ENSLAVED TO AN ARTIFICE


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Within the fields of Ancient History and Biblical Studies, the question of why people throughout the Ancient Near East (ANE) designated themselves as “slave” or “servant” in titles and other inscriptions, and in written communication to others poses a dilemma for scholarship because of the practice of slavery in recent times, particularly in antebellum USA, and because of the Greco-Roman heritage of Western scholarship. In the latter issue is the view, promoted by ancient Greco-Roman elites, that slaves were less than human (Aristotle, in Garnsey 15, 23, 31-32, 108-113, 119, 122; Wiedemann 61-64). Added to this is the endless debate by scholars as to whether anyone in antiquity had a positive view of slavery. This debate arises because of the presence of the imperial slaves from Augustus’ time onwards (familia Caesaris) (the uniquely Roman system of granting freedmen and freedwomen the status of being Roman and sometimes citizenship), and the presence of what is termed “managerial slaves”, that is, slaves who had significant responsibility in a wealthy master’s household and who could often acquire significant assets and own other slaves (Weidemann 161-164; c.f. Osiek and Balch 81; Osiek 176; Bartchy 65-73). The result is that historians are divided as to whether people in Greco-Roman societies viewed slavery as an essentially negative institution, or could entertain some positive connotations of the system. Biblical scholars tend to follow the historians, because of their dependency on such scholars for studies into the societies of the biblical times. The result is that scholars from many fields of study tend to view a priori slavery in antiquity in either mostly positive terms or in mostly negative terms.

1 Compare the somewhat negative views in Weidemann 1981; Vogt 27, 120; and the somewhat positive view in Westermann 1941: 470; 1943: 9-10, 16. Horsley (32-38) is highly critical of the practice of slavery in antiquity and considers Weidemann and Vogt to be positive about slavery in antiquity.

2 For positive views on Greco-Roman slavery, see Bartchy 1973: 47, 70, 77-78; 1992: 65-73 (more positive again); and Martin 1990: 2-48. For negative views, the articles in Semeia 83/84 1998, all of which follow Patterson Slavery and Social Death.
Consequently, just in the historical study of the practice of slavery in antiquity, even when scholars attempt to find the historical “truth” of the system or reconstruct it, they are already interpreting what they find through the “artifice” of some viewpoint or interpretative strategy. This affects the use of “servant/slave” language in the ANE in titles and in the designation of one’s self in relation to others, because any given scholar already has a connotation on the meaning of the terms for “slave/servant” before they study the ancient texts and inscriptions.

THE USE OF SLAVERY TERMS IN TEXTS AND INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE ANE

With respect to the ANE, Plato and Aristotle made negative comments that non-Greeks were enslaved to their despotic rulers (Plato 1930-1935 [1:472-473]; Aristotle, in Garnsey 118). Plato (1926: 1:221,223 [3.693.a.5-7]; 1930-1935: 1:493 [5.469.c.2]) gave some rationale for this: he felt that nations subject to the Persians lived in misery and that the Greeks feared wholesale enslavement to the Persians. Plato and Aristotle’s comments no doubt reflect a sense of cultural superiority, but the way the peoples of the ANE used servile terms to indicate status and in relation to their gods, would no doubt add to their view. “Greeks always found it difficult to express the hierarchy of dependence in oriental kingdoms” (Weidemann 42).

The frequent use of servile terms in titles and in relation to their gods in many ANE societies (including the ancient Hebrews) is now well attested. The terms are found in correspondence, on documents, on seal inscriptions, on tomb inscriptions, monuments, and in a variety of contexts in the Hebrew Bible. With regard to seal inscriptions, in the Yale University collection of Babylonian cylinder seals (Hallo 440-462) alone, 102 have servile terms in their inscriptions. Of these, “servant of a king/ruler” occurs 22 times and “servant of a deity/deities” occurs 46 times. Of the “servant of a king/ruler” seal inscriptions, five are titles of very high status people; for example, Šu-Sin the great king, king of Ur, king of the four heavenly quarters, A’a-kalla governor of Umma (is) your servant [Ur III period, approx 2100-2000 BCE] (Hallo 453). In similar fashion to the Babylonian seal titles, some Hebrew seal inscriptions found in Palestine also have the title, ‘slave/servant’ of so and so. Three examples are (Avigad “Contribution of Hebrew Seals” 197-206): (belonging) to ‘Elishama’, servant (‘ebed) of the king; (belonging) to Miqnêyaw servant (‘ebed) of Yahweh, and (belonging) to Shelimoth maidservant (‘amah) of Elnathan the governor.

