



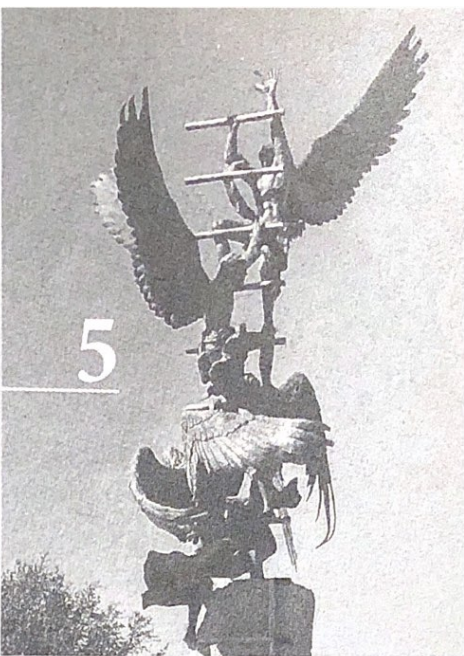
A **Wedding** Invitation

The Marriage of the LORD and Israel

One way to describe the relationship between Yahweh and Israel is to use the classic tale of the damsel in distress. In Egypt, the young woman (Israel) cried out for someone to rescue her. Yahweh came and swept Israel off her feet, flexing his muscles to impress her (and everyone else), and beating the gods of Egypt to a pulp. Israel was impressed enough to run away with Yahweh into the wilderness, escaping Pharaoh's slavery and seeing a new possibility for her future. So Israel and Yahweh traveled through the wilderness "dating" and getting to know each other as they neared Mount Sinai. Their relationship was rocky, to say the least. More than once, Israel asked herself why she ever left Egypt. While on the other side, all Yahweh wanted was for Israel to trust him—to fall in love with him; but, after all those years with Pharaoh and the gods of Egypt, trust did not come easily for Israel. Nonetheless, anyone could see that something special was happening between these two.

So perhaps it is no big surprise that, once Israel and Yahweh reach Mount Sinai, Yahweh pops The Question. In Yahweh's words:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, *you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples.* Indeed, the whole earth is mine, but *you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation.* (Exod 19:4–6a NRSV, emphasis mine)



5

READING ASSIGNMENTS

EXODUS 20

EXODUS 21–25
(SKIM 26–31), 40

KEY TERMS

Alien: a person living in a foreign country where they are not citizens

Apodictic Law: command law, absolute law without conditions: *you will, or, you must not*

Casuistic Law: case law, stated with conditions: *if . . . then . . .*

Law of Talion: punishment must fit the crime, e.g., *an eye for an eye* (Exod 21:23–25)

Ordeal: a physical challenge to demonstrate a person's guilt or innocence

Sabbath: the seventh day of the week, a day of rest for Israelites

Tabernacle: a portable tent with a surrounding compound formed by a curtain fence

Priest: an intermediary between the gods/God and people

Vestments: the robes or clothing a priest wears

Moses brings the LORD's offer down from the top of the mountain, and asks the people what they want to do. "The people all responded with one voice: 'Everything that the LORD has said we will do.'" (19:8a) In other words, Israel speaks a strong: Yes, we will marry you! We will enter into a covenant relationship.

The marriage or covenant ceremony between Yahweh and Israel is recorded a few chapters later in Exodus 24, and looks much like our own marriage ceremonies—well, at least a little bit. Just before the ceremony begins, Moses asks Israel one last time if she is certain that she really wants to go through with the covenant/wedding. Without hesitation Israel responds yes: "Everything that the LORD has said we will do" (24:3). So Moses writes out the scroll/book of the covenant, builds an altar, and offers sacrifices (24:4–6). He reads the scroll of the covenant (probably some form of Exodus 21–23) and asks the people if they accept the terms; they reply (again), "Everything that the LORD has said we will do, and we will obey" (24:7). At this point, Moses dashes blood from the sacrifices on the people, a bit different from our weddings, when the groom is told, "You may kiss the bride."

The final movement in the ceremony, however, is just like our weddings—Yahweh hosts a reception with food. So Moses and the leaders of Israel go up the mountain where they eat and drink in the LORD's presence (24:9–11). And, afterward, Moses heads further up the mountain where Yahweh will give him the tablets of stone with written instructions (24:12–14).

The chapters between the LORD's proposal (19:1–9) and wedding or covenant service (24:1–14) function somewhat like premarital counseling. Although Israel was impressed with what the LORD did for her in Egypt, and Israel and the LORD have been together for at least six months, Israel does not really know what it means to live in relationship with this God. Consequently, chapters twenty through twenty-three—containing the Ten Commandments (20:1–17) and the Covenant Code (21:1–23:32)—serve as an introduction to life with Yahweh, providing Israel with a basic sense of what she may expect from her God and what her God will expect from her.

Again, rather than a summary of all the chapters, we will limit our study to four key questions: (1) How are we to read the Ten Commandments? (2) What are the principles behind the Ten Commandments? (3) What is the Covenant Code and what is its purpose? (4) What is the significance of the tabernacle? With these questions, and at the appropriate time, we will take an excursion outside of Israel's texts to ask about ancient Near Eastern law codes.

I. Reading the Ten Commandments

The Ten Commandments may be the most recognized text from the Old Testament; so, it seems a bit odd to stop and ask how we should read these commandments—just read and obey, right? Yes and no. How these commandments function in Israel's society is actually a much more complicated issue. So, at the outset, we need to consider two radically different ways of understanding the Ten Commandments:

1. A Perimeter Ethic. On the one hand, we may read the commandments as something like setting posts that establish a fence line, inside which the LORD's people must stay. As long as they stay inside the boundaries, the relationship is fine; it does not matter how far they go, so long as

they do not cross over the line. With this understanding of the commandments, the most important questions pertain to locating the fence posts with absolute precision and resolving the question, "How far can I go?"

For example, the seventh commandment prohibits adultery. Read as a part of a perimeter ethic, the most important questions are: What constitutes adultery? How far can a couple go before they have crossed the line? Where, exactly, is the fence post located (see Figure 5.1)? So we ask:

- Is an emotional romance okay, as long as no physical contact takes place?
- What about making out, as long as the couple doesn't go too far? (How far is too far?)
- Is an internet relationship okay?
- What about pornography?
- Is oral sex adultery? What about sexual foreplay—is it okay, as long as there is no penetration? Does adultery pertain only to those who are married—what about the unmarried?

In other words, precisely where is the fence post located? Because when read as a perimeter ethic, locating the fence line is the most critical thing interpreters can do—so we know what we can do, how far we can go, and still stay in relationship with the LORD.

2. Centering Principles. On the other hand, we may read the Ten Commandments as expressions of principles by which to center our lives. Now, instead of looking for a fence line not to cross, we are looking for the principles that stand behind a commandment. We understand these principles to express what the LORD is like and what the LORD would or would not do. So, as a people drawn into covenant with the LORD, Israel's ultimate desire is to live more and more closely to God's heart. So, if we look at Figure 5.2, we reverse the ultimate question from "How far can I go?" to "How close can I get to the heart of God?"

To take the same example as above, instead of defining adultery so that we know how far we can go without stepping over the line, we ask a different set of questions. Most important, we ask: What is the principle behind the commandment? Answer: The prohibition of adultery expresses the principle of faithfulness to my spouse and respect for the covenant relationships of others. So we then ask:

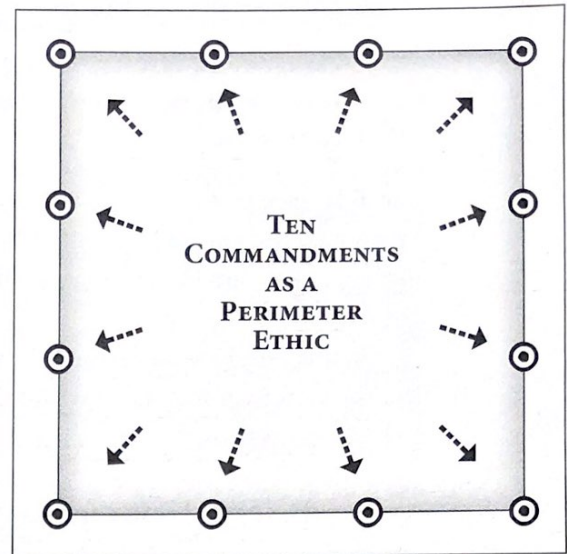


Figure 5.1. The Ten Commandments as a Perimeter Ethic

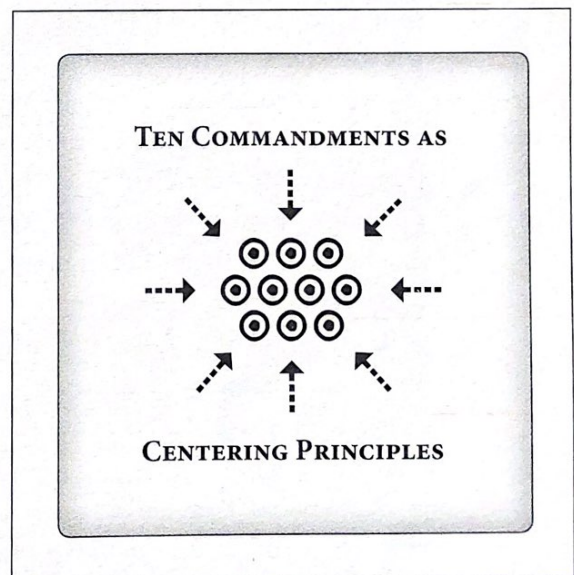


Figure 5.2. The Ten Commandments as Centering Principles

- How may we live more faithfully to our spouses?
- How may we best support the marriages of others around us?
- How may we encourage our community to be a place that keeps covenant agreements of all types?

The difference in understanding this commandment could not be greater. Now, we are no longer looking for the precise placement of a line we must not cross, but looking instead in the opposite direction—toward the center, and how to live closer and closer to the ideal; closer and closer to the LORD.

So then, despite their fame, it is not often that readers consider how they should understand the Ten Commandments. In what follows, it will be clear that I regard the Ten Commandments to be an expression of a centering ethic or principles for God's people.

II. The Principles within the Ten Commandments

Prologue: The Ten Commandments begin with a historical prologue that further defines how we understand the commandments: "I am the LORD *your God*, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery" (20:2, emphasis mine). Surprisingly, before stating the covenant stipulations, and even before the formal covenant ceremony (24:1–18), the LORD claims to be in a relationship with the people; the LORD is already "your God." *It is not obedience to the commandments* that makes Israel the people of God; God made Israel his people when he claimed them and brought them out of the land of Egypt (or before, see Gen 12:1–9). Consequently, obedience is an expression of gratitude for what God has already done. Israel does not work to earn a relationship with God; that relationship is a gift.

Command One: *Do not have other gods before me.* The principle behind the first commandment is God's desire for an exclusive relationship with those who follow him. And at the same time, God accepts Israel's long-held beliefs in the existence of many gods. In time, the prophets will assert that there is only one God, but not here. Here, the LORD enters Israel's life where she is—with a worldview filled with Marduk, Tiamat, Baal, Re, Horus, and many other gods. For now, it will do to demand a position above all other gods in Israel's life. Deuteronomy will restate the commandments (Deut 5) and take up this idea with even greater force throughout the book as a single-minded allegiance to the LORD. And of all that follows in Israel's story, it is this commandment that stands out as most important. Israel may fail the LORD in many ways, violate other commandments, and frustrate the LORD by their actions, but when Israel accepts other gods alongside or in place of Yahweh, the LORD's reaction is entirely different (Deut 6:14–15). The first commandment comes from the most important principle of life with the LORD: more than anything else, the LORD wants a monogamous relationship and a single-minded allegiance from his people.

Command Two: *Do not make a divine image or representation of anything in the sky above or on the earth below or in the seas below the earth. Do not worship them or serve them because I am Yahweh your God—a jealous God.* The second commandment is a natural companion to the

first. The LORD (1) demands a monogamous relationship, and (2) disallows the production of idols. This command, however, reaches for an even deeper principle. On the one hand, the Bible celebrates art and uses many images to help readers understand what the LORD is like: shepherd (Ps 23), king (Gen 1), even a thunderstorm (Ps 29). On the other hand, this command prohibits making an image of anything for the purpose of worship—even for worshipping the LORD. The question “why not?” leads us to the principle at stake. Anytime a person creates an image for worship, he or she restricts, reduces, or limits God to a single image (that we like) and worships the one image at the expense of the full mystery of God. So we might reword this commandment in other ways: “don’t fence me in” or “don’t put me in a box.” Recognize and worship the LORD, who is above all and beyond any single image; do not limit God in any way—not by physical objects of worship or by word images that become exclusive ways of understanding God, addressing God in prayer, or speaking of God. The LORD cannot be captured by any image made by humans.

Command Three: *Do not misuse the name of Yahweh your God.* First, we recognize that the name to which this command refers is the name Israel’s God gave to Moses at the burning bush: Yahweh (Exod 3:15). Second, misusing or “taking a name in vain” is not simply about how someone uses a word, but the respect given to the person whose name is spoken. Third, the command does not forbid someone from taking an oath in the LORD’s name (e.g., as a person swears in court before giving testimony). In fact, Deuteronomy insists that God’s people must take seriously any oath they make in the LORD’s name (Deut 6:13, 10:20). Consequently, the principle at stake is treating the LORD with respect, which begins with reverence for the LORD’s name.

As a side note: **From early times, Jews who had hearts of respect for the LORD and did not want to break this command, refused to speak the name of God at all—a decision that caused difficulty when they read their Bible aloud in the synagogue, since the name of God (yhwah) occurs over 6,000 times in the Hebrew scriptures.** The solution was to substitute a different word for the name of God, a word of honor and respect: Lord (as in master). Most English Bibles continue this tradition by substituting the word “Lord” and printing it in small capital letters (LORD) when the name *Yahweh* appears in the text (for an exception, see the Jerusalem Bible).

Command Four: *Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy.* The fourth command is the final commandment that pertains explicitly and directly to a person’s relationship with God; the final six commandments turn the reader’s attention to relationships with other people, teaching us that a relationship with God includes how we live among and treat others (see Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34; 1 John 4:7–12). Despite common assumptions, I am unable to find any Old Testament text that connects the Sabbath with worship for a layperson. Instead, at its beginning, the command is for everyone in the household to stop for rest. At first glance, this command looks easy to do: everyone gets a day off! With a second look, however, I assume that human nature has not changed, so people resist a Sabbath rest (by any name, on any day of the week) because we think that we must keep working to pay our bills, to keep the company running, to catch up, to get ahead, or for a dozen other reasons. The principle of the Sabbath challenges us to stop and rest; a rest that is possible only if we trust completely in the LORD rather than relying on ourselves.

Command Five: *Honor your father and mother.* Stated in positive form, the principle behind the fifth command seems clear—until we ask who is addressed by these words. Just before, the fourth commandment prohibited work for “you (ms = masculine singular), your (ms) son or your (ms) daughter, your (ms) male or female slave, your (ms) livestock, or the alien resident in your (ms) towns” (20:10 NRSV). All of the pronouns speak to adult males in control of a household. Still ahead, the tenth commandment confirms the same audience: “You (ms) shall not covet your (ms) neighbor’s house; you (ms) shall not covet your (ms) neighbor’s wife . . .” (20:17 NRSV). In fact, all of the commandments speak first to adult males living in community, with secondary application for females and children. Consequently, while a fair application, the primary meaning of this text is not that children should honor and obey their parents. Rather, to honor one’s parents in an ancient society meant to take responsibility for their wellbeing. Jesus supports this idea when he quotes this commandment, condemning those in his audience who acted religious and sacrificial for finding ways around supporting their parents (see Matt 15:4–9).

Command Six: *You shall not murder.* Due to traditional translations (e.g., “Thou shalt not kill” CEB, KJV, ASV), confusion has existed as to whether or not the sixth commandment prohibits capital punishment or killing in war. Newer translations clarify the meaning of the text, “do not murder” (e.g., NRSV, NIV, NLT, NJPS, MSG, ERV), as do references in chapters 21 and 22 that call for capital punishment (21:12, 14–17, 22:18–20) and the LORD calling Israel into battle on more than one occasion (Exod 17:8–14, Josh 6–12). The principle behind this command calls for honoring human life—life created in the image of God (Gen 1:26–27, 9:5–6). Thus, honor for life not only refuses murder, but upholds life and provides for human life with dignity.

Command Seven: *Do not commit adultery.* Earlier, I mentioned the questions that a perimeter ethic raises about the seventh commandment. As a principle, however, this command leads us to faithfulness in our covenant relationships, and to respect those of others. Reasoning in terms of principles helps avoid a potential death trap in fence-line thinking. **For example, since domestic abuse is not “sexual adultery,” some claim that God demands an abused spouse (usually a woman) to stay with her husband.** Our decision between a *perimeter ethic* and *centering principles* is no idle academic exercise! A principle is at stake, not simply stepping over a line. When a husband strikes his wife, his action breaks covenant. That does not mean she must leave him, but it also does not mean the LORD demands that she stay in a physically abusive relationship.

