

Slavery, Survival, and Social Responsibility in Ancient Israel:

A Reassessment within the Ancient Near Eastern Context

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Abstract

Modern critiques of biblical slavery often evaluate the Hebrew Bible through categories shaped by modern race-based chattel slavery, resulting in historical and ethical anachronism. This study argues that Israelite servitude must instead be understood within the socioeconomic realities of the ancient Near East, a world lacking institutional welfare, labor mobility, or state supported relief. Drawing upon Hebrew legal texts, narrative material, and comparative Ancient Near Eastern law codes, the paper contends that biblical slavery functioned primarily as a regulated survival mechanism within a subsistence economy marked by vulnerability, famine, and debt. Particular attention is given to the semantic range of עֶבֶד, the temporal limitation of debt servitude, legal protections against violence, and the integration of slaves within the household economy.

When examined within its historical and theological framework, Israelite slavery emerges not as a system of absolute ownership but as a constrained institution shaped by covenantal accountability, divine ownership, and collective memory of Egyptian bondage. While not abolitionist in the modern sense, biblical law consistently limits duration, restricts violence, protects escapees, and subordinates human authority to divine sovereignty. The result is a legal structure aimed at preserving life and restraining exploitation within the constraints of the ancient world.

I. Introduction: The Problem of Moral Anachronism

Modern critiques of biblical slavery frequently proceed from a moral conclusion rather than a historical investigation. The term “slavery” itself functions as a moral trigger, immediately evoking the race-based chattel slavery of the modern Atlantic world. When these assumptions are retrojected onto the Hebrew Bible, the result is not moral clarity but historical distortion. Ethical evaluation of ancient texts requires first an accurate understanding of the social, economic, and legal realities in which those texts emerged.¹

Anachronism occurs when modern conceptual categories are imposed upon ancient phenomena without regard for historical discontinuity. In discussions of biblical slavery, this anachronism is particularly acute. Modern readers often assume a universal definition of slavery, collapsing distinct systems of servitude across time and culture into a single moral category.² This flattening obscures the diversity of ancient labor systems and prevents meaningful comparison between Israelite practice and its ancient Near Eastern counterparts.

A second layer of anachronism involves the assumption of social infrastructures that simply did not exist in the ancient world. Modern societies possess welfare systems, labor mobility, bankruptcy protections, and institutional charity. Ancient Israel possessed none of these. In a subsistence agrarian economy, land was survival. Crop failure, drought, illness, or debt could rapidly destabilize an entire household, leaving individuals vulnerable to starvation or exposure.³ Within this economic reality, the sale of labor, or even the sale of oneself into servitude, functioned as a survival strategy rather than a moral degradation.

¹ John Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 35–37.

² Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 1–13.

³ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 90–95.

Biblical law does not deny the severity of this reality. Instead, it confronts it by regulating servitude rather than abolishing it within a world where no viable alternative existed. The presence of slavery legislation does not signal moral endorsement but legal containment. As Raymond Westbrook has observed, ancient law codes functioned not to create ideal moral worlds but to manage existing social realities by limiting harm and restraining excess.⁴

This regulatory impulse is evident throughout the Torah. Laws governing slavery appear precisely because the institution was already embedded within the economic structures of the ancient Near East. Their function is not to legitimate exploitation but to impose boundaries on power. Jacob Milgrom emphasized that biblical law consistently operates within a framework of moral limitation, seeking to prevent the most destructive outcomes of human inequality rather than erasing inequality altogether.⁵

Moreover, Israelite legislation embeds slavery within a moral narrative shaped by collective memory. Repeated appeals to Israel's own experience of bondage in Egypt function as an ethical constraint on the exercise of authority. The command to remember slavery is not rhetorical but juridical, grounding social ethics in historical trauma.⁶ This memory transforms servitude from an instrument of domination into a relationship of responsibility under divine scrutiny.

The question, therefore, is not whether biblical slavery aligns with modern moral sensibilities. It does not, nor should it be expected to. The proper historical question is whether biblical slavery represents moral restraint and ethical development within its ancient context.

⁴ Raymond Westbrook, "Biblical Law," in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of the Bible and Law*, ed. Brent A. Strawn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1:118–120.

⁵ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 3B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2156–2159.

⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 54–56.

This study argues that it does, and that failure to recognize this results in a caricature of the biblical text rather than a serious moral critique.

II. The Semantic Range of עֶבֶד and the Nature of Authority in Biblical Hebrew

Any serious evaluation of slavery in the Hebrew Bible must begin with the language employed by the text itself. The primary term rendered “slave” in English translations is עֶבֶד. Yet this translation, while convenient, risks importing modern assumptions foreign to the biblical world. In Biblical Hebrew, עֶבֶד is not a technical term denoting ontological inferiority or permanent dehumanization but a relational designation describing one who exists under authority within a structured hierarchy of obligation.⁷

The semantic range of עֶבֶד is demonstrably broad. It can refer to a household servant, an agricultural laborer, a royal official, a military subordinate, or a subject of a king. The same term is used for figures of the highest honor within Israel’s tradition. Moses is repeatedly designated עֶבֶד יְהוָה, a title that signifies divine trust and covenantal intimacy rather than degradation.⁸ David likewise refers to himself as עֶבֶד in his relationship to YHWH, a self designation that communicates loyalty and responsibility, not loss of dignity.⁹ The application of עֶבֶד to Israel’s most revered leaders makes clear that the term cannot be reduced to the modern concept of chattel slavery.

