


no breaking up the unplowed ground. We need to make use of our baptism, and not relax in our fight against the sin in us and around us.

After all, consider how verse 4 ends with a threat: "Or my wrath will break out and burn like fire

because of the evil you have done – burn with no one to quench it." The LORD emphasizes that there's no salvation without renewal of life. But the LORD wouldn't threaten like that unless he also gave everything needed to be renewed. And if

you believe that, you realize this passage doesn't end on a negative note for those who believe in their covenant God. You know that if he threatens, it's only out of love. It's because he gave everything for you: his one and only Son. 

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# Out of the House of Bondage: The Old Testament Slavery Laws and our Redemption in Christ

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Slavery is illegal in North America and has been for almost 150 years. On January 1, 1863, U.S. President Abraham Lincoln issued a famous document called The Emancipation Proclamation. And this is what it said: "All persons held as slaves within any State. . . in rebellion against the United States, shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free." This proclamation officially put an end to black slavery in the United States of America.

We cannot imagine living in a society that has slaves. Yet we hear slavery mentioned every Sunday morning in church. We're told that our servants shall not do any work on the seventh day. We're told not to covet our neighbour's servants. Both the fourth and the tenth commandments presuppose a society with slaves. Perhaps the eighth commandment does as well: according to some scholars, the eighth commandment was originally intended to forbid stealing people for the sake of enslaving them. Not just "You shall not steal *from* your neighbour," but, "You shall not steal your *neighbour*." Indeed, in Exodus 21:16 we read that kidnapping was punishable by death.

Be that as it may, especially the fourth commandment is relevant for the institution of slavery: it ensured that slaves received rest from their labour: "The seventh day is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant." God told his people to share the blessing of rest with their slaves, remembering that they had once been slaves themselves. Think of the wording of the fourth commandment in Deuteronomy 5: "Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. *Therefore* the Lord your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day."

In a little while I'll mention some of the slavery laws in the books of Moses. It's important to keep in mind that the background for these laws is the fact that God had rescued his people from the house of slavery. Old Testament scholars typically compare the OT slavery laws with the legislation of the surrounding nations, and that's only natural: it helps us to understand Israel's context. Yet it is important to realize

that these laws were given in a unique setting: God gave his laws to a people whom he had just redeemed from slavery. This setting gives them a redemptive focus. They point forward to the redemption which we enjoy in Jesus Christ.

This article will explore the OT slavery laws by addressing four questions: Where did Israelites get their slaves from? What status did slaves have in society? How were they protected? How were they released? Then I'd like to draw out the significance of these laws for our lives as redeemed people of God.

### **Where did Israelites get their slaves from?**

Slaves came from several different sources. Some people were born as slaves. When female slaves gave birth, their children began life with the status of a slave. For example, Abram had 318 trained men "born in his household" (Gen 14:14). Slaves could also be bought with money (Gen 17:23). Joseph, for example, was bought by Midianite traders and sold to Potiphar. The Israelites too were allowed to buy slaves. Now if the slave was a Hebrew, the purchase was only temporary: after six years he could go free (Exod 21:2, Deut 15:12), though he could choose to remain a slave for life. In that case, his master would pierce his ear with an awl as a visible token of lifelong slavery (Exod 21:6).

### *God gave his laws to a people whom he had just redeemed from slavery*

Then there were also debt slaves. If an Israelite could not pay off a debt, say due to repeated bad harvests or heavy taxes, or the death of the provider, then he or members of his family could be sold as slaves (Deut 15:12; cf. Matt 18:25). In 2 Kings 4, we read how the wife of one of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, "Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the Lord. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as slaves." Then Elisha performed that miracle with the oil, so that it kept flowing till she had more than enough to pay off her debts. The point of the story is not so much the miracle itself but the fact that Elisha saved the woman's family from slavery.

