

Manner And Customs of Bible Lands

by
Fred H. Wight

Copyright @ 1953

CHAPTER THIRTY -

Slavery in Bible Times

SLAVERY UNDER THE LAW OF MOSES

SLAVERY AMONG THE HEBREWS THEMSELVES. Hebrews could be "**hired servants**" of their brethren, but they were not allowed to be "**bondservants**" (Leviticus 25:39, 40). Concerning the one thus hired out as a servant, the LORD said: "**Thou shalt not rule over him with rigor; but shalt fear thy God**" (Leviticus 25:43). Such slavery was ordinarily brought about by poverty, i.e., because of debts a man could not meet (Leviticus 25:39); or by theft, i.e., because of restitution a man could not pay (Exodus 22:2, 3). Such a Hebrew slave could be redeemed by relatives at any time (Leviticus 25:48, 49). If not redeemed, he was set free after six years of service and was sent away with presents of cattle and fruit (Deuteronomy 15:12-14). A Hebrew slave could choose out of love for his master not to be free in the seventh year, and thus become a lifelong servant of his master. The following custom was observed in such a case: "**Then thou shalt take an aul, and thrust it through his ear unto the door, and he shall be thy servant for ever**" (Deuteronomy 15:17).¹

Slavery with Hebrew masters and foreign slaves. Most of these slaves were those who were captured in wartime (See Numbers 31:26 ff. and Deuteronomy 21:10). Some were bought in foreign slave markets (Leviticus 25:44). And foreigners living in the land could become slaves for the same reasons Hebrews could, through poverty or theft. Such slaves were treated as the property of their masters (Leviticus 25:45). There are indications, however, that some of them were freed under certain conditions, and some writers are of the opinion that they were freed under the law of Jubilee.²

Protection of the slaves. The Mosaic Code contains various regulations that protect the rights and privileges of slaves. For instance, a fugitive slave law was quite favorable to the slave and was designed to protect him from oppression (Deuteronomy 23:15, 16). All the religious privileges enjoyed by free Israelites were assured to their slaves, including the rest of the Sabbath (Exodus 20:10), the right to attend the national festivals (Deuteronomy 16:10, 11), and the right to attend the gathering of the people to hear the reading of the law (Deuteronomy 31:10-13).³

Why the Mosaic Law permitted slavery instead of abolishing it. When the laws were given at Mt. Sinai, slavery was universal among the nations of the world. It was not practical to do away with it all at once. Rather, laws were given to prevent the worst abuses and evils of it from being present among the Jews. W. M. Taylor has this to say in regard to the relation of the law to slavery, divorce, etc.

"It is noticeable, however, that wherever things in themselves questionable are tolerated, because they were too deeply seated to be removed by an immediate prohibition, the legislation regarding them is of such a character as to mitigate the evils, and prepare the way for their ultimate repression." ⁴

The wisdom of such a policy is seen in the actual influence of the Mosaic legislation upon slavery among the Jews. Due to this influence, slavery among the Jews themselves had virtually disappeared by the time of CHRIST and His disciples.⁵

SLAVERY UNDER ISRAEL'S ENEMIES

Many of the Jews experienced slavery under foreign rule in the time of the captivities. They became captives of war to the Phoenicians who sold them to the Greeks (Joel 3:4-6).

The Philistines captured them and then delivered them up to Edom (Amos 1:6). When the Assyrians conquered Samaria, many of the Jews were taken away to the land of Assyria to serve as slaves of that people (II Kings 17:6). When Jerusalem was destroyed, the Babylonians carried away to Babylon many Hebrews to become their slaves in this foreign capital (II Chronicles 36:20). At a later date, the Syrian merchants came into camp in order to secure Jewish slaves. (I Maccabees 3:41 in the Apocrypha).

And in the days of Rome's supremacy many Jews served as slaves of the empire. But slavery under Gentile dominion was indeed altogether different from slavery under the Mosaic Law. Masters were for the most part cruel and slaves were usually oppressed greatly.⁶

SLAVERY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE

Character and extent of slavery. In the first century human life was indeed cheap, for it has been estimated that a half of the total population of the empire, or about sixty million people, were slaves. Some wealthy Romans possessed as many as twenty thousand slaves. Slave owners became very brutal, and the slaves themselves were without hope and many of them very corrupt.⁷

For the most part these slaves were those conquered in war. Some of those captured were more educated than their captors. Thus it came about that sometimes Greek slaves became schoolteachers for the family of their masters.⁸

The Roman law and the slave. Under the Roman law the slave did not have the rights or protection such as he enjoyed under the Hebrew legislation. A master might have his slave crucified for almost any reason. Augustus Caesar had thirty thousand slaves crucified during his reign.⁹

A slave who stole might be branded by his master on the face with the letters **C. F.**, representing the words "*Cave furem*," meaning, "*Beware the thief*." And in the case of a runaway slave, if he were caught, his master might brand him, give him more than customary labor, or could have him put to death if he so desired. The law did allow that he could be reinstated with mercy, through the intercession of a special friend of the master.¹⁰

The Apostle Paul was Philemon's friend who interceded on behalf of the runaway slave Onesimus. The Epistle to Philemon was Paul's plea to his friend on behalf of the converted slave. No doubt Philemon gave Onesimus his freedom after receiving Paul's letter.

Attitude of the Apostles toward slavery in the Roman Empire. They did not attempt to do away with the terrible evil immediately. This would have been a hopeless task, and such an attempt would have been doubtless crushed by the iron hand of Rome. Rather, they were satisfied to give forth Christian principles, and so preach the gospel of liberation from sin, that the result would be to do away with human slavery through the conquering power of CHRIST.¹¹

Paul's letter to Philemon has, no doubt, done more to overcome slavery than any other document ever written.

New Testament use of the word slave in relation to CHRIST. In view of the way slaves were so often treated in the first century, it is remarkable that the Apostles again and again called themselves the slaves, of CHRIST. Paul refers to himself thus (Romans 1:1 and Philippians 1:1). James, Peter, and Jude do the same thing (James 1:1; II Peter 1:1; Jude 1).

To be the slave of CHRIST is to be GOD's freeman (I Corinthians 7:22). Of course, some of those first century slaves were treated as friends to be trusted, and they really loved their masters and served them faithfully.¹²

This is the picture of all true believers in relation to CHRIST. CHRIST is our Owner, and we are His willing and loving slaves.

1. "Service-Hebrew," *The People's Bible Encyclopedia*, pp. 1003, 1004.
2. William M. Taylor, *Moses the Law-Giver*, p. 260. (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1907.)
3. E. P. Barrows, *Sacred Geography and Antiquities*, p. 431.
4. Taylor, op. cit., p. 258.
5. Ibid., p. 261.
6. Barrows, op. cit., p. 434.
7. Frank E. Gaebelein, *Philemon the Gospel of Emancipation*, p. 17. (New York City: Our Hope Publications, 1939.)
8. A. T. Robertson, *Epochs in the Life of Paul*, p. 278. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1909.)
9. Camden Cobern, *The New Archaeological Discoveries and Their Bearing Upon the New Testament*, p.595.
10. Gaebelein, op. cit., pp. 18, 19.
11. Cpo Taylor, op. cit., p. 261.
12. Cobern, loco cit.

~ end of chapter 30 ~

<http://www.baptistbiblebelievers.com/>