

Article

The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism

James W. Watts 

Department of Religion, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY 13244, USA; jwwatts@syr.edu

Abstract: Leviticus 25:39–46 describes a two-tier model of slavery that distinguishes Israelites from foreign slaves. It requires that Israelites be indentured only temporarily while foreigners can be enslaved as chattel (permanent property). This model resembles the distinction between White indentured slaves and Black chattel slaves in the American colonies. However, the biblical influence on these early modern practices has been obscured by the rarity of citations of Lev. 25:39–46 in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources about slavery. This article reviews the history of slavery from ancient Middle Eastern antiquity through the seventeenth century to show the unique degree to which early modern institutions resembled the biblical model. It then exposes widespread knowledge of Leviticus 25 in early modern political and economic debates. Demonstrating this awareness shows with high probability that colonial cultures presupposed the two-tier model of slavery in Leviticus 25:39–46 to naturalize and justify their different treatment of White indentured slaves and Black chattel slaves.

Keywords: Bible; Leviticus 25; slavery; chattel; indenture; colonialism; racism; Blacks; Whites; Native Americans



Citation: Watts, James W. 2021. The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism. *Religions* 12: 570. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12080570>

Academic Editor: Joel Baden

Received: 1 July 2021

Accepted: 19 July 2021

Published: 23 July 2021

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2021 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Leviticus 25 provides the strongest justification in the Bible for the institution of slavery. The chapter alternates between discussing agricultural land in Sabbath years (vv. 2–7, 18–22) and in Jubilee years (vv. 8–17, 23–34). Its prohibition on the permanent sale of inherited lands requires receiving them back in the Jubilee (vv. 23–34) and introduces descriptions of clearly delineated stages of economic distress that may (a) require the temporary sale of land (vv. 25–34), then (b) force farmers into subordinate labor arrangements as tenants and employees (vv. 35–38), and (c) culminate in indenturing Israelite slaves for up to forty-nine years until the Jubilee (vv. 39–43, 47–55). This last section includes permission to own foreign slaves as permanent property, that is, as chattel (vv. 44–46):

As to your male and female slave whom you own: from the nations around you, from them you may buy a male or female slave. You may also buy them from the immigrating tenants in your jurisdiction and from their family in your jurisdiction who were born in your land. They can be your property. You may bequeath them to your children after you to inherit as property permanently. These you may enslave, but among your relatives the children of Israel, one to another, you must not rule over them violently (Lev. 25:44–46, my translation).

Because Leviticus 25 mandated that slaves be treated differently according to their status as Israelites or foreigners, it probably laid the basis for the early modern racialization of people as White or Black. The economic desire for cheap labor in American colonies led to changing the categorization of enslavable people from “foreign” in Leviticus 25, through “non-Christian” in the later Middle Ages, to “black” in the American colonies. In this way, the two-tier slave system of temporarily indentured Whites and permanently enslaved Blacks was probably naturalized in the minds of European Christians by the model they found in Leviticus 25.

The influence of Leviticus 25 on the early modern racialization of slavery has long been suspected (Schmidt 1978, pp. 87–88; Gerstenberger 1996, p. 391; Meyer 2005, p. 2) but has not been clearly demonstrated. To show the historical influence of this biblical chapter on early modern conceptions of slavery and race, I begin by describing the place of the rules for indentured and chattel slavery within the Jubilee legislation of Leviticus 25. I then set the chapter within the cultural and economic contexts of ancient Israelite and Middle Eastern slavery. The next section notes that Leviticus 25 exerted little influence on Jewish and Christian slave-owning practices in late antiquity and the Middle Ages, which reflected Hellenistic culture and Roman law instead. I then describe the evidence for widespread knowledge of this chapter's economic teachings in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, when its distinction between Israelites and foreigners provided a rationale for racializing the economic institution of slavery.

2. The Jubilee in Leviticus 25

Leviticus 25 is principally concerned with “the Jubilee”, apart from two paragraphs about “Sabbath” years (vv. 2–7, 18–22). It requires that debt slaves be freed and agricultural land returned to its original owners every fiftieth “Jubilee” year. The Jubilee expresses an idealistic vision of Israel's economy regularly restored to its original, God-given conditions, right after the Israelites settled the land of Canaan and God divided the land among their families (Num. 32:33–42; 34:2–15; Josh. 13:2–19:50). People must return to their original homes (vv. 10, 13), Israelite debt slaves must be freed (vv. 35–55), and land must be restored to its original owners (vv. 14–16, 23–34). The chapter emphasizes that both the land and the people of Israel belong to God (vv. 23, 42, 55) and therefore cannot be bought and sold permanently. Instead, Israelites can only rent agricultural land or a person's labor for a set period of time until the Jubilee. Foreigners, however, can be subjected to permanent slavery (vv. 44–46).

