

# Exodus 21 Concerning Daughters Sold into Service Virgins, Concubines, or Slave-wives?

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Here we look at:

- The Tyndale/Matthew Bible translation of Exodus 21:1-11, especially 7-11 on female servants
- How Martin Luther (1534) and Pierre Olivetan (1535) translated verse 8
- How the Geneva Bible changed verse 8, and why
- What the Hebrew says
- Translations and commentaries after Geneva
- The implications

Exodus 21 prescribes rules for the treatment of Hebrew girls or young women sold into indentured servanthood by their fathers. Aside from financial considerations, it appears ancient fathers had good reason to do this: it was a way to find a husband for their daughters. In Exodus we learn that during a girl's term of service the master might betroth her to a future husband. It seems he had not only the authority to do this, but also the duty. We discover that these Jewish masters sometimes promised to give or betroth the girls to their own sons. Finally, we learn what should happen if a young maiden was not given a husband, or if, when she had been promised to the master's son, he took (or was given) another wife.



## ***Exodus 21:1-11 on the treatment of servants: William Tyndale's translation***

Verses 1-11 have to do generally with the proper treatment of servants when their term of indenture comes to an end. Verses 1-6 deal with menservants, limit the period they shall serve, and give special consideration to situations when the master gave the manservant a wife during his term of service, and, also, if the couple had children.

Verses 7-11 deal with girls sold into servitude by their fathers. Verse 7 says specifically that this is a different matter. No time of service is stipulated, and there is no mention of children. If her master found a husband for her, the maid would presumably remain in the master's household until her season of betrothal ended. Then the wedding would occur and her status would change as appropriate in the circumstances.<sup>1</sup> The main focus is what to do if the master did not like the girl and so did not give her a husband.

On the next page is Tyndale's 1530 translation as John Rogers took it into the Matthew Bible in 1537. From it, we may derive a simple picture of some ancient Hebrew customs, but the details are lost in time:

Exodus 21:1-11 in the Matthew Bible	MB note (John Rogers)
<p>1 ¶These are the laws which thou shalt set before them.</p> <p>2 If thou buy a servant that is an Hebrew, six years he shall serve, and the seventh he shall go out free paying nothing.</p> <p>3 If he came alone, he shall go out alone: If he came married, his wife shall go out with him.</p> <p>4 And if his master have given him a wife and she have borne him sons or daughters, then the wife and her children shall be her master's and he shall go out alone.</p> <p>5 But and if the servant say, I love my master and my wife and my children, I will not [do not wish to] go out free.</p> <p>6 Then let his master bring him unto the *gods and set him to the door or the doorpost, and bore his ear through with a nawl [sic], and let him be his servant forever.</p> <p>7 ¶If a man sell his daughter to be a servant: she shall not go out as the menservants do.</p> <p>8 If she please not her master, so that he hath given her to no man to wife, then shall he let her go free: to sell her unto a strange nation shall he have no power, because he despised her.</p> <p>9 If he have promised her unto his son to wife, he shall deal with her as men do with their daughters.</p> <p>10 If he take him another wife, yet her food, raiment, and duty of marriage shall he not minish [reduce or withdraw].</p> <p>11 If he do not these three things unto her, then shall she go out free and pay no money.</p>	<p>*v6 Judges and princes are called in the Scriptures oftentimes 'gods' because they receive their office from God, as in Ex.22.b, which [whom] the apostle calleth the ministers of God. Romans 13.a.</p>

Note, in verses 8 and 9, Tyndale did not use the verb 'betroth' as later English versions did, but 'give' and 'promise.' Betrothal was a special, limited kind of arrangement. Tyndale's translation allows for other possibilities. 'Given to no man' (v8) contemplates a wedding that did not occur, and 'promised unto her son' (v9) may refer either to a betrothal to the son or simply a promise to betroth. Pastor Sam Powell, to whom I am indebted for assisting with language issues, explains concerning the Hebrew:

One thing jumps out at me. In verses 8 and 9, the word translated 'betrothed' in other versions doesn't really mean 'betrothed.' The word for 'betrothed' is אָרַשׁ ('arash), but here the word is יָעַד (ya'ad). Ya'ad means to appoint, or make an appointment. It is most often used of a meeting time or place called ahead of time.

I rarely side with the ESV, but their word 'designated' isn't too bad. But I don't think that it would have been as binding as an engagement – perhaps because they were too young(?). I believe it would refer to a custom that we know little about - perhaps not quite an engagement, but a plan, or appointment. Nowhere else in the Old Testament is the word ya'ad used for 'betrothed.'<sup>2</sup>

Here we have again good evidence of Tyndale's fidelity in translation and his Hebrew scholarship.

So then, verses 7-11 discuss the master's responsibility to a maiden, a virgin, who has come under his care and authority through some arrangement with her father. There was an expectation that the master would find a husband for the girl. These verses especially address the event that she has displeased him – perhaps through her fault (sloth, ill temper, etc.), or through no fault of her own. Whatever the case, if by reason of his displeasure he did not find her a husband, she must go free.

But we also learn that if the master had promised the virgin to his son, then, as an in-law, he stood *in loco parentis*; that is, he stood in the place of a father to her and must treat her as his own (v9), as adopted into the family through marriage. But if the marriage to the son fell through, then what? In such a case, he still had an obligation to provide the three things set out in verse 10 – food, raiment, and duty of marriage – as a father would for a daughter. (We will explore what 'duty of marriage' means below.) However, it might not be feasible for the master to provide these things, or he might neglect or refuse to do so. If so, again she must go free without any obligation, financial or otherwise. This was not intended to excuse the master, as some have regarded it, but to give the parties, especially the maiden and her family of origin, a remedy.

### ***Because he despised her***

In verse 8, I believe Tyndale used 'despise' in the obsolete sense, "to treat with contempt in word or deed."<sup>3</sup> It meant the master had spoken or acted against the girl, contemned her, rejected her. Why did despising her oblige the master to let her go free? The essence of his obligation was to advance her interests, especially her opportunity for marriage. This meant he should care well for her and represent her as worthy, but he had demonstrated that he could not or would not do this. In modern legal terms, he had repudiated the agreement. Therefore it must be treated as at an end. He might wish now to sell the maid away to strangers, but this he may not do.

