

# EPHESIANS 6

## COMMENTARY

**1 Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. 2 HONOR YOUR FATHER AND MOTHER [Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16] (which is the first commandment with a promise), 3 SO THAT IT MAY BE WELL WITH YOU, AND THAT YOU MAY LIVE LONG ON THE EARTH [Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16]. 4 Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord.**

**6:1-9** Having just addressed the relationship that husbands and wives are to have toward one another (5:21-33), Paul continues his commentary on the *Haustafel* and shifts his words to children (vs. 1-4) and slaves (vs. 5-9). Parallels can be seen between Ephesians 6:1-9 and other important sections of the Apostolic Scriptures, notably Paul's concurring letter of Colossians:

EPHESIANS 6:1-9 AND THE HOUSEHOLD CODE <sup>1</sup>		
ITEM	EPHESIANS	COLOSSIANS AND PARALLELS
<b>to children</b>	Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right (6:1)	Children, be obedient to your parents in all things, for this is well-pleasing to the Lord (Colossians 3:20)
<b>reason for conduct</b>	...[this] is the first commandment with a promise... (6:2-3; citing Exodus 20:12)	
<b>to fathers</b>	Fathers, do not provoke your children to anger, but bring them up in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (6:4)	Fathers, do not exasperate your children... (Colossians 3:21a)

<sup>1</sup> Perkins, in *NIB*, 11:448-449.

<p><b>reason for conduct</b></p>		<p>...so that they will not lose heart (Colossians 3:21b)</p>
<p><b>to slaves</b></p>	<p>Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Messiah; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Messiah, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men (6:5-7)</p>	<p>Slaves, in all things obey those who are your masters on earth, not with external service, as those who <i>merely</i> please men, but with sincerity of heart, fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men (Colossians 3:22-23)</p> <p>Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable (1 Peter 2:18)</p> <p>Bid slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to be refractory, nor to pilfer, but to show entire and true fidelity (Titus 2:9-10a, RSV)</p>
<p><b>reason for conduct</b></p>	<p>[K]nowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord... (6:8)</p>	<p>[K]nowing that from the Lord you will receive the reward of the inheritance. It is the Lord Messiah whom you serve. For he who does wrong will receive the consequences of the wrong which he has done, and that without partiality (Colossians 3:24-25)</p>

		For this <i>finds</i> favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly (1 Peter 2:19)  ...so that they will adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in every respect (Titus 2:10b)
<b>to masters</b>	And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening... (6:9a)	Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness... (Colossians 4:1a)
<b>reason for conduct</b>	...knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him (6:9b)	...knowing that you too have a Master in heaven (Colossians 4:1b)

Unlike the mutual submission of equals that husband and wife are to demonstrate, given the general tone of respect in Paul's instructions to them, the specificity of instruction to children indicates that there is less of an equality here. Ben Witherington III summarizes, "The form of exhortation to children and parents is much more precise than what precedes it—the party in question is addressed, the imperative is stated and amplified, and the motivation is presented."<sup>2</sup> He further points out, "both parents are to be obeyed, though only fathers are exhorted."<sup>3</sup>

Just as the relationship between husbands and wives in the First Century Mediterranean was complex, the relationships between parents and children, and masters and slaves, are also addressed by Paul against such a background. A. Skevington Wood reminds us, "Social distinctions, rigidly observed in the Roman empire and even in Judaism, are transformed by the gospel so that those previously dispossessed acquire new rights."<sup>4</sup> The classical, Greco-Roman familial circumstances which Paul is addressing among his primary audience cannot be forgotten here. Peter T. O'Brien notes, "The term 'children' primarily denotes relationship rather than age, and could on occasion include adult sons and daughters, who were expected

<sup>2</sup> Witherington, 335.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>4</sup> Wood, in *EXP*, 11:80.

to honor their parents, especially fathers, who could maintain authority in the family even until death.”<sup>5</sup> How are the ancient classical views subverted by the power of the gospel? How are Paul’s teachings in line with sentiments regarding parents and children as originally given in the Tanach?

