

New-Testament Slavery: Fact vs. Fiction with Dr. Paul Copan

(August 26, 2025)

FRANK:

Is God a vindictive bully? Does the Bible support and condone slavery? That's a topic that we talked about for almost an hour with my friend Dr. Paul Copan on the last program. We're going to continue our discussion. We're not going to review everything we did last time. That would take too long. So, if you haven't heard the first program, find the I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist podcast and look for the program with Dr. Paul Copan.

The first one on Does the Bible support slavery, or condone slavery, or endorse slavery? We're going to pick up our conversation right from that point. And Paul, at the end of our last podcast, we were talking a little bit about abuses of the indentured servitude system, and you wanted to make a point about that. So, let's just pick it up right there.

PAUL:

Yeah, yeah, I mentioned again the incident of you know, under, with Elisha and in, in 2 Kings chapter four. I also was starting to talk about Nehemiah, where there were Jewish people after the exile were charging interest to other people who were indebted to them. And this really impoverished them so that they had to again, parcel out, sell into servitude their own sons and daughters, when again it was not a matter of just being impoverished, but they're being made poor because of the hefty interest payments. And this is prohibited by the law. And Nehemiah was infuriated by this abuse of the law.

And as I said earlier, there is the abuse of the law mentioned in Jeremiah chapter 34, where that six year term limit was not held to, and so that people who had servants let them go and then they took them back again. And the Lord says that it's for this reason that you are going to be brought into exile. So again, a very strong connection between the abuse of those who are indentured servants and going into exile as punishment for that.



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FRANK:

Yes. In fact, if you look at our current system right now, Paul, our current interest system is more immoral than Israel's was in that sense. I mean, you know, you know what's going on right now. There are people buying pizzas. Buy now, pay later. They're paying interest on food.

PAUL:

Yeah. And a lot of price gouging. And of course, this is different than if you're just as certainly doing business in Israel and you charge interest. That's different from charging your own citizen who's impoverished and then plunging him further into poverty.

FRANK:

Yeah, half of Americans are in debt right now to credit card companies. And then that interest on the credit card just continues to compound. People can't get out from under it. But that's another whole topic. I digress. We're talking about slavery in the Old Testament, and we'll get to the New hopefully today. Paul, what were the different rights that--?

Or what were the rights that slaves or servants had in the Old Testament? And how was that unique in the ancient world?

PAUL:

When it comes to for example, injury laws in Exodus 21, we have this, where if a servant has his eye knocked out or his tooth knocked out, then that servant is to be released from debt and to be, you know, just to let him go because this person has been permanently injured.

So, there is, you know, whereas you would have some masters felt free to mutilate their own slaves in Babylon and elsewhere. This is something that is mentioned in the literature. You also have this mention of this person who strikes his servant so that he dies. And if he dies immediately, then the word, he'll be avenged. That word is nakam.

Avenged is used and often it is connected with capital punishment. You know, a life for a life. Now, some people say, oh look, yeah, you can—

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If he's killed, then yeah, okay. There is a punishment. Well, don't just keep going on. Notice the dignity that is assumed about the servant who is killed. That there is capital punishment that is connected to this. So, don't just dismiss it and go on to, oh, yeah, but what about what the next part of the verse says?

No, just ponder that thought for a minute because it does presuppose that there is worth and dignity associated with that servant who was just killed. Now, it goes on to say, what if he gets up and walks around for a day or two and then dies? Well, there is no punishment. Some people say, oh, look, he gets off Scott free. No, he is not avenged. That is, there is no death penalty. It doesn't mean that there is no penalty whatsoever. I mean, just think about the person, again, the same chapter in Exodus 21, who has his eye gouged out or his tooth knocked out.

Well, there is a penalty that you lose that service from that person whom you've injured. So, in the same way, again, judges are able to make these sorts of decisions about what is to be done. But what is interesting is that some people say, but look, doesn't that verse go on to say that that person who dies after a day or two, that that person is his silver or his "property"? Well, what does this mean? Well, the word, it says he is his property.

Well, it could be also translated that is his property. And keep in mind that the injury comes in the context of accidental injuries and mention of medical fees that have been paid. And so, if that person gives—

Shows goodwill, the person who struck him shows goodwill by paying for the medical fees, then this, you know, the judge sees this as kind of an amelioration of the consequences, because it, you know, that person shows that it was not an intentional thing.

And that's really the point of getting up and walking after a day, or for a day or two, and then unfortunately perishing. But, you know, Harry—

Again. Some people say, oh, Paul, you're just kind of making this stuff up. This is, you know, Harry Hoffer, who is an ancient Near Eastern scholar at the University of Chicago who's putting this forward. And so, you know, a lot of people-- Maybe I just put this commercial out there.

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You know, some people say, oh, look, you're an apologist. You're just, you know, coming up with this stuff. I am following very respected Old Testament scholars. I am—

I've had my books endorsed by people like, you know, Tremper Longman, or you know, or James Hoffmeyer, you know, noted Egyptologist, or you know, Alan Millard, from the University of Liverpool, and John Goldengay, one of my favorite Old Testament commentators. In fact, there's a book that he wrote. He's a three volume set on Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life, Volume 3. Just take a look at his comments on pages 417-20 in which he talks about these things.

I'm drawing on people who are actually doing the work of Old Testament scholarship, and they're endorsing my books. So, it's not as though I'm just doing this stuff, coming up with these things out of my ear. I'm actually following what respected Old Testament scholars are talking about.

