



FEED MY SHEEP

PUBLISHED BY JAMES W. BRUGGEMAN
STONE KINGDOM MINISTRIES
P. O. BOX 6388
ASHEVILLE, NC 28816 U.S.A.

Issue #36

November 2001

The Jubilee Laws, Part 4: Slavery

Our immediately previous issue began to deal with the laws of slavery. They are in the form of statutes and judgments and they fall under and are part of the jubilee laws found in Leviticus 25. (Specifically, we looked at Lev. 25:39-43.) The laws of jubilee, it will be recalled, are the highest level of sabbath laws and therefore, jubilee laws fall under the Fourth Commandment. The first actual appearance of any laws dealing with slavery is in Exodus 21 (which we discussed in FMS # 32, July 2001).

Worthy of note there in the book of Exodus is the order in which the laws are given at Mt. Sinai. First, Moses and the people of Israel hear God proclaim the Ten Commandments. The people then flee in fear and they tell Moses to be their “middle man” (Exodus 20:18-21). Then, with the exception a couple of statutes wherein God demands exclusive worship (Exo. 21:22-26), the very first statutes to be given have to do with slavery (for six years) and then release in the seventh, i.e., the sabbath year.

That these slavery statutes should appear first is both appropriate and prophetic. It summarizes the whole journey of mankind—from bondage to rest, from slavery to jubilee. It sets a pattern on several levels. The entire book of Exodus is concerned with the journey of the Israelites from slavery to sabbath rest. This is prophetic of each of us individually as we progress from the slavery of sin to entering the sabbath rest.

The sabbath rest is a type (picture, symbol) of entering into the Feast of Tabernacles, which itself pictures the time when a believer is awarded his immortal, incorruptible body. Moreover, on a larger scale, the six

years of bondage represent the 6,000 years of mankind’s bondage to the slavery of sin and death since the Fall. We are now on the cusp of the Great Sabbath, the Millennium, a soon-to-be (progressively) appearing golden age of peace.

Slavery as an institution

Slavery—like war, divorce, the death penalty and disinheritance—are the results of sin. All these are necessary evils in the Plan of God.¹ They will exist no more when they have served their purposes. Until then, God has promulgated rules for the proper (yea, *righteous*) use of these institutions.

God knew the end from the beginning and He seems to do everything in a progressive manner. So, as abhorrent as slavery is to the modern “enlightened” mind, God planned for societies to progress from slave-holding to “liberty for all,” for in Christ there is neither bond nor free (Galatians 3:28). But we are not all there yet.

Thus, in the world today, there are far more people in bondage than are free. We are not speaking only of *household* slavery, which is primarily extant in Third World countries. That situation is essentially no different now than it was 2,000 or 3,000 years ago; but we also must include the great numbers of people in bondage to their governments, which can be called *statist* slavery. There are different degrees of slavery and last month we gave evidence of our own American populations’ hidden bondage to “Mystery, Babylon.”

The Creator’s Plan called for the existence of

slavery for a time. But is slavery not evil? Most of us would agree that it is, but in the hands of a just and loving God, it ultimately serves the highest good. And God is quite forthright about telling us that He takes credit for it.

Isaiah 45: 7 I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I Yahweh do all these things.

What is the purpose of slavery then? (We limit our scope now to household slavery since that is the focus of the texts to follow.) Ultimately, it is for the purpose of *training* the slave so that he can stand on his own; that is, to be a productive member of society—so that he can provide the necessities of life for himself and his family. In short, it is to train him to be responsible and accountable. Under God’s economic system, no man can go about leaving a trail of injured parties due to his carelessness, negligence or malicious intent, and then get off “scot-free” because he owns nothing. Under God’s law, he is sold into servitude until the debts are paid (with the jubilee qualification to be explained later).

At the same time, under the authority of a God-fearing master, he is to be trained in being an upright citizen of the Kingdom; that is, to be a believer in the true God and a follower of His laws. The punishment fits the crime and the purpose of the punishment is not revenge, but disciplinary and corrective. When these two prime missions are accomplished, the slave no longer has need of any master but Christ (Galatians 3:24, 25), because he then does what is right by nature.

Before commencing our study in the particulars here, it should be noted that the Hebrew word *ebed* and the Greek word *doulos* would be better rendered *slave* instead of *servant*. The distinction is an important one. A servant is one who freely provides service to someone else. It is comparable to the term *employee* today. A slave, however, is one who is compelled to provide service (labor) and whose way of life is greatly restricted by his master.