Command Eight: *You shall not steal.* A commandment against theft, like the other commandments, is essential for community life—especially for a nomadic group living together in close quarters. But then again, the commandment is no less relevant for an urban society in the twenty-first century, nor is the principle that undergirds the command. God’s people are called to respect and value the work and possessions of others. Consequently, the interests of a God-follower change from what he or she can do without breaking the law, to how they may best honor another person’s work and property. In this light, many typical fence line debates vanish: copying a friend’s CD onto our playlist, passing off a used car as better than it is, or turning in a paper lifted from the internet. The covenant requires a shift in priorities from self (e.g., what I want, what I can get for me) to other people who work to make my life better, even the waiter or

waitress serving a meal. It is a sad commentary on believers that the after-church Sunday lunch crowd notoriously gives the worst tips of the week to wait staff. The eighth commandment calls God's people to a higher principle.

Command Nine: *Do not give false testimony against your neighbor.* The command specifically envisions a judicial setting, in which we are called to give testimony for, or against, our neighbor. The supporting principle is perhaps the most obvious of all the commandments: God's people are to be people of truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. And yet this principle is, in fact, a principle, not an absolute law; and principles are always guided by even higher values (e.g., love for God and love for others, Deut 6:5; 10:12, 19; Lev 19:18, 34; Matt 22:34–40; Mark 12:28–34). Consequently, freed from fence line religion, sometimes the most covenant-loyal action is to lie. The midwives in Egypt found themselves in this position and the LORD rewarded them (Exod 1:17–20); and soon in our story, Rahab will hide and lie about Israelite spies (Josh 2:2–7). In fact, such challenges continue to occur in modern history, e.g., in Nazi Germany where many Christians decided God's desire was for them to hide Jews and others at risk, lie to interrogators, and risk their lives for the lives of others—the supreme act of love (John 15:13).

Command Ten: *Do not crave your neighbor's house.* The final command is itself a statement of an attitude that, if left unchecked, will lead to all types of trouble. Like the sixth commandment, but more pervasive, the traditional translation of this command is problematic: “Do not covet” (KJV, NRSV, NIV) has little, if any meaning today (the CEB is not much better in its translation, “do not desire”). The Hebrew verb (*hmd*) reaches beyond the idea of *desire* or *wanting something* to the point of an *illicit desire that consumes a person and leads them to do anything* to get the object of their desire; hence, my translation “Do not crave.” Contentment, satisfaction, and serenity are on the opposite pole of craving or coveting; not the lack of desire, but peace with what we have or what we must do to rightfully earn the object of our desire. That said, there is no greater disease that we in the United States struggle with than a raging materialistic consumerism that teaches and urges us to crave (covet) more and more: *What we need to be happy is always something more than we have, often something we cannot afford to purchase. But wait—fast credit is easy . . .* and we only discover when it's too late that we have bought into a lie that destroys us.

Conclusion: As our review of the ten basic principles comes to a close, one observation needs emphasis. Each of the Ten Commandments relates to life with Yahweh—the first four directly pertaining to God, and the last six to life with other people. As briefly mentioned above, the message is vital: how we deal with and interact with others is part of our relationship with God. My relationship with God includes Sabbath rest (Command Four) and honoring my parents (Command Five); life with God demands a single-minded allegiance to the LORD (Command One) and being truthful with others (Command Nine). The New Testament makes explicit what the Ten Commandments presume everyone knows: it is impossible to love God without loving other people (1 John 2:9–10, 4:20–21). Or, as Jesus replied when he was asked what is the most important command,

Text in Conversation

The book of Deuteronomy takes as its setting the end of Israel's time in the wilderness (just ahead in Chapter Six). Israel is ready to enter the promised land as Moses steps up to remind the people of the covenant that they have with the LORD (not just their parents, Deut 5:1–3). Moses will repeat many of the laws from Exodus 21–23 (and elsewhere), and he will develop several prominent themes unique to Deuteronomy. He also repeats the Ten Commandments (Deut 5:6–21) just as we find them in Exodus 20, with one noticeable and significant difference. In Exodus, Moses explains that Israel keeps the Sabbath because the LORD finished creation in six days and rested on the seventh: “That is why the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exod 20:11). In Deuteronomy, however, Moses appeals to Israel's experience in Egyptian slavery and the LORD's rescue as the foundational reason for the Sabbath. Israel should rest and allow every person in the household (male and female, slave or free) to rest because of their memory of what it is like to be a slave who is never allowed to rest (Deut 5:15). A rationale more fitting and compelling for people about to cross the Jordan and begin new lives in the land of their own.

This change allows us to see that, as circumstances change, so does the basis of appeal for allowing the LORD's instruction. But even more, as life for God's people changes, so too do some of the specific laws. For example, while the people were encamped around the tabernacle, all animals to be butchered for food must be presented as peace offerings at the tabernacle to prevent sacrifices to goat demons in the wilderness (Lev 17:5–7). But once the Israelites are in the land and it becomes unreasonable to travel to the tabernacle or temple, the law changes: a person may slaughter an animal in their home town, as long as they do not eat the blood (Deut 12:20–25). Thus, we learn important insights into the nature of the Law in the Old Testament. The law is not hard and inflexible, but elastic, so that it may change as circumstances change—as long as the principle remains intact.

You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands. (Matt 22:37–40)

In the same way, the Ten Commandments pertain to life with God, directly in the first four commands, and, just as important, indirectly in the last six commands.

III. The Covenant Code and Its Purpose

As part of the covenant/marriage service in Exodus 24, Moses “wrote down all the LORD's words” (24:4). Later in the service, “he took the covenant scroll” and read it to the people for their agreement. Most likely, this scroll consisted of an early form of Exodus 21–23, what scholars aptly call

the “Covenant Code.” This short book serves several purposes in the growing story of the LORD’s relationship to Israel. First, the Covenant Code continues to clarify what a relationship with the LORD looks like. On the one hand, the Code does this by providing explanations for how the community may put the Ten Commandments into effect. It would be wonderful if Israel only had to articulate its guiding principles, speak the subsequent laws, and everyone would agree and obey. In real life, however, every nation must deal with what to do when its principles are broken. This is the first benefit of the Covenant Code.

For example, the sixth commandment said, “You shall not murder” (20:13, NRSV). But what is the community to do if there is a murder? The Covenant Code raises the key questions to be asked: Was the murder premeditated or accidental (21:12–14)? Had the ox that gored a person to death done so in the past? If so, was the owner warned to take precautions (21:28–32)? Or what if, despite the eighth command, a theft takes place? Again, what are the key questions for the community to process? The Covenant Code helps: when a thief is caught selling stolen goods, what should be the penalty (22:1, 4)? What if a thief is caught breaking into a home during the night and the homeowner kills the intruder—is the homeowner guilty of murder (22:2–3)? Or, what if the theft is an action some might not recognize as theft? What if I graze my herd on someone else’s field (22:5, effectively stealing what their herds would have eaten), or if I set a fire that burns someone’s grain (22:6, effectively stealing their grain)?

The many questions raised by the Covenant Code are a matter of dealing with *casuistic* law or “case law” (if—then) as compared to the all-encompassing statements of law in the Ten Commandments (*apodictic* law). With all its statements of *casuistic* law, the Covenant Code is attempting to establish *lex talionis*, the law of talion—in other words, the punishment must fit the crime.

If there is further injury, then you will give a life for a life, an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth, a hand for a hand, a foot for a foot, a burn for a burn, a bruise for a bruise, a wound for a wound. (21:23–25)

The reader should be careful not to fall into either of two common misunderstandings of this statement of talion. First, *lex talionis* is a principle for communal or state law, not private vendettas (a point misunderstood by the time of Christ, Matt 5:38–42). In fact, most nations (including the United States) attempt to set up law systems on the basis of *lex talionis*—the punishment should fit the crime. Second, just because a law may permit a harsh penalty, does not mean that punishment is carried out to the full extent of the law. *Lex talionis* sets the upper limit of fair punishment; but in most cases, reduced sentences and what we would call “plea bargains” occur (see Exod 21:28–30).