This linguistic reality has long been recognized in scholarship. Moshe Weinfeld argued that biblical law consistently reframes authority through covenantal subordination, such that no

⁷ HALOT, The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament, s.v. “עֶבֶד.”

⁸ Deut 34:5; Josh 1:1.

⁹ Ps 18:1; 2 Sam 7:5.

human authority operates independently of divine oversight.¹⁰ In this framework, power is never absolute. The master does not possess autonomous control over the slave but stands accountable to YHWH for the exercise of authority. This theological constraint fundamentally alters the nature of servitude in Israelite law.

Biblical legislation presupposes the continued moral agency of the עֶבֶד. Slaves are subject to commandments, participate in Sabbath rest, and are protected against severe bodily harm.¹¹ Injury resulting in permanent physical damage mandates immediate emancipation, a provision virtually unparalleled in Ancient Near Eastern legal material.¹² These laws presuppose that the slave retains personal worth and legal standing rather than existing as disposable property.

Raymond Westbrook emphasized that legal terminology in ancient law must be interpreted within its broader network of obligations rather than through isolated lexical equivalence.¹³ When the Torah limits the duration of service, enforces manumission, and restricts corporal punishment, it signals that the relationship between master and slave is defined by responsibility rather than ownership in the modern sense. While slaves are described as belonging to a household, this belonging reflects legal accountability rather than unrestricted possession.

The household context is particularly significant. In biblical law, slaves are consistently embedded within the household economy rather than segregated as external labor units. They eat, rest, and live within the domestic structure. This integration stands in sharp contrast to later plantation systems in which slaves were deliberately stripped of familial and communal bonds.

¹⁰ Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 24–31.

¹¹ Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14.

¹² Exod 21:26–27.

¹³ Raymond Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law* (Paris: Gabalda, 1988), 15–18.

In ancient Israel, the household functioned as the primary site of economic survival and social identity.¹⁴

Jewish scholarship has repeatedly emphasized this point. Nahum Sarna noted that Israelite servitude must be understood within the covenantal household, where even non kin were incorporated into a moral community governed by divine law.¹⁵ Similarly, Jacob Milgrom observed that biblical legislation seeks to prevent the reduction of persons to commodities by embedding servitude within a framework of legal restraint and moral accountability.¹⁶

None of this denies the reality of subordination or hardship. The biblical text does not sentimentalize slavery. However, it conceptualizes servitude in a manner that resists the totalizing ownership characteristic of modern slavery systems. The language of עֶבֶד reflects this tension. It acknowledges hierarchy while simultaneously affirming human dignity under divine authority.

Understanding the semantic range of עֶבֶד is therefore foundational for the present study. Without attending carefully to the Hebrew text, modern readers risk imposing categories foreign to the biblical world and misjudging the ethical trajectory of Israelite law. The Hebrew Bible speaks its own moral language, one shaped by covenant, responsibility, and the limitation of power.

III. Economic Vulnerability, Debt, and Survival in the Ancient Near East

¹⁴ Carol Meyers, *Discovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 143–147.

¹⁵ Sarna, *Exodus*, 114–116.

¹⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2162–2166.

Any evaluation of slavery in ancient Israel must be grounded in the economic realities of the ancient Near East. Israel was a subsistence agrarian society in which survival depended almost entirely upon access to land, labor capacity, and stable household structures. The loss of land through famine, crop failure, illness, or debt did not merely result in reduced quality of life but frequently led to starvation or death.¹⁷ In such an environment, economic vulnerability was not marginal but endemic.

Unlike modern societies, the ancient world possessed no institutional welfare systems, no unemployment protections, no bankruptcy courts, and no centralized charitable infrastructure. Aid was localized, relational, and limited. When a household collapsed economically, its members faced stark alternatives: migration, exposure, or the sale of labor.¹⁸ Biblical servitude must be understood against this backdrop. It was not an abstract legal category but a lived response to economic catastrophe.

Leviticus 25:35 articulates this reality with striking clarity. When a member of the community “becomes poor” and his “hand falters,” the response demanded by the law is not moral judgment but economic intervention. The verb נָשָׂא carries the sense of sustaining or holding up one who is collapsing. The text presumes that poverty is a condition requiring response, not condemnation.¹⁹ Servitude emerges here not as exploitation but as a mechanism for survival within the household economy.

Debt slavery occupies a central place in this system. In the ancient Near East, debt was one of the most common causes of servitude. Raymond Westbrook demonstrated that throughout Mesopotamia, individuals regularly sold themselves or their children into service to satisfy debt

¹⁷ Malina, *The New Testament World*, 87–96.

¹⁸ Carol Meyers, *Rediscovering Eve: Ancient Israelite Women in Context* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 165–170.

¹⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2156–2159.

obligations.²⁰ Israel shares this broader economic pattern, yet it modifies it through temporal limitation and moral restraint. Exodus 21:2 mandates release after six years, ensuring that debt servitude cannot become permanent dispossession.

The temporal limitation of Israelite slavery is not incidental. It reflects a theological vision in which economic collapse does not erase covenantal identity. Jacob Milgrom argued that the six year limit functions as a built in safeguard against intergenerational poverty, preventing the crystallization of a permanent underclass.²¹ Unlike many Ancient Near Eastern systems, Israelite law refuses to allow debt to define a person's future indefinitely.