**6:1** The submission of children toward their parents is considered to be right and proper behavior by Paul. He says, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.” How are we to understand and apply the meaning of *tois goneusin humōn en Kuriō* (τοῖς γονεῦσιν ὑμῶν [ἐν κυρίῳ])? Is this a reference to parents who are Believers, or is obedience to parents an act of obedience to the Lord? Could this be a reference to younger Believers respecting older Believers who have mentored them in the faith, similar to how Timothy was considered to be a “son” by Paul (1 Timothy 1:18; 2 Timothy 1:2)? Given the fact that homes of Believers are in view within Ephesians 5:21-6:9, and the parallel seen with Colossians 3:20, Paul is expecting children of Believers to obey *their parents* as an act of obedience to the Lord. He expects parents to be honored by their children, as the words of Proverbs 30:17 tell us, “The eye that mocks a father and scorns a mother, the ravens of the valley will pick it out, and the young eagles will eat it.” While honor of others in the community of faith is surely to be expected, such is not in specific view here.

Regardless of if the children are adolescents or not, the relationship between parents and children is somewhat different than that of husband and wife. Paul is expecting children to obey their parents, assuming that the parents’ instruction is in line with God’s good intention. Submission of children toward their parents is considered to be right or “righteous” (YLT; Grk. *dikaios*, δίκαιος) behavior by Paul. This does not mean, however, that within the rubric of mutual submission (5:21) as fellow members of the assembly, that sons and daughters will not be able to give their parents good advice and wise counsel. On the contrary, if sons and daughters are raised properly “in the Lord,” they will consider it an act of obedience to speak to their parents on critical matters when necessary—coming to their aid if mother and father are in need of help, or are even in error. As parents get older and perhaps lose some of their mental faculties, it is surely necessary for their children to not only take care of them (cf. 1 Timothy 5:4, 8), but to often make decisions on their behalf.

It is not difficult to find where Paul’s primary appeal is for children obeying parents: the Ten Commandments. He quotes the Fifth Commandment as his support (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16). Whereas the command as originally given to Ancient Israel states, “Honor your father and your mother, that your days may be prolonged in the land which the LORD your God gives you” (Exodus 20:12), there is a slight difference between what the Hebrew says and what appears in v. 3. Israelite children were told that their honoring of father and mother would give them long life *al ha’adamah* (עַל הָאָדָמָה) or “in the land,” meaning the Promised Land. The Septuagint rendered this as *epi tēs gēs* (ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς), the same clause used by Paul in v. 3, which can be rendered as either “on the land” or “on the earth.” Paul simply takes a Torah principle and expands its significance from pertaining to

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<sup>5</sup> O’Brien, 440.

more than just the Land of Israel, but now to the whole Earth. Children who obey their parents should merit a long life from the Lord, regardless of where they live.

Yeshua Himself upheld the significance of the Fifth Commandment (Matthew 15:4), but it is Paul who is unique when he can assert that the Fifth Commandment is “the first commandment with a promise”? He uses “first” here not to describe the actual order of the Ten Commandments, but instead to emphasize the significance of what it means to honor and obey one’s parents. Specific rewards *or* specific consequences can follow by obeying or disobeying parents. O’Brien considers that to Paul, “the ten words of Exodus 20:1-17 [serve] as the beginning of many commandments in the Torah.”<sup>6</sup> Here among the commandments of the Decalogue, are specific promises for a long life given for children who honor their parents. A failure to honor one’s parents often merited the death penalty. Lest we think this ancient commandment to be cruel, the parents themselves had to go to town elders and declare, “This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard” (Deuteronomy 21:20), denouncing their own child. Things had to, presumably, get to a point of no return for parents to actually go through with this.

Paul has stated earlier that the presence of disobedient children in the world came as a direct result of the fall of humanity (Romans 1:29-31). With Yeshua having taken the death penalty of the Torah away via His atoning sacrifice (Colossians 2:14), a failure to obey one’s parents would likely then be merited with God Himself taking the life of such a rebellious child via some kind of natural means, or unnatural means should the child’s disobedient lifestyle get him into trouble. We can specifically think about how Eli’s sons, Hophni and Phinehas, did not live long because of their ungodly behavior (1 Samuel 4:11).

Honoring one’s father and mother was not something that ended once a child was grown and left the home, but is something to continue throughout the lifetime *of the parents*. The Qumran literature, for example, commanded its members that grown adults actually care for their aging parents, by saying,

“Honor your father by your poverty, and your mother in your ways, for a man’s father is like God to him, his mother is like his superior. For they are the crucible of your conception, and since He gave them authority over you and formed the spirit, so serve them” (Q416 3.16-17).<sup>7</sup>

**6:2-3** One aspect of Paul’s use of the Fifth Commandment that cannot be overlooked is the fact that he *appeals directly* to the instruction of the Mosaic Law as being applicable to Believers. Andrew T. Lincoln tries to lump a variety of factors together, “the first Christological one, [the author] adds the appeal to ‘natural law,’ to what was seen to be fitting in the ancient world, and then the appeal to the Jewish law,”<sup>8</sup> but it is pretty difficult to ignore—especially with the usage of *entolē* (ἐντολή)<sup>9</sup>—**that the Torah is what is in primary view.**

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>7</sup> Wise, Abegg, and Cook, 385.

