

Interpreting a Biblical Passage

Genre – Law

In the OT, the law describes the **covenant stipulations** between God and the community, Israel. These 600+ stipulations occur between Exodus 20-Deuteronomy 33, though Deuteronomy is in some ways a *distinct genre* that **restates** the Mosaic law through Moses's **speeches**.

Two Forms of Law

- *Casuistic* (“case”) Law – “If ‘A’ happens, *then* the penalty is ‘B’” – specific/hypothetical cases, primarily **civil** or **criminal** and **not religious** in nature. E.g., Exod 21.28-29: “**If** a bull kills a person, **then** the bull must be stoned to death *and* the owner shall not be responsible; **If** a bull is *in the habit* of goring *and* the owner has been warned *and* not penned the bull, **then** the bull *and* the owner shall be stoned to death.”
- *Apodictic* (“absolute”) Law – “You shall (not)...” – categorical/generic commands and prohibitions, primarily **religious** and **moral**
 - 1) Prohibition/admonition – addressed personally (“you...”) and usually negative (prohibition): “You *shall not* murder” (Exod 20.13); occasionally positive (admonition): “honour your mother and father” (Exod 20.12)
 - 2) “Participle” law – the Hebrew participle (“whoever”...) with the penalty: “*whoever* strikes father or mother shall **be put to death**” (Exod 21.15) (Perhaps a mix of *casuistic* and *apodictic* because it prescribes the penalty.)
 - 3) Curse – “cursed be anyone who dishonours father or mother” (Deut 27.15)
 - 4) Retaliation (“lex talionis”) – “life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot...” (Exod 21.23-25; cf. Gen 9.6; Lev 24.18-22; Deut 19.21).

Reading and Applying OT Law

- Identify what form of law you are studying
 - Casuistic laws usually appear as part of a **topical group** (e.g., bodily injuries – Exod 21.18-32) and apodictic laws as part of a **series** (e.g., ten commandments: Exod 20.2-17). To understand the focus of a particular law, look for clues in the surrounding laws.
 - Laws distinguish between instructions for *priests* (e.g., Lev 6-7, 21) and rituals for *laity* (Lev 1-5).
- Determine implications for additional applications of a law
 - Laws are **open representative patterns**, implying further applications, not **closed exhaustive codes**, providing opportunities for *loopholes*. The specific meaning of a given law does not exhaust all its possible meanings. E.g., the *principle* of the negligent ox owner (Exod 21.29) can find fresh application today. (It needn't relate *specifically* to an ox, or even to an *animal*.)
- Recognize the law as a response to divine grace
 - Laws are the **response** to belonging *already* to God's gracious covenant, not a **means** of entering that covenant (“earning salvation” is never implied)
 - Broken laws reveal **broken covenant**, requiring **repentance**. (For Christians, through **Christ**.)
 - Laws are often **alternatives** and **antidotes** to the practices and religions of the surrounding nations, especially the Canaanites. The laws are **context-specific** and **identity-forming** in a way that **Christ** is now meant to identify Christ's people, and are not enduring for Christians.
- Determine whether the NT **reaffirms** the ongoing validity of OT laws (e.g., ten commandments – Matt 5.21-37; Mark 12.29; John 7.23; Rom 13.8-10; 1 Cor 8.6), or **terminates** a law (e.g., gentiles eating “unclean” food – Mark 7.19; Acts 10.9-16; need for animal sacrifice overtaken by Jesus – Heb 7-8).
- **Christ** is the “fulfilment of the Law” (Matt 5.17; Rom 10.4) and **love** is the law's corresponding fulfilment in action (Matt 22.40; Rom 13.10; Gal 5.14). Nevertheless, Christians may **use OT laws** to inform them *how* to put their love into action in fulfilment of the law (so Paul in Rom 13.8-10).