



Introducing Biblical Law

What is 'the Law?'

For many Christians, the Old Testament is considered synonymous with "law." With the exception of Genesis, it is true that the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (or *Torah*) focus largely on the law. Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are the only books in which God gives instructions directly to the Israelites.

Yet while the word "Torah" is often translated "law," it can also be interpreted as "instruction" or "teaching." The real question is: what do *we* mean in English when we talk about "the law?"

Biblical scholars have organized the laws found in the Old Testament into three main categories:

- The Covenant Code: laws given by God to Moses in Exodus 21-23.
- The Priestly Code: mass of "priestly laws" found in Leviticus and Numbers featuring ritual instructions for purity and sacrifice, as well as expectations for how people ought to treat one another (sometimes divided into additional subcategories).
- Deuteronomic Code: collection of laws in Deuteronomy 12-26.

Changes, Contradictions, and Revisions

As is often the case in biblical texts, we find contradictions, revisions, and changes over time within these laws. In Exodus 12:9, for example, there are explicit instructions *not* to boil sacrificial meat, but rather to "roast it in fire." Deuteronomy 16:7, however, dictates that sacrificial meat *should* be boiled. Later, 2 Chronicles seems to combine the two commands and indicates that one ought to simply "boil it in fire."

Changes in these laws over time suggest that the ancient Israelites were constantly discerning how to make sense of the law amid these contradictions and a changing world. In recent years, scholars have asked whether biblical laws were actually meant to be changeable (see Christine Hayes's book under "Additional Resources"). Were laws found in the Hebrew Bible intended to tell people exactly what to do in exactly the same way in perpetuity? The answer is probably both yes and no. Parts of these law codes were likely expected to stand unchanged for all time, while others were a bit more nuanced in purpose.

'The Law' in the Ancient World

All laws found in the ancient world were created specifically for the unique communities in which they were formulated. Research into laws found outside of the biblical canon has revealed that some ancient Near Eastern cultures' laws were not necessarily strict guidelines for how to live one's life, but rather intended to associate their deities and/or kings with notions of "justice." Some laws found repeatedly in the Hebrew Bible are also found in similar law codes discovered elsewhere in the ancient world during this time (e.g., Mesopotamian laws in the Code of Hammurabi).

How Should We Read 'The Law' Today?

Rather than reading "the law" as a transcription record of speeches given by God to Moses, it may be useful to read them as an ancient Israelite discourse about ritual, sacrifice, and identity. They ask: What makes us Israelites? Who are we and who does our God want us to be? What are our values?

At the end of the day, "the law" is a process rather than a monolith. Biblical laws not only respond to and interact with each other, but also interact with the world around them in their historical context. These biblical texts reveal a constant and ongoing process of rehashing, renegotiation, and re-interpretation; not a single uniform set of laws frozen in time.