

CHAPTER 1
SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

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DEFINING SLAVERY IN THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

The study of the ancient Near East, the modern Middle East from Iran to Turkey to Egypt, has been pursued in the last two centuries in societies of Europe and the Americas that have themselves been mired in industrial slavery. Scholars of the ancient region have consequently been quick to point out that nowhere do we see the kind of mass exploitation that we find since the sixteenth century of our era. Some have tried to deny that there even were slaves in the ancient Near East and have suggested that we should not call some of the dependent people slaves.¹

It is true that there were other kinds of dependency in the ancient Near East besides slavery, and ancient law-givers and others who reflected their societies were not concerned clearly to define lowly statuses that they took for granted. But there is no question that persons could be and were bought and sold from a very early period, such transactions fitting with a traditional definition of what slavery is. Patterson (1982), however, questions whether this is sufficient. He argues that in societies with a wide range of documentation, a more general component of the lives of enslaved peoples was systematic dishonour from the enslaving group. He speaks also of natal alienation, meaning that the enslaving group went to lengths to deny the actual family relationships of the enslaved and to create a new subservient identity for them, engineering their social death to their former lives in freedom.

The evidence from the ancient Near East is usually not detailed enough to say anything about dishonour, how it was felt or sometimes even whether it existed. But we do know that those who found themselves enslaved frequently had their names changed; foreign names especially seem to have been replaced by more local ones, and female slave names especially seem to belong to a distinctive category borne only by slaves.² This has the function for us of obscuring the origins of the enslaved, but for them it had the function of deracinating them and re-creating them as little Mesopotamians of

¹ Adams 1966: 103. ² Harris 1977: 48–9; Baker 2001: 23.

low status. If we read carefully the records about slavery across the three millennia covered by cuneiform-using societies, it is repeatedly clear that there were instances of the self-conscious imposition of social death and of dishonour. And if we cannot agree absolutely on terminology, it is nonetheless clear that the institutions that gave elites power in Mesopotamian cities seem to have been where dependent people were concentrated.³

It is legitimate therefore to compare instances of oppression in the ancient Near East with later phenomena. For slavery we have many archival texts, texts that were meant to be kept only for a brief time to fend off disputes about ownership. These are usually laconic and structured simply, with little unnecessary detail. Their point usually is to name living witnesses who would be able to confirm the agreement of the parties concerned. So these lists of names were much more important to the participants than any elaboration of exactly what was and was not permitted, and usually we hear nothing of the thoughts of the sold person.

We also have legal collections made mostly by kings. These were probably not codes in a modern sense of collections of rules intended to be enforced in a jurisdiction. But they may have been resolutions of the community that sketched out examples of correct human behaviour and the justice that could be dispensed by human rulers. They appear to have been teaching texts rather than documents from the practice of law.⁴ And yet they are invaluable as a sketch of the possibilities envisioned within their societies. They notoriously did not define their terms, but they do show how people were supposed to interact. And that allows us to examine the norms of these societies in ideal times, which admittedly may never have existed.

There are chance references to slavery too in letters, especially between officials. And in royal propaganda there is sometimes mention not usually of real slavery, actual people who were demeaned and could be bought and sold, but of political subordination decried as slavery.⁵ Although this does not help us understand how slavery worked, it does help us see what people's attitudes were towards it; everywhere it was a sorry state to be avoided at all costs.

The appearance of slaves in literary texts is more limited and not as suggestive as in the categories just named. But again the slave was a social type that sometimes had to be dealt with in texts copied for scribal education in the cuneiform tradition.

Beyond that tradition, the evidence of slavery is more patchy and best understood in light of evidence from better-documented societies. And yet in Egypt and in the North-West Semitic-speaking areas of the Syrian and Palestinian coast, there is evidence for something like the ancient Near Eastern practice of slavery. The Hebrew Bible passed down texts copied

³ Adams 1966: 103–4.

⁴ Finkelstein 1961: 103.

⁵ Snell 2001: 75–6.

over generations that purport to refer to the first millennium BC, and though there is little doubt that scribes updated them in copying, they may frequently represent early conditions. As evidence is more scarce, there is of course more leeway to impose one's own preconceived notions on it.

THE INVENTION OF SLAVERY

Although it is from the ancient Near East that we have the earliest writings, we can be sure that they do not attest to the origins of slavery. We believe those go back much further into the past, before the rise of societies organised as states, to simpler polities that have been called chieftaincies. These were conglomerations of village farming communities united by a belief in their common descent and organised in a loose way by leaders known for their wealth, their generosity, and their abilities to compel people to do what they wanted. The areas controlled might vary, and the relation of chieftaincies to the state is probably not possible to define with absolute clarity. We may say that a state is an organisation that theoretically at least is not directly tied to the personality of the leader, but a chieftaincy was.⁶ When the chief died, all possibilities were open; his son or successor might be able to take over his role, but that was negotiable and might not in fact be negotiated. Chieftaincies were better and more efficient at waging war than simpler societies, but also at arranging peace.⁷

Apparently all such societies, and even nomadic groups,⁸ had slaves. It is not known why these polities generated slavery, and though there is a growing literature on chieftaincies, there is almost nothing recent that considers the connection to slaves. The guess is that, though there were certainly conflicts in simpler societies between neighbouring villages that might lead to war and bloodshed, the need to continue peaceful relations after war minimised the temptation to exploit prisoners of war and led to prisoner exchanges as conditions of peace. But societies organised on a larger scale could afford to ignore the sensibilities of a village of people who had been enemies. The greed to acquire more hands to do work overcame the need to establish a stable peace, and the prisoners were retained. It stands to reason, though the evidence is weak, that the first such prisoners were women, since enemy men were likely to be killed or, as we shall see below, otherwise mutilated. Men were a continuing threat, especially those who had been skilled at war. But women, it may have been felt, could be subdued, raped and exploited more easily, and they might be folded into the polity as secondary wives. Chieftaincies could never be concerned to exploit too many people in this way, and all would have been used in domestic capacities, serving as amenities for the leadership related to the

⁶ Service 1975: 293.

