An analysis of metaphorical uses of slavery terms in the Hebrew Bible reveals a culture of hierarchical relationships based on power and status. Associations from slavery that are evoked in these uses are possession (with the derived association, control), inferior status, work, debt/poverty, oppression, and propensity to run away. Of six major categories of metaphoric use (subjects and officials to the king, vassalship, personal servants, people in relation to God, deference), inferior status is the association that is evoked in all contexts.

**Key Words:** slavery, slave, metaphor, philology, deference, vassalship, officials, servants, status, servant leadership

**INTRODUCTION**

This article seeks to fill a gap in the study of the use of slave terms in the Hebrew Bible. Despite many philological studies that delineate the various uses of slave terms, including metaphorical uses, little analysis has been undertaken on how slave terms work when they are used metaphorically. In particular, little study has been done on how the metaphorical uses relate to the literal and what, if any, associations with or connotations of slavery are evoked in such uses. “Metaphorical use” refers to the use of slave terms in contexts that do not refer to slaves.

Addressing how slave terms are used metaphorically will reveal an aspect of ancient Israelite culture as reflected in the Hebrew Bible: how ancient Israelites viewed themselves in relation to others and to God. It will also be shown that the use of slave terms in deference and in titles reflects a culture of hierarchical relationships based on power and status.

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It is possible to argue that the metaphoric use of slave terms is conventional, to the point that ancient Israelites did not really think about the meaning of the terms. Metaphoric use of slave terms, especially in titles and in deference, long antedates the Hebrew Bible, being attested as early as 2090–2040 B.C. in seal inscriptions and in letters from Mesopotamia;² being found in the Amarna letters, in Hittite, and in Ugaritic correspondence. It continued to occur throughout the ancient Near East and in the southern Levant during the biblical period and afterward.³ When used in deference, terms such as אדוני (“my lord”) and עבדך (“your servant”) and their ancient Near Eastern equivalents are polite terms that replace the second and first person, respectively, as polite terms. In titles, עבד (“slave”), usually translated as “servant,” designates personal attendants, officials, prophets, and temple staff.⁴ Such conventional metaphoric use of אדון and עבד may mean that the terms have become dead metaphors. That is, the meanings behind the titular use of עבד and the deferential אדוני and עבדך may have become literal or lexicalized (meaning they have a clear, distinct meaning) in their own right along with “master” and “slave.”

I wish, however, to argue that the biblical writers did not lose sight of the metaphoricity of the terms, even in these conventional usages. That is, when slave terms are used metaphorically, aspects of the institution of slavery are actively evoked which make the metaphoric uses work. To illustrate, the present day metaphorical sentence, “he (or she) dug himself into a hole,” despite its conventionality, works because an aspect of the picture it calls up is retained in popular consciousness: a person who digs a hole so deep he cannot climb out of it.⁵ Metaphor works by calling up common understandings that people have for a word or object (the “vehicle”) which are not necessarily the literal meanings for that word or object and which are believed to be apt to describe another word or object (the “topic” or “tenor”). Such common meanings or understandings of the “vehicle” will be designated as “associations.”⁶ Context determines which associations


³. E.g., slave terms used for deference are found in the Lachish and Arad ostraca, the Meṣad Ḥashavyahu plea, the Elephantine papyri, and Assyrian correspondence. Slave terms in titles are found in Hebrew and other language seals and bullae.


are evoked and which are not and is a factor for both those who use the metaphor and those who hear the metaphor. The latter may call up different associations because of what meanings or understandings they attach to the term, thus interpreting the metaphor differently from what the user of the metaphor may have intended. This article focuses solely on the biblical writers’ uses of the terms.

My analysis of slave terms in the Hebrew Bible, using עבד as the key term, will look for any associations from the institution of slavery that may be evoked in the uses of עבד for personal servants, vassalship, people in relation to the king (whether as subjects or officials), people in relation to God, and deference. To do this, the biblical portrayal of slavery will be briefly summarized to determine possible associations, and then the metaphorical uses of עבד will be analyzed to determine which associations may have been evoked.

**Slavery in the Hebrew Bible**

The practice of slavery depicted in the Hebrew Bible is a well-studied topic, so it will be discussed only enough to justify the associations that might be evoked when עבד and its equivalents are used metaphorically. However, some issues need to be addressed first.

The first issue is to define “slave.” If the Hebrew term עבד has “slave” as one of its key meanings, we must make sure that “slave” is the correct word to use. A definition such as “a slave is someone whose person and service belongs wholly to another” is useful. However, this reflects a Roman legal definition of slavery, which focuses on a slave as property (chattel). It is also possible to define slavery as an “alien will” imposed on a person; that is, someone else’s will imposed on a person. As will be discussed, slaves are clearly viewed as possessions in biblical law and have lesser rights at law than free people, so a chattel definition suits. But it can only

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7. Recognized as important in George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) 12–13; fully explored in Ritchie, *Context*, esp. pp. 77–95. Associations of the “vehicle” that are not evoked are called the “tension.”

8. Cf. ibid., 94.


be used as a starting point, since the Hebrew Bible does not define slavery and uses עבד for other forms of unfree labor, such as Israel’s experience in Egypt (עבד בית, “house of slavery”; e.g., Exod 20:2), the Gibeonites’ perpetual service as laborers for the tabernacle (Josh 9:23) and the wealthy Ziba’s perpetual indenturing to Mephibosheth’s estate (2 Sam 9:10).

