisfy the agreement through service or labor, etc.

- Christopher Wright says, “We must put out of our minds pictures such as the Roman galley slaves of Ben Hur, or the neck-irons, slave-ships and sugar plantations of modern black slavery when we read the word ‘slave’ in the Old Testament. It is not even the most helpful translation of the word ebed, which basically meant bonded worker, and in some circumstances could be a term of high office when applied to royal servants.”

- In this sense, OT slaves were more akin to contracted domestic workers, or servants, who were debtors working off their obligations, and were not owned by masters in order to relieve the master of work (as in many cultures). These servants worked together with the rest of the household, and were to be treated fairly and humA.N.E.ly at all times. It can even be argued that such ‘slaves’ in Israel had better legal rights and protections than many employees in our economy today (i.e., there were security and assurances).

- In fact, in the Hebrew law regarding bondage (servant-hood or slavery, etc.), it explicitly does not allow any provisions for the owning of Hebrew chattel slaves (1 Ki 9:22), and the law even required release from bondage after six years (and in the Year of Jubilee). In stark contrast to most of the A.N.E. slave-laws, the OT law is very distinctive in requiring release from one’s “enslavement” or indentured servanthood (Ex 21:2; Deut 15:12, 18); it assured protection against harm (Deut 10:18; 24:14-16; Ps 146:9); it even provided perpetual protection and freedom in the event of a

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2 Interestingly, the KJV uses “slave” only twice in the Bible, apparently due to the very negative connotations for slavery at the time of the translators.

slave/servant running away from [a presumably cruel] master (Deut 23:16-17). The OT law even required that the master when releasing a servant/slave to liberally provide for their needs (from the flocks, threshing floors, and the wine press) in order for them to get established as freemen/freewomen (Deut 15:13-14).

- These laws were to be the precedent in all of Israel which was called to be a light to the nations in the expansion of the rule of God in the earth these laws were to be the new paradigm for the entire world!

In contrast, we read in the ancient The Code of Hammurabi (Akkadian)

15: If anyone take a male or female slave of the court, or a male or female slave of a freed man, outside the city gates [to escape], he shall be put to death.
16: If any one receive into his house a runaway male or female slave of the court, or of a freedman, and does not bring it out at the public proclamation of the [police], the master of the house shall be put to death.

Raymond Westbrook discusses Middle Assyrian Laws (MAL) from the Thirteenth century (Akkadian):

- MA Law A 44 – “If an Assyrian man or woman who is dwelling in the house of a man as a pledge for their value is acquired for their full value, he may beat, tear out hair, crush his ears or pierce them.”
- MA Law A 44 CH 282, allowed a master to cut off his slave’s ear for denying that he was his slave. For the same offense some of the contracts in the Tehiptilla archive from Nuzi applied a remarkably severe penalty:
  1 09 “If A. breaks the contract and leaves B.’s house and declares thus: “I am not a slave—woman and my sons are not slaves,” B. shall put out the eyes of A. and her children and sell them. The purpose of blinding was so that they could be sold as chattel-slaves.⁴

IV. In radical contrast, consider the Bible on slavery and servitude

It can be argued, as Christopher Wright puts it, that “Aspects of Old Testament thought and practice in this area virtually ‘neutralized’ slavery as an institution and sowed the seeds of its radical rejection in much later Christian thinking.”⁵ Indeed, OT theology consistently levels all humans to equals before God and his law.

Some of those aspects are as follows:

A. The creation of humanity in the image of God

- The issues of all human relations, and of course slavery, in the Bible must begin with the well-known theology of the creation of humans in the image of God:
  
  Gen 1:27 God created man in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them.⁶

- This is the biblical starting point, and the perpetual theological framework, for all the OT laws regarding the treatment of humans, including all men, women, and children, as well as pre-born children.

- We see God’s perspective on this further in righteous Job:

  Job 31:13-16 (NASB95) – the equality of all people made in God’s image
  13 “If I have despised the claim of my male or female servants[slaves]
  When they filed a complaint against me,
  14 What then could I do when God arises?
  And when He calls me to account, what will I answer Him?
  15 “Did not He who made me in the womb make him,
  And the same one fashion us in the womb?
  16 “If I have kept the poor from their desire,


⁵Wright, Old Testament Ethics, p. 333.

