

# Slavery and Abolition: How the Early Church Got it Right

Mako A. Nagasawa



# Slavery Today

## 1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution



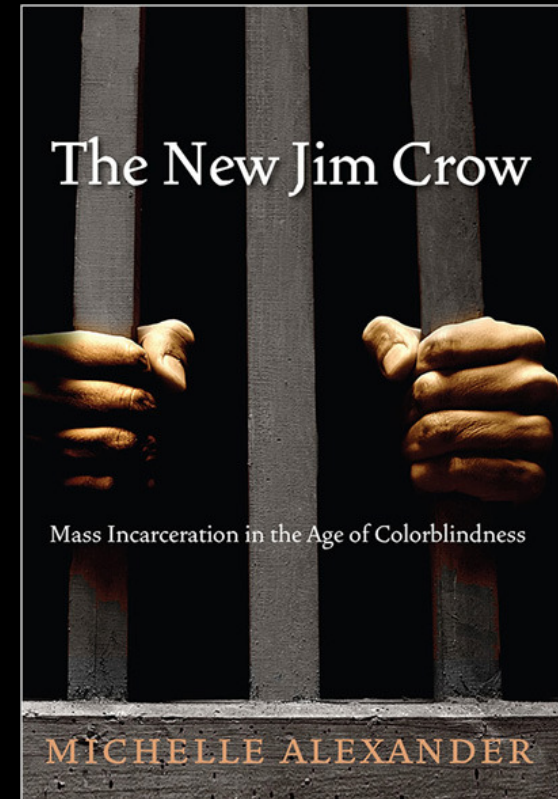
# Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution
2. Child soldiers



# Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution
2. Child soldiers
3. Prison, criminal justice



# Slavery Today

1. Sex trafficking, forced prostitution
2. Child soldiers
3. Prison, criminal justice
4. Debt, bonded labor



# Moral Foundation for Abolition: Christian Faith?

1. What does the Bible say, really?
2. If the Bible is ambiguous at best, can we do better?
3. Do I need to interpret the Bible metaphorically?



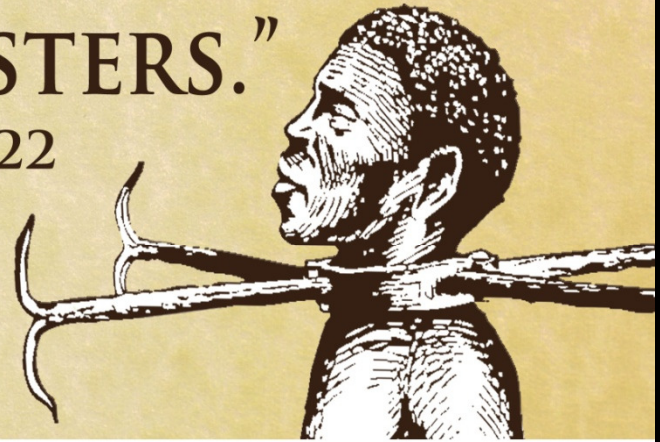
# Moral Foundation for Abolition: Christian Faith?

“SLAVES, OBEY YOUR MASTERS.”

- COLOSSIANS 3:22

This lesson in Bronze Age ethics  
*brought to you by*

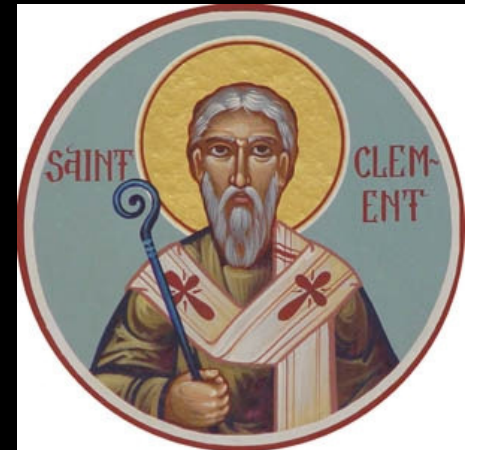
**THE YEAR OF THE BIBLE** and  
the House of Representatives.