These economic principles in Leviticus 25 have been embroiled in conflicts between landowning and landless classes since their origins and, as a result, were rarely enacted. Leviticus itself complains of Israel's failure to observe the fallow rules of the land's Sabbaths (26:35; compare 25:2–7). Jeremiah and Nehemiah berated landowners for failing to observe the requirement to release debt slaves (Jer. 34:13–22; Neh. 5:6–13). Leviticus 27 tries to adjust the Jubilee regulations to moderate their negative effects on temple revenues, and Num. 26:4 bases an appeal against women's inheritance rights on the effects of the Jubilee rules. Both texts suggest that there were at least some attempts to practice the Jubilee.

Yet there is no mention of the word “Jubilee” or a fifty-year term for property transactions or for the release of debt slaves elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. Ancient Jews and Christians did not model their slave-owning practices after Leviticus 25 (see below). In later Second Temple period literature, Jews writing for Hellenistic audiences simply cited the rules for Jubilee as demonstrating Jewish humanitarianism (Philo, *Spec.* 2.110–121; *Hum.* 11.97–101; Josephus, *Ant.* 3.282–285; 4.273; so Seeman in Berner et al. 2017). Rabbinic texts did not elaborate on the theme of “freedom” in this chapter, despite elsewhere showing considerable interest in the relationship of free will and law (Stökl 2018, pp. 692–94). The Jubilee gained mystical connotations in medieval Jewish culture, when Kabbalistic texts projected it onto the cosmos as a cycle of fifty millennia culminating in “the great Jubilee” when everything is restored to “its first cause” (Necker in Berner et al. 2017).

Early Christians also showed no inclination to enact Jubilee legislation, despite Jesus' use of the rhetoric of “release” (Luke 4:18–19, citing Isa. 58:6; 61:1–2; the possibility that Jesus himself announced a Jubilee year with all its political and economic implications was advocated by Yoder 1972, pp. 34–40, 64–77; also, Ringe 1985, pp. 42–45, *passim*). Instead of finding economic principles in this chapter, ancient Christian interpreters such as Origen glossed Leviticus 25 with Rom. 11:33 as an example of God's “incomprehensible judgments and unsearchable ways”. Cassiodorus and Bede spiritualized the Jubilee as representing the Holy Spirit's coming after fifty days during Pentecost and also the absolution from sin available by reciting Psalm 50 (Lienhard 2001, p. 198). Many Christian interpreters

followed Philo in emphasizing the spiritual significance of the numeral fifty as representing forgiveness and remission of sins (Stökl 2018, pp. 694–95). As a result, the Roman Catholic Church declared a Jubilee granting indulgences—releasing penitent Christians from sin’s debts—every fifty years starting in 1300 C.E., later reduced to every twenty-five years (Elliott 2012, pp. 273–76; Ferzoco in Berner et al. 2017). This custom famously elicited the scorn of sixteenth-century Protestant Reformers and was one of many causes for the schism in Western Christianity. Nevertheless, the fifty-year Jubilee cycle continued to encourage dispensational theories that world history is trending towards an eschatological Jubilee—theories that have roots in Second Temple Jewish speculation and in medieval mysticism and remain very popular today (Radner 2008, p. 268).

This history of disconnecting the Jubilee from Jewish and Christian economic practices requires us to look instead at the historical development of slavery in order to discern Leviticus 25’s influence on early modern indentured and chattel slavery.

3. Ancient Chattel Slaves and Indentured Slaves

In light of the Jubilee’s history of inspiring modern movements for reform and freedom (see Parten 2020), it is cruelly ironic that Leviticus 25 also provides the strongest justification in Jewish and Christian scriptures for the early modern institution of slavery. Verses 35–55 distinguish categorically between Israelite debt slaves and foreign chattel. This distinction appeared already in the Laws of Hammurabi (§§115–117, 196–214; Wright 2010, pp. 137, 142). The biblical book of Exodus, however, conflates debt and chattel slavery (Exod. 21:2–11), and Deuteronomy’s rules for Sabbath-year release mention only Israelite debt slaves (Deut. 15:12–18; but compare 15:3; 20:14). Both Exodus and Deuteronomy envision releasing slaves in the seventh year, which is calculated from the date of initial enslavement and so differs for each debt and each slave. Unlike Leviticus 25, they allow debt slaves to voluntarily enslave themselves permanently, but they say nothing about selling such slaves or the status of their children.

Leviticus 25 instead presents a vivid picture of downward social mobility through several levels of economic stratification. At the top are free male landowners who, in the priestly writer’s idealistic projection of Israel’s tribal society, work the family lands distributed to them by the God of Israel (Num. 32:33–42; 34:2–15; Josh. 13:2–19:50). It nevertheless envisions that unpaid debts may force such people to, first, sell their lands (vv. 23–34) and then their labor (vv. 35–38). Further economic misfortune might lead them to fall even lower into slavery, but Leviticus 25 insists that Israelites can only be held as indentured slaves who must be freed in the Jubilee year (vv. 39–43). Foreigners, however, may be bought, exploited, and sold as permanent chattel (vv. 44–46).

