

# SLAVERY

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## CULTURAL INSIGHT

Slavery was so much a fact of life in the ancient Near East that it served as the matrix for the ancient Israelites; as such, slavery was a fact of life within the Old Testament as well. This can sometimes be masked in the King James translation of the Old Testament since Biblical Hebrew uses the word *ebed* for both “slave” and “servant” and does not make the distinction that modern English makes between these two statuses. This is why the word *slave* only appears once in the King James Version of the Old Testament, and there it is a translator’s gloss, or clarification.

“Handmaid” and “maidservant” in the King James Version of the Old Testament are translations of the Hebrew word *šiphah*. This word means “female slave,” so individuals such as Hagar, Zilpah, and Bilhah that are described as handmaids in the Old Testament were slaves. They were owned by Sarah, Rachel, and Leah, who gave their husbands these slaves as wives.

Old Testament slavery was not understood in racial terms or categories—one people was not more likely to be made slaves than another. However, biblical law did make a distinction between Israelite and non-Israelite slaves, and different laws and practices governed these different groups of individuals. It is clear as one reads the various laws in the scriptures that there were variations on how the ancient Israelites practiced their law. This insight paints a broad picture. According to the Bible, Israelite slaves were to be freed after seven years.<sup>1</sup> Leviticus informs us the reason that Israelites had different slave laws is that they were already Jehovah’s servants/slaves, rescued by Him from Egypt (see Leviticus 25:55). Non-Israelite slaves did not have this release clause and hence could be inherited, just like any other property (see Leviticus 25:45–46). Non-Israelite slaves who were circumcised were considered part of the Israelite

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<sup>1</sup> See Exodus 21:2; Leviticus 25:40; Deuteronomy 15:12.

community and could eat the Passover meal (see Exodus 12:44). Children of Israelite slaves became the property of their parents' owner (Exodus 21:4).

Israelites were to keep in constant memory that they were slaves in Egypt. Thus, the Lord continually reminded them of their obligation to treat slaves well. For example, Deuteronomy 23:15–16 required Israelites not to return an escaped slave to his or her master under the assumption that the master was cruel. Although slavery was and is reprehensible, these ethical considerations show the ways in which the Lord worked through the culture of His people, helping both them and us become more like He wants us to be.

### ***Related Verses***

Genesis 12:16

Genesis 16:1–2

Genesis 24:2

Genesis 25:12

Genesis 30:3, 9–10

Genesis 42:10–11

Exodus 1:13–14

Exodus 12:44

Exodus 14:31

Exodus 20:10, 14

Exodus 21:2–7, 20–21

Leviticus 25:39–46, 55

Deuteronomy 5:14–15

Deuteronomy 15:12–18

Deuteronomy 16:11

Deuteronomy 23:15–16

Joshua 1:1

Joshua 9:22–25

1 Kings 8:23

Psalms 89:21

Psalms 116:16

Psalms 119:17

Isaiah 41:8

Isaiah 42:1

Jeremiah 2:14

Ezekiel 37:25

Malachi 1:6

Luke 1:38

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