

# Dismantling the myth that ancient slavery 'wasn't that bad'

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As someone who researches [slavery in the ancient Mediterranean world](#), especially in the Bible, I often hear remarks like, "Slavery was totally different back then, right?" "Well, it couldn't have been that bad."

"Couldn't slaves buy their freedom?"

Most people in the United States or Europe in the 21st century are more knowledgeable about the transatlantic slave trade, and live in societies [deeply shaped by it](#). People can see the effects of modern enslavement everywhere from [mass incarceration](#) and [housing segregation](#) to [voting habits](#).

The effects of ancient [slavery](#), on the other hand, aren't as tangible today—and most Americans have only a vague idea of what it looked like. Some people might think of biblical stories, such as Joseph's jealous brothers [selling him into slavery](#). Others might picture movies like "Spartacus," or the myth that enslaved people [built the Egyptian pyramids](#).

Because these kinds of slavery took place so long ago and weren't based on modern racism, some people have the impression that [they weren't as harsh or violent](#). That impression makes room for public figures like Christian theologian and analytic philosopher William Lane Craig to argue that [ancient slavery was actually beneficial](#) for enslaved people.

Modern factors [like capitalism](#) and [racist pseudoscience](#) did shape the transatlantic slave trade in uniquely harrowing and enduring ways. Enslaved labor, for example, [shaped economists' theories](#) about the "free market" and global trade.

But to understand slavery from that era—or to combat slavery today—we also need to understand the longer history of involuntary labor. As [a scholar of ancient slavery and early Christian history](#), I often encounter three myths that stand in the way of understanding ancient slavery and how systems of enslavement have evolved over time.

## **Myth No. 1: There is one kind of 'biblical slavery'**

The collection of texts that ended up in the Bible represent centuries of different writers from across the Mediterranean and Mesopotamia, often in very different circumstances, making it hard to generalize about how slavery worked in "biblical" societies. Most importantly, [the Hebrew Bible](#)—what Christians call "the Old Testament"—emerged primarily in the ancient Near East, while the New Testament emerged in the early Roman Empire.

Forms of enslavement and involuntary labor in the ancient Near East, for example—areas such as Egypt, Syria and Iran—were not always chattel slavery, in which enslaved people were considered property. Rather, some people were temporarily enslaved [to pay off their debts](#).

However, this was not the case for all people enslaved in the ancient Near East, and certainly not [under the late Roman Republic and early Roman Empire](#), where millions were trafficked and forced to labor in domestic, urban and agricultural settings.

Because of the range of periods and cultures involved in the production of biblical literature, there is no such thing as a single "biblical slavery."

Nor is there a single "biblical perspective" on slavery. The most anyone can say is that no biblical texts or writers explicitly condemn the institution of enslavement or the practice of chattel slavery. More robust challenges to slavery by Christians started to emerge in the fourth century C.E., in the writings of figures like St. [Gregory of Nyssa](#), a theologian who lived in Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey.

## **Myth No. 2: Ancient slavery was not as cruel**

Like Myth No. 1, this myth often comes from conflating some Near Eastern and Egyptian practices of involuntary labor, such as debt slavery,

with Greek and Roman chattel slavery. By focusing on other forms of involuntary labor in specific ancient cultures, it is easy to overlook the widespread practice of chattel slavery and its harshness.

However, across the ancient Mediterranean, there is evidence of a variety of horrific practices: [branding](#), whipping, bodily disfiguration, [sexual assault](#), torture during legal trials, incarceration, crucifixion and more. In fact, [a Latin inscription from Puteoli](#), an ancient city near Naples, Italy, recounts what enslavers could pay undertakers to whip or crucify enslaved people.

Christians were not exempt from participating in this cruelty. Archaeologists have found collars from Italy and North Africa that enslavers [placed upon their enslaved people](#), offering a price for their return if they fled. Some of these collars bear Christian symbols like the chi-rho (☩), which combines the first two letters of Jesus' name in Greek. One collar mentions that the enslaved person needs to be returned to their enslaver, "[Felix the archdeacon](#)."

It's difficult to apply contemporary moral standards to earlier eras, not least societies thousands of years ago. But even in an ancient world in which slavery [was ever present](#), it is clear not everyone bought into the ideology of the elite enslavers. There are records of multiple slave rebellions in Greece and Italy—most famously, that of the [escaped gladiator Spartacus](#).

### **Myth No. 3: Ancient slavery wasn't discriminatory**

Slavery in the ancient Mediterranean wasn't based on race or skin color in the same way as the [transatlantic slave trade](#), but this doesn't mean ancient systems of enslavement weren't discriminatory.

Much of the history of Greek and Roman slavery involves enslaving

people [from other groups](#): Athenians enslaving non-Athenians, Spartans enslaving non-Spartans, Romans enslaving non-Romans. Often captured or defeated through warfare, such enslaved people were either forcibly migrated to a new area or were kept on their ancestral land and compelled to do farmwork or be domestic workers for their conquerors. Roman law required a slave's "natio," or place of origin, to be [announced during auctions](#).

Ancient Mediterranean enslavers prioritized the purchase of people from different parts of the world on account of stereotypes about their various characteristics. Varro, a scholar who wrote about [the management of agriculture](#), argued that an enslaver shouldn't have too many enslaved people who were from the same nation or who could speak the same language, because they might organize and rebel.

Ancient slavery still depended on categorizing some groups of people as "others," treating them as though they were wholly different from those who enslaved them.

The picture of slavery that most Americans are familiar with was deeply shaped by its time, particularly modern racism and capitalism. But other forms of slavery throughout human history were no less "real." Understanding them and their causes may help challenge slavery today and in the future—especially at a time when some politicians are again claiming transatlantic slavery actually [benefited enslaved people](#).

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