In biblical sources, the economic situation presupposed by these laws is best reflected in Neh. 5:1–13 (compare also Gen. 47:13–26). Impoverished Judeans in the fifth century B.C.E. complained that debt was forcing them to sell their lands and even their children. Nehemiah berated Judean landowners to forgive the debts and return foreclosed property. The book of Jeremiah depicts a similar situation two centuries earlier in the desperate last years of the Judean kingdom, when King Zedekiah declared debt slaves free, but landowners quickly re-enslaved the same people (Jer. 34:8–11). Neither story indicates that a regular schedule of “years of release” had become institutionalized in pre- or post-exilic Judea, either on Deuteronomy’s seven-year or Leviticus’s fifty-year cycle.

Similar economic stratification appeared in many ancient Near Eastern societies from the third millennium B.C.E. through the Roman era. Absentee landowners used tenant farmers to produce most of the agricultural wealth (Mayshar 2014, pp. 238–42). Urban households depended more on slave labor, and slaves accounted for a large part of the population of Greco-Roman cities (Graeber 2011, pp. 187–202). Third- and second-millennium sources show kinship groups struggling to maintain communal control of land in many societies. However, high interest rates (20–50%) on short-term agricultural loans forced many nuclear families to sell land and then their own labor (Chirichigno 1993, p. 51; Hudson 2002, pp. 27–29). Such evidence led Dandamayev (1996, p. 171) to conclude that

“debt-slavery became a social disaster as early as the end of the third millennium and continued to be a serious problem throughout the entire history of the ancient Near East”.

The economic practice of ancient indentured slavery is best attested in second-millennium B.C.E. sources from Nuzi, Babylon, and Assyria (Chirichigno 1993, pp. 51, 63–66, 93–100). Interpreters debate the exact terms under which debt slaves were sold and redeemed, whether their labor paid back the debt or just the interest, or their bodies simply served as collateral for loans, and whether the release periods stated in the laws were honored in practice (Chirichigno 1993, pp. 68–72, 76–77). As in biblical legislation, the slave laws in Mesopotamian legal collections may reflect reform attempts rather than the actual economic practices prevalent in their societies. For example, Hammurabi’s law §117 stipulated:

If an obligation is outstanding against a man and he sells or gives into debt service his wife, his son, or his daughter, they shall perform service in the house of their buyer or of the one who holds them in debt service for three years; their release shall be secured in the fourth year (translated by Roth 1995, p. 103).

Another law in the same collection (§119) allowed debt slaves to be redeemed early, or to redeem themselves, by paying off their debt, as in Lev. 25:48–53. The boundary between indentured debt slaves and chattel slaves, however, was not always as sharp as the rules of Hammurabi and Leviticus suggest. Middle Assyrian laws allowed free Assyrians to become debt pledges. Then, plebeian debt slaves could be sold “at full price” and reduced to chattel slavery (Chirichigno 1993, pp. 77–85).

Cuneiform financial contracts offer more concrete evidence of the economics of slavery than do legal collections. Contracts from Nuzi in the mid-second millennium B.C.E. reveal three classes of servitude: indentured citizens who agreed to service contracts, usually for life, in return for land or large sums of money; foreign immigrants (*habiru*) who indentured themselves to receive basic sustenance; and chattel slaves who could be freely bought and sold (Chirichigno 1993, pp. 92–97, following Eichler 1973). In Nuzi contracts, “servitude for debts is widely attested”, observed Zaccagnini (2003, p. 584), who continued: “Upon full repayment of the amount due, the pledged person is set free. In actual fact, the Nuzi documents never attest to such an event”.

Biblical stories mention slaves throughout Israel’s history and sometimes name them (e.g., Eleazar in Gen. 15:2, Hagar in Gen. 16:3, 8). The tenth commandment of the Decalogue against coveting your neighbor’s slave recognizes slaves as property (Exod. 20:17; Deut. 5:21). Clear references to indentured slavery are harder to find. One example may be Jacob, who indentured himself to Laban for two terms of seven years (Gen. 29:18–29), though his “wage” of marrying Laban’s daughters makes this a very unusual case. The rarity of indentured slavery is admitted by Jer. 34:14, which quotes the law for a slave’s release in the seventh year from Deut. 34:14, but then states that “your fathers did not obey me”. Debtor’s children were seized by creditors (2 Kgs. 4:1; Neh. 5:5). Other texts imply that even householders could be forcibly enslaved because of debt (1 Sam. 22:2; Neh. 5:8; Amos 2:6; 8:6; so Schenker 1998, p. 27, contra Chirichigno 1993, pp. 330–34). Contrary to the protections for Israelites in Lev. 25:42, papyri from Samaria document the permanent sale of chattel slaves with Yahwistic names in the fourth century B.C.E. (Lemos 2017, pp. 108–9, citing Gropp 2001, p. 7). In ancient Israel, then, the aphorism that “the debtor is the slave of the lender” (Prov. 22:7) was often literally the case.