Conquering armies would turn their prisoners of war into slaves (1 Sam 17:9, 1 Macc 3:41, 2 Macc 8:10f). During the reign of Ahab, Mesha king of Moab boasted that he carried out his building projects with the help of Israelite captives. Furthermore, the Israelites under King Pekah took 200,000 captives from Judah, intending

to turn them into slaves, but the Lord was angry that they should enslave their brothers, and he sent the prophet Oded who told the Israelites to let the captives go (2 Chron 28). Sometimes captives were also used as concubines (Num 13:18, Judg 5:30).

Another source of slavery was forced labour. The Egyptians used the Israelites that way (Exod 1:11), and later the Israelites turned the Gibeonites into hewers of wood and drawers of water (Josh 9). David and Solomon also used forced labour, three groups of workers on a three-month cycle (1 Kgs 9:20, 5:13, 11:28).

### *The Lord was reminding his people of their own past*

The Lord seldom legislated slavery as a punishment. Yet one example is found in Exodus 22:2-3: if a thief was caught after breaking in but could not make restitution, he had to be sold to pay for his theft. As mentioned earlier, kidnapping was strictly forbidden. As we read in Deuteronomy 24:7, "If a man is caught kidnapping one of his brother Israelites and treats him as a slave or sells him, the kidnapper must die. You must purge the evil from among you."

In summary, slaves in OT Israel came from a variety of sources: they could be born in the house, or bought with money, or indentured to pay off a debt, or captured in war, or forced into service for a building project. They could not, however, be obtained by kidnapping.

How many slaves were there in Israel? It's difficult to say, because slaves were normally not counted when a census was held. We only have numbers for the exiles that returned from Babylon. In Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 we read that there were 7337 slaves and 42,360 free citizens (Ezra 2:64, Neh 7:66), so slaves made up about fifteen percent of the population at that time.

### **What status did slaves have in society?**

Slaves became part of their master's household and lost their independence. They had a market value (Exod 21:32); they could be bought or sold (Lev 25:44) or passed on as part of an inheritance. They could also be physically beaten, though not to death (Exod 21:20f). If a man captured a woman in war, he could marry her without her consent or the consent of her family (Deut 21:10, Judg 21:22). He could also divorce her again, though if he did so, he could not sell her as a slave but had to let her go free.

The Bible often compares slavery to a yoke (Gen 27:40). At times the yoke was very heavy, for the Israelites often ignored the laws which God had given them. The rich would exploit the poor; creditors would come down hard on debtors and force them into slavery, and they did not necessarily release them when they ought to have done so. Slaves were at the mercy of their masters; they could only cry to the Lord: he would send prophets to rebuke the people (Jer 34:8ff, 2 Kgs 4:1, Amos 2:6f, 8:4ff, Isa 58). In that sense they had a very low status.

The flip side is that household slaves could be integrated into the covenant community. The males were circumcised and they were included in festival meals such as the Passover, while foreigners and hired servants were kept out. Already then it could be said that in the Lord there is neither slave nor free (cf. Gal 3:28). God was generous with his covenant grace.

### How were slaves protected?

Virtually all of the OT laws concerning slaves have to do with their protection and release. The law was designed for their wellbeing. For example, a master who beat his slave to death had to be punished (Exod 21:20). If he injured him permanently, he had to release him (21:26), which, incidentally, was a very generous provision for the time: other law codes of the Ancient Near East only offered some financial compensation to the injured slave.

Another interesting law concerns runaway slaves. If a slave ran away from a foreign owner and sought asylum in Israel, the Israelites were not to return him to his owner. The Promised Land became a safe haven where former slaves could begin a new life (Deut 23:15). Again the Lord was reminding his people of their own past. He had set them free from slavery and now they were to let other slaves enjoy their freedom too.

Hebrew slaves had extra protections which foreign slaves did not enjoy. They were not to be treated harshly and could only be held for six years, and when they were released the master had to send them on their way with a generous gift of animals, grain, and wine so that they could make a new start (Deut 15:13-15). Furthermore, if a master took a Hebrew slave girl as wife he was obligated to give her three things – food, clothing, and intimacy, and if he failed to do so he had to let her go free of charge (Exod 21:10f).

