

Ask Away – February 7

1) **Why are there special rules about making altars when the tabernacle had a bronze altar? Why were stone altars not to be made from “hewn stones”?** (Exod 20:24–25)

Prior to the construction of the tabernacle and the bronze altar, there was a need for an altar on which to offer sacrifices. Moses had already built an altar to celebrate the victory God gave them over the Amalekites (Exod 17:15), and he would build another altar as part of the inauguration of the “Book of the Covenant” (Exod 24:4–8). After the tabernacle and the temple were built, there were special circumstances in which temporary altars were made in order to offer sacrifices to God (e.g., Josh 8:30; Jdg 6:25–27; 13:15–20; 1 Sam 16:1–5; 1 Kgs 18:30–40). These rules governed the construction of such altars.

The two reasons usually suggested for the prohibition against “hewn stones” are: (1) God didn’t want the altar to become a kind of idol in itself, and (2) the stones in their natural state represented the wholeness and completeness associated with God’s holiness; any human alteration would cause them to become common or unclean (cf. Num 19:2; Deut 21:3).

2) **How could God allow the practice of slavery when He had just rescued His own people from slavery?** (Exod 21:2)

When God rescued Israel from the harsh and oppressive slavery of Egypt, they were not free to go and do whatever they wanted. Instead, they became God’s slaves: “For the Israelites are My slaves. They are My slaves that I brought out of the land of Egypt; I am Yahweh your God” (Lev 25:55 HCSB; cf. 25:42). This was appropriate, for the Israelites belonged to God twice over: first by right of creation (Exod 19:5) and second by right of redemption (Deut 7:8).

Since God owned the Israelites, He was free to do with them whatever He wanted. In the same way that God was free to delegate the taking of a life which belonged to Him (Gen 9:5–6; Num 15:32–36), He was free to delegate the ownership of a life which belonged to him (Exod 21:2; Deut 15:12). But was that God’s plan for Israel? Did He intend for them to be enslaved to one another?

No—God’s plan for Israel was for them to live in peace and security on their own land, enjoying the fruits of their own labor. Not only that, God also gave them everything the Canaanites had gathered and built over the centuries: “When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you—a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant—then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Deut 6:10–12 NIV; cf. Joshua 24:13).

God gave each tribe a fair allotment of land, and each family was responsible for working the land and providing for themselves (Joshua 21:43). God told them that if they obeyed Him and worshiped Him alone, He would bless and prosper them (Deut

8:6–10; 28:1–14). Thus, God never intended Israel to be a nation in which the people were enslaved to one another.

Indeed, the idea of an Israelite becoming a slave was deadly serious to God. God said, “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death” (Exod 21:16; cf. Deut 24:7; cf. 1 Tim 1:10). Such enslavement is a good example of the kind of slavery that once existed in America. From God’s perspective, those who participated in the slave trade were guilty of a capital offense. In Jeremiah’s day, when the people forced their freed slaves back into slavery, God condemned them to death on the basis of this law (Jer 34:8–22; cf. Exod 21:1–2).

So how could an Israelite end up in slavery? Was it because of poverty? Could misfortune or mistakes lead to a life of enslavement? No! Poverty was *not* the basis for an Israelite to become a slave. In fact, God made extensive provision for the poor:

- They were to be treated with dignity and respect (Deut 24:10–13).
- They were not to be oppressed or exploited in any way (Exod 22:22–23; 23:6; Lev 25:42–43; Deut 24:12), but neither were they to be given preferential treatment before the law (Exod 23:3; 30:15; Lev 19:15).
- They were to be fed from the fields of their neighbors (Exod 23:11; Lev 19:10; 23:22; cf. Ruth 2).
- They were to be paid for their work promptly each day (Lev 19:13; Deut 24:14–15).
- They were to be given zero-interest loans (Exod 22:25; Lev 25:35–38; Deut 15:7–11; 23:19–20; cf. Neh 5:1–13).
- Their debts were to be released at the end of every seven years (Deut 15:1–11; 31:10; cf. Neh 10:28–31).
- Their land was to be returned for free in the Jubilee year (Lev 25:25–28).

