

A Trial Lawyer's Brief on Biblical Law: A Reflection of God's Character

After nearly forty years of legal studies, after even more years of Hebrew study in the Old Testament law, I stay stunned and amazed by the Biblical Law. The "Biblical Law" is commonly known by the English labels of the Old Testament books of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. They were the foundation of ancient Israel's legal code.

Of course, ancient Israel was not the only culture to have a legal code. Law sits at the heart of every culture and society. Law dictates what behavior is acceptable. Law sets up criminal punishments and penalties for lawbreakers. When someone runs a red light and careens into another car, the law sets up schemes for restitution of damages.

In one sense, Israel's Biblical Law was no different. Israel had laws to govern society and behavior, many of which find similar counterparts in other contemporary cultures. For example, Biblical Law set forward criminal penalties for criminal acts.

If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall repay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep (Ex. 22:1).

Israel also had civil penalties for restitution when an ox gored someone, when someone hurt another, etc. In modern legal parlance, this is called "tort law." For example,

When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but takes to his bed, then if the man rises again and walks outdoors with his staff, he who struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed (Ex. 21:18-19).

While Israel's Law held great similarities to modern law and ancient legal codes in these edicts, Biblical Law was profoundly different in other ways. Israel's Law was more than criminal and civil boundaries and rules for a just and respectful society. Israel's Law was given by God. God didn't give the Law simply to uphold a

functioning, fair culture. God gave a Law that revealed God's character and God's ethics, translated into human culture and human interactions.¹

This meant that for Israel, violating Biblical Law was never just a crime or civil wrong. Violating the Law was elevated to the level of "sin." Adhering to Law was adhering to God's standard, not just society's standard.

When this consideration is placed front and center of a study on the law, several considerations come into focus:

1. Biblical Law is worthy of study as a reflection of God. As one learns more of the Law, one can learn more of God.
2. One can better parse the difficulties of why some Biblical Laws seem incredibly important (e.g., "Thou shalt not kill") while others decry common sense ("You shall not wear a cloth made of two kinds of material").
3. Why have people historically erred by either imposing a rigid "legalism" (a view that certain laws must be adhered to in order to walk in God's grace) or a free "antinomianism" (a view that one can live with no regard to any law).

From a Christian perspective, this bears tremendously on issues that *seem* to place the Christian teachings in conflict with certain teachings found in the Old Testament. For example:

1. One also has a basis to understand why Biblical Law seems to change over the course of the Bible. (Is "Do not eat pork" in Deuteronomy 14:8 altered when, in Acts 10, God seems to instruct Peter that unclean food is fine to eat?)
2. This study properly addresses the effect that Jesus and the advent of post-resurrection life has upon following the law. In other words, does Paul teach that the believer is not bound by the law, and if so, why not?

¹ Another distinction of Israel's Law from most modern legal codes and well as most ancient ones is the ritual aspect of many of the laws. God gave Israel instructions that ranged from how the tribes were to camp for the wilderness journey, to how the worship rituals were to be performed.

3. Similarly, why did the disciples of Jesus not always follow the law, even though Jesus said he didn't come to destroy the law?

All of these considerations are worthy of study. A good study of Biblical Law should not only shed light on those questions, but it should also result in many positive side effects. As the Psalmist noted in the very first Psalm, the person who delights in God's Law and meditates on it night and day will be,

like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season,
and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers (Ps. 1:3).

The goal of this work is to provide the reader the blessings of better knowing God, as well as having a fuller grasp on having a successful life.

Soli Deo Gratia

Chapter 1 Law is Fundamental (And the Fundamentals of Law)

Sylvester Stallone's 1995 movie "Judge Dredd" was considered a flop. It earned just a 19% approval on Rotten Tomatoes. Based on a comic strip, the movie takes place in 2080 in Mega-City, a fictional metropolis where crime is rampant. Stallone portrays Judge Dredd, the central character who roams the streets seeking out crime. Dredd, like his cohorts, combines the roles of police, judge, jury, and executioner.

Even though the movie was not commercially successful, it had an epic line. At several points in the movie, Stallone barks out his claim, "I AM THE LAW!" As the plot unfolds, the tension is set up when even Judge Dredd comes under punishment. If one is allowed to find an underlying theme in the movie, it is "What makes law law?" Does might make right? Does law become something interpreted and applied by the powerful? Does the law even apply to the powerful?

Aside from apocalyptic movies, actual history contains moments of similar legal questions. Many tyrants and dictators have trumpeted the claim expressed in the Latin phrase: *Rex lex*. *Rex* is the Latin word commonly translated "king." *Lex* is the Latin for "law." In simple terms, the phrase proclaims that the king is the law. The ruler says what he pleases and does what he pleases.

Into the world of *rex lex*, where the king was law, the Scottish Presbyterian minister Samuel Rutherford (c.1600-1661) wrote a provocative book. Turning the Latin phrase on its head, Rutherford published his book, *Lex Rex*. Rutherford asserted that the law is king, rather than the king being the law. This meant that above the ruler was law and justice, and that even the king should be subject to the law.

Not surprisingly, the authorities ordered Rutherford's book burned. He was charged with treason, dying before his trial. Even though Rutherford was dead, and most copies of his book were burned, the cat was out of the bag. He had made his point to the detriment of the King of England's power. Rutherford's

ideas informed social theorists like John Locke, who went on to write about the importance of society basing governments on core principles of law and justice.

Looking in the past, as well as Hollywood's fanciful ideas of the future, might seem to reveal common ground about the law and its place in society. Yet what exactly is the "law" is still not settled in academic circles. Some might be surprised to learn that many legal scholars and philosophers debate over what exactly "law" means.

Yet for purposes of this study, one need not delve too deeply into those debates, at least at first. If I take the basic Webster definition of "law," I get a great starting place for the points I want to make here. Webster defines "law" as,

a binding custom or practice of a community: a rule of conduct or action prescribed ... or formally recognized as binding or enforced by a controlling authority.²

Law schools typically divide the law into groups. There are criminal laws, where a transgression is a crime enforced and punishable by the government. This means if you rob a store and get caught, you get punished.

A second group of laws are civil laws, which regulate how people relate to each other. These laws mean if you run a red light and hurt another, you can be held responsible for making the other person "whole." Or if you enter into a contract and refuse to follow through as you should, you can be forced to perform the contract or to pay appropriate damages.

More laws are grouped into areas that affect different aspects of life. For example, family law regulates marriage, divorce, custody of children, and more. Immigration law sets out the rules by which people can enter a country legally, how foreigners can become citizens, etc. Employment laws set forth the rights of workers and employers in the marketplace.

All of these legal groupings (and more) are notable and helpful for lawyers who want to specialize, but at the end of the day, most law boils down to how society is structured. Law sets out how people get along with each other.

² <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/law>.

Biblical Law

But what about Biblical Law? What is meant by Biblical Law and what makes it so important today? Is it as simple as saying that the Biblical Law is Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy? Like Webster's definition, did the Biblical Law simply provide "a binding custom or practice of a community: a rule of conduct or action prescribed"? Was there something more about the Law than criminal and civil rules that one must follow under fear of reprisal?

Answers to these questions go back to two important historical people – Moses and Jesus.

Moses and the Law

Moses led a most dramatic and incredible life. Saved from an infant death by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses grew up in Pharaoh's own home, where he was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts. 7:22). Around the age of 40, Moses saw an Egyptian oppressing an Israelite, and Moses exacted revenge, killing the Egyptian. Fleeing Pharaoh's punishment, Moses lived in exile 40 more years as a shepherd in the wilderness (Acts 7:23-30).

At 80 years old, while on Mount Sinai, Moses encountered God sending a message through a burning bush. God spoke to Moses from the bush, while Moses was too frightened even to gaze upon God speaking. God commissioned Moses to lead the people out of Egyptian slavery, and Moses accomplished this feat by the mighty display of God's miraculous power.

