

Slavery in the Old Testament

1. Slavery, bondage, or enforced service is attested from the earliest times throughout the ancient Near East and Far East. In antiquity, slave labor was utilized mainly by wealthy families and in royal building projects, such as the construction of the pyramids in Egypt, and pharaoh's store cities.
2. The Jews were enslaved in Egypt for more than 400 years.
3. In Palestine and Syria the slave was usually a domestic servant rather than an agricultural or industrial worker.
4. In the Alalakh Tablets (discovered in Syria) the highest number of slaves belonging to one master was said to be three. The big landowners, like those of Babylonia and Assyria, seem to have preferred free tenants to slave labor. Tenant farming on the halves or thirds seemed to work better.

Hebrew Etymology

1. The most frequent Hebrew verb translated "serve" is **Abad**. It means "to work" or "to labor."

Exo 20:9 Six days shalt thou "**labor**," and do all thy work:

Exo 5:17 Pharaoh said ...

Exo 5:18 Now get "**to work**." You will not be given any straw, yet you must produce your full quota of bricks."

Exo 5:19 The Israelite foremen realized they were in trouble when they were told, "You are not to reduce the number of bricks required of you for each day."

Exo 5:20 When they left Pharaoh, they found Moses and Aaron waiting to meet them,

- 1.1 It was also often used to mean "to serve a master as a slave," but the noun **Ebed**, in addition to "slave," had a variety of meanings. Notice how it is used in Exo 21:5.

Exo 21:5 And if the "**servant**" shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free:

- 1.2 In 2Sa 9:2 Ziba was said to be Saul's "**servant**" but was seemingly a ranch foreman and in verse 2b and 11 "**thy servant**" is a polite expression of humility. In verse 10, Ziba's 20 "**servants**," were bondsmen.

2Sa 9:2 And there was of the house of Saul a "**servant**" (foreman) whose name was Ziba. And when they had called him unto David, the king said unto him, Art thou Ziba? And he said, "**Thy servant**" (loyal subject) is he ...

2Sa 9:10 Thou therefore, and thy sons, and thy "**servants**", (slaves) shall till the land for him, and thou shalt bring in the fruits, that thy master's son may have food to eat: but Mephibosheth thy master's son shall eat bread always at my table. Now Ziba had fifteen sons and twenty "**servants**" (slaves).

2Sa 9:11 Then said Ziba unto the king, According to all that my lord the king hath commanded his "**servant**", (loyal subject) so shall "**thy servant**" (loyal subject) do. As for Mephibosheth, said the king, he shall eat at my table, as one of the king's sons.

1.3 In deference to the office of the king of Israel, the word **Ebed** also meant "the king's subjects," especially his mercenaries, officers, and ministers, like for example David to Saul and Joab to David.

1Sa 17:32 And David said to Saul, Let no man's heart fail because of him; thy "**servant**" will go and fight with this Philistine.

1Sa 17:33 And Saul said to David, Thou art not able to go against this Philistine ...

2Sa 14:19 The king asked, "Isn't the hand of Joab with you in all this?" The woman answered, "As surely as you live, my lord the king, no one can turn to the right or to the left from anything my lord the king says. Yes, it was your "**servant**" Joab who instructed me to do this and who put all these words into the mouth of your "**servant**."

2. The Hebrew **Naar** translated "young man," or "servant," suggests that often one's attendant was youthful.

Gen 22:3 Early the next morning Abraham got up and saddled his donkey. He took with him two of his "**servants**" and his son Isaac. When he had cut enough wood for the burnt offering, he set out for the place God had told him about ...

Gen 22:5 He said to his "**servants**," "Stay here with the donkey while I and the boy go over there. We will worship and then we will come back to you."

2.1 To illustrate how **Naar** is used of young men and boys. I will give you four examples.

Gen 21:12 But God said to him, "Do not be so distressed about the "**boy**" and your maidservant. Listen to whatever Sarah tells you, because it is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned.

2Sa 1:5 Then David said to the "**young man**" who brought him the report, "How do you know that Saul and his son Jonathan are dead?"

2Sa 1:6 "I happened to be on Mount Gilboa," the "**young man**" said, "and there was Saul, leaning on his spear, with the chariots and riders almost upon him.

