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Trajectories of Justice: What the Bible Says about Slaves, Women, and Homosexuality

Robert Karl Gnuse

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The Bible proclaims a message of liberation. Though the Bible arose in an age when slavery and patriarchalism permeated society, the biblical authors sought to elevate the rights of slaves, the poor, and women. Their attempts to elevate the oppressed set in motion a trajectory of evolution, which we should still be advancing today. Critics of the Bible declare that it accepts slavery and the subordination of women, but they fail to understand the biblical texts in their historical context. For their age the biblical authors were advanced in their understanding of human rights, and the democratic values we hold today actually resulted from their early attempts to affirm the dignity and rights of slaves and women. It is equally important that we critique those spokespersons of the church who quote the Bible literally but have lost sight of its historical context so that they might still subordinate women today. Such spokespersons also declare that the Bible condemns homosexuality. But a closer reading of the text discerns that those few passages that address same-sex relations actually condemn rape, ritual prostitution, and master-slave relations. To use the Bible to condemn people often is to misuse the Bible.

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