

PECULIAR HISTORY IN *SLAVERY AS IT WAS*

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When Kenneth Stampp titled his famous work on Southern slavery *The Peculiar Institution*, he referred to a description of slavery attributed to Southerners themselves. Slavery was peculiar even to Southerners for reasons with which we all are familiar. It was a system of bondage in the land of freedom. It institutionalized subservience to power in a nation that had rebelled against such subservience. It denied personal sovereignty to a class of people under a Constitution grounded in the principle of personal sovereignty. Slavery was peculiar to Southerners as well because slavery was peculiar to the South. As much as they had to rationalize it publicly and privately, and regardless of whether it was a necessary evil, an "organic sin," or a positive good, slavery was in Southern conception a Southern institution. Steven Wilkins and Douglas Wilson in 1996 published *Slavery As It Was* to defend aspects of that Southern. This work demands a response because it was written as a guide for the use of the Bible, and because of the peculiar reconstruction of history the authors make to idealize the peculiar institution.

My analysis of Southern Slavery As It Was centers on two themes: (1) Wilkins and Wilson's inaccuracy on the role of evangelical Protestants in abolitionism; (2) the centrality of race to American slavery. Along the way I address the moral rectitude of abolitionism (and use for evidence a later book by one of their sources, Professor Robert Fogel). I also point to a dilemma that emerges from Wilkins and Wilson's longing, backward glance to Southern slavery, and their stand on the timelessness of the Bible.

In *Southern Slavery As It Was*, Wilkins and Wilson express a simple way of dealing with "problem texts" in the Bible: "This is the way of *a priori* submission. Christians must recognize that they are under the authority of God, and they may not develop their ideas of what is 'right' and 'fair' apart from the Word of God."⁽¹⁾ The issue of slavery is good practice for this position, so they claim, because according to them the Bible is clear on the point of slavery. As they conclude the argument on this point, the authors set forth the first two premises of a deductive argument, but do not take it to its logical conclusion for guiding behavior. "The Bible permits Christians to

own slaves, provided they are treated well," write the authors. They then pose a rhetorical question to force the issue between this biblical justification of slavery and secular

condemnation of slavery: "You are a Christian. Whom do you believe?" (12). So, presumably, if one is a Christian, and binds herself or himself to the guidance of the Bible as the word of God, then one is duty-bound to defend "biblical slavery." Indeed, they cite as a notable example of an evangelical's failure in this duty Dr. Jerry Falwell. In a televised debate with "a liberal Episcopalian bishop" Falwell defended the Bible's position on one contentious issue ("abortion or sodomy"-the authors don't seem to remember which), but then had to "hem and haw" when the bishop challenged him on the Bible's defense of slavery.

And so, Wilkins and Wilson have produced *Southern Slavery As It Was* to show that slavery in the United States was defensible on biblical grounds. This defense comes with two disclaimers. First, they do not defend the racism associated with Southern slavery: "Because of a strong popular bigotry against the South, it is necessary for us to assert as strongly as we can that racism and sympathy for the Southern cause are not necessary companions. Rather, when biblically understood, they are antithetical" (14). Second, they do not defend the abuse of slaves that took place under Southern slavery. They chalk these abuses up to incomplete "sanctification" of Southern culture:

The discipleship of the nations is a process. This means that the South was (along with all other nations) in transition from a state of pagan autonomy to a full submission to the Lordship of Christ. Christian influence in the South was considerable and extensive, but we must acknowledge that the laws of the South fell short of the biblical pattern. In acknowledging this, however, we must remember that the Christian and Reformed influence on *ante bellum* Southern culture was far more extensive than anywhere else in the world (16).

With these disclaimers Wilkins and Wilson define just what they will defend about Southern slavery. Solid Christians who held slaves under biblical principles were right to do so: "Provided he owns them in conformity to Christ's laws for such situations, the Bible is clear that Christians may own slaves" (17). At this point a reader may think that Wilkins and Wilson claim to defend precious little about the historical practice of Southern slavery. Such is not the case, however, because they believe that taken as a whole Southern slavery was righteous. They assert

that while the South was not a "Christian utopia," it "contained many conscientious Christians, both slave-owning and enslaved, who endeavored to follow the requirements of Scripture set down in the New Testament for believers in slaveholding societies" (16). They claim as the consequence for this "large number of believers" that the Old South was "Christianized," and that the practice of slavery there was humane-certainly more humane than in pagan Rome (16).

