

What does the Bible say about slavery?

THE FACTS

Bible teaching on slavery is consistent and explicit throughout both Testaments.

No one is to be treated as a 'chattel slave', without any rights:

- Old Testament: Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, Deuteronomy 15^{1 2 3 4 5}

- New Testament: Colossians 4:1⁶

Servants are to be treated well, like family, because masters are accountable for them:

- Old Testament: Exodus 20:10; 21:20-21, 26-27,^{7 8 9} Deuteronomy 5:14; 12:12; 10:1012; 16:13-14^{10 11 12}

Hebrew Biblical and Hellenistic Roman Culture', Semeia 83/84, p. 86 (1998).

⁵ 'The Hebrew Bible, however, is sharply critical of various forms of human servitude. Its critique is rooted in Israel's formative memory of having been "redeemed from slavery" in Egypt, on the basis of which Israelites are expected not to enslave fellow Israelites and to care for the destitute.', Callender, 'Servants of God (S) and Servants of Kings in Israel and the Ancient Near East', Semeia 83/84, p. 74 (1998).

⁶ 'Just as the masters want the slaves to do right by them, so should the masters deal in the same way with their slaves [Lns]. Slaves have to serve their masters, and in the same way there are certain duties which the masters have towards their slaves. They are to give their slaves all to which they are entitled [Ea]. They are to live by the same moral principles that the slaves are to live by [ICC]. It is equality in the sense of being equals with them. The masters are to treat their slaves in a way which reflects the fact that they are equals with them, the slaves being their Christian brothers [Lg, My] because both the masters and the slaves have been redeemed [Lg]. This means that they are to treat them kindly [My]. QUESTION—What is meant by giving what is just and fair to one's slaves? It means to treat one's slaves justly and fairly [EG, Herm, NIC, TH, WBC; NRSV, TEV, TNT], to treat them fairly and give them an honest remuneration [Mrt], to deal justly and equitably by them [Lt], not to defraud them [Mrt, WBC], not to treat them harshly or cruelly [Ea, Mrt, WBC].', King, 'An Exegetical Summary of Colossians', pp. 303-304 (2nd ed. 2008).

⁷ '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.', Dandamayev, 'Slavery', Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 65 (1996).

⁸ 'In contrast to many ancient doctrines, the Hebrew law was relatively mild toward the slaves and recognized them as human beings subject to defense from intolerable acts, although not to the same extent as free persons.', ibid., p. 65.

⁹ 'Slaves were afforded a degree of legal protection in Israel. The Covenant Code stipulated three basic measures: beating a slave to death would necessitate an unspecified punishment (Ex. 21:20); if a master permanently injured a slave, release of

- New Testament: Ephesians 6:9,^{13 14 15} Colossians 4:1^{16 17 18}

the slave was required (21:26f); and masters were required to provide the sabbath rest for their slaves (23:12). The Deuteronomic Code added that a female captive of war taken as a wife could not be sold (Dt. 21:14).', Hanson, 'Slavery: OT', International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, volume 4, p. 541 (rev. ed. 2002).

¹⁰ 'Thus, the 4th Commandment contains an interdiction against forcing the slaves to work on the Sabbath (Exod 20:10; 23:12; Deut 5:14).', Dandamayev, 'Slavery', Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 65 (1996).

¹¹ 'Thus, slaves both born in the household and those bought with money, just like the free Israelites, were to be circumcised in order to share cultic life and eat the Passover (Gen 17:13, 23, 27; Exod 12:44; Deut 10:16, 18; Lev 22:11).', ibid. p. 65.

¹² 'Household slaves, however, were accorded a certain degree of status in the Israelite family in connection with religious integration. The males were circumcised (Gen. 17:12f). They were included at religious meals, while foreigners and hired servants were excluded (Ex. 12:44; Dt. 12:12ff; 16:11ff). And priests' slaves could eat dedicated offerings (Lev. 22:11)', Hanson, 'Slavery: OT', International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, volume 4, p. 541 (rev. ed. 2002).

¹³ 'Christian owners are urged to treat their slaves "justly and fairly," without threatening, since they have a "master in heaven" who owns them as well as the slaves, and who shows no partiality (Col 4:1; Eph 6:9).', Bartchy, 'Slavery (New Testament)', in Freedman, 'Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary', volume 6. p. 69 (1996).

¹⁴ 'Paul here commands Christian masters to be kind and gracious to their slaves, knowing that they as masters were accountable to their Lord/Master in heaven for the treatment of their slaves.', Mare, 'New Testament Background Commentary: A New Dictionary of Words, Phrases and Situations in Bible Order', p. 310 (2004).

¹⁵ 'As in Col. 4:1, Christian masters are reminded that they themselves serve a Master in heaven: their treatment of their slaves is a matter for which he will hold them responsible to him.', Bruce (egalitarian), 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 402 (1984).

¹⁶ 'If slaves like Onesimus have their duties, so do masters like Philemon; they must treat their slaves fairly and justly. They are masters on earth, but they themselves have a Master in heaven: let them treat their servants with the same consideration as they themselves hope to receive at the hands of their heavenly Master.', Bruce (egalitarian), 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians',

Servants are free to obtain their liberty if possible:

- Old Testament: Deuteronomy 23:16-17^{19 20 21}
- New Testament: 1 Corinthians 7:21,^{22 23 24} Philemon 1:16^{25 26 27}

New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 171 (1984).

¹⁷ 'The sanction is what we might expect given the emphasis of the preceding verses: as slaves should serve their masters as doing it for the Master, **so masters should remember that they themselves have a Master in heaven.**', Dunn, 'The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon', New International Greek Testament Commentary, p. 260 (1996).