<sup>8</sup> Lincoln, 409.

<sup>9</sup> *Entolē* can be used “of divine commandments gener.” (*BDAG*, 340).

If the Apostle Paul has previously stated that the Torah has been abolished, as is commonly interpreted (cf. 2:14-15), then why does he make direct reference to the Torah's instruction here? Note that he has already told his audience not to live like the nations in their behavior (4:17), one that was marked by lawlessness. O'Brien simply considers the command to honor one's parents as being part of an independent "law of Christ" (cf. Galatians 6:2),<sup>10</sup> as opposed to a being an integral part of the New Covenant where the Torah is written on the heart by God's Spirit (Ezekiel 36:25-27; cf. Jeremiah 31:31-34). Those who protest that Paul's quotation of the Fifth Commandment has nothing to do with him believing that the Torah has continuing relevance for Believers, are doing so with very poor support. I sincerely hope they will not merit the status of being "least" in God's Kingdom (Matthew 5:19).

**6:4** Paul's instruction does not end with him referencing the Fifth Commandment. He instructs fathers of children, "do not goad your children to resentment, but give them the instruction, and the correction, which belong to a Christian upbringing" (NEB).<sup>11</sup> Fathers (Grk. *hoi pateres*, οἱ πατέρες) are specifically called out by name, and are not to "exasperate" (NIV) their sons or daughters. Maxie D. Dunnam describes the situation that many of us face *today*:

"The unthoughtful and irresponsible emphasis on permissiveness has created a desperate need in modern America to return to a strong emphasis on discipline and obedience in the home. Yet, the word of Paul, so radical in his day, and still the key to making the family what Christ would have it to be, is reciprocal respect between parents and children."<sup>12</sup>

While the lack of any discipline and consequences for disobedience seem to dominate much of our discussion today, such was not the case in the First Century world of Paul. On the contrary, harsh discipline of fathers toward their children seems to be what he is countering. How would this admonition against provoking children to anger counter how fathers would be allowed to treat their children? This is where we need not interject our Western (American) views of parent-child relationships, where fathers—even if stern—often do not try to make their children their enemies.

Paul was speaking to members of a society where the father had a great deal of leeway regarding how he could treat his children. Just as Paul telling the husband that he had to treat his wife the same as his own body (5:28), taking away the husband's absolutely authority, so too he takes away the father's absolute authority (Lat. *patria potestas*). *IVPBBC* explains that "children were often taught through beating, which was standard in child rearing and education; fathers were considered responsible for their education."<sup>13</sup> The Roman writer Dionysius explains,

"But the lawgiver of the Romans gave virtually full power to the father over his son, even during his whole life, whether he thought proper to imprison him, to scourge him, to put him in chains and keep him at work in the fields, or to put him to death, and this even though the

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<sup>10</sup> O'Brien, 444.

Consult the author's remarks in his commentary *Galatians for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>11</sup> Do note that "Christian" is an addition by the NEB, and does not appear in the source text of the verse.

<sup>12</sup> Dunnam, 232.

<sup>13</sup> Keener, *IVPBBC*, 552.

son were already engaged in public affairs, though he were numbered among the highest magistrates, and though he were celebrated for his zeal for the commonwealth. Indeed, in virtue of this law men of distinction, while delivering speeches from the rostra hostile to the senate and pleasing to the people, have been dragged down from thence and carried away by their fathers to undergo such punishment as these thought fit; and while they were being led away through the Forum, none present, neither consul, tribune, nor the very populace, which was flattered by them and thought all power inferior to its own, could rescue them” (*Roman Antiquities* 2.26.4).<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps most important to consider is how Dionysius further says, “not even at this point did the Roman lawgiver stop in giving the father power over the son, but he even allowed him to sell his son” (*Roman Antiquities* 2.27.1).<sup>15</sup> This kind of absolute authority that a father could exercise over his child, at least present in Ancient Rome, is exactly the kind of attitude that Paul wanted purged from the *ekklēsia*. Lincoln details,

“Weak and deformed children could be killed, usually by drowning, and unwanted daughters were often exposed or sold. All his children were to be reckoned to be under his control, not only those living with him, and also the children of his sons. The mother, on the other hand, had no legal power. The father’s power also carried responsibility, since he was legally liable for the actions of members of his household.”<sup>16</sup>

The vision of the Scriptures is for the home to be a place of love and encouragement to children, and not one where the father gets to do whatever he wants to his children, or even his grandchildren, as an autocrat with unbridled power. We can see how Paul’s admonition to non-Jewish fathers in Asia Minor could have been quite contrary to some of the sentiments of the surrounding Greco-Roman culture.

