

A Liberated Lifestyle: Slaves and Servants in Biblical Perspective

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Before I'd be a slave,
I'd be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.

This passionate, Black cry for freedom finds warm reception today in the hearts of all people of good will. We hear its echo from the peasants of El Salvador and the Philippines, in the agonizing efforts of Solidarity in Poland, and in the voices of women in home, church, and society, who remind us of the oppressive sexual hierarchy that persists even at the end of the second Christian millennium

Some of these freedom movements are peculiarly modern — the Bible knows nothing of Northern Europe, let alone the Americas or the Far East. The women's movement is a Spirit-guided movement *beyond* the Bible, or, at the least, a development of egalitarian strains that existed only in germinal form in biblical times. But this should not blind us to the fact that our biblical fore-bears felt passionately about freedom, their own and that of others, and that in both Testaments acts of liberation form the burning center of what the Promise is all about.

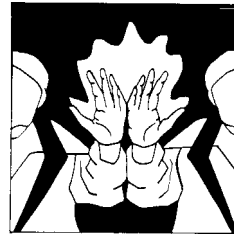
The Old Testament has much to say about those who have been freed, about their rights and responsibilities, their identity and their possibilities. While the Old Testament uses one word *ʿebed* for both slave and servant, it radically differentiates between these words, with negative connotations when it refers to

slaves and positive connotations when it refers to servants. I will attempt to ground our desire to be free and our support of freedom movements in the example of Old Testament society and in its central message. In addition, I will offer guidelines for the liberated, drawn from the biblical portrait of what it means to be a servant.

Slaves

Social action and reform are associated in the popular mind with the prophets, though, actually, Israel's legal traditions offer far greater evidence for the spirit of reform. While the prophets were passionate advocates of the poor and oppressed, they did not think the "system" was wrong. Rather, they were conservatives, calling society back to a traditional morality. The laws in Israel and in the ancient Near East, however, were basically reform decrees; they could be modified as conditions in society changed or as theological positions suggested new concerns. Israel's critical sensitivity to slavery is reflected in its laws.

The Covenant Code (Exod 21:1-23:33), whose present form dates to the eleventh century B.C.E., *begins* with a law about slavery (Exod 21:2-6). The lesser priority given to the laws about slavery in the famous Code of Hammurabi, on the other hand, is shown by their relatively late position at numbers 278-282. The slavery discussed in the Covenant Code would have resulted



from poverty or from failure to pay off a debt. Such slavery was to be temporary servitude: a slave would only serve six years and go free in the seventh. In short, slavery was an emergency institution and was only to be tolerated for a limited period of time for any individual. If that person should decide to volunteer for additional service — because he had married a slave woman during his bondage and had children by her, or because he really loved his master — his ear was pierced with an awl and he became, by his own choice, a slave for life. In the rabbinical work called the *Tosephta*, we find the following sarcastic appraisal of such voluntary slavery: "The ear which heard at Sinai, 'You are *my* servants,' but nevertheless preferred subjection to men rather than God, deserves to be pierced."

The Covenant Code also regulates physical punishment or injury of slaves. If a master struck his male or female slave so that the slave died under the beating, the master himself would be "punished," presumably with the death penalty. If the beaten slave first died a day or two later, this tragedy was viewed as unintentional; the master would merely suffer the financial loss of a slave (Exod 21:20-21). If a master would blind one of his slaves or knock out a tooth, the slave, whether male or female, would go free (Exod 21:26-27). What is remarkable about these laws is that contemporary, extra biblical laws never mention damage caused by a master to his *own*

slave. Presumably that was viewed as "his own business." The Code of Hammurabi and the Hittite Laws provide monetary penalties for damage to slaves belonging to someone else, including blinding of slaves and breaking their teeth. But damage to one's own slaves was apparently not subject to claim.

Israel's slavery laws were also subject to periodic reform, as we see by comparing early (Exod 21:7-11) and late (Deut 15:12-18) laws on the role of slave women. The earlier law provides no emancipation for a woman slave. She was considered the wife, or concubine, of her owner and was not to be freed in the seventh year. Even according to the early law, however, a slave wife was not to be treated as a prostitute. If the owner should take a second slave wife, he could not deprive the first of food, clothing, or conjugal rights.

The Deuteronomic law, typically, is more humane. It provides freedom for both men and women in the seventh year, and also enjoins the master to provide the freed slave liberally with a pre-sent of grain and wine to ease reentry in-to society.