The Covenant Code also continues to clarify life with the LORD by the statement of other *apodictic* laws. Some of these laws are understandable and leave us to again consider the principles behind the laws: Don’t mistreat or oppress an immigrant, because you were once immigrants in the land of Egypt. Don’t treat any widow or orphan badly (22:20–21). Other laws, however, undoubtedly made sense for ancient Israel, but challenge our imaginations as to their inner logic:

“Don’t boil a young goat in its mother’s milk” (23:19b, perhaps on the basis of compassion for the mother?). And then there are laws we would prefer not to imagine: “Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal should be put to death” (22:18; and unfortunately, laws tend to be written because people are doing what they should recognize as forbidden or wrong). In what follows, we briefly explore two groups of laws that further clarify life with God:

The Poor. The Ten Commandments say nothing about the poor. The Covenant Code, however, steps in with instruction for how God’s people should treat the poor. The Code itself begins with instructions regarding debt slavery and fair treatment of those who have paid their debt or served a maximum of six years (21:2–11). In no particular order, the Code forbids partiality to the poor in a lawsuit (23:3), just as it condemns bribes and perverting justice away from the poor (23:6–8). The Code also dictates appropriate financial interactions with the poor; it assumes the LORD’s people will help the poor with loans (for survival, not a new house). In such cases, (1) taking interest on a loan to a poor person is unthinkable; no one should take advantage of the poor in order to make money from their misfortune (22:25). (2) If a loan is made to the poor, it is appropriate to ask for collateral; but, if their only collateral is the cloak they sleep in, it must be returned each night—which will discourage taking such collateral at all (22:26–27).

The Alien and Enemy. Along with the widow and orphan, the Covenant Code forbids any practice that would “wrong or oppress” a resident alien, on the grounds that Israel should remember what it is like to be an alien mistreated in a foreign country (22:21; 23:9). As for an enemy, he or she is to receive treatment equal to that of a friend. If their donkey has fallen under a heavy load, a person in covenant relationship with the LORD will help free the donkey (23:5); and if their donkey is going astray, a person in covenant relationship with the LORD will catch it and bring it back to its master—the enemy (23:4).

An Excursus: Israel’s Law Codes and Ancient Near Eastern Law Codes

The existence of ancient Near Eastern law codes from numerous sources should no longer come as a surprise to most students. Archaeologists have unearthed and advances in linguistics have translated law codes (most are fragmentary) from as long ago as the early third millennium BCE: the Code of Ur-Nammu (2050 BCE), the Code of Eshnunna (1980 BCE), the Code of Lipit-Ishtar (1930 BCE), and, most famous, the complete Code of Hammurabi (1792–1750 BCE). It should also come as no surprise that many biblical laws have counterparts in ancient Near Eastern legal codes that say essentially the same thing as the biblical text. In order for the student to get a feel for these law codes, both biblical and non-biblical, the following chart provides comparable laws from the Covenant Code in Exodus (NRSV) and the Code of Hammurabi (translated by Martha Roth):

TOPIC	COVENANT CODE (EXODUS NRSV)	CODE OF HAMMURABI
Debt Slavery	When you buy a male or female slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt. (21:2)	If . . . he sells or gives into debt service his wife, his son, or his daughter, they shall perform service in the house of their buyer or of the one who holds them in debt service for three years; their release shall be secured in the fourth year. (117)
Goring Ox	When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall not be liable. If the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not restrained it, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is imposed on the owner, then the owner shall pay whatever is imposed for the redemption of the victim's life. . . . If the ox gores a male or female slave, the owner shall pay to the slave owner thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned (21:28–32)	If an ox gores to death a man while it is passing through the streets, that case has no basis for a claim. (250) If a man's ox is a known gorer, and the authorities . . . notify him that it is a known gorer, but he does not blunt its horns or control his ox, and that ox gores to death a member of the noble class, he shall give 30 shekels of silver. (251) If it is a man's slave, he shall give 20 shekels of silver . . . (252)
Miscarriage	When people who are fighting injure a pregnant woman so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no further harm follows, the one responsible shall be fined what the woman's husband demands, paying as much as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life . . . (21:22–23)	If a noble strikes a woman of the noble class and thereby causes her to miscarry her fetus, he shall weigh and deliver 10 shekels of silver for her fetus. (209) If that woman should die, they shall kill his daughter. (210) If he should cause a woman of the commoner class to miscarry . . . [he shall pay] 5 shekels of silver. (211) If he strikes a noble's slave woman and [she miscarries] . . . [he shall pay] 2 shekels of silver. (213) If that slave woman die . . . [he shall pay] 20 shekels of silver. (214)
Violent Son or Daughter	Whoever strikes father or mother shall be put to death. (21:15) Whoever curses father or mother shall be put to death. (21:17)	If a child should strike his father, they shall cut off his hand. (195)
Kidnapping	Whoever kidnaps a person, whether that person has been sold or is still held in possession, shall be put to death. (21:16)	If a man should kidnap the child of another man, he shall be killed. (14)
Items for Safekeeping Go Missing	When someone delivers to a neighbor money or goods for safekeeping, and they were stolen from the neighbor's house, then the thief, if caught, shall pay double. If the thief is not caught, the owner of the house shall be brought before God, to determine whether or not the owner had laid hands on the neighbor's goods. (22:7–8)	If a man gives silver, gold, or anything else to another man for safekeeping and he denies it, they shall charge and convict that man, and he shall give twofold that which he denied. (124)

Table 5.1. The Covenant Code and the Code of Hammurabi (see "For Further Reading" for a full translation)

Comparable laws between the Covenant Code of Exodus and the Code of Hammurabi also include theft or loss of property (Exod 22:1–6; Ham. 9–13) and various injuries (Exod 21:24–27; Ham. 196–207). Parallels to almost, if not, every topic in Hammurabi occur in other Old Testament legal texts (e.g., The Covenant Code of Exodus 21–23, The Holiness Code of Leviticus 16–27, The Deuteronomic Code of Deuteronomy 12–26, and scattered texts in Numbers). For example, like Hammurabi (132), when a husband accuses his wife of adultery and the only evidence is that she is pregnant (and the husband does not believe he is the father), she is forced to go through an **ordeal** to prove her innocence. In Hammurabi, however, this ordeal is life-threatening. In Numbers, she is forced to go through an ordeal that will end her pregnancy if she is guilty, but not kill her as in Hammurabi (Num 5:11–31). And although frequent in Hammurabi (195–197, 200, 282), corporal punishment by cutting off some part of the body is assigned in only one biblical case (Deut 25:11–12).

I will suspend my analysis for that of the student and for class discussion, with one exception for the reader to consider. Some would like to claim that the biblical laws and punishments are consistently superior to their ancient Near Eastern counterparts. The evidence, however, simply will not hold the weight of the claim. Let's take two examples from chart above. First, take the case of an ox that gores a person to death and the owner has been warned before about the ox. In Hammurabi, the owner is fined (251–252); but, in the Bible, the ox and its owner are put to death unless the family of the deceased will accept a ransom (Exod 21:29–30). Second, in Exodus, should a person strike their father or mother, they are to be put to death (Exod 21:15); but, in Hammurabi, the person's hand is to be cut off (Ham. 195).

IV. The Significance of the Tabernacle

Marriage is for the purpose of living with the person you love and to whom you have pledged your life. God's "marriage" covenant with Israel was for the same purpose; God loves and wants to live with his people, restoring one piece of the perfection that was lost in Eden. Thus, after the covenant ceremony in Exodus 24, the LORD directs Moses to collect an offering (25:1–7) so Israel might "make me a sanctuary, so that I may dwell among them" (25:8 NRSV). Moses goes back up the mountain to receive the plans for a tabernacle— a tent that included a fenced-in compound (24:18)—plans laid out in Exodus 25–31.

On the one hand, these plans appear incredibly detailed. So much so that any two people should be able to follow the directions and recreate identical tabernacles. On the other hand, various recreations of the tabernacle turn out looking quite different. So, while the detail threatens to overwhelm the reader, the blueprints actually leave a good bit of freedom to the creative abilities of the craftsmen and women. In order for us to get to the purpose and significance of the Tabernacle, it will be necessary to provide a brief sketch of the blueprints and furnishings, with special attention given to the ark of the covenant.