Harsh treatment of children was by no means limited to the Greeks or Romans, though. The Torah did allow for capital punishment to be enacted upon children who were rebellious and disobedient (Leviticus 20:9; Deuteronomy 21:18-21), and because of this a number of safeguards were in place within the Jewish community to see that such instructions would never have to be enacted. Philo would say that “what God is to the world...parents are to children” (*Special Laws* 2.225).<sup>17</sup> A section on child rearing that appears in the Apocrypha says, “He who loves his son will whip him often, in order that he may rejoice at the way he turns out” (Sirach 30:1ff). The tone in which Josephus speaks on the Fifth Commandment also cannot go unnoticed:

“The law ordains also, that parents should be honoured immediately after God himself, and delivers that son who does not requite them for the benefits he has received from them, but is deficient on any such occasion, to be stoned. It also says, that the young men should pay due respect to every elder, since God is the oldest of all beings” (*Against Apion* 2.206).<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Dionysius of Halicarnassus: *Roman Antiquities*, trans. Earnest Cary, Loeb Classical Library edition (1937-1950). Accessible online at <[http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dionysius\\_of\\_Halicarnassus/home.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Dionysius_of_Halicarnassus/home.html)>.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lincoln, 399.

<sup>17</sup> *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 589.

<sup>18</sup> *The Works of Josephus: Complete and Unabridged*, 807.

The Jewish view of child discipline is far less stringent than the traditional Roman view. Lincoln is correct to assert, “within Judaism...children were seen as gifts from God, a father had no rights over the lives of newborn children, and the pagan practices of abortion and exposure were attacked.”<sup>19</sup> Still, moderating some of the harsh treatment of children that could have manifested itself in the behavior of a father toward his son was necessary, if it were present among any of Ephesians’ Jewish audience. Rather than “beating the truth” into a child, a more constructive approach is taken by Paul.

Paul instructs fathers regarding children, “bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (KJV). The verb *ektrephō* (ἐκτρέφω) has appeared earlier in 5:29 about the Messiah nourishing the assembly, and is used here to speak of fathers raising their children. Similar actions of self-sacrifice that husbands are to demonstrate toward their wives (5:25) is also required toward children. The decree of Proverbs 22:6 is, “Train up a child in the way he should go, even when he is old he will not depart from it,” and the Torah commanded parents that God’s instruction be taught to children (Deuteronomy 4:9; 6:7; 11:19; 32:46). Discipline for disobedient children was to be present so that momentary punishment would keep them from eternal punishment, as Proverbs 23:13-14 advises, “Do not hold back discipline from the child, although you strike him with the rod, he will not die. You shall strike him with the rod and rescue his soul from Sheol.” Both Philo (*Hypothetica* 4.14) and Josephus (*Against Apion* 1.60) agree that the education of children was important to the Jewish people.

The late First-early Second Century Christian instruction, appearing in the *Didache*, echos much of what is seen in v. 4: “Do not neglect your responsibility to your son or your daughter, but from their youth you shall teach them to revere God” (*Didache* 4:9).

Within Paul’s encounter of First Century *Haustafel*, children are here expected to observe the Fifth Commandment, denoting that the Torah indeed does continue to affect Believers after the ministry of Yeshua. Fathers are expected to not be autocrats toward their children, but take up the responsibility to nurture and educate them in the Lord. Discipline was something surely to be enacted upon the disobedient, but it was to be tempered so that children would not resent their parents.

**5 Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Messiah; 6 not by way of eye service, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Messiah, doing the will of God from the heart. 7 With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, 8 knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.**

**6:5-8** This is often not an easy part of Paul’s instruction to understand, because it reflects an ancient society where slavery was a social norm. Oftentimes, modern interpreters try to extrapolate Paul’s words and apply them in a sense of employers needing to treat employees in a fair way. While not entirely inappropriate, one must attempt to understand what vs. 6-9 meant against their ancient background *first*. Likewise, we need not think that

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<sup>19</sup> Lincoln, 400.

