

Exodus 22: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Exodus chapter 22 If a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field, and in his own vineyard.

If fire breaks out and catches in thorns, so that the stacked grain or the standing grain or the field is consumed, he who started the fire shall make full restitution.

If a man gives to his neighbour money or goods to keep safe, and it is stolen from the man's house, then, if the thief is found, he shall pay double. If the thief is not found, the owner of the house shall come near to God to show whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbour's property.

For every breach of trust, whether it is for an ox, for a donkey, for a sheep, for a cloak, or for any kind of lost thing, of which one says, this is it, the case of both parties shall come before God, the one whom God condemned shall pay double to his neighbour.

If a man gives to his neighbour a donkey or an ox or a sheep or any beast to keep safe, and it dies or is injured or is driven away without anyone seeing it, an oath by the Lord shall be between them both to see whether or not he has put his hand to his neighbour's property.

[1 : 56] The owner shall accept the oath, and he shall not make restitution. But if it is stolen from him, he shall make restitution to its owner. If it is torn by beasts, let him bring it as evidence.

He shall not make restitution for what has been torn. If a man borrows anything of his neighbour, and it is injured or dies, the owner not being with it, he shall make full restitution.

If the owner was with it, he shall not make restitution. If it was hired, it came for its hiring fee. If a man seduces a virgin who is not betrothed and lies with her, he shall give the bride price for her and make her his wife.

If her father utterly refuses to give her to him, he shall pay money equal to the bride price for virgins.

You shall not permit a sorceress to live. Whoever lies with an animal shall be put to death.

Whoever sacrifices to any god other than the Lord alone shall be devoted to destruction. You shall not wrong a sojourner or oppress him. For you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.

[3 : 05] You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, and my wrath will burn. And I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows, and your children fatherless.

If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be like a moneylender to him, and you shall not exact interest from him. If ever you take your neighbour's cloak in pledge, you shall return it to him before the sun goes down, for that is his only covering, and it is his cloak for his body.

In what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate. You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people.

You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest, and from the outflow of your presses. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me. You shall do the same with your oxen and with your sheep.

Seven days it shall be with its mother. On the eighth day you shall give it to me. You shall be consecrated to me. Therefore you shall not eat any flesh that is torn by beasts in the field.

[4 : 19] You shall throw it to the dogs. The laws of Exodus chapter 22 refract the fundamental principles of the Ten Commandments in different situations. In chapter 21 verses 1 to 11 there are laws concerning slavery and the giving of Sabbath rest.

I believe that corresponds to the First and the Fourth Commandments. In chapter 21 verses 12 to 36 we have laws concerning violence and the honouring of father and mother relating to the Fifth and the Sixth Commandments.

In verses 1 to 15 of chapter 22 we have laws concerning property and theft, the Eighth Commandment. In chapter 22 verses 16 to 20 we have laws concerning marriage and sexual and spiritual faithfulness, the Seventh and the Second Commandments.

In chapter 22 verses 21 to chapter 23 verse 9 we have laws concerning oppression and false witness relating to the Ninth and the Third Commandment.

And these are both bracketed by not oppressing the sojourner. Laws concerning Sabbath and Thanksgiving conclude this section and I believe that relates to the Fourth and the Tenth Commandments.

[5 : 29] So all of the commandments are covered within these three chapters as different parts of miscellaneous case law are related to the core principles that we see in chapter 20.

Civil and criminal law both come under this along with laws relating to personal and familial practice. This isn't neatly divided into different jurisdictions. There are ways in which it relates to ministries that will have to be performed by various different parties.

This chapter begins with laws concerned with property. Property crimes within the Old Testament are never punished with death unlike in other ancient Near Eastern societies.

The laws concerning property here are also concerned with taking responsibility for property in your possession. There are more laws in scripture that deal with situations of theft in books such as Leviticus and Deuteronomy and Numbers.

Some of the laws elsewhere allow for lesser punishment for voluntary restitution. However, double restitution is the norm. The thief loses as much as he sought to gain from his crime.

[6 : 34] So if he sought to take one item from someone, he has to restore two because he loses what he sought to take from the other person. It's the principle of an eye for an eye. However, if a man steals and butchers an animal, the penalty can be greater.

Destroying capital in the case of an ox is a case in point. The ox is not just a form of property. It's something that enables a man to work, to work his field, to plough his land.

And so an attack upon the ox is an attack upon a man's ability to work his land. There are similar concerns in this chapter about clothing. If a man's cloak is taken, he can't sleep warm at night.

And so the cloak must be restored at a certain point. There are laws here concerning defence of yourself and your property in the case of a burglar. In that sort of case, if the burglar's life is taken at night, there is no blood guilt for doing so.

