

# Is God a Moral Monster?

MAKING SENSE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT GOD

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To my fine son, Peter,  
full of good humor and thoughtful conversation,  
a source of rich blessing from the Lord—to me and many others

# 12

## Warrant for Trafficking in Humans as Farm Equipment? (I)

### *Slavery in Israel*

The runaway slave and abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1781–1845) wrote in his autobiography about his first slaveowner, Captain Anthony.

He was a cruel man, hardened by a long life of slave-holding. He would at times seem to take great pleasure in whipping a slave. I have often been awakened at the dawn of day by the most heart-rending shrieks of an own aunt of mine, whom he used to tie up to a joist, and whip upon her naked back till she was literally covered with blood. No words, no tears, no prayers, from his gory victim, seemed to move his iron heart from its bloody purpose. The louder she screamed, the harder he whipped; and where the blood ran fastest, there he whipped longest. He would whip her to make her scream, and whip her to make her hush; and not until overcome by fatigue, would he cease to swing the blood-clotted cowskin. I remember the first time I ever witnessed this horrible exhibition. I was quite a child, but I well remember it. I never shall forget it whilst I remember any thing. It was the first of a long series of such outrages, of which I was doomed to be a witness and a participant. It struck me with awful force. It was the blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass. It was a most terrible spectacle. I wish I could commit to paper the feelings with which I beheld it.<sup>1</sup>

Harriet Beecher Stowe (1796–1851), author of the powerful bestseller *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, wrote that Southern masters had absolute control over every facet of their slaves' lives: "The legal power of the master amounts to an absolute despotism over body and soul," and "there is no protection for the slave's life."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Spark Publishing, 2005), 20.

<sup>2</sup> Harriet Beecher Stowe, *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin; presenting the Facts and Documents upon which the Story is Founded, together with Corroborative Statements verifying the Truth of the Work* (Boston: John P. Jewett, 1853), I.10, 139.

## Biblical Indentured Service

A mistake critics make is associating *servanthood* in the Old Testament with antebellum (prewar) *slavery* in the South—like the kind of scenario Douglass described. By contrast, Hebrew (debt) *servanthood* could be compared to similar conditions in colonial America. Paying fares for passage to America was too costly for many individuals to afford. So they'd contract themselves out, working in the households—often in apprentice-like positions—until they paid back their debts. One-half to two-thirds of white immigrants to Britain's colonies were indentured servants.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, an Israelite strapped for shekels might become an indentured servant to pay off his debt to a “boss” or “employer” (*’adon*). Calling him a “master” is often way too strong a term, just as the term *’ebed* (“servant, employee”) typically shouldn't be translated “slave.” John Goldingay comments that “there is nothing inherently lowly or undignified about being an *’ebed*.” Indeed, it is an honorable, dignified term.<sup>4</sup> Even when the terms *buy*, *sell*, or *acquire* are used of servants/employees, they don't mean the person in question is “just property.” Think of a sports player today who gets “traded” to another team, to which he “belongs.” Yes, teams have “owners,” but we're hardly talking about slavery here! Rather, these are formal contractual agreements, which is what we find in Old Testament *servanthood/employee* arrangements.<sup>5</sup> One example of this contracted employer/employee relationship was Jacob's working for Laban for seven years so that he might marry his daughter Rachel. In Israel, becoming a voluntary servant was commonly a starvation-prevention measure; a person had no collateral other than himself, which meant either service or death. While most people worked in the family business, servants would contribute to it as domestic workers. Contrary to the critics, this *servanthood* wasn't much different *experientially* from paid employment in a cash economy like ours.<sup>6</sup>

Now, debt tended to come to families, not just individuals. Whether because of failed

<sup>3</sup> David W. Galenson, “[Indentured Servitude](#),” in *The Oxford Companion to American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 368–69.

<sup>4</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 460.

<sup>5</sup> Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary 2 (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2008), 474–75.

<sup>6</sup> Goldingay, *Israel's Life*, 461.

crops or serious indebtedness, a father could *voluntarily* enter into a contractual agreement (“sell” himself) to work in the household of another: “one of your countrymen becomes poor and sells himself” ([Lev. 25:47 NIV](#)). Perhaps his wife or children might “be sold” to help sustain the family through economically unbearable times. If his kinfolk didn’t “redeem” him (pay off his debt), then he would work as a debt-servant until he was released after six years.<sup>7</sup> Family land would have to be mortgaged until the year of Jubilee every fifty years (see [Leviticus 25](#), which actually spells out successive stages of destitution in Israel in vv. [25-54](#)).<sup>8</sup> In other words, this servanthood wasn’t imposed by an outsider, as it was by slave traders and plantation owners in the antebellum South.<sup>9</sup> What’s more, this indentured service wasn’t unusual in other parts of the ancient Near East either (though conditions were often worse). And later on, when inhabitants of Judah took back Hebrew servants they had released, God condemned them for violating the law of Moses and for forgetting that they were once slaves in Egypt whom God had delivered. God told the Judahites that because of their actions they were going to be exiled in the land of their enemies ([Jer. 34:12-22](#)).

Once a servant was released, he was free to pursue his own livelihood without any further obligations within that household. He returned to being a full participant in Israelite society. Becoming an indentured servant meant a slight step down the social ladder, but a person could step back up as a full citizen once the debt was paid or he was released in the seventh year (or in the fiftieth year). Nevertheless, the law was concerned that indentured servants were to be treated as a man “hired from year to year” and were not to be “rule[d] over ... ruthlessly” ([Lev. 25:53-54 NIV](#)). In fact, servants in Israel weren’t cut off from society during their servitude but were thoroughly embedded within it. As I mentioned earlier, Israel’s forgiveness of debts every seven years was fixed and thus intended to be far more consistent than that of Israel’s ancient Near Eastern counterparts, for whom debt-release (if it occurred) was typically much more sporadic.

<sup>7</sup> On some of my comments on servitude in Israel, I borrow from Tikva Frymer-Kenski, “[Anatolia and the Levant: Israel](#),” in *A History of Ancient Near East Law*, vol. 2, ed. Raymond Westbrook (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

<sup>8</sup> See Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, JSOT Supplement Series 141 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1993), [351-54](#).

<sup>9</sup> See Gordon Wenham, “[Family in the Pentateuch](#),” in *Family in the Bible*, ed. Richard S. Hess and Daniel Carrol (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 21.

So unavoidable lifelong servanthood was prohibited, unless someone loved the head of the household and wanted to attach himself to him (Exod. 21:5). Servants—even if they hadn’t paid off their debts—were granted release every seventh year with all debts forgiven (Deut. 15). As we’ll see, their legal status was unique and a dramatic improvement over law codes in the ancient Near East. One scholar writes that “Hebrew has no vocabulary of slavery, only of servanthood.”<sup>10</sup>

An Israelite servant’s guaranteed release within seven years was a control or regulation to prevent the abuse and institutionalizing of such positions. The release year reminded the Israelites that poverty-induced servanthood wasn’t an ideal social arrangement. On the other hand, servanthood existed in Israel precisely because poverty existed: no poverty, no servants in Israel. And if servants lived in Israel, it was a voluntary (poverty-induced) arrangement and not forced.

## Means to Help the Poor

In the ancient world (and beyond), chattel (or property) slavery had three characteristics:

1. A slave was property.
2. The slave owner’s rights over the slave’s person and work were total and absolute.
3. The slave was stripped of his identity—racial, familial, social, marital.<sup>11</sup>

From what we’ve seen, this doesn’t describe the Hebrew servant at all, nor does it (as we’ll see in the next chapter) fit the non-Israelite “slave” in Israel.

Israel’s servant laws were concerned about *controlling* or *regulating*—not *idealizing*—an inferior work arrangement. Israelite servitude was induced by poverty, was entered into voluntarily, and was far from optimal. The intent of these laws was to combat potential abuses, not to institutionalize servitude.

When we compare Israel’s servant system with the ancient Near East in general, what we have is a fairly tame and, in many ways, very attractive arrangement for impoverished Israelites. The servant laws aimed to benefit and protect the poor—that is, those most likely to enter indentured service. Servanthood was *voluntary*: a person

<sup>10</sup> J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 239.

<sup>11</sup> Peter Garnsey, *Ideas of Slavery from Aristotle to Augustine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 1.

who (for whatever reason) doesn't have any land "sells himself" ([Lev. 25:39, 47](#); compare [Deut. 15:12](#)). Someone might also sell a family member as an indentured servant in another's household to work until a debt is paid off. Once a person was freed from his servant obligations, he had the "status of full and unencumbered citizenship."<sup>12</sup>

Old Testament legislation sought to prevent voluntary debt-servitude. A good deal of Mosaic legislation was given to protect the poor from even temporary indentured service. The poor were given opportunities to glean the edges of fields or pick lingering fruit on trees after their fellow Israelites harvested the land ([Lev. 19:9-10](#); [23:22](#); [Deut. 24:20-21](#)). Also, fellow Israelites were commanded to lend freely to the poor ([Deut. 15:7-8](#)), who weren't to be charged interest ([Exod. 22:25](#); [Lev. 25:36-37](#)). And if the poor couldn't afford high-end sacrificial animals, they could sacrifice smaller, less-expensive ones ([Lev. 5:7, 11](#)). Also, debts were to be automatically canceled every seven years. In fact, when debt-servants were released, they were to be generously provided for without a "grudging heart" ([Deut. 15:10 NIV](#)). The bottom line: God didn't want there to be any poverty in Israel ([Deut. 15:4](#)). Therefore, servant laws existed to help the poor, not harm them or keep them down.

### **The Ultimate Goal: No Poverty, No Servanthood ([Deut. 15:1-18](#))**

At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD's remission has been proclaimed. From a foreigner you may exact it [which was typically for business transactions, as we'll see later], but your hand shall release whatever of yours is with your brother. However, there will be no poor among you, since the LORD will surely bless you in the land which the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, if only you listen obediently to the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all this commandment which I am commanding you today. For the LORD your God will bless you as He has promised you, and you will lend to many nations, but you will not borrow; and you will rule over many nations, but they will not rule over you.

If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, "The seventh year, the year of remission,

<sup>12</sup>John I. Durham, *Exodus*, Word Biblical Commentary 3 (Waco: Word, 1987), 321.



is near,” and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you. You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, “You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.”

