

UNITS 35–43

THE LAWS OF THE LORD

DEVELOPING THE EXPOSITIONS

UNIT 35: THE ALTAR (Exodus 20:18-26)

If this section includes the few verses at the end of the Decalogue, 20:18-21, then the entire section can be arranged in two halves, the first part being the demonstration of the holiness of the LORD (18-21), and the second part the proper worship of the holy God (22-26). It seems to me that verse 22 alludes to verses 18-21, and so the material would have to be covered somewhere in the exposition.

1. God reveals himself to his people that they might know him.

Part one is the manifestation of the LORD to the people (20:18-21). The vision that the people received was that of thunder, lightning, and smoke; what they heard was like a trumpet. Moses told them in Deuteronomy 4 that they heard the voice, but saw no form. This is probably the closest any congregation ever came to an immediate proximity to the Holy God. It was a magnificent demonstration of the power of this God.

The people's response was one of fear before the epiphany. Moses explained that they should not be afraid, for the LORD had done all this to test them, to ensure that they would try to avoid sin. So the manifestation was a necessary part of the giving of the Law. *God reveals himself to his people in order that they might know and obey him.*

II. God instructs his people how to worship him.

The second part of the passage offers specific instructions for the worship of God (20:22-26). Based on the revelation from on high, certain requirements were made on the nation. The first was that they not make gods of silver and gold. This is a restatement of what was in the Decalogue. The intent is obviously to counter any pagan influences. If anyone is going to worship this God, he must not use any manipulations or pagan methods of divination.

The next part prescribes the sacrificial worship. They were to make an earthen altar and sacrifice whole burnt offerings and peace offerings on it. The terms used here all depict total acceptance by God of the worshipper. For their worship, God would bring them a blessing. The text says, "Wherever I cause my name to be remembered, I will come to you and bless you." The point here is that God's blessing will be given to the one who worships Him properly, and that place is chosen by God.

The last two verses seem to say that the worship cannot be based on anything that the worshipper has done, and cannot be defiled by anything that the worshipper is. The altar was not to be made of hewn stone if it was made of stone, for lifting the tool polluted the altar. So if the altar was made of dirt, or of stone, it could not be man-made. The last law warns against going up to the altar by steps "that your nakedness be not discovered on it." At this time people could sacrifice, and there was no guard against their person because they wore ordinary clothes. Later, when priests made the sacrifices and did go up by steps to the altar, they were to wear linen drawers that separated their nakedness from the altar.

CONCLUSION

The main point: *Those who worship the holy God must preserve holiness in their worship—they worship where he permits, in the manner he prescribes, and with the blessings he promises.*

UNIT 36

LAWS ABOUT SERVANTS

(Exodus 21:1-11)

There follows now a series of sections called *mishpatim*, or cases (literally “decisions”), beginning with servants. A precept is stated, and then various cases in which the law is applicable are explained. These are all taken in harmony with the Decalogue that has just been given. The laws that follow in all these chapters can be grouped into three main categories:

- A. Laws pertaining to civil and criminal law
 - 1. Rights of slaves (21:2-11)
 - 2. Capital offences (21:12-17)
 - 3. Bodily injuries by animals (21:18-36)
 - 4. Theft of animals and burglary (22:1-4)
 - 5. Damage of property (22:5-6)
 - 6. Loss of deposit or loan (22:7-15)
 - 7. Seduction (22:16,17)

- B. Laws pertaining to religion and worship
 - 1. Images and altars (20:23-26)
 - 2. Banishment for idolatry (22:20)
 - 3. Reviling God and cursing a ruler (22:28)
 - 4. Firstfruits and firstborn (22:29-30)
 - 5. Torn flesh (22:31)
 - 6. Seventh year to be fallow
 - 7. Seventh day a day of rest (23:10-12)
 - 8. God's commands to be honored (23:13)
 - 9. Three pilgrimages (23:14-17)
 - 10. Festal sacrifices (23:18)
 - 11. Firstfruits brought to the temple (23:19a)
 - 12. Boiling a kid in its mother's milk (23:19b)

- C. Laws of a moral and humanitarian nature
 - 1. Sorcery and bestiality (22:18,19)
 - 2. Sojourner, widow, and orphan (22:21-24)
 - 3. Interest from the poor (22:25)

4. Garments taken in pledge (22:26-27)
5. Duties of witnesses (23:1-3)
6. Preserving an enemy's beast from harm (23:4,5)
7. Impartiality (23:6-9).

