

THE LAWS OF YAHWEH CONCERNING SERVITUDE

History, Hebrew Lexicon, and the Covenant Standard

A Study for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

Few subjects in the covenant have been more misused, misunderstood, and weaponized against the people of Yahweh than the institution of servitude.

Chattel slavery — the race-based, generational, kidnapping-fueled institution that scarred the Western world and left wounds still bleeding today — was not the institution the covenant governed. To read American slavery back into the Tanakh is to commit one of the most dangerous errors in biblical interpretation: importing a modern horror into an ancient legal framework that, when read honestly, explicitly condemned the very practices that defined the Atlantic slave trade.

This study examines three questions in order:

1. What is the historical world into which the covenant laws on servitude were spoken?
2. What does the Hebrew word itself mean — and what does it not mean?
3. What does **Yahweh** actually require — law by law, across all three covenant law collections?

The answer will challenge what Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have each, at various points in history, done with this subject. The covenant word stands as judge over all three traditions.

PART ONE: THE HISTORICAL WORLD

Servitude in the Ancient Near East

Every major civilization of the ancient Near East practiced some form of bound labor. Egypt, Babylon, Assyria, Sumer, and the Hittites all had legal structures governing the acquisition, treatment, and release of dependent workers. Before the

covenant laws of **Yahweh** can be properly understood, the world they entered must be clearly seen.

Mesopotamia and the Code of Hammurabi

The Code of Hammurabi (c. 1755–1750 BCE) is the longest and best-preserved legal text from the ancient Near East, containing 282 case laws inscribed on a basalt stele. It governed the three tiers of Babylonian society: the propertied class (*awīlu*), commoners, and slaves. Punishments differed according to social status — a system of legal stratification in which the slave held the lowest position with the fewest protections.

Key provisions of Hammurabi's code regarding slaves included: a master could brand or mark a slave; harboring an escaped slave was itself a capital offense; and any person who helped a slave flee the city could be executed. The slave was, under Hammurabi's system, a piece of property — alienable, returnable, and without inherent standing before the court.

This is the legal world immediately surrounding ancient Israel. The contrast with what **Yahweh** commands is not cosmetic — it is foundational.

Egypt and the Exodus Memory

The covenant laws on servitude were given to a nation that had itself been enslaved — in Egypt, under forced labor with no right of exit, no fixed term, no sabbath rest, no recourse, and no redemption price. The memory of Egyptian bondage is not background music in the Tanakh. It is the moral engine behind virtually every humanitarian law the covenant contains.

This is explicit in **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:15** — the very passage governing the release of Hebrew servants:

"You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your Elohim redeemed you; therefore I command you this today."

The Egyptian experience was the anti-type. What **Yahweh** commanded for servants in Israel was shaped directly by what He condemned in Egypt. A people rescued from bondage were not permitted to replicate that bondage upon others.

PART TWO: THE HEBREW WORD

Lexical Study:

The Hebrew word at the center of this entire discussion is *eved* — עֶבֶד — rooted in the three-letter verb *'avad* — עָבַד — H5647/H5650.

BDB and HALOT Analysis

Brown-Driver-Briggs (BDB) defines *'avad* as: to work, to serve, to labor — with applications ranging from agricultural service to worship. The noun *eved* is classified as: servant, slave, one in subjection to authority. BDB's breadth of usage is critical: the same word describes Moses (Shemot/Exodus 14:31), Abraham (Bereishit/Genesis 26:24), and a bound laborer. Service to **Yahweh** is the highest form of *avodah* — the noun derived from the same root.

HALOT (Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament) provides the most complete modern lexical analysis: *eved* covers the full spectrum from domestic servant hired freely, to one bound by debt or court judgment, to a term of deepest honor — the servant of **Yahweh**. The word does not carry racial connotation. It does not imply permanent chattel status. It describes a relationship of labor and service defined by terms, not by birth.