This concern is reinforced in Deuteronomy 15, where release is accompanied not merely by freedom but by material provision. The former slave is not expelled empty handed but supplied with resources necessary to reenter economic life. This provision presupposes that the goal of servitude is restoration rather than perpetual dependence.²²

Archaeological and comparative evidence supports this reading. Middle Assyrian and Babylonian laws permit indefinite debt slavery and severe corporal punishment with little recourse for the enslaved.²³ Israelite law, by contrast, consistently narrows the scope of permissible authority. The economic function of slavery is retained, but its most destructive tendencies are curtailed.

Jewish scholars have emphasized that this framework reflects a moral response to economic fragility rather than an endorsement of inequality. Nahum Sarna noted that the Torah recognizes poverty as a structural reality of the ancient world and seeks to mitigate its effects

²⁰ Raymond Westbrook, "Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70 (1994): 1631–1634.

²¹ Milgrom, Leviticus 23–27, 2160–2164.

²² Deut 15:13–14; Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 332–336.

²³ Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 79–85.

through law rather than deny its existence.²⁴ Similarly, Moshe Weinfeld argued that Israelite social legislation represents an ethic of compassion embedded within legal form, aiming to preserve life and dignity in a world of scarcity.²⁵

Understanding slavery as a survival institution does not sanitize its hardship. Servitude involved loss of autonomy and dependence upon another household. Yet within the ancient Near Eastern context, it often represented the difference between life and death. Biblical law does not celebrate this reality, but it addresses it with realism and restraint.

This economic grounding is essential for evaluating subsequent legal material. Without recognizing the fragility of ancient life, modern readers risk interpreting slavery laws as moral endorsements rather than pragmatic responses to a world in which survival itself was uncertain. Biblical servitude emerges not as an ideal institution but as a constrained solution to human vulnerability.

IV. Debt Servitude and Temporal Limitation in Israelite Law

Debt servitude represents the most common form of slavery addressed in the Hebrew Bible. Far from depicting slavery as a static or permanent condition, Israelite law frames servitude as a temporary response to economic collapse, carefully regulated to prevent irreversible loss of status or identity. This temporal framing marks a decisive departure from many Ancient Near Eastern legal traditions, in which debt slavery often resulted in permanent alienation.

Exodus 21:2 establishes the foundational principle governing Hebrew debt servitude: a Hebrew slave serves for six years and is released in the seventh without payment. The language

²⁴ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1966), 187–189.

²⁵ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 45–52.

of the text is unambiguous. Freedom is not earned through repayment but mandated by law. The slave's release is grounded not in economic productivity but in legal obligation. This provision interrupts the natural logic of debt, which in the ancient world typically accumulated across generations.²⁶

The six year limitation is not merely pragmatic but theological. The seventh year echoes Israel's broader sabbatical structure, embedding debt servitude within a rhythm of restraint and restoration. Just as the land rests, so too does the laborer. This sabbatical logic resists the commodification of human labor by imposing divinely ordained limits on economic control.²⁷ Jacob Milgrom argued that this rhythm functions as a safeguard against systemic inequality, preventing the emergence of a permanent servile class.²⁸

Deuteronomy 15 expands this principle by addressing the conditions of release. The departing slave is not to be sent away empty handed but is to be supplied generously from the master's resources. This requirement transforms manumission into reintegration. The former slave is equipped to reenter economic life rather than forced back into vulnerability.²⁹

Christopher Wright has emphasized that this provision reflects a moral vision in which freedom without means is insufficient, as it merely perpetuates cycles of poverty.³⁰

The rationale for these laws is explicitly grounded in historical memory. Israel's own experience of slavery in Egypt functions as the ethical foundation for debt release. The command to remember is juridical rather than sentimental. Memory becomes law. By tying social

²⁶ Raymond Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 35–38.

²⁷ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 67–71.

²⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2160–2165.

²⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 333–337.

³⁰ Sarna, *Exodus*, 54–56.

legislation to historical trauma, the Torah transforms past suffering into a constraint on present power.

Exodus 21:5–6 introduces the possibility of voluntary permanent service, a text frequently misunderstood as evidence of coercive enslavement. Yet the passage presupposes choice rather than compulsion. The slave explicitly declares unwillingness to leave, citing attachment to household stability. The ritual marking at the doorway symbolizes incorporation rather than degradation. Scholars have long noted that this provision reflects the harsh realities of ancient economic life, where security within a household could outweigh the risks of independent survival.³¹

Raymond Westbrook cautioned against reading this passage through modern assumptions of freedom and autonomy. In a world without economic safety nets, continued servitude could represent a rational and even desirable option. The law does not force permanence but permits it, thereby preserving agency within constraint.³²

Comparative Ancient Near Eastern material highlights the distinctiveness of Israelite practice. Mesopotamian law codes allow for indefinite debt servitude and often extend liability to family members. By contrast, Israelite law repeatedly interrupts the logic of debt accumulation

³¹ A paradigmatic biblical illustration of this dynamic appears in Gen 47:13–26. During the Egyptian famine, the population voluntarily relinquishes property, land, and ultimately personal servitude to Joseph in exchange for grain, declaring, “You have saved our lives” (Gen 47:25). The arrangement results not in extermination but in a structured agrarian system in which the populace retains seed and pays a fixed fifth (שֵׁנִי) to Pharaoh. The narrative presents this transaction not as coercive chattelization but as life-preserving economic restructuring within catastrophic conditions. While descriptive rather than prescriptive, the episode demonstrates that self-sale in the ancient Near East could function as a survival mechanism that preserved both life and social continuity. See Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 321–324; John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 690–695.

