

Exodus 21 Concerning Daughters Sold into Service Virgins, Concubines, or Slave-wives?

By R. Magnusson Davis, founder and editor, New Matthew Bible Project
Revised and corrected, November 20, 2019

- The Tyndale/Matthew Bible translation of Exodus 21:1-11, especially 7-11 on female servants
- How the Geneva Bible changed verse 8
- What the Hebrew said at verse 8
- Translations and commentaries after Geneva
- The modern emphasis on slavery and slave-wives
- The implications

Exodus 21 prescribes rules for the treatment of Hebrew girls sold into indentured servanthood by their fathers. Aside from financial considerations, it appears from William Tyndale's translation of these passages as they are written in the 1537 Matthew Bible that ancient fathers had good reason to do this: it was a way to find a husband for their daughters. We learn that during a girl's term of service her master might betroth her to a future husband. It seems he had not only the authority to do this, but also the duty. We discover that these Jewish masters sometimes promised to give or betroth the girls to their own sons. Finally, we learn what should happen if a young maiden was not given a husband, or if, when she had been promised to the master's son, he took (or was given) another wife.



The general context in Exodus 21 is the treatment of indentured bondservants in Israel under Mosaic law. An indenture is an agreement by which a person binds himself to serve another, but may also refer to an agreement binding a person's child to service. Verses 1-6 deal with menservants, cover situations where they enter into service married or single, and limit their indenture to a term of six years. Verses 7-11 deal with the situation of young girls, virgins, sold into service by their fathers.

However, Geneva introduced significant revisions to verses 7-11, and also added shocking notes. Since then, the translation and interpretation of Exodus 7-11 has developed so that these verses are often understood to contemplate, not innocent provision for young maidservants, but situations where virgin daughters have been sold to be concubines or "slave-wives." These developments affect how we understand life in ancient Israel and justice under the Mosaic law.

Below is Tyndale's translation from the Matthew Bible:

Exodus 21:1-11 in the Matthew Bible

1 ¶These are the laws which thou shalt set before them.

2 If thou buy a servant that is an Hebrew, six years he shall serve, and the seventh he shall go out free paying nothing.

3 If he came alone, he shall go out alone: If he came married, his wife shall go out with him.

4 And if his master have given him a wife and she have borne him sons or daughters, then the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone.

5 But and if the servant say, I love my master and my wife and my children, I will not [do not wish to] go out free.

6 Then let his master bring him unto the gods and set him to the door or the doorpost, and bore his ear through with a nawl [*sic*], and let him be his servant forever.

7 ¶If a man sell his daughter to be a servant: she shall not go out as the menservants do.

8 If she please not her master, so that he hath given her to no man to wife, then shall he let her go free: to sell her unto a strange nation shall he have no power, because he despised her.

9 If he have promised her unto his son to wife, he shall deal with her as men do with their daughters.

10 If he take him another wife, yet her food, raiment, and duty of marriage shall he not minish [reduce or withdraw].

11 If he do not these three things unto [for] her, then shall she go out free and pay no money.

Unlike the situation with menservants, no time limit is set for a maiden's indenture. If the master found her a husband, presumably she would remain in the household during the season of betrothal, the wedding would take place, and then her circumstances would change as appropriate. There is no mention of children because her continuing virginity was expected and assumed. The main focus is what to do if the master did not find her a husband because she had displeased him and he "despised" her. Tyndale probably used 'despised' in the obsolete sense 'treated with contempt in word or deed,'¹ meaning that the master had spoken or acted against the girl. He should now liberate her, because his obligation was to advance her interests, especially her opportunity for marriage, but he had demonstrated that he could not or would not do this. Therefore the agreement must be treated as at an end and she should go free.

But we also learn that, if the master had promised the virgin to his son, he still stood *in loco parentis* to her; that is, he stood in the place of a father to her, as if she had been adopted into the family through marriage. But if the marriage to the son fell through, then what? In that case the master still had an obligation to the girl to provide the three things

¹ *OED online*, s.v. 'despise,' verb, entry 3. Obsolete by the end of the 16th century. Sample quotation showing the usage: "1557 Bible (Whittingham), Luke xxiii. 11, 'And Herode..with his men of warre, *despised* him, and mocked hym.'"

set out in verse 10, just as a father would for his own daughter: food, raiment, and duty of marriage. (This ‘duty’ is discussed below.) However, depending on the circumstances, it might not be feasible for the master to provide these things, or he might neglect or refuse to do so. In that case, again the girl must go free without obligation. This did not excuse (or condemn) anyone, but gave the parties, especially the maiden and her family of origin, a remedy in a difficult situation.