If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today. It shall come about if he says to you, “I will not go out from you,” because he loves you and your household, since he fares well with you; then you shall take an awl and pierce it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your servant forever. Also you shall do likewise to your maidservant. It shall not seem hard to you when you set him free, for he has given you six years with double the service of a hired man; so the LORD your God will bless you in whatever you do. (Deut. 15:1-18)

This legislation commands the forgiveness of the poor person’s (i.e., servant’s) accumulated debt; this debt remission was to take place every seven years, which shows God’s remarkable concern for the impoverished in the land. Now some will point to various Mesopotamian kings during the second millennium BC who released slaves and debtors during the first or second year of their reign—and another time or more beyond that. But such releases were typically sporadic, unlike the fixed intervals required in Israel every seventh and fiftieth year.<sup>13</sup>

If you just glanced over the [Deuteronomy 15](#) text and didn’t catch its significance, go back and *really* read it. The overriding, revolutionary goal expressed in this text is to totally eradicate debt-servanthood in the land: “there will be no poor [and therefore no debt servanthood] among you” (v. 4).<sup>14</sup> Being a realist, however, God was aware that inferior conditions would exist and that poverty (and thus servanthood) would continue in the land (v. 11). Even so, this undesirable situation was to be battled rather than

<sup>13</sup> John L. Hartley, [Leviticus](#), Word Biblical Commentary 4 (Dallas: Word, 1992), 429. Hammurabi’s Code made provision for release of debt slaves.

<sup>14</sup> Gordon McConville, [Grace in the End: A Study in Deuteronomical Theology](#) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 148.



institutionalized.

In keeping with this “eradicate poverty/eradicate servitude” spirit, a servant’s release was to be accompanied with generous provisions and a gracious spirit. The “master” was to have no wicked thought toward his servant; instead, he was to generously load him up with provisions (vv. 13–14). The motivating reason for this kindness and goodwill was that “you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today” (v. 15). Even if poverty (and therefore servitude) couldn’t be eradicated, Israel was to strive toward this goal.

## The Dignity of Debt-Servants

Rather than relegating treatment of servants (slaves) to the end of the law code (commonly done in other ancient Near Eastern law codes), Israel’s law code put the matter front and center in [Exodus 21](#). For the first time in the ancient Near East, legislation required treating servants as persons, not property.

In other ancient Near Eastern cultures, it was the *king* who was the image of their god on earth—and certainly not the slave. By contrast, [Genesis 1:26–27](#) affirms that all human beings are God’s image-bearers. This doctrine serves as the basis for affirming the dignity and rights of every human. Likewise, [Job 31:13–15](#) clearly reveals the inescapable humanity—and thus equality—of master and servant alike: “If I have denied justice to my menservants and maidservants when they had a grievance against me, what will I do when God confronts me? What will I answer when called to account? Did not he who made me in the womb make them? Did not the same one form us both within our mothers?” (NIV).

Servants (slaves) in Israel, unlike their ancient Near Eastern contemporaries, were given radical, unprecedented legal/human rights, even if not equaling that of free persons (who could, if unfortunate circumstances prevailed, find themselves needing to place themselves into indentured servitude).<sup>15</sup> As the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*’s essay on “[Slavery](#)” observes, “We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their masters.”<sup>16</sup> By comparison, “the idea of a slave as exclusively the object of rights and as

<sup>15</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1995), 124.

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad A. Dandamayev, s.v. “[Slavery \(Old Testament\)](#),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*,

a person outside regular society was apparently alien to the laws of the [rest of the] ANE,” where slaves were forcibly branded or tattooed for identification (contrast this with [Exod. 21:5–6](#)). Indeed, in “contrast to many ancient doctrines, the Hebrew law was relatively mild toward the slaves and recognized them as human beings subject to defense from intolerable acts, although not to the same extent as free persons.”<sup>17</sup> As we’ll see, the protection of runaway slaves who fled to Israel was strikingly different from the slave laws in surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures, and this was due to Israel’s own history as slaves in Egypt. This fact would in effect turn slavery into a “voluntary institution.”<sup>18</sup>

Some will argue at this point that Hittite laws were softened when they were upgraded; they became more humanizing. True enough, but the results weren’t always as positive as one might think. For example, murder no longer carried with it the death sentence—*except for slaves*. Free persons were punished by fining and by mutilation. The improvements were at best a mixed bag!

In the rest of this chapter, we’ll see not only how three key laws in Israel were distinct in the ancient Near East but also how if they had been heeded by “Bible-believing” Southerners in the U.S. and “Christian” Europeans, slavery would not have been an issue. Let’s look at these more closely.

## **Release of Injured Servants**

Another marked improvement of Israel’s laws over other ancient Near Eastern law codes is the release of injured servants ([Exod. 21:26–27](#)). When an employer (master) accidentally gouged out the eye or knocked out the tooth of his male or female servant/employee, he or she was to go free. No bodily abuse of servants was permitted. And as we’ll discuss in the next chapter, if an employer’s discipline resulted in the immediate death of his servant, that employer (master) himself was to be put to death ([Exod. 21:20](#); note that the word for “punished” is very strong, always connoting the death penalty).

By contrast, Hammurabi’s Code permitted the master to cut off his disobedient slave’s ear.<sup>19</sup> Typically in ancient Near Eastern law codes, masters—not slaves—were

vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Frymer-Kenski, “Anatolia and the Levant: Israel,” 1007.

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merely financially compensated for injuries to their slaves. The Mosaic law, however, held masters accountable for their treatment of their own servants, not simply another person's servants. As we'll see shortly, if the servant died because of an employer's physical abuses, this was considered murder. All of this was unparalleled in other ancient Near Eastern codes.<sup>20</sup>

Some might ask whether releasing a servant for gouging out an eye or a tooth is a better reason for freeing servants than in other ancient Near Eastern cultures. After all, Hammurabi allowed for the release of a slave woman and her children (sired by the master) if the master decided not to adopt them.<sup>21</sup> Of course, the question itself is skewed.<sup>22</sup> As we've seen, Israelites were to release their servants every seven years, unless they wanted to stay on. In [1 Chronicles 2:34-35](#), Caleb's descendant Sheshan gave his daughter in marriage to his Egyptian servant Jarha—not a bad move up the social ladder!

As an aside, keep in mind that many—perhaps most—servants were young people who were parceled out by destitute parents to more prosperous families who would feed, clothe, and shelter them. Other adults served *in loco parentis*—in the place of parents—which typically included discipline of servant children. As [Proverbs 29:19](#) puts it: “A servant cannot be corrected by mere words; though he understands, he will not respond” (NIV). The downside of this was that sometimes the head of the household would likely overdo the punishment, possibly resulting in injury.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>19</sup> [Laws of Hammurabi §282](#). See also Elisabeth Meier Tetlow, *Women, Crime, and Punishment in Ancient Law and Society, vol. 1, The Ancient Near East* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>20</sup> On this unique feature, see Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004), 292.

<sup>21</sup> [Laws of Hammurabi §§170-71](#).

<sup>22</sup> I'm referring to Hector Avalos (“[Yahweh Is a Moral Monster](#),” in *The Christian Delusion*, ed. John Loftus [Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010]), who commonly engages in this type of evidence slanting. Despite his ad hominem accusations of my being a biased “religionist” or my “faith-based” approach, the issue is one of evidence and argumentation. As it turns out, Avalos's own tone and selectivity of his arguments certainly qualify him as truly “anti-religionist” and being “anti-faith-based.”

<sup>23</sup> [Goldingay, Israel's Life, 470](#).

## Anti-Kidnapping Laws

Another unique feature of the Mosaic law is its condemnation of kidnapping a person to sell as a slave, an act punishable by death:

He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death. ([Exod. 21:16](#))

If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you. ([Deut. 24:7](#)) (Note the prohibition of kidnapping in [1 Tim. 1:10](#).)

This ban against kidnapping is a point lost on, or ignored by, those who compare servanthood in Israel with slavery in the antebellum South, let alone the ancient Near East.

## Helping Runaway Slaves

Up to this point, we've primarily referred to Israelite servants, not foreign ones. But this particular law reveals just how different Israel's laws were from the antebellum South—despite the Confederacy's claims of following the Bible faithfully. Also, this fugitive-harboring law would have applied to Israelite servants who left harsh employers for refuge. Another unique feature in Israel's "slave laws" was this: Israel was commanded to offer safe harbor to foreign runaway slaves ([Deut. 23:15–16](#)). The Southern states' Fugitive Slave Law legally required runaway slaves to be returned to their masters. This sounds more like the Code of Hammurabi than the Bible. Hammurabi even demanded the death penalty for those helping runaway slaves.<sup>24</sup>

In other less-severe cases—in the Lipit-Ishtar, Eshunna, and Hittite laws—*fin*es were exacted for sheltering fugitive slaves.<sup>25</sup> Some claim that this was an improvement. Well, sort of. In these "improved" scenarios, the slave was still merely property, and ancient Near Eastern extradition arrangements still required that a slave be returned to his master. And not only this, but the slave was going back to the harsh conditions that prompted him to run away in the first place. Even upgraded laws in 1<sup>st</sup> millennium BC Babylon included compensation to the owner (or perhaps something more severe) for harboring a runaway slave. Yet the returned slaves themselves were disfigured,

<sup>24</sup> [Laws of Hammurabi §16](#).

<sup>25</sup> [Laws of Lipit-Ishtar §12](#); [Laws of Eshunna §49–50](#); [Hittite Laws §24](#).

including having their ears slit and being branded.<sup>26</sup> This isn't the kind of improvement to publicize too widely! Yes, positive trends and moral improvements took place in ancient Near Eastern laws. But repeatedly we see a general, noteworthy moral difference between the law of Moses and other ancient Near Eastern law codes.

One more matter: although some claim that the runaway slave in [Deuteronomy 23](#) isn't a foreigner but an Israelite, we have plenty of reason to reject that idea. For one thing, no mention of the word *brother* or *neighbor* is used. In addition, according to [Leviticus 25](#), Israelites weren't allowed to enslave fellow Israelites. Also, the foreign fugitive slave could freely choose a place to live in Israel ("in your midst," "in one of your towns" [[Deut. 23:16](#)]), unlike the rest of the Israelites, who had to stay put on the land allotted to clans (cf. Numbers, Joshua). Thus, those who benefited weren't society's elite but vulnerable, marginalized foreign persons in the midst of a completely different society. Furthermore, Israelites entered servitude voluntarily whereas runaway slaves would likely have become slaves against their will. So if *alien* slaves received protection from harsh masters, how much more would this be so for *Israelites*.<sup>27</sup>

## Summary Comments

In Abraham Lincoln's Second Inaugural Address (☞ March 4, 1865) we find these familiar words regarding the North and the South:

Both read the same Bible and pray to the same God, and each invokes His aid against the other. It may seem strange that any men should dare to ask a just God's assistance in wringing their bread from the sweat of other men's faces, but let us judge not, that we be not judged. The prayers of both could not be answered. That of neither has been answered fully. The Almighty has His own purposes.<sup>28</sup>

Yes, clearly both sides read from the same Bible and sought divine support to overcome their adversaries. However, the critics' common association of Israel's servant laws with those of the antebellum South is seriously misguided. We can plainly affirm that

<sup>26</sup> Joachim Oelsner, Bruce Wells, and Cornelia Wunsch, s.v. "[Neo-Babylonian Period](#)," in *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, ed. Raymond Westbrook (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 2:932.

<sup>27</sup> David L. Baker, [Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law](#) (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 133–34.