4. Slavery in Late Antique and Medieval Judaism and Christianity

In later Judaism and Christianity, Leviticus 25:44–46 was not cited frequently to justify chattel slavery because there was no need. Slavery was ubiquitous in Greek and Roman cultures, and Jewish practices did not differ significantly from those of other peoples (Hezser 2005, p. 381). Jewish kings and aristocrats maintained large households of slaves just as their Hellenistic neighbors did (Martin 1993), and so did upper-class Christians in Late Antiquity (Glancy 2002, 2010, p. 143). Rabbinic literature reproduced the biblical distinction between Hebrew indentured servants and foreign slaves when focusing on

biblical texts (e.g., in *Sifra*), but otherwise ignored it by reflecting contemporary society in only distinguishing slaves and freedmen, as did Jews writing in Greek (Flesher 1988, pp. 36, 54; Hezser 2005, pp. 31–35, 381). Metal slave collars bearing the names of Christian owners are a common artifact from the post-Constantinian Roman Empire. The Church required that runaway slaves be returned to their owners, following the Apostle Paul's example with Onesimus (Philemon) but contrary to Deut. 23:15. There are only a few hints of any principled resistance (Glancy 2002, pp. 88, 90). Therefore, Leviticus 25's distinction between Israelite and foreign slaves did not govern the legal status of slaves in either Jewish or Christian antiquity (Martin 1993; Glancy 2002, pp. 7, 92; Hezser 2005, p. 387).

Justinian's Digest (525 C.E.), a codification of Roman Law under Christian emperors, defined enslavement as "against nature" according to natural law, but as a universal feature of the laws of nations in which prisoners of war were sold as slaves. It allowed that slaves may also be born as slaves or that they may sell themselves (Mommson 1985, vol. I, §5.4–5.5, 15, §6.1, 17–18; also, Code i.iii.2, 4; see Baumgold 2010, pp. 414–15). Justinian's Code, as James Muldoon summarized,

explained the existence of slavery in light of Aristotle's famous distinction between *ius naturale* and *ius gentium*. The Roman law taught that when mankind lived according to the terms of the *ius naturale*, there was no slavery, no war, and no private property. In the world as it actually existed, however, the world of the *ius gentium*, slavery, along with these other evils, did exist . . . the Roman legal tradition regarding the distinction between *ius naturale* and the *ius gentium* fit neatly—perhaps too neatly—with the Christian concept of the fall of man. Both Christians and pagans of the time agreed that the abolition of slavery was as likely as the abolition of war and private property (Muldoon 2005, p. 75).

Justinian's Code and Digest cited no biblical references to slaves.

Slavery did not die out in Europe during the Middle Ages, contrary to common opinion (as demonstrated already by Pijper 1909; more recently McCormick 2002). Pope Gregory I, who led the Latin Church at the end of the sixth century, is often cited for wishing that all slaves would be released, but his social teachings actually emphasized the proper relationship between slave and master, such as in the New Testament. He encouraged the Church to treat its slaves well, not release them (Serfass 2006). Biblical slave laws mandating periodic release were invoked when medieval rulers wished to appear magnanimous: for example, in 854 C.E., the Carolingian king Charles the Bald explicitly cited Lev. 25:39–41 in his edict releasing prisoners of war after seven years (Elliott 2012, p. 284).

In Latin Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Justinian's Code served as the basis for codifying canon law and also for the legal ruminations of scholastic theologians. As a result, medieval and early modern laws about slavery reproduced Roman law, backed up by biblical traditions (Muldoon 2005, p. 72). Canon lawyers were principally concerned with the enslavement of prisoners of war. They translated the prohibition in Lev. 25:42 on permanent Israelite slaves into a mandate that Christians should not be enslaved, but also that non-Christian slaves cannot earn their freedom by converting (Muldoon 2005, pp. 76–77). This amalgamation of Roman slave law with religious exceptionalism based on biblical rules formed the basis for the thirteenth-century slave laws in the Castilian law code of Alfonso X (Muldoon 2005, p. 78) and in the English feudal law of Henri de Bracton (Bracton [1268] 1968, vol. 2, p. 30; Brewer 2017, p. 1049).

