

‘Slavery’ in the Bible

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Today, when one encounters the word ‘slave’, thoughts of appalling treatment of plantation workers in the antebellum cotton plantations of the southern states come to mind, or horrific crimes against humanity committed on slave ships in the 18th and early 19th century. The word ‘slave’, therefore, is associated with a variety of atrocities committed against human beings. It is not surprising, therefore, that when one reads of slaves in the Bible, troubling visions arise.

Before one can critique the Bible on the topic of slaves and servants, however, one ought to have a sufficient knowledge of what the Bible actually says on the subject so that an honest and accurate representation can be made and discussed. This article will by no means give an exhaustive treatment of the subject, but it will offer enough to constitute a decent response to some of the popular misrepresentations that one often encounters.

A. Servants and Slaves in the Old Testament

The Hebrew word *ebed* is the word in the Old Testament that is often translated as ‘slave’. The *New American Standard Version* (NASB) strives to translate the words as literally as possible. In the NASB, *ebed* is translated as some form of ‘servant’ just over 700 times. Occasionally, it is also translated as some form of the word ‘slave’ (approximately 57 times). There is no English word that accurately conveys the meaning of *ebed* when it pertains to Israel and God’s commands. The word ‘slave’ is misleading due to modern connotations with slavery in the Deep South. The word ‘servant’ is much closer to the original meaning but suggests the modern idea of an employee, which is not quite correct either. To avoid a bias either way, I will use the original Hebrew term *ebed* instead of slave or servant, and Anglicize it to ‘ebed’. The following are relevant pieces of information from the Old Testament that will give a better idea of what it says with regard to ebeds.

1. Four types of ebeds:

- a. **Hebrew contract ebed:** A man could choose to sell his services to another person for a period of up to six years, after which time he was to go free.¹ Candidates could include men who needed the money to pay a debt they could not otherwise pay, or young men who wished to acquire sufficient funds to purchase land. The contract ebed was paid in advance of his service. For example, in today’s terms, using a minimum wage of \$15/hour and a 40-hour work week, minus \$1,000/month for board and room, the contract ebed could be paid approximately \$115,000 up front, for six years service.

- b. **Bondslave:** A Hebrew contract ebed who loved his/her master/mistress and

¹ Exodus 21:2

did not wish to go free after six years due to love and loyalty, could make a commitment for life of his/her own free will. The ceremony included having one ear pierced.² Presumably, to keep the hole from filling in, an earring would be worn in that ear for the remainder of his life, making the bondslave stand out among people. It was done for love and loyalty and great honor was attached to the bondslave, which we get a glimpse of later in the New Testament when various apostles referred to themselves as bondslaves of God, the greatest term of loyalty and love for God that was possible.

- c. **Female amah:** A woman was referred to as an *amah* ('woman who is not free' BADG). The role of such a woman was either to work as a maid or she was purchased as a wife. If she was purchased to be a wife, then she was to be treated with the full status of a wife, not a slave. If the man had more than one wife, she was to be treated equal to the others, not merely as a concubine.³ If the woman was purchased as a bride for a son, then she was to be treated as a daughter.⁴ As shall be discussed later, multiple wives and divorce were something that God did not like, but permitted because of the hardness of their hearts.⁵
- d. **Foreign ebed:** It was permitted to acquire male ebeds and female *amah* from pagan nations. These men and women remained with their master or family for life unless they either were redeemed, or decided it was to their best interests to leave as we shall see shortly.

2. Obtaining Freedom:

- a. **Contract ebed:** A contract ebed was free to leave at any time, but of course he must repay the unfulfilled portion of his contract. This is very close to the situation today where an athlete may sign a contract with the owner of a team, but then wish to negotiate out of that contract prematurely.
- b. **Bondslave:** Since the bondslave had made a commitment out of love and loyalty to his master, and of his own free choice, to serve him for life, he had no desire to go elsewhere.
- c. **Foreign ebed:** The foreign ebed did not automatically go free after six years but was owned by his master for life. However, it is likely that redemption could be made for him. If, however, he found the conditions not his liking, he could simply leave (or escape if his master had any objections). God commanded that an ebed who escaped from his master was not to be handed back to his master. Instead, he was to be allowed the freedom to choose where

² Exodus 21:5,6

³ Exodus 21:10

⁴ Exodus 21:9

⁵ Matthew 19:8

he would live and no one was to mistreat him.⁶ Essentially, this put the decision of whether to remain an ebed or choose freedom, in the hands of the man himself. One might wonder why all the ebeds would not immediately claim their freedom, but 'slavery' in ancient Israel could be very rewarding for the ebed and provided security, a place to live, and employment. Starting out on ones own, however, could be a risk that many would rather not take.