Seals connote status. They are used to sign documents, to buy or sell, to prove identity and to prove status. Obviously, Athenian Greeks would find the use of “servant” for these purposes hard to understand because of their “artifice” of the democratic ideals (for elite men!). But what status do seal inscriptions with servile terms connote for lesser status people, especially women who designated themselves as “servants” of someone, such as Shelimoth did? It is difficult for scholars to conceive that a female “servant”, even of a governor, could have status. Obviously this is a scholarly artifice! This is

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3 Hallo does not deal with any cuneiform texts that the seals may have accompanied, but indicates awareness that in some texts, ‘servant of so-and-so’ titles occur (Hallo 1981: 456).
because of factors such as: the predominately patriarchal nature of most ANE societies; the presence of only four inscriptions from Palestine that use the term ‘*amah* (see Davies et al. 73, 140, 253); only one seal inscription in the Yale University Babylonian Seal collection that has a woman as the “servant” of someone (Hallo 545-6, 549); c.f. Avigad 13); the widespread ANE custom of women being sold as slave wives (Mendelsohn 50; Avigad 12; Bakir 95, 98 [inferred only for Egypt]; and Brown et al. 712-15 for Genesis 20:17; 21:12; 23:12 and Judges 9:18; 19:19); the Egyptian preference for female slaves (Bakir 15-16, 65); and the retaining of the term *GEMÉ* (literally, “female slave”) in the titles on Mesopotamian seals of women in contrast to the use of *IR* in male titles instead of *nītā* or *eri(d)* (Mendelsohn 34). On this last matter, some scholars make comments such as: many of Babylonian/Akkadian seals with women as “servant of a deity” titles are “votive seals”. That is, they were created as part of an offering to a deity and express the female worshipper’s self-abasement before the deity (e.g. Avigad *Bulla* 13, fn.22).

One then has to ask about many of the seals of men who called themselves “servant of a deity”. Scholars acknowledge that “worshippers often of course speak of themselves as ‘slaves’ of the deity being adored”, helped by such texts as the *Dingir.sa.dib.ba Incantations* I.72-79 (Lambert 299, 279), in which a worshipper, in an extreme state, described himself as a “slave” to the deity amongst a number of other images. Ultimately, scholars can only assume that Shelimoth’s title indicates status rather than prove it, partly because the seal was found in a setting that suggested an official archive (Avigad *Bulla* 13, 30-31). In support of this conclusion is the portrayal of women in the Hebrew Scriptures: women could have significant status and influence, even though uncommon (see, e.g. Judges 4-5 [Deborah, a significant leader]; 2 Kings 22:14-20 and Ezek 13:17-23 [prophetesses]; 2 Kings 11 [Athaliah, a queen]).

A second text type that can imply status for the use of servile terms for self-deference is inscriptions on monuments. This occurs in tomb paintings in Egypt, particularly from the Middle Kingdom Period onwards. One inscription of an apparently high official reads: *I am the one who grinds corn for Osiris and (I am) the servant (hm) of Nut* … (Bakir 33). This official was either part of a temple staff, or was engaged in funerary services for a high status person, in which the deceased was seen as having merged with the god Osiris and/or Nut. Titles that use the term *mr(t)* are common, and the Egyptian kings would also use servile terms of themselves in relation to the gods (Bakir 25-33).

Why did peoples, including rulers, in many of the ANE societies use servile terms in their titles? Chattel slavery was certainly practiced across the whole of the ANE, but it appears that slaves made up only a small percentage of the population in most societies, with most slaves being state slaves (e.g. for building projects) or temple slaves (Mendelsohn 12, 92-99; Snell *Life in the ANE* 119; Dandamaev 269-271; Bakir 1-9, 100; c.f. Baker 24). Despite some evidence of concern about slaves’ behaviour, Snell (*Life in the ANE* 45, 123) suggests that during the Babylonian and Persian periods in Mesopotamia (626-322 BCE), “the status of being a slave bore little stigma”; however,

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4 Avigad does not provide proof. He simply asserts this.
outside of slavery, there were many other forms of non-free labour systems in the ANE, to which most of the lower classes were subject periodically (Snell *Life in the ANE* 70, 79, 123; Mendelsohn 98-99; Diakonoff; Callender 69-71). Ancient Israelites were sometimes subjected to corvee labour (1 Kings 9:15-22; 12:18; 15:22; and Nehemiah 3). Non-free labour was the norm in Egypt (Bakir 1-9). This can affirm that, at least for Egypt, being a “servant” of someone was a common experience. Consequently, from both the Egyptian and Mesopotamian situations, the use of servile terms in titles and self-deference can be expected.