As the people were fleeing Egypt, Pharaoh got angry and embarrassed at how the events had unfolded. Pharaoh took the world's strongest army in pursuit of Moses and the Israelites. At one point, Israel appeared trapped against the Red Sea (which also can be read as the "Reed Sea"), yet God miraculously saved Israel by parting the waters, allowing all the Israelites – young and old – to pass on dry land. Then God reunited the waters drowning Pharaoh's army.

God used Moses to assure the people he would lead them to the Promised Land. But on the way, God brought Moses back to Mount Sinai in the wilderness, with all of Israel in tow. While the Israelites camped at the mountain base, Moses ascended to encounter God.

There, on Mount Sinai, God again revealed himself to Moses, but this time it wasn't through a burning bush. God produced for Moses, tablets that recorded what history knows as The Ten Commandments. God also gave Moses a great deal more "Law" for Israel. Through the giving of the Law, God set up many of the civil and criminal rules for Israel as a society. In that sense, God gave the "Law" as Webster defines it.

But Scripture teaches that something much greater and much more profound happened when God gave the Law: *God was revealing himself*. God stepped into the Late Bronze Age culture of the Ancient Near East, and explained his nature and character to Moses and Israel through giving the Law. The Law reflected God's ethics, God's behavior, and God's holiness.

As God expounded on various laws to Moses, God emphasized this point, explaining it was why Israel should follow the Law.

For I am the LORD your God. Consecrate yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy (Lev. 11:44).

The Laws *were* holiness explained. God was no ordinary god, and this superlative extraordinariness of God – aka the "holiness" of God – was shown in the Law he gave.

Regrettably, for a great deal ancient Israel's history, the Law passed into obscurity and was forgotten. To some extent, this might seem excusable. After all, there was no printing press. Undoubtedly, many people couldn't read. There was no public education. Yet Israel didn't really have any excuse. For these factors were taken into account by Moses who insisted that,

You shall therefore lay up these words of mine in your heart and in your soul, and you shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. *You shall teach them to your*

children, talking of them when you are sitting in your house, and when you are walking by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Dt. 11:18-20).

Similarly, God instructed Joshua, Moses' successor in leading Israel,

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success (Josh. 1:8).

Once Israel began settling in the Promised Land, as the generations passed, long periods of disobedience became the norm as the Law was forgotten. Then once Israel became a monarchy, it got even worse.

Israel's third king, Solomon, built a temple in Jerusalem as the place of worship. Even though the Law was used to set up the sacrifices and various aspect of Temple life, the Temple soon became a house of idolatry. Since the Law had been forgotten, it was easy for much of Israel's religious life to become idolatrous, focusing on the gods of their neighbors. Generation after generation, as the Law was not read, honored, or taught, society drifted further and further from God.

An interesting turn on the state of affairs is found in the Old Testament book 2 Kings, the 22nd chapter. King Solomon's great, great-grandson, King Josiah had an eventful reign. Josiah had taken the throne of Judah at the early age of eight. When he was twenty-six, he sent his secretary, a fellow named Shaphan, to the temple to gather the temple taxes to paying workmen doing temple repairs. While there, Shaphan was approached by the High Priest Hilkiah who had found a scroll in the recesses of the temple.

The scroll that was found was a copy of Moses' Law. The King did not even know the Law existed. Neither did the priests. Josiah had the Law read to him and he was stunned. He had no clue about that stuff! He and the people had been using God's temple to worship idols, even though God had clearly told them in the Law that there was only one God, and idols should never be worshipped.

The Law was then read to the public. Afterward, the temple was purged of the vessels used to worship idols, the priests assigned to conducting the worship for idols were deposed, and the male prostitutes who committed vulgar sexual acts in the names of other gods were eliminated and their homes destroyed. Josiah then saw that the various places and altars of idolatrous worship outside the temple were also destroyed.

