

Lanier Theological Library

Dr. Peter Williams

"Does the Bible Support Slavery?"

How many of you think
slavery is morally alright?

How many of you think
military draft can be morally
alright?

How many of you think that
lifers might morally be
obliged to work?

Which definition of slavery?

Slavery =

- The institutions we all know about
- Historic definition

Slavery =

- Abstracted definition
- E.g. permanent obligation to work for someone

My thesis: using most common definition of slavery, the Bible does not support it

Atheist Sam Harris



- “In assessing the moral wisdom of the Bible, it is useful to consider moral questions that have been solved to everyone’s satisfaction. Consider the question of slavery. The entire civilized world now agrees that slavery is an abomination. What moral instruction do we get from the God of Abraham on this subject? Consult the Bible, and you will discover that the creator of the universe clearly expects us to keep slaves:”

Sam Harris quotes:

- “As for your male and female slaves whom you may have: you may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are round about you. You may also buy from among the strangers who sojourn with you and their families 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 brethren the people of Israel you shall not rule, one over another, with harshness” (Leviticus 25:44-46 RSV)

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Prima Facie problem

- 1) Bible translations talk of slaves
- 2) In the OT no objection is made to having slaves
- 3) In the NT Christians are not commanded to free their slaves and slaves are told to submit
- 4) Therefore biblical texts approve of slavery
- 5) We know that slavery is wrong
- 6) Therefore biblical texts approve of something that is wrong

But first, the one Hebrew word you need for this lecture:

עֶבֶד

Pronounced: *eved*

Written: *‘ebed* or *‘eved*

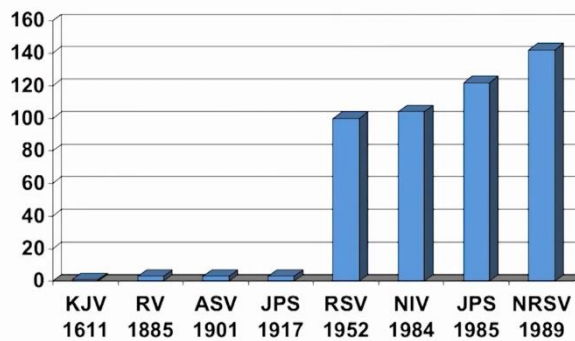
Plural: *‘avadim*

1. Translation

Occurrences of 'Slave'

- *Slave*:
 - KJV 2×; NKJV 46×; NIV 130×; NRSV 166×
 - JPS 1917 3×; JPS 1985 135×
- *Sklave/in*:
 - Luther Bibel 1912 0×; Revised Luther Bibel 1984 70×; Elberfelder 1993 161× + *Sklaverei* 4×
- *esclavo or esclava*:
 - Reina-Valera 1909 4×; 1960 25×; 1995 65×

Growth in occurrences of 'slave' in translations of the Old Testament



Jeremiah 2:14

- KJV 1611: *Is Israel a servant* [עֶבֶד]?
is he a homeborn slave [יְלִיד בְּיַת?]
- NRSV 1989: *Is Israel a slave* [עֶבֶד]?
Is he a homeborn servant [יְלִיד בְּיַת?]

Finnish

	Exodus 21:2	Deut. 5:15	Josh. 1:1	Isaiah 52:13	Gal. 3:28	Eph. 6:5
1776	Orja	Orja	Palvelia	Palvelia	Orja	Orja
1933/38	Orja	Orja	Palvelija	Palvelija	Ojra	Orja
1992	Orja	Orja	Palvelija	Palvelija	Orja	Palvelija

Other languages

	Exod. 21:2	Deut. 5:15	Josh. 1:1	Isaiah 52:13	Gal. 3:28	Eph. 6:5
Swedish 1917	träl	träl	tjänare	tjänare	träl	tjänare
Russian Synodal 1917	pa6	pa6	pa6	pa6	pa6	pa6
Hungarian Karoli	szolga	szolga	szolga	szolga	szolga	szolga

Leviticus 25:42

- RSV: For they are my servants (עֲבָדַי), whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves (עֶבֶד).

עֲבָדַי I 802.13.78.58 n.m. **slave, servant**—עֶבֶד; cstr. עֲבָדִים; pl. עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים; sf. עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים; cstr. עֲבָדִים; sf. עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים, עֲבָדִים.

