

Exodus 21

Verses 1- 6

“Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them: ²“If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment. ³ If he comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. ⁴ If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone. ⁵ But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man,’ ⁶ then his master shall bring him to God, then he shall bring him to the door or the doorpost. And his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him permanently.

Now these are the ordinances which you are to set before them

It would seem that the laws concerning slavery were written for future generations because Israel would spend the next 40 years in the wilderness and their needs were being supplied by God. In addition, during the 7 years it took to conquer Canaan all of Israel accumulated great wealth and no one would have become a slave for many years.

² “If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment.

There are several ways that an Israelite might become a slave.

1. Foreign nations could enslave some Hebrews after a battle or war and sell them on the open slave market to anyone who could afford to buy them. Some Jews sought to buy fellow Jewish slaves so they could set them free or do so after 6 years of service.
2. A Hebrew in debt could become a slave to their creditor.

See 2 Kings 4:1

Now a woman of the wives of the sons of the prophets cried out to Elisha, saying, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that your servant feared the Lord; and the creditor has come to take my two children to be his slaves.”

This widow had to pay off her debt or the creditor would take her children.

While God did not order the abolition of slavery, He did make rules that greatly abated the continuation of slavery.

1. A Hebrew slave could not be bound for more than six years without his consent.
2. He had full rights of rest on the Sabbath

See Exodus 20:10

⁸ “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. ⁹ For six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁰ but the seventh day is a Sabbath of the Lord your God; *on it you shall not do any work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male slave or your female slave, or your cattle, or your resident who stays with you.*

3. He could claim compensation for bodily injury

See Exodus 21:26 - 27

²⁶ “And if someone strikes the eye of his male or female slave and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free on account of the eye. ²⁷ And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let the slave go free on account of the tooth.

4. Slaves that left were to be given their 401K's ☺

See Deuteronomy 15:13 – 15

¹² “If your fellow countryman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you for six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. ¹³ And when you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. ¹⁴ You shall give generously to him from your flock, your threshing floor, and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the Lord your God has blessed you. ¹⁵ And you are to remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you; therefore I am commanding this of you today.

But if the slave plainly says, ‘I love my master, my wife and my children; I will not go out as a free man

No Hebrew slave could be compelled to serve more than six years unless he voluntarily accepted perpetual slavery. That ceremony probably took place at the city gates or the tabernacle.

God held the Jews to a higher standard than the rest of the world because they were His people. Any pagan that became a Jew by choice was bound to the same law.

Verses 7-11

⁷ “If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do. ⁸ If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed. He does not have authority to sell her to a foreign people because of his unfairness to her. ⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters. ¹⁰ If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights. ¹¹ If he will not do these three *things* for her, then she shall go out for nothing, without *payment of money*.

⁷ “If a man sells his daughter as a female slave, she is not to go free as the male slaves do.

A woman who was bought to be a concubine could not be set free if the Master decided he was not pleased with her. This gave women-slaves legal status as permanent members of the family

⁹ If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her according to the custom of daughters.

If a slave woman was given to a man's son, she was to be treated like a daughter.

¹⁰ If he takes to himself another woman, he may not reduce her food, her clothing, or her conjugal rights.

If the master took another wife he could not deny the other wife the three basic rights of food, clothing and cohabitation. If he would not do this the woman was free to return to her father's house without paying her master the purchase price he paid.

Verses 12 - 14

¹² “He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death. ¹³ But if he did not lie in wait *for him*, but God let *him* fall into his hand, then I will appoint you a place to which he may flee. ¹⁴ If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him *even* from My altar, that he may die.

¹² “**He who strikes a man so that he dies shall surely be put to death.**

The punishment for murder is the death penalty. But one accused of murder is not always guilty because there are instances of accidental or unintentional homicide. To protect against unjust punishment, God appointed a place where the man could flee.

After Israel entered Canaan six cities of refuge were appointed.

See Map 2105 This is recorded in Joshua 20.



¹⁴ If, however, a man acts presumptuously toward his neighbor, so as to kill him craftily, you are to take him even from My altar, that he may die.

Any person found guilty of this crime was denied sanctuary. Joab fled to the altar, but Solomon had him put to death.

See 1 Kings 2:28-29, 32, 34

²⁸ Now the news came to Joab because Joab had followed Adonijah, though he had not followed Absalom. So Joab fled to the tent of the Lord and took hold of the horns of the altar. ²⁹ And it was reported to King Solomon that Joab had fled to the tent of the Lord, and was beside the altar. Then Solomon sent Benaiah the son of Jehoiada, saying, “Go, execute him.”

³² The Lord will return his blood on his own head, because he struck two men more righteous and better than he, and killed them with the sword, while my father David did not know *about it*. Abner the son of Ner, commander of the army of Israel, and Amasa the son of Jether, commander of the army of Judah.

³⁴ Then Benaiah the son of Jehoiada went up and struck him and put him to death, and he was buried at his own house in the wilderness.

