

SLAVES OF GOD

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Yehezkel Kaufmann, the Israeli biblical scholar, makes the following statement in his book *The Religion of Israel* (1960), p. 318:

Lev. 25:39-43, on the other hand, does away with Israelite bondage entirely, for Israelites are “slaves of YHWH,” whose lordship excludes subservience to human masters. This lofty conception, *unparalleled elsewhere in antiquity*, is, however, limited in its application to Israelites and does not embrace foreigners. (Italics ours.)

Kaufmann in strongly stressing the uniqueness of the experience of the children of Israel has unfortunately overstated his case and has completely overlooked the evidence from other cultures of the ancient Near East.

In fact, when one views the evidence one has great difficulty finding a culture in the Near East that does *not* have the “slave of God” motif. We may cite some representative examples.

SLAVE OF GOD NAMES

I. Egyptian

Many of the examples occur as theophoric names—personal names that include a god’s name as an element. In the Old Kingdom (2700-2200 B.C.) we have *Hm-Ntr* “Slave-of-God,” *Hm-R’* “Slave-of-Re,” *Hm-Hthr* “Slave-of-Hathor.” Later we have *Hm-Ptah* “Slave-of-Ptah.”¹

II. Babylonian

In old Babylonian (1800-1600 B.C.) we have a well-known historic figure, a king of Larsa (1771-1759 B.C.) who was named *Warad-Sin*, that is “Slave-of-(the god)Sin,” as well as *Ab-di Ili* “Slave-of-God,” and *Ab-du Ish-ta-ra* “Slave-of-Ishtar.” At Nuzi (1500-1400 B.C.) we have the similar *Warad Ishtar*, and other names including *Warad Kubi*, “Slave-of-Kubi” (an evil demon who caused miscarriages). In the Cassite period (1650-1175 B.C.) we have *Abdu-Nergal*, “Slave-of-Nergal.”² Many of these names also occur in the Akkadian letters found at Amarna in Egypt (14th century B.C.), e.g. *Abdi-Heba*, “Slave-of-Heba” (a Hurrian deity).

III. Ugaritic

At Ras Shamra (1500-1200 B.C.) we have the names *’bdil*, “Slave-of-God,” and *’bdb’l*, “Slave-of-Baal.” There also occurs *’bd lbit*, “Slave-of-Labi’t” (the Lioness Goddess). The Lioness Goddess may be either *Atirat*, *Attart*, or *Anat*. The latter was the warlike goddess whose violence was celebrated in Ugaritic myth as follows:

1. Herman Ranke, *Die Agyptischen Personennamen* (1935).
2. Herman Ranke, *Early Babylonian Personal Names* (1905); Albert Clay, *Personal Names from Cuneiform Inscriptions of the Cassite Period*; Ignace Gelb, Pierre Purves, and Allan MacRae, *Nuzi Personal Names* (1943).

She piles up heads on her back
 She ties up hands in her bundle.
 Knees she plunges in the blood of soldiery
 Thighs in the gore of troops.
 Much she fights and looks
 Battles and views.

Anat gluts her liver with laughter
 Her heart is filled with joy.³

IV. Mycenaean Greek

An example which is not a proper name but a designation comes from the Linear B (1450-1100 B.C.) tablets of Knossos in Crete and Pylos in Greece: *te-o-jo do-e-ro*, i.e. *theoio doelos*, "slave of God." Michael Ventris, who deciphered Linear B as Mycenaean Greek in 1952, said:

But by far the greater number of slaves named at Pylos are "slaves of the god (or goddess)." Two explanations of this phrase are possible: we may either suppose that a number of slaves became the property of a deity instead of a man, or that the title really conceals some quite different status from that of ordinary slaves.⁴

V. Phoenician

A further interesting example is found on three inscribed javelin or arrow heads from El-Khadr in Palestine. These inscriptions are written in the Phoenician script, similar to that of the inscriptions from Tyre and Byblos and the later Mesha inscription. Cross and Milik dated these in the 12th and 11th century B.C.⁵ Mazar would now date them later and place them in the time of David.

The inscription on all three arrow heads reads: *hs 'bdb't*, "the arrow of the Slave-of-the Lioness Goddess." Mazar believes that these arrow heads belonged to mercenaries whose patron deity was the warlike Lioness Goddess. Since they were found in a cave in the region where David fled for refuge from Saul, the mercenaries were either those who fought with David or with Saul.

VI. Old Testament

In the Old Testament itself we have not only titles such as *'ebed Yhwh*—a preeminent designation of Moses, but also such theophoric names as: *'Abdi'el*, "Slave-of-El," and *'Abadyahu*, that is Obadiah, one of our Minor Prophets.⁶ One of the three young men who endured the ordeal of the fiery furnace in the book of Daniel was *Abed-nego*, "The

3. Cyrus Gordon, *Ugaritic Literature* (1949), pp. 17-18. Kret in lines 152-53 is called *'bd-el*, i.e. "the Slave of El."
4. Michael Ventris and John Chadwick, *Documents in Mycenaean Greek* (1956), p. 124. Lewis R. Farnell in *Greece and Babylon* (1911), p. 193, felt that the common phrase "slave of God" on Greek Christian tombs was borrowed from Semitic sources as such a term of "subservient flattery" was unworthy of the Hellenic temperament.
5. J. T. Milik and Frank Cross, Jr., "Inscribed Javelin Heads from the Period of the Judges," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, no. 134 (April, 1954).
6. Cf. also the names: Abdi, i.e. *'bd-Y* "Slave-of-Yah or Yahweh" II Chron. 29:12; Abdiel I Chron. 5:15; Abdon I Chron. 8:23; Obed Ruth 4:17; Obed-edom II Sam. 6:10; Ebed Judges 9:26; and Ebed-melech Jeremiah 38:7.

Slave-of-Nego." This last designation of a pious Hebrew with such a name may suggest that the literal etymology may not have been too meaningful. Just so today few people named Adolph would think of themselves as "Noble Wolf," or Christopher as "Christ-bearer," or Margaret as "Pearl." Nonetheless, the point is that when these names were first coined people were certainly conscious of their meanings.