If, after all these safety nets, an Israelite felt compelled to sell themselves as a slave, *they were not to be treated as a slave!* God said, “If your brother becomes poor beside you and sells himself to you, you shall not make him serve as a slave; he shall be with you as a hired worker and as a sojourner. He shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then he shall go out from you, he and his children with him, and go back to his own clan and return to the possession of his fathers. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves. You shall not rule over him ruthlessly but shall fear your God” (Lev 25:39–43). Thus, the worst thing that could happen to a poor Israelite was for them to become a hired worker to their creditor until the next Jubilee.

So how could an Israelite end up in slavery? The answer—sin! Sin was the only way an Israelite could end becoming a slave:

- Idolatry. If an Israelite refused to worship God alone, they were liable to be enslaved by other nations (Lev 26:33; Deut 28:32–33, 68; Judges 2:11–15). While God’s warnings were generally aimed at the nation as a whole, they were just as true for the individual.
- Greed. If an Israelite stole something and could not repay what they had stolen plus the required restitution, they were to be sold into slavery until their debt was paid (Exod 22:1–4).

- Laziness. If an Israelite refused to work their own land or would not work as a hired worker for someone else, they could be sold into slavery until whatever debts they had were paid (Prov 21:25; 24:30–34).¹

Here we see that it was *debt incurred through sin* and not debt in and of itself that could cause an Israelite to become enslaved.² Israelites who fell into poverty through misfortune or mistake were to be supported by the community and cared for until they could get back on their feet (Ruth 2). Israelites who stole from others or fell into poverty because of laziness could be sold into slavery. Such slavery was a disciplinary measure instituted by God to deal with those who were disobedient. *Thus the OT laws concerning slavery should be understood as governing the corrective system which God intended as a deterrent to certain sins.*

God could have given Israel an arrangement in which people were imprisoned for debts incurred through theft or laziness. Instead, God gave them a system in which the thief and the sluggard were sold as slaves and forced to work in order to pay their debts. Imagine a society in which the citizens were personally responsible for and intimately connected with rehabilitation! Under this system, slaves were owned by their masters:

- They were considered the property of their owner and were not free to leave whenever they wanted (Exod 21:2, 4, 21; Deut 15:12).
- They could be bought or sold as property (Exod 21:2, 4, 21; 22:3; Lev 25:44–46; Deut 15:12).
- Their life, though worth as much as any other person (Exod 21:20), was valued in terms of money given their status as property (Exod 21:21, 32).

But might not an owner justify abuse of their slaves on the grounds that they were property? Indeed, this was an issue, and so God put boundaries in place to protect slaves from death or serious injury:

- If an owner killed a slave, the slave was to be avenged. This showed how seriously God valued all life (Exod 21:20–21).
- If an owner seriously injured a slave, the slave gained their freedom immediately (Exod 21:26–27). This served as a check to make sure physical discipline was kept within reasonable bounds.
- If a slave believed their owner was going to seriously injure or kill them, they had the God-given right to escape (Deut 23:15–16).

¹ Although not directly stated in the Law, many passages in Proverbs show God's displeasure with laziness, and when combined with verses that clearly state we should not help the wicked (Ps 26:4–5; 2 Chr 19:2), it follows that slavery is the appropriate response.

² An Israelite could become a slave because of the sin of others, but such slavery was *not* part of God's intention for His people: (1) Idolatry. An Israelite could become enslaved because of the idolatry of their parents or neighbors (cf. the little girl who was Naaman's slave in 2 Kings 5:1–2). (2) Kidnapping. An Israelite could be kidnapped and sold into slavery, but the death penalty acted as a strong deterrent against such crimes (Exod 21:16). (3) Mistreatment. An Israelite could be forced into slavery by a creditor who refused to follow God's laws (2 Kings 4:1–7; Jer 34:8–22; Neh 5:1–13). (4) Parental Abuse. An Israelite could be sold into slavery by their parents, and although this was sometimes done for the purpose of marriage (Exod 21:7–11), there is reason to believe that God did not approve of such sales (Neh 5:1–13; 2 Kings 4:1–7; cf. Matt 19:8). Indeed, if God's laws concerning the poor were obeyed, no parent would ever need to sell their child. (5) Birth. An Israelite could be born into slavery by virtue of being the child of a slave (Exod 21:4), but if God's laws were followed, they were destined for freedom in the Sabbatical year (Exod 21:2–3; cf. Lev 25:41).

