

# Problem Passages – 4 – Slavery

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*Adapted from “Is God a Moral Monster?” by Paul Copan*

## I. The Problem Stated: Why does the Law of Moses apparently endorse slavery?

### A. “Slavery” in Israel

1. The slavery of Israel was indentured servanthood. An *ebed* was not a slave, but a servant.
2. People in severe debt often entered into this relationship (Leviticus 25:47, Deut 15:12).
3. Hebrews did not forcibly take people into slavery. God condemned Israel when they took back servants that had already been released (Jer 34:12-22)
4. The Law spoke specifically as to how these servants were to be treated (Lev 25:53-54)
5. Further, slaves were released upon the seventh and fiftieth year, even if the debt had not been paid off.

### B. Slavery in the Near East

1. In the ancient Near-East, slavery meant: 1) The master had absolute rights over the slave, a slave was property, and a slave was stripped of identity- racial, family, social, marital.
2. This was not the case with the Israelites. It was a practice to help the poor.
3. Further, other laws sought to help the poor and prevent the need for this – gleaning of corners on field, interest-free loans, inexpensive sacrifices. The ultimate goal was the removal of destitute Israelites (Deut 15:1-18)
4. Instead of servants being treated as property, the law treated them as humans made in God’s image.
  - a. Slaves were to be set free if their masters injured them (Ex 21:26-27)
  - b. Kidnapping someone to sell him was punished by death (Ex 21:16)
  - c. Foreign runaway slaves were to be given safe harbour (Deut 23:15-16)

### C. Difficult Texts

#### 1. Beating a slave Exodus 21:20-21

The word for punished (*naqam*) is a word used to signify capital punishment. The following verses show that if the master killed the servant, he would be killed. Injury would mean the slave would be set free. This law gives the master benefit of the doubt if this was not a beating with malicious intent. Recall that some servants were indentured at a young age, and the masters became responsible for discipline.

#### 2. Leaving Wife and Children Behind (Ex 21:2-6)

The servant had three options:

- a) He could wait until his wife had worked off her debt., while he worked elsewhere.
- b) He could try to earn enough money elsewhere to pay for his wife’s debt.

- c) He could enter into lifelong service for his master. Ex 21:5-6. The marriage would have been voluntary, so in accepting the marriage, the man was accepting a kind of incentive to remain there for a long time, if not permanently.

### 3. The Engaged Servant-Girl (Leviticus 19:20-21)

The girl in question, is engaged but not married, and she has not yet been redeemed or set free. The girl has been taken advantage of, and she is not punished. The seducer has to make reparations. The girl's future is not damaged, and she must still be set free later. She falls into a grey area, and this is case law to deal with the situation.

### 4. Foreign Slaves (Lev 25:42-49)

Remember that Israel was commanded to love the foreigner in the land (Lev 19:33-34)

Different words are used for foreigners: stranger (*ger*), sojourner (*toshab*) and foreigner (*nokri*). The *foreigner* seemed to suggest one who resided in Israel but with resentment, and probably only for trading reasons. Obviously, laws for people not committed to the commonwealth of Israel were going to be harder and stricter than for the non-Israelite who happily settled.

Since foreigner could not own the land of Israel, they typically had to settle into Israelite homes as employees. Further, the poorer among them would have no option but to do so.

Loan discrimination was one way of controlling foreigners who were present in Israel for investment or business purposes. POWs would naturally be subdued to avoid uprisings.

Like any nation seeking stability, there are advantages to citizenship. Foreigners who stand outside, or in opposition to, the nation of Israel

### 5. Slavery in the New Testament

- a) The New Testament continues to move people to God's standard of all men created in God's image. (Gal 3:28, Col 3:11)
- b) Masters were told to treat their slaves with dignity (Eph 6:9)
- c) The apostles were not interested in calling for social upheaval and the rebellion of slaves to masters. They were interested that Christian slaves and Christian masters live out their callings in a Christlike way within an inhuman empire – Rome.
- d) Paul condemns 'kidnapping' in 1 Tim 1:10, a reference to human trafficking.
- e) Paul's letter to Philemon subtly suggests that Philemon treat Onesimus as an equal.
- f) The use of terms like 'brother' and 'fellow-worker' for slaves like Andronicus shows the church's attitude. This would have been the beginning of the end of slavery in Rome.
- g) The fact that slaves and masters would eat a common meal – the Lord's Supper - was the ultimate levelling of all distinctions.