Or have caused the eyes of the widow to fail,

- The Spirit of God is said to be poured out on all equally and without any distinctions:
  
  Joel 2:29 (NASB95) “Even on the male and female servants I will pour out My Spirit in those days.
  
  Acts 2 – Pentecost

B. The OT laws governing and regarding slavery were compassionate

- For example, as based on the creational, theology of the image of God, the OT laws governing slaves (that are not found in other ancient Near Eastern law codes) include the following:

  1. In the OT law there was protection from harm as well as the compassionate release of those injured during indentured servitude

  The OT law concerning slaves or indentured servants that are injured/killed by their own masters:
  
  Ex 21:20–21 (NASB95) “If a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod and he dies at his hand, he shall be punished [presumably by death?]. 21“If, however, he survives a day or two, no vengeance shall be taken; for he is his property [or as a slave is figuratively “as his money”] (וֹ֖כַסְפ).

  Further, in the same passage, we read:
  
  Ex 21:26–27 (NASB95) “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. Ex 21:26–27(NIV 84) “If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye. 27 And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.7

  That is, if a Hebrew servant is injured by their master, they were to go free to compensate (meaning their debt was forgiven). If the slave dies, nevertheless, the master was to be punished according to the law. This is remarkable in the A.N.E. context where masters typically had to pay little (if any) recompense for mistreatment or murder of their slaves.

  2. In the OT law there was protection from perpetual servitude in the compassionate release (manumission) of indentured servants/slaves from servitude

  Ex 21:2 (NASB95) “If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment.

  Lev 25:36-37 (NASB) ‘Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you. 37 You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain. 38 ‘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. 39 ‘If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave’s service. 40 ‘He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee. 41 ‘He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and shall go back to his family, that he may return to the property of his forefathers. 42 ‘For they are My servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt; they are not to be sold in a slave sale. 43 ‘You shall not rule over him with severity, but are to revere your God.

  This compassionate liberation (manumission) of indentured servants and slaves is also clearly expressed in
  
  Deut 15:12-18 (NASB95) 1 At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. 2 “This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD’s remission has been proclaimed. 3 “From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother.

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4 “However, there will be no poor among you, since the Lord will surely bless you in the land which the Lord your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess,
5 if only you listen obediently to the voice of the Lord your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today.
6 “For the Lord your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.
7 “If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the Lord your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother;
8 but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks.
9 “Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, ‘The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,’ and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the Lord against you, and it will be a sin in you.
10 “You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the Lord your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings.
11 “For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, ‘You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.’

12 “If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free.
13 “When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed.
14 “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.
15 “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.

16 “It shall come about if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you;
17 then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also you shall do likewise to your maidservant.
18 “It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years with double the service of a hired man; so the Lord your God will bless you in whatever you do.

- This regulation required the release of all indentured servants after six years, and even included the voluntary acceptance of permanent admittance into a household (which was another kindness of the law designed to protect the family and land inheritances) (Ex 21:5-6; Deut 15:16-17).
- There is another remarkable text that shows us God’s heart regarding slavery, since we often understand that Israel’s idolatry was the primary reason Israel and Judah were carried into captivity to Mesopotamia. Yet in the prophet Jeremiah we see also, and supremely important, was Israel’s failure to release their servants/slaves according to the manumission laws of God. Because of this, God said he would bring them to desolation (v.22):

Jer 34:7-22 (NASB95) 7 when the army of the king of Babylon was fighting against Jerusalem and against all the remaining cities of Judah, that is, Lachish and Azekah, for they alone remained as fortified cities among the cities of Judah.

8 The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people who were in Jerusalem to proclaim release to them:
9 that each man should set free his male servant and each man his female servant, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman; so that no one should keep them, a Jew his brother, in bondage.
10 And all the officials and all the people obeyed who had entered into the covenant that each man should set free his male servant and each man his female servant, so that no one should keep them any longer in bondage; they obeyed, and set them free. 11 But afterward they turned around and took back the male servants and the female servants whom they had set free, and brought them into subjection for male servants and for female servants. 12 Then the word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, 13 “Thus says the Lord God of Israel, ‘I made a covenant with your forefathers in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, from the house of bondage, saying,”
14 “At the end of seven years each of you shall set free his Hebrew brother who has been sold to you and has served you six years, you shall send him out free from you; but your forefathers did not obey Me or incline their ear to Me. 15 “Although recently you had turned and done what is right in My sight, each man proclaiming release to his neighbor, and you had made a covenant before Me in the house which is called by My name, 16 “Yet you turned and profaned My name, and each man took back his male servant and each man his female servant whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your male servants and female servants.”’

