

Exegetical Brief: Distinction In Terms—The Slave Trade In Imperial Rome

Stephen H. Geiger

ὅτι δικαίω νόμος οὐ κεῖται, ἀνόμοις δὲ καὶ ἀνυποτάκτοις...
ἀνδραποδισταῖς...καὶ εἴ τι ἕτερον τῆ ὑγιαίνουσῃ
διδασκαλίᾳ ἀντίκειται κατὰ τὸ εὐαγγέλιον
τῆς δόξης τοῦ μακαρίου θεοῦ, ὃ ἐπιστεύθη ἐγώ.

Attempting to quantify the number of slaves in the Roman empire of the first century A.D. is risky business. There seems to be little question, though, that the total number was significant. If the empire contained a total population—both slave and free—of 60 million, some recent scholarship suggests that 10 million of that group was in bondage. In the more limited geographical area of Italy, the first century B.C. may have seen as many as one in every three people enslaved.

Whatever the precise figures, slavery was a huge part of society as the Pentecost Gospel made its way to all nations. It is no surprise, then, that six epistles of Paul and one of Peter offer specific encouragement and instruction to slaves and their masters.

Masters are told to demonstrate good will toward those who serve them, not employing threats. They are to remember that both they and their slaves have the same Master in heaven, with whom there is no favoritism (Ephesians 6:9-10). Those who own slaves are to provide them with what is just and fair, again keeping in mind that they themselves have a Master in heaven (Colossians 4:1).

Slaves, on the other hand, are to obey their masters with respect and fear in sincerity of heart, just as they would obey Christ. Their obedience is to be so heartfelt that it occurs not only when the master is watching but even when he is away (Ephesians 6:5-7). While certainly prohibited from obeying should the master command them to sin, they are otherwise to obey their masters in everything. As they obey, they properly keep in mind the eternal gracious reward waiting for them (Colossians 3:22-24). They are not to speak against their masters or to embezzle but rather should be completely trustworthy. Through such good behavior they are to “decorate” the teaching about our Savior God (Titus 2:9-10). Yes, slaves sometimes have harsh masters. Even then they are to submit with all respect, remembering that it is commendable before God when one endures suffering for doing good (1 Peter 2:18-20).

While noting proper behavior when one is a slave or a master, the Spirit also acknowledges a slave’s normal preference for freedom. “Were you a slave when you were called? Don’t let it trouble you—although if you can gain your freedom, do so” (1 Corinthians 7:21). At the same time, the Spirit desires release from slavery to occur in a manner that is legal—Paul encourages the escapee Onesimus to return to his master Philemon.

While the Spirit gives guidance to both masters and slaves as they operate within the institution of slavery, the Spirit also makes it clear that there was one component of the slave system that was inherently sinful.

In 1 Timothy 1:8-10, after noting that the law of God is not made for the righteous person—for a Christian insofar as he is “new man”—Paul then describes activities that are appropriate targets for the condemning and coercive force of God’s law. Included in this list is the Greek term ἀνδραποδισταῖς, translated by the NIV as “slave traders.”

At first glance one might conclude, “With this word God is condemning anyone who trades in slaves.” Familiarity with other Bible translations, however, might suggest further consideration—the King James Version offers the definition “menstealers,” while the Revised Standard Version and the New American Standard Bible use the term “kidnappers.” What is the accurate English counterpart for ἀνδραποδιστῆς?

Consider a quotation from Philo, a Hellenistic Jewish philosopher who lived from 20 B.C. to 50 A.D. “And therefore everyone who is inspired with a zeal for virtue is severe of temper and absolutely implacable

against men-stealers (ἀνδραποδιστῶν), who for the sake of a most unrighteous profit do not shrink from reducing to slavery those who not only are freemen by birth but are of the same nature as themselves” (*The Special Laws IV.14* as translated by F.H. Colson—1960). In his use of the term, Philo does not focus on the transfer of a slave from dealer to buyer, but instead he condemns a particular method of adding to the slave supply: forcing a freeman to become a slave.

Philo goes on to describe the next step such men-stealers would take: “For the sake of an utterly unlawful profit they [the men-stealers] sell their captives to *slave dealers* [italics mine; Greek ἀνδραποδοκαπήλοις, from ἀνδραποδοκάπηλος] or any chance comers to live in slavery in a foreign land never to return . . .” (*The Special Laws IV.17*).

This description by Philo would not exonerate out-of-hand the slave dealers. For the purpose of clarifying word definition, however, it is significant to note the distinction in terms. A kidnapper (ἀνδραποδιστής) sells his wrongfully gained captives to the slave trader (ἀνδραποδοκάπηλος), who then brings the slaves to market.

The Greek geographer Strabo, who wrote at the beginning of the first century A.D., also notes such a distinction. He writes, “And at the same time the pirates (οἱ λησται), pretending to be slave-dealers [προσποιούμενοι σωματεμπορεῖν], carried on their evil business unchecked.” While Strabo uses an alternate term for slave dealers, he does maintain Philo’s distinction between those who steal people and those involved in legal slave commerce. Those pirates, who were doing wrong, tried to make people think they were individuals operating lawfully.

Liddell and Scott’s classical Greek dictionary offers both “slave dealer” and “kidnapper” as possible definitions for ἀνδραποδιστής. Which works best in 1 Timothy 1? Philo’s usage is helpful, offering a near contemporaneous example of the term being used in the “kidnapper” sense. John Bodel, professor of Classics and History at Brown University, offers the additional observation that during the Imperial Age [from the end of the 1st century B.C. into the first centuries A.D.], the term ἀνδραποδιστής more often means “kidnapper” than “slave-dealer” (“Caveat emptor: Towards a Study of Roman Slave Traders” as found in *Journal of Roman Archaeology—2005*). Finally, the absence of any condemnation of slavery *per se* elsewhere in Scripture, but rather encouragements to operate within the institution in a godly manner, would move us away from seeing a blanket condemnation of slave sellers here. Rather, one would recognize the option of “kidnapper” as well supported and easily understood in the context of the Scripture’s other slavery passages.

The Vulgate appears to reflect this conclusion as it translates ἀνδραποδισταίς with the Latin “*plagiariis*,” which means “kidnappers.” [The English term “plagiarist” reflects the underlying concept of stealing.]

A superior translation for ἀνδραποδιστής, then, would seek to highlight the “man stealing” element. In succinct English, “kidnapper” might come closest, though one would wish to keep in mind that such thefts often had an eventual enslavement connection.

There were numerous ways people became slaves during the Roman Imperial age. Some were conquered in war. Others were born to slaves. Some were abandoned as infants but then rescued and finally sold. Others apparently sold themselves into slavery, perhaps as a remedy for poverty.

The manner of enslavement highlighted in 1 Timothy 1 is one which employs stealing.

The law exists for the condemning of godless behavior. To steal is always contrary to God’s law. The stealing of a human is no exception.