These are the sorts of protections that the Lord put in place for the benefit and wellbeing of slaves so that their service would not be too heavy. God wanted to make their yokes lighter and more bearable.

### How were slaves released?

A slave could gain his freedom in a number of different ways. Firstly, if a man married a female captive of war, he could divorce her, but if he did, he had to let her go free; he could not sell her.

## *The OT slavery laws help us to understand our relationship with God*

Secondly, a Hebrew slave had to be released after six years of service. If his master had given him a wife during that time, the man could not take his wife or children with him, for although the wife belonged to her husband as wife, she (and her children) still belonged to his master as property. Yet if he loved his master and his wife and children, he had the option of remaining a slave for life. So in this case it seems that the master-slave relationship took precedence over the husband-wife relationship (Exod 21:4-6). To us this may sound troubling. One should not understand this law as detracting from the sanctity of marriage, however, but as a means of upholding order and stability in the society of that time.

Thirdly, a member of a slave's clan could act as a redeemer and buy him out of slavery (Exod 21:8, Lev 25:48f). This practice reflected the way the Lord redeemed his people from Egypt and later from Babylon (Exod 6:6, 15:13, Isa 43:14, Jer 31:11, Mic 4:10, etc).

Fourthly, during the Sabbath year debts were cancelled and during the Year of Jubilee, every fifty years, all Israelite slaves were released. The Jubilee was a once in a lifetime opportunity. We do not know whether the Israelites ever observed it, but the law of the Jubilee does show that God wanted his people to be free.

### Redemptive-historical significance

So what significance do these laws have for us as Christians living in the New Testament age? I'd like to suggest that they form the very identity which we have in Christ. Note the following seven points.

1. The OT slavery laws help us to understand our relationship with God. We are both his children and his servants. That was already true of Israel in the OT. In Exodus 4:22 God told Moses to say to Pharaoh, "Israel is my firstborn son. . . let my son go." Yet in Leviticus 25:42 the Lord said, "Because the Israelites

are my servants, they must not be sold as slaves." As children we call God our Father, and as servants we call him our Lord.

2. During his earthly ministry Christ used the Sabbath day to relieve burdens. He said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light" (Matt 11:28). When he healed a crippled woman in the synagogue, he said, "Should not this woman, a daughter of Abraham, whom Satan has kept bound for eighteen long years, be set free on the Sabbath day from what bound her?" (Luke 13:16). Jesus also referred to his ministry as the fulfillment of the Jubilee. In Luke 4, when he was in the synagogue of Nazareth on the Sabbath day, Jesus read a passage about the Jubilee from Isaiah 61: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." And then he said, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." The coming of Christ means that slaves are released. The enduring message of the fourth commandment is the message of redemption from slavery. That's why, when the catechism explains the fourth commandment in Lord's Day 38, it puts so much emphasis on the preaching. On the Lord's Day we have to hear the gospel of redemption. Christ came to set slaves free from bondage to sin and to give them rest for their souls.

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### *The enduring message of the fourth commandment is the message of redemption from slavery*

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3. Jesus fulfilled the OT slavery laws when he said, "The Son of man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45) – Christ came to his own people as their Redeemer, to buy them out of slavery at the cost of his own life. As we confess in Lord's Day 1, "I am not my own, but belong with body and soul. . . to my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ." That is the language of OT slavery.
4. In the OT the Lord taught his redeemed people to share the blessing of redemption with their slaves

by forgiving their debts and setting them free. Jesus used this language when he taught us to pray the fifth petition: "Forgive us our debts as we also have forgiven our debtors." Christians who refuse to forgive their fellow believers want to shackle them to debts from which Christ has set them free.