The other situation that may lie behind the wide use of servile terms in the ANE for titles and self-designations is the nature of leadership in the societies of the ANE. Absolute monarchy was certainly practiced in parts of the ANE, especially in Egypt with its system of the god-king (Frankfort 52-53, 60, 251; Grayson 205; Dandamaev 253; Smith 24). Plato’s comments reflect something of the reality. However, there were some checks, such as religion (the kings were “servants” of the gods [Frankfort 10, 55-59, 240-258; Gurney 121; Baines 27-28]), legal precedent (custom and ideals of social justice) (Frankfort 58; Dandamaev 253; Lambert 57, 60, 65, 69-70; Day 86-87), and the nobility (Dandamaev 253-255; Lambert 67; also Jeremiah 38:1-5 and 2 Chronicles 24:17). Despite Grayson and Frankfort’s descriptions of the bureaucracies of Assyria and Egypt respectively, they do not discuss how authority was practiced. It is likely that the autocratic rule of the king was replicated in the bureaucracy since most officials in Egypt and Sumer/Akkad were related to the royal house, and patronage (which included bribery) was the norm in Assyria (Grayson 199-206; Frankfort 52-53; Hallo and Simpson: 57), and the kings surrounded themselves with nobility and officials to distance themselves as “sacral” persons from the population (Baines 26). The consequence is that everyone was a “servant” of whoever was in immediate authority over them. As scholars discuss what this might have meant in practice, the “artifices” of their assumptions start to emerge. For example, Garnsey (238), a Greco-Roman historian, writes that “everyone was a slave in Persia apart from the king, everyone in Egypt apart from the Pharaoh”, and Finley (145-164), another Greco-Roman historian, comments that the ANE was “a world without free men”. Garnsey writes his comment from the contrast of ancient Greek society ideals of freedom, and Finley writes his comment from the contrast of Western ideals of freedom. Bakir would back up Garnsey’s comment about the “lack” of freedom in Egypt, but Mendelsohn’s work would counter Garnsey’s comment about Persia and Finley’s generalised comment about the ANE. The problem here is the definition of freedom: Athenian Greeks (elite) and Westerners think of freedom as self-autonomy and

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5 However, Baines 1998: 16-53 questions whether the Egyptian king was seen as a god.

6 Mesopotamian and Egyptian understandings of divine legitimisation of the king differs; however in both places, the king was understood to be subject to the demands of the gods. In a number of Mesopotamia societies, for example, the king was ‘re-elected’ by the gods, performed in the ritual of the New Year’s festival; see Frankfort 1948: 313-333 (detail) and Smith 1958: 29-30 (summary).

7 Most scholars note the issue whether the ideals were put into practice!

8 At the time of writing, I have not been able to access McGuire and Briggs 1991.
political self-determination, whereas most of the ancient world would more likely think of “freedom” as “someone [who] is at home somewhere and has the right to be there” (Gerhardsson 4; c.f. Blunck 1:715). All of the scholars just mentioned assume the reader will know what they mean by “free”. This problem is discussed from a cultural anthropological perspective in Malina (1978) and from an ANE text perspective in Snell (2001).

Given that most people in the ANE were a “servant” of whoever was in authority over them, their designation of themselves as a “servant” would not necessarily connote a demeaning status. It may connote the opposite—high status—as, for example, a “servant” of the king would in fact have considerable status, particularly when on the king’s business. This is proven by the “servant of the king” titles by lesser rulers in Mesopotamia already noted above, and in an Egyptian painting in which a “servant” of a king does obeisance to the king and is next portrayed as having been exalted by the king, shown by his peers carrying him on his shoulders (Keel 350-352). Even Greeks and Romans, despite their generally negative view of slaves, recognised that the social position of slaves could vary.9

The use of servile terms for status is also found in ancient correspondence from the ANE. The custom occurred in Egypt, from the Middle Kingdom period onwards, and was used in at least one letter by Amenhotep IV (Bakir 18, 20). Many official letters from Assyria show the custom (see Grayson 207);10 e.g. To the king our lord, your servants Balasi (and) Nahu-ahe-erba: Greetings to the king our lord. May Nahu and Marduk bless the king our lord … (Frankfort 254, from Pfeiffer: 187). Letters (written on fragments of pottery, called ostraca) by ancient Israelites and found at Arad and Lachish also show the custom. For example, the letter, Lachish 2 (seventh century BCE) reads:

To my lord, Ya’ush: May YHWH cause my lord to hear tidings of peace now, today, this very day. Who is your servant, a (mere) dog, that my lord has remembered his [s]ervant? May YHWH quickly bring my … a word that you did not know. (Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 306)

The Mesad Ḥasayyabon or Yavneḥ Yam letter, from the same period, in which a plaintiff appeals to an official about the confiscation of his cloak by his work supervisor, starts:

May my lord, the officer, hear the word of his servant. As for your servant, your servant was harvesting at Ḥazar-asam… (Davies et al. 76-77; Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 358-359)

It is important to note that the author of the Mesad Ḥasayyabon letter is a person of low status, whereas Lachish 2 was written by an official.

The custom was continued by later Jews who were part of a military garrison in Upper Egypt on the island of Elephantine, and involved people of various statuses. A now-unknown author addressed a letter with: To my lords Jedaniah, Mauijah, Uriah, and the garrison, [your] servant […]. … To my lords Jedaniah (and) Mauijah [your] servant …] (Cowley

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9 An attempt to chart this is given by Alfödy (1988: 146) in which flexibility in social position is shown rather than simply putting all slaves in one social strata. See also (within the field of biblical studies) Baruchy ‘Slavery’ 1992: 66, 70-71; Lyall 1970: 78-79; Osiek 1992: 175-176; de Vos 1995: 294-295.

10 The terms are ‘my lord’ (bēl) and ‘your servant’ (uradka).
Mauziah, one of the leaders, started a letter with: To my lords Jedaniah, Uriah and the priests of YHW the God, Mattan son of Jashobiab and Neriah son of [...] your servant Mauziah ... (Cowley 38; late C5 BCE). Jedaniah, another of the leaders, started a letter to the Persian appointed governor in Judea with: To our lord Bagohi governor of Judah, your servants Jedaniah and his colleagues the priests who are in Elephantine the fortress ... (Cowley 30; 407 BCE) (Porten ed. 80-81, 83, 90). Of significance is the second citation: Mauziah’s use of “servant” for self-deference among the group of leaders. It might be that Jedaniah is the leader of the Jewish community, given his spokesperson’s role in the requests to the governors in Palestine (Cowley 30, 31, 33) and his name at the top of the list of addressees in Cowley 21 and 37 (Porten ed. 1976: 79-101). This can account for Mauziah’s deference, but that Mauziah is closely associated with Jedaniah is shown in Cowley 33, unless the variant in spelling the name indicates a different person.11 However, in other letters, for example the Passover Letter (Cowley 21), the familial term “brother” is used (Kraeling 61; Porten ed. 78-79; Hanson). This indicates that “servant” (‘ebed) is a synonym in meaning to “brother”, showing that “servant” is a term of politeness, which can be swapped for other terms.

This actually happens in the Hebrew letter, Arad 40 (either late eighth century or early sixth century BCE): Your sons, Gemar[j]ah and Nebemiah, greet Malchiah. I bless [you by YHW]H. And now, your [se]rvant ... (Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 69-70; Aharoni et al. 71-72).12 But the term that parallels “servant” is “son”, a term that also denotes junior or lesser status to the recipient. Therefore “servant” remains a term of deference to superiors or to people who have authority (c.f. Lachish 2; Meṣad Ḥashayahu).13 However, there is no connotation of servile status by the use of “servant” (or “son”). Arad 40 indicates the authors have complied with their superior’s instructions, but in some of the Lachish letters (Lachish 2, Lachish 3, Lachish 5 and Lachish 6 – see Dobbs-Allsopp et al. 305-306, 309, 320, 322-323; Davies et al. 1-4), the senders, always the junior to the recipient, criticise some action their senior did that they thought was inappropriate and would impugn their status of loyal subordinates. For example, the Lachish 5 reads:

May YHWH cause my lord to hear a report of peace and good tidings [now, today, this very day]. Who is your servant, a mere dog, that you sent to your servant the letters thus? Your servant has returned the letters to my lord. May YHWH cause you to see the harvest in prosperity today. Is it to your servant that Tobiah will bring grain for the king?

The action criticised was the author being given letters not meant to be sent to him. The point with respect to “servant” is that self-deference using “servant” (‘ebed) does not imply servile submissiveness, although loyalty to the superior is indicated.

11 There is a problem with the spelling of Mauziah. In Cowley 37 and 38, the name is spelled מַעְזִיָּה; in Cowley 33 it is מַעְזַיָּה and coupled with ‘son of Nathan’; and in Cowley 28, the name is מַעְזַיָּה, also designated as ‘son of Nathan’ (Porten 1976: 80-83, 101, 29-30). But in Kraeling 4, the spelling is מַעְזִיָּה, with the designation, ‘son of Nathan’ (Porten 1976: 47), and with the occupation of ‘the scribe’.