VII. Aramaic

In the Elephantine Papyrus of the fifth century B.C., discovered near Aswan in Egypt, we have the names *'bd ngo*, "Slave-of-Nego," as in Daniel, and *'bd 'ly*, "Slave-of-my God." Furthermore Papyrus 5 of the Brooklyn Museum Collection gives us a very interesting account of the manumission or freeing of a slave. The papyrus reads:

... Meshullam, son of Zakkur, the Jew of Yeb the fortress of the *degel* of Arpahu to the woman *Tamut* by name, his handmaiden, upon whose hand is a mark, on the right, . . . I have taken thought for thee in my life. I have gone and released thee at my death, and I have released Yehoyishma by name, thy daughter, whom thou didst bear to me. Son of mine or daughter, or brother of mine or sister, close or distant (kin) . . . shall not have power over thee and Yehoyishma . . . thou are freed before (?) the Sun, as well as Yehoyishma, thy daughter, and another man shall not have power over thee and over Yehoyishma, thy daughter, but thou art freed to the god.⁸

The last phrase means that the slave and her daughter are manumitted to the care of the Sun God.

VIII. Hellenistic

The above manumission is very similar to the Greek Delphic sacral manumission texts. These texts, which are quite numerous, were adduced by Adolph Deissmann thirty-five years ago in his *Light from the Ancient East* as the background for Paul's use of the idea of redemption as a liberating process obtained by purchase. Deissmann explains:

Among the various ways in which the manumission of a slave could take place by ancient law we find the solemn rite of fictitious purchase of the slave by some divinity. The owner comes with the slave to the temple, sells him there to the god, and receives the purchase money from the temple treasury, the slave having previously paid it in there out of his savings. The slave is now the property of the god; not, however, a slave of the temple, but a protegee of the god. Against all the world, especially his former master, he is a completely free man; at the utmost a few pious obligations to his old master are imposed upon him.⁹

An example of such a text is the following found at Delphi dating from 200 B.C.

7. E. Sachau, *Aramaische Papyrus und Ostraka* (1911). Cf. the late Syrian name of a metropolitan of Nisibis, Ebed-yeshu "The-Slave-of-Jesus." Aubrey Vine, *The Nestorian Churches* (1937), p. 186.
8. Emil Kraeling, *Brooklyn Museum Aramaic Papyri* (1953), p. 181.
9. Adolph Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East* (1927), p. 322.

Apollo, the Pythian bought from Sosibius of Amphissa, for freedom, a female slave, whose name is Nicaea, by race a Roman, with a price of three minae of silver and a half-mina. Former seller according to the law: Eumnastus of Amphissa. The price he hath received. The purchase, however, Nicaea hath committed unto Apollo, for freedom.¹⁰

IX. Late Northwest Semitic

Cooke in his *Textbook of North Semitic Inscriptions* gives us the following theophoric names: Late Phoenician (4th, 3rd cent. B.C.) 'bd 'sr, "Slave-of-Osir," 'bd mlqrt, "Slave-of-Melqart"; Punic (3rd, 2nd cent. B.C.) 'bd 'rs, "Slave-of-Arash"; Nabatean (B.C. or A.D. 1) 'bd 'bd, "Slave-of-Obodas." Obodas was a king whom the Nabateans in accordance with their practice deified after his death. In Palmyrene (3rd cent. A.D.) we have 'bdy, "Slave--Jehovah."

X. Arabic

In the Sabaen inscriptions from South Arabia, dating from the 8th century B.C. to the 5th century A.D., we have such names as 'abd 'abs, "Slave-of-'Abas," 'bd 'wm, "Slave-of-'Awwam," and 'bd 'tr, "Slave-of-Attar." The work 'bd seems to be used honorifically in names while another word qny is used for literal slaves.¹¹

Wellhausen in his *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* (1897), citing Noldeke, lists about 50 theophoric names beginning with 'abdu, "Slave-of." Mohammed's father's name was Abdullah. In many passages in the Qur'an he speaks of Muslims as 'ibadul-lahi, "the slaves of Allah," and of himself as 'abdul-lahi, "the slave of Allah," (surahs 53:10, 44:18, 19:30). In polemical passages against Christianity Mohammed asserts that God does not have a son, but that all who come to Allah, including Jesus, must come as slaves.

And they say: The Beneficent hath taken unto Himself a son. Assuredly ye utter a disastrous thing, whereby almost the heavens are torn, and the earth is split asunder and the mountains fall in ruins, that ye ascribe unto the Beneficent a son; when it is not meet for the Beneficent that He should choose a son. There is none in the heavens and the earth but cometh unto the Beneficent as a slave. (Surahs 19:88-93) (Cf. surah 7:194.)

He (Jesus) is nothing but a slave on whom We bestowed favour, and We made him a pattern for the Children of Israel. (Surah 43:59) (Cf. surah 4:172.)

In later Islamic times Mohammed was given 100 names—the *Asma'ul-Husna* or "Beautiful Names." All of these begin with 'abdu and end with Allah or with one of the 99 epithets of Allah, for example *Abdur-Rahmani*, "Slave-of the Merciful One." Among Muslims today

10. *Ibid.*, p. 323. The Greek name, *Theodoulos*, does occur but is not common. See W. Pape and Gustav Benseler, *Worterbuch der Griechischen Eigennamen* (1870), vol. I, pp. 490, 504.
11. A. Jamme, *Sabaean Inscriptions from Mahram Bilqis* (1962), pp. 9, 155, 159, 174, 221, 422.

these are perhaps the most popular personal names. The current president of Egypt is named Gamal Abdul Nasser, that is "The Handsome One, the Slave of (Allah) the Helper."