5. God gave his laws for a theocratic society under the old covenant. These laws could only operate as long as Israel remained a free nation under God. In the NT, however, the apostles preached the gospel to Jews who lived under Roman law and to Gentiles who had never lived under Israelite law. The apostles did not seek to introduce the slavery legislation of the OT into the Christian church. They did not try to turn the church into a new Israel under the old law. They did, however, maintain the redemptive focus of the law, in three ways:
  - a. They told slaves to show exemplary obedience to their masters *as serving the Lord* (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22-25). In the New Testament just as much as in the Old, redemption does not imply absolute freedom, but obedience to a new master, the Lord in heaven (Rom 6:22, 14:4, Gal 5, Col 4:1).
  - b. They taught the church that the blessings of salvation are meant for all levels of society. In Christ there is neither slave nor free (Gal 3:28). This teaching reflects the OT laws which allowed slaves full participation in covenant worship: if they were circumcised, they could eat the Passover, and participate in all the great feasts, and they rested on the Sabbath.
  - c. They encouraged slaves to take their freedom if they received the opportunity to do so (1 Cor 7:21).
6. Twenty-first century Canadian society is much different from OT Israel. Slavery has disappeared and the shadows of the law have been fulfilled. Yet the redemptive focus of the slavery laws can still give wise guidance today. I'll mention four applications.
  - a. *Debt Management*. In Israel it could happen that a man became a slave because he could not repay his debts. Today something similar happens when people overextend themselves and make unwise financial decisions. As Christians we are to avoid unnecessary debt so that we do not lose our financial freedom and find ourselves at the mercy of creditors. On the other hand, poverty is also an affliction from the Lord. Institutions such as the Sabbath year and the Year of Jubilee teach us that God allowed debtors to start over. Therefore Christians should



be careful not to attach a negative stigma to bankruptcy and they should be eager to support the work of the deaconry.

- b. *Compensation.* If OT masters were held responsible for injuring or killing slaves, who were their property, then surely employers today should be expected to provide generous compensation in case of injury or death in the workplace, and Christian employers should set an example in this regard.

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- c. *Prostitution.* I hesitate to mention this one, and yet it's an ugly reality of western society. Girls are lured into the sex trade at a very young age with promises of easy money. Not only do they lose their innocence; they also lose their freedom and virtually become slaves of their managers or pimps. The gospel of redemption is also for prostitutes. In fact, the language of the gospel can be very touching for them because it speaks of escape from bondage, removal of guilt, cleansing from impurity, receiving a new identity, a holy environment, a promising future, and a place in the communion of saints. As church, as people redeemed from slavery to sin ourselves,

we have a responsibility to give hope to those who are without hope. Much the same could be said about addicts, which brings me to the fourth application.

- d. *Addictions.* Perhaps this is a topic that comes closer to home. Christians often struggle with addictions, whether to cigarettes, alcohol, or other drugs, or to gambling, gaming, or pornography. And if not these addictions, then there are other sins that try to master us. The Apostle Peter wrote that people are slaves to whatever has mastered them (2 Pet 2:19). Yes, we confess with Lord's Day 1 that Christ has set us free from all the power of the devil. Yet it is a constant struggle for us to live in the freedom of Christ, isn't it? (Gal 5:1) In his mercy the Lord gives us the Spirit of sonship to remind us that we are not slaves of sin but heirs of God's promises. He gives us brothers and sisters to walk side by side with us. He gives us office bearers who are called servants of Christ.
- 7. One final point. As Christians we live our whole lives in service to Christ. As servants we cannot expect rewards or praise from our master, for we are only doing our duty. Yet the day will come when the Master will say, "Well done good and faithful servant. Come and share your Master's happiness!" (Matt 25:21, 23). Then we will be allowed to rest from our labours and sit at table with him (Luke 12:37). The picture of servants being allowed to recline at the table with their master is inconceivable in the biblical world (Luke 17:7-10), but that is the beautiful picture of redemption from slavery which our Lord promises to us.

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