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Slavery in the Pentateuch and Its Relevance to Human Trafficking in Asia: A Theological Review

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Abstract

Human trafficking in Asia has reached an alarming level, with victims trapped in forced labor, sex trafficking, forced marriage, and other forms of exploitation. Meanwhile, the Pentateuch is often misunderstood as legitimizing slavery, whereas its laws actually contain principles of liberation and protection for the oppressed. This study aims to analyze the concept of slavery in the Pentateuch (Ex. 21, Lev. 25, Deut. 15) and to establish its relevance to the phenomenon of human trafficking in Asia, as well as to formulate theological implications for the Church's response. Using qualitative library research with a descriptive-analytical approach and liberation hermeneutics, this study finds that the slave laws in the Pentateuch emphasize the limitation of slavery periods, protection for escaped slaves, restoration through the Year of Jubilee, and voluntary service based on love. These principles are highly relevant for addressing the root causes of human trafficking, such as poverty, corruption, and weak policies. This study concludes that the Church in Asia is called to be an agent of liberation, providing protection, advocacy, holistic recovery, and preventive education for victims and vulnerable communities.

Keywords: Church Response; Human Trafficking; Liberation Theology; Pentateuch; Slavery

INTRODUCTION

Human trafficking constitutes one of the most serious violations of human rights in the modern era, and the bitter reality indicates that this practice remains rampant in various regions of Asia. In Asian countries, human trafficking often appears as forced labor, forced marriage, sex trafficking, and the exploitation of men, women, and children.¹ This phenomenon is not merely a cross-border crime but also a humanitarian issue that touches upon the fundamental values of dignity and freedom of every person

¹ Zeeshan Khan et al., "Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Human Trafficking in Asian Countries: A Scoping Review," *F1000Research* 11 (2023): 1021.

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created in the image of God. Ironically, amid technological progress and globalization, modern forms of slavery have become increasingly complex and well-organized. Advances in information technology have become an opportunity for the expansion of criminal networks, both national and transnational.² Therefore, understanding human trafficking requires not only sociological or criminological perspectives but also deep theological reflection, particularly from the Pentateuch, which serves as the foundation of law and ethics for the nation of Israel.³

Theoretically, discussions of slavery in the Pentateuch often provoke intense debate among theologians because of the difficulty in separating ancient cultural practices from normative theological principles. The term "slave" in Bible translations frequently leads to misunderstandings, since it is all too easy to read the cruel slavery of the Greeks, Romans, Europeans, and Americans back into the Old and New Testaments.⁴ To describe what is permitted in the Bible, many scholars prefer to use terms other than "slave," speaking rather of "bound laborers" (only for actual debt), "service labor," or, following Georg Huntemann, "service work".⁵ Leviticus 25:39-46 describes a two-tiered model of slavery that distinguishes between Israelites and foreign slaves, whereby Israelites could become slaves only temporarily, while foreigners could be enslaved as permanent property.⁶ This model became a theological basis that later indirectly shaped perspectives on slavery practices in various cultures, including during the colonial era.

One might ask why this study focuses exclusively on the Pentateuch rather than on New Testament texts such as Paul's letter to Philemon concerning Onesimus, or the household codes in Ephesians and Colossians, which appear to address slavery more directly in a context closer to the modern era. The answer lies in the foundational nature of the Pentateuch as the theological and legal constitution of Israel, which establishes the core principles of justice, human dignity, and liberation that subsequently inform the entire biblical narrative. While Paul's letters address specific pastoral situations within the context of Greco-Roman household slavery, the Pentateuch provides the original framework within which the concepts of covenant, redemption, and the image of God are first articulated. The laws concerning debt-slavery, the Year of Jubilee, and the protection of fugitive slaves in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy represent the normative ideal of Israelite society, an ideal that repeatedly calls for the limitation of exploitation and the restoration of the oppressed. By contrast, the New Testament household tables assume the existing social structures of the Roman Empire and focus on internal Christian conduct within those structures rather than challenging the institution itself. Therefore, for a study that seeks to establish a theological foundation for combating human trafficking in Asia,

² Evie Ariadne, Benazir Bona Pratamawaty, and Putri Limilia, "Human Trafficking in Indonesia, the Dialectic of Poverty and Corruption," *Sosiohumaniora* 23, no. 3 (2021): 356–63.

³ Ragil Kristiawan, "Pesan Teologis Penggunaan Nama Gabungan Allah יְיָ לַאֱלֹהִים (El-Shaddai) Dalam Pentateukh," *Jurnal Ilmiah Tafsir Alkitab* 1, no. 2 (2024): 93–109.

⁴ thomas Schirmacher, "Slavery in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and Today," *Christian Values vs Contemporary Values*, 2014, 125.

⁵ schirmacher.

⁶ James W Watts, "The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism," *Religions* 12, no. 8 (2021): 570.

the Pentateuch offers a more robust and principled framework for liberation than the pastoral accommodations found in the Pauline epistles. This is not to diminish the importance of Philemon or Colossians, but rather to recognize that the Pentateuch provides the theological lexicon of redemption that ultimately enables the New Testament's vision of freedom in Christ. As Schirmacher himself notes, the Old Testament slave laws present a trajectory toward increasing protection and eventual liberation, a trajectory that finds its culmination in the New Testament's spiritual application but whose legal and ethical foundations remain rooted in the Pentateuch.⁷