<sup>28</sup> This and other Lincoln speeches are available at <http://www.lincolnbicentennial.org>.

if the three clear laws of the Old Testament had been followed in the South—that is, the anti-kidnapping, anti-harm, and anti—slave-return regulations in [Exodus 21:16, 20, 26–27](#) and [Deuteronomy 23:15–16](#) and [24:7](#)—then slavery wouldn’t have arisen in America.

If you had to choose between servanthood in Israel and slavery in other ancient Near Eastern cultures, the sane person would pick Israel every time. The indentured servanthood model wasn’t ideal, but Israel’s laws reflected a greater moral sensitivity than their ancient Near Eastern counterparts.

In his classic *Theology of the Old Testament*, Walther Eichrodt summarizes the contrast well:

The norms given in the Book of the Covenant ([Exod. 20–23](#)) reveal, when compared with related law-books of the ancient Near East, radical alterations in legal practice. In the evaluation of offences against property, in the treatment of slaves, in the fixing of punishment for indirect offences, and in the rejection of punishment by mutilation, the value of human life is recognized as incomparably greater than all material values. The dominant feature throughout is respect for the rights of everything that has a human face; and this means that views which predominate universally elsewhere have been abandoned, and new principles introduced into legal practice. Ultimately this is possible only because of the profundity of insight hitherto undreamt of into *the nobility of Man*, which is now recognized as a binding consideration for moral conduct. Hence in Israel even the rights of the lowliest foreigner are placed under the protection of God; and if he is also dependent, without full legal rights, to oppress him is like oppressing the widow and orphan, a transgression worthy of punishment, which calls forth God’s avenging retribution.<sup>29</sup>

In Israel, indentured servants (slaves) were to be treated as human beings—not as things—and they were protected from “inhuman abuse.”<sup>30</sup> In Old Testament law, though there was a social distinction between a servant and a free person, a servant was certainly protected by the law. Abusing a servant would result in his going free. In the seventh year, a servant would be debt free and able to strike out on his own in his new status as a free person. Though there were some release laws in the ancient Near

<sup>29</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, trans. J. A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1967), 321.

<sup>30</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J. A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1961), 77–82.

East, the contrasts between Israel's laws and other laws are more striking than the similarities. "The Israelites had six years of labor?" the critic asks. "Hammurabi allowed only three!" Generally speaking, though, in the ancient Near East, a "slave's right of manumission [gaining freedom] belonged exclusively to the slave's owner."<sup>31</sup>

The Code of Hammurabi and other ancient Near Eastern law codes stressed class distinctions and legislation corresponding to slaves, free persons, government officials, priests, and so on. These ancient Near Eastern laws were quite unlike the fairly non-hierarchical Old Testament. In Israel, even kings like David or Ahab weren't above the law. Indeed, when they were guilty of murdering Uriah and Naboth (respectively), God's prophets confronted them for taking the innocent lives of two ordinary citizens. (Though Canaanite kings assumed that the land belonged to them and their royal families, Naboth knew that the land belonged to God, which he graciously gave for Israelite families to use.)<sup>32</sup> Although God didn't use Israel's judicial system on kings, he certainly didn't give these kings a pass. God repeatedly brought severe judgments directly on the royal perpetrators of heinous crimes and acts of covenant disloyalty. God divided the kingdom because of Solomon's idolatry ([1 Kings 11:13](#)); he sent leprosy on Uzziah ([2 Chron. 26:19](#)); he sent Manasseh into exile ([2 Chron. 33:10-11](#)); and the list goes on. These incidents illustrate what [Leviticus 19:15](#) commands: "You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor nor defer to the great, but you are to judge your neighbor fairly," whether king or ordinary citizen. Yes, Israel's treatment of servants (slaves) was unparalleled in the ancient Near East:

No other ancient near Eastern law has been found that holds a master to account for the treatment of his own slaves (as distinct from injury done to the slave of another master), and the otherwise universal law regarding runaway slaves was that they must be sent back, with severe penalties for those who failed to comply.<sup>33</sup>

Though Israel's laws on servitude weren't the moral ideal, they show far greater moral sensitivity than other ancient Near Eastern texts. In doing so, they point us back to God's ideal at the beginning: all humans are God's image-bearers ([Gen. 1:26-27](#)). Contrary to what Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris say, servanthood in Israel can hardly be called "a warrant for trafficking in humans" or a means of treating people "like

<sup>31</sup> Muhammed A. Dandamayev, s.v. "Slavery (ANE)," in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, 6:61.

<sup>32</sup> Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 721.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 292.



farm equipment.” No, God’s ultimate intention wasn’t for humans to “keep slaves.”<sup>34</sup> In fact, the Genesis ideal is that all humans are equal and that they do not work for another; rather, each person under God’s care is to be his own “master,” sitting under his own vine and fig tree (1 Kings 4:25; Micah 4:4; Zech. 3:10).<sup>35</sup>

## Further Reading

Chirichigno, Gregory C. *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. JSOT Supplement Series 141. Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1993.

Goldingay, John. *Old Testament Theology III: Israel’s Life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009. See esp. pp. 458–75.

Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004.

# 13

## Warrant for Trafficking in Humans as Farm Equipment? (II)

### *Challenging Texts on Slavery*

We’ve given context and background regarding servitude in Israel—a noteworthy improvement on the slavery laws in other ancient Near Eastern texts. Yet there are still some challenging texts to consider.

### **Beating Slaves to Death (Exod. 21:20–21)**

If a man strikes his male servant or his female servant with a staff so that he or she dies as a result of the blow, he will surely be punished [*naqam*]. However, if the injured servant survives one or two days, the owner will not be punished [*naqam*], for he has suffered the loss. (Exod. 21:20–21 NET)

<sup>34</sup> Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), 14.

<sup>35</sup> Goldingay, *Israel’s Life*, 460–62.

Allegedly, this treatment of the servant (the word *slave* is misleading) suggests to some that he's owned as a possession by another. This impression is reinforced by various translations that render the word *loss* as "property." Now, the word literally means "money"; so is this person is a commodity to exchange rather than a person to value?

The Old Testament affirms the full personhood of these debt-servants (e.g., [Gen. 1:26–27](#); [Job 31:13–15](#); [Deut. 15:1–18](#)), and this passage is no exception. It affirms the servant's full personhood. If the master struck a servant so that he immediately died, the master would be tried for capital punishment: "he shall be avenged" ([Exod. 21:20 ESV](#)). This verb *naqam* always involves the death penalty in the Old Testament—the implication is that judicial vengeance is the result.<sup>1</sup> This theme is reinforced by the mention of taking "life for life" ([Exod. 21:23–24](#)), which follows on the heels of the servant-beating passage. This confirms that the servant was to be treated as a human being with dignity, not as property.

The staff or rod wasn't a lethal weapon, nothing like a spear or a sword. What if the servant *didn't* die immediately from the rod beating? What if he died after "a day or two"? In this case, the master was given the benefit of the doubt that the servant was likely being disciplined and that there was no murderous intent. Of course, if the slave died immediately, no further proof was needed. And if any permanent injury resulted (e.g., losing an eye or a tooth), then the servant was to be released debt free. This is an extraordinarily different treatment compared to other ancient Near Eastern laws in this regard. For example, Hammurabi insisted that payment went *to the master* for such injuries to a slave.<sup>2</sup> In the ancient Near East, where masters could treat slaves as they pleased, this passage upholds the dignity of debt-servants.<sup>3</sup>

Why then does the passage say that the slave is the master's "money" or "property"? The suggestion here isn't that servants were chattel or property. The servant/employee came into the master's/employer's house to get out of debt. So the employer stood to lose money if he mistreated his employee; his harsh treatment toward an employee could impact his money bag. And if he killed his employee/servant, then he was to be executed. Whether of a servant or a free person, murder was murder in Israel.

<sup>1</sup> Gregory C. Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, JSOT Supplement Series 141 (Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1993), 155–63.

<sup>2</sup> [Laws of Hammurabi §§199–201](#).

<sup>3</sup> Walter Kaiser, "Exodus," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 2, ed. Tremper Longman III and Frank C. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 433–35.

Let's go a bit deeper, though. Ancient Near Eastern scholar Harry Hoffner (a Hittitologist at the University of Chicago) rejects the common rendering "he [the servant] is his money" in favor of this one: "that [fee] is his money/silver." This "fee" reading is based on the context of [Exodus 21:18–19](#) (part of a section on punishments dealing with quarrels and accidental killing): "If men have a quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist, and he does not die but remains in bed, if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, then he who struck him shall go unpunished; he shall only pay for his loss of time, and shall take care of him until he is completely healed." Like the modified Hittite law that required masters who had harmed their slaves to pay a physician to provide medical treatment, so here the employer had to pay the medical bills for the servant he had wounded. In verse [21](#), the Hebrew pronoun *hu* refers not to the servant ("he") but to the fee ("that") paid to the doctor tending to the wounded servant. Hoffner writes, "The fact that the master provided care at his own expense would be a significant factor when the judges respond to a charge of intentional homicide."<sup>4</sup>

Are these Exodus laws perfect, universal ones for all people? No, but in this and other aspects, we continually come across improved legislation for Israelite society in contrast to surrounding ancient Near Eastern cultures. As the Jewish scholar Nahum Sarna observes about this passage, "This law—the protection of slaves from maltreatment by their masters—is found nowhere else in the entire existing corpus of ancient Near Eastern legislation."<sup>5</sup>

### **Leaving Wife and Children Behind ([Exod. 21:2–6](#))**

If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year he will go out free without paying anything. If he came in by himself he will go out by himself; if he had a wife when he came in, then his wife will go out with him. If his master gave him a wife, and she bore sons or daughters, the wife and the children will belong to her master, and he will go out by himself. But if the servant should declare, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free," then his master must bring him to the judges, and he will bring him to the door or the doorposts, and his master will pierce his ear with an awl, and he shall serve him forever. ([Exod. 21:2–6](#))

<sup>4</sup> Cf. (New) [Hittite Laws §9](#). This paragraph is taken from Harry A. Hoffner, Jr., "Slavery and Slave Laws in Ancient Hatti and Israel," in *Israel: Ancient Kingdom or Late Invention?*, ed. Daniel I. Block (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, [Exodus](#) (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), [124](#).

NET)

Nuzi was located near Kirkuk, Iraq, close to the Tigris River.<sup>6</sup> Thousands of tablets—the Akkadian Nuzi texts—from the second millennium BC were found there. They mention legislation similar to this: if a slave entered a master’s home single, he left single. If he entered with a spouse, then he left on his marry way! Now, if a wife had been given to him by his master, then she (and any children from this union) belonged to the master.

According to this Exodus passage, if a man was given a wife by his master/employer and they had children, then he had a choice: he could either leave by himself when the seventh year of debt release came, or he could continue as a permanent servant to be with his wife and children. It’s a less-than-ideal setting to be sure, but let’s probe the text more deeply.