At night, it's not clear what a person's motivations are. It's far harder to assess a situation. But in the daylight, it's easier to get things under control. So if the burglar's life is taken then, there are serious consequences.

[7 : 43] There are laws concerning failure to look after things that might damage other people's property. A sort of pollution. You can think of the ways in which fire can be set loose.

We can think of the ways a river could be poisoned. All of these would come under this principle. So property is not just about protecting your property. It's taking responsibility for your property.

And the ways it can damage other people. Elsewhere in the book of Deuteronomy, property also includes your responsibility to give to other people. Your responsibility to allow the poor to glean your land, for instance.

There is also law here concerning mismanagement of your own property and destruction of other people. Failure of safekeeping. If something is put in your charge and you lose possession of it or you damage it or something goes wrong with it, you need to take responsibility in some of those cases.

Whereas in others, for instance, if the owner was there when something went wrong with something that was put in your safekeeping by him, you do not have to pay in the same way. Some of these cases had to be brought before God for adjudication.

[8 : 49] Perhaps God here refers to the judges or perhaps it refers to the prophet. Someone who's going to declare God's judgment upon the situation and his decision in the matter.

We can think maybe of Solomon and his judgment concerning the two women. Solomon didn't just reflect upon legal precedent and think about the particular laws that might apply. He gave a wise judgment that illuminated the situation with divinely given wisdom.

And maybe that's the sort of thing that's being looked for in these sorts of cases. There are laws then that follow concerning marriage and sexual and spiritual faithfulness. And here I think we've moved from the eighth commandment, the commandment concerning theft and stealing, to the

second and the seventh commandments.

The second commandment concerning idolatry and the seventh commandment concerning adultery. The first of the laws concerns the seducer. The seducer has to marry the woman that he seduces, although there is a veto of her father.

And elsewhere in scripture we see that the woman was consulted to give her consent in these cases. But it was a situation where the father would adjudicate and act on behalf of his family, representing his daughter in that particular matter.

[10:01] And the seducer here has to pay a bride price and marry the woman. Now it's worth thinking about what a bride price is. We've seen elsewhere in the beginning of chapter 21, the case of someone buying a female slave who would later be married.

Now the payment in that situation is not a bride price. That's the payment for a slave or the payment for one who is a prospective wife, who's bought from her father and that money is used by her father.

Whereas in the case of the bride price, the money was given to the father or to the brother and kept in trust, presumably, for the woman to be used when she needed it. It gave her some financial security.

It gave her something to fall back on if her husband proved unfaithful that she had this security given to her in that money. In the case of Leah and Rachel, we see them complaining about the fact that their father had consumed the money that had been given for them.

This was their money. He was supposed to keep it in trust. He could use it and have benefit of the use of it, but he couldn't consume it. And if he had consumed it, he was treating them as if they were slaves that had been sold to Jacob, rather than those who are free wives who could fall back on that money if Jacob mistreated them.

[11:17] There are various other such payments that we have in scripture connected with marriage. We can think also of the gifts that are involved in marriage that can be given to the family of the bride, given as a sign of respect to them and a sign of the joining together of two families, not just two individuals.

But the requirement that the seducer had to pay this amount of money was important. It meant that the woman was not put at a disadvantage because she had lost her virginity. If she were to marry someone else, the bride price would already be paid.

And so it would give her a sense of security that someone could not just seduce a woman and get away with it and end up with her losing her honour. Many such laws can be startling for us.

They relate to a society that is very different from our own, with very different values, very different practices around marriage. And there's no reason why we should re-pristiniate these, why we should treat these as applicable in our own society.

Yet they are examples of God's good law related to specific historical and cultural situations. And we can learn lessons from them. We should also hold some of our own prejudices up to examination.

[12:31] For instance, as members of a more egalitarian society, we might see some sexual double standard here, a way that men and women are treated very differently in relationship to marriage.

But scripture, in that respect, is highlighting something about reality itself, that there is an asymmetry in marriage. And marriage is in part designed to ensure not equality, but fairness. That the two parties in marriage do not take advantage of each other, but are joined together in one with a common good. The commandment that follows concerns the sorceress. And I think she's in here because she represents spiritual adultery.

As a woman, she represents the bride, but yet has abandoned the Lord and given herself to familiar spirits. The commandment that follows this, concerning bestiality, is an example of a more general sin of sexual immorality or fornication, being classified under the seventh commandment, concerning not committing adultery.

Now, when we see that commandment, we think it can be narrowly applied to marriage relationships, but it stands as a heading for a great many sins of a sexual nature.

