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Inhuman Bondage
by David Brion Davis

David Brion Davis is Sterling Professor of History Emeritus at Yale University and has long been recognized as the leading authority on slavery in the Western World. This book originated during an intensive two-week summer seminar he began teaching in 1994 for high school teachers mainly from New York City. At this time, slavery was not yet considered a topic worth an entire semester's course and he recognized new public interest in the subject and many of the new developments in the study of slavery were virtually unknown to the nation's general public, in schoolrooms, and among most college students. As a result, *Inhuman Bondage* is a fascinating scholarly work which synthesizes and translates the various findings of historians and economists regarding American slavery viewed from a global perspective. As a high school U.S. History teacher, I have selected several chapters of this book that apply directly to our curriculum frameworks, important historical themes and my personal core values as an educator for this book review. This is a captivating, must read for anyone who is interested in the peculiar institution, for the issue of slavery proves to be America's most profound problem and greatest contradiction.

Davis begins the book with a historical narrative of the Amistad because it presents a concrete test of American law and justice and dramatically illustrates the multinational character of the Atlantic Slave System. This case involved American politics, the judiciary, and foreign relations at the highest levels. For nearly four

centuries West Africans had been devising techniques, including war, to enslave other Africans- usually members of other lineage or ethnic groups to sell to European and American traders on the coast and thus meet the continuing and generally rising demand for the cheapest and most exploitable form of forced bondage. Many students today are shocked to learn that virtually all of the enslavement of Africans was carried out by other Africans. Davis quotes African American historian, Nathan Huggins who pointed out the concept of an African "race" was the invention of Westerners, and most African merchants saw themselves as selling people other than their own.[1] As the chapter educates the reader on the Atlantic crossing from Sierra Leone to Cuba onboard the *Tecora*, Davis reminds the reader of the outlawing of the trans-Atlantic slave trade by England and the United States in 1808, along with the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) which devastated the world's major producer of sugar and coffee. Cuba suddenly emerged as the world's greatest producer of sugar and by 1856, Cuba was producing over four times as much sugar as Brazil, though slave grown sugar was still Brazil's major export. The African slaves are purchased by Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes who load them onto *La Amistad* and set out for Havana. The ship is intercepted by an American cutter off the coast of Long Island, and then the vessel is towed to New London, Connecticut. The central issue of the case was the glaring discrepancy between American positive law- the explicitly enacted statues that recognized slaves as legitimate private property and the fundamental doctrine of natural rights embodied in the Declaration of Independence.[2] As Davis takes the reader through the sequence of trials he emphasizes the role of John Quincy Adams, the 73 year old congressman, former president and defender of the

[1] Davis, p 13
[2] Davis, p 16

Africans. While defending the Africans in the Supreme Court, Adams used the Declaration of Independence to assert the "natural right" to revolution by the Africans- "I know of no other law that reaches the case of my clients, but the law of Nature and of Nature's God on which our fathers placed our own national existence. The circumstances are so peculiar, that no code or treaty has provided for such a case. That law, in its application to my clients, I trust will be the law on which the case will be decided by this Court."[3] Davis credits Adams with being the statesman who passed on to Abraham Lincoln, the conviction that a president, as commander in chief during a war or civil war, had the power to emancipate America's slaves.

The Origins of Antiblack Racism in the New World is the third chapter of this book and I found it to be extremely interesting and it will be useful when exploring the following questions: Did antiblack racism lead to the choice of African slaves to supply the immense demand for physical labor in the New World, or was such racism the consequence of long-term interaction with black slaves? Theodore S. Wright, a black abolitionist viewed racial prejudice as the central evil to overcome, even more so than slavery. A Presbyterian minister in New York City, a graduate of Princeton Seminary and founding member of the American Anti-Slavery Society, Wright was physically assaulted by a southern student when he visited his alma mater in 1836, as the student shouted "out with the nigger, out with the nigger." The following month, Wright stated "the prejudice which exists against the colored man, the freeman, is like the atmosphere everywhere felt by him, the free colored men of the North were not whipped nor liable to have their wives and infants torn from them, still we are slaves-everywhere we feel the chain galling us…this spirit of prejudice is withering all our hopes and oft times causes

