

From Genesis to the Antebellum South

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There is a bumper sticker that reads, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it". This may seem like a harmless statement, but there was once a time in American history that this statement could have been proclaimed by many of the slaveholders of the antebellum south. The idea of using the Bible to support slavery had always been present in America since the time of the Revolution, but it really took center stage during the period between 1830-1860. When the slavery issue became more and more heated, pro-slavery defenders looked to the Bible to provide the real "truth" about God's position on slavery. The Bible can be an extremely inspiring book and at the same time, if read literally, can support even the most evil of deeds, such as slavery.

Many pro-slavery advocates really knew their scripture. It was clear that slavery was present in the Bible, and many of them used this as the basis of their argument for defending slavery. Defenders of slavery usually relied on several different areas of the Bible to support their claim. The fact that Abraham owned hundreds of slaves was usually quickly pointed out, along with Noah's curse of Ham, the missionary work of Christ which never openly condemned slavery and the letters of Saint Paul. These men were able to intertwine these different passages from scripture to prove that slavery was not sinful in the eyes of God. As the debate over slavery became more and more heated, these advocates of slavery dived deeper and deeper into their Bible. While abolitionists in the North denouncing slavery on moral grounds, these men were able to use their knowledge of the Bible in a way that almost turned the tables on their accusers. By casting themselves as carrying out God's will, they were able to accurately quote scripture as a way to both defend slavery and denounce the abolitionists.

Slavery has existed in almost every society from the times of antiquity to the antebellum South in the United States. Some people denounced slavery, while most accepted it as the way things were. Although slavery did not always have an ethnical or racial connotation, it was usually reserved for the lowest people in a society. From antiquity to the Jewish and Greek philosophies, slavery became associated as a punishment resulting from sin.<sup>1</sup> The idea of leaving human bondage to the decision of God, can clearly be seen by the words of Saint Augustine. According to Augustine, slavery was “a remedy as well as a penalty for sin, and it was God who bore the direct responsibility for appointing both masters and slaves.”<sup>2</sup>

As slavery began to flourish in the Southern states, many proslavery responses began to surface as well. Slavery was portrayed as something that helped the South economically while at the same time helped control an inferior race. One major component of the slaveholders’ philosophy was the ideas surrounding family and authority. By forming the slave institution like a “black family,” which often had the master as the head father figure, these men were able to justify in their minds that what they were doing was benefiting everyone involved.<sup>3</sup> When this “black family” worked together, it was clear that the only winners were the owners and other whites involved. Slaveholders would promote this unity so that they could achieve the highest economic profits possible.

Southerners also employed arguments asserting the importance of uncompensated labor as a vital part of their economy. Economically, slavery benefited the Southern

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<sup>1</sup> David B. Davis, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), 91.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>3</sup> Eugene D. Genovese, *The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969), 196.

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plantation owners directly and at the same time benefited Northerners indirectly because of the cheaper price of raw materials. The New England textile mills depended almost exclusively on the cotton grown on Southern plantations that were employed by slaves.<sup>4</sup> Although owners invested a good deal of capital in purchasing slaves, the labor this workforce provided was still far below free market labor costs. Excluding slaves, Southern slavery benefited almost every person that was involved. Economically, antislavery advocates could not make much of a case against slavery. Since Northern industries were growing because of the cheap raw materials provided from the South, the abolition of slavery would have an extremely negative impact on the economy in the North. Economic arguments defending slavery were strong in the South because they were not easily refuted from abolitionists in the North. To many Southerners, slaves were only there to benefit their masters because they were a sort of subhuman race.

To most Southerners and many Northerners, Africans were not on the same level as whites. The ideas of scientific African inferiority started to surface as a way to explain why Africans were the way they were. Scientists and theorists in the eighteenth century made it known that “the white man was the norm, the Negro the deviation.”<sup>5</sup> When more and more theories began to surface connecting man and apes, some academics claimed that “Negroes must be a different species from the rest of mankind.”<sup>6</sup> Although these “scientific” claims were often based on physical features such as hair and skin color they gained credibility because they were supported by many well-educated men. Ideas of a polygenic creation also helped the biblical support for slavery which concluded that

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<sup>4</sup> Mason I. Lowance Jr., ed., *A House Divided: The Antebellum Slavery Debates in America, 1776-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 117.

