

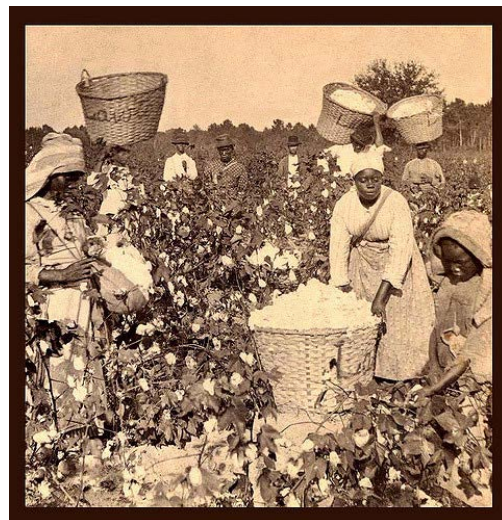
Slavery in the 1st century world of the New Testament

Introduction

What picture comes into your mind when you think of slavery?

No doubt, many of you will think of slaves picking cotton in the American South over a hundred years ago. You may even have seen the TV series “Roots” and formed the impression that being a slave was worse than terrible. Working up to 18 hours a day, without weekend breaks, many died within a decade of arriving on the plantationⁱ. Marriages and families were often split up when one partner was sold. Punishment for slaves who were re-captured after escaping was brutal.

How does this apply to the way we think about slavery in the New Testament? In the first place, it wasn’t restricted to black people; all races, including Europeans might be held as slaves! But the more important question is “was it the same, better or worse”? Well the short answer is “it depends”ⁱⁱ. If you were captured in battle and forced into slavery, life under Roman rule could be just as brutal as that of the American slave. A criminal punished with slavery in the mines fared in much the same way.



Pickin' cotton in Georgia (c. 1860)

On the other hand,

“The lot of the urban slaves was generally easier than that of their rural counterparts. Their work was lighter, and the conditions under which they lived and worked were incomparably better. ... Some controlled large sums of money ... and apparently were able to call much of that money their own. Greek and Roman authors complained constantly about high-flying slaves who were richer than they were. ... There are a number of other examples, ... of slaves who made money. For them in particular, as for most urban slaves, freedom was always a possibility. In most cases this was not so for rural slaves.”ⁱⁱⁱ

When referring to slaves, the New Testament writers make no mention of whether they were urban or rural. However, the majority of New Testament churches were based in medium to large cities. Hence we might conclude that Paul and his fellow Apostles only knew Christian slaves whose lives were relatively stress-free. Unfortunately, this doesn’t tally with some of the things we find in Scripture.

Branding

Gal 6:17 NIV From now on, let no one cause me trouble, for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus.

The Greek word in this verse that is translated as “marks” is the word “*stigmata*”. Many slave owners, especially in rural areas where escape was more likely, branded the forehead of their slaves. The word for such a brand of ownership was “*stigma*”, the singular of “*stigmata*”.

“The *hierodouloi*, a class of slaves with whom his Galatian readers were no doubt familiar, were attached for life to the Phrygian temples and **branded** with the name of the god whom they served. Paul may have seen himself as the *hierodoulos* of Jesus, sealed by his scars for the service of Christ in perpetuity.”^{iv}

This seems to suggest that, at least in this instance, Paul was referring to one of the less pleasant aspects of slavery in the 1st century. In effect he was saying that he was “branded” for his Master, Jesus Christ, and hence no-one could, or should, question his Apostolic authority. He certainly called himself “a slave^v of Jesus Christ”, devoted to the service of his Lord (Rom. 1:1).

Buying and Selling

1Co 6:19-20 NIV Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? **You are not your own; (20) you were bought at a price.** Therefore honour God with your bodies.

1Co 7:22-23 NIV For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. **(23) You were bought at a price;** do not become slaves of human beings [*lit. "men"*].

1st century slaves

“were the lowest class of society and even freed criminals had more rights. Slaves had no rights at all in fact and certainly no legal status or individuality. ... To all intents and purposes **they were merely the property of a particular owner**, just like any other piece of property - a building, a chair or a vase - the only difference was that they could speak. ... Slaves were, for many of the Roman elite, a status symbol and, therefore, the more (and the more exotic) one had, the better, so that wealthy Romans very often appeared in public accompanied by an entourage of as many as 15 slaves.”^{vi}

Although it was possible for slaves to buy their freedom, this was uncommon, especially in the rural areas^{vii}. For most of them, they had no option other than to obey their masters in everything^{viii}. This included the fact that they could be bought and sold, often in publically sanctioned slave auctions.

