God's Slaves
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Since the publication of the King James version in 1611, or earlier, readers of English Bibles have read about God's "servants." Abraham, Jacob, Moses and David are all called God's "servants" in the Old Testament. In the New Testament, Paul, John, Peter and Phoebe are designated as "servants" of God. Sometimes they even call themselves that.

The problem is that the words translated as "servant" do not mean that, they mean "slave." Neither ancient Jewish society nor the ancient Greek and Roman cultures within which Christianity took shape had a social class of people similar to our modern idea of servants as household employees, such as butlers, maids, cooks or even hired hands.

The Hebrew word "eved" used in the Old Testament and the Greek word "doulos" used in the New Testament indicates a human being who is owned by another individual; a person who is property. It does not refer to someone employed and paid wages to work in a household. In fact, long_term employment as a concept did not exist in the ancient Mediterranean world. Household workers were either slaves or freed slaves, who were still beholden to their former masters. People could be paid for short_term labor, often on a daily basis, but that was not a permanent job.

The difference between slave and servant of course sounds quite jarring to our modern sensibilities. Consider the opening line of the New Testament book of James: "James, a slave of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, greetings to the 12 tribe in the diaspora." Or, in the Old Testament, God transfers the leadership of the Israelites to Joshua after Moses' death by saying, "Moses my slave is dead. Therefore rise, Joshua, and you and this people shall cross this Jordan" (Joshua 1:1). Or God speaks of King David as "my slave David" (e.g., 1 Kings 11:13).

Ancient slavery was quite complex, with many levels of status, trust, and loyalty. Some slaves worked in the fields or tended the sheep -- and were often treated little better than the animals they supervised. Other slaves were faithful household assistants who interacted with their masters every day. A few slaves rose to positions of power within their master's household. For instance, Abraham sent his most trusted slave, an overseer, many hundreds of miles to choose a wife for his son Isaac (Genesis 24).

Slavery could also be a temporary status, as described in Exodus 21. If a person became poor, they might sell themselves or their family members into slavery for a few years. During that time, they would serve their owner as he (or she) desired, but the master would feed and clothe them. Exodus recognized that young girls were often sold in this manner and considered this a path to wifehood.

Slavery also provided metaphors for social relationships. In the ancient world, people were not considered free citizens of a nation, but as subjects to the ruler. To be a "subject" is to be under a king's power and authority with little legal protection from personal injury, theft or even death at the king's order. When speaking to a king in public, therefore, a person referred to himself or herself as the king's slave. Even King David's wife, Bathsheba, refers to herself as a "slave woman" when speaking to David (1 Kings 1:13).

As we saw above, this figurative language of slavery is used when relating a faithful follower to God. This is true whether the one praying is a commoner, a prophet or a king themself. When Solomon prays to God at the dedication of the newly completed Jerusalem Temple (2 Chronicles 6), he calls himself a slave before God, his father King David a slave before God, and even refers to all the Israelites as slaves to God.

Our modern society is so far removed from slavery that to translate these terms in their actual meaning of "slave" is too jarring and carries no meaning except that of extreme social degradation. So English translators of the Bible have for centuries altered the slavery language to that of "servant" so that people who read Scripture today can perceive the social relationships in familiar terms rather than ones that are now incomprehensible.