Duty of marriage

The scholars disagree about what ‘duty of marriage’ was, and whose duty it was. Again, from Tyndale we learned that it was a master’s duty to a maiden whom he had “*promised*” to his son. His duty flowed from his promise. It appears that this promise was not a proper betrothal, perhaps because the children were too young. Much turns on the correct understanding and translation of the Hebrew here. In verses 8-9, Tyndale did not use the verb ‘betroth’ as the Geneva Bible and some other versions did. He used ‘give’ and ‘promise.’ Betrothal was a special, limited arrangement. Tyndale’s translation allows for a different arrangement. Hebrew scholar Sam Powell explains that his translation is also faithful to the Hebrew:

One thing jumps out at me. In verses 8 and 9, the word translated ‘betrothed’ in other versions doesn’t really mean ‘betrothed.’ The word for ‘betrothed’ is אָרַשׁ (*arash*), but here the word is יָעַד (*ya’ad*). ‘*Ya’ad*’ means to appoint, or make an appointment. It is most often used of a meeting time or place called ahead of time. I rarely side with the ESV, but their word ‘designated’ isn’t too bad. But I don’t think that it would have been as binding as an engagement – perhaps because they were too young(?). I believe it would refer to a custom that we know little about - perhaps not quite an engagement, but a plan, or appointment. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is the word ‘*ya’ad*’ used for ‘betrothed.’²

We cannot be sure about the details, but it is possible that the girls were 9-10 years of age or younger. Whatever the case, the promise of verse 9, though not a proper betrothal, was significant and binding. See the verses again:

Exodus 21:9-10 ⁹If **he** have [*has*] promised her to his son as wife, **he** shall deal with her as men do with their daughters. ¹⁰If **he** take him another wife, yet her food, raiment, and duty of marriage shall **he** not minish.

Who is the *he* of verse 10 who takes another wife, and for whom? Martin Luther’s 1534 translation made it clear that *he* is the master who has taken another wife for his son.³ This is also the natural understanding from Tyndale’s translation. Flowing from this, the *he who must not minish* is also the master. He must continue to act as a father to the girl and provide food, clothing, and the mysterious duty of marriage.

² Rev. S. Powell, M. Div., pastor and retired professor of Hebrew, private correspondence, June 2018. I am indebted to Pastor Powell for the thoughtful assistance he gave me with this passage.

³ Exodus 21:8-11 in Martin Luther’s 1534 Old Testament reads, “⁸Gefellet sie aber irem herrn nicht, und hat sie niemand vertrawet, sol er sie zu losen geben, aber unter ein frembd volct [*fremd volk*] sie zuerteuffen hat er nicht macht, weil er sie verschmecht hat. ⁹Vertrawet er sie aber seinem son, so sol er tochter recht an ir thun. ¹⁰Gibt er im aber ein andere, so sol er ir an irem futter, decte, und eheschuld nicht abbrechen. ¹¹Thut er deise drey nicht, so sol sie frey ausgehen, und nichts bezalen.” As in Tyndale, verse 8, “und hat sie neimand vertrawet,” means, “if the master has given (entrusted, promised?) her to no man (‘nobody’).”

The English expression ‘duty of marriage’ is a general term. ‘Duty’ is early modern English for *that which is due*. ‘Of marriage’ means *by reason of marriage*; that is, belonging to or arising out of the married state. Therefore ‘duty of marriage’ is that which is due by reason of marriage. The Hebrew is one word: ‘*ownah*.’ According to Strong’s Concordance, ‘*ownah*’ derives from a root word meaning ‘to dwell together,’ and has to do with living in the same household.⁴ In ancient times many households, especially those of wealthy and powerful men, were large, with several generations and extended family members dwelling together. In this context ‘duty of marriage’ must mean all that the girl would be entitled to as an in-law dwelling with the family: a proper home. It was a catch-all phrase, so as not to unduly limit her “duty” or due. After all, the promise of marriage was a promise of everything that goes along with membership in a family. Powell confirms that ‘*ownah*’ probably had this meaning here:

This Hebrew word is only used once in the whole OT, but most lexicons agree that it means to ‘dwell together’ or something like that. Put together with the other words, I think it is an idiom that means something like “room and board.” Literally it is “her flesh, her covering, her dwelling.” It’s an odd phrase, and only used here.⁵

