

# CHRISTIANITY AND THE SLAVERY QUESTION

BY

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The evangelists Matthew and Luke tell of Jesus' conversation with a centurion who was concerned about his slave. The centurion explained that he was the captain of a military company. As such he gave orders to his soldiers when and where they were to come and go. He said further, "Also to my slave I say do this and he doth it" (*Matt.* 8:9; *Luke* 7:8). Jesus, far from making a statement in condemnation of the institution of slavery, commends the centurion for his exemplary faith. By his statement the centurion had assigned the same finality to the words of healing of Christ as he gave to his own commands to his slaves.

In his epistles Paul shows the same disregard for what we would call the "slave question." He says instead, "Masters, give to your slaves that which is just and equal" (*Col.* 4:1). "Slaves be obedient to your masters according to the flesh" (*Eph.* 6:5; cf. 6:8f.). Furthermore, there are frequent allusions to slavery in figures of speech in the New Testament. Yet the point of such passages is never the ills of slavery but the demand for obedience (note *Matt.* 25:21-26; *Rom.* 6:16-20). From these and other passages we can with certainty conclude that it would be false to ascribe to Christ and the Apostles any consciousness of a slave problem. The emphasis is instead on the responsibility of the master to treat his slave well (*I Cor.* 7:20 22; 12:13; *Gal.* 3:28; *Col.* 3:22; *Titus* 2:9). In short, the institution of slavery is not condemned but the abuses of it are.

The principle upon which the master-slave relationship existed is best expressed in the statement, "The laborer is worth of his hire" (*Luke* 10:7; *I Tim.* 5:18). According to this principle an individual is obligated to provide just compensation for anyone in his employ. That this was true in the slave system of the Graeco-Roman world of the first century A.D. will be shown by the fact that a slave usually received as much or more in the way of compensation than his free counterpart. Nor can it be objected that a slave had given up all rights to freedom in return for the necessities of life. On the contrary the slave of ancient times could look forward to a day of freedom and opportunity in the near future if he were obedient and industrious.

Many have suggested, in order to justify the attitude of Christ and the Apostles, that the slave should be considered the property of one man in the labor of another. John Murray presents very well the case for this point of view.<sup>1</sup> To this definition he adds the Biblical perspective that a slave is not a mere chattel. Instead, the nature of that which is owned and the use made of the individual determines the character of ownership. However, the only justification which he presents for the existence of the slave as the property of one man in the labor of another is indebtedness. His reasoning is sound but there is a serious difficulty. Indebtedness was seldom, if ever, the cause of slavery in the first century A.D. or even two hundred years before. At Rome it had been illegal for some time. Varro does not include it in his list of six ways of becoming a slave. Cicero says that non-payment of debts was a cause of slavery in the early Republic, but his obvious intimation is that it was not a legal reason in his time (*Para.* 35). The law forbidding slavery for indebtedness is assigned by Livy to the year 326 B.C. (*Liv.* 8:28. I). If the law was this early or even a century and a half later, it is logical to assume that it would have spread throughout the Mediterranean world by praetor's edict or other similar edicts before New Testament times. The overwhelming number of slaves at Rome and in the East were acquired as prisoners-of-war or by piracy. In a few cases parents even sold their children to unscrupulous slave dealers. For this reason and

reasons to follow I would simply suggest that the justification for slavery is to be found in the fact that the slave receives his due on the principle that "the laborer is worthy of his hire."

Among the Romans slavery was a means by which a captive in war could be educated and trained in Roman ways before becoming a Roman citizen. The younger Pliny in a letter states in justification of manumission that he freed his slaves because of a desire to see his native country increased in the number of its citizens (Plin. *Ep.* 7. 32.1). Cassius Dio puts similar words in the mouth of Augustus Caesar, but the statement is less reliable than Pliny's (46. 7. 6). Behind these statements there is the fact that Rome was faced with a population decline of freeborn citizens. The freedman, therefore, under the name and patronage of his former master could fulfill obligations to the state, the most important of which was military service. Whatever the reasons, evidence of various kinds indicates that the Romans freed slaves in great numbers.

