

The Mosaic Law and Old Testament Slavery

1. The Mosaic Law Set Parameters and Provided Protection of Servants and Slaves

- As Israel left Egypt, they had been exposed to slavery for 430 years. As they entered the Promised Land, the surrounding pagan nations carried out many human atrocities (including oppression through slavery).

There are *two* categories within the nation of Israel: Hebrews and non-Hebrews.

First: A Hebrew would become a servant/slave typically under three conditions:

- Theft (Ex.22:1-3)
- Individual Debt (Lev.25:39)
- Debt of Parents (Ex.21:7-11)

Hebrews were usually considered servants until their debt was paid. However, at the conclusion of the sixth year, they could choose to become permanent members (slaves) of the household (Ex.21:5-6).

Second: Non-Hebrews (Strangers, Aliens, Foreigners, Prisoners of War, Refugees, and Runaway Slaves):

- Many of the slaves in Israel were prisoners of war (Num.31:26), runaway soldiers who abandoned their posts from pagan nations, or slaves who belonged to oppressive masters in pagan lands (Deut.23:15). Some nations even voluntarily became slaves (Josh.9:9).
- Kidnapping and slave trading were prohibited in the Mosaic Law (Ex.21:16; Deut.24:7) and anyone who practiced them would have been put to death.

How did a Hebrew or non-Hebrew become a servant or slave? They were either a prisoner of war, refugee, unwilling to work, in debt, or had committed a crime.

Hebrew servants could not be forced to be servants for life; foreign slaves could be.

2. The Mosaic Law was Unprecedented in Ancient Near Eastern Cultures

- Unlike other pagan nations in the Promised Land, several of the nations who were enemies of Israel were spared from death (with the exception of Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites, who were to be completely destroyed (Deut.20:17-18)).
- The poor were given gleanings from the harvest (Deut.24:19-21). When freed, a slave would be supplied with grain, wine and livestock (Deut.15:12-15). The nation of Israel was commanded to be generous to the poor. The Mosaic Law made it almost impossible to be poor.

Israelites could take for themselves wives from foreign nations but these women had similar rights as Hebrew women:

- Captured women were given a month to mourn their family (Deut. 21:13).
- The husband was not allowed to divorce her and if he did, she was freed. Captured women who were freed could not be sold to anyone else (Deut.21:14).

Regarding female slaves, the Mosaic Law condemned:

- Rape (Deut.22:25-27), sex outside of marriage, whether consensual or not (Ex.22:16-17; Deut.22:28-29), sex with a slave who was betrothed to someone else (Lev.19:20-22), and prostitution (Deut.23:17-18).

The Mosaic Law elevated the cultural status of those who were normally oppressed in other pagan nations. This is not oppression but protection.

How did the Law enhance the condition of servants and slaves?

- Robbery required restitution in the Mosaic Law through actual payment or service (Ex.22:1).
- Any master who killed his slave would receive the death penalty (Ex.21:20).
- In Israel, any master who injured his slave that caused disability would compensate for that damage, often times resulting in freedom (Ex.21:27).
- No slave worked on the Sabbath (Ex.20:10).
- A Hebrew servant, after the debt was paid (or after their sixth year (Ex.21:2)) would be given a choice either to remain with his master and have his ear bored (Ex.21:5-6) or be supplied with grain, wine and livestock (Deut.15:12-15) after freedom.
- Every 50th year (Jubilee) all Hebrew slaves were to be freed, including those who were owned by foreigners (Lev.25:10, 47-54).

The protection of slaves from maltreatment of their masters is found nowhere else in all of ancient Near Eastern legislation.

3. The Mosaic Law Provided Opportunities for Pagans to Know God

- The giving of the Law was the first step in God's redemptive history towards the abolishment of slavery.
- Slaves from harsh masters would run away to Israel (Deut.23:15).
- The treatment of the servant would be in light of the character and heart of the master as he submitted to the Law of God.
- The Mosaic Law was never intended to abolish slavery: it protected slaves and mitigated the institution of slavery.
- God permitted the acquiring of slaves from the pagan nations as a token of grace and mercy to that slave, who would have otherwise lived in the worst conditions.