

עבד - Word Study

Daniel Kleven

(עֶבֶד, עֲבָדָה, עָבַד) - 377x in the Pentateuch

Introduction

“Slavery” is a bad word, especially in 21st century America. Given our own nations gruesome history with a particular form of race-based chattel-slavery, it can be disconcerting to be reminded the the Scriptures permit, regulate, and seem to even approve of slavery. Deuteronomy 15:12–18 is just one such passage, regulating the particular terms and limits of a particular form of “service” in Israel. This word study takes a broad look at every occurrence of the terms associated with עבד in the Pentateuch.

An Exhaustive Outline of all 377x occurrences

I. Divine

A. YHWH

1. before the fall, עֲבָד describes man’s active responsibility to YHWH with respect to the ground, specifically the garden of Eden. He was to work it (Gen 2:5) and keep it (Gen 2:15).
2. After the fall, this relationship still maintains outside the garden (Gen 3:23) but now it is under the curse. Cain was an עֲבָד of the ground in this general sense (Gen 4:2). It includes the expectation that such service/work will yield fruit (Gen 4:12)
3. Individuals:
 - a) Abraham, Isaac and Jacob referred to as YHWH’s עֲבָדִים, whom he swore to them and promised to multiply their offspring and give them the land (Ex 32:13). Moses appealed to this relationship in pleading with YHWH to overlook the stubbornness and sin of Israel because his reputation is connected with theirs (Deut 9:27–29)
 - b) YHWH refers to Abraham as “my עֲבָד” as a basis for blessing his son Isaac (Gen 26:24).
 - c) In prayer, Eleazar Abraham’s עֲבָד refers to Isaac as YHWH’s עֲבָד as the basis for asking a favor from YHWH, namely a wife (Gen 24:14).
 - d) Moses refers to himself as “your עֲבָד” when negotiating with YHWH and asking not to speak (Ex 4:10). He later pleads again: “why have you dealt ill with your עֲבָד? Why have I not found favor in your sight?” (Num 11:11). YHWH praises “my עֲבָד Moses — he is faithful in all my house, I speak with him face to face. Why were you not afraid to speak against my עֲבָד Moses?” (Num 12:7–8). Moses uses the title “your עֲבָד” when pleading with YHWH to let him enter the promised land (Deut 3:24). YHWH denies his request, and instead Moses the עֲבָד of YHWH died in the land of Moab (Deut 34:5). Moses is closely associated to YHWH: Israel saw YHWH’s power, feared YHWH, and believed YHWH and his עֲבָד Moses (Ex 14:31).

