OPPOSING SLAVERY

Like many believers before who obeyed their governments so long as they did not conflict with God’s precepts, early Adventists heartily supported the U.S. government and its laws in most areas except slavery. Adventists were staunch defenders of abolitionism even when more than ninety percent of the U.S. population viewed it as extreme. Adventist publications consistently opposed slavery causing our publications to be forbidden in the slave-owning South.

It’s clear from church leaders’ letters that they wanted to present a united front on this important issue. As such, Adventists who supported slavery were disfellowshipped. Ellen White warned in a letter that unless the recipient changed his position, “it will be the duty of God’s people to publicly withdraw their sympathy and fellowship from you, in order to save the impression which must go out in regard to us as a people. We must let it be known that we have no such ones in our fellowship, that we will not walk with them in church capacity” (Testimonies for the Church, vol. 1 [1855], 359). Adventists felt so strongly that the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald released an article on June 13, 1854 that challenged the nation to either abolish slavery or amend the Declaration of Independence: “If this nation would not be the most hypocritical nation on the face of the earth, it should amend this declaration thus: All white men are created free and equal etc.” (ARSH, vol. 5). This week, we’ll unpack the biblical prophecies that made it impossible for Adventists to be apathetic toward slavery.
Write out Revelation 14 from the translation of your choice. If you’re pressed for time, write out verses 6–8. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the passage.
THE FIRST ANGEL

The three angels’ messages of Revelation 14:6–12, which comprise God’s final warning to the world, have always held great importance for the Seventh-day Adventist Church. The first two messages in particular provided a strong moral imperative to stand against slavery. We’ll focus on the first for now and look at the second later this week.

The first angel’s message begins with the command to “fear God” (v. 7). Even a quick study of the Bible shows how a person who fears God will never be able to oppress or take advantage of a fellow human being. The fear of God leads a true believer to treat others kindly, even when they could easily abuse or cheat them. For instance, we are to show special regard for the disabled and elderly: “You shall not curse the deaf, nor put a stumbling block before the blind, but shall fear your God: I am the LORD.... You shall rise before the gray headed and honor the presence of an old man, and fear your God: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:14, 32).

Fearing God requires us to oppose and combat all forms of oppression (Lev. 25:17). There is no fear of God where there is oppression, and there is no oppression where there is fear of God. Leviticus 25 discusses the year of Jubilee, which was to take place every fifty years (v. 10). On that year’s Day of Atonement, Israel was to “proclaim liberty throughout all the land to all its inhabitants” (v. 10). We usually associate the Day of Atonement with judgment, but it also includes the promise of liberty. Our proclamations of God’s impending judgment should not be warnings alone; they should declare liberty as well.

The first angel’s message concludes with an invitation to “worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water” (Rev. 14:7). Enslaved people usually do not have the freedom to even hear the message, let alone gain an education so they can study the Bible for themselves, and this invitation for all people to worship the Creator God threatens those who gain power by oppressing others. The slaves in America had to gain freedom before they could assemble for worship and rest on the Sabbath day in accordance with the commandments. Opposing slavery was a necessary part of early Adventists proclaiming the three angels’ message. The three angels' work will remain incomplete until the messages reach the entire world—“every nation, tribe, tongue, and people” (Rev. 14:6). This divine mandate supersedes every human law that seeks to prohibit certain groups of people from hearing the message. Today, we must actively seek the autonomy and resources that personal Bible study necessitates for those who cannot attain them on their own, much as the early Seventh-day Adventists did.
Slavery in the Old Testament was vastly different from slavery in more recent history. The two systems have very little in common. Most slavery in the Old Testament would be better called indentured servitude since it acted as a safety net for people in dire financial situations.

Strict laws protected all slaves’ dignity and safety in the Old Testament. If an owner abused a slave so that they knocked out a tooth or ruined an eye, the slave was to be immediately set free for the sake of their injury (Exod. 21:26, 27), and an owner who killed a slave was to be put to death (vv. 12, 20). Communities were commanded to protect the life, property, and liberty of any slaves who escaped their master. Maltreatment in any form toward escaped slaves was not tolerated (Deut. 23:15, 16). Knowing that their country protected any slave who chose to escape would have been a major motivation for owners to take care in how they treated their slaves.