2Sa 1:7 When he turned around and saw me, he called out to me, and I said, 'What can I do?'

2Sa 1:8 "He asked me, 'Who are you?' "'An Amalekite,' I answered.

2Sa 1:9 "Then he said to me, 'Stand over me and kill me! I am in the throes of death, but I'm still alive.'

2Sa 1:10 "So I stood over him and killed him, because I knew that after he had fallen he could not survive. And I took the crown that was on his head and the band on his arm and have brought them here to my lord."

2Sa 1:11 Then David and all the men with him took hold of their clothes and tore them.

2Sa 1:12 They mourned and wept and fasted till evening for Saul and his son Jonathan, and for the army of the LORD and the house of Israel, because they had fallen by the sword.

2Sa 1:13 David said to the "**young man**" who brought him the report, "Where are you from?" "I am the son of an alien, an Amalekite," he answered.

3. The verb **Sharat** means "to minister," or serve in a personal way. For example, Joshua waited upon Moses.

Exo 24:13 And Moses rose up, and his "**minister**" Joshua: and Moses went up into the mount of God.

Exo 33:11 And the LORD spake unto Moses face to face, as a man speaketh unto his friend. And he turned again into the camp: but his "**servant**" Joshua, the son of Nun, a young man, departed not out of the tabernacle.

4. A female slave was called a **Shipha**; her status was often that of a child-bearing concubine.

Gen 25:12 Now these are the generations of Ishmael, Abraham's son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah's "**handmaid**", bare unto Abraham:

Old Testament Protocol

1. There were often work agreements (**Aboda**) established between two parties for a stipulated period of time. These service or work periods resembled tenures of slavery.

Gen 29:27 Fulfill her week, and we will give thee this also for the "**service**" which thou shalt serve with me yet seven other years.

Gen 29:28 And Jacob did so, and fulfilled her week: and he gave him Rachel his daughter to wife also.

2. Work of the hired servant or hireling (Hebrew **Sakir**) was to be treated fairly and handled with kindness and not as a bond servant.

Job 7:1 "Does not man have hard service on earth? Are not his days like those of a "**hired man**?"

Job 7:2 Like a slave (**Ebed**) longing for the evening shadows, or a "**hired man**" waiting eagerly for his wages,

3. Jewish men often became slaves of their brethren because of poverty, i.e., they were unable to provide for either themselves or their families. This was regarded as a kind of sale, or better or personal property lease.

3.1 The person sold the right to his labor in return for sustenance for himself and his family. The term was for seven years or until the next jubilee year. A jubilee year occurred every fiftieth year.

Lev 25:39 And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel (**Abad**) him to serve (**Aboda**) as a bondservant:

4. There were special rules with reference to Gentiles as compared with Jews. For example in the case of a Jew:

Lev 25:41 Then (after Jubilee) he and his children are to be released, and he will go back to his own clan and to the property of his forefathers.

Lev 25:42 Because the Israelites are my **servants**, whom I brought out of Egypt, they must not be sold as **slaves**.

Lev 25:43 Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.

5. The Gentiles on the other hand could be purchased and sold like personal property.

Lev 25:44 "Your male and female **slaves** are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy **slaves**.

Lev 25:45 You may also buy some of the temporary residents living among you and members of their clans born in your country, and they will become your property.

Lev 25:46 You can will them to your children as inherited property and can make them **slaves** for life, but you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.

6. Restitution by law required the return of at least double the amount stolen. Should the thief be unable to make restitution, he was sold as a slave and he made the restitution by his work.

Exo 22:1 "If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.

Exo 22:2 "If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed;

Exo 22:3 ... if he gets away the thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, **he must be sold to pay for his theft**.

7. Children of a Hebrew slave became a slave at birth, though this was never permanent unless he later (after attaining his majority) elected to become a permanent slave. There were also special rules for family members.

Exo 21:2 "If you buy a Hebrew **servant**, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.

Exo 21:3 If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him.

Exo 21:4 If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.

