

MIQDASH BETHEL COVENANT INSTITUTION

Plain-Language Companion to Document 194

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE ACTUALLY SAY ABOUT SLAVERY?

A Plain-English Guide for Everyday Readers

This is a simple explanation of **Document 194**, a longer covenant study on slavery in the Bible. If you want the full scripture-by-scripture research with Hebrew word studies and historical sourcing, read Document 194. This page is the short version, in everyday language.

THE BIG QUESTION

People sometimes say the Bible 'supports slavery.' Others say it flatly condemns it. The honest answer is more layered than either soundbite — and this page walks through it without dodging the hard parts.

1. THE BIBLE'S 'SERVANT' LAW WAS NOT AMERICAN-STYLE SLAVERY

In the Old Testament, a poor Israelite could work off a debt as a 'bondservant' for another Israelite. But the law **required** the person be set free after six years, and sent off with supplies — livestock, food, and provisions — so they could start over. That's closer to a modern indentured work arrangement with a legally guaranteed end date than to being owned as property forever.

2. KIDNAPPING SOMEONE TO SELL THEM WAS A CAPITAL CRIME

Here's the part most people never hear: the book of Exodus (chapter 21, verse 16) says that anyone who kidnaps a person and sells them — or even just holds a kidnapped person — **must be put to death**. That's the exact mechanism behind the Atlantic slave trade: raiding villages, capturing people, and selling them. The Bible's own law makes that a capital crime.

This is not a modern reinterpretation. Christian abolitionists in the 1600s and 1700s — Quakers like John Woolman and George Keith — used exactly this verse to argue that American slavery was unbiblical, because it was built on stolen people.

3. RUNAWAY SERVANTS WERE PROTECTED, NOT RETURNED

Deuteronomy 23:15-16 says that if a servant escapes to you, you must not hand him back to his master — he's allowed to live wherever he chooses, safely. American slave laws did the opposite: they required escaped slaves to be captured and returned. That's a direct contradiction between the two systems, not a match.

4. THE BOOK OF JOB SAYS MASTER AND SERVANT ARE MADE BY THE SAME GOD

Job 31 has one of the clearest lines in the whole Bible on this: Job says he never dismissed a servant's complaint against him, because the same God who formed Job in his mother's womb also formed his servant. Same maker, same worth. That's the theological floor under everything else in this document.

5. WHERE THE BIBLE IS GENUINELY UNCOMFORTABLE

To be fair and complete: Leviticus 25 does allow Israelites to buy servants from surrounding nations and pass them down to their children — a harsher, more permanent arrangement than the 6-year Israelite servant law. This document doesn't pretend that verse isn't there or explain it away. It's part of the text, it's in tension with everything else described above, and honest readers have to sit with that tension rather than force a tidy answer.

6. THE "CURSE OF HAM" MYTH

You may have heard that the Bible curses Black people to slavery through Noah's son Ham. That's not what the text says. Genesis 9 has Noah cursing his **grandson Canaan** — one man and his descendants, the ancestors of the Canaanite nations — not an entire race or continent. That racial reading was invented by writers in the 1800s to defend slavery. It was wrong then and it's wrong now, and even the Southern Baptist Convention, one of the denominations that historically defended slavery this way, formally apologized for it in 1995.

7. WHAT ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE QURAN?

The New Testament tells slaves and masters in the Roman world how to treat each other, but it also lists 'slave traders' among the worst kinds of lawbreakers (1 Timothy 1:10) — the same idea as the Exodus kidnapping law. The Quran doesn't abolish slavery outright, but it pushes hard in that direction: freeing a captive is treated as one of the most righteous things a person can do, and there are built-in financial incentives to free people.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The Bible does not endorse the kind of race-based, hereditary, kidnapping-based slavery practiced in early America — its own law makes that specific practice a capital crime. At the same time, it does describe a regulated servant system, including a harsher category for foreign servants, that this document doesn't erase or excuse. Read it honestly, in both directions, and the text is far more critical of the historical slave trade than most people — on either side of the argument — usually assume.

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