Of course, the author's position would seem to justify *contemporary* practice of slavery, so long as it is "biblical." After all, for their brand of duty-bound Christian, the Bible's view on slavery didn't change in 1865. Yet Wilkins and Wilson are ambivalent about slavery's death in the United States. They assert later that "economic death of slavery in our nation would have been hastened had there been more widespread obedience to the Word of God on the part of everyone-

abolitionists, slaves, and slave owners" (14). Their defense of slavery seems stuck in past practice again when they contrast whether they as pastors would admit an abolitionist to membership in their churches (they would not), to whether they *would have* admitted a slave owner: " . . . if our churches had existed in the *ante bellum* South, and a godly slave owner sought membership, we could not refuse him without seeking to be holier than Christ" (18). Yet if, according to their reasoning, the sin lay in the human practice of an institution authorized by the Bible rather than in the idea of slavery itself, then they should have no reason to think that the demise of slavery should have been hastened at all. To offer an analogy for their reasoning: The sin of spouse abuse exists in the human practice of marriage, which is authorized by the Bible. That sin is not in the institution of marriage. Thus the believing Christian wouldn't want to hasten the demise of marriage on the basis of the sinful behavior of married people. One ought to hate the sin, and not the biblically sanctioned institution, right? Yet the authors conveniently stick themselves in the past on the issue of slavery when they claim to be most bold: "We will say (out loud) that a godly man could have been a slave owner." Why "could have been?" Why not "can be?" To put the point another way, if the Bible justifies slavery, and the contemporary Christian must follow the Bible in all things, then the Christian should be able to justify the practice of biblical slavery, past, present and future.

By sticking to the past, the authors try to disentangle themselves from the dilemma faced by the Kentucky Presbyterians in 1797, who in taking a position on slavery affirmed that it was a "moral evil," but denied that persons holding slaves were guilty of moral evil. When pressed by the question of which slaveholders were not guilty of moral evil, those voting put the question off for some future day.⁽²⁾ Wilkins and Wilson excuse themselves from this dilemma by saying that slavery is not a moral evil.

But as the dilemma of the Kentucky Presbyterians shows, the antebellum churches were not nearly as convinced as Wilkins and Wilson either of the moral rectitude of slavery, or of the Bible's stance on slavery. The General Assembly of the undivided Presbyterian Church in 1818 condemned slavery "of one part of the human race by another, as a gross violation of the most precious and sacred rights of human nature, as utterly inconsistent with the law of God, which requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves, and as totally irreconcilable with the spirit and principles of the Gospel of Christ, which enjoins that, 'all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them.'⁽³⁾ Expulsion of the New School Presbyterians at the General Assembly in 1837 may have ' happened through collusion between conservatives who feared their revivalist heresies and Southerners who feared their support of antislavery.⁽⁴⁾ The Methodists were torn as well. By 1840 the editor of *Zion's Herald* announced in the paper that the church could be in principle "evangelically antislavery," yet allow slaveholders membership.⁽⁵⁾ In 1844 the Methodists divided over slavery. Wilkins and Wilson would have the reader believe that the split in the mainstream churches over abolitionism and antislavery extended from radicalism, apostasy and Unitarianism: "In the early nineteenth century, the intellectual leadership of the North apostatized (*sic?*) From their previous cultural commitment to the Christian faith" (12) According to Wilkins and Wilson, the "watershed event" in this apostasy "was the capture of Harvard by the Unitarians in 1805" (12). By the time of the War

Between the States, according to the authors, "the intellectual leadership of the South was conservative, orthodox, and Christian," while "the leadership of the North was radical and Unitarian" and the "drums of war" were being beaten by that northern leadership-- "by the abolitionists, who were in turn driven by a zealous of hatred of the Word of God" (12, 13). Yet this generalization does not account for Northern evangelicals such as Joshua Leavitt, who broke from hard line Garrisonian abolitionism in 1839, and who thought slavery should be ended through the Constitution, nor Albert Barnes, whose volume *An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* carefully rebutted proslavery scriptural arguments, nor Charles Grandison Finney, who thought that evangelism should come before abolition, but who also argued in 1839 in resolutions before the Ohio Anti-slavery league that religion could not be separated from politics, that slavery should be discussed openly, that civic law must conform to a higher moral law, and that obeying the Ohio fugitive slave law was immoral.⁽⁶⁾ Evangelicals such as these were not falling under the spell of Unitarianism, nor were they taking marching orders from supposedly radical abolitionists. Rather, they were working from biblical justification for their positions. Albert Barnes' *Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* illumines this position. Through his nearly 400 page exegesis of biblical passages referring to servitude and slavery, Barnes argues that slavery was not divinely enacted, that divine legislation was implemented to ease the evils of slavery, that slavery engendered "bad passions," and that the tendency of Christian teaching was to abolish the institution.⁽⁷⁾ This is not the work of a Garrisonian radical. Barnes work is careful scholarship, and serious theology. Large numbers of moderate evangelicals, like Barnes, Finney, Theodore Dwight Weld and the agents that emerged from the Lane Seminary debates worked for abolition or antislavery. Wilkins and Wilson's fulmination about Unitarians, Harvard and radicalism is simply wrong.