- d. **Female *amah*:** There were two ways an *amah* could leave. If she was a maid who was being treated fairly, but she wanted her freedom, she could be redeemed (a portion of her purchase price could be refunded) by her family or someone else who would step in. If, however, she was being treated unfairly as an *amah*, she had the right to claim her freedom without any redemption or repayment of the maid price or the bridal price.⁷ This essentially put the decision into the hands of the *amah*.

Summary: With the exception of the bonds slave, who did not want his freedom, but wanted to serve his master for life, an ebed or an *amah* could gain their freedom by one of three ways: i) by redemption or, ii) serving out their term until the Sabbath year or, iii) by simply leaving or escaping if they were being treated unfairly. If the latter, the community was to support the ebed, not the master.

3. Treatment:

In the Old Testament and, specifically, in the Law handed down to Moses at Mt. Sinai, there were things that God forbade, things that God permitted, and things that God commanded to do. Jesus' comment with regard to why divorce was permitted in the Law is highly revealing, 'Because of your hardness of heart he wrote you this commandment.'⁸ This tells us that God permitted some things in the Old Testament that were wrong but, because of the society of the day, were permitted. As my ethics professor, Dr. Art Schaeffer, once said, a perfect law that is seen as unreasonable by society is actually a bad law, as no one will comply with it and the result will be an increased contempt for the law. Nevertheless, God does set the bar very high as to how they are to treat their ebeds and *amah*.

We observe God's standard of treatment for a male ebed in Proverbs where it states, 'He who pampers his slave (*ebed*) from Childhood will in the end find him to be a son.' As we saw earlier, the female *amah* was to be treated as a wife or daughter. Although the Law permitted things that were wrong, as Christ indicated above, Christ makes it clear that there is a more fundamental law, which transcends history, consisting of just two commands. Interestingly, both commands were given in the Law, but Israel could not even keep the normal rules, much less the fundamental law that transcends history.

⁶ Deuteronomy 23:15,16

⁷ Exodus 21:11

⁸ Mark 10:5

In Abraham's time, if a man had no heir to leave his inheritance to, then the oldest ebed born in his house inherited his wealth.⁹ An ebed could also be entrusted with great responsibility, wealth and weapons, as we observe in the case of Abraham's quest for a wife for his son Isaac.¹⁰ We also observe that an ebed could acquire wealth, lands and ebeds of his own.¹¹

As noted earlier, if an ebed of any type was mistreated, he or she could leave (or escape, if the master was unwilling) and settle where they wished. Physical abuse was grounds for freedom. For example, if a man struck his ebed and knocked out a tooth, the ebed was to immediately go free,¹² even if he was a contract ebed with years of service still owing on his contract. If a man struck and killed his ebed, then he was to be punished, which in the case of murder, was death.¹³

If a man injured another free man and the man died later, or recovered, the first man was required to compensate the other free man for his loss of time,¹⁴ or compensate the other man's family according to what the family demanded. If, however, a man struck his own servant and the servant did not die immediately but survived a day or two before dying, 'no vengeance shall be taken; for he is his property.'¹⁵ This is one of the most troubling passages in the Old Testament until one realizes two things. One issue is *mens rea*, or, intent. The other has to do with compensation. As in our legal system today, establishing intent was and is a key requirement in a conviction of murder. Because the injured man did not die that day, the benefit of the doubt was given to the other man who had struck him that he did not intend to kill him. However, in such cases, compensation must be made to the man or to his family, which could be enormous if the man was the breadwinner for the family. In the case of an ebed, however, it was the master of the ebed who suffered the loss of services, for which he had already paid in advance at the rate in today's minimum wages of \$19,000 or more per year. This is why it stated that no vengeance was to be taken, for the ebed was his 'property'. The Hebrew word used here is '*keseph*' (silver, money). In other words, the man bore the financial loss himself without any compensation. The penalty for manslaughter in our justice system today is often less by comparison.

