



Deuteronomy & The Beauty of Obedience

## Delight in God's Law

*Moses summoned all Israel and said: Hear, Israel, the decrees and laws I declare in your hearing today. Learn them and be sure to follow them. (Deut. 5:1)*

### The Beauty of Law

Rule of law is one of the greatest political blessings in history, since good laws protect us from arbitrary treatment, hold back those who would exercise unjust power over us, provide us with a path to dignity, and set us free. Good laws form \_\_\_\_\_.

God's laws are holy, just and good (Rom. 7:12), so we are encouraged to delight in them (Psalm 119:77). But OT laws can seem strange and counter-intuitive today. How do we delight in OT law?



Sunset on top of Mt Sinai (dmy)

### Moses Begins his Second Sermon (Deut. 4:44-5:33)

- **Deut. 4:44-49.** Moses starts his second farewell sermon near **Baal Peor** under Mt. Nebo.
- **5:1-5.** Moses presents God's law to all the people, admonishing them to **learn** and **obey** God's command. **But with us:** The commandments were written *to* ancient people, but *for* all people. Moses wants us to know that the Word of God is for us.
- **5:6-21. The Ten Commandments.** The first three teach us to honor God; that last seven teach us to honor one another. These commandments form the basis for all other commands. In Hebrew, the commands are in the singular "you." They are to be \_\_\_\_\_ and not just social policies.
- **5:9. Punishing the children.** Though each of us is responsible for our own sins, the effects of our sins last for generations.

#### The Ten Commandments: A Bill of Rights\*

1. The Lord has the right to your exclusive loyalty.
2. The Lord has the right to have His name honored.
3. The Lord has the right to have sacred things honored, and everyone has the right to rest from their work.
4. Parents have the right to be respected by their children.
5. The next person has the right to live.
6. The next person has the right to live sexually pure.
7. The next person has the right to his/her property.
8. The next person has the right for the truth to be told.
9. The next person has the right to a secure marriage.
10. The next person has the right to enjoy his property without worrying about you wanting it.

\*Adapted, Daniel Block, *The Gospel According to Moses*, p. 146.

• **5:15. Remember you were slaves.** Note that receiving God's law is the opposite of being a slave. God's commands are not a burden; rather, they are good for us, and set us free! (cf., 1 John 5:3)

• **5:17. You shall not murder.** Other OT texts make it clear that not all killing is wrong, but, rather, the taking of innocent human life.

• **5:25. Why should we die?** A common ancient belief held that if one saw God, he/she would die.

• **5:33.** Obedience to God brings prosperity and long life.

### Precept and Statute: Understanding OT Law

- The OT is built on timeless spiritual truths grounded in the very character of God. Behind the written law, then, are spiritual *precepts* (Latin: "to grasp beforehand") that are always true. But these *precepts* must be expressed in temporal, local, and culture-specific *statutes* (Latin: "standing position") in order to govern real-life activities. Precepts are \_\_\_\_\_; statutes are \_\_\_\_\_.

*Example: A statute in a swampy area requires that dams be maintained. A statute in a desert area requires that dams be broken down. Both statutes, though in conflict, are based on the exact same precept: You cannot handle water in such a way as to harm others. Maintaining a dam in*

*swampy areas protects a neighbor's property from flooding; breaking a dam in a desert area provides necessary water for a neighbor. Opposite statutes, exact same precept.*

- The *statutes* of the OT strike us as foreign because our culture is radically different from that of the Israelites. But these *statutes* were never intended to be timeless and universal—rather, as the Hebrews writer says, they are \_\_\_\_\_ of spiritual realities (10:1). We are not bound by the *statutes* of the OT which were for another time. We do, however, live in its *precepts*.
- In its historical context, every OT *statute* expresses a just and beautiful *precept*. Discover the precept and delight in it.



East Pediment, U.S. Supreme Court Building  
(left to right): Confucius, Moses, Solon  
(<http://home.hiwaay.net/~jalison/supct.html>)

### How Christians Read the Old Testament

1. Uncover what the Old Testament meant in its historical, grammatical, and literary context. At its most basic level, a text is a written set of instructions for constructing a \_\_\_\_\_. So, a text means what its author intended it to mean. Understanding a text, therefore, involves constructing the mental image the author intended you to construct. To do this, we use whatever helps: historical, linguistic, literary, theological data, etc.
2. Uncover the spiritual precept of any the text. Every text of the OT was written for spiritual reasons. So, behind every law, story, poem, or prophecy is a spiritual truth. Learn to perceive the spiritual truth behind every OT text.