It will be immediately observed that the laws listed in this topical arrangement do not follow the order in Exodus. If the exposition goes through chapter by chapter, then explanations will have to be offered for the present arrangement of the material. The above list simply shows the topics in the legislative material.

The expositor will have to determine how much time may be spent on this material. Naturally a full exposition could be given for each unit if one has that luxury. However, if the material of the plagues can be condensed to a survey, certainly this material could also. Each unit would then be a point in developing the righteous demands of the LORD.

The first section deals with slaves/servants (Israel was not to enslave people in war; people who were slaves or servants might have come that way, but most were in some kind of debt or bondage, working it off).

Introduction

The first section, Exodus 21:1-11, deals with laws about slavery.¹ The present section deals only with Hebrew slaves; foreign slaves are discussed in Leviticus 25:44-46. The conditions in the ancient world were such that slavery could not be abolished; but it was regulated for righteousness' sake.

There were several ways that an Israelite might become a slave: 1) he might be sold by his parents (fairly common with daughters); 2) he might be sold for theft (22:3) or insolvency (Am. 2:6); 3) he might be obliged by poverty to sell himself (Lev. 25:39); or 4) he might be born a slave. This needs to be clarified at the outset because the subject itself will provoke antagonism. God worked within the societal structure and restricted the power of the owner over the slave.

¹ See H. L. Ellison, "The Hebrew Slave: A Study in the Early Israelite Society," *ExQ* 45 (1973):L30-35; and N. P. Lemche, "The Manumission of Slaves—The Fallow Year—The Sabbatical Year—the Yobel Year," *VT* 26 (1976):38-59.

In outlining this material I would bypass verse one which is a heading for all these sections. I would then divide the section between the male slave (21:2-6) and the female slave (21:7-11).

Exposition

I. The Male Slave (2-6)

For the male slave, several rules are laid down: first, a Hebrew slave can only work six years, and then must go free in the seventh (v. 2); second, he must leave with what he had when he came in (vv. 3, 4), which means that anything his owner gave him remains the owner's; and third, if the servant does not wish to go free, he can remain forever as the man's servant (vv. 5, 6). This is clearly the choice of the servant, but must be legally ratified before the judges. So the law makes it clear that *those in slavery for one reason or another should have the hope of freedom and the choice of service.*

II. The Female Slave (7-11)

The case and circumstance for a woman was totally different. The main reason one would sell a daughter is that she be a maidservant or concubine. Marriages were fixed in those days. If a woman were going to marry someone in her social class, there would be little dowry for most of the women. The prospects might be better for her if her father sold her to someone wealthy. In this case, certain rules were necessary: first, if she was not pleasing (actually “evil, bad”) in the eyes of her master, he could let her be redeemed but not sold to a foreigner (v. 8); also, she cannot be set free after six years (v. 7) because marriage is involved; third, if he marries her to his son, then she must be treated as well as a daughter (v. 9); if he marries again, she still must receive here full rights or she may go free (vv. 10, 11). Through these laws God was teaching that *women, who were often at the mercy of husbands or masters, must not be trapped in an unfortunate situation, but be treated well by masters or husbands.*

Conclusion

The only thing that can be done here is to compare and contrast our structures of society with theirs. We do not sell ourselves into slavery when impoverished, and we do not sell daughters as concubines. But in that society, and in ours, we can say that *God prohibits those who have control or care of other*

people from abusing that power by requiring them to treat them magnanimously and kindly, or relinquish their control over them. One area of application could be the employer-employee relationship; another could be marriage. People should not feel trapped hopelessly in a harsh, unfortunate situation. Israel was not to repeat the bondage of Egypt. People must be given a chance for their freedom; they must have hope.

