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7. Jews and Slavery in Antebellum America

What Does the Bible Say? Why Does It Matter?

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Abstract

In early January 1861, several religious leaders throughout the United States took to their pulpits to consider whether slavery, as practiced in the South, was or was not supported by the Bible. Among this largely Protestant group there were a few rabbis, some of whom found biblical support for slavery, with others condemning it based on biblical teachings. In my presentation, I will summarize and analyze selected antebellum sermons within several contexts: Jewish interpretive/exegetical traditions, other (Christian) sermons delivered on the same topic, American biblical interpretation through the mid-nineteenth century, and the lasting effects and relevance of these sermons up to and including today. I invite readers to reflect on other circumstances in which the (mis)interpretation/application of the Bible has played a role in the consideration and determination of attitudes toward race.

Keywords: slavery, Jewish views on; slavery, Christian views on; slavery, biblical views on; Noah's curse of Canaan; American Jews and Judaism, mid-nineteenth century; Biblical terminology, slave or servant

Introduction

In an important article, titled “Battle for the Bible,” historian Mark A. Noll constructed a framework that will be useful for us. He is concerned with the “Battle for the Bible” within the context of Protestant antebellum religious/political rhetoric. For Protestants, the Bible was their only authoritative source. For Abolitionists, what mattered most was “the broad principle of common equity and common sense,” “the whole scope of the Bible,” “the principles of the Bible are justice and righteousness.” New Testament statements predominate. For pro-slavery advocates, greatest emphasis was placed on what they saw as the pro-slavery implications of specific biblical texts.

In terms of the language(s) of scripture: the Hebrew and Greek words translated, respectively, “bondsmen” and “servants” were not slaves at all. “Manstealing” could possibly be equated with all slaveholding. But basically, for abolitionists, slavery was “inconsistent” with “the benevolence commanded in the Scriptures.” It is “the moral argument from Scripture” that was most compelling (Noll 2006; on the Jewish context, see Korn 1951, esp. 15–55; Sarna and Mendelsohn 2010).

In a sermon delivered on January 4, 1861, Henry Ward Beecher strenuously appealed to the general meaning of the Bible as opposed to what he called the pedantic literalism that undergirded the pro-slavery view. Again, with reference to the New Testament, Beecher’s view is far more appealing today than it was in his day, when the conviction that we would easily separate the Bible’s anti-slavery “spirit” from its pro-slavery “letter” was widely perceived as a theologically dangerous position. As one Congregationalist minister, who was himself opposed to slavery, said, “The evidence that there were both slaves and masters of slaves in the churches founded and directed by the apostles, cannot be got rid of without resorting to methods of interpretation which will get rid of everything.” Thus, people like Beecher—who “tortured the Scriptures into saying that which the anti-slavery theory requires them to say”—did great damage to the Scriptures themselves. It was in fact part of the American experience that American churches had prospered by following the Bible strictly—with no separation of “spirit” from “word.”

Those who wanted both to preserve traditional biblical authority and to oppose slavery could concede that although the Bible never did in fact condemn slavery per se, scripture did condemn the kind of slavery practiced in the American South. So it was denied that the descendants of Canaan were Africans (see below on Gen 9:25). More generally, biblical precedents for slavery—see, e. g., Abraham’s life and Mosaic law—were irrelevant for the American experience. See, for example, Abraham’s circumcision of his slaves (Gen 17:12) and ameliorating Mosaic legislation (Exod 21:27; Deut 23:15–16).

Thus, it was argued that “it does not follow necessarily that Abraham’s servants were slaves in the American acceptance of the word. And there was often the stated, or unstated, reference to the great change inaugurated by the coming of Jesus Christ.

Noll (2006, 24–25) highlights three reasons why nuanced biblical attack on American slavery was relatively ineffective: 1. Their nuanced biblical arguments could easily be lumped together with those of radical abolitionists, who claimed that the Bible condemned slavery per se as a sin. 2. The inability to countenance “the blood unity of the race” provided strong

support for biblical defenses of slavery. 3. Nuanced biblical attacks on slavery would fail precisely because they were nuanced. This position could not simply be read out of any one biblical passage. You'd have to patiently reflect on the entirety of the scriptures as well as possess considerable knowledge of the Ancient Near East and the classical world. This position also demanded a relatively sophisticated interpretive practice to replace the commonsensically literal approach to the sacred text that had stood America so well. And yes, it was a position taken and argued by the elites, requiring that the general populace defer to its intellectual betters.

