

Old-Testament Slavery: Fact. vs. Fiction with Dr. Paul Copan

(August 22, 2025)

FRANK:

Ladies and gentlemen, the Bible says in Leviticus 25 this. As for your male and female slaves, who you may have, you may acquire male and female servants from the pagan nations that are around you. Then too, it is out of the sons of the sojourners who live as aliens among you, that you may gain acquisition. And out of their families who are with you whom they will have produced in your land, they may become your possession.

You may even bequeath them to your sons after you to receive as a possession. You can use them as permanent servants. But in respect to your countrymen, the sons of Israel, you shall not rule with severity over one another. Unquote. That's Leviticus 25 and verses 42 and following. This appears to say that Israelites can actually buy slaves from foreign nations as a possession.

Is that really-- Does that really mean what I think it means? Because a lot of atheists and a lot of skeptics are claiming that the Bible believes in chattel slavery. We're going to dive into this very controversial and very complex topic today with my friend Dr. Paul Copan, who's written several books related to this.

The most recent is called 'Is God a Vindictive Bully? Reconciling Portrayals of Gods of the Old and New Testaments.' Paul also wrote 'Is God a Moral Monster?' He teaches down at Palm Beach Atlantic. He is a gem when it comes to these issues because they're very difficult. So, here he is, ladies and gentlemen, the great Paul Copan. Paul, how are you?

PAUL:

Hi. Doing well. Thanks so much for having me on your program again, Frank. Always a pleasure.



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FRANK:

Paul, you're the go to guy on this issue. You've done so much fabulous work on this. It is such a difficult issue. And I know you wrote 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' in response to people who read 'Is God a Moral Monster?' and said Paul, there's more, it seems in Leviticus 25 what I just read, that needs attention. Why did you decide to write 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' And then we'll get into the details of Leviticus 25.

PAUL:

Right. Yeah, yeah, yeah, just, we'll throw them up here. You know, the Moral Monster book that came out in 2011, which was written largely in response to the New Atheists and their claims about the quote, God of the Old Testament. You know, and I did treat the question that you, the text that you addressed, in a shorter space. And as you said, a lot of people wanted me to do a bit more on Leviticus 25.

So, there are three chapters in the book 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' on Leviticus 25? And try to settle some more of those issues. And I'm looking forward to talking about them with you. But yeah, there has been that challenge to look at this text and a lot of people make this distinction. Yes, you could talk about the Israelites who could potentially be indentured servants, but what about those pagans? Looks like you can mistreat them, you can abuse them, you can use them as objects and so on.

And there's a lot more to unpack here. And as we'll see, if people just read further in Leviticus 25, a lot of that same language that is used, of those foreigners or those aliens who are living among you or sojourning among you, that same language is also applied to Israelites. And so, we want to talk about that and say, well, there's kind of an interchangeability of language here and a lot more going on. That's part of the background of that. So, I'm looking forward to jumping into this conversation with you.

FRANK:

Yeah. One of the things I want to point out to our audience, Paul, and you point this out in both of these books, that we all want the easy button when it comes to these issues. But it's not an easy issue. It's a complicated issue. And you need to have sort of a detailed knowledge of several other topics. And you being an Old Testament scholar, have that knowledge. I just want

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to list a number of things you need to know if you want to know this topic in detail as it was intended to be known. First of all, you need to know the distinctions between slavery described in the Bible and slavery in the pre-Civil War area era in America.

We'll get to that. You also have to know something about the ancient near east culture versus Western culture. You have to know about translating certain words in Hebrew, which Paul, you do a great job of in the book. You have to know the purpose of the nation of Israel, and its laws, and the limited scope of the Old Covenant and its laws. You also have to know something about the ability or inability of people in the land of Israel. Could they own land? That had something to do with this. You have to know the difference between a prescription and a description in the Bible, including the concept of case law.

We'll see as we go into this discussion as well, ladies and gentlemen. You have to know the difference, or you have to know the fact that people entered into slavery or servitude, as we'll see, for their own economic benefit, because it was more secure than being a day worker in this agrarian society that didn't have welfare. You'll also have to know something about Roman laws in the New Testament. And you also have to know that there was a universal acceptance and perceived societal need of slavery throughout history.

