

Slavery

First of all, under ideal circumstances the system of slavery described in the Mosaic Law would not have been needed. God was clear that if the Israelites obeyed Him there would be no poor in the land:

Deuteronomy 15:4: "Save when there shall be no poor among you; for the Lord shall greatly bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee for an inheritance to possess it:

5 Only if thou carefully hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe to do all these commandments which I command thee this day."

However, since the Israelites did *not* obey the Lord there were poor people among them. Since God knew this was going to happen He established a number of provisions in the Mosaic Law that were intended to take care of the poor. For example, every seventh year the Israelites were supposed to leave their fields alone so that the poor could eat whatever grew in their vineyards and olive trees:

Exodus 23:10: "And six years thou shalt sow thy land, and shalt gather in the fruits thereof:

11 But the seventh year thou shalt let it rest and lie still; that the poor of thy people may eat: and what they leave the beasts of the field shall eat. In like manner thou shalt deal with thy vineyard, and with thy oliveyard."

Likewise, whenever they harvested their field in the other six years they were to leave the corners alone and not go back a second time to reap again. What was left behind was for the poor:

Leviticus 19:9: "And when ye reap the harvest of your land, thou shalt not wholly reap the corners of thy field, neither shalt thou gather the gleanings of thy harvest.

10 And thou shalt not glean thy vineyard, neither shalt thou gather every grape of thy vineyard; thou shalt leave them for the poor and stranger: I am the Lord your God."

Moreover, the poor were not to be charged interest:

Leviticus 25:35: "And if thy brother be waxen poor, and fallen in decay with thee; then thou shalt relieve him: yea, though he be a stranger, or a sojourner; that he may live with thee.

36 Take thou no usury of him, or increase: but fear thy God; that thy brother may live with thee."

On top of that, every three years the levitical tithe was to be shared with the poor:

Deuteronomy 14:28: "At the end of three years thou shalt bring forth all the tithe

of thine increase the same year, and shalt lay it up within thy gates:
29 And the Levite, (because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee,) and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the widow, which are within thy gates, shall come, and shall eat and be satisfied; that the Lord thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest.”

Finally, and most amazingly, every seven years all debts were canceled:

Deuteronomy 15:1: “At the end of every seven years thou shalt make a release.
2 And this is the manner of the release: Every creditor that lendeth ought unto his neighbour shall release it; he shall not exact it of his neighbour, or of his brother; because it is called the Lord's release.”

As you can see, the Mosaic Law had a number of provisions in it that were designed to take care of the poor. Every seven years all debts were canceled and all food that was grown was given to the poor. The poor could not be charged interest. Every three years the poor shared in the tithes that were given to the Levites, and every year they were given the food that was in the corners of the fields and the food that grew after the first harvest. This is how the poor were cared for under the Mosaic Law.

However, there were cases where these provisions were not enough. In that case the poor person could choose to sell himself into slavery:

Leviticus 25:39: “And if thy brother that dwelleth by thee be waxen poor, and be sold unto thee; thou shalt not compel him to serve as a bondservant:
40 But as an hired servant, and as a sojourner, he shall be with thee, and shall serve thee unto the year of jubile.
41 And then shall he depart from thee, both he and his children with him, and shall return unto his own family, and unto the possession of his fathers shall he return.”

It is important to note that the poor in Israel sold *themselves* into slavery; they were *not* kidnapped and sold into slavery by others. When they sold themselves into slavery they took the money that they received for doing so and used it to pay their debts. Their purchase price went to *them*, not to someone else. They were to be treated as servants, not slaves. Slavery also did not last a lifetime: they were to be set free after a certain period of time.

The system of slavery that is described in the Mosaic Law is *completely different* from the system of slavery that was practiced in the United States. First of all, you could not kidnap someone and sell them as a slave, or force someone into slavery. That was punishable by death:

Deuteronomy 24:7: “If a man be found stealing any of his brethren of the children of Israel, and maketh merchandise of him, or selleth him; then that thief shall die; and thou shalt put evil away from among you.”

