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## THE BIBLE'S VIEWPOINT

## Did God Condone the Slave Trade?

DARK sweating bodies bent almost in two shuffle up gangplanks under the crushing burdens of enormous bales of cotton. Ruthless overseers drive them on with rawhide whips. Screaming children are torn from the arms of weeping mothers and sold to the highest bidder in auctions. These are likely the stark, brutal images that come to mind when you think of slavery.

Ironically, it is said that many slave traders and slave owners were deeply religious individuals. Historian James Walvin wrote: "There were hundreds of such men, Europeans and Americans, who praised the Lord for his blessing, giving thanks for profitable and safe business in Africa as they turned their slave ships into the trade winds and headed for the New World."

Some people have even asserted that God condoned the slave trade. For example, in a speech to the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in 1842, Alexander McCaine stated that the institution of slavery was "ordained by God Himself." Was McCaine correct? Did God approve of the kidnapping and raping of girls, the heartless separating of families, and the cruel beatings that were part and parcel of the slave trade of McCaine's day? And what of the millions who are forced to live and work as slaves under brutal conditions today? Does God condone such inhumane treatment?

### Slavery and the Israelites

The Bible states that "man has dominated man to his injury." ([Ecclesiastes 8:9](#)) This is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the oppressive forms of slavery that have been devised by man. Jehovah God is not indifferent to the suffering that slavery has wrought.

For example, consider a situation that developed with the Israelites. The Bible tells us that the Egyptians "kept making their life bitter with hard slavery at clay mortar and bricks and with every form of slavery in the field, yes, every form of slavery of theirs in which they used them as slaves under tyranny." The Israelites "continued to sigh because of the slavery and to cry out in complaint, and their cry for help kept going up to the true God." Was Jehovah indifferent to their plight? On the contrary, "God heard their groaning and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob." Furthermore, Jehovah told his people: "I shall certainly bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians and deliver you from their slavery."—[Exodus 1:14; 2:23, 24; 6:6-8](#).

Clearly, Jehovah did not approve of 'man dominating man' through abusive slavery. But did not God later allow slavery among his people? Yes, he did. However, the slavery that existed in Israel was vastly different from the tyrannical forms of slavery that have existed throughout history.

God's Law stated that kidnapping and selling a human was punishable by death. Furthermore, Jehovah provided guidelines to protect slaves. For example, a slave who was maimed by his master would be set free. If a slave died because his master beat him, the master could be punished with death. Women captives could become slaves, or they could be taken as wives. But they were not to be used for mere sexual gratification. The gist of the Law must have led

righthearted Israelites to treat slaves with respect and kindness, as if these were hired laborers.—[Exodus 20:10; 21:12, 16, 26, 27; Leviticus 22:10, 11; Deuteronomy 21:10-14](#).

Some Jews voluntarily became slaves to their fellow Jews in order to repay debts. This practice protected people from starvation and actually allowed many to recover from poverty. Furthermore, at key junctures in the Jewish calendar, slaves were to be released if they so desired.\* ([Exodus 21:2; Leviticus 25:10; Deuteronomy 15:12](#)) Commenting on these laws regarding slaves, Jewish scholar Moses Mielziner stated that a "slave could never cease to be a *man*, he was looked upon as a *person* possessing certain natural human rights, with which the master even could not with impunity interfere." What a stark contrast to the abusive systems of slavery that mar the annals of history!

## Slavery and Christians

Slavery was part of the economic system of the Roman Empire, under which first-century Christians lived. Hence, some Christians were slaves, and others had slaves. ([1 Corinthians 7:21, 22](#)) But does this mean that disciples of Jesus were abusive slave owners? Hardly! Regardless of what Roman law permitted, we can be confident that Christians did not mistreat those under their authority. The apostle Paul even encouraged Philemon to treat his slave Onesimus, who had become a Christian, as "a brother."<sup>#</sup>—[Philemon 10-17](#).

The Bible gives no indication that the enslavement of humans by other humans was part of God's original purpose for mankind. Furthermore, no Bible prophecies allude to humans owning fellow humans through slavery in God's new world. Rather, in that coming Paradise, righteous ones "will actually sit, each one under his vine and under his fig tree, and there will be no one making them tremble."—[Micah 4:4](#).

Clearly, the Bible does not condone the ill-treatment of others in any form. On the contrary, it encourages respect and equality among men. ([Acts 10:34, 35](#)) It exhorts humans to treat others the way that they would like to be treated. ([Luke 6:31](#)) Moreover, the Bible encourages Christians humbly to view others as superior, regardless of their social standing. ([Philippians 2:3](#)) These principles are totally incongruous with abusive forms of slavery practiced by many nations, especially in recent centuries.

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\* The fact that provision was made to allow some to remain with their master clearly indicates that Israelite slavery was not abusive.

<sup>#</sup> Similarly, some Christians today are employers; others are employees. Just as a Christian employer would not abuse those working under him, disciples of Jesus in the first century would have treated servants according to Christian principles.—[Matthew 7:12](#).