

SLAVERY IN CLASSICAL JEWISH SOURCES
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Narrative Examples of Slaveholding in the Bible

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Also consult The Jewish Publication Society's edition of the Tanakh (not transcribed here due to copyright protection by JPS, 1985 and 1999), which is more frequently used by religious Jews. The following website provides the Hebrew text and an earlier translation no longer under copyright:

<http://www.mechon-mamre.org/p/pt/pt0.htm>

Genesis 12:16

And for her sake he dealt well with Abram; and he had sheep, oxen, male donkeys, male and female slaves, female donkeys, and camels.

Genesis 16:1–9

Now Sarai, Abram's wife, bore him no children. She had an Egyptian slave-girl whose name was Hagar, and Sarai said to Abram, "You see that the Lord has prevented me from bearing children; go in to my slave-girl; it may be that I shall obtain children by her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. So, after Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Sarai, Abram's wife, took Hagar the Egyptian, her slave-girl, and gave her to her husband Abram as a wife.

He went in to Hagar, and she conceived; and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked with contempt on her mistress. Then Sarai said to Abram, "May the wrong done to me be on you! I gave my slave-girl to your embrace, and when she saw that she had conceived, she looked on me with contempt. May the Lord judge between you and me!" But Abram said to Sarai, "Your slave-girl is in your power; do to her as you please." Then Sarai dealt harshly with her, and she ran away from her.

The angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, the spring on the way to Shur. And he said, "Hagar, slave-girl of Sarai, where have you come from and where are you going?" She said, "I am running away from my mistress Sarai." The angel of the Lord said to her, "Return to your mistress, and submit to her."

Genesis 20:14

Then Abimelech took sheep and oxen, and male and female slaves, and gave them to Abraham, and restored his wife Sarah to him.

Genesis 21:9–14

But Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, whom she had borne to Abraham, playing with her son Isaac. So she said to Abraham, “Cast out this slave woman with her son; for the son of this slave woman shall not inherit along with my son Isaac.” The matter was very distressing to Abraham on account of his son. But God said to Abraham, “Do not be distressed because of the boy and because of your slave woman; whatever Sarah says to you, do as she tells you, for it is through Isaac that offspring shall be named for you. As for the son of the slave woman, I will make a nation of him also, because he is your offspring.”

So Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child, and sent her away. And she departed, and wandered about in the wilderness of Beer-sheba.

Genesis 24:35

The Lord has greatly blessed my master, and he has become wealthy; he has given him flocks and herds, silver and gold, male and female slaves, camels and donkeys.

Genesis 25:12

These are the descendants of Ishmael, Abraham’s son, whom Hagar the Egyptian, Sarah’s slave-girl, bore to Abraham.

Nehemiah 5:1–13

Now there was a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish kin. For there were those who said, “With our sons and our daughters, we are many; we must get grain, so that we may eat and stay alive.” There were also those who said, “We are having to pledge our fields, our vineyards, and our houses in order to get grain during the famine.” And there were those who said, “We are having to borrow money on our fields and vineyards to pay the king’s tax. Now our flesh is the same as that of our kindred; our children are the same as their children; and yet we are forcing our sons and daughters to be slaves, and some of our daughters have been ravished; we are powerless, and our fields and vineyards now belong to others.”

I was very angry when I heard their outcry and these complaints. After thinking it over, I brought charges against the nobles and the officials; I said to them, “You are all taking interest from your own people.” And I called a great assembly to deal with them, and said to them, “As far as we were able, we have bought back our Jewish kindred who had been sold to other nations; but now you are selling your own kin, who must then be bought

back by us!” They were silent, and could not find a word to say. So I said, “The thing that you are doing is not good. Should you not walk in the fear of our God, to prevent the taunts of the nations our enemies? Moreover I and my brothers and my servants are lending them money and grain. Let us stop this taking of interest. Restore to them, this very day, their fields, their vineyards, their olive orchards, and their houses, and the interest on money, grain, wine, and oil that you have been exacting from them.” Then they said, “We will restore everything and demand nothing more from them. We will do as you say.” And I called the priests, and made them take an oath to do as they had promised. I also shook out the fold of my garment and said, “So may God shake out everyone from house and from property who does not perform this promise. Thus may they be shaken out and emptied.” And all the assembly said, “Amen,” and praised the Lord. And the people did as they had promised.

Biblical Slave Law

Genesis 17:12

Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring.

