

Assignment 6.1

The practice of slavery in New Testament times

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Becoming a slave, sources of slaves

There were a number of ways to become a slave in the Roman Empire, one could be born in to it if your mother was a slave and some slave owners would deliberately encourage their female slaves to be pregnant to produce more, either for their own use or as an investment to sell later at slave markets. There were also abandoned babies like people now leave their old unwanted furniture on the side of the road to be stolen, such babies would be taken away to be sold as slaves. The slave status of the mother determined that the baby would be a slave, the status of the father was irrelevant.

You could sell yourself in to slavery if you had a debt, you could not pay or were destitute, this was usually for a fixed term similar to how indentured servants, usually from Ireland, would get passage to America or Australia, and they would serve the master for a fixed term contract and then be released.

Many slaves were captured in battle from edges of the Roman Empire and newly conquered territories, when the Romans conquered Britain, many were captured and taken to the Roman slave markets. It was customary in battle to have slave traders follow the soldiers to take them quickly to the slave markets leaving the soldiers to carry on with the war.

There was kidnapping by pirates, many from Sicily and Crete who fed the slave markets of Delos. Kidnapping was common also in mediaeval England, pirates would rowm the British shores and land raiding parties in coastal villages. One Turk was defeated in battle and executed giving the name of a pub in Falmouth, Devon, the Turk's Head. This caused King Charles I to establish the Royal Navy to protect the coastline.

Slaves were generally sold at slave markets where they would be displayed on platforms, often naked or not wearing much and any potential buyer could come along and inspect them, quite a degrading experience. There were the usual methods to maximise the price of slaves at the markets, the sales pitch and overstating of skills, low skilled slaves were often sold in bulk.

Status and work of slaves

About one third of the population of the Roman Empire were slaves and they were crucial to the economy, the Roman Empire depended on them, one Roman senator suggested a uniform for slaves but the idea did not take off as if too many slaves realised who else was a slave it could incite a revolt. Slavery was widely accepted in society and even the very poor might own a slave or two.

Slaves were chattels, the property of the master and had no legal protection, a slave marriage was not legally recognised and their children had no status as the children of any parents, a master was free to separate them from their biological parents and sell them off, or sell the parents off. There was no protection from abusive masters, they could be sexually abused and even murdered and if a slave ran away, he was technically stealing himself from his master. Some slaves were considered part of the household and some masters treated their slaves well although the master was usually paternalistic. Some even declined their freedom if offered it as they knew they were well looked after.

It was a taboo for Greeks to own Greek slaves so they would be either ransomed or sold at non-Greek markets.

There were the Helots, a sub group of Laconians who lived slightly differently under the forces of Sparta in that they worked their land but had to give a large portion of the produce to their masters, a similar style to serfdom in Russia before the 1917 revolution.

Slaves lived in slave quarters on their master's property away from the actual family and usually in shared rooms.

The work of slaves was varied, in a large house some would be domestic servants, domestic servitude was almost exclusively done by slaves and others would work on the land and in some occupations, slaves worked alongside free people. Some jobs were open to slaves and free people including civil officials and some management type positions, some were craftsmen or artisans with their own studio or workshop, but their owner would take most or all of their earnings, some would work in other jobs alongside their master but the master would get most of their pay.

There was a hierarchy among the slaves, especially in large work areas where there would be a supervisor or slave driver who was also a slave.

Temples were large slave employers, some to do the general jobs around the temple and some for prostitution.

The worst jobs in society were exclusively for slaves and some like mining were usually a punishment. Working in the mines was considered a slow death sentence, working hard underground breathing dusty toxic air with the risk of roof collapse, often such slaves were chained together and was usually a punishment occupation. The ships were nearly all powered by rowing and the oarsmen, or galley slaves were chained in their seats never to leave, food was brought to them and they had to relieve themselves where they were, they would get skin sores and would never leave their seat until they died, chained for life.

There were gladiators, the successful had the status of rock or sports stars today but were slaves as fights were to the death but some even owned slaves even though they were slaves themselves. Roman entertainment often involved public slaying.

Revolts and discipline

There was always the risk of a slave revolt and Spartacus, an ex-gladiator led one. Recalcitrant male slaves could be castrated and slaves who escaped and were

recaptured would be branded with the letters FUG on their foreheads, for fugitive. They could also be left chained by the front door of their house for all to see and as a deterrent to any other slave who thought of misbehaving. Onesimus, as useless slave who stole from his master Philemon could have faced crucifixion on his return to Colossae. More formal punishments could be being sent to work in the mines or being fed to wild animals in the gladiator ring to be devoured alive publicly, this was another entertainment for the masses.

Ways out of slavery

There was not much chance of successful escape as there was nowhere to run to, Onesimus would have tried to hide among the masses in Rome but found out Paul probably because life was tough. Freedom could be earned by long faithful service and slaves could also save up from what meagre earnings they could keep and buy their freedom. If a master died the slaves would usually be inherited by his heirs but they could be given freedom on his death. There was a limit to how many slaves could be freed as too many ex-slaves could disrupt social order and there was always a stigma to being an ex-slave, it was not possible to climb up much in society although some did, Onesimus became a bishop.

Sources:

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