1. A Survey of the Plans (25–27). First, the plans for the tabernacle (see Figures 5.3 and 5.4) begin with the furniture: (a) the ark of the covenant (25:10–22), (b) the table for bread (25:23–30), and (c) the lampstand (25:31–40). Second, the plans lay out the dimensions of the tabernacle and

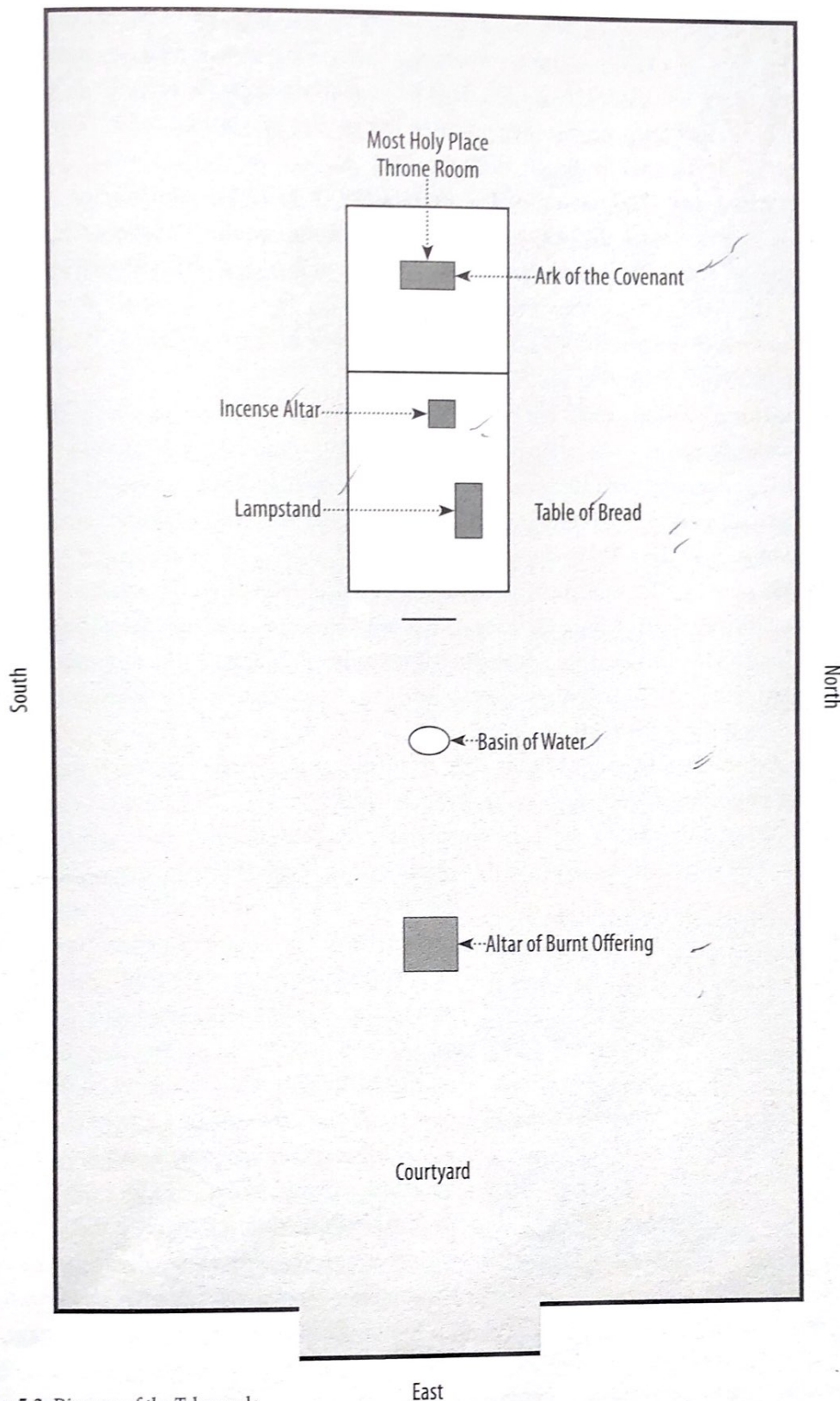


Figure 5.3. Diagram of the Tabernacle

give instructions on how to construct the tent so that it will be portable, yet sturdy and weatherproof (26:1–30). In addition, a screen or curtain separates the tent into two rooms: the holy place and the most holy place (26:31–37). Third, the plans describe the outer courtyard, created by a fence of curtains hung on another portable framework system (27:9–19). The centerpiece of the courtyard is the altar for burnt offerings (27:1–8).

2. Vestments and Ordination of the Priests (28–29). The second section of the plans describes the vestments for the priests who will work in and around the tabernacle—especially the ornate robe, ephod (long vest), breastplate, turban, and sash of the high priest (28:1–39)—followed by the vestments for the other priests (28:40–43). Next, the text describes procedures for the ordination of the priests (29:1–35), the consecration of the altar (29:36–37), and the daily offerings to be made at the altar (29:38–44).

3. Furniture and Taxes (30). The third section returns to descriptive plans: (a) for two additional pieces of furniture—the altar of incense (30:1–10)—and a large bronze basin for water (30:17–21), (b) an annual temple tax that will support the needs of the tabernacle (30:11–16), and (c) the recipes for making anointing oil (30:22–33) and incense (30:34–38) for use in anointing priests and objects in the tabernacle.

4. Workers (31). The final section identifies the lead craftsmen for the building project, Bezalel and Oholiab (31:1–11), and closes with a restatement and expansion of the Sabbath law from Exodus 20 (31:12–17). This reiteration of the Sabbath law stands as a reminder to those about to start work on God’s tent: no matter what the work may be, the Sabbath rest must be observed, even if the work is making God’s tent.

5. The Ark of the Covenant (25:10–22). The instructions for the tabernacle begin with the single most important object or piece of furniture. But why this is so and what the ark of the covenant is, is not immediately clear. The blueprints describe a small box, no longer than four feet,

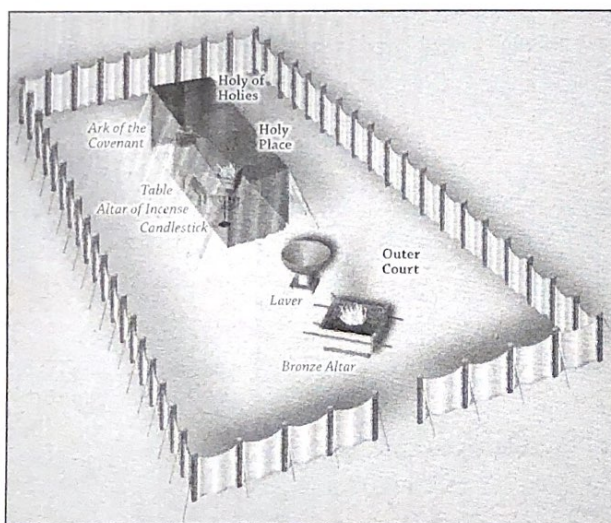


Figure 5.4. An Artist's Rendering of the Tabernacle

just over two feet wide, and two feet high. The box or chest is plated with gold, has gold trimming, feet at each corner, and rings of gold fastened to each foot so that the box may be lifted and carried by two long poles (also plated with gold). A lid or “mercy seat” made of gold fits over the top of the chest, and on either end of the lid sit cherubs—fierce angelic creatures that face one another, with wings spread out over the ark that touch in the middle.

The instructions are clear enough. But the bigger question remains: What have we built? In Exodus 25, the LORD says, in reference to the ark, “There I will meet with you. From there above the cover, from between the two winged heavenly creatures that are on top of the chest containing the covenant, I will deliver to you all that I command you concerning the Israelites” (25:22). Two later texts help further

identify the ark—and why it is so important. First, Leviticus 16 warns the high priest, Aaron, that “he cannot come whenever he wants into the holy area inside the inner curtain, to the front of the cover that is on the chest, or else he will die, because I am present in the cloud above the cover” (16:2). In some way, the LORD appears above the mercy seat—either above the lid or, more likely, above the wings of the cherubs. But again, why? The mystery continues for us until the book of First Samuel, when the Israelites urgently call for the priests to bring the ark to join them in battle:

So the people sent to Shiloh and brought from there the chest containing the covenant of the LORD of heavenly forces, *who sits enthroned* on the winged heavenly creatures. (1 Sam 4:4, emphasis mine)

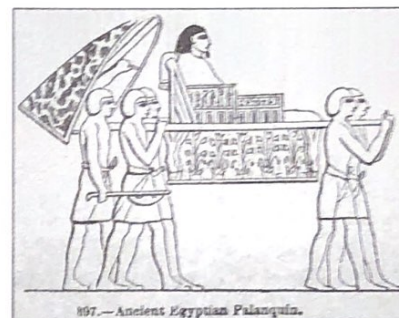


Figure 5.5. An Egyptian Palanquin

Mystery solved. The ark of the covenant is a portable throne for Yahweh, to match the portable tabernacle. Once we recognize the ark, we recall that monarchs throughout the ancient Near East used palanquins similar to the ark for travel (see figure 5.5). More important, we recognize that the holy of holies, the Hebraic way of saying “the holiest place,” is the LORD’s throne room, where the LORD sits enthroned upon the wings of the cherubim.