But if there had also been an arrangement between the master and the girl's father that the girl would marry the master's son, the master still stood *in loco parentis*. Verse 10 makes clear that his fatherly obligation continued. However, if he did not meet this obligation, verse 11 applied. His right and authority was terminated, he could not sell her, and she must be allowed to go out freely.

### ***The provision due by a master as father-in-law: Food, clothing, and a home***

See Exodus 21:9-11 again. In verse 9, the two pronouns 'he' clearly refer to the master, but in verse 10 it is not clear:

<sup>9</sup>If he has promised her to his son as wife, he shall deal with her as men do with their daughters. <sup>10</sup>If **he** takes him another wife, yet her food, raiment, and duty of marriage shall **he** not minish. <sup>11</sup> If he do not these three things unto her, then shall she go out free and pay no money.

The Hebrew pronouns in verse 10 are in the 3rd person singular, and the antecedent(s) are at first glance ambiguous. We could understand the "he" who "takes him another wife" to be either the master or the son. Luther and Olivetan (see below) clarified that it is the *master* who chooses another wife for his son. This would be consistent with Hebrew custom, under which the parents appointed their child's spouse. As to the second "he,"

who must not “minish,” I understand this obliges *the master*, who is *in loco parentis*, to continue to provide food, clothing, and “duty of marriage” to the maiden. Therefore, both “he’s” must refer to the master.

But what is ‘duty of marriage’? It is a general term. ‘*Duty*’ is old English for ‘that which is due.’ ‘*Of marriage*’ means by reason of marriage; that is, belonging to or arising out of the married state. In this context it must refer back to verse 9, which says betrothal to the son (which was considered as binding as marriage) obliges the master to care for the girl as his own daughter. Therefore she should have her food, clothing, and also this vague ‘duty’ or due, by reason of the promised marriage to the son.

The Hebrew translated ‘duty of marriage’ is one word: ‘*ownah*.’ According to Strong, it derives from a root word meaning ‘to dwell together.’ It has to do with living in the same household. In ancient times many households, especially those of wealthy men, were large, with many generations and extended family members dwelling together as a group – if not under one roof, then in a household encampment or caravan. If I am correct, in this context ‘duty of marriage’ means generally all that the girl was entitled to as an in-law dwelling with the family. It was a catch-all phrase, used so as not to unduly limit the girl’s “duty.” After all, the promise of marriage was a promise of a family and everything that goes with it. Therefore verse 10 spells out the master’s responsibility to provide food, clothing, and a proper home. Pastor Powell confirms that ‘*ownah*’ could well have been used idiomatically in this sense here:

This Hebrew word is only used once in the whole OT, but most lexicons agree that it means to ‘dwell together’ or something like that. Put together with the other words, I think it is an idiom that means something like “room and board.” Literally it is “her flesh, her covering, her dwelling.” It’s an odd phrase, and only used here.

Hebrew Professor David C. Nicholls, to whom I also turned with language questions, confirms concerning the Hebrew expression in verse 10: “The whole phrase: ‘*isherah kesuthah veonathah*’ occurs just once in the Hebrew Bible.... It seems to be an idiomatic phrase translated in our terms as her ‘full board and lodging’ or her ‘full subsistence.’”<sup>4</sup>

### ***Food, clothing, and sex ... or?***

However, some interpreters consider ‘*ownah*’ or ‘duty of marriage’ to refer to conjugal relations; that is, sexual relations, such as were proper only between a husband and wife. This cannot be the case here, obviously, if the passage is addressing the master’s duty to the virgin as a daughter-in-law (v9). But if it is construed as now speaking of the son who owed duty of marriage to the girl, we must understand that the girl was not only promised to, but actually married to him, which goes against the entire drift. The point is that she never married, and so she goes out alone. In verses 1-6, we see that the wife is “given,” the parties have consummated the marriage, and there is mention of children born to them. Contrariwise, in verses 7-11 the girl is clearly not “given,” and there is no mention of children because continuing virginity is assumed. (Therefore I cannot accept the suggestion that the son married the girl and then took a second wife.)

Then again, however, some interpreters understand the duty of conjugal relations to refer to sexual relations between the master and the maid. They derive this from a different reading of verses 8 and 9. It becomes very muddled at this point, because if the two never

married, there can be no conjugal relations as ‘duty of marriage.’ In any case, they say the three things of verse 10 are food, clothing, and *sex*; the maiden is entitled to sexual relations so that she may bear children, or so she will not be ashamed or feel unloved. It may be ideal for a couple to maintain intimacy (1Co. 7), but I cannot conceive of imposing a positive, statutory duty upon a man who despises his wife to have perpetual sexual relations with her. If it were even humanly possible, when would this obligation expire? At menopause? At the first grey hair, given the hardness of their hearts? But then, some turn it around and say it is the woman who must *provide* sex, which only adds to the confusion, because the context deals with *her* entitlement. (Does this not also come perilously close to authorizing domestic rape?)

Yet again, however, some scholars say ‘*ownah*’ means a *return of dowry*. The Geneva Bible has *recompense of her virginity*. John Calvin opined that *affliction* was a possible translation, or better yet, *agreement* (See Appendix A). William Coleman prefers *affection* (see page 11). The confusion does not end there, however. Pastor Powell:

According to the Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament, ‘*ownah*’ is based on the root ‘*anah*, which means ‘to answer.’ The scholars do not agree. ... According to HALOT (Koehler and Baumgartner's lexicon), the phrase corresponds to the old Babylonian “*ipru, pisēsātu, lubusētu*”, or “food, ointment and a garment,” but they admit that they are just guessing about ‘ointment.’

Clearly the scholars are confused. I derived my understanding – that the three things due to the maiden are food, clothing, and *a proper home* – from Tyndale’s translation, the context, and Strong’s definition of the Hebrew. And as it turns out, as we have seen, this agrees with the meaning of the idiom ‘*isherah kesuthah veonathah*.’