[13:42] Keeping the seventh commandment requires the honouring of the marriage bed. It requires opposition to a great many sexual sins and forms of fornication that push against that or undermine that.

And it's not just narrowly focused upon adultery as we would think of it. It's a lot broader than that. The next law concerns sacrificing to any God other than the Lord.

Here, I think, we're seeing the association between the seventh and the second commandment. There is a natural association and affinity between these two commandments, one that's especially seen in the explanation following the second commandment.

You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me. The jealousy of God is a marital jealousy, a jealousy for his bride. He does not want his bride to abandon him for any other. And there are further statements concerning this in Exodus chapter 34, verses 11 to 16.

[14:46] Towards the end of that, it warns them against making a covenant with the inhabitants of the land. And when they whore after their gods and sacrifice their gods and you are invited, you eat of his sacrifice and you take of their daughters for your sons.

And their daughters whore after their gods and make your sons whore after their gods. What we're seeing here is the blending together of the sins of sexual immorality and adultery and the sins of spiritual adultery and idolatry.

Those two things belong together. The next section concerns laws against oppression. And this whole section is bracketed in verse 21 and in verse 9 of chapter 23 with statements, first of all, And so that whole section belongs together.

If we were writing the Ten Commandments, we would have a commandment against the abuse of power. However, the expansion of the law here makes clear that there is such a command, that the command, particularly of the Ninth Commandment, relates to this abuse of power.

God is concerned for the stranger and the oppressed. Israel was once a stranger in Egypt. And in the book of Genesis, Hagar was a stranger in the house of Abram and Sarai.

[16:12] And she was oppressed there. God hears the voice of the oppressed. And if they oppress people, they will suffer the same judgment. They're supposed to learn from what happened in Egypt.

They're supposed to treat their slaves in a way that gives them freedom, that orders slavery towards manumission. And to exemplify a society that has God's own fierce hatred for oppression. The warning not to oppress the stranger and the foreigner was not without relevance to Israel's life in the wilderness. They went out of Egypt with a mixed multitude, with many foreigners around them.

And so they were not just a group of natural born Israelites. They were surrounded with people who were not Israelites, who were going to become part of their nation over time, that needed to be adopted in.

And they had to show respect and care and concern for them, not to oppress them in the way that they themselves have been oppressed. The text then goes on to talk about the widow and the fatherless.

[17:11] This isn't just the orphan or the person who's been bereaved. It's a concern in particular for people without a man to provide and protect for them. And God is the heavenly father. He hears the cries of all such persons.

And God describes powerfully his anger at the mistreatment of the vulnerable, the helpless and the oppressed. God's attitude towards the mistreatment of the widow and the orphan is not just expressed as some sort of principled objection.

Rather, God is made furious by it. And God will act for them. God also speaks to the charging of interest, the way that predatory interest can be a means of controlling others, of indebting them. And we can think of the way that indebtedness would often lead to slavery. God wants to ensure that his people are not reduced to that state. Where at all possible, he wants people to give charitable loans, loans that do not make our brothers' losses an occasion for our personal gains. The Christian teaching against usury that has existed for centuries, but has fallen into neglect, is something that really needs to be revisited. There are many things that can be learned from it.

[18:25] One of the concerns is that we do not have business dealings, which are just abstracted from our concern for our neighbor's well-being. There is the general expectation of sharing in each other's profit or loss, and not profiting at the expense of others.

The laws that conclude this chapter relate to giving firstfruits and firstborn to the Lord. It's a sign of Israel's own dedication to the Lord. They are consecrated to God.

They bear his name, and they should not bear it in vain. They must give the firstfruits of their land, and they must give the firstborn of their sons. We might see a clue to the meaning of circumcision here.

As the firstborn animal was staying with its mother until the seventh day, and then sacrificed on the eighth. In the same way, the sons of Israel had to be circumcised on the eighth day.

It was a sacrifice of the sons of Israel to the Lord. And this whole section, I believe, should be classed under the ninth and the third commandments together. The ninth commandment relates to not bearing false witness, but not using the legal system as a tool of oppression.

[19 : 34] It's not just about lying. It's not just about bearing witness in court. It's about using the structures of justice, the structures of power, as means of oppression. And I think we see that even more clearly in the book of Deuteronomy.

I think it's also about bearing the name of the Lord. Israel is consecrated to the Lord. They bear his name. And as a result, they must give their firstfruits, and they must give their firstborn, and they must act in a way that bears that name in a righteous manner, that does not cause God's name to be blasphemed among the nations, but brings honour to him by their actions.

A question to consider. Reflect upon the connections between the various laws and the ten commandments. Do you agree with the ordering that I have suggested?

What insights occur to you when reflecting upon the associations?