At first glance, this text seems to treat females (and children) unfairly. The (apparently) favored male can come into a service arrangement and then go out of it. Yet the wife he married while serving his employer and any children who came while he served were (so it seems) “stuck” in the master’s home and couldn’t leave. That’s not only male favoring; it strikes us as criminal! Wasn’t this an earlier version of slave families during the antebellum South (like Frederick Douglass’s) who were broken up and scattered by insensitive slaveowners?

Our first point in response is this: we’re not told specifically that this scenario could also apply to a woman, but we have good reason to think this situation wasn’t gender specific. (We’ll see shortly that [Deuteronomy 15](#) makes explicit that this scenario applied to a woman as well.) This is another example of case law: “if such and such a scenario arises, then this is how to proceed.” Case law typically wasn’t gender specific. Furthermore, Israelite judges were quite capable of applying the law to male and female alike. An impoverished woman, who wasn’t given by her father as a prospective wife to a (widowed or divorced) man or his son ([Exod. 21:7-11](#)), could perform standard household tasks. And she could go free by this same law, just as a male servant could.<sup>7</sup> Various scholars suggest that the Scripture text could be applied to females quite readily: “If you buy a Hebrew servant, she is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh

<sup>6</sup> Much in this section is taken from Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, New American Commentary 2 (Nashville: B & H Publishing, 2008), 476–81.

<sup>7</sup> Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, chap. 6.

year, she will go out free.... If her master gives her a husband, and they have sons or daughters, the husband and the children will belong to her master, and she will go out by herself.” The law makes perfect sense in light of this shift; its spirit isn’t violated by doing so.

Some critics, though, would rather fight than shift. Rather than applying these case-law scenarios to both men and women, they’d rather put up resistance in order to make this law look its very worst. But we have no compelling reason to do so. Again, Israel’s judges would have looked to this general passage for guidance regarding female servants. Simply because many verses in the law happen to use a masculine gender pronoun rather than alternating between “he” and “she” hardly means that women are thereby being excluded.

As an aside, the term *Hebrew* (at this stage in Israel’s history) was broader than the term *Israelite*; the two terms would later be equated. The *habiru* were people not formally attached to established states like Egypt or Babylon; they were considered foreigners and noncitizens from the speaker’s perspective. So this passage may well refer to a non-Israelite. That means this servant—possibly a foreigner—was to be released after six years unless he preferred the security of his employer’s household. In this case, he could make the arrangement permanent. For now, we’ll assume that this passage refers to an Israelite servant, but we’ll revisit this issue when discussing [Leviticus 25](#).

For our second point, let’s (for the moment) stick with a *male* servant/employee scenario. Let’s say his employer arranges for a marriage between him and a female employee. (In this case of debt-servitude, the employer’s family would now engage in marriage negotiations.) By taking the male servant into his home to work off a debt, the boss has made an investment. He would stand to suffer loss if someone walked out on the contract. Think in terms of military service. When someone signs up to serve for three or four years, he still owes the military, even if he gets married during this time. Likewise in Israel, for debts to be paid off, the male servant couldn’t just leave with his wife once he was married. He was still under contract, and he needed to honor this. And even when his contract was completed, he wasn’t allowed simply to walk away with his wife and kids. After all, they were still economic assets to his boss.

What could the released man do? He had three options.

1. He could wait for his wife and kids to finish their term of service while he worked elsewhere. His wife and kids weren’t stuck in the employer’s home the rest of their lives. They could be released when the wife worked off her debt. Yet if the

now-free man worked elsewhere, this would mean (a) he would be separated from his family, and (b) his boss would no longer supply him with food, clothing, and shelter. On the other hand, if he lived *with* his family after release, he'd still have to pay for room and board. So this scenario created its own set of financial challenges.

2. He could get a decent job elsewhere and save his shekels to pay his boss to release his wife and kids from contractual obligations. What a great option! Why not take this route? Because it would have been very difficult for the man to support himself *and* earn enough money for his family's debt release.
3. He could commit himself to working permanently for his employer—a life contract ([Exod. 21:5-6](#)). He could stay with his family and remain in fairly stable economic circumstances. He would formalize this arrangement in a legal ceremony before the judges (God) by having his ear pierced with an awl.

Before coming up with all sorts of modern Western solutions to solve these ancient Near Eastern problems, we should make greater efforts to better grasp the nature of Israelite servitude and the social and economic circumstances surrounding it. We're talking about unfortunate circumstances during bleak economic times. Israel's laws provided safety nets for *protection*, not oppression. It's obvious that this arrangement was far different from the South's chattel slavery, in which a slave wasn't a temporarily indentured servant who voluntarily sold himself to live in another's household to pay off his debts.

### **The Engaged Servant Girl ([Lev. 19:20-21](#))**

Now if a man lies carnally with a woman who is a slave [i.e., servant] acquired for another man, but who has in no way been redeemed nor given her freedom, there shall be punishment; they shall not, however, be put to death, because she was not free. He shall bring his guilt offering to the LORD to the doorway of the tent of meeting, a ram for a guilt offering. ([Lev. 19:20-21](#))

This passage is different from [Deuteronomy 22:23-27](#), which we addressed earlier and which deals with an engaged *free* woman. Here the situation involves a free man and a *servant* girl promised to another man. The man is clearly guilty of adultery; he seems to be a seducer who is taking advantage of his position over a servant girl, something like what King David did with Bathsheba. We're dealing with statutory rape between the seducer and the servant girl, who was pressured to consent (see our discussion of [Deut.](#)

22:28–29).

In this murky and oft-debated passage, two issues are highlighted. First, the girl was *engaged* and not married. Second, she was a *servant girl* and not free; she hadn't yet been redeemed by a family member or liberated by her master. (This is the reason given for not punishing the girl or the seducer.) So her master wouldn't have had the typical claim on her, nor could he be compensated because she was engaged. This presents a kind of gray area in Israel's legislation with a mixture of a free person and an engaged servant (see the immediately preceding passage on mixtures in [Lev. 19:19](#)).<sup>8</sup>

As with other laws regarding women, the goal of this law was to protect those who were more vulnerable. We know that it's easier for persons in vulnerable situations to be taken advantage of and even sexually harassed. In this case, the girl was taken advantage of, and she isn't punished. Notice too that, though she has a diminished social status, this status is viewed as temporary. It doesn't prevent her from being "given her freedom" ([Lev. 19:20](#)). Now, there's no death penalty for the man here (and we've seen that only murder *requires* the death penalty, while for adultery and other potential capital offenses, other compensation could be made). The offense is still very serious, and expensive reparations are required (i.e., a sacrificial ram).<sup>9</sup> Yet clearly the law protects girls who are taken as servants for their parents' debt.<sup>10</sup>

Based on [Leviticus 19](#) (and a surface reading of [Exod. 21](#)), it may seem that women were treated as property. However, we've observed that, despite Israel's inherited and imperfect patriarchal structure, these laws actually served to protect women as well as the family structure, which was central to Israelite society. Rather than viewing these law texts as demeaning women, we should actually see them as protecting the vulnerable.

To get further perspective, however, consider again other ancient Near Eastern cultures in this regard. Punishments were often of the vicarious sort. For committing certain crimes, men would have to give up their wife, daughter, ox, or slave—a clear indi-

<sup>8</sup> Martin Noth, [Leviticus: A Commentary](#), trans. J. E. Anderson (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1965), 143; see also Jacob Milgrom's lengthy discussion in [Leviticus 17–22](#), Anchor Yale Bible 3A (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 1665–77.

<sup>9</sup> Richard M. Davidson, [Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament](#) (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2007), 361–62.

<sup>10</sup> Tikva Frymer-Kenski, "[Anatolia and the Levant: Israel](#)," in [A History of Ancient Near East Law](#), vol. 2, ed. Raymond Westbrook (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 1034.



cation that a woman was often deemed the property of a man. Middle Assyrian laws punished not a rapist but a rapist's wife and even allowed her to be gang-raped. In other ancient Near Eastern laws, men could freely whip their wives, pull out their hair, mutilate their ears, or strike them—a dramatic contrast to Israel's laws, which gave no such permissions.<sup>11</sup> Again, despite some of Israel's problematic social structures and corresponding laws, Israel's legal system—if faithfully followed—created a morally preferable environment to other societies in the ancient Near East. (The operative words are “faithfully followed,” which Israel wasn't very good at doing.)

## Foreign Slaves

For they [Israelites] are My servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt; they are not to be sold in a slave sale. You shall not rule over him with severity, but are to revere your God. As for your male and female slaves whom you may have—you may acquire male and female slaves from the pagan nations that are around you. Then, too, it is out of the sons of the sojourners [*toshabim*] who live as aliens [*ger*] among you that you may gain acquisition, and out of their families who are with you, whom they will have produced in your land; they also may become your possession. You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession; you can use them as permanent slaves. But in respect to your countrymen, the sons of Israel, you shall not rule with severity over one another.

Now if the means of a stranger [*ger*] or of a sojourner [*toshab*] with you becomes sufficient, and a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to him as to sell himself to a stranger who is sojourning with you, or to the descendants of a stranger's family, then he shall have redemption right after he has been sold. One of his brothers may redeem him, or his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or one of his blood relatives from his family may redeem him; or if he prospers, he may redeem himself. (Lev. 25:42-49)

Here we come across a jarring text, a significant distinction between *Israelite* servants/employees and *foreign* workers in Israel. Does this text regard foreign workers as nothing more than property?

Before we jump to this conclusion, we should look at what *precedes* this text—and at other scriptural considerations. When we do so, we'll continue to see that (1) these foreigners were still nowhere near the chattel slaves of the antebellum South; (2) a significant presence of apparently resentful foreigners required stricter measures than those

<sup>11</sup> Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh*, 250.

for cooperative aliens who were willing to follow Israel's laws; (3) since only Israelites were allowed to own land (which ultimately belonged to Yahweh), foreigners who weren't in Israel just for business purposes were typically incorporated into Israelite homes to serve there, unless they chose to live elsewhere; and (4) strangers in the land could, if they chose, not only be released but potentially become persons of means. For poor foreigners wanting to live in Israel, voluntary servitude was pretty much the only option.

### ***Being Nice to Strangers***

In [Leviticus 19:33-34](#), the Israelites were commanded to love the stranger in the land: "When a stranger [*ger*] resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God." This is reinforced in [Deuteronomy 10:19](#): "So show your love for the alien [*ger*], for you were aliens in the land of Egypt." So before we jump to conclusions about "harsh and oppressive" Old Testament laws regarding outsiders, we should take such texts seriously.

Since the land belonged to Yahweh ([Lev. 25:23](#); [Josh. 22:19](#)), who graciously loaned it to the families of Israel, foreign settlers couldn't acquire it. Yet a foreigner (*nokri*) could become an alien (*ger*) if he embraced Israel's ways fully; he would no longer be a permanent outsider. Allowances were made for aliens in terms of gleaning laws and other provisions. The foreigner didn't need to feel excluded in the host country; presumably he wasn't forced to remain in Israel either. Though without land, he could share in the community life and religious celebrations of Israel with many improved economic and status perks; think of Rahab or Ruth here.