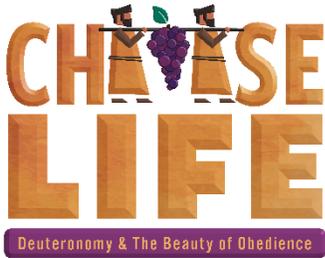
#### Faith and Law

- The whole OT is inspired by God and, therefore, flawless. (Psalm 19:7-14; 2 Pet. 1:20-21)
- The OT was written for Christians. (1 Cor. 10:11) It is *our* book, able to equip *us* for maturity in Christ. (2 Tim. 3:17)
- Jesus is the God of the OT. What other God would Jesus be?
- The *statutes* of the OT were for the Israelites, but the *precepts* behind these *statutes* are for all: they are holy, right, and good. (Rom. 7:14)
- The OT points to Jesus Himself, who fulfills (or fills full) the Law. Jesus embodies the *precepts* of the OT. (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 10:4)
- The *statutes* of the OT were nailed to the cross, though its *precepts* remain timeless. (Eph. 2:14-16)
- So, when we put our faith in Jesus, we uphold the Law, embracing its *precepts* even though we're not bound by its *statutes*. (Rom. 3:31)

3. Bring the spiritual precept to Jesus for its full meaning. The OT only finds its full meaning in Jesus (He “fulfills” the OT). Bring each spiritual truth in an OT text to the NT, where you’ll find that truth explained and applied to you. Ex: caring for your cattle in the OT is spiritualized in the NT to mean caring for ministers. (1 Cor. 9:9-10) Circumcising the flesh in the OT is interpreted in the NT as having receptive hearts for the Word of God. (Rom. 2:28-29)
4. Obey what you learn. You can’t fully understand the Bible until you obey it. The guy who can read a verse in every language in the world knows less about that verse than the guy who simply obeys it. Until you obey a text, \_\_\_\_\_.

“He who is his own master is the student of a fool.”  
—St. Bernard

*Answers: guardrails for the road of life, personal ethics, eternal, local, shadows, mental image, you don't understand it.*



## Reading the Old Testament

*When all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place he will choose, you shall read this law before them in their hearing. Assemble the people-- men, women and children, and the foreigners residing in your towns-- so they can listen and learn to fear the LORD your God and follow carefully all the words of this law. (Deut. 31:11-12).*

There is substantial distance between the contemporary reader and the actual world of the OT. Our social structures, conventions, opportunities, customs, and language are all very different from those of the OT. To read the OT rightly, we must learn to think like Ancient Near Easterners. Here are some strategies for reading the OT.

### Strategies for Reading the OT

- Learn to see metaphorical language. The OT uses lots of metaphorical language, but metaphorical language can be difficult to comprehend for outsiders. Language should be understood metaphorically when (1) history shows us that the ancients understood a term as metaphorical and (2) something in the text indicates a term is metaphorical. Near Easterners were especially fond of hyperbole and circumlocution (common in honor/shame cultures). Ex: the word “all,” often means “many” in the Bible (cf., 1 Kings 12:1 or Exod. 9:6, 19). To “destroy” a city may mean to destroy its social structure, even if many of the people remain (cf., Deut. 4:26-27). Be cautious, however: a text is not metaphorical just because it violates your modern sensibilities.
- Don’t impose modern mathematical standards on the OT. In the ancient world, numbers often had mystical and idealized meanings rather than literal meanings. The Hebrew word for “thousand” sometimes means “clan” or “group” (see Jud. 6:15). The number 40 can mean “generation.” “Seven” can mean “complete.” Since markings for numbers and letters were the same, ancients often used *gematria*, assigning theological meanings to numbers: (Ex: there are 375 Proverbs of Solomon [Prov. 10:1-22:16], and 375 spells “Solomon” in Hebrew). Ancient Mesopotamians often used a sexagesimal system of counting (where 60 was the base number), resulting in other symbolic uses of numbers that may be lost to us.\*
- Understand the chronological and geographical span of the OT. The Bible covers centuries of time and miles of geography. Don’t assume a “fixed” reference point to social and geographical terms. Place names and people names changed frequently: “Philistine” may refer to the Sea People living on the Israeli coast or to any other people who lived there. Jericho had several different locations. Cities often bore the same names (there were at least 2 Bethels, Josh. 19:4 and Jud. 4:5). Anachronisms were deliberate—a place was sometimes called by the name it bore when the book was written rather than by its earlier name, so readers could understand.
- Don’t read from a place of modern abundance. The world of the OT was a world of scarcity, danger, and hardship. Many OT institutions were established to soften the edge of such a world. For example, having multiple wives was often done to protect women from extreme poverty or to provide children—who were necessary as one’s workers, police force, and clan. This is why many women *asked* their husbands to take additional wives. Indentured servitude was a preferred way of life for many, since it gave people a steady income (similar to share-cropping; cf., Deut. 15:17).
- Learn the honor/shame value system of the OT world. In the OT world, values centered on preserving the clan’s honor and avoiding its shame. Individualism was often considered a betrayal,