My understanding was also independently confirmed to me by Hebrew professor David Nicholls, who wrote, “The whole phrase: ‘*isherah kesuthah veonathah*’ occurs just once in the Hebrew Bible. Each of the three words is itself a *hapax legomenon*. It seems to be an idiomatic phrase translated in our terms as her ‘full board and lodging’ or her ‘full subsistence.’”⁶

However, other interpreters say ‘*ownah*’ or ‘duty of marriage’ refers to *conjugal relations*, such as are proper only between a husband and a wife. Of course, this cannot be the meaning if verse 10 is addressing the master’s duty as a father-in-law. But some say the master actually married the girl, and therefore ‘*ownah*’ refers to his husbandly duty. Usually, however, the different understanding is due to construing the *he who must not minish* as the master’s son, which makes ‘*ownah*’ to be the son’s husbandly duty. But this creates an insurmountable difficulty: it assumes the girl was not merely promised to, but actually married to the son, which goes against the entire drift of the passage. The point is, she never married. That is why she goes out alone. That this must be the case becomes evident when these verses are compared with verses 1-6 concerning menservants. There it is contemplated that a wife is given to the man, the marriage is consummated, and the couple might have children. On the contrary, in verses 7-11 the girl is *not* given and there is no mention of children at all. This must be because her continuing virginity is assumed. (For this reason, the alternate interpretation, that verse 10 means the son married the girl and then took another wife, is also untenable.)

But not all commentators say ‘*ownah*’ refers to sexual relations. Some say it means a *return of dowry*. Some prefer *emotional support* (more below). Then again, the Geneva Bible translated it *recompense of her virginity* (meaning compensation for loss of virginity). John Calvin speculated that *affliction* was a possible translation, or better yet,

⁴ Strong, s.v. 5772 ‘*ownah*.’

⁵ Powell, private correspondence, June 2018.

⁶ Right Revd. Prof. D. C. Nicholls, PhD., private correspondence, June 2018.

agreement (see his commentary on Exodus 21 attached as appendix A). It is difficult to imagine greater confusion than this. Powell adds:

According to the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ‘ownah’ is based on the root ‘*anah*, which means ‘to answer.’ The scholars do not agree.... According to HALOT (Koehler and Baumgartner’s lexicon), the phrase corresponds to the old Babylonian “*ipru, pisēsātu, lubusētu*”, or “food, ointment, and a garment,” but they admit that they are just guessing about ‘ointment.’

These speculations leave everything uncertain. The simple meaning ‘food, clothing, and a proper home,’ in accordance with the Hebrew idiom, is sensible and appropriate.

The revised translation of verse 8: Laws for immoral masters

The modern confusion arises from a different reading of Exodus 21:8, introduced in the Geneva Bible. The puritans also added questionable notes to address the difficulties that arise from their translation:

Exodus 21:1-11, Geneva Bible 1560 & 1599	
<p>1 Now these are the laws, which thou shalt set before them:</p> <p>2 If thou buy an Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing.</p> <p>3 If he came himself alone, he shall go out himself alone: if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him.</p> <p>4 If his master hath given him a wife and she hath borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s, but he shall go out himself alone.</p> <p>5 But if the servant say thus, I love my master, my wife and my children, I will not go out free,</p> <p>6 Then his master shall bring him unto the Judges, and set him to the door, or to the post, and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall serve him forever.</p> <p>7 Likewise if a man ⁽¹⁾sell his daughter to be a servant, she shall not go out as the menservants do.</p> <p>8 If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall ⁽¹⁾he cause to buy her: he shall have no power to sell her to a strange people, seeing he ⁽²⁾despised her.</p> <p>9 But if he hath betrothed her unto his son, he shall deal with her ⁽¹⁾according to the custom of the daughters.</p> <p>10 If he take ⁽¹⁾him another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her raiment, and recompense of her virginity.</p> <p>11 And if he do not these ⁽¹⁾three unto her, then shall she go out free, paying no money.</p>	<p>[<i>Relevant notes shown below</i>]</p> <p>7(1) Constrained either by poverty, or else to the intent that the master should marry her.</p> <p>8(1) By giving another money to buy her of him.</p> <p>8(2) Or, deflowered her.</p> <p>9(1) That is, he shall give her dowry. [1599: ‘his’ dowry.]</p> <p>10(1) For his son.</p> <p>11(1) Neither marry her himself, nor give another money to buy her, nor bestow her upon his son.</p>

To comment first on a compositional problem with the Geneva revision: verse 7 commences with “likewise” and then proceeds to say how the maidservant should *not* be treated likewise. No good translator would confuse semantics like this, and mislead readers about the nature and relation of the following verses.