5. Leviticus 25 behind Early Modern Slavery and Racism

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the expansion of Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires, first in Africa and then in the Americas, entrenched slavery further in religious policy. It also led, for the first time, to prominent debates about its legality and morality (Prior 1997, pp. 48–70; Newcomb 2008, pp. 43–50). Papal bulls by Pope Nicholas V in 1452 and 1454, reaffirmed by several subsequent popes over the following century, designated Muslims and Africans as enemies of Christianity who could be subjected to

perpetual slavery. They also justified colonial conquest under “the Doctrine of Christian Discovery” (Newcomb 2008). However, other Papal bulls by Eugene IV in 1435, Paul III in 1537, and Urban VIII in 1639 advocated freedom for all slaves (Muldoon 2005, pp. 83, 90–91). The sixteenth century saw an active debate in Spain and in its American colonies over the morality of enslaving Native Americans or subjecting them to forced labor, which was already criticized vehemently by Fray Anton de Montesinos in 1511. The moral criticism of the growing African slave trade also began in this century.

These arguments reproduced natural law ideas about slavery from Aristotle and Roman law more than biblical slave texts. In a public debate in 1550, for example, Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda justified enslaving indigenous Americans under the *ius gentium* by describing their immoral and servile nature, while Bartolomé de las Casas rejected slavery by celebrating the advanced level of Native American civilizations. Against the complaints of Montesinos and las Casas that Spain’s conquests in the Americas offended Christian morality, Sepúlveda provided a racist rationalization for them by depicting indigenous Americans as morally, physically, and intellectually inferior to Europeans (Sepúlveda [1544] 1961). Silvio Torres-Saillant has summarized the historical effect of this argument:

[Sepúlveda] removed the aura of sin that had surrounded the Crown’s colonial exploits since the calling out by Montesinos and the continued moral militancy of Fray Bartolome de las Casas and others . . . Whether having read him or even heard of him or not, the champions of racist discourse since the 1540s have simply regurgitated the ills, weaknesses, godlessness, vices, moral defects, savagery, ugliness, intellectual deficiency, and moral turpitude that Sepúlveda imputed to the indigenous population of the Americas (Torres-Saillant 2020, p. 49).

The early Protestants in northern Europe did not immediately face these colonial conditions, though they were well aware of the biblical texts allowing slavery. The most popular sixteenth-century English translation, the Geneva Bible, added a marginal gloss, “unto perpetual servitude”, to Lev. 25:42 and 46 to make clear that its translation “bonde men” meant slaves. Protestants, similarly to their predecessors, regarded slavery as an unfortunate but endemic condition of human society whose chief danger lay in its religious effects. Calvin ([1564] 1857) commented on Lev. 25:44, “What God here permits as regards strangers was everywhere customary among the Gentiles”, and on v. 47, “the object of the law was, that none of those whom God had adopted, should be alienated from their race, and thus should depart from the true worship of God Himself”.

The prohibition in Lev. 25:41–42 on buying and selling Israelite slaves because they are God’s slaves was widely understood since the Middle Ages to refer to Christians. Thus, the Duke of York’s Laws for the colony of New York (1665–1675) proclaimed that “No Christian shall be kept in Bondslavery, villenage or Captivity, Except Such who shall be Judged thereunto by Authority, or Such as willingly have sould, or shall sell themselves . . . Apprentices for Terme of Years, or other Servants for Term of years or Life”. These laws do not cite legal or religious sources, but they seem to reflect an awareness of Leviticus 25. Indentured servitude for a set number of years was acceptable among Christians, because indenture was governed by contract law and biblical precedent (Lev. 25:39–42). Outright chattel slavery was reserved for non-Christians, also on biblical precedent (Lev. 25:44–46), but Virginia’s laws of 1662 and 1667 reasserted medieval canon law’s ruling that religious conversion does not change someone’s status as slave or free. Colonial laws thus defined people of African descent and Native Americans as legally available to be subjected to perpetual slavery (Goetz 2012, p. 79).

Historians of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England and the English colonies frequently remark on the fact that English people proudly regarded themselves as “free”, yet unquestioningly accepted forced servitude of various kinds: voluntary indenture, forced labor by convicts, and chattel slavery for Africans. English law did not provide much basis for these economic practices (Bush 1993, pp. 417–19). Seventeenth-century intellectuals such as Hugo Grotius, Thomas Hobbes, and John Locke readily accepted slavery because

of the institution's antiquity and apparent ubiquity, as well as because of cultural biases against non-Europeans and especially Africans. Their discussions, however, focused not on contemporary practices but, as Jonathan Bush concluded, on "Roman practice and doctrines, especially capture, supplemented primarily by biblical and medieval examples" (Bush 1993, p. 451). As with the colonial laws, their failure to cite the Bible frequently to justify chattel slavery has inhibited the recognition of the role of biblical precedents in encouraging early modern practices of enslaving Africans.

