

## The Law(s): Covenant Stipulations for Israel

Along with the patriarchal narratives found in Genesis, the three defining narratives for Israel as a people are found in the book of Exodus (see *How to 2*, pp. [35–38](#)). First, their miraculous deliverance (the “exodus”) from slavery in Egypt, the most powerful empire in the ancient world at that time ([Exod 1–18](#)); second, the return of the presence of God as distinguishing his people from all other peoples on earth ([Exod 33; 40](#)); and third, God’s reconstituting them as a people for his name at the foot of Mount Sinai ([Exod 19–Num 10:10](#)). It is hard for us even to imagine the enormity of difficulty involved in this third matter.

Here were people who for hundreds of years had known only slavery and Egyptian culture. And now God was about to reconstitute them into a totally new people on the face of the earth. Not only must they be formed into an army of warriors in order to conquer the land promised to their ancestors, but they must also be formed into a community that would be able to live together both during their time in the wilderness and eventually in the land itself. At the same time they needed direction as to how they were to be *God’s* people—both in their relationships with each other and in their relationship with God—so that they would shed the ways and culture of Egypt and not adopt the ways and culture of the Canaanites whose land they were to possess. A further challenge was the rapid assimilation of large numbers of non-Israelites into the people of Israel, not just ethnically, but, far more importantly, religiously ([Exod 12:38](#)).

And this is the role of the law in Israel’s history. It was God’s *gift* to his people to establish the ways they were to live in community with one another and to provide for their relationship with and worship of Yahweh, their God. At the same time the law set boundaries with regard to their relationships with the cultures around them. A formidable task indeed!

If we are going to read and understand the law well, we must begin with this understanding of its role in Israel’s own history. At the same time we must be aware of its covenantal nature—because our understanding not only of the law, but of the prophetic texts and of the New Testament story itself as a new covenant, depends on it. So the first purpose of this chapter is to guide you into a good understanding of the nature and role of the law(s) in Israel. But we also care about its second purpose. What role do these laws have for those of us who live under God’s new covenant with his people?

### WHAT IS THE LAW?

In order to appreciate the role of the Old Testament law in Scripture, we need to face three matters at the outset, matters brought about by “law” language in the Bible itself. First, the word “law” itself has more than one connotation when it is used throughout Scripture: It is used (1) in the plural to refer to the “laws”—those 600-plus specific commandments that the Israelites were expected to keep as evidence of their loyalty to God (e.g., [Exod 18:20](#)); (2) in the singular to refer to all of these laws collectively (e.g., [Matt 5:18](#)); (3) in the singular to refer to the Pentateuch (Genesis to Deuteronomy) as the “Book of the Law” (e.g., [Josh 1:8](#)); (4) in the

singular by some writers in the New Testament to refer theologically to the entire Old Testament religious system (e.g., [1 Cor 9:20](#)); (5) in the singular by some New Testament personages to refer to the Old Testament law (in sense [2](#) above) as it was interpreted by the rabbis (e.g., Peter in [Acts 10:28](#)). Our interest in this chapter is primarily with helping Christians to read and understand uses 1 and 2 in order to come to appreciate what the many stipulations God gave Israel meant for them and how we may best read them in our own day.

The second matter has to do with use [3](#) above, the fact that the Pentateuch itself is by New Testament writers frequently referred to as “the Law” (e.g., “the Law and the Prophets” in [Matt 5:17](#); [Luke 16:16](#)). Two things need to be pointed out: (1) The commandments themselves are found almost exclusively in only four of the five books called “the Law”: Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. (2) These books also contain much other material besides lists of laws, and this material is primarily narrative (see ch. [5](#)). The reason for this is that the covenantal law between Yahweh and Israel, which begins in [Exodus 20](#), cannot be understood apart from the narrative in which it is embedded—including (especially) Genesis, which, in fact, contains only a handful of “basic” commandments, such as “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it” ([Gen 1:28](#)); “Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed” ([Gen 9:6](#)); and “You must keep my covenant” ([Gen 17:9](#)), laws that are not specifically limited to Israel and its special covenant with Yahweh. And this is why there is not an exact correspondence between what we would call “laws” and what are called “books of the Law” in the Old Testament.

Third, the most difficult problem for most Christians with regard to these commandments is the hermeneutical one. How do any of these specific legal formulations apply to us, or do they? Because this is the crucial matter, we turn next to some observations about Christians and the law, which in turn will aid in the exegetical discussion that follows.