A second issue is whether “metaphorical” is an appropriate term to use when discussing “nonliteral” uses of slave terms. This issue has two aspects. One is whether nonliteral uses of עבד are in fact metaphorical. As noted, עבד can denote various unfree labor arrangements and is conventional in titles and in deference. Did ancient Israelites understand such uses as metaphoric or as metonymic? Metaphor can be defined as the use of one term for another that is from a different semantic domain, whereas metonym can be defined as the use of one term for another that is from the same semantic domain.

The difficulty with these definitions is determining whether a given nonliteral use of a term is metaphoric or metonymic. For example, Punter considers the phrase “bricks and mortar” to be metonymic when it is used to refer to houses, real estate in general, and financial security. However, the semantic realm behind financial security, “money,” is quite different from the semantic realm behind houses and real estate, “physical property/buildings”. The same problem exists when biblical writers use terms in non-literal ways; e.g., did they understand “servant” (e.g., a personal servant) to be semantically different from “slave”? Given that the primary meaning of the verb form of עבד is “work,” is the primary meaning of the noun form of עבד, “slave,” semantically different from “work”? Similarly, when עבד is used to designate people such as officials of the king, subjects of the king and vassals, have semantic boundaries been crossed? Against the arguments that seek to differentiate metaphor and metonym is a recognition that both tropes work in the same way; that is, one term is used in place of another, even if the terms are within the same semantic domain. Therefore, a broad meaning of “metaphor” will be used: the use of one term in place of another. A second aspect relates to when the non-

13. In this, the Hebrew Bible is in keeping with the wider ancient Near East. See, e.g., Bakir, Slavery, 7; and D. C. Snell, Life in the Ancient Near East 3100–332 B.C.E. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997) 123.
15. Punter, Metaphor, 147.
16. Ringgren et al., “עָבַד ʿābad; עֶבֶד ʿebed; עֲבֹדָה ʿaḇōdāh,” 382.
literal uses of terms in the Hebrew Bible have crossed semantic domains. Our translations of these uses may use terms from different semantic domains, whereas the biblical writers may consider their uses of the term as remaining within a single semantic domain; that is, there is likely to be a difference between what we think to be metaphor versus what biblical writers understood to be metaphor. This problem relates to the possibility that the use of the English words “slave” and “servant” to translate slave terms may impose semantic categories that the biblical writers did not use.\(^\text{18}\) But, as Harris notes, “slave” and “servant” share conceptual territory; for example, “service for another,” even though “every slave is a servant” but “not every servant is a slave.”\(^\text{19}\) In other words, “servant” is a suitable English translation for nonliteral uses of עבד, no matter how semantically different “servant” may be from “slave.” As has already been noted, עבד designates categories of people who can hardly be called “slave,” showing that עבד has some meanings akin to extended or nonliteral meanings of the English term slave, such as submission in a servile manner to another, domination by some influence or person, and to describe a person whose work situation is comparable to that of a slave.\(^\text{20}\)

A third issue is the lack of information in the Hebrew Bible on slaves and slavery. Most information is found in legal texts (Exod 21:1–11, 20–21, 26–27; Lev 25:39–55; Deut 15:12–18) and these are neither extensive nor uniform. They focus primarily on Israelite debt slavery, but permanent slavery of Israelites is also envisaged. Outside legal texts, there is only occasional mention of slavery, except for the slave wives of the patriarchs in Gen 12–50. Consequently, it is primarily from legal texts that reconstructions are made of the biblical practice of slavery.\(^\text{21}\) There are some corollaries. One is that the legislation may not have been enforced, especially in regards to slaves’ legal rights. Jer 34:8–16 indicates that the manumission legislation in Exod 21:2, Deut 15:12–18, and Lev 25:41–42 was not enforced in the final years of the Kingdom of Judah. 1 Kings 2:39–40 indicates that the provision against masters recovering runaway slaves in Deut 23:16–17\(^\text{15–16}\) was not enforced or may not have been in force in the early monarchy.\(^\text{22}\)

\(^{18}\) This will also be the case for equivalent terms in other European languages.

\(^{19}\) Harris, Slave of Christ, 187.


\(^{22}\) This disparity between the legal texts and what happened in practice creates much discussion. The most common view is that the laws were developed over time. See, e.g., Eckart Otto, “Aspects of Legal Reforms and Reformulations in Ancient Cuneiform and Israelite Law,” in Theory and Method in Biblical and Cuneiform Law: Revision, Interpolation and Development (ed. Bernard M. Levinson; JSOTSup 181; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994) 160–96, and Bernard S. Jackson, Studies in the Semiotics of Biblical Law (JSOTSup 314; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000). Another view is that, even if the laws were written early, they were treated as descriptive, rather than prescriptive. See, e.g., Raymond Westbrook, “Cuneiform Law Codes and the Origins of Legislation,” in Law from the Tigris to the Euphrates: The Writings of Raymond Westbrook, vol. 1: The Shared Tradition (ed. B. Wells and F. R. Magdalene; Winona Lake,
A second corollary is the possibility that the legal status of slaves may be different from “real” status; e.g., Prov 17:2 recognizes the standing of “wise” household slaves. Jackson draws attention to the disparity between the slave-wife legislation in Exod 21:7–11 and the practice of having slave-wives as narrated in Gen 16, 21, and 29–30. Revell comments, “It seems likely that legal status, slave or free, had little relevance to everyday life at the lowest level of society.” A third corollary, and a consequence of the previous two, is that it is difficult to use legislation to determine associations evoked by the use of slave terms. Associations evoked by slave terms more likely derive from the day-to-day practice and experience of slavery rather than from legislation. Since, as already noted, biblical legislation is the primary source of the practice of slavery in the Hebrew Bible, it will feature significantly in my discussion. I will, however, discuss where there are deviations from the legislation and assess what impact these may have when determining associations evoked by metaphoric uses of slave terms.