⁷ Service 1975: 271.

⁸ Nieboer 1900; Sáenz 1991.

chiefs. The women might run away, but not if they were from a distant village, nor if they were pregnant or already had children in the community.

In Mesopotamia itself there is no physical evidence of slavery in early periods. But the suggestion has been made that the Ubaid period (5500–4000 BC) may have seen changes that corresponded to chieftaincy organisations.⁹ The main evidence is the creation of public buildings, usually understood as temples, within the rather small settlements we find exploiting irrigation along the rivers of southern Iraq.

In the earliest texts we find signs that probably mean ‘slave’ and ‘slave girl’; one later became a sign for ‘mountain’ and ‘foreign country’. Another came to mean ‘woman’. There were also other signs that cannot be interpreted because they later dropped out of the system. The earliest texts had groups of somewhat more than fifty almost equally divided between men and women.¹⁰ A later form of the sign for ‘slave’ in Sumerian had a sign for ‘man’ with a sign for ‘mountain’ worked into it, and in fact many slaves appear to have been caught in the Iranian foothills and brought to the Mesopotamian plain.

The later Sumerian word for ‘slave’, *arad*, is either the same or directly derived from the Akkadian word, *wardum*.¹¹ The mountains may not be far away from that word either, since there is a possibly related Akkadian verb meaning ‘to descend, to go down’, though that might be taken socially, not physically. Others have sought an etymology from Sumerian words for ‘man’, *ur*, and ‘woman’, *eme*, showing up in later Sumerian as *geme*, ‘(working) girl’.¹²

Speculation on etymology does not bring us back to the origins of the terms, but there were several other ways of referring to slaves. One was to list them as ‘head, male’, or ‘head, female’.¹³ This tells us nothing about origins, but it is the way animals also could be counted, and it probably was meant to reduce slaves to animals. Another early term is ‘blind ones’, literally ‘eyes do not see’. Perhaps the word originated in the often posited practice of killing male prisoners of war but preserving female prisoners for work and reproduction, while mutilating some few others. Blinding is known from the slaves of the Scythians as a way of keeping slaves from trying to escape.¹⁴

In early times slaves were sometimes referred to as *subur*, connecting them to the country called Subar, the northern reaches of Mesopotamia. The idea that this alone shows that chattel slavery itself was imported from the north seems unlikely in light of comparative material.¹⁵

⁹ Porada, Hansen, Dunham and Babcock 1992: 87; Stein 1994. ¹⁰ Vajman 1989.

¹¹ Gelb 1982. ¹² Krecher 1987. ¹³ Gelb 1982: 89.

¹⁴ Taylor 2001: 38. ¹⁵ Gelb 1982: 89–90.

Another term that appears from the Old Babylonian period on (2004–1595 BC) is *subaru* ‘lad, young one’. That word may imply nothing about slave status, but sometimes it is obvious that slaves were meant. One letter writer begs, ‘Please take my lads along and sell them.’ And another notes silver ‘for the price of an ox and a lad’. Another letter advises, ‘There is no lad worthy of any trust.’¹⁶ In the same vein later periods refer to the slave as *qallu*, a word probably related to notions of lightness, unimportance, and inferiority.¹⁷

STATE AND CORVÉE

As the Mesopotamian city-state remade its environment and attempted to irrigate more and more land, it did so not by organising slaves but by compelling peasants living nearby to work on the canals as forced labour. This involved giving them rations and direction, though it may not have involved much physical punishment. People subject to this corvée – *dullu* ‘forced labour, misery’ in Akkadian, *dusu* ‘basket’ in Sumerian – may have been marched some distance from their homes and set up in camps. But the obligation probably fell during agricultural off-seasons and did not last more than a month or two. Through all Mesopotamian history corvée was an important power of the state, always more important than slavery. And it is not obvious that corvée labourers were necessarily viewed as dishonoured.¹⁸ Scribes and officials too sometimes were called upon to do corvée, and corvée workers and their labour were not sold. Still, the meticulous labour texts from the Ur III period (2112–2004 BC) show that small numbers of workers attempted to run away.¹⁹

UR III SLAVES IN COURT

Texts from southern Mesopotamia document the ‘final judgements’ of courts in a couple of cities. Twelve of the texts show results of cases in which slaves tried to dispute their slave status, and their arguments reveal some details about slave life we would not otherwise have known. In one case the court reaffirmed the slave status of a woman who had run away with her daughters from her master. The master held the slaves as punishment since their husband and father had murdered the master’s father, a court musician. The runaway had spent most of her life as a free woman and had been a slave only for five years. She clearly knew how to pass as free, and perhaps some of her old friends had harboured her, since she eluded her master for a time.²⁰

¹⁶ Gelb *et al.* 1956: E 232.