## CHRISTIANS AND THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

We begin by noting that contemporary believers are not expected to express their loyalty to God by keeping the Old Testament law(s), since we are related to God under a new covenant. And in any case, how could anyone possibly do so, since there is no longer any temple or central sanctuary on whose altar you can offer such things as the meat of animals ([Lev 1–5](#))? In fact, if you killed and burned animals as described in the Old Testament, you would probably be arrested for cruelty to animals! But if we are *not* supposed to observe the Old Testament law(s), then what did Jesus mean when he said, “Truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished” ([Matt 5:18](#))? This question needs an answer as to *how* the Old Testament law still functions for Christians.

We suggest six initial guidelines for understanding the relationship of the contemporary believer to the Old Testament law. These guidelines will require explanation, some of which we include immediately and some of which will appear more fully later in this chapter.

1. *The Old Testament law is a covenant.* A covenant is a binding contract between two parties, both of whom have obligations specified in the covenant. In Old Testament times, covenants were often given by an all-powerful suzerain (overlord) to a weaker, dependent

vassal (servant). On the one hand, the suzerain guaranteed the vassal benefits and protection. But in turn, the vassal was obligated to be loyal solely to the suzerain, with the warning that any disloyalty would bring punishments as specified in the covenant. How was the vassal to show loyalty? By keeping the stipulations (rules of behavior) also specified in the covenant. A covenant put in place a relationship—in Israel’s case, a relationship with the one true God, who alone could save and sustain them. So the rules were very important. No rules? No relationship! As long as the vassal kept the stipulations, the suzerain knew that the vassal was loyal. But when the stipulations were violated, the suzerain was required by the covenant to take action to punish the vassal. In an extreme case, the relationship could even be altered or suspended by the suzerain ([Deut 4:25–27](#); [28:20](#)).

What is important for your understanding is that in making a covenant with Israel on Sinai, God used this well-known covenant form when he constituted the binding contract between himself (Yahweh = “the LORD”) and his vassal, Israel. In return for benefits and protection, Israel was expected to keep the many stipulations (i.e., commandments) contained in the covenantal law such as we find it in [Exodus 20–Deuteronomy 33](#).

The covenant format had six parts to it: preamble, prologue, stipulations, witnesses, sanctions, and document clause. The *preamble* identified the parties to the agreement (“I am the LORD your God” [[Exod 20:2](#)]), while the *prologue* gave a brief history of how the parties became connected to one another (“[I] brought you out of Egypt” [[Exod 20:2](#)]). The *stipulations*, as we have noted, are the individual laws themselves. The *witnesses* are those who will enforce the covenant (the Lord himself, or sometimes “heaven and earth,” a meristic way of saying that all of God’s creation is concerned with the covenant being kept—e.g., [Deut 4:26](#); [30:19](#)). The *sanctions* are the blessings and curses that function as incentives for keeping the covenant (e.g., [Lev 26](#) and [Deut 28–33](#)). The *document clause* is the provision for regular review of the covenant so that it will not be forgotten (e.g., [Deut 17:18–19](#); [31:9–13](#)). Both the first statement of the law (at Sinai, [Exod 20–Lev 27](#), with supplementation in Numbers) and the second statement (just prior to the conquest, as found in Deuteronomy) reflect this six-part format.

The importance of this first observation can hardly be overemphasized. It is its covenant nature that makes “the law” so important to one’s understanding the Old Testament as a whole. As such, it is an essential part of Israel’s *story* (see ch. 5, pp. 93–111), which also explains in part why the laws themselves may seem in general to be so oddly organized. Furthermore, apart from the covenantal nature of the law, you will not be able to understand the role of the prophets in Israel (see ch. 10). So even though we are not expected to “keep” these laws, they are essential for us to read and know if we are going to appreciate the biblical story—God’s story—and our own place in the story.