Thus the practice of designating oneself as the Slave of one's God has been maintained for at least 4000 years to this day. We should also note, however, that the reasons for the designation were not always the same. Some who were called "slaves of god" may have actually been temple slaves such as those in Babylonia,¹² or in Israel as the *nethinim* or "given" persons who are mentioned together with the "descendants of the slaves of Solomon" in the lists of those returning from the exile in Ezra 2:43-58 and Nehemiah 7:46-60.¹³

But more often the term was used figuratively for an individual's name as Warad-Sin; for the description of an exceptional leader as Moses; and even for an appellation of the Messiah.¹⁴ It may also describe a particular category of men as the mercenaries of the Lioness Goddess, or even an entire body of followers as the Moslems. In the last instance there is a morphological distinction between the literal and the figurative use of the word for slave: in the plural the former is 'abidun and the latter is 'ibadun.¹⁵

In any case, although the general concept is the same, the specific character of a given use of the phrase receives its color from the particular conditions of slavery known to the users of the phrase. Therein lies our inability to appreciate the phrase "slave of God," since with the possible exception of Saudi Arabia the institution of slavery is happily no longer existent.¹⁶ To help us regain the perspective of the ancients it may be useful to review some of the salient conditions associated with slavery which are relevant to our understanding of the "slave of God" motif in the New Testament.

12. Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (1961), p. 383; I. Mendelsohn, "Slavery in the Ancient Near East," *Biblical Archaeologist*, IX (1946), p. 86.
13. Baruch Levine, "The Nethinim," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, LXXXII (1963), pp. 207-212, argues that the *nethinim* of the Old Testament were not actual slaves but constituted a guild serving in the temple as at Ugarit.
14. Cf. W. Zimmerli and J. Jeremias, *The Servant of God* (1957), which is the English translation of the article on *pais theou* in Kittel's *Theologisches Worterbuch zum N.T.* Cf. also Kelly R. Fitzgerald, "A Study of the Servant Concept in the Writings of Paul" (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, 1959). The writer seeks to answer the question: Why did Paul fail to portray Jesus as the "Servant of Jehovah"?
15. S. D. Goitein, "Slaves and Slavegirls in the Cairo Geniza Records," *Arabica*, IX (1962), p. 2, writing of slavery in the 11th-13th centuries A.D., notes that, "The very word 'slave' 'abd, was felt as being improper and was replaced by circumscriptions such as 'boy' and 'young man'."
16. For a description of slavery in modern times, especially in Saudi Arabia, see C. W. Greenidge, *Slavery* (1958). According to a news report in *Parade* (September 22, 1963), p. 4: "All slaves in Saudi Arabia have been bought by the government and given their freedom. Officially, Saudi Arabia outlawed slavery last year, but several recalcitrant slaveholders declined to release their slaves until they were compensated. The 1,682 slaves recently bought by the government cost about \$3,500,000."

SLAVERY in ANTIQUITY

The origin of the institution in the first place probably began with the taking of captives in raids and in war. The earliest word for slave—the Sumerian *Nita-Kur*—means “Man of Another Country,” or “Man of the Hill Country,” whence the Sumerians obtained their slaves through warfare. Our own English word comes from the “Sclavonians”—a tribe whom the Germans subjugated and reduced to bondage. This adds an especially poignant note to the condition of many slaves, for it was often the policy of the victors to kill the men of a captured city and take the wives and children of these slain men as their slaves.¹⁷

Moreover some of those who were reduced to slavery had known nothing but the luxury of a royal palace all their lives before. Euripides pathetically describes the plight of Queen Hecuba of Troy at her capture in *The Trojan Women*, 455-512. She says:

First I will descant upon my former blessings; so shall I inspire the greater pity for my present woes. Born to a royal estate and wedded to a royal lord, I was the mother of a race of gallant sons. . . All these have I seen slain by the spear of Hellas, and at their tombs have I shorn off my hair; with these my eyes I saw their sire, my Priam, butchered on his own hearth, and my city captured. . . And last, to crown my misery, shall I be brought to Hellas, a slave in my old age. And there the tasks that least befit the evening of my life will they impose on me, to watch their gates and keep the keys, me Hector's mother, or bake their bread, and on the ground instead of my royal bed lay down my shrunken limbs, with tattered rags about my wasted frame, a shameful garb for those who once were prosperous.

The lot of the slave was not always as harsh as this. Eumaeus, the faithful swineherd of Odysseus who had been kidnapped as a child and sold into slavery, in speaking of the treatment he received from the mother of Odysseus said:

She herself had brought me up with long-robed Ctimene, her noble daughter, whom she bore as her youngest child. With her was I brought up, and the mother honored me little less than her own children. XV: 363-365

Eumaeus also experienced kindly treatment from Odysseus himself. Speaking of the absent master he says:

For verily the gods have stayed the return of him who would have loved me with all kindness, and would have given me possessions of my own, a house and a bit of land, and a wife, sought of many wooers, even such things as a kindly master gives to his thrall who has toiled much for him. XIV:61-65.

17. This happened, for example, when Bassus besieged the town below the citadel of Machaerus. “The most courageous of the fugitives, however, contrived to cut their way through and escape; of those left in the town, the men, numbering seventeen hundred, were slain, the women and children were enslaved.” Josephus, *The Jewish War* VII: 208. Cf. also *Odyssey* XIV:264-65; *Qur'an* 7:124; de Vaux, *op. cit.* pp. 254-57.

At the same time even Eumaeus himself was very conscious of the distance between freedom and slavery, for he says, “Zeus, whose voice is borne afar, takes away half his worth from a man, when the day of slavery comes upon him.” XVII:322-323. In the context, this refers not so much to the deprivation of a man's freedom as to the degradation of his character. But character (*arete*) no less than freedom is a prized possession of the man who is free.

The slave, it has to be said, was at least more secure and more fortunate than the *thetes*, “unattached property-less labourers who worked for hire and begged what they could not steal.”¹⁸ This was true because the slave was a member of the *oikos* or household and the *thes* was not. This situation was paralleled in later Roman times in which the slaves of the wealthy were often better dressed and better fed than the poor, free men who lived off the doles of the emperor as they were too proud to work with their hands. Juvenal says, “Sons of men freeborn give right of way to a rich man's slave.”¹⁹

Some of these slaves, Juvenal tells us, were bought for fabulous sums on account of their beauty or skills.

