

Slavery in the Bible – Charts

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Part 1: Slavery in the Old Testament – Fill in the Chart

Historical Context:

- I have left the Hebrew word *ebed* untranslated. Biblical Hebrew has fewer than 9,000 words, so words had more than one meaning, and you need the context to determine a word's meaning. Modern Hebrew has 30,000 – 35,000 words. Modern English has over 1,025,000.
- What we call 'slavery' or 'indentured service' reflects the fact that ancient Israel's primary political and economic institution was the household; they did not have apartments or homeless shelters (to house), banks (to lend), corporations (to employ), police (to enforce laws), prisons (to incarcerate), or halfway houses (to rehabilitate); households served all those functions. The Hebrew household appears to have been the institution for naturalization (politically) and mentoring-discipleship (spiritually and morally). There was no bureaucratic state in ancient Israel for its first 450 years (Acts 13:19), and even when there was, it did not provide schooling, acculturation, and a citizenship test as is done in the U.S. today.

Reason for Enslavement	How Often?	Entrance	Exit
War captivity	Never	Hebrew tribes were forbidden to fight against and enslave one another.	NA
Kidnapping, piracy			
Purchase from slave trade			
Perpetual involuntary servitude (including birth to slave parents)			
Sold by parents			
Indentured servitude: misfortune			
Indentured servitude: debt			
Indentured servitude: criminal punishment			
Voluntary servitude	Sometimes?	Exodus 21:5 – 6	

Political vassalage	Never	Kingship was very limited in its war-power and diplomacy: 'He shall not multiply horses for himself...nor shall he greatly increase silver and gold' (Dt.17:14 – 20). There was no forced military service or even a standing army (Dt.20:1 – 9)	NA
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Leviticus 25

^{25:13} On this year of jubilee [every fiftieth year] each of you shall return to his own property.

^{25:35} Now in case a countryman of yours becomes poor and his means with regard to you falter, then you are to sustain him, like a stranger or a sojourner, that he may live with you. ³⁶ Do not take usurious interest from him, but revere your God, that your countryman may live with you. ³⁷ You shall not give him your silver at interest, nor your food for gain. ³⁸ I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt to give you the land of Canaan and to be your God. ³⁹ If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a *ebed* service. ⁴⁰ He shall be with you as a hired man, as if he were a sojourner; he shall serve with you until the year of jubilee. ⁴¹ He shall then go out from you, he and his sons with him, and shall go back to his family, that he may return to the property of his forefathers. ⁴² For they are My *ebedim* whom I brought out from the land of Egypt; they are not to be sold in a *ebed* sale. ⁴³ You shall not rule over him with severity, but are to revere your God.

- In the Ancient Near East, exorbitant interest rates on loans were the chief cause of people being sold into slavery.¹

^{25:48} One of his brothers may redeem him, ⁴⁹ or his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or one of his blood relatives from his family may redeem him; or if he prospers, he may redeem himself. ⁵⁰ He then with his purchaser shall calculate from the year when he sold himself to him up to the year of jubilee; and the price of his sale shall correspond to the number of years. It is like the days of a hired man that he shall be with him. ⁵¹ If there are still many years, he shall refund part of his purchase price in proportion to them for his own redemption; ⁵² and if few years remain until the year of jubilee, he shall so calculate with him. In proportion to his years he is to refund the amount for his redemption. ⁵³ Like a man hired year by year he shall be with him; he shall not rule over him with severity in your sight. ⁵⁴ Even if he is not redeemed by these means, he shall still go out in the year of jubilee, he and his sons with him. ⁵⁵ For the sons of Israel are My *ebedim*; they are My *ebedim* whom I brought out from the land of Egypt. I am the LORD your God.

Deuteronomy 15

^{15:1} At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. ² This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD'S remission has been proclaimed. ³ From a foreigner you may exact it, but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. ⁴ However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, ⁵ if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. ⁶ For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you. ⁷ If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; ⁸ but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. ⁹ Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, 'The seventh year, the year of remission, is near,' and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you. ¹⁰ You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. ¹¹ For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, 'You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.' ¹² If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall

¹ T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, editors, 'Slavery', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, InterVarsity Press: Downers' Grove, IL, 2003

serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. ¹³ When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. ¹⁴ You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵ You shall remember that you were a *ebed* in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today. ¹⁶ It shall come about if he says to you, ‘I will not go out from you,’ because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you; ¹⁷ then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also you shall do likewise to your maidservant. ¹⁸ It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years with double the service of a hired man; so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do.