### ***The Foreigner and the Alien***

The established alien (*ger*) and the sojourner (*toshab*) were those who had embraced the worship of Yahweh, the covenant God of Israel. They had come from another land and had sought refuge in Israel for perhaps political or economic reasons—like Abraham in Hebron ([Gen. 23:4](#)), Moses in Midian ([Exod. 2:22](#)), Elimelech and his family in Moab ([Ruth 1:1](#)), or the Israelites in Egypt ([Exod. 22:21](#)). Perhaps the best term for such persons is *ethnic minorities*—persons with "distinctive racial or cultural traditions [who] are vulnerable to exploitation or discrimination by dominant groups in the population."<sup>12</sup> They had settled in the land for some time. They didn't have their own land

but had come under the protection of Israel ([Deut. 10:19](#)). Furthermore, these resident aliens were proselytes or converts to the religion of Israel. (In fact, the term *ger* is typically translated *prosēlytos* in the Greek Old Testament.) Aliens (and foreigners [*nokrim*]), however, were permitted to eat nonkosher food ([Deut. 14:21](#)), but aliens couldn't eat food with blood in it ([Lev. 17:10, 12–13](#)). They kept the Sabbath laws, and they were circumcised, which meant they could celebrate Passover ([Exod. 12:48–49](#); [Num. 9:14](#)). God is said to love the alien ([Deut. 10:18](#)), and the alien was not to be oppressed. However, the well-to-do alien (*ger*) was restricted from having an Israelite servant in his home ([Lev. 25:47–49](#)). An Israelite could not be a debt-servant of a non-Israelite alien—especially in light of God's delivering Israel from Egypt.

Foreigners (*nokrim* or sometimes *bene-nekar* [literally, “sons of a foreign land”]) were in a different category. Perhaps they came into Israel as prisoners of war, or they came voluntarily to engage in business transactions. They didn't embrace Yahweh worship and remained uncircumcised.<sup>13</sup> The foreigner didn't show concern for Israel's purity laws, and he was allowed to eat nonkosher foods. He likely didn't have a problem eating a dead animal not killed by a human. What's remarkable in Israel's legislation is the accommodation to the foreigner: if an Israelite saw an animal that had died by itself, he couldn't eat it (it would make him unclean), but he could give it to an alien (*ger*) or sell it to a foreigner (*nokri*) living in his town ([Deut. 14:21](#)). This was a way to show love to the alien and foreigner alike, even if the foreigner didn't embrace Israel's purity laws and didn't identify as fully as possible with God's people.<sup>14</sup>

Further, we've already noted that in a postwar situation ([Deut. 21:10–14](#)), a foreign woman could follow certain requirements to separate from her former culture and embrace her new one. After this, she could be elevated to the status of Israelite wife, a far cry from acquiring chattel.

Just because an outsider to Israel came to live in the land didn't mean he would nec-

<sup>12</sup> David L. Baker, *Tight Fists or Open Hands? Wealth and Poverty in Old Testament Law* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 182.

<sup>13</sup> J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 69–70; “*gwr*” in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 1:836–38; 3:108–9; and Baker, *Tight Fists*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> Of course, non-Israelite religious practices like child sacrifice were not to be tolerated in Israel, even if practiced by a foreigner ([Lev. 20:2](#)).

essarily become a household servant. The stranger (*ger*) or sojourner (*toshab*)—often used synonymously—could become a person of means (e.g., [Lev. 25:47](#)). The foreigner (*nokri*)—the word typically, though not always, has a negative connotation—often came to Israel for business transactions: “foreigners were normally present in a country for purposes of trade,” which meant that “goods or money given to them on credit were usually investments or advance payments on goods, not loans because of poverty.”<sup>15</sup> We should factor all of the above into our discussion of foreigners before looking at the downside of foreigners as servants.

There’s more to the word *foreigner* than first meets the eye. In the Old Testament, the term is associated with someone who is dangerous or hostile to what is good and to God’s purposes for Israel. The foreigner is frequently associated with idolatry (cf. [Josh. 24:20](#); [Jer. 5:19](#); [Mal. 2:11](#)), hostility ([Neh. 9:2](#); [13:30](#)),<sup>16</sup> or the enemy ([2 Sam. 22:45–46](#)). Solomon married foreign wives who led him into idolatry ([1 Kings 11:1](#); cf. [Ezra 10:2](#)). Proverbs warns against the strange or foreign woman, who is an adulteress ([Prov. 2:16](#); [5:20](#); [7:5](#); [23:27](#), etc.). Because of difficulty of integrating into Israel, foreigners may have served as forced laborers (*mas*) who worked for the state (cf. [Deut. 20:11](#)). They performed public works such as construction and undertook agricultural work as well. Under kings David and Solomon, Ammonites and Canaanites engaged in such work ([2 Sam. 12:31](#); [1 Kings 9:15, 20–22](#); cf. [Judg. 1:28–35](#)). We don’t know if they served part-time or permanently.<sup>17</sup>

Overall, the alien or stranger/temporary resident in Israel wasn’t to be oppressed but was to be dealt with fairly (e.g., [Exod. 22:21](#)). Repeatedly in the law of Moses, God showed concern that outsiders/foreigners be treated well.

### ***Special Considerations***

What about loan discrimination? For Israelites, loans were given at cost; no interest was permitted. However, loans with interest were allowed when it came to the foreigner (*nokri*) in Israel ([Exod. 22:25](#); [Lev. 25:36–37](#); [Deut. 15:3](#)). Wasn’t this unfair? Some have

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, Torah Commentary Series (Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 2003), 146.

<sup>16</sup> See [Nehemiah 4](#); [6](#); and [13](#) as examples of foreigners who are hostile to Israel (for example, Sanballat and Tobiah); at the end of the book Tobiah is given a room in the temple by Eliashib the priest ([Neh. 13:1–8](#)).

<sup>17</sup> Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 189, 380nn28–29.

argued so. But as we've seen, typically foreigners sought loans for *business/investment purposes*, not because they were destitute and needed money to relieve their debt, let alone to keep from starving.

In other instances, the presence of foreigners was tricky. If Israel fought against other nations, some POWs might need to be assimilated into Israelite society. Structures were needed to prevent them from rising up in rebellion against their new masters or remaining consolidated in their own land where they could muster forces and launch a counterattack. In cases where Israel's captured enemies (especially the males) didn't care for the "laws of the land" and posed an internal threat to Israel's safety (e.g., [Num. 21-22; 25; 31](#)), servanthood was one way of subduing or controlling this menace.

Certain economic, military, and social realities made things messy.<sup>18</sup> Even so, Israel couldn't oppress or exploit foreigners. [Deuteronomy 23](#) shows concern for desperate, threatened foreign slaves, and this text sheds light on—or even improves on—previous legislation in [Leviticus 25](#). And there's no hint of racism here, as though being a non-Israelite was justification for Israelite slave keeping. In fact, as Roy Gane argues, the laws of [Exodus 21:20-21, 26-27](#) protect from abuse *all* persons in service to others, not just Jews.<sup>19</sup>

Notice something important in [Leviticus 25:44-47](#), which is typically overlooked by the critics. We've seen that kidnapping and slave trading were clearly prohibited by the Mosaic law, but foreigners would come to Israel as prisoners of war and, given the dangers of an internal uprising, would be pressed into supervised construction or agricultural work. Yet the very sojourners and aliens who were at first pressed into service (v. 45) were the same ones who had the capability of saving up sufficient means (v. 47). Yes, in principle, *all* persons in servitude within Israel except criminals could be released.<sup>20</sup>

At this juncture, let's note several important points about the "foreign servitude" passage of [Leviticus 25](#): First, the verb *acquire* [*qanah*] in [Leviticus 25:39-51](#) need not

<sup>18</sup> Richard Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics: How to Read the Bible Politically* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1989), 108.

<sup>19</sup> Roy Gane, *Leviticus, Numbers, NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 441-42.

<sup>20</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, "A Principalizing Model," in *Four Views of Moving beyond the Bible to Theology*, ed. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 40.

involve selling or purchasing foreign servants. For example, the same word appears in [Genesis 4:1](#) (Eve's having "gotten a manchild") and [14:19](#) (God is the "Possessor of heaven and earth").<sup>21</sup> Later, Boaz "acquired" Ruth as a wife ([Ruth 4:10](#)), although she was no inferior but rather a full partner in Boaz's eyes.

Second, in some cases, foreign servants could become elevated and apparently fully equal to Israelite citizens. For instance, a descendant of Caleb ended up marrying an Egyptian servant. "Now Sheshan had no sons, only daughters. And Sheshan had an Egyptian servant whose name was Jarha. Sheshan gave his daughter to Jarha his servant in marriage, and she bore him Attai" ([1 Chron. 2:34-35](#)). Not only do we have marriage between a foreign servant and an established freeperson with quite a pedigree, but the key implication is that inheritance rights would fall to the servant's offspring (the genealogy lists Jarha's son Attai, who had a son Nathan, whose son was Zabad, and so on).

Third, foreign runaway slaves were given protection within Israel's borders and not returned to their harsh masters ([Deut. 23:15-16](#)). Kidnapping slaves was also prohibited ([Exod. 21:16](#); [Deut. 24:7](#)). So serving within Israelite households was to be a safe haven for any foreigner; it was not to be an oppressive setting, but offered economic and social stability.

Fourth, we've seen that the "Hebrew" servant in [Exodus 21:2](#) could well have been an outsider who had come to be a resident alien and was to be released in the seventh year, presumably to go back to his country of origin. However, he could make the arrangement permanent if he loved his master/employer and wanted to stay under his care. Given the security and provision of room and board for landless aliens, this arrangement could apparently be extended into the next generation(s). This setup wasn't to be permanent, unless the servant chose to stay with his master. John Goldingay writes, "Perhaps many people would be reasonably happy to settle for being long-term or life-long servants. Servants do count as part of the family." He adds, "One can even imagine people who started off as debt servants volunteering to become permanent servants because they love their master and his household" (cf. [Deut. 15:16-17](#)).<sup>22</sup>

Fifth, the text of [Leviticus 25](#) makes clear that the alien/stranger could potentially work himself out of debt and become a person of means in Israel: "if the means of a

<sup>21</sup> John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Life*, vol. 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2009), 464 (and note).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 465-66.



stranger or of a sojourner with you becomes sufficient” (v. 47). This is another indication that he wasn’t stuck in lifelong servitude without a choice. The terms *stranger* (*ger*) and *sojourner* (*toshab*) are connected to the terms used in verse 45 “sojourners who live as *aliens/strangers* among you”). That is, these “acquired” servants could potentially better themselves to the point of hiring servants themselves (v. 47). Of course, an alien could not hire an Israelite.