¹⁷ Gelb *et al.* 1956: Q 64–6.

¹⁸ Sharashenidze 1986.

¹⁹ Snell 2001: 48–54.

²⁰ Falkenstein 1956–7: no. 41.

A more typical case involved a slave who argued that his father had been freed more than fifteen years previously. But the current master produced witnesses who affirmed that they had seen the father receive rations from the household, apparently implying that he must still have been a slave. It was not clear if the father had been living away from the household and perhaps paying a fee to the master and so appearing to be a free craftsman. The son may have been confused about the status of the father, but the court was also stacked against him.²¹ There was no legal barrier to a slave's appearing in court at least to argue his case for freedom. This society divided up the roles of slaves as things and as persons differently from the societies influenced by Roman law with which we are more familiar.

A few cases show that there was a recognised class of freedmen who had lower status than the freeborn but could claim to be locals by birth. The freedman was not, however, a 'son of the city', with political rights, but simply a 'free son'.²²

PRICES

'Blind ones' were cheaper than 'heads' in the Early Dynastic period (*c.* 2400 BC), once costing fourteen shekels of silver versus twenty,²³ but prices could vary. The shekel was a weight of about 8.33 grammes, and sixty were sometimes the equivalent of a month's wage for an unskilled worker. Silver was paid by breaking it and weighing the pieces. In the Old Akkadian period (2334–2195 BC), a letter writer asked for two slaves in exchange for his fifteen shekels, though both were to be 'young and beardless', and so perhaps cheap.²⁴ Ur III (2112–2004 BC) slave prices varied from two-thirds of a shekel to fifty-five, but most were under ten shekels.²⁵ In the Neo-Babylonian and later periods (605–333 BC), prices ranged from nineteen to more than a hundred shekels.²⁶

From the Old Babylonian period (*c.* 2004–1595 BC), we have a number of documents that allow us for the first time to study price changes over time. As in the Early Dynastic period, male slaves cost about fifteen shekels of silver. But there were fluctuations. Since we have several other commodities priced in the period, we can see that the inflation in slave prices corresponded to an inflation in other prices, especially in the reign of one of the Old Babylonian kings, Abi-eshuh (1711–1684 BC), whose loss of territory may have affected his city's ability to procure grain and slaves.²⁷ The availability of slaves from northern Mesopotamia fell off under the later kings of Babylon, probably because of the rise of the state of Mitanni

²¹ Falkenstein 1956–7: no. 34. ²² Westbrook 2003b.

²³ Nikol'skii 1908: 293. ²⁴ Michalowski 1993: 45, text 58.

²⁵ Falkenstein 1956–7, 1: 88–90. ²⁶ Dandamaev 1984: 200–95. ²⁷ Farber 1978.

in what is now northern Syria.²⁸ There is advice in an Old Babylonian letter about selling ‘lads’:

So long as the lad is not fine looking, don’t consider buying him. Also the slave-girl . . . so long as she is not fine looking and is small, don’t consider buying her . . . We bought two slave girls for a third mana three shekels [23 shekels or 11.5 each]. Since they were thin, no one bought them. I have arranged that they now appear in good health, and I shall sell them. Don’t pay attention to the low cost and buy no slave not fine looking. As long as a slave or a slave girl does not look fine, don’t consider buying them!²⁹

HAMMURAPI’S VISION

From early in the Old Babylonian period, we have two monumental texts that show how slavery worked in theory. The Edict of Ammisaduga, king of Babylon *c.* 1626 BC, decreed the remission of some kinds of debt, probably in response to an agricultural crisis. Although the king ordered that free people who had been enslaved for debt should be freed, he was careful to note that other slaves were not to be freed at all. The edict may have been thought of as a ‘freedom edict’, but it did not apply to regular slaves.³⁰

The other and much more famous document is Hammurapi’s so-called code which recorded about 282 ‘decisions of justice’, some of which dealt with slaves. While we must warn that the connection of the text to practice is remote, the code does allow us to see fairly clearly ideas about justice, and sometimes we can see underlying social practices.³¹

Probably the most enduring of those practices is the Near Eastern descent system, in which a marriage between a free person and a slave resulted in a child of free status. In the code it was obvious that this way of reckoning descent was not applied without exception. If the father never acknowledged that the child was his, the child would not divide the inheritance with free half-siblings but would nonetheless be free. If the father had acknowledged the child, at his death the child inherited a portion equal to any other offspring, and the slave mother became free.³² This way of proceeding became the most common manner of tracing descent since it was assumed by Islamic law.³³ Its practice meant that female slaves usually could count on their children’s being acknowledged and on their own being free if they had children with their masters. At Old Babylonian Mari, enslaved women actually changed their names at the birth of their free child, perhaps to commemorate this eventual change in status.³⁴

²⁸ van Koppen 2004: 23. ²⁹ Kraus 1964: text 139, 12.

³⁰ Pritchard 1969: 526–8, paragraph 21. ³¹ Westbrook 2003a: 12–13, 16; Roth 1997: 76–142.

³² Roth 1997: 113–14, paragraphs 170–1. ³³ Juynboll 1974: 3. ³⁴ Charpin 2003.

