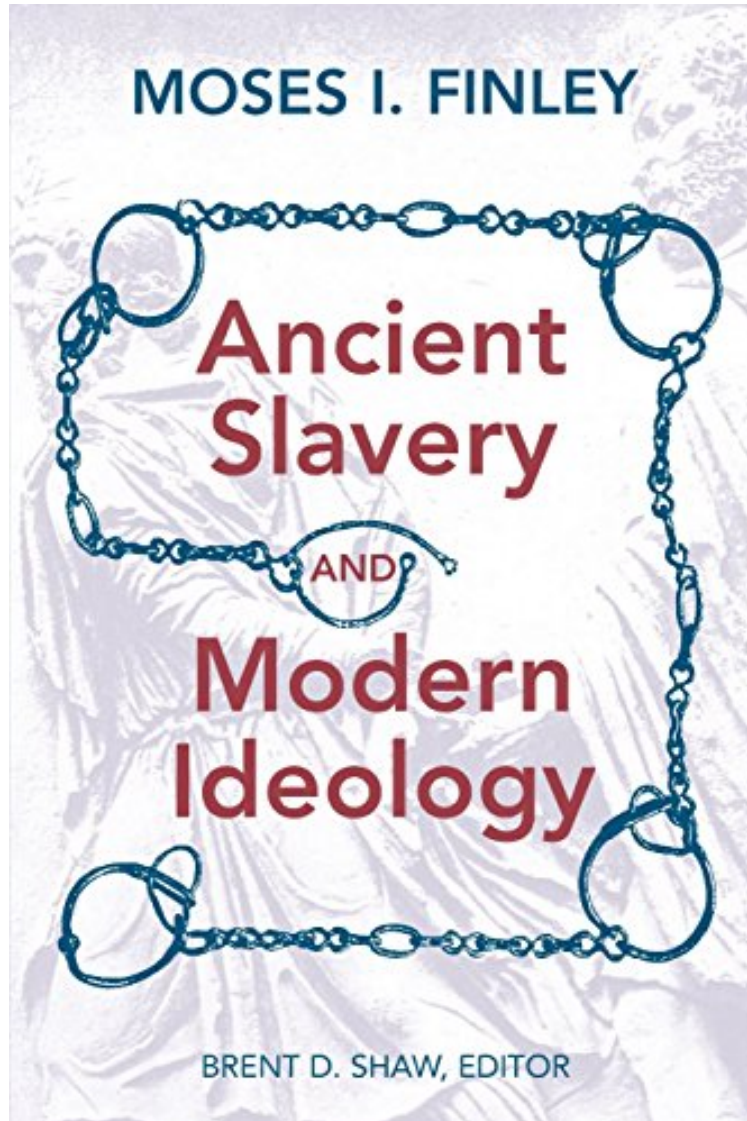


## Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology

*Moses I. Finley*

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**Moses I. Finley : Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology:

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Finley on Ancient Slavery and Modern IdeologyBy Richard MathisenMoses Finleys classic 1980 work, Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology, was re-issued in 1998 by Brent Shaw with added commentary and is the edition reviewed here.Finley was interested in ancient slavery and its ideological misinterpretations by other historians. To Finley, there have been only five genuine slave societies, two ancient (Greece and Rome), and three modern (Caribbean, Brazil, and American South). But historians of ancient