4. Summary remarks:

The word 'slave' as used in the Old Testament is substantially different in meaning from the connotations applied to the word from antebellum United

⁹ Genesis 15:3

¹⁰ Genesis 24

¹¹ 2 Samuel 9

¹² Exodus 21:27

¹³ Exodus 21:12,20

¹⁴ Exodus 21:18,19

¹⁵ Exodus 21:21

States. In the Old Testament, the ebed/slave always had the option of gaining his or her freedom either through redemption or, if treated unfairly, by simply leaving. As for those who had an ebed in their employ, God's desire was that he was to be 'pampered' as a son if a man, or treated as a daughter or wife if a woman. Ultimately, it was the slave/ebed who decided if service to their masters was in their own best interests or not in considering freedom or service within a family.

B. Servants and Slaves in the New Testament

The New Testament was written within the context of Roman rule. The number of slaves being set free in the 1st century was so large that the social system was in danger of collapsing. Thus, restrictions were placed on the number of slaves that a person could set free.¹⁶ For this reason, Roman citizens who became Christians were not permitted to free all their slaves, but only as many as the law permitted. It is within this context that God spoke through the New Testament writers.

1. God's perspective on slavery and freedom:

From God's perspective, all human beings are enslaved to something that is so awful that what we normally think of as slavery or servitude is trivial by comparison. God is much more concerned by a person's spiritual slavery and its consequences than He is about a person's social status in this world. Here are some relevant points:

- a. Slaves of moral corruption: This is the default state of all human beings. If they die in this state, they are lost forever.¹⁷
- b. Bondslaves of God and righteousness: The alternative to being a slave of moral corruption is to be a slaves of God and everything that is right (justice, truth, beauty, and so forth).¹⁸ All human beings are either one or the other; there is no freedom from both evil and good; you are either one or the other.
- c. The highest position and title: The highest position a person could achieve was to become the servant of all.¹⁹ From God's perspective, the highest title a human being can have is 'bondslave' or 'bondservant' of God.²⁰ With all this in mind, human freedom is illusory, something that obscures a much more important, eternal state of slavery.
- d. Slaves and free people were equal before God: God made no distinction

¹⁶ Lex Fufia Caninia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lex_Fufia_Caninia

¹⁷ Romans 6, Titus 3:3 & 2 Peter 2:19

¹⁸ Romans 6:16-19

¹⁹ Matthew 23:11 and Luke 22:25,26

²⁰ 2 Timothy 2:24, James 1:1, Titus 1:1, 2 Peter 1:1 & Jude 1

between slave and freeman.²¹ As for the Gospel and the Kingdom of God, there is no such thing as 'slave' or 'free man'; all are one before God.²²

2. God's preference was freedom:

'Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that.'²³ For those who could gain their freedom, God's desire was that become free.²⁴

3. Treatment of slaves:

Keeping in mind that although God's preference was freedom for slaves, Christians were not free under Roman law to release all their slaves. With this in mind, God's commands to masters are highly relevant.

- a. The second greatest command was to love your neighbor, including slaves, with all your heart.
- b. Masters were to grant to their slaves 'justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.'²⁵ Masters were also to treat their slaves the same way their slaves were to treat them.²⁶ Specifically, 'with good will render service' to their slaves as if they were rendering service to the Lord, knowing that in serving his slaves, he was actually serving God and would be rewarded by God.²⁷ He was to serve his slaves and love them as he would wish to be served and loved.

C. Conclusion

It is essential to remember the historical and social context within which the Bible was written. When that is done, we observe that its treatment of slaves is truly astounding. In the Old Testament times, service was a way for many unskilled or poor people to find employment security and earn wealth. We see, however, that the decision to stay or leave was up to the person and no one was permitted to hand that individual back to their master; they were free to settle down wherever they wished. Ultimately, it was the 'slave' who decided whether freedom or service was in their best interests. In the New Testament, freedom was advocated but Roman rule prohibited all slaves being set free. Within that context, masters were to serve their own slaves from the heart, as to the Lord, and love them as themselves.

²¹ Colossians 3:11

²² Galatians 3:28

²³ 1 Corinthians 7:21

²⁴ 1 Corinthians 7:23

²⁵ Colossians 4:1

²⁶ Ephesians 6:9

²⁷ Ephesians 6:7,8