The Law's teachings on Passover and other holy times were reinstated. For the first time in ages, the Law was honored and set out as a guide for life.

But Josiah's reforms were short-lived. After Josiah died, his son Jehoahaz took the throne, returning to the evil ways of the earlier kings. Then after Jehoahaz died, his son (Josiah's grandson) Jehoiachin took the throne. Jehoiachin was also evil and it was during his reign that the Babylonians came and destroyed Jerusalem and Solomon's temple, forcing most of the Jews to live in Babylon for several generations. Before, during, and after this captivity of the Jews, multiple prophets railed against the country, explaining that the failure of Judah to live up to the Law was the cause of the destruction and captivity.

In Babylon, without a temple, there was a resurgence in teaching of the Law. For starters, the Jews had no temple. That meant no sacrifices, and no priestly attendants to the daily rituals.³ In place of the temple, the Law itself became the national identity and a place of refuge for the Jews. Additionally, to the extent that abrogating the Law was the reason God's favor turned against Judah, the adherence to the Law became extremely important.

After almost 100 years in exile, the Jews were allowed to return to Jerusalem. Upon returning, they rebuilt a temple (commonly called the "Second Temple" to distinguish it from the temple of Solomon). This temple didn't take the place of the Law, but went hand-in-hand with the Law. Temple practice became the center of much of Jewish religious life, but the Law was still taught.

³ The Law's increased emphasis during the exile is particularly interesting because many of the laws no longer had impact on the Jews. The laws that pertained to temple sacrifices were useless when there were no sacrifices and no temple. The laws relating to Judah's land, how it was inherited, laws pertaining to agriculture were irrelevant when the land was not available. Laws pertaining to city and national governance became moot as well. Yet in spite of the changes necessitated by a century of absence, Jews still studied even those moot laws with great precision and passion.

From Babylon as well as Jerusalem, the Law was carefully dissected, with rabbis explaining many Scriptures with exacting interpretations. For example, in the Biblical Law, the Sabbath is a day set aside for honoring God and resting from work. The Bible explained the need for rest in honor of God's creating the Sabbath (e.g., Ex. 13:22-24), and the Ten Commandments include the imperative to,

Remember the Sabbath day, to keep 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, you, or your son, or your daughter, your male servant, or your female servant, or your livestock, or the sojourner who is within your gates (Ex. 20:8-10).

Yet subsequent to the Babylonian exile, the rabbis enumerated 39 principal types of "work," explaining prohibitions and exceptions in precise detail.

This was the situation during the life of Jesus. The temple practice kept going as prescribed and interpreted by the Law of Moses. The people read the Law in synagogues as well, and the Law was taught by rabbis as a rule of practice which, if heeded by the Jews, would keep them in God's good stead, rather than lead them to the type of destruction that happened in Babylon.

To Jews in New Testament days, the Biblical Law was useful and even critical for daily practice, but a key part of the Law was how to make atonement for failing to keep all the Law. The law itself, especially seen as a reflection of God's morality, was not something that anyone could completely keep, try as one might. So, within the Law were provisions for atonement when one broke God's Law (i.e., "sinned") either intentionally or unintentionally.

In the decades following the resurrection of Christ, the Jewish Rabbi and Christian apostle Paul explained that the Law given through Moses could never give life to sinful humanity. Since the Law was a reflection of God and God's holiness, the Law's greatest effectiveness was not justifying human behavior, but showing the inadequacy of human effort. Try as anyone might, not a single person could live up to the letter of the Law, much less the spirit behind the Law. The Law revealed God, but it didn't give life to those who saw it.

In plain terms, as the Law revealed the perfect nature of a perfect God, at least in the form that his perfection would take in the time and culture of the day, the Law demonstrated to those who would face its truth, that no one could live up to God's holiness. For this reason, Paul called the Law a "ministry of death" (2 Cor. 3:7).

Yet even bearing that label, the Law was BRILLIANT in its light. It shone brightly because the Law reflected God in his holiness. Paul spoke of the "glory" of the Law as being so great, that after receiving it, Moses' own face shone so brightly, the Israelites placed a veil over it (2 Cor. 3:7, 13).