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# Christian Emancipation

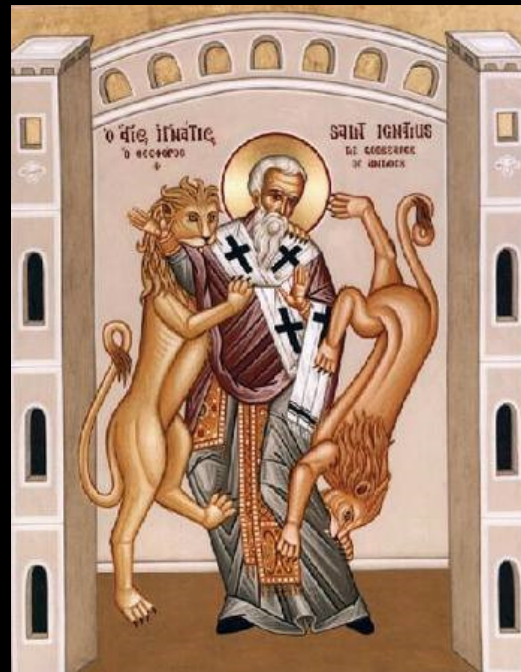
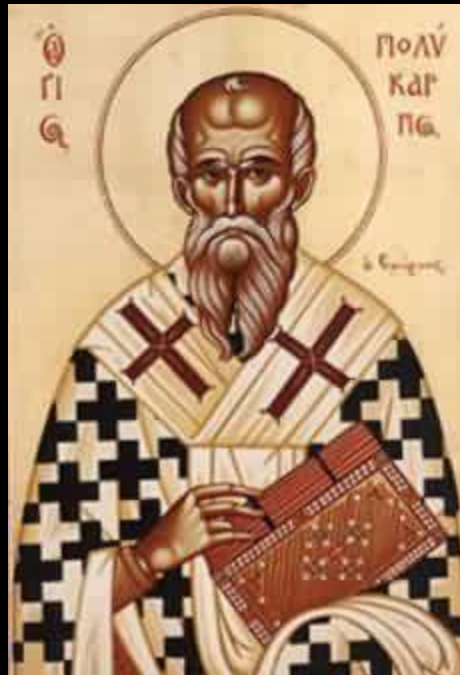
- ~90 AD: Clement of Rome observes, 'We know many among ourselves who have given themselves up to bonds, in order that they might ransom others.'  
(1 Clement 55)





# Christian Emancipation

- ~90 AD: Polycarp of Smyrna (69 – 155 AD) and Ignatius of Antioch (~50 – 117 AD), second generation Christian leaders, free their slaves.



# Christian Emancipation

- 95 – 135 AD: Ovidius, appointed bishop of Braga (in modern day Portugal) under Pope Clement I in 95 AD, emancipates 5,000 slaves.

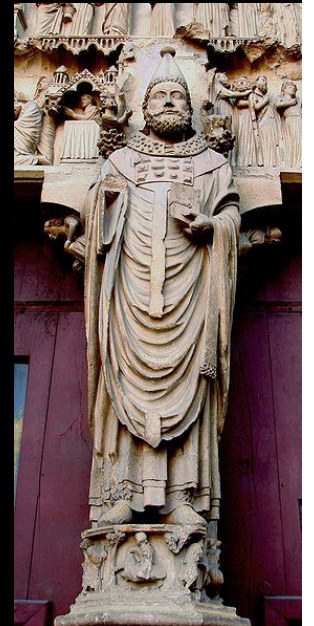
# Christian Emancipation

- 98 – 117 AD: A Roman prefect named Hermas received baptism at an Easter festival with his wife, children, and 1,250 slaves. On that occasion, he gave all his slaves their freedom and generous gifts besides.



