

## ***Of Slaves and Masters: The subversion of Brotherly love in Philemon***

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*No one shall be held in slavery or servitude: slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms. Article 4 Universal Declaration of Human Rights<sup>1</sup>*

*“...no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.” (NIV)*

Apostle Paul<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Introduction

There are currently 27 million slaves in the world today<sup>3</sup>. Of this number, at least five to six thousand are in South Africa (Bales 2005: 185). At first thought, the aforementioned might sound like some anachronous quote from a tragic and bygone era, but this is not the case. This is rather a reality of our current decade! While, in many countries of the world, the scourge of slavery has for all intent and purpose been legislatively abolished, what will soon become clear later in this article is that the ancient practice of slavery is still a present reality, only having taken on different and arguably more tragic forms.

While the history of the Abolition of Slavery has produced many heroes for the cause (e.g. William Wilberforce, Thomas Paine, etc) the actual abolition was a process that both preceded and proceeded from the significant Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 which effectively made slavery illegal in the British Empire. While the story of the abolishment of slavery also produced a number of protagonists undoubtedly motivated by Christian principles, the role and use of the Bible regarding the issue of

slavery reflects the extremes of interpreters seeing the biblical witness as either condoning to that of condemning<sup>4</sup>. The challenge therefore, for the reader of the Bible in dealing with these extremes is a challenge in hermeneutics. The purpose of this brief article will therefore be to propose an Evangelical solution to this impasse, with a brief outline of the Biblical witness regarding slavery, and an attempt to motivate a more adequate hermeneutic for dealing with the relevant Biblical passages. This is followed by a brief synopsis of slavery in the world and in South Africa, and concludes with a challenge to the modern-day church, especially Baptists in South Africa to re-adopt the historical stance of some of the best of our forebears in bringing about a new emancipation from all forms of modern slavery.

## 2. Slavery in the Bible:

The concept of slavery is a well-documented practice in the Bible. This Biblical witness to slavery may at best be described as ambivalent in that there is no clear, unequivocal and uniform statement on the topic. The sum total of Biblical passages paints a picture of a well-established practice.

### 2.1 Slavery in the Old Testament

The Old Testament theological witness identifies the provenance of the Lord's chosen nations as one that was brought out of slavery (cf. Ex 20:2; Dt 5:6). Those who came to enjoy a special relationship with the Lord became characterised as "slaves of Yahweh" (Bartchy 1997: 1099). It is therefore in one sense not altogether strange to find in the Old Testament Scriptures, instead of an outright condemnation, rather an establishing of regulations for the practice. While the nation of Israel was called to be a holy nation, they were not completely removed from the contextual realities even so that De Vaux (1961: 81) states that "slave traffic was general throughout the ancient

East”. Slavery is therefore not surprisingly acknowledged in the Old Testament but consciously regulated (cf. Dt 21:10-14; Lv. 25:44 –45, etc.). The Old Testament reflects a variety of laws and practices that regulated most aspects of slave reality with the slave’s lot ultimately dependent upon his/her master’s disposition (De Vaux 1961: 85).

A wider survey of the numerous Old Testament passages that highlights the reality seems to further reinforce this ambivalence. This ambivalence contrasts between further passages within the legal and prophetic material that condemns anyone who enslaves another (cf. Ex 21:16, Am 1:6-7), to the virtual encouragement of harbouring an escaped slave (Dt. 23: 15-16) as well as to the regulation of the lives of slaves (Lv 25, etc).