The Hebrew Bible clearly views a slave as a possession. This is stated in Lev 25:44–46 in reference to foreign persons as slaves, using terms such as כנה (“acquire”) and אחזת (“possession”; cf. Exod 12:44; Isa 50:1). Exodus 21:21 uses the metaphor, הוא כספו כי (“for he is his ‘money’ [.‘silver’]”), in reference to a lack of punishment for a master who so physically abuses a slave that the slave dies after a few days. Here, כסף associates slavery with “money”; that is, silver has been exchanged to purchase the slave. The lack of punishment of the owner relates to the fact that he has lost the investment that the slave represents. One could say “a slave is money.” Slaves are also frequently listed with other property a household may own (e.g., Gen 12:16; Exod 20:10, 17; Deut 5:21; 1 Sam 8:16; 2 Kgs 5:26; Eccl 2:7; Ezra 2:65). Despite the legal texts permitting only foreigners to be viewed as possessions it can be assumed that if an Israelite debt slave becomes a permanent slave, he is the possession of his master. This is also the case for a person who is sold as punishment for theft (Exod 22:3b; cf. Gen 43:18; 44:10, 16–17, 33) and children born to slaves (Exod 21:4). “Possession” therefore should be seen as a possible association of slavery in the Bible (“a slave is a possession”). A derived association, “control,” can also be postulated, based on the principle that whoever owns something controls how it is used.


25. Only in Lev 25:44–46 is אחזת used for anything other than land. כנה is also used for Boaz’s “purchase” of Ruth as his wife in Ruth 4:1–12. Here, the context is the combining of redemption of land and Levirate marriage, so Ruth should not be thought of as being chattel of Boaz.

Slaves working for their owners is presupposed in Deut 15:12–18 and Lev 25:39–55, which legislate that Israelites in debt slavery have the legal status of paid workers. “Work” should thus be seen as a possible association of slavery in the Bible (“slavery is work”), even though work is integral to gaining one’s livelihood no matter one’s legal or social status. This use of slave terms is probably a case of metonymy rather than metaphor.

Slavery due to debt defaulting is the type of slavery most mentioned in the Hebrew Bible both in legislation and elsewhere (Exod 21:2–11 [implied]; Lev 25:39–55; Deut 15:12–18; 2 Kgs 4:1; Neh 5:4; cf. Amos 2:6–8). This was a temporary enslavement of either six years or forty-nine years, and considered as service in lieu of debt repayment. 2 Kgs 4:1 and Neh 5:5 indicate debt slavery was an ever present threat to poor people, with children most at risk. Amos 2:6–8 and Neh 5:1–13 place the practice in the context of the rich and powerful exploiting poor people. The prevalence of this form of slavery in the Hebrew Bible allows for “debt/poverty” to be seen as a key association of slavery (“slavery is poverty”). The connection of this form of slavery with the rich/powerful exploiting the poor allows also for the proposal of a possible association, “oppression” (“slavery is oppression”). Since slavery due to debt-defaulting is the most frequently mentioned type of slavery outside legal texts, it is reasonable to assume that these two possible associations, “debt/poverty” and “oppression,” may be the most readily called to mind when biblical writers use slave terms metaphorically.

Biblical texts witness to the abuse of slaves: physical assault (Exod 21:20–21); physical coercion (Prov 29:19; cf. Lev 25:32); general abuse (Gen 16:6); and abandonment (Gen 21:14; 1 Sam 30:13). Such treatment of slaves adds weight to the possibility that “oppression” is an association of slavery (“slavery is oppression”), even though “oppression” is a term that could also describe the lot of the poor. Slaves running away (Gen 16:6; Deut 23:16–17[15–16]; 1 Kgs 2:39–40; cf. 1 Sam 25:10) can witness to harsh treatment (esp. Gen 16:6) but can also be interpreted as a form of protest about not being free. This phenomenon can therefore allow the suggestion that “flight” could also be an association of slavery (“slaves are those who run away”). The mention of physical coercion and assault of slaves may imply


28. E.g., I. Mendelsohn, Slavery in the Ancient Near East (New York: Oxford University Press, 1949) 59, 66; and Snell, Flight, 137–49, both who discuss the flight of slaves in the wider ancient Near East. Both indicate that slaves running away was a common occurrence.
slaves were seen as being lazy, but there is no direct comment on this except in Prov 29:19. Therefore, “laziness” should not be seen as a possible association of slavery in the Hebrew Bible.