The phenomenon of human trafficking in Asia today exhibits complexities far exceeding the ancient slavery practices recorded in Old Testament texts. Indonesia, for example, not only serves as a country of origin in the trafficking process but is also used as a destination and transit country. Alarming, all 38 provinces in Indonesia are both sources and destinations for human trafficking (when the data were collected in 2021, there were 34 provinces; the number has since increased to 38), and the victims are mostly women and children.⁸ Poverty is considered the primary trigger for prospective Indonesian migrant workers. In addition, natural disasters also increase vulnerability to human trafficking, and endemic corruption among government officials contributes to trafficking vulnerability.⁹ The crime of human trafficking is sustained by three important factors: the supply of potential victims for exploitation in countries of origin, the constant demand for trafficking victims in destination countries, and the presence of organized criminal groups acting as intermediaries.¹⁰

Previous research on human trafficking and slavery in the Bible has been conducted by several scholars, yet significant gaps remain. First, the study by James W. Watts in "The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism" highlights how the two-tiered model of slavery in Leviticus 25 was used to justify differential treatment of white and black slaves in the American colonies, but it does not connect this to contemporary human trafficking practices in Asia.¹¹ Second, Schirmacher's study of slavery in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and Today discusses the differences between slavery in the Bible and modern slavery, yet it focuses more on ethical defense of the Old Testament text without specifically analyzing its relevance to human trafficking cases in Southeast Asia.¹² Third, the study by Hoskins in *The Servant's Ear: Study of the Servant in Whom YHWH is Well Pleased* examines the motif of ear piercing in Exodus 21:5–6 and Deuteronomy 15:16–17 as a symbol of voluntary service based on love, but it does not develop the theological implications for

⁷ schirmacher, "Slavery in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and Today."

⁸ Ariadne, Pratamawaty, and Limilia, "Human Trafficking in Indonesia, the Dialectic of Poverty and Corruption."

⁹ Ariadne, Pratamawaty, and Limilia.

¹⁰ Ravi Mahalingam, "Human Trafficking from a Multidisciplinary Perspectives: A Literature Review," *Asian Journal of Social Science Research* 2, no. 2 (2019): 1–16.

¹¹ Watts, "The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism."

¹² schirmacher, "Slavery in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and Today."

contemporary efforts to liberate victims of human trafficking.¹³ The novelty of this research lies in its systematic attempt to connect the laws concerning slavery in the Pentateuch (Ex. 21, Lev. 25, Deut. 15) with the root causes of human trafficking in Asia, such as poverty, corruption, and weak policies, and to formulate a contextual theological response for the Church in Asia.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that discussions of human trafficking in Asia often suffer from overly broad generalizations that treat the region as a homogeneous analytical category. Asia is extraordinarily diverse in its political systems, cultural traditions, religious landscapes, and socio-economic conditions. Human trafficking manifests differently across Asian societies, with varying motivations, operational structures, legal responses, and cultural perceptions. For instance, trafficking in parts of South Asia is frequently associated with economic vulnerability and poverty, whereas in the Middle East it may be connected to labor migration regimes and employment sponsorship systems. Similarly, East Asian contexts such as Japan are shaped by distinct social and economic frameworks that influence public and legal understandings of commercial sexual industries.¹⁴ This study recognizes these regional variations and, while focusing on Indonesia as a primary case study within the broader Asian context, does not claim to represent all Asian societies uniformly. Rather, the theological principles derived from the Pentateuch are offered as a framework that can be adapted to various local contexts, allowing the Church in each Asian nation to respond to human trafficking according to its specific social, legal, and cultural realities.

Based on the background outlined above, this study aims to critically analyze the concept of slavery in the Pentateuch and to establish its relevance to the phenomenon of human trafficking in Asia, as well as to formulate theological-practical implications for prevention and victim recovery. This research not only discusses the legal and ethical aspects of Old Testament slavery but also explores how texts such as Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 15 can be reread from a liberation perspective to respond to human trafficking practices that remain deeply rooted in various Asian countries. The liberation perspective employed in this study is a hermeneutical approach rooted in the recognition that God's heart is for the oppressed and that Scripture calls for the transformation of unjust social structures. This perspective draws upon the theological tradition that reads the biblical text in solidarity with the marginalized, seeking to uncover its liberating message for contemporary contexts of exploitation and injustice. Specifically, this study will show that although the Pentateuch acknowledges the existence of the institution of slavery within the social context of ancient Israel, it contains theological principles, such as protection of the weak, limitation of the duration of servitude, and emphasis on the value of every person before God, that actually provide a strong foundation for rejecting all forms of human exploitation in the modern era.

¹³ Warren Eugene Hoskins, "The Servant's Ear: Study of the Servant in Whom YHWH Is Well Pleased: An Expository Connection of Exodus 21: 5-6 and Deuteronomy 15: 16-17 to the Servants of Revelation," 2025.

¹⁴ Sheila Devi Michael and Ravi Mahalingam, "Sex Trafficking in Asia: A Review from Business and Organisational Perspectives," *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 61, no. 1 (2026): 179–93.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative method with a descriptive-analytical approach based on library research. The choice of library research is justified by the research objective, which is not to provide an exhaustive empirical account of human trafficking in a specific locality, but rather to establish a theological framework that can inform the Church's response across various Asian contexts. While a comprehensive case study would require extensive longitudinal fieldwork across multiple national contexts, the library research approach allows for the integration of diverse sources, including biblical exegesis, theological reflection, sociological analysis, and policy evaluation, thereby enabling a multidisciplinary examination.¹⁵ The primary data consist of the Hebrew text of the Pentateuch,¹⁶ specifically Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 15, analyzed through exegetical methods using *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*.¹⁷ This direct engagement with primary sources addresses the concern that textual discussions should not rely solely on secondary materials. Secondary data include academic journals, books, policy reports, and legal documents from Asian countries and international organizations, which provide the empirical and contextual grounding necessary for establishing the relevance of Pentateuchal laws to contemporary human trafficking.