The status of the slave woman in ancient Near Eastern law was sometimes dominated by owners' seeing her as property and sometimes as a marriageable woman. Her legal personality was split between her owner and her husband, if those were different people. In an Old Babylonian text, a free man took a slave woman in marriage but was warned that if she asserted her freedom to her mistress, the mistress could simply sell her and keep what property the slave had. The husband would be left with no rights.³⁵

Another shorter-lived feature of slavery clear in the code is the issue of how to distinguish a slave. One could not count on the slave having a foreign look or accent, so 'marks', possibly tattoos, fetters, or a slave haircut, might be imposed. We do not know what the haircut looked like, but law-makers knew hair could be shaved off and so forbade such barbering except if authorised by a master.³⁶ Runaway slaves were punished by marks, possibly tattoos.³⁷

Patterson (1982: 60) argued that since hair was frequently a sign of honour in many societies, the slave had his hair removed or changed. However, cutting pubic hair was not a custom in Mesopotamia (*contra* Patterson 1982: 60–2). This idea derives from a translation of the penalty clause for repudiation of an adoptive relationship or of a slave, as in 'On the day that (a slave) says to her mistress, "You are not my mistress", she shall cut her [front] hair and sell her for money.'³⁸ '[Front] hair' is taken by Patterson, and perhaps meant by Mendelsohn, to mean pubic hair. This translation goes back to an early scholar who rendered *Stirnhaar*, explicitly 'forehead hair', and not pubic,³⁹ but the original just says 'she shall cut' and does not mention hair of any kind.

Assertions that ritual murder of slaves was widespread in the ancient Near East are also incorrect.⁴⁰ The source for this idea discussed the Ur graves, where there may have been some victims of sacrifice, but there is no clue that these persons were slaves.⁴¹ The only real evidence for human sacrifice in burials is the funerals for substitute kings, appointed in order to ward off or to suffer an evil predicted for the king; the Ur graves may conceivably have been early examples of that practice,⁴² but again it is not known if such persons were slaves before they were chosen for this dubious honour.

The acts of free persons in taking in and harbouring runaway slaves and using them as their own were of more interest to law-givers than any other aspect of slavery. Clearly harbouring was a major problem. The punishment for harbouring was basically restoration. The temptation must have been

³⁵ Westbrook 1998: 234.

³⁸ Mendelsohn 1948: 9.

⁴¹ Finegan 1979: 32, 53.

³⁶ Roth 1997: 124, paragraphs 226–7.

³⁹ Schorr 1913: 522.

⁴² Scurlock 1995: 1885.

³⁷ Reiner 2004.

⁴⁰ Patterson 1982: 191, 222.

widespread to increase one's labour force with hands that were willing to work if only to escape the old master.⁴³ We see the harbouring in an Old Babylonian letter where one writer who owned a cook complained, 'Then you corrupted my slave's views, so that my slave has run away to you from Babylon. You had the slave, who does not belong to you, taken along, and then you had him sold to someone else.'⁴⁴ The unequal power among the free persons allowed this cook to choose his master, but then he was sold off.

Hammurapi's vision of justice did not extend to freedom for slaves, but he did include wrongs against slaves among his list of punishable deeds, no matter who the perpetrator might be. Someone who hurt a slave was to be punished more lightly than one who hurt a 'man', a fully free citizen, or even a 'subjected one', from among the lower classes. But he was still punished and included among the weak whom the king wanted to protect from the strong, though this text especially was devoted to the protection of rights to property, in which slaves definitely were included. Even trusted slaves could not enter into contracts for their masters. Like children and imbeciles, slaves were not seen as fully legally competent persons.⁴⁵

From this period too we have a remarkable set of wisdom texts which reflect attitudes towards slaves. They were seen as lazy and unmotivated, as in the Sambo caricature of New World slavery. Slave girls especially were criticised for constant complaining. The rich young men to whom such texts were addressed were warned not to have sex with slave girls since they would turn on them. They brought 'pleasure, but also damage'.⁴⁶

Among such texts is an astounding set of admonitions against getting caught by slavers in the Iranian mountains. The slaves one saw in Mesopotamia came down from the mountains, and one could count on people from Mesopotamia not to enslave other Mesopotamians.⁴⁷ Slaving almost by definition lay outside the area controlled by strong governments, and so these lines in a literary text are welcome supplements to our understanding.⁴⁸

Most households had only small numbers of slaves. But in one inheritance thirty-two slave girls and slaves, along with large quantities of silver, 644 plough oxen and 120 cows, are mentioned.⁴⁹

MIDDLE BABYLONIAN EXPLOITATION

After *c.* 1500 BC, Mesopotamia underwent a dark age, in the sense that government archives ceased, and even the lengths of reigns of kings are unknown. Such conditions might have been ideal to encourage rogue

⁴³ Snell 2001: 79–86.

⁴⁴ Kraus 1968: text 155.

⁴⁵ Roth 1997: 82, paragraph 7.

⁴⁶ Snell 2003: 16.

⁴⁷ Snell 2003: 17–18.

⁴⁸ James 1988.