Paul uses this image of being bought and sold in the passages quoted above. In other words, Paul says that you and I change ownership when we give our lives to Jesus. Some preachers use 1 Cor. 6:20 out of context, saying that our freedom has been bought by Jesus' death on the cross^{ix}. But Paul says that “you are not your own”, therefore he is saying that Jesus has bought us, and we are now “slaves of Christ”. Yes, we *have* been purchased out of bondage to sin, but that doesn't mean we are free to do as we like. Instead, out of love for our Saviour, we are to obey His every command (John 14:15).

Crucifixion

Gal 5:24-25 NIV Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. **(25) Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit.**

Gal 6:14 NIV May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.

If you were a Roman citizen, you had no need to fear a punishment as dreadful as crucifixion – even if you murdered another Roman citizen. On the other hand, runaway slaves, or those who had committed a crime, were often crucified. Death in this manner was in reality the most cruel and barbarous form of execution ever devised by mankind. It involved the slow torture of the victim, with death by strangulation sometimes taking days. It was sufficiently common that everyone would have known about it or witnessed it.

Therefore, when Paul applies this image to our behaviour as Christians, it should jolt and shock our consciences. It is an extreme metaphor, at least partially drawn from how Rome treated slaves. It should serve to spur us into the arms our Saviour, who both commands and enables obedience (Php. 2:13). At the very least it should teach us that Western materialism isn't the best way to please God. If nothing else it serves to warn against placing too much value on the standards of society around us.

However, we should also note that Paul applies his metaphor to our passions and desires. As slaves of our Master, Jesus Christ, we must seek to align our spirits with He who in-dwells us. As we allow God the Holy Spirit to fill us each and every day, we should see definite and measurable changes in our moods and feelings. The Fruit (*singular*) of the Spirit grows within us as we yield to His inner promptings. Those with a fiery temper should see it crucified

and controlled. Those with unseemly habits will find their desire for them diminishing. In short, if we allow the shocking image of the crucifixion of our passions to work as Paul intended, we will be changed from one degree of glory to the next (2 Cor. 3:18).

Abolition of Slavery – New Testament Perspectives

Whenever, and wherever the topic of slavery is raised in discussion with non-Christians (or even with some Christians), the issue of how the New Testament writers seem to treat it will come up. The claim may well be made that slavery is never condemned in the New Testament, and that even Jesus seemed to approve of it. For example, the following passage may be quoted as showing that Jesus supported masters who beat their servants:

Luk 12:47-48 NIV "The **servant** [Gk. *doulos*] who knows the master's will and does not get ready or does not do what the master wants **will be beaten with many blows.** (48) But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.

The Greek word "*doulos*" that the NIV translates as "servant" is more literally rendered as "slave". Apart from the "New American Standard Bible" (NASB)^x and some modern translations^{xi}, the majority of English versions "soft pedal" the way in which "*doulos*" is translated. On the face of it, Jesus would seem to be giving tacit approval for the harsh discipline of slaves by their masters. However, "context is everything" and we must realise that the surrounding passage (Luk. 12:35-48) is a warning parable, aimed at shocking the hard-hearted into realising their true spiritual situation. The fact that Jesus **recognises** the brutal reality of slavery^{xii}, and uses the pre-understanding of his hearers to "bring them to their senses", **doesn't mean that He approves of it.**

Once we place our faith in Jesus, we find an altogether different imagery being used by our Saviour:

Joh 15:14-17 NIV You are my **friends** [Gk. *philoí*] if you do what I command. (15) I no longer call you servants [Gk. *doulos*], because a servant [Gk. *doulos*] does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you **friends**, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. (16) You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit--fruit that will last--and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. (17) This is my command: **Love** each other.

In other words, Jesus **uses** the imagery of slavery as a metaphor for the condition of the lost, but when He talks about those who have found salvation He speaks of them as His friends. Jesus never refers to slavery approvingly – after all His audience might well have consisted of both masters and slaves. His message was, and is, of universal application and hence speaks to all classes, creeds and callings equally, and without favouring one over another. On the one hand, He never rebukes masters for their treatment of their slaves, but neither does he urge slaves to break free from their chains. Therefore we cannot use what He says to argue either one way or the other in terms of His views on abolition.