## 2.2 Slavery in the New Testament

The same Old Testament ambivalence regarding slavery occurs in the New Testament. While the Gospels do not directly address the topic, the New Testament Epistles, especially in those of the Apostle Paul highlights the issue more clearly. Paul has no reservation in boldly accepting the designation “slave of the Lord” in the time-honoured tradition of the Old Testament (Bartchy 1997: 1099). On the one hand, the Apostle Paul encourages seeking manumission (1 Cor 7:21-23) and declares a universal Christian egalitarianism (cf. Gl 3: 28 & Col 3:11), but then on the other hand regulates the relationship between slave and master (Philemon) when the ideal opportunity is presented to make a clear statement. Philemon, as a “small commentary on slavery on the ancient world” (Patzia 1993: 706) presented no better opportunity for a clear refutation, but for some reason, the Apostle Paul stops short of this. Many of the key theological metaphors of the New Testament used by the apostle Paul reflects a strong influence from an understanding of slavery (Ruppert 1993:882),

which becomes the very vocabulary for the fulfilment of the goal of salvation history in the person and work of Jesus Christ. All these references allow us to at least conclude that slavery was an integral part of the world of the New Testament (Ruppert 1993:881). This leaves us with the challenge of what to conclude about what the biblical witness is clearly teaching about slavery.

### 3. Slavery According to the Commentators

The afore-mentioned Biblical ambivalence to the issue of slavery is also reflected amongst the community of Evangelical commentators. The following serve as a summary of what has generally pervaded amongst these commentators:

“...[Colossians] a companion Epistle to Philemon is an illumination commentary on the mutual duties of slaves and masters within Christian fellowship, and the transforming effect of this fellowship upon their relationship...(slavery) may persist in the home and business, but in the church is swallowed up in a new relationship” (Bruce 1957:293)

“...the success of the gospel is more significant than the lot of any one individual, and therefore slaves should not behave in such a way as to bring reproach to the gospel.” (Mounce 2000:327)

“...[Philemon] is written from the perspective of the slave owner and with the concern that the Christian slaves not damage the public image of the church.” (Verner 1983:145)

We hurry to point out that these commentators are not necessarily endorsing slavery, but as the balance of comments will show, do begin to move into the direction of seeking to show how the Biblical texts seek to critique the practice of slavery by means of what this article suggests are subversive comments based upon the biblical ethic of Brotherly love. For example: Mounce 2000: 418 also says that “while he [Paul] instructs slaves to be obedient to their masters, he never teaches that slavery is right.”<sup>5</sup>

To which we may add Muller 1955:168 where he notes:

“The Letter offers an illustration of the reforming power of the gospel which seeks to reach its purpose, not by compulsion but by inward persuasion” yet does not see slavery incompatible with Christianity, but as something that “could be sanctified by the Christian faith (v16)”.

And to which may be more broadly supplemented:

Galatians 3:28 is an example of “the choice of antithesis is apparently made with a view of overthrowing the threefold privilege which a pious Jew recalls morning by morning when he thanks God that he did not make him a Gentile, a slave or a woman” (Bruce 1957: 275)

“...[the] teaching does not reflect the church’s surrender to cultural status quo an endorsement of a secular ethic...the purpose statement of these instructions and other textual clues suggest that Paul and other Christian writers regard the church’s calling in the world as a robust, redemptive role...the implication is that the gospel creates a people capable of living within human society, observing its institutions, speaking its language, embracing its good values, while reshaping and retooling others, in order to bring redemption to it” (Towner 2006: 735-740).

It is however, Thompson (2005:242) that comes to a more realistic conclusion when he says, “Paul simply had no real options for effecting social change or overhauling the social structures of his day such as slavery.” In essence, Paul was a child of his times (see also Reynolds 1995:796), whose major focus was the spreading of the gospel rather than seeking a major overhaul of an entrenched institution. Thompson’s (2005) main reason for coming to this conclusion is based upon a solid understanding of the complexity of the slave issue within the New Testament world. Barth & Blanke(2000:42), based upon the same contextual premise raises the pertinent question: “Did or did not Paul hope, expect and urge Philemon to grant legal freedom to his runaway slave Onesimus?” They go on to successfully demonstrate that slavery, while clearly being a “history of pain and tears and humiliation” (Barth & Blanke 2000:17), did not present a run-away slave any better options, especially as

manumission was a rarity with no guarantee of lasting freedom, more often a life of far worse conditions (Barth & Blanke 2000: 44 – 53).