2. *The Old Testament is not our Testament.* Testament is another word for covenant. The Old Testament represents God’s previous covenant with Israel made on Mount Sinai, which is one we are no longer obligated to keep. Therefore we can hardly begin by assuming that the old covenant should automatically be binding on us. We should assume, in fact, that *none* of its stipulations (laws) are binding on us unless they are *renewed* in the new covenant. That is, unless an Old Testament law is somehow restated or reinforced in the New Testament, it is no longer directly binding on God’s people (cf. [Rom 6:14–15](#)). There have been changes from the old covenant to the new covenant. The rules have changed because, in Christ, the relationship

has changed. God expects of his people—us—somewhat different evidences of obedience and loyalty from those he expected from the Old Testament Israelites. The *loyalty* itself is still expected. It is *how* one shows this loyalty that has been changed in certain ways.

3. *Two kinds of old-covenant stipulations have clearly not been renewed in the new covenant.* While a complete coverage of the categories of Old Testament law would take a book of its own, the portion of laws from the Pentateuch that no longer apply to Christians can be grouped conveniently into two categories: (1) the Israelite civil laws and (2) the Israelite ritual laws. While some Old Testament laws do still apply to us (see #4 below), these do not, just as laws in Canada do not apply to people in the United States.

The *civil laws* are those that specify penalties for various crimes (major and minor) for which one might be arrested and tried in Israel. These are the laws that shaped the daily life of Israel as God's people in their relationships with one another and toward their culture. So when you read them, think in terms of their role in ancient Israelite society; and think also in terms of how they reveal something about God's own character. On the other hand, such laws in the end apply only to citizens of ancient Israel, and no one living today is a citizen of ancient Israel.

The *ritual laws* constitute the largest single block of Old Testament laws and are found throughout Leviticus, as well as in many parts of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. These told the people of Israel how to carry out the practices of old-covenant worship, detailing everything from the design of the implements of worship, to the priests' responsibilities, to what sorts of animals should be sacrificed and how. The sacrificing (ceremonial killing, cooking, and eating) of animals was central to the Old Testament way of worshiping God. Without the shedding of blood, no forgiveness of sins was possible (see [Heb 9:22](#)). When Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice was accomplished, however, this old-covenant approach was immediately made obsolete. It no longer figures in Christian practice, although worship—in the *new-covenant* manner—continues.

But some will ask, "Didn't Jesus say that we are still under the Law, since not a jot or tittle, not the least stroke of a pen, would ever drop out of the Law?" The answer is, no, he did not say that. What he said (see [Luke 16:16–17](#)) was that the Law cannot be changed. Jesus came to establish a new covenant (see [Luke 22:20](#); cf. [Heb 8–10](#)), and in so doing "fulfilled" the purpose of the old, thus bringing its time to an end. The fulfillment itself Jesus called a "new command"—the law of love ([John 13:34–35](#)).

There are many modern analogies to this sort of change of stipulations from covenant to covenant. In the case of labor contracts, for example, a new contract may specify changes in working conditions, different staffing structures, different pay scales, etc. Yet it may also retain certain features of the old contract—seniority, work breaks, provisions against arbitrary firing, etc. To be sure, a labor contract is hardly on the level of the covenant between God and Israel, but it is a type of covenant and therefore helps illustrate in a familiar way the fact that a new covenant can be quite different from an old covenant, *yet not necessarily totally different*. This is also the case with the biblical covenants.

4. Part of the old covenant is renewed in the new covenant. Which part do we refer to? The answer is that some aspects of the Old Testament ethical law are actually restated in the New Testament as applicable to Christians. But such laws derive their continued applicability from

the fact that they serve to support the two basic laws of the new covenant, on which depend all the Law and the Prophets ([Matt 22:40](#)): “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (see [Deut 6:5](#)) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” (see [Lev 19:18](#)). Jesus thus excerpts some Old Testament laws, giving them new applicability (read [Matt 5:21–48](#)), redefining them in terms of love for neighbor rather than simply as prohibitions to be “kept,” and in so doing broadens the perspective considerably! Thus we say that aspects rather than simply the laws themselves are renewed from the old covenant to the new.

5. All of the Old Testament law is still the word of God for us even though it is not still the command of God to us. The Bible contains all sorts of commands that God wants us to know about, which are not directed toward us personally. If we are not concerned about building parapets around the roof of our houses ([Deut 22:8](#)), we should nonetheless delight in a God who cared that houseguests not fall off a (usually flat) roof with which they were unfamiliar; and therefore God’s people were taught to build their houses with that sort of love for neighbor in mind. This fits into our understanding of the law as part of Israel’s story, since we cannot know the significance of our story, the story of the new covenant, without knowing well how the law functioned in Israel’s story, the story of the former covenant.

