

4.19—MORRIS RAPHALL, "THE BIBLE VIEW OF SLAVERY: A DISCOURSE,"
A DEFENSE OF SLAVERY BY A NORTHERN RABBI, JANUARY 4, 1861

On December 14, 1860, President James Buchanan issued a proclamation calling on the people of the United States to observe a day of "Humiliation, Fasting and Prayer throughout the Union . . . in view of the present distracted and dangerous condition of our country."

To honor Buchanan's proclamation, Rabbi Morris J. Raphall (1798–1868) delivered an address entitled "The Bible View of Slavery" to his congregation, B'nai Jeshurun, of New York City. This sermon—which Raphall also delivered a week later to a largely non-Jewish audience at the New York Historical Society—sparked a firestorm of controversy that spread across the nation.

Despite insisting he was not defending southern slavery, the rabbi argued that, as far as the Hebrew Bible was concerned, "slaveholding [was] not only recognized and sanctioned as an integral part of the social structure . . . [but] the property in slaves [was] placed under the same protection as any other species of lawful property."

Raphall's address—excerpted and printed as follows—was published and circulated throughout the nation. Southerners insisted the rabbi was defending their cause, and those who opposed slavery were appalled by the implications of Raphall's argument.

On January 9, 1861, Rabbi David Einhorn (1809–1879), a leading reformer, put pen to paper and composed a vigorous critique of Raphall's assessment. While granting a moral understanding for slaveholders who were, in Einhorn's mind, simply adopting the dominant values of their surrounding communities, the Reform rabbi challenged the validity of Raphall's assertions. Einhorn's opposition to slavery eventuated in his flight from Baltimore that same year. He moved to Philadelphia,

where he became the rabbi of the Keneseth Israel congregation.

Einhorn's article, excerpted here, first appeared in his German-language periodical, Sinai, and was subsequently translated into English by his daughter, Johanna Einhorn Kohler (1848?–1932).

My Friends—We meet here this day under circumstances not unlike those described in my text. Not many weeks ago, on the invitation of the Governor of this State, we joined in thanksgiving for the manifold mercies the Lord had vouchsafed to bestow upon us during the past year. But "coming events cast their shadows before," and our thanks were tinged by the foreboding of danger impending over our country. The evil we then dreaded has now come home to us. As the cry of the prophet [Jonah 3:4], "Yet forty days and Nineveh shall be overthrown," alarmed that people, so the proclamation [of South Carolina on December 20, 1860], "the Union is dissolved," has startled the inhabitants of the United States. The President—the chief officer placed at the helm to guide the vessel of the commonwealth on its course—stands aghast at the signs of the times. He sees the black clouds gathering overhead, he hears the fierce howl of the tornado, and the hoarse roar of the breakers all around him. An aged man, his great experience has taught him that "man's extremity is God's opportunity"; and conscious of his own inability to weather the storm without help from on high, he calls upon every individual "to feel a personal responsibility towards God," even as the King of Nineveh desired all persons "to cry unto God with all their strength"—and it is in compliance with this call of the Chief Magistrate of these United States that we, like the many

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millions of our fellow-citizens, devote this day to public prayer and humiliation. . . .

. . . If they truly and honestly desire to save our country, let them believe in God and in His Holy Word; and then when the authority of the Constitution is to be set aside for a higher Law, they will be able to appeal to the highest Law of all, the revealed Law and Word of God, which affords its supreme sanction to the Constitution. There can be no doubt, my friends, that however much of personal ambition, selfishness, pride, and obstinacy, there may enter into the present unhappy quarrel between the two great sections of the Commonwealth—I say it is certain that the origin of the quarrel itself is the difference of opinion respecting slaveholding, which the one section denounces as sinful—aye, as the most heinous of sins—while the other section upholds it as perfectly lawful. It is the province of statesmen to examine the circumstances under which the Constitution of the United States recognizes the legality of slaveholding; and under what circumstances, if any, it becomes a crime against the law of the land. But the question whether slaveholding is a sin before God, is one that belongs to the theologian. I have been requested by prominent citizens of other denominations, that I should on this day examine the Bible view of slavery, as the religious mind of the country requires to be enlightened on the subject.