Thus it was that those who defended the legitimacy of slavery in the Bible had the easier task, a simple three steps: first, read a passage like Leviticus 25:44–45 (“It is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You shall also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you . . . and they may be your property”) or 1 Corinthians 7:20–21 (“Let each of you remain in the condition in which you were called. Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it”). Second, decide for yourself what the passage means without waiting for some authority to tell you what it means. Third, if anyone tries to convince you that you are not interpreting the passages in the commonsensical, ordinary meaning of the words, look hard at what such a person believes with respect to other biblical doctrines. Almost certainly, that person harbors more than a bit of the unorthodox. In effect, you are being asked not just to give up the plain meaning of scripture, but in fact you must give up the entire trust in the Bible that made America into such a great Christian civilization.

It is immediately clear that not all these factors were applicable to the Jewish context; some were also not relevant within Roman Catholicism. For example, the insistence on the ultimate authority of the un-adorned biblical text, a distinctive feature of Protestantism since the Reformation, plays little if any role in Judaism, where millennia of rabbinic, non-rabbinic, and even anti-rabbinic biblical exegesis built huge interpretive structures. Nor has Jewish exegesis placed much emphasis on the literal reading of the text, for what *peshat* yields (a plain reading of the text) often differs considerably from what a Protestant would speak of as the literal reading.

Certainly of equal significance is the obvious observation that a Jewish reading of the Bible did not extend to the Christian New Testament—not even as a provider of guidance because of its supersessionist use. Even Protestant abolitionist sermons that did not explicitly extol the role of Jesus as the “liberator” of Old Testament servitude nonetheless typically began and ended with some message or image of Jesus as Christ. In the Prefatory Remarks to his (in)famous fast day sermon, “Bible View of Slavery,” Rabbi, the reverend Morris Jacob Raphall (1861) takes direct aim at this practice on the part of ministers: He cites Matthew 7:12 (“All things whatsoever you would that men should do to you, do you even so to them”). In addition to citing precedent for this in the Hebrew Bible (thus, this is no new idea), he demonstrates (at least to his own satisfaction) that up until recent times no Christian writer had associated this passage with the issue of slavery. So far as I know, none of Raphall’s Jewish detractors gave him any credit for these statements—or for similar sentiments in the sermon itself—which alas are not without resonance even today.

Pro-Slavery Rabbinic Sermons

But what of the rest? Did Raphall rely on the Jewish equivalence of a “commonsensical” interpretation of discrete biblical passages, while his opponents appealed more generally to the spirit of the Bible? And were the differing interpretations of these sets of passages part of a larger impending, if not already existent “Battle for the Bible” in Judaism? Let us see.

Raphall set as his goal what he explicitly characterizes as an issue for the theologian: “the question whether slave-holding is a sin before God” (to which he replied “no”). Based on Noah’s curse (Gen 9:25: “Cursed be Canaan//lowest of slaves shall he be to his brothers”), he first argues that “slaves” (not “servants,” as in the King James Version) existed in the pre-flood era. After all, so Raphall reasons, Noah could not have condemned Ham and his descendants to slavery if the word and the concept were not already well known. Thus, he concludes that master-slave is the oldest extra-familial (father-son, e.g.) relationship known. Raphall’s identification of the descendants of Ham as Africans and his derogatory consignment of that race to the trash bins of history is more than deplorable, but does not directly relate, as I see it, to his arguments about the antiquity of slavery.

In the midst of his dissertation on the lowly status of the Black slaves, Raphall takes time to attack the “Biblical critics called Rationalists, who deny the possibility of prophecy [and] have taken upon themselves to assert, that the prediction of which I have spoken was never uttered by Noah, but was made up many centuries after him....With superhuman knowledge like that of the Rationalists, who claim to sin in judgment of the Word of God, I do not think it worthwhile to argue. But I would ask you how it is that a prediction, manufactured for a purpose—a fraud in short . . . should nevertheless continue in force.” For the most part, critical scholarship associated with the Rationalists emerged in European, especially German, circles in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Its adoption, and in some ways adaptation, by reformist Judaism was surely not unknown to the traditionalist Raphall, but he does not go beyond these statements in disparaging at least some of his opponents—in language reminiscent of passages cited or evoked within a Protestant context by Noll (2006).

