UNDERSTANDING OLD TESTAMENT SLAVERY

Psalm 105:16-19 He called down famine on the land and destroyed all their supplies of food; and he sent a man before them – Joseph, sold as a slave. They bruised his feet with shackles, his neck was put in irons, till what he foretold came to pass, till the word of the LORD proved him true.

Exodus 12:43-45 The LORD said to Moses and Aaron, “These are the regulations for the Passover meal: “No foreigner may eat of it. Any slave you have bought may eat it after you have circumcised him, but a temporary resident or a hired worker may not eat of it.”

The Hebrew word translated “slave” in these passages is translated by a form of the word slave about 70 times in the New American Standard, and by a form of the word “servant” about 700 times in the same translation.

Abraham’s Slaves

Genesis 12:5 He took his wife Sarai, his nephew Lot, all the possessions they had accumulated and the people they had acquired in Harran, and they set out for the land of Canaan, and they arrived there.

Genesis 17:12&13a “For the generations to come every male among you who is eight days old must be circumcised, including those born in your household or bought with money from a foreigner – those who are not your offspring. Whether born in your household or bought with money, they must be circumcised.”

Genesis 14:14-16 When Abram heard that his relative had been taken captive, he called out the 318 trained men born in his household and went in pursuit as far as Dan. During the night Abram divided his men to attack them and he routed them, pursuing them as far as Hobah, north of Damascus. He recovered all the goods and brought back his relative Lot and his possessions, together with the women and the other people. (Note: It is 154 miles from Hebron to Damascus.)

Laws Regulating Slavery

Exodus 21:16 Anyone who kidnaps someone is to be put to death, whether the victim has been sold or is still in the kidnapper’s possession.

Genesis 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.

Exodus 21:2-6 “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.

Deuteronomy 15:12-14 If any of your people – Hebrew men or women – sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you.

Exodus 21:7-9 “If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as male servants do. 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. If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter.

Exodus 21:10&11 If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

Deuteronomy 21:10&11 When you go to war against your enemies and the LORD your God delivers them into your hands and you take captives, if you notice among the captives a beautiful woman and are attracted to her, you may take her as your wife.

Deuteronomy 21:12-14 Bring her into your home and have her shave her head, trim her nails and put aside the clothes she was wearing when captured. After she has lived in your house and mourned her father and mother for a full month, then you may go to her and be her husband and she shall be your wife. If you are not pleased with her, let her go wherever she wishes. You must not sell her or treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.

Exodus 21:26&27 “An owner who hits a male or female slave in the eye and destroys it must let the slave go free to compensate for the eye. And an owner who knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must let the slave go free to compensate for the tooth.

Exodus 20:9&10 “Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but 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 male or female servant, nor your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns.”

Exodus 23:12 “Six days do your work, but on the seventh day do not work, so that your ox and your donkey may rest, and so that the slave born in your household and the foreigner living among you may be refreshed.”

Deuteronomy 23:15&16(NASB) “You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him.”

Did Israel Keep the Laws about Slavery

Jeremiah 34:8-10 The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD after King Zedekiah had made a covenant with the people in Jerusalem to proclaim freedom for the slaves. Everyone was to free their Hebrew slaves, both male and female; no one was to hold a fellow Hebrew in bondage. So all the officials and people who entered into this covenant agreed that they would free their male and female slaves and no longer hold them in bondage.

Jeremiah 34:11-14a But afterward they changed their minds and took back the slaves they had freed and enslaved them again. Then the word of the LORD came to Jeremiah: “This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: I made a covenant with your ancestors when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. I said, “Every seventh year each of you must free any fellow Hebrews who have sold themselves to you. After they have served you six years, you must let them go free.”

Jeremiah 34:14b-16 “Your ancestors, however, did not listen to me or pay attention to me. Recently you repented and did what is right in my sight: Each of you proclaimed freedom to your own people. You even made a covenant before me in the house that bears my Name. But now you have turned around and profaned my name; each of you has taken back the male and female slaves you had set free to go where they wished. You have forced them to become your slaves again.”

Jeremiah 34:17-20 “Therefore this is what the LORD says: You have not obeyed me; you have not proclaimed freedom to your own people. So I now proclaim ‘freedom’ for you, declares the LORD – ‘freedom’ to fall by the sword and plague and famine. I will make you abhorrent to all the kingdoms of the earth. Those who have violated my covenant…I will deliver into the hands of their enemies who want to kill them. Their dead bodies will become food for the birds and the wild animals.”

Things to Think About

Abraham had slaves who could be armed and go to war, chasing the enemy over 154 miles, and who then returned to their home. They did not try to escape, which speaks volumes on how they perceived the condition.

The Old Testament regulated slavery in the following ways:

Kidnapping a person to sell him as a slave was punishable by death.

Jewish slaves served for seven years and were then set free.

If a man had sexual relations with a female slave, she became his wife, and if he did not give her what she deserved as a wife, she was free to leave as a free woman. She could not be sold as a slave.

If a slave owner seriously injured a slave, the slave was to go free.

Slaves could not be required to work on the Sabbath.

Runaway slaves were not to be returned to their masters. They were to be given property and allowed to live there as free people.

One of the reasons the nation of Judah went into captivity to Babylon was their failure to keep God’s rules about how slaves were to be treated.