6. Only that which is explicitly renewed from the Old Testament law can be considered part of the New Testament “law of Christ” (cf. [Gal 6:2](#)). Included in such a category would be the Ten Commandments, since they are cited in various ways in the New Testament as still binding on Christians (see [Matt 5:21–37](#); [John 7:23](#)), and the two great commandments carried over into the New Testament—“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength” ([Deut 6:5](#)) and “Love your neighbor as yourself” ([Lev 19:18](#)). And in this case these two “laws” perfectly display God’s character, which is to be reproduced in God’s children. No other specific Old Testament laws can be demonstrated to be binding on Christians, valuable as it is for Christians to know all of the laws.

## THE ROLE OF THE LAW IN ISRAEL AND IN THE BIBLE

Even though the Old Testament laws are not our laws, it would be a mistake to conclude that the law is no longer a valuable part of the Bible. To the contrary, not only did it function in the history of salvation to lead us to Christ, as Paul says ([Gal 3:24](#)), but without it we would not be able to understand what it meant for Israel to be God’s people. Note well that nowhere in the Old Testament is it suggested that anyone was saved by keeping the law. Rather the law was God’s gift to Israel—his way of setting them apart from their pagan neighbors, of setting stipulations and boundaries for their conduct so that they might know how they were to love the Lord their God and to love each other. In other words, the rules of his law gave them an understanding of their relationship both to God and to each other. This is why in the Old Testament the righteous regularly express delight in God’s law (e.g., [Pss 19](#) and [119](#)). And when people did not keep the law perfectly, God also provided for them the means of forgiveness and atonement.

Israel’s problem in the Old Testament was not with their *inability* to keep the law; it was with their *choosing* not to do so. The story of Israel as recorded in most of the Old Testament is

a long and sad story of disobedience, of constant flirtation with and attraction to the gods of their neighbors. Isaiah saw clearly that people become like the gods they worship; hence Israel is described as having eyes but not seeing, and having ears but not hearing ([Isa 6:9–10](#))—just like the idols they were attracted to and finally worshiped. Hence, instead of being Yahweh’s people—a people who exemplified his character of justice and mercy, caring for the needy in the land, etc.—they were full of greed, capriciousness, and sexual immorality, like the baals of the Canaanites.

So the *role* of the law in Israel is especially important for us to know well, because here we see examples of God’s own character being expressed in the laws he gave to Israel as they worshiped him and lived in loving relationship with one another. And here we understand why there had to be a new covenant accompanied by the gift of the Spirit ([Ezek 36:25–27](#); [2 Cor 3:6](#)), so that God’s people would bear his likeness by being conformed to the image of his Son ([Rom 8:29](#)).

All of this is to say again that the law was not thought of in Israel as a “means of salvation.” It was neither given for that reason nor could it possibly function in that way. Rather, it functioned as a way of setting out parameters of relationships and of establishing loyalty between God and his people. The law simply represented the terms of the agreement of loyalty that Israel had with God.

The law in this sense thus stands as a paradigm (model). It is hardly a complete list of all the things one could or should do to please God in ancient Israel. The law presents, rather, examples or samples of what it means to be loyal to God. In order to help with your reading of the laws, it should prove useful for you to understand the two basic forms in which they are given.

### *Apodictic Law*

In light of what has just been said, consider the following passage:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.

Do not steal.

Do not lie.

Do not deceive one another.

Do not swear falsely by my name and so profane the name of your God. I am the LORD.

Do not defraud or rob your neighbor.

Do not hold back the wages of a hired worker overnight.

Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God. I am the LORD.

[Leviticus 19:9–14](#)

Notice first, by the thrice-repeated “I am the LORD,” how clearly tied to Yahweh’s own character these laws are. The Israelites as God’s people were to worship, and thus be like, their God. Such commandments as these, therefore, were binding on all Israelites at all times. Commands like these that begin with “do” or “do not” are what we call apodictic laws. They are

direct commands, usually in the second person imperative, generally applicable, telling the Israelites the sorts of things they are supposed to do to fulfill their part of the covenant with God. It is fairly obvious, however, that such laws are not exhaustive. Look closely, for example, at the harvesting welfare laws with which the series begins (vv. [9](#) and [10](#)). Note that only field crops (wheat, barley, etc.) and grapes are actually mentioned. Does this mean that if you raised sheep or harvested figs or olives, you were under no obligation to share your abundance with the poor and resident foreigner? Would others bear the burden of making the Old Testament divinely commanded welfare system work while you got off scot-free? Of course not. The law is paradigmatic—it sets *a standard by an example* rather than by mentioning every possible circumstance. But at the same time it is also universally applicable to all who own land and raise cattle or crops.