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the eminent apostle is endorsing the practice of slavery. Witherington indicates, “This material is a perfect example, if taken in the wrong way (not recognizing the context and trajectory), of how a superficial treatment of the material will lead to conclusions opposite to what is intended.”<sup>20</sup>

Vs. 5-9 undeniably portray a societal setting where slavery was practiced, something that the Apostle Paul did not actively try to overthrow (1 Corinthians 7:21-22)—even though he did expect slaves to take freedom were the opportunity presented to them: “if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity” (1 Corinthians 7:21b, RSV). Lincoln reports on how “During the first century C.E. there was an increase in the ease and frequency of manumission, and this relieved the sort of pressures that might have provoked slave revolts. Domestic and urban slaves could expect to be manumitted as a reward for hard work after serving their owners to ten to twenty years.”<sup>21</sup> This environment of expectation would have made it easier for Paul to instruct slaves and slave owners, over and against an environment where slaves were not expecting any kind of freedom, save possibly death.

Just as he has addressed the way husbands are to treat their wives (5:21-33), and fathers their children (vs. 1-4), Paul addresses slave owners and slaves and how they are act toward one another. We have to remember that the slaves addressed are people here who were mainly members of a family unit of Believers (cf. 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10). O’Brien comments, “He is addressing himself to Christian readers. The issue was not that of an acceptance of an institution sanctioned by law and part of the fabric of Greco-Roman society; nor was it a question of how to react to a demand for its abolition. Rather, it concerned the tension between the freedom given in Christ (cf. Col. 3:11) and the ‘slavery’ in which Christian slaves are to continue to serve their earthly masters (cf. 1 Cor. 7:21-24).”<sup>22</sup>

It is far too tempting for many of us to read the experiences of Nineteenth Century American slavery into an ancient text of Scripture, a slavery that was of a different variety than those in the First Century Roman world. Most of the “slaves” being addressed in vs. 5-9 are those who were some kind of household domestics, responsible for cooking, cleaning, and maintaining the master’s estate. Lincoln instructs, “Modern readers need to free themselves from a number of assumptions about first-century slavery, including the assumptions that there was a wide separation between the status of slave and freedperson, that all slaves were badly treated, and that all who were enslaved were trying to free themselves from this bondage.”<sup>23</sup> For many slaves, their status within the home of their master meant that they had guaranteed food, clothing, and shelter. It has been estimated that perhaps as many as one-third to one-half of the total population in the Roman Empire at the time of Ephesians’ composition were slaves to some degree, somewhere around 60 million.

One of the main sentiments present about ancient slaves is seen in Aristotle, who said, “but there can be no friendship or justice towards inanimate things, and not even towards a horse or an ox, nor yet towards a slave *qua* slave; because there is nothing common to both

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<sup>20</sup> Witherington, 339.

<sup>21</sup> Lincoln, 417.

<sup>22</sup> O’Brien, 448.

<sup>23</sup> Lincoln, 416.

parties: the slave is a living tool in the same way that a tool is an inanimate slave” (*Nicomachean Ethics* 8.1161).<sup>24</sup> The Roman Seneca, a First Century figure, had views that were far more moderated. He expressed, “‘They’re slaves,’ people say. No. They’re human beings.... ‘They’re slaves.’ Strictly speaking they’re our fellow-slaves, if you once reflect that fortune has as much power over us as over them...I don’t want to involve myself in an endless topic of debate by discussing the treatment of slaves, towards whom we Romans are exceptionally arrogant, harsh and insulting. But the essence of the advice I’d like to give is this: treat your inferiors in the way in which you would like to be treated by your own superiors” (*Epistles* 47).<sup>25</sup> While Seneca did believe that slaveowners must treat their slaves with respect, his views were often those of only a few.

The Torah itself details regulations that were to guide the Ancient Israelites in the handling of their slaves. The Torah’s instructions regarding “slavery” largely relate to one’s economic status and inability to cover debt (regardless of race or ethnicity).<sup>26</sup> G.H. Haas notes, “Israelites who must sell themselves into bondservice (because of personal impoverishment or inability to pay a debt or a fine) are not permitted to be treated like foreign slaves. They may not be sold as chattel slaves to other masters. Their time of service to fellow Israelites is limited to six years, and to resident aliens it is limited to the Jubilee Year.”<sup>27</sup>

