

**DOES THE BIBLE
SANCTION
AMERICAN SLAVERY?**

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Does the Bible Sanction American Slavery? by Goldwin Smith

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P R E F A C E .

THE following pages are an expansion of a lecture delivered at the Manchester Athenæum, and the author has to plead, as his justification for printing them, the wishes of some of his audience on that occasion.

They treat of the subject stated on the title-page ; not of the justice or wisdom of the present war, nor of the conduct of any American party.

The argument is as much historical as theological ; and the question whether the Book which Christendom regards as the rule of conduct is favorable to Slavery or to Free Labor, to the degradation or to the independence and dignity of the laboring class, is interesting to the statesman and economist, as well as to the divine.

It will be remembered that we have no longer to deal with the question between immediate and gradual emancipation, as to which the greatest enemies of Slavery may fairly differ ; nor with the excuses which may be made for those who have inherited a bad system not of their own creating, and which no reasonable man would desire to withhold. A complete change has of late taken place in the sentiments and language of the Southern States on the subject of Slavery. That which was regarded and spoken of by Washington and the statesmen of his time as a transient evil, is now declared to be a permanent good, and not only a permanent good, but the best of all social institutions. Mr. Stephens, the Vice-President of the Slave States, avows that " the foundations of the

new Government are laid upon the great truth that Slavery — subordination to the superior race — is the Negro's natural and moral condition ; that it is the first Government in the history of the world based upon this great physical, philosophical, and moral truth ; and that the stone which was rejected by the first builders is in the new edifice become the chief stone of the corner." Those who hold and proclaim such sentiments as these may naturally proceed to still more extensive and startling doctrines affecting the position of the laborer, without regard to the color of his skin, in all the countries of the world.

With regard to the part of the argument turning upon the Laws of Moses, Michaelis has long since made us familiar with the fact that these Laws were not a new Code, but a revision of the old customary law of the nation. But since his time much light has been thrown upon this subject by eminent writers, on the philosophy of history and on the history of the Jews.

Many of the points here mentioned have been mentioned before in various works ; but the author is not aware that the question has been placed as a whole exactly in the light in which he wished and has here endeavored to place it.

In this discussion the authority of the Pentateuch is taken for granted on both sides. In using, therefore, the common language on the subject, the author is not presuming to pass any opinion upon the questions respecting the date and authorship of the Books which divide great Hebraists and theologians, and which, he is perfectly aware, can be decided only by free inquiry, carried on by men learned in the subject, with absolute faith in the God of Truth.

DOES THE BIBLE SANCTION AMERICAN SLAVERY ?

WHEN a New World was peopled, strange things were sure to be seen. And strange things are seen in America. By the side of the Great Salt Lake is a community basing itself upon Polygamy. In the Southern States is a community basing itself upon Slavery. Each of these communities confidently appeals to the Bible as its sanction ; and each of them, in virtue of that warrant, declares its peculiar institution to be universal and divine. The plea of the slave-owner is accepted. Perhaps if the Mormonite were equally an object of political interest to a large party, his plea might be accepted also.*

It is important in more ways than one to determine whether the slave-owner's plea is true. The character of the Bible is threatened ; and so is the character of the English law and nation. *The Times* says that slavery is only wrong as luxury is wrong, and that the Bible enjoins the slave at the present day to return to his master. If so, the law of England, which takes away the slave from his master directly his feet touch English soil, is a robber's law. If so, the great Act of Emancipation, of which we speak so proudly, was a robber's act ;

* No less a person than Luther was in fact led, by his irrational treatment of the Bible, into both errors. He preached the doctrine that a slave had no right to escape even from a heathen master (see his *Heer-Prädigt wider die Türken*), and he brought an eternal scandal on Protestantism by sanctioning the double marriage of the Elector of Hesse.

for though a partial compensation for their loss was granted to the West Indian slave-owners, they were forced to give up their slaves notoriously against their will.

SECTION I.

It is true that the Old Testament distinctly recognizes Slavery as a Hebrew institution. It is also true that the New Testament speaks of Slavery in several passages, and does not condemn it.