### ***The Geneva revision of verse 8***

With the great diversity of scholarly views, and since the customs of the Hebrew people are shrouded in the mists of time, certainty may elude us. That moderns have settled on food, clothing, and *sex* is due to their accepting a different translation of verse 8 as changed in the Geneva Bible:

**Exodus 21:8 in the 1537 Matthew Bible** If she please not her master, *so that he hath given her to no man as wife*, then shall he let her go free: to sell her unto a strange nation shall he have no power, because he despised her.

**Exodus 21:8 in the 1560 Geneva Bible** If she please not her master, *who hath betrothed her to himself*, then shall he cause to buy her: he shall have no power to sell her to a strange people, seeing he despised her.

Instead of saying the master had *given* the daughter to *no man*, the Geneva Bible says he had *betrothed* her *to himself*. This however is inconsistent with Israelite practice. Betrothal was an agreement arranged between parents,<sup>5</sup> and the bride-to-be was expected to live separately until the marriage. To send her into the groom’s home to take up residence with his servants until the wedding would be improper. It is also difficult to imagine how the master negotiated a betrothal to himself *after* she came to work for him, since he, not the father, now had power to betroth. I’m not sure self-betrothal is really a ‘betrothal.’ In any case, this has us going around in circles. And this is part of the problem: the new translation sows confusion.

Also significant is the fact that the Geneva rendering does not follow the Hebrew. This is important to understand what happened here. The Geneva revisers departed from the Hebrew to follow an alternate rendering suggested by Jewish scribes in a marginal note in the Masoretic text. The scribal note was followed in the Septuagint, the Greek Old Testament from the second century BC (“LXX”), which was evidently an influence upon the Geneva Bible. More about this is below, but first, let us go back a few decades before the Geneva revision to see the first translations from the Reformation. We will discover that Tyndale was not alone.

### ***Early translations of Exodus 21:8***

Like Tyndale, Martin Luther followed the Hebrew:

**Exodus 21:8, Martin Luther 1534** <sup>8</sup>Gefellet sie aber irem herrn nicht, *und hat sie niemand vertrauet*, sol er sie zu losen geben, aber unter ein frembd volct [fremd volk] sie zuuerteuffen hat er nicht macht, weil er sie verschmecht hat.

<sup>9</sup>Vertrauet er sie aber seinem son, so sol er tochter recht an ir thun. <sup>10</sup>Gibt er im aber ein andere, so sol er ir an irem futter, decte, und eheschuld nicht abbrechen. <sup>11</sup>Thut er deise drey nicht, so sol sie frey ausgehen, und nichts bezalen.

“Und hat sie neimand vertrauet” means, if the master has given (entrusted, promised?) her to ‘no man’ (*‘niemand’*).

Myles Coverdale also followed the Hebrew, both in his Bible and in the Great Bible:

**Coverdale (1535) and Great Bible (1540)** If she also please not her master, *and he giveth her to no man to wife*, then shall he let her go free. To sell her unto a strange nation shall he have no power, seeing he despised her.

However, see what the French Reformer and Bible translator Pierre Olivetan did here:

**Pierre Olivetan 1535** <sup>8</sup>Si elle desplaist a son seigneur *avant quil layt fiancee [avant qu’il l’ait fiancée]*, il permettra la racheter, & ne aura point pouoir [pouvoir] de la vendre a peuple estrange, apres quil laura mesprisee [après qu’il l’aura méprisée].

<sup>9</sup>Mais sil la fiancee a son fils, il luy sera selon la coustume des filles. <sup>10</sup>Que sil en prunt une autre pour luy, il ne retiendra point sa pension, sa vesture, et son \*puelage. <sup>11</sup>Et sil ne luy faict ces troys choses, elle sortira pour neant sans argent.

**Olivetan’s note:** puelage: Grec: convenance & copulation; R. Da., temps de mariage.

With modern punctuation, “avant quil layt fiancee” is clearly “avant qu’il l’ait fiancée.” The meaning is, if the virgin displeases the master *before* he has betrothed or engaged her, he will let her be redeemed.<sup>6</sup> Thus there was an expectation that he would betroth her. But Olivetan’s translation does not indicate *to whom* the girl might or might not have been betrothed. It seems he was uncertain, given the issue raised by the Masorete scribes, and so left it ambiguous. We can see that he was aware of the LXX from his note on ‘puelage,’ if I am correct that “Grec” means the Greek LXX. If so, it appears the edition he consulted had a note suggesting that ‘ownah’ meant ‘copulation’; that is, sex.

### ***The Geneva revision***

The Geneva Bible was a significant revision of Tyndale and Coverdale’s translations by

English Puritans in Geneva, who advanced many new interpretations. (See article at <https://goo.gl/1vXf9W>) Note below their numerous and remarkably innovative notes, and in how many particulars they departed from Tyndale. Also attached at the end of this paper as Appendix A is John Calvin’s commentary on this passage. It is interesting to assess his influence and to see where the Puritans departed from his views:

Exodus 21:1-11 in the 1560 Geneva Bible	Geneva Bible notes
<p>1 Now these are the laws, which thou shalt set before them:</p> <p>2 If thou buy an Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free for <sup>[a]</sup>nothing.</p> <p>3 If he <sup>[b]</sup>came himself alone, he shall go out himself alone: if he was married, then his wife shall go out with him.</p> <p>4 If his master hath given him a wife and she hath borne him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her <sup>[c]</sup>master’s, but he shall go out himself alone.</p> <p>5 But if the servant says thus, I love my master, my wife and my children, I will not go out free,</p> <p>6 Then his master shall bring him unto the <sup>[d]</sup>Judges, and set him to the <sup>[e]</sup>door, or to the post, and his master shall bore his ear through with an awl, and he shall serve him <sup>[f]</sup>forever.</p> <p>7 Likewise if a man <sup>[g]</sup>sell his daughter to be a servant, she shall not go out as the menservants do.</p> <p>8 If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall <sup>[h]</sup>he cause to buy her: he shall have no power to sell her to a strange people, seeing he <sup>[i]</sup>despised her.</p> <p>9 But if he hath betrothed her unto his son, he shall deal with her <sup>[j]</sup>according to the custom of the daughters.</p> <p>10 If he take <sup>[k]</sup>him another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her raiment, and recompense of her virginity.</p> <p>11 And if he do not these <sup>[l]</sup>three unto her, then shall she go out free, paying no money.</p>	<p>a) <u>21:2</u> Paying no money for his liberty.</p> <p>b) <u>21:3</u> Not having wife nor children.</p> <p>c) <u>21:4</u> Till her time of servitude was expired which might be the seventh year or the fiftieth.</p> <p>d) <u>21:6</u> Hebrew, gods.</p> <p>e) <u>21:6</u> Where the judges sat.</p> <p>f) <u>21:6</u> That is, to the year of Jubilee, which was every fiftieth year.</p> <p>g) <u>21:7</u> Constrained either by poverty, or else to the intent that the master should marry her.</p> <p>h) <u>21:8</u> By giving another money to buy her of him.</p> <p>i) <u>21:8</u> Or, deflowered her.</p> <p>j) <u>21:9</u> That is, he shall give her dowry. [1599: ‘his’ dowry.]</p> <p>k) <u>21:10</u> For his son.</p> <p>l) <u>21:11</u> Neither marry her himself, nor give another money to buy her, nor bestow her upon his son.</p>

To comment first on a compositional problem with the Geneva revision: verse 7 commences with “likewise” and then proceeds to say how the maidservant should *not* be treated likewise. This only obfuscates. No good writer should jumble semantics like this.

But to the issue at hand, and the matter of the master betrothing the virgin to himself. The OED confirms that in 1560, ‘betrothed’ meant promised in marriage (and still does).<sup>7</sup> So this does not and cannot mean that the master *married* the maid “to himself.” Therefore, when the Geneva note contemplates that he deflowered his maidservant and owes her “recompense of virginity,” it is confirming that he had scandalous relations with her during the betrothal period. Note (h) on verse 8 makes the strange suggestion that the master should give someone money to “buy” the girl from him: in other words, make a pretence of purchase and sale. Then note (l) reinterprets the “three things” as three ways to *deal with* the girl, not ways to *provide for* her. But if the master does not do these

things, then verse 11 says he should let the girl he exploited “go free” without paying money – and childless, we might presume.

It is perhaps worth noting how inconsistent this seems to be with other Mosaic laws. Deuteronomy 22:28-29 says a man who has raped or lain with a girl who is not betrothed to another must (unless her father objects) marry her, and then he is not permitted to ever divorce her. So then, the law provided the violated girl of Deuteronomy with a husband for life, but the violated maid of Exodus 21 must go?

It is not at all clear what was intended by, or may be construed from, the Geneva revision. John Calvin thought the best view was simply that the master was not pleased with the girl’s appearance and so did not want to marry her (see Appendix A). Are we to think that the master did not see the girl before he “betrothed her to himself”? Or perhaps she gained weight? or suffered some disfiguring injury? Then again, Calvin acknowledges the possibility that “she had been seduced.” In any case, he says that the girl’s “liberty may compensate for the wrong she has received.” However, there is a problem with this emphasis. The purpose of letting the girl go free is not to compensate or atone for wrong, though there is an element of legal relief in it. As we will see, Calvin’s view even led him to say God remitted punishment for any sins here contemplated.

### ***What the Hebrew says***

Why the different translations of verse 8? It hinges on one consonant. Compare again:

**Exodus 21:8 in the Matthew Bible** If she please not her master, *so that he hath given her to no man as wife*, then shall he let her go free: to sell her unto a strange nation shall he have no power, because he despised her.

**Exodus 21:8 in the Geneva Bible** If she please not her master, *who hath betrothed her to himself*, then shall he cause to buy her: he shall have no power to sell her to a strange people, seeing he despised her.

Pastor Powell explains the source of the confusion:

It is fascinating. In the Hebrew text, there are certain places where the ancient scribes, for whatever reason, thought that there should be some changes in the text. But they had such a respect for God’s word, they wouldn’t dare change the text itself. So they made their “edits” in the margin, as notes to the reader. These became known as the *qere* (to read) as opposed to *kethib* (as written). The *kethib* was the exact consonants, as they were written. The *qere* were the marginal notes on how to read it. I believe that the *kethib* is inspired, and the *qere* you take with a grain of salt, as it were.

In Exodus 21:8, the *kethib* is *lo'*, which means ‘not.’ And that clause would be “whom he has not betrothed” – pretty much the way Tyndale has it. But the *qere* reading (in the margin) is *low*, pronounced the same, but with different consonants. It means ‘to him,’ rather than ‘not,’ so the translation would be “which he betrothed her to him” which is what the Vulgate, Septuagint [LXX], and all the English versions have from Geneva on down. Geneva was following the lead of the LXX, I believe. They did a lot.

So it depends on one consonant: *lo'* or *low*. The Hebrew gives us “which he did not betroth her”; the other gives us “which he betrothed her to himself” If you take the consonants as written, Tyndale was right.



Luther and Tyndale followed the Hebrew, the *kethib*, at verse 8. Further, their translations simply make more sense. They do not create the kind of confusion that results from following the *qere*, as will be seen. Also, they do not sully these verses with suggestions of lust, betrayal, and ruined virgins.

### ***Translations after Geneva***

The KJV committee followed the Geneva lead and added a few changes of their own:

**KJV 1611:** If she please not her master, *who hath betrothed her to himself*, then shall he let her be redeemed: to sell her unto a strange nation he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her.

At verse 8, translating the Hebrew ‘*bawgad*,’ the KJV changed “he hath despised her” to “he hath dealt deceitfully.” This apparently refers to the master’s seduction of the girl by falsely promising marriage. Every Bible since the KJV has incrementally added its own changes, but all followed *qere* in the foundational understanding that the master somehow had the young girl for himself:

**Revised Version 1895:** If she please not her master, *\*who hath espoused her to himself*, then shall he let her be redeemed; to sell her unto a strange people he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her.