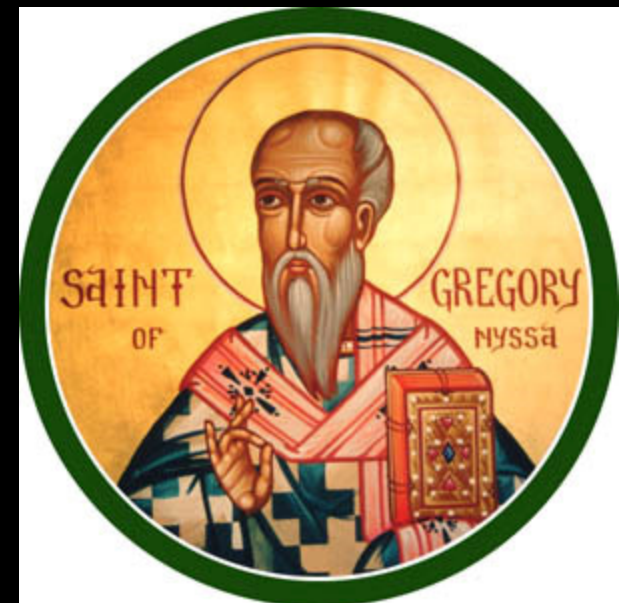
# Christian Emancipation

- Epitaphs in the Roman catacombs mention manumission of slaves, exact dates unknown.
- 284 – 305 AD: Chromatius emancipates 1,400 slaves after they are baptized with him



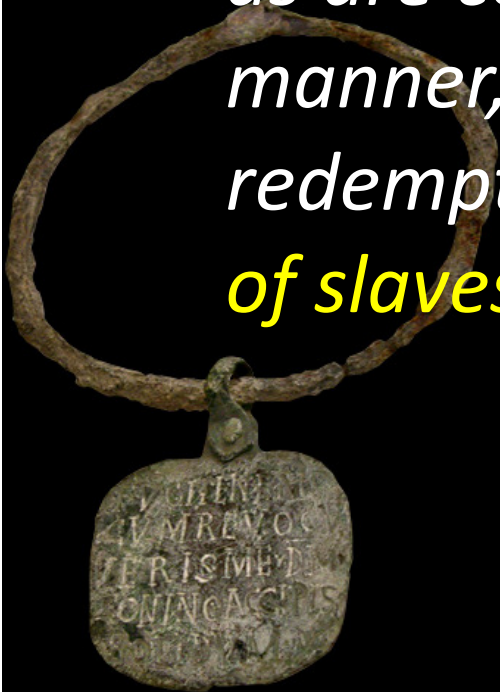
# Christian Emancipation

- 379 AD: Gregory of Nyssa, in a sermon during Lent, reminds his audience, *'Since God's greatest gift to us is the perfect liberty vouchsafed us by Christ's saving action in time, and since God's gifts are entirely irrevocable, it lies not even in God's power to enslave men and women.'* He also said God gives the creation to each person, so to possess a slave's belongings is wrong.



# Christian Emancipation

- 390 – 400 AD: The *Apostolic Constitutions*, a summary of Christian teaching to that point, 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.*'





# Christian Emancipation

- 395 AD: Augustine (bishop of Hippo from 395 – 430 AD) notes that the Christian community regularly used its funds to redeem as many kidnapped victims as possible, and had recently purchased and freed 120 slaves whom the Galatians were boarding onto their ships.



# Christian Emancipation

- 400 AD: Acacius, bishop of Amida, in modern day eastern Turkey/western Mesopotamia ransoms 7,000 Persian prisoners being held by Romans.
  - ‘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.

# Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 315 AD+: Constantine
  - imposed the death penalty on those who kidnap and enslave children
  - forbade separating slave families
  - made manumission possible at a church service
- Since Constantine was (at best) a new Christian (313 AD), this suggests that the Christian community had a strong antislavery position.



# Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 595 AD: A council at Rome under Gregory the Great permits a slave to become a monk without any consent from his master.



# Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 649 AD: Clovis II, king of the Franks, frees and marries his British slave Bathilda. Together, they dismantle slavery in France.
- 1000 AD: Stephen I of Hungary abolishes slavery.



# Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- 1102 AD: The London Church Council forbids slavery and the slave trade, which abolishes both throughout England. This decree emancipates 10% of England's population.
- 1117 AD: Iceland abolishes slavery.
- ~1300 AD: The Netherlands abolishes slavery.
- 1335 AD: Sweden (which included Finland at this time) makes slavery illegal.



# Christian Impact on Law & Policy

- So how did these Christians understand the Bible?

# The Early Christian View of the Old Testament

- Israel's 'Garden Life' represented Adam and Eve's ideal 'Garden Life'

'I acquired slaves and slave girls.' [Eccl.2:7] What is that you say? You condemn a person to slavery whose nature is free and independent, and in doing so you lay down a law in opposition to God, overturning the natural law established by him. For you subject to the yoke of slavery one who was created precisely to be a master of the earth, and who was ordained to rule by the creator, as if you were deliberately attacking and fighting against the divine command.'

- Gregory of Nyssa (335 – 394), *Fourth Homily on Ecclesiastes*  
Bishop of Nyssa (Cappadocia, Asia Minor) (372 – 376, 378 – 395)



# The Early Christian View of the Old Testament

- Marriage is also a reflection of the original creation

Marriage between slaves is just as valid. Slaves are just as human.

- Basil (the Great) of Caesaria (329 – 399), *Epistle 199:42*

Bishop of Caesaria (Cappadocia, Asia Minor) (370 – 399)



# The New Testament: One Factor Affecting Slavery

- The human body is meant for Jesus' Spirit
  - <sup>6:19</sup> Do you not know that **your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit** who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? <sup>20</sup> *For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.* (1 Corinthians 6:19 – 20)
  - <sup>7:21</sup> Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that. <sup>22</sup> For he who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. <sup>23</sup> *You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men...* (1 Corinthians 7:21 – 23)

# The New Testament: One Factor Affecting Slavery

- The human body is meant for Jesus' Spirit

‘[Joseph, though a slave, did not yield to being a sex slave.] In fact, **there are limits set to slaves by God Himself**; and up to what point one ought to keep them, has also been determined, and to transgress them is wrong. Namely, when your master commands nothing which is unpleasing to God, it is right to follow and to obey; **but no farther**. For thus the slave becomes free. But if you go further, even though you are free you have become a slave. At least he intimates this, saying, Be not ye the servants of men.’

- John Chrysostom (c.349 – 407 AD), *Homily on 1 Corinthians 7*

Bishop of Antioch (386 – 397)

Archbishop of Constantinople (397 – 407)



# The Early Church and Prostitution

‘Prostitutes were supposed to register with the authorities; a state tax on these registered prostitutes was introduced in the first century A.D. A woman who had once registered as a prostitute retained that stigma for the rest of her life, even if she ceased all professional activity. Although the Church fathers fulminated against the commerce of the body with the same ferocity as against other sins of the flesh rampant in the Roman world, prostitution, being a social phenomenon rather than a personal sin (such as fornication), did not, strictly speaking, lie within the spiritual jurisdiction of the Church. Despite its condemnation of all premarital and extramarital sexual activity, the Church recognized prostitution to be an inevitable feature of worldly society, which it had no hope or ambition to reform. Saint Augustine even warned that the abolition of prostitution, were it possible, would have disastrous consequences for society; the practice, he believed, was a necessary evil in an inevitably imperfect world...



# The Early Church and Prostitution

‘Canonical wrath was focused, rather, on those who profited from this commerce, for, while prostitution was regarded as a social phenomenon distinct from the sin of fornication, procuring was considered by the Church to be synonymous with the sinful act of encouraging debauch (since the latter is usually associated with a pecuniary motive, whereas fornication can be committed out of passion as well as out of desire for money). Procuring was therefore considered to be a matter of spiritual jurisdiction, and strong measures were taken against it at the Council of Elvira (c. 300), whose canons were included in most of the major canon-law collections of the Middle Ages.’

- Leah Lydia Otis, *Prostitution in Medieval Society: The History of an Urban Institution in Languedoc* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1985), p. 12 – 13