³² Raymond Westbrook, “Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70 (1994): 1631–1676.

through mandated release. Martha Roth observed that such limitations are exceptional within the broader legal landscape of the ancient Near East.³³

These laws do not eliminate inequality, nor do they romanticize servitude. They acknowledge economic vulnerability as a persistent feature of ancient life while refusing to allow that vulnerability to become permanent social erasure. Debt servitude in Israel is thus framed as a temporary condition oriented toward restoration rather than a terminal status defined by loss of personhood.

Understanding this legal framework is essential for evaluating biblical slavery on its own terms. Without recognizing the centrality of temporal limitation and release, modern critiques risk mischaracterizing Israelite law as endorsing systems it actively sought to restrain.

V. Foreign Slaves, Legal Protection, and the Limits of Ownership

The treatment of foreign slaves in biblical law has often been cited as the clearest evidence that Israelite slavery constituted chattel ownership analogous to later systems of exploitation. Leviticus 25:44–46 is frequently isolated from its legal and theological context and presented as proof that the Hebrew Bible endorses permanent ownership of non Israelites. Such readings, however, overlook the broader legal constraints imposed upon slaveholding and misunderstand the nature of “property” within Israel’s covenantal framework.³⁴

Leviticus 25 distinguishes between Israelite debt servants and foreign slaves, permitting the latter to be acquired from surrounding nations. This distinction reflects sociopolitical realities rather than racial hierarchy. Israelite law presumes that covenant members

³³ Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, 54–57; Roth, *Law Collections*, 79–85.

³⁴ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2167–2172.

possess an inalienable identity tied to land inheritance and kinship, whereas foreigners lack this structural protection.³⁵

The difference, therefore, is covenantal and economic, not ontological. Foreign slaves are not depicted as less human, but as existing outside Israel's land based kinship system. A significant tension remains in Leviticus 25:44–46, where non-Israelite slaves may be acquired and held “as a possession” (נִקְחָהּ). Some interpreters argue that this language represents an endorsement of conventional chattel slavery. Yet even here the broader theological framework of the chapter must be maintained. The same chapter that permits foreign servitude also declares unequivocally that “the land is mine” (Lev 25:23) and that Israelites themselves are YHWH's servants (25:55). The legislation does not eliminate hierarchy, but it embeds it within divine ownership and covenantal accountability. Authority remains real, but it is not ultimate.³⁶ For modern readers shaped by post-Enlightenment notions of universal autonomy, the permission of permanent foreign servitude in Leviticus 25:44–46 remains morally unsettling and demands careful contextual analysis rather than dismissal.

Even within this category, Israelite law imposes significant restrictions. Foreign slaves are included in Sabbath rest, a provision without parallel in other Ancient Near Eastern law codes.³⁷ Sabbath inclusion affirms that rest is not a privilege of ethnicity or status but a theological right grounded in creation and redemption. The slave's participation in Sabbath observance implicitly affirms shared humanity under divine authority.

Legal protections further limit the master's authority. Exodus 21:20–27 establishes accountability for bodily harm inflicted upon slaves. Injury resulting in permanent damage

³⁵ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 86–90.

³⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 3B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2170–2180; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 38–45.

³⁷ Roth, *Law Collections*, 79–85.

mandates emancipation, regardless of the slave's origin. This provision sharply contrasts with Mesopotamian law, where masters faced little or no consequence for injuring slaves. Torah thus restricts violence in a manner that presupposes the slave's bodily dignity and legal standing.

Perhaps most striking is the prohibition against returning escaped slaves found in Deuteronomy 23:15–16. This law has no clear parallel in the Ancient Near East. Whereas other legal systems demanded the return of runaway slaves under penalty of severe punishment, Israelite law commands the opposite. The escaped slave is to be allowed to reside freely “in the place he chooses,” without oppression.³⁸ Raymond Westbrook described this provision as “without precedent” and indicative of a moral ceiling placed upon slaveholding authority.³⁹

This law is particularly significant because it applies without qualification. The text does not distinguish between Israelite and foreign slaves, nor does it require investigation into the master's conduct. The presumption favors protection of the vulnerable rather than preservation of property claims. Such a provision resists any interpretation of biblical slavery as absolute ownership.

The language of “property” itself must be carefully examined. In biblical law, ownership does not imply unrestricted dominion. Land, Israel's most valued economic asset, ultimately belongs to YHWH. Humans possess land as stewards rather than absolute owners.⁴⁰ This theological principle extends to all forms of possession. Masters are accountable for how they exercise authority over those within their household, including slaves.⁴¹

³⁸ Deut 23:15–16.

³⁹ Westbrook, “Slave and Master,” 1643–1646.

⁴⁰ Lev 25:23.

⁴¹ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 3B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2148–2154. Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 120–124.