Deuteronomy 21:10–14

When you go out to war against your enemies, and the Lord your God hands them over to you and you take them captive, suppose you see among the captives a beautiful woman whom you desire and want to marry, and so you bring her home to your house: she shall shave her head, pare her nails, discard her captive’s garb, and shall remain in your house a full month, mourning for her father and mother; after that you may go in to her and be her husband, and she shall be your wife. But if you are not satisfied with her, you shall let her go free and not sell her for money. You must not treat her as a slave, since you have dishonored her.

Deuteronomy 23:15

Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them.

Exodus 12:43–44

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance for the passover: no foreigner shall eat of it, but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised.

Exodus 21:2–11

When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. If he comes in single, he shall go out single; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone. But if the slave declares, "I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person," then his master shall bring him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost; and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life. When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has dealt unfairly with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money.

Exodus 21:16

Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death.

Exodus 21:20

When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished.

Exodus 21:26–27

When a slaveowner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye. If the owner knocks out a tooth of a male or female slave, the slave shall be let go, a free person, to compensate for the tooth.

Leviticus 19:20–22

If a man has sexual relations with a woman who is a slave, designated for another man but not ransomed or given her freedom, an inquiry shall be held. They shall not be put to death, since she has not been freed; but he shall bring a guilt offering for himself to the Lord, at the entrance of the tent of meeting, a ram as guilt offering. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of guilt offering before the Lord for his sin that he committed; and the sin he committed shall be forgiven him.

Leviticus 25:39–54

If any who are dependent on you become so impoverished that they sell themselves to you, you shall not make them serve as slaves. They shall remain with you as hired or

bound laborers. They shall serve with you until the year of the jubilee. Then they and their children with them shall be free from your authority; they shall go back to their own family and return to their ancestral property. For they are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness, but shall fear your God. As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness. If resident aliens among you prosper, and if any of your kin fall into difficulty with one of them and sell themselves to an alien, or to a branch of the alien's family, after they have sold themselves they shall have the right of redemption; one of their brothers may redeem them, or their uncle or their uncle's son may redeem them, or anyone of their family who is of their own flesh may redeem them; or if they prosper they may redeem themselves. They shall compute with the purchaser the total from the year when they sold themselves to the alien until the jubilee year; the price of the sale shall be applied to the number of years: the time they were with the owner shall be rated as the time of a hired laborer. If many years remain, they shall pay for their redemption in proportion to the purchase price; and if few years remain until the jubilee year, they shall compute thus: according to the years involved they shall make payment for their redemption. As a laborer hired by the year they shall be under the alien's authority, who shall not, however, rule with harshness over them in your sight. And if they have not been redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children with them shall go free in the jubilee year.

Historical Sources on Jews Opposed to Slaveholding

Flavius Josephus (37/38–ca. 97), *Jewish Antiquities*, 18.21, writes about the ancient Essenes. *Josephus: Jewish Antiquities*. Trans. Louis H. Feldman. Loeb Classical Library; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965. Vol. 9, p. 19.

They neither bring wives into the community nor do they own slaves, since they believe that the latter practice contributes to injustice and that the former opens the way to a source of dissension. Instead they live by themselves and perform menial tasks for one another.

Philosopher Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 BCE–ca. 50 CE), *On the Contemplative Life* 70–72, writes about a group called the Therapeutrides and Therapeutai. *Philo*. Trans. F. H. Colson. Loeb Classical Library. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961. Vol. 9, p. 157.

They do not have slaves to wait upon them as they consider that the ownership of servants is entirely against nature. For nature has borne all men to be free, but the wrongful and covetous acts of some who pursued that source of evil, inequality, have imposed their yoke and invested the stronger with power over the weaker. In this sacred banquet there is as I have said no slave, but the services are rendered by free men who perform their tasks as attendants not under compulsion nor yet waiting for orders, but with deliberate goodwill anticipating eagerly and zealously the demands that may be made. For it is not just any free men who are appointed for these offices but young members of the association chosen with all care for their special merit who as becomes their good character and nobility are pressing on to reach the summit of virtue. They give their services gladly and proudly like sons to their real fathers and mothers, judging them to be the parents of them all in common, in a closer affinity than that of blood, since to the right minded there is no closer tie than noble living. And they come in to do their office ungirt and with tunics hanging down, that in their appearance there may be no shadow of anything to suggest the slave.