Deuteronomy 23 – 24

^{23:15} You shall not hand over to his master a *ebed* who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶ He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him. ¹⁷ None of the daughters of Israel shall be a cult prostitute, nor shall any of the sons of Israel be a cult prostitute. ¹⁸ You shall not bring the hire of a harlot or the wages of a dog into the house of the LORD your God for any votive offering, for both of these are an abomination to the LORD your God. ¹⁹ You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, or anything that may be loaned at interest. ²⁰ You may charge interest to a foreigner, but to your countrymen you shall not charge interest, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all that you undertake in the land which you are about to enter to possess.

- ‘A slave could also be freed by running away... This provision is strikingly different from the laws of slavery in the surrounding nations and is explained as due to Israel’s own history of slavery. It would have the effect of turning slavery into a voluntary institution.’²

^{24:7} If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you.

Exodus 20 – 22

^{20:13} You shall not murder. ¹⁴ You shall not commit adultery. ¹⁵ You shall not steal. ¹⁶ You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. ¹⁷ You shall not covet your neighbor’s house; you shall not covet your neighbor’s wife or his male *ebed* or his female *ebed* or his ox or his donkey or anything that belongs to your neighbor. (Ten Commandments)

^{21:1} Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them: ² If you buy a Hebrew *ebed*, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment. ³ If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife [inference: who is also indebted; see Dt.15:12], and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master [for the duration of her indebtedness, see Dt.15:12], and he shall go out alone. ⁵ But if the *ebed* plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ ⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.³

^{21:7} If a man sells his daughter as a female *ebed*, she is not to go free as the male *ebedim* do. ⁸ If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. ¹⁰ If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. ¹¹ If he will not do these three things for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without payment of money.

² Raymond Westbrook, editor, *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, 2003, volume 2, page 1006

³ The Jewish Encyclopedia online says that even the voluntary slave went free in the jubilee year (the 50th year) or upon the death of the master. Israel’s vision of each family owning its own piece of land qualified the idea that the slave served ‘permanently.’

- This refers to a preliminary form of wedding betrothal for young girls, not a sale by parents of the girl into slavery. Notice: The daughter being ‘sold’ into betrothal became a free woman within the new family, not a servant with servant duties, and not a chattel slave that could be resold (Ex.21:8). Any breach of marriage contract by the betrothed man/family earns the girl her freedom and the man receives no compensation (Ex.21:10 – 11). Jewish rabbis view it as pertaining to poor families who could not afford a dowry for their daughter.⁴

21:16 He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.

21:27 If a man strikes the eye of his male or female *ebed*, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. ²⁸ And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female *ebed*, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.

22:1 If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for the ox and four sheep for the sheep. ...³ He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft... ⁷ if the thief is caught, he shall pay double... ⁹ he whom the judges condemn shall pay double to his neighbor.

- Note there were no prison systems in Old Testament Israel, nor was there really ‘commuting to work.’

22:25 If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest.

Some Summary Points

1. Slavery in the Old Testament between Hebrews was a contract of labor, not ceding ownership of one’s body. Indentured servants under the Law of Moses held kinship rights, marriage rights, personal legal rights relating to physical protection and protection from breach of contract and right to testify in court, freedom of movement, and access to liberty by paying their debt (either through service, or with money). This meant that they could accumulate savings, wealth, and property of their own, something which was not permitted in other slave systems because of the idea in those systems that the master owns everything the slave produces, saves, or has. There was absolutely no sex slavery; God’s vision for marriage was retained in all cases and limited indentured servitude. Unlike the other Ancient Near Eastern societies, the Law of Moses did not permit family members to sell each other into indentured service to recover family debts. The head of the household sold *himself* into indentured service, and while his family certainly joined him as members of the master’s household, they did not become the property of the master, nor were they contracted to serve. A Hebrew indentured servant retained parental rights over his children, and presumably marital rights to be joined to his wife, so that when he went free in the jubilee year, he would take his family (Ex.21:2 – 6; Lev.25:39 – 42; provided she was free from debts as well).
2. The service of a ‘slave’ or indentured servant was domestic, rural, and very limited. Hebrew indentured servants, like all other Hebrews, were bound to the worship and festival calendar of the Mosaic Law, such that they were released from labor nearly one half of the entire fifty year time period between two jubilee years.⁵ Furthermore, there were no large plantations in Israel as with the great Roman *latifundia* estates or the American South, no quarry mines as with the Athenian slaves in Laurium, and certainly no global competition as with the American South’s trade in sugar and cotton, but only farmland enough to sustain the household. Furthermore, the high value placed on work by Israel (e.g. rabbis in the 1st century all learned a trade), meant