Standing in front of your host is the very flower of Asia, bought for a higher price than the whole estates of old kings, Tullus, the fighter, and Ancus, were worth. In fact, you could throw in all of the goods of all of the kings of the Rome of the legends.²⁰

In the classical period of Greece Plato answered the question of a master's relationship to his slave by saying:

He is a troublesome piece of goods, as has been often shown by the frequent revolts of the Messenians. . .

Slaves ought to be punished as they deserve, and not admonished as if they were freemen, which will only make them conceited. The language used to a servant ought always to be that of a command, and we ought not to jest with them, whether they are males or females. . . *Laws* VI, 777-8.

Plato's disciple, the great Aristotle, differed with his master in answering the same problem and pled for a more humane relationship with slaves, albeit from motives of calculated self-interest.²¹

Now we determined that a slave is useful for the wants of life, and therefore he will obviously require only so much virtue as will prevent him from failing in his duty through cowardice or lack of self-control. . . It is manifest, then, that the master ought to be the source of such excellence in the slave, and not a mere possessor of the art of mastership which trains the slave in his duties. Wherefore they are mistaken who forbid us to converse with

18. M. I. Finley, *The World of Odysseus* (1954), pp. 66 f.

19. *The Satires of Juvenal*, trans. Rolfe Humphries (1958), p. 38.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

21. Cf. Robert Schlaifer, “Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle,” in *Slavery in Classical Antiquity*, ed. M. I. Finley (1960), pp. 93-132.

slaves and say that we should employ command only, for slaves stand even more in need of admonition than children. *Politics* I, ch. 13.

Later, Paul's contemporary—the Stoic philosopher Seneca—went even further and said:

Associate with your slave on kindly, even on affable terms; let him talk with you, plan with you, live with you.

Remember that he whom you call your slave sprang from the same stock, is smiled upon by the same skies, and on equal terms with yourself breathes, lives, and dies.²²

Seneca, however, was an exception as he himself shows when he describes the tortured lot of ordinary slaves.

The poor slaves may not move their lips, even to speak. The slightest murmur is repressed by the rod; even a chance sound,—a cough, a sneeze, or a hiccup,—is visited with the lash. There is a grievous penalty for the slightest breach of silence. All night long they must stand about, hungry and dumb.²³

In Palestine itself the treatment of slaves, especially Hebrew slaves, was milder than in the surrounding areas. In addition to the fact that an Israelite slave was to be freed in the sabbatical year (Exodus 21:2; Deuteronomy 15:1-6), he was also more highly regarded in the years of his bondage. For example, in Hammurapi's Code a man was to be punished who injured another person's slave, but not if he injured his own slave. In contrast, Exodus 21:20 tells us that a Hebrew who killed his own slave would be sorely punished.

In the later Jewish period, the Mishna (compiled c. 200 A.D.) tell us:

If a man wounded his fellow he thereby becomes liable on five counts: for injury, for pain, for healing, for loss of time, and for indignity inflicted.

If a man struck his father or his mother and inflicted no wound, or if he wounded his fellow on the Day of Atonement, he is liable on all the (five) counts; if he wounded a Hebrew bondman he is liable on all the counts, excepting loss of time, if it was his own bondman. If he wounded a Canaanitish bondman belonging to others he is liable on all the counts. *Baba Kamma* 8:1, 3.²⁴

In the Damascus or Zadokite Document we read:

22. Seneca, *Ad Lucilium Epistulae Morales*, trans. Gummere (1953), p. 309.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 303. For a comparison of the attitudes of Seneca and of Paul toward slavery, see: J. N. Sevenster, *Paul and Seneca* (1961), pp. 186 f. Seneca condescended to a certain equality with slaves, but he also arrogated to the wise philosopher equality with God. As F. W. Farrar points out in *Seekers After God* (n.d.), p. 297: "With him, for instance, the wise man is the equal of God; not His adorer, not His servant, not His suppliant, but His associate, His relation. He differs from God in time alone."
 24. Solomon Zeitlin, "Slavery During the Second Commonwealth and the Tannaic Period," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, LIII (1963), pp. 185-218, shows how Hillel at the beginning of the first century A.D. and his disciples at the end of the century sought to raise the position of the slaves.

Let no man irritate his slave or maidservant or employee on the Sabbath.

And concerning his slave and his maidservant; let no man sell them to them (the Gentiles) because they have entered with him into the Covenant of Abraham.²⁵

In speaking of the Essenes, Philo tells us that:

There are no slaves among them, not a single one, being all free they help one another. And they condemn slave-owners, not only as unjust in that they offend against equality, but still more as ungodly, in that they transgress the law of nature, which, having given birth to all men equally and nourished them like a mother, makes of them true brothers, not in name but in reality.²⁶

Now this sentiment which strikes us as a most natural one was in fact an entirely unnatural one in the history of the Aegean and Near Eastern world. This includes the attitude of the early Christians also, as they ameliorated the conditions of slavery but did not abolish it. At the turn of the first century A.D. Ignatius in a letter to Polycarp said:

Despise not slaves whether men or women. Yet let not these again be puffed up, but let them serve the more faithfully to the glory of God, that they may obtain a better freedom from God. Let them not desire to be set free at the public cost, lest they be found slaves of lust.²⁷ (cf. I Cor. 7:21; I Tim. 6:2)

In the Apostolic Constitutions of the 4th century A.D., we read:

You are also to avoid their public meetings, and those sports which are celebrated in them. For a believer ought not to go to any of those public meetings, unless to purchase a slave, and save a soul, and at the same time to buy such other things as suit their necessities. Book II, sec. vii, 72.²⁸

In the same source we also read of the anticipation of the modern 5-day week with holidays.

Let the slaves work five days; but on the Sabbath day and the Lord's day let them have leisure to go to church for instruction in piety. . . . Let slaves rest from their work all the great (Passion) week, and that which follows it, . . . Book VIII, sec. iv, 33.

