

LA0. Commentary on Slaves & Indentured Servants.

The biblical subject of “Slaves and Indentured Servants” is challenging to write about because, whereas slavery today is considered morally wrong, God did not consider it morally wrong (as recorded in various Books of the Bible) under certain circumstances and when applied according to His Law.

The Hebrew word for “slave” in the Bible is “*eved*” (Strong’s H5650) and the Greek word is “*doulos*” (Strong’s G1401). Yet, so sensitive is this subject, that these Hebrew and Greek words were only translated as “slave” twice in the King James Version of the Bible (Jeremiah 2:14 and Revelation 18:13). There are many references to slaves and slavery in the *Tanakh* and, in all cases other than the two mentioned, the KJV translators avoided the words and opted instead for words such as “menservants” and “womenservants” (Genesis 20:14), “maid” and “bondwoman” (Genesis 16:6 and 21:10), etc. The problem with such substitutions is that most “slaves” in the *Tanakh* (by whatever names they are called) are not ordinary servants in that they are not paid wages, and are not free to choose whether or not to serve or whom to serve.

The title of this book is “The Law of Messiah: Mitzvot from a New Covenant Perspective,” and one may therefore wonder why so much attention is being given in this commentary to the *Tanakh*. It is because there is a subtle change in what is meant by slavery as we move from the Mosaic Covenant (and covenants that preceded it) to the New Covenant. It is similar to the changes we make in adapting other aspects of the Mosaic Law to the New Covenant, often moving from a physical to a spiritual emphasis (see *Mitzvah* #LA1).

The *Tanakh* describes several kinds of slavery in which Israelites own slaves, the most potentially oppressive of them being the kind where Israelites purchase Gentiles and own them as chattel. We read of this in Leviticus 25:44-46a:

“Concerning the men and women you may have as slaves: you are to buy men- and women-slaves from the nations surrounding you. You may also buy the children of foreigners living with you and members of their families born in your land; you may own these. You may also bequeath them to your children to own; from these groups you may take your slaves forever..”

Deuteronomy 20:10-11 describes a similar kind of slavery that results from when Gentile heathen nations surrender to Israel to avoid being attacked and conquered:

“When you advance on a town to attack it, first offer it terms for peace. If it accepts the terms for peace and opens its gates to you, then all the people there are to be put to forced labor and work for you.”

Slaves acquired in the aforesaid ways are literally the property of those who own them. Their labors and their very lives are subject to their owner’s volition, and limited only by a few rules of compassion and justice established by God. Exodus 21:26-27 illustrates one such rule:

“If a person hits his male or female slave's eye and destroys it, he must let him go free in compensation for his eye. If he knocks out his male or female slave's tooth, he must let him go free in compensation for his tooth.”

Colossians 4:1 of the *Kitvey B'rit Chadashah* (written during the time when the Mosaic Covenant was still fully operative) summarizes God's view of how slaves were to be treated:

“Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly. Remember that you too have a Master in heaven.”

Its broader lesson for both then and now is that we must treat persons over whom we have power as we want God to treat us.

The foregoing is about the enslavement of Gentiles, but there are also Scriptures that describe Israelites being enslaved by other Israelites. Exodus 21:7-8 is such an example:

“If a man sells his daughter as a slave, she is not to go free like the men-slaves. If her master married her but decides she no longer pleases him, then he is to allow her to be redeemed. He is not allowed to sell her to a foreign people, because he has treated her unfairly.”

And 2 Kings 4:1:

“The wife of one of the guild prophets complained to Elisha. “Your servant my husband died,” she said, “and you know that he feared ADONAI. Now a creditor has come to take my two children as his slaves.”

There are also instances in Scripture of Israelites selling themselves into servitude for personal reasons, often financial (Leviticus 25:39-40); we tend to call them “indentured servants” or “bond servants” to distinguish them from slaves, and because special rules apply to them that include the kind of work they are required to do (Leviticus 25:39), and their release after six years of service (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12) and in the Year of Yovel (Leviticus 25:10). Leviticus 25:39-43 gives further details of this:

“If a member of your people has become poor among you and sells himself to you, do not make him do the work of a slave. Rather, you are to treat him like an employee or a tenant; he will work for you until the year of yovel. Then he will leave you, he and his children with him, and return to his own family and regain possession of his ancestral land. For they are my slaves, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; therefore they are not to be sold as slaves. Do not treat him harshly, but fear your God.”

A famous example of voluntary servitude is in Genesis 29:20-30 in which Ya'akov obligates himself to work for Lavan for two seven-year periods (one of the seven due to fraud perpetrated on him by Lavan) in order to obtain Rachel as his wife. He was not released after each six-year period – presumably because the six-year rule originated with the Mosaic Law that came later.

There is one category of enslavement in the Bible wherein an Israelite can choose to become a slave for life; it is described in Exodus 21:5-6:¹

“Nevertheless, if the slave declares, 'I love my master, my wife and my children, so I don't want to go free,' then his master is to bring him before God; and there at the door or doorpost, his master is to pierce his ear with an awl; and the man will be his slave for life.”

A Closing Thought:

Let us not believe that all enslavement is bad and that we, in today's democratically governed and presumably enlightened world do not enslave. One of the prominent penalties for violating the laws of our various legal systems is loss of freedom through imprisonment which, in many ways, is nothing short of slavery. Prisoners are told where they can live, where they can walk, what they can own, and the means by which they are allowed to communicate. They must eat what they are given to eat, wear what they are given to wear, and suffer the indignity of personal inspections at a moment's notice. As for servitude (a component of slavery), prisoners who are sentenced to (or elect) hard labor must do physical work for which they are typically not paid (e.g. road work), often to benefit the government entity that has imprisoned them. Prisoners who have the choice to work or not work must choose jobs from among options given them and are typically paid wages that are hugely substandard compared with the wages earned by freemen who labor similarly. We do not like to say that the state or other government entity that operates prisons “owns” those who are imprisoned but, in reality (albeit with limitations), they do!

Comment by Daniel C. Juster

It is important to note that Israel is not to be the aggressor in a war with surrounding nations; only if they go to war against Israel can slavery be the result. Slaves from the nations do have limited rights and are freed when abused. Within Israel itself, slavery in the form of indentured servanthood is a temporary solution to personal debt, and Israelite slaves have more rights than do Gentiles.

Neither Israelite nor Roman slavery should be identified with modern slavery that is based upon claims of racial inferiority. The only human inferiority in the Bible is following false gods and creating a debased culture therefrom. That all people are created equal and in the image of God is foundational, and all Jews and believers in Yeshua are brothers and sister regardless of their economic and social standing.

It therefore seems incoherent to have fellow Jews and believers in Yeshua as slaves. This is the sense behind the writing of Philemon. If a slave who is a brother can gain his freedom, he is to do so. This orientation ended slavery among believers in the 2nd century. No command was needed; the spirit of the New Covenant was sufficient.

Supportive Tanakh Scriptures

¹ See also, Deuteronomy 15:16-17.

Genesis 17:12

Exodus 21: 2-11, 16

Leviticus 25:38-55

Deuteronomy 15:12-18, 23:16(15)-17(16), 24:7

Proverbs 22:7