Having established, at least to his own satisfaction, that the master-slave relationship was almost as old as, say, the mother-daughter relationship, Raphall moves to directly confront the question, “Is slaveholding condemned as a sin in sacred Scripture?” He evinces an almost incredulous horror that the question would even arise, if the people of his day were truly conversant in the Bible, as had been the case in the past. He then turns again (actually, for the first time in the sermon itself) to a confrontation with Christian ministers who held that the teaching of Christ constituted an advance (or better, series of advances) in the “requirements for moral instruction” as laid out in the Old Testament, with slavery being one of the areas where advancement can be demarcated. No, says Raphall: “The New Testament nowhere interferes with or contradicts the slave code of Moses.”

In order to demonstrate the centrality of this issue to Mosaic teaching, Raphall makes reference to the Ten Commandments, where (according to Raphall), slaveholding is “recognized and sanctioned as an integral part of the social structure” of Ancient Israel. After all, we are commanded to give rest to the male and the female slave on the Sabbath, and we are forbidden to covet our neighbor’s male and female slaves (Exod 20:10, 17). It is central to

Raphall's thinking that these are references to "heathen slaves" and not designations of "Hebrew bondsmen."

To continue: Raphall asks his audience to remember that prominent biblical figures like Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job were all slaveholders. In response to a hypothetical questioner, who retorts, "Oh, in their time slaveholding was lawful, but now it has become a sin." Raphall responds, "When and by what authority do you draw the line? Tell us the precise time when slaveholding ceased to be permitted and became sinful." He urges his listeners (and readers) to remember how much mischief has been caused by "this inventing a new sin, not known to the Bible."

In his final remarks in this central section of the sermon, he declares that he is "sorry to find, that I am delivering a pro-slavery discourse. I am no friend to slavery in the abstract, and still less friendly to the practical working of slavery. But I stand here as a teacher in Israel . . . to propound to you the word of God, the Bible view of slavery."

The last major Bible-based section of Raphall's sermon is devoted to developing the distinction between "the Hebrew bondsman and the heathen slave." As we observed above, for Raphall this distinction was very important to a proper understanding and appreciation of the status and identity of the "slaves" in the Ten Commandments. Thus, there would have been no reason to single out the need for Hebrew bondsmen to rest on the Sabbath—as Hebrews they were already bound to this practice—nor would Hebrew bondsmen be mentioned in coveting one's neighbor's property, since they were not classified as property. Thus, Raphall postulates, there "is no point of resemblance" between the Hebrew bondsman and the Southern slave.

There were, however, the heathen slaves, "whose general condition was analogous to that of their Southern fellow sufferers." Raphall is able to show such connections, including the heathen slave's status as property. He is even able to reconcile his views with Deuteronomy 23:16 ("Thou shalt not surrender unto his master the slave who has escaped from his master unto thee"), which was often quoted in discussions about the Fugitive Slave Law—the Deuteronomy passage, it was argued, referred only to a slave who escaped from a foreign land (say, Edom or Syria) to another "nation," to the United States or to Canada, but does not refer to a slave going from one tribe of Israel to another, or from one state of the United States to another. Even though Raphall describes the lowly status of the heathen slave in some detail, he nonetheless avers that such individuals were far better off than the slaves of ancient Rome.

To resolve or at least diffuse the current crisis, Raphall calls upon Northerners to stop denouncing slavery as a biblical "sin" and for Southerners to adopt the biblical practices associated with "the Hebrew bondsman" and discard those related to the "heathen slave."

On the same day, January 4, 1861 (set by President Buchanan as a day of fasting and reflection), that Raphall spoke in New York City, many other religious leaders, there and throughout the country, also used the pulpit to make their points. Among the rabbis in general agreement with Raphall was Bernard Illowy, a traditional rabbi in Baltimore. For our purposes, Illowy's speech offers only a scant amount of material for analysis since this rabbi made infrequent direct appeal to the text of the Hebrew Bible. In general, his observations are in the form of questions directed to, or at least referring to, "magnanimous philanthropists," who,

he urges, “not [to] pretend to be more philanthropic than Moses was.” “Why,” he queries, “did [Moses not] prohibit the buying and selling of slaves from and to other nations?” “Where was ever a greater philanthropist than Abraham, and why did he not set free the slaves which the king of Egypt made him a present of?” “Why did Ezra not command the Babylonian exiles . . . to set their slaves from and send them away?” Why did even the Therapeutae and Essenes entrust “to their slaves the management of their property?” For Illoy, “these are irrefutable proofs that we have no right to exercise violence against the institutions of other states or countries, even if religious feelings and philanthropic sentiments bid us disapprove of them.”

