

## *Old Testament Slavery*

**Kippy Myers**

### *The Challenge*

It is commonly charged that the Old Testament condones chattel slavery. This is significant because it implies that the Old Testament teaches a flawed moral system. However, this charge and its conclusion are unjustified.

### *What's Wrong With Slavery?*

When we see the word *slavery*, most of us have a strong visceral reaction. Here in the States, we are familiar with many horrendous practices that certain slaveholders inflicted upon slaves in the days prior to the Civil War. We have been **reared** to hate slavery because the chattel slavery that we are familiar with is a clear violation of many Biblical principles. However, world history teaches us that chattel slavery is but one of many types of servitude that reflect various degrees of control between master and servant.

Orlando Patterson suggests that there are four things wrong with chattel slavery: (1) violence (physical abuse of the slave), (2) natal alienation (the forced separation of the slave from his people), (3) dishonor (the slave is chattel), and (4) social death (the slave is a social non-entity).<sup>1</sup> Some types of servitude do not include any of these four criteria. People in the Old Testament were allowed to have servants, but the Mosaic Law in many specific ways managed the practice so that it did not involve these four evils.

Walter Kaiser says, "Slavery in the Old Testament is not the horrible institution known by the same name in the modern Western countries, for it often approximated employer and employee relationships, but there were aspects of it that were subject to abuse and the law [of Moses] spoke to these."<sup>2</sup>

### *How Slavery in the Old Testament Is Different*

First, slavery in the Old Testament was not violent as some think it was. The Israelites were not to rule over their servants ruthlessly as the Egyptians had ruled over them (Exodus 1:13-14; Leviticus 25:46). The command, "Thou shalt not oppress a hired servant that is poor and needy, whether he be of thy brethren, or of thy sojourners that are in thy land within thy

gates” is followed the somber reminder about their Egyptian servitude (Deuteronomy 24:14-18, KJV). The Egyptian taskmasters had beaten them, forced them to labor, and abused them to the point that the Israelites were helpless and cried out in sorrow (Exodus 3:7; 5:14).

If a master severely hurt a servant, and the master’s intentions for doing so were dubious (i.e., was it a fight or was it the abuse of a subordinate?), the servant had to be set free immediately (Exodus 21:26-27). A master murdering a slave was like murdering anyone else and was punishable by death (Exodus 21:20).

No one was given absolute control over a servant or license to treat a servant in just any way he pleased. The Israelites were not even permitted to treat animals as badly as some nations treated slaves (Proverbs 12:10; Exodus 23:5).

Unlike pre-Civil War America, ancient Israel had conditions allowing a servant to leave his master without fear of reprisal (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Also unlike American slavery, the servant could flee to another town and no one who encountering him was responsible for returning him to the master.

Second, there was no natal alienation in the Old Testament laws about Israelite slaves/servants. They were not allowed to kidnap a Jew in order to make him/her a servant. Deuteronomy 24:7 says, “If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you” (KJV). R. E. O. White says that in Israel “as in Athens, Hammurabi, and Rome, kidnapping into slavery is punishable by death....”<sup>3</sup> Thus the slave trade was outlawed.

One could become a servant in ancient Israel for a number of reasons including poverty, normal debts, or a debt owed due to thievery (i.e., a thief could serve his victim in order to reimburse him for the crime). Although the Law included provisions for the poor and destitute (such as gleaning, Leviticus 19:10) for some poverty stricken folks, serving a master and taking advantage of their protection and provision was another welfare option.

Kaiser explains, “Since the land could not be sold but had to remain in the family permanently, the only recourse that a Hebrew had for borrowing money was to sell his or her labor for up to six years.”<sup>4</sup> Selling their temporary obedience allowed them to pay off debts or just survive (Leviticus 25:35, 39, 47).

Third, the slave is not chattel. Being a Jewish servant was a temporary position because a servant could not be held indefinitely unless he wished to be. He or she had to be freed after six years, i.e., in a Sabbath year (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:12-18).<sup>5</sup> However, when a servant faced the decision of whether to leave a master's service, they might decide to remain. The law says, "If [your servant] says to you, 'I will not go out from you,' because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you..." (Deuteronomy 15:16, ESV). Being in a good home presented the possibility of gaining a share of the master's inheritance, perhaps the entire estate.<sup>6</sup> If a servant chose to leave, the Law also governed that situation so that he or she would not be abused by a vindictive master who was angry over his departure. Thus, when a servant left, the master could not allow him to go empty-handed. He had to furnish the departing servant with liberal provisions from his flock, threshing floor, and winepress (Deuteronomy 15:12-14).

Fourth, the slave had rights and was not a social non-entity. In addition to those rights mentioned in regard to his departure, in Israel, "The slave was given human and legal rights unheard of in contemporary societies."<sup>7</sup> For example, under Mosaic Law, servants could marry members of the master's family (1 Chronicles 2:35). They could even marry the master. If this occurred, the new mate (previously a servant) had to be treated with the proper respect afforded to any spouse (Exodus 21:9). However, a man might promise to marry a servant girl, but later change his mind and marry a different woman. The law required him to provide the rejected female servant with food, money, etc. If he failed to provide this remuneration, she was free to leave his service (Exodus 21:7-11).

### ***Remaining Questions***

These are just a few of the relevant texts that distinguish Jewish servitude from chattel slavery, but this brief discussion cannot hope to address every question. The more familiar someone is with the relevant Bible texts as well as world history, the clearer the picture becomes. Notice Job's attitude toward his servants. "If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant, when they brought a complaint against me, what then shall I do when God rises up? When He makes inquiry, what shall I answer Him? Did not He who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?" (Job 31:13-15, ESV). This is more like Golden Rule thinking than "absolute master" thinking.

The regulated Jewish practice was not savagery or brutalization of people as mere subhuman tools who could be manipulated and abused at will. It did not involve person stealing. Servants had a number of rights. It condemned the slave trade. This is not to say that the practice of servitude in a different time and culture will be completely palatable to Western eyes today. But if one were to line up Old Testament teachings about this next to the moral problems of chattel slavery, there would be an obvious and pronounced contrast between the two.

### **Endnotes**

1. Orlando Patterson. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981) chapt. 1.
2. Walter C. Kaiser. *Toward Old Testament Ethics*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 98.
3. R. E. O. White, *Biblical Ethics* (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1979) 21.
4. Walter C. Kaiser, *Toward Old Testament Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983) 98.
5. There were other ways for a servant to gain freedom before the six-year limit. For example, when a Jew was in poverty and sold himself to a non-Jew, a family member could redeem him or he could redeem himself if he prospered in the master's service (Leviticus 25:48-49).
6. See Proverbs 17:2 (cf. Genesis 15:3) and Proverbs 29:21.
7. Christopher J. H. Wright, *Walking in the Ways of the Lord* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1995) 124.