So, you just can't sort of quote verses devoid of context to understand what the Bible as a whole is teaching about slavery. And by the way, ladies and gentlemen, we're not even going to be able to cover this topic in this podcast. There's so many intricacies and Paul has written it down in 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' So, you need to know that background to know this topic well. So, Paul, please set the table for us when it comes to the opening chapter of Genesis, because there's something in the opening chapter of Genesis that really feeds into this issue.

PAUL:

Right Of course, Genesis 1 tells us that both male and female are made in the image of God, that there is this intrinsic dignity that is God given, that this is something that then helps to shape the, vision of the Old Testament and also brings us into the New where you see that human beings are described as being made in the likeness of God. James, chapter three. So, at the very beginning, we see in the created order that God has made this, given human beings this fundamental equality.

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There is no intrinsic hierarchy. There is no class system at the very beginning. We see that there is in this sin free state, this fundamental equality between male and female, that there is no classism introduced at the very beginning that is a result of the fall. And so, when God steps into the world, as it were, in working with Abraham and then Israel and so forth, God is entering in and giving a law to people who are already broken, fallen.

The structures of society are corrupted. And so, this again has a great bearing on the issue of slavery, and how we are to understand that. And what we'll see is that God steps into a world that's already broken, but offers his people, kind of meeting them halfway, to accommodate them perhaps, but also to set them off in a redemptive direction. So, God, we see a greater legislation, as it turns out, than what the surrounding nations have.

And we see a vision that is informed by that fundamental equality. And there is this drive to move people to keeping that fundamental equality in mind, as things move forward toward the New Testament, toward the Messiah, and the incorporation of Jews and Gentiles, male and female, slave and free, into the body of Christ.

FRANK:

So, God starts in Genesis 1 saying that everybody's made in the image of God. That's the ideal. Man sinned. They bring slavery into the world. By the time Moses writes the Torah, you know, we're in 1400 or so BC. What's the status of slavery around the world at that point? And what kind of slavery is it, Paul? Is it the kind of slavery that we had in the American south prior to the Civil War? What was it like?

PAUL:

Yeah, well, for example, you know, you do have the-- You do have servitude slavery. And I guess you could technically call what Israel is experiencing in Egypt as a matter of serfdom, that they're simply, you know, the state owns the land. The Israelites are working it. They can perhaps have their own crops and so forth. But fundamentally, they've got to do what the ruler says and that their work is going to be for, you know, building pyramids or building storage cities, or whatever.

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But that is the sort of thing that you pick up on with regard to the ancient world. You do have potential for-- You have concern, for example, in ancient near eastern laws about, you know, widows, and orphans, and so forth. But what's unique about the Israelites is that they say you've got to look out for the foreigner, for the alien in your midst. That is a unique element that I think a lot of our discussion is going to be informed by. Because again, going back to the image of God, that that is taken for granted.

And so, God is working with people who are in these fallen structures, and that is seeking to move them in a redemptive direction. And that says a lot about how to treat the foreigner in your midst because the Israelites were once aliens in the land of Egypt.

FRANK:

A lot more with Dr. Copan. Back in a couple. Does the Bible condone slavery? If so, what kind of slavery? Why didn't the Bible just outlaw slavery? Is there a difference between slavery in the Old Testament and the kind of slavery we had in the American south prior to the Civil War?

Can you just buy people, and can they be property? These are the kind of questions we're diving in today with my friend Dr. Paul Copan, who wrote the book 'Is God and Vindictive Bully?' It details this particular subject, in a lot of detail. It goes into it. So, we're only going to cover the surface here. So, if you want to go much further in this topic and several others related to the Old Testament, get the book 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' by my guest, Dr. Paul Copan. Paul, before the break, we were talking a little bit, about the issue of slavery.

And you were talking just before that rude interruption came up called the hard break. That the Bible does express a concern for foreigners and that this was kind of unique in the ancient near east culture. Continue from that point.

PAUL:

Yeah, sure. We see that God is willing in the law of the Old Testament, God is willing to work with the Israelites where they are, and work with some of the things that we in the modern society take for granted. You know, maybe a welfare system, a social network, and support structure, and so forth. But again, those things were not available in the ancient near east and there was just kind of a—

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It was a hardscrabble existence for so many, but God is often creating conditions for the people of Israel so that indentured servitude, for example, won't become a reality. And so, we see things like God providing gleaning laws where people can pick fruit from the trees of their neighbors, or grain, like in the book of Ruth, grain from someone's field, in order to keep them out of having to sell themselves into servitude or contract themselves out for six years.

