CHAPTER 1

Slavery: A Worldwide Phenomenon

THE ANCIENT WORLD

The idea of slavery was so deeply ingrained that no one questioned its propriety. All nations either endured or enjoyed it.¹

A. O. Sherrard

Freedom from Fear

For most Americans the term “slavery” evokes mental images of the antebellum South and hundreds of African-Americans toiling away in fields of cotton. Yet, slavery existed long before the American South was settled by Europeans. It should also be understood that slavery knows no racial or ethnic boundaries. Long before the advent of modern Western Civilization, various forms of slavery existed. There are few ancient cultures where slavery did not exist in some form. Historically, whenever one society conquered another society, any captives that were not slain were then considered trophies of war and disposed of as slaves. Ancient civilizations, like Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, and Rome, all practiced some form of slavery. Historians have noted that the foundational cultures of our present Western European civilization were the slaveholding cultures of Greece and Rome.² The ownership of slaves during this time was not restricted to the wealthy alone, for many common and even poor people owned slaves.³ The ancient system of slavery, like its more modern American form, was based upon the economic necessity of providing a dependable and uniform system of labor. Ancient Athens, the cradle of our modern “democracy,” had more than twenty thousand slaves by 413 B.C. Some historians have estimated the ratio of slave to free in Athens to be three to one at various times in its history. This ratio is even
higher for Sparta. As cruel as enslavement might have been, its benefits to the people of Athens and future generations of mankind cannot be overestimated. Then, in 272 B.C., after centuries of warfare, Rome conquered Greece and took tens of thousands of better educated, more sophisticated, and highly cultured Greek citizens as slaves. Through them, Rome experienced great advancements in art, science, literature, architecture, medicine, drama, and government. Even laudatory intellectuals such as Plato and Aristotle spoke favorably of the institution of slavery:

[A]ll people who differ from one another by as much as the soul differs from the body or man from a wild beast . . . these people are slaves by nature. . . . For a man who is able to belong to another person is by nature a slave.5

Plato often spoke of the necessity in an advanced society of having a "subject people" for the flowering of civilization. As noted by O. A. Sherrard in his work on slaves, the idea of slavery was indeed deeply ingrained into the fabric of the ancient world.

Two important changes have been noted in the nature of slavery in ancient times and in modern times. In the earliest days of slavery, one nation would go to war with another and capture part or all of its population. These conquered peoples would then be made slaves of the victorious nation. Therefore, slaves were more likely to be owned by the state rather than by an individual. Slave labor was used for public works projects such as the building of temples, roads, and aqueducts and for other services deemed good for the victorious nation. As time progressed, this system of public ownership of slaves changed to the more common modern system of private ownership.6 Another important change in the nature of slavery in ancient times was religious in nature. In the early days of slavery, slaves had their own religion but were seldom encouraged to become participants in the religion of their masters. Eventually, slaves were given back their “souls,” that is, they were encouraged to adopt the religion of their masters. This was true both in Ancient Israel and later in Christian nations. Thus, slaves became the subjects of an even higher power than their masters; therefore, they were under the protection of the same higher power as those who owned them. Many scholars believe this change marked the beginning of the abolition of both the slave trade and slavery itself.7
By the middle of the second century B.C., it is believed that the number of slaves in Italy was twelve million, while the number of free citizens numbered only five million. At the time of Christ, the Roman Empire dominated the known world. While Jesus lived and taught, 30 to 40 percent of the population of Italy were slaves. The percent of slaves in Italy at the time of Christ was equal to the number of slaves in the Old South during the time of the War for Southern Independence. This slavery existed not only in Rome and Italy but was a ubiquitous force throughout the empire; it even existed in Palestine, the land of Christ.

