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SLAVE; SLAVERY

slav, slav'-er-i:

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Slave, Slavery

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LITERATURE

The origin of the term "slave" is traced to the German sklave, meaning a captive of the Slavonic race who had been forced into servitude (compare Slav): French esclave, Dutch slaaf, Swedish slaf, Spanish esclavo. The word "slave" occurs only in [Jeremiah 2:14](#) and in [Revelation 18:13](#), where it is suggested by the context and not expressed in the original languages (Hebrew yelidh bayith, "one born in the house"; Greek soma, "body"). However, the Hebrew word `ebhedh, in the Old Testament and the Greek word doulos, in the New Testament more properly might have been translated "slave" instead of "servant" or "bondservant," understanding though that the slavery of Judaism was not the cruel system of Greece, Rome, and later nations. The prime thought is service; the servant may render free service, the slave, obligatory, restricted service.

Scripture statement rather than philological study must form the basis of this article. We shall notice how slaves could be secured, sold and redeemed; also their rights and their masters' rights, confining the study to Old Testament Scripture, noting in conclusion the New Testament conception. The word "slave" in this article refers to the Hebrew slave unless otherwise designated.

1. Acquiring of Slaves:

Slaves might be acquired in the following ways, namely:

- (1) Bought.

There are many instances of buying slaves ([Leviticus 25:39](#)). Hebrew slavery broke into the ranks of every human relationship:

a father could sell his daughter ([Exodus 21:7](#); [Nehemiah 5:5](#)); a widow's children might be sold to pay their father's debt ([2 Kings 4:1](#)); a man could sell himself ([Leviticus 25:39,47](#)); a woman could sell herself ([Deuteronomy 15:12,13,17](#)), etc. Prices paid were somewhat indefinite. According to [Exodus 21:32](#) thirty shekels was a standard price, but [Leviticus 27:3-7](#) gives a scale of from 3 to 50 shekels according to age and sex, with a provision for an appeal

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to the priest in case of uncertainty (27:8). Twenty shekels is the price set for a young man (27:5), and this corresponds with the sum paid for Joseph ([Genesis 37:28](#)).

But in 2 Macc 8:11 the price on the average is 90 for a talent, i.e. 40 shekels each. The ransom of an entire talent for a single man ([1 Kings 20:39](#)) means that unusual value (far more than that of a slave) was set on this particular captive.

There were certain limitations on the right of sale ([Exodus 21:7](#)).

- (2) Exchange.

Slaves, i.e. non-Hebrew slaves, might be traded for other slaves, cattle, or provisions.

- (3) Satisfaction of Debt.

It is probable that a debtor, reduced to extremity, could offer himself in payment of his debt ([Leviticus 25:39](#)), though this was forbidden in the Torah Kohanim; compare 'Otsar Yisra'el, vii.292b. That a creditor could sell into slavery a debtor or any of his family, or make them his own slaves, has some foundation in the statement of the poor widow whose pathetic cry reached the ears of the prophet Elisha:

"Thy servant my husband is dead; and the creditor is come to take unto him my two children to be bondsmen" ([2 Kings 4:1](#)).

- (4) Gift.

The non-Hebrew slave, and possibly the Hebrew slave, could be acquired as a gift ([Genesis 29:24](#)).

- (5) Inheritance.

Children could inherit non-Hebrew slaves as their own possessions ([Leviticus 25:46](#)).

- (6) Voluntary Surrender.

In the case of a slave's release in the seventh year there was allowed a willing choice of indefinite slavery. The ceremony at such a time is interesting:

"Then his master shall bring him unto the judges (margin), and shall bring him to the door, or unto the door-post: and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl: and he shall serve him for ever" (Exodus 21:6). A pierced ear probably meant obedience to the master's voice. History, however, does not record a single instance in which such a case occurred.

- (7) Arrest.

"If the thief be found breaking in, he shall make restitution:

if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft" ([Exodus 22:2,3](#)).

- (8) Birth.

The children of slaves, born within the master's house of a wife given to the slave there, became slaves, and could be held, even if the father went free ([Exodus 21:4](#); compare [Leviticus 25:54](#)).

- (9) Capture in War.

Thousands of men, women and children were taken in war as captives and reduced, sometimes, to most menial slavery. Such slavery, however, was more humane than wholesale butchery according to the customs of earlier times ([Numbers 31:7-35](#)). Males were usually slain and females kept for slavery and concubinage ([Deuteronomy 21:10,11,14](#)). Captive slaves and bought slaves, "from nations round about," forced moral ruin into Israel's early civilization.

See SIEGE, 3.

The two principal sources of slave supply were poverty in peace and plunder in war.

2. Hebrews as War Captives:

The Hebrews themselves were held as captive slaves at various times by

- (1) Phoenicians (the greatest slave traders of ancient times),
- (2) Philistines,
- (3) Syrians ([2 Kings 5:2](#)),
- (4) Egyptians, and
- (5) Romans.

There must have been thousands subjected to severest slavery.

See also EGYPT: ISRAEL: PHARAOH: SERVANT, etc.