As we’ve seen in other scenarios, these situations weren’t ideal given the inferior social structures of the time. God instituted laws for Israel that began where the people were. But we see a remarkable humanization encoded in Israel’s laws—for foreign and Israelite servants alike.

### ***Membership Has Its Privileges***

If a foreigner happened to be poor, this circumstance could help create an incentive for the foreigner to become part of the Israelite community and share in, say, the Passover, something the alien could celebrate (Exod. 12:48–49). The foreigner (*ben-nekar*) wasn’t allowed to participate in this feast (12:43) since he didn’t care to identify himself with Israel’s covenant and with Yahweh. Again, why should loans be *at cost* for people who chose to live in (and off) Israel without entering into the corporate life and worship of Israel? We should expect some difference between them.

Think of America’s illegal immigration situation, a complex matter that’s often emotionally charged on both sides of the debate. We all know how this goes: illegals slip across the United States—Mexico border to benefit from the U.S.’s economic way of life. Meanwhile, many foreigners desiring to live in the U.S. may follow all the legal channels to acquire a U.S. green card (resident alien status) in order to (perhaps) eventually become naturalized citizens; they wait a long time for their applications to be processed. Even so, their applications may be rejected. Yet illegals completely bypass the legal channels and maneuver their way across the border.

Now, I’m not unsympathetic with the concerns of illegals looking for a better life in the United States, and we should extend kindness and personal concern to them. Perhaps churches can try to assist undocumented aliens in getting a fair trial and making sure they’re treated respectfully as God’s image-bearers; perhaps churches could even sponsor them in hopes of their becoming naturalized citizens. But for the sake of maintaining order and preserving the privilege and dignity of citizenship in a country (cf. Rom. 13), priority should be given to tax-paying citizens over illegals when it comes to



health care, drivers' licenses, insurance, and the like. It's understandable that when legal protocols aren't followed, certain privileges are withheld.<sup>23</sup>

The same held true in ancient Israel. The foreigner (*nokri*) was more like an illegal immigrant. The resident alien/sojourner (*ger*), however, sought to play by Israel's rules. Unlike the resident alien, foreigners weren't willing to abide by Israel's covenant relationship with God, so they shouldn't expect to receive all the privileges of an Israelite citizen. Ruth the Moabitess embraced the God of Israel and of her mother-in-law, Naomi: "Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God" (*Ruth 1:16*). If Gentiles like Ruth or Rahab or Uriah the Hittite were willing to fully embrace Israel's God, people, and laws, then they could become more easily incorporated into mainstream life in Israel, even if they couldn't own land. And foreigners didn't have to come to Israel at all.

Like the credit card company (American Express) used to say, "Membership has its privileges." The same pertained to membership within Israel.

### **Final Considerations**

*Leviticus 25* reflected an attempt to regulate and control potential abuses that often come through greed and social status. This legislation created a safety net for vulnerable Israelites; its intent was to stop generational cycles of poverty. The story of Ruth and Naomi actually puts flesh and bones on the Sinai legislation. It brings us from the theoretical laws to the practical realm of everyday life in Israel. We see how the relevant laws were to be applied when death, poverty, and uncertainty came upon an Israelite. We also witness a Gentile who came to Israel with her mother-in-law. Both were vulnerable and seeking refuge with relatives who could assist them. They were provided for as Ruth was able to glean in the fields of Boaz, a kinsman-redeemer. Naomi was cared for in her old age.<sup>24</sup>

We should consider *Leviticus 25:44* in light of the Ruth narrative: "You may acquire [*qanah*] male and female slaves from the pagan nations that are around you." Interestingly, Boaz announced to the elders in Bethlehem that he had "acquired" Ruth as his wife: "Moreover, I have acquired [*qanah*] Ruth the Moabitess, the widow of Mahlon" (*Ruth 4:10*). Does this mean that Boaz thought Ruth was property? Hardly!

<sup>23</sup> See James K. Hoffmeier, *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2009).

<sup>24</sup> See Robert L. Hubbard Jr., "The *Go'el* in Ancient Israel: Theological Reflections on an Israelite Institution," *Bulletin of Biblical Research* 1 (1991): 3–19.

Boaz had the utmost respect for Ruth, and he viewed her as an equal partner.

Was a foreign worker of a lower social rank than an Israelite servant? Yes. Was this an ideal situation? No. Am I advocating this for contemporary society? Hardly. Let's not forget the negative, sometimes God-opposing association bound up with the Old Testament use of the term *foreigner*. We often detect in this term a refusal to assimilate with Israel's ways and covenant relationship with God, which conflicted with God's intentions for his people. Again, foreigners could settle in the land, embrace Israel's ways, and become aliens or sojourners, which would give them greater entry into Israelite social life and economic benefit. And, as I've emphasized, the foreigner could have chosen to live elsewhere rather than in Israel. So we have a lot of complicating factors to consider here.

Even so, if we pay attention to the biblical text, the underlying attitude toward foreigners is far better than that found in other Near Eastern cultures. God constantly reminded Israel that they were strangers and aliens in Egypt ([Exod. 22:21; 23:9](#); [Lev. 19:34](#); [Deut. 5:15; 10:19; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22](#)). This memory was to shape Israel's treatment of strangers in the land. That's why God commanded the following: caring for the needy and the alien ([Lev. 23:22](#)); loving the alien ([Deut. 10:19](#)); providing for his basic need of food ([Deut. 24:18–22](#)); promptly paying for his labor ([Deut. 24:14–15](#)). In addition, the Old Testament looks to the ultimate salvation of, yes, the foreigner and his incorporation into the people of God ([Isa. 56:3](#) ["the foreigner who has joined himself to the Lord"]).

Lest we think that a foreigner's permanent servitude (which could well be understood as voluntary in [Lev. 25](#)) meant that his master could take advantage of him, we should recall the pervasive theme throughout the law of Moses of protection and concern for those in servitude. They weren't to be taken advantage of. So if a foreign servant was being mistreated by his master so that he ran away, he could find his way into another Israelite home for shelter and protection: "You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him" ([Deut. 23:15–16](#)). This provision wasn't simply for a foreign slave running to *Israel* but also for a foreign servant *within Israel* who was being mistreated. Israel's legislation regarding foreign slaves showed concern for their well-being, very much unlike the Code of Hammurabi, for example, which had no regard for an owner's treatment of his slaves.<sup>25</sup>

## Comparing Servitude Texts

Let's try to tie up some loose ends here. We looked at [Deuteronomy 15:1-18](#) in the last chapter; so we won't cite the text in full here. This is the famous release text where God commanded generosity and goodwill toward debt-servants who were being released. God expressed the desire that there be no poor in the land at all.

Scholars have claimed that this passage stands in tension with the earlier servitude laws of [Exodus 21:1-11](#) and [Leviticus 25:39-46](#) (and we could add here [Lev. 19:20-21](#)).<sup>26</sup> If so, the tension may not be as great as some have assumed. For example, [Exodus 21:7](#) doesn't expressly say that *female* servants were to be set free after the seventh year. We've argued, though, that this is implied; this verse is an instance of case law. Tension exists if we assume that gender switching isn't allowed by the text. But that's not so. We could add that verses [26-27](#) mention that a male or *female* servant may be freed if injured; if he or she was killed by an employer's abuse, the employer was to be put to death.

At any rate, [Deuteronomy 15:12](#) explicitly affirms that both *male and female* servants were in view. *Both* were to be given freedom in the seventh year, the sabbatical release. If a genuine tension exists, then this passage suggests that the arrangement for acquiring a wife in [Exodus 21:7-10](#) had later been *dropped* in Israel.<sup>27</sup>

What about the law that a male servant couldn't leave with his wife and children if his wife were given by his master ([Exod. 21:4](#))? This appears to change by [Leviticus 25:40-42](#) (in the Jubilee year laws), where the children (and presumably the wife) were to go free with the husband/father. Also, in contrast to [Exodus 21:2-6](#), [Leviticus 25:41-42](#) doesn't distinguish between children born before and children born during indentured servanthood. Yet already in [Leviticus 25:40-42](#), in the Jubilee year (every fiftieth year), the children (and presumably the wife) were released with their father (husband).

We do see some tensions between earlier texts (like [Exod. 21](#)) and [Deuteronomy 15](#). We don't need to throw up our hands in despair at hopelessly contradictory texts. Rather, what we have here is a dynamic adjustment and a moral upgrade taking place within a short span of time in national Israel's early life. Remember the daughters of Zelophehad, who petitioned Moses for adjustments of the law ([Num. 27](#))? Moses took

<sup>25</sup> Chirichigno, *Debt-Slavery in Israel*, 147-48.

<sup>26</sup> Noth, *Leviticus*, 192.

<sup>27</sup> Frymer-Kenski, "Anatolia and the Levant: Israel," 1008-9.

their case before Yahweh, who approved their request. This is another example of an adjustment in Israel's laws, a move from inferior legislation to improved legal status. This is a far cry from Christopher Hitchens's notion of "unalterable" Old Testament laws.

Christopher Wright points out that in the final editing of the Pentateuch (Genesis–Deuteronomy), the editor(s) would certainly have been aware of these differences and tensions yet kept all of these texts in place. The editorial hand shows remarkable skill in handling the text.<sup>28</sup> In fact, the majority of scholars see Exodus giving the oldest law and Deuteronomy later revising and expanding it (which could also apply to the Leviticus text).<sup>29</sup> So the fact that these texts coexist in the same body of work itself suggests a possible reconciliation or rationale for doing so. Wright sees Deuteronomy "modifying, extending, and to some extent reforming earlier laws, with additional explicit theological rationale and motivation."<sup>30</sup> Even the ancient Israelite would recognize that [Exodus 21](#), which emphasizes the humanness of servants (slaves), stood in a certain tension with the later text of [Deuteronomy 15](#) (and [Lev. 25](#)).

So to obey Deuteronomy, to a certain extent, "necessarily meant no longer complying with Exodus [or Leviticus]."<sup>31</sup> These texts were deliberately kept together, in part to reflect this adjustment. Apparently, these tensions didn't seem all that wildly contradictory to the final editor of this portion of the Bible. This point serves to illustrate the "living, historical and contextual nature of the growth of Scripture."<sup>32</sup>

By the time we get to the prophet Amos (whose ministry was in the Northern Kingdom of Israel), God levels harsh words against those who are "buying the poor with silver and the needy for a pair of sandals, selling even the sweepings with the wheat" ([8:6 NIV](#); cf. [2:6](#)). Corrupt judges were bribed by the rich to make slave labor available to them. The poor were heavily fined and, when unable to pay, sold into servitude at low prices—thrown in with the sweepings of wheat.<sup>33</sup> In Amos, the Israelite poor were

<sup>28</sup> For example, see John H. Sailhamer, *Pentateuch as Narrative* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

<sup>29</sup> Baker, *Tight Fists*, 166.