The quality of a slave’s life in the Roman Empire was more or less dependent upon the good will of his master. Although some laws were passed to protect the life of a Roman slave, he could be sold, mutilated, tortured, or killed by his master. With the slave population being so large, a constant fear existed among the slaveholding class concerning slave uprisings. To prevent such occurrences, Roman law dealt harshly with any slave participating in a revolt or attack upon his master. The most notable slave uprising in Roman history was led by a Thracian slave named Spartacus. After a surprisingly difficult struggle, the Roman army was able to put down the revolt. As a consequence of the uprising, the Roman officials put to death, by crucifixion, more than six thousand slaves who had been captured after Spartacus’s defeat. But more than just slaves who revolted against their masters were put to death. Often, innocent slaves were put to death as a warning to other slaves when a slave master had been attacked or killed by his slaves. After the murder of a particular slave master by one of his slaves, the killing of four hundred innocent slaves was ordered by Roman officials. Commenting on this incident, Roman historian Tactitus noted, “. . . you will never coerce such a mixture [slaves] of humanity, except by terror.”

Eventually slavery was eliminated in Italy by the slow process of the manumission of slaves as well as by slaves buying their own freedom. Although this event took place at around the time of the rise of the Christian Church, Christianity itself took little direct action to abolish slavery. Rather, it was a Christian emperor, Justinian, who gave slavery its legal foundation in Rome. This system of laws regarding slavery became the basis upon which latter-day European nations established their legal system of slavery. It should be noted that the laws of slavery that were brought to the New World had Roman antecedents.
Although reprehensible to the mind of modern man, slavery carried little or no moral revulsion in the ancient world. For thousands of years, slavery was an integral part of life on earth. By contrast, slavery under Europeans lasted only 383 years in the Western Hemisphere, and only 222 years in the United States. This of course does not take into consideration slavery as practiced by the various Native Americans of North and South America.

In ancient as well as more modern times, slavery was a universal risk of all mankind and not merely a risk confined to one race. Vikings made slaves of various Europeans, Romans made slaves of Germans and Greeks, the English made slaves of the Scottish and the Irish, Moslems made slaves of Christians, Christians made slaves of Moslems, and the list could go on *ad infinitum*.

Most Americans will admit that slavery was a color-blind institution in the far gone days of ancient civilization. But when it comes to more modern times, Americans are reluctant to accept the notion of slavery in any other terms than “white masters and black slaves.” Nevertheless, historical records abound with proofs of white slavery both in Europe and in America. Even in the age of political correctness, a few daring souls have come forward and challenged the notion that only Africans were held as slaves in the Americas. Writing in the *New York Times Review of Books*, David B. Davis, a prolific investigator of the slave trade, noted that slave markets from the Black Sea to Egypt maintained a brisk commerce in white slaves throughout the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Davis also noted that in the seventeenth century white slavery was not uncommon from Virginia to Barbados.12

So great was the enslavement of British subjects that in 1701 it was estimated that of 25,000 slaves in Barbados, 21,700 were white. Many of these “slaves” were indentured servants who had been illegally or at least “extra-legally” taken from their English homeland. Speaking of the indentured servant, Dr. Hilary Beckles, a contemporary English authority, states that “the ownership of which could easily be transferred, like that of any other commodity . . . as with slaves, ownership changed without their participation in the dialogue concerning transfer.”13 Describing the indentured servant as a “White proto-slave,” Beckles gives modern readers a more accurate picture of indentured servitude in early America. Early in the history of the English colonies in America, the institution of white slavery provided the bulk of the labor supply. For the most part, prior
to 1640 most of the sugar grown in English colonies was produced by forced white labor. With life expectancy reduced for the indentured servant, a five- to seven-year indentureship was often tantamount to slavery for life.

White slavery was not anything new for the English. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England, as more and more people were removed from their land, a class of poor whites grew at an alarming rate. So great did their numbers become that laws were passed to “control” these poor whites. From these laws, many poor white folks were sold into actual slavery or proto-slavery both in England and the Americas. The most degraded and offensive (to modern sentimentalities) of this class were the children of poor white people. Many of these urchins were “sold” to workhouses, where they worked from twelve to sixteen hours each day. In one 1765 report, it was established that the workhouses in one district had a 90 percent mortality rate for children. It should be noted that these children ranged in age from five to sixteen years. How much abuse and criticism would have been placed upon a Southern plantation that had such a record? The lack of a moral outcry by the abolitionist crowd caused many English labor leaders to question the sincerity of abolitionists’ criticisms of the evil institution of slavery. Bemoaning the lack of sympathy for the white slave children of England, Rev. Richard Oastler, a Methodist minister in York, England, stated,

Thousands of our fellow creatures . . . are this very moment . . . in a state of slavery more horrid than are the victims of that hellish system ‘colonial slavery’ . . . the very streets which receive the droppings of the ‘Anti-Slavery Society’ are every morning wet by the tears of innocent victims at the accursed shrine of avarice, who are compelled, not by the cartwhip of the negro slave-driver, but by the dread of the equally appalling thong, or strap, of the overseer [in the South an overseer was known as an overseer] to hasten, half-dressed, but not half-fed, to those magazines of British infantile slavery—the worsted mills in the town of Bradford!!