So again, just keep that in mind, because a lot of people are very quick to say, oh, that's just kind of this apologist saying those things. Actually, there's a lot of work that is being distilled from those Old Testament scholars that I'm trying to make available and more, as it were, accessible in one place. So anyway, I just wanted to mention that as well.

FRANK:

You know, that's important because as I mentioned at the top of the previous program, Paul, there are so many topics you need to understand in order to really understand the full context of the passages that we're reading in the Old Testament. And maybe it's important to point out, and you did in the past program, but it's important to reemphasize that the Old Testament law is not the ideal law for all time, for all nations, for all people. It was a temporary code for Israel in that situation.

It was written to Israel, not to us. But it helps us understand how God dealt in history in that situation. So, people think they can just pull verses out of the Bible and dependent upon how they're translated, make them sound like this is slavery in the south, you know, 160 years ago. That is not the case. And we dealt already with the worst sounding one of all, Leviticus 25. And

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you go into much more depth in your book, 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' Can you also mention the book you just squeezed in at the end of the last program? I didn't quite get that—

PAUL:

The book is called 'Christianity Contested.' It just came out at the very end of last year. But the subtitle is 'Replies to Critics Toughest Objections.' So, it has chapters on sexuality, the problem of evil, the hiddenness of God, Christianity and women, and so forth. And I have a chapter on the accusation of genocide as well as the accusation of slavery.

And so, I have very lengthy chapters in this book on that. So, it's published by Whipenstock, and co-edited by Stuart Kelly, and me. So again, this is the latest, work that I've done on the matter of servitude. So, hopefully that'll be—

It's kind of distilling a lot of information, into that lengthy chapter.

FRANK:

'Christianity Contested' ladies and gentlemen, by Dr. Paul Copan. Paul, the work you're doing is very important because, you know, commentaries rarely get down to the common person. They're read by maybe a few hundred people in the world.

They're not widely read, or they're not read in a widespread fashion. But the books you put together are. And of course, you footnote these. You can go back and look at the commentaries and see what people are saying about it.

But we're talking about revelations written over 1400 years, by 40 different people, on three different continents, in different cultures, at different times, for different reasons, with different genres. In fact, I actually like what Alex o' Connor said about the Bible. And he's of course an atheist, but he says, look. The Bible's not a book. It's a library of books. And in fact, that's the case. And you've got to know something about the context to understand it rightly.

PAUL:

Let me just say something about that very quickly because a lot of times this comes up, and I deal with this in my book, 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' The question of, is the Bible, you know,

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like, is the law of Moses borrowing from other laws like the code of Hammurabi, of Babylon, and so forth?

And you know, I go into some detail on that. But what I try to point out is that, you know, and again, not original with me. Bruce Wells, for example, an ancient Near Eastern scholar, talks about how the law of Moses does quote from some other ancient Near Eastern law codes, kind of a common source that the code of Hammurabi also borrowed from.

But it doesn't mean that there is no difference that the Old Testament, the Old Testament law displays. You have the book of Proverbs, which is a collection, a lot of general revelation there, and some that resemble proverbs from the land of Egypt.

Again, all truth is God's truth. And so, instead of reinventing the wheel, some of these things are brought into Israel's law code, like the goring ox. I mentioned the book of Exodus. But you also—

And it's helpful to see that there is a distinction, however, between the laws that are found in the law of Moses. Sometimes, you know, it assumes people will sin. Sometimes there are concessionary laws permitting divorce and so forth. But we need to distinct between the laws and as I said earlier, the overarching vision of the Old Testament.

There's a larger vision, a humanizing vision, a vision for human flourishing. And sometimes those laws are not-- And those laws are not always giving to us the ethical ceiling, but really the moral floor on what is going to be tolerable, what can be regulated and so forth.

So, it's not giving us the ideal of loving the Lord your God with heart, soul, mind and strength, and loving your neighbors yourself. No, if someone sins or if someone gets a divorce, this is how it's going to be done. So, there is that factor too. And as you said before, we need to distinguish between the description as well as the prescription. They're seeing things that are simply permitted, as Jesus said in Matthew 19:8, because of the hardness of human hearts.

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FRANK:

Well, that's an important point that maybe we need to amplify, Paul, because case law—

And I learned this from you, actually. I didn't realize it until I read, I think it was, 'Is God a Moral Monster?' There's a difference between case law and what you might say is a ceiling, a moral ceiling. Describe the difference.

PAUL:

Yeah, and again, I've hinted at it already, but when we're talking about case law, we're dealing with kind of if then scenarios where, you know, if you see your neighbor's, you know, oxen or donkey under this load, well, love your enemy.

You're to help him with that. You know, if you know, there's assumption that you might have enemies in Israel, personal enemies. You know, if someone steals something, what is to be done? You know, or if someone—

If there is—

FRANK:

If someone hits a slave. Why don't we do that one?

PAUL:

Exactly. Yeah. So, this is not ideal. Hitting a slave or a servant is not ideal. But in case that is done, then these are the sorts of steps to take. And again, keep in mind, the law of Moses is giving to us certain—

It's not comprehensive. It's giving to us certain pictures or vignettes, that judges can therefore use to assess related cases, or comparable cases, and so it doesn't have to be giving something that is totalistic in its legislation, but is giving to us wisdom, in how certain things are to be judged, and cases are to be delineated. So, yes. So, it's the if then sort of scenario rather than you shall not steal, you shall not commit adultery, and so forth. These are prescriptive laws, not merely case laws.

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FRANK:

Now, of course, when we think of slavery, we talked about this in the last program, we think of some sort of taskmaster driving others to do his work. But, Chris Wright, he says that slaves, or really servants in Israel, would be people that would be walking or working alongside their masters to do the work. Is that a fair assessment?

