

How do we explain
the Bible's apparent
acceptance of slavery
since it is the
Word of God?



Slavery as an institution is not condemned outright in the Scriptures, but those same Scriptures teach that all men and women are created “in the image of God” and so are to be treated with equity and integrity (Genesis 1:26, 27).

There have been times when Christians justified the institution of slavery by selectively appealing to Scriptures that regulate slavery. The best way to understand the passages that accept slavery is the teaching that Jesus gave regarding divorce. He clarified that divorce was not the plan of God, but he permitted it, even regulated it (Deuteronomy 24:1–4), because of human “hardness of heart” (Matthew 19:8).

Because men and women are sinners and live in a fallen world, such things as divorce, and we can add for our purposes slavery, occur. It is sadly a part of the human experience, and the Bible sets out to first regulate treatment of slaves and then to set the grounds for slavery's elimination. The Bible makes it clear that slaves were not mere chattel but had God-given protections and certain rights (e.g., Exodus 21:7–11). For example, a runaway slave from a foreign country was not to be returned to his master (Deuteronomy 23:15, 16). The motivation for gentler treatment of slaves was theological: the Israelites had once been slaves in Egypt whom God had delivered. The cruelty that they experienced in Egypt was not tolerated in Israel.