At verse 8, instead of saying the master had not given the daughter to any man, the Geneva Bible says he had *betrothed her to himself*. One of the problems with this is its inconsistency with Israelite practice. Betrothal was arranged between parents or guardians, not by the groom. Can self-betrothal really be considered betrothal? Another issue is that normal practice for a betrothed bride was to live separately until the marriage. This may explain why the Hebrew at verse 8, which Tyndale translated ‘promise,’ was not the word normally used for ‘betrothed’: the arrangement concerning the young girl was not a proper betrothal. To send a betrothed bride to live in her groom’s home until the wedding would be highly irregular. Would she take up residence with his servants, who were soon to be her servants? That does not seem appropriate. Or did the master betroth her to himself after she came to dwell in the home because he was motivated by carnal lust and, as Calvin casually opined (appendix A), wished to “enjoy her embraces”? In any case, the Geneva notes inform us that the wicked master took advantage of and sinned against the girl. Note 8(2) informs us that he “deflowered her” – that is, he had sinful relations with her.

All this is not just confusing, it is defiling to contemplate.

Let us assume verse 8 meant the master betrothed the young girl to himself. The meaning of ‘betroth’ has not changed. When the Geneva Bible was written it meant ‘promise in marriage,’ just as it still does.⁷ Therefore verse 8 in the Geneva Bible does not mean the master *married* the girl to himself (as some moderns interpret it). When note 8(2) says the master deflowered the maid, it is confirming beyond any doubt that he seduced her or forced himself on her during the engagement period – relations that amount to statutory rape at the very least. Adding to the depravity of the situation, note 8(1) prescribes a sham sale whereby the rapist pays someone to pretend to buy the girl from him. This is one way to get rid of her. Geneva’s note 11(1) then reinterprets the “three things” the master should do, not as ways to *provide for* the young girl, but simply as ways to deal with her, including the sham sale. It is devilish and cold. But if he does not do these three things, then out she goes, without succour or aid, and without having to pay for the privilege – and nothing more is required of the rapist. This scenario provides for the master, not the maiden. Even worse, Calvin falsely taught, contrary to the entire thrust of the law and of natural justice, that God overlooked the evil of the wicked master (appendix A).

The Geneva revision does not follow the Hebrew

Geneva’s revision to verse 8 concerning the master’s self-betrothal to the girl hinged on a speculative reading of the Hebrew. Powell explains:

⁷ *OED online*, s.v. ‘betroth.’ Quotation: “1685, R. Baxter *Paraphr.* Luke i. 26 ‘Not married, but betrothed.’” Accessed May 25, 2018.

In the Hebrew [Masoretic] text, there are certain places where the ancient scribes, for whatever reason, thought that there should be some changes in the text. But they had such a respect for God’s word, they wouldn’t dare change the text itself. So they made their “edits” in the margin, as notes to the reader. These became known as the *qere* (to read) as opposed to *kethib* (as written). The *kethib* was the exact consonants as they were written. The *qere* were the marginal notes on how to read it. I believe that the *kethib* is inspired, and the *qere* you take with a grain of salt, as it were.

In Exodus 21:8, the *kethib* is *lo’*, which means ‘not.’ And that clause would be “whom he has not betrothed” – pretty much the way Tyndale has it. But the *qere* reading (in the margin) is *low*, pronounced the same, but with different consonants. It means ‘to him,’ rather than ‘not,’ so the translation would be “which he betrothed her to him” which is what the Vulgate, Septuagint (LXX), and all the English versions have from Geneva on down. Geneva was following the lead of the LXX, I believe. They did a lot. So it depends on one consonant: *lo’* or *low*. The Hebrew gives us “which he did not betroth her”; the other gives us “which he betrothed her to himself” If you take the consonants as written, Tyndale was right.⁸

Luther and Tyndale followed the Hebrew, the *kethib*, at verse 8. Their translations not only make more sense, they do not sully the verses with immorality.

Translations after Geneva

The KJV also followed the *qere* at verse 8, and then added a few revisions of its own:

Exodus 21:8, KJV If she please not her master, *who hath betrothed her to himself*, then shall he let her be redeemed: to sell her unto a strange nation he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her.