Again, consider the final two commands (vv. [13b](#) and [14](#)). The point of these statements is to prohibit holding up payment to day workers, and abusing people with disabilities. What if you withheld payment to a worker almost all night but then gave it to him just before dawn? The teachers of the law and the Pharisees of Jesus' day might have argued that your actions were justified since the law plainly says "overnight." But narrow, selfish legalism of this sort is, in fact, a distortion of the law. The statements in the law were intended as a reliable *guide* with general applicability—not a technical description of all possible conditions one could imagine. Likewise, if you harmed a person who is mute, or one who is lame or has mental disabilities, would you still have kept the final command in the list? Certainly not. The "deaf" and the "blind" are merely selected examples (= ear and eye; thus sight and sound) of all persons whose physical weaknesses demand that they be respected and aided rather than disregarded or despised.

Modern societies often have relatively exhaustive legal codes. The federal and state legal codes in the United States, for example, contain thousands of specific laws against all sorts of violations. Even so, it always requires a judge (and often a jury) to determine whether a law has been transgressed by an accused individual because it is impossible to write laws so comprehensive in wording that they specify every possible way of violating the intended rule. Accordingly, the Old Testament law is much closer to the United States Constitution—setting out in broad sweep and outline the characteristics of justice and freedom in the land—than it is to the federal and state codes.

Note that our explanation that the Old Testament apodictic (general, unqualified) laws are paradigmatic (examples rather than exhaustive) is no help to the person who wishes to make obedience to those laws easy. Rather, we have pointed out that these laws, though limited *in wording*, are actually very comprehensive *in spirit*. If one therefore were to set out to keep the spirit of the Old Testament law, he or she would surely fail eventually. No human being can please God consistently in light of such high, comprehensive standards (cf. [Rom 8:1–11](#)). Only the pharisaical approach—obeying the letter rather than the spirit of the law—has much possibility of success. But it is a worldly success only, not one that results in actually keeping the law as God intended it to be kept ([Matt 23:23](#)).

Thus we make here a preliminary hermeneutical observation: Although not its primary intent, the law shows us *how impossible it is to please God on our own*. This, of course, is not a new observation. Paul said the same thing in his letter to the believers in Rome ([Rom 3:20](#)). But the point is applicable for *readers* of the law, not just as a theological truth. When we read the Old Testament law, we ought to be humbled to appreciate how unworthy we are to belong to

God. We ought to be moved to praise and thanksgiving that he provided for us a way to be accepted in his sight apart from humanly fulfilling the Old Testament law! For otherwise we would have no hope at all of pleasing God.

### *Casuistic Law*

Apodictic law has a counterpart in another sort of law, which we call casuistic (case-by-case) law. Consider the following passage from Deuteronomy:

If any of your people—Hebrew men or women—sell themselves to you and serve you six years, in the seventh year you must let them go free. And when you release them, do not send them away empty-handed. Supply them liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to them as the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.

But if your servant says to you, “I do not want to leave you,” because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, then take an awl and push it through his earlobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your female servant.

[Deuteronomy 15:12–17](#)

The elements in a law like this are conditional—they describe certain conditions that may prevail in certain types of situations involving certain types of people, but not necessarily in every situation involving every person. Casuistic laws, usually involving third-person descriptions, give examples of what may be the case or what may happen, and what ought to be done if it does. In contrast to apodictic laws, which prescribe what must always be done by everyone in all situations, casuistic laws single out particular cases that apply only to some people in some situations, not to everyone in all situations. The recipients of the law were expected to understand that they had broader implications.

Thus the law just cited applies only in the case that (1) you, an Israelite, have at least one servant, or (2) you, an Israelite, have a servant who does or does not wish to remain as your servant voluntarily after the mandatory minimum term of service has passed. If you are not an Israelite or do not have servants, the law does not apply to you. If you yourself are a servant, this law, because it is directed to your boss, applies only *indirectly* to you in that it protects your rights. But the law does not pertain to everyone. It is conditional—based on a long-term special labor contract (somewhat like a multiyear military enlistment in modern times), a *possible* condition that may or may not apply to a given person at a given time.

