FREEDOM IN THE BIBLE

U of M lecture

A paper delivered by Herbert M. Baumgard, Rabbi, D.H.L.
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Down through human history such freedom as a society has given its members has been limited in two ways. First of all, the extent of the freedom has been limited to the scope of the society and to its traditions or laws; and secondly, such freedom as the laws allowed was limited to the recognized members of the society. Outsiders may have dwelled within the boundaries of the society, but their status was different from those who were recognized members.

It is in this context that we can begin to understand the concept of freedom in the Biblical society. Like the Americans who broke away from subjection to King George III of England but subjected its own black people to slavery, so the ancient Hebrews fought an epic battle against Pharaoh and the Egyptians to gain their freedom but subjected certain ~~groups~~ People within their own society to slavery![1] In ancient Israel, freedom was broader than that granted to the citizenry of other societies in the ancient Near-East, but it was not an absolute concept. The concept of freedom in ancient Israel was grand enough, however, to influence the Bible-oriented founders of America. The inscription on the American Liberty Bell, "Proclaim liberty throughout the land to all the inhabitants thereof", taken from the Book of Leviticus, is but symbolic of the strong reliance of early Americans on the Biblical example.[2] We know that a committee headed by Benjamin Franklin suggested an official seal for early America which pictured Pharaoh's chariots being overwhelmed by the waters of the Red Sea and which included the slogan, "Rebellion against tyrants is obedience to God".[3]

Notes: Pg. 21

1. Lev. 25:44, "...of the nations that are round about you, of them shall ye buy bondmen and bondmaids".
   Lev. 25:45 "...moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you...(i.e. not landowners)". But these very "strangers" could get rich enough to buy an Israelite slave (Lev. 25:47 ff). The Canaanites, at first, did not have the privileges of the Israelites, Josh. 16:10; 17:13; Jud. 1:28; 30:33, 35; IK 9:21.

2. Lev. 25:10. The Hebrew for "liberty" here is (d^{e}rōr). It is d^{e}rōr of which Jeremiah speaks in chastizing the king and nobles of Judea for first releasing their slaves and then reclaiming them (Jer. 34:8-11); cf Jer. 34:12-17. It is this failure to proclaim liberty that causes the downfall of the state.

3. Oscar S. Straus, The Origins of the Republican Form of Government, G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York and London, the Knickerbocker Press, 1926 pp.139,140.

All this being true, we should know that the concept of freedom in ancient Israel was limited to the recognized members of that society and was defined in terms of the laws and traditions of that society. If we are to understand the notion of biblical freedom, we have to stop thinking of freedom as merely the opposite of slavery, and we can't apply the "modern" idea of freedom as including the right to disassociate oneself from the needs of the community.[1] The free citizen of Israelite days was the person included as a full member of that society who acquiesced to its laws and who accepted the obligation of fulfilling those laws.[2] Such freedom as the individual enjoyed in ancient times was his only so long as he was a loyal and participating member of the group.

The central group in the ancient Israelite society was the family. Indeed, the entire nation was considered to be a family. All of its members were considered to be descendents of a common ancestor whose name was Jacob or Israel. The Israelite nation was called the Bēth Yisrā'el meaning the house or family of Israel. There were ways that one could enter this family and be considered on a par with blood members, but, in any event, the mood and thinking attached to all of its members was a family mood.[3]

Notes: Pg. 2

1. The year of Jubilee (Lev. 25:10-13) refers to a release in the 50th year (yōbhēl); cf Num. 36:4; Ezek. 46:16-17. See now the discussion of "The Biblical Institution of D^{e}rôr in the Light of Akkadian Documents" by Julius Lewy, Journal of Near Eastern Studies, Vol. V, in which d^{e}rôr is compared to andurâru and durâru. D^{e}rôr apparently means to "let loose, free" It has the notion of mobility, flow.
   Ezekiel fights for the land of the poor as against the right of the prince to take and hold that land. He must observe the "year of liberty, s^{e}nath ha-d^{e}rôr" (46:17). See the complaint in Samuel against the King, I Sam 8:14.

2. Roland de Vaux, Ancient Israel, McGraw-Hill, London, 1961, p. 70, says, "The ʿam ha-'ares were, in the early biblical period, a body of free men enjoying civil rights in a given territory. But in Ex 5:5, Pharaoh identifies the Hebrews with the people of the land". In Ex 22:20; 23:9; Dt 10:19, the Hebrews in Egypt are "resident foreigners, gērim".

3. de Vaux (Ibid, p. 68) says, "Even slaves do not constitute a class apart; they form part of the family".

The considerable freedom of that ancient society was shared by all the members of this national family. Those who were not officially in the family were given a status of one kind or another which tied them in some way to the family structure. Their rights, too, were well defined, but they were not the same rights given to the fully recognized members of the society!

The head of the family was the father. In him was centered the authority and the ownership of landed property, but the other members of the family benefited from the rights and freedom of the father. His privileges were their privileges, even if only secondarily. Whatever profited his bēth or house profited them. Their status and esteem rose as his status rose.