3. Freedom of Slaves:

The freedom of slaves was possible in the following ways:

(1) By Redemption.

Manumission by redemption was common among the Hebrews. The slave's freedom might be bought, the price depending on

- (a) the nearness to the seventh year or the Jubilee year,
- (b) the first purchase price, and
- (c) personal considerations as to age and ability of the one in bondage.

A slave could be redeemed as follows:

- (a) by himself,
- (b) by his uncle,
- (c) by his nephew or cousin,
- (d) or by any near relative ([Leviticus 25:48-55](#)).

The price depended on certain conditions as indicated above.

(2) By the Lapse of Time.

The seventh year of service brought release from bondage. "If thou buy a Hebrew servant (margin "bondman"), six years he shall serve;

and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing" ([Exodus 21:2-4](#)).

(3) By the Law of the Jubilee Year.

The year of Jubilee was the great year when slaves were no longer slaves but free. "He shall serve with thee unto the year of Jubilee;

then shall he go out from thee, he and his children return unto his own family, and unto the possession of his fathers" ([Leviticus 25:40](#)).

(4) By Injury.

A servant whose master maimed him (or her), in particular by causing the loss of an eye or even a tooth, was thereby freed ([Exodus 21:26](#)).

(5) By Escape.

([Deuteronomy 23:15](#); [1 Kings 2:39](#)). See "Code of Hammurabi" in HDB (extra vol, p. 600) and compare [Philemon 1:12](#).

(6) By Indifference.

In case of a certain kind of female slave, the neglect or displeasure of her master in itself gave her the right to freedom ([Exodus 21:7-11](#); [Deuteronomy 21:14](#)).

(7) By Restitution.

A caught thief, having become a bondsman, after making full restitution by his service as a slave, was set at liberty ([Exodus 22:1-4](#)).

(8) By the Master's Death.

"And Abram said, I go childless, and he that shall be possessor of my house is Eliezer of Damascus and, lo, one born in my house is mine heir" ([Genesis 15:2](#)). This passage has been mistakenly supposed to indicate that a master without children might give freedom to a slave by constituting the slave an heir to his possessions. But on the contrary, Abram seems to contemplate with horror the possibility that Eliezer will take possession of his goods in the absence of an heir. In view of the fact that adoption, the *adrogatio* of the Roman law, was unknown both to Biblical and Talmudic law (see Jewish Encyclopedia, under the word), the statement in [Genesis 15:2](#) does not seem to indicate any such custom as the adoption of slaves. If any method of emancipation is here suggested, it is by the death of the master without heir, a method thoroughly discussed in the Talmud (*mithath ha-'adon*).

(9) By Direct Command of Yahweh.

"The word that came unto Jeremiah from Yahweh, that every man should let his manservant, and his maid-servant, that is a Hebrew or a Hebrewess, go free; that none should make bondsmen of them they obeyed, and let them go" ([Jeremiah 34:8-10](#)).

The nine methods here enumerated may be classified thus:

A. By operation of law:

1. By lapse of time.
 - (a) After serving six years or other contractual period. See (2) above.
 - (b) Upon the approach of the Jubilee year. See (3) above.
2. By death of the master without heirs. See (8) above.

B. By act of the parties:

1. By an act of the master.
 - (a) Voluntary manumission, including (9) above.
 - (b) Indifference in certain cases. See (6) above.
 - (c) Maiming servant. See (4) above.
2. By act of the servant.
 - (a) Redemption. See (1) above.
 - (b) Restitution. See (7) above.
 - (c) Escape. See (5) above.

3. By act of a third party.

Redemption--(1) above.

4. Rights of Slaves:

As noted in the beginning of this article, the Hebrew slaves fared far better than the Grecian, Roman and other slaves of later years. In general, the treatment they received and the rights they could claim made their lot reasonably good. Of course a slave was a slave, and there were masters who disobeyed God and even abused their "brothers in bonds." As usual the unfortunate female slave got the full measure of inhuman cruelty. Certain rights were discretionary, it is true, but many Hebrew slaves enjoyed valuable individual and social privileges. As far as Scripture statements throw light on this subject, the slaves of Old Testament times might claim the following rights, namely:

(1) Freedom.

Freedom might be gained in any one of the above-mentioned ways or at the master's will. The non-Hebrew could be held as a slave in perpetuity ([Leviticus 25:44-46](#)).

(2) Good Treatment.

"Thou shalt not rule over him (Hebrew slave) with rigor, but shalt fear thy God. Ye shall not rule, one over another, with rigor" ([Leviticus 25:43-46](#)). The non-Hebrew seemed to be left unprotected.

(3) Justice.

An ancient writer raises the query of fairness to slaves. "If I have despised the cause of my man-servant or of my maid-servant, when they contended with me: what then shall I do when God riseth up?" ([Job 31:13](#)). No doubt the true Hebrew master was considerate of the rights of his slaves. The very fact, however, that the Hebrew master could punish a Hebrew slave, "to within an inch of his life," gave ready opportunity for sham justice. "And if a man smite his servant, or his maid ("bondman or bondwoman"), with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall surely be punished. Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his money" ([Exodus 21:20](#)).