Unlike other ancient near eastern cultures, which did not have gleaning laws. They did not look out for foreigners. They charged high rates of interest. You have a hierarchical system in the surrounding nations, whereas you have a fundamental equality that even the native, as well as the alien. The native and the alien, are both basically living under the same law as Leviticus 24:22 says. So, the chapter of just before says there's basically this fundamental law under which both the alien as well as the native are to live.

And so, God is bringing in these redemptive structures, even though in other parts of the ancient near east, it's a lot worse. So, if you want to find refuge, as it were, if you want to have a hope of something that is more humanizing and enabling you to flourish, you know, if those laws are kept, you know, come to Israel, because that is going to be much more to your benefit than it would have been in other portions of the ancient near east.

FRANK:

What are the essential differences between Old Testament slavery and the kind of slavery we had in America 160 years ago?

PAUL:

Yeah, well, in the Ancient Near East, I mean, I don't know if you wanted to go into Israel per se, but yeah. In the Ancient Near East, kidnapping, for example, is prohibited. Generally speaking, you also have something that's different. You have something that is more, you have servitude, or serfdom, perhaps, that is based on ethnicity, or kind of a tribalism, rather, you know, and rather than, say, skin color. You also have a, like I said, you have this you know, this understanding of some people.

There's maybe different degrees of how someone was treated. But you do have in the antebellum south, you have slaves who are treated as property, and for example, blacks were

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considered as having two-thirds the value of a white person in the antebellum south, the Dred Scott decision, and so on. You also have this fugitive slave law, which if a slave runs away because he's property, he is to be returned to his master.

And interestingly, you have various extradition treaties in the Ancient Near East, like the Hittites, and Babylonians, and so forth, that, if a slave runs away to another land, then those people in that land are to return that slave to his master, on pain of death for the person harboring that person, and the slave who returns is perhaps not just mistreated, but even mutilated, and so forth.

So, there are those sorts of harsh punishments that come to anyone who has run away. So, there are some similarities there, as you do some comparing. As we'll see, the Israelites are distinctive in allowing runaway slaves running from harsh masters to come into Israel and to settle in any of their cities. And so, certainly the issue is not going to be, oh, if you come to our land of Israel, come and be mistreated. Come be treated as property. Come. Come and be deprived of your rights, just like you were in the country from which you came.

No, that's ridiculous. And as you see how foreigners are to be treated, the orphan, the widow, the alien, this triad appears over three dozen times in the law of Moses, looking out for those who are the most vulnerable in society. If there's something to be said about the law of Moses, it looks out for not the elites, but it looks out for those who could be most easily taken advantage of in a society.

FRANK:

But when we see the word slave in the Old Testament, say in Exodus 21, or even in Leviticus 25, which we read earlier, I think most people in America think, okay, I'm thinking of a person that has been taken against their will due to some sort of racial prejudice, and they are subservient, and even being abused to do manual labor. Was that the kind of slavery that Exodus 21 is talking about or Leviticus 25?

PAUL:

Right. Well, again, we can distinguish perhaps between the Israelite in servitude in Exodus 21, and then the foreigner in servitude in Leviticus 25. And so, I think we could treat those

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separately, although there's a lot of overlap, as we'll see. But, the term, slave itself is very misleading because it does conjure up all sorts of emotive language related to the terrible-- You think of Frederick Douglass in his narrative about his own experience, and that of his family, and being separated from his mother, and so forth.

And you read that, and you think, oh, that's the slavery that the Old Testament is talking about. And, again, that's very, very misleading. And unfortunately, a lot of modern translations have just used the term slave with all of those connotations that people bring to the text. And then they simply write it off saying, oh, if the Bible is endorsing slavery or it's talking about slavery in this way, I'm not having any of it. It can't be from God and so forth. The problem is, I think that the term ebed, the word for slave, sometimes should be translated servant.

That is a more appropriate translation because that word servant can be used in a very honorific way. For example, Joshua and Moses are called the ebed Adonai, the servant of the Lord. So, it's used in a very positive way there. In fact, you read the book of Exodus and God tells Moses to tell Pharaoh, you know, to let my people go so that they may serve me in the wilderness. So, they're moving from one oppressive servitude to a liberating servitude.

That term itself of, you know, the word servant or slave, comes from the word work or worker. You know, in the Russian the word rab, servant is related to the word rabotnik. That that is a kind of close comparison there. And so, there is this servant is someone who is in a dynamic dependency relationship with someone to whom he is obligated. It can be positive, it can be negative, it can be neutral.