The Abarim Analysis: Singular vs. Plural

The Abarim Theological Dictionary draws a critical distinction between *eved* in singular and plural: the singular form (עֶבֶד) denotes a unified, even autonomous service-detail — one who operates with purpose and direction. The plural (עֶבְדִים) by contrast emphasizes individual bondage within a labor force — those who must do what they are told without internal policy. When **Yahweh** speaks of His servants, He typically uses the singular: 'My servant' (**Isaiah 65:8–13**). When Israel is described in degradation — as in **Lamentations 5:8** — the plural is used.

Significantly, *eved* never appears in the Tanakh with a racial qualifier. Race is not a category the covenant law employs to determine who may or may not be bound to service. The entire framework of race-based, hereditary chattel slavery has no foundation in the Hebrew text.

The Verb Root in Context

The root *'avad* is also the Hebrew word for worship — *avodah* (עֲבוּדָה). To serve Yahweh is the highest act a human being can perform. The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT) notes: 'When service is offered to **Elohim**, it is not bondage, but rather a joyous and liberating experience.' The covenant reframes all legitimate service — including economic service — as participation in a framework that leads toward freedom, never away from it.

PART THREE: THE COVENANT LAWS

What Yahweh Actually Commands

Three primary law collections in the Tanakh address servitude: **Shemot (Exodus) 21, Vayikra (Leviticus) 25, and Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15**. These are not contradictory collections. Scholars at TheTorah.com and the Jewish Encyclopedia confirm these three collections are complementary — each addressing different categories of persons in different economic circumstances. Together they form a complete covenant framework that no single collection fully captures alone.

Law Collection One: Shemot (Exodus) 21:2–16

Shemot (Exodus) 21 is part of the Covenant Code (Mishpatim), the oldest collection of covenant law. It opens immediately after the Sinai revelation — making the governance of servitude the first legal matter Yahweh addresses.

The Six-Year Limit — Shemot (Exodus) 21:2:

"When you purchase a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years, but in the seventh year he shall leave as a free person without any payment."

This is the foundational rule. No Hebrew could be bound indefinitely against the covenant. Six years was the maximum term. In the seventh — the sabbatical number of completion — freedom was mandatory. No ransom. No further debt. Liberation was the right, not the reward.

The Voluntary Permanent Bond — Shemot (Exodus) 21:5–6:

"If, however, the servant declares: I love my master and my wife and children; I will not leave as a free person — his master shall bring him to Elohim and there, at the door or doorpost, he shall pierce his ear with an awl, thus keeping him as his servant forever."

The only path to permanent service was voluntary and public. The servant chose, declared his choice before witnesses, and was marked at the doorpost — the threshold of the household. This was not coercion. This was covenant: a man binding himself by his own word to a household he loved. The root **avad** here reaches its fullest human expression — chosen, declared service.

Kidnapping — The Capital Offense — Shemot (Exodus) 21:16:

"He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death."

This single law demolishes any attempt to use the covenant to justify the Atlantic slave trade. Kidnapping a human being for the purpose of selling him was a capital offense — the same category as premeditated murder. The entire American slavery system was built on precisely the act that Yahweh punished with death. The placement of this law is no accident: it sits directly alongside the laws governing servants, making the contrast explicit. Legitimate servitude was voluntary or judicial. Forced abduction was murder in the sight of Yahweh.

The Eye and Tooth — Liberation for Physical Harm — Shemot (Exodus) 21:26–27:

"When someone strikes his male or female servant in the eye and destroys the use of the eye, he shall let the servant go free in compensation for the eye. If he knocks out a tooth of his male or female servant, he shall let the servant go free in compensation for the tooth."

The servant's body was not the master's property. Any permanent physical injury inflicted upon a servant triggered immediate emancipation. In the surrounding ancient world — including Babylon under Hammurabi — a master faced no such consequence for harming a slave's body. **Yahweh's** covenant made the servant's physical integrity a legal tripwire: injure the person and forfeit the service.

Death of a Servant Under the Master's Hand — Shemot (Exodus) 21:20:

"When someone strikes his male or female servant with a rod so that the servant dies under his hand, the act shall certainly be avenged."

A servant's death at the hands of a master was not a private property matter. It was a matter demanding **naqam** — נָקָם — **H5358** — retribution. The covenant treated the servant's life as a life, not an economic unit.

