

# What did Paul say about slavery?

## THE CLAIM

‘The same applies to slavery: **“there are no direct prophetic admonitions or arguments in the Gospels or Paul’s letters calling for new social relations”**. This enabled people, wrongly, to claim that the Bible favours slavery.’<sup>1</sup>

## THE FACTS

Bible teaching on slavery is consistent and explicit throughout both Testaments.

**No one is to be treated as a ‘chattel slave’, without any rights:**

- Old Testament: Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15<sup>2 3 4 5 6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ‘Reply 2’, p. 124 (April 2009).

<sup>2</sup> Legislation maintained kinship rights (Exodus 21:3, 9, Leviticus 25:41, 47-49, 54, providing for Hebrew indentured servants), marriage rights (Exodus 21:4, 10-11, providing for a Hebrew daughter contracted into a marriage), personal legal rights relating to physical protection and protection from breach of conduct (Exodus 21:8, providing for a Hebrew daughter contracted into a marriage, Exodus 21:20-21, 26-27, providing for Hebrew or foreign servants of any kind, and Leviticus 25:39-41, providing for Hebrew indentured servants), freedom of movement, and access to liberty (Exodus 21:8, 11, providing for a Hebrew daughter contracted into a marriage, Leviticus 25:40-45, 48, 54, providing for Hebrew indentured servants, and Deuteronomy 15:1, 12; 23:15, providing for Hebrew or foreign servants of any kind).

<sup>3</sup> ‘The nations subjected by the Israelites were considered slaves. **They were, however, not slaves in the proper meaning of the term**, although they were obliged to pay royal taxes and

- New Testament: Colossians 4:1<sup>7</sup>

**Servants are to be treated well, like family, because masters are accountable for them:**

- Old Testament: Exodus 20:10; 21:20-21, 26-27,<sup>8 9 10</sup> Deuteronomy 5:14; 12:12; 10:1012; 16:13-14<sup>11 12 13</sup>

perform public works.’, Dandamayev, ‘Slavery’, Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 62 (1996).

<sup>4</sup> ‘Those people who were enslaved in ancient Israel **had a social and legal status different from that of the chattel slaves** who made up the system practiced later in Hellenistic-Roman times.’, Wright III, ‘Ebed/Doulos: Terms and Social Status in the Meeting of Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture’, Semeia 83/84, p. 86 (1998).

<sup>5</sup> ‘In ancient Israel (and the ancient Near East generally) (debt-)slaves and (indentured) servants were utilized primarily in small numbers in households, **not in mass numbers as laborers who worked large agricultural estates or mines.**’, Wright III, ‘Ebed/Doulos: Terms and Social Status in the Meeting of Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture’, Semeia 83/84, p. 86 (1998).

<sup>6</sup> ‘The Hebrew Bible, however, **is sharply critical of various forms of human servitude**. Its critique is rooted in Israel’s formative memory of having been “redeemed from slavery” in Egypt, **on the basis of which Israelites are expected not to enslave fellow Israelites and to care for the destitute.**’, Callender, ‘Servants of God (S) and Servants of Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East’, Semeia 83/84, p. 74 (1998).

<sup>7</sup> ‘**Just as the masters want the slaves to do right by them, so should the masters deal in the same way with their slaves** [Lns]. Slaves have to serve their masters, **and in the same way there are certain duties which the masters have towards their slaves. They are to give their slaves all to which they are entitled** [Ea]. They are to live by the same moral principles that the slaves are to live by [ICC]. It is equality in the sense of being equals with them. **The masters are to treat their slaves in a way which reflects the fact that they are equals with them, the slaves being their Christian brothers** [Lg, My] because both the masters and the slaves have been redeemed [Lg]. This means that they are to treat them kindly [My]. QUESTION—What is meant by giving what is just and fair to one’s slaves? **It means to treat one’s slaves justly and fairly** [EG, Herm, NIC, TH, WBC; NRSV, TEV, TNT], **to treat them fairly and give them an honest remuneration** [Mrt], **to deal justly and equitably by them** [Lt], **not to defraud them** [Mrt, WBC], **not to treat them harshly or cruelly** [Ea, Mrt, WBC].’, King, ‘An Exegetical Summary of Colossians’, pp. 303-304 (2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2008).

- New Testament: Ephesians 6:9,<sup>14 15 16</sup> Colossians 4:1<sup>17 18 19</sup>

<sup>8</sup> ‘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.’, Dandamayev, ‘Slavery’, Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 65 (1996).

<sup>9</sup> ‘In contrast to many ancient doctrines, the **Hebrew law was relatively mild toward the slaves and recognized them as human beings subject to defense from intolerable acts**, although not to the same extent as free persons.’, *ibid.*, p. 65.