- e) Caleb is called “my עֶבֶד Caleb” because he followed YHWH fully, and so God will bring him into the land and bless his descendants (Num 14:24).
4. The Nation of Israel
- a) Israel will be brought out of עֶבְרָה in Egypt in order to עֶבֶד YHWH on the mountain (Ex 3:12). This becomes the main point of contention between YHWH and Pharaoh “Let me son go that he may עֶבֶד me” (Ex 4:23) or “let my people go that they may עֶבֶד me” (Ex 7:16, 26, 8:16, 9:1, 13, 10:3). Pharaoh relents and reluctantly permits the men only to go עֶבֶד YHWH (Ex 10:8, 11, 24), but Moses requires all the livestock to come with in order to עֶבֶד YHWH (Ex 10:26). Pharaoh finally relents and tells them to go YHWH (Ex 12:31).
- b) The Passover is considered עֶבְרָה to YHWH (Ex 12:25, 26, 13:5)
- c) A basic relationship between Israel and YHWH: they עֶבֶד YHWH, and he blesses their bread and water and takes sickness away from them, no miscarriages, and full days in the land (Ex 23:25–26). This fundamental relationship: “the sons of Israel are עֶבְדֵי to me. They are my עֶבְדֵי, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am YHWH your God” (Lev 25:55) — is the foundation that undergirds the rest of the laws regulating עֶבֶד in Israel. This relationship is basic to the entire covenant: “it is YHWH your God you shall fear. Him you shall עֶבֶד and in his name you shall swear” (Deut 6:13, 10:20) “if you obey my commandments to love YHWH your God and עֶבֶד Him with all your heart and with all your soul” (Deut 11:13, 13:5)
- (1) Covenant blessings start with the fact that YHWH brought them out of Egypt that should not be their עֶבְדֵי (Lev 26:13, Deut 7:8). Israel must take care that they do not forget YHWH who brought them out of Egypt, the house of עֶבְרָה. Remembering this fact is fundamental to their covenant relationship (Deut 6:12, 21). Forgetting their redemption from the house of עֶבְרָה will cause them to fall away and to עֶבֶד other Gods (Deut 8:14, 13:6, 7, 11, 14, 31:20)
- (2) Covenant curses involve being exiled to a foreign land where you will עֶבֶד other gods (Deut 28:36, 64). You will עֶבֶד vineyards, but you will not drink the wine or gather the grapes (Deut 28:39). These curses will come because you did not עֶבֶד YHWH your God with joyfulness and gladness of heart (Deut 28:47) therefore you will עֶבֶד your enemies in hunger and nakedness and thirst with a yoke of iron (Deut 28:48). You will offer yourselves for sale to your enemies as עֶבְדֵי but no one will buy you (Deut 28:68).
- (3) Yet ultimately YHWH will have compassion on his עֶבְדֵי (Deut 32:36) and avenge the blood of his עֶבְדֵי (Deut 32:43).
- d) Tabernacle:
- (1) The actual construction of the tabernacle was considered עֶבְרָה by Bezalel and Oholiab and every craftsman (Ex 36:1, 3, 5, 39:32. 42). money was appointed for the עֶבְרָה of the tabernacle (Ex 30:16), as was acacia wood for the עֶבְרָה (Ex 35:24).
- (2) “the tabernacle and its עֶבְרָה” (Ex 35:21). The tabernacle had bronze utensils for עֶבְרָה (Ex 27:19, 39:40). The Levites did their עֶבְרָה in the tabernacle (Ex 38:21). The Levites עֶבֶד at the Tabernacle which includes: attending to Aaron’s

needs, guarding Aaron and the congregation, guarding the furnishings of the tent (Num 3:6–8). There is עֲבֹדָה connected with the screens and cord (Num 3:26), the ark, table, lampstand, altars, and vessels (Num 3:31), the frames, bars, pillars, bases and accessories (Num 3:36), and the most holy things (Num 4:4). Aaron and the priests direct the עֲבֹדָה among the Levites (Num 4:19), for men 30–50 years old (Num 4:23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35, 37, 39, 41, 43, 47, 49, 7:5, 7, 8, 9, 8:22, 24, 25, 26, 18:4). The Levites were considered a “wave offering” offered to YHWH from among the people of Israel in order to עֲבֹד the עֲבֹדָה of YHWH (Num 8:11) after being cleansed (Num 8:15). The Levites are a gift that YHWH gave to Aaron in order to do the עֲבֹדָה for the people of Israel at the tabernacle, to make atonement for the people of Israel, so that there will be no plague when they come near (Num 8:19, 18:6). To עֲבֹד the עֲבֹדָה of the tabernacle and to be so near to YHWH is considered a privilege (Num 16:9).

- (3) In return for the עֲבֹדָה that the Levites do in the tabernacle, YHWH gives them all the tithes in Israel (Num 18:21). Since they are doing the עֲבֹדָה of the tabernacle, they receive no inheritance in the land (Num 18:23). The tithe is their reward in return for their עֲבֹדָה (Num 18:31).
- (4) The priesthood itself is considered an עֲבֹדָה and this is a gift from YHWH (Num 18:7).

B. Other Gods

1. Israel is commanded not to bow down or עֲבֹד any other gods like the nations (Ex 20:5, 23:24, 33, Deut 4:19, 28, 5:9, 7:4, 16, 8:14, 19, 11:16, 12:2, 30, 13:3, 17:3, 28:14, 29:17, 25, 30:17)
2. the covenant curses involve being exiled to a foreign land where you will עֲבֹד other gods (Deut 28:36).

II. Human

A. Curses/blessings

1. Canaan is cursed by being told he will be עֲבָד עֲבָדִים to his brother (Gen 9:25–27).
2. It is prophesied to Rebekah that two nations are in her womb, and the older shall עֲבֹד the younger. Isaac blesses Jacob saying “let peoples עֲבֹד you... and be lord over your brothers” (Gen 27:29, 37). This will be a yoke that Esau will later break from his neck (Gen 27:40).