Jesus was a moral reformer, not a social revolutionary. What I mean by this is that His first and most passionate concern was to change the hearts of individuals, rather than to preach that society as a whole needed to change. This is not to pour scorn on the efforts of Christians down through the centuries who have sought to bring about social reform. Nevertheless, in the very short period of time that He had available to Him, His "doing only what His father commanded" (cf. Joh. 5:19; 12:49 et. al.) did not allow for massive social change. His almost blinkered focus was to disciple the few rather than to direct the many; He sowed the mustard seed of individual heart change, that would eventually result in society-wide change of heart.

The Apostle Paul and slavery

Paul too, comes in for some stiff criticism over his supposed attitude to slavery. Consider the following:

Eph 6:5-9 NIV Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. (6) Obey them not only to win their favour when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. (7) Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, (8) because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. (9) And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.

Only one of these five verses is addressed to the Christian masters of slaves, telling them to alter their behaviour, but not to telling them to free their slaves. In contrast, in the four verses addressed to the Christian slaves, Paul instructs them to obey as if their service was to Jesus Himself. To the modern 21st century mind, this seems just plain wrong. However, I believe there are a number of factors that we need to take into account in order to see things from Paul's point of view:

- **Leverage.** In our, Western society, the Christian voice is recognised as having validity, and as deserving of respect – it has leverage. In Paul's day, Christianity was suppressed, both by the Jewish faith from which it had arisen, and by the deeply suspicious Roman authorities. Whilst Judaism was an "approved" religion, Rome saw Christianity as a break-away sect of the Jewish faith, and one which seemed to cause nothing but trouble. Hence, at best it was treated with contempt, and at worst it was suppressed with beatings and/or imprisonment (cf. Acts 12:1-19; 16:16ff; 2 Cor. 11:25; et. al.) If Paul had preached social reform he would have had no effect and most probably worsened the lot of his fellow Christians;
- **Legality.** Estimates of the numbers of slaves in Rome vary from 25% to 35% of the population, and everything depended on their free labour. Slavery was so important to the smooth running of Roman society that it was enshrined in the complex legal codes of the Empire. It took William Wilberforce and his co-abolitionists nearly 50 years to achieve the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, and during this time they ate and slept very little else save their campaign. Were Paul to have attempted to steer the juggernaut of the Roman Empire towards the necessary legal reforms, he would not have spread the Gospel in the way that he did. Christ commissioned him to be an Apostle, a pioneer church planter, not a legal reformer, and his writings reflect this emphasis;
- **Liberty.** Whilst Paul did not specifically encourage manumission (the legal act whereby a slave owner frees a slave), he most definitely did not preach that slavery was allowed. In the middle of a section where he urges contentment in life, he tells slaves – "although if you can gain your freedom, do so" (1 Cor. 7:21 NIV). From this I would argue that Paul was all for freedom, but by means of peaceful reform rather than revolution. Echoing his Lord and Master, he preached heart transformation, and the yielding of individuals to the inner witness of the Holy Spirit. I believe that he knew that this would inevitably lead to the unstoppable advance of the principles and precepts of the Kingdom of God into the kingdoms of mankind. In the long run, Godly persuasive preaching is always better and more long lasting than political pressure;
- **Law of Moses.** Describing himself as a "Hebrew of the Hebrews" (Php. 3:5), Paul might well have made use of the Jewish Torah and concluded that slavery was allowed under certain conditions. [Old Testament enslavement](#) (this would be a hyperlink to an article on OT slavery) was of a totally different character to that faced by Roman slaves. On the one hand it was normally time limited, and on the other resembled indentured service more than forced labour. The fact that Paul did not refer to the Mosaic Covenant, probably indicates his focus upon taking the gospel to the gentiles. They would only have understood things from a Roman perspective, and therefore **Paul deals with the situation as he finds it, not as he would like it to be;**
- **Love.** In many ways Paul's letter to Philemon reveals Paul's true position on slavery. Whether Onesimus (the subject of the letter) was a runaway slave befriended by Paul, or sent by Philemon to serve Paul in prison, is open to debate. Whatever the situation, Onesimus becomes a Christian whilst in Paul's company, and a bond of love develops between them. To me, this speaks volumes; the love of Christ in Paul knows no distinction according to race, religion, gender or class (Gal. 3:28). He lovingly looks beyond social stigma to

see the individual, and speaks the love of Jesus into their situation. In Christ, all are equal at the foot of the cross, and Paul urges Philemon, the Christian slave owner, to receive Onesimus in the same manner that he himself did. Love trumps liberty in Paul's teaching.