According to Wilkins and Wilson, slavery could not have been as bad as abolitionist propaganda maintained because there were not "thousands of rabid abolitionists demanding an end to the evil" (22). Moreover, there were not "hundreds of slave rebellions" (22). They argue that southern slave society, for the master and the slave, overall was happy: "There has never been a multi-racial society which has existed with such mutual intimacy and harmony in the history of the world" (24). They attribute the cause for this harmony to the influence of Christianity: "The gospel enabled men who were distinct in nearly every way, to live and work together, to be friends and often intimates" (24). Two chief sources provide the evidence for their argument: *The Slave Narratives*, which comprise the transcripts of former slaves interviewed and recorded in the late-1920's and 1930's, and Robert Fogel's and Stanley Engerman's *Time on the Cross*, the controversial cliometric study of records related to slavery published in 1974.⁽⁸⁾ In a later work Fogel refers to Alexander Pope's famous line, a little knowledge is dangerous, and adds to it that that little knowledge "is also comforting."⁽⁹⁾ Would that Wilson and Wilkins had read this work before building their case on the earlier one. In 1989 Fogel pointed out that while the grasp of the economics of slavery, which cliometrics enables, is essential to building a complete understanding of Southern slavery, this kind of study does not strengthen the historical pro-slavery argument about the good treatment of slaves. Rather, cliometric; analysis enables a four-pronged "modern indictment" of slavery that in an important way restores "continuity with the earlier and more frankly ethical aspects" of abolitionists' attacks on slavery. Cliometric analysis

reaffirms (1) the abolitionists' early argument that slavery required absolute domination of one group over another, (2) that slavery denied economic opportunity to slaves, (3) that out of necessity slavery denied citizenship to slaves and, moreover, legal status afforded even aliens in the United States, (4) that slavery denied slaves of "cultural selfidentification."⁽¹⁰⁾ Each of these four points effectively refutes Wilkins' and Wilson's argument about the supposed "good treatment" of slaves under southern slavery, for they affirm that even if it were true that slaves were treated well, that point would be moot. But Fogel's first point is especially interesting, because it hearkens back to the early moral attacks against slavery as an abomination before God. Since this is the claim that Wilson and Wilkins deny most strongly, both the claim and the denial merit close scrutiny.

The economic analysis reinforces abolitionists' early argument "that slavery permitted one group of people to exercise unrestrained personal domination over another group of people." This view, "the logical outcome of the theologies of both Quakers and evangelicals," assumed the equality of all humans before God and associated moral evil with human institutions. One's salvation was to be obtained through "unremitting struggle against inward and outward evil."⁽¹¹⁾ "The extreme degree of domination required by the system, and not percentages of masters who were cruel or benevolent in their operation of the system, was and is the essential crime."⁽¹²⁾

Of course, no informed discussion of southern slavery can avoid the subject of race and racism. Wilson and Wilkins recognize this point, and address it directly. They "have no interest in defending the racism (in both the North and the South) which was often seen as the basic justification for the system." Indeed, they "condemn it most heartily" (8). Thus would they exorcise the need to treat racism in their argument, and they deflect attacks against Bible-based slavery grounded in race. They also condemn "the abuse slaves had to endure," the "immorality some masters and overseers indulged in with some slave women," and the "separation of families that sometimes occurred" (8). They admit these were the "sad realities in the Southern system." These were the "attendant evils" of the institution of slavery in a "fallen world" (8, 10). Unlike the subject of race, however, the authors address these "attendant evils," and argue that they were not as widespread as abolitionist "propaganda" would have us believe. More about this point later. The issue of race is not so easy to dodge, because it bears directly on the authors' biblical justification for slavery.