The KJV changed “he hath despised her” to “he hath dealt deceitfully.” This “deceit” might involve breach of promise to marry and/or seduction by promising marriage. In centuries past, the latter offence constituted rape under English law, even in situations that did not involve such a power imbalance as was between the master and the maid.

Every Bible since the KJV that I surveyed has followed the *qere* at verse 8, in the foundational understanding that the master somehow had or arranged to have the young girl for himself. Ironically, the RV put the *kethib* in the margin:

Exodus 21:8, RV If she please not her master, **who hath espoused her to himself*, then shall he let her be redeemed: to sell her unto a strange people he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her. (***RV marginal note:** Another reading is, so that he hath not espoused her.)

Modern Bibles, recognizing that ‘*ya’ad*’ does not mean ‘betrothed,’ speak of the master “selecting” or “designating” the girl. The Living Bible says the man bought *her* as opposed to buying her *to be a servant*, which blurs the distinction between slavery and indenture. The Bibles have variously translated ‘*ownah*’:

⁸ Powell, private correspondence, June 2018. The ‘*kethib*’ are sometimes called ‘*ketib*’ or ‘*ktiv*.’

Exodus 21:8-10; the Scriptures now

NIV ⁸If she does not please the master *who has selected her for himself*, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. ⁹If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. ¹⁰If he marries another woman, he *must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights*.

Living Bible ⁸If she does not please the man *who bought her*, then he shall let her be bought back again; but he has no power to sell her to foreigners, since he has wronged her by no longer wanting her after marrying her. ⁹And if he arranges an engagement between a Hebrew slave girl and his son, then he may no longer treat her as a slave girl, but must treat her as a daughter. ¹⁰If he himself marries her and then takes another wife, he may not reduce her food or clothing, or *fail to sleep with her as his wife*.

Good News Translation ⁸If she is *sold to someone who intends to make her his wife*, but he doesn't like her, then she is to be sold back to her father; her master cannot sell her to foreigners, because he has treated her unfairly. ⁹If a man buys a *female slave* to give to his son, he is to treat her like a daughter. ¹⁰If a man takes a second wife, he must continue to give his first wife the same amount of food and clothing and *the same rights that she had before*.

ESV ⁸If she does not please her master, *who has 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 broken faith with her. ⁹If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. ¹⁰If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, or her *marital rights*.

In modern Bibles, the interpretations vary. The Living Bible assumes the master married the maiden and imposes upon him a duty to provide continuing sexual services to her.

Some modern commentators treat Exodus 21:7-11 as if it deals with the sale of young girls as “slaves” or concubines. William Coleman, considered an authority on Bible times and customs, says this passage dealt with daughters who were sold as concubines and, further, that it was meant to “guarantee concubine rights.”⁹ Coleman also uses the term “slave-wife,”¹⁰ a concept that perhaps flows from the idea we see in the LB, where the master buys a wife. Moderns teach that these “slave-wives” had far-reaching rights to claim their ‘*ownah*’ or duty of marriage. Coleman interprets ‘*ownah*’ as “affection,” apparently a euphemism for sex. He writes, “A slave-wife who was deprived of food, clothing, and affection could go free.”¹¹ Another writer says “slave-wives” were entitled to a divorce if they did not receive “sexual love” and “emotional support” as their duty of marriage:

This passage [Ex. 21:10-11] describes the rights of a slave wife: food, clothing, sexual love – that is, material support as well as emotional support. If her

⁹ William Coleman, *Today's Handbook of Bible Times and Customs* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 86.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

husband reneges, she may be released from the marriage. The rabbis correctly saw that if a slave had such rights, so did a free woman, who implicitly expected his faithfulness as a husband. If any of these four rights is neglected, there are grounds for legitimate divorce. The four grounds are withdrawal of physical support (food or clothing), withdrawal of emotional support (manifest in sexual engagement), and (implicitly) adultery.¹²

These are quite the rights to give a “slave.” According to the scholars, the foregoing was the rabbinic interpretation of the Exodus passage when Christ came.¹³ If so, it reveals that the source of the *qere* at Exodus 21:8 was rabbinic tradition. Apparently (and not surprisingly) the translators of the LXX were influenced by this tradition. Tyndale, however, rejected it, as did Luther.¹⁴ Luther often rejected the interpretations of Jewish rabbis and grammarians – not, he emphasized, “out of a misunderstanding of the languages, nor out of ignorance of the rabbinical commentaries, but knowing and deliberately.”¹⁵ However, Geneva, the KJV, and later Bibles followed the rabbinic interpretation. As a result, insofar as the Exodus 21 passage is concerned, moderns have developed a different understanding of life and justice under the Mosaic Law than the Matthew Bible (and other Reformation Bibles) taught.