But so often, that word slave is inherently negatively loaded for our modern readers. Whereas in earlier English or German, or slavery, or Spanish, or Dutch translations, the word was more like servant rather than the modern day renderings in those languages of slave. And so, I think we need to understand that this is a problematic, something that we just have to deal with and say the language itself, in a sense biases the casual reader looking at the text.

And then again with all those emotional issues related to colonialism and antebellum slavery, that we need to really address that. That's one of those things that requires more than two minutes to take care of.

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FRANK:

Yeah, it does. In fact, it's interesting. The King James version doesn't use the word slave. It does use the word servant, but the more modern translations tend to use the word slave. I'm wondering why is that? Why do they use the word slave knowing that modern readers would have a different idea of slave when they read it in that context?

PAUL:

Sure, yeah, yeah. Actually, the word is, you know, there's only one. It's actually not even the Hebrew text. But in Jeremiah the word slave is used, but it's for kind of smoother reading, by the translator. But you're right, that this is something that is kind of a head scratcher. Because why would you load this language with such emotion after colonialism, the antebellum of southern slavery? You have the Emancipation Declaration, you have the Civil War, you have all sorts of things up to Jim Crow laws and racism in the United States.

Why cause all these further headaches and misunderstandings? It seems that-- And Peter Williams, a biblical scholar at Tyndale House in Cambridge, talks about how the language needs to be pulled back to preserve the negativity—

Both the kind of neutrality of the word ebbed. It could be used either positively, or negatively, or neutrally, just depending upon the context. So, don't weight it with further emotion. If the Israelites are servants in the land of Egypt but are being oppressed, then you take that as such, but don't load the language so much that it creates all these misunderstandings to the modern mind.

FRANK:

Why was indentured servitude needed in that society? And what is it? First of all, what is indentured servitude? How would we define that?

PAUL:

Right, yeah. The indentured servant is someone who is paying off a debt. It's a contracted labor, in that you are obligated to fulfill that debt. For a-- Like if you're coming over from, to the New World from Europe, and you need to pay passage. You can't pay it right away, but you go to the

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New World, you pay off that debt, and then seven years you're free to go around like any free citizen would, but you have that contracted work for a period of time.

So, the indentured servant is one who is operating that way in Israel. You have a six year term limit, which again is a unique feature in the Ancient Near East, in terms of the law collections. You might have a king who might say in a couple of years I'll give you freedom or whatever, but there's no regulated, mandated freedom from that debt servitude. In fact, Jeremiah 34, it talks about the abuse of that system if you keep your servant for longer.

Jeremiah excoriates, the Lord excoriates the Israelites, the Judahites, for letting them go after six years and then calling them back. And then it says that God is actually bringing the Israelites into exile because they abused that servitude law, that indentured servant law. So, this is something that is I think very significant to understand that there is a lot of skin in the game for the Israelites to hold to that law and to keep those servants to that six year term.

FRANK:

All right, we're going to come back with much more. We're going to get into the apparent chattel slavery in Leviticus 25 here in just a couple of minutes. Don't go anywhere. You're listening to I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist with me, Frank Turek. My guest, Dr. Paul Copan. Back after the break. Ladies and gentlemen, we are going to be 'Digging Up the Bible' here in the beginning of September. That's a brand new course that I put together with Dr. John Ferrer on all of the archaeological discoveries, the major ones from Genesis all the way to maps, to Revelation.

It's 22 hours of video. It's some amazing stuff that, dependent on archaeologists like Titus Kennedy, and Scott Stripling, and others. But this course, it took us, as I say, 22 lessons to pull together. If you want to be a part of it, what you need to do is go to crossexamined.org and click on online courses. It starts September 8th, but if you hear this later, you can still join the premium version either a week or two after because of the Zoom sessions. The live Q&A Zoom sessions start a week or two after that.

Of course, you can take the course self-paced anytime you want. Also, Shanda Fulbright, for your sixth to eighth graders is doing 'Let's Get Real.' That's basically, I Don't Have Enough Faith

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to Be an Atheist for sixth to eighth graders. Oh, fifth to ninth is okay. If you want to teach your kids why Christianity is true, perfect for homeschooling this semester.

