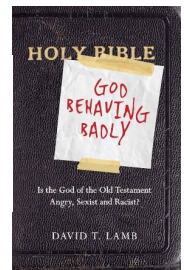


God Behaving Badly – Lesson 6: Is God legalistic or gracious?



Understanding the “Law” (Torah)

Let's review what we have talked about so far

We have been looking at biblical texts across the diverse genres of OT literature.

We have tried to understand passages in the context of the culture they were written in and their historical context.

We have seen that OT qualities of God are also manifested in the behavior of Jesus.

Angry vs. Loving

Legalistic vs. Gracious

Sexist vs. Affirming

Rigid vs. Flexible

Racist vs. Hospitable

Violent vs. Peaceful

Let's start with a discussion

Why do you think some people might conclude God is legalistic?

In general, why are laws a good thing?

What is an Old Testament law that does not make sense to you (one that seems weird, bizarre, harsh or unfair)? Why do you think God might have commanded it?

Here are just a few from Deut 22:5-12. What observations can you make on this short passage?

⁵ A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the LORD your God detests anyone who does this.

⁶ If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. ⁷ You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you, and you may have a long life.

⁸ When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.

⁹ Do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled.

¹⁰ Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.

¹¹ Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together.

¹² Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.

Here are some other ones

Ex 22:2-3 ² If a thief is caught breaking in at night and is struck a fatal blow, the defender is not guilty of bloodshed; ³ but if it happens after sunrise, the defender is guilty of bloodshed.

Ex 23:19 Do not cook a young goat in its mother's milk.

Lev 3:17 This is a lasting ordinance for the generations to come, wherever you live: You must not eat any fat or any blood.

Lev 19:27-28 Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard. Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the LORD.

Deut 25:11-12 ¹¹ If two men are fighting and the wife of one of them comes to rescue her husband from his assailant, and she reaches out and seizes him by his private parts, ¹² you shall cut off her hand. Show her no pity.

What is the first command in the Bible?

Gen 1:28 God blessed them and said to them, "Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky and over every living creature that moves on the ground."

Gen 2:16-17 ¹⁶ And the Lord God commanded the man, "You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; ¹⁷ but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die."

Note: The Hebrew word "akal" is repeated for adverbial emphasis - "eat freely."

How would you summarize these commands?

Some critics may say God is legalistic because the OT includes many laws, random laws, and harsh laws.

“Lots of laws” – Actually, there were a lot less than we have today.

What about laws that don’t seem to make sense to us today?

Deut 22:9-11 - ⁹ Do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant but also the fruit of the vineyard will be defiled. ¹⁰ Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together. ¹¹ Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together.

Laws that don’t make sense to us today would have made sense to them in their culture

These laws are culturally specific with several possible explanations.

- **Wool and linen could be related to the practice of magic.**
- **Wool represents a desert, pastoral economy, and linen is a product of an agricultural society such as Egypt.**
- **Both the priestly garments and the tabernacle weavings were a combination of wool and linen. The priest’s white undergarment was linen, and the brightly colored vestment was wool. So it was prohibited for laypersons to dress in the same way.**
- **We just don’t know for sure.**

What would people think in the year 5024 if they found an old manuscript of a sermon from 2018 that said, “Do not buy *Sports Illustrated* in February”?

Here are some old U.S. laws that I found on Buzzfeed (I have not confirmed these are true)

1. It's illegal to eat raw onions while walking down the street in Northfield, Connecticut.
2. Oklahoma and Ohio: You can't make faces at a dog.
3. California: It's illegal to eat a frog if it died during a frog-jumping competition.
4. Florida: It's illegal to sing in your swimsuit.
5. Arizona: You can't have a donkey sleeping in your bathtub after 7 p.m.
6. Kansas: It's illegal to serve ice cream on cherry pie.
7. California: It's against the law to eat an orange while taking a bath.
8. Alabama: It's illegal to drive while blindfolded.
9. Georgia: It's illegal to consume fried chicken by any other means than with your hands.
10. Louisiana: It's illegal for a woman to drive a car without her husband waving a flag in front of it.

What about the harshness of the penalties? God “ordered death” for the following offenses:

1. Murder ([Ex 21:12-14](#))([Lev 24:17-21](#))([Num 35:16-21, 30-31](#))

2. Kidn

3. Child

4. Both

5. Rape

6. Daug

7. An ic

8. Brea

9. No p

10. Hor

11. A m

12. A m

13. A m

14. Bes

15. A fa

16. A fa

17. A d

18. A child who strikes his father or mother ([Ex 21:15](#))

19. A cl

20. Me

to use a

21. A m

22. A sc

23. A m

24. A b

25. Eve

26. A b

27. Any

28. Any non-Levite who tried to set up or take down the Tabernacle ([Num 1:51](#))

Talmudic requirements rendered its application extremely rare.

