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# The Book of *Exodus*

A BIOGRAPHY

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## Slavery in the Bible

The book of Exodus makes perfectly clear that the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt is an affront to God, and the impetus for divine intervention: "The Israelites were groaning under the bondage and cried out, and their cry for help from the bondage rose to God" (Exod 2:23); "I will free you from the labors of the Egyptians and deliver you from their bondage. I will redeem you with an outstretched hand" (Exod 6:6). The rationale for God's deliverance of Israel, however, is not any broad antipathy toward the institution of slavery in general; it is, rather, the preexisting relationship between God and Israel's ancestors, the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. "I established my covenant with them, to give them the land of Canaan, the land in which they lived as sojourners. I have now heard the moaning of the Israelites because the Egyptians are holding them in bondage, and I have remembered my covenant" (Exod 6:4-5). What bothers God is not that a people is being held in slavery, but that the divine plan for Abraham's descendants is being forestalled by their bondage in Egypt. The affront is not to God's sense of universal human justice but to God's pride and power. The redemption of Israel affirms God's ability to bring to pass what was promised.

As we have already seen, Israel's release from slavery in Egypt is merely a prerequisite for their true service to God: "For it is to me that the Israelites are slaves: they are my

slaves, whom I freed from the land of Egypt" (Lev 25:55). Even when service to God is construed as an obligation rather than a free act of faithful love, it is obviously an improvement over enslavement to a human overlord. But even this statement maintains a crucial specificity: it is Israel that is to serve God, not anyone else (the idea that all nations should worship Israel's God is a later theological development). And, therefore, it is only Israel whose enslavement by Pharaoh—or any human—is problematic.

Nowhere does God (or Moses, or anyone else) signal that all slavery is wrong. It is Israel's enslavement that is at odds with the divine will. In the Judeo-Christian West, it is common for the vast majority of the population to consider itself part of Israel—whether in the direct lineal descent of Judaism or as part of the "new Israel" of Christianity. But in the period of the Hebrew Bible, and in its texts, Israel was a closely defined group: a nation, yes, but a small one, surrounded by and living among non-Israelites. God's promise to Abraham, and God's covenant with Israel, was not universal but exceedingly particular. So too the biblical attitude toward slavery: we, Israel, are exempt, as the people singled out for divine favor by our national deity. The rest of the world is not implicated in Israel's redemption.

This is abundantly clear in the laws of the Pentateuch. These laws do not prohibit slavery across the board. Quite the contrary: biblical law recognizes two categories of slave—Hebrew and non-Hebrew. The first of these, Hebrew slaves, are essentially restricted to debt slavery: when an Israelite cannot pay his debts to a fellow Israelite, he must work to pay them off. Though this could well be unpleasant, it was, at least in theory, neither debilitating nor permanent.

Much attention is paid to the fair treatment of Hebrew slaves, with possibilities offered for financially redeeming them from their service and accommodations made for the release of all debt slaves at regular intervals. The principle is set out clearly in Leviticus: "If your kinsman under you continues in straits and must give himself over to you, do not subject him to the treatment of a slave" (Lev 25:39). Again, the claim that Israel cannot be slaves to anyone but God stands behind this sentiment: "For they are my slaves, whom I freed from the land of Egypt; they may not give themselves over into slavery" (25:42).

The treatment of the Hebrew debt slave is contrasted with that of the non-Israelite slave: "It is from the nations round about you that you may acquire male and female slaves. . . . These shall become your property: you may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property for all time. Such you may treat as slaves. But as for your Israelite kinsmen, no one shall rule ruthlessly over the other" (Lev 25:44–46). The implication, clearly, is that an Israelite may "rule ruthlessly" over a foreign-born slave. Such slaves are pure property, inheritable over the course of multiple generations. Non-Israelites, not being party to the redemption from Egypt, and not having been singled out by God for special favor, are granted no kindness. They have nothing resembling civil or human rights.

The Bible itself, therefore—even in the law-giving that follows directly on the redemption from Egyptian slavery—hardly presents a straightforward argument against the institution of slavery. Rather, it assumes the continued existence of slavery. It even explicitly allows for the mistreatment of chattel slaves, mistreatment that is

highlighted by contrast with the favoritism shown toward Israelite debt slaves. In light of the biblical attitudes toward slavery embedded in the Exodus story, the appropriation of that story for the promotion of civil rights is remarkable, and requires explanation.