In compliance with that request, and after humbly praying that the Father of Truth and of Mercy may enlighten my mind, and direct my words for good, I am about to solicit your earnest attention, my friends, to this serious subject. My discourse will, I fear, take up more of your time than I am in the habit of exacting from you; but this is a day of penitence, and the having to listen to a long and sober discourse must be accounted as a penitential infliction.

The subject of my investigation falls into three parts:—

First, How far back can we trace the existence of slavery?

Secondly, Is slaveholding condemned as a sin in sacred Scripture?

Thirdly, What was the condition of the slave in Biblical times, and among the Hebrews; and saying with our Father Jacob, “for Thy help, I hope, O Lord!” I proceed to examine the question, how far back can we trace the existence of slavery?

I. [. . .] If we consult Sacred Scripture, the oldest and most truthful collection of records now or at any time in existence, we find the word *Ngebed*[,] “slave,” which the English version renders “servant,” first used by Noah, who, in Genesis ix, 25, curses the descendants of his son, Ham, by saying they should be *Ngebed Ngabadim*, the “meanest of slaves,” or as the English version has it “servant of servants.” The question naturally arises how came Noah to use the expression? How came he to know anything of slavery? There existed not at that time any human being on earth except Noah and his family of three sons, apparently by one mother, born free and equal, with their wives and children. Noah had no slaves. From the time that he quitted the ark he could have none. It therefore becomes evident that Noah’s acquaintance with the word slave and the nature of slavery must date from before the Flood, and existed in his memory only until the crime of Ham called it forth. You and I may regret that in his anger Noah should from beneath the waters of wrath again have fished up the idea and practice of slavery; but that he did so is a fact which rests on the authority of Scripture. I am therefore justified when tracing slavery as far back as it can be traced, I arrive at the conclusion, that next to the domestic relations of husband and wife, parents and children, the oldest relation of society with which we are acquainted is that of master and slave.

[. . .]

II. Having thus, on the authority of the sacred Scripture, traced slavery back to the remotest period, I next request your attention to the question, “Is slaveholding condemned as a sin in sacred Scripture?” How this question can at all arise in the mind of any man that has received a religious education, and is acquainted with the

history of the Bible, is a phenomenon I cannot explain to myself, and which fifty years ago no man dreamed of. But we live in times when we must not be surprised at anything. . . . Receiving slavery as one of the conditions of society, the New Testament nowhere interferes with or contradicts the slave code of Moses; it even preserves a letter written by one of the most eminent Christian teachers to a slave-owner on sending back to him his runaway slave. And when we next refer to the history and "requirements" of our own sacred Scriptures, we find that on the most solemn occasion therein recorded, when God gave the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai— . . . slaveholding is not only recognized and sanctioned as an integral part of the social structure, . . . [b]ut the property in slaves is placed under the same protection as any other species of lawful property, when it is said, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, or his field, or his male slave, or his female slave, or his ox, or his ass, or aught that belongeth to thy neighbor" (Ibid. xx. 17; v. 21). That the male slave and the female slave here spoken of do not designate the Hebrew bondman, but the heathen slave, I shall presently show you. That the Ten Commandments are the word of God, and as such, of the very highest authority, is acknowledged by Christians as well as by Jews. . . . When you remember that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job—the men with whom the Almighty conversed . . . all these men were slaveholders, does it not strike you that you are guilty of something very little short of blasphemy? . . . My friends, I find, and I am sorry to find, that I am delivering a pro-slavery discourse. I am no friend to slavery in the abstract, and still less friendly to the practical working of slavery. But I stand here as a teacher in Israel; not to place before you my own feelings and opinions, but to propound to you the word of God, the Bible view of slavery. With

a due sense of my responsibility, I must state to you the truth and nothing but the truth, however unpalatable or unpopular that truth may be.