<sup>10</sup> ‘**Slaves were afforded a degree of legal protection in Israel**. The Covenant Code stipulated three basic measures: beating a slave to death would necessitate an unspecified punishment (Ex. 21:20); if a master permanently injured a slave, release of the slave was required (21:26f); and masters were required to provide the sabbath rest for their slaves (23:12). The Deuteronomic Code added that a female captive of war taken as a wife could not be sold (Dt. 21:14).’, Hanson, ‘Slavery: OT’, International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, volume 4, p. 541 (rev. ed. 2002).

<sup>11</sup> ‘Thus, the 4th Commandment contains **an interdiction against forcing the slaves to work on the Sabbath** (Exod 20:10; 23:12; Deut 5:14).’, Dandamayev, ‘Slavery’, Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 65 (1996).

<sup>12</sup> ‘Thus, slaves both born in the household and those bought with money, **just like the free Israelites, were to be circumcised in order to share cultic life and eat the Passover** (Gen 17:13, 23, 27; Exod 12:44; Deut 10:16, 18; Lev 22:11).’, *ibid.* p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> ‘Household slaves, however, **were accorded a certain degree of status in the Israelite family in connection with religious integration**. The males were circumcised (Gen. 17:12f). **They were included at religious meals**, while foreigners and hired servants were excluded (Ex. 12:44; Dt. 12:12ff; 16:11ff). **And priests’ slaves could eat dedicated offerings** (Lev. 22:11)’, Hanson, ‘Slavery: OT’, International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, volume 4, p. 541 (rev. ed. 2002).

<sup>14</sup> ‘**Christian owners are urged to treat their slaves “justly and fairly,” without threatening**, since they have a “master in heaven” who owns them as well as the slaves, and who shows no partiality (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9).’, Bartchy, ‘Slavery (New Testament)’, in Freedman, ‘Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary’, volume 6, p. 69 (1996).

<sup>15</sup> ‘Paul here commands Christian masters to be kind and gracious to their slaves, **knowing that they as masters were accountable to their Lord/Master in heaven for the treatment of their slaves.**’, Mare, ‘New Testament Background Commentary: A New Dictionary of Words, Phrases and Situations in Bible Order’, p. 310 (2004).

## Servants are free to obtain their liberty if possible:

- Old Testament: Deuteronomy 23:16-17<sup>20 21 22</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> 'As in Col. 4:1, Christian masters are reminded that they themselves serve a Master in heaven: **their treatment of their slaves is a matter for which he will hold them responsible to him.**', Bruce (egalitarian), 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 402 (1984).

<sup>17</sup> 'If slaves like Onesimus have their duties, so do masters like Philemon; **they must treat their slaves fairly and justly.** They are masters on earth, but they themselves have a Master in heaven: **let them treat their servants with the same consideration as they themselves hope to receive at the hands of their heavenly Master.**', Bruce (egalitarian), 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 171 (1984).

<sup>18</sup> 'The sanction is what we might expect given the emphasis of the preceding verses: as slaves should serve their masters as doing it for the Master, **so masters should remember that they themselves have a Master in heaven.**', Dunn, 'The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon', New International Greek Testament Commentary, p. 260 (1996).

<sup>19</sup> 'Nevertheless, Christian masters are different people because of their relationship with the Lord. **They, too, have a new center of reference and so are called upon to demonstrate fairness and justice toward those who serve them; they too have a Master in heaven.**', Patzia, 'Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon', New International Biblical Commentary, p. 94 (1990).

<sup>20</sup> 'In contrast to all the ANE laws, Deuteronomy (23:15–16) forbade the handing over of a fugitive slave who had sought asylum from his master. **The law instructed the owner to let the slave stay where he chose to live.**', Dandamayev, 'Slavery', Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 65 (1996).

<sup>21</sup> '**A slave could also be freed by running away.** According to Deuteronomy, a runaway slave is **not to be returned to its master.** He should be sheltered if he wishes or **allowed to go free, and he must not be taken advantage of** (Deut 23:16-17). This provision is **strikingly different from the laws of slavery in the surrounding nations** and is explained as due to Israel's own history of slaves. It would have the effect of turning slavery into a voluntary institution.', Westbrook (ed.), 'History of Ancient Near Eastern Law', volume 2, p. 1006 (2003).