The oppressive treatment of slaves arises from slaves having less redress at law than free people (e.g., Exod 21:20–27; Lev 19:20–22). That is, a slave’s legal status is inferior to that of a free person. This is shown especially by the lack of punishment given to the master if he assaults a slave so severely that slave dies after a few days (Exod 21:20–21). Further, if a slave was killed by a third party, compensation was given to the master (e.g., Exod 21:32) because the master has lost his כסף, whereas the death of a free person is either treated as murder or manslaughter, or a ransom can be imposed if the free person’s death was due to an animal (Exod 21:30). The most rights slaves have in the biblical laws is their freedom if they are permanently injured by their master (Exod 21:26–27) and protection from recovery by the master if they run away (Deut 23:16–17 [15–16]). The lesser status of slaves in comparison to the free is continued in Wisdom texts that presuppose the social inferiority of slaves (Prov 19:10; 30:22; Eccl 10:7). It is difficult to know if these few rights of slaves were upheld, but it is reasonable to assume that any rights slaves may have had could be disregarded. The incident in Jer 34:8–16 of manumitted slaves being reenslaved suggests the possibility. Despite some argument that slaves bore no stigma in wider society, there is no doubt that “inferior status” should be considered an association of slavery (“a slave is an inferior person”).

The Bible also indicates a female slave’s sexuality could be a factor in her enslavement. Exodus 21:4 indicates that a male slave can be given a wife—presumably a female slave—and Exod 21:7–11, Deut 21:10–14, Gen 16, and 30:1–13 show that slave women could be married to the master or one of the master’s sons. A complaint in Neh 5:5, ירש מבנתינו נכבשות (“some of our daughters have been ravished”), suggests in Nehemiah’s time sexual exploitation of girls who were sold for debt-defaulting did occur. Job 31:10 and 2 Sam 6:20 also presuppose the exploitation of a female slave’s sexuality within the household. The control or exploitation of a female slave’s sexuality should be viewed as an aspect of the master’s control over her, derived from his ownership of her. Male slaves’ sexuality does not seem to figure in their enslavement. It is only alluded to in Exod 21:4, where a male slave may be given a wife, and in Gen 39, which shows a

29. Cf. Revell, Designation, 35. Snell (Life, 104) asks, in relation to slavery in the ancient Near East, why did rich slaves not purchase their freedom?
31. Jackson (ibid.) argues that Exod 21:4 envisages the male debt slave as providing a service of breeding permanent slaves for the master.
potential problem with male slaves: sexual liaisons with free women of the household. Generally, discussions on control of male sexuality focuses on the term סריס, used to designate castrated male officials in Isa 56:3–5 and to designate male attendants of royal women in Esth 2:3–15, 4:4–5 and 2 Kgs 9:32, who were presumably castrated.32

To summarize, possible associations (connotations) that could be drawn from the biblical portrayal of slavery are possession (with the derivation control), inferior status, work, debt/poverty, oppression, and propensity to run away. It will now be argued that one or more of these associations lies behind the metaphoric uses of עבד and its feminine equivalents, אמה and שפחה. Context will determine which of these associations are called up in any given metaphoric use.

ASSOCIATIONS OF SLAVERY CONTAINED WITHIN BIBLICAL METAPHORICAL USES OF SLAVE TERMS

A metaphorical use of עבד occurs when it designates people as the king's subjects.33 This use of עבד is infrequent in the Hebrew Bible, but it provides a good start for discussions of the metaphoric uses of slave terms. As subjects, people pay taxes to the king and they may also be subject to corvée labor (cf. 1 Kgs 5:13–16; 15:22) and periodic military duty (cf. 1 Chr 27:1–15). This is highlighted in 1 Kgs 12:4, in which the people of Israel ask Rehoboam to lighten these obligations, in return for their continued “serv-ing” him (see also v. 7), and in Gen 47:13–26 where the literal meaning of עבד is reified in conjunction with the use of קנה to portray the people of Egypt as “slaves” to Pharaoh. One association evoked is “work,” since taxes are a form of “work in kind.” Conscription and corvée labor are clearly forms of work. A second association evoked is “inferior status”—subjects are low status in relation to the king. The context of 1 Kgs 12:4 (the people complain that Solomon’s obligations on them was harsh) also suggests that the association “oppression” can also be evoked; that is, the king can rule his subjects harshly. Harsh rule by a king is described in 1 Sam 8:10–18 as a feature of monarchy. 1 Samuel 8:10–18 also suggests that a king might even be seen as “owner” of his people; that is, the use of עבד for subjects might call up the association “possession.” Subjects are expected to be loyal to the king, so this use of עבד will bring in an association of “loyalty.” This should be considered to be a new association, not derived from the institution of slavery itself, because the Bible does not present an ideal of slaves’ being loyal even though it shows it could happen (Gen 24; Prov 17:2).


