In my last column, I discussed how English Bible translations use the word "servant" when translating the Hebrew and Greek words for "slave." The slavery terminology is used not only in situations with actual slaves, but also metaphorically with one’s social superiors, such as a king or even God.

Thus when the King James translation has "Moses, the servant of God," the original Hebrew actually reads, "Moses, the slave of God." The same happens when translating the New Testament; Peter refers to himself as the "slave" of God. Using "servant" in these passages moderates the jarring character of this reference for modern ears, suggesting someone more like an English butler or gardener.

If Scripture is full of references to slaves, then it is not surprising that it contains references to masters as well. Indeed, the term "master" often appears in tandem with slavery terminology. The owner of a slave is an Adon in Hebrew and a Kurios in Greek.

Both Adon and Kurios are used to identify those who own slaves and as words of submission before individuals who are socially superior. When Exodus 21 speaks of people selling themselves into slavery, it refers to the purchaser as the Adon. When Moses humbles himself before God at the burning bush, he acknowledges God's infinite superiority by calling him, "my Adon."

Similarly, when King David is addressed by his subordinates, they refer to him as "my Adon," or in the early Greek translation called the Septuagint as, "my Kurios." When the Gospel of Matthew in 7:21 says, "No man can serve two masters," referring to God and money, the term for master is Kurios.

In English translations, Adon and Kurios are usually translated as either "master" or "lord." When the latter refers to God, it is capitalized. "Master" is usually used when talking about actual slaves, and "lord" is the translation in situations where the term is used metaphorically to indicate social inferiority. Furthermore, when a person uses it in relationship to God, it often indicates not only inferiority, but also devotion and commitment.

Sometimes it is not clear whether actual or metaphorical slavery is meant. A story in the apocryphal book, the Acts of Thomas, illustrates this. After Jesus ascended into heaven, so the story goes, the 12 disciples were deciding which territories each should evangelize. They prayed to God and God told each of them where to go. Jesus through prayer instructed Thomas, who initially doubted Jesus' resurrection, to go to India. Frightened of the challenge and afraid to travel so far, he refused. Despite clear instructions in prayer, he continued to refuse.

So Jesus appears in physical form in Jerusalem to an Indian merchant who was in Israel to purchase a carpenter. Jesus pointed to Thomas, who was standing across the square, and said, "That man is my slave. He is a carpenter and I will sell him to you." After the transaction was completed, Jesus took the Indian over to Thomas. The Indian asked Thomas, "Is this your Kurios?" He meant, "is this your owner?" Thomas answered, "This is my Kurios." Thomas used the term metaphorically, of course, to indicate his devotion to the Lord Jesus. Nevertheless, the Indian took possession of Thomas as a slave and brought him to India.

This story's ability to play on the confusion between the two uses of the term indicates the extent to which slavery terminology was used and recognized in the early church and in ancient Judaism. The model of the devoted Christian, in this fictional tale, is one who is a slave to the master Christ. Much of this brash character has been lost through the substitution of "servant" for "slave" in the translations.

Another reason for the moderation of slavery terminology in Scripture is the change in the meaning of "Lord." In ancient Judaism, God's name was not supposed to be uttered. To ensure this did not happen, the Greek translation always translated God's name as "Kurios," a habit that English translations continued by rendering the name as "Lord." Since "Lord" has come to function as God's name, appearing in nearly every chapter of the Bible, the word's association with slavery has been largely forgotten.