Back in 1968, at the height of the war in Vietnam, I volunteered my “service” to the United States Air Force. Had there not been a certainty that I would have been conscripted into the Army and sent to Vietnam, I would not have volunteered. But once I volunteered, my way of life was greatly restricted. I was

provided food, shelter, clothing and a meager salary and in return I was owned 24 hours a day. I was told where to go, what to do, how to do it and for whom to do it (immediate supervisors). It was a four-year lesson about slavery—a relatively benevolent slavery, to be sure, but slavery nonetheless. I am grateful now for the experience. By contrast, when I was discharged and after college entered the job market, I could freely serve any employer I chose; that is, I could quit at any time. Then I was a servant not a slave.

There is a great deal more to be learned about biblical slavery in general, but with these few preceding concepts as our backdrop, we now proceed to examine the particular laws in Leviticus 25 and elsewhere which God set forth to bring good out of the evil of slavery.

Provisions for non-Israelite slaves

In Leviticus 25:39-43, discussed last month, the context showed that it concerned slavery by Israelites of their Israelite brethren. The next passage deals with Hebrews owning *non-Israelite* slaves. Three provisions of the Israelite-to-Israelite relationship bear repeating. First, even though circumstances of debt may have forced an Israelite into slavery, he is nonetheless to be treated as though he were an employee (v. 40). Secondly, Israelite slaves may not be sold (v. 42), and thirdly, they shall not be ruled over with rigor (v. 43). In contrast, note the regulations concerning slavery of non-Israelites by Israelites.

Leviticus 25:44 Both thy bondmen [Heb.: *ebed*: slave], and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, shall be of the heathen [Heb.: *goy*: nations] that are round about you; of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids.

45 Moreover of the children of the strangers [Heb.: *toshawb*: stranger, sojourner] 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.

46 And ye shall take them as an inheritance for your children after you, to inherit *them* for a possession; they shall be your bondmen for ever: but over your brethren the children of Israel, ye shall not rule one over another with rigour.

We notice first that non-Israelite slaves may be bought from non-Israelite nations. Presumably, these slaves may also be sold, since the prohibition in v. 42

applies to Israel only. Of all the families of the earth, Israel alone was chosen to be servants (slaves) to God. Observe, though, that the words “shall be” in v. 44 are in italics, indicating they were supplied by the translators. Granted, some form of the verb “to be” is necessary for proper English, but saying “shall be” conveys the idea that slaves must be non-Israelites whereas the previous five verses showed the opposite possibility. We propose a better translation would be “...and thy bondmaids, which thou shalt have, may be of the heathen...”

Secondly, the source of slaves was not only from without but also from within the borders of Israel. Israelites were permitted to buy slaves from the non-Israelites who lived among them² (v. 45). Thirdly, these slaves could be passed on to the owners’ children. Unquestionably, in centuries past, these passages were looked to for biblical support by Christian men who held slaves—both black and white slaves! By the same token, Deuteronomy 23:15 & 16 make it clear that fugitive slaves were *not* to be returned to their masters.

Deuteronomy 23:15 Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant [Heb.: *ebed*: slave] which is escaped from his master unto thee:

16 He shall dwell with thee, *even* among you, in that place which he shall choose in one of thy gates, where it liketh him best: thou shalt not oppress him.

Anyone finding a fugitive slave was to permit him his freedom. Paul applied this law in a most unusual, but poignant way, as described in his letter to Philemon. It seems that Philemon had once owned a slave named Onesimus who was in some way not a very satisfactory slave. He fled and somehow met Paul and was converted to Christ and in so doing became a valuable aide to Paul. (In fact, he served as Paul’s scribe and messenger for this very letter.)

Paul sends Onesimus back, in effect, telling Philemon “By the law, I could keep him as my aide [not slave], but I would not do so without your willing permission because you are my brother in Christ. But now Onesimus is also our brother as well, and he would be a very valuable helper to me. If he has done you wrong or owes you anything, I will repay you on his behalf.” This summary does not do justice to the very heart-rending and touching way in which Paul wrote to Philemon, so we encourage you to read it—

only 25 verses, but too much for this monograph.

Seeing that the Bible does sanction slavery, are we as Christians to seek to own slaves? ...as in, “Whoopee! The Bible says that I can own slaves. Where can I buy some?” Such an attitude betrays a woefully immature soul and spirit. We should no more seek to own slaves than we would gleefully seek divorce or war. Our highest goal should be to teach (by example, if not in a formal capacity) and to encourage all men to be Christians. Our attitude should be that we seek that day when every knee will bow, every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Our job is ultimately to make covenant-keepers (Christians) out of every person on the earth.