III. It remains for me to examine what was the condition of the slave in Biblical times and among the Hebrews. . . .

. . . The slave is a *person* in whom the dignity of human nature is to be respected; *he has rights*. Whereas, the heathen view of slavery which prevailed at Rome, and which, I am sorry to say, is adopted in the South, reduces the slave to a *thing*, and a thing can have no rights.

The result to which the Bible view of slavery leads us, is—1st. That slavery has existed since the earliest time; 2d. That slaveholding is no sin, and that slave property is expressly placed under the protection of the Ten Commandments; 3d. That the slave is a person, and has rights not conflicting with the lawful exercise of the rights of his owner. If our Northern fellow-citizens, content with following the word of God, would not insist on being "righteous overmuch," or denouncing "sin" which the Bible knows not, but which is plainly taught by the precepts of men—they would entertain more equity and less ill feeling towards their Southern brethren. And if our Southern fellow-citizens would adopt the Bible view of slavery, and discard that heathen slave code, which permits a few bad men to indulge in an abuse of power that throws a stigma and disgrace on the whole body of slaveholders—if both North and South would do what is right, then "God would see their works and that they turned from the evil of their ways"; and in their case, as in that of the people of Nineveh, would mercifully avert the impending evil, for with Him alone is the power to do so.

Source: *DHJ*, 407–18. From a pamphlet published in New York by Rudd and Carleton, with a preface by Morris Raphall, dated January 15, 1861.

4.20—DAVID EINHORN'S RESPONSE TO RAPHALL, OFFERING A BALTIMORE
RABBI'S OPPOSITION TO SLAVERY, *Sinai*, 1861

This is not the first time that we have had occasion to admire the originality of Dr. Raphall; but we never would have given him credit for the originality displayed in a sermon which he delivered on January 4th, and published in the *New York Herald*, and in which he claims for the institution of slavery the sanction of the Bible, in language the most positive and decided. . . .

The point at issue is certainly not whether the South ought to be, or should be deprived of its slaves, for every truly moral man would look upon such an outrage, in view of its horrible effects, as a grievous sin. Nor is it the question, whether the slaveholder, as such, is or is not a moral monster, with whom no kind of commerce should be had. No considerate person will venture to doubt that slaveholders may be men of honor and character; since they have been raised and educated under the influence of this institution, and find consolation in the consciousness that their slaves are treated with humanity. The moral sentiment, in spite of its absolute authority, is subject to all kinds of modification growing out of time and place, and owing to the variation of habits, customs and youthful impressions. Abraham was a slaveholder, and had Hagar for a concubine, and yet he is for us a model of virtue, when we take into consideration the age in which he lived. . . .

The question restricts itself exclusively to this: "Is the institution of Slavery, *per se*, a moral evil or is it not?" And here it is that Dr. Raphall earned for himself the sorry reputation of declaring, on the authority of the divine law, the legitimacy and moral rectitude of slavery, and inveighed sharply against Christian ministers who happen to differ from him. A Jew, the offspring of a race which daily praises God for deliverance from the bondage of Egypt, and whose fellow-believers are to this hour groaning under the heavy yoke of slavery in most of the cities of the old world and crying to the Almighty for help, undertakes to parade slavery as a perfectly sinless institu-

tion, sanctioned by God, and to confront those presumptuous people who will not believe it, with somewhat of an air of moral indignation! A more extraordinary phenomenon could hardly be imagined. But when the speaker, in the midst of his oratorical effort, became himself aware of the grandeur of his undertaking, and from a bosom overflowing with loving kindness, the following words escaped his lips, "I find, and I am sorry to find, that I am delivering a proslavery discourse, . . . but I stand here to propound to you the word of God," then surely the crown of martyrdom must have descended upon his head, had not the black skull-cap at the time covered the enviable spot.