6. Implementing the Plans: The final chapters of Exodus put the plans for the LORD’s tabernacle into motion. After another brief reminder to keep the Sabbath (35:1–3), Moses asks for donations of the vast array of material needed for constructing the tabernacle (35:4–9) and calls for all those with skill to come forward to the work (35:10–19, 35:30–36:1). Moses gets both. Every morning the people continue to bring freewill offerings to the workers, until finally, the workers pass word to Moses that the people are bringing too much, far more than is needed to complete the work (36:5). So Moses gives an unusual command for a religious leader: stop giving. No one else was to bring any offering for the project (36:6–7).

Conclusion

The writer describes the creation of the tabernacle in mind-numbing detail (at least for Westerners), from the tabernacle itself (36:8–38), to the furniture to go inside (37:1–29), to the courtyard and its outdoor “furniture”—the water basin for washing and the Altar of Burnt Offering (38:1–20)—along with a summary of the craftsmen employed and materials used (38:21–31). Relentless, detailed descriptions of making the priests’ vestments follow (39:1–31), until the work is declared finished: “The Israelites did *everything just exactly as the LORD* had commanded Moses” (39:32, emphasis mine). Now the unassembled parts are brought to Moses: hooks, frames, pillars, bars, animal hides, curtains, cords, pegs, and so much more (39:32–43). When Moses sees that “they in fact had done all the work *exactly as the LORD* had commanded, Moses blessed them” (39:43, emphasis mine).

Now, it is time for Moses (and those he directs) to erect the tabernacle and do everything “*exactly as the LORD* had commanded” (40:1–33; see vv. 16, 19b, 21b, 23b, 25b, 27b, 29b, 32b). And when the LORD moves into his palace: the glory of the LORD fills and consumes the tabernacle (40:34–35).



Leaving Sinai

Round and Round We Go

At the end of Exodus, all the fanfare associated with the LORD moving into the tabernacle masked serious problems—matters of life and death, or, if possible, even worse. Despite appearances, the marriage between Yahweh and Israel is on the rocks, about to break up after only a short time together. So we begin this new chapter with an attempt to understand the couple's problem(s), and to get to the bottom of the matter, we must return to Exodus 32–34. After getting a grip on the problem, we will then see how Yahweh resolves the crisis in Leviticus. Finally, fully prepared and organized in Numbers 1–10, we will leave Mount Sinai for the promised land, with yet more crises erupting on the journey, followed by God's intervention (Num 11–36). Our study, then, follows the contours of the text—crisis/resolution, crisis/resolution, crisis/resolution, on and on it goes—and the faith issues that emerge, trying to ask the right questions that will help us see and understand God better.

I. The Rebellion at Sinai (Exodus 32–34)

Shortly after the covenant/wedding service for Yahweh and Israel, Yahweh called Moses up the mountain with two stones for the Ten Commandments, and to give him the plans for the tabernacle (Exod 25–31). Whatever the cause, Yahweh kept Moses up on the mountain, away from the people, for an extended time (40 days, Exod 24:15–18)—too long for the nervous newlywed Israelites at the base of the mountain. They panic at the apparent loss of their leader and their God and come



READING ASSIGNMENTS

EXODUS 32–34

LEVITICUS 1–5, 16, 19, 25

NUMBERS 11–17, 20–25

KEY TERMS

Atonement: to make amends for a wrong or for causing ritual impurity; to cleanse what is polluted

Blood: a ritual detergent for making objects and people clean

Clean/Unclean: categories for objects and people; their ritual status

Ordain: to appoint to a religious office or role

Sanctify: to make an object or person especially holy, or set apart for God

Seer: a term for a prophet

Tribe: an extended family group of one of Jacob/Israel's sons

Transjordan: the land on the East side of the Jordan River

to Aaron in desperation, “Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don’t have a clue what has happened to him” (32:1). Aaron shows no hesitation, and even seems to jump at the opportunity, “All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me” (32:2). They do, and Aaron casts a golden image of a young bull; he then proclaims, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!” (32:4). And, I have no idea what was going through Aaron’s mind when he then built an altar in front of the calf and announced: “Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!” (32:5b). The LORD, *yhwh*, the one who just said . . . *what is the future high priest of Israel thinking?*

It is worth a moment of our time to pause and count the number of primary principles (Ten Commandments) that have been shattered here, within only weeks of the marriage ceremony. To say the very least, the heart of the covenant between Yahweh and Israel has been destroyed. And, as a result of Israel’s actions, the LORD threatens two overwhelming and devastating consequences. First, the LORD returns to a well-known formula: kill all the people and start over with someone else—Moses (32:9–10).

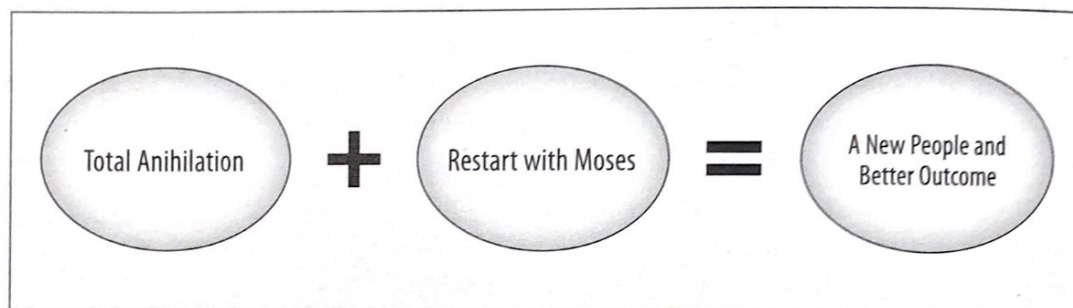


Figure 6.1. A Tried and Not-So-True Formula

We’ve seen this equation before with the generation of Noah (see Figure 6.1); and it appeared that the LORD had learned then that wiping out one group just to start over with another doesn’t work (Gen 8:21). People have the same heart problem wherever you go. So, Moses, in direct defiance of the LORD’s command (“Now leave me alone”), steps up and refuses to back down until the LORD hears him out. Moses gives three reasons the LORD must not do what he has threatened.

1. The LORD just told Moses, “Go down at once! *Your* people, whom *you* brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything” (32:7, emphasis mine). But Moses does not let God off the hook so easily. He responds, “O LORD, why does your fury burn against *your own* people, whom *you* brought out of the land of Egypt” (32:11, emphasis mine). It is like parents arguing over “whose child is this?” when Junior sneaks his pet hamster Buford into church and Buford escapes, running free in the sanctuary, igniting a spirit-filled revival. Moses refuses to let the LORD pass off the ownership of the people to him (Moses). Israel belongs to the LORD and they are the LORD’s responsibility.

2. If the LORD wipes out Israel, Moses warns, the LORD will lose his reputation with the Egyptians (and other nations) who will think that the LORD only brought Israel out of Egypt to kill them (32:12).
3. Finally, Moses reminds the LORD of the promises he made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, to make them into a nation and give them the land of promise (32:13).

These brief but strong arguments are enough to persuade the LORD to change his mind (32:14; see Table 6.1). The first crisis is prevented, but Israel is not yet out of danger.

HOLD THAT LINE!	
Did God <i>really</i> change his Mind?	
Your Answer	
If <i>no</i> , why does the text say, "the LORD changed his mind"?	If <i>yes</i> , why would God change his mind?
Your Answer	
So the best explanation of the text is to say that God was (e.g., kidding, teaching) . . .	
Your Answer	
What do you think Moses would say in response to God's actions (1) if he knew God never really intended to destroy Israel, (2) if he knew God really did intend to destroy them until Moses spoke?	
Your Answer	
Finally, what does your interpretation say about God?	
If God <i>did not really</i> change his mind, then God is . . .	If God <i>really did</i> change his mind, then God is . . .

