

Christianity & Slavery

Sam Harris, a leading voice in contemporary atheist resurgence, recently penned, “If a person doesn't already understand that cruelty is wrong, he won't discover this by reading the Bible ... — as these books are bursting with celebrations of cruelty, both human and divine. ... We have made considerable moral progress over the years, and we didn't make this progress by reading the Bible... more closely. [The Bible] ... condone[s] the practice of slavery — and yet every civilized human being now recognizes that slavery is an abomination.”¹ Austin Cline, a Regional Director for the Council on Secular Humanism and atheist/agnostic apologist wrote, “God is depicted [in the Bible] of both approving and regulating slavery, ensuring that the traffic and ownership of slaves proceeds in an acceptable manner.”² In this paper I will rebut these and similar claims and argue that Christianity opposes slavery as a matter of biblical theology. I shall discuss the classic “problem of evil” as it relates to slavery, and attend to some of the historical revisionism that ignores the Christian church’s history of opposition to slavery, including a review of the abolitionist movement as it is rooted in Christian theism.

Problem of Evil

Who has not struggled to understand the existence and sometimes prevalence of evil in mankind? Indeed, this is a standard complaint of atheists and some agnostics—part of their creed of unbelief or skepticism. How could a good and all-powerful God allow such an institution as slavery, after all? God must be either lack power to restrain such evil, or is not the benevolent being that monotheists misunderstand God to be. It is good that humankind has this powerful

¹ Sam Harris, “10 myths -- and 10 truths -- about atheism”, *Los Angeles Times*, 24 December 2006, Opinion Section. Available on line at <http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/la-op-harris24dec24.0,3994298.story?page=2>.

² Austin Cline, “Bible, Race & Slavery”, web article available at <http://atheism.about.com/library/weekly/aa112598.htm>

emotional response to evil; it is the stimulus to corrective action. But that such evil as slavery exists is not inconsistent with what Christian theists maintain to be true about God.

Christian theism holds that God has endowed human beings with free agency—the freedom of moral choice. Despite the intramural debate as to the extent of that freedom of moral choice, it is widely accepted that humans are held responsible for their actions. Moreover, God has revealed what choices are in keeping with His perfect moral will—violations against that perfect moral will are called “sin”. God has endued humans with these moral capacities as part of His plan to bring about salvation and His own righteous kingdom on the earth. Mankind is to overcome evil with good; these themes are repeated throughout the Christian scriptures. Like other forms of evil, God allows slavery (as a matter of moral choice) to exist while simultaneously overcoming that evil through a redeemed people. Indeed it is through that process that we come to prefer the one moral choice to the other—we experience the moral will of God and become more of what God intended human beings to be. We shall see below, that “only in Christianity did the idea develop that slavery was sinful and must be abolished.”³ That idea developed in the mind and practice of mankind through biblical revelation, which revelation we now turn to. What *does* the bible⁴ say about slavery, or about how to treat others?

Slavery and the Bible

Before reviewing specific texts that speak to the slavery question, it is important to mention the history of slavery, generally speaking. The bible of course does not address the slavery issue in a cultural vacuum. “Every great civilization—from Mesopotamia to China, from

³ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts, and the end of Slavery* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 291.

⁴ I hold to the classic Christian belief that the Bible is the self-revelation of God to man and without error in all that it affirms as true. Therefore, what the *bible* says about slavery, applying proper hermeneutical and exegetical rules, is what *God* says about slavery.

the Indus Valley up to Crete—was defined by the ubiquitous presence of slaves.”⁵ The term slave has had a wide range of meaning throughout history, from indentured servant to property; many were laborers in agriculture, building, and mining, while others were concubines and house servants to their masters. Some slaves suffered extreme brutality, and others were treated near to kin. The Mosaic Law of the Israelites forbade turning over a runaway slave from another country, while the Code of Hammurabi decreed death for those that harbored runaway slaves. These are not distinctions without a difference, for any discussion of slavery that either equivocates on the term or misrepresents the practices particular to any culture, will lead to faulty conclusions, unreasonable generalizations, and as is evidenced in this paper—historical revisionism. Not only so, but even some Christians, due to a lack of such discipline, have (in America’s colonial and pre-Civil War history) argued in favor of slavery *from the scriptures!*

The Mosaic Law regulated slave treatment for the Old Testament Israelites, who took slaves from among their own people (especially in payment of a debt or as penalty for some crime against another), and from foreign nations captured in military conflict. These were “benevolent laws” that served to “restrain evil” and “encourage improvement”.⁶ As result there was no slave trade, it was not a profitable enterprise. The law forbade the kidnapping and selling of human persons, and was punishable by death. (Deut. 24:7) For that matter, Israelites could “sell themselves” into the service of another Hebrew to avoid utter destitution and ruin. Hebrew slaves were to be set free after six years of service, and were sent away sharing the blessings that God had blessed their masters with, from both the flock and the winepress. (Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:12-15) If a master beat a servant resulting in the loss of an eye or a tooth, the servant was

⁵ Vincent Carroll & David Shiflett, *Christianity on Trial: Arguments Against Anti-Religious Bigotry* (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002), 29.

