

Addressing Questions About the Bible and Slavery

I. Why did God allow slavery at all?

Many Christian theologians conclude that slavery was not God's creational ideal because human beings are created in God's image, Israel was redeemed from slavery, and the biblical story moves toward freedom and equality. Slavery existed before the bible was written. It existed primarily, though not exclusively, because of economic conditions. There were no banks that people could go get guaranteed loans for. There were no payment plans that could be set up to pay off a debt. Slavery became a necessary way for someone who had great need or debt to escape those situations to escape poverty and starvation.

What would have happened if God just said, “no more slavery”?

The people would probably have ignored it. How do we know this? Because that’s just what happened:

The word that came to Jeremiah from the Lord, after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with all the people in Jerusalem to make a proclamation of liberty to them, ⁹ that everyone should set free his Hebrew slaves, male and female, so that no one should enslave a Jew, his brother. ¹⁰ And they obeyed, all the officials and all the people who had entered into the covenant that everyone would set free his slave, male or female, so that they would not be enslaved again. They obeyed and set them free. ¹¹ But afterward they turned around and took back the male and female slaves they had set free, and brought them into subjection as slaves. ¹² The word of the Lord came to Jeremiah from the Lord: ¹³ “Thus says the Lord, the God of Israel: I myself made a covenant with your fathers when I brought them out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, saying, ¹⁴ ‘At the end of seven years each of you must set free the fellow Hebrew who has been sold to you and has served you six years; you must set him free from your service.’ But your fathers did not listen to me or incline their ears to me. ¹⁵ You recently repented and did what was right in my eyes by proclaiming liberty, each to his neighbor, and you made a covenant before me in the house that is called by my name, ¹⁶ but then you turned around and profaned my name when each of you took back his male and female slaves, whom you had set free according to their desire, and you brought them into subjection to be your slaves. – Jeremiah 34:8 -16 (ESV)

There was a command to release all Jewish slaves in Israel, and the people disobeyed it. Jeremiah 34 suggests Israel was unwilling even to obey God's command to release Hebrew slaves, illustrating how deeply embedded slavery was within their society.

There would have been great economic hardship for many. Imagine if today something happened that instantly wiped out the internet, all banks, and the economy. That’s the equivalent of instantly disallowing slavery in the Old Testament. Israel had no welfare state. Given the absence of banks, bankruptcy laws, or organized welfare, many scholars argue that an immediate prohibition of all servitude would likely have produced severe economic disruption – which may have included rampant poverty, starvation, warfare, etc. Widows and orphans would have especially been vulnerable.

God worked through smaller reforms and divine accommodation, meeting people where they were culturally to improve the conditions of slavery and work towards its abolishment.

Just as women's rights, civil rights, and labor rights have all worked through small incremental reforms, so too God has used these to move people to accepting a more moral position.

There are many cases in the Bible where God has used divine accommodation to meet people where they are, and though the system was not ideal, he allowed it, so that improvements could be made. Some examples of divine accommodation are:

Divorce - The Bible says that God hates divorce, yet He allowed it. Why?

"Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so." (Matthew 19:8, ESV)

It was not the ideal. God permitted it to give the woman and her children some protections though rather than them being abandoned. God allows divorce, that does not mean He believes it is ideal.

Israel's kings – God did not want Israel to have a king. He said it was a rejection of Him (1 Samuel 8). Yet, God gave rules for kings to follow.

Many Old Testament rites and regulations were temporary – they served a purpose for that time, but they were not the ideal. Some of these were animal sacrifices, circumcision, dietary laws, temple worship, and oaths. Many of these laws became useless and found their fulfillment in Christ.

Why would God use divine accommodation for slavery? All the nations around Israel had it, and so did Israel. The laws God commanded made life significantly better for slaves – He forbade kidnapping. He commanded *"You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped to you..." (Deuteronomy 23:15–16)*. He recognized specific rights for slaves and commanded that they not be treated harshly. He set limits for servitude for Jewish slaves. All these laws were revolutionary for their time. These incremental improvements paved the way for establishing a way of ending slavery.