The research process is structured into three interconnected stages: exegesis of the key Pentateuchal passages concerning slave laws, analysis of the phenomenon of human trafficking in Asia focusing on its forms and root causes, and formulation of the theological relevance of these laws for the Church's response. Data analysis is conducted using a descriptive-analytical method, wherein findings from various sources are systematically described, categorized, and interpreted thematically. The validity of the research is maintained through critical reading of the biblical text in its original Hebrew, constant comparison across multiple translations and scholarly commentaries, and triangulation of sources from biblical texts, academic literature, and policy documents. The hermeneutical approach employed in this study adopts a liberation perspective that reads the Pentateuchal slave laws as texts containing theological principles capable of challenging and transforming unjust social structures.¹⁸ While the study focuses on Indonesia as a primary example, it acknowledges the diversity of Asian contexts and does not treat the region as a homogeneous analytical category, ensuring that the theological principles derived are offered as a flexible framework adaptable to various local realities.¹⁹

¹⁵ Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson, *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology* (Zondervan Academic, 2020).

¹⁶ Ragil Kristiawan, "Pembekalan Penulisan Jurnal Bertajuk 'Mengubah Khotbah Menjadi Jurnal PkM' Pada Program Pascasarjana STT Kristus Alfa Omega," *Tikkun-Olam: Jurnal Penelitian & PKM* 2, no. 2 (2025): 171–84.

¹⁷ Ragil Kristiawan, *Dari Teks Kuno Ke Hidup: Mengenal, Mempraktekkan, Dan Menerapkan Eksegesis Narasi Perjanjian Lama Di Jaman Now* (Solok: Penerbit Mafy, 2026).

¹⁸ Charlie Trimm, Brittany Kim, and Carmen Joy Imes, "Black Readings of Exodus," *Currents in Biblical Research* 23, no. 1 (2024): 80–99.

¹⁹ Michael and Mahalingam, "Sex Trafficking in Asia: A Review from Business and Organisational Perspectives."

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Concept of Slavery in the Pentateuch: Between Law, Ethics, and Human Values

Before analyzing the relevance of Pentateuchal law to human trafficking in Asia, it is necessary first to resolve hermeneutical misunderstandings that often hinder modern readers from seeing the liberating values within Old Testament texts. When someone reads the term "slave" in Bible translations, this term often leads to misunderstandings, since it is all too easy to read the cruel slavery of the Greeks, Romans, Muslims, Europeans, and Americans back into the Old and New Testaments.²⁰ If this error is not corrected, any discussion of slave laws in the Pentateuch will always be overshadowed by images of transatlantic slavery, which is fundamentally different. To describe what is permitted in the Bible, it is better to use terms other than "slave" and to speak rather of "bound laborers" (only for actual debt), "service labor," or, following Georg Huntemann, "service work".²¹ The consequences of such a misreading are not merely academic but also ethical, for they may lead modern Christians either to justify exploitative practices on biblical grounds or, conversely, to reject the authority of the Old Testament altogether. By adopting more precise terminology, readers can see that the New Testament household tables discuss domestic slavery, not the criminal slavery of galleys and mines, and must not be thought of in light of modern slave trade practices. Thus, this subsection will begin its analysis with the assumption that the institution of slavery in ancient Israel is fundamentally different from the racial and exploitative forms of slavery in modern history, so that the discussion of Pentateuchal law can focus on its theological principles relevant to contemporary efforts to liberate victims of human trafficking.

Etymologically, the Hebrew term used for "slave" in the Old Testament has a root related to work, not to the ownership of a person as property. The Hebrew term for slave, עֶבֶד is a direct derivative of the verb meaning 'to work'.²² Consequently, a 'slave' is merely a worker or servant.²³ This etymological meaning is very important because it shows that the status of "slave" in Hebrew thought is determined more by the function of work than by an ontological status as property. Furthermore, עֶבֶד is distinguished from a hired worker in three respects: he receives no wages for his work; he is a member of his master's household; and his master exercises paternal control over him.²⁴ The aspect of "paternal control" indicates that the relationship between master and slave in Israelite society was not merely transactional but also contained dimensions of responsibility and protection. The principle that every person possesses inherent dignity aligns with the

²⁰ schirmmacher, "Slavery in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and Today."

²¹ Schirmmacher.

²² Francis Brown, Samuel Rolles Driver, and Charles Augustus Briggs, *Enhanced Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Oak Harbor: Logos Research Systems, 2000).

²³ schirmmacher, "Slavery in the Old Testament, in the New Testament, and Today."

²⁴ schirmmacher.

biblical view that even a slave is a member of the household, not merely a means of production.²⁵

One of the most important contributions of comparative studies between Israelite law and the laws of other ancient Near Eastern nations is the discovery of uniquely humane characteristics in Israelite slave law. The debt-slave law in Exodus 21:2–11 presents a particular challenge for biblical scholars who struggle to explain the relationship between male Israelite slaves and female slaves based on ancient Near Eastern parallels and intertextual approaches.²⁶ This challenge arises because Israelite law not only adopted legal codes from Mesopotamia but also transformed them significantly in accordance with Israelite covenant theology. The casuistic form of the debt-slave law, with its "if-then" pattern, clearly reflects many characteristics of ancient Near Eastern legal codes, especially the Code of Hammurabi from the second millennium BCE. On the other hand, researchers have noted the intertextual relationships among the three laws within the debt-slave laws, namely Exodus 21:2–11, Deuteronomy 15:12–18, and Leviticus 25:39–46, which together allow scholars to examine other aspects of Hebrew slave law, including the release of female Hebrew slaves and the Year of Jubilee for slaves.²⁷ The existence of these three layers of law indicates that the Israelite tradition continually reflected on and refined its understanding of slavery throughout its history, with a tendency toward increasing emphasis on protection and liberation.²⁸