<sup>30</sup> Christopher J. H. Wright, "Response to Gordon McConville," in *Canon and Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006), 283. See Wright's fuller explanation in this chapter.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

being mistreated and even being traded for a pair of sandals. How much worse it must have been for aliens in Israel, whom God commanded Israel to protect.

Isaiah expresses similar concern for Gentile fugitives fleeing Moab. Notice the great concern shown for the vulnerable and those escaping dangerous situations: “ ‘Hide the fugitives, do not betray the refugees. Let the Moabite fugitives stay with you; be their shelter from the destroyer.’ The oppressor will come to an end, and destruction will cease; the aggressor will vanish from the land” (Isa. 16:3–4 NIV).

In the prophetic book of Joel (2:29), God made an egalitarian promise to pour out his Spirit on *all* mankind, young and old, male and female—including male and female *servants*. This same theme is found in Job 31:15, where master and slave alike come from the same place—the mother’s womb. They are fundamentally equal.

Reflecting on the wider context of Scripture passages reminds us not to focus on a single text but to see how each passage fits into the broader whole. Furthermore, any deviations from ideal moral standards of human equality and dignity set down at creation are the result of human hard-heartedness. Over and over, we’re reminded of Israel’s superior legislation in contrast to the rest of the ancient Near East.

## Further Reading

Chirichigno, Gregory C. *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. JSOT Supplement Series 141. Sheffield: University of Sheffield Press, 1993.

Gane, Roy. *Leviticus, Numbers*. NIV Application Commentary. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004.

Hoffmeier, James K. *The Immigration Crisis: Immigrants, Aliens, and the Bible*. Wheaton: Crossway, 2009.

# 14

## Warrant for Trafficking in Humans as Farm Equipment? (III)

<sup>33</sup> Douglas Stuart, *Hosea-Jonah*, Word Biblical Commentary 31 (Waco: Word, 1987), 316–17.

## Slavery in the New Testament

The three-day Battle of Gettysburg in early July 1863 took the lives of approximately fifty thousand Confederate and Union soldiers. Abraham Lincoln was invited to commemorate their deaths, dedicating the cemetery where over thirty-five hundred Union soldiers are now buried. His brief but powerful Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863) began with these immortalized words: “Fourscore and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.” Lincoln appealed to the Declaration of Independence in his argument against slavery, something he had done throughout the Lincoln-Douglas debates (1858) and well before.<sup>1</sup>

Lincoln regularly appropriated this founding document to reshape Americans’ thinking regarding slavery and the alleged subhumanity of blacks. Although America had fallen short of this ideal—whether in its breaking of treaties with Native Americans or the mistreatment of blacks—Lincoln called on his fellow citizens to think through the implications of this document. So at Gettysburg, Lincoln urged his hearers “to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced”; he longed to see fulfilled the vision articulated in the 1776 declaration: a “new birth of freedom.”

The declaration’s role in Lincoln’s presidency illustrates a similar phenomenon in the Old Testament. [Genesis 1](#) was “dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal”! In the Mosaic law, God was pointing back to this creational “founding document,” affirming that treating humans as property or inferiors was fundamentally at odds with it. Despite human fallenness, Old Testament readers were continually pointed toward the ideal.

Though our focus has been on the Old Testament, we should say something about slavery in the New Testament. ■ [The New Testament presupposes not only a fundamental equality because all humans are created in God’s image \(James 3:9\) but also an even deeper unity in Christ that transcends human boundaries and social structures: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor](#)

<sup>1</sup> For example, in the debate at Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois (October 7, 1858), Lincoln defied Douglas (or anyone) to search the world’s written records from 1776 to 1855 to find “one single affirmation, from one single man, that the negro was not included in the Declaration of Independence.”

female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28). We’ll look at the implications of this Christian manifesto.

## A Little Background

We need to reorient our thinking away from the Old Testament situation of (primarily) Hebrew debt-servanthood (from which male and female were to be freed in the seventh year). ■ The landscape of the Roman world was much different—namely, the existence of institutionalized chattel (property) slavery. Rome (unlike Old Testament legislation) sought to institutionalize not merely servanthood but (chattel) slavery.

During the first century AD, 85 to 90 percent of Rome’s population consisted of slaves.<sup>2</sup> Although slaves were considered their masters’ property and didn’t have *legal* rights, they did have quite a range of other rights and privileges. These included (1) the possibility of starting a business to earn potentially large sums of money, (2) the capability of earning money to eventually purchase freedom (manumission) from their masters, or (3) the right to own property (known as the *peculium*).<sup>3</sup> The work of slaves covered the spectrum from horrid conditions in mines to artisans, business agents, and other positions of respect and prestige such as civil or imperial servants.<sup>4</sup> So slavery wasn’t unkind to *all* slaves in the Roman Empire.

## The New Testament’s Affirmations of Slaves as Persons

You’ve probably heard the complaint, “Jesus never said anything about the wrongness of slavery.” Not so! ■ Jesus explicitly *opposed* every form of oppression. Citing [Isaiah 61:1](#), Jesus clearly described his mission: “to proclaim release to the captives, ... to set free those who are oppressed” ([Luke 4:18](#)). This, then, would mean Rome’s oppression and its institutionalizing slavery. Now, Jesus didn’t create an economic reform plan for Israel, but he addressed heart attitudes of greed, envy, contentment, and generosity to

<sup>2</sup> A. A. Ruprecht, s.v. “[Slave, Slavery](#),” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald Hawthorne et al. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 881–83.

<sup>3</sup> D. B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), 1–49.

<sup>4</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Carlisle, UK: Eerdmans, 1995), 182. Some of my comments in this section are taken from pp. 181–85.



undermine oppressive economic social structures. Likewise, New Testament writers often addressed the underlying attitudes regarding slavery. How? ■ By commanding Christian masters to call their slaves “brother” or “sister” and to show them compassion, justice, and patience. No longer did being a master mean privilege and status but rather responsibility and service. By doing so, the worm was already in the wood for altering the social structures.<sup>5</sup>

As faithful followers of Christ, Paul and other New Testament writers likewise opposed dehumanization and oppression of others. They, for instance, fully rejected the idea that slaves were mere property. The status of slave or free was irrelevant in Christ (cf. *Gal. 3:28*; *Col. 3:11*). In fact, Paul gave household rules in *Ephesians 6* and *Colossians 4* not only for Christian slaves but for Christian *masters* as well. Slaves were ultimately responsible to God, their heavenly Master. But *masters* were to “treat your slaves in the same way”—namely, as persons governed by a heavenly Master (*Eph. 6:9 NIV*). New Testament commentator P. T. O’Brien points out that ■ “Paul’s cryptic exhortation is outrageous” for his day.<sup>6</sup> Given the spiritual equality of slave and free, slaves could even take on leadership positions in churches.

■ Paul would have considered ▸ the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century slave trade an abomination, an utter violation of human dignity and an act of human theft. In a “vice list” of Paul’s in *1 Timothy 1:9–10*, he expounded on the fifth through the ninth commandments in *Exodus 20* and *Deuteronomy 5*; there he condemned “slave traders” (v. *10 NIV*) who steal what isn’t rightfully theirs.<sup>7</sup>

Critics wonder why Paul (or Peter in *1 Peter 2:18–20*) didn’t condemn slavery outright and tell masters to release their slaves. Yet we should first separate this question from other considerations, even if the New Atheists aren’t necessarily interested in nuance. ■■ Paul’s position on the status of slavery was clear on various points: (1) he repudiated slave trading; (2) he affirmed the full human dignity and equal spiritual status of slaves; and (3) he encouraged slaves to acquire their freedom whenever possible (*1 Cor. 7:20–22*). Paul’s revolutionary Christian affirmations helped to tear apart the

<sup>5</sup> James Tunstead Burtchaell, *Philemon’s Problem: A Theology of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 16.

<sup>6</sup> P. T. O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 454.

<sup>7</sup> See Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*, NIBC 13 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1988), 45–46n, 49.

fabric of the institution of slavery in Europe.

Paul reminded Christian masters that they, with their slaves, were *fellow slaves* of the same impartial Master; so they weren't to mistreat them but rather deal with them as brothers and sisters in Christ. Paul called on human masters to grant "justice and fairness" to their slaves (Col. 4:1). In unprecedented fashion, Paul treated slaves as morally responsible persons (Col. 3:22–25) who, like their Christian masters, were brothers and part of Christ's body (1 Tim. 6:2).<sup>8</sup> Christian slave and master alike belonged to Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11). *Spiritual* status was more fundamental than *social* status.

Paul (and Peter) didn't call for an uprising to overthrow slavery in Rome. They didn't want the Christian faith to be perceived as opposed to social order and harmony. Hence, Christian slaves were told to do what was right; even if they were mistreated, their conscience would be clear (1 Peter 2:18–20). Obligations fell to these slaves, yes, without their prior agreement. So the path for early Christians to take was tricky, very much unlike the situation in Old Testament Israel. On the one hand, a slave uprising would do the gospel a disservice and prove a direct threat to an oppressive Roman establishment (e.g., "Masters, release your slaves!" or "Slaves, throw off your chains!"). Rome would meet any flagrant opposition with speedy, forceful, lethal opposition. So Peter's admonition to unjustly treated slaves implies a suffering endured *without retaliation*. No, suffering in itself is not good (which would be a sadistic attitude to adopt and certainly not the view of Scripture); rather, the *right* response in the midst of suffering is commendable.

■ On the other hand, the early Christians undermined slavery indirectly and certainly rejected many common Greco-Roman assumptions about it, such as Aristotle's (slaves were inherently inferior to masters, as were females to males). Just as Jesus bore unjust suffering for the redemption of others and entrusted himself to the One who judges justly (1 Peter 2:20–24), so Christian slaves could bear hardship to show others—including their masters—the way of Christ and redemption through him, all the while entrusting themselves to God.<sup>9</sup> Thus, like yeast, such Christlike living could have a gradual leavening effect on society so that oppressive institutions like slavery could finally fall away. This is, in fact, what took place throughout Europe, as we'll see in the

<sup>8</sup> O'Brien, *Ephesians*, 455.

<sup>9</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter*, IVP New Testament Commentary (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991), 89–90; and Karen H. Jobes, *1 Peter*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 180–87.

final chapter.