II. Slavery in the Bible vs. Antebellum Slavery

a. Key Differences

	Hebrew Debt-Servitude	Foreign Slavery	Antebellum Chattel Slavery
Basis	Voluntary self-sale for debt, not race based – Hebrews could be the slave of foreigners	Self-sold, Could be purchased, war capture, or birth in household, not about race – about covenant status	Race-based capture and hereditary ownership
Term	Capped at 6 years / released at Jubilee	No Mandatory release timeframe – negotiated if not a prisoner of war	Permanent, hereditary

	Hebrew Debt-Servitude	Foreign Slavery	Antebellum Chattel Slavery
	(Exodus 21:2; Lev 25:40–41) Hebrew slaves could choose to voluntarily remain slaves forever (Exodus 21, Deuteronomy 15). This shows that not all slavery was viewed as oppressive.		
Consent	Entered voluntarily generally due to debt	Foreign slaves entered slavery through several means, including purchase, birth, war captivity, and in some cases voluntary self-sale due to poverty.	Never consensual
Kidnapping	Forbidden (Exodus 21:16)	Forbidden as “entry method” into slavery, though war capture and purchase from existing markets were both permitted (but couldn’t have been initially kidnapped - If Exodus 21:16 applies universally—as most scholars argue—kidnapped persons could not have been lawfully bought.)	Central to the system
Protections	Sabbath rest, injury-manumission, anti-extradition, festival inclusion	Sabbath rest, injury-manumission, anti-extradition, festival inclusion	

The word for ‘slave’ in Hebrew and Greek can mean a ‘slave’ or a ‘servant’. Context determines the fuller meaning. Hebrew slavery differed from the slavery in the countries around Israel which were much more like chattel slavery. Here are some differences:

i. Kidnapping was Forbidden

“Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death.” (Exodus 21:16)

- Paul Copan emphasizes that the Mosaic Law’s condemnation of kidnapping for slavery was unique and punishable by death, unlike the practices that fueled the transatlantic slave trade.
- The language of Exodus 21:16 is generic and does not contain any qualifiers, such as “just Hebrew slaves”.

ii. Mutually Agreed Terms and Limits (for most circumstances)

- Hebrew slavery was often a form of indentured servitude to pay off debt, with a maximum term of six years. The ‘mutual’ part of this is important to understand:
 - *“If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.”* (Exodus 21:2)
- Release and fair treatment were mandated (Deut. 15:12–15).

iii. Slaves Had Rights

- Slaves shared in Sabbath rest (Deut. 5:14).
- If a master injured a slave, the slave was to be set free (Exodus 21:26–27).
- Runaway slaves were not to be returned to their masters (Deut. 23:15–16).

Some have claimed that the Bible permitted the beating of slaves. However, this misrepresents what the Bible is saying:

“When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, 19 then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed. 20 “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. 21 But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money.... When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. 27 If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth”. - Exodus 21: 18-21, 26-27

In verses 18-19 the situation is just one person injures another, in the verses about harming a slave, the same standard is applied. This same standard for harming a slave being treated the same way as treating a non-slave was unheard of in other countries at the time of the Mosaic law. It applied the law to all classes the same. These are case laws – they talk about what to do if a particular situation arises. It does not give slave owners permission to mistreat their servants.

But doesn’t the Bible call the slave ‘property’ or ‘money’?