Jewish scholarship has emphasized that foreign slaves were incorporated into the household economy rather than treated as disposable labor. Nahum Sarna noted that the household in ancient Israel functioned as a moral unit governed by covenantal norms, even when its members were not ethnically Israelite.⁴² Jacob Milgrom similarly argued that the Torah’s legal constraints are designed to prevent the reduction of any human being to mere commodity, regardless of origin.⁴³

None of this denies that foreign slaves occupied a more vulnerable position than Israelite debt servants. The biblical text acknowledges this asymmetry. Yet it simultaneously places boundaries around that vulnerability, limiting the master’s power and affirming the slave’s humanity. Foreign slavery in Israel thus reflects a system of constrained authority rather than unqualified ownership.

Evaluated within its ancient Near Eastern context, Israelite law emerges not as an endorsement of exploitation but as a significant moral departure from prevailing norms. While it does not abolish slavery, it consistently resists its most destructive expressions, subordinating economic power to theological accountability.

VI. Property, Stewardship, and Covenant Responsibility

Modern discussions of biblical slavery often hinge on the claim that slaves are described as “property,” and therefore that biblical law endorses ownership of persons in a manner analogous to modern chattel slavery. This conclusion, however, rests on a failure to account for the nature of property within Israel’s covenantal worldview. In the Hebrew Bible, property is

⁴² Sarna, *Exodus*, 115–117.

⁴³ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2173–2176.

never absolute. All possession exists under divine ownership, and human authority is consistently framed as stewardship rather than unrestricted dominion.⁴⁴

This theological framework is articulated most clearly in Leviticus 25:23, where YHWH declares that the land cannot be sold permanently because it belongs to Him alone. Humans are described as *תושבי־הארץ*, resident dependents rather than autonomous owners. The land, Israel's most valuable economic asset, is thus held conditionally. This principle relativizes all claims of ownership and establishes accountability as a defining feature of possession.⁴⁵

While Leviticus 25 employs standard acquisition language such as *קנה* and speaks of *אֲדָמָה* as landed possession, the chapter simultaneously subordinates all human claims to divine sovereignty. The declaration *כִּי־לִי הָאָרֶץ* (“for the land is mine,” Lev 25:23) relativizes ownership and prevents its absolutization. Possession in this context functions within a covenantal framework of accountability rather than autonomous control. Property is not redefined lexically as responsibility, but it is legally and theologically bounded by divine claim. Human authority over land, labor, or persons therefore operates as stewardship under YHWH rather than as unrestricted dominion.

The implications for slavery are significant. If land itself cannot be absolutely owned, neither can human beings created in the image of God. While slaves are described as belonging to a household, this belonging must be understood within a framework of responsibility rather than ontological possession. Masters are accountable for the treatment of slaves in ways that sharply limit their authority.⁴⁶ Injury to a slave resulting in permanent bodily harm requires immediate emancipation, a legal consequence incompatible with absolute ownership.⁴⁷

⁴⁴ Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, 61–64.

⁴⁵ Lev 25:23; Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2148–2151.

⁴⁶ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 92–97.

⁴⁷ Exod 21:26–27.

Raymond Westbrook emphasized that biblical property law operates through relational obligation rather than unrestricted control.⁴⁸ Possession entails duties, and failure to fulfill those duties results in legal consequences. This logic extends throughout Israelite law. Power is tolerated but constrained. Authority exists but is never autonomous.

The household structure further reinforces this point. In ancient Israel, the household was not merely an economic unit but a moral community governed by divine law. Slaves were incorporated into this community, participating in Sabbath rest, religious festivals, and household rhythms.⁴⁹ This integration does not erase hierarchy, but it does resist the reduction of persons to commodities. The slave exists within a moral economy rather than a purely economic one.

Jewish scholarship has consistently highlighted this dynamic. Moshe Weinfeld argued that Israelite social legislation reflects an ethic of responsibility rooted in covenant rather than contractual exchange.⁵⁰ Jacob Milgrom similarly noted that biblical law seeks to prevent the absolutization of power by embedding economic relations within a theological framework of accountability.⁵¹ The master's authority is real, but it is always provisional and answerable to divine judgment.

Christian scholars have echoed these conclusions. Christopher Wright emphasized that biblical ethics operates within a framework of redeemed relationships rather than abstract moral ideals. Slavery laws, therefore, must be read as part of a broader system aimed at preserving life and dignity in a fallen world.⁵² Paul Copan likewise argued that Israelite slavery reflects “damage

⁴⁸ Westbrook, *Property and the Family*, 7–12.

⁴⁹ Exod 12:44; Deut 16:11–14.

⁵⁰ Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 34–38.

⁵¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2176–2180.

⁵² Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 336–341.

control” rather than moral endorsement, functioning to restrain abuse rather than legitimize domination.⁵³

The concept of stewardship also clarifies why biblical law addresses slavery without abolishing it outright. The Torah does not seek to dismantle every broken structure of ancient life but to place moral limits upon them. By framing possession as stewardship, it resists the dehumanization inherent in absolute ownership while acknowledging economic realities that could not be undone by legislation alone.

Understanding property as stewardship rather than ownership is therefore essential for evaluating biblical slavery. Without this framework, modern readers risk misreading legal language as moral endorsement and mistaking regulated responsibility for unrestrained control. The Hebrew Bible consistently subordinates human authority to divine ownership, ensuring that power remains bounded and accountable.

VII. Violence, Legal Accountability, and the Protection of the Vulnerable

One of the clearest indicators that biblical slavery cannot be equated with unrestricted chattel ownership is the Torah’s treatment of violence against slaves. In Ancient Near Eastern legal systems, the use of physical force against slaves was largely unregulated, and injury or death often carried little consequence for the master. Israelite law departs sharply from this norm by imposing legal accountability for harm inflicted upon enslaved persons, thereby affirming their bodily integrity and moral value.⁵⁴

⁵³ Paul Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 119–125.

