**Does the Bible Endorse Slavery? (Paul Copan)**

**Part I: Slavery and the Old Testament**

1. *Bad associations:* Critics commonly link slavery in Israel with the antebellum slavery of the South. But servitude in Israel was more like contracted *indentured* *servitude*, common in colonial America (e.g., work for several years to pay for his passage to the New World, after which he was free from obligation).

2. *Slavery through poverty:* Israelite servitude came through extreme poverty—*not* through *kidnapping*, a capital offense (Ex. 21:16; cp. Deut. 24:7).

3. *Dependency-relation: Servant*/*slave* (Heb. *ebed*) is a neutral word denoting a *dependency relationship*, not degradation, property ownership, or oppression.[[1]](#footnote-1) It can be an honorific title: “the servant [*ebed*] of the Lord” (Moses: Dt 34:4; Joshua: Josh 1:1; 24:29). Exodus speaks of shifts from dependency on Pharaoh to dependency on God as his “servants” in the wilderness. Israelites are Pharaoh’s “servants/slaves” (5:15, 16)—just as *Egyptians* too are called Pharaoh’s “servants/slaves” (5:21)! Israel is going from one state of servitude or dependence to another (Ex. 4:23; 7:16; 8:1, 20; 9:1, 13; 10:3, 7, 8, 11, 24, 26).

4. *Voluntary servitude:* Israelite servitude was *voluntary* and *temporary*. One “sells himself” (Lev. 25:47) or parcels out family members to clan homes (Ex. 21:7) to live/be cared for under their roof. Kinsmen could buy out/“redeem” him from debt; this would be eradicated in the (50th) Jubilee year (Lev. 25).[[2]](#footnote-2)

4. *Temporary servitude:* Lifelong servitude wasn’t permitted, unless voluntary (Ex. 21:5). These servants had dignity in the ancient Near East: “Hebrew has no vocabulary of slavery, only of servanthood.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

5. *Easing poverty:* Israel had laws to mitigate poverty—and thus servitude—and controls to prevent institutionalizing it (gleaning laws, six-year service limits, the year of Jubilee, warnings to care for “the stranger, the orphan, and the widow who are in your midst” (Dt 16:11); no-interest loans (Ex. 22:25); commands to lend freely to the poor (Dt. 15:7-8), and so on.

6. *Persons, not property:* Servants in Israel were to be treated as persons, not property, which is in keeping with the image of God in all people (Gen. 1:27; cp. Job 31:13-15). *Anchor Bible Dictionary*: “We have in the Bible the first appeals in world literature to treat slaves as human beings for their own sake and not just in the interests of their masters.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

7. *Freedom through injury:* Injured servants were to be released (Ex. 21:26-7); a master could be executed for killing servants (Ex. 21:20); if the servant dies a day or two later, the employer likely had no murderous intent. The context is of accidental injury/paying the medical bills for another’s recovery (Ex. 21:18-19); employers paying a good-will medical “fee” for injuries (*that is his fee/silver*: Ex. 21:20-21)*.*

8. *No right of return: Contra* the Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, foreign runaway slaves weren’t to be returned to harsh masters (on pain of death) but were to settle safely within Israel’s cities (Dt. 23:15-16).

9. *Servant marriages:* If a male and female servant marry—and even have children—while under the six-year contract, they must complete it (Ex. 21:2-6). The male or female servant—Mosaic case-law was not gender-specific—who completed his contract could leave. But marriage does not cancel a contract. The husband, say, could (a) leave so that he can earn his own way without family, (b) try to buy out his family while sustaining himself, or (c) permanently attach himself to his live-in employer and be with his family.