⁴⁹ Kraus 1972: text 244.

slaving, and it does seem that the population continued to decline. But when texts resume, the situation for slaves seems not to have changed much. We see in this Middle Babylonian period the word for 'men' clearly used to designate saleable people, along with other more usual terms known from earlier. Such 'men' and 'women' could get rations for an entire year, and their ranks included all age groups except the old. 'Lasses', the feminine equivalent of the 'lads' of Old Babylonian times, appear getting rations, while 'lads' worked as washers, butchers, eunuchs and even wranglers for horses.⁵⁰

The sources of slaves who were not debt slaves were beyond the central Mesopotamian area. In Nuzi in Northern Iraq, slaves were frequently but not always from the ethnic group called Lullubians, perhaps located in the mountains beyond Nuzi.⁵¹

The late second millennium saw a slow breakdown of the palace-centred economy especially in Syria-Palestine. Also the long-attested phenomenon of the urban underclasses joining with nomads to plunder the countryside increased, and this may have encouraged slaves to run away to join them.⁵² The Amarna letters to the Egyptian king from Asiatic lords mention the transfer of women especially from potentate to potentate, and most may have had no choice in the matter, though they may not have been slaves either (Moran 1992: texts 64, 268, 301, 309; 365 has *corvée* workers).

Archaeologists have found an intriguing item of evidence for slavery in a grave on a hillside at the site of classical Pella overlooking the Jordan Valley after 1350 BC. Two upper-class men were buried there with grave goods, but with them was another man with a manacle on his ankle. The constrained man might merely have been a criminal or prisoner of war, but of course both criminals and prisoners were sometimes made slaves. The shackled man apparently was executed and died violently on the spot.⁵³ There are no texts from Pella in this period, so we cannot reconstruct the story of these men, but we may guess that it had to do with slavery and oppression. Further inland a sanctuary near the modern Amman airport dating from about 1300–1200 BC clearly was a centre for human sacrifice. The status of those killed is impossible to determine, and even their ages and sexes are problematic, but it is possible that they were slaves.⁵⁴

FIRST MILLENNIUM

The Phoenicians in their seafaring heyday were said to be notoriously good at kidnapping people to be transported to distant lands as slaves.⁵⁵

⁵⁰ Sassmannshausen 2001: 117–26; Cardellini 1981: 157–67.

⁵¹ Maidman 1987: 163–6.

⁵² Liverani 1988: 541–52. ⁵³ Routledge 2003: 70–1.

⁵⁴ Hennessy 1985. ⁵⁵ Markoe 2000: 105.

The story told by Homer (*Odyssey* 15.400–50) about a boy enslaved by the devious Phoenicians reflects how the Greeks felt about them.⁵⁶ And later their descendants the Carthaginians had slaves in all sorts of jobs.⁵⁷

A set of cuneiform texts from the city of Harran, now on the Turkish–Syrian border, reveals a kind of census or population report to the Assyrian government around 750 BC concerning settlements of farmers. These people were more like serfs than slaves in that they apparently could not be sold, but they did owe service to the government, and they were not supposed to leave their posts.⁵⁸ It is not clear that these people were deportees, but there were at least a million people who were uprooted by the Assyrian government over the 250 years of imperial activity. Most were not enslaved but were forced to walk from their homes to the Assyrian heartland in northern Iraq, where they were settled on farms and forbidden to leave. Early on they were said to be ‘counted as citizens of Assyria’ and presumably allowed or forced to serve in the army. But later deportees were seen as more alien, perhaps because there were more of them.⁵⁹

The most interesting of the slaves under the Assyrians may have been the eunuchs. Though there is evidence of gender ambiguity in a statue of a singer at Early Dynastic (c. 2400 BC) Mari on the Euphrates, now on the Syrian–Iraqi border,⁶⁰ only later do we find the *ša reši*, ‘he of the head’, who, sometimes at least, was a eunuch. Such persons held high positions at court and worked among the royal harems because they could be trusted not to impregnate women. But people with that title also were sometimes generals and governors, and some even had families, perhaps through adoption if they really were castrated.

Eunuchs may have been the ‘ultimate slaves’, persons who were alienated from their pasts and who could have no future offspring.⁶¹ But we are very uncertain that the people ‘of the head’, *šalšut resi*, really were castrated, a procedure which is, understandably, not discussed in the texts.⁶² In the Bible *sarisim*, certainly cognate with the Akkadian, refers to high foreign officials, but again one cannot be sure of eunuchism.⁶³

The first Assyrian eunuchs were seen in the thirteenth century under Tukulti-Ninurta I. It is not so clear that Old Babylonian Mari’s use of the same term in military contexts really means that the persons involved were eunuchs. The etymology may actually be ‘one with two heads’ as a euphemism for one without testicles.⁶⁴ Hittite material does seem to indicate that the attendants designated by the term in Akkadian and hieroglyphic Luwian really were physically eunuchs.⁶⁵ Under the Neo-Assyrians

⁵⁶ Fitzgerald 1963: 279–83. ⁵⁷ Tsirkin 1987: 134; Markoe 2000: 91. ⁵⁸ Fales 2001: 171–8.

⁵⁹ Oded 1979. ⁶⁰ McCaffrey 2002: 380–1. ⁶¹ Patterson 1982: 315. ⁶² Meier 1938.

