

Law Code

Content

Biblical laws govern a range of social circumstances and cultic and economic transactions. Thus there are laws governing sexual relations, personal injury, homicide, theft, ritual, debts, slavery. There is little mention of laws regarding robbery, lease, rental and sale of property, surety, and dowry arrangements. Biblical law codes are transmitted not as free-standing codes but as part of orally-delivered addresses.

Form

Scholars have discerned several different legal forms within codes of law. These forms are distinguished by syntax rather than content. Like forms are often grouped together.

1. Laws in Conditional Form

a. When/If Form

Introduced by “When [s/he does *x*, you do *x*, *x* occurs],” with each hypothetical sub-case introduced by “if”

Exodus 21:22-27

²²When men have a fight and hurt a pregnant woman, so that she suffers a miscarriage, but no further injury, the guilty one shall be fined as much as the woman’s husband demands of him, and he shall pay in the presence of the judges. ²³But if injury ensues, you shall give life for life, ²⁴eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

b. Relative Form

Introduced by “The wo/man who [does *x*]”

Leviticus 20:9

The man who curses his father or mother shall be put to death; since he has cursed his father or mother, he has forfeited his life.

c. Participial Form

Participle + consequence in third person

Exodus 21:12

The one striking a man such that he dies, he must be put to death.

2. Laws in Unconditional Form

a. Direct Address

- Positive commands

Exodus 20:12, 24

Honor your father and your mother...

An altar of earth you shall make for me....

- Negative commands

Exodus 20:14

Do not commit adultery. Do not steal.

b. Third Person Commands

- Positive commands

Leviticus 7:2

The guilt offering shall be slaughtered...

- Negative commands

They shall not shave smooth any part of their heads...

Function

Biblical law codes were influenced in their origins by near eastern covenant treaties and law codes (e.g. the Codes of Urnammu and Hammurapi, Hittite and Middle Assyrian Laws). They were read publicly in communal rituals of national or ritual renewal.

For Further Practice

Decalogue
(Exod 20:1-17; Deut 5:6-21)

Covenant Code
(Exod 21–23)

Holiness Code
(Lev 17–26)

Deuteronomistic Laws
(Deut 4:44–26:19)