33. עבד (verb: “to serve”): e.g., Judg 9:28; 1 Kgs 12:4. עבד (noun: “servant”): e.g., 1 Sam 29:10; 1 Kgs 20:6; 1 Chr 21:3; 2 Chr 8:18; cf. Gen 21:25; and 1 Sam 27:12. For the complement, אדון (“master/lord”): 1 Sam 29:10; 11:9, 13; 1 Kgs 12:27; 22:17; Ps 45:12[11].
A related form of subjection to a king is vassalship: the subjection of one nation to another nation. In the Hebrew Bible, only 

אֲבָדָד

is used in this context. A number of associations can be evoked in this metaphorical use of 

אֲבָדָד

.“Work” is clearly applicable because of tribute imposed on the vassal nation and its king, along with any corvée or military duty. Tribute represents work in kind, while corvée or military duty is clearly a form of work for the suzerain. “Oppression” can be evoked, because the vassal king has obligations imposed on him, and he cannot free himself from vassalage except by rebellion or accepting vassalship to an alternative strong power. An example is King Hezekiah, whose rebellion against Assyria (2 Kgs 18:7) was accompanied by negotiations with Egypt (2 Kgs 18:21; Isa 30:1–7). Inferior status can also be evoked, because a vassal has less status than the suzerain. In the biblical texts, negotiations by a king seeking a suzerain use 

אֲבָדָד

in the form of 

אֲבָדָד אֱלֹהִים

(“your servant”; e.g., 1 Kgs 20:32; 2 Kgs 16:7).

Possession,” along with loyalty, do not seem to be evoked by the biblical writers in their portrayal of vassalship. There is no doubt that a vassal was expected to be loyal to the suzerain, but as I just noted, vassals cannot free themselves from vassalship except by rebellion (e.g., 2 Kgs 24:1, 20) or by accepting vassalship to an alternative strong power. The result is that a vassal had to be loyal to the suzerain, unless he felt he was strong enough to rebel. That is, “loyalty” for a vassal is derived from “oppression” rather than being a natural consequence of submission to leadership. In vassalship there is fear: “be loyal to the suzerain or be punished.”

The combination of the possible associations just discussed (“work,” “oppression,” and “inferior status”) give the impression that the biblical writers viewed vassalship as similar to slavery. In 1 Sam 4:9, the Philistines, who fear defeat by Israel, say “Take courage, and be men, O Philistines, in order not to become slaves (עבדרים) to the Hebrews as they have been to you; be men and fight.” (NRSV) The translation of עבדרים as “slaves” is appropriate and emphasizes the harshness of vassalship. However, in Jer 30:8, the NRSV translates עבדר as “make a servant of him,” in the context of vassalship to Babylon imagined as a yoke (cf. Jer 27–28): “and strangers shall no more make a servant of him.” In the light of 1 Sam 4:9, “no more make a slave of him” would be a perfectly appropriate translation. Another text, 2 Chr 12:8, also envisages vassalship as harsh service. Here, God speaks to Judah through a prophet after Shishak, king of Egypt, has invaded Judah and defeated Rehoboam: “Nevertheless they shall be his [Shishak’s] servants (עבדים), so they shall know the difference between serving (עבדה) me and serving (עבדה) the kingdoms of other lands.” In this text, two associations of עבד are played on: the worship of God on the one hand and service to a foreign nation on the other. The former is the more metaphorical use:

34. Verb: e.g., Gen 14:4; Deut 28:48; 1 Sam 11:1; 17:9; 2 Kgs 18:7; Jer 27:7–17; 30:8. Noun: e.g., 1 Sam 4:9; 17:9; 2 Sam 8:12; 6, 14; 2 Kgs 17:3; 24:1; 2 Chr 12:8; Neh 9:36; עבד (noun: “slavery/service”): 2 Chr 12:8; Ezra 9:8–9.

35. Cf. Josh 9:23, in which the NRSV translates עבד as “slave”.


worship of YHWH (cf. Pss 2:11; 22:32[31]; 97:7; 100:2; 102:23[22]; 106:36)\(^{36}\) should be a joy, whereas “serving” Egypt is viewed as punishment by God and should be interpreted as something akin to slavery.

The term סֶבֶט is frequently applied to personal servants.\(^{37}\) A pair of synonyms are also used in this context, נער (“young man”) and שָׁבַר (“to serve”).\(^{38}\) For all three terms, the legal status of the “servant” in question is usually not specified, prompting debate on what is the status of the persons for whom the latter two terms are used.\(^{39}\) Whatever is the exact social status, the relationship between the servant and the master is a formal relationship: the one being served is either the employer or owner of the one giving the service. In this setting for סֶבֶט, “work” is clearly evoked, because the servant works for the other. By working for the master, “loyalty” is also evoked,\(^{40}\) and along with “inferior status,” because the servant is clearly inferior to the one who receives the service.

At a higher level of service is the use of סֶבֶט for courtiers of the king,\(^{41}\) including officials and high officials.\(^{42}\) This use of slave terms also evokes “work,” because courtiers and officials work for the king and are delegated by him to do tasks. Similarly, “inferior status” is evoked, because courtiers and officials have lesser status than the king. “Loyalty” is heightened in this context, indicated by the gifting of land as a reward (1 Sam 22:7; cf. 8:14 and Ezek 46:17), demotion for disobedience (2 Sam 18–19),\(^{43}\) and the killing of high ranking supporters of a previous king in a coup d’etat or purge by a new king (e.g., 1 Kgs 2; 2 Kgs 10:11), and it is presupposed in texts in

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\(^{37}\) Noun only: e.g., Gen 26:15–32; Judg 6:27; 2 Sam 9:12; Neh 5:13; Job 19:16; Prov 12:9.