Paul's permanent disposition, it seems to me, was anti-slavery, but considering his calling, condition and chance of bringing about change, I believe he followed Jesus in being careful how he dealt with the matter.

In conclusion

Life as a 1st century slave –

- 1) didn't happen to people from just one race or nation;
- 2) could be as harsh as that of a black African slave in 18th century America, if you were a convict or a prisoner of war;
- 3) could be relatively less harsh if
 - a) you lived in a city rather than in the countryside;
 - b) your master was kind and/or rich;
- 4) meant that you had no legal status;
- 5) meant a lifetime of service, unless you could buy your freedom, or unless your master freed you;
- 6) meant that your master had total control over every aspect of your life;
- 7) meant that you might be branded on the forehead with your master's mark;
- 8) meant that you could be bought and sold at will;
- 9) meant crucifixion if you were caught running away, or if you committed all sorts of crimes, including ones that would today be considered minor.

Finally, we have seen that the Apostle Paul used the fact of slavery to illustrate some of the truths of our life as Christians. The whole subject of 1st century slavery is an active field of Biblical research at present, and views have radically altered within the last quarter century.

ⁱ Source : http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_69.html, accessed 14 Feb. 17

ⁱⁱ "Slavery was diverse in practice and ideology from nation to nation. It was diverse even within the Roman Empire itself. Those who were enslaved in an urban setting experienced a better (or at least improved) quality of life than those who worked on large farms or in the mines. A slave's quality of life depended upon their function, relation to the master and the degree of responsibility carried by the slave." John Byron (2004) "Paul And The Background of Slavery: The Status Quaestionis in New Testament Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research*, 3.1, p 133

ⁱⁱⁱ Williams, David, J. (1999) *Paul's Metaphors: Their Context and Character*, Hendrickson Publishers Inc, ISBN-13: 978-1565632875, p 112

^{iv} *ibid.*, p115 (emphasis mine)

^v The Greek "*doulos*" is sometimes translated as "servant" (NIV, ESV, RSV et. al.), but its literal meaning is "slave" (NLT, TLV, JUB, et. al.)

^{vi} Mark Cartwright, "Slavery in the Roman World," *Ancient History Encyclopedia*, last modified November 01, 2013, <http://www.ancient.eu/article/629/>, (emphasis mine), accessed on 15 Feb. 17

^{vii} "One of the most striking aspects of Roman slavery was the frequency with which masters freed their slaves. The sources suggest that many thousands of ex-slaves mingled with the freeborn population of Rome. Sulla alone, for example, is said to have manumitted ten thousand of his slaves. The fire brigade, formed by Augustus in 6 CE, comprised, at the time of its establishment, seven thousand men, all of them ex-slaves." Williams, David, J. (1999) *Paul's Metaphors*, p119

^{viii} This included sexual slavery: "Slaves' bodies were unconditionally available to the master for the purposes of sexual gratification and providing enslaved offspring for the future. Obtaining sexual gratification through a slave was considered a legitimate use of one's property." John Byron (2004) "Paul And The Background of Slavery: The Status Quaestionis in New Testament Scholarship," *Currents in Biblical Research*, 3.1, p 127

^{ix} Clearly **it is true** that we *have* been set free by God's Son (John 8:34-36) – "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed." However, that is not the picture Paul is using here, and in any case it is only a part of the truth.

^x "The New American Standard Bible is considered by some scholars to be the most literally translated of major 20th-century English Bible translations. The NASB is a revision of the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901 and offers an alternative to

the Revised Standard Version (1946–1952/1971), also a revision of the ASV, which is considered by some to be theologically liberal.” – adapted from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_American_Standard_Bible, accessed on 22 Feb. 17

^{xi} such as the “Tree of Life Version” Copyright © 2014 by the Messianic Jewish Family Bible Society.

^{xii} Similar passages such as Mt. 18:23-35; 24:45-51 & 25:14-30 may also be quoted in this regard.