The mother had a different kind of authority than the father. She was his helper. Her great role was to help increase the size of the house, so important in an era of farming where every new pair of hands meant an addition to the family ability to earn its living. As the bearer of children she achieved a unique honor and status, for children were the precious fruit of family life, and the basis of the future power of the family. Children were to be the family representatives in the future life of the nation. In the success of the children, the success of the early founders of the family would be increased. A bēth or house was the vehicle through which the welfare of the generations were tied together.

Notes: Pg. 3

1. See the discussion on gērim, the stranger, in Johs. Pedersen, Israel, its Life and Culture. Oxford U. Press, Copenhagen, 1926, Vol. I-II, p. 39 ff. A gēr is someone living associated to a community not his own. He could be an Israelite, Jud. 17:7-9; 19:16; cf Lev. 25:35 ff, or a non-Israelite. He was apparently intermediate between the free Israelites and the slaves. Pedersen compares them to the periokoi (the Peloponnese) conquered by the Greeks in their own land. "They had personal freedom and right of property but were excluded from the privileged society of the patrician citizens". (P. 41)

   The gērim were not landowners, usually, but some became rich and sometimes owned Israelite slaves (Lev. 25:47-55).

   Ezekiel says the gērim would share in the redistribution of land (Ezek. 47:21-23).

p. 4. The mother could own property in her own name. Her father could give her property as part of her dowry. She could have her own hand-maiden, and if she could not herself bear children to her husband, she could give her hand-maiden to her husband as a wife and claim ~~her children~~ the hand-maiden's as her own.[1,2] A son left the bēth or house of his father when he got married to found his own bēth, but his bēth was, in the broad sense, also considered a part of his father's bēth. A daughter would leave the bēth of her father to join the bēth of her husband. Thereafter, her fate was tied up in her new family and, as their fortunes went, so went hers.

Property in ancient Israel was originally distributed on a tribal and family basis, and the law forbade the sale of farming land, so that a family would never lose its means of livelihood. With each family on its own land and with holdings relatively equal, it was possible to develop a democratic government of freeholders where the judges would not be influenced by the rich, and justice would be even-handed.

The notion of family was the essential ingredient of the ancient Israelite society. No member of that family could be enslaved by another member of the society. If a citizen were forced to sell himself to an outsider who lived in the community, the members of the family had to buy him back. The word for this procedure of restoring a member to his freedom or to his original standing in the society was g^{e}'ūlāh. It means redemption.[2+] There were, of course, laws which described how the members of this national family should treat each other justly, but the mood of the law goes beyond justice. The same code which calls for justice, ṣedek, and righteousness, ṣe'dāḳāh, calls the citizen to love his neighbor as himself.[3] Indeed, the stranger, the gēr, the outsider who lives in ~~his~~ the midst of the citizenry and who is accepted within the workings of the society, even though he is not a family member, is also to be loved as oneself.[4]

Notes p. 4

1. For situations in which women exercised their authority see Gen. 21: 8-13; Gen. 21: 8-13; 27: 6-36; and Jud. 4: 4-5, 31
2. Lev. 25: 47-55
3. Lev 19: 17, 18
4. Lev. 19: 33-4

The family structure of the ancient Israelite society made for a certain kind of relationship amongst the citizens, but a nation does not exist on the basis of family feeling alone. It must have laws which hold the fabric together. It is in the detailed law of ancient Israel that we begin to see the true character of the society. It is a law which calls its citizens to more than freedom. It calls them to holiness, to the imitation of God in His holiness.[1] Because God is holy, the law proclaims, you must leave the corners of your fields for the poor and the stranger at harvesting time, and you must protect the defenseless.[2] The individuals in the Israelite society were protected by more than the law itself. They were protected by God who was considered to be the special protector of those who were disenfranchised. If the law did not adequately protect the orphan, the widow, and the stranger because they were not within the confines of a bēth, then they were the special wards of God. He would hear their cry, even as He heard the cry of the slaves in Egypt, and He would protect their interests to the extent of punishing those who did not take special care of them.[3] Time and again the Israelites are reminded that they were to be sympathetic to slaves and strangers because they were slaves and strangers in the land of Egypt, which is to say, they were not part of the in-group; they were not part of the recognized citizenry; and, therefore, they did not have all the freedom and the privileges of the Egyptian citizenry.[4] In other words, the Israelites were encouraged to extend the privileges of the society beyond the limits of the law. In the 19th chapter of Leviticus, we are told that the stranger is to be treated as if he were indeed a full fledged member of the society.[5] There seems to be strong evidence in the Book of Deuteronomy and in Ezekiel that there was a gradual development of the law itself to the point where those who lived on the periphery of the Israelite society were progressively included within the operation of the law and were progressively given the full privileges of the society. Ezekiel suggests that the gērim were to share in the distribution of the land when the exiles returned to Judea.[6]

