

Leviticus 25: 44-46
Matthew 5:17, Philemon

word count:2,406

People come to Biblical texts from many different perspectives and interpret them according to their community. If you believe that your faith is about mystery or prophecy, you search the Bible for clues. If you are a rationalist, you apply reason to an understanding of life in the ancient world. If you are a fundamentalist, your eyes don't go past the printed word for its obvious meaning. If you believe the Bible is about love, you search out the sections that justify your belief. And so we have different interpretations.

I'll give you a very simple text as an example. One word. Four letters. Surrounded by a red octagon. The word "stop." Suppose you're traveling to work and you see a stop sign. What you do depends on how you interpret the sign.

A Post-Modernist deconstructs the sign by knocking it down with his car, ending forever the tyranny of the north-south traffic over the east-west traffic.

Similarly, a Marxist sees the stop sign as an instrument of class conflict. She concludes that the bourgeoisie use the north-south road and obstruct the progress of the workers on the east-west road.

A Catholic rolls through the intersection because he believes he cannot understand the stop sign apart from its interpretive community and tradition. Observing that the interpretive community doesn't take it too seriously, he doesn't feel obligated to take it too seriously either.

An Average Mainline Protestant doesn't bother to read the sign, but she'll stop if the car in front of her does.

A Fundamentalist, taking the text very literally, stops at the sign and waits for it to tell him what to do.

A Prophecy-oriented Christian notices that the square root of the sum of the numeric representations of the letters S-T-O-P (sigma-tau-omicron-pi in Greek), multiplied by 40 (the number of testing), and divided by 4 (the four corners) equals 666, the dreaded "mark of the beast." All stop signs are therefore satanic.

A scholar from the Jesus Seminar concludes that the passage "STOP" was never uttered by Jesus, since he would not stifle peoples' progress. So, STOP is a textual insertion from stage III of the gospel tradition, when the church was first confronted by traffic in its parking lot.¹

And so you see, a consensus is never reached, and a universal understanding of a text seems to be impossible.

No greater moral debate over interpretation in this country occurred causing more ultimate harm on a continuing basis than that of slavery. Perhaps nowhere in history does it become clearer that a literalist approach to reading the Bible poses the greatest threat to a society's sense of humanity, than in the biblical justification of slavery. When a section of scripture is lifted up without its literary and historical significance attached and examined, almost anything can be justified.

Thomas Paine said it clearly:

"The Bible must be judged by its reasonableness and utility, by the probabilities of the case, by historical confirmation, by human experience and observation, by the facts of science, and by the intuition of the Spirit."

And yet the argument for slavery as drawn from the Bible provided the fuel for the continuation of this practice, which at many turns has been and continues to be the greatest stain on our country. At the 2nd Continental Congress during the framing of the Constitution, the words “All men are created equal” were intended to apply to all persons. The delegates from North Carolina with the aid of one delegate from Pennsylvania proceeded to threaten any chance of bringing the thirteen colonies into a nation until the issue of the abolition of slavery was removed from the full meaning of the equality that Thomas Jefferson envisioned, despite his own slave-holding. To bring some of us together, others were left behind for the greater good in a terrible sin of omission. John Adams rightfully predicted “within a hundred years, this issue will return to tear this country asunder.”

The debate over the right for slaves to be free burned in the pulpits of New England and some churches in the South, while from other pulpits, this passage from Leviticus was held up as literal scriptural evidence for slavery. Just as today, reproductive rights, and the rights of women, gays and lesbians are held up to the same moral scrutiny of conscience versus biblical literalism.

Many of these moral issues and the question of slavery in particular, are clarified in the historical placement of The Book of Leviticus. Leviticus was probably written shortly after the liberation of the Jewish people from the Babylonian captivity. For decades, these people were slaves themselves, forced to serve those whose ways were antithetical to theirs, and who served the god Ba'al. When they were freed, they straggled back to the ruined city of Jerusalem. Their city was a shambles, their people had forgotten their ways, and intermarriage with non-Jews threatened their sense of cohesion as a people.

And so, the priests wrote a holiness code to bring their people together for the purity of their race. The temple was rebuilt, and as a result of once having lost absolutely everything to outsiders, they became extremely xenophobic. Intermarriage would no longer occur, because any foreigner could now by law be made a slave, and therefore one's children by such a marriage would also be slaves. Cheap labor was needed to strengthen the city, and foreigners were brought into lifelong servitude. And from this passage in Leviticus, written around the 6th C. before Christ, to address a very specific situation, came the biblical justification for the greatest evil that ever befell this nation, the stain of which can never be completely wiped away.