This was also the type of incremental strategy taken by President Abraham Lincoln. Though he despised slavery and talked freely about this degrading institution, his first priority was to hold the Union together rather than try to abolish slavery immediately. Being an exceptional student of human nature, he recognized that political realities and predictable reactions required an incremental approach. The radical abolitionist route of John Brown and William Lloyd Garrison would (and did!) simply create a social backlash against hard-core abolitionists and make emancipation all the more difficult.<sup>10</sup>

Paul's ministry illustrated how in Christ there was neither slave nor free. He greeted people in his epistles by name. Most of these individuals had commonly used slave and freedman names. For example, in [Romans 16:7](#) and [9](#), he refers to slaves like Andronicus and Urbanus (common slave names) as "kinsman," "fellow prisoner," and "fellow worker." The New Testament approach to slavery was utterly contrary to aristocrats and philosophers like Aristotle, who held that some humans were slaves by nature (*Politics* I.13). New Testament Christianity hardly endorsed slavery; it leveled all distinctions at the foot of the cross. In [Revelation 18:11–13](#), doomed Babylon stands condemned because she had treated humans as "cargo," having trafficked in "slaves [literally 'bodies'] and human lives." This repudiation of treating humans as cargo reflects the doctrine of the image of God in all human beings. No wonder the Christian faith was particularly attractive to slaves and lower classes:<sup>11</sup> it was countercultural, revolutionary, and anti—status quo. No wonder slavery in Europe eventually fizzled: Europeans Christians had the mind-set that owning another human being was contrary to creation and the new creation in Christ.

## The Question of Onesimus

Now it has been alleged that Paul's returning the "runaway slave" Onesimus to his owner Philemon was a step backward—toward the oppressive Code of Hammurabi! The Old Testament prohibited such an action ([Deut. 23:15–16](#)), but Babylon's laws required returning a slave. So here it looks like Paul is siding with Hammurabi *against*

<sup>10</sup> See Ronald C. White's *A. Lincoln: A Biography* (New York: Random House, 2009), which explores these themes in detail.

<sup>11</sup> Jonathan Hill, *What Has Christianity Ever Done for Us?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005), 176.

the Old Testament! Do such charges have any merit?

It's been said that reading a New Testament epistle is like listening to just one party in a phone conversation. This is certainly true of the letter to Philemon. We hear only Paul's voice, but plenty of gaps exist that we'd like to have filled in. What was Paul's relationship to Philemon ("dear friend and fellow worker" and "partner" [vv. 1, 17 NIV])? What debt did Philemon owe Paul? How had Onesimus wronged Philemon (if he even did)?<sup>12</sup> Many interpreters have taken the liberty to "help" us fill in the gaps. Yet a common result is that they can read too much into the text. The stock fugitive-slave hypothesis (that Onesimus was a runaway slave of Philemon's) dates back to the church father John Chrysostom (l<sup>v</sup> 347–407). However, genuine scholarly disagreement exists about this interpretation. For one thing, the epistle contains no verbs of flight, as though Onesimus had suddenly gone AWOL. And Paul revealed no hint of fear that Philemon would brutally treat a returning Onesimus, as masters typically did when their runaway slaves were caught.

It's been plausibly suggested<sup>13</sup> that Onesimus and Philemon were estranged Christian (perhaps biological) brothers. Paul exhorts Philemon not to receive Onesimus as a slave (whose status in Roman society meant being alienated and without honor); rather Onesimus was to be welcomed as a beloved brother: "that you might have him back for good—no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord" (Philem. 1:15–16 NIV). Notice the similar-sounding language in Galatians 4:7: "Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God." This may shed further light on how to interpret the epistle of Philemon: Paul wanted to help heal the rift so that Onesimus (not an actual slave) would be received back as a beloved brother in the Lord, not even simply as a biological brother. To do so would be to follow God's own example in receiving us as sons and daughters rather than as slaves.

Even if Onesimus *were* an actual slave in the Roman Empire, this still doesn't mean

<sup>12</sup> For a fine general discussion, see David B. Capes, Rodney Reeves, and E. Randolph Richards, *Rediscovering Paul* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2007), 237–41. I also borrow insights from Allen Dwight Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon: Toward an Alternative Argumentum," *The Harvard Theological Review* 86, no. 4 (October 1993): 357–76; and Sarah Winter, "Paul's Letter to Philemon," *New Testament Studies* 33 (1987): 1–15.

<sup>13</sup> See Callahan, "Paul's Epistle to Philemon."

he was a fugitive. If a disagreement or misunderstanding had occurred between Onesimus and Philemon, and Onesimus had sought out Paul to intervene somehow or to arbitrate the dispute, this wouldn't have made Onesimus a fugitive. And given Paul's knowledge of Philemon's character and track record of Christian dedication, the suggestion that Onesimus's return was "Hammurabi revisited" is way off the mark. Again, if Onesimus *were* a slave in Philemon's household, Paul's strategy was this: instead of forbidding slavery, impose fellowship!<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the New Testament church showed itself to be a revolutionary, new community united by Christ—a people that transcended racial, social, and sexual barriers.

## Hagar, Sarah, and Paul

We should probably bring up the Hagar-Sarah story here. In [Galatians 4:30](#), Paul refers to Sarah's act of sending Hagar away ([Gen. 21](#)). Some caricature this allegorization by asserting Paul's endorsement of Sarah's cruel desire to cast her out—and God told Abraham to go along with this ([21:12](#))! Let's keep this in context. We've already seen that both Hagar and Ishmael contributed their share of difficulty and tension within the household; they were hardly blameless. God had also assured Abraham (as he had told Hagar previously) that God would take care of them and would make Ishmael into a great nation.

Paul refers to this passage ([Gen. 21:10](#)) to give the Galatians a message: get rid of the slave woman ([4:30](#))! That is, they were to stop adhering to and depending on the Mosaic law to gain/maintain acceptance before God. The critics' misportrayal of Paul—that Paul was actually encouraging the mistreatment of slaves—is actually quite humorous.<sup>15</sup> (This is typical of left-wing fundamentalism.) It completely misses the very thrust of the allegory and the tone of Paul's strong opposition to Judaizers. The point was that their heresy mustn't be tolerated in the church. This doesn't reflect Paul's endorsement of slavery. In fact, Paul's heart cry was that his Jewish brothers would find salvation ([Rom. 10:1](#)), and his opposition to the Judaizers was accompanied with tears ([Phil. 3:18](#)).

<sup>14</sup> Burtchaell, *Philemon's Problem*, 21.

<sup>15</sup> Hector Avalos's argument here ("[Yahweh Is a Moral Monster](#)," in *The Christian Delusion*, ed. John Loftus [Amherst, NY: Prometheus, 2010]) is a remarkable example of brutally twisted exegesis.

## God's Ultimate Goal: Enslaving Everyone?

From the very beginning, Scripture affirms that all persons are made in God's image—essentially, “there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female.” Though humanity deviated from this ideal, Scripture regularly undermines human institutions that exist because of hardened human hearts, pointing people back to the creational ideal as well as forward to the new creational ideal in Christ, the new Adam.

Some critics claim that God's far-reaching goal is to enslave all people, the ultimate tyranny and dehumanization. Look at [Isaiah 14:1-2](#) as a prime example:

The LORD will have compassion on Jacob; once again he will choose Israel and will settle them in their own land. Aliens will join them and unite with the house of Jacob. Nations will take them and bring them to their own place. And the house of Israel will possess the nations as menservants and maidservants in the LORD's land. They will make captives of their captors and rule over their oppressors. (NIV)

The critic tends to make this slave analogy walk on all fours—that is, the slavery image is extended far beyond the intended point of comparison. A less-selective look at Scripture reveals that the slavery image is just one swatch taken from a larger tapestry. God ultimately sought to bring blessing to all the nations ([Gen. 12:3](#)). Biblical pictures of God's subduing his and his people's enemies suggest that God's opponents won't have the final word; their opposition to God will have to give way to acknowledging God's lordship over all. Those refusing to acknowledge God's rightful place in the end freely separate themselves from God, the source of joy, hope, and peace. They will receive their divorce from God.

What about those who belong to Christ? To describe those wholly dedicated to God, the New Testament uses the language of *slave* (*doulos*). A number of modern translations render this word “servant,” but the servant's bond to his employer is often temporary and detachable. But rather than being a picture of oppression, the “slave of righteousness” is no longer in bondage to sin ([John 8:34](#); [Rom. 6:17-20](#)). We've seen earlier that by nature humans are worshipers; they're slaves to what they worship, whether false gods or the true one. To worship the true God with full devotion is actually a picture of genuine freedom and abundant living rather than oppression; false worship actually oppresses ([John 10:10](#)).

So the slave image shouldn't dominate the spiritual picture. Abraham is called God's servant (*'ebed*) as well as God's friend ([Isa. 41:9](#); [James 2:23](#)). Jesus told his disciples that



he no longer called them slaves (*douloi*) but friends (*philoï*). Jesus himself would lay down his life for his friends ([John 15:13-15](#)). The Son of Man, who himself came to serve humankind ([Mark 10:45](#)), took on the form of a slave—God in the flesh serving and dying for humanity ([Phil. 2:5-11](#)).

So are we slaves? Yes and no—something along the lines of what Martin Luther famously said: the Christian is *both* free and subject to none of his fellow human beings as well as dutiful servant who is subject to all.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, God is concerned about removing oppression by enabling us to find true freedom in loving and obeying God, who is both Master and Father. The Scriptures use the imagery of slavery and fear that is transformed into adoption as God’s children with full security in God’s love ([Rom. 8:14-16](#); [Gal. 4:3-8](#)). The Scriptures refer to the privileged status as God’s people and God’s dwelling in their midst ([Rev. 21:3](#)). God’s people are also the bride of Christ ([Rev. 21:2](#)).

God’s kingdom rule isn’t intended to oppress. In [Matthew 20:1-16](#), the landowner who hires workers throughout the day asks the one grouching about bearing the heat of the day while others worked only a short time, “Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with what is my own?” (v. 15). This is hardly despotism, as some claim. After all, the landowner was generous and certainly did no wrong; indeed, the master *initiated* the opportunity to work, and the worker *agreed* to the wage of a denarius, just like everyone else did.

As we review the New Testament, slavery language is one part of the bigger picture. Christ’s ultimate goal isn’t to oppress and destroy but to give life, to redeem, and to release ([Luke 4:18](#)). And Paul in [Galatians 3:28](#) (the “Christian manifesto”) doesn’t abolish slavery; rather, he makes it ultimately irrelevant! All the structures that separated Jew and Greek, male and female, slave and free were radically overturned by their sharing a common meal together to celebrate the Lord’s death (see [1 Cor. 11:17-34](#)). Indeed, this was a defiant, countercultural act against Rome’s embedded social structures—a far cry from the critics’ “passive resignation” argument (that Paul didn’t speak out against slavery but accepted it). Furthermore, the Lord’s Supper was also a culturally shameful act: not only did these Christians worship a shamefully crucified (yet risen!) Messiah, but those who were “dishonorable” or of lower social status—females, Gentiles, and slaves—were treated as equals with males, Jews, and free persons. This “meal of shame” actually symbolized the removal of all dishonor at the foot of the cross. In

<sup>16</sup> This famous point is taken from Luther’s *Concerning Christian Liberty*.



the early church, a social revolution had begun!<sup>17</sup>

## **Further Reading**

- Harris, Murray. *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1999.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Gordon D. Fee, “The Cultural Context of Ephesians 5:18–6:9,” *Priscilla Papers* 16/1 (2002): 7–8.