societies were affected by ideological bias. Classical historians admired Greek and Roman civilizations so they downplayed the ugly aspects of slavery. Christian historians tried to claim that Christianity ended slavery, but it didn't. Marxist historians wanted to interpret ancient slavery through that lens, while anti-Marxist historians had an opposite view. While ancient slavery had no racial component, modern historians are influenced by racial concerns so that every new interpretation of slavery has professed to be more antiracist than the one it replaces. Finley traces the distorting effect of each of these ideologies on the history of slavery. Finley explains the emergence of ancient slave societies, which requires three conditions: private ownership of land, commodified systems of production, and a shortage of labor. He considers societal attitudes toward the humanity of slaves and traces the end of slavery as it transitioned into feudalism. Finley carefully defines slavery, because many examples of forced labor have existed, including Egyptian pyramids, Assyrian and Babylonian empires, Spartan helots, feudal serfs, and indentured servants, but they were not slaves. Indeed, he notes that the most unusual labor system in history is modern free wage labor, with individuals free to move. This leads to Finley's real interest. What factors led to ancient slavery? When did it start, when did it end, and why? What aspects of ancient society were part of slavery's support system? What were the ideological presuppositions of the Greeks and Romans? Why was the legitimacy of slavery never questioned in ancient times, even during slave revolts? Why did slavery exist only in certain areas of Rome, such as Italy and Sicily? Could slavery ever come back again in the modern world, if the necessary conditions seemed to demand it? When re-issuing Finley's book, Brent Shaw added a 1981 response by Finley to his critics and a 1979 essay on Slavery and the Historians. Shaw also wrote a 76-page essay updating the slavery debate since 1980. Unfortunately, that essay is placed first, so the reader must read Shaw discussing reactions to Finley's book before encountering Finley. It's probably better to read Finley first.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. On slave societies, slavery, and the modern conscience against it. By M. Fant. Even though this book was published in 1980, the work still stands as being one of the best on Ancient Slavery. He deals with the modern sensibilities toward slavery in our post-abolitionist world, dealing specifically with the rise of the slave society. Not an easy read, but important to work through if you deal in ancient cultures and literature. This book is especially helpful for Biblical New Testament background study.

24 of 29 people found the following review helpful. And the difference between Ancient and Modern Slavery is... By Joseph Martin. This is an important topic given the embarrassing fact of the modern return of Slavery in the midst of the European Enlightenment. Indeed, even the United States, the first nation produced by the Enlightenment, was a home to modern slavery. What was this 'enlightened' slavery, and how did it differ from the ancient variety? Hmm... So, how do we go about distinguishing between ancient and modern slavery? Ancient slaveholders originally were masters and knew they were masters because they excelled at violence. They had won a war; the slaves had lost. When questioned more deeply about their amazing string of victories, the Romans would generally point to their *pietas*, which is a religious notion. Now, is this the difference between ancient and modern slave societies? That in modern times we try to give a 'scientific explanation' of events? President Jefferson, a man renowned for his love of freedom, in the midst of a terrifyingly 'scientific' discussion of "the real distinction that nature has made" informs us that blacks are "in reason much inferior" to whites, and "in imagination they are dull, tasteless, and anomalous." Mercifully, the man we remember every Fourth of July had the grace to concede the possibility, even the necessity, that "further observation will or will not verify the conjecture, that nature has been less bountiful to them in the endowments of the head", because "where our conclusion would degrade a whole race of men from the rank in the scale of beings which their Creator may perhaps have given them" we must indeed be cautious! The Romans, of course, never dreamed of denying the humanity of their slaves. Obviously, this is cold comfort to those unfortunate enough to lose a war to Rome! Modern slaveholders, in contrast, would try to ground their slaveholding in science, not violence; in fact, not force. And it is this penchant for science that is both the difference between ancient and modern slavery, and, ironically, the beginning of modern racism. Now, this difference has consequences and causes. To find one of the causes let's look at the practice of manumission, the freeing of slaves. Finley tells us that a freed Roman slave became "transformed from an object to a subject of rights, the most complete metamorphous one can imagine." How? How was it possible for people whose families had been slaves for generations to become free? Or rather, why, in 'enlightened' Virginia, did it not happen? Again Finley, "Freedmen in the New World carried an external sign of their slave origin in their skin color, even after many generations, with negative economic, social, political and psychological consequences of the gravest magnitude. Ancient freedman simply melted into the total population within one or at the most two generations." Were ancient plebeians aware of this? - That former slaves worked, lived and (Gasp!) intermarried among them? Finley reminds us of stories in Tacitus and Pliny of plebeians rioting when local slaves were killed en masse, as Roman law required, for the assassination of a master. Not only does it appear the plebeians knew, but they also approved and identified with the slaves! The contrast with modern American slavery - the poor whites quasi-mystical belief in their 'superiority' to black slaves, and the certainty that this aligned them with the masters - is too obvious, and too depressing, to mention. So, ancient slaves, upon manumission, were able to melt into the lowest Roman classes, while freed Blacks could never simply become part of society, however poor. What of it? Is this enough to explain the differences of modern and ancient slavery? No, of course not. To explain why ancient slavery never developed a crackpot ideology like racism to both justify and defend itself, and, on top of that, to create