Slavery in Early Rabbinic Sources

The Mishnah, which was codified around the beginning of the third century CE, contains many discussions by ancient rabbis on slavery. The following brief selection gives a sense of the many contexts in which enslaved laborers are discussed. *Shisha Sidre Mishnah: The Mishnah: A New Translation*. Commentary by Pinhas Kehati. Jerusalem: Eliner Library, Department for Torah Education and Culture in the Diaspora of the World Zionist Organization, 1988–1996.

Mishnah, Tractate *Ketubot*, Chapter 1: Mishnah 2

A virgin, her *ketubah* is two hundred, and a widow, a *maneh*. A virgin widow, a divorced woman, and a woman who underwent *halitzah* after the *erusin* – their *ketubah* is two hundred, and they have a claim of virginity. A female convert, captive, and a bondwoman who were redeemed, converted, or were freed less than three years and one day of age – their *ketubah* is two hundred, and they have a claim of virginity.

Mishnah, Tractate *Qiddushin* (= *Kiddushin*), Chapter 1: Mishnah 2

A Hebrew servant is acquired with money or with document, and acquires himself with years, with the Jubilee year, or through a monetary deduction. The Hebrew maidservant has an advantage over him, for she acquires herself with signs. One who is pierced is acquired through the act of piercing, and he acquires himself with the Jubilee year, or through the death of his master.

Mishnah, Tractate *Qiddushin*, Chapter 1: Mishnah 3

A Canaanite servant is acquired with money, and with a document, and by *hazakah*, and acquires himself with money from others, and with a document by himself, the words of Rabbi Meir. And the Sages say, with money by himself, and with a document by others, provided that the money is from others.

Mishnah, Tractate *Qiddushin*, Chapter 3: Mishnah 13

Rabbi Tarfon says, *mamzerim* can purify. How so? If a *mamzer* weds a maidservant, the offspring is a servant. If he frees him – the son consequently is a freeman. Rabbi Eliezer says, This one is a *mamzer* servant.

Mishnah, Tractate *Bava Qamma* (=Kamma), Chapter 8: Mishnah 3

One who strikes his father or his mother, but inflicts no wound on them, and one who wounds his fellow on the Day of Atonement, is liable for all of them. One who wounds a Hebrew bondman is liable for all of them, except for loss of time, during the period that is his. One who wounds a Canaanite bondman belonging to others is liable for all of them. Rabbi Yehudah says, there is no shame for bondmen.

Mishnah, Tractate *Bava Metzia*, Chapter 8: Mishnah 4

If one exchanged a cow for an ass, and it gave birth, and similarly, if one sold his bondwoman and she gave birth, this one says, “Before I sold,” and this one says, “After I bought,” they divide. If he had two bondmen, one big and the other small, and similarly, two fields, one big and the other small, the purchaser says, “I purchased the big one,” and the other one says, “I do not know,” he is entitled to the big one. If the seller says, “I sold the small one,” and the other one says, “I do not know,” he only has the small one. This one says, “The big one,” and this one says, “The small one,” the seller must take an oath that he sold the small one. If this one says, “I do not know,” and this one says, “I do not know,” they divide.

Mishnah, Tractate *Pesahim*, Chapter 7: Mishnah 2

They may not roast the *pesah* on a spit, or on a grill. Rabbi Zadok said, It once happened that Rabban Gamliel said to Tabi, his slave, “Go out and roast for us the *pesah* on the grill.”...

Mishnah, Tractate *Pesahim*, Chapter 8: Mishnah 1

A slave belonging to two partners may not eat from either of them. One who is half slave and half free may not eat from his master’s.

In the United States in the Nineteenth Century, Jewish Leaders Were Drawn into the Debates on Slavery

For a sermon defending slavery as biblically based, see: <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/raphall.html>

Rabbi Morris J. Raphall (1798–1868).

Bible View of Slavery: A Discourse, Delivered at the Jewish Synagogue, B'nai Jeshurun, New York, on the Day of the National Fast, January 4, 1861.

New York: Rudd and Carleton, 1861.

General Collections

For an anti-slavery response, see: <http://www.jewish-history.com/civilwar/einhorn.html>

Rabbi David Einhorn (1809–1879).

David Einhorn's Response to “A Biblical View of Slavery,” in *Sinai* 6 (Baltimore, 1861) 2–22, Baltimore, 1861, translated from the German by Mrs. Kaufmann Kohler.