

## Christianity on Trial

### TRYING THE CHRISTIAN CASE IN A COURT OF LAW.

*Class 11: Is God a Moral Monster: Slavery and Genocide in the Bible?*

#### I.

### SLAVERY<sup>1</sup>

When we Americans read slavery, we think of the slavery that is in our cultural DNA. Thus, Sam Harris says: "While slaves are human beings who are capable of suffering and happiness, the Old Testament regards them as "farm equipment," which is "patently evil.""

This is, unfortunately, distortion and terrible misrepresentation.

God actually chose an enslaved people to be his chosen nation. God liberated slaves!

#### **A. Slavery in the Old Testament**

##### 1. Hebrew debt-servanthood

- is more fairly compared to apprentice-like positions to pay off debts
- much like the indentured servitude during America's founding. People would work for about seven years to pay off the debt for their passage to the New World; then they went free.
- like a live-in employee, temporarily embedded within the employer's household until terms of the contract were completed.
- contractual arrangement to be fulfilled

##### 2. Mechanics

- financial disaster tended to come to families, not individuals
- they could sell themselves or a child into servanthood, which would last 6 years
- any family land mortgaged until the year of Jubilee- 50 years

##### 3. Differences with our understanding

- Not imposed by an outsider—as in the pre-war South.
- Indentured servants could even be "hired from year to year" and weren't to be "rule[d] over . . . ruthlessly" (Lev 25:53–54).
- they were full members of society

##### 4. Three remarkable provisions in Israel

***Anti-Harm:*** When an employer ("master") accidentally gouged out the eye or knocked out the tooth of his male or female servant/employee, she was to go free. No bodily abuse of servants was permitted. If an employer's disciplining his servant resulted in immediate death, that employer ("master") himself was to be put to death for murder (Exod 21:20)— Not so in other Ancient Near East cultures.

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<sup>1</sup> Most of this material is drawn from *Paul Copan- Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?*

**Anti-Kidnapping:** condemnation of kidnapping a person to sell as a slave—an act punishable by death: "He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death" (Exod 21:16 NASB; cf. Deut 24:7). By contrast, of course, kidnapping is how slavery in the antebellum South got off the ground.

**Anti-Return:** Israel as a safe haven for slaves around the world, due to the fact that escaped slaves would not be sent back and would not be mistreated and would not be second-class citizens. (Deut 23:15–16)

From this, we conclude two things: (1) this slavery was very different than the American South; (2) Israel's treatment of servants unparalleled in the Ancient Near East.

## **B. Slavery in the New Testament**

**Key point:** the NT is revolutionary when it comes to slavery. Are all "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28 NASB; cf. Col 3:11)

In the first century, a very large percentage of Rome's population consisted of slaves with both lowly and prestigious positions.

### 1. Slaves as persons

- Some critics claim, "Jesus never said anything about the wrongness of slavery."
- Not so! In his "mission manifesto," He explicitly opposed every form of oppression; after all, he came "to proclaim release to the captives . . . to set free those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18 NASB;

### 2. Paul

- In fact, Paul gives "household rules" in Ephesians 6 and Colossians 4 not only for Christian slaves but for Christian masters as well.
- Commentator Peter O'Brien points out that "Paul's cryptic exhortation is outrageous" for his day.
- Paul's ministry illustrates how in Christ there is neither slave nor free, greeting people in his epistles by name. Most of these individuals had commonly used slave and freedman names. For example, in Rom 16:7 and 9 he refers to Andronicus and Urbanus (common slave names) as kinsman, fellow prisoner, and fellow worker. The New Testament's approach to slavery is utterly contrary to that of aristocrats and philosophers like Aristotle, who held that certain humans were slaves by nature.
- Paul called on human masters to grant "justice and fairness" to their slaves (Col 4:1 NASB).
- clear that spiritual status was more important than social status

### 3. Other NT admonitions against slavery

- the repudiation of slave trading (1 Tim 1:9–10);
- the affirmation of the full human dignity and equal spiritual status of slaves;
- the encouragement for slaves to acquire their freedom whenever it is possible (1 Cor 7:20–22);

- the revolutionary Christian affirmations (e.g., Gal 3:28) which, if taken seriously, would help to tear apart the fabric of the institution of slavery; indeed, this is precisely what took full effect several centuries later—namely, the eventual eradication of slavery in Europe;
- and the condemnation of treating humans as cargo (Rev 18:11–13, where doomed Babylon—the "city" of God-opposers—stands condemned because she had treated humans as "cargo," having trafficked in "slaves [literally 'bodies'] and human lives," NASB).