⁶ Albert H. Bayliss, *From Creation to the Cross: Understanding the First Half of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing, 1996), notes, 142.

released from his service to that master. If a master killed a servant due to harsh discipline, the master was punished. (Ex. 21:20, 26-27) One who sold himself into the service of another could also be redeemed, i.e. a family member could purchase his freedom. In a very real sense, it was the person's labor that was owned by a master, and not the person himself and therefore benefited the person as much as the master. Not only so, but the Mosaic Law made provision for those slaves who, at the end of their service, chose to remain with the family as a permanent slave for the love and prosperity that had developed between them. (Deut. 15:16-17) Slaves were to have rest on the Sabbath along with the Hebrew people, and could enter into the Mosaic covenant. (Ex. 20:9-10) It is also noteworthy that Moses and the Hebrews were called "servants" of the Lord, the term used in many of the passages noted.

In the Greco-Roman world, which is the historical setting of the New Testament writers, slavery was common, so much so that "it was thought that *every* household in Athens and Rome had slaves".⁷ Slaves were used in the construction of both the Parthenon and Coliseum, most actors were slaves, and at times slaves "outnumbered free populations".⁸ Slaves "were found in all occupations and generally had more opportunity for social advancement than free peasants." Even so, under Roman law, slaves were considered property and could be executed by the slave owner.⁹

Under these conditions, Jesus and Paul gave instruction not aimed at the political overthrow of the institution of slavery, but at the human heart and mind. Jesus taught that people were to "love God with all the heart, mind soul and strength, and to love one's neighbor as

⁷ Rodney Stark, *For the Glory of God*, 297, quoting Milton Meltzer, *Slavery: A World History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993). Italics in original.

⁸ Stark, 299.

⁹ Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: Intervarsity Press, 1993), 642-643.

oneself.” (Luke 10:27) Dallas Willard captures the essence of Jesus’ ministry as it applies to social and cultural change:

The revolution of Jesus is in the first place and continuously a revolution of the human heart or spirit. It did not and does not proceed by means of the formation of the social institutions and laws, the outer forms of our existence, intending that these would then impose a good order of life upon people who come under their power. Rather, his is a revolution of character, which proceeds by changing people from the inside through ongoing personal relationship to God in Christ and to one another.... External, social arrangements may be useful to this end, but they are not the end, nor are they a fundamental part of the mean.¹⁰

Likewise, in his letters to the various churches, Paul exhorted slaves regarding their personal conduct and holiness. Slaves were to serve their masters well, as though they were serving Christ. Furthermore, both servants and masters were to remember that each served the ultimate master —Jesus Christ, and that with gladness and sincerity (Eph. 6:5-9, 1 Tim. 6:1-2) In the most meaningful sense then, slaves and masters were equals, and Paul says as much in his letter to the Galatians. “In Christ”, he wrote, “There is neither slave nor free”, (3:28) Those differences in the economy of the world were not defining in the community of believers.

It is noteworthy also, that Paul did encourage slaves to be free if it were *possible*. But he offers that advice only after he has reminded them that the Lord called each person while in a particular state; some were free, some were slave, some were circumcised, some were not. (1 Cor. 7:21-24) In other words, these were not to prevent them, in either contrast, from pursuing the life in Christ. Also, in his letter to his friend Philemon, Paul “goes beyond other documents of his time in not only pleading for clemency for an escaped slave but asking that he be released because he is now a Christian”.¹¹

“But”, insists the objector, “ why doesn’t scripture just condemn the practice of slavery?” Did slavery, by absence of specific condemnation in Christian scripture, “tacitly” enjoy “divine

¹⁰ Clay B. Jones, *Prepared Defense* (Database © 2005 WORDsearch Corp.) CD-ROM, quoting Dallas Willard, *Renovation of the Heart* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2002), 15.