Such casuistic or case-by-case laws constitute a large portion of the 600-plus commandments found in the Old Testament Pentateuchal law. Interestingly, none of them is explicitly renewed in the new covenant. Because such laws apply specifically to Israel’s civil, religious, and ethical life, they are by their very nature limited in their applicability and therefore unlikely to apply to the Christian. What hermeneutical principles then can a Christian learn from the casuistic laws? Looking at the Deuteronomy passage cited above we may note several items.

First, although we personally might not have servants, we can see that God’s provision for long-term service under the old covenant was hardly a brutal, harsh regulation. We could scarcely justify the sort of slavery practiced in most of the world’s history—including American

history, for example—from such a law. Letting servants go free after only six years of service, and with enough resources to start a new life, provided a major limitation on the practice of contractual servitude, so that the practice could not be abused beyond reasonable limits. Note especially how this law is related to Israel’s own story. As redeemed slaves, who once had no hope of ever earning their freedom, they are to show mercy to those who find it necessary to become servants amongst their own people.

Second, we learn that God loves both servants and slaves. His love is seen in the stringent safeguards built into the law, as well as in the final set (vv. [14](#) and [15](#)), which demand generosity toward the servants, inasmuch as their God had shown such generosity toward Israel, God’s own people, a group of former slaves.

Third, we learn that long-term service could be practiced in such a benign fashion that servants were actually better off being in service than being free. That is, the servant’s boss, by assuming the obligation to provide food, clothing, and housing for one’s servants, was in many cases keeping them alive and well. On their own, they could die of starvation, or perhaps exposure, if they lacked the resources to survive in the harsh economic conditions that prevailed in ancient Palestine.

Fourth, the servant’s boss did not really own the servant in a total sense. He owned the servant *contractually*, subject to a host of restrictions spelled out or alluded to in a number of other laws on service. His power over the servant was not absolute under the law. God was the owner of both the boss and the servant. God had redeemed (bought back) all the Hebrews, as the gentle reminder at the end of the first set (v. [15](#)) states, and had owner’s claim on all of them—servant or free.

These four observations are valuable lessons for us. It does not matter that the law code of this set ([Deut 15:12–17](#)) is not a command directly to us or about us. What matters is how much we can learn from this law about God, his demands of fairness, his ideals for the Israelite society, and his relationship to his people, especially as regards the meaning of “redemption.” This law, then, provides us with (1) an important part of the background for the New Testament teaching on redemption, (2) a clearer picture of how Old Testament servitude was quite different from what most modern people usually think of as slavery, and (3) a perspective on the love of God that we may not otherwise have had. This legal passage, in other words, is still the word of God for us, though it is obviously not a command from God to us.

Not everything, however, about servants in ancient Israel can be learned from this law. For example, certain rules for servants of foreign origin are different in scope. Indeed, all the laws on servitude and/or slavery in the Pentateuch put together still only touch the surface. It should be obvious that a few hundred laws can function only in a paradigmatic way, that is, as examples of how people should behave, rather than exhaustively. If even the modern criminal and civil codes with their thousands of individual statutes cannot exhaustively give guidance to a society, then the Old Testament law should not be understood as all-encompassing. Nevertheless, because it does contain the *sorts* of standards God set for his old-covenant people, it should be particularly instructive to us as we of the new covenant seek to do his will.

## THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW AND OTHER ANCIENT LAW CODES

The Israelites were not the first people to live by laws. Several other law codes from ancient nations have survived from times even earlier than the time the law was given to Israel through Moses (1440 BC or later, depending on the date of the exodus from Egypt). When these earlier laws are compared to the Old Testament law, it becomes evident that the law given to Israel represents a definite ethical advancement over its predecessors. Consider, for example, the following two sets of laws. The first is from the *Laws of Eshnunna*, an Akkadian law code dated about 1800 BC:

If a free man has no claim against another free man, but seizes the other free man's servant girl, detains the one seized in his house, and causes her death, he must give two servant girls to the owner of the servant girl as compensation. If he has no claim against him but seizes the wife or child of an upper-class person and causes their death, it is a capital crime. The one who did the seizing must die ([Eshnunna, laws 23, 24](#), author's translation; cf. J. B. Pritchard, ed., [The Ancient Near East](#). [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011], p. [152](#)).