#### 4. Undermining slavery

- A direct undermine would have been foolhardy.
- A slave uprising would do the gospel a disservice—and prove a direct threat to an oppressive Roman establishment (e.g., "Masters, release your slaves!" or "Slaves, throw off your chains!"). Rome would quash flagrant opposition with speedy, lethal force.

#### 5. Indirect approach

- On the other hand, early Christians undermined slavery indirectly, rejecting many common Greco-Roman assumptions about it (e.g., Aristotle's) and acknowledging the intrinsic, equal worth of slaves.
- Like yeast, such Christlike living can have a gradual leavening effect on society so that oppressive institutions like slavery could finally fall away.

#### 6. Philemon- a step backward?

No. Gaps:

- we only hear Paul's voice
- what was the relation to Philemon?
- what debt was owed to Paul?
- Had Onesimus wrong Philemon?

It's been plausibly suggested that Onesimus and Philemon were estranged Christian (perhaps biological) brothers. Paul exhorted Philemon not to receive Onesimus as a slave (whose status in Roman society meant alienation and dishonor); rather, Onesimus was to be welcomed as a beloved brother: "that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord" (Phlm 1:15–16 NIV, my emphasis).

### Conclusion

Slavery not abolished but made utterly irrelevant!

All the structures that separated Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free were radically overturned by these Christians sharing a common meal together to celebrate the Lord's death (cf. 1 Cor 11:17–34). Indeed, this was a defiant, countercultural act against Rome's embedded social structures—a far cry from the critics' "passive resignation" argument ("Paul didn't speak out against slavery but accepted it").

**That's a social revolution!**

## II. GENOCIDE?

### The Command. Dt. 20:16 - 18:

But in the cities of these peoples that the Lord your God is giving you for an inheritance, you shall save alive nothing that breathes, but you shall devote them to complete destruction, the Hittites and the Amorites, the Canaanites and the Perizzites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, as the Lord your God has commanded, that they may not teach you to do according to all their abominable practices that they have done for their gods, and so you sin against the Lord your God.

### The action.

Joshua records the carrying out of this command at Jericho: "they devoted the city to the LORD and destroyed with the sword every living thing in it—men and women, young and old, cattle, sheep and donkeys" (6:21 NIV).

Several chapters later, we read that throughout the region Joshua "left no survivors. He totally destroyed all who breathed, just as the LORD, the God of Israel, had commanded" (10:40).

The text mentions city after city where Joshua, at God's command, puts every inhabitant "to the sword," "totally destroyed everyone," and "left no survivors" (chi 10 and 11).

This leads to atheists accusing God of genocide, and moral monstrosity.

### A. LITERAL VIEW<sup>2</sup>

Proponents of this view see it in terms of judgment. Not morality, conquest, rules of war, but judgment.

1. Canaanites were a nasty bunch.
  - a. Dt. and Lv. note that they were "wicked" and "defiled".
  - b. The culture was grossly immoral:
    - Debauchery came from their fertility religion that tied eroticism of all varieties to agrarian cycles of planting and harvest.
    - Divination, witchcraft, and female and male temple sex.
    - "Adultery, homosexuality, transvestitism, pederasty (men sexually abusing boys), sex with all sorts of beasts, and incest."
  - c. Sodom: note that after the Canaanite city Sodom was destroyed, Lot's daughters immediately seduced their drunken father, imitating one of the sexual practices of the city just annihilated.
2. Child sacrifice
  - a. Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech" (Lev. 18:21 NIV):

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<sup>2</sup> *This handout explores two views: Literal and Non-Literal. It is not an endorsement for either, but is simply informational. You must make up your own mind. The handout will happen to spend more time on the non-literal because it needs more explanation.*

- Molech was a Canaanite underworld deity represented as an upright, bull-headed idol with human body in whose belly a fire was stoked and in whose outstretched arms a child was placed that would be burned to death...And it was not just infants; children as old as four were sacrificed.”

Archaeological evidence indicates that the children thus burned to death sometimes numbered in the thousands.

### 3. Judgment

- God cared only about sin.
- This was capital punishment on a national scale, for hundreds of years of idolatry and unthinkable debauchery.
- Indeed, God brought the same sentence of destruction on His own people when they sinned in like manner.

### 4. Prevention

- God’s rescue plan to save mankind depended on the theological purity of Abraham’s seed,
- Israel. The cancer of idolatry needed to be cut out for the patient—God’s plan of redemption—to survive.
- Coexistence with pagan religions would have corrupted Israel’s theological core. By purging the land of this evil, God ensured that redemption—forgiveness for the evils of any nation—would be available in the future for people of every nation

## B. NON-LITERAL VIEW

Espoused by some Christian apologists; this study comes from apologist/author Matthew Flanagan and Dr. Richard Harris of Biola University.

