

SLAVERY IN THE FIRST CENTURY

Slavery, the legal possession of an individual by another, was the primary “energy source” for the Greco-Roman world. Slaves were employed in agricultural and manufacturing enterprises, construction, mining, governmental positions, education of children, cultural and entertainment activities, as well as many routine household duties.

In the Roman Empire slavery was unrelated to race. Most scholars believe it began as generals chose to enslave conquered enemies rather than execute them. Slavery was also a form of punishment for crimes or a means of dealing with debtors unable to repay loans.

Unwanted, exposed children were frequently rescued, raised, and sold as slaves. Children of slaves were themselves slaves. Some kidnap victims were sold into slavery. Some voluntarily became slaves for religious reasons or chose security in benevolent bondage over insecurity in freedom and poverty.

By the first century there were thousands of slaves in all parts of the empire. By AD 63, there were some 3 million slaves (400,000 in the city of Rome) of a total population of 7.5 million Romans.

A slave’s status and treatment differed greatly. Slaves were not completely without legal rights. They were free from taxation and military service, had the right to common-law marriage, and could join social groups or associations.

Yet their lot was determined by the will of their masters. Essentially they were nonpersons, property, “human tools” (Aristotle). Abuse, harshness, and brutality were frequent. Runaway slaves could be subject to torture and death.

Kind and considerate treatment was extended if not on humanitarian grounds, then because it was prudent to care for one’s “property.” Slaves were valuable property. In New Testament times the price of a slave was about nine times the wages paid a laborer for a year. A slave could be sold privately or at public auction at the will of the owner.

Slaves had the hope of freedom. Some bought their freedom. More often it was given, either formally in the will of the owner, by pronouncement of an official, or informally. In the latter case former slaves had no legal proof of their new status. Slaves might gain freedom by being sold to a god; the walls of some ancient temples contain hundreds of names of such individuals. As a “freed-man” the former slave had basic civil rights and the possibility of achieving citizenship but retained some obligations to the former owner.

The New Testament attests that slaves were members of the early church. Both Christian slaves and masters are told their relationship must be controlled by their common relationship in Christ. Philemon was enjoined to receive the runaway slave Onesimus “a faithful and dearly loved brother” (Col. 4:9), thus elevating the nonperson to the status of an equal. Slavery furnishes New Testament imagery for the status of the sinner under sin and of the Christian to God. In His incarnation Christ accepted the role of slave (or “servant,” Phil. 2:7). Terms such as “ransom” and “redeem” reminded New Testament readers of the parallels between the purchase of their spiritual freedom and that of the physical freedom of the slave.

Adapted from the Holman Concise Bible Commentary (Nashville, TN: Holman Reference, 1998), 615.