

The Bible & Racism - Lesson 3
The EXPERIENCE Bible Study – STUDENT COPY
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We have been focusing our attention on the misinterpretation and misapplication of the Scriptures as a way to promote, sanction and endorse racism. The longest running social problem plaguing the United States, still to date, is the issue of racism between whites and blacks. This long-standing issue has its roots in how some Christians interpreted the Bible and how manipulation from Christian slave-owners influenced the spread of this social ill.

The Slave Bible Recap

The Slave Bible, as it would become known, is a missionary book first published in London in 1807. It was published by an organization dedicated to improving the lives of enslaved Africans who labored to in Britain's lucrative Caribbean colonies. This organization, known as the *Society for the Conversion of Negro Slaves* used the Slave Bible to teach enslaved Africans how to read while at the same time introducing them to the Christian faith. This "unique" Bible was not like other missionary Bibles in it contained only "select parts" of the biblical text. Publishers deliberately removed portions of the biblical text, such as the exodus story, that could inspire hope for liberation. They instead emphasized portions of Scripture that justified and fortified the system of slavery that was so vital to the British Empire.

Old Testament View on Slavery

When articulating God, Christian slave-owners portrayed God as both approving of and regulating slavery. This misinterpretation and misrepresentation of God ensured that the traffic and ownership of fellow human beings took place in a manner acceptable to God. One particular passage that both referenced and condoned slavery, in the eyes of Christian slave-owners is Exodus 21:20-21. This passage "allowed" for the beating of slaves and it highlights the fact that slaves were regarded as "property" and not human beings.

"When a slave owner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property." (Exodus 21:20-21 NRSV)

New Testament Views on Slavery

When communicating the person of Jesus and his role in the affairs of humanity, slave-owning Christians used the New Testament to further "validate" their argument. In the eyes of the Christian slave-owners, Jesus never disavowed, disapproved or condemned slavery and many of His statements were "taught" from the perspective that he stood in agreement with the inhumane treatment of human beings. A few of the passages found in the Gospels are:

"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master" (Matthew 10:24 NRSV)

"Who then is the faithful and wise slave, whom his master has put in charge of his household, to give the other slaves their allowance of food at the proper time? Blessed is that slave whom his master will find at work when he arrives." (Matthew 24:45-46 NRSV)

When considering Paul, who wrote nearly $\frac{3}{4}$ of the New Testament, the idea of slavery was further reinforced. Paul's letters seem to suggest that slavery, and its existence, was acceptable. As a common practice during the time of Paul's writings, slaves were "reminded" that they should not assume that freedom and equality preached by Jesus excluded them from forced servitude. A few examples are:

"Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties." (1 Timothy 6:1-5) Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. (Ephesians 6:5-6 NRSV)

Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior. (Titus 2:9-10 NRSV)

Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh. For it is a credit to you if, being aware of God, you endure pain while suffering unjustly. If you endure when you are beaten for doing wrong, what credit is that? But if you endure when you do right and suffer for it, you have God's approval. (1 Peter 2:18-29 NRSV)

Conclusion

By laying this early indoctrination into the sanctioning and endorsing of slavery based upon manipulated Scripture, the foundation was laid for the dehumanizing of Africans. It's no wonder to see how slave-owning Christians in the South might conclude that the author(s) did not disapprove of the institution of slavery and probably regarded it as an appropriate part of society. To further complicate matters, if Christian slave-owners believed that these biblical passages were divinely inspired by God, they would, through ignorance and deceit, conclude that God's attitude toward slavery was not particularly negative.