Enroll them in 'Let's Get Real' again crossexamined.org. Click on online courses. You will see it there. All right, let me go back to my guest, Dr. Paul Copan. We are talking about this issue of slavery in the Old Testament. And before we get to Leviticus 25 again, Paul, that's what we started the show with. I want to ask you about chattel slavery. First of all, what is chattel slavery?

PAUL:

Right. The matter of chattel slavery has to do with the buying and selling of slaves as property, without regard to their dignity, their freedoms, their autonomy. And so basically, I think what the evil of slavery is-- And again, sometimes people even talk about chattel slavery, but you can have sometimes people who are, quote, bought and sold.

But is it actually chattel slavery where they're simply objects? What the real issue is, what the true evil of slavery is, is that one person is basically the owner of another person, body and soul, as it were. And that this person has been stripped of all dignity, of all rights, and so forth.

That this person is at the disposal of his master and perhaps even being potentially killed, as we would see in the antebellum south, in some of those narratives. But this is, you know, fundamentally, the slave has no rights. The slave has, you know, has no dignity. The slave is a mere object, a mere commodity and nothing more.

FRANK:

All, right, let me go to Leviticus 25 again. We started the show with that. And let me just read a few verses here. This begins in verse 44, Leviticus 25, verse 44 says as for your male and female slaves, whom you may have, you may acquire male and female slaves.

Again, some translations say servant rather than slaves, from pagan nations that are around you. And then it goes on to say it is out of the sons of the sojourners who live as aliens among you, that you may gain acquisition. And out of their families who are with you whom you may have produced in your land, and they may also become your possession.

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And it says you can bequeath them to your sons. This sounds like chattel slavery. And a lot of scholars will say, hey, that's what the Bible's teaching here, Paul. You say that's not the case. Why are they wrong?

PAUL:

Okay, again, I would say that this is the most challenging passage for any of us to deal with. And I think it's important to keep this sort of a thing in mind. For one thing, there's the context. We could talk about the-- In chapter 19, the alien, you know, the Haggarim, you know, and the sojourner, the Hatoshavim sojourners who live as aliens.

That the Israelites in chapter 19 of Leviticus, same book, are commanded to love the alien in their midst and not to take advantage of him. So, whatever the text is saying, it is not permission to abuse, or to disregard the rights and dignity of the alien who is dwelling in your midst. We have, secondly, the context of chapter 24 in verse 22, where it says that the alien and the native are to both live under the same basic law, so that there is to be this fundamental regard for the dignity of both the Israelite as well as the person who is from another country and living in Israel.

Now, notice that this is not a command. You may. This is not prescribed. A lot of people think, oh, no, this is a prescription. You ought to do this. No, it's something that you may do. So, how does a person acquire? And keep in mind the word acquire is the same word used later on in chapter 25, the same chapter that refers to a foreigner. Again, the sojourner who is living as an alien among you. The ha toshavim hagarin.

That connection, the same words are used, but it is now referring to someone who has prospered sufficiently. So, keep this in mind. You have these people who are working for you, these pagan servants who are working for you. But it also says if you keep reading the text, that that person may become a person of means within Israel to the point that he may acquire the same word *kanah*, as we see here in this text about foreigners, it is applied to the Israelite.

The foreigner can actually acquire an Israelite servant to work for him. And then it goes on to say that the Israelite later on may become a person of means or may prosper. Again, the same

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word that is being utilized of the foreigner who is able to ascend and rise to a position of self-sufficiency, of being a person of means or prospering. So, we see a lot of overlapping language here. And again, we're talking about transactional language. Keep that in mind. We're told that the word God, redeems his people in Exodus 15 from the land of Egypt.

That is, again, it's a transactional act of redemption that God is bringing the Israelites out. It's kind of a legal statement being made about how he is redeeming his people. And so, that term is used in a more technical sort of a way to deal with this transactional way of operating. Now, what about the issue of foreigners who live with you? Some people say, well, you know, there are these laws about treating aliens and who are living in Israel. But how were they actually treated on the ground?

That's a very good question. When you look at who would actually fit into this. For example, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks in his commentary on Leviticus talks about how, for example, Uriah the Hittite, again, a foreigner. He is someone who is actually a hero. He's not just a hero because he's one of David's mighty men, but he's also a moral hero in contrast to King David, who's been sleeping with his wife, and she becomes pregnant by him. That he is the more noble person.