PAUL:

Yeah, there is that sort of thing. You see someone like a Boaz, for example, in the book of Ruth, who is very much involved in the life of the servants. I mean, maybe as a foreman, but it's not as though he's kicking back. He's checking on the work, making sure that it's done and so forth, and not simply kicking back, and relaxing, and letting others do the work. So, there often is that.

Maybe not in all cases, but it's not unusual because there are people who are sharing the load and people who have other various responsibilities. They may not be doing the identical thing, but at least they're going to be doing some things that are going to be supporting the household and the well-being of everyone in it.

FRANK:

How about the different standards for treating men and women who are servants? It seems like men go free after seven years, but not women. In fact, Exodus 21:7 says this. If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. And then there's a lot more to that. But what would be the difference? Why would the law treat men and women servants differently?

PAUL:

Right. Well, in my Moral Monster book I touch on this, but I expand on it in the Vindictive Bully Book, because this is sometimes, you know, people say, oh look, the—

You know, you've got Deuteronomy, you've got Exodus 21, you've got Deuteronomy 15, you've got Leviticus 25. And they're all quote, contradictory. Well, it's interesting that, you can see them as contradictory as opposed to being kind of a complementarity. Is the law kind of progressing and kind of outmoding previous laws? Or is there a kind of coherence? Or maybe

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what you see going on in Exodus 21 where the male goes free is implicitly indicating that if the situation were reversed, it would be the woman who could go free.

In fact, that's what Deuteronomy 15 draws out. But when you read for example Jeremiah-- And Joshua Berman, the Jewish, Old Testament scholar points out, he says that there is a kind of, some people see this as kind of a progress, the Old Testament law as being kind of progressive and certain things be outmoded, but you can also see it as being a kind of a complementarity.

And I think that that's what's going on because Jeremiah in Jeremiah 34, when he's referring to this six year law, he refers to male and female servants, and he's bringing together these three Old Testament texts without any sort of differentiation. And I think that this makes a lot more sense, of the law of Moses.

Rather than seeing it as being contradictory, you'd think, well why would Moses, why would Moses the editor, of these laws have these contradictory sorts of laws if they really are inherently conflicting? Wouldn't he say, well I'm going to get rid of this older one and we're going to work with the newer ones?

Well, I think it makes more sense to say that a lot of these complement each other, and can reinforce each other, or emphasize something in particular without seeing them as contradicting one another.

So, Joshua Berman I think does a very, very good job of highlighting this sort of a differentiation. So, I don't see them as being inherently conflicting, but simply one being more, perhaps implicit, and then the other one being more explicit later on in Deuteronomy 15 for example. But again, I could say a lot more, but I'd refer people to the 'Is God a Vindictive Bully' book where I go into more detail on why that's the case.

FRANK:

So, what might you say to somebody who said well I thought this was God's law and God doesn't change? Why would he progress? Why would these laws progress? What would your response to that be?

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PAUL:

Yeah, well I think in this case it's not so much a progression as it is in terms of drawing out certain things that were implicit earlier. But yeah, you do have a—

Let's just take a basic category of the Old Testament and what it permits. And I talked about, you know, being permitted to have Gentile servants and again keeping them within your household. And a lot of times there's nowhere to go except to stay within the household. And so, so that's one situation.

But keep in mind that the Old Testament has a vision that is going to be fulfilled through Jesus the Messiah. It's already, you see in seed form in the image of God in Genesis chapter one, that there is this fundamental equality, but through Christ there is kind of an elevated and glorified vision, that all people are—

That there is no Jew, Gentile, male, female, slave, nor free in Christ, Galatians 3:28. And that there is this vision that any sort of line of demarcation that is perhaps assumed in that particular text, I think it's because people are Gentiles, pagans can't have land themselves, that this creates that kind of a situation.

But keep in mind the broader vision that the Old Testament is looking forward to a place where all the people of God are Jew and Gentile alike in the Messiah, and that this is the fulfillment of that. And so, there is something incremental, that God is blessing Israel, so that Israel might be a blessing to the ends of the earth.

And that of course, ends up through Jesus the Messiah. But there is something that is primary, that is incremental, that is the shadow of what will later on come to be fulfilled in Jesus Christ. And all people being all Jew and Gentile, like being one in Christ, that is the realization of the vision.

But again, it's not something that is from the outset, although people can come, you see kind of hints of that, as, you know, Gentiles are coming into Israel, being incorporated into the life of Israel, having, you know, flourishing work and you know, intermarrying within Israel. And so,

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you do see hints of that, that God's spirit is open to that, to incorporating them into the people of God. But again, there's that greater vision that is going to be realized in the future.

FRANK:

I think also people make a mistake, Paul, when they say God's laws can't change. It depends on what they are. Because I think the value behind the command doesn't change, but the command can change. You know, obviously the dietary laws changed. You know, you no longer are bound by those. You know, there's old covenant practices that were just for ancient Israel because the situation on the ground was different.

But we do that with our kids. You know, when our kids are young, we'll say, hey, stay out of the street, because we love them. When they hit 16 or something, we say, hey, get out in the street and get a job. You know, I mean, the command is opposite, but the value behind the command is the same because the circumstances have changed on the ground. So, I think God can do that as well.

PAUL:

Yeah, and I use the example-- And again, it's kind of similar to that street thing. When my kids were younger, I would say, you know, hold my hand when we're crossing the street. And then, of course, when they got older, they didn't have to. They could walk on their own. And, you know, maybe one day they'll say, dad, hold my hand when we're crossing the street.

