

Rules and Principles

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Passage: “You shall *love* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deuteronomy 6:5, ESV).

Introduction: The “law of Moses” as a corpus fits the genre of narrative, not codebook. Though it contains legislation, it instructs through its stories (as well as its laws). Many Jews agree that there are, among the many recorded stories, 613 rules (commandments) in the Torah (five books of Moses), though there is no unanimity as to the exact list, and some question if in fact the number 613 is precise.¹ The Talmud points to Rabbi Simlai in the 3rd century AD as the originator of this idea of 613 laws in the Torah.²

A casual survey of the laws recorded in the Torah leads to the conclusion that no one is able to perfectly observe every rule. Many are directly connected to the rituals of the ancient Temple, which was destroyed in 70 A.D. Others deal with agricultural laws in the land of Israel which, except for a handful of Jewish farmers, are not relevant to the general population. Yet Paul affirmed that “all Scripture [including Deuteronomy] is ... profitable for teaching ... for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).

So what value is there for the modern reader in ancient laws given in the context of an agrarian society? Moses claimed that the “rules” (laws) given by God to Israel served as a paradigm³ for the nations. Following them, Moses told Israel, would “be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all these statutes, will say, ‘Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.’ For what great nation is there...that has statutes and rules so righteous as all this law that I set before you today?” (Deut 4:5-8).

So underneath each specific “rule” (command, law, statute, etc.) is *wisdom*—God’s wisdom. The foundation of each rule is the fundamental, eternal principle of that governs God’s universe—*love*. It is in this sense that God’s law is a reflection of his character (thoughts and feelings). When we read that God instructed Israel not to “charge interest on loans” a fellow Israelite (Deut 23:19), we learn something about God’s character. We discover his concern for the poor and needy. We discern wisdom. We see the fundamental principle that governs the universe—love, applied to a real-life situation.

¹ In any calculation of the number of commandments in the Mosaic Law, complications arise. For example, if a command occurs in Exodus and is then repeated in Deuteronomy, does that count as one commandment or two? Further, some commandments can be understood as clarifications of other commandments rather than additional commandments.

² There is no record of Rabbi Simlai listing all 613 commandments. The most commonly accepted breakdown was done by Maimonides in the 12th century AD. Maimonides further divided the 613 commandments into positive, “do this” commandments, numbering 248, and negative, “do not do this” commandments, numbering 365.

³ A paradigm is a typical example or pattern of something; a model.

Body:

- I. The bulk of Deuteronomy is summarized in these words, “Moses undertook to explain this law...” (Deut 1:5). God’s laws are not static.⁴ The legislative portion of Deuteronomy contains:
 - a. A repetition of earlier commands given in Exodus, Leviticus and Numbers;
 - b. New commands not previously given;
 - c. An adaptation of commands previously given;
 - d. An exposition of commands previously given;
 - e. An application of previous commands to the new particular situation of Israelites.
- II. Love is the foundational principle upon which all of God’s laws, commands and teachings are based. The Ten Commandments are an unfolding of the great principle of love. They were intended to address the conditions and circumstances of sinful humans.
 - a. After reiterating the “ten commandments” (Deut 5:6-21), Moses said, “Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the rules—that the Lord your God commanded me to teach you, that you may do them in the land to which you are going over, to possess it” (Deut 6:1). Then he commands, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall *love* the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might” (Deut 6:4-5).
 - b. When Jesus was asked: “which is the great commandment in the Law?”, he quoted Deuteronomy 6:5 (Matt 22:36-37).
 - c. Paul said that “the one who *loves* another has fulfilled the law” because “*love* is the fulfilling of the law” (Rom 13:8-10). In fact, “the whole law is fulfilled in one word: ‘You shall *love* your neighbor as yourself’ (Gal 5:14).
 - d. God’s character as a basis for how to live.
 - e. God’s wisdom on display...
- III. Paul understood that the specific “rules” contained in Deuteronomy were based on broader principles. In other words, Paul read Deuteronomy paradigmatically.⁵

⁴ “They were about to enter the promised land, and the law of the covenant could not lie as a dead letter” (Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976, p 82).

⁵ For Paul, Israel was the paradigm for the church. The priesthood was a paradigm for the ministry. The exodus experience was a paradigm for the Corinthians coming out of paganism (1 Cor 10:7). The laws given by God to ancient Israel served as a paradigm for Christian ethics.