Nevertheless, their attitudes were shaped by the Bible, even if they rarely cited it. Thus, Grotius referred to the manumission of Hebrew slaves in Deut. 15:13 and noted that God gave the Israelites the right to subject Canaanites to perpetual slavery. He took the principle as long established "among who professed one common religion" (by which he explicitly meant Christians and Muslims) that prisoners of war cannot be sold as slaves, which he interpreted as "an abolition of slavery" (Grotius [1625] 2013, book 3: ix, xiv.vi.5, xiv.viii.1). Locke showed somewhat more contemporary awareness in noting the similarity between the household slaves of biblical Patriarchs and those in the contemporary West Indies. His governing theory distinguished slaves captured in war from indentured servants who sell themselves for a set period, an institution "among the Jews" by which he clearly presupposed the distinction in Lev. 25:39–55 (Locke 1689, 1:§129; 2: sec. 24, p. 10; sec. 85, p. 28).

Many historians argue that Locke accepted slavery because of his liberal defense of private property (e.g., Morgan 2000, pp. 32–33). However, conflicts between Parliamentarians and Royalists in seventeenth-century England may have been more decisive for his views. Brewer (2017) traced the connections between the ideas of hereditary monarchy and hereditary slavery, noting that "only with the restoration of hereditary monarchy in 1660 did colonies pass laws enshrining hereditary slavery" by citing Bracton's "feudalism" as precedent (Brewer 2017, pp. 1048–49). Royalists controlled American colonies such as Virginia where they received their lands by royal grant (Bush 1993, pp. 419–20). The amount of land was determined by the number of slaves (called "headright") that they owned or planned to import. This policy encouraged labor-intensive cash crops that could be taxed heavily (Brewer 2017, pp. 1045–47). Locke served the Stuart kings as a lawyer and shareholder in the slave-trading Royal Africa Company, but then sold his shares to support the 1688 regime change that ended absolutism in England.

However, another change of monarch in 1702 reversed many liberal reforms in order for England to dominate the slave trade. Virginia then encoded headright into its Slave Code of 1705, where, for the first time, the adjective "white" was used to describe "christian servants" with legal rights in explicit contrast to "negro, mulatto, or Indian, Jew, Moor, Mahometan, or other infidels", who had none. Similar to some of its predecessors, this code also outlawed miscegenation and assigned financial penalties and extensions of indenture terms for bearing mixed-race children (Goetz 2012, pp. 83–85). Therefore, Brewer (2017, p. 1043) concluded that in these changing economic and political conditions, it was a capitalistic pursuit of profits more than ideology or religion that drove the evolution of racist colonial slave policies.

Ancient, medieval, and early modern Christians all regarded slavery as a ubiquitous, if deplorable, feature of human economic life. There was little debate about its morality, and therefore little reason to cite scriptural precedents for it. Even early modern Christians did not need to cite Leviticus 25 often because their practices accorded easily with this biblical model of indentured and chattel slavery.

Nevertheless, there is ample evidence that they were consciously employing the economic teachings of Leviticus 25. First, a popular topic for early modern political theory was "the Hebrew Republic". In seventeenth-century Italy and Holland, Baruch Spinoza, Carlo Sigonio, and Petrus Cunaeus (the latter both in books titled *The Hebrew Republic* citing especially the Bible and Maimonides) advocated for land reform based on Leviticus 25's model. They regarded the biblical model of land redistribution as just as necessary for constitutional government as ancient Rome's model of republican polity (Nelson 2010,

pp. 71–78, 130–34; [Stökl 2018](#), pp. 696–97). Leviticus 25 was well known in popular circles as well. In seventeenth-century England, divided by civil war and religious strife, the agrarian parties of Diggers and Jacobites embraced the Jubilee of Leviticus 25 to advocate for land redistribution ([Parten 2020](#), p. 301).

Second, Lev. 25:36–37 and other biblical bans on charging financial interest were evoked regularly in the constant sixteenth- and seventeenth-century debates about usury ([Valeri 2011](#), p. 143). These verses were the source of the deep and long-standing traditions of prohibiting interest-bearing loans among co-religionists in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim cultures. However, the rise of mercantile economies in the late Middle Ages depended on debt for financing, so early modern intellectuals rationalized away the prohibition on charging interest. For example, John Calvin argued that changing economic circumstances rendered the biblical laws irrelevant ([Elliott 2012](#), p. 283). English Renaissance monarchs instead reinstated caps on interest rates from Roman law. This conflict between clear biblical teachings and the current economies of many Christian nations led to great controversy, as [Valeri \(2011, pp. 143–44\)](#) summarized:

First, few topics aroused such extensive debate from the mid-sixteenth through the seventeenth centuries as did usury ... everyone wrote about usury ... a second observation: during the seventeenth century, the dominant teaching in Christian Europe about usury changed ... at the beginning of the century, most Western Christians read Scripture to include strictures against the exchange of credit for profit, and at the end of the century, they read Scripture to allow for it ... [This] represented the Christianization of an economic practice that has since become known as modern, rational, and unavoidable.

The Roman Catholic Church maintained the ban on interest-bearing loans as late as a papal edict in 1745, then progressively loosening it by the mid-nineteenth century ([Valeri 2011](#), p. 145).