Law Collection Two: Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:35–55

Vayikra (Leviticus) 25 governs servitude within the broader framework of the Jubilee Year — the fiftieth year in which all land returned to its original families and all bound Hebrews were released. The Jubilee was Yahweh's built-in economic reset.

No Rigorous Labor for a Hebrew Brother — Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:39–43:

"If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave. He shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the Jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and return to his own clan and go back to the possession of his fathers. For they are My servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly, but shall fear your Elohim."

Four principles are embedded in this single passage:

First: a Hebrew could not be treated as a slave — even if bound by economic desperation. The word the covenant uses is deliberately specific: do not impose on him the conditions of a slave.

Second: the Jubilee year was the absolute backstop. No economic arrangement survived the fiftieth year. The land returned, the families reunited, the servitude ended.

Third: the reason is explicitly theological — **they are My servants**. **Yahweh** owned His people first. No human master held a claim that superseded the covenant claim of their Creator and Redeemer.

Fourth: *lo tirde-nnu befarekh* — לא תרדה בו בפרך — you shall not rule over him with rigor, with crushing force. The same Hebrew word — *parekh* — describes the Egyptian oppression of Israel in Shemot (Exodus) 1:13–14. Yahweh forbade His people from doing to their servants exactly what Pharaoh had done to them.

Law Collection Three: Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:12–18

Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15 is the fullest expansion of the servant release law. It deliberately extends the protections of **Shemot (Exodus) 21** to women — an explicit corrective to any reading that limited the six-year release to men alone.

Equal Release — Male and Female — Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:12:

"If your Hebrew kinsman, or kinswoman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you."

Devarim (Deuteronomy) emphasizes with unusual grammatical force that this law applies to women equally. The text fronts the word 'female servant' and adds the particle *af* ('even') — meaning: even for your female servant you shall do likewise. The covenant does not create a gendered underclass within servitude.

The Liberation Package — Devarim (Deuteronomy) 15:13–15:

"And when you send him away free from you, you shall not let him go away empty-handed. You shall supply him liberally from your flock, from your threshing floor, and from your winepress. From what Yahweh your Elohim has blessed you with, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your Elohim redeemed you; therefore I command you this today."

Freedom was not simply the cessation of service. **Yahweh** commanded that the departing servant be equipped — with livestock, grain, and wine. The ancient rabbinical commentary calls this *ha'anaqah* — the grant, the severance gift. A person leaving service was to leave better resourced than when he entered. The motivation given is the Exodus memory: you were sent out empty-handed from Egypt. Do not send your servant out that way.

The Runaway Servant Law — Devarim (Deuteronomy) 23:15–16

This is the most radical servant law in the entire ancient Near Eastern legal world, and it stands in absolute contrast to every surrounding legal system — including Hammurabi's code, which made harboring a fugitive slave a capital offense.

"You shall not hand over to his master a servant who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him."

This law requires no justification of the escape. No inquiry into the servant's conduct. No diplomatic obligation to foreign masters. The escaped servant arrived on Israelite soil

and became free. The entire land of Israel functioned as a permanent sanctuary. No ancient Near Eastern law — not Babylon, not Assyria, not Egypt — granted this protection. It was unprecedented.

The JPS Torah Commentary (Jeffrey Tigay) notes that Mesopotamian treaties and laws universally required the return of fugitive slaves. Against that backdrop, **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 23:15** is a declaration: Israel's covenant does not serve the economic interests of slave-holding systems. It serves the human dignity Yahweh invested in every person He created.

PART FOUR: WHAT YAHWEH NEVER COMMANDED

The Clear Boundaries of the Covenant

The covenant draws explicit lines that the nations — and often Israel herself — crossed. These lines are not ambiguous.

Yahweh never authorized kidnapping for enslavement — He made it a capital crime (Shemot/Exodus 21:16).

Yahweh never authorized race-based hereditary slavery — the covenant knows no such category.