<sup>5</sup> Davis, 456.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 454.

Africans were indeed not part of the same blood as Adam and Eve.<sup>7</sup> Science and religion were often intertwined, and the ideas of scientific racism only helped the proslavery cause. As scientists around the nation began supporting this classification of Blacks, the religious proslavery argument gained the academic “proof” that it needed to bolster its argument.

“HAD THERE BEEN NO MORAL CONDEMNATION OF SLAVERY,  
THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN NO WAR.”

When the North began its direct attack on slavery in the 1830s, there was a drastic change in the pro-slavery movement throughout the entire country. As abolitionists began their barrage against the slaveholders, the pro-slavery argument shifted to much more of a religious standpoint by using the exact book that the abolitionists were using to denounce it; the Bible. Historian Larry E. Tise conducted a major study of proslavery literature from 1701- 1865 by sampling 275 proslavery publications. Tise pointed out that as the abolitionists made claims questioning the morality of slavery; the South had no better response but to turn to their Bibles. Tise goes on to explain that there were only 22 major arguments in favor of slavery that referred to the Bible between 1800-1831. After the 1831 publication of William Lloyd Garrison’s *The Liberator*, southern proslavery advocates went on the offensive. Tise adds that “from the perspective of moral sciences no argument was more important for the proslavery case than that proving the biblical authorization for American Slavery.” From 1831-1861, the number of proslavery arguments that included a reference to the Bible increased to over 180. The works that

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<sup>7</sup> Lowance, 249.

Tise sampled showed that the writers favored the New Testament at a ratio of 3:2.<sup>8</sup> Although slavery was more explicitly sanctioned in the Old Testament, these new proslavery arguments wanted to focus more on the New Testament as a way to refute the claims by the abolitionists that claimed slavery was in opposition to Christianity. These proslavery writers claimed to be God-fearing Christians, and they wanted everyone to know that they were simply following the examples set by God in the Bible and not the opinions of the abolitionists.

The men that were quoting scripture to support slavery were very well-educated men and they were well prepared to defend slavery by using Scripture. Out of all authors surveyed in Tise's study, nine out of ten had obtained grammar and secondary school educations and three out of four also attended a college or university.<sup>9</sup> Mason I. Lowance states that often times the antislavery ministers were "restricted to moral and ethical arguments."<sup>10</sup> Instead of relying on rhetorical messages, the proslavery writers were able to quote exact books and verses from the Bible that, in their minds, explicitly proved God had sanctioned slavery Himself.

Slavery was imbedded in the deepest roots of the South. A denunciation of slavery was a direct attack on the Southern people as a whole. There are little [few] things these people took more seriously than their religion. Slavery played a bigger role than any other single factor as a cause of the Civil War. Historian Sidney Ahlstrom points out that "had there been no moral condemnation of slavery, there would have been

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<sup>8</sup> Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 115-117.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>10</sup> Lowance, 55.

no war.”<sup>11</sup> Slaveholders had already convinced themselves that slavery was right in both their eyes and the eyes of God. Historian Drew Gilpin Faust adds that slaveholders were “less troubled about whether slavery was right than precisely why it was right and how its justice could best be demonstrated.”<sup>12</sup> When the abolitionists from the North began evaluating and criticizing Southern slavery, many proslavery writers knew that they had to look no farther than their Bible to find their rebuttal.

Because of the advantage these men held over the antislavery advocates in regard to the biblical justifications of slavery, the proslavery mainstream kept the Bible as the core of their defense.<sup>13</sup> This paper will examine just how these men were able to use the Bible so adamantly for their cause while at the same time rebutting and denouncing the abolitionists. Instead of the abolitionists looking down on the Southerners for condoning slavery, the proslavery advocates were able to turn the tables on them and cast them as the ones that were opposing God’s will that was specifically laid out in both the New and the Old Testaments.