These usury debates, as well as the many books published in these centuries about “the Hebrew Republic,” show a very high awareness among early modern Europeans of the economic teachings in Leviticus 25, which includes the two-tier model of slavery that they emulated in the American colonies ([Gerstenberger 1996](#), pp. 390–91). It is very likely, therefore, that Leviticus’s distinction between Israelites and foreigners provided European colonizers precedent and justification for distinguishing between White indentured servants and Black chattel slaves.

6. Conclusions

The growing abolitionist movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries placed Leviticus 25 at the center of its rhetoric against slavery. The chapter rose to more explicit prominence at that time because, first of all, North American slaves themselves grasped onto the hope conveyed by the idea of Jubilee to motivate each other to survive, resist, and escape when possible. The Jubilee of Leviticus 25 also became the rallying cry of Evangelical abolitionists who emphasized biblical rather than legal or philosophical arguments because of their Protestant convictions. This story of the Jubilee’s profound influence on and through the slaves and the abolitionists deserves separate discussion (see, e.g., [Parten 2020](#)).

The same chapter of Leviticus, however, provided a scriptural justification for the institution of Black chattel slavery in the first place. The influence of Leviticus 25 in shaping the economic discourse of the era is shown by the occasional citations of it mentioned above, but even more by the chapter’s frequent citation in the period’s debates about politics and economics. Knowledge of Lev. 25:39–46 as scripture therefore contributed to the naturalization of a two-tier bondage system of indenture for indebted Christians (later redefined as Europeans, later redefined as Whites) and chattel slavery for non-Christians (redefined as non-Europeans, then Blacks). In the language of philosopher [Bourdieu \(1977, pp. 164–69\)](#), Leviticus legitimized the *doxa* that led these cultures to take slavery for granted as a natural part of human relationships with foreigners, and to classify Native

Americans and Africans as the paradigmatic foreigners. Today, we call the heritage of this particular form of *doxa* “structural racism” (see Delgado and Stefancic 2017).

Funding: This research was funded by a fellowship at the Syracuse University Humanities Center (January–May 2021).

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Informed Consent Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Baumgold, Deborah. 2010. Slavery discourse before the Restoration: The Barbary coast, Justinian’s Digest, and Hobbes’s political theory. *History of European Ideas* 36: 412–18. [CrossRef]
- Berner, Christoph, George Ferzoco, Robert Goldenberg, Michael Harbin, Gerold Necker, Chris Seeman, and J. Blair Wilgus. 2017. Year of Jubilee. In *Encyclopedia of the Bible and its Reception*. Edited by Constance M. Furey, Joel Marcus LeMon, Brian Matz, Thomas Christian Römer, Jens Schröter, Barry Dov Walfish and Eric Ziolkowski. Berlin and Boston: De Gruyter, vol. 14. [CrossRef]
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bracton, Henricus de. 1968. *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae [On the Laws and Customs of England]*. Translated by Samuel E. Thorne. 2 vols. Cambridge: Belknap. First published 1268. Available online: <http://bracton.law.harvard.edu/> (accessed on 21 July 2021).
- Brewer, Holly. 2017. Slavery, Sovereignty, and ‘Inheritable Blood’: Reconsidering John Locke and the Origins of American Slavery. *American Historical Review* 122: 1038–78. [CrossRef]
- Bush, Jonathan A. 1993. Free to Enslave: The Foundations of Colonial American Slave Law. *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities* 5: 417–70. Available online: <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/yjlh/vol5/iss2/7> (accessed on 21 July 2021).
- Calvin, John. 1857. *The Harmony of the Law*. Translated by Charles William Bingham. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, vol. 3, p. 15. First published 1564.
- Chirichigno, Gregory C. 1993. *Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East*. Sheffield: JSOT Press.
- Dandamayev, Muhammad. 1996. Review of Chirichigno’s Debt-Slavery in Israel and the Ancient Near East. *Jewish Quarterly Review* 87: 171. Available online: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1455225> (accessed on 21 July 2021).
- Delgado, Richard, and Jean Stefancic. 2017. *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3rd ed. New York: NYU Press.
- Eichler, Barry L. 1973. *Indenture at Nuzi: The Personal Tidenutu Contract and its Mesopotamian Analogues*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Elliott, Mark W. 2012. *Engaging Leviticus: Reading Leviticus Theologically with Its Past Interpreters*. Eugene: Cascade.
- Flesher, Paul V. M. 1988. *Oxen, Women, or Citizens? Slaves in the System of the Mishnah*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Gerstenberger, Erhard S. 1996. *Leviticus: A Commentary*. Old Testament Library. Translated by D. W. Stott. Louisville: Westminster John Knox.
- Glancy, Jennifer A. 2002. *Slavery in Early Christianity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Glancy, Jennifer A. 2010. Early Christianity, Slavery, and Women’s Bodies. In *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*. Edited by Bernadette Brooten. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 143–58. [CrossRef]
- Goetz, Rebecca Anne. 2012. *The Baptism of Early Virginia: How Christianity Created Race*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Graeber, David. 2011. *Debt: The First 5000 Years*. Brooklyn: Melville.
- Gropp, Douglas M. 2001. *Wadi Daliyeh II: The Samaria Papyri from Wadi Daliyeh*. Oxford: Clarendon.
- Grotius, Hugo. 2013. *On the Law of War and Peace*. Edited by Stephen C. Neff. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. First published 1625.
- Hezser, Catherine. 2005. *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hudson, Michael. 2002. Reconstructing the Origins of Interest-Bearing Debt and the Logic of Clean Slates. In *Debt and Economic Renewal in the Ancient Near East*. Edited by Michael Hudson and Marc Van de Mieroop. Bethesda: CDL, pp. 7–58.
- Lemos, T. M. 2017. *Violence and Personhood in Ancient Israel and Comparative Contexts*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lienhard, Joseph T. 2001. *Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy*. Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, Old Testament 3. Downers Grove: Eisenbrauns.
- Locke, John. 1689. *Two Treatises of Government*. London: Awnsham and John Churchill.
- Martin, Dale B. 1993. Slavery and the Ancient Jewish Family. In *The Jewish Family in Antiquity*. Edited by Shaye J. D. Cohen. BJS 289. Atlanta: Scholars Press, pp. 113–29. [CrossRef]
- Mayshar, Joram. 2014. Who Was the Toshav? *Journal of Biblical Literature* 133: 225–46. [CrossRef]
- McCormick, Michael. 2002. New Light on the ‘Dark Ages’: How the Slave Trade Fuelled the Carolingian Economy. *Past & Present* 177: 41–53.
- Meyer, Esias E. 2005. *The Jubilee in Leviticus 25: A Theological Ethical Interpretation from a South African Perspective*. Münster: LIT Verlag.
- Mommsen, Theodor, ed. 1985. *The Digest of Justinian*. Translated by Alan Watson. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