He doesn't even go into his wife while his comrades are on the front lines, and David eventually has him killed. And of course, David is confronted by his mistreatment of this sojourner who is living as an alien in Israel. So, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks says Uriah is an example of someone who fits this description. We have Ruth, who would also be fitting this description, and notice how well she's treated. We have Yahar, who's an Egyptian in 1 Chronicles 2, who ends up marrying a descendant of Caleb, and then they have a daughter together.

So, he's a servant, an Egyptian, but ends up kind of becoming incorporated into Israel. We see Eben Melech, who is a noted, he's a servant, a foreign servant, an Ethiopian working for the king in the book of Jeremiah. And we read about how Ebed Melech himself, God promises, because of how he treated Jeremiah with kindness, that God is going to reward him with land that he himself can own. Which again was unique for a foreigner to have.

You also see other foreigners. You see the Rechabites, in the book of Jeremiah, who are living, kind of living a nomadic lifestyle. But they are aliens who are sojourning in Israel. And they are

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praised, their dignity is obviously taken for granted, but they're praised as being people who are respectable, as it were, people inhabiting that land and living under the umbrella of Israel's protection. We have Obed the Gittite, in 2 Samuel 6, who is actually entrusted with guarding the Ark of the Covenant.

So, he's a Philistine who is living in Israel, and he's entrusted with the guarding of this. So, when you look at what's happening on the ground, are these people being treated as property, as object and so forth? No, just the opposite. These people are in respectable conditions. We can talk about Shebna, who is working for King Hezekiah.

He's probably from Syria. That name is probably an Aramaic extraction. And so, he also has this lofty position. And you also have, why do people come to Israel? They may come because of famine and look for a place to live.

You can think of Ruth coming with Naomi back to Israel in the book of Ruth. You have, interestingly, the Moabites in Isaiah 16. There is a concern for those who are in danger of losing their lives. And so, Isaiah is calling on the Israelites to take them in these refuge, these people who are refugees, to take them in and help them because their lives are otherwise in jeopardy.

And so, there is even a mourning and lamenting for these Gentiles. So, there is a concern to take them in. In fact, a lot of people might come into Israel because they're runaway slaves. We've already talked about that. A runaway slave is allowed to settle in any of Israel's cities rather than being sent back.

Surely, this is not an occasion for the Israelites to take advantage of this foreigner, but actually to help them out. And of course, people who are in this situation can't acquire land. And so, they're going to be living in households, perhaps from generation to generation, although the assimilation process actually takes place in a generation or two, as Stuart Tyson Smith has argued.

And so, there is that assimilation process that is going on here. But in the absence of having a place to live, having your own farm or whatever, this is the best that you can do by attaching yourself to foreigners, to these Israelites, as a foreigner, so that you can live from generation to

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generation. But again, it's not a denigration of these people. In fact, they can prosper. And when you look at all the examples of foreigners in Israel, you see a lot of them are indeed prospering, having positions of prominence and so forth.

So, a lot of people will place so much emphasis on, oh, look, they can become your possession. Of course, God is called the Levites possession and so forth. But beyond that, we can say this. Let's just say that this is a bad law, that the Gentiles are somehow getting a terrible treatment here or whatever. Let's think about, let's distinguish between laws and the Old Testament vision. The Old Testament vision is, as we said, rooted in Genesis 1, where there's this fundamental equality, male and female, no classes and so forth.

We read, for example, in Isaiah 57, that the foreigner is going to be one day, you know, if he calls God, all calls on God. He's going to belong to the people of God. He's going to be attached to the people of God. And so, therefore, that Gentile Jewish distinction is fundamentally going to fall apart. That this is not an ultimate state.

FRANK:

Hold the thought, Paul, because we're coming up to one of those nasty hard breaks again, right when you're on a roll talking about Leviticus 25. We're going to come back to it right after the break. Why doesn't the Bible just outlaw slavery? And again, is it the same as we had in the American south? Much more with Dr. Paul Copan. Don't go anywhere.

We're talking to Dr. Paul Copan about a very complicated and controversial topic, slavery in the Bible. Right now, we're talking about the Old Testament. In the next podcast, the midweek podcast, we'll try and get into the New Testament. But right now, we're talking about the Old Testament. And probably the most challenging passage in the entire Bible related to this is the Leviticus 25, which, by the way, happens to be addressing the Jubilee.

We'll get to that here in a minute. But I want to point out, Paul, that you had mentioned that if people keep reading through Leviticus 25, they see, yes, Israelites can acquire foreign servants/slaves, but if they keep reading, they're going to run into this verse 47. Now, if the means of a stranger or a sojourner with you becomes sufficient, and a countryman of yours

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becomes so poor with regard to him as to sell himself to a stranger who is so journeying with you, then it goes on to explain what to do.