One of the most controversial aspects of the discussion of slavery in the Pentateuch is the differential treatment of male and female slaves, as well as of Hebrew versus foreign slaves. Leviticus 25:39–46 describes a two-tiered model of slavery that distinguishes Israelites from foreign slaves, whereby Israelites could become slaves only temporarily while foreigners could be enslaved as permanent property.²⁹ This two-tiered model has become a basis for much criticism of the Bible, as it is seen as legitimizing racial discrimination. James W. Watts shows that this model resembles the distinction between white indentured servants and black chattel slaves in the American colonies.³⁰ However, it is important to note that the biblical influence on these early modern practices has been obscured by the scarcity of citations of Leviticus 25:39–46 in sixteenth and seventeenth-century sources on slavery. Nevertheless, demonstrating this awareness proves with high probability that colonial culture assumed the two-tiered model of slavery in Leviticus 25:39–46 to naturalize and justify their differential treatment of white indentured servants and black chattel slaves. In the context of teaching about American

²⁵ M Dewi Candra, "Nilai Filsafat Keadilan Dalam Putusan Pidana Terhadap Pelaku Human Trafficking.," *Jurnal Pendidikan Indonesia* 5, no. 12 (2024).

²⁶ Inchol Yang, "An Analysis of the Debt-Slave Law in the Book of the Covenant," *성경원문연구*, no. 55 (2024): 105–25.

²⁷ Yang.

²⁸ Yurika Sakinah Sakinah, Rahma Adzkie Putri, and Asep Suherman, "Pengaruh Kinerja Aparat Penegak Hukum Terhadap Tingkat Efektivitas Penegakan Hak Asasi Manusia Dalam Menangani Kasus Perdagangan Orang," *Jurnal Kajian Hukum Dan Kebijakan Publik* | E-ISSN: 3031-8882 3, no. 1 (2025): 96–107.

²⁹ Watts, "The Historical Role of Leviticus 25 in Naturalizing Anti-Black Racism."

³⁰ Watts.

slavery and its connections to Christianity and the Bible, Dan Shepherd notes that the reluctance of social studies teachers to address religious issues prevents students from understanding the intersection of two important American institutions, namely slavery and Christianity.³¹ However, history teaching, which has mistakenly acquired a reputation as lifeless and boring, can be enhanced and energized by the content of two topics still vital in America today, namely race and religion.

Another aspect that often provokes debate is the right of a father to sell his daughter as a slave. Early rabbis also derived legal practices concerning betrothal and marriage from the biblical right of a father to sell his daughter as a slave in Exodus 21:7-11.³² At first glance, this practice appears highly discriminatory. Yet a closer reading shows that this law actually provided protection for daughters who might otherwise lack a social safety net in the ancient world. In an exegesis of Exodus 21:10-11, Jeffrey A. White examines how, with the publication of his 2002 book, David Instone-Brewer seems to have ignited a fire over the issue of grounds for divorce that had been dormant for millennia.³³ The aim is to map twentieth-century exegesis of this passage, to locate Instone-Brewer within the landscape of those commentaries, and, using that new data, to provide some guidelines for assessing the quality of Instone-Brewer's research. The law in Exodus 21:7-11 strictly regulates the rights of such female slaves, including the right to be redeemed, the right to marry, and the right to adequate sustenance. If these three rights are not fulfilled, the female slave is entitled to go free without payment of redemption money. Thus, this law functions as an instrument of protection for the vulnerable.

Another unique feature of slave laws in the Pentateuch that often escapes attention is the protection of fugitive slaves. The protection of fugitive slaves finds no parallel among ancient Near Eastern slave laws, and this law constitutes a petition to protect the escaped slave.³⁴ In the ancient world, running away from one's master was considered a criminal act punishable by death. However, this law concerns the protection of fugitive slaves, for in Deuteronomy 23:16-17 it is stated that a slave who has escaped shall not be returned to his master and shall be permitted to live wherever they wish within the Israelite community.³⁵ This revolutionary principle shows that in Old Testament ethics, individual freedom and protection of the exploited take precedence over the master's property rights. In the context of international law, the role of international law in efforts to combat human trafficking is evaluated in terms of its effectiveness and the challenges

³¹ Dan Shepherd, "Teaching about American Slavery and Its Connections to Christianity and the Bible," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 14, no. 2 (2019): 225–37.

³² Bernadette J Brooten, "Overcoming the Religious and Sexual Legacies of Slavery: An Overview," *Gender Violence, 3rd Edition*, 2020, 25–41.

³³ Jeffrey A White, "Divorce and a Deafening Silence: Exegesis of Exodus 21: 10-11 in the Twentieth Century," 2011.

³⁴ Daisy Yulin Tsai, *Human Rights in Deuteronomy: With Special Focus on Slave Laws*, vol. 464 (Walter de Gruyter GmbH & Co KG, 2014).

³⁵ Tsai.

faced by the international community in combating human trafficking.³⁶ The results of this literature review provide an understanding of the international legal landscape concerning human trafficking, as well as identify areas where further efforts are needed, and conclude the importance of interstate cooperation and effective law implementation in efforts to combat human trafficking effectively worldwide.