Who got to be a slave under American slavery? From Wilkins and Wilson's view, the question should be "Who *gets to be* a slave!?" Shucks, except for the occasional whippin' they make biblical slavery sound pretty dam good! Plenty of food, and a benevolent master willing to take care of his "people!" They hold that the "attendant evils" in Southern slavery were relatively few, and that the practice of slavery was generally beneficial to all-slaves included. Nonetheless, the authors' disclaimer on race is weak medicine for their argument, precisely because of this claim that Southern slavery was generally beneficial to all. The basis for slavery, for ownership of one human being by another, in the United States was race. The fact is that the authors set out to defend the practice of, and the principles behind Southern slavery while disclaiming race. But the foundation for that institution was racial prejudice. As Don Fehrenbacher puts the point, "as a

racial caste system, slavery was the most distinctive element in the southern social order."⁽¹³⁾ Africans were brought to America to be slaves. They were deemed worthy to be enslaved by the framers of the Constitution, in the words of Chief Justice Taney in the Dred Scott decision, because

[t]hey had for more than a century *before* been regarded as beings of an inferior order; and altogether unfit to associate with the white race, either in social or political relations; and so far inferior, that they *had* no rights which the white man was bound to respect; and that the negro might justly and lawfully be reduced to slavery for his benefit. This opinion was at that time fixed and universal in the civilized portion of the white race.⁽¹⁴⁾

Taney's characterization of history certainly was not news to those Southerners Wilkins and Wilson defend, Christian or not. Slave laws held race to be the qualifying condition for being a slave. The earliest of these laws was enacted in Maryland in 1663: "All negroes or other slaves within the province and all negroes and other slaves to be hereafter imported into the province, shall serve *durante vita*; and all children born of any negro or other slave, shall be slaves as their *fathers* were for the term of their lives." So indemnifying was race that the Maryland law stipulated that white women, "forgetful of their free condition," who married a slave, were required to serve the slave's master during the life of the slave. Children of these unions would be slaves.⁽¹⁵⁾ Early laws in Virginia and "Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Slavery, the Framers, and the Constitution," in *Slavery and Its Consequences: The Constitution*, New Jersey classified "Indians" with blacks and mulattoes as subject to slavery under certain conditions.⁽¹⁶⁾ These laws were not extraordinary. To the contrary, "quatroon" legislation was necessary to insure that blacks stayed black, that slaves stayed slaves. And in white society long after the war the rumor of having African American blood was the stuff of social scandal. It is, to put it mildly, both disingenuous and contradictory for Wilkins and Wilson to defend slavery as it was practiced in the South, yet condemn the racism that was woven, warp and weft, into that system whole-cloth. Disentangling American slavery from racism in an attempt to cleanse the institution from taint is impossible. Wilson and Wilkins cannot accomplish the task with their simplistic soapbox stand, "Slavery is acceptable; the Bible tells us so. And, by the way, the Bible also tells us that racism is wrong."

The ethicist R. M. Hare defines a fanatic as someone willing to hold an ideal above all human interest, even his or her own. Fortunately, he argues, the world has few true fanatics. They are the ones who fail a simple test of imagination. Say that you believe that anyone with one quarter Jewish blood should be sent to a concentration camp. If by a trick of imagination one can imagine oneself with the requisite blood dosage, and say, "Take me away!" he or she qualifies as a fanatic. In their peculiar history, Wilkins and Wilson so idealize, romanticize and distort the real practice of Southern slavery as to make one wonder whether we shouldn't get them to play the game.

ENDNOTES

¹Steve Wilkins and Douglas Wilson, *Southern Slavery As It Was* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 1996) 12. Hereafter, all references to this work will be cited in parentheses.

²Lester B. Scherer, *Slavery and the Churches in Early America, 1619-1819* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1975), 134.

³C. C. Goen, *Broken Churches, Broken Nation: Denominational Schisms and the Coming of the American Civil War* (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1985) 76.

⁴Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (1957; New York: Harper, 1965) 185.

⁵Smith 185.

⁶Charles C. Cole, Jr., *The Social Ideas of the Northern Evangelists, 1826-1860* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966) 200-211.

⁷Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry Into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (1855; reprint ed., Detroit: Negro History Press, n.d.).

⁸Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman, *Time On the Cross* (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1974). Cliometric analysis applies "behavioral models and statistical methods of the social sciences to the study of history." See Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989).

⁹Robert William Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989) 388.

¹⁰Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract* 393.

¹¹Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract* 394.

¹²Fogel, *Without Consent or Contract* 394.

¹³Don E. Fehrenbacher, "Slavery, the Framers and the Constitution," in *Slavery and Its Consequences: Constitution, Equality, and Race*, eds. Robert A. Goldwin and Art Kaufman (Washington: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1988) 6.

¹⁴Quoted in Walter Ehrlich, *They have No Rights: Dred Scott's Struggle for Freedom* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979) 143.

¹⁵George M. Stroud, *A Sketch of the Laws Relating to Slavery in the Several States of the United States of America* (1856; reprint ed., New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968) 1.

¹⁶16 Stroud 5-6.

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