In general, Talmudic tradition required:

- Two witnesses to the actual offense.
- The perpetrator had to have been warned the action carried the death penalty.
- The perpetrator had to exhibit knowledge that the act carried the death penalty.
- Mere confession was not enough; witnesses were needed, and circumstantial evidence was not permitted.

Death was the maximum sentence when it was prescribed in the “Law,” not necessarily the required one.

Judges were to weigh the circumstances of each offense and consider the offender's hard-heartedness before wisely applying the standards of the Mosaic law.

What about the man who was killed for gathering wood on the Sabbath?

Num 15:32-36 ³² While the Israelites were in the wilderness, **a man was found gathering wood on the Sabbath day.** ³³ Those who found him gathering wood brought him to Moses and Aaron and the whole assembly, ³⁴ and they kept him in custody, because it was not clear what should be done to him. ³⁵ **Then the LORD said to Moses, “The man must die.** The whole assembly must stone him outside the camp.” ³⁶ So the assembly took him outside the camp and stoned him to death, as the LORD commanded Moses.

How can this possibly be considered just or fair? Does the punishment fit the crime?

In this case, we need to understand the importance of the Sabbath

The Sabbath was very important to God! It reminded Israel of two things:



It also promoted justice, since slaves could not be forced to work on the Sabbath.

Let's look at a key verse about the Sabbath

Deut 5:12-15 ¹² “Observe the Sabbath day by keeping it holy, as the LORD your God has commanded you. ¹³ **Six days you shall labor and do all your work,** ¹⁴ but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it **you shall not do any work,** neither you, nor your son or daughter, nor your male or female servant, nor your ox, your donkey or any of your animals, nor any foreigner residing in your towns, so that your male and female servants may rest, as you do. ¹⁵ **Remember that you were slaves in Egypt** and that the LORD your God brought you out of there with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm. Therefore, the LORD your God has commanded you to observe the Sabbath day.

But he was just picking up sticks!

This seems harmless to us today, but by doing so the man was disrespecting God's creation, his deliverance, and his covenant.

God made it clear what the punishment was for violating the Sabbath. Everyone would have known the punishment.

The timing of this incident is important. In Num 14 we see the people refusing to enter the promised land, and in Num 16 we see the rebellion of Korah. The time to be lax about the law was not in the middle of a series of rebellions.

Remember the original purpose of the Sabbath – it was intended to be a blessing.

We don't know the specifics of this man and this situation.

Let's look at how the recipients of the law felt about it before we judge it

The writers of the Psalms describe the law, not as oppressive or a burden, but as worthy of delight and love.

- He delights in God's law (Ps 1:2, Ps 119:14, 16, 24, 35, 47, 70, 77, 92, 143, 174)
- He loves God's law (Ps 119:47, 97, 119, 127, 163, 165, 167)
- It refreshes the soul and gives joy (Ps 19:7-8)

The psalmists loved God, and following God's laws brought the psalmists into a deeper relationship with God.

In what ways do you think God's laws are a blessing and not a burden?

We need to try to understand the purpose of the commands (if we can)

Ex 21:23-25 ²³ But if there is serious injury, you are to take life for life, ²⁴ eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, ²⁵ burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

One purpose of this command was to limit retribution.

The commands weren't meant to be a burden, but a way for God to bless them.

Let's look at how Jesus discussed the law

Jesus said he did not come to abolish it, but to fulfill it.
(Mt 5:17-18)

Jesus recognized that the purpose of the Sabbath was to be a blessing, not to deprive people of food or healing (Mark 2:23 – 3:6 – stories of the disciples plucking heads of grain and of Jesus healing on the Sabbath).

Jesus asks the question, “Is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm?” He is looking at a higher principle.

Q. Was it a sin for a homeowner in Nazi Germany to lie to a soldier who came to his door and asked if there were any Jews in the house and was he hiding Jews?

God is accused of being legalistic because Christians can be (we saw this with racism)!

There are three ways Christians do this:

1. Following God's laws is viewed as a way to earn salvation.
2. Following God's laws is viewed as a means to pay God back. “God has done so much for you, the least you can do is obey his commands.”
3. God's laws are viewed as merely a duty or an obligation. “God commanded it, so I do it.”

Let's step back a bit and look at the "Law"

What, in your opinion, was the primary purpose of the "Law" to Israelites in the ANE?

- a) It was intended to bring salvation.
- b) It was intended to define sin.
- c) It was primarily for the forgiveness of sins.
- d) It is wisdom literature like Proverbs. ←
- e) It is legislation with prescriptive commands.
- f) It is God telling the Israelites how to live in a covenant relationship with him.
- g) It told people what they needed to do to be holy.