The second is from the famous *Law Code of Hammurabi*, a Babylonian king who "enacted the law of the land" in 1726 BC:

If a free nobleman hit another free nobleman's daughter and caused her to have a miscarriage, he must pay ten shekels of silver for her fetus. If that woman died, they must put his daughter to death. If by a violent blow he caused a commoner's daughter to have a miscarriage, he must pay five shekels of silver. If that woman died, he must pay 1/2 mina of silver. If he hit a free nobleman's female servant and caused her to have a miscarriage, he must pay two shekels of silver. If that female servant died, he must pay 1/3 mina of silver ([Hammurabi, laws 209–14](#), author's translation; cf. J. B. Pritchard, ed., [The Ancient Near East](#). [Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011], p. [175](#)).

There are several issues in these laws that may bear looking at, but we wish to draw attention to one in particular—the class distinctions built into them. Note that the laws provide only for fines as punishment for causing the death of a servant or a commoner, whereas the penalty for causing the death of a member of the nobility is death. Note also that male members of the nobility were practically immune from personal punishment so long as the harm they brought was to a woman. Thus in the second group of laws ([Hammurabi, laws 209–14](#)), even when the nobleman causes the death of another nobleman's daughter, he himself does not suffer. Rather, his daughter is put to death. In the first set of laws ([Eshnunna, laws 23, 24](#)), likewise, the death of a servant is simply compensated for by the payment of two servants. The killer goes free.

In such laws, then, women and servants are treated like property. Harm to either of them is handled in the same way that harm to an animal or a material possession is handled in other laws in these law codes.

Ethically, the Old Testament law represents a quantum leap ahead over such codes. The prohibition against murder is absolutely unqualified by sex or social status: "You shall not murder" ([Exod 20:13](#)). "Anyone who strikes a person with a fatal blow is to be put to death" ([Exod 21:12](#)). As regards compensation for injury to servants, there has been an advance as well: "An owner who knocks out the tooth of a male or female slave must let the slave go free to compensate for the tooth" ([Exod 21:27](#)). Servants, in general, had a very different status in the

Old Testament law from their status under the earlier laws. “If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand them over to their master. Let them live among you wherever they like and in whatever town they choose” ([Deut 23:15–16](#)). And in contrast to the provision in the laws of Hammurabi that allowed a nobleman to force his daughter to be put to death for a death he had caused, the Old Testament law is explicit that “parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin” ([Deut 24:16](#)).

## THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW AS BENEFIT TO ISRAEL

In terms of its ability to provide eternal life and true righteousness before God, the law itself was quite inadequate. But, then, it was not designed for such purposes. Yet when its own purposes are properly understood, the law should be recognized as beneficial to the Israelites, a marvelous example of God's mercy and grace to his people. We conclude with a few examples to help you read it in the way it was intended. So, read it in that light when you come across the kinds of laws we have sampled here.

### *The Food Laws*

Example: "And the pig, though it has a divided hoof, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you" ([Lev 11:7](#)).

The food laws, such as this prohibition against pork, are not intended by God to represent arbitrary and capricious restrictions on Israelite tastes. Rather, they have a serious protective purpose. The vast majority of the foods prohibited are those that (1) are more likely to carry disease in the arid climate of the Sinai desert and/or the land of Canaan; or (2) are foolishly uneconomical to raise as food in the particular agrarian context of the Sinai desert and/or the land of Canaan; or (3) are foods favored for religious sacrifice by groups whose practices the Israelites were not to copy. Moreover, in light of modern medical research indicating that food allergies vary according to ethnic populations, the food laws undoubtedly kept Israel away from certain allergies. The desert did not contain many pollens to bother the Israelite pulmonary tract, but it did contain some animals whose meat could irritate their digestive or nervous systems. It is especially interesting to note that the main source of Israel's meat—lamb—is the least allergenic of all popular meats, according to specialists in food allergies.

### *Laws about the Shedding of Blood*

Example: "Bring the bull to the front of the tent of meeting, and Aaron and his sons shall lay their hands on its head. Slaughter it in the LORD's presence at the entrance to the tent of meeting. Take some of the bull's blood and put it on the horns of the altar with your finger, and pour out the rest of it at the base of the altar" ([Exod 29:10–12](#)).