According to the Holiness Code (Lev 17-26), edited in late pre-exilic times, slavery was to be confined to foreigners or sojourners. Hence, a fellow Israelite, "your brother," could not be treated as a slave. Hard times might force a fellow Israelite to offer himself for involuntary employment, but this status was to be that of hired servant and even that would

end with the year of Jubilee. He and his children would then be freed to return to his family. We are not told how this idealistic law against slavery was coordinated with the laws of Exodus and Deuteronomy, which permitted internal Israelite slavery. But the fact that the Pentateuchal canon contains such a tension is evidence of a basically critical attitude toward slavery, at least in some circles, that can be a model for us as we confront the issue of political, sexual, social, or economic servitude.

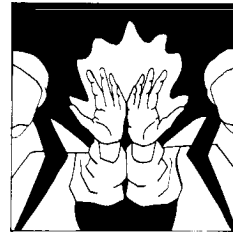
Israel as Freed Slaves

Basic to Israel's enlightened attitude toward slavery was its own sense of identity and self-consciousness. The Israelites had become a people as God led them out of Egypt. This country of origin is further defined on 13 occasions as "the house of slaves." "We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt," Israel confessed in Deut 6:21, and, once freed, they were promised by Yahweh that they would never have to return there again (Deut 17:16; 28:68). Perhaps, therefore, one of the most bitter curses threatened by Hosea was that iniquitous Israel would be forcibly returned to their former land of bondage in Egypt (8:13; 9:3).

In the Deuteronomic law code Israel's past slavery is used to motivate her present action. It was because of the Exodus from Egypt that Israel was to keep the Sabbath (Deut 5:15; the other version of the Decalogue, in Exod 20:8-11,

grounded Sabbath-keeping in the pattern established by Yahweh's six-day creation and his resting on the seventh day). The deuteronomic Decalogue enjoins the Sabbath so that "your manservant and your maidservant may rest as well as you. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and Yahweh your God brought you out thence with a mighty hand and an out-stretched arm; *therefore*, Yahweh your God commanded you to keep the Sabbath Day." (Deut 6:14-15) Israel knew what it meant to be a slave, and this knowledge suggested a kind treatment of her own servants.

The custom of providing freed slaves with presents to ease their way back into society (Deut 15:15, discussed above) was based on the memory of past servitude and past redemption at God's hand. "As Yahweh has blessed you, you shall give to the freed slave." (Deut 15:14-15) At the great feast of Weeks (Pentecost), a banquet was to be eaten in the sanctuary to which all sorts of disadvantaged were to be invited — your manservant and maidservant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. "You shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt; and you shall be careful to observe these statutes." (Deut 16:12) Finally, Israel's emancipation from Egypt was the theological rationale for not perverting the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow (Deut 24:18), and for not gleaning the



grapes, so that there would be enough left on the vine for the poor to help themselves (Deut 24:22).

Servants

What a strange and wonderful irony that the same Hebrew word used for Israel's inglorious and detested past as slaves (*ebed*) would become the vocable for describing her glorious status as servants. Israel was liberated into perfect servitude. This new condition deserves exploration for its own sake and for the lessons it offers contemporary children of God.

Status

Her new status resulted from God's actions. Israel could not celebrate a chain of human liberators, who had rallied the people during their bondage. Even Moses, as the Yahwist remembered him, ascribed the credit totally to God's intervention: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of Yahweh, which he will perform for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. Yahweh will fight for you, and *you have only to be still.*" (Exod 14:13-14) The introduction to the Decalogue clarifies what is unique about the following commandments. They were given by a God who made Israel what she was: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slaves ." (Exod 20:2)

It is perhaps necessary for us to under-score the transcendent character of God's action here. Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch has defined God as the Exodus event, and American sociological exegete Norman Gottwald similarly defines Yahweh as the historically concretized, primordial power to establish and sustain social equality in the face of counter oppression, or as the symbol of a single-minded pursuit of an egalitarian tribal social system. Yahweh is not such an ideology. Rather, he was the almighty one who freed Israel and who was alone responsible for the status she enjoyed. Status did not result from self achievements, nor was the status itself the achievement.

God's honored servants include even foreigners who join themselves to Yahweh and who love his name; God's temple will be a house of prayer *for them and for all peoples* (Isa 56:6-7). God's honored servants are those chosen by him (Isa 65:8-9); his choice and not their efforts gives them status. The contrast between God's favored servants and those who oppose him is brought out dramatically in the following polemical passage, where the "you" are God's enemies while the "servants" are his pious followers:

Behold, my servants shall eat,
but you shall be hungry;
behold, my servants shall drink,
but you shall be thirsty;
behold, my servants shall rejoice,
but you shall be put to shame;

behold, my servants shall sing for
gladness of heart,
but you shall cry out for pain of
heart,
and shall wail for anguish of spirit.
(Isa 65:13-14)

Who are the servants? They are the ones
whom Yahweh's hand supports. Who are
his enemies? Those who are under his
indignation (Isa 66:14).