FRANK:

That's right. [Laughter] We're getting there, Paul. We're on our way there. Well, there's so much more in the Vindictive Bully book on this. We're not covering the waterfront here, friends, on Old Testament servitude or slavery. But a couple of things we can summarize. It was different than what we had here in America 160 years ago.

Slaves or servants had rights that other Ancient Near East cultures did not afford them. In many cases, people joined as indentured servants in order to make a living. They did it for their own benefit. And you couldn't just treat a slave or a servant any way you wanted to. There were laws involved there. And Israelites could own foreigners, and foreigners could own Israelites as well, but foreigners couldn't own land.

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So, that created a complication. One last thing before we get to the New Testament, Paul. And I know that the skeptics out there hate this analogy, but I want you to unpack it. If I'm Steve Cohen, the owner of the New York Mets, can I sell Pete Alonso next year if he's under contract?

PAUL:

Yeah. Well, there is. Yeah. I have used that example. I brought it out in my Moral Monster book in there. It seems like the critics get so infuriated.

FRANK:

I know they do. [Laughter]

PAUL:

And again, all I try to do is illustrate the transactional language. It's not dehumanizing or diminishing anyone. People say, oh, look, these athletes, they get so much money they can just drop out of sports. If they wanted to, they could retire. But the "slave" has no such option, and so on.

Well, keep in mind the only point. Keep in mind the Venn diagram here. There's a little bit of overlap here. We're not talking about luxury or freedom. We're talking about the transactional language that does not diminish their humanity. Buying, selling, having a team owner and so forth. Keep that in mind as you read that transactional language in Leviticus or even, God buying, redeeming his people and bringing them out of the land of Egypt in Exodus chapter 15.

But, yeah, so I think it's helpful to keep that in mind that there is a certain contract that needs to be fulfilled, that you are limited. But let me just again get back to what I was saying about the evil of slavery. That the evil of slavery, and I should mention this too. The evil of slavery is that you own another person, that that person is at your disposal. That that person's dignity, and volition are totally stripped from them. Interestingly, in Leviticus chapter 19, there is a prohibition against tattooing.

Now people think, oh, maybe that's because of some paganism, or maybe it's associated with, maybe mourning practices, people cutting themselves and tattooing themselves. No, there is in the journal of Vetus Testamentum, a few years back, a couple of authors, John Huneagard and

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Harold Leibowitz, you know, kind of looked at the literature and they said, well, actually, no. The reason that tattooing is prohibited, not modern-day tattoos, but tattoos back then is that tattoos indicated the ownership of another person.

That if you tattooed someone, it was a mark that you owned that person. And Israel is prohibited from tattooing anyone because it indicates that you are treating that person as though that person is at your disposal. You do whatever you want with them. That is the evil of slavery. Tattoos, you know, the prohibition against tattooing is an indication that no. Human beings are not mere objects. They have dignity and worth. Don't tattoo them.

FRANK:

Wow, I hadn't heard that before. Well, it is interesting though that going back to the analogy. If Steve Cohen wants to sell Pete Alonzo's services, he can. But he can't sell him as a person. Right?

PAUL:

That is his total disposal. Yeah. In fact, Harriet Beecher Stowe talked about Uncle Tom in, you know, regarding 'Uncle Tom's Cabin.' She said that basically in the south, the master, basically was, you know, had a complete despotism over the slave body and soul. And that, that really is the again, the essence of the evil of slavery, which again, you do not have in the Old Testament.

FRANK:

Friends, we've got a lot coming up this fall. We're going to be going to Israel on October 3. You say, I know we can't go to Israel. It's too dangerous. There are people over there right now, and unless something flares up, it's going to be a great trip. And if it does flare up, we're going to go to Jordan.

We're flying to Jordan and out of Jordan, so we'll be able to get in and out of Israel, but it's safe over there. I've been over there several times. We're going to be with the great Eli Shukran, the archaeologist who discovered the Pool of Siloam and so much else in Jerusalem. He's like the mayor over there. Wherever he wants to go, he goes, and he takes us with him.

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It's going to be a phenomenal trip. By the way, it's not going to be walk where Jesus walked. It's going to be run where Jesus walked. We're going to see a lot. It's going to be tiring, but we stay at the best hotels. It's a VIP trip. Check it out crossexamined.org.

Also, we've got a couple of college, or I should say online courses coming up. Yeah, I'm going to colleges too, but online courses coming up. The first is going to be Digging up the Bible, 22 hours of archaeology showing there are so many archaeological discoveries that support the Bible.

You're not going to want to miss that. We're also going to have Titus Kennedy, an archeologist, in one of the Q&A Zoom sessions. You're not going to want to miss Titus. In fact, a couple of his books are required for the course. And also, we have Let's Get Real, which is basically, I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist for sixth to eighth graders.

Even fifth to ninth graders can work. Shanda Fulbright is the lead on that. I'm also involved. Homeschooling kids, they want to take Let's Get Real. Or just your kid in general, if they want to know why Christianity is true and they should, take Let's Get Real. All right, friends, we'll see you here next time. Let's get back to Paul Copan.

We do have it in the new, though, so let's transfer over to the New for a second, Paul. Because Roman slavery was worse than indentured servitude. Although there were some differences to the slavery we had in America. What were the differences and what was the evil of the Roman slavery system?

