

“Slavery” for *Biblical Illustrator* (Lifeway Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention), 2016

The book of Esther records the account of the anti-Semite Haman’s intent to murder Jews. Haman bribed Persian King Ahasuerus to authorize the hanging of innocent Hebrews. The realization of the decree meant that Queen Esther, a Jew, would die. Esther implored Ahasuerus for her life and the lives of her people. Esther told Ahasuerus that she would have kept silent if she and her people had “. . . merely been sold as male and female slaves . . .” (7:4). The book concludes with God miraculously sparing the life of Esther and countless Jews.

What do we know about Hebrew slaves? How did a person become a slave? How could a slave become a free person? Was that even possible? Did the Hebrews view slavery and treat slaves differently than other civilizations?

The ancient world widely embraced the institution of slavery.¹ For more a thousand years, slavery existed in Palestine.² Although slave labor drove the economies of Egypt, Greece and Rome, in Israel, slaves assumed domestic rather than agricultural or industrial responsibilities.

A person might lose freedom in a number of ways. The children born to household slaves began life as slaves (Genesis 17:23). Slaves could be bought and sold as Joseph’s brothers sold him to professional traders (Genesis 37:28). Failure to pay a debt could result in a man (or his family) being enslaved by his creditor.

Captors often enslaved prisoners of war (1 Samuel 17:9). One might be enslaved by government officials in order to carry out building (and agricultural) programs.³ A convicted thief, unable to make restitution, could be enslaved in order to collect fines and damages (Exodus 22:3). A person might be kidnapped and coerced into slavery (Exodus 21:16 reveals that the perpetrator of such a crime must be capitally punished). A father could sell his daughter as a slave (Exodus 21:7, in times of poverty no doubt). Leviticus 25:39-43 reveals the practice of voluntarily selling oneself into slavery, probably to escape poverty.⁴

A slave could become a free person in several ways. A purchased slave had to be offered freedom after six years of labor (Exodus 21:2). A person who voluntarily entered slavery was freed in the year of jubilee (Leviticus 25:39-40). A slave permanently maimed by his master received freedom as compensation (Exodus 21:26-27). An enslaved daughter who failed to please her master could be liberated (Exodus 21:7-8).

Did the Hebrews view slavery differently than their neighbors? Did the Hebrews treat slaves differently than their neighbors treated slaves? The law codes of surrounding civilizations identified slaves as possessions, a “thing” to be treated as any other thing.

¹James A. Brooks, “SLAVE, SERVANT,” *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville: Holman Reference, 2003), 1511.

²Check K. A. Kitchen, “SLAVE, SLAVERY,” *New Bible Dictionary*, (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 1110 for “Captives . . . were commonly reduced to slavery, a custom that goes back . . . to roughly 3000 BC and probably further . . .”

³Check Exodus 1:11 for an example of the former.

⁴Numerous factors might lead to this type of debt-slavery including repeated poor harvests, exorbitant taxation or the loss of the family’s provider. Of all the ancient law codes, only the Hebrews had laws regulating voluntary slavery (check also Exodus 21:5-6).

These laws reveal the slave to have been at the mercy of his/her owner. The Old Testament laws regarding slavery records a fundamental difference.

Slavery laws appear in the Old Testament in Exodus 21:1-11, Leviticus 25:39-55 and Deuteronomy 15:12-18. A cursory examination of these laws reveals that most of them concern the treatment and freedom of slaves. Biblical law limited the master's power over a slave. The law dictated that a master who permanently maimed a slave had to free the slave (Exodus 21:26-27) and clarified punishment for any master who murdered a slave (Exodus 21:20-21). Such laws recognized a slave's humanity and protected his/her rights. The prophet Joel recognized the humanity of the slave by insisting that God would, one day, "pour out" his spirit on all peoples, including male and female slaves (2:28-29). The wealthy Job recognized the humanity and worth of slaves by insisting that God created the slave the same as God created him (31:13-15).⁵

Hebrew slavery often differed from that in other civilizations in that Hebrew slavery had a domestic element. Slaves worked side-by-side with masters in field and home. Masters were expected to treat slaves as a member of the family, albeit an inferior member.

Hebrew law stipulated that masters must not send out a freed slave "empty-handed" (Deuteronomy 15:13). Instead, the law ordered the master to "Give generously to him . . . whatever the Lord your God has blessed you with" (Deuteronomy 15:14). Such gifts allowed slaves the opportunity to maintain their new-found freedom. The motivation for such generosity came from the master's remembrance that he too had once been a slave in Egypt (Deuteronomy 15:15).

Much of the quality of a slave's life depended on the master's personality. Exodus 21:2-6 sheds valuable light on the environment in which some slaves in Old Testament Israel lived. After six years of servitude, Hebrew law required a master to free his slave. But these verses reveal instances where the slave forfeited such a right and *chose* to remain a slave: "But if the slave declares: 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I do not want to leave as a free man.'" While not surprised by the slave's love for his own wife and children, a slave's love for master might be surprising to modern readers. Undoubtedly an environment that fostered love between a slave and a master differed from the slavery of many other civilizations.

Interestingly the slave laws of the Old Testament provide no legislation for the Hebrew fugitive slave. Could one reason be that, generously treated, the Hebrew slave seldom fled?⁶ Nor does the Old Testament provide guidance should a master willingly choose to free his slave. Thus, in such a case, the law did not interfere.

Generally speaking and in contrast to many other civilizations, a more humane element permeates the laws of slavery in ancient Israel. The Mosaic law instructed the Hebrews "... not to rule over them harshly but fear your God" (Leviticus 25:43).

Some individuals may point out the fact that neither Jesus, the Apostles nor Paul condemned slavery. How does one explain such silence? With the prevalence of slavery⁷

⁵Another area where biblical law differed from other legal codes: In regard to runaway foreign slaves, the Old Testament law provided for asylum rather than extradition, informing Hebrews not to "mistreat him" (Deuteronomy 23:15-16).

⁶But the Old Testament does record episodes of runaway slaves, check Hagar in Genesis 16: 6. Check also 1 Samuel 25:10.

⁷Check *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary*, 1511 for: "In the first Christian century, one out of three persons in Italy and one out of five elsewhere was a slave."

any call for abolition could have resulted in violence and casualties. Instead, Jesus advocated treating all human beings with dignity and equality. Paul admonished the slave owner Philemon to accept the runaway slave Onesimus “no longer has a slave, but more than a slave—a dearly loved brother” (verse 16). Taken seriously, the message of Jesus (so eloquently articulated by Paul) will destroy the institution of slavery.