Yahweh never authorized the crushing labor (*parekh*) that Egypt used on Israel — He explicitly forbade it (Vayikra/Leviticus 25:43, 46, 53).

Yahweh never authorized the permanent possession of Hebrew persons — the six-year rule, the Jubilee, and the voluntary-only permanent bond all speak against it.

Yahweh never authorized the return of escaped servants — He commanded Israel to give them sanctuary (Devarim/Deuteronomy 23:15–16).

Yahweh never authorized masters to injure servants without consequence — permanent physical harm meant immediate emancipation (Shemot/Exodus 21:26–27).

The Atlantic slave trade was built on kidnapping, racial categorization, hereditary bondage, crushing labor without release, and the legal return of fugitives. Every one of these pillars was explicitly forbidden by the covenant law of Yahweh. Anyone who used the Bible to justify American or European race-based slavery was not misapplying the covenant — they were inverting it.

PART FIVE: THE COVENANT WORD TO ALL THREE TRADITIONS

What the Tanakh Says to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam

To Judaism

The Talmudic tradition largely preserved the protections embedded in the covenant law. Maimonides, in the *Yad ha-Hazaqah*, wrote of the laws of servitude: 'They are all mercy, compassion, and forbearance.' He required that masters share food, drink, and lodging with their servants on equal terms. He prohibited humiliation and verbal abuse. He stated: 'The law destined them for service, not for humiliation.'

Yet the post-Talmudic world — including Jewish merchants involved in the medieval slave trade — departed from these standards. The covenant standard judges that departure, not accommodates it. The memory of Egypt — ***ki gerim hayitem be'erec Mitzrayim*** — 'for you were strangers in the land of Egypt' — remains the moral anchor that no generation can retire.

To Christianity

Christianity bears the greatest institutional weight of slavery's legacy in the Western world. The American slaveholding church's use of **Shemot (Exodus)** and **Vayikra (Leviticus)** to justify chattel slavery was not merely poor exegesis — it was a covenant violation. The same book that was cited to defend slavery contained the law making slave-kidnapping a capital offense.

The prophetic tradition of the Tanakh is clear. In **Yirmeyahu (Jeremiah) 34**, **Yahweh** pronounced judgment on Israel specifically because they had freed their servants and then recaptured them. The language of that indictment is among the sharpest in the *Nevi'im*. The covenant does not forget what it commanded.

To Islam

Islam inherited a world in which slavery was pervasive and developed its own legal framework for governing it, including rules of manumission and prohibitions on certain abuses. But the Islamic legal tradition, like the Talmudic tradition, remained

at a distance from the Hebrew covenant's most radical provisions — particularly the runaway servant law of **Devarim (Deuteronomy) 23:15–16**. No parallel in Islamic law grants unconditional sanctuary to an escaped slave from a foreign master.

The Quran's repeated call to free slaves as an act of righteousness (**Surah 90:13, Surah 2:177**) resonates with the spirit of the covenant — but the letter of the covenant law goes further: freedom was not charity. It was a legal right, built into the structure of time itself through the seventh year and the Jubilee.

CONCLUSION

Yahweh did not invent slavery. He entered a world where it already existed and placed a legal framework around it that, if honored, would have made the institution unrecognizable to those who later invoked His name to justify it.

The covenant law of servitude carries a single moral trajectory: toward freedom. Six years, then release. Injury by a master, then immediate emancipation. Voluntary permanent service, then honor — not exploitation. An escaped servant crossing the border, then sanctuary — not return to chains.

At the center of it all stands the foundational declaration of **Vayikra (Leviticus) 25:55**:

"For the children of Israel are servants to Me; they are My servants whom I brought out of the land of Egypt: I am Yahweh your Elohim."

No human master's claim on another human being could supersede the prior claim of Yahweh — the One who redeemed them. That is the covenant word on servitude. That is the standard by which every tradition, every system, and every law that has claimed His name must be judged.

Primary Sources and Research Witnesses

Tanakh: Shemot 21 · Vayikra 25 · Devarim 15, 23 · Yirmeyahu 34

Lexicons: BDB · HALOT · TWOT · Abarim Theological Dictionary

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