For Hebrew debt-servants, terms like 'money' or 'investment' (Exodus 21:21, better rendered 'for the servant is his property/investment') capture something closer to a claim on labor during a fixed term, with the servant's personal rights (Sabbath rest, injury protection, eventual release) retained - somewhat like an employer holding a contract on an employee's labor without owning the person. There were less protections for the foreign-slave (Leviticus 25:44–46) where the person could be passed to one's children, with no consent at entry if sold, and no stipulated exit (depending on the circumstances they became a slave). The foreign slave situation is not as ideal as the Hebrew slave, even still the foreign slave/servant had the following rights:

- **Homicide liability:** Exodus 21:20 - a master who beats a slave to death "shall surely be punished" (the Hebrew *naqom yinnaqem* is the same phrase used for blood vengeance elsewhere). – meaning the death penalty
- **Injury manumission:** Exodus 21:26–27 - permanent loss of an eye or even a tooth through the master's abuse triggers automatic freedom.
- **Mandatory rest days:** Exodus 20:10; 23:12 — slaves rest on the Sabbath along with the family.
- **Worship inclusion:** circumcised slaves ate the Passover (Exodus 12:44) and participated in festival worship (Deuteronomy 12:12, 18; 16:11, 14) — i.e., they had a place in Israel's religious life that others did not.
- **Not to mistreat** - Exodus 22:21: *"Do not mistreat or oppress a foreigner, for you were foreigners in Egypt."*
- **Anti-extradition law:** Deuteronomy 23:15–16 forbids returning an escaped slave to his master - a striking departure from ANE norms, where Hammurabi §§16–20 mandates *death* for harboring a fugitive slave.

Extra-biblical rights – not mentioned in the bible but known historically

- **Ban on Re-Selling to Non-Jews:** Talmudic law claimed a Jew was forbidden to sell a converted foreign slave to a non-Jew or outside the Land of Israel. Doing so automatically resulted in the slave being granted their freedom.
- **Prohibition on Forced Conversion:** Talmudic law stipulated that if a foreign slave explicitly refused to undergo the initial partial conversion (circumcision/immersion) after 12 months, the Jewish owner was not allowed to keep them and had to sell them to a non-Jewish master.
- **Could inherit master's property if no heir** - Genesis 15:2–3 - *"But Abram said, 'O Sovereign Lord, what can you give me since I remain childless and the one who will inherit my estate is Eliezer of Damascus?' And Abram said, 'You have given me no children; so a servant in my household will be my heir.'"* (This is pre-Mosaic law and reflects ANE culture).
- **Could receive personal gifts to buy their freedom-** The Talmud stated, *"This gift is yours on the condition that your master has no rights to it, and it is for the specific purpose of buying your freedom,"* the slave could temporarily hold those funds to buy their independence.

III. Addressing Difficult Old Testament Passages

a. Masters and Beating Slaves; Were Slaves Property?

"When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged.²¹ But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money (many translations say "property"). (Exodus 21:20-21)

Some have claimed this gives someone permission to beat their slave. That is not the meaning of the passage. This is case law. The circumstance is if an owner strikes his slave and the slave dies he can face the death penalty – which differed from other nations at the time and undermines the “a slave is just property” argument.

- The Hebrew word for “punished” (naqam) indicates the death penalty for murder according to most scholars.
- The law gave the benefit of the doubt if the servant lingered, assuming no murderous intent, but still held masters accountable – by the way, this is the same standard for free people.
- If a slave was injured, the bible says this:

“When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, ¹⁹ then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.” – Exodus 21:18-19

The owner had to pay for his care. Also if any permanent damage was done the owner lost his investment:

When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. ²⁷ If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth. – Exodus 21:26-27 (ESV)

This manumission (freeing slaves) clause applied to any slave – Hebrew, foreign, or war slaves, according to most scholars. That was not a part of other ANE cultures and served to prevent mistreating slaves.

- Some translations say that the slave was “property”. The Exodus 21 text does not use that word, but the word for silver. Many modern translations will use the terms “money” or “investment”. The idea of the passage is that the death penalty is off the table if the person survives the beating because the benefit of the doubt was given that murder was not the objective. The Old Testament affirms human dignity (Genesis 1:26–27), and slaves were not mere property. Slaves had rights, Hebrew slaves had more rights than foreign slaves (more on this later).

b. Selling Daughters

“When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she does not please her master, who has designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter.” – Exodus 21:7-9 (ESV)

- In the ancient context, selling a daughter as a servant (Exodus 21:7–11) was often a form of arranged marriage or economic provision, the case law mitigates that risk. The

passage is focused on giving the woman protections that other cultures did not give to her.