When one reviews the Torah’s instructions regarding slavery, one sees that male and female slaves were expected to participate in the Passover (Genesis 17:13; Exodus 12:44), rest on the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14), live wherever they please (Deuteronomy 23:15-16), and severe penalties are placed upon masters who abuse their slaves (Exodus 21:20-27). This kind of treatment was largely not seen in the Ancient Near East “where the people were defined as subjects of their king whose rule was mythologically grounded in the gods or who had some political right to rule over them.”<sup>28</sup> The vast majority of “slaves” that we see in Ancient Israel are what we would better define as indentured servants in financial straits, who indeed had certain rights. And even though there would be some differences between Israelite slaves and foreign slaves, Haas describes how “In contrast to the laws of other ancient Near Eastern nations, slaves who flee their owners and come to Israel are not to be returned to their masters, nor are they to be oppressed, but they are to be allowed to live wherever they please (Deut 23:15-16).”<sup>29</sup> The kind of slavery seen in Ancient Israel was much different than the bondage of the Israelites in Egypt prior to the Exodus.

Jewish literature contemporary to the period of Ephesians emphasizes how slaves were to be treated with respect, a view somewhat contrary to those of Greco-Roman classicism. Sirach 7:20-21 in the Apocrypha admonishes, “Do not abuse a servant who performs his work faithfully, or a hired laborer who devotes himself to you. Let your soul love an intelligent

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<sup>24</sup> Aristotle, *Ethics*, 278.

<sup>25</sup> Seneca: *Letters from a Stoic*, trans. Robin Campbell (London: Penguin Books, 2004), pp 90, 93.

<sup>26</sup> Note that both the Hebrew *eved* (עֶבֶד) and Greek *doulos* (δούλος) can be rendered as either “slave” or “servant,” contingent on context.

<sup>27</sup> G.H. Haas, “Slave, Slavery,” in T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, eds., *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 781.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 780.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 781.

servant; do not withhold from him his freedom.” Sirach 33:31 also says, “If you have a servant, treat him as a brother, for as your own soul you will need him. If you ill-treat him, and he leaves and runs away, which way will you go to seek him?” Philo said that the commandments in the Torah recommended slaveowners “to practice that gentleness and mildness towards their slaves, by which the inequality of their respective conditions is in some degree equalized” (*On the Decalogue* 167).<sup>30</sup>

**6:5** Paul’s instruction in Ephesians regarding slavery is consistent with sentiments seen in the Judaism of his time, with similar remarks seen by Romans like Seneca. He says, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear” (NIV). Witherington describes how “Exhorting slaves directly as moral agents is remarkable since normal Greco-Roman household counsel was directed only to the master.”<sup>31</sup> So already, just as the Torah originally afforded various rights to slaves, continuing to recognize them as people, **so does Paul**. The obedience that slaves were to demonstrate to their masters was not to be because of their own condition, but rather was to occur “with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ” (NIV). Rewards from God would come to slaves who would not try to revolt or disobey (Romans 14:12; 1 Corinthians 4:5; 2 Corinthians 5:10).

**6:6** Paul instructs slaves to obey their masters as an act of obedience to the Lord, “not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Messiah, doing the will of God from the heart.” Their obedience is to be motivated by the love they have for the Lord, as though they are accomplishing His will. Any kind of pleasing is a result of the love of God in the slave’s heart, not as trying to incur favors or treats. This ran contrary to a widescale Greek view of slavery, as Xenophon indicates, “where slaves are concerned, the training which is apparently designed only for lower animals is very effective for teaching obedience; for you’ll get plenty of results by gratifying their bellies in accordance with their desires” (*The Economist* 13.9-12).<sup>32</sup> From this standpoint, slaves were to be treated well and given food because they have been trained well like animals, perhaps with *slaves thinking* that they are not that much different than animals. So, in wanting to get slaves to think of their obedience to their masters as an act of obedience to the Lord, they would be forced to view themselves *as people of value* and not as well trained animals.

Also important to keep in mind is that domestic slaves, considered a part of the local home, were often expected to follow the religion of the family and worship the family’s gods. Their obedience to their owners as an act of obedience to the Lord would have been necessary in settings where a slave was a Believer, and a master was not. Lest we think that this was a major problem, Lincoln describes how “the principate Romans...became more tolerant about slaves’ participation in other cults, and there was considerable freedom for slaves to practice their own religion.”<sup>33</sup> If slaves were obedient to their duties, such slaveowners would have shown little interest in their religious affairs. R.P. Martin is right to

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<sup>30</sup> *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, 589.

<sup>31</sup> Witherington, 340.

<sup>32</sup> Xenophon: *Conversations of Socrates*, trans. Hugh Tredennick and Robin Waterfield (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 336.