16th century AD Hebrew Manuscript of Num. 16:27ff (dmy)

as the clan was far more important than the individual. This was necessary in a scarce and hierarchal world. Ex: In levirate marriage, a family member was expected to marry a clan widow so as to preserve the deceased clan member's legacy (cf., Deut. 25:5-10). But note that, though the OT was born in an honor/shame culture, it moves towards the individualistic world of guilt and innocence.

- Don't assume modern institutions. We live in a sophisticated and wealthy world with social institutions that did not exist in the OT. The OT world generally had no such institutions as police



Late 1800's photo of an Egyptian village. Imagine how different the lives of these women were from ours! (dmy)

forces, general prisons, social security, hospitals, cash, etc. Combatants took slaves in battle because POW camps were too expensive to maintain. Physical punishment was common because feeding and housing a prisoner was too expensive. Blood revenge was necessary because a standing police force was too expensive. Laws had to be crafted around what actually existed, not what one would like to exist.

- Understand the importance of holiness. Americans have a cheap view of holiness, so much of the OT doesn't make sense to Americans. But the OT knows that without holiness there can be no lasting justice. For example, "human rights" only exist if we presume the sacredness of humans. Our weak

view of holiness makes many OT texts difficult to appreciate. Everything in the OT—clothes, houses, calendars, hairstyles, food, relationships, everything—is subject to holiness laws because without holiness there can be no justice.

- Don't practice chronological snobbery. Though we live in a world of abundance, that doesn't mean our culture is always superior to ancient cultures. For example, we enter marriage for emotional reasons, whereas ancients tended to enter marriage for economic reasons. Millions of Americans do not find happiness in marriage, and end up in misery—is our system really that much better?
- Read the OT pre-Jesus first. Recognize how much the world has been shaped by Jesus—we are on the back side of a Christian civilization. Because Christianity has had such a tremendous impact for good on the world, many of our institutions are far superior to those of the ancient world. Don't assume that the ancient world had the privilege of a Christian-based value system.
- Then read the OT through the eyes of Jesus. The earliest parts of the Old Testament reveal basic truths, which are then developed as one progresses through Scriptures. This doesn't mean that the early sections are untrue, but it does mean that their truth is incomplete until one gets to the NT. For example, though the OT implies life after death, it is only in the person of Jesus and the work of the NT that we discover that eternal life will be secured through resurrection from death. In the NT, we are given the final and completed revelation of truth (see Jude 3).
- Don't try to manage God. God is not tamable, docile, or passive. Though He is compassionate and full of grace, He is also a consuming fire, a jealous God, and the judge of humanity (Deut. 4:24). Don't be ashamed of the fierce and powerful God who is. Do not seek to submit this God to *your* values.



This God won't be tamed. "Death on a Pale Horse," by Benjamin West, based on Rev. 6:8 (<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons>)

*\*This may account for the high numbers in Genesis 5. See Copan and Jacoby, Origins, pp. 129ff. This system lives today in our time-keeping (60 minutes to an hour, etc.) and in our geometry and navigation (360 degrees in a circle and on a compass).*