⁶³ Wolf 1962; Kedar-Kopfstein 1999. ⁶⁴ Deller 1999: 304–5, 309–11. ⁶⁵ Hawkins 2002.

the chief eunuch played an important role in administration and frequently led armies.⁶⁶

THE POOR AND THE RICH

In the Neo-Babylonian period (605–333 BC), there is a wealth of documentation about slaves, working in three capacities. First, there was a small number of royal slaves who did menial jobs in the palace and who had no chance of catching the eye or the favour of their master. It is not clear how a slave became a royal slave. Perhaps such slaves were prisoners of war retained by the king. Then there were slaves as janitors owned by the temples, which continued to be economic as well as religious centres. In this case the master was not even a real person, but a god, and so preferential treatment or manumission seemed to be impossible. Finally, the largest and best-known group of slaves were those owned by private persons. Among them we see great variety in the tasks performed, from agriculture to loan-sharking.⁶⁷

One became a slave by getting caught as a prisoner of war, being sold as a debt-slave, or, in the case of the temple slaves, being 'dedicated' by a family overwhelmed by crop failure and unable to continue caring for a child. The loan-sharking slaves could become very rich and in some ways quite powerful. They could marry in legally recognised weddings and must have known the high and mighty who gave them loans. They probably had access to amenities that very few free Babylonians could afford, and many apparently invested for themselves on the side and so controlled their own money as a *peculium*. They also owned their own slaves. But they never were allowed to accumulate enough money to buy their freedom or the freedom of their loved ones. Once the master of one of the rich slaves sold him along with his wife and children. The slave had some of his own money, but far from enough to match or to top the amount his new buyer spent.⁶⁸

Here one can see an illustration of the idea that slave status was not the same as economic status. The rich slaves could not keep their families or themselves from dishonour, though of course they cost the new buyer a very great deal of money, 24 manas (1,440 shekels) of silver, which bought the principal and his family of seven along with the loans owed him.⁶⁹

Once a slave was ordered to study to become a scribe;⁷⁰ another was apprenticed as a seal-cutter, another as a baker and another was to run a tavern.⁷¹ A unique text shows a Neo-Babylonian princess freeing a male slave, saying he 'is free; he belongs to himself'.⁷²

⁶⁶ Tadmor 2002. ⁶⁷ Dandamaev 1984; Baker 2001.

⁶⁸ Dandamaev 1984: 345–71, 451–2. ⁶⁹ Dandamaev 1984: 361–2, 395. ⁷⁰ Dietrich 2001.

⁷¹ Baker 2001: 23. ⁷² MacGinnis 1993: 102.

There appears to have been a growth in the number of slaves through the first millennium, but texts fall off after the early Seleucid era around 270 BC. An Arsacid or Parthian period text from after 247 BC shows little girls as young as five given as slaves for building work, so clearly the institution continued, but the documentation did not.⁷³

EGYPT

In Egypt the history of slavery is harder to trace than in ancient Iraq, but it is nonetheless known that there were small numbers of slaves in early periods. They were termed *hm* meaning 'server', from a word for 'body', and free people sometimes termed themselves the *Om* of a god or king. We know that expeditions were sent south to kidnap workers termed *sgr.w-c nh* 'bound for life'.⁷⁴ It has been argued that the 'bound for life' may have been treated like slaves, but they did not constitute a separate legal status in the Old Kingdom (2575–2125 BC).⁷⁵

There were not many 'bodies' in the earliest periods. In the Middle Kingdom (1975–1640 BC), there were many 'slaves of the king', some of whom were identified as Asiatics. These were presumably prisoners of war or people caught by other Asiatics and sold to Egyptians. In the period such 'bodies' could be inherited and bought. Slaves who repeatedly ran away could be punished with death. We know that runaway groups, including runaways from corvée duty, holed up in desert oases and were attacked by the king's police. There were also instances of individual owners manumitting favoured slaves. Some slaves owned fields, and most had names that made good sense in Egyptian and did not set them apart.⁷⁶ Runaways along with their families could be condemned to work for their lives for the state. Notable is the use of *tp.w* 'heads' for numbers of slaves, just as in Mesopotamia. The child of a slave woman was a slave, regardless of who the father was.⁷⁷

It was in the expansionist New Kingdom period (1558–1080 BC) that we see large numbers of slaves coming in as prisoners of war from Asia and from up the Nile in Africa. They were called *b3k.w* 'workers', which hardly explains their status. They were used in small numbers in domestic and other supervised labour. The government exercised active surveillance over foreign slaves.⁷⁸ Masters relied on the forbidding deserts on each side of Egypt to keep slaves from running to the east and west, limiting the problem of control to the narrow valley of the river, except down in the Delta where the swamps did allow runaways to disappear.

The New Kingdom was the time of Egypt's sustained intervention in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. But prices in the New Kingdom seem stable

⁷³ Oelsner 1995: 120–2, 147–8. ⁷⁴ Loprieno 1997: 193. ⁷⁵ Poláček 1970: 161, 165.

⁷⁶ Helck 1984: 983–4; Berlev 1972: 23–5. ⁷⁷ Loprieno 1997: 198–200. ⁷⁸ Bakir 1952.

with men costing 2 *dbn* (a weight) of silver, or about forty shekels of silver. Women cost more, 4 *dbn* or eighty shekels,⁷⁹ presumably because they were valued for the children they might bear. Slave status could be inherited for a royal servant and for an Asiatic slave, and there was also a sizeable percentage in some texts who were native Egyptians.⁸⁰ Slaves could sometimes gain freedom by enlisting in the army.⁸¹

A document from Ramses II's time (1279–1212 BC) details the purchase by a woman of a young Syrian girl in exchange for a number of textiles and some bronze and copper vessels. The owner gave the girl an Egyptian name. The document also shows a person buying a tomb in exchange for a male slave.⁸²

Although the New Kingdom had 'houses of female slaves' apparently devoted to producing more slave children, it is also clear that some slaves could own land. In later periods in the first millennium, the roles of slaves again became murky. It seems that some forms of dependence became more like clientship than slavery.⁸³