One of the most beautiful theological contributions of the Pentateuch concerning the meaning of slavery is found in the motif of voluntary service sealed with the ear-piercing ritual. This study argues that the Old Testament uniquely views slavery as involving choice, inherent human worth, and covenantal relationship.³⁷ A slave who has reached the end of his period of servitude is given the choice to go free or to remain with his master out of love. The ear-piercing ritual in Mosaic law becomes a hermeneutical key for understanding the New Testament call to discipleship, obedience, and participation in the sufferings of Christ. Through detailed exegesis, this dissertation investigates the servant typology as revealed in Israel's national calling, prophetic literature with special attention to the Servant Songs in Isaiah, and the failure of Israel's prophetic, priestly, and royal offices to realize the ideal of faithful obedience.³⁸ This thesis affirms that the motif underlies the theological identity of the early Christian community, reframing slavery as an arena for true greatness, spiritual discernment, and eschatological hope, and the declaration about the servant in whom YHWH delights is fulfilled in the voluntary and loving obedience of Christ. In the context of Black readings of the Bible, Charlie Trimm, Brittany Kim, and Carmen Joy Imes note that most academic studies of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament in North America have been conducted from a white European or North American perspective, while the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament also has a long history of interpretation by non-white and Majority World thinkers, and their contributions need to be more fully recognized and utilized.³⁹ Black scholars employ various methods and approaches as they engage with the biblical text, including textual criticism and translation, Africa-focused work on the Bible, drawing on African or African American contexts, and highlighting gender issues or liberation theology perspectives.⁴⁰

In understanding the Pentateuch as a response to imperial legal traditions, Chung Man Anna Lo argues that as the first legal corpus in the biblical canon, Exodus 19-24 is a collection of laws belonging to a people living in the shadow of empire, and this imperialized social context, together with the narrative of liberation, calls for reflection on the relationship between Exodus 19–24 and extant cuneiform legal collections.⁴¹ The

³⁶ Deri Wicaksono Surya and Tubagus Krisna Bayu, "Peran Hukum Internasional Dalam Memerangi Perdagangan Manusia: Tinjauan Studi Literatur," *ALADALAH: Jurnal Politik, Sosial, Hukum Dan Humaniora* 2, no. 2 (2024): 125–36.

³⁷ Hoskins, "The Servant's Ear: Study of the Servant in Whom YHWH Is Well Pleased: An Expositional Connection of Exodus 21: 5-6 and Deuteronomy 15: 16-17 to the Servants of Revelation."

³⁸ Hoskins.

³⁹ Trimm, Kim, and Imes, "Black Readings of Exodus."

⁴⁰ Trimm, Kim, and Imes.

⁴¹ Chung Man Anna Lo, *The Laws of the Imperialized: Understanding Exodus 19-24 as a Response to Imperial Legal Traditions* (Fuller Theological Seminary, Center for Advanced Theological Study, 2021).

similarities and differences between these two corpora reveal how the imperialized Israelites and Judahites wrestled with imperial legal traditions as well as the imperial conquests of their time, and this wrestling certainly involved acceptance and ambivalence, but also undoubtedly consisted of resistance. Meanwhile, in a review of William J. Webb's book on slaves, women, and homosexuals, Thomas R. Schreiner asks whether the command to subdue and fill the earth still applies, and what about tithing and the holy kiss, and whether the command to abstain from sexual relations during menstruation is normative.⁴² Such hermeneutical questions, and many others, pose challenges for believers, and Webb rightly reminds us of the fundamental hermeneutical problem in assessing the normative status of commands and practices in Scripture.

Human Trafficking in Asia as a Modern Form of Slavery and Its Root Causes

The phenomenon of human trafficking in Asia has now reached an extremely alarming level. In Asian countries, human trafficking often appears as forced labor, forced marriage, sex trafficking, and the exploitation of men, women, and children.⁴³ The diversity of forms of exploitation shows that human trafficking is not a monolithic phenomenon. Globally, human trafficking and other forms of extreme exploitation, including forced labor and forced marriage, now collectively fall under the terminological umbrella of 'modern slavery', reportedly affecting about 40.3 million people globally, with 29.4 million considered to be in situations of forced labor. More than just numbers, human trafficking is a multidimensional human rights violation centered on the act of exploitation. The UN definition includes elements of coercion, exploitation, and harm that connect human trafficking to other modern forms of slavery, forced labor, and forced marriage. Cathy Zimmerman states that because human trafficking has pervasive and severe global health implications, this violation and perhaps labor exploitation more generally must be treated as preventable.⁴⁴ In Indonesia, thirteen years after the enactment of Law Number 21 of 2007 concerning the Eradication of the Crime of Human Trafficking, this law remains unable to free Indonesia from human trafficking cases. Indonesia not only serves as a primary source country in the trafficking process but is also used as a destination and transit country. Alarmingly, all 38 provinces in Indonesia are both sources and destinations for human trafficking, and the victims are mostly women and children.⁴⁵

One of the most concerning sectors is the sex trafficking industry. The sex trafficking industry has grown into a persistent and pervasive global problem, especially in Asia, and it is fundamentally a profit-driven, business-oriented activity. Political, social, and economic factors influence the modus operandi of sex traffickers. Three

⁴² Thomas R. Schreiner, "William J. Webb's *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: A Review Article 1*," *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 6 (2002): 46–64.

⁴³ Khan et al., "Prevalence, Causes and Impacts of Human Trafficking in Asian Countries: A Scoping Review."

⁴⁴ Cathy Zimmerman and Ligia Kiss, "Human Trafficking and Exploitation: A Global Health Concern," *PLoS Medicine* 14, no. 11 (2017): e1002437.