PAUL:

Yeah, well, I mean, it did-- You had, of course, you know, people—

And again, this isn't necessarily essential to slavery. You have people working in very bad conditions. That's not essential to slavery. You can have toilsome work that's not essential to slavery. Again, it's that sense of being, you know, having, you know, being at the total disposal of your master. You can, who can even kill you.

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Now, there was that, you know, understanding of human beings as, you know, sometimes through war or whatever, that they were brought into a household, that they could be sold and so forth. And you had various liberties, a range of liberties, some very restricted, others where there was a lot of freedom and even friendship between a master and his slave.

So again, you'll have varying conditions here. And also, the slave could, if he was able to earn enough money, in some urban centers, perhaps, could manumit himself, could buy his own freedom. So, there are these differences, with the Old Testament. This is not mere indentured servitude where you're going to work for me for six years and then you can go, or if you freely choose, you can align yourself with me.

There weren't those sorts of liberties. You had to be able to pay yourself out of that freedom, or you simply pay yourself to be free, or you're simply stuck in that situation. But you know, so anyway, when it comes, well, anyway, I'll maybe just stop there, and we can go with any follow-up questions. But that's just a few nuggets to consider.

FRANK:

Okay. Yeah, I know there were people who were slaves in Rome that were doctors, and lawyers, and these kind of things. But also, as I understand it, a slave owner could kill his slave if he wanted to without real penalty. Correct?

PAUL:

Yeah, yeah, that was possible.

FRANK:

Okay, so why does Paul then tell slaves to obey their masters in that awful situation? Why would he ever say such a thing?

PAUL:

Right. What's interesting when you see women, and you know, slaves and children being addressed in Paul's epistles, for example, in you know, in Ephesians as well as Colossians. What's interesting is that those who tended to be the, you know, kind of, what should we say,

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the ones who had less status or no status, were the ones who are being addressed first as though they are agents, as they have choices, as they have volition.

And they were also, keep in mind, and in a household typically you were obligated to adhere to the religious views of your master, of the paterfamilias, the head of the family. But women as well as slaves could depart from that. You had Christian slaves working for pagan masters. And so, Paul wanted to create the best kind of relations by exhorting them to do the best they could by obeying their masters, and so forth.

I mean presumably it wasn't anything immoral that they're being asked to do, but it might be very difficult and tedious, work and thankless work and so forth. But Paul is addressing them as agents. But Paul then says to those who are, of course, husbands, those who are fathers, those who are masters. Paul reminds the masters that you are to treat your slaves justly and fairly because you have a master in heaven.

So, there's an accountability factor. So, Paul is telling the masters, basically treat them with dignity and respect. And some people say, well, why didn't Paul just kind of go ahead and abolish everything? Why don't you say, well, just Christians, just let your slaves go.

Well, if you've turned him into a brother, this really isn't an issue any longer. That person is working for you. And therefore, that person is not a piece of property. That person is a brother and sister in Christ. And so, Paul is holding them accountable. Let me just unpack a few things here because there are a few interrelated points.

The Apostle Paul, if you read Romans 16, there are two slave names that are mentioned, Urbanus and Andronicus. These are common slave names in the Roman Empire. And these people are fellow workers with the Apostle Paul. These are people who are doing work. One has been a fellow prisoner, someone who's been, someone, who is known among the apostles.

So, he's called an apostle. So, there's someone of very high rank. So, Paul is basically bringing them into the work of the church, church planting, the body of Christ. And also in Romans 16, very interestingly, in 1616, it says greet one another with a holy kiss. And so, you've got people who are like, you know, Priscilla and Aquila, who have a house church, down to those who are

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slaves. They're called to greet one another with a holy kiss, which was a picture of family belonging. So, the Christian master is basically going to be, you know, greeting his slave with a holy kiss, is going to be treating that person, you know, as, you know, if he's a believer, in this brotherly way.

And also, furthermore, in the church, you also have again, further ways of undermining this master slave dichotomy by having masters and slaves sitting with one another, first at a love feast, and then sharing in the Lord's supper together, that they were to share in this as a common meal, that this is a picture of family belonging. So, you have all sorts of indications, that there is this-- Paul is pressing the notion of family belonging, as the driving metaphor.

You see this very clearly in the Book of Galatians, the notion of family, of family belonging, that this is central to what Paul is doing in the Book of Galatians, but also informs the relationships between Christian masters, Christian slaves, and how to operate. So again, those are some things that are very important to keep in mind that Paul is fundamentally eroding the rigidity of this institution and is humanizing it. He is seeking to bring people together and pushing for justice, fairness in how you treat the slave.

FRANK:

Yeah, we Westerners don't like that though, Paul. We want Paul, not you, Paul, the Apostle Paul, to slam his fist down and say, that's it. No slavery anywhere in society. Let me put it right here in the Scriptures. Why doesn't he do that?

PAUL:

Right.

FRANK:

Well, I guess that we're speculating, but why?

PAUL:

Well, I think there is, there is a presumption that, you know, any, again from the Old Testament, any sort of ownership of another person that degrades his humanity, that treats

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him as an object rather than as an agent, as someone treating him without any dignity and so forth, that this is inherently wrong.

In fact, some people talk about the slave trade. Well, the slave trade is condemned in both the Old Testament and the New, as we know today. Well, we see, for example in Ezekiel 27, the condemnation against Tyre where human beings are being traded as cargo. In the book of Revelation, chapter 18 mentions this phrase, that these human beings, the souls and bodies of human beings or bodies of human beings are being traded.

They're being treated as cargo. And this is seen as again, a condemnation of Babylon in Revelation 18. But the assumption is that these are mere commodities. That is again, driving at the heart of chattel slavery in its form, that really treats them as humans, as objects and note without dignity and so forth.