Tenney Frank made a study of the sacred treasury of the Romans for the years 81-49 B. C. His conclusions are remarkable. One of the sources for the sacred treasury was a manumission tax of 5% on the value of the slave about to be freed. Using a value of 500 *denarii* per slave, a reasonable if not high evaluation, he came to the conclusion that 500,000 slaves were freed during this period, for 12,000,000 *sesterces* were derived from the tax during this time.<sup>2</sup> These figures are all the more startling when one learns that the total population of Rome in 5 B. C. has been estimated at 870,000.<sup>3</sup>

Two other bits of evidence of the frequency of manumission during this period are significant. Caesar sent 80,000 poor people, mostly freedmen, out of the city of Rome to the provinces as colonists in the years 46-44 B. C. (Suet. *Iul.* 42). Earlier, in 57-56, when a dole of grain was established for needy citizens at Rome, many owners set their older slaves free. This indicates that it was not humanitarianism which prompted some to free their slaves (Cassius Dio 39. 24).

Information regarding the length of time a slave must wait for his freedom is scanty. Cicero, however, makes the point that a worthy slave could expect his freedom in about seven years (*Phil* 8:32), a figure which coincides remarkably with the Old Testament requirement (*Ex.* 21:2). It does not surprise us, therefore, to find that, in the works of Cicero, a number of individuals, such as Tiro, Staius, Dionysius and Eutychedes to name a few, are first mentioned in connection with some important duties they performed as slaves and then a few years later they are spoken of as freedmen.

Evidence from the early Empire, since it is the time of the early church, is more significant and also most unusual. In a study of 13,900 grave inscriptions published in the *Corpus Inscriptorum Latinorum*, Frank has shown that of 4,485 persons born at Rome and who with few exceptions were poor citizens, 3,723 or 83% have foreign names and 70% have Greek names. This is a sure indication that the individual was a former slave, or, perhaps, the son or daughter of a slave, or freedman. There is further evidence that this percentage is too low; for in instances where a record of a succeeding generation appears, the percentage of Greek names shrinks from 64% to 38%. It appears that a freedman of ambition soon tried to shed a Greek name and presumably any other foreign name in favor of a Latin one.<sup>4</sup> The reliability of one aspect of Frank's conclusions is borne out by other studies. At Minturnae 77% of all slaves and freedmen are Greek.<sup>5</sup> Likewise 76% of the freedmen and slaves of Cicero are Greeks and 73% of the slaves and freedmen mentioned by Cicero have Greek names.<sup>6</sup>

The legislation of Augustus indicates that on the death of their masters slaves were being freed in wholesale numbers. To curb such activity, which Dionysius of Halicarnassus says was prompted by the owner's desire that his slaves should grace

his funeral wearing the cap of freedom (4.24), the *lex Fufia Canina* was passed in 2 B. C. The law stipulated that on their death owners could free a portion of their slaves on a sliding scale. If one owned two to ten slaves, one-half could be freed. If 10-30, one-third could be freed. If 30-100, one-fourth could be freed. If a master owned 100-500, only one-fifth could be freed (*Gai.* 1. 42f.). In all, the evidence supports the contention that slaves in ancient Rome were freed in very great numbers.

When a master freed his slave, he frequently established his freedman in a business and by providing capital he became a shareholder in it. Usually the slave had learned his skill as an apprentice. Then by extra labor he saved enough to buy his freedom or it was granted gratuitously by his master.<sup>7</sup> Many examples of the prosperity of former slaves can be given.

Because it was a prosperous new community during the late Republic and early Empire, freedmen flocked to Ostia, the seaport of Rome. Even a large proportion of the magistrates of the city were freedmen.<sup>8</sup> Many became knights which meant that they possessed property valued at more than 50,000 sesterces.<sup>9</sup> They amassed their wealth as grain dealers (*CIL* 14. 309, 4140, 4142, 4620-22), carpenters (314, 4642), wine merchants (318), furniture makers (296, 297, 299, 330, 407, 418, 4565, 4668) and surveyors (4452). Two other prosperous freedmen at Ostia were a silversmith (*CIL* 14. 405) and a miller (393).

At Rome the situation was the same. There was a street of shops, the *Sacra Via*, which specialized in jewelry. All the owners of the shops who can be identified were freedmen. There were seven pearl merchants (*CIL* 6. 9545-49), two jewelers (9434f.), two goldsmiths (9207), one engraver (9221) and one maker of silverplate (37824). An inscription found at Rome illustrates the practice of the time. The patron of M. Canuleius Zosimus set up a memorial plaque to his freedman when he died at 28 years of age. He said of him, "he excelled in carving Clodian ware" (*CIL* 6. 9222). We also learn of two firms of bricklayers at Rome. These were headed by Cn. Domitius Trophimus and C. Calpetanus Favor, both of whom were freedmen with slaves working under them. One of the slaves, Hermes, was later freed by his master and became C. Calpetanus Hermes (*CIL* 15. 319, 904, 1112-14).