**RV note:** Another reading is, *so that he hath not espoused her*.

See how in the RV note, the *kethib* has become the *qere*. What a slippery slope. These scholars have, as Tyndale would say, turned the roots of the tree upwards.<sup>8</sup>

Why did the RV committee change ‘betroth’ to ‘espouse’? This is ambiguous and suggests marriage more than promise or betrothal. Perhaps it is an effort to clean up the verses. Modern Bibles speak of ‘selecting’ or ‘designating’ the girl. (The Hebrew is discussed in my long paper, see end.) However, all the moderns still accept the premise that the “selection” was by the master for himself. Some, like the RV, give the *kethib* – or something like it – as an alternate rendering in their side notes:

#### **Exodus 21:8 in modern versions (all from biblegateway.com as at June 1, 2018)**

**NIV:** If she does not please the master *who has selected her for himself*,\* he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her.

**NIV note:** \*Or master so that he does not choose her.

**ESV:** If she does not please her master, *who has designated her\* for himself*, then he shall let her be redeemed. He shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people, since he has broken faith with her.

**ESV note:** \*Or so that he has not designated her.

**The Message:** If she doesn’t please her master [--], her family must buy her back; her master doesn’t have the right to sell her to foreigners since he broke his word to her. [Words left out]

**Living Bible:** If she does not please the man *who bought her*, then he shall let her be bought back again; but he has no power to sell her to foreigners, since he has wronged her by no longer wanting her after marrying her.

The Living Bible adopted the theory that the master married the virgin that he “bought.”

The meaning of these passages has thus been changed and confused. Tyndale would say it has been locked up. To my surprise, in Jay P. Green's interlinear Bible the scribes' *qere* is given as the "literal" translation of the Hebrew. He has the written text right, but translated it wrong. The actual Hebrew, the *kethib*, is לֹא (lo', 'not'). The scribes' *qere* reading is לוֹ (low, 'to him'). Green confused them and translated לֹא as 'to him':

**Exodus 21:8 in The Interlinear Bible of Jay P. Green, Sr.**

**English translation beneath Hebrew text:** If she is displeasing in the eyes of her master, *who for himself has* he shall let her be redeemed.

**'Literal' rendering in side column:** If she is bad in the eyes of her master, *who has chosen her for himself*, he shall allow her redemption.

How then can we discover what the Hebrew said? The scholars aren't telling us. Even the most diligent lay researcher is locked out of the true meaning of the Hebrew by unfortunate falsifications such as we see in Green's interlinear Bible. (What was he thinking?)

So then, Tyndale, Coverdale, and Luther followed the *kethib*, the Hebrew text, and others followed the *qere*. Not a little flows from this. The Geneva and King James Bibles are commonly praised as literal translations. But is it really literal to follow the *qere*? Further, nowadays the KJV is proclaimed by some zealous souls to be "God's inerrant and perfectly preserved word." Is what happened here evidence of preservation? Or is it time to cast away a Protestant myth of infallibility?<sup>9</sup>

***Commentators after Geneva; the implications***

*"Let academics be far from us Christians" — Martin Luther*

Confusion abounds in modern commentaries. This was foreseeable because, if we believe the master betrothed the young girl to himself – or worse yet, bought her for himself – the passage becomes fraught with difficulties. It is then impossible to make verses 7-11 hang together coherently, even if you reinterpret other words to make them fit, as the Geneva revisers did with "cause to buy" for "let her go free," and "deflowered her" for "despised her." Their retranslation of 'ownah' as "recompense of virginity" (v10), presumably meaning compensation for deflowerment, makes sense in the *qere* context: better sense than 'conjugal rights,' which the KJV has, since no marriage ever happened. No marriage = no conjugal rights, nor 'marriage rights' (NKJV), nor 'privilege as a wife' (Amplified Bible), nor 'right to sleep with her as his wife' (Living Bible). Notice the additional confusion between the last two versions. The Amplified Bible gives conjugal privilege to the wife, but the Living Bible gives it to the husband. What a mess. Is God really the author of this confusion?

All is as clear as mud now. Sometimes these verses are interpreted as dealing with virgin daughters sold as concubines. William Coleman writes, "Ex. 21:7-11 and Deut. 21:10-14 guarantee concubine rights."<sup>10</sup> Concubines were part of ancient life, but the idea of a father selling his daughter for this purpose is disturbing. Leviticus 19:29 forbids a father from prostituting his daughter – not quite the same thing, but similar, in that the woman is sold to satisfy the sexual desires of a man who is not her husband. Anyway, by the normal and correct use of our language, concubinage would not give rise to 'conjugal rights.' The term 'conjugal' has always related to marriage and matrimony only.<sup>11</sup> A

concubine is a woman who lives with a man without being married to him.<sup>12</sup>

But then Coleman comments on the great value placed upon virginity in Israel. He says, “Because of the potential for shame to the entire family, fathers were prone to keep a careful eye on their single daughters”<sup>13</sup> – unless he could sell her as a concubine, I suppose. Once defiled, it would be difficult for a young woman to find a husband, and indeed impossible by the traditional means of betrothal and dowry. That would be the plight of the deflowered girl set “free” from service to a master who had seduced her.

But then again, Coleman uses the unbiblical term “slave-wife” in reference to Exodus 21:7-11,<sup>14</sup> only increasing confusion. This contemplates not concubinage, but a sort of (second class?) marriage, no doubt flowing from the same idea we saw in the Living Bible: the master bought the girl for his personal purposes, as slaves are bought and sold. In connection with slave-wives, Coleman interprets ‘*ownah*’ as “affection,” apparently another euphemism for sex, though marvelously vague. He writes, “A slave-wife who was deprived of food, clothing, and affection could go free.”<sup>15</sup> Others have also treated these verses as referring to slave-wives who had a legal “right” to “sexual love,” which is oddly equated with “emotional support.”<sup>16</sup> These are quite the rights to give a slave.<sup>17</sup>

Deuteronomy 21:10-14 is often quoted along with Exodus 21 to support the concept of slave-wives, but this is misleading. Deuteronomy deals with foreign women captured in warfare, an entirely different situation. It should not be likened to that of daughters, perhaps very young girls, who are formally entrusted by their parents to the care of a fellow Israeli, following domestic custom and negotiated agreement. Different principles would necessarily apply.

