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# BIBLICAL HEBREW WORDS

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Man in Society (*cont.*)

*Slaves*

Man as God's Slave

The translation is more difficult to decide, when 'ebed is used to express man's relationship to God, and so also 'amah—it is probably mere chance that *shipchah* is not found in this sense.

We must always remember that the religious words in Hebrew, like the secular, go back into a pre-Mosaic and even pre-Abrahamic pagan past, and that the fulness of their present meaning is not derived from their etymology but from the facts of God's self-revelation, which has used and transformed them.

Why man was the 'ebed of the gods, and why 'abad, to work, also means to worship, and 'abodah = worship, is clear enough from the mythology of the Fertile Crescent. Man was quite simply made by the gods, that they might be fed and housed by him\*.

God did not hesitate to use this vocabulary (Lev. 25:55), but He made it clear that the Exodus was an act of grace, for Israel's benefit, not His. This explains Moses' stress on the love of God in Dt., e.g., 4:37; 7:6 ff; 10:15. Obviously it was hard for the people to grasp this, and hence we find the prophets having to reject the false popular ideas of sacrifice, e.g., Is. 1:11-14, Jer. 7:21 ff, Hos. 6:6, Amos 5:21 ff, Ps. 50:8-13.

There is no need to give details of this use of 'ebed beyond pointing out its use in proper names, e.g., Ebed-melech (Jer. 37:7—*melech*-king, probably a title of Jehovah), Obadiah (1 Kings 18:3, etc.) Abdiel (1 Chr. 5:15), Abed-nego (Dan. 1:7). But how should we translate it?

The New Testament *doulos*-slave so often used of the Christian exactly expresses the Hebrew 'ebed. It includes the fact that we are absolutely God's property (1 Cor. 6:19 f), and that we are called to a complete voluntary self-surrender to Him (Rom.

\* Cf C. J. Gadd. *Ideas of Divine Rule in the Ancient East*, Lecture I.

12:1). Our translation must bear the fulness of the New Testament meaning in mind, for it is in fact implicit in much of its Old Testament use.

Servant seems to fail on every count. It neither conveys the element of compulsion and duty in *'ebed*, nor does it suggest the glad abandon of the believer, which is his 'spiritual worship' (Rom. 12:1, RV. Mg., RSV). It seems difficult to find any suitable equivalent, and so we should probably be truer to Scripture, if we were to render *'ebed* and *doulos*, when used of man's relationship to God by slave.

### King and Subject

Since the king was the representative of the gods, and in Egypt even a god himself, the same terms are used of the relationship between him and his subjects as between them and the gods. Every subject was technically his slave (*'ebed*, or it might be *'amah* or *shipchah*). He was their lord (*'adon*) and they addressed him as *'adoni* (my lord)—the slightly differing *'adonai* used in address to Jehovah is probably an example of Rabbinic reverence. In pre-exilic days *'adonai* was probably used in address to God and man alike.

It need hardly be stressed that a natural extension of this language was to apply it to persons of rank by their subordinates who were not actually their slaves.

Since even outside Israel the power of the king was not absolute, but was restrained by law and custom, and in Israel it was even less, it is clear that we are dealing solely with a polite convention. So except in a merely historical translation to translate *'ebed* by slave would be intolerable, but servant is almost as unsuitable. We must be guided by the context as to the best rendering.

The commonest use of *'ebed* in this setting is for the men nearest to the king. Normally the translation 'courtier' will be best; this is used by Moffatt with occasional unexplained deviations into 'officer'. A few examples are Gen. 40:20; 41:37 f; 45:16; 50:7, Ex. 7:10; 8:3 f and repeatedly in these chapters; 14:5, Num. 22:18, 1 Sa. 16:15 ff; 21:7 (or was Doeg a slave?); 21:11; 28:7,

2 Sa. 3:38; 15:4. In some cases 'officer' is better or even necessary, e.g., 1 Sa. 29:3 (Moffatt strangely enough uses 'servant'), 2 Sa. 8:7; 11:9, 11. Other variations are possible. Moffatt uses 'royal officials' very well in 1 Kings 1:9.

There are fewer passages where 'ebed is used of the people in a wider sense. Here 'subject' is perhaps best. Possible examples are Gen. 21:25 (though perhaps 'slaves'); 27:37, Jos. 9:8, 1 Sa. 17:8f. In cases like 2 Sa. 8:2, 6, 14; 10:19 'tributory' is obviously the right word (so Moffatt in some cases).

We also find 'ebed in a military sense, where it suggests troops particularly linked to their leader. Perhaps 'retainer' best fits the meaning in passages like 1 Sa. 25:10, 40 (Moffatt rather weakly 'servants'); 2 Sa. 2:12, 13, 15 (Moffatt, adherents); 3:22 (Moffatt, followers); 11:1 (Moffatt, troops); 18:9 (Moffatt most improbably, body guard).

There are cases where 'ebed is used of high ranking officers and ministers of state, e.g. 1 Kings 16:9, 2 Kings 5:6; 19:5; 24:10; 25:8.

It is worth noting that in passages like Num. 31:49; 32:4, 1 Sa. 12:9 the same type of language is used to Moses and Samuel as is normally used to rulers.

### The Servant of Jehovah

Moses is repeatedly referred to as the servant of Jehovah. The same title is given to Joshua, David, the prophets and specially to the unnamed figure of 'the Servant Songs' in Is. 40-55.

We have here probably a combination of the two sets of ideas conveyed by the relationship of man to God and the subject to his king. In calling these outstanding men and the Messiah to come the 'ebed of Jehovah, their complete obedience and self-dedication to God are stressed. They were in the fullest sense slaves of God. But in return for their loyalty they were made true representatives of God and empowered to speak and act for Him. They are His trusted members of His privy council (Jer. 23:18, 22). Though no translation could be adequate, once again 'slave' suggests itself as being nearer the true meaning than 'servant'.

(To be continued)