B. Individuals

1. Abram
 - a) It appears that Abram was given slaves by both Pharaoh king Egypt, and Abimelech king of the Philistines as a result of Sarah’s deception (Gen 12:16, Gen 20:14)). They are listed alongside sheep oxen, donkeys and camels. Abram’s servants join him in battle (Gen 14:15), dig wells (Gen 26:15).
 - b) Abraham has a trusted עֲבָד Eleazar, the oldest of his household in charge of everything he has (Gen 24:2). He is entrusted to travel a great distance with a substantial amount of wealth (jewelry, gold, garments (Gen 24:53)) to seek a wife for Isaac, his son. Eleazar describes his master (אֲדֹנָי) as greatly blessed by YHWH,

including that YHWH has given to him עֲבָדִים, as well as flocks and herds, silver and gold (Gen 24:35). Later, the עֲבָד reports everything to Isaac (Gen 24:66).

2. Isaac

- a) Like his father, Isaac also has many עֲבָדִים as well as other possessions and herds. This is a cause of envy with the Philistines (Gen 26:14). Among the work they do is digging wells (Gen 26:19, 25, 32).

3. Jacob

- a) Jacob עָבַד Laban his uncle. He does not עָבַד for nothing, but this includes terms and wages — 7 years for Rachel (Gen 29:15, 18, 20, 25). When this agreement is broken, Jacob is angry that he has been deceived (Gen 29:25). The terms are updated — 7 more years for Rachel (Gen 29:27, 29, 30). When the time period is complete, Jacob demands to leave along with his “wages” (wife and children) (Gen 30:26, 29). He עָבַד Laban with all his strength (Gen 31:6) for twenty years for specific wages, and laments that those wages were changed ten times (Gen 31:41).
- b) Jacob himself, while עָבַד Laban, increased greatly, and flocks, camels, donkeys and his own עֲבָדִים (Gen 30:43, 32:6, 17).
- c) See Jacob’s self-referential address relating to Esau (below).

4. Joseph

- a) Joseph is sold to Midianite traders (Gen 37:28) and then resold to Potiphar in Egypt. He became successful (Gen 39:2) found favor (39:4) and was put in complete charge of his whole house (39:5). Potiphar’s wife desired him, a Hebrew עֲבָד, for a sinful relationship. The relationship between Potiphar and Joseph is such that Potiphar’s wife reproves him on behalf of his עֲבָד (Gen 39:17, 19). In prison, Joseph become the עֲבָד of the captain of the guard (Gen 41:12) and found favor in his eyes (Gen 39:21) in charge of everything (Gen 39:23). Joseph also has his own עֲבָדִים including physicians who embalm his father (Gen 50:2)

5. Joseph’s brothers

- a) Even though they refer to themselves as Joseph’s עֲבָדִים for the purpose of negotiating their relationship with him, yet they fear him assaulting them, falling upon them, seizing their donkeys and actually making them his עֲבָדִים (Gen 43:28). When the stakes are high (who stole the cup?) they maintain the duality between their self-title עֲבָדִים and actually becoming עֲבָדִים as a punishment for theft (44:9, 10, 17, 33)

C. Nations

1. The five Canaanite kings עָבַד Chedorlaomer for twelve years, until they “rebel” and go to war against him (Gen 14:4).
2. It is prophesied to Rebekah that two nations are in her womb, and the older shall עָבַד the younger. Isaac blesses Jacob saying “let peoples עָבַד you... and be lord over your brothers” (Gen 27:29, 37). This will be a yoke that Esau will later break from his neck (Gen 27:40).
3. The whole nation of Egypt negotiates a transaction with Pharaoh — he purchases them and their land and gives them seed so that they don’t die. IN exchange, they become his עֲבָדִים (Gen 47:19, 25).