And so, what we need to understand is that chattel, this kind of humans as objects, as owned as not having any dignity, that that kind of slavery, that slave trading is prohibited both in the Old Testament, again in Ezekiel 27, as well as in Revelation 18. So, there is that assumption that the slave trade is not for the Israelites, that they should not engage in that in the Old Testament. And again, that's further reinforced in the New Testament as well.

FRANK:

I think it's 1 Timothy as well. He mentions kidnappers, and then Exodus 21. So, there's several places.

PAUL:

Sure, sure, yeah. But again, if you even just want to expand it to just the whole issue of slave trade, you've got two texts, kind of anchor texts in the Old and New Testaments. In fact, you know, there is a, you know, article fairly recently by Murray Vassar, in New Testament studies back in 2018 talks about that very phrase from, from Revelation 18 and basically says, this is again drawing from Ezekiel 27. This is an indictment against slave trading.

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FRANK:

What would have happened? Some scholars say that Rome was made up of 30% slaves. Some have said that, well, if it were outlawed outright immediately then, then there would be a lot of starvation and poverty because people couldn't support themselves. Is that correct? And if it is correct, God taking the incremental approach that you write about in *Vindictive Bully and Moral Monster*, to us in the West seems like, well, incremental is not enough. This issue requires more urgency. So, can you deal with that? Like, how would you respond to that?

PAUL:

Yeah, well, of course, Paul talks about, you know, if you can gain your freedom to do so in—

FRANK:

Right.

PAUL:

--1 Corinthians chapter seven. You do have, you know, the, the issue with the urgency is that there's no way-- One, there is no way of simply bringing about, this kind of a change. That there are certain, you know, there may be certain insurmountable barriers to doing so. But you know, just let's consider England. Where England, actually, this is the issue for a lot of, you know, when they'd outlawed and abolished—

FRANK:

Slavery trade with Wilberforce?

PAUL:

Yeah, it won—

There in a sense were reparations made because those who had slaves in England, they were paid by the British government, at a great cost, to the British government. That they were paid to free the slaves. And further money was actually spent on patrolling the, you know, the Atlantic Ocean, the Mediterranean Sea, from slave trading.

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So, it was an attempt to prevent further slave trading going on in other parts of the world. So, there was a great cost that went along with it. Now, Rome was probably more like 50% slave, the city of Rome. So again, a huge percentage, that constituted that city.

So again, the whole issue of economics, if the government does not have a will to bring about this sort of a change, it's not going to happen. Whereas you did have the will, within the British government, informed by the biblical faith and reformers like William Wilberforce, and the Clapham sect, and so forth. So again, it was able to—

And again, legislation that reinforced that, that this was-- They were able to do this, whereas it just was in some ways a non-issue in Rome. But the point is that Paul fundamentally is undermining the institution of slavery within the church by saying, treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Even Philemon, of course—

I mentioned this in my Moral Monster book, that the question of Onesimus being a runaway slave, I mean, there are no flight verbs or anything like that associated with Onesimus. That came to be the interpretation after the fourth century. But even so, that Paul exhorts, Philemon to receive back Onesimus, as more than a slave, but as a brother.

And again, that's the same language that Galatians use, that we're no longer slaves, but again, we are adopted sons in Christ. So, there is kind of a similarity of language there that Paul uses in Galatians that kind of carries over into the book of Philemon and that perhaps could inform the discussion in that regard as well.

But the point is that Paul is trying to bring the body of Christ together, to break down that barrier between master and slave, and to say he's useful to you as a brother in Christ. And so, therefore, don't hold to that master/slave relationship, if indeed that's the case, but rather receive him back as a brother.

FRANK:

Does God ever take an incremental approach on any other issue? I know you're saying that, yeah, slavery, the slave trading is outlawed in both the Old and New Testaments.

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Okay, we get that. But slavery itself or servanthood itself isn't necessarily outlawed. And you make the case, well, this—

You planted the seeds for overturning this. Are there any other issues where God doesn't set a ceiling, but he says, here's a moral floor? I know you're not going to—

You're not going to get to the optimum right now, but here's a moral floor.

PAUL:

Right. Yeah, well, I mean, I did allude to this earlier, but I think we can talk about, say, divorce legislation, where Jesus is stating that this was not God's intent from the very beginning. And again, distinguish between the vision of the Old Testament, you know, that God made—

You know, that from the beginning it was not so. You know, quoting Genesis 2:24. And you know, but Jesus says that Moses permitted it because of the hardness of human hearts. But Jesus is also promoting something that brings people back to creation. So, it's in a sense, it's incremental, in saying, okay, it's permitted in this situation, but the ideal is this, and you ought to pursue that ideal and live in light of that ideal, in light of who we are as new covenant people.

So, we do see, say divorce is another example of that. We do see, an incrementalism in kosher laws, for example, the food laws, where they are implemented for the people of Israel. I've got a chapter on kosher laws in the Moral Monster book, in which Israel, in its diet, its clothing, its plowing laws, and planting laws, it is to see in all of these areas of life that they're to be God's distinctive people, that they are not to be mixed in with the nations, but rather they're to be distinctive.

And so, their diet reflects that, their clothing reflects that, how they plant crops reflects that. But of course, Jesus, in Mark 7, then declares all foods clean. That it's not what goes into a man that contaminates him, but what comes out of a man. And so, Jesus declares all foods clean. So, this is something that was temporary, but it was a marker of the people of God for a particular period of time that would give way to and be fulfilled in Jesus, who ultimately points people

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back to creation, that all things were made good in the very beginning, that there was nothing in itself that was unclean. And so, anyway, we can also talk about those sorts of things as well.