UNIT 37

LAWS ABOUT VIOLENCE

(Exodus 21:12-27)

Introduction

The next section addresses the problem of violence with the famous *talionic* justice: eye for eye, tooth for tooth. This immediately raised questions about retaliation and the instruction to forgive and leave vengeance to God.

The passage can be divided into violence between free citizens (21:12-19), violence involving slaves (21:20-21), and violence involving innocent bystanders (21:22-27). The underlying point remains true today: *The people of God must treat all human life as sacred*. Naturally, the laws of retributive justice will change from society to society, but the underlying truth based on God's creation is the same.

Exposition

I. Violence between Free Citizens (12-19)

The first part (21:12-19) begins with the principle and then qualifies it: “Whoever smites a man and he dies, shall surely be put to death.” This law would have applied to Moses. Provision of sanctity is promised for nonpremeditative killing (v. 13), but not for premeditation (v. 14). Smiting parents, kidnapping, or cursing parents, are all punishable by death (vv. 15-17). (You will have to study *qalal*, “curse” in this regard.) One final case is that of a non-fatal attack. Here the attacker will pay damages and care (vv. 18, 19).

II. *Violence to Servants (20, 21)*

The second part (21:20, 21) concerns damages to servants. Less was thought of slaves than of free men—a slave was his master’s “money.” So the different law is based on the value of the person to society. All that is said here is that the guilty person must be punished. Some Jewish interpreters argued by context that the death penalty was meant—but why did it not say it that way. The penalty was determined by the judges, but it would have been a fine. If the slave survives a few days, there is no penalty, for that is proof he did not intend to kill him, only correct him.

III. *Violence to Innocent Bystanders (22-27)*

The third part treats of innocent bystanders. The critical line that gets all the attention is in verse 22: “If men fight and hurt a pregnant woman so that her ‘fruit’ depart from her (literally, “her children go out”) and yet no trouble follow” Several of these terms have to be studied very carefully, but “her children” needs primary attention.

The Hebrew says “her children depart” (a generic plural), but no other permanent damage results. The text seems to be describing a woman trying to intervene to separate them who is hit and has a miscarriage. The penalty is a fine. Nothing really can be said from this passage about the time when life begins, for the death of a slave did not bring capital punishment either. Valuable lives, such as free Israelites, called for talionic justice. But slaves or unborn infants that could be more readily replaced, especially if the death was not premeditated, did not.

If trouble follows, i.e., if the woman dies, or is injured, then talionic justice applies to her.

The last two verses could be taken as a fourth point, or subordinated to the third. A slave was less valuable and so the *talio* does not apply. But mistreating a slave was punished by loss of the slave.

UNIT 38

LAWS ABOUT ANIMALS

(Exodus 21:28-36)

The point that this brief section makes in the laws is that *one must ensure the safety of others by controlling the circumstances*. This pertains to neglect or carelessness with animals.

The first few verses deal with a goring ox (21:28-32), which is probably representative of any dangerous animal. If it gores so that the victim dies, then that animal must be stoned. But if it had happened before and the owner had been warned, the owner also must be put to death. But the owner can ransom himself with money in this case (v. 30). If the ox gores a servant, then the owner must pay for the slave. The simple point is that the lives of people must be saved from dangerous beasts.

A second case of negligence is found in verses 33, 34. If one digs a pit and the ox of another falls in, then the man must pay the owner for the ox. This is the only equitable arrangement. It would teach people to control their environment.

Finally, if two animals get into an altercation and one die, they sell the other and divide the money, unless there was negligence again. Here too one must keep control of dangerous animals for the sake of others. God's people were not only to deal justly and fairly when problems arose—they were to prevent danger for any living creature.

UNIT 39

LAWS ABOUT PROPERTY

(Exodus 22:1-15)

The next unit turns to the matter of property rights. These laws protected the property from thieves or oppressors, but also restricted the kind of retribution permitted (much less harsh for property than was Hammurabi). *God's law demands that the guilty make restitution for their crimes against property and*

that the innocent be exonerated.

The first four verses legislate the treatment of thieves: God demands restitution for sins (22:1-4). The thief must restore more than what he stole, but if he cannot he must be sold for the theft. If a thief was killed in the dark, then no blood avenger is permitted; but if it happened in the daytime, then the homicide is not justifiable.