Verses 15 - 17

¹⁵ He who strikes his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

¹⁶ He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.

¹⁷ “He who curses his father or his mother shall surely be put to death.

Four capital offenses are mentioned in this chapter, murder, striking your father or mother, cursing your father or mother and kidnapping.

Verses 18 - 19

¹⁸ “If men have a quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with *his* fist, and he does not die but remains in bed, ¹⁹ if he gets up and walks around outside on his staff, then he who struck him shall go unpunished; he shall only pay for his loss of time, and shall take care of him until he is completely healed.

This is not about someone who is a victim of a crime. This is about people who get into physical altercations and someone is hurt. If one of them suffers an injury that keeps them from working, the other person shall reimburse them for medical bills and financial loss.

Verses 20 - 21

²⁰ **“If a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod and he dies at his hand, he shall be punished. ²¹ If, however, he survives a day or two, no vengeance shall be taken; for he is his property.”**

If a slave died while being punished, the owner shall be punished. We can assume the punishment would be determined by a judge after hearing all the evidence.

If the slave survived a few days and then died, the master was not held responsible. This assumes a harsh punishment was warranted and the death was not intentional. This assumption is based on verses 26 and 27. If the loss of an eye or a tooth brings freedom for the slave then a master would be unwise to use undue punishment when disciplining a slave and his death would be loss enough.

Verses 22 - 25

²² **“If men struggle with each other and strike a woman with child so that she gives birth prematurely, yet there is no injury, he shall surely be fined as the woman’s husband may demand of him, and he shall pay as the judges *decide*. ²³ But if there is *any further* injury, then you shall appoint *as a penalty* life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.”**

If the conduct of the men resulted in a premature birth of the child then it would result in a fine which the husband of the woman would determine but if the amount seemed excessive the judges would have to decide what amount would be fair. Apparently there were two or more judges making the decision.

However, if the injury was more severe, then the penalty would be based on the injury to the mother and/or the child.

Some scholars believe there was a price attached to each loss (see vs 30), be it an eye, a tooth, a hand, a burn, etc. The person responsible was fined accordingly. So this was not a law of retaliation but one of justice (making things right).

Verses 26 - 27

²⁶ “If a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. ²⁷ And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.

This protected slaves from harsh punishment from masters that lacked civility.

Verses 28 - 32

²⁸ “If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished. ²⁹ If, however, an ox was previously in the habit of goring and its owner has been warned, yet he does not confine it and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death. ³⁰ If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him. ³¹ Whether it gores a son or a daughter, it shall be done to him according to the same rule. ³² If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall give his or *her* master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.

²⁸ “If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall surely be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall go unpunished.

Dangerous animals must be confined by their owners but if this was not done, and it killed someone, the animal had to be stoned.

²⁹ If, however, an ox was previously in the habit of goring and its owner has been warned, yet he does not confine it and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned and its owner also shall be put to death.

If an owner was a persistent violator of this law (keeping a dangerous animal confined), and it led to someone's death, that man shall also be put to death.

³⁰ If a ransom is demanded of him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is demanded of him.

The amount was not determined by the judges, but by the family of the deceased. This was the only case where compensation could spare someone from capital punishment.

³² If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall give his *or her* master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned.

This was probably the average price of a slave, so the price was limited to that amount. Clearly, slaves were seen as property, not as human being. So why did God allow slavery? God allowed slavery for the same reason he allowed divorce.

See Matthew 19:3 - 9

Because of your hardness of heart Moses permitted you to divorce your wives; but from the beginning it has not been this way.

We know God hated divorce.

See Malachi 2:16

¹⁶ “For I hate divorce,” says the Lord, the God of Israel, “and him who covers his garment with violence,” says the Lord of armies. “So be careful about your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.”

Is God required to say “I hate slavery” as He did with divorce for it to be wrong? When people say God never condemned slavery one has to wonder if they ever read the Book of Exodus. Egypt was judged for their cruel treatment of the Hebrew slaves. So people need to ask themselves a very simple question. What would I do if the situation was reversed? What if I was the slave and the other person was the master. This is the basis of the Golden Rule, is it not?

Verses 33 - 34

³³ “If a man opens a pit, or digs a pit and does not cover it over, and an ox or a donkey falls into it, ³⁴ the owner of the pit shall make restitution; he shall give money to its owner, and the dead *animal* shall become his.

Many of these laws deal with compensation for the loss of property.

Verses 35 - 36

³⁵ “If one man’s ox hurts another’s so that it dies, then they shall sell the live ox and divide its price equally; and also they shall divide the dead ox. ³⁶ Or *if* it is known that the ox was previously in the habit of goring, yet its owner has not confined it, he shall surely pay ox for ox, and the dead *animal* shall become his.

The owner of a dangerous animal has a responsibility to control the animal. Again, the prior history of the owner to control an animal he knows to be a threat affects the cost to be paid. Most of these laws are based on common sense and would still apply in a courtroom in our time.