⁴⁵ Ariadne, Pratamawaty, and Limilia, "Human Trafficking in Indonesia, the Dialectic of Poverty and Corruption."

important factors contribute: the supply of potential victims for exploitation in countries of origin, the constant demand for trafficking victims in destination countries, and the presence of organized criminal groups acting as intermediaries in market-driven business enterprises.⁴⁶ In a multidisciplinary review, it is found that the crime of human trafficking is sustained by three important factors: the supply of potential victims for exploitation in source countries, the constant demand for trafficking victims in destination countries, and the presence of organized criminal groups acting as intermediaries to supply victims to end users. This research also finds much work on human trafficking focuses on debating the crime as an effect of irregular migration of people from source to destination countries. Overall, this indicates that the crime of human trafficking is a profit-driven, business-oriented activity.⁴⁷

In Southeast Asia, massive labor migration is a major driver of exploitation. After the ten ASEAN member states committed to full economic and social integration with the implementation of the ASEAN Economic Community in 2015, labor migration has increased significantly. However, there is significant diversity among the ten member states in their economic and political structures as well as their health systems. Highly unequal national income disparities have contributed to large flows of workers from less prosperous countries to more prosperous ones. Workers for so-called 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and demeaning) in industries such as fishing and construction are in high demand. Such extreme exploitation has even been characterized by some as 'slavery at sea'. The commercial fishing industry is among the most dangerous occupations practiced in the region, with long working hours, physically demanding tasks, lack of availability and use of protective equipment, inexperienced crew, and high injury rates.⁴⁸

The root causes of human trafficking in Asia are highly complex. Poverty is considered the primary trigger for prospective Indonesian migrant workers to take the risk of becoming migrant workers. Natural disasters also make them vulnerable to human trafficking. Endemic corruption among government officials contributes to vulnerability to human trafficking, especially in the travel, hotel, and labor recruitment industries. Globalization and advances in information technology have become opportunities for the expansion of criminal networks, both national and transnational.⁴⁹ A borderless world enables cross-cultural social integration and the free movement of people without hindrance, which has led to the emergence of various forms of crime such as human trafficking. The most common forms of trafficking are for forced labor and sexual exploitation, as women, children, and men are moved domestically and across international borders, and they are exploited in the fishing and fish processing industries, construction, plantations, palm oil plantations, mining, and manufacturing.

⁴⁶ Michael and Mahalingam, "Sex Trafficking in Asia: A Review from Business and Organisational Perspectives."

⁴⁷ Mahalingam, "Human Trafficking from a Multidisciplinary Perspectives: A Literature Review."

⁴⁸ Rapeepong Suphanchaimat, Nareerut Pudpong, and Viroj Tangcharoensathien, "Extreme Exploitation in Southeast Asia Waters: Challenges in Progressing towards Universal Health Coverage for Migrant Workers," *PLoS Medicine* 14, no. 11 (2017): e1002441.

⁴⁹ Ariadne, Pratamawaty, and Limilia, "Human Trafficking in Indonesia, the Dialectic of Poverty and Corruption."

A new form of human trafficking is the online scam industry. In recent years, the online scam industry has experienced massive growth in East and Southeast Asia. What were once small-scale operations located in apartments and hotel rooms in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, and the Philippines have begun to escalate and move into larger 'scam compounds' housing dozens of different companies. There is now substantial evidence that thousands of people are deceived and trafficked into scam operations located in these facilities. Many of them become victims of fake job advertisements; others are lured or deceived by friends, relatives, or acquaintances; and still others are openly kidnapped.⁵⁰ In a bibliometric study, it is found that of 2,044 documents found, more than one-third (771 or 37.7%) were about sex trafficking, 616 (30.1%) about labor trafficking or forced labor, 199 (9.7%) about child trafficking, and 138 (6.8%) about organ trafficking. One-third (707 or 34.6%) of the documents are in health-related fields, while 1,526 (74.7%) are in the social sciences and humanities. The United States ranks first (735 or 36%) in terms of number of published documents, while regions of the world with a high prevalence of human trafficking have the lowest research contributions.⁵¹

The gender dimension is very significant. Migrant workers, especially women, face various insecurities related to migration, such as limited legal protection, limited access to health and social services, economic exploitation, exposure to violence, and significant barriers to social integration. Deeply rooted gender norms in many South and Southeast Asian communities can lead to discrimination and isolation, limiting women's empowerment and hindering their integration into host societies. Social stigma surrounding women who work or migrate independently exacerbates their insecurities, limits support networks, and increases the risk of exploitation.⁵² Research on sexual aggression in Southeast Asia finds that the prevalence of sexual harassment varies widely across studies but indicates that victims of sexual harassment are widespread across different social groups, regardless of gender and sexual orientation. Data on sexual aggression in conflict situations and in human trafficking are also limited.⁵³ In research on the influence of war, poverty, and discrimination on women and children in the context of human trafficking, Nizmi aims to describe the unhappiness of being women and children because the crime of human trafficking destroys their lives, driven by war, poverty, and discrimination.⁵⁴ Another study on the important role of international law in maintaining world security regarding human trafficking in Cambodia, Vietnam, and

⁵⁰ Ivan Franceschini et al., "A New Type of Victim? Profiling Survivors of Modern Slavery in the Online Scam Industry in Southeast Asia," *Trends in Organized Crime*, 2024, 1–23.

⁵¹ Waleed M Sweileh, "Research Trends on Human Trafficking: A Bibliometric Analysis Using Scopus Database," *Globalization and Health* 14, no. 1 (2018): 106.

⁵² Marufa Akter and Sultana Razia, "Gendered Dimensions of Migration-Related Security Challenges in South and Southeast Asia," *Handbook of Migration, International Relations and Security in Asia*, 2025, 1–22.

⁵³ Lylla Winzer, Barbara Krahé, and Philip Guest, "The Scale of Sexual Aggression in Southeast Asia: A Review," *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse* 20, no. 5 (2019): 595–612.

⁵⁴ Yusnarida Eka Nizmi, "Analisis Pengaruh Perang, Kemiskinan Dan Diskriminasi Terhadap Perempuan Dan Anak Dalam Konteks Perdagangan Manusia," *Review of International Relations Vuyedumenu: Universitas Islam Negeri Alauddin Makassar* 2, no. 1 (2020).