It seems hardly likely that even the kindest Christian master could have afforded to carry out this program of holidays, as the writer goes on to urge that slaves be allowed to rest also on the days of Ascension,

25. *Damascus Document* 11:12, 12:11, cited in *The Essene Writings from Qumran* by A. Dupont-Sommer (1962), pp. 153, 155.
 26. Philo, *Quod omnis probus liber sit*, 79, cited in *ibid.*, p. 22.
 27. *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. J. B. Lightfoot (1956), p. 87. Cf. Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries* (1904), vol. I, pp. 207 ff.; and Arthur Rupprecht, "Christianity and the Slavery Question," *Bulletin of the Evangelical Theological Society*, VI (1963), pp. 64-68.
 28. *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1951), vol. VII, pp. 424, 495. Jews also considered it a duty for the community to ransom Jewish slaves from Gentile masters, if their own relatives were unable to do so.

Pentecost, Christmas, Epiphany, the Days of the Apostles, and the Days of Stephen and the other holy martyrs!

In other respects Christian slaves shared the rights of the church with other believers. Some of them became clergymen; the Roman bishops Pius and Callistus probably belonged to the class of slaves. A slave who advanced in the ranks of the clergy would usually be freed by his Christian master.

Islam, which also did not abolish slavery, likewise considered as a meritorious deed the manumission of a slave. We read in the Qur'an:

Ah, what will convey unto thee what the Ascent is! (It is) to free a slave, and to feed in the day of hunger an orphan near of kin, or some poor wretch in misery. (Surah 90:12-16)

Ibn Hisham records that Mohammed also urged the kind treatment of slaves:

And your slaves! See that ye feed them with such food as ye eat yourselves, and clothe them with the stuff ye wear; and if they commit a fault which ye are not inclined to forgive, then part from them, for they are the servants of the Lord, and are not to be harshly treated.²⁹

We thus see from the selection of citations above from Homeric to Islamic times that although the treatment of slaves varied considerably, nonetheless, with the exception of the Essenes, the institution of slavery itself was always an accepted fact of society. The word slave in itself was not a revulsive word to the ancients as it seems to be to us.

The Word "Slave" and The Translators of The King James Version

In the light then of the widespread prevalence of slavery in biblical times it is most amazing that the King James Version of the Bible (1611) uses the word "slave" but twice: once in Jeremiah 2:14 where it occurs in italics, and once in Revelation 18:13, where it is actually the translation of the word *suma*, which is properly "body." The deliberate substitution of the word "servant" for the word "slave" is highly puzzling.

Was there a "Christian" motive for glossing over the fact of slavery? Was the word "servant" used in the sense of "slave" in England at the time of the translation? We may gain some insight into the answers to these questions by probing the use of these terms by English writers of the 17th century.

First of all, we may inquire as to the existence of slavery in Europe at this time. Were Englishmen of the 17th century personally acquainted with slavery? We know, of course, that a century later the famous hymn writer, John Newton (1725-1807), was the captain of a slave ship.

Slavery had continued to be a "live" institution in the Middle Ages. The Church seemed more interested in Christianizing the slave than

29. Syed Ameer Ali, *The Life and Teachings of Mohammed* (1891), p. 214.

in freeing him; for example, since the time of Constantine frequent prohibitions were enacted against the owning of Christian slaves by Jews and pagans but not against the owning of Christian slaves by Christians.

It was only in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries that slavery disappeared from northwestern Europe, although the system of serfdom continued long after.³⁰ A serf could not be sold but was bound to the land. When that land was sold, his services were also sold to the new master. He could not leave the manor without his master's permission. In southwestern Europe slavery continued in Spain until the 16th century. In Spain the slaves were Moors; in Portugal Negroes were imported from Africa after 1441.

Personal slavery having diminished in Europe in the fourteenth and following centuries, it was revived upon a gigantic scale on this continent shortly after the discovery of America. The scarcity of labor in the New World, and the necessity for it, seem to have overcome all objections to the system, whether founded upon motives of Christian duty or economic considerations.³¹

Slavery therefore was known to the 17th century Englishmen—at least at the beginning of that century—not as an intimate, accepted institution but rather as a remote phenomenon. When writers from the time of Chaucer (1340-1400) used the word "servant" they tended to interpret this in the light of the European experience with serfdom. When they used the word "slave" they tended to restrict this to the extreme case of a captive in fetters. Thus the great political writer, Thomas Hobbes—a learned classicist whose first work was a translation of Thucydides—made the following distinction between "servant" and "slave" in his *Leviathan* (1651), part II, ch. 20.

Dominion acquired by conquest, or victory in war, is that which some writers call *despotal* from *Despotes*, which signifieth a lord or master, and is the dominion of the master over his servant. And this dominion is then acquired to the victory when the vanquished, to avoid the present stroke of death, covenanteth, either in express words or by other sufficient signs of the will, that so long as his life and the liberty of his body is allowed him, the victor shall have the use thereof at his pleasure.

After such covenant made, the vanquished is a servant, and not before: for by the word *servant* (whether it be derived from *servire*, to serve, or from *servare*, to save, which I leave to gram-

30. In 1031 Conrad II forbade all traffic in slaves; in 1102 a synod held in London repeated the prohibition. The last serf was enfranchised in England in 1574, and in Scotland in 1799.
31. C. J. Stille, "Slavery," *New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia*, ed. Samuel Jackson (1911), vol. X, p. 452. British seamen from 1562 took part in the slave trade supplying the Spanish colonies. African slaves were first offered for sale in a British colony in Virginia in 1620. "Slow at first the traffic into British colonies got under way in the latter half of the seventeenth century. Between 1680 and 1700 no less than 300,000 African slaves were imported into British colonies." Greenidge, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

marians to dispute) is not meant a captive, which is kept in prison, or bonds, till the owner of him that took him, or bought him of one that did, shall consider what to do with him: for such men, commonly called *slaves*, have no obligation at all; but may break their bonds, or the prison, and kill, or carry away captive their master, justly; but one (that is, a *servant*) that, being taken, hath corporal liberty allowed him; and upon promise not to run away, nor to do violence to his master, is trusted by him.

... For slaves that work in prisons, or fetters, do it not of duty, but to avoid the cruelty of their taskmasters.

John Locke in his essay *Concerning Civil Government*, (1690), ch. 7, made a similar distinction.

