

Why doesn't the Bible condemn slavery?

In the Bible, slave owners are given instructions about how to treat their slaves – why aren't they just told, "Free your slaves"? We know God isn't bound by any cultural norms. He's never shy about condemning immoral things, even when they are an accepted of the culture at the time.

The answer is God didn't condemn the system of slavery because the system, in that culture, wasn't inherently evil.

We think of it as evil because the system of slavery we know of in our own culture was incredibly evil. But it's important to understand what the system back then was.

A slave was someone who was legally owned by someone else. And there were 4 ways a person could become a slave:

1. Birth -the children of slaves became slaves
2. Debt (or theft)
3. Be kidnapped or captured in war
4. Selling yourself (Lev 25:39,47, Dt 15:12-13,17)

Why would anyone sell himself into slavery?

People did that, because many times it was in their own best interests. Certain positions of slavery were actually desirable. Slaves, as a group, did not constitute a social or economic class. Slaves were a widely diverse group that spanned the entire range of the social-economic spectrum depending on who owned them. An upper class slave was way above a lower class freeman socially. In fact, some free day-laborers sold themselves into slavery to improve their situation – to gain job security, to gain Roman citizenship, or to get an education and to enter a life that was much less strenuous.

Education for slaves was greatly encouraged, because it made them worth more. Many slaves were more educated than their owners. Slaves were used for prestigious jobs. They were sea-captains, musicians, secretaries, teachers, overseers, writers, agents, bailiffs, accountants, historians - even doctors. Becoming a slave was often a great career move. Because there were many jobs – good jobs, that only slaves could have.

In Ro.16:23 Paul mentions Erastus, who is the city's director of public works. The Bible doesn't say anything else about him, but we know from inscriptions discovered by archeologists that this same Erastus got that prestigious position by selling himself to the city as a slave. He had to serve until about age 40, and then he was freed and became a Roman citizen who could pursue a political career. And that's exactly what Erastus did. He ended up being elected a Roman administrator of Corinth. And even while he was legally a slave of the city, as director of public works, Erastus was probably the most socially distinguished member of the Christian congregation in Corinth.

Remember Felix, who judged Paul in Acts 24? Through outside historical evidence we know how he attained that prestigious position. He became a slave of Claudius' mother Antonia. And after being freed, he pursued a career in politics.

We see the same thing in the OT, where slaves could rise to positions of great prominence and wealth like Eliazar (Gn.15:2) and Joseph (Gn.39:4).

So slaves at that time did not have a general sense that they were being oppressed. There were slave rebellions from time to time, but even they never sought to abolish slavery. No Greek

or Roman author attacked the institution of slavery, not even those who had been raised as slaves. There was no reason to – it wasn't an evil system.

Of course there were some cruel slave-owners. But that wasn't because of the system. In fact, the Romans and the Greeks both were concerned that the slave system function well and to their advantage, and so they would

- provide slaves the security of room and board,
- grant them the privileges of owning property (including their own slaves),
- of making contracts,
- and in some cases receiving wages or even profit-sharing.

Slaves were valuable. An unskilled adult male was worth about four tons of wheat. That's a big investment. And for that reason slaves were kept as healthy and happy as possible. Just like employees today, the value of a slave depended upon how hard he worked. And any slave owner with any brains understood that motivation was crucial. For that reason, slave owners motivated their slaves by offering freedom. In fact, in Jesus' time, slave owners in Rome were freeing so many of their slaves that Augustus Caesar took action to slow it down, because he was concerned about the cultural impact. Still, in Rome, if you were a slave, you could pretty much count on the fact that by age 30 you would be free. Slavery was a temporary phase of life.

For Jews, slavery was an even better situation. In OT law, God provided 6 different ways a slave could be freed.

Slaves could gain freedom by...

- Redemption - A slave could be purchased or could purchase himself. Even if he was a thief, once he made restitution he was set free. (Ex 22:1-4).
- By the lapse of time - In Israel the seventh year of service brought release from bondage. (Ex 21:2-4), and on the year of Jubilee all slaves were freed (Lev 25:40 f).
- By abuse - If a master injured his slave, the slave was free. (Ex 21:26 f)
- By escape -(Dt 23:15 f; 1Ki 2:39).
- By indifference - In case of a certain kind of female slave, the neglect or displeasure of her master gave her the right to freedom (Ex 21:7-11; Dt 21:14).
- By the master's death

Beyond that, slaves, in the OT, were given the dignity afforded every human being based on the fact that he is a person in the image of God. The laws governing kindness & respect applied to everyone without exception.

Job 31:13-15 If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, 14 what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account? 15 Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?

Jewish slaves became so accustomed to good treatment, that there was a saying among the Romans: "Whenever one acquires a Hebrew slave, he acquires a master" (They were spoiled).

At this point someone might say, "Ok, I can see why the writers of Scripture didn't speak out against the institution of slavery, but why didn't they at least condemn the abuses?" Answer: they did!

Exodus 21:16 Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death.

1 Timothy 1:9-10 law is made not for the righteous but for lawbreakers and rebels, the ungodly and sinful, the unholy and irreligious; for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers, 10 for adulterers and perverts, for slave traders (menstealers) ...

So, were there abuses? Of course – just as there are abuses today in our system of employment. There are employers who get a strangle hold on employees so they can't quit, and then treat them horribly. But the existence of abuses doesn't say anything about whether the system is bad. Did the system invite trouble? Only from evil people. From good people it invited good things.

But isn't it morally wrong for one human being to own another? No. The master did not own the slave in an absolute sense. Only in a limited sense. And that is the case in our system too. There are all kinds of contexts in which one human being will have a claim on another. There is one sense in which you belong to your employer – even to the degree where in certain contexts it may be unethical for one employer to “steal” an employee from another employer. A player in the NFL may belong to a certain team, and if another team wants him they have to pay not only the player, but the team that owns the rights to him. Everyone would agree that to some extent, in a relative way, it's OK for one person to have a claim on another person provided that claim is limited and not absolute. And that's exactly the situation with slavery. The reason the idea of slavery itself is repulsive to our culture is partly because we have not been exposed to the type of system they had in the NT which was very workable, and, in some ways, more humane than our system of employment. (For example, a slave never had to worry about food or shelter. In our system someone can have a job and be unable to pay the rent. Other people can't find jobs, etc.)

For documentation of many of the facts in this article, see the Anchor Bible Dictionary article on slavery.