NOTES P. 5

1. Lev. 19:1-2
2. Lev. 19:9-10; 13-14 Cf Lev 23:22
3. Ex 22:21
4. Dt 24:14, 17-22; Cf Lev 19:33,34; Ex 22:20
5. Lev. 19:33-4
6. Ez. 47:21-23

If human rights depended on a certain equality of land holdings, if they depended on the land being held by all elements of the citizenry, there had to be some authority which would work against the natural gravitation of land holdings to a few. The Bible tells us that God was the real owner of the land, that is why it couldn't be sold in perpetuity. But the sale of land progressively increased, and as it did, we have an increase in the amount of slavery in the Israelite society.[1] For the land was the only real wealth, and in bad times the owner of the land could sometimes only get money for seed by selling his land and then selling his labor over a period of years. This kind of indentured slavery existed not only in ancient Israel but in early America. The Biblical society contained very clear cut laws limiting the amount of time in which an Israelite could be a slave of this kind. Leviticus tells us the limit was six years.[2] Further, there are express laws about how such a slave is to be treated.[3] There were special laws concerning the treatment of female slaves designed to protect her since she was more vulnerable in her person. Israelite slaves were not considered members of a lower caste. They were considered as freemen in a temporary state of servitude.[4] The law indicated that it was not permissable for an Israelite to be the slave of a non-Israelite. If he were forced to sell himself to a non-Israelite, his kinsmen had to buy him back.[5] Non-Israelites could be slaves to Israelites, but the law also had protective measures for them.

Notes: Pg. 6

1. See Lev. 25:23-24, "...for the land is Mine...". The law provided that if an Israelite were forced to sell his land, his kinsman (redeemer) had to buy it back (Lev 25:25-28). The function of the Jubilee year was to restore the status quo (Lev 25:28).
2. Ex. 21:2 ff; Dt. 15:12-18. The law provides that the former owner must give the released slave the wherewithal to start anew.
3. Lev. 25:39-43. "Thou shalt not rule over him with rigour...". The law provides that non-Israelites might be permanent slaves (Lev. 25:44-46). Non-Israelites might also be well enough off to own a slave (Lev. 25:47-48).
4. Lev. 25:40-41, cf Pederson, ILC, p. 44, "...a slave is just a subordinate".
5. Lev. 25:47-55, in this sense, buying back, redeeming, g^{e}'ūlāh, means "freeing", i.e. restoring to the status of a member of the society.

Progressively, it seems, the Israelite attitude turned against slavery. Dr. Isaac Mendelsohn writes in his definitive work on slavery in the ancient near-east,[1] "The Deuteronomic ordinance (23:16-17) 'Thou shalt not deliver a slave to his master who escapes to you from his master stands unparalleled in the slave legislation of the early Semitic world...' ". The Hammurabi code, for example, punished with death anyone who harbors a slave.[2] The Biblical text provides, "(the fugitive)...shall dwell with thee, in the midst of thee, in the place which he shall choose within one of thy gates, where it liketh him best; thou shalt not wrong him".[3] Isaiah proclaims in the name of God, "...hide the outcasts; betray not the fugitive. Let mine outcasts dwell with thee..."[4] In these proclamations we see that there was a reaching within the Israelite community away from slavery. In the Book of Leviticus, God is quoted as saying, "for unto Me are the children of Israel servants; they are My servants whom I brought forth out of the land of Egypt..."[5] The inference is that no servant of God can possibly be a servant to a mere mortal.

In the Israelite prescriptions about the limits to slavery within the community, which limited the time of service to six years[6] and which provided for a Jubilee year when all must go free,[7] we see evidence of the anti-slavery sentiment. The goal of freedom for all seemed inevitable for the society which held that mankind had been created in the image of the divine.[8] The author or authors of Genesis I[9] make it clear that by mankind (ʾādhām), they mean both man and woman, male and female. Woman does not have a second class citizenship in the eyes of God, according to The Scripture.

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1. Legal Aspects of Slavery in Babylonia, Assyria and Palestine, I. Mendelsohn, The Bayard Press, Williamsport, Pa., 1932, P. 40
2. Ibid, P. 41
3. Dt 23:17
4. Isa 16:3-4
5. Lev 25:55
6. Ex 21:2-5; Dt. 15:12-17
7. Lev. 25:41, 54
8. de Vaux, AI, "a freed slave is called hofshi ...", P. 88.
   See now Ex 21:2, 5, 26, 27; Dt 15:12, 13, 14.
9. Gen 1:26-27

Nonetheless, we must understand that full freedom was not completely realized in ancient Israel, as, indeed, it has not even been achieved in America where women fight unsuccessfully today to pass an Equal Rights Amendment. Still we can say that Israel's accomplishments were so wonderful in her time that it is from her that those nations seeking freedom in later years drew their inspiration. The proposition that all human beings are created in the image of the divine and that it is the duty of human beings to love one another are still grand ideals in our own modern age. We are still trying to realize the projections that ancient Israel made for all of us.

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