The modern “Christian” preoccupation with slavery

The different interpretations of Exodus 21 after the Geneva Bible have contributed to exposing Christianity and the Bible to the charge of sanctioning slavery. However, this charge is undeserved. While many ancient customs are unfamiliar to us and seem difficult to justify, it should be clear that true slavery was not taught or tolerated under the Mosaic law.

The word ‘slave’ has always had a very narrow meaning. It means a person who “is the property of, and entirely subject to, another person, whether by capture, purchase, or birth; a servant completely divested of freedom and personal rights.”¹⁶ Since Exodus 21 makes it clear that the menservants and maidservants had many rights – including the all-important right to go free – it is simply not correct to refer to them as slaves. Semantics matter. There is a difference between protected, indentured servanthood and slavery. Tyndale and Coverdale used the more general term ‘bondservant,’ a broad word that was appropriate to different situations.¹⁷ There was no need to depart from their terminology and use the pejorative and inappropriately narrow term ‘slave.’

The noun ‘slavery’ in a concrete sense means “severe toil like that of a slave: heavy

¹² David Instone-Brewer, “Instone-Brewer on Divorce and Remarriage,” <https://www.douglasjacoby.com/wp-content/uploads/Instone-Brewer-on-Divorce-Remarriage-1.pdf>. Accessed June 7, 2018.

¹³ Douglas Jacoby, foreword to “Instone-Brewer on Divorce and Remarriage,” *ibid*.

¹⁴ Cf. note 3.

¹⁵ Luther, “Defence of the Translation of the Psalms,” *LW*, Vol. 35, 209

¹⁶ *OED online*, s.v. ‘slave.’ Accessed August 2019.

¹⁷ This is my conclusion after reviewing its usage in early modern literature and the Bible. However, the OED treats ‘bondservant’ as a synonym for ‘slave.’ But this definition is clearly incomplete. Exodus 21 and other passages make it clear that the word was used differently, in situations where bondservants had rights and freedoms, as in the Matthew Bible.

labour, hard work, drudgery.”¹⁸ This is the burden that the Jews experienced in Egypt. But the word of God to Moses when he was preparing their exodus from Egypt was,

Exodus 6:7, MB And I will take you for my people and will be to you a God. And ye shall know that I am the Lord your God which bringeth you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.

Modern Bibles, through different verb tenses and semantics, present this verse simply as a prophecy that the people would know God had rescued them from slavery under the Egyptians. This is true insofar as it goes, but the MB allows the further understanding that the people would know God as one who relieves from such burdens.

The concept of slavery raises ugly spectres of human trafficking, kidnapping, and inhumane treatment. It was and has always been a terrible reality among the nations, but God desired the Israelites to depart from such practices, and to be a special and holy people unto him. Mosaic law prescribed that anyone who kidnapped and sold a person was to die for it (Ex. 21:16). There were remedies for ill-treated servants and punishments upon cruel masters; for example, a master who beat a servant to death must be sorely punished (Ex. 21:20). Servants were to go free if their masters injured them (Ex. 21:26-27). Certain verses granted manumission, or, as at Exodus 21:5, the right to insist on remaining with the master and his family. Servants (or perhaps slaves from surrounding nations) who escaped from their masters were not to be returned, but on the contrary, should be given safe harbour. (De. 23:15-16). These are not laws that countenance slavery.

Jesus summed up the law simply: We must do unto others as we would have them do unto us. The Israelites were to be a holy, gentle, and loving people. It is true that sin was swiftly and gravely punished, often with death. However this was to show the terrible gravity of sin, and to keep the community free from its defiling influences. The people were exhorted and commanded to be good and kind. The Lord called to Moses and said, “Tell the children of Israel: Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I took you up upon eagles’ wings, and have brought you unto myself.... Ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests and a holy people” (Ex. 19:4,6).

Below are some Mosaic laws setting out the right and expected treatment of man and beast among God’s people:

Exodus 23:6-13, Matthew Bible

⁶Thou shalt not hinder the right of the poor that are among you in their suit.

⁷Keep thee far from a false matter, and the innocent and righteous see thou slay not, for I will not justify the wicked.

⁸Thou shalt take no gifts, for gifts blind the seeing and pervert the words of the righteous.