The Jews at Rome were an interesting group. Many thousands of them came to the city as slaves in the periods of the late Republic and early Empire. Leon,<sup>10</sup> in his study of catacomb inscriptions, discovered that there is not a single mention of a slave among them. This confirms the statement of Philo that many Jews came to Rome as slaves but were soon set free (*legatio* 23.155). Moreover, many Jews took lofty Roman names for themselves and, except for the fact that they were buried in the Jewish catacombs, would never have been recognized as Jews.

All of this evidence suggests that the Roman slave, far from living in perpetual servitude, could look forward to a day of opportunity. It became the common practice of the Romans to free their slaves and then establish them in a trade or profession. Many times the former slave became wealthier than his patron.

During the early Empire both slaves and freedmen enjoyed a new status. Great power was then concentrated in the person of the emperor. His great interest in the city of Rome and the administration of the provinces resulted in the appearance of a new class of slaves and freedmen who assisted him in the affairs of state. They were the Imperial Slaves and Freedmen of Caesar, sometimes called the Freedmen of Augustus. They included such imperial slaves as Helicon, a slave of Tiberius and Gaius. He was accused by the Jews of persecution while an administrator in Alexandria, (*Philo de legatione ad Gaium* 172). Cleander, a freedman of Commodus, enrolled freedmen in the Senate, sold appointments in the provinces and made 25 men consults in one year. (*Script. Hist. Aug., Commodus* 6. 2, 9-13). Freedmen of the emperors enjoyed exceptional favor. Licinius was appointed procurator of Gaul (*Suet. Aug.* 6. 7; *Cassius Dio* 54. 27. 7). An unnamed freedman became pre-

fect of Egypt (Ibid. 58. 19. 6). Under Claudius, Felix, a brother of the powerful freedman, Pallas, was made procurator of Judea, was given command over the troops there and married Drusilla, the daughter of King Herod Agrippa I (Suet. *Claud.* 28. 1).

While an individual was a slave, he was in most respects equal to his free born counterpart and in some respects he had an advantage. By the first century A.D. the slave had most of the legal rights which were granted to the free man. Sepulchral inscriptions of the first and second centuries indicate the prosperity and family solidarity of the imperial slave. Many had a considerable amount of money at their disposal and had rights to wife and family.<sup>11</sup> In A.D. 20 a decree of the Senate specified that slave criminals were to be tried in the same way as free criminals (Just. *Dig.* 48. 2. 12. 3). We learn of one Roman, Pliny the Younger, who treated the wills of his slaves as valid on the grounds that the master's house was the substitute for the state (*Ep.* 8. 16. 2; 8. 24. 5). In A.D. 61 the family of a slave owner attempted to use an old prerogative—the execution of all the slaves of the master who had been killed by one of them. When the family of Pandanius Secundus ordered that all of the slaves were to be put to death, so great a riot broke out when the report reached Rome that troops had to be called in to quell it and the slaves were not killed (tac. *Ann.* 14. 42. 45). There is also the interesting incident that took place during the reign of Hadrian. The emperor was attacked by an insane slave with a sword, but instead of being put to death, the slave was turned over to the care of a physician (*Script. Hist. Aug., Hadrian* 12. 5).

The living conditions of many slaves were better than those of free men who often slept in the streets of the city or lived in very cheap rooms. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the slave lived within the confines of his master's house. They usually lived on the top floor of their owner's city house or country villa (Cic. *Phil.* 2. 67; Colum. *Rust.* 1. 63). In Pliny's Laurentian Villa the quarters for the slaves and freedmen were in a separate section of the house, but were considered attractive enough to be used for the entertainment of overnight guests (Plin. *Ep.* 2. 17. 22). In another place Pliny adds that the *ergastulum*, a building more like a prison than a house, into which slaves were put at night in his father's time and earlier, ceased to be used in his area of the Po River Valley (Plin. *Nat. Hist.* 18. 7. 4; Plin. *Ep.* 3. 19. 7). At Pompeii in one villa, the Casa del Menandro, separate quarters for slaves were provided on one side of the building. These rooms were on the second floor, included a kitchen and latrine and were connected to the rest of the house by a long corridor.<sup>12</sup>

The slave was not inferior to a free man of similar skills in regard to the acquisition of food and clothing. That most slaves at Rome were as well dressed as free men is indicated to us in an unusual way. Seneca states that legislation was introduced into the Senate that slaves should be required to wear a type of clothing that would distinguish them from free men. The legislation failed because there was fear that the slaves would then know how large and powerful a group they were (Sen. *de Clementia* 1. 24. 1).