Master and servant are names as old as history, but given to those of far different condition; for a free man makes himself a servant to another by selling him for a certain time the service he undertakes to do in exchange for wages he is to receive; and though this commonly puts him into the family of his master, and under the ordinary discipline thereof, yet it gives the master but a temporary power over him, and no greater than what is contained in the contract between them.

But there is another sort of servant which by a peculiar name we call slaves, who being captives taken in a just war are, by the right of Nature, subjected to the absolute dominion and arbitrary power of their masters. These men having, as I say, forfeited their lives and, with it, their liberties, and lost their estates, and being in the state of slavery, not capable of any property, cannot in that state be considered as any part of civil society, the chief end whereof is the preservation of property.

Since Locke by definition conceives of "slavery" as being a condition of absolute and abject bondage, he did not acknowledge that "slavery" was to be found in the Bible. In the same essay he says in chapter 4:

I confess, we find among the Jews, as well as other nations, that men did sell themselves; but it is plain this was only to drudgery, not to slavery; for it is evident the person sold was not under an absolute, arbitrary, despotical power, for the master could not have power to kill him at any time, whom at a certain time he was obliged to let go free out of his service; and the master of such a servant was so far from having an arbitrary power over his life that he could not at pleasure so much as maim him, but the loss of an eye or tooth set him free (Exod. 21:26).

In a similar fashion modern Jewish apologists have denied the existence of real slavery in the Old Testament.³²

If we may assume that the translators of the King James version had a similarly negative concept of "slavery" we may well understand why

32. "Certain writers, and especially Jewish scholars, have denied that real slavery ever existed in Israel; at least, they maintain, Israelites were never reduced to slavery." de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 80.

they avoided the use of the term. Americans whose concept of "slavery" tends to be associated with the Negroes of the South³³ may not relish the reintroduction of the term into the translation of the Bible. However, if we keep in mind what "slavery" meant to the ancients, and not what it means to us or to the 17th-century theorists, we shall gain a heightened understanding of many passages in the New Testament.

SLAVES in the NEW TESTAMENT

In the New Testament, of the 127 times that the word *doulos* occurs, it is translated 120 times as "servant," 6 times as "bond," and once as "bondman." the verb *douleuw* occurs 25 times and is translated with the word "serve" 21 times and with the word "bondage" 4 times. The feminine *doile* occurs 3 times and is translated as "handmaid" or "handmaiden." The substantive *doileia* occurs 5 times and is always translated "bondage." The verb *doulouo* occurs 8 times and is translated 4 times with the idea of bringing into "bondage," 3 times with that of becoming a "servant," and once "given" to much wine in Titus 2:3. The word *doulagwgew* occurs at I Corinthians 9:27 with the rendering "bring into subjection"; *doulon* occurs twice as "servant."

The Revised Standard Version has rendered many of these passages correctly with "slave" and its cognates, but not with complete consistency.

Bearing in mind the preceding discussion of the conditions of slavery in antiquity, we may profitably examine the following passages in the New Testament.

1) *Luke 7:2*. The centurion had a "slave" who was dear to him, even as Odysseus had an affectionate regard for his swineherd. In the Mishnah we read that when Rabbi Gamaliel's slave Tabi died, he accepted condolences for him.

They said to him, "Master, didst thou not teach us that men may not accept condolence because of slaves?" He replied, "My slave Tabi was not like other slaves: he was a worthy man." Berakoth 2:4.

2) *Matthew 24, 25; Luke 12*. In the parables of responsibility the RSV renders the word *doulos* by the word "servant" instead of "slave." But this obscures the fact that in Roman times slaves were given considerable responsibility and were sometimes given the right to own other slaves.

It became convenient, as a result of this development for a master to assign to a slave a definite piece of property, of whatever sort, and with it the right to add to this property whatever accrued,

33. Stanley M. Elkins, *Slavery* (1963), p. ix, calls American slavery "the most awful the world has ever known." He points out that in America, "The slave could not, by law, be taught to read or write; he could not practice any religion without the permission of his master. . . ; and finally, if a master wished to free him, every legal obstacle was used to thwart such action. This was not what slavery meant in the ancient world, in medieval and early modern Europe, or in Brazil and the West Indies."

even without knowledge of the owner, by way of investment, earnings, gift, interest, produce, or wages. Such assignment was termed a *peculium*. This property became a *quasi-patrimonium* of the slave and was *de facto* the slave's own property, subject however to partial or total recall at the owner's wish. . . . In this way he might accumulate a sizable fortune, which, with permission, could be used to purchase his freedom.³⁴

3) *Galatians* 3:24-4:2. The RSV rendering of *paidagwgos* "custodian" is not much more illuminating than the KJ "schoolmaster." The *paidagwgos* was a slave, usually an elderly one, who was appointed by the parents to look after a young boy from the age of 6 when he began school until the age of 14 or even 18 when he came of age. He was a combination of "nurse, footman, chaperon, and tutor."

He waited on them in the house, carried their books or lyres to school, sat and watched them in the schoolroom, and kept a strict eye upon their manners and morality in the streets and the gymnasia. Careful parents would select responsible slaves; others were more careless. In Plutarch's day (46-120 A.D.), parents often selected for this office slaves who were of no use for any other purpose.³⁵

There is a passage in Plato's dialogue *Lysis* which perfectly illustrates Paul's point in *Galatians* 4:1, "I mean that the heir, as long as he is a child, is no better than a slave, though he is the owner of all the estate." Socrates encounters Lysis and taunts him in the following manner:

(Soc.) And do they esteem a slave of more value than you who are their son? And do they entrust their property to him rather than to you? And allow him to do what he likes, when they prohibit you? Answer me now: Are you your own master, or do they not even allow that?

(Lys.) Nay, he said, of course they do not allow it.

(Soc.) Then you have a master?

(Lys.) Yes, my tutor (pedagogue); there he is.

(Soc.) And is he a slave?

(Lys.) To be sure; he is our slave, he replied.

(Soc.) Surely, I said, this is a strange thing, that a free man should be governed by a slave. And what does he do with you?

(Lys.) He takes me to my teachers.