### ***The dilemma of sexual abuse and exploitation construed from these passages***

Abuse occurs where there is an imbalance of power. The victims fear to or simply cannot defend themselves. As I read the Scriptures, God regards this grimly:

**Exodus 22:22-24** Ye shall trouble no widow nor fatherless child.\* If ye shall trouble them, they shall cry unto me, and I will surely hear their cry, and then will my wrath wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.

**John Roger’s note:** Let all oppressors of the poor take heed to this text.

However, John Calvin wrote that Exodus 21:7-11 shows God “tolerated vice” and “accorded liberty to the ancient people, in all these particulars; only provision is here made that the poor girls *should not* suffer infamy and injury from their repudiation” (emphasis added, see Appendix A). But the facts are that the poor girls have *already* suffered injury and infamy – to a lesser or greater extent, depending how the situation is construed – and this injury is the *cause* of their going free. Calvin misrepresented the fundamentals of the passage. It prescribes remedial, not preservative, measures. Further, he indicated that there would be no consequences for sin beyond what the law required this side of heaven for the appropriate termination of the girl’s indenture. “God is gracious in remitting the punishment,” he wrote – as if these verses have anything to do with divine forgiveness or the remittance of sin’s eternal consequences. No.

I ask moreover, does Calvin’s teaching promote the fear of God, or does it turn the grace of God into licentiousness? True, there is lip service to chastity. Calvin wrote, “although

God is gracious in remitting the punishment, still He shows that chastity is pleasing to Him, as far as the people's hardness of heart permitted." But what does this mean? As Luther would say, let us tear away the cover of obscure language. Calvin has said here that chastity is only pleasing to God as far as the people were capable. That in itself is absurd. He then says or implies – it is like grasping oil with the fingers to gather the sense of his words – that their hardness of heart excuses them from anything more. He seems to be referring back to Jesus' words at Matthew 19:8, that Moses permitted divorce due to hardness of the men's hearts. But is this a true appreciation of what Jesus said? Again, no. Jesus was not saying sin's punishment would be remitted due to the hardness of people's hearts. He was simply saying what was permitted to deal with the consequences of hard hearts in this world. Calvin makes too light of things, and conflates the eternal and the temporal, the divine and the carnal. He never ought to have suggested that God forgave the wrongs done to the girl – at least, not without mentioning repentance.

All of this arises out of a change in the reading of one consonant in verse 21:8. What a great fire a little thing can kindle.

### ***Conclusion***

*Woe is to you, scribes and Pharisees ... you shut up the kingdom of heaven before men.* (Matthew 23:13)

Which translation of verse 8 is true? Everyone now follows the scribes' *qere*. The little flock, Luther and Tyndale, are outnumbered. Nonetheless, to follow the *qere* is not to translate the Hebrew, but is to "correct" it – and that, unworthily. I trust the little flock.

There are not only the questions of propriety and of changing the Hebrew, but also of competence in Hebrew. This study has furthered my suspicions that modern scholars have lost some understanding of that ancient language. Tyndale and Luther gained their knowledge at the feet of 16th century Jewish scholars and Hebrew speakers. A person relying on modern resources might conclude they were wrong, when actually it is the moderns who are lacking. Even worse, some of the changes we have seen here are the doctrines of men or the devil, sowing confusion and numbing consciences.

Instead of looking "forward" from the time of the Reformation Bibles to later ecclesiastical revisions, textual criticism, committee scholarship, and so forth, we at the New Matthew Bible Project are looking "back" to that which we first received, and which is ready to die (Rev 3:2,3) – the work of the fishermen and disciples who laboured "outside the camp." Missionary and Bible translator Russ Stendal, who has restored the Spanish Reformation Bible of Casiodoro de Reina, has remarked on a decline in scholarly understanding of ancient Hebrew since the 16th century, when Hebrew was a "living language." Moderns, he wrote, "cannot discern between all the possible variations of meaning."<sup>18</sup> Further,

We must have the witness of the Holy Spirit. Let us allow the Spirit of Truth to have the last word regarding this matter. We must always bear in mind that even if we were to all learn Hebrew to perfection and could obtain a flawless manuscript of the original text, there would still be a humanly insurmountable language barrier between us and the Truth that can only be bridged by the Spirit of God.<sup>19</sup>

William Tyndale and Martin Luther were two of the men God anointed to open his word

to us in the languages of Europe amidst all the blood and angst of the Reformation. They worked outside the camp of ecclesiastical and political authority, answering to no one but the Holy Spirit and their own conscience. They gave us pure, uncompromised Scriptures. We can easily judge from their writings and their lives that they were motivated only by the love of God's word and the desire to feed his sheep faithfully. That this motivation was divine, I do not doubt. That God equipped them properly for their task, I also do not doubt. We have every reason to look "back" to their work with full trust – which is, after all, to trust the God who called them to it.

And Bezaleel wrought, and Ahaliab, and all the wise-hearted men  
to whom the Lord had given wisdom and understanding,  
to know how to work all manner work for the holy service,  
in all that the Lord commanded. (Exodus 36:1, Matthew Bible)

He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet will receive a prophet's reward.  
(Matthew 10:41, October Testament)

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*Endnotes follow Appendix A.*

## Appendix A

### John Calvin's Commentary on Exodus 21:7-11

Extracted from <http://biblehub.com/commentaries/calvin/exodus/21.htm>, May 25, 2018

Calvin:

“From this passage [Exodus 21:7-11], as well as other similar ones, it plainly appears how many vices were of necessity tolerated in this people. It was altogether an act of barbarism that fathers should sell their children for the relief of their poverty, still it could not be corrected as might have been hoped. Again, the sanctity of the marriage-vow should have been greater than that it should be allowable for a master to repudiate his bond-maid, after he had betrothed her to himself as his wife; or, when he had betrothed her to his son, to make void that covenant, which is inviolable: for that principle ought ever to hold good -- “Those whom God hath joined together, let not man put asunder.” ([Matthew 19:6](#); [Mark 10:9](#).) Yet liberty was accorded to the ancient people in all these particulars; only provision is here made that the poor girls should not suffer infamy and injury from their repudiation.

