

Deuteronomy 23:15-16

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Moses prohibited Israel from returning an escaped slave to his master.

Verses 15 – 16 deal with the issue of runaway slaves. The rule Moses gave the people here was that they were to *not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you* (v. 15). Probably the *slave* mentioned here was not an Israelite but was someone who had escaped a miserable situation in another country. Israelites who had to sell themselves into slavery in order to pay their debts had to be released after seven years. Israelites were required to treat their slaves humanely, including giving them the sabbath to rest (Deuteronomy 5:14,15:1).

Consequently, runaway slaves were not uncommon, as the biblical material makes clear (Genesis 16:6; 1 Samuel 25:10). Because most of them were subjected to such hard labor, it was not uncommon for a *slave* to seek a place of refuge. Many of them likely chose the land of Israel as a place to start a new life. Therefore, Moses prohibited the Israelites to hand over an escaped *slave to his foreign master*.

Most ancient Near Eastern laws condemned anyone who failed to return a slave to his or her master. The biblical law, however, allowed a slave to settle wherever he desired in the Israelite towns and forbade returning him to his master.

Instead, the Israelites were to allow him to *live with them in their midst*. (v. 16). The escaped slave was free to live *in the place which he chose in one of the Israelite towns where it pleased him*. This means that he was allowed to live fully integrated among the Israelite community.

Moses further told the people to *not mistreat him*. Sinful humans tend to underestimate and mistreat those who are more vulnerable (e.g. aliens, widows, and orphans, as indicated in Exodus 22:21-22). But this is never God's plan for human beings because every human life is precious and is created as the image of God (Gen. 1:26-28). God's covenant of self-governance was based on loving others, whereas the surrounding pagan cultures were based

on the strong exploiting the weak. The principles of loving others were to apply to those seeking refuge in Israel.

Thus even a lowly slave was created as the image of God and thus had worth, dignity, meaning, and purpose. Israelites, unlike their neighbors, were to treat a slave's life as valuable. Having such an attitude would set them apart from their neighbors and be a testimony to the grace of the LORD to all, and the great benefit of following His ways. It also spoke to the impartiality of God, whose benevolence extended to all who sought refuge under His wings, regardless of one's station in life.

Biblical Text:

¹⁵ You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his master to you. ¹⁶ He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him.