<sup>33</sup> Lincoln, 419.

remind us, “Not all slave-owners were the monsters of popular imagination, however degrading the principle of the institution seems to us today.”<sup>34</sup>

6:7-8 Paul’s instruction to the slave is, “Do your work as slaves cheerfully, as though you served the Lord, and not merely human beings. Remember that the Lord will reward each of us...” (Good News Bible). Some have thought that Paul teaches for slaves to go beyond what their masters tell them, similar to Yeshua’s word “Whoever forces you to go one mile, go with him two” (Matthew 5:41). Certainly if slaves work with a happy demeanor, then they will receive benefits for this. But Paul is very unique in that not only does he say that the Lord will reward the slaves, but “whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether **slave or free**.<sup>35</sup>” Paul’s view of equality is that whether one is slave *or* free, the Lord *will reward both* according to their good works. Concurrent with this, some have thought that Yeshua’s teaching, “your Father who sees *what is done* in secret will reward you” (Matthew 6:6), could parallel what he has in mind for slaves to be rewarded—as they were not to seek rewards directly from their masters.

In his instructions to slaves, Paul does seek to change their motives for obedience. Rather than being the property of their owners, or some kind of well-trained animals desiring treats, slaves’ obedience was to be viewed as an act of service to God. For the most part, slaveowners who were Believers would be hearing this instruction as well, knowing that the same Lord who would reward the slave would also reward them. O’Brien rightly summarizes, “Christ’s lordship over the lives of both slaves and masters has the effect of changing the dynamic of the relationship between them and lifting their mutual attitudes and behavior to a new plane.”<sup>36</sup>

## **9 And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.**

6:9 While slaves were to demonstrate an obedience “in the sincerity of your heart” (v. 5), rendering “service, as to the Lord, and not to men” (v. 7), Paul’s view of mutual submission (5:21) does not only affect how slaves approach their masters—but also how masters approach their slaves! He is direct in stating, “masters, treat them the same way, without threatening them, because you know that both their and your Master is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with Him” (HCSB). The slaveowners were to show acts of goodness and kindness to their slaves, as works of obedience to God. The Lord Yeshua is Master<sup>37</sup> of the slaveowner *every bit as much as He is Master of the slave*. Paul instructs in Colossians 4:1, “Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in

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<sup>34</sup> Martin, in *NBCR*, 1122.

<sup>35</sup> Grk. *eite doulos eite eleutheros* (εἴτε δοῦλος εἴτε ἐλεύθερος).

<sup>36</sup> O’Brien, 456.

For a further examination on the practice of slavery, and its effects on Ephesians, consult Lincoln, pp 415-422.

<sup>37</sup> The NASU rendering of “M/master” for *kurios* (κύριος) is for stylistic reasons, as it is the same term more commonly rendered “L/lord.”

heaven.” Even if the family proper were Believers, and the slaves were pagans, upstanding treatment of slaves would have been required as a testimony to the slaves of the gospel and the love of Yeshua emanating from the heart.

Suggesting that slaves were the spiritual equals of their masters was something quite rare in the ancient world (i.e., Job 31:13-15).<sup>38</sup> The Lord Himself as the Master of both the slave and the slaveowner will judge them both according to the same standard. In v. 9, Paul says that how masters treat their slaves will be something to which He will hold them to account, and he is quite serious when he says “Do not threaten them” (NIV). The *Didache* will later say, “Do not be harsh in giving orders to your slaves and slave girls. They hope in the same God as you, and the result may be that they cease to revere the God over you both. For when he comes to call us, he will not respect our station, but will call those whom the Spirit has made ready” (*Didache* 4:10). The proper relation of slave and master is something further explicated by Paul in his letter to Philemon.<sup>39</sup>

The fact that God does not show partiality to any person is a concept seen elsewhere in the Apostolic Scriptures (Acts 10:34), and within Paul’s letters (Romans 2:11; Colossians 3:25-4:1). This is true regardless if one is Jewish, non-Jewish, or in this case slave or free. James 5:4 could also be added to our discussion, where it is said, “Behold, the pay of the laborers who mowed your fields, *and* which has been withheld by you, cries out *against you*; and the outcry of those who did the harvesting has reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.” Here, employers who fail to pay their employees are specifically targeted by James as those who will incur Divine punishment. The Tanach itself implores that God is One who does not show partiality, as 2 Chronicles 19:7 says, “Now then let the fear of the LORD be upon you; be very careful what you do, for the LORD our God will have no part in unrighteousness or partiality or the taking of a bribe.” All are going to be judged by Him because of their conduct, and their human status is meaningless. What is meaningful is how people act toward one another given their status.