In addition to these safeguards, slaves also enjoyed other rights and protections:

- They retained the dignity of personhood and were to be treated with respect and kindness (Exod 21:20; Lev 19:18; Deut 23:15–16).
- They enjoyed equal participation in Sabbath, Sabbatical year and Jubilee year rest (Exod 20:10; Lev 25:6, 11; Deut 5:14).
- They could rejoice in worship before God at the annual feasts and offer sacrifices at the sanctuary (Deut 12:8–18; 16:11–15).
- They could earn money and own property (Lev 25:49).
- A female slave who was violated sexually was not liable to the death penalty, since she was not free (Lev 19:20–22; cf. Deut 22:22–29).
- A female slave bought or taken for the purpose of marriage was not to be sold if the man didn't want to keep her. She was free to leave for nothing and go wherever she wanted (Exod 21:7–11; Deut 21:10–14).

God also put a limit on the amount of time an Israelite could be kept as a slave. Indeed, from the moment an Israelite became a slave, they were destined for release and freedom:

- All Israelite slaves were to be freed in the seventh year. They did not have to buy their freedom; rather, the owner was required to liberally furnish them from his own flock, threshing floor and winepress (Exod 21:2; Deut 15:12–14).
- Those who wanted to remain with their owners could choose of their own free will to become permanent slaves (Exod 21:5–6; Deut 15:16–17).
- Those who had been sold into slavery to pay for debt incurred by theft were to be set free as soon as their restitution was complete (Exod 22:3).
- Those who belonged to resident foreigners had the right to be redeemed by a relative or by themselves. If they could not be redeemed, they were to be set free in the Jubilee year (Lev 25:47–55).

The system instituted by God for Israelite slavery was both just and generous. Sin was dealt with appropriately and people were given a fresh start with a clean slate. Further, society's intimate involvement in the process ensured that other Israelites were motivated to resist the temptations of greed and laziness.

But what about Gentile slaves? Although they enjoyed many of the rights and protections given to Israelite slaves—the dignity of personhood, safeguards from injury, equal participation in rest, female slave provisions—there were also some important differences:

- Gentile slaves could be freely acquired from other nations as well as from the spoils of war (Lev 25:44–45; Deut 20:10–18; 21:10–14).³
- Gentile slaves could be kept in perpetuity and passed on as property to children (Lev 25:45–46).
- Gentile slaves had no right to redeem themselves (Lev 25:46).

³ It is assumed that God did not sanction participation in the buying or selling of kidnapped slaves regardless of their nationality (Exod 21:16).

Why did God allow Israel to freely buy, sell and own Gentiles slaves? We should begin by remembering the stark difference between God's chosen people, Israel, and the rest of the nations. God said, "You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exod 19:4-6). The Gentile nations nearby were wicked, perverse, idolatrous, slaves of sin, and most of them were the enemies of Israel. Their enslavement was appropriate, for in many cases the alternative was death (Deut 20:10-18; cf. Joshua 6:25-26; 9:26-27).

Indeed, as slaves to Israel, the Gentiles would be treated better than in any other nation. Moreover, they would have the privilege of living among God's people and witnessing His blessings. In this way, God was incentivizing all Gentile slaves to join His covenant people and become part of their holy community. If a Gentile converted, they would receive the same treatment and favor that Israelites received. Thus God's laws concerning Gentile slavery can be seen as redemptive and gracious, for they spoke to the goodness of Israel's God.