The tasks slaves were forced to do varied from domestic service to agriculture. One Twelfth Dynasty letter (1979–1805 BC) commanded that a royal slave be made to learn to write 'without being allowed to run away'.⁸⁴

ISRAELITE SLAVERY

In the texts copied in religious circles in ancient Israel there was for the first time discussion of special concern for slaves from the in-group of Hebrews. Non-Hebrew slaves were ignored by law-givers and seem to have been treated as in the rest of the ancient Near East. Stories indicate that the Near Eastern descent rules applied, and the slave woman who bore a child to a free man, in this instance Abraham, found her son free and herself free even before the death of the father (Gen. 21:1–21). Hebrew legal thinkers limited the length of debt-slavery a Hebrew could endure to six years, while Hammurapi had limited debt-slavery service to three years (Exod. 21:2).⁸⁵ The Hebrew legalists also proposed the institution of a Jubilee year after forty-nine years, which would see the returning of land that had been sold; debt-slaves were also to go home (Lev. 25:25–8).⁸⁶ It is not known if this utopian idea was applied to non-Hebrew slaves. In later tradition if a slave converted to Judaism, he was then regarded as free.⁸⁷ But in Jeremiah's time, around 587 BC, as Jerusalem was falling to the Babylonians, the prophet complained that the six-year limit had not been observed for years and really ought to apply to all slaves. This time the owners acquiesced in

⁷⁹ Helck 1984: 984–5. ⁸⁰ Loprieno 1997: 200. ⁸¹ Shaw and Nicholson 1995: 38.

⁸² Gardiner 1935. ⁸³ Loprieno 1997: 206, 208, 213–14. ⁸⁴ Wente 1990: 86, text 107.

⁸⁵ Roth 1997: 103, paragraph 117. ⁸⁶ Chirichigno 1993: 329–39. ⁸⁷ Mielziner 1894: 3, n. 3.

freeing the slaves but then recaptured them, much to the disgust of the prophet (Jer. 34:6–22).

An important revelation of attitudes towards slavery was the Deuteronomic reforms, in which later thinkers revised parts of the early Covenant Code in a more compassionate direction for slaves and other oppressed persons. They were to be treated well 'because you were slaves in Egypt' (Deut. 5:15). The ultimate statement was the call to refuse to return runaway slaves to their owners (Deut. 23:15). If consistently applied, such a prohibition would have eroded the entire institution of slavery. It was interpreted in later times as applying only to Hebrew slaves who had returned as runaways to the land of Israel. But the statement can be taken at face value as a call to attend to the needs and desires of all humans, even including slaves.⁸⁸ It is also a kind of play on ancient Near Eastern treaties. Such treaties paid lots of attention to assuring that escapees were returned to their countries of origin, presumably for punishment by their masters. Deuteronomy as a whole is in the form of an ancient Near Eastern treaty, and the fact that it said the opposite of what such treaties usually said about runaways underlines the originality of the effort.⁸⁹

The usual term for slave in Hebrew was *ʿeved*, a term also used by free persons showing subservience. It probably just meant 'worker', like the Egyptian word.⁹⁰

Biblical sources were concerned for the slave wife, and such marrying up implied freedom for children and probably for the wife. A slave wife could be the first or primary wife of a free man.⁹¹

The Hebrews had besides the usual privately owned slaves also a group of temple slaves called *netinim*, 'given' people, who worked in the temple as long as it existed. Their origins and slave status are unclear, but they have been compared to the contemporary Neo-Babylonian temple slaves called *širku*, which also meant 'given'.⁹²

When Judahites were allowed to return to Israel by the Persians a generation after their exile around 520 BC, many brought slaves with them. The books of Ezra and Nehemiah list names of free people who returned, and the summaries say that of the 42,360 making the trek 7,337 were slaves, almost one in every six (Ezra 2:64–5 = Neh. 7:67–8).⁹³ This did not make the returners from exile a slave society, but it may have approximated the proportion of slaves in the Neo-Babylonian society they were leaving behind.⁹⁴ The irony of a recreated Israel celebrating its freedom with the help of slaves was lost on the exiles.

⁸⁸ Snell 2001: 129–30, 143. ⁸⁹ Weinfeld 1992: 169–71. ⁹⁰ Westermann 1975.

⁹¹ Kessler 2002. ⁹² Healey 1992; Dandamaev 1984: 469.

⁹³ Mowinckel 1964. ⁹⁴ Dandamaev 1984: 218, 648.

HITTITE SLAVES

The laws from the Hittite area in central Anatolia, what is now Turkey, from between 1400 and 1200 BC show three classes of serfs being manipulated by the government: deportees, 'taken ones' – probably meaning prisoners of war – and craftsmen. A term that is widespread in the newer version of the laws, written as 'prisoner' using an Akkadian word as a logogram, may stand for Hittite /Eipparas, which might be related to a verb for buying; these may have been chattel slaves.⁹⁵ Slaves could marry free women, and they were assumed to be able to pay a bride price for them; it may be that the free women became slaves for three years as a punishment for this, but then reverted to free status. The children of such unions were assumed to be free. The flexibility in this arrangement may be due to the shortages of labour, so slaves were to be rewarded for staying on the land and accumulating wealth.⁹⁶

Slaves were frequently used as herdsmen in the lucrative herding industry; this was lonely and undesirable work, though probably allowing for chances to escape.⁹⁷ Prices in the Hittite laws were twenty shekels of silver for ordinary slaves, and this was the same as the price of a draught horse; a slave trained as an expert on omens could cost twenty-five shekels.⁹⁸ Hire was one shekel of silver a month for a male labourer, half that for a female.⁹⁹

AEGEAN SLAVES

The Minoans in the third and early second millennium BC may have had slaves used in domestic capacities.¹⁰⁰ The evidence, of course, is entirely from art and from continuities with the later culture, since Minoan writing has not been deciphered.