Thanking Rev. Oastler for his efforts on behalf of the slave children of Bradford, a delegation of labor leaders questioned the “conduct of those pretended philanthropists and canting hypocrites who travel to the West Indies in search of slavery, forgetting there is a more abominable and degrading system of slavery at
home.” In yet another account of the horrors of white child slavery, there is the account by Charles Shaw, a former child labor slave, who managed to live through the experience:

Fortunes were piled up on the pitiless toiling of little children, and thousands of them never saw manhood or womanhood. Their young life was used as tillage for the quick growth of wealth . . . these little White slaves were flogged at times as brutally, all things considered, as Legree flogged Uncle Tom. Nearly all England wept about thirteen years later for Uncle Tom, especially the ‘classes,’ but no fine lady or gentleman wept for the cruelly-used [English] children.

Although white slavery, both in ancient and more modern times, is a provable fact, Africa has the dubious distinction of being the continent from which more slaves have been taken than any other continent. In antiquity, all the major civilizations have taken their share of slaves from Africa. In more modern times Arab slave traders carried on a brisk traffic in black slaves during the days of the Trans-Sahara slave trade. From the ninth century until the advent of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, around the middle of the fourteenth century, Arab Moslem slave traders were responsible for an estimated ten million slaves taken from Sub-Sahara Africa. Most of these slaves were transported to areas around the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Indian Ocean. Although the Trans-Sahara slave trade did decrease after the commencement of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, it never ceased. In 1840 the ruler of Egypt, a Moslem, carried on a brisk traffic in slaves from Nubia. A virtual army of more than twenty-seven hundred men armed with rifles, lances, and cannons, struck into the interior of Africa, destroying crops and making slaves out of more than a thousand Africans.

In this way, the men carrying the sheba [a wooden instrument attached to the neck of one slave then to another], the boys tied together by the wrists, the women and children walking at their liberty, and the old and feeble tottering along leaning on their relations, the whole of the captives are driven into Egypt, there to be exposed for sale in the slave-market. Thus negroes and Nubians are distributed over the East, through Persia, Arabia, India, & Co.
SUMMARY

At this juncture, two points should be clear to all about the institution of slavery. Slavery was neither a European nor a Christian plot; nor was slavery an institution which exclusively oppressed black people as many in the politically correct community maintain. Indeed, as will be demonstrated in upcoming chapters, even in America, slavery crossed racial boundaries. In the nineteenth century, white men were sold into slavery, black men owned black slaves, and Native Americans owned black and red slaves. The myth that slavery was solely a black problem is a position that cannot be supported by historic fact.

MYTH: Slavery is an institution that oppressed only black people.

REALITY: From ancient times to the early part of the nineteenth century, slavery has existed across racial boundaries. The English word “slave,” according to the Oxford World Dictionary, is derived from the word “Slav,” a Caucasian ethnic group. These people were so often taken into slavery by conquering armies of the Ottoman Empire, that from the name “Slav” grew the word “slave.”

MYTH: The institution of slavery was a creation of the Christian world.

REALITY: As we have noted, slavery existed from as far back as the earliest record of man’s progress. It is foolish to assert that Christianity, which grew from the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth some two thousand years ago, is responsible for the institution of slavery. Most people who espouse this theory merely mean that Christians were responsible for the Trans-Atlantic African slave trade and thus slavery in America. This fact is true, but it overlooks five hundred years of the Trans-Sahara slave trade of the Moslems. This slave trade was responsible for as many African slaves as the Trans-Atlantic trade. If one is to condemn Christianity because of five hundred years of African slave trade, one must also condemn Islam because of five hundred years of the Moslem Trans-Sahara slave trade.