Redemption of a slave

Next, the Scripture presents us with another type of situation; this, concerning a “stranger” and a poverty-stricken Israelite. But in this scenario the stranger is a wealthy individual who acquires an Israelite slave. The stranger is again a non-Israelite since it is the same Hebrew word as used in v. 45 above. Moreover, the context of this scenario shows such to be the case.

Leviticus 25:47 And if a sojourner or stranger wax rich by thee, and thy brother *that dwelleth* by him wax poor, and sell himself unto the stranger or sojourner by thee, or to the stock of the stranger’s family:

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

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.

50 And he shall reckon with him that bought him from the year that he was sold to him unto the year of jubile: and the price of his sale shall be according unto the number of years, according to the time of an hired servant shall it be with him.

The case here is one in which a poor Israelite becomes the slave of a nearby and wealthy non-Israelite. That he is a “stranger” does not mean that he is unknown in the neighborhood, but it does mean that he is of different ancestry than of Jacob-Israel. For the moment, we will ignore who does the redeeming and focus on the method. Notice that this is the same principle that is used to determine the price of land which had been leased out due to poverty. (See FMS

#33, August 2001.) How much is the slave worth; what is to be his redemption price? His value is computed by the number of years left until the jubilee. Therefore,...

51 If there be yet many years behind, according unto them he shall give again the price of his redemption out of the money that he was bought for.

52 And if there remain but few years unto the year of jubile, then he shall count with him, and according unto his years shall he give him again the price of his redemption.

53 And as a yearly hired servant shall he be with him: and the other shall not rule with rigour over him in thy sight.

Note the reference in both vss. 50 and 53 to a hired servant. This is not to say that the poverty-stricken Israelite *is* a hired servant (employee), but that (1) the price shall be computed as though he were an employee, and (2) he is to be *treated* as though he were an employee. Neither harshness, nor cruelty nor any other injustice is permitted.

At this point, a critical facet of the laws of redemption becomes apparent; *vid.*, **who** can qualify to redeem an Israelite slave? First, if the slave were able to accumulate sufficient wealth, he could redeem himself. Fat chance; seldom, if ever, happened. Secondly, an uncle, a cousin or any close relative could redeem him; but in any case, a *non-Israelite could not redeem him*. These statutes are all literal laws for the just operation of society, but they also are applied on a national scale.

Through Mary, Jesus the Christ took on the physical seed of Abraham so that he would have the lawful right to redeem the children (nation) of Israel. No one else could qualify, unless he were of the seed of Abraham. That is why, **in this context** of the word "redeemed," *only Israel can be redeemed!* (*Nota bene*: We are discussing redemption here, not salvation. The two are not synonymous!) It should not be a shocking idea that only Israelites can be redeemed. Israel was God's special possession; i.e., He owned her. God sold Israel into captivity (bondage, slavery). [See Judges 2:14: 3:8; 10:7, *et al.*] Therefore, when the time came for Israel to be bought back (redeemed), only a near kinsman (Jesus Christ) could perform the work.

Of course, in another context, there is a much wider application of the term "redemption." For example, one can speak of *all creation* needing redemption from the bondage of corruption (Romans 8:21) due to the Fall of Adam. Hence, the second Adam took on flesh and blood, and not the nature of angels, which therefore qualified Him to redeem the whole world!

To further elaborate, He came of the family of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob-Israel in order to qualify as a near kinsman to redeem Israel. He did not come of the family of Ham or Japheth because He did not come to redeem them in the strict sense used of Israel. However, in the larger application, He took on Himself the nature of humanity as opposed to angels in order to qualify as a near kinsman of and to redeem all mankind. That, too, is an appropriate use of the term "redemption," so do not let the statement that "only Israel can be redeemed" disturb you.

The preceding discussion of Bible laws on slavery is admittedly cursory. There are many aspects of it which we have not even begun to address. We are approaching the culmination of our studies of the unknown sabbath laws, and next month's FMS will likely see the conclusion of our studies of the jubilee laws.

ENDNOTES

1. This topic will be discussed in some detail in upcoming issues of FMS.
2. A study of the Hebrew words *goy* and *toshawb* (and others) will show that they can refer to an Israelite or non-Israelite depending upon the context. For example, *toshawb* (stranger) in v. 45 is clearly speaking about non-Israelites because they are contrasted to "your brethren the children of Israel" in v. 46. Throughout these statutes, and in many places in Scripture, "stranger" refers to the "strange" (i.e., different) genetic, ethnic stock of the individual.

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