12 Aharoni argues for a late eighth century dating for Arad 40; Dobbs-Allsopp et al for the early sixth century.

Similar occurs in the six Assyrian official letters cited in Frankfort (253-255). In these letters, various priests and soothsayers who designate themselves as “servants” (uradka) to the king of Assyria claim the right to direct him on matters of determining the will of the gods. One letter reads (Frankfort 1948: 254):

To the king our lord, your servants Balasi (and) Nahu-abe-erba: Greetings to the king our lord. May Nabu and Marduk bless the king our lord.

The king our lord is gracious. A day has gone by since the king began fasting and has not eaten a morsel. “Until when?” is his enquiry. Today the king should eat no food, the king is a beggar. At the beginning of the month the moon will be seen. (The king says:) “Release me! Have I not waited (long enough)? It is the beginning of the month. I want to eat food, I want to drink wine!” Now, is Jupiter the moon? Later, for a whole year, the king may ask for food. We have pondered the matter and we have prescribed. We have written accordingly to the king.

In effect, they criticise the king, their superior, for his desire to end a period of fasting quickly. The king cannot hurry a religious ritual: he “appears as a true slave of the ritual” (Frankfort 254). That is, “servant” is not a title that indicates servile submissiveness. Despite their deference to the king, the priests maintain their authority to direct the king on matters of religious ritual, which as scholars point out, is part of their obedience to the king (Frankfort 253-255; Smith 30, 47).

The Lachish, Arad and the Assyrian letters cited in Frankfort have the one thing in common: “servant” was a polite metaphor (“artifice”) used in reference to a superior. In a similar fashion, the term “lord” in the Lachish and Arad letters is freed from its meaning of “ruler, a person of the nobility” to become simply a title of respect. Ultimately, the term “servant” is used to replace the first person personal pronoun, “I”. This is in contrast with the use of “servant” in the seals, where status is the focus (the right to own, to witness, to buy and sell, to prove identity, and to prove status even if it is derived status such as an official of a ruler).

The varied situations in the Hebrew Bible in which the metaphorical use of “slave/servant” (‘ebed [m], ‘amah[f]) is found are in keeping with the use of “servant” in the letters just discussed. It is used of significant people (“the servant of Yahweh” – e.g. David [Psalm 89], Abraham [Psalm 105:6], Moses [Deuteronomy 34:5], prophets [Jeremiah 44:4]); by worshipers in the Psalms (e.g. Psalm 119 [many times]; Psalm 86:2, 4, 16); in Genesis 33 of Jacob before his brother and equal, Esau; and for low status people before a high status person (e.g. Ruth to Boaz in Ruth 2-3 [‘amah]; Ziba to King David in 2 Samuel 9 [‘ebed]). In the Books of 1&2 Samuel and 1&2 Kings, officials, courtiers and ordinary people are often described as “servants” of the king, and soldiers as “servants” of their leader. Subjugated peoples to Israel are also described as “serving” the Israelite king (e.g. 2 Samuel 8:2, 6, 14; Psalm 18:44; 2 Kings 24:1). Except for subjugated peoples, the common idea in this use of “servant” is “deference”. Lesser

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14 For lists and discussions on the uses of ‘ebed and ‘amah in the Hebrew Bible, see Brown et al 1979: 712-715; Zimmerli and Jeremias 1965: 11-36; See also, for Genesis-Deuteronomy, Haas 2003: 778-783.
status persons are narrated as using the title, “your servant”, as a polite, deferential replacement for “I”. The biblical narrators themselves used “servant” as a cover-all term for anyone of lesser status to the (usually high profile) character in focus at the time of use.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the metaphoric use of servile terms by people in the ANE for titles and self-designation to others is simply an “artifice” of politeness. In this use, the meaning of the terms has moved from the literal meaning, “slave”, to denote status. The status is real, emphasised by the seal inscriptions, but derived through loyalty, emphasised by ancient letters. Yet, in the latter, servile submissiveness is not connoted: “servant” has become a polite metaphor for the first person personal pronoun “I”, a use found in many contexts of the metaphorical use of “servant” in the Hebrew Bible.

It is concluded that the self-designation, “slave/servant” is a metaphoric artifice used by people in the ANE to claim status before a higher power by means of the connotation that they are obedient to that higher power.
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