1. **slave, servant of household or person** (Gn 14:15 24:2+12:26 15:19 25:32 32:17 39:17 41:12 50:2 Ex 21:5 20:26 27:32 Lv 25:39 Dt 5:14 12:12 15:17 16:11 23:16 Jg 6:27 1 S 8:16 25:10 30:13 2 S 9:2 12:1 K 2:39 39:40 40:2 K 6:3 Is 24:2 Jr 2:14 34:9 10:11 11:16 16: Ezk 46:17 | 1 3z Ml 1 6 Ps 123:2 Bn 3:19 7:2 19:16 31:13 Pr 12:9 [perh. at table, i.e. waiter]* 17:2 29:19 21 30:10 Ec 7:21 Ezr 2:68 | Ne 7:67 1 C 2:34 35 Si 7:20 | C 1:21 10:25 25 30:34 35 36 39 39 42:5 1 Q 5 9 22 4 Q Ways 12:2 CD 11:12 Bene Hezir tomb inscr. 2[AHL] Kh. Qumran ost. 1:14 Bullae 321 [Hebron, 8th/7th cent.] 1182 1183 1184 [all three 8th cent.] Seals 65 67 [Palestine] 68 [Megiddo] 141 [all four 8th cent.] 962 [8th cent.], mentioned together with other posses-

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The resulting mismatch with the semantics of *'ebed*

Riesener's conclusion

- 'A dynamic relational term ... The person marked with this root is characterized as dependent on their relational partner'
 - 'ein *dynamischer Relationsbegriff* ... Der so Bezeichnete wird damit als *abhängig* von seinem jeweiligen Bezugspartner charakterisiert ...' (Ingrid Riesener, *Der Stamm עבד im Alten Testament: eine Wortuntersuchung unter Berücksichtigung neuerer sprachwissenschaftlicher Methoden* [BZAW 149; Berlin: De Gruyter, 1979], pp. 268–69).

Belonging to Shema the *'eved* of Jeroboam



The word *'eved*

- Translated both 'servant' and 'slave'
- Not inherently negative
- Related to work
- Subservient
- Israel: subjects are 'servants' of the king
- Ancient Near East: king is 'servant' of deity

Problems with the modern word 'slave' in translations of the OT

- Irredeemably negative vs. term with no necessary negative connotation
- Generally leads to inconsistency in translation
- It is hard for readers not to read OT in light of subsequent slave systems (Greece, Rome, North American)

2. The essence of the OT institution

The patriarchal system

- Work: herdsmen, domestic servants
- Eliezer of Damascus will inherit (Genesis 15:3), children of Bilhah and Zilpah inherit
- Children of Hagar, Bilhah, and Zilpah are free
- Trusted
 - To travel with valuables (Genesis 24)
 - with weapons (Genesis 14:14)
- No approved 'selling' of people
- **But** Abraham 'acquired' people in exchange for silver

Slave systems compared

Conditions

	OT	Roman	New World
Holiday	Yes	No	Yes
Food enough	Yes	No	No
Legal redress	Yes	No	No
Sexual protection	Yes	No	No
Kidnapped	No	Yes	Yes
Chains	No	Yes	Yes
Torture	No	Yes	Yes
Physical abuse	No	Yes	Yes

Runaways

- Bible: “You shall not give up to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. He shall dwell with you, in your midst, in the place that he shall choose within one of your towns, wherever it suits him.” (Deuteronomy 23:15–16 ESV)
- Ante-bellum South USA: failure to deliver back escaped slave of suffer 6 months prison and fine of \$1000

The Lawcode of Hammurabi

- “If any one find runaway male or female slaves in the open country and bring them to their masters, the master of the slaves shall pay him two shekels of silver.” (Law 17)



South Carolina law of 1740

- V. And it shall be further enacted by the authority aforesaid, That if any slave who shall be out of the house or plantation where such slave shall live, or shall be usually employed, or without some whiter person in company with such slave, shall refuse to submit or undergo the examination of any white person, it shall be lawful for any such white person to pursue, apprehend, and moderately correct such slave; and if any such slave shall assault and stricke such white person, such slave may be lawfully killed.

Transcription from McCord, David J., ed. *The Statutes at Large of South Carolina*. Vol. 7, Containing the Acts Relating to Charleston, Courts, Slaves, and Rivers. Columbia, SC: A.S. Johnston, 1840, p. 397.€

Does Exodus 21 treat slaves as chattel?

- 18 “When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, 19 then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed. 20 “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be avenged. 21 But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, for the slave is his money. [... 4 verses later ...] 26 “When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free because of his eye. 27 If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free because of his tooth.

Correctly interpreting ‘for’/‘because’

- 25 “But if in the open country a man meets a young woman who is betrothed, and the man seizes her and lies with her, then only the man who lay with her shall die. 26 But you shall do nothing to the young woman; she has committed no offense punishable by death. For this case is like that of a man attacking and murdering his neighbor, 27 because he met her in the open country, and though the betrothed young woman cried for help there was no one to rescue her.