It is to be presumed that a slave ate as well as the poor free man though we have no direct evidence on the subject. At least, it is hard to believe that a master who provided well for his slaves in other ways would not feed him well. The following information will make it obvious that the free laborer was inadequately paid for his services. The average free laborer at Rome and in the provinces could expect to earn about one *denarius* a day. This was the pay of the workers in the vineyard of Jesus' parable (*Matt.* 20. 2). Julius Caesar's troops received 225 *denarii* a year plus fringe benefits of food and booty<sup>13</sup> and many men were quick to enroll in his legions. One of Caesar's scribes received one *denarius* per day (Dessau 6087. 62). Augustus raised the pay by giving a bonus of 3,000 *denarii* for 20 years of

service in addition to the salary of 225 *denarii* per year (Cassius Dio 55. 23). Finally in Diocletian's time, when food prices were approximately the same as those of the late Republic and early Empire where they can be compared, the wages of the unskilled were set by imperial decree at one-half to one *denarius* a day.<sup>14</sup> At this point Tenney Frank's comparison of the free man with the slave is worth noting.<sup>15</sup> The free man might receive one *denarius* a day in wages or approximately 313 *denarii* a year, if he worked six days a week. He would spend half of that, 2-2½ *sesterces* per day on food or 184 *denarii* a year. This would provide him with a diet of bread, vegetables and fruit. Clothing of a poor quality would cost about 5-10 *denarii* a year. If the individual did not sleep in the streets as many did, housing would cost 30 *sesterces* a month or 90 *denarii* a year. Therefore, of the 313 *denarii* earned, 279 would be spent on basic necessities. However, the slave in addition to receiving these basic necessities, was given 5 *denarii* a month as spending money (Sen. *Ep.* 80. 7). From these statistics one can only conclude that the average freeman lived no better than the slave. In fact, in times of economic hardship it was the slave and not the freeman who was guaranteed the necessities of life for himself and his family.

## CONCLUSION

The silence of Christ and the Apostles in regard to the institution of slavery suggests that some explanation for their silence should be sought in the nature of the slave system itself. The Biblical attitude toward the master-slave relationship is based on the principle that "the laborer is worthy of his hire." As has been shown, a slave received a recompense in food, clothing, shelter and spending money. His recompensation was as much or more than that of his free-born counterpart. When he was freed, his former owner loaned or gave him the money to establish himself in business. The evidence further suggests that hundreds of thousands of slaves were freed by the Romans. Therefore, it is concluded that the silence of the New Testament on the slavery question is to be explained by the essentially worthwhile character of slavery during this period. In our thinking we have too long superimposed the viciousness, perpetual bondage and race hatred of slavery in the American South on conditions in the Roman world.

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## FOOTNOTES

1. John Murray, *Principles of Conduct*, Grand Rapids 1957, 95-103.
2. Tenney Frank, "The Sacred Treasury and the Rate of Manumission," *AJH* 53 (1932) 360.
3. K. J. Beloch, *Die Bevoelkerung der Griechisch-Roemischen Welt*, Leipzig 1886, 404, 434.
4. Tenney Frank, "Race Mixture in the Roman Empire" *AHR* 21 (1916) 689-708.
5. Jotham Johnson, *Excavations at Minturnae* 2 (1) Philadelphia 1933, 106-113.
6. Arthur Rupprecht, *A Study of Slavery in the Late Roman Republic*, diss. U. of Penna., 1960, 7, 200f.
7. Tenney Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, Baltimore, 1933-40, 5. 212. Klingmueller in *RE* s. v. "Institutor", 1564.
8. M. Gordon, "The Freedman's Son in Municipal Life", *JRS* 21 (1931) 70. He puts the figure at 33 per cent.
9. Their names indicate their former status: Antistius Agathangelus (*CIL* 14. 294); Carminius Parthenopaeus (314); Combarisius Vitalis (335); Cornelius Epagathanus (341); Licinius Herodes (373); Lutatius Charitoneanus (378).
10. H. J. Leon, *The Jews of Ancient Rome*, Philadelphia 1960, 237f. He estimates the Jewish population in Rome at 50,000.
11. W. L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity*, Philadelphia 1955, 112f.
12. A. Maiuri, *Casa del Menandro*, Rome 1933, 1. 186-188.
13. Libernam in *RE* s. v. "Exercitus" 1672-74.
14. Tenney Frank, *Economic Survey of Ancient Rome*, Baltimore, 1933-40, 1. 404.
15. Tenney Frank, *Economic History of Rome*, Baltimore 1927, 2. 266-283.