Verses 5 and 6 establish the necessity of restitution for damaged crops, whether by grazing or by fire.

There follows, then, a section of disputed things (22:7-13), cases in which there is no indisputable evidence. In these matters if the judges cannot decide, then the accused shall take an oath before the LORD that he is innocent, and the matter be ended. A guilty, fraudulent shepherd would have to pay double restitution if the judges find him guilty.

The last portion, verses 14 and 15, place the responsibility of borrowed things on the borrower, unless it was hired.

So this section instructs God's people to treat the property of others with value. Any violations will require restitution, and sometimes arbitration. What happens now with disputes between Christians? They ought to be able to settle their differences rather than go to a pagan court. If they give their word of innocence, they should be trustworthy. If violators, they must make restitution—and Jesus said we could not worship until we made such reconciliation.

UNIT 40

MORAL AND CEREMONIAL LAWS

(Exodus 22:16-31)

The last half of chapter 22 records various laws of purity and justice. Any one of them could be treated in an exposition; however, in their present order they lend themselves nicely to a general exposition of God's standards.

I. Maintain the sanctity of marriage (22:16, 17).

The first part deals with sexual enticement. Sexual intercourse was reserved for marriage. If a man enticed a single girl and slept with her, it is his duty to endow her to be his wife. Casual sex was against the Law of God. The father was given the right of refusal (to avoid having undesireables force their way onto a girl and into a family). In this case the culprit pays the money value. Note here the infinitives absolute: “he shall surely endow her” and “if her father utterly refuses.”

II. Maintain the purity of the religious institutions (22:18-20).

Three laws are here. The first outlaws magic and divination. The sorceress probably used drugs and herbs to heal diseases, ward off curses, to inspire fertility, etc. The second law prohibits bestiality. This seems out of place here (and may not refer to religious customs). However, I would take it in that context due to the importance of bestiality in Canaanite religion. The third law states that anyone sacrificing to another god except Yahweh shall be destroyed. The verb here is *kharam*, “to put under the ban” or “devote.” If that which was banned (devoted to the LORD) was not destroyed it was appropriate for temple use. Here it would be destroyed. Anything put under the ban was off-limits to people (cognate to the word for the *harem*).

III. Maintain the rights of human beings (22:21-28).

The following list covers some of the basic human rights: do not oppress sojourners (v. 21); do not afflict the widow and the orphan (v. 22), or there will be angry talionic justice to leave your family fatherless (vv. 23-24); do not charge interest for the poor (v. 25); return the garment taken in pledge by sundown (v. 26), for it is his bed roll too (check the “Yavneh Yam” letter; it comes from about 600 B.C.; it is the complaint of a share-cropper who gave his garment in pledge until he got the crop in and fulfilled his quota—which he said he did, but the overlord had not returned his garment to him).

Be sure to distinguish the modern use of loans for commercial purposes as opposed to lending an impoverished person money—that should be charity.

Verse 28 commands respect for rulers. The word *'elohim* is parallel to *nasi*, “prince,” here. Some translate verse 28a to refer to God; I prefer the

translation “judges.” No one should curse or revile these leaders.

IV. Maintain the rights of the LORD (22:29-31).

Finally, God's rights are rehearsed: the first fruits of the threshing-floor and of the wine-press are His, as are the firstborn sons, and firstborn animals (after seven days). They were to be holy, not eating anything torn by beasts--obviously a law concerned with cultic holiness. They belonged to God and must maintain their holiness.

So God's people must preserve holiness by maintaining moral and religious purity and by preserving the rights of God and man.

UNIT 41: JUSTICE (Exodus 23:1-9)

People who claim to worship and serve the righteous judge of the whole earth must preserve justice and equity in their dealings with others. These few verses deal with the specifics of this idea.

I. God's people must be honest witnesses (23:1-3).

The beginning of this section is reminiscent of the Ten Commandments “You shall not take up a false (vain) report.” The next line clarifies that this is a false witness. The word *khamas* more accurately describes a malicious or violent witness, one who seeks to subvert the innocent.