- The law protected such women, granting them rights to food, clothing, and marital status. If denied, they were to be set free without payment.

c. Foreign Slaves and Permanent Servitude

"As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, and they may be your property. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit as a possession forever. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly." – Leviticus 25:44-46 (ESV)

- Foreign slaves came through several legal avenues described in the Old Testament, but the bible forbids kidnapping. Note that Israel was not allowed to take captives from the Canaanite nations within the promised land (Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, Jebusites) (Deuteronomy 20:16–18).
- The system provided social stability and survival for those with no other means but still included protections against abuse and the possibility of integration into Israelite society.
- Unlike Hebrew slaves, foreign slavery could be permanent. And the right of ownership could be passed on to descendants. An extrabiblical exception is that a foreign slave that has begun the process to be a Jew, could not be sold to a foreigner.

Conditions under which foreigners could be a slave/servant

- **Purchase from existing slave markets among the nations** — Leviticus 25:44, "you may buy male and female slaves from the nations around you." The text presupposes an already-existing ANE slave trade and permits participation in it as a *buyer*, not as an originator. Still can't be kidnapped though (Copan).
- **Purchase of resident aliens (*gerim*) and their descendants already living in the land** — Leviticus 25:45.
- **Prisoners of war from "distant" cities that surrendered rather than resisted** — Deuteronomy 20:10–11: such populations became conscripted forced labor (*mas*).
- **Female captives taken in war**, governed by the distinct statute in Deuteronomy 21:10–14.
- **House-born slaves** - children born to a slave woman already owned by the household (Genesis 17:12–13; implied in Exodus 21:4). Children stayed with their mother and adopted their mother's status.
- **Self-sale by a sojourner in economic distress**, and subsequent sale of that person or their kin to a third party (Lev 25:47) - the mirror case to an Israelite selling himself to a resident alien (25:47–55).

d. Why did the OT law treat Hebrew slaves differently than foreign slaves/servants?

Leviticus 25 grounds the distinction in Israel's covenant relationship with God: because Yahweh redeemed Israel from bondage in Egypt, Israelites belong to him as his servants, and no Israelite may hold a fellow Israelite in permanent bondage (Lev 25:42, 55). Foreigners were outside that covenantal relationship, and the same protections did not apply to them. The Mosaic law was first and foremost for the nation state of Israel and that its focus was not on fixing the world's problems like slavery. The primary purpose of the Mosaic code was not to create a global blueprint for all nations to adopt immediately, but rather to make Israel a "holy nation" (*Set Apart*) distinct from the surrounding pagan cultures (Leviticus 20:26).

However, a Hebrew slave could voluntarily choose to be a permanent slave, but this would be their choice:

"But if the slave plainly says, 'I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free,'⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, and he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall be his slave forever." – Exodus 21:5-6 (ESV)

Just a note about that. If Hebrew slaves voluntarily chose to remain slaves, then the image of chattel slavery doesn't seem to fit what slavery was like for them.

IV. The New Testament and the Undermining of Slavery

The New Testament does not endorse slavery but subverts it by affirming the equal value of all people:

"There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28)

- Paul appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (Philemon 16).
- Revelation 18:13 condemns Babylon for trafficking in "human souls," rejecting the treatment of people as property.
- 1 Corinthians 7:21 suggests a trajectory toward freedom - *"Were you a slave when called? Do not be concerned about it. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity."*
- These principles fueled the abolitionist movement and civil rights reforms centuries later.

V. Conclusion: God's Goodness and Human Dignity

- The Bible's regulations on slavery were radically different from the brutality of antebellum slavery, emphasizing protection, dignity, and eventual freedom.
- God's ultimate answer to slavery is found in Christ, who "became like a slave" to redeem humanity (Philippians 2:7).
- The biblical trajectory is toward liberation, justice, and the equal worth of all people.

VI. Bibliography

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