“WE TAKE THE BIBLE OF GOD AS OUR GUIDE;  
AND TO ITS PLAIN TEACHINGS WE CONFIDENTLY APPEAL.”

If it was in the Bible, it was the infallible truth to the vast majority of slavery advocates. This is made known explicitly during a public debate on slavery in Cincinnati during the fall of 1845. The debate was between Rev. Jonathan Blanchard, who was an

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<sup>11</sup> Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), 649.

<sup>12</sup> Drew Gilpin Faust, ed., *The Ideology Of Slavery* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981), 6.

<sup>13</sup> Faust, 10.

antislavery advocate, and N.L. Rice, who supported slavery. These two men engaged in a series of 16 debates over four days. Rice made it known from the start that the Bible was like a “light to his feet and a lamp to his path.” He continued to explain that if you took away his Bible, he “can do nothing.”<sup>14</sup> Rice wanted his listeners and readers to make no mistake that biblical evidence trumped any other argument. He clearly stated this in his first speech of the series when he proclaimed that, “we take the Bible of God as our guide; and it its plain teachings we confidently appeal.”<sup>15</sup> This notion that the Bible was the absolute truth resurfaces again and again in almost all of the proslavery literature researched for this essay.

Slavery proponents made the Bible their primary source of argumentation because it offered, from their vantage point, the most convincing proof that slavery was sanctioned by God and therefore could not be a sin or crime. Because slavery was present in much of the Bible, these men felt that “slavery is inseparably connected with Gospel Church government.”<sup>16</sup> To these men, if one strayed from the biblical teachings on slavery, one would soon stray from the Bible. The Bible was the only way these men could “determine which side of the question God and justice is on.”<sup>17</sup> If the Bible clearly sanctioned slavery, then the moral question would cease to exist. As the abolitionists

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<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Blanchard and N.L. Rice, *A Debate on Slavery* (Cincinnati: Wm. H. Moore & Co., Publishers, 1846; reprint, New York: Arno Press, Inc., 1969), 251.

<sup>15</sup> Blanchard and Rice, 41.

<sup>16</sup> Southern Clergyman, *A Defences of Southern Slavery Against the Attacks of Henry Clay and Alex'r Campbell*, in *A Defense of Southern Slavery and Other Pamphlets* (n.p. 1835-1863; reprint, New York: Negro University Press, 1969), 6.

<sup>17</sup> Bryan Tyson, *The Institution of Slavery in the Southern States, Religiously and Morally Considers in Connections with Our Sectional Troubles*, in *A Defense of Southern Slavery and Other Pamphlets*, 3.

continued their onslaught against the proslavery defenders in both the North and the South, supporters of slavery continued to “look to a higher and far purer source.”<sup>18</sup>

To these slavery supporters, the question of slavery in light of the Bible was much more important than looking at slavery through the eyes of man. Since the Church was seen in such a light, it was understood that “the Bible, and the Bible alone, is her rule of faith and practice.” The Church can “announce what it teaches,...[and] prohibit what it condemns.” To them, the Church could never go beyond or apart from the Bible.<sup>19</sup> Since slavery was clearly present though not condemned in the Bible, it was only right that the Church and its members follow the Bible accordingly. Proslavery ministers were comfortable with their role in condoning slavery because to them it was no different than any other subject in the Bible. They felt that ministers preached about slavery “as freely as they do the doctrine of God’s word on any other subject.”<sup>20</sup>

Slavery was often seen as a moral question first before it was looked at from any other perspective. To the proslavery advocates, “all other considerations will weigh little with him [a Christian man] compared with its moral character and moral influences.”<sup>21</sup> By putting themselves in the position for only using the Bible as their rebuttal, these men were able guide slavery debates in a way that benefited them the most. Before debating on the moral question of slavery, these men would make it known that they “recognize no

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<sup>18</sup> James Kirk Paulding, *Slavery in the United States* (Harper & Brothers, 1836; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 14.