The word "servant" came to connote the
trust of a worshiper. So the psalmist prays:
Preserve my life, for I am godly, save your
servant, who trusts in you

(Ps 86:2)

The new status of servant does not mean
fawning subservience, but belonging and
protection under God's care. This hopeful
dependency is perhaps best expressed in a
somewhat unfamiliar Communal Lament:

Behold, as the eyes of servants look to
the hand of their master,
as the eyes of a maid to the hand of
her mistress,
so our eyes look to Yahweh our God, till
he have mercy upon us.
Have mercy upon us, Yahweh . . . for
we have had more than
enough of contempt. (Ps 123:2-3)

"I am your servant/we are your servants"
— what joyful, confident, liberated trust
resides in these words!

Servants Serve

Still, being a servant is not merely a
rank; it is also the act of *servicing* Yahweh
the liberator. The introductory formula we
noted above, "I am Yahweh your God,
who brought you out of the land of Egypt,
out of the house of slaves," is followed by
"You shall have no other gods," and by the
rest of the Decalogue. Such service is not
nominal or optional, but involves the
entire existence of the servant. It was not
for nothing that the Deuteronomist urged
Israel to serve Yahweh "with all your heart
and soul" by keeping the commandments
and statutes contained in Deuteronomy. In
Jeremiah's new covenant passage (Jer
31:31-34), itself under heavy
deuteronomistic influence, we read that
service of or knowledge of God will not be
an option, a kind of elective by which the
believer enriches his or her life program.
Rather, such obedience will be indelibly
in-scribed on the hearts of the servants. To
claim the status of servant without a
commitment to serve is an utter and in-
tolerable contradiction.

The opposite of serving God is not no
service. Rather, the opposite of serving
Yahweh is serving other gods, as the
deuteronomistic literature never tires of
repeating. Serving other gods means not
only participation in foreign cults, but also
recognizing their lordship. To serve other
gods is to reject the first commandment.
Every sin is, finally and at its



roots, a rejection of the first commandment.

While serving God can denote worship (*Gottesdienst*), it cannot ever re-place obedient serving of God in all of life (*Gott dienen*). The servants addressed in Micah 6 are reminded that they have been freed from the house of slaves, given faithful leaders like Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, and that they were blessed through Balaam as God led their fore-bears from Shittim to Gilgal as part of the conquest. How are such saving acts, or righteous deeds, of Yahweh to be re-paid? With burnt offerings or yearling calves? With ten thousand rams or myriad libations of oil? With the sacrifice of an eldest child in a desperate quest for forgiveness? (Micah 6:6-7) The prophet's famous answer has become proverbial:

He has showed you, mankind,
 what is good;
 and what does Yahweh
 demand of you
 but to do justice,
 and to love kindness,
 and to walk humbly with your
 God? (Micah 6:8)

Doing justice would seem to be the broadest definition of service, of which *loving mercy is* a part. Those who love mercy see the claim of the helpless as an obligation laid on their conduct; they acknowledge the needy as brothers and sisters. *Humble walking with God* has sometimes been an excuse for inaction or

even for self-deprecation. Instead of such "humble walking," the Hebrew suggests a walking or a conduct that flows from a clear and sober judgment of the circumstances that prevail. Those who have insight into what God has done — at the Exodus, in his on-going provision of leadership, in the conquest — will respond wisely and appropriately. In other words, humble walking is only another way of saying that such people will seek justice and recognize the claim of the needy upon them. That's what Yahweh requires of his servants.

The Servant(s) of God

A number of individuals are called the servant of God as they participate in God's work on and for his people Israel. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Job, and David are such servants. In the Deuteronomistic History (Joshua — 2 Kings) the prophets are often called, "my servants, the prophets." In a time of growing apostasy they remained true to Yahweh and performed his service. Moses is called the servant of God some 40 times. At times his servanthood denotes his high rank, much like that of the highest and most faithful servants of a king (e.g., 1 Sam 27:5, 12; 2 Sam 15:21). With most prophets Yahweh spoke in a vision or in a dream. "Not so with my servant Moses; he is entrusted with all my house. With him I speak mouth to mouth, clearly; and not in dark speech. . . ." (Num 12:7-8)

