

Slavery

By the New Testament era slavery was the foundation of the economy of the Roman Empire. Rome was one of only a few true slave economies known to world history.¹ It was a widespread and acknowledged institution and its morality was seldom questioned.² The number of slaves has been estimated from fifteen percent to one third of Roman population.³

A person could become a slave in a variety of ways. Historically, most slaves were prisoners from Rome's wars of expansion or victims of kidnap by slave traders or pirates. However, by New Testament times, few became slaves by this manner.⁴ Forced slavery for indebtedness was also forbidden before the first century.⁵ By the time of the New Testament, most slaves were thus because they were born to slave women. One could also raise an abandoned newborn to be a slave.⁶ Also, many people sold themselves into slavery.⁷

The status of slaves in the Roman empire was different from the modern understanding of slavery in the American south. While slaves had the legal status of a thing⁸ - a tool-, practically, they were treated as well as a freeman.⁹ A slave could be punished more severely for a crime than a freeman could.¹⁰ But there was a radical improvement in the way slaves were treated by the first century.¹¹ They were protected by law against severe cruelty¹² though still liable to corporal punishment.¹³ Some suggest that household slaves were treated with goodwill and affection.¹⁴ Slaves had most of the legal rights of a freeborn person.¹⁵ There was no difference in dress or racial markers to

¹ Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 543.

² Bartchy, S.S., Dictionary of the Later New Testament, p. 1099.

³ Harrill, J.A., Dictionary of New Testament Background, p. 1126.

⁴ Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 543. Contra Harrill, p. 1126.

⁵ Rupprecht, A. Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, Vol. 6, p. 458.

⁶ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, Vol. 6, p. 67.

⁷ Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 543.

⁸ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, Vol. 6, p. 66, ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 544.

⁹ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, Vol. 6, p. 66.

¹⁰ Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 544.

¹¹ Rupprecht, p. 458.

¹² Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 544.

¹³ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, p. 68.

¹⁴ Judge, E.A., The New Bible Dictionary, p. 1199.

¹⁵ Rupprecht, p. 459.

signify a person as a slave.¹⁶ Slaves held responsible positions both in the household and in civil service.¹⁷ Slaves played a wide range of social and economic roles.¹⁸

In many ways, slaves were better off than the poor freeborn laborers.¹⁹ They had a guaranteed room and board, often their own room in the master's house.²⁰ Educated slaves were prized for their usefulness. Therefore, slaves were educated at their master's expense. Many slaves were more educated than their masters.²¹ Slavery was also not a permanent condition. A slave could expect to be freed around age thirty.²² Manumitted slaves of Roman citizens were usually granted Roman citizenship.²³ For this reason, many people sold themselves into slavery in order to gain security, education or a trade, or to secure an inroad into social position and advancement.²⁴

Two factors greatly influence our understanding of First Peter. First, the father of the household exercised full legal control over all in the household.²⁵ Therefore, the quality of a slaves life depended almost entirely on the owner.²⁶ An owner would treat his slaves better or worse depending on his mood or character. Thus Peter felt the need to address both those with good masters and those with bad. Secondly, slaves usually shared the same culture and religious traditions as the owner.²⁷ Therefore, as a slave became a Christian while the owner remained pagan, Christianity would be perceived as a threat to "traditional kinship ties and patriarchal family structure."²⁸ The Christian group may have been perceived as a different family or kinship demanding loyalty and thus challenging loyalty to the owner. This may account in part for the slander and persecution suffered by the Christians in general and slaves in particular to which Peter felt the need to speak.

¹⁶ Bartchy, S.S, Dictionary of the Later New Testament, p. 1098.

¹⁷ Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 544.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

¹⁹ Rupprecht, p. 460.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, Vol. 6, p. 66.

²² Bartchy, S.S., ISBE, Vol. 4, p. 545.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 543.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, p. 68.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

²⁷ Bartchy, S.S., Dictionary of the Later New Testament. P. 1098.

²⁸ Bartchy, S.S., ABD, p. 68.