<sup>19</sup> George Armstrong, *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery* (n.p. 1857; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 7.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>21</sup> Charles Hodge, D.D., *The Bible Argument on Slavery*, in Ebenezer Newton Elliot, ed., *Cotton Is King, and Pro-Slavery Arguments: Comprising the Writings of Hammond, Harper, Christy, Stringfellow, Hodge, Bledsoe, and Cartwright, on This Important Subject* (Augusta, Ga.: Pritchard, Abbott & Loomis, 1860; reprint, New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968) 846.

authoritative rule of truth and duty but the word of God.”<sup>22</sup> Defenders of slavery deemed most arguments null and void if they were not supported by scripture, and in the case of slavery, scripture was on their side.

By commonly referring to the numerous references to slavery throughout the Bible, the proslavery advocates were able to support their cause in ways the antislavery crusaders could not. According to them, it would be “vain to contend that slaveholding is a sin, and yet profess reverence to scriptures.”<sup>23</sup> These men did not use their Bibles as much to defend that slavery *was not* sinful but rather to prove *why* it was not sinful. Most of these men probably professed to have a clear conscience when it came to the issue of slavery because they based the majority of their argument on what the Bible had to say on the matter. Because they accepted the “Bible terms as the definition of slavery, and its precepts as the guide of [their] conduct,”<sup>24</sup> they had no problem whatsoever using their Bibles to prove that slavery was and has never been seen as sinful in the eyes of God. The changing public opinion that was trickling into their society was to be seen as an after thought because these opinions were based on the word of man and not God. Alexander McCaine may have captured the overall sentiment of religious slavery defenders best when he said, “it is not popular opinion-it is not the law of the land- but it is the world of God that I receive as the standard of morals. It is this, and his alone, which determines what is great moral evil and what is not.”<sup>25</sup> These men made it clear

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 847.

<sup>23</sup> Hodge, 860.

<sup>24</sup> *The Pro-slavery Argument: as Maintained by the Most Distinguished Writers of the Southern States, Containing the Several Essays on the Subject, of Chancellor Harper, Governor Hammond, Dr. Simms, and Professor Dew*(Chareston: Walker, Richards & Co., 1852; reprint, New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), 108.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander McCaine. *Slavery Defended from Scripture against the Attacks of the Abolitionists, in a Speech Delivered before the General Conference of the Methodist Protestant Church in Baltimore, 1842*, in Mason I. Lowance, Jr., ed., *A House Divided*, 86.

that opinions were always changing, but the word of God is something that remained constant.

By contrast, the antislavery rhetoric used by the abolitionists was often based on the moral teachings of Jesus. To them, the actions of Jesus spoke louder than any of the words he ever said, or in the case of slavery, did not say. By using anecdotal moral examples rather than literal scriptural text, they tried to show that slavery was in fact sinful. Abolitionist would often cite that all men were members of the “same great family” that shared a “universal parent.”<sup>26</sup> The Bible was written thousands of years ago, and a lot had changed since the time of Jesus. Abolitionists felt it was their duty to follow the moral and ethical examples left by Jesus in a way that would help emancipate slaves. This argument often lacked sufficient biblical quotes, which often left them at a disadvantage when the debate over slavery focused on words in the Bible [and not it’s moral teachings.

The men that used scripture to defend slavery defending slavery were often highly respected in their church and community. Whether they were doctors, lawyers or most importantly ministers, when these men spoke, people listened. The arguments that are going to be laid out are those put forth by some of the most prominent proslavery writers during the time period. Their words were heard or read by many people in both the North and the South. These men knew their Bible like the back of their hand, and the way they used different passages was an example of their theological knowledge as well as their clever use of words. The passages they quoted were the same passages that could be found in any Bible in the world. They did not paraphrase or look for deeper meanings

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<sup>26</sup> Alexander McLeod, *Negro Slavery Unjustifiable*, Edinburgh, 1846, in Mason I. Lowance, Jr., ed., *A House Divided*, 107.

but rather took the Bible at face value. The fact that Abraham owned hundreds or even thousands of slaves was known by both the abolitionists and the slavery supporters. The idea of owning slaves was not as significant of a question to them because they did not feel that owning the slaves is something that was in question. The deeper question was *why* owning slaves was acceptable when one used the Bible as their main source. They had already convinced themselves that God had sanctioned slavery, and it was now their time to convince anyone else that wanted to read or hear what they had to say.