¹¹ Keener, 643.

sanction and approval” so long as it was duly regulated and carried out “appropriately”?¹² This question is typically framed with reference to new world slavery; but recall my warning to be mindful of the equivocation on the term slavery that attends the question. Scripture cannot be said to allow for new world type slavery if that slavery was properly regulated. New world slavery was not the kind of slavery amenable to such regulation. We have seen the benevolent provisions of the Mosaic Law above, provisions that are diametrically opposed to the slave trade of the new world and to the other nations of the ancient near east wherein slavery was especially cruel. Rather, scripture condemns slave trading—the kidnapping of other human beings for the purpose of slavery. (1 Tim. 1:10) “The commands in the bible...would subtly undermine the institution far better than a slave rebellion.... Compare the application of Paul’s teachings with the tragic end to the rebellion of Spartacus (c. 120-70 BC).”¹³ Not only, then, does the stated objection miss the main point that biblically informed Christians would bring about the demise of slavery; but it only enjoys its status as a “serious” objection due a fair amount of historical revisionism in which the objection is quite at home.

Revisionism

The revisionists’ pens have left considerable blots on the historical record, blots that obscure the truth either by omission or distortion of facts. Some of this is pure anti-religious bigotry, which proceeds from overgeneralizations of the cause and effect of cultic worship and ritual. Rodney Stark discusses the impact of monotheism on progress and reformation. He contrasts the “effects of religiousness on individual morality” that derives from belief in God as a “conscious, morally concerned being”, with that of “impersonal or amoral Gods” that have no

¹² Austin Cline, “Bible, Race & Slavery”.

¹³ Jonathan Sarfati, “Anti-slavery Activist William Wilberforce: Christian Hero”, (Creation Ministries International, Creation on the Web.com, Feb. 20, 2007), available from <http://www.creationontheweb.com/content/view/4932/>. (Spartacus led a slave revolt that ultimately resulted in the crucifixion of six thousand slaves.)

effect on “moral choices”. He adds, “participation in religious rites and rituals have no *independent* effect” on our moral choices.¹⁴ Part of the revisionists’ failure is that they see all religion in the same way. Yale University history professor David Brion Davis “imputed a monolithic social and moral character to Christianity”¹⁵; if *some* Christians advocated slavery from scripture, then *Christianity* must advocate slavery based on scripture. Perhaps due to some anti-supernatural bias, or from the negative effects of religion wrought by some that call themselves Christians, these revisionists deny the causal effects of Christian monotheism in the overthrow of slavery and other evils. Hence, some other cause must be accounted for, despite the facts. Davis goes so far as to insist that abolitionist Quakers were actually motivated by economic self interest, but deceived themselves into believing their opposition was based on their religious convictions—“fairy tales” they told to one another. Certain Marxist theories also promoted the idea that economics drove abolition despite the fact that in Britain for example (and America too) “the economic costs of abolition were immense.”¹⁶

Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett chronicle some of this revisionism, pointing to mass media like the New York Times, wherein columnist “William McDonald wonders ‘how an institution [Christianity] that spread a message of love...could also engage in brutality...and turn a blind eye to slavery.’” They also remind of that pestilent tendency in Hollywood to leave out details about Christian involvement in moral reform, as in Steven Spielberg’s *Amistad*, in which the important role of “white evangelicals” is “discounted” in the story of the brave black men that mutinied on that slave ship.¹⁷

¹⁴ Rodney Stark, 374.

¹⁵ Ibid, 348

¹⁶ Ibid. 362-364

¹⁷ Vincent Carroll and David Shiflett, 25.

Another amazing example of anti-Christian bias is the misrepresentation of Jesuit efforts in South America to bring civility and culture to the Republic of Paraguay. Stark reviews the omission (in most historical accounts of that 150 year effort) of the advances in arts and industry, as well as the “valid attempt made at representative government” that the Jesuits wrought in that culture. Rather than report these things, the Jesuit effort is commonly reduced to “fanatical” attempts to colonize or “impose religion” on the otherwise “gentle” Indians of Paraguay.¹⁸

Secular philosophy and activity is also underreported in the history of slavery. Enlightenment thinkers Thomas Hobbes, John Locke and David Hume each favored slavery, as did ancient philosophers Plato and Aristotle, though for different reasons. For many humanists, the aforementioned Greek and Roman culture was well worth the enslavement of thousands upon thousands. Like today, colonial and pre Civil war America had its share of those that complained against religious “moralists”. In 1790, a “Maryland Congressmen complained against religious sects that imagined they understood the rights of human nature better than all the world besides.”¹⁹ Still others suggest that certain contemporary political ideology promotes a modern form of slavery wherein the “state is the master providing aid and assistance...and control...over those unable to provide for themselves.”²⁰

Regardless of these several attempts to explain away, ignore or revise the truth about slaveries opponents and proponents, the historical facts testify to an abolitionist movement deeply rooted in Christian theology, a “monotheism...[with] immense capacities to mobilize human action—capacities far beyond those found in polytheism and Godless religions”.²¹

The Abolitionists

¹⁸ Stark, 335-336.

