

119

MINISTRIES

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Parashah Points: Behar - Foreign Slaves

Welcome to another episode of Parashah Points—short thoughts from the weekly Torah Portion.

This week’s Parashah Point comes from Behar, which is Hebrew for “On the mountain,” and it goes from Leviticus 25:1 to Leviticus 26:2.

This Torah portion gives instructions concerning the *Shemittah* and *Yovel*—that is, the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. It also gives limits on debt servitude. The parashah concludes with a reminder to keep God’s Sabbaths and reverence his sanctuary.

There’s a lot we can talk about in this Torah Portion. Today we’re going to talk about a common objection to the Bible in regard to slavery.

It’s no secret that the Torah has laws regarding slavery. But we should keep in mind that the type of “slavery” the Torah permits is not the same as what modern people think of when they imagine slavery.

For instance, the Torah does *not* permit a “slave trade” type of system. There are no laws allowing for men or women to be enslaved against their will to be bought and sold. In fact, the Torah prescribes the death penalty for anyone who does such a thing (Exodus 21:16).

What the Torah does allow for is a type of indentured servitude. Men and women, usually to pay off a debt or to get out of poverty, could *voluntarily* become servants. That is to say, people could enter into a contract to be a servant for a set period of time. And, if the servant is an Israelite, their debt was automatically cancelled on the seventh year and they were released (Deuteronomy 15:12).

The Torah permitted indentured servitude as a means by which people could work off their debts and get out of poverty. The Torah’s regulation of this system served to protect servants and guard against potential abuses.

For more information on slavery in the Bible, we recommend watching our teaching, [Slavery and the Bible](#).

However, there is a passage regarding slavery that has troubled some people. This passage occurs in our Torah Portion:

Leviticus 25:44-46

As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their clans that are with you, who have been born in your land, **and they may be your property**. You may bequeath them to your sons after you to inherit **as a possession forever**. You may make slaves of them, but over your brothers the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another ruthlessly.

Many might object to this passage and say that the Torah regards foreign slaves as literal property, which can be passed on to one's children as permanent possessions. Critics complain that these laws are thus demeaning and discriminatory toward foreigners.

However, several contextual considerations can perhaps mitigate some of the difficulty with this passage.

First, as we've already mentioned, the Torah did not permit people to be bought and sold against their will. So whatever the Torah permits here, it is not comparable to kidnapping and enslaving someone, like what occurred during the transatlantic slave trade. The foreign servants who entered into this type of arrangement described in our passage did so voluntarily.

Second, while non-Israelites were not automatically released from their debts on the Sabbatical or Jubilee year, Leviticus 25:47 clearly states that the strangers living within Israel could "become rich." In other words, a foreign slave could eventually get out of poverty, become self-sustaining, and thus wouldn't have to be a servant anymore. While foreigners in Israel *could* serve for life, serving multiple generations if they wanted (just like an Israelite servant could!), the Torah doesn't require that.

Third, except for automatic debt cancellation on the Sabbatical and Jubilee years, foreign servants were afforded the exact same protections and benefits as Israelite servants. They were given Sabbath rest (Exodus 20:10). If they suffered abuse from their masters, they were allowed to go free (Exodus 21:26-27). Also, if they decided to flee their master for *any* reason, the Torah protected them and did not permit them to be returned (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). This last protection proves that any servant, even if they were taken captive in the aftermath of war, is a servant voluntarily, as they are always free to leave.

When these points are considered, this passage from our Torah Portion doesn't appear to be morally problematic at all. Still, some might object to the fact that the text refers to these servants as "property" and "possessions." Isn't such verbiage dehumanizing?

Well, not so fast. As Leviticus scholar Jay Sklar explains:

In English, we regularly use commercial language to describe people when the context is commercial, for example, 'trading' a player to another team (as one might 'trade' a stock), or 'transferring' an employee to another location (as one might 'transfer' money). We do not use this language because we view the people involved as less than human; we use it because it accurately describes their circumstances in a given commercial context. To say that servants are *property* (Lev. 25:45) or *inherited* (25:46) is not to put them on the level of furniture, any more

than to say a sports star is ‘traded’ puts him on the level of a stock.

-Jay Sklar, *Leviticus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), p. 308-309

When we consider the language in that light, any moral objection is quickly resolved. The Bible teaches that all mankind is made in the image of God and worthy of dignity and rights. This applies also to foreigners who choose to become servants within Torah’s legal system.

Hopefully this short teaching was helpful to you in reading some of these difficult passages concerning slavery. Again, for a fuller treatment of this topic, see our teaching, [Slavery and the Bible](#).

Thank you for joining us for another Parashah Point!

We pray you have been blessed by this teaching. Remember, continue to test everything. Shalom! For more on this and other teachings, please visit us at www.testeverything.net

Shalom, and may Yahweh bless you in walking in the whole Word of God.

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