D. Kings

1. Pharaoh king of Egypt had עֲבָדִים, and he appears to have given some to Abram (Gen 12:16).
2. Abimelech also had עֲבָדִים with whom he shared intimate news (Gen 20:8). They are intimately associated with him so that they are cursed when he is cursed (Gen 20:7), and he is reproved on their behalf (Gen 21:25).
3. The later Pharaoh (Joseph) has עֲבָדִים which include a chief cupbearer and a chief baker (Gen 40:20). When angry with them, he put them in custody (Gen 41:10). Both Pharaoh and his עֲבָדִים consider Joseph's proposal (Gen 41:28, 45:16) and Pharaoh consults with them (Gen 41:38). The עֲבָדִים go with the elders to Jacob's burial in Canaan (Gen 50:7).
4. Exodus-Pharaoh has his own closer circle of עֲבָדִים who are not the Israelites. They are unified in their oppression of Israel (Ex 5:21) and are with Pharaoh in his back and forth with Moses and are recipients of the plagues (Ex 6:9, 7:20, 28, 29, 8:5, 7, 17, 20, 25, 27, 9:14, 20, 21, 30, 10:6, 11:3, 8, 12:30, Deut 29:1, 34:11). They do not fear God and have their hearts hardened with Pharaoh (9:30, 34, 10:1). They plead with him to let the Israelites go to stop the plagues (Ex 10:7).
5. Balak has עֲבָדִים who go to fetch Balaam (Num 22:18).

E. Egypt/Israel

1. YHWH predicts that Abram's offspring will be both sojourners and עֲבָדִים and that this will include being "afflicted" for 400 years (Gen 15:13). Nevertheless that nation will be judged, and they will come out with great possessions (Gen 15:14).
2. This comes to pass after Joseph dies — they ruthlessly make them עָבַד (hiphil) and it is bitter, hard service, mortar and brick and work in the field (Ex 1:13–14). Israel groans because of their עֲבָדָה and cry out for help and rescue from it (Ex 2:23). When Moses comes, this עֲבָדָה is made even heavier (Ex 5:9, 11, 18). YHWH hears their groaning as עֲבָדִים and promises to bring them out, deliver them, and redeem them from the עֲבָדָה (Ex 6:5–6), but when Moses tells them, they do not listen because the harsh עֲבָדָה has broken their spirits (Ex 6:9). After they are let go, Pharaoh and his עֲבָדִים regret letting Israel go from עָבַד them, and pursue them to the Red Sea.
3. After this, Egypt will be referred to often as the "house of עֲבָדִים" (Ex 13:3, 14, 20:2, Deut 5:6, 6:12, 8:14)
4. In the wilderness, Israel thinks it was better to עָבַד the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness (Ex 14:12)

F. Titles of address

1. Men refer to themselves as "your עָבֵד" This can be to traveling strangers (Gen 18:3, 5, Gen 19:2) and takes upon oneself the responsibility to show hospitality, food, shelter, and overnight lodging. As a result, the עָבֵד hopes to "find favor" in the sight of the one served (Gen 19:19).
2. Jacob refers to himself as "your עָבֵד" to Esau, hoping to be spared violence (Gen 32:5, 11, 19, 21, 33:5) and be permitted to travel separately (33:14).
3. Joseph's brothers plead with him against his accusation by calling themselves and their father "your עֲבָדִים" (Gen 42:10, 11, 13, 28, 44:7, 9, 16, 18, 19, 21, 23, 24, 27, 30, 31, 32, 33). Later they refer to themselves as "עֲבָדֵי הַיְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אָבִיךָ" as well as "your עֲבָדִים" when pleading for forgiveness for their past sins (Gen 50:17–18).

4. Jacob and his sons call themselves “your עֲבָדִים” to Pharaoh when asking for a specific favor, the land of Goshen (Gen 46:34, 47:3, 4)
5. The foremen of the Israelites use the title “your עֲבָדִים” to negotiate with Pharaoh about their working conditions (Ex 5:15–16).
6. The officers of the army call themselves “your עֲבָדִים” when reporting back to Moses from war (Num 31:49).
7. The tribes of Reuben and Gad refer to themselves as “your עֲבָדִים” when negotiating with Moses to stay on the East side of the Jordan (Num 32:4, 5, 25, 27, 31).

G. Unknown

1. Issachar is prophesied that he became a band of עֲבָדִים (Gen 49:15).

H. Regulations in Israel

1. General

- a) when you go to war, make an offer of peace to the city: they will be placed under tribute to you and will עֲבָד you (Deut 20:11).
- b) A female slave is to be treated differently than a male עֲבָד — she doesn’t “go out” like they do (Ex 21:7).