In the priestly stratum of the Pentateuch, the death of Moses was due to his rebellion in the wilderness of Zin (Num 27:14; cf. 20:12). But in the Deuteronomistic History, Moses' death is given salvific significance. He dies in the place of the people: "Yahweh was angry with me on account of you, and said, 'You also shall not go in there.'" (= the land Deut 1:37) When Moses, the servant of Yahweh, later prays that he might enter the land (Deut 3:24-25), Yahweh again declines: "Let it suffice you; speak no more to me of this matter." As Moses re-ports, "Yahweh was angry with me on *your* account." (Deut 3:26)

The servant role of Moses, by which he bore the punishment intended for Israel, is generalized and developed in the role of the Servant of Yahweh in Second Isaiah (Isa 40-55). The original identity of this servant, now as before, remains under dispute though the options have now been restricted to Israel as the servant or to the prophet himself as the servant, or, as I would prefer, to a combination of these ideas: the servant is Israel, but certain aspects of the servant's description are shaped by reflections upon the career of Second Isaiah.

In the first servant poem, Isa 42:1-4, Yahweh presents his servant before an unnamed audience, possibly to be identified with the Divine Council. Gifted with the spirit, like the judges, the early kings, or the prophets, the servant is to carry out the royal task of effecting justice for the nations. Pastorally kind and

gentle in his dealings, he will successfully implement justice until God's faithfulness is known among the nations. Though the servant (read: prophet or faithful Israel) will experience rejection and resistance from the fellow Israelites, he will persist and hold fast as he establishes the rule of Yahweh and his law for all the nations. As Yahweh seeks Israel through the servant, he is at the same time seeking the nations.

Isa 49:1-6 is a speech of the servant in which he reports his own sense of vocation. God chose his servant before his birth — one does not decide to be God's servant or claim any credit for service. The chosen servant is Yahweh's secret weapon though the form of this weapon is a mouth that speaks God's word in-stead of a destructive weapon of war. As prophetic mouth, the servant is God's last and greatest plan for the world. Like any pious servant, he is hidden away under the deity's protection. The present failure of the servant ("I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity." Isa 49:4) is balanced by the promise of and the hope in eventual success: "My right is with Yahweh; my pay will come from God." (Isa 49:4) His present lack of success results from at-tacks by those whom he is seeking to win for Yahweh. Hence, his lack of success is related to Yahweh's lack of success, and the latter's eventual victory will bring with it the servant's reward. Yahweh's eventual success means not only that his message will get through to recalcitrant



Israel, but that the servant will be appointed as light to the nations, so that God's salvation may reach to the end of the earth (Isa 49:6).

The third Servant poem (Isa 50:4-9) is a psalm of confidence. In verse 4 the servant tells how Yahweh gave him a tongue and an ear, the guarantee that he would know the right word to speak to God's exhausted people. The servant, mean-while, has not been turned aside by rejection and even physical abuse — they smote him, pulled out the hair of his beard, and spit upon him. No, the servant remains the servant, not a rebel or a quitter. Why? Because lord Yahweh helped him. One is always a servant be-cause of God's action (see above), and a servant responds to such aid with utter confidence: "I have not been con-founded; I have set my face like a flint; I know that I shall not be put to shame; the one who vindicates me is near." (Isa 50:7-8) The servant stands up to attacks and eventually receives vindication because of lord Yahweh. The question is not only, or not really, "Will the servant succeed?" Rather, the question is, "Will Yahweh's cause prevail?" And since it will, the servant acts in confidence and hope.

The fourth servant poem (Isa 52:13-53:12) is sometimes difficult in detail to understand, but it is, by any reckoning, the most profound. It begins, as in 42:1, with Yahweh hailing his servant: he will be successful and he will receive honor (52:13). His exaltation, how-

ever, is highlighted against the backdrop of humiliation and failure (52:14; 53:2-3). The servant's coming victory, which echoes Yahweh's own victory, will take place with all the nations as witnesses (52:15). The despised and rejected servant was not really despicable himself. He suffered because of and in the place of the griefs and sorrows due to those who opposed him. Instead of being under God's punishment, he bore the transgressions and iniquities of his enemies. What a strange economy: the servant's punishment meant healing for his opponents. The turn in the servant's fate, as he sees his offspring and prolongs his days, is matched by a turn in the fate of the whole world. The servant brings recalcitrant Israel and/or the nations to Yahweh with his substitutionary death. As a reward, he will be joined with all Israel (= the many), and together they will count up their booty, namely, the salvation of the Gentiles.

