

## 1.6 Laws of the Hebrews

The basis of Hebrew law is the code of moral law known as the Ten Commandments that, according to the account in Genesis, their God Yahweh gave them on Mt. Sinai in the thirteenth century B.C.E. The Hebrews also had other laws and customs they followed that applied those broad principles more specifically.

Source: The Bible, New International Version, © 1973, 1978, 1984, International Bible Society. Ex. 20: 1-17, Ex. 21-23, *passim*.

### EXODUS 20: 1-17

#### The Ten Commandments

1. And God spoke all these words:
2. "I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.
3. "You shall have no other gods before [*besides*] me.
- 4-6. "You shall not make for yourself an idol in the form of anything in heaven above or on the earth beneath or in the waters below. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I, the LORD your God, am a jealous God, punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me, but showing love to a thousand [generations] of those who love me and keep my commandments.
7. "You shall not misuse the name of the LORD your God, for the LORD will not hold anyone guiltless who misuses his name.
- 8-11. "Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work, neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your manservant or maidservant, nor your animals, nor the alien within your gates. For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
12. "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.
13. "You shall not murder.
14. "You shall not commit adultery.
15. "You shall not steal.
16. "You shall not give false testimony against your neighbor.
17. "You shall not covet your neighbor's house. You shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant or maidservant, his ox or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor."

### EXODUS 21

#### Regarding Slaves and Servants

1. "These are the laws you are to set before them:
2. "If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything.
3. "If he comes alone, he is to go free alone; but if he has a wife when he comes, she is to go with him.
4. "If his master gives him a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the woman and her children shall belong to her master, and only the man shall go free.
- 5-6. "But if the servant declares, 'I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,' then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.
7. "If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do.

#### Regarding Crimes of Violence

12. "Anyone who strikes a man and kills him shall surely be put to death.
13. "However, if he does not do it intentionally, but God lets it happen, he is to flee to a place I will designate.

## Part 1: The Ancient Near East

17. "Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.

18-19. "If men quarrel and one hits the other with a stone or with his fist [*or tool*] and he does not die but is confined to bed, the one who struck the blow will not be held responsible if the other gets up and walks around outside with his staff however, he must pay the injured man for the loss of his time and see that he is completely healed.

20-21. "If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property.

22. "If men who are fighting hit a pregnant woman and she gives birth prematurely [*or she has a miscarriage*] but there is no serious injury, the offender must be fined whatever the woman's husband demands and the court allows.

23-25. "But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

26. "If a man hits a manservant or maidservant in the eye and destroys it, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the eye.

27. "And if he knocks out the tooth of a manservant or maidservant, he must let the servant go free to compensate for the tooth.

### Regarding Liability Regarding Property

28. "If a bull gores a man or a woman to death, the bull must be stoned to death, and its meat must not be eaten. But the owner of the bull will not be held responsible.

29. "If, however, the bull has had the habit of goring and the owner has been warned but has not kept it penned up and it kills a man or woman, the bull must be stoned and the owner also must be put to death.

30. "However, if payment is demanded of him, he may redeem his life by paying whatever is demanded.

31. "This law also applies if the bull gores a son or daughter.

32. "If the bull gores a male or female slave, the owner must pay thirty shekels [*about 12 ounces*] of silver to the master of the slave, and the bull must be stoned.

33-34. "If a man uncovers a pit or digs one and fails to cover it and an ox or a donkey falls into it, the owner of the pit must pay for the loss; he must pay its owner, and the dead animal will be his.

35. "If a man's bull injures the bull of another and it dies, they are to sell the live one and divide both the money and the dead animal equally.

36. "However, if it was known that the bull had the habit of goring, yet the owner did not keep it penned up, the owner must pay, animal for animal, and the dead animal will be his.

## EXODUS 22

1. "If a man steals an ox or a sheep and slaughters it or sells it, he must pay back five head of cattle for the ox and four sheep for the sheep.

2-3. "If a thief is caught breaking in and is struck so that he dies, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; but if it happens after sunrise, he is guilty of bloodshed. A thief must certainly make restitution, but if he has nothing, he must be sold to pay for his theft.

5. "If a man grazes his livestock in a field or vineyard and lets them stray and they graze in another man's field, he must make restitution from the best of his own field or vineyard.

6. "If a fire breaks out and spreads into thornbushes so that it burns shocks of grain or standing grain or the whole field, the one who started the fire must make restitution.

14. "If a man borrows an animal from his neighbor and it is injured or dies while the owner is not present, he must make restitution.

15. "But if the owner is with the animal, the borrower will not have to pay. If the animal was hired, the money paid for the hire covers the loss.

### Regarding Relationships and Ethical Behavior

16. "If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife.

17. "If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.

18. "Do not allow a sorceress to live.

19. "Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death.

20. "Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the LORD must be destroyed.

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21. "Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.
22. "Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan.
23. "If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry.
24. "My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.
25. "If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest.
- 26-27. "If you take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.
31. "You are to be my holy people....

### EXODUS 23

1. "Do not spread false reports. Do not help a wicked man by being a malicious witness.
- 2-3. "Do not follow the crowd in doing wrong. When you give testimony in a lawsuit, do not pervert justice by siding with the crowd, and do not show favoritism to a poor man in his lawsuit.
4. "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to take it back to him.
5. "If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help him with it.
6. "Do not deny justice to your poor people in their lawsuits.
7. "Have nothing to do with a false charge and do not put an innocent or honest person to death, for I will not acquit the guilty.
8. "Do not accept a bribe, for a bribe blinds those who see and twists the words of the righteous.
9. "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt.
10. "For six years you are to sow your fields and harvest the crops,
11. "But during the seventh year let the land lie unplowed and unused. Then the poor among your people may get food from it, and the wild animals may eat what they leave. Do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.

#### Questions:

1. What are the authority and principles on which this law code is based?
2. How are the law codes similar to Hammurabi's Law Code in document 1.5? How are they different?
3. What do these two law codes reveal about the social structure, family, and the position of women in each society?