FRANK:

Dr. Peter Williams, you mentioned earlier, I saw a presentation he did on slavery, and he said that the Romans had certain laws restricting how many slaves you could free at the time, which might complicate someone saying free all the slaves. What would happen there? Does that come into the calculus at all? Do we know?

PAUL:

Yeah, perhaps so. I don't know—

I mean, I'm not aware of that point that Peter Williams makes. But anyway, something to think about.

FRANK:

Yeah. And why were most of the abolitionists Christians? I mean, I see some skeptics saying, oh, no, this is an Enlightenment thing. You know, rationality brought us to the fact that we ought not have slaves. But throughout history, I mean, even Aristotle said some people should be slaves. Like, it didn't sound that obvious to people. Right? Why was it Christians that ultimately got rid of slavery? In fact, let me read a quote that you have in your book, Paul, if I can before you answer that.

You're quoting somebody by the name of Baker. You say, who says this? Rather than outlawing the institution of servitude completely, the Bible establishes various principles to ameliorate the condition of the poor and the needy, emphasizing the individual worth of every human-being, and treating slaves as persons rather than property. And all these principles—

If all these principles had been practiced consistently, slavery would have probably disappeared many centuries before William Wilberforce. So, unpack that a little further and talk about why the abolitionists were almost all Christians.

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PAUL:

Yeah, yeah. You do have a number of Enlightenment figures who, like you know, David Hume and you know, even John Locke and so forth, who were, did believe in slavery. David Hume, for example, believed in the inferiority of non-Europeans, blacks, and so forth.

FRANK:

So did Darwin.

PAUL:

Yeah, you do have that as well. Yeah. But you do have—

Again, some people say, well, why weren't things changed earlier? I mean, you do have some breakthroughs earlier on, and you do have huge changes that are brought about in society. You know, you have Christians who are starting hospitals, they're starting engaging in hospice care, they're outlawing gladiatorial games. They're outlawing under Constantine not just the gladiatorial games, but child exposure and child abandonment. And so, these Christians are going into places where there are plagues, and they're caring for the sick, and even dying with them.

And Julian the apostate, mid 4th century, Julian the apostate, who was a Roman emperor, he was dismayed that Christians were not only caring for their own, but also caring for the pagans, which the pagans themselves weren't doing for themselves, and that they're basically being put to shame by what they call the Galileans.

And it's very interesting that you see all sorts of humanizing efforts by Christians. And again, Tom Holland, not a Christian, but in his book 'Dominion', and Neil Ferguson and so forth, they highlight the various advances that came in terms of human rights and so forth that were again the heir of the Judeo-Christian, vision.

Jurgen Habermas, again an atheist, held that it's been the Christian Christians. And he said the Jewish ethic of justice and the Christian ethic of love actually gave to us that inheritance of individual rights before the law, freedom of conscience, human rights, and so forth. So, I'm not just talking about Christians who are saying these things. These are people who are secular,

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agnostic scholars and so forth, that Christianity has brought to us democracy and so forth because of that emphasis on human dignity and worth.

And unfortunately, things didn't happen sooner than they did. But it was because Christians believe in the image of God. They believed that human beings were not property. And people like Martin Luther King Jr.—

Going and then back to Abraham Lincoln, and then going back even earlier, they're pressing to look at the documents like the Declaration of Independence. That all men are created equal, and to really push this forward, and to live up to that ideal rather than compromising on that.

And so, we see a lot of changes taking place, incremental ones. But again, this has taken time and just shows the embeddedness of human sin, and in those structures that keep people from setting the prisoners free.

FRANK:

You know, N.T. Wright, in his biography of Paul, pointed out how slavery was like the oil of the ancient world. You know, that's just the way it was. And people thought it was necessary to do what they did. Seems like the Bible tried to humanize people involved in any kind of servitude, as you mentioned. And—

PAUL:

It also deals with the internal rather than trying to, you know, having to change everything when it wasn't even in their power to do so.

FRANK:

Right.

PAUL:

So, basically, you know, why, you know, in some ways, if you've got someone who's your brother, then he could work for you. He's not your property, as it were, because you regard him as brother in Christ. You could even do service in the church together like, Andronicus and

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Urbanus in Romans 16. So, in a sense, a lot of work is being done at that internal level. Anyway, I could go on more about that. But yeah.

FRANK:

Christians, while they did get rid of slavery, ultimately were late to the game. They were before anyone else, but still late to the game. Other than Gregory of Nyssa, who back in the 300's AD was a firebrand against slavery. But it didn't go anywhere.

PAUL:

His oldest sister, which was pretty remarkable, she was at the forefront of that. So, encouraging.

FRANK:

Yeah. So, I mean, there are bright spots. But of course, as I always try and point out, when Christians don't act properly, we say, when somebody plays Beethoven poorly, who do you blame?

PAUL:

Right.

FRANK:

You don't blame Beethoven. You don't blame Jesus. But last question, Paul. And this has to do with the fact that Jesus became a slave to free us. How does that help us understand the issue and the beauty of Christianity?

PAUL:

Yeah, I think Tom Holland, the historian, beautifully illustrates this. Again, not a Christian, but he wrote the book 'Dominion', which talks about the dramatic impact the Christian faith had in Western history. And what he discovered was that Jesus coming into the world, the picture of God entering into the world not to punish humanity, but actually to take the punishment for humanity.