So, yes, the Israelites could acquire foreign servants, but foreign servants could also acquire Israelites as well. So, this went both ways. Comment on that and then complete the thought you had before we had to go to the break, if you would.

PAUL:

Yeah. I think what you see here is that there is a kind of interchangeability of the language here when it comes to acquiring, selling oneself, etc. That this is applied to, and in my book 'Is God of Vindictive Bully?', I go into detail, kind of chart these things, and showing how this language applies to both the Gentile as well as to the Jew, to the pagan as well as to the Israelite.

And, that this is, I think very, I think richly informative about how we ought to look at this passage, that it shouldn't be seen as a kind of dehumanization. And keep in mind, as you were pointing out earlier, that we're in the context of the year of Jubilee. Again, there's this, I don't want to go into the details of the year of Jubilee.

But the main thing to keep in mind is that the Israelites are the ones who are able to own the land. Again, it's borrowed, as it were. The Lord is the one who owns the land. And even the Israelites in Leviticus 25 are called, again, strangers and sojourners in the land that has been given to them by God.

So, they can't be presumptuous themselves. But foreigners are not allowed to own land within Israel, which makes them more vulnerable and dependent upon the Israelites for their well-being and for their sustenance. You think of somebody like a Ruth who comes to Israel and is dependent upon Israelites, including Naomi and so forth. But this is what you see going on in general.

And so, what I was then moving forward to talk about was that the ultimate vision of the law is that Jew and Gentile again, the promise to Abraham, that all the nations of the earth be blessed, that we are children of faith, children of Abraham by faith in the Messiah, whether Jew or Gentile.

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And so, we have this promise that is anticipated, and we see language like in Isaiah chapter 19, where both Assyria and Egypt, along with Israel, are called my people, my possession, and so forth. That these are ones who all belong to the Lord, that they're one people. All the nations will stream to the mountain of the Lord, that there's that picture of ultimately Gentiles being incorporated into the people of God.

So, even if you're going to be a stickler about this passage, which again you need to take context for you need to love the alien in your midst, but even if you say no, this is diminishing of the Gentile and so forth, keep in mind that this is not the ultimate vision.

There are some laws that are concessionary in the Old Testament, things that are done as Jesus said in Matthew 19:8. Certain things are permitted because of the hardness of human hearts. But it's not because that this reflects God's ideal.

But the ideal is that all people, reflecting Genesis 1, the image of God, that all people come to know who God is through the Messiah, and that they all, Jew or Gentile alike, can share in that family unity because of what the Messiah had done, and that there is no ultimate ethnic distinction. That is something that is a shadow of the substance that is to come.

FRANK:

Now, the Bible does forbid kidnapping. It's punishable by death in the Old Testament. And Paul condemns slave trading in the New Testament. But you know, Paul, some skeptics will say, while that would rule out the Atlantic or the transatlantic slave trade that we had here in America, that kidnapping is not the only way people can enter slavery. So, why not just prohibit all slavery outright in the Old Testament?

PAUL:

Right. Well, the prohibition, again, if you have, if you use the term slave in this very negative way—

FRANK:

Yeah, servant.

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PAUL:

Then this is going to color how you address the question. But if you understand the term servant as being something, it could be something—

Sometimes it's a negative thing, sometimes a positive thing. Does it denigrate a human being? Does it strip that person of rights or not? Those are more fundamental questions to be asking. But when it comes to abolishing, well, just think of somebody who is a refugee, like in Isaiah 16 from Moab fleeing to Israel and has no way of sustaining himself.

What do you do? Well, you're going to attach yourself to an Israelite household. You're going to try to find some work through the kindness of the Israelites. Or if you're a runaway slave who comes to Israel, then the law says that this runaway slave is allowed to settle in any of Israel's cities. And so, the presumption is that this person can attach himself to an Israelite household, and find provision, find work to sustain him, and so forth.

And that this is another way of coming into servitude in Israel as a foreigner. Sometimes you'll have people who are prisoners of war. And we read, for example, in Deuteronomy 21, of even entering into marriage, after a period of waiting. And so, there are different—

So, you see that there are different ways of coming in. There may be families who are trying to sell their own children because they can't sustain themselves or support their children. And so, they will engage in some sort of a transaction.