Yahweh reaches out to recalcitrant Israel and to the nations through the word and vicarious suffering of his servant. Yahweh's plan succeeds, in that through the servant all return to him.

The highlights of the servant poems bear repeating. God's servant is under his special care and assigned a special mission. His mission is the prophetic one of conveying God's word to Israel and the nations, in spite of rejection and abuse at their hands. Yet, Yahweh's seeking of Israel and the nations is promised ultimate success, partly because the

servant endures the punishment meant for the enemies of Yahweh. The servant seeks justice like a king; he announces the word and suffers like a prophet. His life is the paradigm of the liberated lifestyle.

How does this vocation of servant harmonize with the message of Second Isaiah elsewhere? The prophet announced to exilic Israel a great new Exodus and a trip home to Zion, an announcement undergirded by references to Yahweh as Creator and Redeemer. Yahweh was able and willing to save. This good and joyful news was promised by God in accord with his freedom. In his freedom he could use the Persian Cyrus as his special agent; he could offer to the oppressive nations both defeat and an opportunity to recognize whose was the real glory in the world. At the beginning and end of his book, Second Isaiah based his proclamation on the word or promise of God proclaimed to weak and weary Israel.

As Israel waited for this word to happen, she was invited to conduct herself as God's servant. Her faithful endurance of exile, despite her rejection by God's opponents and her victorious accomplishment of God's task, were designed to make her a light to the nations. That exalted, but realistic servant role remains the vocation of God's people until this day.

Still, another way in which the servant poems intersect with the rest of Second Isaiah's message is exemplified in Isa 43:22-28, a Trial Speech against Israel.

This speech seems to presuppose a complaint of Israel, that ran somewhat as follows: "How could you act this way Yahweh, whereas we served you faithfully?"

Yahweh responded by denying that he had made Israel serve (RSV: "I have not burdened you") with all kinds of sacrifices. Instead, Israel made Yahweh serve (RSV: "You have burdened me") with their sins and iniquities. While Israel's sins were no doubt a "burden" and a "weariness" for Yahweh, this conventional understanding misses a most important feature of the passage. Israel's sins and iniquities also turned *Yahweh* into a servant, and he, like the servant of the servant poems, would make himself an offering for sin and would make them be accounted righteous. If the earthly servant by his patient bearing of rebuke helps Yahweh's salvation to reach to the ends of the earth, how much more will the patient bearing of rebuke by the heavenly servant be a light and a covenant to the nations.

The church — early and late — has seen in the servant a model and paradigm for understanding the work of Jesus Christ. He is the servant par excellence; he served that we might serve. His servants have a new status given to them by promise. His servants are not crushed or subservient, but they belong to, and find protection with, their Lord. His servants obey, a service of heart and soul and mind. His servants seek to install God's justice in the world and to walk shrewdly in light of their Emancipator's



ways. His servants participate in God's work for his people right now. They imitate the self-giving service of the Greatest Servant of all in their daily lives.

God's freed-up servants would never again want to be slaves. They also know that they do not have to go home to their Lord to be free. Self-giving service right now is the shape of the liberated life-style.

How Does All This Apply?

Biblical images can lose their power through too much familiarity or too much sentimentality — the Good Shepherd is perhaps the best example. Or biblical images fade because contemporary Christians no longer have a clear or usable picture of what the original image implied. God as Father or King may sound too "masculine" today, or it may imply facets of fatherhood and kingship that are only negative in our personal or corporate experience. Yet, if we choose not to use such images because they seem archaic or their connotations counterproductive, we often lose what those images were once designed to convey.

So it is with the Christian as servant. Western Christians may think only of a long-departed elitist society when they hear talk about being a servant. Or the

notion of servants may suggest that of slaves and remind only of the shameful history of Black slavery in America. To some Liberation theologians servanthood automatically implies non-assertiveness, yielding to the status quo, a non-liberated anthropology. Small wonder that a study of slaves and servants seems quite unmodern.

Slavery, non-assertiveness, and yielding to the status quo are all hindrances to our understanding of what the new life in Christ is all about. But to fail to ponder what it means to be emancipated slaves and new-style servants would mean missing a great deal of the Christian perspective on the human condition. I wrote this paper because I perceived that today's criticism of slavery and servanthood often throws out the baby with the bath.

We may not at first like servant talk, but the Christian Gospel leaves us little choice. Luther spoke of our freedom, our being subject to no one, but insisted that at the same time we are slaves and servants, subject to everyone. To bear proudly the status of servant and to serve to the uttermost are, finally, the marks of a liberated person. All hail to God the Liberator! All joy to his obedient daughters and sons, who serve because they are free.