Verse 2 warns against joining a group to pervert justice. Verse 3 requires impartiality in judgments. It is an unusual expression, though, for it describes false sympathy (= honor) or antipathy to the rich.

II. God's people must be just, even with enemies (23:4, 5).

The material now turns to helping an enemy. Such treatment as one would give to a friend in trouble should also be given to an enemy. This kind of justice

the New Testament confirms.

III. God's people must be fair (23:6-9).

Here the text gives attention to impartiality. Verses 1-3 concerned witnesses; these verses concern administering just decisions. Bribes are not to be taken and the poor and the sojourner are not to be oppressed. Falsehood is to be avoided, God says, for He will not justify (= declare **just**) the wicked.

The passage is rather straightforward. God expects believers to be fair and just in all their dealings, but especially in legal matters. It makes no difference if people are poor, foreign, hostile, or important. God demands justice and truth.

UNIT 42

SABBATHS AND FEASTS

(Exodus 23:10-19)

The next section of the *mishpatiom* (“decisions”) concerns religious observances in the land. Unless this portion is arranged topically, there will be several points in the construction. Verses 10 and 11 go together, verse 12 is the Sabbath, verse 13 concerns the names of pagan gods, verses 14-17 the feasts, verse 18 concerns the sacrifices, and verse 19 the firstfruit (produce and animal). Verses 18 and 19 could be joined with 14-17 and treat festivals and sacrifices (at the festivals). One could put verse 13 with 12, arguing for loyalty to the covenant, keep sabbath and avoid false gods; or, one could put it with 14-19 as an introduction. I would leave it as a separate point.

I. God requires that his people allow the poor to share in their bounty (23:10, 11).

The nation could grow their crops and make a profit for six years, but in the seventh they were to leave them alone. This, of course, is the sabbath year law, treated so fully in Leviticus 25. The purpose, apart from any benefit to the soil, and any spiritual reflection of creation, was for the poor and needy (this is stressed in

this chapter). You will have to broaden the discussion to explain other ways that God wanted the poor to be cared for, for it is questionable this ruling was ever followed.

II. God requires that his people provide times of refreshment for those who do the labor (23:12).

In connection with the Sabbath year is the Sabbath day. Again, the motivation in this chapter differs from Sabbath day legislation elsewhere. The words must be studied here, especially **shabat**, often translated “rest,” but probably meaning “cease” (“rest” today has the wrong connotation for this Hebrew word). The Sabbath day in the Law was to be set apart (“sanctified”) to the LORD, so it was a day void of labor but given over to spiritual and charitable service. Here, however, the emphasis is on its being void of labor. Note also the words *nuakh* and *naphash*, “rest” and “refresh.” These need to be studied too, with special attention given to the purpose and nature of the sabbath day.

Specifically mentioned are ox and ass and son of handmaid and stranger. Why these are selected is not readily clear. Probably they are representative of animals and people (household servants and strangers [strangers are often included in the privilege and so here with the obligations as well]). Physical labor was to cease throughout the land so that people and livestock could rest (and people could worship).

III. God requires allegiance to himself (23:13).

Israel was to keep all His ways, and not “mention” the name of other gods. The verb *zakar* (*hiphil* of “to remember”) probably means far more than “mention.” In other passages (see Psalm 20) it signifies trust. The verb is complex: remember, keep in memory (internal causative in the *hiphil*), meditate, ponder, boast. Israel was not to meditate in reliance on the names of other gods. Moreover, they should not let those names be heard from their mouth. God, and only God, was to be the object of their meditation and praise.

IV. God requires his people to come before him in worshipful gratitude to share their bounty (23:14-17).

This portion legislates the annual festivals: Unleavened bread, Harvest, and Ingathering. They were all harvest feasts when the nation would go up to Jerusalem and celebrate the LORD's provisions. I think you will need to study these in other passages a good deal before expounding their mention here. They were times when the people gave to the LORD and shared with the poor. They were also times of worship, called Sabbaths and holy convocations.

