

Exodus 21

With Exodus 21 we move from the rather general set of ten words, to a set of much more detailed laws. These laws deal with slaves, daughters sold to others, murder, injuries committed by both humans and animals, and injuries to animals. For those of us living in the 21st century, much of what is contained in this chapter will probably be distressing. Rather than examining each law, this article will bring them together in four overarching themes.

Theme one is that all human life is precious. This can be seen in the severity of the penalties for murder, striking or cursing parents, and for the death of the owner of an ox who kills someone (if the owner knows that the ox is dangerous and does not restrain the animal). While these laws may seem onerous, especially the ones concerning cursing or striking parents, their intent is to protect societal order and avoid the type of incidents found in Genesis (Cain slaying Abel, Ham uncovering Noah's nakedness, and Jacob's sons killing the people of Shechem). In other words, a civil society cannot exist where life is not valued and protected. This also includes kidnapping which is the theft of the life of another.

Theme two is that all human beings matter equally to God. We see this in the discussion on slavery in that, while God does not outlaw slavery (something that would have been unthinkable in the ancient world), God ensures that slaves are beings, equal to their masters. This can be seen in the following ways. First, Hebrew slaves are to be freed after six years. This means that slaves are not property. They are God's creations, deserving of freedom. Second, a freed slave, if married prior to enslavement, can take his/her spouse and children with them when they are freed. Third, if a slave marries another slave, and is then set free, the freed slave can redeem their family. Fourth, if a daughter is sold into slavery, the daughter must be sold as a wife. The purchaser cannot sell the woman into slavery and must treat her well, otherwise the slave/wife must be set free. Fifth, if a slave owner kills a slave, the owner will be punished and if a slave owner injures a slave, the slave is set free. Again, each of these laws makes clear that slavery is a temporary relationship and that slaves are full human beings in the eyes of God and the Law.

Theme three is that God cares about women just as much as men. We see this in the following ways: First as noted above, if a daughter is sold to another, the daughter must be a wife who is treated well and whose rights are not infringed upon. Second, when an ox gores a woman, the penalties are the same for the ox's owner as they are for injuring a man. Third, if a pregnant woman is injured when two men fight, the one causing the injury is liable for damages. Fourth, the penalties for a slave owner injuring a slave are the same for both male and female slaves. Fifth, the penalty for striking a mother is the same as for striking a father.

Theme four is personal responsibility. We see this in the following ways: First, the owner of an ox must care for it and protect people from it. Second, men are responsible for injuries they inflicted on other men, slaves, or pregnant women. Fourth, children are responsible for honoring their parents. Fifth, there are penalties for not protecting others from digging a pit into which animals might fall.

What makes all these laws unique is that in the civilizations with which the Israelites would interact there is no respect for all human life (there are castes which dictate crime and punishment), slaves have no rights, women are not treated equally, and personal responsibility only applies to lower castes.

Reflection: While most readers may find many of these laws abhorrent, their intent is to protect life for all and treat all persons as equals. Notice that there is no differentiation of penalties based on whether the person is slave or free, rich or poor, male or female, young or old. This equality is utterly remarkable for their time and for ours. It reflects the theological belief that every human being is a beloved child of God, deserving of respect and equal treatment.

Questions:

1. Which of these laws disturbs you the most and why does it do so?
2. Where do you see the basis for modern law in these laws?
3. Do you think any of these laws might be helpful today?