17 “Therefore thus says the LORD, ‘You have not obeyed Me in proclaiming release each man to his brother and each man to his neighbor. Behold, I am proclaiming a release to you,’ declares the LORD, ‘to the sword, to the pestilence and to the famine; and I will make you a terror to all the kingdoms of the earth. 18 ‘I will give the men who have transgressed My covenant, who have not fulfilled the words of the covenant which they made before Me, when they cut the calf in two and passed between its parts— 19 the officials of Judah and the officials of Jerusalem, the court officers and the priests and all the people of the land who passed between the parts of the calf— 20 I will give them into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of those who seek their life. And their dead bodies will be food for the birds of the sky and the beasts of the earth. 21 ‘Zedekiah king of Judah and his officials I will give into the hand of their enemies and into the hand of the army of the king of Babylon which has gone away from you. 22 ‘Behold, I am going to command,’ declares the LORD, ‘and I will bring them back to this city; and they will fight against it and take it and burn it with fire; and I will make the cities of Judah a desolation without inhabitant.’”

This same theme is also found in the Northern Kingdom prophet Amos:

Amos 2:4–6 (NASB95) Thus says the Lord,

“For three transgressions of Judah and for four
I will not revoke its punishment,
Because they rejected the law of the Lord
And have not kept His statutes;
Their lies also have led them astray,
Those after which their fathers walked.
5 “So I will send fire upon Judah
And it will consume the citadels of Jerusalem.”
6 Thus says the Lord,

“For three transgressions of Israel and for four
I will not revoke its punishment,
Because they sell the righteous for money
And the needy for a pair of sandals.

There is a sad truth about Israel’s time in exile that we now know much more about from the discoveries of some two hundred Neo-Babylonian tablets that document the rural communities of exiled Judeans in Babylonia. What we have learned is that the Israelites typically adopted, syncretistically, the Babylonian practices more akin to chattel slavery than to the ideals of OT biblical law. We have long known that life in exile was not all hardship for them, but rather there was considerable possibility for social mobility and prosperity, but now we know that this also often included the chattel ownership of Jewish, as well as foreign slaves. That is, their slaves were transferable, as in in debt situations, they could be sold or transferred as part of an inheritance or even given as a gift. There is also evidence of Judean antichretic pledges of Hebrew slaves; these antichretic pledges, common in A.N.E. slave-practice, were where interest owed on the debt is offset by the labor of the slave, and this was in total incompliance with the biblical law we just considered from Lev 25:36-37 -- “Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God,

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that your countryman may live with you.” This is tragic evidence that Israel, though taken into captivity in Babylon due to idolatry, immorality, and corruption, was also in exile for their mistreatment and long-term retention of servants and slaves!

- Upon return from exile, we also learn that the Hebrews even brought their slaves with them:
  
  Ezra 2:64–65 (NASB95) The whole assembly numbered 42,360, \textsuperscript{65} besides their male and female servants who numbered 7,337; and they had 200 singing men and women.
  
  Neh 7:66–67 (NASB95) The whole assembly together was 42,360, \textsuperscript{67} besides their male and their female servants, of whom there were 7,337; and they had 245 male and female singers.

- Upon returning to the land of Canaan after their captivity, we also read a fascinating account in Nehemiah 5 that Israel had continued to enslave those in debt-bondage and that it was resulting in the subsequent loss of family and property, also entirely out of accord with the law. Nehemiah strongly condemns their practice and required them to end it.