Abolitionist Rabbinic Sermons

There were many religious leaders who spoke in favor of abolition and brought in the Bible as support of their position. Probably the most famous such spokesman within the Protestant world—on that day or most any day—was the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher. Not surprisingly, he began with a New Testament reference and, in speaking of the Bible, kept to general statements of principle (or spirit). Thus, “When one professing to be ordained of God stands forth and teaches a religion which sanctions and sanctifies the barbarities of Slavery, then blessed by the infidels! When the Bible can be made to teach that man can rightfully be bought and sold . . . then I declare I will do by the Bible what Christ did by the Temple. If I can, I will drive out the profaners of its sacredness. . . . That minister who preaches Slavery out of the Bible is the father of all infidels.” In *The New York Times*, which printed the entirety of Beecher’s sermon on the following day, January 5, the following observation is inserted at this point: Here, there “burst out a spontaneous and most wonderful roll of applause . . . Never did sentiment receive a more natural and hearty endorsement.”

Beecher’s sermon, being delivered on the same day as Raphall’s, cannot be viewed as a specific response to the rabbi’s comments on January 4, 1861. But responses were not long in coming from the Jewish community. Were they like Beecher’s, whose remarks do conform to Noll’s analysis of much of the abolitionist rhetoric based on the Bible? In a few respects, yes; in most respects, no. Let us look at two such responses. The first, by Michael Heilprin—not a rabbi, but a man learned in Judaism as well as many other topics—appeared in the *New York Daily Tribune* on January 15, 1861 (Heilprin). In declaring Rabbi Raphall’s words “sacrilegious,” he does at first appeal to a general sort of statement: “Have we not had enough of the ‘reproach of Egypt?’ Must the stigma of Egyptian principles be fastened on the people of Israel by Israelitish lips themselves?” (The “reproach of Egypt” was commonly made against Jewish supporters of slavery.) But Heilprin immediately turns to the biblical texts themselves, seeking to refute Raphall. As for Noah’s statements in Gen 9:25, he counters: “Noah was never regarded as a saint; nonetheless, our learned Rabbi prefers to canonize him.” By reference to several German translations, Heilprin supports “servant” (so the King James Version) over against Raphall’s “slave” as a translation of Hebrew *‘eved*. The curse of Noah, Heilprin argues, cannot refer to the Africans for two reasons: it was not a curse from God, but from Noah, and the African race, far from inhabiting the accursed historical status Raphall described, was in fact distinguished in many respects. As for the references to Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Job as slaveholders, these are completely irrelevant, Heilprin argues, for any consideration of the contemporary circumstances. Whether acquired by “persuasion” or by “mutual agreement,” the “servants” of the patriarchs were in fact “attendants” or “brethren,” “pupils” or “friends.”

The arguments based on the Ten Commandments, Heilprin declares, “are as ridiculous as they are sacrilegious.” How, he queries, could anyone possibly “fasten ‘the reproach of Egypt’ on the law of the great fugitive slave [that is, Moses] . . . who . . . over again repeated, ‘Forget not that you have been slaves in Egypt!’”?

Moreover, Raphall is guilty of having missed an important part of the rabbinic understanding of issues such as slavery: these rabbis know that “much was yielded by the law of Moses to the stubborn passions of man.” Thus, the Talmudic dictum: “the law does not ignore the evil instinct.” Or stated another way, everything that is “allowed” in the Hebrew Bible is not for that reason “sanctified” by God.

Probably the best known of Raphall’s interlocutors was Dr. David Einhorn (1861), at that time a Reform rabbi in Baltimore. His text, originally in German, was soon translated into English. Early on, he summarizes Raphall’s sermon in terms of a statement about the Southern States: “Let them have it [slavery], not because we approve of it, but because it is here through the providential sanction of the Divine Being.” For Einhorn, “The question simply is: Is Slavery a moral evil or not? And it took Dr. Raphall, a Jewish preacher, to concoct the deplorable farce in the name of divine authority, to proclaim the justification, the moral blamelessness of servitude . . . to designate slavery as a perfectly sinless institution, sanctioned by God!” Never let it be said, we observe once again, that the preachers of that generation pulled any punches.

In beginning his Bible-based refutation of Raphall’s biblical analysis, Einhorn starts at, or at least very near, the beginning—which he notes Raphall does not: “and God created man in His image . . .” (Gen 1:28)—with “no mention . . . of dominion over the negro.” And if indeed the institution of slavery did exist in antediluvian times: “Does it not appear as a very doubtful compliment to the God-sanctioned institution of slavery to attribute it—as related in Holy Scriptures—to a world filled with robbery, and which owing to its viciousness was swallowed up by the deluge?” In an argument consistent with Einhorn’s overall critical view of the Bible, he casts doubt on the reading of Noah’s words as a prophecy; rather, they form part of “the preface to an old family-tradition.” After arguing that there was no connection between “the negroes [and] Canaan [or] Ham,” Einhorn offers this rejoinder to Raphall: “No matter how this may be—the negroes must decline the honor of having been destined by Noah, who planted a vine-yard but no cotton, to be slaves!”