¹⁸ 'Nevertheless, Christian masters are different people because of their relationship with the Lord. **They, too, have a new center of reference and so are called upon to demonstrate fairness and justice toward those who serve them; they too have a Master in heaven.**', Patzia, 'Ephesians, Colossians, Philemon', New International Biblical Commentary, p. 94 (1990).

¹⁹ 'In contrast to all the ANE laws, Deuteronomy (23:15–16) forbade the handing over of a fugitive slave who had sought asylum from his master. **The law instructed the owner to let the slave stay where he chose to live.**', Dandamayev, 'Slavery', Anchor Bible Dictionary, volume 6, p. 65 (1996).

²⁰ 'A slave could also be freed by running away. According to Deuteronomy, a runaway slave is **not to be returned to its master**. He should be sheltered if he wishes **or allowed to go free, and he must not be taken advantage of** (Deut 23:16–17). This provision is **strikingly different from the laws of slavery in the surrounding nations** and is explained as due to Israel's own history of slaves. It would have the effect of turning slavery into a voluntary institution.', Westbrook (ed.), 'History of Ancient Near Eastern Law', volume 2, p. 1006 (2003).

²¹ 'Ancient Near Eastern law forbade harboring runaway slaves, and international treaties regularly required allied states to extradite them. **The present law, in contrast, permits escaped slaves to settle wherever they wish in the land of Israel and forbids returning them to their masters or enslaving them in Israel.**', Tigay, 'Deuteronomy', JPS Torah Commentary, p. 215 (1996).

²² 'Rather than encouraging slaves to remain in their slavery, **Paul offers an exception that encourages them to make use of any opportunity to obtain their freedom:** "Though if you can gain your freedom, do so" (RSV, NIV, REB).', Garland

Enforced servitude is a wicked sin:

- Old Testament: Exodus 21:16, Deuteronomy 24:7²⁸
- New Testament: 1 Timothy 1:10^{29 30 31}

(egalitarian), '1 Corinthians', Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament, p. 309 (2003).

²³ 'The apostle goes on to qualify his remarks, as he has done on more than one occasion in this chapter, **by encouraging believers to welcome manumission when granted to them.** There were recognized legal means (there were few slave revolts in Paul's Roman world) by which a slave could be freed from the legal status of slavery in the Roman setting. **It is in light of these legal options well known to Paul and his readership, that Paul acknowledges the preference to manumission.**', Oster (complementarian), '1 Corinthians', College Press NIV commentary (1995).

²⁴ 'On the topic of slavery, Paul teaches that believers should be content with their lot, **but if the chance to go free arises, he advises the slave to take it.**', Beale & Carson, 'Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament', p. 715 (2007)

²⁵ 'He writes as one who assumes that Philemon will do the decent thing—**that he will take legal steps to change the master-slave relationship.**', Bruce (egalitarian), 'The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 218 (1984).

²⁶ 'In this social-legal context **the question regarding manumitting Onesimus was most likely when, not if, Philemon planned to set Onesimus free.** Paul's climactic appeal in v 16 (receive him "no longer as a slave but ... as a beloved brother") seems best understood as Paul's request that Onesimus' manumission not be delayed because of any wrongdoing (see v 18) **and that Philemon forgive his slave and manumit him very soon.**', Bartsch, 'Philemon, Epistle to', in Freedman, 'Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary', volume 5. p. 308 (1996).

²⁷ 'Slaves were sometimes freed by their masters to become slaves of the temple of some god; **here Paul asks that Philemon free Onesimus for the service of the gospel.**', Keener (egalitarian), 'IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament' (1993).

²⁸ 'Kidnapping for slavery was deemed an offense worthy of death, because it threatened the very integrity of the community (Ex. 21:16; Dt. 24:7).', Hanson, 'Slavery: OT', International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, volume 4, p. 543 (rev. ed. 2002).

If these commandments had been followed in the West, then the evil slavery systems of the North American plantations, and the British colonies, could never have existed. The Law of Moses permitted only voluntary service ('indentured service'), for the purpose of paying off debts.

Both enforced servitude and 'chattel slavery' (under which slaves are treated as inanimate objects), are condemned consistently from one end of the Bible to another. Servants of whatever kind are to be treated humanely, and with compassion.

In the Old Testament era slaves suffered under the inhumane system of the Ancient Near East, which the Law of Moses condemned, and in the New Testament era slaves suffered under the inhumane system of the Romans, against which Paul protested.

(Jonathan Burke, 2010)

²⁹ "'Slave traders" (or "kidnappers"; only here in biblical Greek) **denotes those engaged in the business of kidnapping or stealing people and selling them into slavery.**', Towner (egalitarian), 'The Letters to Timothy and Titus', New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 128 (2006).

³⁰ 'Kidnappers refers generally to those in Biblical times who sold people as slaves (so NRSV "slave traders"), and specifically to those who used kidnapping as a way of capturing people for the purpose of selling them into slavery.', Arichea (egalitarian), & Hatton, 'A Handbook on Paul's letters to Timothy and to Titus', UBS handbook series, p. 25 (1995).

³¹ "'Kidnappers" (NASB, TEV) were "slave traders" (NIV, NRSV; this was the purpose for which people were kidnapped—cf. Ex 21:16; Deut 24:7); **Paul's remark directly assaults the vicious slave trade of his day.**', Keener (egalitarian), 'IVP Bible background commentary: New Testament' (1993).