

## **A Biblical Perspective of Slavery**

### **Trusted Bondservants and Oppressed Slaves - Part 2 of a series**

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Abraham, Sarai, and Egyptian slave Hagar  
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Last week's article was dominated by direct quotes from Scripture, especially the letters of the Apostle Paul. An overall understanding of those Scriptures should be clear to those who are able to think. It is a substantial non-Biblical cultural bias prevalent for many decades. The Bible does not promote slavery but providentially allows it and regulates it to prevent human abuse. Slave-owning was not a sin, but slave mistreatment and abuse were.

We need to set some definitions for our further understanding of the issues. A good definition of slavery was given by the Reverend John Henry Hopkins, Episcopal Bishop of Vermont in 1863:

**“Slavery may be defined as servitude for life, descending to the offspring.”** The conditions and rules of slavery varied considerably from civilization to civilization, but we will concentrate on Jewish, Roman, and American slavery, which for the most part were three of the most benign forms of slavery.

It is also important to know what words are used to describe slavery in English translations of the Bible. The word “slave” is far less common than “bondservant,” but they mean essentially the same thing. The word “servant” also usually means the same. The Bible usually distinguishes between “servants,” meaning bondservants or slaves, and “hired servants,” designated as such.

Around 2000 BC, Abraham had bondservants (slaves), which he considered a part of his larger household.

### Genesis 14:14

“When Abram heard that his kinsman had been taken captive, he led forth his trained men, **born in his house**, 318 of them, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.”

### Genesis 17: 12

“He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised. Every male throughout your generations, **whether born in your house or bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring,**”

### Genesis 16:6-9

“ But Abram said to Sarai, “Behold, your servant is in your power; do to her as you please. Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she fled from her. The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, “Hagar, servant of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?” She said, “I am fleeing from my mistress Sarai.” The angel of the Lord said to her, “Return to your mistress and submit to her.”

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Genesis 21:9-14, 20-21  
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“But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, laughing. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son, for the son of this slave woman shall not be heir with my son Isaac.” And the thing was very displeasing to Abraham on account of his son, But God said to Abraham, “Be not displeased because of the boy and because of your slave woman. Whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for through Isaac shall your offspring be named. And I will make a nation of the son of the slave woman also, because he is your offspring. So Abraham rose early in the morning and took bread and a skin of water and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed and wandered in the wilderness of Beersheba.”

**20-21:** “And God was with the boy, and he grew up. He lived in the wilderness and became an expert with the bow. He lived in the wilderness of Paran, and his mother took a wife for him from the land of Egypt.”

Egyptian slavery in the time between Joseph and Moses had obviously grown harsh.

### **Exodus 1:8-14. Egyptians enslave Israelites.**

“Now there arose a new king over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. And he said to his people, “Behold, the people of Israel are too many and too mighty for us. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.” Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with heavy burdens. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. But the more they were oppressed, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. So they ruthlessly made the people of Israel work as slaves and made their lives bitter with hard service, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they ruthlessly made them work as slaves.”

### **Exodus 2:23-24. Israelites groan because of their slavery and God hears.**

“During those many days the king of Egypt died, and the people of Israel groaned because of their slavery and cried out for help. Their cry for rescue from slavery came up to God. And God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew.”

### **Exodus 3:7-9, 17. The Lord saw the affliction and oppression of Israel and promised their delivery.**

“Then the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and

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**Verse 17:** “and I [The Lord] promise that I will bring you up out of the affliction of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites, a land flowing with milk and honey.”

In understanding slavery issues, it is helpful to think through what degrees of freedom or limitations of freedom are typical of different sorts of employment circumstances and contracts. For example, as an Air Force officer, I had less freedom than farmers or salesmen, but I had much more certainty of income and support for a family. Freedom and opportunity matter, but various types of certainty and security also matter, especially when survival is challenging. We also need to think through what levels of civilization and technology make freedom and security more possible.

In contrast to the harsh oppression they had experienced under Egyptian slavery, Jewish heads of household were held accountable for the welfare of their bondservants but held an implied moral right to retain their presence and services and value to the household.

### Exodus 20:10, 17, The Fourth and Tenth Commandments

“But the seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates.”

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male servant, or his female servant, or his ox, or his donkey, or anything that is your neighbor's.”

Truth is the first rule of justice, love, and a better future.