[. . .]

In the history of the Creation, of which our pious speaker, engaged in his own creative efforts, takes not the least notice, we read: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created He him, male and female created He them. And God blessed them and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth." This passage at least is devoid of any intimation respecting dominion over negroes, except it be assumed that the latter are included in the class of animals that creep upon the earth.

[. . .]

And now, one word to you, my fellow-believers, and more especially to the members of my congregation! Whilst I write this—January 9th—the threatening clouds are still above our heads, and envelope the future of our beloved country in a thick mist. There may be some among us who will hardly justify the open manner in which I have given expression to my convictions of what Moses taught respecting slavery. The Jew is conservative from principle, and intensely so in a land which, in spiritual and material blessings, offers to him everything that he can desire. He

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wishes for peace, almost at any price, and trembles, perhaps more than any other, for the perpetuation of the Union—like a son for the life of his mother, sick unto death. I also share your patriotic sentiments with my full heart, and join you in the fervent supplication, that God may answer right speedily our prayers for peace. But, whatever party we may follow, we are not permitted to let the sanctuary of our religion be dragged into the political arena, and made subservient to the interests of this or that party, as has been attempted with such publicity, and from a consecrated place, in the instance stated above. The immaculate virtue of the Mosaic principles has been our pride, and our boast, and our weapon these thousands of years. This weapon we cannot yield without supplying our enemies with formidable means of attack; this pride and this boast we dare not, and will not, suffer to be taken from us. It were unpardonable; the greatest triumph of our opponents, and our certain destruction; too dearly exchanged for the unstable and evanescent favors of the moment. Might it not be said, and with justice, as it has already been said, in reference to the lamentable event which has called forth this disclaimer: Look at these Jews! there, where they are oppressed, they cannot find words enough to boast of the humanity of their religion; but where they are free, their preachers pronounce,

on the authority of that “solemn and most holy occasion,” on Sinai, the divine sanction of slavery; whilst Christian ministers in the South, and in the presence of the representatives of the people advise moderation, sometimes openly deprecate or plead the force of circumstances in extenuation of the established institution!

I am not a politician, and have nothing to do with politics. But to proclaim in the name of Judaism, that God has consecrated the institution of slavery! Such a shame and reproach the Jewish religious press is in duty bound to disown and disavow, if both are not to be stigmatized for ever. If a Christian clergyman in Europe had delivered a sermon like that of Dr. Raphall, all the Jewish orthodox and reform pens would have immediately been set to work—heaven and earth been summoned for witnesses to prove its fallacies—to repel such a foul charge, and to inveigh against this desecration of God’s holy name. Why should we, in America, keep silence when a Jewish preacher plays such pranks? Those Jews only who value the dollar more than their God and their religion, can give it their consent and approval.

Source: D. Einhorn, *The Rev. Dr. M. J. Raphall’s Bible View of Slavery* (New York: Thalmessinger, Cahn & Benedicks, 1861), 5–22. Reprinted from *Sinai* 6 (1861): 2–22; translated by Mrs. Kaufmann Kohler.

4.21 — PETITION FROM AMERICAN JEWS TO THE U.S. SENATE AND HOUSE, ON THE CHAPLAINCY ISSUE, 1861 OR 1862

The Civil War era focused attention on religious pluralism in the military chaplaincy. While the U.S. military charged its chaplains with tending to the religious needs of all soldiers in their command, it only hired Protestant clergy until the 1850s, when Catholic priests first were permitted to serve.

The right of Jewish clergy to serve as military

chaplains became a salient issue after Confederate forces attacked a U.S. military installation at Fort Sumter in South Carolina on April 12, 1861. Lincoln called on Congress to raise a volunteer army from each state. The ninth section of the “Volunteer Bill” authorized regimental commanders to appoint military chaplains for each regiment’s soldiers. However,