Thailand discusses how developments in international law seek to address this human trafficking problem.⁵⁵

Theological Relevance of Pentateuchal Law for the Church's Response to Human Trafficking in Asia

Reading the slave laws of the Pentateuch from a liberation perspective provides a strong theological foundation for the Church in Asia. In the context of Israel's liberation from Egyptian slavery, God is depicted as the victor who defeats Pharaoh by drowning the Egyptian army in the Red Sea.⁵⁶ God's power, surpassing the power of Egypt, affirms that this liberation is entirely the result of His strength, without direct intervention from the nation of Israel. The song of salvation sung by Moses and Miriam is an expression of gratitude for the victory given by God, showing His favor toward Israel. The author's hypothesis is that the destruction of the enemy is a manifestation of God's glory as the Divine Warrior who fights against sin and brings salvation to His people. Salvation is understood as liberation from both physical and spiritual oppression, ultimately fulfilled in the name of Jesus Christ, and the song, as an expression of thanksgiving, reinforces the theme of salvation in the Exodus narrative. This study affirms that the event of Israel's liberation is central to the Old Testament salvation history, with God as Savior and Warrior who brings victory to His people.⁵⁷ For the Church in Asia, the belief that God is the Divine Warrior who defends the oppressed becomes a source of hope for action against human trafficking.

The principle of protecting fugitive slaves in Deuteronomy 23:16–17 provides an ethical model for the Church. The protection of fugitive slaves finds no parallel among ancient Near Eastern slave laws. A fugitive slave shall not be returned to his master and shall be permitted to live wherever they wish within the Israelite community.⁵⁸ The Church is called to be a place of refuge for victims of human trafficking. Unfortunately, out of more than 14,000 initial search results, this article focuses only on initiatives (N=16) that support the economic development of individuals or families after being trafficked. The scarcity of effective aftercare programs indicates that there is a strong need for research and literature on the effectiveness of programs and appropriate aftercare efforts for those whose lives and livelihoods have been affected by trafficking.⁵⁹ Regarding child trafficking, the gravity of child trafficking requires interventions to address all 21 social determinants of child trafficking at all levels of the socio-ecological model. Government and NGO anti-child trafficking strategies in 16 South and Southeast

⁵⁵ Irwan Triadi et al., "Peran Penting Hukum Internasional Dalam Menjaga Keamanan Dunia Dalam Perdagangan Manusia Di Kamboja Vietnam Dan Thailand," *Media Hukum Indonesia (MHI)* 3, no. 2 (2025).

⁵⁶ Ragil Kristiawan, *Pengenalan Pada Perjanjian Lama* (Semarang: KAO Press, 2016).

⁵⁷ Roy Haries Ifraldo Tambun, "God Fights to Save the Nation of Israel: A Historical-Critical Review of Exodus 15: 1-21," *Theological Journal Kerugma* 7, no. 2 (2024): 73–83.

⁵⁸ Tsai, *Human Rights in Deuteronomy: With Special Focus on Slave Laws*.

⁵⁹ Meghan A Camp, John R Barner, and David Okech, "Implications of Human Trafficking in Asia: A Scoping Review of Aftercare Initiatives Centered on Economic Development," *Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work* 15, no. 2 (2018): 204–14.

Asian countries address 15 and 12 of the 21 social determinants, and social determinants at the intrapersonal, interpersonal, community, and policy levels of the SEM are addressed, but fail to address the organizational level. The study finds no records of anti-child trafficking interventions from four South Asian countries and five Southeast Asian countries, so continuous dissemination and evaluation of anti-trafficking interventions is urgently needed.⁶⁰

The law of the Year of Jubilee in Leviticus 25 offers a theological vision of restoration. The three interrelated laws among the debt-slave laws, namely Exodus 21:2-11, Deuteronomy 15:12-18, and Leviticus 25:39-46, together allow scholars to examine other aspects of Hebrew slave law, including the release of female Hebrew slaves and the Year of Jubilee for slaves.⁶¹ The concept of the Year of Jubilee teaches that slavery should not be permanent. In the context of commercial fishing, one of the neglected issues is the forced use of this labor by vessel owners, and in particular, this industry has seen an increase in human trafficking where this labor is forced to work. Six recommendations to combat human trafficking or forced labor in the commercial fishing industry address gender issues, poor reporting mechanisms including reliance on self-reporting, interstate cooperation and data sharing, prevention and law enforcement, and awareness of human trafficking issues.⁶² The Church can advocate for these recommendations at both national and international levels.

The motif of voluntary service with ear piercing teaches that right relationships should not be based on coercion. This study also examines the Hebrew word עֶבֶד and the Greek word δοῦλος to show how the concept shifts from forced labor to voluntary and loving service.⁶³ The Church is called to offer an alternative model of economic relations not based on exploitation. In the Malaysian context, the digital era has increasingly become a vehicle for exploitation and criminal activity, and transnational criminals are increasingly using the darknet or deep web as a medium for human trafficking. An analysis of existing policies, Malaysian laws and international law, and the instruments available to prevent and protect women, children, and migrant workers from trafficking is needed.⁶⁴ The Church needs to educate congregations about the dangers of online human trafficking.

There is a convergence between human trafficking and wildlife trafficking. This research outlines the convergence occurring between human trafficking and illegal wildlife trafficking according to information and case studies reported in the literature. The impetus for this study is to highlight the various ways that human exploitation and

⁶⁰ Pragya Gautam Poudel and Cristina S Barroso, "Social Determinants of Child Trafficking Addressed by Government and Non-Government Strategies in South and Southeast Asia: An Integrative Review," *Scandinavian Journal of Public Health* 47, no. 8 (2019): 808–19.

⁶¹ Yang, "An Analysis of the Debt-Slave Law in the Book of the Covenant."

⁶² Joan P Mileski, Cassia Bomer Galvao, and Zaida Denise Forester, "Human Trafficking in the Commercial Fishing Industry: A Multiple Case Study Analysis," *Marine Policy* 116 (2020): 103616.