⁹Thou shalt not oppress a stranger, for I know the heart of a stranger, because ye were strangers in Egypt.

¹⁸ *OED online*, s.v. ‘slavery,’ entry 1. Accessed August 2019. Also “the fact or condition of being a slave.”

¹⁰Six years thou shalt sow thy land and gather in the fruits thereof:

¹¹and 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 do with thy vineyard and thine olive trees.

¹²Six days thou shalt do thy work, and the seventh day thou shalt keep holy day, that thine ox and thine ass may rest, and the son of thy maid and the stranger may be refreshed.

¹³And in all things that I have said unto you, be circumspect.

Therefore, true slavery was forbidden in Israel.

The words ‘slave’ and ‘slavery’ were first used in the Bible by the Geneva scholars, though infrequently. There was only one use in the Scriptures, and others were in chapter summaries and notes. However, the Modern Period has seen a staggering increase in the occurrence of these words in the Bible. I did a key word search¹⁹ and turned up the following:

Occurrences of the words ‘Slave’ or ‘slavery’ in the Bible	
GNV 1599	1
KJV	2
Douay 1899	23
Phillips	37
NKJV	55
ESV	127
NIV	181
CJB	284
LB	318

To portray slavery as a typical and acceptable in ancient Israel falsely gives it the appearance of lawfulness and biblical sanction. Modern commentaries that interpret Exodus 21 as covering situations where fathers sold their daughters to be concubines and “slave wives” only exacerbate this wrong impression.

The question also arises, what or who were concubines in ancient Israel? The patriarch Abraham had concubines. Since the 13th century, ‘concubine’ has generally meant a kept mistress; a woman who cohabits with a man she is not married to.²⁰ John Rogers added a note in the Matthew Bible clarifying that in the polygamous society of the Israelites, concubines were proper wives, but with a servant status. However this is not clear in the Geneva version:

Genesis 25:6, MB And unto the sons of his concubines, he gave gifts

MB note: Concubines in the Scripture are not harlots, but wives, yet bore no rule

¹⁹ Search done at biblegateway.com. Accessed July 1, 2019.

²⁰ OED online, s.v. ‘concubine.’ Accessed October 2019.

in the house, but were subject as servants. As Hagar was to Sara.

GNV note: Concubine is oftentimes taken in the good part for those women which were inferior to the wives.

Rogers wanted to make it clear that there was no impropriety. However, the Geneva version is ambiguous. It does not actually say they were wives, or inferior wives, but that they were inferior *to* the wives. This suggests they were not in fact wives. If this was not the intended meaning, the Geneva note should have made it clear.

Another problem with modern semantics is the trend to speak of Christian believers as “slaves” of God. This is no doubt due to the influence of modern Bibles. But this is wrong. Slaves must work against or in spite of their will, but a true believer is willing and has a kind master. The truth has set him free (Joh. 8:32). He (or she) is a child of the free woman (Gal. 4:30), whose burden is light (M’t. 11:30). To call a child of the Lord a “slave” misrepresents the teaching of Scripture about the gift of salvation. Tyndale’s term “servant of the Lord” is better and truer.

In conclusion, Geneva’s treatment of Exodus 21:7-11 went against the spirit of the law, and against justice and propriety. Moderns have not done much better. God is ill-spoken of because of such things. However, the purity, innocency, and propriety of the Matthew Bible and William Tyndale’s translation glorify God.

~ ~ ~ ~ ~

© Ruth Magnusson Davis

Revised (again) November 20, 2019.

Appendix A

John Calvin's Commentary on Exodus 21:7-11

I have divided Calvin's commentary into shorter paragraphs so that it is easier to follow. May readers consider how, in the second paragraph, Calvin concluded that God remitted the punishment due the men:

From this passage, as well as other similar ones, it plainly appears how many vices were of necessity tolerated in this people. It was altogether an act of barbarism that fathers should sell their children for the relief of their poverty, still it could not be corrected as might have been hoped. Again, the sanctity of the marriage-vow should have been greater than that it should be allowable for a master to repudiate his bond-maid, after he had betrothed her to himself as his wife; or, when he had betrothed her to his son, to make void that covenant, which is inviolable: for that principle ought ever to hold good -- "Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (M't 19:6; Mk 10:9). Yet liberty was accorded to the ancient people in all these particulars; only provision is here made that the poor girls should not suffer infamy and injury from their repudiation.