What is more, the Law served as a "tutor" or pre-school teacher to prepare people to come to faith in Jesus as the Messiah. The Law did this in two ways, both centered on the central truth that the Law was an expression of God's nature and character. First, as a reflection of God's character, the Law showed the inability of everyone to live up to the morality required to have intimate fellowship/union with a moral God. Additionally, as a reflection of God's character, the Law gave a graphic picture of what God would look like in human form. The Law was God's behavior personified in culture. Just as the Law reflected God, so Jesus reflected the Law. (See generally, Gal. 3:24).

How this Law reflected the glory of God will be discussed in later chapters, but *that* the Law reflected the glory of God should be emphasized now. It makes the Law worthy of careful study. For in it, one can see God.

Jesus and the Law

Before dying, Moses assured Israel that God would bring another prophet like him from among the Israelites (Dt. 18:15). Consider the implications:

- Moses was commissioned by God to save God's people and to lead them out of slavery into a Promised Land.
- Displaying God's miraculous power, Moses led the people as God directed.
- Through Moses, God displayed his holiness and character to Israel giving the Law.

Israel was put on red-alert that another like Moses would come. That “other” was Jesus. To an even greater degree than Moses, who became a shadow of the reality that would be seen in Jesus:

- Jesus was commissioned by God to save God’s people and to lead them out of slavery to the law of sin and death into the Promised Land of eternal life.
- Displaying God’s miraculous power, Jesus led the people as God directed.
- In and through Jesus, God displayed his holiness and character by fulfilling the Law.

The Law of Moses reflected the character and nature of God so brightly, that Moses physically radiated brightness from encountering God in that way. In Jesus, one more fully sees the character and nature of God. As people encounter Jesus, in an intimate and personal way as Moses did on Sinai, the result is much the same. People begin to radiate and shine the character and nature of God.

Paul explained this to the Corinthian church writing,

And we all, with unveiled face, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another. For this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

So, in this sense, Scripture provides two places where the glory of God can be seen.⁴ God can be seen in the Law, and God can be seen in Jesus. To explain this further, consider the logic of the Biblical teaching:

1. God’s moral nature and character are reflected in the law
2. Jesus is God incarnate, living with God’s moral nature and character.

Therefore:

3. One finds in Jesus the fullest expression of fulfilling the morality of Biblical Law.

⁴ I hedge on the previous sentence only because there are more places where the glory of God is on display, including his people who are to shine like a city set on a hill, as well as in nature which displays the glory of God. But in this study, I am concentrating on the two displays in the Law and Jesus.

By definition as God himself, since the Law is an expression of God's morality, Jesus walks perfectly in the Law. Understanding this explains passages like 2 Cor. 5:21 where Paul spoke of Jesus as one who "knew no sin." Hebrews 4:15 spoke of Jesus as a High Priest, "who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin." Of course, Jesus himself made the absolute statement saying,

Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished (Mt. 5:17-18).

This becomes important as one tries to trace what Biblical Law was specifically tied to the culture and place of Israel as a nation holy to God, and what was the proper understanding of Law as applicable to Jew and Gentile at the time of Jesus, and even today. This point is explored more fully later.

Just as the divine Jesus is the full expression of God's moral truths, he is also the expression of God's mercy – a concept found in the Law, but more fully expressed in Jesus. Hence John wrote in contrast of Jesus and Moses,

the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (Jn. 1:17-18).

Unlike Judge Dredd, Jesus could really proclaim, "I am the Law!" In Jesus, one finds the fullest expression of God in his moral nature and character. God expressed his nature in the Law, but in Jesus, God is known plainly and clearly.

Armed with this understanding that the Law expressed a reflection of God, this study now focuses on what of God is revealed through that Law. In this sense I join the Psalmist in his prayer,

Open my eyes, that I may behold wondrous things out of your Law (Ps. 119:18).