“But, although God is gracious in remitting the punishment, still He shows that chastity is pleasing to Him, as far as the people's hardness of heart permitted. First of all, He does not allow a master to seduce his purchased maidservant, but if he wishes to enjoy her embraces, a marriage must take place; for although He does not set this out in express terms, still we may infer from what He condemns, that the contrary is what He approves. From whence, too, their notion is refuted who suppose that fornication was lawful under the Law. But the words must be more closely examined on account of their ambiguity. First, the sex is treated with consideration, that the condition of a female may be somewhat more favorable than that of a male; since, otherwise, their weakness would render young women subject to injury and shame. An explanation then follows, respecting which, however, interpreters differ; for some read the particle l', [74] lo, which is properly negative, for lv, lo; and hence arise two opposite meanings -- If he hath, or hath not, betrothed her to himself. If it be preferred to take it affirmatively, the meaning of the precept will be: If a master shall repudiate his bond-maid, whom he has loved and destined to be his wife, he must give her her liberty; for although literally it is, “he shall cause her to be redeemed,” yet; the context shows that the obligation of setting her free is laid upon him; nor is this contradicted by the fact that he is only deprived of the power of selling her to a strange people; since I do not understand this as applying to foreigners only, but to others of his own nation, since sometimes those of another tribe or family are called strangers. For, even though there were no marriage-compact, it was not otherwise lawful to sell slaves of the holy and elect people to foreigners. Besides, amongst the Israelites, slavery was only temporary. But, to pass by everything else, let it suffice to observe the absurdity that a master should hold his wife as a slave to be sold at pleasure,

if their opinion is received who suppose that the words refer to repudiation after betrothal. [75] I myself rather approve of the other opinion, that, although the master shall not have aspired to matrimony with her, if her appearance displeases him so that he would be unwilling to have her as his wife, at least he must provide for her redemption; because her chastity would be in jeopardy if she remained with him unmarried; unless perhaps Moses may signify that, after she had been seduced, her master did not honor her with marriage. But the other view which I have just expressed is more simple; and a caution is given lest masters should seduce their maidservants at their pleasure. Thus the word *despise* [76] does not refer to repudiation, but is opposed to beauty, or conjugal love.

“The next case is, that if he should betroth her to his son, (he must give her a dowry, [77]) in which, also, her modesty and honor is consulted, lest she should be oppressed by the right of ownership, and become a harlot. In the third place, it is provided that, if she should be repudiated, her condition should not be disadvantageous. If, therefore, he would make her his daughter-in-law, and betroth her to his son, he is commanded to deal liberally with her; for “after the manner of daughters” is equivalent to giving her a dowry, or, at any rate, to treating her as if she were free. Finally, he adds that, if he should choose another wife for his son, he should not reject the former one, nor defraud her of her food and raiment, or of some third thing, concerning which translators are not well agreed. Some render it time, but I do not see what is the meaning of diminishing her time; others, duty of marriage, but this is too free a translation; others, more correctly, affliction, since the girl would be humiliated by her repudiation; still, to diminish affliction, is too harsh an expression for to compensate an injury. Let my readers, then, consider whether the word, *nth, gnonathah*, is not used for compact or agreement; for thus the context will run very well: If his son have married another wife, that the girl who has suffered ignominious rejection should obtain her rights as to food, and raiment, and her appointed dowry; otherwise, God commands that she should be set free gratuitously, in order that her liberty may compensate for the wrong she has received.”

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Calvin condemns the long established custom of indenture as “barbarous,” which seems to misunderstand its benefits, while he excuses “vice.” As to his treatment of the Hebrew word ‘*ownah*,’ he dismisses Tyndale’s rendering ‘duty of marriage’ as being “too free a translation,” but says it may mean ‘affliction’ or ‘agreement’ or ‘appointed dowry,’ an impossibly diverse collection of meanings. The insightful reader will find much that is confused and confusing in Calvin’s commentary.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> Modern scholars disagree about how long a maidservant would have been required to serve. Some say seven years, like the men. This apparently derives from connecting the KJV rendering of Deut. 15:12, which speaks of men and women who “are sold” as servants, with this passage. However, there are at least two problems with this. First, Exodus 21:7 expressly says, “she shall *not* go out as the menservants do.” Second, in the Mathew Bible, Deut. 15:12 is about *adults*, both men and women, who *sell themselves*. In contrast, the Exodus passage deals with young girls who are sold by parents. Interestingly, the NIV restored the Tyndalian understanding at Deut. 15:12. I don’t particularly like the NIV, but have noticed that it restored some Old Testament renderings.

Other moderns say the girl was bound for life, but this must also be wrong, because the verses here contemplate that her service will come to an end at some time. Others are silent on the question. None acknowledge any confusion! I suspect there were no fast rules, because it seems length of service would depend on the girl’s age, if she married, and other circumstances. When she married, her status would depend on her husband’s status. If she married a manservant in the home, Exodus 21:4 applied, but if she married a manservant elsewhere, surely she would leave after the wedding. But if she was not betrothed, or if betrothal to the son fell through, verses 8-11 applied. If she married the son, her status as a servant would no doubt change after the wedding, if not before.

<sup>2</sup> Pastor Sam Powell, M.Div., in private correspondence, June 2018. All quotations from Pastor Powell are from private correspondence in May-June 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary online, s.v. ‘Despise,’ verb, def’n 3. Obsolete by the end of the 16th century. Two sample quotations showing the usage: (1) 1483, Caxton tr. J. de Voragine, Golden Legende, 127/2 “The poure man..began to chyde and *dyspyse* hym in his vysage by cause he had no more almesse.” (2) 1557 Bible (Whittingham), Luke xxiii. 11, “And Herode..with his men of warre, *despised* him, and mocked hym.” [So Wyclif, Tindale, etc.; Rhem. and 1611, “set him at naught.”]