[3] Davis, p 20

the colored parent as he looks upon his child, to wish he had never been born."[4] Wright and other black reformers recognized that this humiliating prejudice was related to slavery and could be self-reinforcing in the sense that such contempt and denial of hope could lead to despair and patterns of behavior that provoked more prejudice. The chapter discusses the 13-15th century enslavement of "Slavs" in Western Europe, peasants and serfs who were darkened by the constant exposure to sun, soil, and manure. From early antiquity and in various parts of the globe, the elites who lived indoors and sheltered themselves from the sun sharply differentiated themselves from the field workers, making linkage between low social class and the physical markers of menial labor.[5] The iconography of western European churches became stocked with the images of unmistakable black Africans as torturers, tempters, and executioners, often in scenes of the Passion of Christ. According to Davis, it is thus seems possible that most Europeans received their first subliminal impressions of so-called Negroes in a local church or cathedral.[6] Davis suggests rooted in Christianity are the common or universal propensity to sin, and many also believed in a compelling need to baptize and "save" as much of humanity as possible. Thus a succession of popes in the mid-1400's, confronted by the threatening expansion of Islam, saw enslavement as an instrument for Christian conversion and gave religious approval to the Portuguese ventures along the western coast of Africa, the onset of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Throughout the nineteenth-century, Southern proslavery ideology and scientific theories of racial inferiority were often drawn from Aristotle who proclaimed "from the hour of their birth, some are marked out for subjection, others for rule." Through this lens, slavery was truly good for

[4] Davis, p 48
[5] Davis, p 51
[6] Davis p 59

the slave, who lacked the necessary mental capacity to make decisions and exercise forethought for himself. Plato had also contributed to the conceptual basis of racial slavery by maintaining the division between master and slave was part of a vast cosmic scheme in which irrational nature was ordered and controlled by an intelligent and purposeful authority.[7] As Davis focuses on more specific origins of antiblack racism and its relationship to Africa's long exportation of slaves, we now move into humanity's universal need for sunlight, and fear or mistrust of darkness, where the moral and aesthetic "power of blackness" seems to first emerge in the Bible when God brings light into the dark void and divides day from night, and then continues as the Children of Light struggle with the Children of Darkness. No other passage in the bible has had such a disastrous influence through human history as Genesis 9:18-27, the story of Noah's curse of slavery. The story of Noah, Ham, and Canaan provided a way of remaining faithful to the biblical account of a common human origin while also giving divine authority for the enslavement and subordination of African blacks and their descendants. Acceptance of "the Curse" even by many blacks continued well into the twentieth century.[8] The presence of increasing numbers of black African slaves, first in the Islamic world, fused ancient stereotypes of slaves and the negative symbolism of "blackness" with the physical features of sub-Saharan Africans. This was not an originally racist biblical script that led to the enslavement of "Ham's black descendants," but rather the increasing enslavement of blacks that transformed biblical interpretation. The biblical account of "the Curse" includes no hint or implication regarding race or color, but Noah clearly

[7] Davis, p 55
[8] Davis, p 66

intended to punish some of his descendants with the lowliest form of eternal slavery and to reward other descendants with this cheap, humiliating and involuntary labor.[9]

Davis's multifaceted approach to understanding the global context of New World slavery in *Inhuman Bondage* provides the reader with a framework to understand how slavery in the Americas is an extension of Old World beliefs and practices. One pedagogical approach to use this text in the classroom will be to use a painting discussed on p.59 called the" Miracle of the Black Leg." From the third century, the painting shows two white brother saints who are replacing the gangrenous leg of a white man with the amputated limb of a dying black man, whose face is contorted with pain. Students should analyze the painting (I have seen two versions) and make observations as to the paintings meaning as we introduce the study of slavery. I greatly anticipate the conversation generated from such a piece of art and feel it will give students a sense of the significance of the relationship between slavery and the development of the New World. The cross-curriculum approach will stimulate students' curiosity and desire to acquire more knowledge in reference to the practice and development of slavery throughout history. Davis suggests the painting, today, seems to have the message "an African's sacrifice is a European saved," a message that conveys much of the meaning of New World slavery. Various sections of the text could be read, questions answered and discussed to enrich the learning experience while students analyze the various maps Davis includes in order to understand the geographic regions discussed and the global expansion of slavery.

[9] Davis, p 67