  Neh 5:1–12 (NASB95) \textbf{Usury Abolished}

  1 Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brothers.
  2 For there were those who said, “We, our sons and our daughters are many; therefore let us get grain that we may eat and live.”
  3 There were others who said, “We are mortgaging our fields, our vineyards and our houses that we might get grain because of the famine.”
  4 Also there were those who said, “We have borrowed money for the king’s tax on our fields and our vineyards.
  5 “Now our flesh is like the flesh of our brothers, our children like their children. Yet behold, we are forcing our sons and our daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters are forced into bondage already, and we are helpless because our fields and vineyards belong to others.”
  6 Then I was very angry when I had heard their outcry and these words.
  7 I consulted with myself and contended with the nobles and the rulers and said to them, “You are exacting usury, each from his brother!” Therefore, I held a great assembly against them.
  8 I said 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?” Then they were silent and could not find a word to say.
  9 Again I said, “The thing which you are doing is not good; should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?
  10 “And likewise I, my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Please, let us leave off this usury.
  11 “Please, give back to them this very day their fields, their vineyards, their olive groves and their houses, also the hundredth part of the money and of the grain, the new wine and the oil that you are exacting from them.”
  12 Then they said, “We will give it back and will require nothing from them; we will do exactly as you say.” So I called the priests and took an oath from them that they would do according to this promise.

3. \textbf{In the OT law there were protective laws against kidnapping and the selling of humans as slaves: this was \textit{punishable by death}}

- In light of this, consider the horror of the kidnapping of slaves in the Modern European and American Atlantic slave period in contrast to what we see in the OT law.

  Ex 21:16 (NASB95) He who \textbf{kidnaps} a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, \textbf{shall surely be put to death}.
  
  Deut 24:7 (NASB95) “If a man is caught \textbf{kidnapping} any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently or \textbf{sells} him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you.

- As we can see, in contrast to most ancient and modern practice, the kidnapping and selling/enslaving of humans was sorely condemned in the OT law, and was so serious that the punishment was death!
Yet, as noted already, this was precisely the most common means by which slavery in our so-called Christian Europe and America was established and grew so vast, and thus was so difficult to outlaw.

Thus, professing Christians who seek to justify that slave-trade and its forms of slave-ownership have the burden of proof on them and against scripture! Indeed, the biblical law totally repudiates the entire industry, and shows us that the modern Atlantic slave trade was in essence the same as the heinous coercions, kidnapping, trafficking, and enslavement of men, women, and children today. The only difference was, it was once legal, and [in most countries] today it is not.

4. **In the OT law there were protective and compassionate servants/slaves**

   Lev 25:44-46 ‘As for your male and female slaves whom you may have—you may acquire male and female slaves from the pagan nations that are around you.

   45 ‘Then, too, it is out of the sons of the sojourners who live as aliens among you that you may gain acquisition, and out of their families who are with you, whom they will have produced in your land; they also may become your possession.

   46 ‘You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession; you can use them as permanent slaves. But in respect to your countrymen, the sons of Israel, you shall not rule with severity over one another.’

   Paul Copan in his discussion of this says that foreigners were in a different category because there were distinct groups being referred to: one group were the aliens (גֵּר, ger) and sojourners (תֹּשָּׁב, toshab) who were the proselytes to faith in YHWH. The sojourner, who was a circumcised proselyte to faith was to be treated as an equal to all native-born Israelis. The foreign sojourner had the right to glean food in the fields (Lev 19:10; 23:22), to tithe (Deut 14:29), to practice the Sabbath year (Lev 25:6), to offer sacrifices at the Tent of Meeting (Lev 17:10), and to follow the laws of purity (Lev 17:10-16).

   The other group were the foreigners (בֵּנֵי-נְכֹר, beni-nokrim) who were not proselytes to faith, but who were welcome to join Israel’s faith (Gen 17:12; Ex 12:43). In the case of the former group of sojourning foreigners, they were proselytes and shared in most of Jewish life, but this latter group were in Israel on account of business (or as prisoners of war) and did not share in Israel’s religious faith and life. These non-believing foreigners could pose a threat spiritually since so often they represented idolatry (Josh 24:20; Jer 5:19; Mal 2:11; Jer 8:19; Prov 2:16; 5:20). Yet these foreigners could also be taken as slaves and servants (to the advantage of both sides), but not by force unless prisoners of war, and they too were to be treated well according to the law of God.

   Indeed all foreigners were to be treated rightly: for example, in Exodus 22:21 (NASB95) we read, “You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.” Better than that, all who were foreigners were to be loved as though they were brothers:

   Deut 10:18-19 For the Lord your God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God who does not show partiality nor take a bribe. 18 He executes justice for the orphan and the widow, and shows His love for the alien by giving him food and clothing.

   19 “So show your love for the alien (גֵּר), for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.”