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He said it's so radical, so different in the Greco-Roman world. He said we have just gotten so used to that picture that it's just become kind of humdrum to us. He said, but this revolutionized, this picture revolutionized the world and brought to us the humanizing changes that we've seen in Western civilization where all human beings are fundamentally equal. Because Tom Holland himself had been enamored of the Greco-Roman vision of kind of the noble hero, the one who is engaged in winning wars.

But he came to see that there's no regard for the weak, no regard for the disabled, no regard for the poor. They're just trampled underfoot. If you don't want them, you just get rid of them. They're disposable. And he came to see that. He said, even though he's not a Christian, he says that he is no longer Greco-Roman in his ethical understanding, but rather thoroughly and proudly Christian.

And so, I think that you see God coming to the world to rescue us, to free us, to make his enemies into friends, as Romans 5 tells us, that this is an astonishing picture that ought to have a transformative effect on how we engage with one another, how we-- Informs us on loving our enemies, but also establishing just structures within society such as democracy, human rights, crimes against humanity, and so forth, public education. These are all the heritage of the biblical faith.

FRANK:

Yes. And it seems like the atheists who are rightfully bringing up good questions about this issue, but wrongfully assuming they have a standard by which to judge this issue, don't realize they're stealing from God to argue against him. So, that's another thing. When atheists are complaining about slavery, they're actually stealing from God to say, well, God didn't do enough on slavery. When we look at the overall context, you've got to see that God did move people in the right direction on this, in a, tragically, a situation that was all over the world by the time Moses wrote the Torah.

PAUL:

Yeah, yeah. And I like to bring this story up about a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation journalist by the name of Brian Stewart who was basically disenchanted with "religion". But he went to all the hellholes of the world, to famine in Ethiopia, to earthquakes in different parts of

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the world, and he said it was the Christians who were there. They were there before the camera lights came, and they were there after the camera lights left. He said sometimes it was they alone who are doing the work of bringing help to those who are suffering.

And he said it was what he saw that actually brought him out of his skepticism toward religion to becoming a Christian. He saw Christians as God's hands and feet in the world, doing great good as coalitions of churches, and lay people, and pastors all going out to those places where no one else wanted to go. In fact, I wrote to Rodney Stark, noted, historian and sociologist at Baylor University. He called himself an agnostic back in 2006.

And in 2011, I sent him an email, and I said, you mentioned you were an agnostic. Where do you stand now? And he wrote me back and he said, well, basically I wrote myself into the Christian faith. He had seen all the good that the Christian faith had done in history.

And he said he became persuaded about the reality of the Christian faith because the remarkable, dramatic, humanizing changes that the Christian faith brought to Western civilization and wherever it happened to touch other cultures as well. So, anyway, those are a few things to keep in mind as well. Not just the slavery issue, but the whole humanizing, democratizing, you know, bringing benefit to for the public good, that you see Christians at the forefront of that in Western civilization.

FRANK:

Fabulous. Paul, thanks so much for being such a scholar in areas that the average person has no training for. You're doing a great service to people who really want to know the truth on these issues, despite all the consternation that people give you and, you know, give people who are Christians. You've done a great service, in educating people on this, and you've taken a lot of arrows for it. So, thanks for doing that. Can you mention the books again, including the newest ones?

PAUL:

Okay, so thank you for asking. 'Is God a Moral Monster?' And again, these are covering different topics than the, you know, than some of the other books. So, is 'God a Moral Monster?' You

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know, God and, you know, commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son, to kosher laws, to God being jealous and so forth.

'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' You know, dealing with issues like, why did God harden Pharaoh's heart? Or, you know, was David really a man after God's own heart? And, you know, and you know, is the God of the Old Testament the same as the God of the New? And so on.

So, getting into those questions, covering new material, but also revisiting some old stuff, and filling in some of the gaps. And then, two chapters in this book, 'Christianity Contested', that replies to critic's toughest objections. So, I wrote on the question the Bible and genocide, the Bible and slavery. And so, I've expanded on that quite a bit and kind of distilled a lot of things but also adding more material, as well.

FRANK:

Fabulous. And the website again?

PAUL:

Paulcopan.com and also, you know, Amazon carries my books. So, thanks for having a look.

FRANK:

Hey Paul, tell people what you teach down at Palm Beach Atlantic. So, people are looking for undergraduate education. What kind of program do you have down there?

PAUL:

Sure, I appreciate it. Yeah, we have an undergraduate in apologetics. So, it's a Christian liberal arts university. So, an undergrad in apologetics. And we also have a Master of Arts in Philosophy of religion. Paul Gould, who's written Cultural Apologetics, and you know, is a great philosopher. He and I are teaming up. We also have a couple of visiting professors who team up with us as well.

And it's a two-year program. Would encourage you to come on the ground. It's a great community. We also have a hybrid program for that too that you can finish in say three to four years. But would encourage you all to consider Palm Beach Atlantic University too.

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And we have a strong emphasis on public philosophy, on engaging the culture, on being the public facing. So, we have a class on public philosophy, another one on philosophy, technology, and ethics, another one on philosophy, and literature. And we go through a lot of C.S. Lewis's works, and other things that really seek to engage the culture. And Paul again, Paul Gould wrote the book 'Cultural Apologetics', which again, has been very well-received.

FRANK:

Fabulous. Paul Copan, ladies and gentlemen. Dr. Paul Copan. Thank you so much, Paul. Great being with you.

PAUL:

Thanks so much. A real pleasure.

FRANK:

All right, friends, Lord willing, we'll see you here next week. God bless.

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