⁶³ Hoskins, "The Servant's Ear: Study of the Servant in Whom YHWH Is Well Pleased: An Expository Connection of Exodus 21: 5-6 and Deuteronomy 15: 16-17 to the Servants of Revelation."

⁶⁴ Olivia Swee Leng Tan et al., "Human Trafficking and Cyber Laws in Malaysia," *Encyclopedia of Criminal Activities and the Deep Web*, 2020, 518–32.

wildlife exploitation are closely linked, and to offer an explanation for such crime convergence. This study concludes by outlining future research directions and the implications of the convergence between human and wildlife exploitation.⁶⁵ In research on forced migration in Southeast Asia, the results show that the main part of the studies focus on refugees and asylum seekers in the main host countries of the region, namely Thailand, Malaysia, and Indonesia. Although Southeast Asian countries contribute a substantial share of the world's IDPs, only a very limited number of studies focus on this group.⁶⁶

From the perspective of Indonesian law, the purpose of this study is to comprehensively analyze the Indonesian legal perspective on the crime of human trafficking (TPPO) in relation to prostitution practices. The existing legal framework, including Law Number 21 of 2007 concerning the Eradication of the Crime of Human Trafficking and the Criminal Code, faces implementation challenges such as the complexity of perpetrator networks, limited law enforcement resources, lack of interagency coordination, patriarchal culture, social stigma, corruption, difficulty in victim identification, and the complexity of proof.⁶⁷ This study also examines the legal implications for victims of human trafficking in the context of prostitution, including the right to protection, recovery, restitution, compensation, witness and victim protection, and victim-sensitive legal processes. The contribution of this research is to provide an in-depth understanding of the legal landscape of human trafficking and prostitution in Indonesia, identifying strengths and weaknesses, as well as potential future policy development.⁶⁸ In research on the philosophical value of justice, the application of criminal sanctions in human trafficking cases is considered low, and every punishment must reflect the principles of objective criminal justice and due process. Three main themes are identified in human trafficking: the development of more effective models and strategies to combat human trafficking, the exploration of the social and cultural factors underlying human trafficking in various regions, and capacity building and policy implementation to protect victims.⁶⁹

The principle of Sabbath and rest is also relevant for victim recovery. Paul Heintzman states that Sabbath and rest cannot be equated with leisure but provide material for developing a Christian understanding of leisure, and they illustrate that the biblical understanding of leisure includes the rhythm of life (quantitative dimension of leisure) and the quality of life that God offers to humans (qualitative dimension of leisure).⁷⁰ From the perspective of ritual studies, Tamara Prosic notes that from the perspective of biblical

⁶⁵ Michelle Anagnostou and Daan van Uhm, "The Links between Human Trafficking and Wildlife Trafficking," *Ecoviolence Studies: Human Exploitation and Environmental Crime*, 2025, 21–39.

⁶⁶ Gunnar Stange et al., "Forced Migration in Southeast Asia: A Brief Overview of Current Research," *Advances in Southeast Asian Studies* 12, no. 2 (2019): 249–65.

⁶⁷ Sukro Makmun and Hasruddin Nur, "Trafficking Dan Prostitusi Dalam Perspektif Hukum Di Indonesia: Sebuah Tinjauan Literatur," *Journal of Law, Ethics, and Multidisciplinary Research*, 2025, 7–17.

⁶⁸ Makmun and Nur.

⁶⁹ Candra, "Nilai Filsafat Keadilan Dalam Putusan Pidana Terhadap Pelaku Human Trafficking."

⁷⁰ Paul Heintzman, "Implications for the Leisure of Business People from a Review of the Biblical Concepts of Sabbath and Rest," *Journal of Biblical Integration in Business* 18, no. 1 (2015).

studies, the annual festivals of the Pentateuch are usually considered more or less artificial collections of cultic events. However, the application of ritual studies' findings and methods reveals that there are several syntagmatic relationships among these festivals, and their explicit and implicit dynamics also reveal something about their pre-biblical origins and significance.⁷¹ Finally, history teaching, which has mistakenly acquired a reputation as lifeless and boring, can be enhanced and energized by the content of two topics still vital in America today, namely race and religion. Evidence for the rich spiritual experience of enslaved African Americans is abundant and easily accessible. Conversely, the misuse of Christianity by oppressors and the biblical support for abolition commonly referenced in that period can also be easily explored.⁷² The Church in Asia is called to learn from this history and to work toward dismantling the structures that perpetuate human trafficking while providing holistic recovery for victims.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted, this study concludes that the concept of slavery in the Pentateuch cannot be equated with modern human trafficking practices, because the laws in Exodus 21, Leviticus 25, and Deuteronomy 15 actually emphasize the protection of the weak, the limitation of the duration of servitude, and periodic restoration through the Year of Jubilee. The principle of protecting fugitive slaves and the motif of voluntary service sealed with ear piercing show that right relationships between humans should not be based on coercion and exploitation but on love and voluntary commitment.

The phenomenon of human trafficking in Asia, driven by poverty, corruption, natural disasters, and weak law enforcement, constitutes a form of modern slavery that must be theologically rejected. The Church in Asia is called to be an agent of liberation by providing protection, policy advocacy, holistic recovery programs, and preventive education for vulnerable communities. Rooted in the liberation narrative of the Pentateuch fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Church is expected to respond to human trafficking concretely, courageously, and sustainably, for the sake of upholding the dignity of every person as the image of God.

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⁷¹ Tamara Prosic, "Annual Festivals in the Hebrew Bible II: Perspective from Ritual Studies," *Religion Compass* 4, no. 12 (2010): 727–36.

⁷² Shepherd, "Teaching about American Slavery and Its Connections to Christianity and the Bible."

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