Slavery was entered into voluntarily. You could not be stolen and sold. People who did such things were hunted down and executed.

Next, slaves were to be treated as hired servants, not as slaves. Mistreatment was forbidden:

Leviticus 25:53: “And as a yearly hired servant shall he be with him: and the other shall not rule with rigour over him in thy sight.”

Masters were not allowed to kill their slaves – and if they did they were held accountable for it:

Exodus 21:20: “And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished.”

If the master caused the servant any type of permanent physical damage he was required to immediately set him free:

Exodus 21:26: “And if a man smite the eye of his servant, or the eye of his maid, that it perish; he shall let him go free for his eye's sake.

27 And if he smite out his manservant's tooth, or his maidservant's tooth; he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake.”

As you can see, mistreatment was strictly forbidden – but the law went even further than that. All slaves were required to take the Sabbath day off:

Deuteronomy 5:13: “Six days thou shalt labour, and do all thy work:

14 But the seventh day is the sabbath of the Lord thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, nor thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thine ox, nor thine ass, nor any of thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates; that thy manservant and thy maidservant may rest as well as thou.”

Moreover, when masters went up to Jerusalem to make sacrifices, partake in celebrations, or celebrate the various festivals, their slaves were to accompany them and partake in the celebration:

Deuteronomy 12:17: “Thou mayest not eat within thy gates the tithe of thy corn, or of thy wine, or of thy oil, or the firstlings of thy herds or of thy flock, nor any of thy vows which thou vowest, nor thy freewill offerings, or heave offering of thine hand:

18 But thou must eat them before the Lord thy God in the place which the Lord thy God shall choose, thou, and thy son, and thy daughter, and thy manservant, and thy maidservant, and the Levite that is within thy gates: and thou shalt rejoice before the Lord thy God in all that thou puttest thine hands unto.”

Finally, all slaves were to be set free on the seventh year, and when they were set free they were to be let go *with payment of money*:

Deuteronomy 15:12: “And if thy brother, an Hebrew man, or an Hebrew woman, be sold unto thee, and serve thee six years; then in the seventh year thou shalt let him go free from thee.

13 And when thou sendest him out free from thee, thou shalt not let him go away empty:

14 Thou shalt furnish him liberally out of thy flock, and out of thy floor, and out of

thy winepress: of that wherewith the Lord thy God hath blessed thee thou shalt give unto him.”

Not only was the person given money when he sold himself into slavery, but when he was set free in the seventh year he was to be given *additional* payment for his years of service.

It should also be noted that the slave could purchase his freedom at any time, regardless of whether the master wanted to set him free or not. Relatives of the slave could also purchase his freedom:

Leviticus 25:48: “After that he is sold he may be redeemed again; one of his brethren may redeem him:

49 Either his uncle, or his uncle's son, may redeem him, or any that is nigh of kin unto him of his family may redeem him; or if he be able, he may redeem himself.

50 And he shall reckon with him that bought him from the year that he was sold to him unto the year of jubile: and the price of his sale shall be according unto the number of years, according to the time of an hired servant shall it be with him.

51 If there be yet many years behind, according unto them he shall give again the price of his redemption out of the money that he was bought for.

52 And if there remain but few years unto the year of jubile, then he shall count with him, and according unto his years shall he give him again the price of his redemption.

53 And as a yearly hired servant shall he be with him: and the other shall not rule with rigour over him in thy sight.”

There is more. Slaves were to be treated as members of the household: they were to be given the same type of food that their masters ate, live in the same type of house, and sleep in the same type of bed. They were also allowed to own property. As Leviticus says, slaves were to be treated as hired servants.

I hope this makes it clear that the system of slavery described in the Mosaic Law is completely different from the system of slavery that was once practiced in this country. The two systems are completely different and should not be confused. When reading the Bible it is important to keep in mind that this was the system that was in place in the Old Testament. Context is crucial; if we don't keep the proper context in mind then we will jump to all sorts of erroneous conclusions.