

Deuteronomy 23:15

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee:

Analysis

Thou shalt not deliver unto his master the servant which is escaped from his master unto thee:

This remarkable law prohibited returning escaped slaves to their masters, standing in stark contrast to ancient Near Eastern legal codes and modern fugitive slave laws. The Hebrew word (עבד, 'servant' or 'slave') likely refers to foreign slaves fleeing to Israel from harsh masters in surrounding nations, though it could include Hebrew slaves fleeing abusive treatment. The command 'thou shalt not deliver' (lo tasgir) used the same verb describing betrayal or handing over an enemy (Deuteronomy 32:30, Joshua 20:5).

This law embodied revolutionary humanitarian principles:

1. recognition of human dignity transcending property rights
2. Israel as a refuge for the oppressed
3. protection for vulnerable individuals against exploitation.

While Israel's own slavery system included regulations and limitations (Exodus 21, Leviticus 25), this law acknowledged that some servitude was so oppressive that escape was justified and those fleeing deserved protection, not punishment. It placed human welfare above economic interests and international treaties.

Theologically, this law pointed toward the gospel's liberation theme. Israel was to remember their own slavery in Egypt and God's deliverance (Deuteronomy 5:15),

extending similar mercy to others. Christ's redemption fulfills this pattern: He provides refuge for those fleeing slavery to sin and Satan. The church becomes a sanctuary where former slaves of sin find freedom and protection. Historically, this law influenced some abolitionists who argued that biblical principles condemned returning fugitive slaves, though others tragically cited different passages to defend slavery. The law's clear humanitarian thrust reveals God's heart for the oppressed.

Historical Context

Ancient Near Eastern law codes treated escaped slaves very differently from Israel's law. The Code of Hammurabi (sections 15-20) prescribed death for anyone harboring escaped slaves and required their return to masters. Mesopotamian treaties between city-states included extradition clauses for fugitive slaves. Egyptian, Hittite, and Ugaritic texts similarly demanded slaves' return and punished those aiding escapees. Slavery was foundational to ancient economies, making fugitive slave laws crucial for maintaining social order and economic stability.

Archaeological evidence from texts across the ancient Near East confirms the pervasiveness of slavery and harsh penalties for escape. Slaves were valuable property, and losing them represented significant economic loss. International treaties routinely included provisions for mutual return of fugitive slaves, workers, and political refugees. Against this universal practice, Israel's law stands as a radical exception, prioritizing humanitarian concern over economic and diplomatic considerations.

The law's practical application likely involved escaped foreign slaves rather than internal Hebrew servitude, which had its own regulations (Exodus 21:2-11, Deuteronomy 15:12-18). Archaeological evidence shows that Israel was surrounded by nations with harsh slavery practices, including temple slavery, debt bondage with no release provisions, and brutal treatment. Israel's willingness to shelter escapees would have attracted desperate individuals and provoked diplomatic tensions with neighboring states, demonstrating commitment to humanitarian principles despite economic and political costs. This law established

Israel as a beacon of hope for the oppressed, foreshadowing the church's mission to offer spiritual refuge to all who come to Christ.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

Genesis 1:1 — Creation of heavens and earth

Psalm 19:1 — Heavens declare God's glory

Study Questions

1. How does this law's protection of escaped slaves challenge economic systems that prioritize property rights over human dignity?
2. In what ways should the church serve as a refuge for those fleeing oppressive situations in contemporary contexts?
3. How does God's command to protect fugitive slaves foreshadow Christ's invitation to all who are weary and burdened (Matthew 11:28)?

Interlinear Text

לֹא	תִּשְׁלַח יְה	בְּדַע	אֶל	אֶלְעָנִים	אֲשֶׁר
H3808	Thou shalt not deliver	the servant	H413	from his master	H834
	H5462	H5650		H113	

אֲשֶׁר	לֹא	יָצַא	מִן	אֶל	יָבֹא	אֶלְעָנִים
which is escaped	H413	H5973		from his master	H113	

Additional Cross-References

1 Samuel 30:15 (Parallel theme): And David said to him, Canst thou bring me down to this company? And he said, Swear unto me by God, that thou wilt neither

kill me, nor deliver me into the hands of my master, and I will bring thee down to this company.

Obadiah 1:14 (Parallel theme): Neither shouldest thou have stood in the crossway, to cut off those of his that did escape; neither shouldest thou have delivered up those of his that did remain in the day of distress.

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