<sup>4</sup> Right Revd. Prof. D. C. Nicholls, PhD., in private correspondence, June 2018. He wrote, “Exodus 21:10. The whole phrase: ‘*isherah kesuthah veonathah*’ occurs just once in the Hebrew Bible. Each of the three words is itself a *hapax legomenon*. It seems to be an idiomatic phrase translated in our terms as her ‘full board and lodging’ or her ‘full subsistence.’”

<sup>5</sup> From Dictionary of Bible Themes, s.v. ‘Betrothal.’ <https://www.biblegateway.com/resources/dictionary-of-bible-themes/5654-betrothal>: “(1) Wives were often chosen by parents for their sons (Ge 21:21). It was usual practice for the groom’s parents to choose his wife and arrange the wedding. See also Ge 24:4; Ge 38:6. (2) Suitable husbands were sought by parents for their daughters (Ru 3:1-4). Naomi, in the role of parent, assumes responsibility to find a husband for Ruth. See also Jdg 1:12-13; 1Sa 18:17,21. (3) Betrothal following the couple’s wishes (Jdg 14:1-4): Sometimes the man chose a prospective bride and his parents negotiated the marriage. See also Ge 34:1-4; Ge 24:57-58.” Accessed May 26, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> There is a diversity of renderings of the remedy of v8: “let go free,” “cause to buy,” and “let be redeemed.” Powell advises: “There is a spectrum [of meanings] possible: from the most passive (let her be ransomed) to the most active (set her free) - all of which would be possible. “Cause to buy her” has the causative sense, but “buy” is not the right word. You aren’t selling her like merchandise, but allowing her to be redeemed, which is a whole other concept. So either KJV or MB would be accurate, depending on whether you interpret it more passively or actively. This [calls for] judgement and discernment.”

<sup>7</sup> OED online, s.v. ‘Betroth.’ Eg: “1685, R. Baxter *Paraphr.* Luke i. 26 ‘Not married, but betrothed.’ Accessed May 25, 2018. Some moderns say ‘betrothed’ can mean “marry,” but it was never understood that way.

<sup>8</sup> Tyndale wrote, “Antichrist turneth the roots of the trees upward.” See *The Obedience of a Christian Man*,



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ed. David Daniell (London: Penguin Books, 2000), 20.

<sup>9</sup> To claim inerrancy – that is, infallibility – for any translation of the Bible is to make of it a new kind of pope. To claim inerrancy for a committee of ecclesiastics reviewing and rewriting the Scriptures is to make of them another Church council that cannot err. Myles Coverdale wisely wrote, in the prologue to his 1535 Bible, “There is no man living that can see all things, neither hath God given any man to know everything. One seeth more clearly than another, one hath more understanding than another, one can utter a thing better than another; but no man ought to envy or despise another.”

<sup>10</sup> William Coleman, *Today’s Handbook of Bible Times and Customs* (Minneapolis, Minnesota: Bethany House Publishers, 1984), 86.

<sup>11</sup> OED online, s.v. ‘Conjugal.’ (1) Of or relating to marriage, matrimonial. Quotation: *a1626*, L. Andrewes *Serm.* (1631) l., 9, “Whereby He and we become..‘one flesh’ as man and wife do by conjugal union.” (2) Of or relating to a married couple in their relation to each other.” Quotation: 1653, I. Walton *Compl. Angler* i., 25, “The hearing of such conjugal faithfulness will be Musick to all chaste ears.” Accessed June 12, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> OED online, s.v. ‘Concubine’: (1) A woman who cohabits with a man without being his wife; a kept mistress. Quotation: 1530, J. Palsgrave *Lesclarcissement*, 155, “Prestre, a preeste; presteresse, a preestes concubyne.”

<sup>13</sup> Coleman, *Today’s Handbook*, 88.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Unidentified author: “This passage [Ex. 21:10-11] describes the rights of a slave wife: food, clothing, sexual love—that is, material support as well as emotional support. If her husband reneges, she may be released from the marriage. The rabbis correctly saw that if a slave had such rights, so did a free woman, who implicitly expected his faithfulness as a husband. If any of these four rights is neglected, there are grounds for legitimate divorce. The four grounds are withdrawal of physical support (food or clothing), withdrawal of emotional support (manifest in sexual engagement), and (implicitly) adultery” <https://www.douglasjacoby.com/wp-content/uploads/Instone-Brewer-on-Divorce-Remarriage-1.pdf>. Accessed June 7, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> The word ‘slave’ is not used in the MB. By definition a slave is a servant “completely divested of freedom and personal rights.” That has always been its sense (see the OED online s.v. “Slave”<sup>\*</sup>). Therefore, in my view, it is not the best word in the Old Testament, where bondmen and women were granted rights and protection, and were not bound to serve for life or at their master’s whim. Ironically, moderns who use the word ‘slave’ do grant them rights, as we have seen. There is uncomfortable semantic confusion here. Further, nowadays the word ‘slave’ raises the spectre of kidnapping and brutal treatment along with human trafficking. This taints the Scriptures. The terminology of the MB is more appropriate.

\*I do note, however, that the OED treats “bondmaid” as a synonym for ‘slave.’ I believe this is an error, deriving from the scholars’ treatment of biblical usage. A ‘bondmaid’ is a “bound girl” – bound to domestic service. The nature and extent of her bondage will be defined by indenture or circumstance. It need not be understood as equivalent to slavery, as we learn from Exodus 21.

<sup>18</sup> Russell Stendal, Introduction, *The Jubilee Bible 2000*, Aneko Press. Mr. Stendal shares our vision of looking “back,” but apparently does not go as fully or purely back as we at the New Matthew Bible project do. If I understand correctly, he accepts editorial revisions up to the time of the KJV, which we do not. Exodus 21:8 in the Jubilee Bible follows the *qere*: “If she pleases not her master, who therefore took her not unto himself to wife, then it is permitted that she be ransomed; and he may not sell her unto a strange nation when he rejects her.” I was unable to confirm with Mr. Stendal before publication if this rendering is de Reina’s own, or if he incorporated a later editorial revision.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*