There was also a time limit on how long one could be a slave; they were to be released every seven years or on the year of Jubilee (Exod. 21:2; Lev. 25:10). Failure to release slaves at the appointed time resulted in covenant curses from God (Jer. 34:12–17). Some chose to remain permanent slaves. They had to appear before a judge to make sure they were not being forced, and the decision was publicly displayed by having the slave’s ear pierced with an awl. It might seem a bit primitive to a modern audience to puncture a slave’s ear as a public symbol of their servitude, but it was the best way they had of ensuring that the community could easily see that the decision had been ratified by a judge and the master of the house was not taking advantage of the person.

A modern reader may also wonder why anyone would choose to be a permanent slave. Well, to put it simply, slaves in the Bible often found a sense of belonging in the family they served. Though hired servants and strangers were not permitted to share the intimate Passover meal with the family, slaves were (Exod. 12:44, 45). Similarly, hired servants working for Levites could not partake of the holy meals of the sanctuary, but a slave in a Levite’s house ate the same holy offerings that the rest of the family shared (Lev 22:10, 11). A slave voluntarily chose to become a permanent slave when they felt loved by the family and saw that this was the best way for them to provide for their needs (Exod. 21:5).

If America had decided to follow the Old Testament slavery laws, it would have eradicated their entire system of slavery and destroyed the parts of the economy that depended on the system being cruel. Christian scholars and pastors who used slavery from the Old Testament to defend the extremely inhumane slavery in America were doing so completely disingenuously.
What relationship do the following verses have with Revelation 14?

Revelation 18:13
Daniel 4:27
Matthew 25:41–47
Matthew 28:19
Luke 12:7
Acts 17:26

What other verses come to mind in connection with the primary passage?

(Cont. from inSight, p. 87):

“The law of our land requiring us to deliver a slave to his master, we are not to obey; and we must abide the consequences of violating this law. The slave is not the property of any man. God is his rightful master, and man has no right to take God's workmanship into his hands, and claim him as his own.” (Ibid., 202.)

“Every species of slavery is not in accordance with the Word of God. The evils are too great to be enumerated. And if men and women have embraced the solemn truth for these last days that sanctifies the soul, the old political sentiments that sustain the old system of slavery will be, before they are translated, purged from them.” (Ellen White, Letter 36, 1880.)
The Struggle Against Slavery

Jesus is the only One who can properly diagnose people’s spiritual condition (Rev. 3:14). Because He sent the second angel of Revelation 14, we can trust the warning that Babylon has fallen and the earth has become intoxicated with her wine (v. 8). Revelation 17 and 18 expound on the symbols in that verse, identifying Babylon as a harlot woman who has harlot daughters (Rev. 17:5). This unfaithful woman represents an unfaithful church (Rev. 17:1–5; 2 Cor. 11:2) from which many evils arose.

There’s a reason the unfaithful church in the New Testament and the city of Babylon in the Old Testament share the same name: they are parallels. The best way to understand the characteristics of prophetic Babylon is therefore to examine the characteristics of the Old Testament city. Daniel 4 records the advice the prophet Daniel gave King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon regarding the city’s spiritual depravity: “Break off your sins by being righteous, and your iniquities by showing mercy to the poor. Perhaps there may be a lengthening of your prosperity” (v. 27). If Old Testament Babylon struggled with how they treated the poor, we can expect prophetic Babylon to stumble over the same issue. The institution of slavery fits into this problem, for it’s one of the surest and cruelest ways to force people into perpetual poverty. The solution for both historic and prophetic Babylon’s corruption involves the act of showing mercy to all the poor, including the enslaved. Adventist pioneers knew this and, referencing Revelation 18:11–13, taught that making merchandise of the “bodies and souls of men” was among Babylon’s vilest sins. The call to leave Babylon in verse 4 therefore necessitates a complete separation from and ardent opposition of the evil practice of slavery.