#### 4. Brotherly Love as a Subversive Hermeneutical Motivation

Provided with the afore-mentioned hermeneutical honesty by traditional commentators we now move to suggesting a refinement of their very own discoveries into a more focussed methodological motivation. It is when hermeutical methodology comes short in presenting us with a clear-cut answer in solving current ethical dilemmas, that we have to engage in the process of “reading between the lines”<sup>6</sup>

(Hart 2006: 333). For Swartley (1983:60), this process helps us to see “the gospel’s new ethic of impartial love for all, mutual service, and equal accountability of master and slave to God, rather than justifying the existence and continuation of slavery as a social institution.” He adds that the best way to treat Scripture is via “theological principles and basic moral imperatives [that] should be primary biblical resources for addressing social issues today” which is a ‘spirit-use’ rather than a ‘letter-use’ (Swartley 1983:61).

It is when we read Philemon today that we should see this as a letter that has “hidden nuances and deep meanings” (Martin 1991: 15) in which Paul uses a deliberative rhetoric in appealing to Philemon on the basis of honour and love (Bartchy 1992:306-7). He says “by use of skilful appeals to the reason, the emotions, and the character of their hearers, rhetoricians sought to establish two motives for action: maintaining honour and gaining advantage” (Bartchy 1992:307)<sup>7</sup>. By calling Onesimus “a beloved brother” he is presenting an antithesis to calling him a slave (O’Brien 1982:303). Thompson (2005:247) calls this an expression of “dualistic anthropology” which offers a notion of a transformed community on the basis of brotherly love.

Thus, while traditional hermeutical methodology comes short, in dealing with the sticky issue of the Bible's lack of clear and unequivocal objection to the institution of slavery, what the entire biblical witness and the *leitmotif* of brotherly love in the book of Philemon demonstrates, is a subversive approach to the issue. Indeed, provided that slavery was more entrenched in the Roman world than the Greek world, and that the Roman approach to the subjugation of slaves were more stringent and punitive (Bartchy 1997:1099), it would have been unwise for the New Testament writers to directly challenge this socially-entrenched institution. Paul wanted a useful Onesimus, for the sake of the spreading of the gospel, rather than a dead Spartacus that would have sabotaged such efforts!

#### 5. Brotherly/Sisterly Love Subverting Modern Slavery

Slavery is unfortunately not a relic of the past, but a present reality. Slavery continues to essentially be the reducing of "the human to the level of chattel or personal property, and thereby denies basic human rights" (Reynolds 1995:795). While this may involve some type of remuneration, it typically is a "lack of any payment beyond subsistence" (Bales 2005: 9). Slavery has simply taken on different forms in our modern world that includes forms such as work camps and child labour (Reynolds 1995:796), trafficking in humans (especially woman and children as "sex-workers"), child placement and mail-order brides (Bales 2005: 126), child soldiers (Batstone 2007:1), refugee trafficking, debt slavery, forced labour (especially in so-called "sweat-shops") as well as enslavement for the purpose of harvesting organs (Martens 2003:15) with South Africa being a destination for people trafficked in Southern Africa (Martens 2003:125). In fact, South Africa has been placed on the Tier 2 watch list, which means that its government is seen to be making significant efforts to meet

minimum standards in the prevention of human trafficking<sup>8</sup>. One of the critical differences between ancient and modern slavery is that many of the modern forms are very well hidden from public view and controlled by syndicates operating internationally. While it is easy to continue to plead ignorance, allow this gross sin against humanity to be relegated to collective amnesia or even to feel completely overwhelmed by its enormity, the challenge remains and requires decisive action. Besides the need for prayer, education and information on these topics, Bethell (2006: 11) offers good practical advice as to how churches could be involved in anti-trafficking – such as providing care and compassion to the victims of trafficking and intervention in the face of evidence of developing situations. The greatest tragedy of modern slavery is that most of the victims tend to be women and children who are amongst the most powerless of our communities.