When analyzing Old Testament texts, proslavery defenders accepted every word for its literal meaning. Abolitionists would often shy away from the Old Testament because it was clear that slavery was sanctioned throughout many of its books. When abolitionists interpreted Old Testament readings, they would often do so in light of the New Testament. They would make it clear that there was an obvious difference between the Old and New Testaments and that Christians were more obliged to follow the New Testament since it focused on the life of Jesus and His disciples. However, the fact that slavery defenders were able to use both the New and the Old Testaments only helped strengthen their case. To them, the Old Testament was as relevant to a true Christian as the New Testament, and each should be embraced with equal reverence.

“THE PROPHECY OF NOAH IS THE  
*VADE MECUM* OF SLAVEHOLDERS.”

Noah’s curse upon his son Ham was used at some point by almost every religious proslavery advocate. This passage, which is found in Genesis 9:20-27, was used to explain slavery as a whole and also to assign slavery to the African people. Theodore

Weld, one of the most prominent antislavery crusaders, commented in his widely known publication of *The Bible Against Slavery*, that “the prophecy of Noah is the Vade Mecum of slaveholders, and they never venture abroad without it.”<sup>27</sup> By having a biblical passage that not only sanctioned slavery, but specifically African enslavement, many of these proslavery writers played this card as many times as they could. In the passage, Ham witnesses his father Noah naked inside his tent. Ham then goes out of the tent and tells his older brothers, Shem and Japheth what he has seen. Shem and Japheth then enter the tent without seeing their father’s nakedness and put a robe on their father’s back. Noah becomes extremely angry that his youngest son Ham did nothing to honor his father, and exclaims, “Cursed be Canaan (the son of Ham)! The lowest of slaves shall be to his brothers. . . Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem! Let Canaan be his slave. May God expand Japheth, so that he dwells among the tents of Shem; and let Canaan be his slave”.

There was no better example of an obedient patriarch than Noah himself. Southerners viewed Noah as God’s delegate to the world after the flood but also as “the patron saint of plantation life.”<sup>28</sup> Family unity and dignity was extremely important to the South, and Ham directly violated his family’s honor and loyalty. Because Ham was dishonorable to Noah, any punishment Noah saw fit was just. God’s law was put into action by Noah and as James Furman, a southern Baptist member and slaveholder explained, “We who hold slaves, honor God’s law in the exercise of our authority.”<sup>29</sup> To

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<sup>27</sup> Theodore Weld, *The Bible Against Slavery: An Inquiry into the Patriarchal and Mosaic Systems on the Subject of Human Rights* (New York, 1838), 66.

<sup>28</sup> Stephen R. Haynes, *Noah’s Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 69.

<sup>29</sup> James C. Furman to W.E. Bailey, December 18, 1848, Furman Papers, Furman University, cited in Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977), 179.

them, it was a Christian duty to display God's laws by exercising one's right to authority through slavery.

Proslavery advocates were able to use the biblical passage of Noah's Curse as a way to explain the hierarchy of the different human races. Shem and Japheth were honorable and loyal when they covered their naked father. Shem and Japheth did not fall into sin like their younger brother Ham. For this, they were blessed by Noah. Proslavery advocates were able to use Noah's three sons to characterize the different races: The White/Japhetic race, the Red/Shemetic race, and lastly the Black/Hamitic race. They stated that Genesis 9:26-27 specifically calls for Shem to rule over Ham and Japheth to rule over them both. The universal southern acceptance that the African people were the direct ancestors of Ham made these racial distinctions easier to accept for many proslavery advocates.

