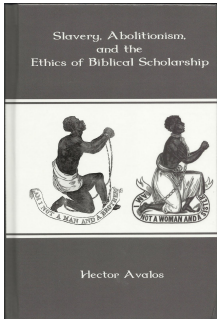
Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship, by Hector Avalos



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This provocative book represents a genre of writing enjoying a renaissance these days: the informed atheist attack on Christian traditions of biblical interpretation. It has resonances of Robert Ingersoll's writings in the nineteenth century, but this twenty-first-century analysis of the biblical and church teaching on slavery is by an aca-

demic, Dr Hector Avalos of Iowa State University, who has taught Religious Studies and Latino Studies at Iowa since 1993. This book is intriguing, stimulating and irritating! Yes, all of these. Its argument is that far from condemning slavery, the Bible on the whole defends and protects it, and the same trend is dominant in church history as well. So this is a very broad and sweeping challenge, which includes a chapter attacking the ethics of Jesus.

There is undoubtedly a case to be made that the Bible supports the institution of slavery and Christian apologists have frequently defended it. Avalos bases much of his commentary on the pro-slavery literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and considers it more intellectually honest than the abolitionist literature. Much of the book is a reaction to Rodney Stark's book *For The Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and The End of Slavery* (Princeton University Press, 2003). Stark is a big name in the sociology of religion, and also doubles as a passionate Christian apologist. Now, as Avalos points out, Stark is no historian, and often seems very loose with details—rather disturbing in so prominent an academic. Consequently, faced with this high-profile academic blundering into areas where Stark has very limited expertise, Avalos has a field day. But in the process, we end up with a broad-brush attack not as sloppy as Stark, but no more subtle than Stark's in its arguments.

The aspects of the book require some careful and specific reflection, and perhaps this is a good reason why the book deserves to be read. However irritated I am with some aspects of it, I think it is still an interesting book making some excellent points as well as some weak ones.

The book starts very well with its analysis of slavery in the Old Testament. Its case is, quite simply, that there is nothing distinctive about the ancient Hebrew approach to slavery. Its provisions for manumission are in fact fairly typical of the Ancient Near East. The points are well made, but the difficulty is that Avalos ranges freely into Mesopotamian, Greek and Roman traditions over many centuries, and it is very difficult to establish whether like is being compared with like. Moreover the treatment of slavery in Roman society and a number of these economies which were based on the labour of slaves perhaps would be better viewed without constant comparisons with Southern states of the USA in the nineteenth century. Still, I certainly think that Avalos makes a good point that the Pentateuch does not conceive of Hebrew society abandoning slavery, and while the law has manumission provisions, these cannot be used to establish the moral superiority of the Hebrew theocracy. Avalos is right to critique some scholars like Westermann who argue

the moral superiority of the Jewish law. He rightly critiques the interpretation that the chosen people are slaves to God, and therefore they must reject all enslavement to humans. It sounds convincing, but it certainly does not seem to be either the practice or theory of Jewish society.

However, Avalos cannot resist broadening his case into a strident attack on all aspects of biblical ethics, and as far as he is concerned, all use of the metaphor of slavery in the Bible—for example with respects to females based on Gen 3:16 or metaphorically to Christian "service" of God—is further evidence of the moral inadequacy of the Bible. This argument is very weak. The treatment of the free wife by the husband is sometimes described in the language of service, but this does not establish that it is the same thing. Equally, describing the Christian as a slave to God does not mean that it equates in all ways to the institution of slavery, only that it is capable of camparison in some key respects.

There is a curious aspect, then, to Avalos's scholarship. Furious at Phyllis Trible's attempt to lessen the force of the language, he attacks her as any fundamentalist would. Indeed, Avalos is, just like the nineteenth-century rationalists, every bit a fundamentalist in his use of the Bible. The result is wild exaggeration based on a very literal reading of the text. Abraham is accused of raping Hagar in Gen 16. Circumcision is described as a form of mutilation in which God treats the Jews as slaves to be stamped with a cruel mark of ownership. The Exodus may take the Jews out of slavery but it gives them the right to enslave others. Slave owners are allowed to beat slaves and if they do so wrongly they can escape with monetary compensation, which proves "the inhumanity of this biblical law." But there are other possible interpretations of Exod 21:26–27. In a fascinating section, Avalos attacks the church as hypocritical, and attacks their behaviour by citing James 2:17 and Matt 7:16–17. This language struck the reviewer as absurd.