Property, ownership and sale

‘Sale’ and ‘buying’

- Debt slavery / servitude
- People ‘sell’
 - Themselves
 - Their daughters
- Temporary leasing
- No explicit evidence of salesmen
- Bodies retain rights
- Everything is God’s property

Creation pattern: Job



- “If I have rejected the cause of my manservant or my maidservant when they brought a complaint against me what then shall I do when God rises up? When he makes enquiry, what shall I answer him? Did not he who made me in the womb make him? And did not one fashion us in the womb?” (Job 31:13–15 ESV)

Permissive law / regulation

- **Matthew 19:8** He said to them, “Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so.” (ESV)
- Possibly also:
 - Polygamy
 - Servitude

3. The story of Exodus like you’ve probably never heard it

Exodus: The story as sometimes told

- Israelites were slaves to the Egyptians
- God brought them out of Egypt
- In doing so he made them free so that they were no longer slaves

Problems with the story

- The text does say that the Israelites worked in a way we would see as slavery
- But it does not *explicitly* say that the Israelites were slaves in Egypt
- Back then there wasn't such a strong slave-free contrast, since everyone was the servant of someone else
- The Israelites were to come out to 'serve' God

Are the Israelites described as slaves or servants of Pharaoh in Exodus?

- Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, lest they multiply, and, if war breaks out, they join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land." 11 Therefore they set taskmasters over them to afflict them with **heavy burdens**. They built for Pharaoh store cities, Pithom and Raamses. 12 But the more they were **oppressed**, the more they multiplied and the more they spread abroad. And the Egyptians were in dread of the people of Israel. 13 So they **ruthlessly** made the people of Israel work as **slaves** 14 and **made their lives bitter with hard service**, in mortar and brick, and in all kinds of work in the field. In all their work they **ruthlessly** made them work as **slaves**. (Exodus 1:10-14 ESV)

Egyptians are Pharaoh's servants

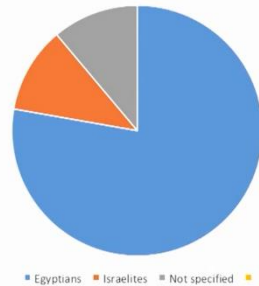
- Israelite foremen to Moses and Aaron: "The LORD look on you and judge, because you have made us stink in the sight of Pharaoh and his **servants**, and have put a sword in their hand to kill us." (Exod. 5:21)
- So Moses and Aaron went to Pharaoh and did just as the LORD commanded. Aaron cast down his staff before Pharaoh and his **servants**, and it became a serpent. (Exod. 7:10)
- Moses and Aaron did as the LORD commanded. In the sight of Pharaoh and in the sight of his **servants** he lifted up the staff and struck the water in the Nile, and all the water in the Nile turned into blood. (Exod. 7:20)
- 18 more references (Exod. 7:28, 29; 8:5, 7, 17, 20, 25, 27; 9:14, 20, 30, 34; 10:1, 6, 7; 11:3, 8; 12:30)

The only time Israelites are called Pharaoh's servants

- Then the foremen of the people of Israel came and cried to Pharaoh, "Why do you treat your servants like this? 16 No straw is given to your servants, yet they say to us, 'Make bricks!' And behold, your **servants** are beaten; but the fault is in your own people." (Exod. 5:15-16)

How often are the Israelites and Egyptians called Pharaoh's servants in Exodus?

Proportions of mentions of *'eved*



I brought you out of the house of *'avadim*

- Then Moses said to the people, “Remember this day in which you came out from Egypt, out of the house of slavery, for by a strong hand the LORD brought you out from this place.” (Exodus 13:3 ESV)
 - Cf. Exod. 13:14; 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Josh. 24:17; Judg. 6:8.
- Also translated “house of bondage”
- Literally “house of *'avadim*”

Who were the *'avadim*?

- Obvious answer: Israel
 - “When your son asks you in time to come, ‘What is the meaning of the testimonies and the statutes and the rules that the LORD our God has commanded you?’ 21 then you shall say to your son, ‘We were **Pharaoh's slaves** in Egypt. And the LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand. (Deut. 6:21 ESV)
 - Cf. Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24:18, 22.
 - m.Pesah 10.5: “he brought us out from slavery to freedom.”
- But that's not the answer from Genesis and Exodus
 - Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, 23 and I say to you, “Let my son go that he may **serve** me.” If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son.’” (Exod. 4:22-23 ESV)