Dr. Samuel A. Cartwright, a writer and physician that practiced in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, even took these connections among Shem, Japheth, and Ham to a whole new level. Dr Cartwright suggested that the entire discovery of the New World fulfilled Noah's curse. Japheth's land was truly enlarged when he discovered the American continent. He "literally dwelt in the tents of Shem in Mexico" and then fulfilled the destiny of the Hamites when he made them into his servants.<sup>30</sup> By fulfilling this prophetic curse, the Japhetic people (Whites) were following God's will as He has ascribed over 3500 years ago. If religious slavery supporters could use Genesis 9:20-27 to make a correlation between Japheth and whites, then they definitely could make an even stronger connection between Ham, Africans, and slavery.

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<sup>30</sup> Samuel A. Cartwright, *Essays* (Vidalia, La: n.p. 1843), pp. 7-8, cited in William Sumner Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: 1935; reprint, 1960), 205.

Genesis 9: 20-27 was also used by the proslavery defenders as a way to link the name of Ham, who was cursed by Noah, to skin color of Africans. Samuel Dunwody, a preacher and slaveholder from South Carolina, was quick to point out in many of his sermons that the very name Ham stems from the Hebrew word that “signifies burnt or black.”<sup>31</sup> Josiah Priest, who was one of the most outspoken pro-slavery advocates, explains that God specifically created the Black race on purpose. Noah would never have given the name Ham to his youngest son if he did not have black skin.<sup>32</sup> Southern Evangelicals were quite aware of the use of etymology in the Bible, and many came to the conclusion that Ham’s name alone was almost enough evidence to place the connotation of black skin upon him. They felt that since Noah was also one of God’s greatest prophets, he must have been able to foresee that Blacks would eventually end up in slavery in America.

The most important factor of Genesis 9:20-27 is that it incorporated two major facets of southern ideology; racial prejudice and the defense of slavery. There were other passages in the both Testaments that gave less ambiguous support to slavery, but there was never a way to tie in the ideas of race. Jews and early Christians all had slaves, but they were based more on class than on race. It was just as easy for a white man to be a slave as it was for a black man. Slaveholders would conveniently overlook this fact when they were making their arguments for slavery. By making the connection between Ham and people of African decent, southern Evangelicals could fully rationalize their position in respect to the word of God. This passage combined the strict adherence to the Bible

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Dunwody, *A Sermon Upon the Subject of Slavery* (Columbia, S.C., 1837), 4, cited in H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But... Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972), 131.

<sup>32</sup> Josiah Priest, *Slavery as It Relates to the Negro or African Race* (Albany: C. Van Benthuysen and Co., 1842; reprint, New York: Arno Press Inc., 1977), 27.

that many southern evangelicals prided themselves on and also the ideas of racism that were rooted deep into the hearts of these individuals.

“I AM NOT COME TO DESTROY, BUT TO FULFILL.”

The way proslavery advocates looked at the New Testament differed from the way they interpreted the Old Testament. Since slavery was never condemned and rarely talked about in the New Testament, they used a negative logical argument as a way to prove slavery was still in accordance with God’s will. Passages from the Old Testament were much easier to interpret since there were explicit instructions and references to a slave world, but this same reasoning became much more difficult when they turned to the New Testament because slavery became much vaguer. Yet, while references to slavery rarely appear in the Gospel, its defenders argued that if Christ or Paul did not openly condemn slavery, it must have been an issue of little importance in the eyes of God.

As proslavery supporters transitioned into the New Testament, they made it known that any rules that were sanctioned in the Old Testament were still implemented unless they were specifically denounced. Jesus spoke the words Himself during the Sermon on the Mount. In Matthew 5:17, Jesus professed that “I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill.” The coming of Jesus did not make the lessons from the Old Testament void, it made them stronger. The arguments justifying slavery only got stronger when the New Testament was cited.

The first and foremost area of concern many proslavery advocates made known was that “Christianity is a revision of the code of the Old Testament, and not a new

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