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5. In the OT law there were protective and compassionate regulations granting asylum to runaway slaves in cities of refuge

- In stark contrast to the Code of Hammurabi we just read, we see in Deuteronomy:
  Deut 23:15-16 (NASB95) “You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. 16 “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.

- This is one of the most radically new regulations in the A.N.E. As Wright calls it “one of the most countercultural pieces of legislation to be found. Israel’s law not only allowed runaway slaves freedom; it went beyond that and commanded their protection.”

- In sum, as Christopher Wright expresses it, “No other ancient Near Eastern law has been found that holds a master to account for the treatment of his own slaves (as distinct from injury done to the slave of another master), and the otherwise universal law regarding runaway slaves was that they must be sent back, with severe penalties for those who failed to comply.”

C. NT texts contributing to the eventual abolition of slavery

- There are several important considerations regarding slaves in the NT era: the practice among the pagans, especially the Romans, and the practice among Jews and Christians. A case can be made that, as in the OT law, the NT principles would lead to the abolition of chattel slavery altogether among the people of God, and eventually beyond in the world of the pagans, as well.

- Jesus declared at the outset of his ministry that he came to fulfill the ancient prophecy of Isaiah
  Lk 4: 18–19 “THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES, AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED, 19 TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”

- Jesus said that his disciples were not slaves but his friends:
  12 “This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you.
  13 “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.
  14 “You are My friends if you do what I command you.
  15 “No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.

- Even though the NT does not condemn slavery outright, it consistently shows the unity and equality of all people by leveling all distinctions before the Cross of Christ. In addition to the fact that all humans are created in the image of God, and are descended from common parents, the principle that in Christ all are equal is further sufficient to undermine all the sinful notions that have led to human oppression and the practice of chattel slavery.
  Gal 3:28 (NASB95) There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

- The Lord’s Supper itself made all those distinctions irrelevant (1 Cor 11:17-34), thus in time contributing to the undoing the institution of slavery itself. It also is evidence against all efforts among professing Christians to justify the Atlantic slave trade and its practices of enslaving both professing Christians and non-professing unbelievers.
  Col 3:11 (NASB95) a renewal in which there is no distinction between Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.

12 Wright, Old Testament Ethics, p. 336.
14 Wright, Old Testament Ethics, p. 292.
Eph 6:9 (NASB95) 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.

Ja 3:9 (NASB95) With it we bless our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the likeness of God;

Gal 5:13 (NASB95) For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not turn your freedom into an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

- One well-known example is the story of Paul and Onesimus in Philemon, in which Paul exhorts the master of Onesimus to consider him a brother and treat him accordingly:

  Phil 10-18 I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,
11 who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.
12 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart,
13 whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;
14 but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.
15 For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever,
16 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.
17 If then you regard me a partner, accept him as you would me.
18 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;¹⁷

- In Col 4:9, Paul calls Onesimus “our faithful and beloved brother”

  Col 4:9 and with him Onesimus, our faithful and beloved brother, who is one of your number. They will inform you about the whole situation here.¹⁸

Lastly, the Final Judgment in John’s Revelation includes judgment on those who trade in slaves:

Rev 18:11–13 (NASB95)

11 “And the merchants of the earth weep and mourn over her, because no one buys their cargoes any more—12 cargoes of gold and silver and precious stones and pearls and fine linen and purple and silk and scarlet, and every kind of citron wood and every article of ivory and every article made from very costly wood and bronze and iron and marble, 13 and cinnamon and spice and incense and perfume and frankincense and wine and olive oil and fine flour and wheat and cattle and sheep, and cargoes of horses and chariots and slaves and human lives.

1. **In conclusion: the biblical case against is solidly against chattel slavery**

It can be proposed that these texts have considered went radically against the grain of the A.N.E. law and practice regarding slaves; indeed the backdrop to all of Israel’s law is that God the Creator had created all people in his image (Gen 1:27), and the law was given in the context of their remarkable and unique story of deliverance (redemption) from Egypt by God. Their attitude was to be transformed by that deliverance from captivity. That experience was to define their understanding of redemption itself. Thus, the treatment of all persons, whether slaves or free, was to be defined and determined by that understanding. It can also be said that those seeds of liberation were to be the eventual undoing of all the ancient practices of chattel enslavement! As Christopher Wright further suggests,