¹⁹ Carroll and Shiflett, 42.

²⁰ Stephen McDowell, “The Bible, Slavery, and America’s Founders”, 2003; available at <http://www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=94>

²¹ Stark, 11.

Mention abolition today and a few names from the past will likely rise to the surface—William Wilberforce, Harriet Tubman, Harriet Beecher Stowe, and perhaps others from “popular” history. The movement is quite a bit older than those 18th and 17th century figures however. St. Patrick was an early public opponent of slavery; the 7th and 8th century had St. Bathilde and St. Anskar (he worked to stop the Viking slave trade); Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John, freed his slaves, as did early church father Ignatius. “The papacy condemned slavery or the slave trade in 1462, 1741, 1815, and 1839”²²; Pope Eugene IV even threatened excommunication from the church for those who had enslaved the natives of the Canary Islands. Medieval Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas denounced slavery, as did St. Anselm. Again, in the 17th-19th centuries of America, evangelist and Oberlin College director Charles Finney and his student Theodore Weld wrote and spoke against slavery, as did the Rev. Charles A. Torrey, known as the “father of the underground railroad”. Whole Christian sects such as the Mennonites and the very organized and influential Quakers worked within their own ranks, and then within the general public to abolish slavery. By 1790, due to their Puritan heritage, Maine and Massachusetts had no slavery. “Antislavery Christians ensured that the election [of 1864] became, in effect, a referendum on whether or not to abolish slavery for good.”²³ Between 1834-1840, clergy made up 52% of the national “traveling agents” of the American Antislavery Society, and 75% of the local travel agents. In short, the abolitionist movement was Christian, and we must ask how or why.

Stark writes, “Abolition was not inherent in Christian scripture; it was only a *possible* conclusion and one unlikely to be reached except under favorable circumstances.... I do not propose that...Christian culture was a *sufficient* basis for deeming slavery to be a sin.... It was a

²² Carroll and Shiflett, 29

²³ Ibid, 51.

necessary basis in that only those religious thinkers working within the Christian tradition were able to reach antislavery conclusions (with the exception of...two Jewish sects).”²⁴ There were after all, those Christians in the south that were either slave owners themselves (and who misapplied scripture to support it), or were entirely acculturated to a way of life that was a counteractive force to antislavery, and served to reinforce self-interest (particularly economic). In a sense, they could not “see the trees for the forest.” Keep in mind my earlier remarks about the “process” of overcoming evil in the world, a process of measures and counter-measures, failures and successes; all which Christian theism holds work together in the economy of God to bring about His righteous rule. Stark therefore concludes, and rightly so, that particularly those that had a more “external” view of slavery were able to see slavery opposing “freedom” and “dignity”; for those least entrenched in slavery were thereby “freed from preconceptions as to its normality”.²⁵ In parts of Europe and in the Northern American states, the antislavery root found fertile soil. Stark’s argument makes sense; while the necessary internal impulse exists to bring about reform, an external pressure and perspective generate the sufficient *coefficient* for change to take place. Both yield to and prefer the moral order imposed on man by the Creator God.

Christianity holds that Jesus embodies the divine prerogatives in that respect; he lived a perfect moral life, serving others by example and instruction. The Apostolic teaching upon which the church was “built together as living stones” moves the people of God to live in a similar manner—serving, loving and sacrificing, even (or especially) when the costs are great. Christian abolitionists were cut from that mold and were the primary change agents leading to American and European abolition movements.

Conclusion

²⁴ Stark, 345

²⁵ Ibid, 346

In this paper I have provided a brief historical, religious, and philosophical response to the accusation that Christianity and Christian scripture either sanction or are indifferent to, slavery. That slavery existed in many forms and that God provided an incremental approach to overcoming it (as opposed to a specific command against it), presents neither theological conundrum nor contradiction. Rather, it is quite in keeping with the incarnate God who demonstrated His perfect moral will as a human being (rather than mere words on stone), an example for His people to follow, who likewise infuse God's moral order into the creation as agents empowered to that very end. When Christians act contrariwise, it is a failure of obligation and Christian duty, not a failure of God or the systematic theology that exposes those evil deeds *as contrary*.

Only Christian monotheism provides the basis for actual moral reform. When atheists and agnostics attempt to use the tools of theism to issue moral rebuke to anyone, they surrender their worldview. Consistently pointing to the failure of some Christians (which failure is a falling short of the divine standard) while embracing a worldview that makes slavery an amoral act is irrational; and Christians can both admit to their own error, and simultaneously rebut the false charge of "condoning evil" that is regularly levied against them.