But, although God is gracious in remitting the punishment, still He shows that chastity is pleasing to Him, as far as the people's hardness of heart permitted. First of all, He does not allow a master to seduce his purchased maidservant, but if he wishes to enjoy her embraces, a marriage must take place; for although He does not set this out in express terms, still we may infer from what He condemns, that the contrary is what He approves. From whence, too, their notion is refuted who suppose that fornication was lawful under the Law.

But the words must be more closely examined on account of their ambiguity. First, the sex is treated with consideration, that the condition of a female may be somewhat more favorable than that of a male; since, otherwise, their weakness would render young women subject to injury and shame. An explanation then follows, respecting which, however, interpreters differ; for some read the particle *l'*, *lo*, which is properly negative, for *lv*, *lo*; and hence arise two opposite meanings -- If he hath, or hath not, betrothed her to himself. If it be preferred to take it affirmatively, the meaning of the precept will be: If a master shall repudiate his bond-maid, whom he has loved and destined to be his wife, he must give her her liberty; for although literally it is, "he shall cause her to be redeemed," yet; the context shows that the obligation of setting her free is laid upon him; nor is this contradicted by the fact that he is only deprived of the power of selling her to a strange people; since I do not understand this as applying to foreigners only, but to others of his own nation, since sometimes those of another tribe or family are called strangers. For, even though there were no marriage-compact, it was not otherwise lawful to sell slaves of the holy and

elect people to foreigners. Besides, amongst the Israelites, slavery was only temporary.

But, to pass by everything else, let it suffice to observe the absurdity that a master should hold his wife as a slave to be sold at pleasure, if their opinion is received who suppose that the words refer to repudiation after betrothal. I myself rather approve of the other opinion, that, although the master shall not have aspired to matrimony with her, if her appearance displeases him so that he would be unwilling to have her as his wife, at least he must provide for her redemption; because her chastity would be in jeopardy if she remained with him unmarried; unless perhaps Moses may signify that, after she had been seduced, her master did not honor her with marriage. But the other view which I have just expressed is more simple; and a caution is given lest masters should seduce their maidservants at their pleasure. Thus the word despise does not refer to repudiation, but is opposed to beauty, or conjugal love.

The next case is, that if he should betroth her to his son, (he must give her a dowry,) in which, also, her modesty and honor is consulted, lest she should be oppressed by the right of ownership, and become a harlot. In the third place, it is provided that, if she should be repudiated, her condition should not be disadvantageous. If, therefore, he would make her his daughter-in-law, and betroth her to his son, he is commanded to deal liberally with her; for “after the manner of daughters” is equivalent to giving her a dowry, or, at any rate, to treating her as if she were free.

Finally, he adds that, if he should choose another wife for his son, he should not reject the former one, nor defraud her of her food and raiment, or of some third thing, concerning which translators are not well agreed. Some render it time, but I do not see what is the meaning of diminishing her time; others, duty of marriage, but this is too free a translation; others, more correctly, affliction, since the girl would be humiliated by her repudiation; still, to diminish affliction, is too harsh an expression for to compensate an injury. Let my readers, then, consider whether the word, *nth*, *gnonathah*, is not used for compact or agreement; for thus the context will run very well: If his son have married another wife, that the girl who has suffered ignominious rejection should obtain her rights as to food, and raiment, and her appointed dowry; otherwise, God commands that she should be set free gratuitously, in order that her liberty may compensate for the wrong she has received.

Discussion:

(1) Calvin condemns the long established custom of indenture as barbarous, which seems to misunderstand its benefits, while he excuses licentious “vice” and rape, which is truly barbarous.

(2) Calvin says that provision is made at Exodus 21 for the poor girls in order that they should not suffer infamy and injury. But the facts are they *already* suffered injury, and infamy is sure to follow. Further, this injury is the *cause* of their going free. Calvin also indicated that there would be no consequences for sin beyond what this law required for termination of the girl’s indenture: “God is gracious in remitting the punishment,” he wrote – as if these verses have anything to do with divine forgiveness and the remittance

of the eternal consequences of sin. Calvin makes too light of things. He never ought to have suggested that God forgave the wrongs done to the girl, at least not without both repentance and appropriate reparation. His teaching turns the grace of God into licentiousness (Jude 1:4).

(3) As to his treatment of the Hebrew word '*ownah*,' Calvin dismisses Tyndale's rendering 'duty of marriage' as being "too free." However, he then says it might mean 'affliction,' or maybe 'agreement,' or maybe 'appointed dowry,' etc. This is an impossibly "free" collection of meanings.