Table 6.1. Hold That Line! An Exercise in Interpretation and Theology

The second consequence God threatens comes from love rather than anger. The LORD tells Moses to leave for the land,

I'll send a messenger before you. I'll drive out the Canaanites. . . . Go to this land full of milk and honey. *But I won't go up with you* because I would end up destroying you along the way since you are a stubborn people. (33:2–3, emphasis mine)

And again:

You are a stubborn people. If I were to go up with you even for a single moment, I would destroy you. So now take off your jewelry, while I figure out what to do with you. (33:5)

The LORD wants to live with his people, but he realizes there is no way to live with them without killing them. And to their credit, the people also recognize the danger but still want to live with the LORD (33:4, 6); without the LORD, they are nothing. The problem is complex with dire consequences at stake. The LORD loves his people and wants what existed in Eden—to live with them. He has plans for a place to live; *but how?* He is a holy God and they are unholy people; how can a holy God live with the people he loves, and who love him, without killing them?

Moses steps in again. He begins with the same argument he used in the first crisis—remember “this nation is *your people*” (33:13, emphasis mine)—and continues with an ultimatum—“If you won't go yourself, don't make us leave here” (33:15). In other words, if you (the LORD) will not go with us, then we are not going anywhere. Moses is so intense, however, that he fails to hear God speak. Between “this nation is your people” and *if you won't go we won't go*, the LORD agrees, “I'll go myself, and I'll help you” (33:14a).

Because of how important it is to Moses that the LORD goes with them, or perhaps because of his insecurity, Moses pushes for an opportunity to see God: a confirmation that the LORD is still with them (33:18). The LORD explains the danger in Moses's request: to see the LORD fully, face-to-face is deadly. Nonetheless, the LORD agrees to the request with strict conditions for protecting Moses (33:20–23). So Moses comes back up the mountain the next day with two new stone tablets to replace the earlier set Moses broke (see 32:15–20). Then, with Moses protected behind a rock, the LORD descends in a cloud, passes near Moses, and proclaims his name—who he is at his most basic, fundamental level—his nature:

The LORD! The LORD!
a God who is compassionate and merciful,
very patient,
full of great loyalty and faithfulness,
showing great loyalty to a thousand generations,
forgiving every kind of sin and rebellion,
yet by no means clearing the guilty,
punishing for their parents' sins

their children and their grandchildren,
as well as the third and the fourth generation. (34:6–7)

Moses bows in worship in the presence of the LORD and asks one more time, “If you approve of me, my Lord, please go along with us. Although these are stubborn people, forgive our guilt and our sin and take us as your own possession” (34:9).

Both crises have come to a tentative resolution: God does not kill his people and start over with Moses (as the new “Abraham”), and the LORD agrees to go with Israel. Now, after a renewal of the wedding vows (34:10–28), work can begin on the tabernacle (Exod 35–40). Moses oversees putting the structure together for the first time (40:1–33), and the glory of the LORD fills the tabernacle (40:34–38). The LORD has come to live with his people.

What a wonderful, awesome, terrible, bad day! I hope you will reflect on what has happened at the end of Exodus and my claim. It is easy to see what is wonderful and awesome about the LORD moving into the tabernacle to take up residence among his people; one part of what was lost at Eden has been restored. So how could it be a terrible, bad day? The answer is back at Sinai—in the second crisis.

The LORD has moved into the tabernacle to live with his people, but the earlier issue has not yet been resolved: How can God live with the people he loves and not destroy them? How can the people live with the God they love and not die in the process? It is wonderful that God is now living with Israel, but nothing has been done that will enable the relationship to last beyond Israel’s next failure. Something must be done to make this relationship possible, and that something—the resolution to the problem—is in the book of Leviticus.

II. The Resolution (Leviticus)

The book of Leviticus is the phone book of the Old Testament; who wants to read a phone book? Many resolutions to read through the Bible in a year have died a long, cruel death in the pages of Leviticus. Readers go in, but they never come out. The causes of death may be many, but ultimately, they don’t come back because of the depth at which Leviticus is submerged in ancient Near Eastern culture and the reader’s failure to recognize how Leviticus responds to the crisis at the end of Exodus. Without culture and context, readers don’t stand a chance. Leviticus does not and will not make sense. If, however, we grant respect to cultural practices over two thousand years old and understand the issues to which Leviticus responds, then we have a better than average chance of survival and a good chance of understanding a difficult book with a tremendous message about God.

To begin, God takes over in Leviticus. Again and again the writer records the words, “The LORD said to Moses.” The LORD takes responsibility for finding a way for this troubled relationship to not only have a chance of survival, but to thrive and grow.

1. Sacrifice (Lev 1–7). The sacrifices of Leviticus 1–7 are not all alike, and they are not all about sin. For example, the whole burnt offering (Lev 1) is primarily a voluntary act to express total surrender to the LORD (Lev 22:17–19); with overwhelming joy, a person gives the entire animal to

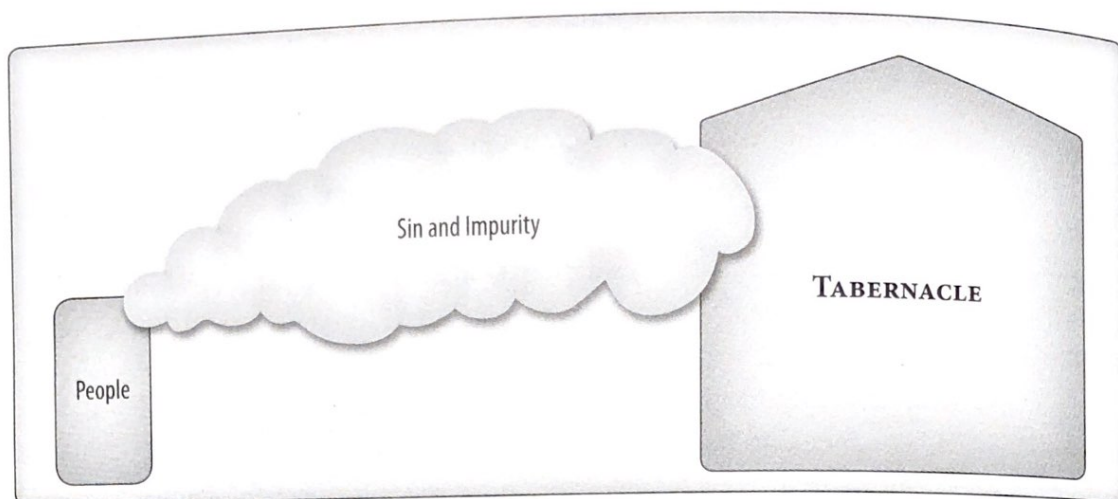


Figure 6.2. The Concept of Sin and Impurity in the Ancient Near East

the LORD (e.g., Ps 66:13–20). The peace offering (Lev 7:15–17, 32–24), on the other hand, returns part of the meat to the priest and the worshipper for the purpose of a feast or party with family, friends (Ps 54:6–7), and the LORD (Deut 27:6–7; 12:12–18)—a luxurious opportunity to eat meat in a society for which meat was an infrequent or rare treat. Sacrifices for the purpose of **atonement** of sin were also part of the system, though less frequent than most readers imagine. Behind these sacrifices are two critical cultural concepts: (a) sin and human impurity are like airborne pollution that pollutes holy objects such as the tabernacle (see Figure 6.2), and (b) **blood** is a ritual detergent that cleanses what has been polluted by sin or human impurity. So, for the primary atonement sacrifices (the sin offering and the guilt offering), the objective is not just to forgive the offender, but to purify the tabernacle by sprinkling or touching contaminated objects with blood.

Atonement sacrifice involved much more than just bringing an animal to be killed. Careful reading of Leviticus 4–6 reveals that before bringing a sacrifice, a person must realize their offense (4:13–14a), recognize and feel guilty for their wrong (4:13–14; 5:3–5; 6:4–5), confess their sin (5:4–6), and make restitution when appropriate (5:15–16; 6:5–6). Then—and only then—can an atonement sacrifice accomplish forgiveness and the cleansing of the tabernacle. In other words, a process that includes attitudes and actions must precede an atonement sacrifice, or the sacrifice itself is worthless and achieves nothing.

Even so, it is still valid to ask how such a system could ever work to achieve atonement and forgiveness. And Leviticus does claim that God forgives the people (4:20, 26, 31, 35). But how could the death of an animal and use of its blood repair the relationship between God and his people? The key comes later in Leviticus, in a prohibition against eating blood. Leviticus explains,

A creature's life is in the blood. I have provided you the blood to make reconciliation for your lives on the altar, because the blood reconciles by means of the life. (17:11)

We need to unpack this verse and its cultural assumptions: (a) life is in the blood, (b) God owns all life/all blood (see also Gen 9:3–5), (c) God gives the lifeblood of animals for the purpose of

atonement. In other words, the person bringing the sacrifice is not earning or doing anything to achieve forgiveness. Instead, it is God's gift—and only by God's gift of what God owns—that a person can be forgiven and the tabernacle kept clean. A good synopsis of the system in Leviticus comes from the New Testament: "You are saved by God's grace because of your faith. *This salvation is God's gift.* It's not something you possessed" (Eph 2:8, emphasis mine).