(Soc.) You do not mean to say that your teachers also rule over you? Then I must say that your father is pleased to inflict many lords and masters on you. But at any rate when you go home to your mother, she will let you have your own way, and will not interfere with your happiness. . . . I am sure that there is nothing to hinder you

34. William Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (1955), p. 83. Cf. also R. H. Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (1928), pp. 100 ff.; W. W. Buckland, *The Roman Law of Slavery* (1908), pp. 187-206; and Rupprecht, *op. cit.*; and W. L. Westermann, "Slavery and the Elements of Freedom in Ancient Greece," in *Slavery in Classical Antiquity*, pp. 17-32.

35. Kenneth Freeman, *Schools of Hellas* (1922), pp. 66-67.

from touching her wooden spathe, or her comb, or any other of her spinning implements.

(Lys.) Nay, Socrates, he replied, laughing; not only does she hinder me, but I should be beaten if I were to touch one of them.

(Soc.) Well, I said, this is amazing. And did you ever behave ill to your father or your mother?

(Lys.) No, indeed, he replied.

(Soc.) But why are they so terribly anxious to prevent you from being happy, and doing as you like?—keeping you all day long in subjection to another. . . . so that you have no good, as would appear, out of their great possessions, which are under the control of anybody rather than of you, and have no use of your own fair person, which is tended and taken care of by another, while you, Lysis, are master of nobody, and can do nothing?

(Lys.) Why, he said, Socrates, the reason is that I am not of age.

4) *John* 15:15. Here again the RSV avoids the rendering "slave" for *doulos*. When Jesus speaks to us as His slaves, he certainly commands us as Plato urged, admonishes us as Aristotle suggested, and talks with us intimately as Seneca would have masters do. But where in the pages of history, which knows many examples of devoted slaves dying for their masters, can one find the master dying for his slaves (vs. 13)?

5) *I Corinthians* 9:19; *Galatians* 5:13; *I Peter* 2:16; *II Corinthians* 4:5. Westermann in his classic *Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (p. 161) remarks:

By emphasizing a group of the gentler virtues, those of obedience, resignation, humility, and patience, Christianity gave a new strength and a new place in life to the slave class. According to William Lecky these virtues were "servile" qualities which stood in marked contrast to those characteristics embodied in the ideal of the *virtue* of the Roman citizen of the old Republic. The concept of *virtus*, according to Lecky, had stressed the attributes of dignified demeanor, self-reliance, strength, endurance in difficulties, and the like.

There are passages (*Colossians* 3, *Ephesians* 6, *I Timothy* 6) where Christian slaves are enjoined to "serve" (*doluein*) their masters with diligence. There are other passages where the same type of service, namely that of a slave, is enjoined upon Christians of all social levels.

In *I Corinthians* 9 Paul chides the Corinthians for their tenacious insistence upon their own rights as free agents. "Am I not free? Am I not an apostle?" he queries in the first verse. In the 19th verse he says, "For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a *slave* to all, that I might win the more." In *II Corinthians* 4:5 Paul declares, "For what we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ as Lord (i.e. as the Master), with ourselves as your *slaves* for Jesus' sake."³⁶

36. On Paul's use of the phrase "slaves of righteousness" in *Romans* 6, see David Daube, *The New Testament and Rabbinic Judaism* (1956), p. 284.

In Galatians 5:13 Paul says: "For you were called to freedom, brethren; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love be *slaves* of one another." Peter likewise admonishes, "Live as freemen, yet without using your freedom as a pretext for evil; but live as *slaves* of God."

The RSV in the last three passages renders *doulos* and its cognate verb by the word "servant," and thereby obscures the contrast between freemen and slaves that was certainly meant as is clear in I Corinthians 7:21-23:

Were you a slave when called? Never mind. But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity. For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men.

6) *Matthew* 20:25-28. Although it is true that the words "servant" and "slave" may perhaps in some contexts be interchanged, they are best kept distinct as in the following passage: Jesus says that

A. the rulers (Lk. 22:25 kings) lord it, *katakuriuw*;

B. the great ones (i.e. aristocrats) exercise authority that has been delegated, *exousiazw*.

Therefore if we would be

B. great, we are to become servants, *diakonos*;

Moreover if we would be

A. first, we are to become slaves, *doulos*.

Just as the Son of Man came

B. to serve, *diakonethenai*;
and to

A. give His life a ransom for many.

We have here a clear chiasmus, that is an AB:BA arrangement, from the greater to the lesser and then from the lesser to the greater.

7) *Acts* 20:19. Paul says that since the day he set foot in Asia he has served the Lord as a slave, *douleuwn*, with all lowliness of mind, *tapeinophrosune*. The latter trait was associated with slaves by the classic writers such as Plato and Plutarch. It is associated with the lack of freedom and with that which is slavish and servile: *aneleutheros*, *andrapodwdes*, *doulikos*.³⁷ It was Christ who made a virtue of that which had been considered a vice.

8) *Matthew* 3:11. Another who displayed the lowliness of a slave of God was John the Baptist. Roland de Vaux points out that the Rabbis commenting on Leviticus 25:39-40 held that a Hebrew slave was not to be given tasks which were too exacting or degrading, "like turning the mill (cf. Jg. 16:21), or taking of his master's shoes or washing his feet (cf. I S 25:41). Hence in the New Testament, when John the Baptist

37. Richard Trench, *Synonyms of the New Testament* (1953), p. 148.

protests that he is not worthy to untie the sandals of the one he announces (Mt. 3:11 and parallels), he means he is less than a slave."³⁸

9) *John* 13. But above all Jesus Himself was the most striking example of humility—not a false humility that prides itself in thinking meanly of oneself—but a humility that stooped to serve others. We read that in the very moment when Jesus was most conscious of having come from God (vs. 3), He laid aside the garments of a free man and girded Himself and the apron towel of a slave. Certainly all of the disciples were acutely and uncomfortably aware that their feet had not been washed. But even though *the* basin (vs. 5) lay in view, no slave, such as Eurycleia (*Odyssey* XIX:374 f.), had come forward to perform the washing. It probably never occurred to them that one of them might perform the service. When the Lord Himself began to do so, they were too stupefied at this shocking abasement to say anything. All, that is, except the irrepressible Peter who blurted out in holy horror, "Dost thou—my Lord—wash my feet?" (vs. 6) Then with the strongest possible negation Peter declares, "Never will you ever wash my feet unto the end of eternity!" It is ironic that the slave should address his Master as "Lord," and then tell Him what He can and cannot do.