⁵⁴ Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, 66–69.

Exodus 21:20–21 addresses the case of a master who strikes a slave, resulting in death. While the passage has generated considerable debate, its core legal principle is unmistakable: the killing of a slave is subject to punishment. The very presence of penalty language distinguishes Israelite law from surrounding cultures, where slaves were treated as expendable property.⁵⁵ The text assumes that the slave's life possesses value that cannot be violated without consequence.

Exodus 21:26–27 goes further by mandating emancipation for injury resulting in permanent bodily harm. The loss of an eye or tooth, representative injuries rather than an exhaustive list, triggers immediate release. This law functions as a powerful constraint on violence. Permanent injury is incompatible with continued servitude. Such a provision presupposes that the slave's body is inviolable beyond certain limits, and that violation of those limits nullifies the master's authority.⁵⁶

Raymond Westbrook observed that this law is virtually unparalleled in Ancient Near Eastern jurisprudence.⁵⁷ In Mesopotamian law codes, bodily injury to a slave was typically compensated monetarily, if at all, reflecting the slave's status as economic property. Israelite law, by contrast, prioritizes the slave's freedom over financial compensation, signaling that bodily harm disrupts the moral legitimacy of ownership claims.

The protection of slaves from violence is reinforced by Sabbath legislation. Slaves are explicitly included in the command to rest on the seventh day.⁵⁸ This inclusion functions as a structural limitation on exploitation. Regular rest is not contingent upon productivity or status but is grounded in divine command. The Sabbath thus operates as a recurring interruption of economic dominance, reminding both master and slave that labor does not define human worth.

⁵⁵ Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law*, 89–92.

⁵⁶ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2180–2183.

⁵⁷ Westbrook, "Slave and Master," 1640–1644.

⁵⁸ Exod 20:10; Deut 5:14.

Deuteronomy 23:15–16 further extends protection by prohibiting the return of escaped slaves. This law is striking precisely because it prioritizes the welfare of the vulnerable over the property rights of the master. Unlike other Ancient Near Eastern systems, which treated runaway slaves as criminals to be returned and punished, Israelite law commands that the escaped slave be allowed to remain freely and without oppression.⁵⁹ This provision presupposes that escape may reflect abuse and that the slave's safety outweighs the master's claim.

Jewish interpreters have long recognized the radical nature of this command. Nahum Sarna noted that the law represents a moral inversion of prevailing norms, privileging compassion over economic loss.⁶⁰ Jacob Milgrom similarly argued that the provision reflects the Torah's broader concern to prevent unchecked domination, especially where power differentials are extreme.⁶¹

Taken together, these laws establish a pattern of accountability that undermines any notion of absolute ownership. Masters possess authority, but that authority is conditional and revocable. Violence nullifies legitimacy. Injury terminates servitude. Escape is protected rather than punished. These constraints collectively affirm that slaves in Israelite law are not disposable objects but persons whose vulnerability demands legal protection.

This emphasis on bodily integrity aligns with the Torah's broader ethical vision. Human beings are consistently portrayed as accountable moral agents created under divine authority. Even within systems of hierarchy and inequality, the law insists that power be exercised within limits. Slavery, though permitted, is hedged about with protections that resist its most dehumanizing tendencies.

⁵⁹ Roth, *Law Collections*, 90–93.

⁶⁰ Sarna, *Exodus*, 157–159.

⁶¹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2184–2186.

Understanding these legal constraints is essential for evaluating biblical slavery on its own terms. Without attending to the Torah's concern for violence and accountability, modern critiques risk mistaking regulated authority for unrestricted domination and overlooking the moral boundaries that define Israelite law.

VIII. Comparative Ancient Near Eastern Law and Moral Trajectory

A proper evaluation of biblical slavery requires comparison with contemporaneous legal systems of the ancient Near East. Israel did not develop its legal traditions in isolation but within a shared cultural and juridical environment that included Mesopotamian, Assyrian, and Hittite law codes. Comparison does not function here to excuse Israelite practice, but to clarify its distinctive features and ethical orientation. When viewed alongside these systems, Israelite slavery law reveals a consistent pattern of restraint, limitation, and moral accountability.⁶²

The Code of Hammurabi provides a useful point of comparison. While it regulates slavery extensively, it does so primarily to protect property interests rather than the welfare of slaves themselves. Physical injury to a slave is typically addressed through financial compensation to the owner rather than concern for the injured individual.⁶³ The slave's body is treated as economic capital rather than a bearer of intrinsic dignity. In contrast, Israelite law mandates emancipation for permanent bodily injury, privileging the slave's freedom over the master's financial loss.⁶⁴ Unlike Mesopotamian law codes, where manumission and debt release

⁶² Westbrook, *Studies in Biblical and Cuneiform Law*, 1–6.

⁶³ Roth, *Law Collections*, 71–78.

⁶⁴ Exodus 21:26–27.

provisions function primarily as economic stabilizers without theological grounding, Israel's legislation roots servitude in covenant identity and divine ownership.⁶⁵

Middle Assyrian Laws further illustrate the contrast. These codes permit extreme corporal punishment and sexual exploitation of slaves with minimal restriction. Runaway slaves are to be returned and punished, and those who assist them face severe penalties.⁶⁶ Against this background, Deuteronomy's prohibition against returning escaped slaves stands out as an ethical anomaly. The law prioritizes the safety of the vulnerable over the preservation of economic order, a reversal virtually unknown in ancient jurisprudence.