And so, the Israelite can say, okay, this person can work for me. I'll take such and such an amount from you, and then this person will be working for me. And so, different ways of entering into servitude, but it's not as though they're all terrible, or somehow, contrived. That this is institutionalized. It's sometimes a matter of accident, famine, runaway warfare, refugee status, and so forth. So, there's a range of things. But again, this is not a call to dehumanize those who are most vulnerable.

And as I said, the alien is to be looked out for along with the widow and the orphan. This is repeated over and over again. It seems like the critics who point to this text totally ignore that reference to looking out for the alien and not taking advantage of him.

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FRANK:

If it was outlawed and you couldn't sell yourself to make money, what was your option? What could you do? Because if you couldn't own land, if you're a foreigner, as you mentioned earlier, the only way you could harvest crops to eat would be either to take the corners of the field. That was what Leviticus said you should do.

But that would require work on your own part too. That wasn't straight welfare. Right? You had to go harvest it. Or if it's outlawed for you to sell yourself, so to speak, to somebody, how could that person survive?

PAUL:

Yeah, there's no real way of sustaining yourself. And keep in mind, we're often imposing our own modern standards of social supports and everything that have been developed over the centuries, and thinking, oh, the Ancient Near Eastern peoples should have done this, or Israel should have done this.

Well, this is just the reality on the ground. And things are not as ideal as we would like them to be. And so, these are the sorts of things in a fallen, broken world where you make the best of those situations. And this seems to be a very, you know, again, a very reasonable alternative that you attach yourself to someone and maybe have to live in that home, for some time before you can maybe like a yarha, marry someone whom you're serving, and then become more mainstreamed into Israelite society.

But what's interesting is this. And David Klein, who is at University of Sheffield, a noted Old Testament scholar. He's one who said, let's take a look at it this way. In Israel—

And he basically talks about deconstructing slavery in the Old Testament, that you have within the Old Testament law, passages that actually deconstruct slavery, servitude such that it's not to be an enduring institution.

So, he talks about the runaway slave. He says, simply by the expedient of runaway, the foreigner can come to Israel through his own free choice. And we read in Exodus 21, the Israelite himself, through his own free choice, can say, I love my master, my employer. And you

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attach yourself to that person permanently. The same word that's used in Leviticus 25, by the way. And that this person says, I want to live under his roof, my family and everything too, because there is this affection, and sweetness, and there's a security that is here too, that a lot of things are taken care of.

And John Goldingay, noted Old Testament scholar, says that people would be happy often to live in this kind of a secure environment rather than having to strike out on your own, and be kind of vulnerable to the forces of, you know, of society, climate, and so on. And so, you've got someone already caring for you in this regard. So, he says by the simple expedient of runaway, or by freely volunteering to attach yourself, this notion of slavery as this oppressive thing kind of loses all of its force.

In fact, it's interesting that within Israel, we read in 1 Samuel 25, where Nabal is talking to David's servants, his quote, slaves, perhaps including Uriah the foreigner. And they're asking for food, for provisions from Nabal. And he says, who is David? And who is this son of Jesse? He says servants are running away from their masters all the time in Israel. So, you've got that sort of a thing going on. Now, some people say, well, look. You've got passages, for example, in 2 Kings 4 where you got this widow who has these two sons.

And she's concerned that these boys are going to be enslaved by this man. And so, there's the miracle of the oil that is sold. And so, she basically purchases their freedom and buys herself out of debt. Well, this is an example not of something normative or prescriptive. This is actually an abuse of the system, that you see examples of how servitude can be abused and how you can have oppressive people. You see this in Nehemiah chapter five, where people—

FRANK:

Hold the thought because we're running out of time. And we're going to continue this on the midweek podcast. If you're listening on radio, you won't hear it on radio. Look for the I Don't Have Enough Faith to Be an Atheist podcast. But Paul, give people your website so people can go and learn more about the book 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?' And you go ahead.

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PAUL:

Very good. Yeah, my website is paulcopan.com. Again, the three books, I'd add, you know, 'Is God a Moral Monster?', 'Is God a Vindictive Bully?', and there's actually a chapter on slavery in this book, 'Christianity Contested: Slavery and Warfare in the Old Testament.' You can check them out at Amazon, so I would encourage you to take a look there. And this is the most developed argument on slavery that I've written so far, so you can take a look at that.

FRANK:

Thank you, Paul. Outstanding. See you next time.

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