“We do not find a section of ‘moral law’ denouncing slavery, not even in the Ten Commandments. But we do find a moral principle operative within the civil law, when put alongside other Old Testament passages on the subject (e.g. Lev 25:42; Neh 5:1-12; Job 31:15; Jer 34; Amos 2:6), puts a


V. The abolition of the oppression and enslavement of humans

- The story of the Christian opposition to slavery has sometimes been told but we will present some inspiring stories today that are one part of the answer to those accusations that the Bible and Christian faith is what motivated and drove the Atlantic slave trade. We believe such accusations are a gross distortion of the facts, and also that wherever those who profess Christ justify abuses of other humans (whether in captivity or not), then their Christianity is itself a gross perversion. This we resolutely affirm as Evangelical Christians: the Bible cannot be used to justify the maltreatment of other humans through deceit, coercion, discrimination, abuse, exploitation, oppression, or enslavement, and certainly not on the basis of color or creed or economics!
- We also affirm that the many modern movements for “liberation” – that claim to be based on the Bible yet exclude the whole gospel of Jesus Christ – are inadequate as a message of hope and true liberation for those in either physical or spiritual captivity. Since physical captivity is truly not as serious a problem as spiritual captivity that includes a total lack of any eternal hope of redemption, we affirm that we need a larger vision for those held captive in our world than just their broken chains.
- This we understand in part from the biblical affirmation that servant-hood is a paradigm that Christ himself greatly extolled, as the Suffering-Servant-Messiah, thus showing the supreme dignity of all humans regardless of their station (Phil 2:5-8; 2 Cor 4:5). Even those in the worse forms of slavery can maintain their dignity and confidence in Christ, even serving those who enslave them, as though they are serving Christ alone. We have been set free to serve the King of all servants. We are freed to be slaves for Christ. Which, seeming ironic, means that we are truly free, regardless of our station in life. As Paul wrote to the Galatians (5:1) (NASB95), “It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery.” He also wrote to the Corinthians, “For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I may win more” (1 Corinthians 9:19 [NASB95]).
- This does not in any fashion justify human bondage; it is instead a message of hope that dignity does not come from being free of physical chains, but from being made in the image of the living and eternal God the Creator, and being in Christ means that you are his precious, adopted child, regardless of your place in this world. Our identity does not come from other humans, institutions, skin color or class, but from God himself. Our adoption is the central biblical motif that depicts our deliverance in Christ: we are all lost orphans before Christ rescues us and brings us home.
  - Rom 8:15 (NASB95) For you have not received a spirit of slavery leading to fear again, but you have received a spirit of adoption as sons by which we cry out, “Abba! Father!”
- Knowing this, is precisely how so many slaves in the Americas could hold their heads high and still serve their brutal overlords: they knew to whom they truly belonged.

VI. In conclusion, the major biblical themes from the Scripture include

- That all are created in the image of God.
- That all are descendants of one couple named Adam and Eve (not evolved from pond slime into different “races”). This is now indicated by human genetics, as well.
- That God heard Israel’s cries in oppressive captivity in Egypt and gave them exodus deliverance.
- That in remembrance of that they were commanded to give proper treatment to all slaves and servants.
- That liberation and freedom is a good that must be used righteously.
- That freedom is not an absolute good in itself since freedom from God or his law means slavery to sin and evil.
- That servanthood is the chief paradigm for the Christian life established by the Suffering Servant himself.
- That adoption is the key motif depicting redemption, God hears the cries of the orphans and captives.
- That with God there will be the perfect execution of his justice. There will be judgment and a final balancing of the books.

- The gospel of Christ, the liberating King of justice, calls us to oppose oppression and to fight against injustice. We in Baltimore have a great opportunity – along with all of the people of God – to be a light of liberating hope to the world, to love the oppressed and captives as God loves them. It is also a sobering responsibility – to fight and pray and work against the wicked transport and buying and selling of men, women and children – to turn the tables on those powerful and wicked men and women who use this city in both high and low places as a hub for the sale of arms, drugs, men, women, and children. It does seem like an impossible task from our vantage point, but God hears and answers.
- May he give us a greater heart of zeal to fight this fight for the deliverance of those in captivity: that we might rescue those being led away into captivity. May we hear on that Great Day of his return, “Well done, good and faithful SERVANT . . .”