\(^{38}\) נָעֶר (masculine): e.g., Gen 22:3–5; Num 22:22; Judg 9:11; 1 Sam 9:5–8; 2 Sam 9:9; 13:17, 28–29; 19:18[17]; 2 Kgs 4:12; 8:4; Neh 6:5. נָעֶר (feminine, “young woman”): e.g., Gen 24:61; Exod 2:5; 1 Sam 25:42; Esth 4:16; Prov 9:3; 31:15. שָׁבַר (Piel verbal stem only): e.g., Exod 23:13; 2 Sam 13:17–18; 1 Kgs 1:4; 19:21; 2 Kgs 6:15.

\(^{39}\) W. F. Albright (“The Seal of Eliakim and the Latest Preexilic History of Judah, with Some Observations on Ezekiel,” JBL 51 [1932] 82) argues נער designates a free person, but van der Ploeg (“Slavery,” 86) and Revell (Designation, 33) argue that it can cover slaves, with Revell adding that it designates a person of the lowest socioeconomic class(es). The use of נער in the Eliakim seal and for Abraham’s allies in Gen 14:24 show that Revell’s observation is not correct. Van der Ploeg, “Slavery,” 86–87, also argues that שָׁבַר designates “noble service,” a view also of K. Engelken, “שָׁבַר,” TDOT 15:503–14. שָׁבַר seems to take the place of the verb form סֶבֶט for personal service.

\(^{40}\) As Engelken (ibid., 508) comments for שָׁבַר, “all servants are expected to be trustworthy and loyal.”


\(^{42}\) סֶבֶט (noun) only: Exod 7:28–29[8:3–4] through to 12:30; 1 Sam 29:3; 2 Sam 10:2–4; 17:20; 1 Kgs 15:18; 2 Kgs 6:8, 11; 22:12.

\(^{43}\) Here, Joab is disobedient (2 Sam 18:5, 9–15), rude to and critical of his king (19:1–8), and was demoted (19:13). See also his similar behavior in 2 Sam 3:24–25.
which officials rebel against their king.\textsuperscript{44} A new feature not present in the other metaphorical uses of slave terms discussed so far is that courtiers and officials have authority, power, and status, derived from their close proximity to the king and their role as his delegates when on his business. Thus, \textit{עבדְךָ} in this context carries the idea of “status,” which is not present in the other contexts so far discussed.\textsuperscript{45}

The word \textit{עבדְךָ} is also used metaphorically for notable individuals in relation to God. As for the use of \textit{עבדְךָ} for courtiers and officials, “work” is evoked. This is certainly the case for prophets,\textsuperscript{46} whose roles are generally that of spokespersons for God. Kings “work” for God by promoting ideals of justice and the worship of God. Patriarchs work for God in their acts of worship (for example, sacrifices) and other rituals they perform. For all three groups of people, however, it is the designated person’s loyalty to God that warrants their designation as \textit{עבדְךָ}. This is shown for the kings by the use of \textit{עבדְךָ} solely for David and Hezekiah, who are both portrayed as exceptionally devoted to God.\textsuperscript{47} By doing this, the Hebrew Bible goes somewhat against the wider ancient Near East, in which kings regularly viewed or promoted themselves as the servant of the chief national deity.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, “loyalty” is also an association for notable individuals as \textit{עבדְךָ} of God. It needs to be noted that, though “work” and “loyalty” are associations common to all three groups of people, the type of “work” done for God is different for each group.

In 1 Kgs 12:7, there is a unique use of \textit{עבדְךָ}. Rehoboam, a king, is advised by some counselors to “be a servant \[\textit{עבדְךָ}\] to the people, and they will be your servants \[\textit{עבדים}\] all the days.” Here, Rehoboam has been asked by the people of Israel to lighten their yoke (1 Kgs 12:4–5); that is, obligation to the crown. This is unspecified, but likely to be corvée service and/or taxes. Despite most scholars recognizing the idea that fairness to the people will ensure their continued loyalty to the king, very few recognize the uniqueness of the social superior being asked to serve inferiors.\textsuperscript{49} Weinfeld, one of the few scholars who has studied this matter, points out that 1 Kgs 12:7 is in line with 1 Sam 12:2 and Deut 17:23, both of which have the king in

\textsuperscript{44} E.g., 1 Kgs 11:26; 2 Kgs 12:21–22[20–21]; 14:5; 21:23 (see TDOT 10:392).

\textsuperscript{45} It could be argued that “status” may map from situations when slaves (or other low status courtiers) have more apparent social status than what their technical legal status is.

\textsuperscript{46} E.g., 2 Kgs 21:10; Jer 7:25; 25:4; 35:15; 44:4; Ezek 38:17; Dan 9:6; Amos 3:7; Zech 1:6; and the “servant of the LORD” (\textit{עבדְךָ ליהוה}) in Isa 40–55.

