

Appendix B - Biblical and Theological Views of Slavery

Speaking to God's People who had long been dispossessed and in exile, the prophet Isaiah was called to offer the people God's message of hope:

Is not this the fast that I choose:

to loose the bonds of injustice,

to undo the thongs of the yoke,

to let the oppressed go free,

and to break every yoke?

Is it not to share your bread with the hungry,

and bring the homeless poor into your house;

when you see the naked, to cover them,

and not to hide yourself from your own kin?

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,

and your healing shall spring up quickly;

your vindicator shall go before you,

the glory of the Lord shall be your rearguard.

Then you shall call, and the Lord will answer;

you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

If you remove the yoke from among you,

the pointing of the finger, the speaking of evil,

if you offer your food to the hungry

and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,

then your light shall rise in the darkness

and your gloom be like the noonday.

The Lord will guide you continually,

and satisfy your needs in parched places,

and make your bones strong;

and you shall be like a watered garden,

like a spring of water,
whose waters never fail.

Your ancient ruins shall be rebuilt;
you shall raise up the foundations of many generations;
you shall be called the repairer of the breach,
the restorer of streets to live in.

Isaiah 58: 6-12

God's people were not being called to a pious fast to repent, but instead, they were called to repair their relationships, and to amend the responsibilities they had long neglected. The hope was that if they would commit to freeing the oppressed, to sharing with those who had nothing, and to quit their grumbling and judgment, their lives would be renewed. They would be called "repairers of the breach."

We're also told by the prophets that Israel had become exiled because they had not cared for those who were most vulnerable in their society; all they had been given as signs of God's promises to Israel was lost to them because they had not cared for those who needed it most. There were many places in their society that had been neglected, broken and breached, which desperately needed mending.

In his book *The Prophets*, the late, Civil Rights era advocate Rabbi Abraham Heschel gives us some context for the depth of concern that we hear from God's prophets. Heschel points out that the problems that the prophets were overwrought about were things that seem like such minor issues to us today. He even muses about whether or not God's indignation and anger, which the prophets communicated, was disproportionate to the cause of the anger. However, Rabbi Heschel is quick to add out that we are witnesses to the "callousness and cruelty of man," but that our hearts try to forget and to silence our consciences so we don't have to feel guilty over the weight of its burden. Prophets feel fiercely; they feel the silent agony so many in our society suffer; they give the poor a voice; they make us hear God's deep anger and sadness at our lack of care for one another.

Maybe it seems unconscionable that the Church could be complicit, if not an active agent, in the institution of slavery. And yet the Church, the Episcopal Church included, was often a source for the justification and perpetuation of slavery. Through particular biblical teachings and the maintenance of the social norms of the day, the Church supported and greatly benefited from the institution of slavery. Given the message of liberation and justice that we find echoed throughout the Gospels and the rest of Scripture, we may wonder how this complicity was, and in many ways, remains possible.

We must look to both the Old and New Testaments to gain a better understanding of the difference between biblical slavery and institutionalized slavery as we know it from our country's history. People have cited slavery's presence in the scripture as justification for the institution; however, it is important to take the time to discern the different types of slavery described in scripture versus the heinous and deplorable type of slavery perpetrated by Europeans and Americans.

Slavery was not a part of God's original plan or creation order. Instead, slavery can be seen as a product of the fall of man; man's disobedience to God, His law, and His word. The law given to Moses included ordinances that provided parameters for the treatment of slaves, which were for the benefit of both master and slave. Ultimately, God desires that all his people and nations are liberated. Biblical slave laws reflect God's redemptive desire to this extent.

We know that Mosaic law permitted some types of voluntary slavery:

- Voluntary servitude or indentured servants: These were individuals who needed assistance, could not pay their debts or needed protection. Under biblical law, they were allowed to become indentured servants. (Ex. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:12-18)
- Voluntary permanent slaves (bondservant): An indentured servant could choose to become a permanent slave. The law recognized that some people wanted the security of being taken care of and allowed this provision. (Ex. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:16-17)
- A thief or criminal making restitution: A thief or criminal who did not have the means to make restitution could be sold as a slave and remain in servitude until enough work was done to pay for the amount it was determined he owed. (Ex. 22:1,3)
- Foreigners (unbelievers) from neighboring nations could be made permanent slaves (Lev. 25: 44-46). However, biblical slave laws protected and eventually redeemed these slaves. Since they were allowed to become part of the covenant and a part of the family, this even gave them opportunity to receive an inheritance.

Our understanding of the word slavery in light of the American historical context comes from a race-based, chattel slavery system in which the slave was the property of a master and lacked any legal rights. This type of slavery is not supported biblically. In fact, Mosaic laws strictly forbade involuntary servitude and/or slavery.

Exodus 21:16 / Deuteronomy 24:7 / Deuteronomy 23:15-16

The Greek word *doulos* can be translated slave, sometimes servant or bondservant, and it often referred to people who had a surprising level of legal and social status in the 1st

Century, Greco-Roman period. Most weren't slaves from birth or for their entire life. It was also not because of their race.

Further evidence of the difference between biblical slavery and American slavery:

- Hebrew slaves were to be freed after 6 years (Ex. 21:2).
- Most freed slaves were released with liberal pay (Deut. 15:12-15).
- Runaway slaves were to go free (Deut. 23:15-16).
- Excessive punishment of slaves was forbidden (Ex. 21:26-27; Lev. 24:17).
- Slaves could be brought into the covenant and then partake of the Passover meal (Ex. 12:43-44 / Gen. 17:12-1). They could also eat of "holy things" (Lev. 22:10-11).
- Slaves had some rights, position in the home and could share in the inheritance (Gen. 24:2 / Prov. 17:2).
- Slaves were to rest on the Sabbath (Ex. 20:8-11)
- There were slave laws for the protection of females (Exodus 21:4-11).