Raymond Westbrook emphasized that Israelite law consistently limits the reach of debt slavery in ways unparalleled elsewhere in the ancient Near East.⁶⁷ Whereas Mesopotamian systems allowed debt servitude to become permanent and hereditary, Israelite law repeatedly interrupts this trajectory through mandated release and provision. These interruptions prevent the formation of a permanent slave class and reflect a resistance to the absolutization of economic power.

Importantly, Israelite law does not abolish slavery. To frame it as an abolitionist text would itself be anachronistic. Instead, the Torah operates within the realities of ancient economic life while embedding them within a moral narrative shaped by covenant, memory, and divine ownership. The ethical force of biblical slavery law lies not in the elimination of hierarchy but in the limitation of harm and the preservation of personhood within hierarchy.

⁶⁵ Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 79–85; Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 120–124.

⁶⁶ Deut 23:15–16; Westbrook, "Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70 (1994): 1643–1646.

⁶⁷ Westbrook, *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 35–42.

Jewish scholars have long recognized this dynamic. Moshe Weinfeld argued that Israelite social legislation reflects a distinctive concern for the weak, grounded not in philosophical abstraction but in theological commitment.⁶⁸ Jacob Milgrom similarly emphasized that biblical law consistently moves toward the protection of life and dignity without dismantling every existing social structure.⁶⁹ This approach reflects realism rather than moral indifference.

Christian scholarship has often described this pattern as moral trajectory or redemptive movement, though such language must be used carefully. Christopher Wright cautioned against reading biblical law as a linear progression toward modern ethics, instead emphasizing its role as a covenantal response to historical conditions.⁷⁰ Paul Copan has argued that Israelite slavery laws function as moral “speed bumps,” restraining abuse within an otherwise brutal ancient world.⁷¹ While the terminology differs, the consensus across traditions is that biblical slavery represents ethical restraint rather than endorsement of exploitation.

The comparative evidence therefore challenges simplistic moral critiques. When measured against its ancient context, Israelite slavery law emerges as a system that consistently resists the most dehumanizing aspects of servitude. It limits duration, restricts violence, mandates rest, protects escapees, and subordinates ownership to divine accountability. These features do not render the system ideal, but they do mark it as ethically distinct.

Understanding this comparative framework is essential for any serious moral evaluation of biblical slavery. Without it, the text is judged by standards it never claimed to meet and criticized for failing to abolish structures that no ancient society possessed the conceptual or

⁶⁸ Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 110–118.

⁶⁹ Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27*, 2187–2192.

⁷⁰ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 351–357.

⁷¹ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 126–133

economic tools to dismantle. Biblical law speaks into its own world, and within that world, it represents a significant moral intervention.

IX. Theological Foundations: Covenant, Memory, and Divine Ownership

Biblical slavery legislation cannot be fully understood apart from the theological framework in which it is embedded. Israelite law does not operate as a secular legal system but as covenantal instruction shaped by Israel's relationship to YHWH. This theological context profoundly shapes the contours of servitude, transforming it from an expression of absolute human authority into a regulated relationship accountable to divine ownership.⁷²

At the center of this framework lies the conviction that YHWH alone is the ultimate owner of all things. This claim is not abstract but juridical. Psalm 24:1 asserts that the entirety of the world belongs to YHWH, while Leviticus 25:23 applies this principle concretely to land tenure. Human beings hold possessions conditionally, as stewards rather than sovereigns. This theology relativizes all human claims to ownership, including claims over labor and persons.⁷³

This theological relativization is especially significant in the context of slavery. While masters exercise real authority, that authority is derivative and limited. The slave does not ultimately belong to the master but exists under the same divine sovereignty. Jacob Milgrom argued that this theological premise prevents the absolutization of power by embedding all social relationships within a structure of accountability.⁷⁴ Slavery, therefore, is not a sphere exempt from moral scrutiny but one in which divine oversight is explicitly operative.

⁷² Barton, *Ethics in Ancient Israel*, 70–73.

⁷³ Ps 24:1; Lev 25:23; Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice*, 120–124.

⁷⁴ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 23–27: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Yale Bible 3B (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 2148–2154, 2192–2196.

Covenantal memory further constrains the exercise of authority. Israel's experience of slavery in Egypt is repeatedly invoked as the moral foundation for social legislation. This appeal is not rhetorical but normative. Deuteronomy 5:15 and 15:15 explicitly ground ethical obligations toward servants in Israel's own history of oppression. Memory functions as law, shaping behavior by transforming historical suffering into moral responsibility.⁷⁵

Nahum Sarna emphasized that this appeal to memory distinguishes biblical law from other Ancient Near Eastern systems, which rarely ground legal obligation in collective historical experience.⁷⁶ In Israel, law is not merely pragmatic regulation but moral pedagogy. The past is not forgotten but institutionalized as ethical restraint.