- a. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9:9, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.”⁶
 - i. The ox was the primary work animal in agriculture. This legislation reflects God’s compassion for work animals (cf Deut 5:14).
 - ii. Paul was not teaching the Corinthians how they should run their farms. Paul was not addressing an agrarian audience.
 - iii. Most people reading the New Testament today are also not inserted in an agrarian context. This passage still has something to say to such people.
 - iv. The underlying wisdom in this specific legislation is that of *just compensation*.
 - v. Paul applies Deuteronomy 25:4 paradigmatically to drive home the point that “those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel” (1 Cor 9:14).
 - b. In 2 Corinthians 6:14, Paul admonished, “Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers.” Here he applies Deuteronomy 7:3 paradigmatically.
 - i. Intermarriage was not forbidden for ethnic reasons, but for moral and religious reasons (Deut 7)
 - c. In 1 Corinthians 5:13, he instructed the Corinthians, “Purge the evil person from among you” (Deut 13:5; 17:7, 12; 21:21; 22:21, 22, 24).
- IV. The laws in Deuteronomy are “profitable for teaching...and for training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16).
- a. In the legislation recorded in Deuteronomy 24:17-22, concern for the immigrant, orphan and widow is expressed.
 - i. Approaching this law paradigmatically will lead the modern reader to show compassion for not only this group but also the refugee, homeless, single parents, disabled and aged in our society.
 - b. The wages of “hired workers” were to be paid at the end of their day’s work (Deut 24:14, 15).
 - i. This legislation is intended to guard against the exploitation (taking advantage of someone to benefit from their work) of “poor and needy” day workers.

⁶ “Oxen were used to plow fields and to pull threshing sleds to crush the stocks of grain once they were harvested...The injunction that the ox not be muzzled ... allows the animal to eat a portion of the grain as its wage” (The IVP Bible Backgrounds Commentary, Old Testament, p 199).

- ii. Daily pay was probably essential for daily food.⁷
 - iii. The prophets solemnly warned against the exploitation of workers, “Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness, and his upper rooms by injustice, who makes his neighbor serve him for nothing and does not give him his wages” (Jeremiah 22:13; Is 58:3; Ja 5:4).
- c. “When you build a new house, you shall make a parapet⁸ for your roof, that you may not bring the guilt of blood upon your house, if anyone should fall from it (Deut 22:8).
- i. The roof of homes was flat and they were used for many purposes, such as drying various grains and fruits, sleeping in the summertime, etc.
 - ii. For safety purposes, a retaining wall was built around the outside of the roof area.
 - iii. The goal of this legislation is to protect people from falling below.
 - iv. It reflects God’s concern for the value and protection of human life.
 - v. This law speaks to those who are in a position to provide safe conditions for children, workers and elderly people.
 - vi. “The number of human deaths around the world that are caused, not by malice, but by negligence and carelessness, industrial dangers, inadequate maintenance, unhealthy work environments, etc., must be simply incalculable. Christians (like the Clapham Sect in Britain) were in the forefront for the basic safety, hygiene, and worker protection laws.”
 - vii. C.H. Wright observes that “this was a paradigm law, setting a precedent for similar cases where injury or death was caused by avoidable accidents.”⁹
- d. A man during his first year of marriage was exempted from military service or any other public service for one year (Deut 24:5).

⁷ “The legislation refers specifically to the hire of poor people, whose need was such that to be paid on a weekly (or longer) basis would cause real hardship. The money would be needed each day to feed a family each day” (Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976, p 309).

⁸ A parapet is a low protective wall along the edge of a roof.

⁹ Christopher J.H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, Understanding the Bible Commentary Series (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2012), 241.

- i. This legislation was “intended to promote the health and growth of a new marital relationship.”¹⁰
 - ii. It also tried to prevent “the untimely death of the husband, which would result in the woman becoming a widow almost immediately after her marriage, and also the absence of the husband from the home for a prolonged period of time immediately after the wedding.”¹¹
 - iii. God is concerned with the health of the family unit.
 - iv. This law speaks to employers who are in a position to adopt policies that benefit employees and promote healthy family relationships.
 - v. It invites couples to set healthy boundaries around their marriage, not only during the first year but throughout their married life.
- e. Incest was forbidden. An Israelite male was not allowed to have sex with “the daughter of his father or the daughter of his mother” (Deut 27:22).
- i. By the time of Moses, because of our sin and our fallen nature, genetics have made it more harmful to inter-marry and thus a new law was given to stop sibling inter-marriage.
 - ii. Adam and Eve, on the other hand, did not "accumulate" genetic defects.
 - iii. They were physically perfect when God created them. But this “perfection” diluted many generations down because of sin.
 - iv. Today we know the health risks involved in incestuous relationships and can appreciate God’s wisdom in forbidding them (Deut 7:15; 28:58-60).

Conclusion: God’s moral standard did not come to Israel directly as a complete, single, monolithic, dictated rule book. He chose a more indirect route—a historical route. It was hammered out within the historical and cultural particularity of Israel. The laws in the Torah are not exhaustive. They do not address every potential situation humans face in a world of sin. Understanding God’s wisdom revealed in them, however, the Christian today can understand how to navigate a number of ethical issues not explicitly addressed in Scripture, such as pornography, marijuana, seatbelts, guns, neglecting pets, etc.

¹⁰ Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 306.

¹¹ Ibid.