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## Slavery in the Hebrew Bible

by Zev Farber



Slavery, namely, the ownership of one person by another, was an institution in the ancient Near East and Israel, encompassing both fixed-term indenture of citizens and permanent slave status for outsiders.

### What are “Hebrew slaves”? How would they regain their freedom?

An Israelite man might sell himself (or his child) as a slave (*eved*) to pay off debt (Lev 25:39) or a court might sell him for theft (Exod 22:2). The Pentateuch has three conflicting sets of laws providing for the release of such “indentured” Hebrew slaves.

- Indenture lasts six years (Exod 21:2, Deut 15:12) or until the Jubilee (fiftieth) year (Lev 25:40).
- The Hebrew slave leaves with nothing (Exod 21:2), receives a financial grant upon being freed (Deut 15:13-14), or retakes his ancestral property (Lev 25:41).
- Women are purchased permanently as wives (Exod 21:7-11), or the same rules as for males apply to female indentured servants (Deut 15:12).

Periodic manumission (*andurāru*) of debt slaves was practiced in the ancient Near East. Hammurabi’s Code (#117) assumes that a man’s family, sold to cover debt, would be released after a three-year indenture. The Sumerian king, Lipit-Ishtar, describes how he restored enslaved Sumerian citizens to their rightful place in free society (*amargi*, “return to mother”).

Lev 25 requires Israelites to be freed from debt or extended bondage and to have their ancestral property returned to them (a process called *deror*). In ancient Near Eastern tradition, a king would grant this freedom sporadically. In Leviticus, however, manumission automatically takes effect upon the blowing of the ram's horn on Yom Kippur of the Jubilee year since, Lev 25:9-10 claims, Yahweh, the king of kings, built manumission into the social order of Israel.

Nevertheless, manumission may have been an ideal rather than typical practice. During the Babylonian siege on Jerusalem, the prophet Jeremiah urges the Judeans to free their Hebrew slaves in accordance with the law, which they do, only to retake them afterwards (Jer 34:8-11).

Deuteronomy and Exodus allow the Hebrew slave to choose permanent indenture by submitting to a ceremony in which the slave's ear is pierced at the doorway (Exod 20:5-6; Deut 15:16-17). This marking of a slave may be related to the ancient Near Eastern practice of using hairstyles unique to slaves that barbers were forbidden to adjust (Hammurabi's Code #226-227).

### **Did Israelites have foreign slaves? How would they be treated?**

Non-Israelite slaves are acquired either by purchase (Exod 12:44) or captured during war (Deut 20:14) and remain so permanently (Lev 25:44-46). Foreign male slaves are circumcised and allowed to participate in the Passover sacrifice (Exod 12:44), which implies some level of integration.

A master who knocks out a slave's eye or tooth must let him go free (Exod 21:26-27). A murdered slave is "avenged" (Exod 21:20-21). These biblical laws are designed to protect slaves; but they also demonstrate that slaves were beaten, even severely.

Likewise, a woman taken captive during battle is given time to mourn her family before becoming part of the household, and her master/husband is prohibited from selling her (Deut 21:10-14). This protects women from becoming sexual chattel while taking wartime rape and forced marriage for granted.

The Bible applies the Israelite Sabbath day of rest equally to slaves (Exod 20:10, Exod 23:12; Deut 5:14-15), appealing to Israel's sacred history: do this "so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you. Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt."

### **Is the Hebrew Bible comfortable with slavery?**

The prophet Amos criticizes debt bondage, referring to it as "selling the poor for shoes" (Amos 2:6). Deut 23:16 forbids the return of a runaway slave to his master. 2Kgs 4:1-7 tells of a widow whose children the prophet Elisha saves from a creditor's seizure by miraculously producing olive oil that she uses to pay off the debt. Thus, although the Bible takes slavery as a given, it makes attempts to humanize the institution and even sporadically expresses how the world might be a better place without it.

## **Contributors**

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Zev Farber is the editor of [TheTorah.com](https://www.torah.com), a website of Project TABS, and a research fellow at the Shalom Hartman Institute's Kogod Center. He holds a PhD from Emory University in Jewish Religious Cultures (Hebrew Bible focus) and an MA from Hebrew University in Jewish History (biblical period). He also holds rabbinic ordination (*yoreh yoreh*) and advanced ordination (*yadin yadin*) from Yeshivat Chovevei Torah (YCT) Rabbinical School. He is coeditor (with Jacob L. Wright) of *Archaeology and History of Eighth-Century Judah* (SBL Press, 2018) and the author of *Images of Joshua in the Bible and Their Reception* (de Gruyter, 2016).

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