Along with Heilprin (and undoubtedly many others), Einhorn is critical of Raphall’s handling of the Ten Commandments or at least two of them: “Above all,” he writes, “let us notice the wretched foolery enacted with the expression ‘property’ in regard to the man-servant and maid-servant.”

But beyond specifics, Einhorn deals at great length with a matter that Heilprin raised only briefly: “The question exclusively to be decided is whether Scripture merely *tolerates* this institution as an evil not to be disregarded, and therefore infuses in its legislation a mild spirit gradually to lead to its dissolution, or whether it *favours, approves of and justifies and sanctions* it in its moral aspect? Hah!—we hear Mr. Raphall explain—there you have the rationalists! Not our own ideas but the word of God must rule, and I am too pious to attempt to interpret these words. Whatever the Bible concedes, is morally good, and I dare not consider it a sin with my sophistry!” This is exactly the sort of statement that Noll had attributed to traditional

Protestants in their combat with Rationalists, modernists, and proponents of the critical approach to the biblical text.

But Einhorn now moves in a somewhat different direction, challenging Raphall over his assumed acceptance of bigamy or blood-vengeance. Since they, along with other long-ago discarded practices are mentioned in the Bible, should they not also be approved these days? But Raphall never made such an argument nor would he. At which Einhorn declares: “Nevertheless does Rev. Raphall dare in the name of the Decalogue to declare slavery holy in spite of all the irrefutable evidence?” Also, for Einhorn, the answer is “yes, he does.”

What should Raphall have done? Wherein is the origin, if you will, of his mistaken analysis? “Had Dr. Raphall searched for the spirit of the law of God . . . he would have preferred to trace his way as far back as the history of creation, where the golden words shine: *God created man in His image. This blessing of God ranks higher than the curse of Noah.*” The Bible, which starts with such a grand principle, can never approve of slavery and have it find favor in the sight of God. Along with other examples, Einhorn calls to mind “all our prophets [who] have proclaimed . . . that all human beings on the wide globe are entitled to the service of God.” This accords well with the universal impulse of a reform understanding of the Bible.

Einhorn concludes: “I am no politician and do not meddle in politics. But to proclaim slavery in the name of Judaism to be a God-sanctioned institution—the Jewish-religious press must raise objection to this, if it does not want itself and Judaism branded *forever* . . . to ignore this mischief done by a *Jewish* preacher? Only such Jews, who prize the dollar more highly than their God and their religion, can demand or even approve of this!”

Conclusion

As we consider this material, we observe that in some ways Jews were like the Protestant majority in their debate over slavery, while in other ways they differed. As it happens, Jewish as well as Protestant proponents of abolition appealed to general principles that undergirded the Bible or, in other words, to the “spirit” of the Bible that must also be taken into account when analyzing or applying a specific passage.

At the same time, both Raphall and likeminded traditional (“orthodox”) Protestant ministers could have argued that their goal was not only to maintain the integrity, the wholeness, of their nation, but—along with that and surely of equal importance—the integrity of the Bible. For just as there were people bent upon dividing, and destroying, the country, so were there individuals (often the same individuals) who would divide up the Bible into sources, thereby destroying it and the ground from which Protestantism in particular, but surely also Judaism, came forth and upon which it must take its stand.

The Jewish abolitionist appeared less likely than his Protestant counterpart to yield anything to those who find divine sanction for slavery within the Bible. Thus, Heilprin and Einhorn (among others) took issue at every junction with Raphall’s interpretation of specific passages. Sometimes the appeal was to the general tenor of the Bible, but appeal was also made to careful analysis of the biblical text and to rabbinic interpretation.

Raphall spoke for Jewish proponents of slavery in his strongly worded prohibition against use of the New Testament to further his Old Testament-based argumentation. In the case of

Einhorn, critical approaches to the Bible, Rationalist approaches, were utilized as well. Interestingly enough, despite a certain affinity with progressive Christian methods of biblical exegesis, going beyond the scope of the Hebrew Bible to the “other” testament for support was also not a practice of Jewish abolitionists.

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