⁴ ‘In the ancient world, a father, driven by poverty, might sell his daughter into a well-to-do family in order to ensure her future security. The sale presupposes marriage to the master or his son. Documents recording legal arrangements of this kind have survived from Nuzi. The Torah stipulates that the girl must be treated as a free woman; should the designated husband take an additional wife, he is still obligated to support her. A breach of faith gains her her freedom, and the master receives no compensation for the purchase price.’ (Nahum M. Sarna, *Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary Series: Exodus*, 1991, note on Exodus 21). See also Ken Campbell (editor), *Marriage and Family in the Biblical World*, InterVarsity Press: Downers’ Grove, IL, 2003, p.55 – 57.

⁵ Theodore Dwight Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery*, 1837, p.22 – 23. This does not count marriages and other family-specific festivals.

that master and servant would have worked together in the fields. Since there were no segregated quarters for indentured servants, masters provided for them at the same level of lifestyle they had. 'Such servitude was in fact not slavery at all, in the proper sense of the term.'⁶

Part 2: Slavery and the New Testament

Historical Context:

- Greece: The combination of democracy, mass slavery, and racism traces back to Athens. Athenian philosophers Plato and Aristotle opposed enslavement of fellow Greeks, but favored mass enslavement of 'barbarians' while the Athenians worked on theoretical science, political philosophy, and art. They were the first civilization to use mass slavery – under the justification that the Athenians and the 'barbarians' were descended from different ancestors, and hence slaves were inferior by nature. Plato assigned 'barbarian' slaves a vital role in his republic doing all of the production. Aristotle said, 'From the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule.' Plato and Aristotle owned five and fourteen slaves, respectively, as enumerated in their wills.⁷
- Roman Empire: At the time of Christ, in the Roman heartland, there were an estimated 2 – 3 million slaves, about one third the population of the Empire.
 - Slaves came from military conquests, birth to slave parents, rescue from infanticide, international trade, piracy and kidnapping, debt servitude, penal servitude, and voluntary servitude.⁸ Many slaves would have been children or elderly, without the means to live in freedom. From a practical standpoint alone, given the function of slavery in all its forms and its magnitude, it would have been impossible for the Christian community to carry out a categorical command to emancipate slaves.
 - Manumission was widespread, frequent, and expected by a majority of slaves: 'A freedman was a slave who had been manumitted, that is, freed. Manumission was widely practiced in ancient Rome, and it is an aspect of Roman society which sets it apart from other slave-owning societies. For example, very few slaves in the American antebellum South were ever manumitted by their owners. In Rome, however, slaves were not only freed but were also given Roman citizenship and thus assimilated into Roman society and culture. Yet, although manumission was a common practice, not every slave could hope to be manumitted. Wealthy slave-owners could much better absorb the cost of manumission (loss of property) than could moderate-income slave-owners. And slaves working in a private household, whose job had been to attend to a master's personal comfort and who were therefore known well by the master, were the most likely to receive freedom. Slaves whose work brought profit to an owner – that is, slaves working on a farm or ranch in a mine or factory, as a prostitute or gladiator – were least likely to be manumitted.'⁹
 - People sometimes chose to become slaves to wealthy masters for the sake of advancement, hopes for sharing in an inheritance or in social prestige, etc. Living conditions could be quite good, sometimes better than the economic situation of free poor people. Emperors used slaves for imperial secretarial and administrative roles. In the cities, slaves performed roles in the immediate household: nurses, tutors, teachers, dishwashers, housecleaners, litter-bearers, cooks, secretaries, gardeners, tailors, hairdressers, butlers. Their incentives to perform were more positive, ranging from advancement to ownership of property to manumission, rather than being negative, like fear of punishment and abuse.

⁶ Goldwin Smith, *Does the Bible Sanction American Slavery?*, p.40

⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason*, p.27.

⁸ See Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1986, p.105 – 131 on the enslavement of previously 'free' persons, especially p.111 – 112 for war captives, p.116 for kidnapping and raids by pirates, p.122 – 123 for Romans accepting tribute and tax payment in slaves in the eastern provinces, p.125 for debt enslavement, p.126 for slavery being a punishment for crimes, p.129 – 130 on abandoned children. On enslavement by birth in classical Roman times, see Patterson, p.139 – 141.

⁹ Jo-Ann Shelton, *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, Oxford: 1988. See also Andrea Giardina (ed), *The Romans*, University of Chicago Press: 1993, p.159; and Lesley Adkins and Roy Adkins, *Handbook to Life in Ancient Rome*, FactsOnFile: 1994, p.342.

Slaves could in fact own other slaves. There were some means of exit of which slaves availed themselves; thus slavery during this period was sometimes used as a form of employment or indentured servitude. Slave concubines were usually freed either after they bore the master a child or at the master's death.¹⁰

- In rural areas, however, slaves worked on large estates in agriculture or as miners. The three Roman Servile Wars, where slaves revolted under the late Roman Republic (135 – 132 BC in Sicily, 104 – 100 BC in Sicily, and 73 – 71 BC in mainland Italy, famously, under Spartacus), show that Roman slavery had been certainly quite harsh and oppressive before the New Testament period, due to changes in land ownership during the Second Punic War against Hannibal (218 – 202 BC). After the Third Servile War, the Roman people 'out of sheer fear seem to have begun to treat their slaves less harshly than before.'¹¹ Also because of the period of peace after Julius Caesar's Gallic Wars from 52 BC, fewer war captives were enslaved, so wealthy Roman agriculturalists began to use fewer slaves and more paid free labor in sharecropping arrangements.¹² While there were legal and cultural limitations placed on masters' ability to abuse their slaves – for example, during the reign of Claudius (41 – 54 AD), laws were enacted that made the killing of an old or infirm slave an act of murder¹³ – 'of themselves, slaves had no real rights before the law, and no proper means of appeal against their masters. Moreover, their word was of no account. A slave was so entirely devoid of any personal dignity that, when called to testify before a duly appointed court, torture might be applied as a matter of course.'¹⁴
- Harboring a fugitive slave was punishable by death. 'The *senatus consultum* also appears to have prescribed a penalty for failure to hand over a fugitive to his master or to the magistrates within 20 days, if found on one's property.'¹⁵ 'At the same time that the privilege of asylum was conferred on the temple, a suit for compensation and penalty was instituted against any private individual who should either help or harbour a runaway. Flight of slaves was an issue to be regulated...The prosecution of persons either for persuading a slave to run away, concealing his whereabouts, or seizing, selling or purchasing him was known to Roman law from the second century BC...It became a *crimen capitale* no longer punished necessarily by a monetary penalty but also by banishment to the mines or crucifixion...'¹⁶ The fact that Philemon did not post a warrant for his runaway slave Onesimus, then welcomed him back and freed him at Paul's request, attests to Christians cultivating a forgiving character.
- Slavery declined again in the latter days of the Roman Empire (nearing 476 AD) as a direct result of military weakness. Agriculture and industry were manned by free, paid laborers. This development probably made slaves more valuable as labor, contributing an economic disincentive to free slaves.¹⁷ It is significant that Christians continued to free slaves during this time period, and advocate manumission.

¹⁰ Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge, MA, 1986, p.230.

¹¹ Davis, *Readings in Ancient History*, p.90.

¹² Frank E. Smitha, *From a Republic to Emperor Augustus: Spartacus and Declining Slavery*, 2006. <http://www.fsmitha.com/h1/ch18.htm>. Retrieved 2006-09-23.

¹³ Suetonius, *Life of Claudius*, 25.2

¹⁴ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press: New Haven, 2009, p.168. See also S. Scott Bartchy, 'Slavery' in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (Vol.4, Q-Z), edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley et al., Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1988, p.539 – 46.

¹⁵ S.R. Llewelyn, *New Documents Illustrating Early Christianity* (volume 8). Ancient History Documentary Centre, Macquarie University:1997, p.26ff.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.35.

¹⁷ Rodney Stark, *The Victory of Reason*, p.27.

Entering and Exiting Slavery: Christian

Cause of slavery	Of anyone	Entering	Exit
War captivity	No	Christian mission did not advance through warfare or violence. The Christian condemnation of war resulted in an implicit condemnation of war captivity. Although there is a lack of explicit evidence, Christians probably cared for those enslaved by war captivity. ¹⁸	Uncertain.
Kidnapping, piracy	No	The Mosaic Law held a kidnapper and slave trader to the death penalty (Ex.21:16; Dt.24:7), and the New Testament continued to see this as a heinous moral crime (1 Tim.1:10). In addition, the New Testament authors commanded that ‘no man transgress and defraud his brother’ (1 Th.4:6) and taught that ‘thieves’ – broadly understood to include kidnappers, slave traders, extortionists, and oppressors – would not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor.6:10). Revelation 18:13 condemns slave trading. Thus, the New Testament continued to evaluate the various sources of slavery.	They made consistent efforts to purchase slaves and give them their freedom. ¹⁹
Purchase from slave trade	No		
Perpetual involuntary servitude	No		
Sale by parents	No		
Indentured servitude: misfortune	Limited	Paul indicates that lawfully obtained manumission was the ideal for slaves: ‘Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that’ (1 Cor.7:21). He also taught Christians to avoid self-enslavement: ‘Do not become slaves of men’ (1 Cor.7:23), but it was probably inevitable that some of this happened anyway. Jesus’ aggressive teaching about financial giving and sacrifice (see above) also contributed a great deal to Christians offsetting others’ misfortune (Acts 2:42 – 46; 4:31 – 34; 6:1 – 15; 2 Cor.8 – 9; Rom.15:26 – 27; 1 Tim.6:6 – 17; 1 Jn.3:16). It is unlikely that Christians enslaved other people for indebtedness, since they prayed constantly, ‘Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors’ (Mt.6:12).	They either allowed slaves to work off their debt, or freed them outright especially if the slaves became Christian and demonstrated capacity for Christian leadership. ²⁰
Indentured servitude: debt	Limited	Paul indicates that lawfully obtained manumission was the ideal for slaves: ‘Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that’ (1 Cor.7:21). He also taught Christians to avoid self-enslavement: ‘Do	Lack of clear documentation; they probably allowed slaves

¹⁸ For example, Acacius, bishop of Amida, in modern day eastern Turkey/western Mesopotamia from 400 – 425 AD, saw seven thousand Persian prisoners being held by Romans in Amida. Acacius gathered his fellow clergy, sold various items, purchased them from slavery, supported them for a while, and sent them furnished with supplies back to Persia. This was reported to have impressed Sassanid Emperor Bahram V so deeply that he requested to see Acacius personally. ‘When the war [between Byzantium and Persia] ended in 422, it may have been this generous gesture of Acacius that speeded the negotiations for peace and brought an end to persecution in Persia. The peace treaty contained the remarkable stipulation that freedom of religion was to be granted on both sides of the border, for Zoroastrians in the Byzantine Empire and for Christians in Persia’ (Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Volume 1 (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 1998), p.160). This incident was surely unusual in its magnitude, but probably not in its character.

¹⁹ Around 90 AD, 1 Clement 55 notes, ‘We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others.’ Three centuries later, efforts were still being made. At about 400 AD, the *Apostolic Constitutions* (book 4, section 2, paragraph 9), a handy summary of the rulings of the early Christian community up until that point, probably compiled in Syria, still directs Christians, ‘As for such sums of money as are collected from them in the aforesaid manner, designate them to be used for the redemption of the saints and the deliverance of slaves and captives.’ Augustine (bishop of Hippo 395 – 430 AD) noted that the Christian community regularly used its funds to redeem as many kidnapped victims as possible, and had recently saved 120 slaves whom the Galatians were boarding onto their ships (Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, 1994).

²⁰ Historian Robin Lane Fox judges that ‘Christian masters were not specially encouraged to set a slave free, although Christians were most numerous in the setting of urban households where freeing was most frequent: our pagan evidence for the practice is overwhelmingly evidence for the freeing of slaves in urban and domestic service...Among Christians, we know that the freeing of slaves was performed in church in the presence of the bishop: early laws from Constantine, after his conversion, permit this as an existing practice.’ (Robin Lane Fox, *Pagans and Christians: In the Mediterranean World from the Second Century AD to the Conversion of Constantine*, HarperCollins, 1986, p.298)