But before we draw the conclusion that Slavery is a divine institution established by God for all time, we must consider what was the object of God's dealings with Man recorded in the Bible.

If it was to put human society at once in a state of perfection, without further effort, political, social or intellectual, on the part of Man, the inference is irresistible that every institution enjoined in the Bible is part of a perfect scheme, and that every institution mentioned in the Bible without condemnation will be lawful to the end of time.

But if the object was to implant in man's heart a principle, viz. the love of God and Man, which should move him to work (God also working in him) for the improvement of his own state and that of his fellows, and for the transforming of his and their life into the image of their Maker; in this case, [it will by no means follow that any social institution recognized in Scripture for the time being, or mentioned by it without condemnation, is forever good or lawful in the sight of God.]

And that this, not the other, was the real object is matter of hourly experience; for man labors till now to improve his state and that of his fellows; and his conscience, which is the voice of God, tells him that he does well.

To say that the Bible has nothing to do with politics or science, is a bad way of escaping from a difficulty of our own creating. The Bible has much to do with politics and science, and with everything that enters, as all parts of our social and intellectual state do enter, into the moral life of man. But it does not suddenly reveal political and scientific truth without calling for any effort on the part of man himself to attain them ; because such a revelation, instead of promoting, would have defeated the end for which, as the voice of our free moral nature assures us, the world was made. It implants in man the principle which leads him to good action of every kind. The love of God and Man, moving to disinterested efforts for the good of the community, is the source of all political improvement, at least of all that is real and lasting. And the same affection moves the high and self-devoted labors which have led to the discovery of scientific and philosophic truth. And thus in its onward progress human nature is by the very condition of that progress changed into the likeness of its Maker. Why God should choose gradual improvement rather than immediate perfection, this is not the place to inquire. That He does so, appears from the history not only of the moral, but of the physical world.

The Bible recognizes Progress. The New Testament says of the Old Testament that Moses gave the Jews certain things for the hardness of their hearts ; not, of course, for their wickedness, to which God would not bend His law, but for their rude and uncivilized state. And not merely for their rudeness and want of civilization, but for the primitive narrowness of the circle of their affections ; for it is only in the course of history, and with the increasing range of man's social vision, that his affection extends from the primeval family to the tribe, from the tribe to the nation, and from the nation to mankind. And as to the New Testament itself, it breathes in every page boundless hope for the future, together with the charity which is the source of social effort, and with

the faith which carries each man beyond the sensual objects of his own short life. And it closes with that splendid vision of the consummation of all Christian effort in the perfect reign of God on earth, from which folly attempts to cast, like an astrologer, the horoscope of nations; but which is in truth the last voice of Christianity, as it passes from the hands of the Apostles and commits itself to the dark and dangerous tide of human affairs, breaking forth in the assurance of final victory.

The true spiritual life of the world commenced in the Chosen People. He who denies this would seem to deny, not a theory of Inspiration, but a great and manifest fact of history. But the spiritual life commenced under an earthly mould of national life similar in all respects, political, social, and literary, to those of other races. The Jewish nation, in short, was a nation, not a miracle. Had it been a miracle, it might have shown forth the power of God, like the stars in heaven, but it would have been nothing to the rest of mankind, nor could its spiritual life have helped to awaken theirs.*

This commencement of the spiritual life was marked by the appearance (1.) of a Cosmogony which, unlike those of heathen nations, gave a true account of the origin of the world and of Man, and a true account of the relations between Man and his Creator; (2.) of a series of histories written on a moral and religious principle, and still unrivalled among historical writings for the steadiness with which this, the true key to history, is kept in view; (3.) of a body of religious literature, in the shape of hymns, reflections, preachings, apologues, which, though not Christian, and therefore not to be indiscriminately used by Christians, was wholly unapproached among the heathen; (4.) of a Code of Laws the beneficence of which is equally unapproached by any code, and least of all by any Oriental code, not produced under the influence of Christianity.

* See the author's work on *Rational Religion*, p. 50.