

# WHAT ABOUT SLAVERY IN THE OLD TESTAMENT?

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## Confronting The Fallacy of Equivocation...

The logical “fallacy of equivocation” is committed when the same word or phrase is used in different senses within an argument, making reasoning misleading. This fallacy typically takes place when someone says, “*There was slavery in the Bible!*”

When one makes such an assertion, they are usually applying the concept of antebellum (pre-Civil War) slavery to the Old Testament experience of indentured servitude, thereby committing “the fallacy of equivocation.”

## 1. Old Testament Indentured Servitude Versus Antebellum Slavery

### Three Stages of Battling Poverty (Leviticus 25)...

**Stage One:** A poor Israelite mortgages his land until the Year of Jubilee... (vv. 25-28)

**Stage Two:** If that does not pay his debt, he can seek to access an interest-free loan... (vv. 35-38)

**Stage Three:** If the loan fails to resolve the debt, he – and possibly his entire family – can work for a fellow Israelite, as a contracted employee, eventually returning to normal life once the debt is resolved... (vv. 39-41)

- a. The Hebrew word “*ebed*” (“slave” in many modern translations) is better translated “servant” or “worker” if one wishes to avoid “the fallacy of equivocation.” In ancient Hebrew, “*ebed*” simply refers to someone who is in a dynamic dependency relationship...  
(Exodus 14:31; 2 Samuel 7:5-8; Isaiah 42:1; Exodus 21:2-6)
- b. “Indentured servitude” was a contractual arrangement, not an entrapped bondage...  
(Deuteronomy 15:12-18; Exodus 21:2; Leviticus 25:39-41)
  - i. It was voluntary, not coerced.
  - ii. It was enforced by a contract, not by chains.
  - iii. It had a fixed six-year term limit.
  - iv. In a limited-options economy, it was a way of avoiding starvation or paying off debt.

- c. Kidnapping (the foundation of antebellum slavery) was prohibited in Israel... (Exodus 21:16; Deuteronomy 24:7)
- d. Harsh treatment of indentured servants was forbidden... (Exodus 21:26-27)
- e. Foreign runaway slaves who fled to Israel to seek refuge were protected... (Deuteronomy 23:15-16)

## 2. The Special Case of Foreign Slaves... (Leviticus 25:39-51)

- a. When Moses speaks of not making other Israelites “*work as slaves*” (Leviticus 25:39), the context of this chapter appears to be alluding to the length of the service, as opposed to the nature of the work. Unlike an Israelite, it was possible for a foreign-born servant to be a servant/slave for life, as they were not included in the “Year of Jubilee” legislation.
- b. Israelites are not encouraged to acquire foreign servants, only permitted to do so. Foreigners appear to have been treated (legally) as “property”, however, they were not to be de-humanized. Israel’s understanding of God’s image in every human, plus Israel’s own history of Egyptian bondage, was to act as a shield against abuse.
- c. Since foreigners had no property rights in Israel, their financial options were limited to attaching themselves to an Israelite household to receive money, security, food, clothing, and shelter.
- d. Foreigners had the right/ability to own their own businesses and prosper, even to the point of having Israelites work as a servant for *them*! (Leviticus 25:47-48)
- e. Thirty-six times the Israelites are told to be kind to aliens, since Israelites were once aliens in Egypt. If a slave was being treated harshly, they had the option to run away and seek refuge without the fear or threat of being forcibly returned to their harsh conditions... (Leviticus 19:34; Deuteronomy 24:14; 27:19; Deuteronomy 23:15-16)

### The Bottom Line...

Slavery (indentured servitude) was similar to divorce; it was not God’s desire, nor was it God’s design. It was a practical concession to the reality of broken, sinful humanity. God created laws to limit its damage, not to promote its use.