\textsuperscript{47} For David: see, e.g., 1 Kgs 11:32–34; 2 Kgs 19:34; Ps 18:1 (title); 78:70; 132:10; Jer 33:21–26; Ezek 34:23–24; 37:24–25. For Hezekiah, see 2 Chr 32:16. For their devotion, see 1 Sam 13:4; 16:7; 2 Kgs 18:5; 2 Chr 31:20–21. Why other “good” kings such as Josiah are not given the \textit{עבדְךָ} designation is a mystery.

\textsuperscript{48} The extensive discussion on royal ideology in the Hebrew Bible cannot be dealt with here.

\textsuperscript{49} Two who recognize the uniqueness of the king serving the people are Terrence E. Fretheim, \textit{First and Second Kings} (Westminster Bible Companion; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1999) 72 (“a mutuality of serving”); and John Gray, \textit{I and II Kings} (OTL; London: SCM, 1977) 305. This lack of awareness is compounded by 2 Chr 10:7’s swapping \textit{עבדְךָ} for \textit{רציתם} (“appease/please them”), which, however, indicates the message of the counsel.
a servant-like role to the people, along with some Mesopotamian texts that indicate much the same.\textsuperscript{50} In effect, 1 Kgs 12:7 fits into a well-known aspect of Israelite and ancient Near Eastern rhetoric of kingship: the king had to be fair to his people, normally expressed in terms of ideals of justice, as noted above.\textsuperscript{51} The use ofָהָבָכָּה in 1 Kgs 12:7 evokes “work” because the king, as a “servant,” works for his people by creating conditions for people to prosper—by keeping obligations to the crown reasonable. This also evokes loyalty—reasonable obligations to the crown shows the king cares for the welfare of the people. A similar situation of leaders serving the people is found in 2 Chr 35:3. Here, Levites are commanded by Josiah to “serve (דבָכָה) the Lord your God and his people.” In this context takes the meaning of “work” in relation to God but it also takes this meaning in relation to the people, because the Levites’ work in this passage is primarily to slaughter the Passover lambs for the people. Thus, there are no slavery connotations forָהָבָכָה in 2 Chr 35:3, though it highlights that serving God can mean serving people.\textsuperscript{52}

When slave terms are used in deference, either to people or to God, they become metaphors for relative status rather than absolute status. Such deference is used in a wide variety of contexts (formal and informal relationships), for a wide variety of purposes (requests, thanks, self-defense, criticism), and by a wide range of people to an equally wide range of people (e.g., Gen 33:1–16; 44:18–33; 1 Sam 1:11; 25:24–31, 41; 2 Sam 14; 19) including God (Gen 32:11[10]; 1 Sam 1:16, 18; Pss 86; 116; 119; 132). The typical form of deference is אֱדֹנִי (“my lord”), which replaces the second person when addressing the hearer; and עבדך (“your [male] servant”) as self-reference for a male speaker and אָמֶתך or שפחתך (“your [female] servant”) for a female speaker, which replaces the first person.

\textsuperscript{50} Moshe Weinfeld, “King-People Relationship in the Light of 1 Kgs 12,7,” \textit{Leshonenu} 36 (1972) 3–13 [Hebrew], summarized in idem, “The King as the Servant to the People: The Source of the Idea,” \textit{JJS} 33 (1982) 189–94. As part of his case, Weinfeld has to argue Saul’s “walking” (לָהֲךָ) before the people in 1 Sam 1:22 means Saul “served” the people (the \textsc{nrsv} translates as Saul “is leading” the people). This is detailed in Moshe Weinfeld, \textit{Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomic School} (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 76–77, noting that נָהָל, “walk,” in 1 Sam 2:30; Gen 24:40; 48:15; Mal 2:6; 1 Kgs 3:6; 9:4; 14:18 means service/loyalty to God. For Mesopotamian texts, see Weinfeld, “King as the Servant,” 193–94, citing a Babylonian text, “Advice to a Prince,” part of which is cited in a letter to King Esarhaddon of Assyria.


\textsuperscript{52} Clines (DCH 6:210) gives two other examples of social superiors serving the inferior: free people serving slaves in Sir 10:25 and priests serving Gentiles in 4QD\textsuperscript{a} 5.2.8.
Deference is a form of speech in which speakers humble and/or abase themselves and portray the hearer (or recipient of a letter) as being of a higher status than them, which establishes a situation of relative status. Why choose master-slave language for deference? It is clear that ancient peoples recognized associations of slavery as being salient to relative status contexts. In all cases, the association of slavery evoked is “inferior status”: the person who uses slave terms always takes the role of the inferior in the interaction. Conversely, the person in the role of the social superior has “power” over the one using deference, whether it is formal or informal. Occasionally, the association “possession” is played on in prayer (Pss 86:16; 143:12). This creates a relationship with God that is viewed as the same as the master-slave relationship, but it is a device to assist in the appeal for a favorable answer to what is being requested in the prayer. “Loyalty” is an association that is also sometimes evoked in the use of slave terms in deference. In Psalms, the use of עבד as deference to God is always connected with expressions of loyalty to God. In narrative, implications of loyalty often a rejection of an offer (e.g., 2 Sam 19:34–37) or create a false persona (in 2 Sam 13:24 and 15:7; here, עבד deference hides murderous and rebellious intentions).

