

Understanding Slavery

...in the New Testament World



While slavery is always reprehensible, 1st century slavery was quite different than America's experience / history with slavery. Some differences included:

- 1) Racial factors played no role.
- 2) Education was greatly encouraged (some slaves were better educated than their owners).
- 3) Many slaves carried out sensitive and highly responsible social functions.
- 4) Slaves could own property (including other slaves).
- 5) Their religious and cultural traditions were the same as those of the freeborn.
- 6) No laws prohibited the public assembly of slaves.
- 7) Perhaps the greatest difference was that the majority of urban and domestic slaves were emancipated by the age of 30.
- 8) In addition, those in slavery were not generally at the bottom of the social and economic pyramid. At the bottom were free and impoverished persons who had to look for work each day without any certainty of finding it.

How widespread was slavery in the New Testament World?

It was practiced in all cultures relevant to New Testament times. There was no action or belief or institution in Greco-Roman society that was not impacted by slavery. Greco-Roman society had come to depend on persons in slavery as the basic labor force...a normal part of the daily life of most families. This extensive use of slave labor produced much wealth and the leisure time that permitted the great accomplishments of the Greco-Roman culture.

What rights did slaves have?

In the Roman Empire slaves on the one hand were rigorously regarded in much legislation as things (a "speaking tool"), yet on the other hand they were regularly treated as well as free human beings and were normally granted Roman citizenship when set free, as happened regularly. Enslavement under Roman law is best understood as a process rather than a permanent condition. Interestingly, when a person sold themselves into slavery, they kept the money of the sale which was often the beginning of personal funds that would later be used to purchase freedom.

What was the quality of life like for a slave?

Some slaves were treated extremely well, and others extremely poorly. The quality of life depended almost entirely on the character and mood of the owner. Laws gave slave owners much room to be cruel or compassionate. For punishment, slaves were subject to public or private corporal punishment. Demosthenes said that the greatest difference between a slave and free person was that the slave "is answerable with his body for all offences." Torture of slaves was also legal. The fact that the owner of the slaves owned the bodies and not just the work of the persons in slavery meant, also that slaves were generally regarded as sexually available without restriction. Roman "household codes" were set up to try to change the cruelty and exploitation of slaves.

How did a person become a slave?

The greatest source of new slaves was the children born of women in slavery. The second source of slaves was “self sale” which included the sale of freeborn children to pay debt or to improve a child’s situation. The selling of daughters into slavery was an extremely frequent phenomenon. Self sale included selling one’s self into slavery to pay debt, climb socially (with the reward of Roman citizenship once released), to obtain certain jobs (only available to slaves) and to obtain a more secure life (than being a poor, freeborn person). Third, prisoners of war were brought to Rome as slaves. Fourth, a frequent means of “post birth control” in the Roman culture was “throwing away” newborn infants. When such infants were found alive, they could be raised as slaves.

What job did slaves have?

Slaves were used for an enormous variety of functions in enormously different circumstances ...such as “doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries and sea captains.” They were also used as agricultural workers.

What was the philosophical basis for slavery?

It is important to understand that Romans had no tradition that made it acceptable for free Roman citizens to take orders from anyone except their fathers or their military leaders. This applied to farms, urban workshops or government bureaucracies. Cicero stated that working every day to earn a living was beneath the dignity of a citizen and that working with one’s hands was a “dirty business.”

Did the slaves try to organize to free themselves?

In none of the relevant cultures did persons in slavery constitute a social or economic class. Slaves’ individual honor, social status, and economic opportunities were entirely dependent on the status of their respective owners, and they developed no recognizable consciousness of being a group or of suffering a common plight. For this reason, any such call as “slaves of the world, unite!” would have fallen on completely deaf ears.

How were slaves freed?

Releasing slaves was a frequent and carefully regulated event...by which at one stroke the person in slavery ceased to be a property and became a legal person. Roman law required slaves to be 30 years old if they were to receive Roman citizenship. Many were freed much earlier in age. Sometimes an entire household of slaves was released upon the death of the owner. Other slaves had their freedom bought by a family member or friend. At times it was to the financial advantage of the owner to free his slaves, as he was given purchase price of freedom, yet could continue to work him as a freeman without providing the food and lodging.

Does the Bible support slavery?

No. New Testament writers did not seek in any way to justify human beings’ owning other human beings. The fact that no theological justification for slavery can be found in the NT became important for those Christians who later fought to abolish the entire institution.