NOTE: Many New Testament references to and discussion of the "Law" are focused on how it was viewed at the time in the 2nd Temple period, not the way it was originally viewed (the Greco-Roman culture was significantly different than the ANE).

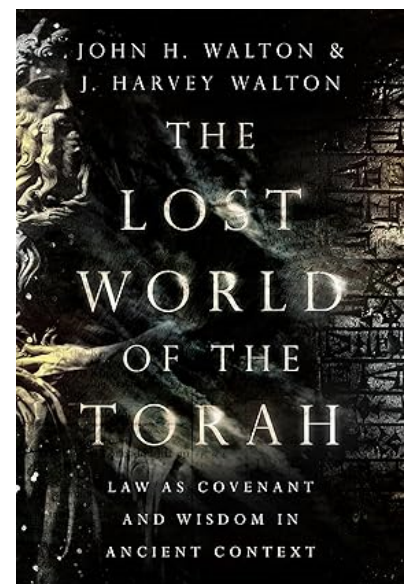
Let's look at the "Law" (Torah) and how we can't apply 20th century ideas to it

Some people try to categorize the "Law" into "ceremonial laws," "civil laws," and "moral laws." Why do you think they do this?

There is no such division in the OT.

There was no concept of "law" or "legislation" in the Ancient Near East – it was a "non-legislative" society.

The word "Torah" was translated "law" in the Septuagint, but it simply means "teaching" or "instruction."



Let's actually look at the "Law" (Torah) and how we can't apply 20th century ideas to it

Claim: The Torah was God telling the Israelites how to live in a covenant relationship with him.

We must understand the culture and the genre of the literature. This reference claims the "Law" falls into 3 categories:

1. **Wisdom literature**
2. It seems to be in the same style as a **suzerain contract** (a contract between a king and a vassal)
3. **Ritual text**

Wisdom literature

Documents like this give examples of what justice in society looks like to help judges or kings determine what wisdom is to guide them in making decisions.

The Torah has an aspective (reflecting one or more aspects of a unified whole) and descriptive nature. It is not a prescriptive guide for ethics for all people for all time.

It is like an art teacher answering the question "What is art?" by giving examples.

The Torah gives examples of what wisdom is.

“Legal” collections in the ANE were **wisdom literature**

“Law of Hammurabi” – this is not the god giving rules to the king, but examples of the king’s wisdom to show his god that he is a good king.

None of the collections are comprehensive or what we would consider to be legislation.

The legal sayings provide wisdom for judges/rulers who need to make decisions. They were not legislative decrees (this is a modern concept).

They do not tell us what laws were in force in society, much like Proverbs does not tell us how everybody lived their lives.



Wisdom literature is not a list of rules

Let’s look at Proverbs 26:4-5:

- ⁴ **Do not answer a fool** according to his folly,
or you yourself will be just like him.
- ⁵ **Answer a fool** according to his folly,
or he will be wise in his own eyes.

Marcion used apparent conflicts to reject the OT:

- God commanded that no work should be done on the Sabbath, but he told the Israelites to carry the ark around Jericho seven times on the Sabbath.
- God commanded that no graven image was to be made, but Moses was directed to fashion a bronze serpent.

The “Law” also has the form of a **suzerain contract**

These contracts give examples of what faithfulness to a suzerain (sovereign) looks like.

A vassal served the suzerain, offered tribute, and was dependent upon him for his needs.

It was intended to bring honor to the suzerain.

Similarly, Israel was to bring honor to God before the nations.

The “Law” also falls into the category of a **ritual text**

Ritual texts in the ANE detailed rituals performed in order to meet the needs of the gods.

But,

God made it clear to Israel that he has no needs. So, for Israel, sacrifices were similar to a tribute given by a vassal to a suzerain.

The rituals associated with the Torah maintained an appropriate relationship between Israel and her sovereign – the one who made a covenant with them.

Let's conclude with a discussion

Does any of the “Law” (Torah), including the 10 commandments, have any binding authority on us today?

Scholars have a lot of different views on this, but there seem to be three major camps:

1. The moral and the civil laws are still binding, but the ceremonial laws are not.
2. The moral laws and the 10 commandments (albeit modified) are still binding on us.
3. None of the Torah or the 10 commandments are binding on us as Christians.

What do you think about each of these?



If none of it is binding, then what is the basis for ethical behavior?

So, what is the bottom line?

These laws/instruction/teaching were given 1000s of years ago, so applying modern norms to them makes no sense.

In the ANE people were not governed by legislation, that is, they were not governed by laws like our modern ones.

God did not give the Torah to the church. God gave the Torah to Israel to help them be Israel.

For us as Christians, the Torah holds great historical and spiritual significance since it is the foundation of the Old Testament. It provides important insights into the history, culture, and religious practices of the Jewish people and helps us understand the roots of our own faith.