

# UNIT 36

## LAWS ABOUT SERVANTS

### (Exodus 21:1-11)

There follows now a series of sections called *mishpatim*, or cases (literally “decisions”), beginning with servants. A precept is stated, and then various cases in which the law is applicable are explained. These are all taken in harmony with the Decalogue that has just been given. The laws that follow in all these chapters can be grouped into three main categories:

- A. Laws pertaining to civil and criminal law
  - 1. Rights of slaves (21:2-11)
  - 2. Capital offences (21:12-17)
  - 3. Bodily injuries by animals (21:18-36)
  - 4. Theft of animals and burglary (22:1-4)
  - 5. Damage of property (22:5-6)
  - 6. Loss of deposit or loan (22:7-15)
  - 7. Seduction (22:16,17)
  
- B. Laws pertaining to religion and worship
  - 1. Images and altars (20:23-26)
  - 2. Banishment for idolatry (22:20)
  - 3. Reviling God and cursing a ruler (22:28)
  - 4. Firstfruits and firstborn (22:29-30)
  - 5. Torn flesh (22:31)
  - 6. Seventh year to be fallow
  - 7. Seventh day a day of rest (23:10-12)
  - 8. God's commands to be honored (23:13)
  - 9. Three pilgrimages (23:14-17)
  - 10. Festal sacrifices (23:18)
  - 11. Firstfruits brought to the temple (23:19a)
  - 12. Boiling a kid in its mother's milk (23:19b)
  
- C. Laws of a moral and humanitarian nature
  - 1. Sorcery and bestiality (22:18,19)
  - 2. Sojourner, widow, and orphan (22:21-24)
  - 3. Interest from the poor (22:25)

4. Garments taken in pledge (22:26-27)
5. Duties of witnesses (23:1-3)
6. Preserving an enemy's beast from harm (23:4,5)
7. Impartiality (23:6-9).

It will be immediately observed that the laws listed in this topical arrangement do not follow the order in Exodus. If the exposition goes through chapter by chapter, then explanations will have to be offered for the present arrangement of the material. The above list simply shows the topics in the legislative material.

The expositor will have to determine how much time may be spent on this material. Naturally a full exposition could be given for each unit if one has that luxury. However, if the material of the plagues can be condensed to a survey, certainly this material could also. Each unit would then be a point in developing the righteous demands of the LORD.

The first section deals with slaves/servants (Israel was not to enslave people in war; people who were slaves or servants might have come that way, but most were in some kind of debt or bondage, working it off).

### **Introduction**

The first section, Exodus 21:1-11, deals with laws about slavery.<sup>1</sup> The present section deals only with Hebrew slaves; foreign slaves are discussed in Leviticus 25:44-46. The conditions in the ancient world were such that slavery could not be abolished; but it was regulated for righteousness' sake.

There were several ways that an Israelite might become a slave: 1) he might be sold by his parents (fairly common with daughters); 2) he might be sold for theft (22:3) or insolvency (Am. 2:6); 3) he might be obliged by poverty to sell himself (Lev. 25:39); or 4) he might be born a slave. This needs to be clarified at the outset because the subject itself will provoke antagonism. God worked within the societal structure and restricted the power of the owner over the slave.

In outlining this material I would bypass verse one which is a heading for all

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<sup>1</sup> See H. L. Ellison, "The Hebrew Slave: A Study in the Early Israelite Society," *ExQ* 45 (1973):L30-35; and N. P. Lemche, "The Manumission of Slaves—The Fallow Year—The Sabbatical Year— the Yobel Year," *VT* 26 (1976):38-59.

these sections. I would then divide the section between the male slave (21:2-6) and the female slave (21:7-11).

## Exposition

### I. *The Male Slave (2-6)*

For the male slave, several rules are laid down: first, a Hebrew slave can only work six years, and then must go free in the seventh (v. 2); second, he must leave with what he had when he came in (vv. 3, 4), which means that anything his owner gave him remains the owner's; and third, if the servant does not wish to go free, he can remain forever as the man's servant (vv. 5, 6). This is clearly the choice of the servant, but must be legally ratified before the judges. So the law makes it clear that ***those in slavery for one reason or another should have the hope of freedom and the choice of service.***

### II. *The Female Slave (7-11)*

The case and circumstance for a woman was totally different. The main reason one would sell a daughter is that she be a maidservant or concubine. Marriages were fixed in those days. If a woman were going to marry someone in her social class, there would be little dowry for most of the women. The prospects might be better for her if her father sold her to someone wealthy. In this case, certain rules were necessary: first, if she was not pleasing (actually “evil, bad”) in the eyes of her master, he could let her be redeemed but not sold to a foreigner (v. 8); also, she cannot be set free after six years (v. 7) because marriage is involved; third, if he marries her to his son, then she must be treated as well as a daughter (v. 9); if he marries again, she still must receive here full rights or she may go free (vv. 10, 11). Through these laws God was teaching that ***women, who were often at the mercy of husbands or masters, must not be trapped in an unfortunate situation, but be treated well by masters or husbands.***

## Conclusion

The only thing that can be done here is to compare and contrast our structures of society with theirs. We do not sell ourselves into slavery when impoverished, and we do not sell daughters as concubines. But in that society, and in ours, we can say that ***God prohibits those who have control or care of other people from abusing that power*** by requiring them to treat them magnanimously and kindly, or relinquish their control over them. One area of application could be

the employer-employee relationship; another could be marriage. People should not feel trapped hopelessly in a harsh, unfortunate situation. Israel was not to repeat the bondage of Egypt. People must be given a chance for their freedom; they must have hope.