(4) Family.

The slave before his release might have his wife and children ([Exodus 21:5](#)).

(5) Voluntary Slavery.

Even when the seventh year came, the slave had a right to pledge himself, with awl-pierced ear, to perpetual service for his master ([Exodus 21:5](#); [Deuteronomy 15:16](#)). The traditional interpretation of "forever" in these passages is "until the next Jubilee year" (compare [Kiddushin 21](#)).

(6) Money or Property.

Some cases at least indicate that slaves could have money of their own. Thus, if a poor slave "waxed rich" he could redeem himself ([Leviticus 25:49](#)). Compare [1 Samuel 9:5-10](#), where, however, the Hebrew throughout calls the "servant" na' ar, "a youth," never ' ebhedh.

(7) Children.

If married when free, the slave could take wife and children with him when freedom came, but if he was married after becoming a slave, his wife and children must remain in possession of his master. This law led him often into perpetual slavery ([Exodus 21:3](#)).

(8) Elevation.

A chance to rise was allowable in some instances, e.g. Ellezer, a foreign slave in a Hebrew household, and Joseph, a Hebrew slave in a foreign household. Each rose to a place of honor and usefulness ([Genesis 15:2](#); [39:4](#)).

(9) Religious Worship.

After being circumcised, slaves were allowed to participate in the paschal sacrifice ([Exodus 12:44](#)) and other religious occasions ([Deuteronomy 12:12](#)).

(10) Gifts.

Upon obtaining freedom, slaves, at the discretion of masters, were given supplies of cattle, grain and wine ([Deuteronomy 15:13](#)).

5. Rights of Slave Masters:

The rights of a slave master may briefly be stated as follows:

(1) to hold as chattel possession his non-Hebrew slaves ([Leviticus 25:45](#)):

(2) to leave such slaves as an inheritance for his children ([Leviticus 25:46](#)):

(3) to hold as his own property the wife and children of all slaves who were unmarried at the time they became slaves ([Exodus 21:4](#)):

(4) to pursue and recover runaway slaves ([1 Kings 2:39-41](#)):

(5) to grant freedom at any time to any slave. This is implied rather than stated. Emancipation other than at the Sabbatical and Jubilee years was evidently the right of masters:

(6) to circumcise slaves, both Jew and Gentile, within his own household ([Genesis 17:13, 23, 27](#)):

(7) to sell, give away, or trade slaves ([Genesis 29:24](#). According to Torah Kohanim a Hebrew servant could be sold only under certain restrictions. See 1, (1)):

(8) to chastise male and female slaves, though not unto death ([Exodus 21:20](#)):

(9) to marry a slave himself, or give his female slaves in marriage to others ([1 Chronicles 2:35](#)):

(10) to marry a daughter to a slave ([1 Chronicles 2:34](#)):

(11) to purchase slaves in foreign markets ([Leviticus 25:44](#)):

(12) to keep, though not as a slave, the runaway slave from a foreign master ([Deuteronomy 23:15, 16](#). See 3, (5)):

(13) to enslave or sell a caught thief ([Genesis 44:8-33](#); [Exodus 22:3](#)):

(14) to hold, in perpetuity, non-Hebrew slaves ([Leviticus 25:46](#)):

(15) to seek advice of slaves ([1 Samuel 25:14](#): but the reference here is open to doubt. See 4, (6)):

(16) to demand service ([Genesis 14:14](#); [24](#)).

Throughout Old Testament times the rights of both slaves and masters varied, but in general the above may be called the accepted code. In later times Zedekiah covenanted with the Hebrews never again to enslave their own brothers, but they broke the covenant ([Jeremiah 34:8](#)).

6. The New Testament Conception:

There were slaves during New Testament times. The church issued no edict sweeping away this custom of the old Judaism, but the gospel of Christ with its warm, penetrating love-message mitigated the harshness of ancient times and melted cruelty into kindness. The equality, justice and love of Christ's teachings changed the whole attitude of man to man and master to servant. This spirit of brotherhood quickened the conscience of the age, leaped the walls of Judaism, and penetrated the remotest regions. The great apostle proclaimed this truth:

"There can be neither Jew nor Greek, there can be neither bond nor free, ye all are one man in Christ Jesus" ([Galatians 3:28](#)). The Christian slaves and masters are both exhorted in Paul's letters to live godly lives and make Christ-like their relations one to the other-- obedience to masters and forbearance with slaves. "Bondservants (m), be obedient unto your masters, as bondservants (m) of Christ And, ye masters forbear threatening: their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no respect of persons with him" ([Ephesians 6:5-9](#)).

Christ was a reformer, but not an anarchist. His gospel was dynamic but not dynamic. It was leaven, electric with power, but permeated with love. Christ's life and teaching were against Judaistic slavery, Roman slavery and any form of human slavery. The love of His gospel and the light of His life were destined, in time, to make human emancipation earth-wide and human brotherhood as universal as His own benign presence.

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William Edward Raffety

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