2. Priests (Lev 8–10). If the LORD is going to live with Israel, someone must attend to the LORD's home; a tabernacle requires priests. Consequently, Leviticus 8–10 describes how Moses, Aaron, and Aaron's sons followed the directions in Exodus 29 to **ordain** Aaron as high priest and his sons as priests. Their duties included offering various sacrifices, distinguishing "between the holy and the common, and between the **unclean** and the **clean**" (see below), and teaching Israel the word of the LORD (Lev 10:10–11). (On the actions of Nadab and Abihu, see "Dig Deeper" at the end of this chapter.)

Later, all of the men from the **tribe** of Levi will be ordained as aides to the priests at the tabernacle (Num 8). These "Levites" will have special duties to guard and transport the tabernacle, as well as put it up and taking it down (Num 3:4–4:49). One may fairly imagine that the Levites did much more to assist the priests, as long as they did not enter into the tabernacle (the tent) itself.

The relationship among the high priest, priests, and Levites often causes some confusion, which may be remedied with a simple chart (see Figure 6.3). All of these servants are members of the tribe of Levi, and thus, they are all Levites. But not all Levites are from the priestly family of Aaron, from which the firstborn son of the high priest becomes the next high priest.

3. The Purity Code (Lev 11–15). If we have been able to keep one foot in the twenty-first century as we have read Leviticus 1–10, chapters 11–15 demand that we jump into Israel's culture with both feet. However strange the contents of this text may seem, at the end of chapter 15, the writer reminds us what is at stake:

You must separate the Israelites from their uncleanness so that they don't die on account of it, by making my dwelling unclean, which is in their midst. (15:31)

Every culturally embedded word is about keeping God's tent clean from Israel's impurities (not sin). Five clear sections unfold before us:

- a. **Clean versus Unclean Animals (Lev 11).** Israel must discern between clean animals (that may be eaten) and unclean animals that will defile them; instead, Israel must be holy, like her God (11:44–45). Of course, from Israel's perspective, clean animals

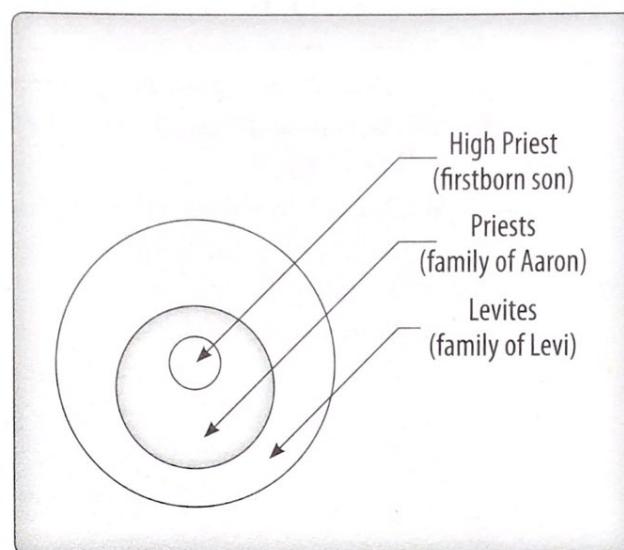


Figure 6.3. Levites, Priests, and the High Priest

are those most like those they herd—with split hooves and who chew the cud (11:3); sheep, cows, and goats.

- b. **Childbirth (Lev 12).** Uncleaness associated with childbirth must be contained or controlled so that the woman, while unclean from childbirth, does not come into the tabernacle and defile it (12:4).
- c. **Leprosy (Lev 13).** Multiple concerns drive this chapter: (1) how to diagnose an infectious disease of the skin (13:59; not “leprosy” as we commonly understand the term), (2) how to recognize dangerous mold or mildew in cloth, leather, or building materials, and (3) the use of quarantine outside the camp to contain communicable diseases (13:45, 46).
- d. **Purification Rituals (Lev 14).** The rituals in this chapter are not for the purpose of healing someone with leprosy, but for reincorporating them back into the community after they have become well.
- e. **Bodily Discharges (Lev 15).** Once again, this chapter seeks to identify what makes a man or woman unclean—in this case, by bodily discharges (most are sexual in nature). Such discharges have nothing to do with sin. And yet, like other forms of uncleaness, these too threaten the cleanness or purity of the tabernacle (15:31), which, if defiled, leaves God with few options—none of them good.

What is going on with all of the instruction regarding Israel’s culture and God’s tent? (1) The LORD has fully entered into Israel’s culture. So, instead of God saying Israel’s way of thinking is backward or stupid, God works with it. (The mark of good cross-cultural communication and a point that should slow our criticism of Israel; no doubt, in a thousand years, people will look back at us and laugh at how backward we were.) (2) Most of what makes a person unclean are normal parts of human life that have nothing to do with sin: reproduction (sex), food (clean and unclean animals), and health. Consequently, for the Israelites, these purity laws may have served as a constant reminder of their humanity (they are not gods). (3) Based on the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas, the food laws may have also reminded Israel of her calling to be holy or pure, the ideal type of human in God’s world.

④ **The Day of Atonement (Lev 16).** The most important place to keep clean is also the most dangerous to clean: God’s throne room, the most holy place. Once a year, the LORD provides a way for the high priest to enter this most sacred space, purify it, and live to see another day.

In order for the Day of Atonement to succeed, both the high priest and the people of Israel must fully participate. The high priest must wash and put on the clothes of a common servant before offering the various sacrifices (16:4): first for his own family members and their sin (16:6, 11–14) and then for Israel (16:15–19). In the same way that the high priest humbles himself, the people must also observe the day with no work and fasting (16:29–32). The various rituals on the day, including confessing Israel’s sin over a goat that is then led out into the wilderness to be set free, where it belongs among all the other forces in the wilderness that stand against God’s good order of life—“demons,” so to speak (16:20–22; see also 17:5–7); these rituals cleanse the

tabernacle—along with everything and everyone associated with the tabernacle—so that the LORD may continue to live with the people he loves.

⑤ **The Holiness Code (Lev 17–27).** The final block in the LORD's plan to live with Israel is a code of conduct that explains to Israel what it means to be holy—to be like the LORD. Notice just a few important points established by these chapters. First, the Holiness Code covers all of life, not just when a person is at worship. Second, the Code emphasizes that because the LORD is the God of the Israelites, they must live by the LORD's standards and not the standards of the gods of Egypt or the gods of the people in the land of promise. The god of a people determines their ethics—how they will live (18:1–5; 26:1–2); so, because Israel's God is holy, Israel must be holy (19:2; 20:7, 26).

Third, the Holiness Code has to do with the presence of the LORD's tent *and the land* to which they are going. If they pollute the land by sin or impurity, the land will vomit them out, just as it is about to vomit out the current residents for their sin (18:24–28; 20:22–26). Or, if Israel pollutes God's tent by sins, such as child sacrifice, God will set his face against them (20:1–5). But if they make the LORD their God and follow the LORD's way of life, then the LORD promises,

I will place my dwelling among you, and I will not despise you. I will walk around among you; I will be your God, and you will be my people. I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt's land—who brought you out from being Egypt's slaves. I broke your bonds and made you stand up straight. (26:11–13)

In terms reminiscent of the Garden of Eden, God will be restored to his people.

Fourth and finally, at first glance, God's plan has a flaw the size of the Grand Canyon—a problem the LORD seems to keep forgetting: humans are not and cannot be holy—just take a look back at Gen 8:21. Just when we thought there might be a way for people to walk with LORD, the whole system appears doomed; the Holiness Code will never work. But, if we don't give up and continue to read carefully, we discover another idea:

You will keep my rules and do them; I am the LORD, *who makes you holy*. (20:8, emphasis mine)

Yes, the LORD wants obedience; but, at the end of the day, it is the LORD who makes people holy. Consider another text:

You must keep my commands and do them; I am the LORD. You must not make my holy name impure so that I will be treated as holy by the Israelites. I am the LORD—the *one who makes you holy* and who is bringing you out of the land of Egypt to be your God; I am the LORD. (22:31–33, emphasis mine)

The LORD wants people to follow his ways and he understands that people cannot be or make themselves holy. Only God can make a person holy—like God; and that is what God determines