		not become slaves of men' (1 Cor.7:23), but it was probably inevitable that some of this happened anyway. Jesus' aggressive teaching about financial giving and sacrifice also contributed a great deal to Christians offsetting each others' debts (Lk.6:34 – 35; 19:1 – 10). It is unlikely that Christians enslaved other people for indebtedness, since they prayed constantly, 'Forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors' (Mt.6:12).	to work off their debt, or perhaps forgave the debt and released them especially if the slaves became Christian and demonstrated capacity for Christian leadership.
Penal servitude	Limited	There were civic punishments for crimes that placed people into slavery. There is a lack of documentation, but I assume that if slaves were placed by the Roman state into Christian households, Christians probably accepted this as part of their respect for the state and the law (Rom.13:1 – 7; 1 Tim.2:2; 1 Pet.2:13 – 17). Due to the teaching of Jesus about loving one's enemy (e.g. Mt.5:38 – 48) and forgiveness (e.g. Mt.6:14 – 15; 18:21 – 35), Christians made notable efforts to forgive offenses done against them personally.	Lack of clear documentation; they probably retained the slave for the duration of the sentence unless the slaves became Christian and demonstrated capacity for Christian leadership. ²¹
Voluntary servitude	Very limited	Self-enslavement was often undertaken in the Roman world for social, economic, and political advancement. Paul taught Christians to avoid self-enslavement: 'Do not become slaves of men' (1 Cor.7:23). But some Christians were known to sell themselves into slavery in order to provide for others (1 Clement 55).	Lack of clear documentation, but they probably either allowed slaves to work off their debt, or freed them outright especially if the slave became a Christian and demonstrated capacity for Christian leadership.
Political vassalage	No	Christians believed allegiance to Jesus made allegiances to the Emperor and other authorities complex and usually problematic (1 Cor.7:17 – 35). They accepted the state as a necessary institution for a fallen world (Rom.13:1 – 7; 1 Tim.2:2; 1 Pet.2:13 – 17) but did not make special allegiances to it.	NA

Historical Observations

1. Christians for 300 – 400 years did not enslave anyone. This is remarkable in its own right, for the way they encountered slavery was by inheriting it from the world around them, as people joined the Christian community, and then wrestling with how to handle it. Only when the Roman Emperors and Germanic leaders became Christians did they begin to produce justifications for wars (Augustine's 'just war' theory) and, only when Islam became a military threat in the early 600's did Christians start to practice slavery by war captivity.

²¹ For example, according to the *Philosophumena*, Callistus of Rome, as a slave, embezzled funds, was caught trying to escape, was released by his master in hopes he would recover the money, pressured Jews to pay debts and caused a brawl in a synagogue, was rearrested and sentenced by the government to the mines, was freed at the request of Christians, recovered his health, and later became a Christian leader, and then (remarkably) Pope from 217 – 222 AD.

2. Christians during this early time period encountered slavery in its different forms by inheriting the problem. Slavery was a complex institution. Due to the theological ethics and sociology of the Christian community, they responded in two basic ways:
 - a. Manumission: ‘Paul’s explicit injunctions (1) to not become slaves, (2) against slave traders, and (3) for voluntary manumission are very strong indications that preserving the status quo in favor of the masters was neither a goal, nor an acceptable stopping point for the gospel of freedom.’²² One ideal was to ransom captives forcibly taken. Another was to manumit one’s own slaves; Christians subverted the older Roman practice of killing slaves upon the death of the master; when the newly Christian master went through the rite of water baptism – a symbolic death – s/he often freed her or his slaves, often providing gifts to assist the newly freed persons.
 - b. Ignoring slavery: Christian response was not uniformly abolitionist because, within their own community, they simply ignored its legal status and social stigma. They probably worked within the debt-repayment and penal servitude purposes of slavery at the time, but they certainly rejected the Roman degradation of slaves in favor of the full humanity of the person. This is consistent with the vision of the church being a new spiritual and moral community in the midst of the nations.
3. The early Christians for over 1300 years understood themselves as following the teaching of the New Testament.²³ Christians emancipated slaves within the church, or they made slavery a nominal issue but irrelevant in their relationships overall, and eventually translated this into public policy. As I said before, the process was not without its hiccups, and some rationalizations also appeared. Nevertheless, the remarkable fact is that Christian theology and people ended slavery in France, Hungary, England, Iceland, Sweden, and the Netherlands by about 1300 AD, not just on the law books nominally, but actually. Slavery persisted in all other countries of the world. Slavery was not the ‘peculiar institution.’ Freedom was.

²² Glenn M. Miller, <http://www.christianthinktank.com/qnoslave.html>. Glenn’s research, posted on his website, is an excellent resource on the subject.

²³ My attempt at outlining the history of Christian treatment of slavery is found at <https://www.anastasiscenter.org/race-slavery-belief-systems>