<sup>22</sup> 'Ancient Near Eastern law forbade harboring runaway slaves, and international treaties regularly required allied states to

- New Testament: 1 Corinthians 7:21,<sup>23 24 25</sup> Philemon 1:16<sup>26 27 28</sup>

## Enforced servitude is a wicked sin:

---

extradite them. **The present law, in contrast, permits escaped slaves to settle wherever they wish in the land of Israel and forbids returning them to their masters or enslaving them in Israel.**', Tigay, 'Deuteronomy', JPS Torah Commentary, p. 215 (1996).

<sup>23</sup> 'Rather than encouraging slaves to remain in their slavery, **Paul offers an exception that encourages them to make use of any opportunity to obtain their freedom:** "Though if you can gain your freedom, do so" (RSV, NIV, REB).', Garland (egalitarian), '1 Corinthians', Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p. 309 (2003).

<sup>24</sup> 'The apostle goes on to qualify his remarks, as he has done on more than one occasion in this chapter, **by encouraging believers to welcome manumission when granted to them.** There were recognized legal means (there were few slave revolts in Paul's Roman world) by which a slave could be freed from the legal status of slavery in the Roman setting. **It is in light of these legal options well known to Paul and his readership, that Paul acknowledges the preference to manumission.**', Oster (complementarian), '1 Corinthians', College Press NIV commentary (1995).

<sup>25</sup> 'On the topic of slavery, Paul teaches that believers should be content with their lot, **but if the chance to go free arises, he advises the slave to take it.**', Beale & Carson, 'Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament', p. 715 (2007)

<sup>26</sup> 'He writes as one who assumes that Philemon will do the decent thing—that **he will take legal steps to change the master-slave relationship.**', Bruce (egalitarian), 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 218 (1984).

<sup>27</sup> 'In this social-legal context **the question regarding manumitting Onesimus was most likely when, not if, Philemon planned to set Onesimus free.** Paul's climactic appeal in v 16 (receive him "no longer as a slave but ... as a beloved brother") seems best understood as Paul's request that Onesimus' manumission not be delayed because of any wrongdoing (see v 18) **and that Philemon forgive his slave and manumit him very soon.**', Bartchy, 'Philemon, Epistle to', in Freedman, 'Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary', volume 5, p. 308 (1996).

<sup>28</sup> 'Slaves were sometimes freed by their masters to become slaves of the temple of some god; **here Paul asks that Philemon free Onesimus for the service of the gospel.**', Keener (egalitarian), 'IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament' (1993).

- Old Testament: Exodus 21:16, Deuteronomy 24:7<sup>29</sup>

- New Testament: 1 Timothy 1:10<sup>30 31 32</sup>

The Law of Moses and Paul spoke consistently against the slave systems of their day.<sup>33 34</sup>

---

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

---

<sup>29</sup> '**Kidnapping for slavery was deemed an offense worthy of death**, because it threatened the very integrity of the community (Ex. 21:16; Dt. 24:7).', Hanson, 'Slavery: OT', International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, volume 4, p. 543 (rev. ed. 2002).

<sup>30</sup> "'Slave traders" (or "kidnappers"; only here in biblical Greek) **denotes those engaged in the business of kidnapping or stealing people and selling them into slavery.**', Towner (egalitarian), 'The Letters to Timothy and Titus', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 128 (2006).

<sup>31</sup> '**Kidnapers refers generally to those in Biblical times who sold people as slaves** (so NRSV "slave traders"), **and specifically to those who used kidnapping as a way of capturing people for the purpose of selling them into slavery.**', Arichea (egalitarian), & Hatton, 'A Handbook on Paul's letters to Timothy and to Titus', UBS handbook series, p. 25 (1995).

<sup>32</sup> "'Kidnappers" (NASB, TEV) were **"slave traders"** (NIV, NRSV; this was the purpose for which people were kidnapped—cf. Ex 21:16; Deut 24:7); **Paul's remark directly assaults the vicious slave trade of his day.**', Keener (egalitarian), 'IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament' (1993).

<sup>33</sup> Surprisingly, despite Paul's repeated calls for social relations between slaves and their masters under the Roman slave system to be replaced by Christlike social relations (Ephesians 6:9, Colossians 4:1), despite his instruction to Philemon to free Onesimus (Philemon 1:16), despite his condemnation of enforced servitude (1 Timothy 1:10), and despite his encouragement for slaves to take any available opportunity for freedom (1 Corinthians 7:21), Ian and Averil claim **'The same applies to slavery: "there are no direct prophetic admonitions or arguments in the Gospels or Paul's letters calling for new social relations"**. This enabled people, wrongly, to claim that the Bible favours slavery.', 'Reply 2', p. 124 (April 2009); readers may judge for themselves to what extent this is actually true.

<sup>34</sup> These commandments prohibit slavery systems such as those of the North American plantations and the British colonies.