Exo 21:5 "But if the **servant** declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,'

Exo 21:6 then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the door-post and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

8. Jewish children, of a defaulting Jewish debtor, were claimed along with their father as slaves.

Lev 25:39 And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; **thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bond servant:**

Lev 25:40 **But as an hired servant**, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee, and shall serve thee unto the year of **jubilee**.

Lev 25:41 And then shall he depart from thee, both he and his children with him, and shall return unto his own family, and unto the possession of his fathers shall he return.

8.1 Some of David's early followers were defaulting debtors who fled their creditors.

1Sa 22:1 David left Gath and escaped to the cave of Adullam. When his brothers and his father's household heard about it, they went down to him there.

1Sa 22:2 All those who were in distress **or in debt** or discontented gathered around him, and he became their leader. About four hundred men were with him.

9. The jubilee year, mentioned above in Lev 25:40, occurred every fiftieth year. Every fiftieth year all Jewish slaves were manumitted. Besides freedom granted in the year of jubilee, a relative of a Jew might also redeem him.

10. A family member could redeem one of his brethren.

Lev 25:48 After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him:

Lev 25:49 Either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or any that is nigh of kin unto him of his family may redeem him; or if he be able, he may redeem himself.

11. If not redeemed, however, a Jew would receive freedom after seven years together with a gift from a master's flock, his threshing floor or his winepress. The gift was designed to get the former slave started on the way to economic independence.

Deu 15:12 If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free.

Deu 15:13 And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed.

Deu 15:14 Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you.

Deu 15:15 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.

12. In most cases a man's wife and children also went free with him.

Exo 21:3 If he came in by himself, he shall go out by himself: if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him. If, however, the male slave had been given a wife by the master, then she and her children remained with the owner.

Exo 21:4 If his master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself.

12.1 He could of course buy them back or elect to stay as a slave with his family.

12.2 If so, he came before the elders, had his ear bored through with an awl against a door-post and thereby became a lifelong servant. (Exo 21:6; Deu 15:17; Psa 40:5-8; Heb 10:5)

Deu 15:17 Then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant forever. And also unto thy maidservant thou shalt do likewise.

12.3 The bored ear lobe was not only used to show the election to stay a slave, but the custom was also used metaphorically to teach how Christ elected to become a slave to the Father's plan. Compare Psa 40:6 to Heb 10:5.

Psa 40:6 Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine ears hast thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast thou not required.

Heb 10:5 Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not but a body thou hast prepared for me.

13. Illegal slave trading took place even in the best of families.

Gen 37:27 Come, let's sell him to the Ishmaelites and not lay our hands on him; after all, he is our brother, our own flesh and blood." His brothers agreed.

Gen 37:28 So when the Midianite merchants came by, his brothers pulled Joseph up out of the cistern **and sold him for twenty shekels of silver to the Ishmaelites**, who took him to Egypt.

14. Special provisions covered a maid sold as a household slave who becomes betrothed to the master or one of his sons.

14.1 Her relationship ceased to fall under the rules of slavery but rather marriage. Should she not please her master, she could not be resold but was to be immediately redeemed.

Exo 21:8 If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her.

Exo 21:9 If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter.

14.2 She is to be treated like any other betrothed maiden and this even included a dowry. He must treat her equally with any other wife he took.

Exo 21:10 If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights.

Exo 21:11 If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

15. Gentile slaves, purchased from the nations or captured in the conquest of Palestine or in later wars remained permanent slaves along with their children. (Num 31:9 and Lev 25:44-46)

Num 31:9 And the children of Israel took all the women of Midian captives, and their little ones, and took the spoil of all their cattle, and all their flocks, and all their goods.

Lev 25:44 Both thy bondsmen, and thy bond maids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondsmen and bond maids.

Lev 25:45 Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession.

Lev 25:46 And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit them for a possession; they shall be your bondsmen forever: ...

16. There were at least seven ways for a slave to become a freeman.

- Redemption by a payment of money
- Granting of a bill of freedom
- Disposition through a testament or will
- Making a slave one's heir
- By command of the Lord
- By loss of an eye or a tooth
- A female slave married a master or a master's son

17. If a slave of an Israelite is circumcised He was thereby entitled to participate in the annual festival days and the weekly sabbaths.