When Avalos comes to the New Testament, he focuses on the way that the Christian community responds to Roman slavery both as an institution (Gal 3:28 and Eph 6:5 and Philemon) and as an image (Gal 4:6–8 and Phil 2:6–8). He reacts especially to Horsley's anti-imperial interpretation of Christianity, which he regards as nonsensical. Some of his argument is an overdue response to our tendency to re-read scripture in the light of the abolition of slavery in the modern age. If New Testament writers had wanted to fully condemn the institution of slavery they could have, for there were classical precedents for attacks on the institution of slavery. This does not mean, however, that the New Testament advocates or defends slavery. There

is an intermediate position, that the early Christians live with slavery but treat slaves as equal in discipleship. I do not think he makes enough of the encouragement to seek freedom from slavery in 1 Cor 10.

The argument becomes particularly far-fetched when applied to Jesus. According to Avalos, when Jesus instructs his disciples in Matt 5:41 that if they are required to accompany a soldier for one mile they should go two miles, that means he is endorsing slavery! Really? In essence Avalos is taking a very modern position, that all service is servile, even voluntary service. He finds a dominant metaphor in scripture of Christ as imperial slave master and attacks the morality of Jesus inviting service from his followers as morally repugnant. Once again metaphorical words are not allowed to be qualified by the terms on which Jesus invites discipleship. He is especially emphatic on the morality of a Jesus who can say that he comes not to bring peace but a sword (Matt 10:34). Part 2 of the book portrays the history of slavery in the Christian world. He criticises the survival of slavery in the Christianised imperial and medieval worlds (describing serfdom as slavery). Rejecting the claim that Thomas Aquinas was an opponent of slavery, he looks carefully at the famous debate on slavery between Spanish theologians Las Casas and Sepulveda and the response of the papacy. Curiously Avalos says Sepulveda takes the honest and correct interpretation when he argues from scripture, because Las Casas treats the biblical text too loosely (204) and notes that Las Casas never questions the justice of slavery itself.

Coming into the modern era, Luther's morality is attacked, there is criticism of Catholic and Protestant states' approach to slavery, and he is unsympathetic at a mere rising of compassion for the suffering of slaves (230). Here Avalos's lack of historical understanding is very apparent. Compassion was certainly not a principled attack on slavery, but Avalos fails to see that compassion because it treated slaves as fellow humans and Christians, had an implication for the practice of slavery. Of course it is historically evident that a crucial tool in the change in slavery has as much to do with the Enlightenment as with Christianity, but it is easy to show the hypocrisy of the enlightened as well. Avalos delights in showing that the British abolitionists had weak biblical arguments, and thinks that this shows how useless the Bible is in moral reasoning. Needless to say he revels in the biblical disputes between the southern and northern US states, and considers that the abolitionists were weak on scripture. Citations of Acts 17:26 do not impress Avalos, because they teach a universal slavery to God as master. Avalos backs the Williams argument that slavery collapsed not because people listened to the Bible, but because economically it had passed its day and because the world was becoming more secular.

In his conclusion, Avalos insists that "biblical ethics stands or falls on its attitude toward slavery" and declares that in the light of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Bible "has been one of the greatest obstacles to human ethical progress in history." Avalos's consistent use of modern notions of human rights with which to attack traditional cultures is the sign of the lack of understanding of history. Institutions such as slavery existed but that did not make them morally commendable in the eyes of people in the ancient world. The reform of social institutions is not the central theme of scripture. The biblical position probably is not wholly consistent, but then neither was the type of slavery. Roman slavery is very different than Ancient Near East slavery, based as it was on a vastly higher proportion of enslaved people. Similarly a human rights ethics, standard as it is today, is not the only model of ethics, and it carries with it weaknesses as well as strengths. In my view Avalos is guilty of presentism.

The book intrigued me so much that I ransacked websites to learn about the author, and was intrigued to find him described as a Mexican, a Pentecostal child evangelist who became an atheist at the age of 19 when he was studying to answer Jehovah's Witness questions, and decided that it was impossible to defend Christianity adequately. He suffers from a very rare disease, but nevertheless gained a doctorate from Harvard in biblical studies and seems to be a well respected teacher.[1] He has clearly come to prominence through association with the New Atheists, yet unlike most of them he knows his field very well. He has written three books rather in the same genre, including also *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence* (2005) which uses the theory of scarce resources to explain why people fight over religion; *The End of Biblical Studies* (2007), which ferociously criticises the relevance of the Bible to the modern world, as well as works on illness in the Ancient Near East and works on Latino experiences of religion. So I did not waste my time reading this book; it was stimulating as well as provoking.

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[1] Kate Kompas, "Avalos encourages religious diversity," *Iowa State Daily*, October 18, 1999, http://www.iowastatedaily.com/article_e2452f94-6e07-57d0-b4f3-9d01e477791a.html; Taysha Murtaugh, "An Unlikely Atheist teaches others," *Iowa State Daily*, November 9, 2010, http://www.iowastatedaily.com/news/article_dc15f8b2-eb81-11df-9186-001cc4c002e0.html.