

## Exodus 22

This chapter consists of four major sections. The first section deals with the issue of property, the second with issues of creation, the third with treatment of the vulnerable or “those below us”, and the fourth with how we treat those “above us.”. As with the last article, we will not examine each law individually, but will look for overarching themes that bind the laws together.

The three themes that tie the first section together are personal responsibility, restitution, and the value of human life. Personal responsibility and restitution are deeply intertwined in this section of the Torah. This intertwining can be seen in this section in the following places: First, in the penalty for the theft of an animal which is not death (as the Code of Hammurabi orders), but restitution. The thief is to take responsibility for his/her actions and to either pay for the stolen property or make restitution with service as a slave. Second, in being careful with fire so as to not burn a neighbor’s fields. If a fire consumes the fields of others, restitution must be made. Third, in caring for items given to an individual for safekeeping. The one doing the safekeeping must be diligent, so the goods are not stolen. If the goods are stolen restitution must be made to the owner. Fourth, if an individual borrows an animal and it comes to harm, then again, restitution must be made. There are exceptions to all these laws including where the loss is brought about by “force of nature” such as wild beasts or if the owner of a hired animal is present when the animal is injured.

The value of human life can be seen in the following places: First, in that a thief may be killed at night because the family can assume the intruder is there to harm them, but a thief may not be killed during the day because it is assumed the intruder is not there to harm. Second, in the seduction of a virgin by man. In some cultures, such an act is punishable by death, but here it is punished by the seducer marrying the woman and paying the bride price (which is also personal responsibility and restitution). Note that the bride price must be paid even if there is no marriage, which should cause a would-be seducer to think twice about his actions.

The second section is tied together by actions intended to destroy God’s created order. First, sorcery is an attempt to turn what God created into something God did not intend it to be (such as a staff into a snake in Pharaoh’s court). Second, bestiality (which was widely practiced in the ancient near east) transgresses the line between human beings and the creatures God created. Third, sacrificing to other gods leads people away from God’s Torah and into worship of nature or humans as god.

The third section deals with the care for vulnerable persons, which carries the theme of the value of all human life. This section can be divided into caring for strangers and for vulnerable members of the community. First, there is care for the resident alien. Care is to be offered because once the Hebrew people were strangers and know what it is to be oppressed. Second, there is care for widows and orphans, who in a man’s world are the most vulnerable to abuse. They are not to be abused or else they will cry out to God (same wording as the cry to God by the enslaved Hebrews) and God will do to the abusers what God did to the Egyptians. Third, there is care for the poor. This is exemplified by not charging interest and a creditor not keeping a person’s only garment overnight as collateral on a loan.

The fourth section deals with appropriate relations between rulers/God and others. These relationships are to be defined by gratitude and not cursing. People are not to curse God or their leaders. Instead, persons are to offer to God their first fruits (the best they have) as a way of appropriately orienting themselves to their redeemer and life giver.

**Reflections:** Once again we see God’s compassion for human life and for the appropriate ordering of that life. Where these laws are followed there is harmony between neighbors and strangers, respect for marriage and the vulnerable. In other words, these laws allow for a society in which life can flourish and God’s blessings can be shared by all.

Questions:

1. Where do you see reflections of the call for personal responsibility in our world?
2. Why do you think restitution is such an important part of the law?
3. Where might our world benefit from some of these laws replacing laws we currently follow?