## 6. Conclusion

The modern reality of slavery occurs in a context very different than that of the ancient world. While it is the responsibility of governments and law enforcement agencies to focus both laws and resources in a concerted effort to eradicate this growing problem, there is a significant role that Christians and churches can and should play corporately as well as individually. The first step could be to become informed and educated about all forms of slavery within the contexts of contemporary society and to identify the commercial as well as social focal points of these activities. Slavery is all around us, if we are but willing to open our eyes to the reality! There is also a need for a growing awareness of ways in which we may inadvertently be benefiting from these activities (e.g. the origin of cheap products that we purchase and

how we may becoming complicit in upholding “sweat-shops” by our purchases, etc.). Churches may also investigate the need within its own community and thereby reach out to the many victims of modern-day slavery (e.g. ministry to prostitutes, refugees, street children, etc.). While we are not necessarily calling for action that places us at the forefront of battling crime syndicates (which some may do), but as responsible citizens, motivated by Biblical concerns, to care for the marginalised and prophetically voice these concerns to government authorities. One contemporary issue may be to challenge ideas about the legalizing of prostitution for the 2010 World Cup to be held in South Africa.<sup>9</sup> Like the Apostle Paul, our speech and actions in these matters should subvert this all-too-real social injustice.

## 7. Notes

1. The full version is available at <http://www.un.org/Overview/rights.html>
2. Philemon 16, Scripture quotation taken from the HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission.
3. While the origin of this number is uncertain, the most reliable sources all concur with this figure (Bales 2005: 3-4; Batstone 2007:1)
4. In his case study on the use of the Bible in relation to the issue of slavery, Swartley (1983: 57ff) has shown how both sides of the slavery debate has used the Bible to support their positions.
5. Mounce (2000:330) also shows how the various passages speaking to the issue of slavery in the Pastorals have been used to argue for slavery in the antebellum writings in the American south. It was the disagreement between Baptists north and south of the Mason-Dixon line which eventually led to the split between these groups and led to the formation of Southern Baptists, who generally felt at the time that slavery was biblically permissible. The Southern Baptist Convention has offered its apology for its historic complicity in slavery (Christian Century 1995), and interestingly enough, also the Baptist Union of Great Britain (Henry 2008:8)

6. Hart (2006:330ff) successfully demonstrates the principle of “Imagination”, popularised by scholars such as Walter Brueggemann, which helps interpreters committed to finding the plain sense meaning of the text the ability to also apply a “principle of willingness to sacrifice a genuine Christian liberty for the sake of the gospel to more extreme lengths” (Hart 2006:332). In other words, a methodological constraining and accountability of reader bias, where the gap exists in the hermeneutical method. On this matter, Swartley (1983:59 - 63) is in agreement, in acknowledging that adopting a historical (plain sense) meaning of interpretation does not always help an interpreter in seeing how his biases affect interpretation.

7. In his article, Bartchy (1992: 305-10) shows how Philemon is styled on essentially Quintillian rhetoric (influenced by Aristotle and Cicero) in invoking certain feelings in Philemon, that while maintaining Philemon’s honour, Paul advocates for Onesimus’ manumission without calling for it directly. He also concludes that this is the reason why the Philemon Epistle was included in the New Testament canon and became “Onesimus’ charter of freedom” (Bartchy 1992: 267-8)

8. This is according to the US State departments report on trafficking of persons, available at <http://gvnet.com/humantrafficking/00-Ratings.htm> , where Tier 1 is the list of countries who do not fully comply and Tier 3 being the list of countries who do not fully comply and are not making an effort to comply. Some of these developments and attempts have been reported in South African news papers , see

[http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=3045&art\\_id=nw20080813122333469C198979](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=3045&art_id=nw20080813122333469C198979)

9. A January 2008 newspaper reports a South African member of parliament suggesting that prostitution should be legalized for the 2010 world cup in South Africa. Article available at [http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set\\_id=1&click\\_id=3045&art\\_id=vn20080130032424911C629388](http://www.iol.co.za/index.php?set_id=1&click_id=3045&art_id=vn20080130032424911C629388) . While some are suggesting that prostitutes have a legal right to “ply their trade”, global evidence clearly shows that there are strong connections between prostitution and human trafficking (cf. Martens 2003).

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