2. Sabbath/Feasts.

- a) The Passover is considered עֲבָדָה to YHWH (Ex 12:25, 26, 13:5). In it, they should do no ordinary עֲבָדָה (Lev 23:7, 8, Num 28:18, 25). No foreigner can eat the passover, nor a hired servant or sojourner; but an עֲבָד who was bought for money may eat the passover after he has been circumcised (Ex 12:44).
- b) No עֲבָדָה for the Feast of Weeks (Lev 23:21, Num 28:26) or the feast of booths (Lev 23:25, 35, 36, Num 29:1, 12, 35). The עֲבָדִים feast and rejoice along with the Israelites at the yearly tithe (Deut 12:12) and at the other feasts (Deut 12:18, 16:11, 14) because you remember that you were an עֲבָד in Egypt. When you give the tithe, the Priest will remind you “the Egyptians treated us harshly and laid on us hard עֲבָדָה but YHWH brought us out with an outstretched arm. Therefore we are giving the first fruits of the land” (Deut 26:4–10).
- c) Six days you shall עֲבָד and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath for you and your son and daughter and עֲבָדִים (Ex 20:10. 34:21, Deut 5:13, 14). The ground of this command is because “you shall remember that you were an עֲבָד in the land of Egypt, and YHWH your God brought you out from there” (Deut 5:15).
- d) In the seventh year sabbath the land provides food for you, yourself, and your עֲבָדִים with no sowing or reaping (Lev 25:6).

3. Specific Regulations regarding slavery:

- a) If you buy a Hebrew עֲבָד he shall serve six years and go out free for nothing in the seventh year. If the master gave him a wife and they have children, the wife and children stay with the master, unless he says “I love my master, wife and children. I will not go out free” then he becomes an עֲבָד forever (Ex 21:2–6). This command is repeated in Deuteronomy 15:12–18 specifying that you shall not send him away empty handed, but give him liberally from your flock, threshing floor, and winepress, which YHWH has blessed you with (15:14). This is because you must remember that YHWH redeemed you from being an עֲבָד in Egypt. You shall be

- happy to do this, because he has served you for half the cost of a hired worker (15:18)
- b) if an עֶבֶד is beaten with a rod and dies, he will surely be avenged (Ex 21:20). If “a day or two days he will stand, he will not be avenged, because he is his silver” (Ex 21:21). A עֶבֶד will be set free if he is struck and loses an eye or a tooth (Ex 21:26–27). If an עֶבֶד is killed by a goring ox, the owner pays the master of the 30 עֶבֶד shekels of silver, and the ox is killed (Ex 21:32), in contrast with killing a man or woman where an unspecified “sum of money to redeem his life” is paid.
 - c) If your brother becomes poor and sells himself to you, the עֶבְדָּה of an עֶבֶד will not עֶבֶד, but rather he will be a hired worker and sojourner and will עֶבֶד with you until the Jubilee. This is because they are YHWH’s עֶבְדִּים whom He brought out of Egypt, so they shall not be sold as an עֶבֶד (Lev 25:39–44). Nevertheless, you may have עֶבְדִּים from the nations around you, you may buy the children of strangers, and their families, they will become your property, and become an inheritance to your children after you to possess forever. You may עֶבֶד in them, but not over fellow Israelites (Lev 25:45–46).
 - d) if a brother becomes poor and sells himself to a sojourner or stranger, he may be redeemed again by one of his relatives, the price calculated according to the Jubilee. He shall be like a hired servant, and shall not be ruled with rigor, but he will be released in the Jubilee — all of this is rooted in this fundamental relationship: “the sons of Israel are עֶבְדִּים to me. They are my עֶבְדִּים, whom I brought out of Egypt. I am YHWH your God” (Lev 25:55).
4. Grounding other laws of mercy
 - a) you shall not pervert justice to the stranger, the fatherless, or widow, because you shall remember that you were an עֶבֶד in Egypt (Deut 24:18). Rather, you shall positively provide for the widow, stranger, and fatherless because you remember that you were an עֶבֶד in Egypt (Deut 24:22).
 5. Other Peoples’ עֶבְדִּים
 - a) you shall not covet your neighbor’s עֶבֶד (Ex 20:17, Deut 5:21)
 - b) An עֶבֶד who escapes from his master shall not be returned to his master, but shall live with you in your midst (Deut 23:26–17)
 6. Animals
 - a) you do not use the firstborn males of the flock to עֶבֶד because they are dedicated to YHWH (Deut 15:19).
 - b) an unsolved murder is solved with the use of a heifer the has never עֶבֶד or pulled a yoke (Deut 21:3, 4)