The Mycenaean documents on clay tablets in the syllabic Linear B script show a number of slaves in the workforce, termed *do-e-ro* and *do-e-ra* for later *doulos* and *doula*. The slaves appear to have derived from captives. The greatest number of slaves were slaves of a god or goddess and so were attached to temples. Some had grants of land that they worked as part of their duties. One text implies that children of a slave father and a free mother were slaves. This would go against archaic Greek practice and the custom of the Near East in general, where one free parent tended to confirm freedom. But the passage is not unequivocal (Ventris and Chadwick 1973: 123–4, 166–8: 'Six women, reapers, their father a slave and their mother from [a place]').

⁹⁵ Güterbock 1972; Roth 1997: 224–5, paragraphs 48–9. ⁹⁶ Bryce 2002: 51–5, 121–3.

⁹⁷ Bryce 2002: 83. ⁹⁸ Bryce 2002: 52, referring to laws paragraph 177.

⁹⁹ Bryce 2002: 80 to laws 158. ¹⁰⁰ Castleden 1990: 25–6.

Although the subservience of the slaves seems obvious, they probably were not regarded as private property, but 'slaves of the god' were the largest group of smallholders of land at Pylos. They seem to have been dependent on private individuals, gods, and another social class of free or freer persons.¹⁰¹

AFRICAN SLAVES

Aside from the expeditions of the Egyptians, we know little of African conditions in ancient times. There were many chieftain-level societies that probably indulged in slavery, and some states that certainly did. One aspect of African thought about property and consequently about slavery proved important later. Many Africans apparently did not see land as capable of being owned.¹⁰² Perhaps this feeling derived from the very fecundity of the African environment where almost anything would easily grow. Owning particular bits of land did not make sense since there was more than enough to go around. But land ownership in Muslim areas did sometimes coexist with slavery, and slaves could be assigned to work particular fields of their masters.¹⁰³

The way to power was through controlling people, and one way to get more people was to enslave them. The status of slaves was inheritable, though slaves in Africa probably did not reproduce enough to replenish their numbers in the next generation. Useful slaves would be rewarded by being granted more freedoms and eventually might become full members of the master's community.¹⁰⁴

As elsewhere in the ancient world, such access to eventual freedom for some did not mitigate the dishonour or the horror of exploitation, and the membership in the kin group might not involve complete assimilation.¹⁰⁵ The distinction between servants who might be paid and slaves who were not is known in several African societies, and the happy story in which slavery ended in kinship was not necessarily frequently acted out.¹⁰⁶

CONCLUSION

The literate Near East had at least two thousand years' experience of slavery by the time the Greeks under Alexander arrived with their own take on the institution. And the varieties of experience slaves had has been rivalled only in the two thousand years since. To the argument that such enslaved people were not quite chattel slaves, we must answer that it is true that most

¹⁰¹ Uchitel 1985: 137–8, 173, 177. ¹⁰² Bohannon and Curtin 1971: 120–8.

¹⁰³ Fisher 2001: 216–17, 277. ¹⁰⁴ Lovejoy 2000: 9–15.

¹⁰⁵ Kopytoff 1982: 222. ¹⁰⁶ Fomin 2002: 13–15.

slaves were not sold in the course of their lifetimes. But many slaves could be sold. And the rights of slaves to appear in court, marry and do other things that some slaves in other societies could not do does not lessen the dishonour that was felt. When one of the richest men in Babylon was sold, he was not in a position to object, though he doubtless had many friends in high places. Society had contrived to demean him and to exploit his family, who were sold with him.¹⁰⁷ And still down the ages echoes the assertion in court in the late third millennium of a feeling shared by all who would ever be exploited for their labour and denied some of their humanity. To the court that would find against him and continue his slavery a man asserted, 'I am not a slave.'¹⁰⁸

BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

A brief introduction in English is Mendelsohn (1948), to be supplemented by Chavalas (1997), Snell (1997) and (1998), and Ricks (1998). The only modern study of a whole period is Dandamaev (1984). Westbrook (1995) has considered legal aspects especially of the Old Babylonian period. Cardellini (1981) collected the legal texts. Texts in translation may be found still in Pritchard (1969) and also in Hallo and Younger (1997–2002). Hebrew institutions may be seen in Westermann (1975) and Healey (1992). Sasson (1995) gives a general overview of the ancient Near East. Several studies by Gelb elucidate Mesopotamian labour. Bakir (1952) remains the basic study for Egypt. Mycenaean labour has been studied by Uchitel (1985). Pre-contact African systems are surveyed by Kopytoff (1982). Tsirkin (1987) examined Phoenician and Punic labour. For ideology see Snell (2001).

¹⁰⁷ Dandamaev 1984: 361–2.

¹⁰⁸ Falkenstein 1956–7: no. 34, lines 4, 11.