*V. God requires that he people safeguard
the proper worship forms (23:18, 19).*

Several laws are put together now that pertain to the worship at the festivals: separate leavened bread from blood, do not keep the fat til the morning, bring the first fruits to the LORD, and do not boil a kid in its mother's milk. In the first, unleavened bread was to be offered in the sacrifices (study Leviticus). In the second, the fat = the best) was to be consumed on the altar, for it was God's. The third is clear enough: God gets the first. The fourth seems related. The Law required that they let the kid grow so that it was living, healthy, and would constitute a sacrifice. But this law, while in harmony with that, probably has connections polemically with Canaanite laws. Modern Jews use this as the basis of kosher laws--not to eat dairy and meat products at the same table. But ancient Rabbis knew it was written with some pagan practice in mind.

So the entire section deals with religious observances that retain pious devotion to the LORD and kindness to others. I do not think it necessary in sections of related laws to write a comprehensive idea--although it can be done--because it would be so general it would be like a title to a section. The specifics here are sabbath year, sabbath day, avoiding pagan gods, keeping feasts, observing sacrifices. Each has to be correlated to the New Testament antitypes: sanctification and generosity, preeminence of Christ, maintaining times of worship, keeping the Eucharist undefiled, etc.

UNIT 43

THE ANGEL OF THE PRESENCE

(Exodus 23:20-33)

This passage has some of the most interesting and perplexing expressions and constructions in the book. There are many key words and interesting figures, making a good challenge for the exegete. The passage is still part of the laws, for it includes demands for obedience, but it now stresses the promise of the conquest and blessing in the land for obedience.

*1. God promises to send his angel
to prepare the way (23:20-23).*

The Angel, *mal'ak*, is usually taken as either the LORD Himself (we would say a preincarnate appearance of the second person) or some manifestation of the LORD. The implication here is a manifestation, but in history it would represent an invisible presence only revealed at certain times. Compare the captain of the LORD's army in Joshua. This Angel was to go before them (so He is referred to as the Angel of the Presence) to keep them in the way, that is, protect them as they travel to the land of promise. That land was prepared (< *kun*) for them by the LORD.

Verse 21 shows that the Angel is divine, for He--the Angel--will not forgive sins. So stern warnings are given: "Beware," or take heed to yourself, "obey" (*shama'*), so that He would not be provoked. Israel did, of course, disobey and provoke Him.

Conversely, obedience made God an ally. The wording of verse 22 is interesting: If you obey Him, then I will. . . . The repetition ensures the victory: "I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries." Verse 23 promises that God would destroy these nations for them.

So the first part promises the Angel, warns of disobedience, promises victory for obedience, and promise the Angel--a nice chiasm.

II. God promises blessings for his loyal servants (23:24-33).

The next section demands undiminished loyalty to the LORD. Negatively, they were not to bow, serve, or do pagan religion. Rather, they were to utterly overthrow them and completely smash their images. Compare Gideon and the idol of Baal.

Instead, they must serve the LORD their God--and then He will bless them. The way this is put is with figures, metonymies: "He will bless your bread and your water." Abundant provisions in the land, accompanied by health, would come to the pious servants. Full life and fruitfulness would be the rule.

Now, in verses 27-31, the theme of protection returns. Now God promises to send fear (<'emah) before them (compare the words of Rahab in Joshua). This will be the metonymy of effect, the cause being the report of victory in the LORD. The enemies will be destroyed and turned to flight.

The mention of hornets here in verse 28 and in Deuteronomy 7:20 and Joshua 24:12 is problematic. It is not likely literal. The writer uses the image possibly to describe the miraculous way God will put the enemy to flight. It does not seem to refer to the Israelites, because the hornets go before them (as the Angel did). But perhaps the hornets are parallel to the fear, turning the enemy to flight.

The second chiasm is completed in verses 30 and 31. This chiasm was:

worship God in purity (24-25a) and
He will bless abundantly (25b-26);
he will deliver (26-29), so they must
worship in purity (30, 31).

This last section warns of becoming associated with their gods--that would be a snare.

So we learn that *God promises his protection (victory) and blessing (through his Angel) for obedient, loyal worshipers.*

See S. A. Meier, *The Messenger in the Ancient Semitic World*, HSM 45 (1988); C. F. Graesser, "Standing Stones in Ancient Palestine," BA 35 (1972):34-63.