

DOES THE BIBLE PROMOTE SLAVERY?

By Ryan Leasure

“Consult the Bible, and you will discover that the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves.” This provocative statement by atheist Sam Harris is meant to cast shade on the God of the Bible. After all, if civilized humanity overwhelmingly condemns slavery, why should we worship a God who thinks it’s acceptable?

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The question of slavery and the Bible is a bit more complicated than Sam Harris makes it out to be. Unfortunately, Harris and others aren’t interested in providing context or nuance in their books. Instead, they “quote mine” verses and then spin them in such a way to make the slavery laws look as ridiculous and backwoods as possible. Furthermore, they assume that biblical slavery and pre-Civil War slavery are essentially the same institutions.

In the remaining space, I’ll attempt to provide some context and nuance for slavery in the Bible. I can’t address everything — which would require much more than a blog post — but I hope to provide some clarity on the issue by looking at eight key points.

1. Slavery Was Pervasive Throughout The Entire Ancient World

It’s estimated that of all the people in the first century Roman Empire, 85 to 90 percent were slaves. We also know from the Code of Hammurabi (1700 BC) and another ancient Near Eastern law codes that slavery was pervasive in earlier times.

Not only was slavery the norm, but it was also corrupt and extremely harsh. We see this in how the Egyptians treated the Israelite slaves — forced hard labor, whippings, and killing young children. As you’ll see below, Israel’s slavery laws were a vast improvement on this horrendous institution.

2. God Outlawed The Slave Trade

Exodus 21:16 states, “He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.” Unlike other ancient cultures and the antebellum South, God forbade Israel from kidnapping individuals and forcing them into slavery. God was so serious about this offense that this act was punishable by death. Already, we can see that Biblical slavery was significantly different from the slavery we think of today.

3. Slavery Was More Like Indentured Servitude

In colonial America times, many foreigners couldn’t afford the fare to cross the Atlantic. So they’d contract themselves — agree to work for a set period of time — until they paid back their debt to the one who paid for their passage.

In the same way, ancient Israelites often times found themselves in financial trouble. In order to get themselves out of debt, they’d agree to become someone’s servant — or slave — until they could get themselves back on their feet.

Leviticus 25:39 describes this when it says, **“If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave: he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner.”** Furthermore, **verse 47** even reports that Israelites became slaves of foreigners living in the land. It states, **“If a stranger or sojourner with you becomes rich, and your brother beside him becomes poor and sells himself to the stranger or sojourner...”**

Unlike antebellum slavery where the owner had complete ownership over the slave, biblical slavery was more equivalent to an employer/employee relationship. This setup provided financial security for people who otherwise wouldn't be able to survive on their own. By agreeing to become someone's slave, they received regular food, shelter, and clothing.

And to give you an idea of how different this institution was from slavery in the South, Israelites often times sold themselves back into slavery after they had gained their freedom because it provided a better life for them.

4. Masters Couldn't Harm Their Slaves

Horror stories of slave abuse and mistreatment abounded from the antebellum South. God, however, established laws that forbade owners from physically harming their slaves. In **Exodus 21:26-27**, we read that if a master injured his slave, that slave was to go free. Additionally, if the owner killed his slave, he received the death penalty (**Ex 21:20**).

Israel's anti-harm law was a vast improvement on slavery throughout the rest of the world. Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna reports, **“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.”** The Hammurabi Code, by contrast, permitted masters to cut off their disobedient slave's ears.

5. Slavery Was Only For Seven Years

“If any of your people — Hebrew men or women — sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh you must let them go free (Deut. 15:12). That is to say, Israelite slavery was never intended to be a life-long ordeal. At most, God allowed for them to sign a seven-year contract to work for their master while they paid off their debts, but that was to be the maximum.

Again, this doesn't sound anything like slavery in the South where it was **“once a slave always a slave.”** As I mentioned earlier, many times slaves would voluntarily go back into slavery after they gained their freedom because it provided a better lifestyle for them. The key, however, was that it was voluntary.

6. Runaway Slaves Received Safe Haven

Unlike slavery in the South which legally required runaway slaves to be returned to their masters, God ordered the Israelites to give runaways safe haven. **Deuteronomy 23:15-16** orders, **“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.”

Not only is this different from the South, it's a huge improvement upon other the Hammurabi Code which demanded the death penalty for those helping runaway slaves.

7. Slavery Is Not God's Ideal

Contrary to what Sam Harris thinks, God doesn't want us to have slaves. Just because the Bible describes slavery and regulates the already existing institution doesn't mean God thinks it's ideal. Consider Jesus' words in **Matthew 19:8** with respect to divorce. He says, **“Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard.”** In other words, God allowed for divorce under certain circumstances and even gave laws related to its practice, but that doesn't mean God was happy with it. After all, Jesus previously said, **“Therefore what God has joined together, let no one separate” (Mt 19:6).**

In the same way, just because God established laws regulating the already existing institution of slavery doesn't mean he approved of it. Rather, it seems that God gave laws that sought to mitigate slavery and undermine it altogether.

For example, because poverty was the main cause of slavery, God made laws that benefited the poor. He decreed that landowners leave the crops on the edges of their fields for the needy (**Lev 19:9-20**), ordered the wealthy to never charge interest on loans to the poor (**Ex 22:25**), and permitted the poor to sacrifice less expensive animals (**Lev 5:7**). Additionally, God ordered that lenders cancel all debts every seven years (**Deut. 15:1-3**).

8. The Full Personhood Of Slaves

Israelites were to treat slaves as people, not property. Job refers to this when he declares, **“If I have denied justice to any of my servants, whether male or female... what will I do when God confronts me?... Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?” (Job 31:13-15)**

Job understood full well that his slaves were God's image bearers as he was (**Gen 1:26-27**). Furthermore, slaves received a day of rest on the Sabbath (**Deut 5:14**) and were participants in Israel's religious life (**Deut 12:12**). Paul even writes in the New Testament that both slave and free are one in Christ Jesus (**Gal 3:28**). “We have in the Bible,” Muhammad Dandamayev observes, “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.”

Slavery and The Bible

I hope it's clear by now that God isn't pro-slavery. The slavery in the Bible — though not ideal — is a far cry from the slavery that comes to our mind when we think of the word. Those who have used the Bible to justify slavery in the past have, therefore, distorted Scripture's teachings.

It's interesting to note that modern abolitionists and civil rights leaders like William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King Jr. have led the charge against slavery and racial injustice by appealing to Scripture's teaching that every person bears God's image. Rather than promoting slavery, it seems the Bible was the foundation for abolishing it.

Frank Turek:

- Old Testament Slavery was not based on forced servitude or based on race. It was a voluntary means of working off debt (or for keeping captives from mustering a rebellion)
- Slave Trading is condemned in the bible, both in the Old and New Testaments. Exodus 21:16, ESV ““Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” Also, 1 Timothy 1:10, ESV “the sexually immoral, men who practice homosexuality, enslavers, liars, perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine,”
- The Bible teaches that everyone is made in God's image, slave and master, that they are equally human and one in Christ. (Exodus 21:20, Deut. 23:15, Job 31:13, Gal. 3:28)
- Jesus came to set the captives free Luke 4:17-21, ESV “And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” And he rolled up the scroll and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”
- The Bible's main goal is spiritual redemption not social reform. (But redemption achieves reform) Slavery is a social issue not a biblical one.