a horrid cultural pseudo-immortality for itself, we have to look elsewhere. But first, what did our ancient slaves do, by and large, with their new found freedom? Finley shows us that, in the long run, being freed in the early empire was no great favor. He tells a depressing story of ever increasing taxes and barbarian invasions combining to force citizens to seek some sort of relief in service to either the empire or a great lord. "From the time of Augustus on, everything changed, [...] the state no longer permitted the peasant to vote or needed his fighting power, [however] it continued to need his money, in increasing quantities [...] by Justinian's reign the state took between one fourth and one third of the gross yield of the land". And elsewhere he mentions "the extent of the financial and material damage inflicted by [...] continuous civil war in the third century and by the persistent assaults thereafter of Germans, of Persians in the east..." These combined to force the peasants and the urban poor into some form of debt service. In late antiquity one's poor cousins were always in danger of losing their freedom, whether selling it for protection to some lord or losing it in court for unpaid taxes. That is why the ancients, in the long run, could never base slavery or servitude on some pseudo-biological theory, the next slave could be a relative or, and this is really the heart of the matter, themselves. Slavery in antiquity could happen to almost anyone, while that was really never the case in eighteenth or nineteenth century America. That was the fundamental difference between ancient and modern slavery. The consequences of this difference are revealed with terrifying clarity in the twentieth century. Modern 'scientific' racism, whether encountered in President Jefferson or Comte de Gobineau, comes to its ultimate fruition in Hitler, who is the cause of so many of our century's horrors. Among the consequences of the Enlightenment, many of which are indisputably good, is the notion that everything can, should and will eventually be explained by science. History is reeling under the weight of bigots and quacks who were able to 'justify' their manias 'scientifically'. When you have proven that your enemy is not fully human, by supposedly scientific means, all you have shown is that you no longer believe you have to behave humanely toward him. Some of the consequences of this pseudo-scientific ranting include the Holocaust and Bosnian ethnic cleansing. Tocqueville, who was a friend of Gobineau, somewhere remarked to him, "I believe your theories are wrong, I know they are dangerous." Precisely. What gave poor Roman citizens the ability to accept freed slaves as their own, or allowed the Roman aristocracy the latitude to have their children educated by slaves is simply this: they never denied the humanity of their slaves. They had yet to come under the sway of modern 'enlightened' ideology. This is why, pace Messieurs Gobineau and Jefferson, ancient slaves (whether from Europe, Asia, or Africa) could teach the children of their masters or excel in the various sciences and arts. - No one had thought of a 'reason' to deny that they could.

The author compares slave societies with the ir relatively modern counterparts in the New World to show a new perspective on the history of slavery. He sheds light o n the complex ways in which ideological interests affect his torical interpretation. ""

"A major creative achievement in historical interpretation...." -- TLS "A topnotch book." (The New Yorker)\ -- z "This may well be Finley's best book." -- American Historical .About the AuthorThe late Sir Moses I. Finley, Cambridge University, is the author of *The World of Odysseus*; *The Olympic Games: The First Thousand Years*; *Democracy Ancient and Modern*; and numerous other books.