The covenantal framework also explains why biblical law prioritizes restoration over retribution. Slavery exists within a narrative that moves from bondage to liberation. The Exodus serves as both historical event and theological paradigm, shaping Israel's understanding of freedom, authority, and redemption. Even when slavery is permitted, it is never severed from this redemptive horizon.⁷⁷

Christian scholars have often noted that this theological structure resists reduction to legal formalism. Christopher Wright argued that Israelite ethics must be read narratively rather than atomistically. Laws concerning slavery are intelligible only within the broader story of a redeemed people called to reflect divine character within historical constraints.⁷⁸ Paul Copan

⁷⁵ Deut 5:15; 15:15; Nahum M. Sarna, *Exodus*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 54–57.

⁷⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis*, Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 325–327; Raymond Westbrook, “The Economic Role of the State in the Biblical World,” in *Property and the Family in Biblical Law* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991), 79–83.

⁷⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 182–186.

⁷⁸ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 351–357.

similarly observed that biblical slavery laws reflect divine accommodation to fallen social realities while simultaneously subverting their most destructive tendencies.⁷⁹

This theological dimension does not eliminate the tension inherent in slavery legislation. The text does not resolve every moral difficulty, nor does it claim to establish an ideal social order. Instead, it situates slavery within a framework of divine ownership, covenantal memory, and moral accountability that consistently limits human power. Authority is tolerated but never absolutized.

Theological grounding thus completes the ethical portrait of biblical slavery. What emerges is not a system of unchecked domination but a constrained institution shaped by divine sovereignty and historical consciousness. Slavery, as regulated in the Hebrew Bible, exists within boundaries that reflect concern for life, dignity, and responsibility in a world marked by economic fragility.

X. Conclusion: Slavery, Survival, and Moral Responsibility in Ancient Israel

This study has argued that biblical slavery cannot be responsibly evaluated apart from the historical, economic, legal, and theological world in which it functioned. Modern moral objections often proceed from categories shaped by post-Enlightenment assumptions and the horrors of race-based chattel slavery, categories that do not map cleanly onto the realities of the ancient Near East. When those categories are imposed uncritically upon the Hebrew Bible, the result is moral condemnation without historical understanding.

Ancient Israel existed within a fragile subsistence economy marked by chronic vulnerability. In the absence of welfare systems, institutional charity, or economic mobility,

⁷⁹ Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster? Making Sense of the Old Testament God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 134–139.

poverty frequently threatened life itself. Within this context, servitude functioned as a survival mechanism, providing food, shelter, and protection when alternatives were few or nonexistent. Biblical law does not deny the harshness of this reality, but it confronts it by regulating servitude rather than ignoring or idealizing it.⁸⁰

A close reading of the Hebrew text demonstrates that slavery in Israel was not conceived as absolute ownership of persons. The semantic range of עֶבֶד, the consistent limitation of authority, and the retention of moral agency all point toward a system of constrained hierarchy rather than dehumanizing domination. Temporal limits on debt servitude, mandated release, and provision upon manumission interrupt the logic of perpetual indebtedness and resist the formation of a permanent slave class.⁸¹

The legal protections afforded to slaves further undermine any equation of biblical slavery with later chattel systems. Accountability for violence, emancipation for bodily injury, Sabbath inclusion, and the unprecedented protection of escaped slaves collectively establish a moral ceiling on slaveholding authority. These constraints are not incidental but systematic, revealing a legal framework concerned with preserving life and dignity within unequal social arrangements.⁸²

Comparative analysis confirms that Israelite law represents a significant departure from prevailing Ancient Near Eastern norms. While it does not abolish slavery, it consistently limits its most destructive expressions. Scholars across Jewish, Christian, and secular traditions have

⁸⁰ Bruce J. Malina, *The New Testament World: Insights from Cultural Anthropology*, 3rd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001), 87–96.

⁸¹ Westbrook, “Slave and Master in Ancient Near Eastern Law,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 70 (1994): 1639–1646.

⁸² Moshe Weinfeld, *Social Justice in Ancient Israel and in the Ancient Near East* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1995), 110–118; Martha T. Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, 2nd ed. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), 71–85.

recognized that Israelite social legislation reflects an ethic of restraint rather than endorsement, realism rather than moral indifference.

At the theological level, biblical slavery is embedded within a covenantal worldview that relativizes all human ownership claims. Ultimate possession belongs to YHWH alone. Human authority, whether over land, labor, or persons, is provisional and accountable. Israel's historical memory of slavery in Egypt functions as a juridical restraint, transforming past oppression into present moral responsibility. Slavery is thus never abstracted from theology or narrative, but always situated within a story that moves from bondage toward liberation.⁸³

None of this requires the modern reader to approve of slavery or to deny its moral tension. The Hebrew Bible itself does not present slavery as an ideal social arrangement. Rather, it addresses slavery as a tragic but unavoidable feature of ancient life, seeking to regulate it in ways that preserve human dignity and prevent irreversible harm. To demand abolition within an ancient world lacking the economic and conceptual tools to sustain it is to ask the text to answer questions it was never positioned to address.

A historically responsible reading of biblical slavery, therefore, neither excuses suffering nor condemns the text through anachronism. It recognizes that within its ancient context, Israelite law represents a moral intervention aimed at survival, responsibility, and restraint. Slavery in the Hebrew Bible is not a celebration of domination but a constrained response to human vulnerability in a fallen world. This does not render Israelite servitude morally ideal by modern standards, but it demonstrates that its legal form operated within a framework of limitation, accountability, and theological restraint rather than unchecked domination.

⁸³ Sarna, *Exodus*, 54–57.

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