

Review of Hector Avalos, *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship*. The Bible in the Modern World 38. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix, 2011.

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Avalos' most recent work is a thorough survey of slavery – both actual and metaphorical – in the biblical texts and a review of the history of the exegesis of key biblical “slavery texts”. *Slavery, Abolitionism, and the Ethics of Biblical Scholarship* is divided into two parts. Part one is a survey of biblical texts deemed critical by Avalos in arguments regarding the biblical treatment of slavery, and part two is a review of the works of nineteenth-century American anti-slavery advocates on these biblical texts. Avalos argues that the biblical text, read in its “natural” sense (which for Avalos is the most reasonable reconstruction of the original author’s intention, discerned by conventional historical-grammatical exegesis – the “plain sense” of the text), not only allows but affirms slavery. The only way to use the Bible in anti-slavery arguments is intentionally to “misread” (for Avalos, to read any way than the above). In other words, the Bible not only does not inhibit or prohibit slavery, it endorses it, and the demise of slavery did not come from biblical exegesis or the application of biblical principles, but, rather, arose from the wilful distortion of biblical context, argument, and principle. Avalos argues that biblical support for slavery introduces critical problems for ethics derived from biblical literature. Avalos affirms that slavery is always, in every form, immoral, and that failing to oppose slavery is a critical moral fault. That the biblical text not only allows, but perpetuates slavery (at the minimum via metaphor for faithful service to God) suggests that the biblical literature is critically flawed as a basis for ethics and moral reflection.

Among Avalos' principal antagonists are several evangelical scholars and Rodney Stark. Stark's *For the Glory of God: How Monotheism Led to Reformations, Science, Witch-Hunts and the end of Slavery* argues that (Roman Catholic) Christianity and the Bible initiated most intellectual and ethical progress in Western culture. One specific example, for Stark, is the role of the Bible in abolition. Avalos' critique of Stark is complete and devastating. To be fair, however, as a target for scholarly fire, Stark tends to be a rather low-flying dirigible, lacking any substantive training in relevant languages, literature, and scholarly history for biblical and theological debate, and revelling in deeply tendentious argument. Yet Avalos also challenges numerous critical biblical scholars, with appropriate training and at least the pretence of objectivity. Most of these are evangelicals (with notable exceptions such as Richard Horsley and Alan Callahan) who argue that the Bible uniquely proscribes or restricts slavery, advocating humane advances that outpace ancient Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultural practices. Others argue that slavery in the context of antiquity was substantively and morally different than slavery in modern European and American experience. Still others argue that the biblical texts, while not disallowing slavery, set a context for humane interaction that would, by design, result, if taken to its natural end, in the dissolution of slavery, *de facto* if not *de jure*.

Avalos identifies all these arguments as biblical apologetic, morally and historically dubious. Slavery can never be moral but can only vary in its degree of immorality. The Bible does offer some advance on ethical treatment of slaves, but no more than can be found in other ancient Near Eastern or Greco-Roman sources; Avalos argues rather convincingly that the origins of American arguments against the ethics of slavery are actually rooted in Greco-Roman convention and philosophy. There is no evolutionary development of moral thinking in the West; this is an illusion of (narcissistic) scholarly location. The idea that moral thinking is progressive or chronologically evolutionary is merely an illusion of perspective: we think the world is becoming increasingly moral because of our

present cultural, scholarly, and intellectual locations. In fact, slavery is not only pervasively tolerated in the biblical texts, but is occasionally mandated by God and a central metaphor for service to God.

Avalos' work will almost certainly irritate many Bible readers. Good. He is absolutely correct that the biblical texts have been used in arguments to justify, spread, and perpetuate slavery, and this collusion has yet to be broadly engaged. Slavery did not end because of natural progress in the application of the biblical texts or theological argument; slavery ended, to a large extent, because of a complex interaction of economic, industrial, and political factors. Once these factors shaped popular thought about slavery, then the Bible was re-interpreted to fit them. In many ways, one could argue that the idea of abolition as a moral imperative arose first and was then retrojected into Judeo-Christian exegesis.

Avalos will irritate others, however, unnecessarily. He clearly positions himself as the only person bold enough to reveal the gaps in biblical ethics and expose "apologetics" among scholars. Avalos is not the only voice of challenge to the Bible, and to biblical interpreters, on this question. There is no way, for example, one can read Jennifer Glancy and not conclude that slavery is an abhorrent evil and that the biblical text misses the opportunity to condemn it; Glancy clearly also subjects the biblical texts and their interpreters to ethical and moral critique.

Avalos (repeatedly) uses "deconstruction" incorrectly, using it to mean "harshly criticize and expose assumptions". This mistake is common and, though personally irritating, not in itself worth noting, except that in this case it partners with a larger concern: Avalos sees a very narrow spectrum of "appropriate" or "reasonable" methods and purposes for biblical exegesis. He shows little literacy in (indeed, little interest in) non-historical exegesis that is not intent on searching out authorial intention. To read any other way – say, postcolonially or as a feminist or with racial interest or attuned to queer dynamics or even honestly to deconstruct a biblical text – is to "misread".

Avalos tends dangerously close to assumptions Dale Martin has called "textual agency". Certainly, there is continuity between the choice to read for authorial intent and readings which promoted or allowed slavery. Frankly, I would readily grant that ancient authors, redactors, and editors of the biblical texts lived in a world where slavery existed, conceded slavery as moral, and some probably owned (or would have owned) slaves. Yet, why does that matter? Why must history and intention claim the sole right to be regarded as "legitimate" interpretation? Why can one not ignore problematic biblical texts or refute them by intentional re-interpretation? Certainly, many Christians have an answer: the Bible is, to them, the inspired word of God and (for many Protestants) the ideas and intentions of the biblical authors are critically important. But those who do not affirm a rather facile definition of biblical inspiration or biblical authority would seem to me to lack significant concerns about authorial intent and can recognize that historical readings and explorations of authorial intent are, themselves, superimposed constructions. One only cares about authorial intention and biblical authority because of specific (normally Protestant Christian) theological assumptions which are not "necessary" but are superimposed. I would argue that the Bible had no more to do with the dissolution of slavery than it did with slavery's creation or perpetuation. I do not concede that Judeo-Christian moral or ethical ideas arose solely from readings of biblical texts; moral and ethical ideas developed socially and were more often than not retrojected back into/onto the biblical texts. The decision to pursue "plain sense" historical reading is not innocent. Misreading, as Avalos defines it, is not uniquely concerned with constructing continuity between a preconceived ethical idea and biblical hermeneutics; historical approaches did/do the same thing. It is frustrating that Avalos regards abolitionist readings as "misreading" and not as readings which (often intentionally) refuse to regard historical readings and authorial intent as normative or authoritative. One could argue that one role of biblical scholarship is – as Avalos exemplifies – pointing out where the limits of certain cultural and theological assumptions about biblical norms and authority fail.

Despite these moments of argumentative hyperbole, this book has, at his core, a critically important point. The challenge to faith communities or those who wish to defend biblical ethics is as devastating as it is acute. Yet he also serves as an apt reminder of where, when, and how apologetics and expectations of what Bible “must be” or “is” shape our readings.



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