Synthesis

The term עֶבֶד describes a fundamental relationship that every single human being participates in. It is a reciprocal relationship between an עֶבֶד and his master/lord, and each side has responsibilities and obligations. The עֶבֶד performs service or work, and the master reciprocates with favor, wages, and other blessings. These blessings can take the form of

fruitfulness in the work itself, as when YHWH causes the land to produce fruit as a result of someone's labor. This relationship existed between man and God before the fall, and was part of man's telic purpose for existence. The same relationship maintains after the fall, but with added layers of difficulty as a result of the curse.

There are multitudes of layers of the עֶבֶד relationship within the human sphere. It can describe entire nations or cities relating to each other. Generally, kings or other wealthy individuals have servants. They serve in a multitude of capacities: digging wells, advising them, entrusted with deeply personal and lengthy errands, physicians, cupbearers, bakers, keeping flocks, or taking charge of an entire household or estate. A servant may have his own servants working under him.

Often the specific terms of the relationship are spelled out, precise times of service, the wages paid in return. The servant often will negotiate terms with his master once the service is being performed.

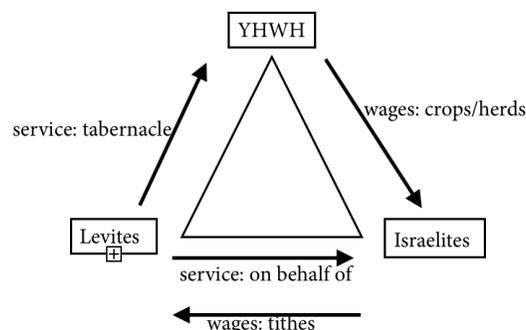
This service can be good or bad. It can be joyful or bitter. A master who makes unreasonable demands or changes the wages is unreasonable. A master who keeps his end of the bargain is joyous to serve. On the human level, it is generally preferable not to be the servant of another human being, and this can be prophesied as either a blessing (for the master) or a curse (for the servant).

Often, in negotiating other social relationships, the terminology of עֶבֶד will be used as part of the bargaining process. One will call himself an עֶבֶד in order to compel some favor from the one he is negotiating with.

The bond between a master and servant is very close and intimate. Their reputations become intertwined, their dispositions and thoughts become closely associated, the one may be blessed or reproached for the sake of the other in either direction.

The most dramatic and foundational עֶבֶד relationship in the Pentateuchal account of redemptive history is the relationship between YHWH and Israel, and the barrier that Egypt presents to that relationship. Egypt's mastery over Israel is bitter and hard, and it prevents Israel from performing her עֶבֶד obligations to YHWH. Therefore, YHWH redeems Israel from Egypt in order to serve Himself, and this becomes a fundamental part of His covenant with them.

Even within the nation of Israel's relationship, there are complex overlapping relationships. Fundamentally the entire nation is in עֶבֶד relationship to YHWH. This is why a Hebrew cannot be held in perpetual service to another, because he is *YHWH's* servant. However, the priests and the Levites are set apart for a special particular form of service to YHWH, making atonement in the tabernacle on behalf of the nation. This service comes with a wage/reward, namely the tithes of the rest of the nation. The Levites serve YHWH, YHWH blesses the land with increase, the people reciprocate to the Levites:



Nevertheless, the basic covenant with all of Israel requires them to עבד YHWH, by loving him and keeping his commandments. Turning away to עבד other gods is to break the covenant.

Within this framework, Israel is to carefully regulate the way they negotiate service and payment within the nation. Hebrew servants were strictly limited to 6 year terms of service, and were to be repaid when they left. If they were injured, they would be set free immediately. If they were killed, their death was to be avenged. Foreigners were permitted to be owned as perpetual property including passing along to your children. However, presumably, if a foreigner was to convert to Israel, they would then be treated as a brother and the other laws would then apply. Servants were to be fully included in every sabbath, feast, and tithe, rejoicing along with the whole household in the fruit that YHWH had provided.