10. *Acquiring permanent slaves?* Leviticus 25 refers to acquiring [*qanah*]male and female slaves from the pagan nations”—out of that sons of the sojourners [*toshabim*]who live as aliens [*gerim*] among you….they also may become your possession. You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession; you can use them as permanent slaves” (Lev. 25:42-46). Consider: (a) Israel was commanded to love the stranger (*ger*) in the land *and* the native (Lev. 19:33-34); this sets a tone for us. (b) The Israelites were to remember that they too had been strangers (*gerim*) in Egypt (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; etc.); Israel’s laws were to protect Israelite servants *and* strangers (Ex. 21:20-21, 26-27; Dt. 23:15-16). (c) The verb “acquire [*qanah*]” isn’t necessarily property (e.g., sports teams have “owners” who “sell” players); Eve “acquired” a child (Gen. 4:1); Boaz “acquired” Ruth as a wife (Ru. 4:10). (d) In Lev. 25, the couplet “stranger” (*ger*) and “sojourner” (*toshab*) is repeated: Israelites themselves are “*sojourners* and *aliens* with [God]” (v. 23); Israel is to sustain a poor countryman “like a *stranger* or a *sojourner*, that he may live with you” (v. 35); and it was possible that “the means of a *stranger* or of a *sojourner* with you becomes sufficient” (v. 47)—which suggests this status was not permanent, although one could voluntarily enter into permanent servanthood. (e) A foreigner couldn’t acquire land, which means he was typically had to attach himself to an Israelite family—just as an impoverished Israelite did. So a foreigner would typically not be able to establish himself in the land without belonging to another family permanently. (f) The conditions for a stranger staying permanently in an Israelite home (and into the next generation) seem *identical* to an Israelite’s doing so: the word *permanent(ly)* (*olam*) is identical in both Exodus 21:6 (the Hebrew servant) and Lev. 25:46 (the foreign “slave”). *And* in both cases they also could leave the state of servitude and become persons of means. In principle, all persons in servitude within Israel could be released, unless they had committed a crime.[[5]](#footnote-5) (g) Sometimes foreign servants could become elevated and apparently fully equal to Israelite citizens (e.g., Caleb’s descendant Sheshan gives his Egyptian servant Jarha to his daughter in marriage; they had a child, Attai [1 Chron 2:34-35]); (h) Israel was required to give oppressed foreign runaway slaves protection within her borders (Dt. 23:15-16); surely, this text is no basis for lesser treatment (Ex. 21:16; Dt. 24:7). (i) *Israel was repeatedly commanded to remember their slavery in Egypt and to treat aliens kindly* (e.g., Lev. 19:34; Dt. 10:19).

**Part II: Slavery and the New Testament**

1. *Roman vs. Hebraic:* Roman slavery was chattel (property) slavery, not Mosaic (indentured) servitude that assumed human dignity and rights.

2. *Jesus and slavery:* “Jesus never condemned slavery,” we’re told. But Jesus’ own mission statement implicitly opposes treating slaves as property; he came to *release* captives/*free* the oppressed (Lk. 4:18).

3. *Paul’s epistles on slavery:* Does Paul just go along with the system of slavery? No, he *undermines* the very spirit of it: (a) he *affirmed that there is “neither slave nor free” in Christ* (Gal. 3:28); (b) he *encouraged slaves to find their freedom if possible* (1 Cor. 7:21) (c) he *urges masters and slaves in his congregations “greet one another with a holy kiss,” which is a picture of familial equality* (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:20; 2 Cor. 13:12; 1 Thes. 5:26)—particularly significant in Romans 16:16, whose context mentions Andronicus and Urbanus (typical slave names), who also shared in the gospel work of Paul is fellow-workers and fellow-prisoners in the gospel (vv. 7, 9); (d) he promotes the practice of believing masters and slaves who lived in the same household to share the Lord’s Supper together—another radical statement of equality; (e) he *condemns “slave traders”* (1 Tim 1:9-10)—the basis of modern-day slavery.

4. *John condemns chattel slavery* in “Babylon” (ancient Rome; cp. 1 Pet. 5:13) for her trafficking in humans as cargo (“bodies and souls of humans”/“bodies, that is, the souls of humans”); Romans traded them as they did spices, oil, and cattle (Rev. 18:11-13; cp. Ezek. 27:13, where ancient Tyre does this).

5. *What of Onesimus?* Wasn’t he a runaway slave whom Paul sent back to his master? (a) The “fugitive-slave hypothesis” actually had quite a late start (church father John Chrysostom [AD 347-407]); (b) the epistle contains no “flight” verbs; (c) Paul reveals no hint of fear that Philemon would mistreat a returning Onesimus—a common occurrence in the Roman empire; (d) a plausible suggestion is that Onesimus and Philemon were *estranged Christian (or biological?) brothers*;[[6]](#footnote-6) Paul exhorts Philemon not to receive him as a (low-status) slave, but as a brother: “…that you might have him back for good—*no longer as a slave, but* better than a slave, *as a dear brother*. He is very dear to me but even dearer to you, both as a man and as a brother in the Lord” (Philm. 1:15-16)—similar to Galatians 4:7: “Therefore you are *no longer a slave, but a son*; and if a son, then an heir through God,” and we likewise should receive our brothers and sisters in Christ as sons and daughters through Christ rather than as slaves; (e) even if this hypothesis is incorrect, we see how Paul at a number of points undermines the Roman system of chattel slavery.

1. P. Williams, “Moral Objections to the Old Testament: Slavery,” Southeastern Seminary (Sept. 2013), Wake Forest, NC: <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justintaylor/2013/09/26/answering-moral-objections-to-the-old-testament/> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Douglas Stuart, *Exodus* (Nashville: B&H, 2009), 474-5; cp. Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?* [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. J.A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2005),239. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Muhammad A. Dandamayev, s.v. “Slavery (Old Testament),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, vol. 6, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Walter C. Kaiser, “A Principlizing Model,” in *Four Views of Moving Beyond the Bible to Theology*, eds. Stanley N. Gundry and Gary T. Meadors (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 40. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Allen Dwight Callahan, *Embassy of Onesimus: The Letter of Paul to Philemon* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)