Such laws as this set an important standard for Israel. Sin deserves punishment. God revealed to his people through the law that the one who sins against God does not deserve to live. But God also provided a procedure by which the sinner might escape death: a substitute's blood could be shed. Thus God offered to accept the death of another living thing—an animal—in place of the death of the sinner among his people. The sacrificial system of the law incorporated this procedure into the life of Israel. It was a necessary part of the survival of the people, picked up and cited in the New Testament. "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" ([Heb 9:22](#)). Most important, the laws that required a substitutionary sacrifice set a precedent for the work of Christ's substitutionary atonement. The principle stated in Hebrews is a thoroughly biblical one. Christ's death provides a fulfillment of the law's demand and is the

basis for our acceptance with God. The Old Testament law serves as a vivid background for that greatest of events in history.

### *Unusual Prohibitions*

Example: “Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk” ([Deut 14:21](#)).

“What’s wrong with that?” you may ask. And why are this and other laws like “Do not mate different kinds of animals,” or, “Do not plant your field with two kinds of seed,” or, “Do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material” ([Lev 19:19](#)) in the Old Testament?

The answer is that these and other prohibitions were designed to forbid the Israelites to engage in the fertility cult practices of the Canaanites. The Canaanites believed in what is called sympathetic magic, the idea that symbolic actions can influence the gods and nature. They thought that boiling a goat kid in its mother’s milk would magically ensure the continuing fertility of the flock. Mixing animal breeds, seeds, or materials was thought to “marry” them so as magically to produce “offspring,” that is, agricultural bounty in the future. God could not and would not bless his people if they practiced such nonsense. Knowing the intention of such laws—to keep the Israelites from being led into the Canaanite religion that stood so utterly over against God and his character—helps you see that they are not arbitrary but crucial, and to the original recipients, graciously beneficial.

### *Laws Giving Blessings to Those Who Keep Them*

Example: “At the end of every three years, bring all the tithes of that year’s produce and store it in your towns, so that the Levites (who have no allotment or inheritance of their own) and the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns may come and eat and be satisfied, and so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands” ([Deut 14:28–29](#)).

Of course, all of Israel’s laws were designed to be a means of blessing for the people of God ([Lev 26:3–13](#)). Some of them, however, specifically mention that obedience will provide a blessing. Thus this third-year tithe law predicates blessing upon obedience. If the people do not care for the needy among them—those without “land” such as the Levites, orphans, and widows—God will withhold prosperity. The tithe belongs to God, who has thus delegated how it is to be used. If this command is violated, it is a theft of God’s money. This law provides benefit for the needy, and benefit for those who benefit the needy. Such a law is neither restrictive nor punitive. It is instead a vehicle for good practice, and as such it is instructive to us as well as to ancient Israelites.

## IN SUMMARY: SOME DOS AND DON'TS

As a distillation of some of the things we have talked about in this chapter, we present here a brief list of hermeneutical guidelines that we hope will serve you well whenever you read the Old Testament Pentateuchal law. Keeping these principles in mind may help you to avoid mistaken applications of the law while seeing its instructive and faith-building character.

1. Do see the Old Testament law as God's fully inspired word *for* you.
2. Don't see the Old Testament law as God's direct command *to* you.
3. Do see the Old Testament law as the basis for the old covenant, and therefore for Israel's history.
4. Don't see the Old Testament law as binding on Christians in the new covenant except where specifically renewed.
5. Do see God's justice, love, and high standards revealed in the Old Testament law.
6. Don't forget to see that God's mercy is made equal to the severity of the standards.
7. Do see the Old Testament law as a paradigm—providing examples for the full range of expected behavior.
8. Don't see the Old Testament law as complete. It is not technically comprehensive.
9. Do remember that the *essence* of the law (the Ten Commandments and the two chief laws) is repeated in the Prophets and renewed in the New Testament.
10. Don't expect the Old Testament law to be cited frequently by the Prophets or the New Testament. Legal citation was first introduced only in the Roman era, long after the Old Testament was complete.
11. Do see the Old Testament law as a generous gift to Israel, bringing much blessing when obeyed.
12. Don't see the Old Testament law as a grouping of arbitrary, annoying regulations limiting people's freedom.