10) *Philippians* 2:5-8. When the Son of God, who clutched not His equality with God but divested Himself of His garment of Glory, came to earth, He donned not the royal robes of a king but the soiled apron of a slave. He who descended from heaven came not to earth's heights but to its depths. As a faithful Slave He served, and as an obedient Slave he went to that ignominious death, from which Rome exempted her citizens and which she reserved especially for slaves.³⁹

11) *Hebrews* 10:5-7. According to the writer of Hebrews, the Messiah, quoting from the Septuagint of Psalm 40:6-8, says: "Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared for me." The original Hebrew of the passage reads: "Sacrifice and offering thou hast no delight in; mine ears hast thou digged (or pierced)." The last statement refers to the practice mentioned in Exodus 21:6 and Deuteronomy 15:17 whereby a Hebrew slave who declined to be set free and who wished to remain as a permanent slave with his master had his ear bored through with an awl. The Messiah was the obedient Slave of Jehovah, who was willing not only to have His ear but also His body pierced.

Conclusion and Application

Finally, we may ask what the phrase "Slave of Jesus Christ" and "Slave of God" should mean to us.

38. de Vaux, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

39. David Smith, *The Days of His Flesh* (1906), p. 494, comments: "Crucifixion was a horrible punishment. Originally Oriental, the Romans had borrowed it from their enemies the Carthaginians, and they reserved it for slaves and provincials, accounting it a sacrilege that a Roman citizen should endure either the scourge or the cross."

It means that we have been captured, beaten and enslaved. We discover, however, that our captor is a Despot of love and mercy. Neither is there anything slavish or servile about our slavehood, for we have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear but the spirit of adoption (Rom. 8:15). Nor has our reduction to slavery been a debasement or an abasement. We have not been toppled from our thrones to grovel in the dust as Hecuba wailed. We have not lost half our manhood on the day when slavery came upon us as Eumaeus mourned. Rather have we been elevated to serve in a heavenly court and have been invested with a higher nature.

The title "Slave of God" is thus indeed an honorific one by reason of the genitive, and not the nominative, element of the phrase. In Juvenal's Rome "Sons of men freeborn give right of way to a rich man's slave." Like that slave we can boast in another's affluence that is ours to enjoy in the presence of reputedly free men who are beggars by comparison. If this were all, we might be content to simply translate the term *doulos Christou* as simply "the servant of Christ."

But if the title *doulos Christou* is an appellation of honor as it declares what we are in our relationship to the Sovereign of the Universe, it is also a designation of humility as it reminds us of what we are in ourselves. Thus it was used by Paul in the letters in which he felt no need to assert his apostolic authority. In the same way James and Jude, the brothers of Jesus, called themselves "slaves of God," rather than the audacious *theoadelphoi*, "brothers of God," bestowed upon them by later generations.

It is also a phrase that reminds us of our ransom from another master at an incredible price. It was not with the fabulous sums of all the royal estates we were bought, nor was it for handsome features or some prized skill we were purchased. But rather unlovely, without any merit, rebellious at heart, we were redeemed with the precious blood of the Master Himself.

Having thus been bought by Christ we are entirely His. There is no sign of a dual ownership such as was often the case. Nor are we half-slave and half-free.⁴⁰ This may sound strange to us, but not if we remember that as far as ownership was concerned a slave was a chattel. Thus it often happened that two brothers would each own half the value of a

40. In *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, ed. Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt (1899), part II, p. 232, a papyrus recording the sale of a slave makes explicit mention of the fact that the slave was the absolute property of the owner: "I swear that she is my property and is not mortgaged, and has not been alienated to other persons in any respect. . . ." In contrast in *The Oxyrhynchus Papyri* (1904), part IV, pp. 186 f. (cf. also pp. 199 f.), another papyrus makes explicit mention of the joint ownership of a slave, part of which has been manumitted: "The said minors own, Eudaemonis one-sixth and Dionysius and Thaeis a half, together two-thirds of a slave of their father's named Sarapion, aged about 30 years, the remaining third share of whom, belonging to Diogenes their brother on the father's side, has been set free by him."

slave. When, as it sometimes happened, one of the brothers freed his share of the slave, the man would now be half-slave and half-free. The Mishna in Eduyoth 1:13 says: "If a man was half bondman and half freedman, he should labour one day for his master and one day for himself."

When therefore Jesus declared that we could not be slaves to both God and Mammon (Mat. 6:24, Lu. 16:13), there was nothing intrinsically impossible in the thought of serving two masters. What is impossible is the attempt to be a slave to such disparate and antagonistic masters as God and Mammon. Of course, there have always been treacherous slaves as Melanthius the goatherd in Odysseus' palace. Paul remonstrates against any such charge of disloyalty on his own part when he says in Galatians 1:10, "For am I now persuading men or God? or am I seeking to please men? if I were still pleasing men, I should not be of Christ a slave."

Since we are slaves and not aristocratic lords we ought not to deem ourselves too high and mighty to soil our hands with work⁴¹ The lot of a slave was one of toil. So Paul labored night and day to the point of exhaustion (I Thes. 2:9). Since we are slaves we can expect the circumscription of our own rights and desires. If we are truly Christ's bondmen we shall forego these for the sake of serving and saving others (I Cor. 9:19). Since we are slaves we cannot think ourselves worthy of any thanks for what we do (Lu. 17:10). We should be prepared to labor graciously and gratuitously at thankless tasks all our days. Our very lives ought to be expendable.

Only as we acknowledge that we are indeed the slaves of Jesus Christ and realize in our lives all that this implies, may we hope to hear the Master say on the day of reckoning, "Well done, thou good and faithful slave."

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41. Samuel Dill, *Roman Society from Nero to Marcus Aurelius* (1956), p. 119, notes that, "By ancient law, as well as by sentiment, senators were forbidden to soil themselves by trade or usury."

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