### 1. Note on non-literal:

a. If we take everything in Scripture to be literally true, then:

- Trees sing. (1 Chr 16:33; Ps 96:12),
- Christ is a door. (Jn 10:7),
- God flies in the sky on Cherubs. (2 Sam 22:11),
- Elihu’s heart jumped out of his chest. (Job 37:1).

b. Proponents of this view hold that these passages must be read in context and compared to the literature of the day.

2. Old non-literal view: Holds that the passages are hyperbole: This response goes back to the patristic era (early church). They commonly held that this was hyperbolic. Should understand it more like-

- "Knock his block off!

- Hand him his head!
- Take him out!"
- "annihilate the Patriots"
- "totally slaughter the Dallas Cowboys."

### 3. Modern non-literal view

Based on textual analysis, original language, comparison to other ancient literature.

#### Joshua v. Judges

1. Joshua states that Joshua conquered the whole land:
  - repeatedly the text states that Joshua left "no survivors" and "destroyed everything that breathed" in "the entire land" and "put all the inhabitants to the sword."
  - cities include Hebron, Debir, the hill country, the Negev, and the western foothills (Josh 10:38,40).
  - Likewise, Josh 11:23 states that "Joshua took the entire land" and then "gave it as an inheritance to Israel according to their tribal divisions" (NIV).
2. And yet Judges states that much of the land was unconquered:
  - ch. 1 we are told that the Canaanites lived in the Negev, the hill country, the western foothills, Hebron, and Debir (1:9–11).
  - they were there in such numbers and strength that they had to be driven out by force.
  - These are the same cities that Joshua 10 tells us Joshua had annihilated, leaving no survivors.

Therefore, taken as a single narrative and taken literally, Joshua 1–11 gives a seemingly different account of events to that narrated by Judges and also to that narrated by the later chapters of Joshua itself.

#### Type of literature

1. Clues:
  - The early chapters of Judges read like "down-to-earth history."
  - Joshua has "certain stylistic renderings"—"formulaic phrasings" and "formulaic convention[s]" as well as "the highly ritualized character of some of the major events described"
2. Stylistic Phrasing:
  - "edge of the sword" gets repeated, seven times in close succession in chapter 10, two more times in chapter 11, and several times in other chapters. The repetition makes it unmistakable that we are dealing here with a formulaic literary convention.
  - "From man to woman" means generally go kill, not necessarily women as well. If they were there, they were probably killed. But it is not a command to seek them out.

- “City” means population center. The same word for city is also used for village (Bethlehem) and even a tent encampment. When used in 2 Samuel, it refers to the fort in Jerusalem, the citadel, not the whole town.
- Flanagan: "Thus Joshua itself appears to be full of ritualistic, stylized, formulaic language. It therefore looks like something other than a mere literal description of what occurred. In light of these facts Wolterstorff argues that Judges should be taken literally whereas Joshua is hagiographic history, a highly stylized account of the events designed to teach theological and moral points rather than to describe in detail what literally happened."

### Compared to other Ancient Near East Conquests

1. Very similar to writing about conquests in Egyptian, Hittite, Akkadian, Moabite, and Aramaic texts.
2. Those accounts are "highly figurative" and narrate military events very similarly.

Example:

- 1500 BC: Tuthmosis III: "the numerous armies of Mitanni, was overthrown within the hour, annihilated totally, like those (now) non-existent"
  - but we know in fact, the forces of Mitanni lived to fight many another day, in the fifteenth and fourteenth centuries.
- 840/830 BC: Mesha king of Moab: "Israel has utterly perished for always"—a rather premature judgment at that date, by over a century!
- Such studies show
  - (1) such accounts are highly hyperbolic, hagiographic, and figurative, and follow a common transmission code;
  - (2) part of this transmission code is to portray a victory hyperbolically in absolute terms of totally destroying the enemy or in terms of miraculous divine intervention: "such statements are rhetoric indicative of military victory," not necessarily literal descriptions of what occurred.
- It is in this frame of reference that the Joshua rhetoric must also be understood.

**Implication:** When we understand it this way, "killing everyone that breathed" is this:

Israel scored a decisive victory. Joshua did not conquer all the cities in the land nor did he slaughter all the inhabitants in the cities he did conquer. The book of Joshua does not say that he did.