There are some implications of this study to biblical interpretation. One is that the metaphorical use of slave terms in the Hebrew Bible is not a reflection of a society where ordinary people are in near slavery to their rulers. This is an issue in the interpretation of slave terms when used as deference. For example, Abigail in 1 Sam 25:41 is sometimes interpreted to say she makes herself a female slave to David (she responds positively to David’s marriage proposal of vv. 39–40). It is better to interpret her statement as an example of self-abasement to express thanks, something common in narrative texts in the Hebrew Bible. Ultimately, the use of slave terms, for example, for courtiers, officials, and people in relation to the king reflects social standing relative to the king. The use of slave terms in deference reflects the same, not slave-like obsequiousness to people of higher social standing. A second implication is that the metaphorical use of

54. Formal: e.g., king over a subject (Sam 14; 19:34–37), official over a subject (2 Sam 20:15–22), king over an official (2 Sam 14:22; 24:3), high official over a foreigner (Gen 44:18–34), and God over a worshipper (e.g., 1 Sam 1:11; Ps 116; 119:122–125). Informal: e.g., Esau over Jacob (Gen 33:1–15), David over Abigail (1 Sam 25:23–31), Nabal over David (1 Sam 25:8), and Elisha as a prophet over the foreign military captain, Naaman (2 Kgs 5:17–19).
56. Ibid., 368–74.
57. E.g., Diana Vikander Edelman, King Saul in the Historiography of Judah (JSOTSup 121; Sheffield 1991) 216, 220; and Éduard Lipiński, “Kinship Terminology in 1 Sam 25:40–42,” ZAH 7 (1994) 16.
slave terms is also something that draws on the institution of slavery rather than the court. This is in contrast to some influential studies on the biblical slave terms. A third implication is that this study can assist the argument that the NT’s use of slave language (e.g., δοῦλος / οἱ Χριστοῦ, “servant / slave(s) of Christ”; Rom 1:1; 1 Cor 4:1; Gal 1:1 Phil 1:1; Jam 1:1; 2 Pet 1:1; cf. Rev 22:3, 6) is influenced more by the Hebrew Bible than Greco-Roman practice of slavery. In particular, the rarely expressed but persistent idea of the king serving the people comes to prominence in the NT. This is especially the case in Mark 10:44–45 and parallels, in which leadership ideals are reversed (cf. 1 Cor 3:5; 1 Pet 5:3–4), drawing on slavery language, along with Jesus’ statement that “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life a ransom for many.” Despite “servant leadership” also being a Stoic ideal, Jesus and the early church most likely drew directly from the Jewish Scriptures for these ideas rather than from Stoicism.

CONCLUSIONS

The practice of slavery in the Hebrew Bible shows that certain ideas associated with slavery could be evoked when slave terms are used metaphorically. These are “possession” (with the derived association “control”), “inferior status,” “work,” “debt/poverty,” “oppression,” and “propensity to run away.”

In the metaphorical use of עבד for subjects to a king, “work” and “inferior status” are evoked. An additional association, not present in the biblical writers’ thinking about slavery, “loyalty,” is also called to mind. However, if the king rules harshly, “oppression” could also be evoked, suggesting that biblical authors viewed subjection to a cruel king as little different from slavery. “Oppression” is also an association that is evoked when עבד is used in the context of vassalship. This, along with “work” and “inferior status,” indicates that the biblical authors viewed vassalship as not very different from slavery. When עבד is used for personal servants, the same three associations evoked for subjects of the king, “work,” “inferior status,” and “loyalty,” are also evoked. These three associations are also evoked when עבד is used for courtiers and officials of the king. That is, courtiers and officials are viewed as similar to personal servants and subjects. Despite this, officials and courtiers have status, due to their closeness to power and their work for the king. Consequently, “status” becomes an association that gets attached to עבד when it is used for these people.

61. Weinfeld argues that the Stoics got this from the ancient Near East: “King as the Servant,” 189–94.
62. It is common to argue this use of עבד reflects the ancient Near Eastern experience of absolute monarchy, but see Bridge, “Loyalty,” 370–73, for a critique in the context of Psalms.
When אָבֵד is used for notable individuals in relation to God (which includes kings), the associations “work” and “loyalty” are evoked, with the latter being the most important.

The use of אָבֵד and its feminine equivalents (אַמָּה and שְׁפָחָה) in deference varies from the other metaphoric uses of אָבֵד, evoking only the association inferior status in all uses. In speeches in narrative texts, loyalty is also sometimes evoked. In prayer, loyalty is also evoked and sometimes possession.

The common element in all metaphorical uses of slave terms in the Hebrew Bible is the association “inferior status.” This brings awareness that Israelite society in the biblical period was hierarchical, and people were conscious of who was above and below them in social status. Power is also part of this stratification, brought out especially in how slave terms are used in deference. Even if the hearer is an equal to or even a social inferior of the speaker, it is his ability to exercise power over the speaker that prompts the speaker’s use of master-slave deference. The association “loyalty” is evoked in many metaphorical uses of אָבֵד, indicating that the socially inferior were expected to support the socially superior in some fashion. That this is played on in deference indicates that such expectations did not always occur. The same conclusions could also be argued for the wider ancient Near East, because the metaphorical use of slave terms antedate the biblical texts and had lexicalized this use of slave terms prior to the biblical texts’ being written.