Jesus said that he did not come to destroy the law but to fulfill it. This is a very difficult passage to interpret. It can mean that Jesus tells his followers on the Mount to obey every jot and every tittle of the law. Or as many interpret, it can mean that the law is fulfilled in the very presence of the Son of Man himself, but certainly in this new way of understanding our relationship to God and to each other, and it is now *this* law, the law of *love* that we must follow. Jesus tells us, “You’ve heard it said, an eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth, but I tell you, do not resist evil, but turn the other cheek.” Now we are asked to look at the law through a different lens, through a gospel of love. And so, especially as children of the Enlightenment we no longer innocently espouse the high view of the OT scripture that locates its authority in its jots and tittles. We do however affirm its authority as a whole, and, like Jesus and Paul, we interpret its requirements by subordinating many specific injunctions to broader principles such as the command to love.

Which brings me finally, to Paul, and the letter to Philemon. At the time Paul wrote this little missive in jail, 2/3 of the Roman population were slaves. Paul wasn't about to take on the evil of slavery. As a matter of fact, it has been said of Paul that he never met a status quo he didn't like. But Paul is changed by this new law of love. Here is where we see the real liberation.

Philemon stands apart from Paul's other letters, in its simple clarity of purpose and private tone. Philemon's runaway slave Onesimus, whose name literally means “useful,” has

come to Paul in prison, is converted, and Paul writes to Philemon to forgive him and accept him back as a brother. The simplicity on the surface of this letter, the few and interesting characters involved, the conditions we find them in, and the brevity of the letter makes Philemon an excellent example of the liberating Spirit at work.

What do you do when you are forced to confront the fact that we are all brothers and sisters in Christ? How does it affect our sense of status, what sort of humility is required of us, and how are we to be transformed in the Spirit of God's love when we look into the eyes of "the other" in our midst who also professes faith? Can anyone truly be "less than" we are? Philemon was forced to face this publicly when his runaway slave fled to Paul and was converted. Paul asked that the letter be read in the church at Colossae, which was a church in the wealthy Philemon and Apphia's home. Paul speaks of Onesimus as having been "begotten" by him in prison: his child. Paul speaks of himself as "father" of those who have become Christians because of his ministry.

When slaves were integrated into the church, they were not denied baptism, the Spirit, or participation in the Lord's Supper. How then, in this new status as "brothers in Christ" do slave owners treat their slaves? Paul asks Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a beloved brother in the Lord, because both are Christians. There is an outward respect for the legalisms and conventions of society, but inwardly this legalism must now be rejected as they fly against the new Christian ideals of love and full equality in Christ.

Listen to the words of Paul to Philemon:

"Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,

"To: Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:

"Grace to you and peace from God and the Lord Jesus Christ. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

"For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to *command* you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.

"If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

"One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so

do Mark, Aristech's, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. AMEN"

Theologian John Knox describes this letter to Philemon as "the seed that finally split the rock of slavery," giving substance to the then otherwise weak concept of democracy. He calls this letter "the real revolution," because it changed peoples' hearts about slavery; it is, as he says, "divinely subversive propaganda" for building a free democratic society based not on privilege, rank, race, or learning, but on the more universal redeeming grace of God. As with Onesimus, our true free natures are of God, and therefore it is not the demagogue, but a rule of the people which must win out; a true democracy, he says, is born of the gospel of Christ.

Philemon gave his home for the church at Colossae. What did it mean to him to hear this letter read aloud to the whole church which met in his home? What does it mean today? How are we asked to show Christ's love? In humble-ness and acceptance in our gradual understanding that we were all meant to be equal free creatures deserving of respect in the love of Christ, or do we search the scriptures for justification that we are somehow better because someone else is less than? From Galatians 4:9- "Now that you know God, how can you turn back to the regulations and rules of the old way and be enslaved by them." Gal. 5:1- "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject to the yoke of slavery."

That injunction from Paul doesn't mean for some of us to stand free. This country learned that lesson painfully. The law of Christ's love calls for equality across the board which transcends all prejudices, one which lifts us up and can free us all, only when we have lifted up and liberated whichever "other" is in our midst at any particular time.

This can be attested to by a Bishop from North Africa near the end of the first century. He lovingly copied and preserved some of the larger letters of Paul, along with one short little missive asking a slave-owner to think of his slave as a brother in Christ. Bishop Onesimus had reason to preserve that little letter, for it was proof that the power of love is our true liberation. Let it be ours as well.

Sermon Resource:

1. The "Stop Sign Hermeneutic" was read to us in seminary by Dr. James Sanders. Since then, I have not been able to find the original source, though there are different versions of it on-line.

Scripture for Sunday, September 16, 2007

Leviticus 25:44-46

44 As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. 45 You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. 46 You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness.

Matthew 5:17

17 "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill."