

Bible Against Slaveholders

Friend of Freedom and the Perpetuity of the Union

This is an annotated edition of the original text of *Bible Against Slaveholders*, a tract published in 1840 and reprinted in 1849 in Buffalo, New York. No author is listed or has been identified for this tract. Original spelling, punctuation and page citations have been retained; minor typographic errors have been corrected.

This electronic edition has been prepared for the Antislavery Literature Project, Arizona State University, a public education project working in cooperation with the EServer, Iowa State University. Digitization has been supported by a grant from the Institute for Humanities Research, Arizona State University.

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Introduction

This anonymous tract was published twice, in 1840 and again in 1849, in Buffalo, New York. ‘Friend of Freedom and the Perpetuity of the Union,’ the unknown author of *Bible Against Slaveholders*, paid for the printing of the tract at the *Buffalo Republican*, a newspaper that existed under various names during the 1840s and beyond. Buffalo was a highly active antislavery city during this period, with a well-known vigilance committee that worked to transport fugitives across the border into Canada.

This is a tract that in many ways represents the local character of the antebellum antislavery movement. While the author exhibits significant familiarity with classical terms and dialogical rhetoric, the essay does not reference any text beyond the Bible. It rehearses biblical argument with easy familiarity, indicating that the author was concerned primarily with religious arguments against slavery. Like many religious antislavery texts during the antebellum period, the present tract is concerned to contradict citation of the Old Testament as providing license for the institution of slavery. The author subordinates secular political arguments over slavery to religious argument and concludes that, even under threat of disunion, the iniquitous sin of slavery must be prevented from expansion through passive resistance.

Bible Against Slaveholders is rude-hewn religious antislavery argument written by an author who does not employ the theological vocabulary characteristic of Garrisonian abolitionism. Its expressions are more attributable to the reform evangelical culture that abounded in western New York State during most of the first half of the nineteenth century.

— Joe Lockard

SLAVES BOUGHT AND SOLD!

READ AND EXAMINE

My doctrine is "— That God hath made of one blood, all Nations of men, for to dwell on all the face of the earth." — That the Negro is a man, and that which is the inalienable right of one man is also the right of all men, — That Freedom and Slavery are antagonistical principles; both cannot be right — that Freedom is right and Slavery wrong, therefore Slavery ought not to exist.

As we were passing through your city we saw the above sign, and a man came out and accosted us, "Have you slaves to sell? or do you wish to buy?"

Ardent. Neither; we abhor all such business.

Man. There is no need to speak reproachfully of it. It is a legal business, carried on under the sanction of the public authorities. I claim to have just as much right to buy men, women and children, as my neighbor has to buy horses and cattle.

Thoughtful. The laws of the land may protect you in so doing; but they do not make it right, unless it is authorized by the laws of God, which we suppose you will scarcely claim.

Man. I believe that slaveholding is authorized by the Bible; and that, consequently, the buying and selling of slaves is authorized also. Was not Abraham a slaveholder?

Ard. I think not. But, perhaps we shall need to define our terms. What is a slave?

Man. He is a "chattel personal." He is not regarded as a person, but a thing. He has no rights and can have no property. Whatever he has in his possession belongs to his master.

Th. I believe that is a correct definition of modern slavery, and nearly so of the ancient Roman slavery. The fundamental idea is that *slaves are not persons but things*, (thereby all the rights of property attach, even to the selling of men, women, children, and even babies by the pound, as is said to have been done.) In this case I deny that slavery was authorized in the Old Testament or the New.

Man. You take bold ground. Had not Abraham bondman and bondwomen, born in his house, and bought with his money?

Th. Yes; but, what was a *bondman* in Abraham's house? Was he considered as a *person*, having rights, like the white servants among us, capable of making contracts, capable of acquiring and holding property, and the like? If so, he was not a slave. For a slave is a *thing*, and not a *person*. A slave has no rights.

Man. But I suppose the word *bondman* meant slave.

Th. The Hebrew word is *ebed*, which is commonly rendered *servant*. David was the *ebed* of Saul, not his slave. Ziba was the *ebed* of Mephibosheth, but a man of wealth and importance. Jeroboam was the *ebed* of Solomon. It is used just as we use the word *servant*, to denote subordination and dependence, but not the degradation of *persons* to *things*, in which the essence of slavery consists.

Man. But Abraham's servants were *bought* with his money.

Th. The word signifies, *acquired, got, procured*. Abraham procured them with his money. And this is the way we procure white servants. The usual way to obtain a servant in patriarchal times is brought into view in that very ancient composition, the Book of Job, where, in respect to the leviathan, it is asked, "Will he make a covenant with thee? wilt thou take him for a servant forever?" The servant was bought, indeed, but he was bought of himself, and became a servant by contract. So it seems to be contemplated it might be among the Israelites. "If a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother that dwelleth by him wax poor, and *sell himself* unto the stranger." *Slaves* are never bought of themselves, but of some other. Abraham might also have procured servants of his heathen neighbors, by way of redeeming captives taken in war, on the easy condition of their becoming permanent members of his family, and there enjoying the substantial benefits of freedom, which they could not hope to do among their enemies. Wives also were *bought*. Jacob gave fourteen years' personal service for his. David bought his wife of the king her father, by his military services. To betroth a wife among the Israelites was to *buy* her, by paying a sum of money, or goods to her father. Joseph bought the people with food to be servants unto Pharaoh. But they were not made slaves. They were only to pay Pharaoh a large rent for their land.

Ard. Would any slaveholder now treat his slaves as Abraham did his servants? He put arms into their hands, and intrusted them with the guardianship of his person. They were to be his heirs, in case of the failure of children, in preference to other relations. The oldest servant of Abraham's house was a person of great consideration, to whom Isaac was in some respects subordinate, even at the age of forty years. And Abraham thought it necessary to bind him by an oath that *he* would not marry Isaac to any of the daughters of the land. There is no evidence that Abraham sold any of them, or gave them away, or treated them in any respect like slaves.

Th. If Abraham's service was slavery, his servants had an easy method of emancipating themselves. It was but to refuse a compliance with some of the religious obligations which his family were required to observe, and they would at once be excluded from his family, and turned out of his house. No, they must have been substantially like the servants of whom the apostle speaks. "Now I say that the heir, as long as he is a child, differeth nothing from a servant, though he be lord of all." Of course, the servant differs nothing from a child in his minority. But as a child in his minority is very different from a slave, so also the servitude which is authorized by the Scriptures is very different from slavery.

Man. But Moses found slavery in existence, and made laws to regulate it.

Th. Moses found a system of servitude in existence, not slavery, and made laws to regulate it which are not found in modern slave countries. Servants could make intermarriages with other members of the family, and become heirs with the children. "A wise servant shall have rule over a son that causeth shame, and shall have part of the inheritance among the brethren." Servants were not allowed to be separated from their wives and children; they were invited guests at all the national and family festivals of the household in which they resided; they were under the same religious instruction, and under the same civil laws with their masters. There was not one law for the master, and another for the servant, as in all slave countries. Servants might be parties to a suit at law for the recovery of their rights; and they could give testimony in courts of justice where masters were concerned.

Man. But Moses says: "Both thy bondmen and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids—they shall be your bondmen forever." Is not that authority to buy slaves?

Th. The word rendered, *bondmen* signifies *servants*; the word rendered *buy* signifies *procure*. — And we are not obliged by the language, when divested of the wrong ideas derived from our familiarity with slavery, to understand it as meaning any more than this: "Both thy male and female" servants, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; (and not of your Hebrew brethren;) of them shall ye procure men servants and maid servants—of such shall be your permanent servants in all ages."

Ard. Did Moses authorize the buying and selling of slaves?

Th. The institutions of Moses provide for persons selling themselves to be servants, that is, hiring themselves out to be permanent servants, for a sum paid in advance; and also for fathers selling their daughters to be wives, and thus providing them with a dowry. But there seems to be no trace of any toleration of slave trading. The possibility that such a thing might be attempted appears to be pro-

vided for. "He that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death."

Man. Were not the Israelites slaves in Egypt?"

Th. They were under great oppression there, for which their oppressors were severely punished; but not slaves according to your definition. They resided by themselves in the land of Goshen, in permanent dwellings, in their own distinct and separate families. They held their possessions independently, and owned a large amount of property, which does not appear to have been claimed by their masters. They kept arms, and were fully equipped when they left Egypt. They had their own government, and laws, and magistrates. They appear to have been called out, a given portion of the men at a time, to labor in the public works. And the great oppression consisted in their being required to perform too much labor for the king. They appear to have had time to learn and practise several of the fine arts. There is no complaint that their women were subject to any personal outrages, nor to any species of cruel treatment, save that which Pharaoh judged to be necessary for his own safety, the destruction of their male children. They were abundantly supplied with the necessaries and comforts of life, as they afterwards alleged in their complaints when in the wilderness. Instead of being allowed "a quart of corn a day," as some slave-holding states now provide, they "sat by the flesh pots, and did eat bread to the full." They also did "eat fish freely, and cucumbers, and melons, and leeks, and onions, and garlic." No restrictions seem to have been placed on their intellectual and moral improvement, or the free exercise of their religion, till they asked leave to go away in a body three days' journey into the wilderness, with all they possessed. And then the king seems to have refused chiefly from the fear that they would not return. If such was the bondage of Egypt, so decidedly condemned and so severely punished; if it was so mild, compared with modern slavery; is it credible that God would authorize any thing like modern slavery, among a people whom he so abundantly enjoins not to oppress the stranger, nor to forget that they had been strangers in the land of Egypt? I cannot think it credible.

Ard. And then, there was a year of jubilee, of which it is said: "And ye shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout all the land, unto *all* the inhabitants thereof."

Th. And there was another direction, which the modern advocates of slavery do not like to have us obey. "Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee."

Man. You had better take care what you do, when you are within the reach of slaveholders.

Th. We mean to obey God, in relation to this matter, as well as all others; and bear testimony against oppression and cruelty. And we do not think you have any right to complain of us for doing so.

Man. "Slavery was prevalent at the coming of Christ; but he issued no command with regard to it; the apostles nowhere assailed it; the Gospel does not proclaim liberty to the slave."

Th. I cannot but wonder that you should use such language, if you have read the New Testament. It brings to mind the annunciation of the object of his coming, which is put into the mouth of our Lord, by the prophet: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto to the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, *to proclaim liberty to the captives*, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn."

Man. But I cannot think it a sin to hold slaves, because the New Testament gives precepts to regulate the conduct both of masters and slaves. "Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh." "Exhort servants to be obedient unto their own masters, and to please them well in all things."

Th. With reference to these precepts, I have two remarks to make. One is that nothing is here said about *slaves*. The Greek word is *doaloi*, servants. The relation of *master* and *servant* may be, very proper, and the relation of *master* and *slave* not be sanctioned at all. The proper Greek for *slave* is *andrapodon*. *Doulos*, servant, is used in the New Testament, very much as the Hebrew *ebed*, (servant,) is in the Old. It is evident, to any who examine the New Testament, that those who are called *douloi* were regarded as *persons*, and not as *things*; they possessed property of their own, were capable of making contracts, of owing debts to others, and having debts due to them; their wives and children were theirs, and not their masters. None of these things apply to modern slaves. Paul called himself a *doulos*, *servant*, of Jesus Christ, which was a title of honor. But his declaring it to be the same condition in which the heir is, during his minority, shows that it meant a man in a subordinate station, and not a mere chattle. But there is another remark to be made respecting these commands: They mention the duty of the servant, without deciding whether it is right for him to be held in that condition. It is the duty of those who are held as slaves; to be obedient to the lawful commands of those to whom, in the providence of God, they are subordinate. But that does not prove it right for them to be held in that condition. Christianity found Nero exercising the most cruel tyranny at Rome; and it says, to the Christians of that city: "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God; the powers that be are ordained of God." Did this prove that the government of Nero was right and no sin?

Man. But Christianity gives precepts to masters also; and thus recognizes that relation.

Th. It gives precepts for, the treatment of *servants*. But I do not

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admit that it therefore recognizes slave-holding as no sin. It says, indeed, "Masters, give unto your servants that which is just and equal; knowing that ye also have a master in heaven." *Just* and *equal*; what is that, but a fair equivalent for their service? Can it be just and equal to compel them to labor without wages, and refuse to pay them for their work?

Man. I consider the case of Onesimus as good proof. When Paul sent him, back to Philemon, he practically recognized the right of taking up runaway slaves, and sending them back to their masters.

Th. This case seems to be strangely misunderstood. Philemon had embraced the Gospel. His servant Onesimus had run away, apparently in his debt. By the preaching of Paul, Onesimus was converted to Christianity. Paul speaks as if he might have retained him for the service of the Gospel; but he chose to have Philemon do his duty in discharging him, of his own accord, and not by compulsion. He sends him therefore, and exhorts Philemon to receive him, "*not now as a servant*, but above a servant, a brother beloved, especially to me; but how much more unto thee." Was that to receive him as a slave? He said, "If thou count me, therefore, a partner, receive him as myself," that is receive him as a partner, a companion, not as a slave. And he expresses the greatest confidence that he would do his duty in the case: "Having confidence in thy obedience, I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say." If all men, now held as slaves, were treated as Paul asks Onesimus might be, the reproach of slavery would no longer rest upon our country.

Ard. How do you pretend to reconcile slave-holding with our Savior's golden rule, "Whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so them; for this is the law and the prophets!"

Man. That means, I suppose, that we should do what is best for others, considering their situation, character, and circumstances. And it is clearly best for most slaves to be kept in that condition; for they cannot take care of themselves.

Ard. They prove that they can, by taking care of themselves and their masters, too, in many cases. But that would acknowledge that all who would be better off in freedom, should be set free.

Man. I doubt whether any would be better off.

Ard. Suppose you test the sincerity of your principles by changing places with them. Would you be willing to be shut up for a season, and then be sold to the highest bidder? Would you be willing to be chained in a company, and be driven with a whip to the sugar plantations, and there be worked, as those you sell are worked, till they are exhausted, and die? Just put the case to yourself; and put yourself in their place, and see what you ought to do.

Man. "Slavery is the corner-stone of our republican edifice."

Ard. Out upon such republicanism. The republican edifice erected by our revolutionary fathers, has the contrary as its foundation. They say: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are

created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." If these truths are self-evident, in the light of nature, they are equally clear according to the word of God. That affirms that God "hath made of one blood all nations of men, for to dwell on the face of the earth." Here, then, we, take our stand, with the Bible in one hand, and the declaration of our fathers in the other; and we fearlessly affirm, that every pretended grant of the right of property in human beings, is self-evidently null and void; and every assertion of such a right is usurpation and robbery.

Man. Such declarations are mere rhetorical flourishes. Nobody believed them at the time.

Th. I am not willing to think that it was so. I believe them to be true, according to the natural import of their language, and I honor the patriots who put forth such a declaration before the world; and I think it eminently disgraceful for their posterity to maintain the contrary now.

Man. We must have slaves in our warm regions to perform the labor necessary to support human life. If they were free, they could not be hired to do it, and the land would become desolate.

Th. Better so, than live in the continual violation of the laws of God and man. "Woe unto him that buildeth his house by unrighteousness, and his chambers by wrong; that useth his neighbor's service without wages, and giveth him not for his work" "Rob not the poor because he is poor; neither oppress the afflicted in the gate; for the Lord will plead their cause, and spoil the soul of those that spoiled them." I should suppose you would sometimes think as Mr. Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, said: "I tremble for my country, when I reflect that God is just, and that his justice cannot sleep forever. The Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with us."

Man. I am astonished at such sentiments. *Slaveholders* will not tolerate them; secession, rebellion, and division of the Union will be the result, if persevered in.

Ard. Away with your threats of rebellion, secession, and disunion — remember the Whisky Rebellion and Shay's War — in later times, Nullification. Will not freemen, now as then, stand by the UNION. Try it —

Th. Hold, hold, brother! "In meekness admonish those that oppose themselves." Although I admit that slaveholding, in these United States *is sin*; the vilest transgression of the laws of God, and the principles of the constitution of these United States, that ever had a legal existance, yet we must remember the slaveholding mind is darkened by reason of its existance, therefore we must bear with their taunts and threats. But as you love your country, your fellow men and our free institutions, do nothing to extend or perpetuate the system of slaveholding; or in any way be partaker of its iniquity. — The love you bear your fellow men at the south, and their children yet unborn, — DEMAND IT AT YOUR HANDS!