Adventist publications in the 1850s expressed an even deeper concern for what was happening in American churches than what was happening in the U.S. government. A quote from the March 6, 1855 edition of the Advent Review and Sabbath Herald says, “The right to hold human beings in bondage and to buy and sell them, is now made out in the most confident manner from the Old and New Testaments, by the leading doctors of divinity of most denominations.... The professed church to a fearful extent, is the right arm of the slave power, and our own nation is a perfect illustration on the subject of slavery, of a nation drunken with the wine of Babylon. That most infamous law, ‘the fugitive slave bill,’ was vindicated by our most distinguished doctors of divinity as a righteous measure” (ARSH, vol. 6). This severely misguided support from American Christianity is very disappointing, especially in comparison with the successful movement a few decades before to overthrow slavery in England. Slavery in the U.S. may well have been crushed sooner were it not for the Christian churches that protected it.

Early Adventists were unable to study these prophecies without speaking out for human dignity and liberty. In the three angels’ messages, Adventists heard a call to return to true Christianity, doctrinally and practically.
Review the memory verse. How does it apply to your life this week?

After this week’s study of the passage, what are some personal applications you are convicted of in your life?

What are some practical applications you must make in your school, family, workplace, and church life?

Read more inSight from the Spirit of Prophecy at www.inversebible.org/RL10-7

SLAVERY IN THE UNITED STATES

“All heaven beholds with indignation human beings, the workmanship of God, reduced by their fellow men to the lowest depths of degradation and placed on a level with the brute creation. Professed followers of that dear Saviour whose compassion was ever moved at the sight of human woe, heartily engage in this enormous and grievous sin, and deal in slaves and souls of men. Human agony is carried from place to place and bought and sold. Angels have recorded it all; it is written in the book. The tears of the pious bondmen and bondwomen, of fathers, mothers, and children, brothers and sisters, are all bottled up in heaven. God will restrain His anger but little longer. His wrath burns against this nation and especially against the religious bodies that have sanctioned this terrible traffic and have themselves engaged in it. Such injustice, such oppression, such sufferings, are looked upon with heartless indifference by many professed followers of the meek and lowly Jesus. And many of them can themselves inflict, with hateful satisfaction, all this indescribable agony; and yet they dare to worship God. It is solemn mockery; Satan exults over it and reproaches Jesus and His angels with such inconsistency, saying, with hellish triumph, ‘Such are Christ’s followers!’

“These professed Christians read of the sufferings of the martyrs, and tears course down their cheeks. They wonder that men could ever become so hardened as to practice such cruelty toward their fellow men. Yet those who think and speak thus are at the same time holding human beings in slavery. And this is not all; they sever the ties of nature and cruelly oppress their fellow men. They can inflict most inhuman torture with the same relentless cruelty manifested by papists and heathen toward Christ’s followers. Said the angel, ‘It will be more tolerable for the heathen and for papists in the day of the execution of God’s judgment than for such men.’ The cries of the oppressed have reached unto heaven, and angels stand amazed at the untold, agonizing sufferings which man, formed in the image of his Maker, causes his fellow man.” (Ellen White, Early Writings [1882], 275, 276.)

“I saw that you, Brother A, have permitted your political principles to destroy your judgment and your love for the truth. They are eating out true godliness from your heart. You have never looked upon slavery in the right light, and your views of this matter have thrown you on the side of the Rebellion, which was stirred up by Satan and his host. Your views of slavery cannot harmonize with the sacred, important truths for this time. You must yield your views or the truth. Both cannot be cherished in the same heart, for they are at war with each other.” (Ellen White, Testimonies for the Church, vol. 1 [1855], 359.)

(Cont. on p. 85.)
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Share insights from this week’s memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

Why is first the angel’s message incompatible with modern slavery?

What are some biblical examples of how to fear God?

How does the fear of God change the way a person relates to others?

What was the purpose of slavery in the Old Testament?

How does the slavery of recent history violate God’s commandments?

What did Christianity’s general support of slavery in America say about the quality of spirituality in the churches?

What people in our local community need help restoring human dignity and liberty?

What groups of people lack equal access to the gospel? How can we help them?