- Morgan, Kenneth. 2000. *Slavery and Servitude in North America, 1607–1800*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Muldoon, James. 2005. Spiritual Freedom—Physical Slavery: The Medieval Church and Slavery. *Ave Maria Law Review* 3: 69–93.
- Nelson, Eric. 2010. *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Newcomb, Steven T. 2008. *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Christian Discovery*. Golden: Fulcrum.
- Parten, Bennett. 2020. ‘Blow Ye Trumpet, Blow’: The Idea of Jubilee in Slavery and Freedom. *The Journal of the Civil War Era* 10: 298–318. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Pijper, Frederick. 1909. The Christian Church and Slavery in the Middle Ages. *American Historical Review* 14: 675–95. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Prior, Michael. 1997. *The Bible and Colonialism: A Moral Critique*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Radner, Ephraim. 2008. *Leviticus*. Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Ringe, Sharon H. 1985. *Jesus, Liberation, and the Biblical Jubilee: Images for Ethics and Christology*. Overtures to Biblical Theology 19. Philadelphia: Fortress.
- Roth, Martha T. 1995. *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Schenker, Adrian. 1998. The Biblical Legislation on the Release of Slaves: The Road from Exodus to Leviticus. *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 78: 23–41. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Schmidt, Klaus. 1978. *Religion, Versklavung und Befreiung*. Stuttgart: Kohhammer.
- Sepúlveda, Juan Ginés de. 1961. Democrates Alter, Or, on the Just Causes for War Against the Indians. In *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West*. New York: Columbia University Press. First published 1544.
- Serfass, Adam. 2006. Slavery and Pope Gregory the Great. *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 14: 77–103. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Stökl, Jonathan. 2018. ‘Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof!’ Reading Leviticus 25:10 through the centuries. *History of European Ideas* 44: 685–701. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Torres-Saillant, Silvio. 2020. Latina/os and Race. In *The Oxford Handbook of Latino Studies*. Edited by Ilan Stavans. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 12–61. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Valeri, Mark. 2011. The Christianization of Usury in Early Modern Europe. *Interpretation* 65: 142–52. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Wright, David P. 2010. ‘She Shall Not Go Free as Male Slaves Do’: Developing Views About Slavery and Gender in the Laws of the Hebrew Bible. In *Beyond Slavery: Overcoming its Religious and Sexual Legacies*. Edited by Bernadette Brooten. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 125–42. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Yoder, John Howard. 1972. *The Politics of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Zaccagnini, Carlo. 2003. Mesopotamia: Nuzi. In *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law. Handbuch Der Orientalistik*. Edited by Raymond Westbrook and Gary M. Beckman. Leiden: Brill, pp. 565–617. [[CrossRef](#)]