It is admittedly difficult for us to deal with verses like 5-9, because Paul is addressing the circumstances of his day, and *primarily* not the circumstances of *our day*. Slavery was a major part of the ancient world, clearly witnessed in the Bible. Not “even a violent revolution could have ended slavery in the Roman Empire” (*IVPBBC*).<sup>40</sup> With this in mind, what we see Paul primarily doing here is significantly moderating even Jewish sentiments of masters toward slaves, radically reforming the institution as one of the slave obeying the Lord by obeying his master, and one of the master treating his slave with respect, knowing that he as slaveowner is owned by the Lord. Paul’s position on the equality of all persons in the Lord (Galatians 3:28), and the necessity of masters treating their slaves properly, does show us where he would have stood on the issue of abolition would it have ever presented itself in the First Century. In the words of O’Brien, “What is remarkable here is that Paul directly exhorts slaves

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<sup>38</sup> “If I have despised the claim of my male or female slaves when they filed a complaint against me, what then could I do when God arises? And when He calls me to account, what will I answer Him? Did not He who made me in the womb make him, and the same one fashion us in the womb?” (Job 31:13-15).

<sup>39</sup> Consult the author’s entry for the Epistle to Philemon in *A Survey of the Apostolic Scriptures for the Practical Messianic*, and his commentary *Colossians and Philemon for the Practical Messianic*.

<sup>40</sup> Keener, *IVPBBC*, 553.

in a manner that is unprecedented, for in traditional discussions of household management the focus of attention was on how a master should rule his slaves.”<sup>41</sup> What makes Paul so significant is in his simple assertion: **slaves are people too, with great value in the eyes of God.**

**10 Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might. 11 Put on the full armor of God, so that you will be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil. 12 For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the powers, against the world forces of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of wickedness in the heavenly places.**

**6:10-17** Vs. 10-24 finish Paul’s letter, and they return us to the theme of Divine power that began his words to the audience. Vs. 10-17, in particular, detail the concept of “the full armor of God,” where the people of God are portrayed as participating in a struggle against Satan’s army of darkness. Martin indicates, “The battle motif is now introduced, as the Christian lives as it were in a no-man’s-land between the opposing forces of *God* and *the devil*.”<sup>42</sup> As O’Brien summarizes the scene that Paul will depict in this closing section, “Throughout this paragraph on spiritual warfare Paul’s sustained imagery is drawn from a prophecy of Isaiah, which describes the armour of Yahweh and his Messiah (11:4-5; 59:17; cf. 49:2; 52:7). The Isaianic references depict the Lord of hosts as a warrior dressed for battle as he goes forth to vindicate his people.”<sup>43</sup>

**6:10** Paul first exhorts his audience here, “Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of His might.” The Tanach certainly exhorts the people of God to be strong in Him, as seen in the examples of His commissioning of Joshua (Deuteronomy 31:6-7, 23; Joshua 1:6-7, 9), David having to seek His strength (1 Samuel 30:6), and His promise to strengthen a restored Israel (Zechariah 10:12). A part of being strong, according to Paul, is that God’s people need to put on and employ some specific armor. Many interpreters have viewed vs. 10-17 as Paul’s reflection on being guarded by a Roman soldier awaiting trial (Acts 28:16, 20). Witherington sees *both* the Lord’s armor and the standard armor of a Roman soldier as being sources of Paul for this passage.<sup>44</sup> Some have even seen hints at the author employing a call to battle similar to that of ancient generals like Cyrus, Hannibal, Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and others.<sup>45</sup> Lincoln comments, “the writer’s combination and adaptation of OT

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<sup>41</sup> O’Brien, pp 448-449.

<sup>42</sup> Martin, in *NBCR*, 1122.

<sup>43</sup> O’Brien, 457.

<sup>44</sup> Witherington, 349.

<sup>45</sup> Lincoln, 433 specifies,

“Among the topics dwelt on in these speeches are the soldiers’ heritage, including their glorious achievements in the past, an exhortation not to disgrace this heritage by suffering defeat, a comparison with enemy forces with a reminder that it is ultimately valor and not numbers that will prevail, a detailing of the prizes that await the victors, a pointing to favorable auspices and to the gods as allies, an appeal to patriotism, a reminder that the enemy has been conquered before, a depicting of the wrongs inflicted by the enemy, and praise of the commander as superior to the leaders of the opposing forces.”