

## A Study on the Laws and Codes of the Old Testament

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### Abstract

*The Pentateuch of the Old Testament has many laws and law-codes, for example, Decalogue, Covenant Code, Deuteronomy Code and Holiness Code, etc. Those laws and law-codes of the old testament have long history. They were influenced by the laws of ancient near eastern world and have developed in old testament itself and have undergone a good deal of changes in their interpretations after codifying. The purpose of this article is to investigate the particularities of the pentateuchal laws of ancient Israelites in the old testament and to search the role and effective value of those laws in the present time. The Pentateuch laws and codes are within the scope of the Torah. The fundamental meaning of Hebrew Torah is the teaching of God to His people Israel. God gave Torah to Israel because He loved them and still loves Israel and all the peoples of the world. So we can learn that the fundamental mind of the laws of old testament is love(=agape). Is the Torah still valid today? We can not apply all the contents of the laws of old testament to our daily life but the laws of old testament are valid and have simultaneity in the period of old and new testament and even nowadays, because love remains unchanged like God Himself even in our ever-changing world.*

**Key word:** Law, Love, Old testament, Ten commandments, Judaism

### 1. Introduction

As we read the Pentateuch from the Old Testament, we find that the stories of the Pentateuch are interrupted by many laws. There are codes of law in the Pentateuch. They are Ten Commandments, Deuteronomistic Code, Priestly Code, Holiness Code etc. So what is Israel's law? What is contained in those laws? Why did the ancient Israelites record their "life" in the Old Testament as a form of code?

All laws have a purpose to sustain life in the community. In other words, the existence of the law is only worth the existence of serving the human community. The laws of Israel contained in the Pentateuch contain the spirit of law reflecting their place of life and the request of the times, and to some extent depend on their natural conditions. In particular, the understanding of the laws of the ancient Near East and ancient Israel is different from ours today. They have developed deeply in relation to rituals in their unique political, social, and economic aspects. In other words, Israeli law is the blessing God has given for the people, and has played the ultimate role in the faith of the nation of Israel. So is it still valid for modern people living in a complex and diversified society that is incomparable to the ancient Israeli era? In this paper, I look at the laws of the nation of Israel, which are concentrated in the Old Testament, and examine the "story of life" of the ancient Israeli society in the form of

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each code. Also, I will reveal the characteristics, similarities, and uniqueness of each of the codes. In addition, I would like to examine the understanding of Jesus and Paul's laws in the New Testament as a whole, to identify the role of the law in the life of the nation of Israel, and to consider the meaning that gives us living in this age beyond the temporal and spatial gap.

## **2. The ten commandments**

The Ten Commandments can be found in four places in the Bible (Exod 20:1-17, Deut 5:6-21, Exodus 34:11-26, Le 19:1-18). In general, Old Testament scholars agree that the four texts of the Ten Commandments belong to different groups of documents. The Ten Commandments in Exodus 20 belong to the E document and are called "ethical ten commandments" due to their ethical nature. The Ten Commandments in Deuteronomy 5 belong to Document D and are largely the same as the Ethical Ten Commandments, but show some differences in terms of interpretation. And the Ten Commandments in Exodus 34 belong to the J document, and only three (1, 2, and 4) of the Ten Commandments appear, and the rest are related to the priestly ritual, so they are called "Priestly Ten Commandments" [1]. The Ten Commandments (Le 19) at the beginning of the Holiness Code is a post-captive work, in which two or three orders of twenty are combined by the same subject. This paper examines the ten commandments in Exodus 20:1-17 and Deut. 5:6-21, which are mainly read.

There has been vigorous debate over the age of the Ten Commandments. Some scholars have entirely denied the possibility of Moses mentioning the date of recognition or the ban on idolatry, and even doubting that the worship of other gods was already banned in the Moses era [2]. On the other hand, scholars of the Albright School argue that the content of the Ten Commandments, as well as their literary form, pointed out that the age of the Ten Commandments was before the 13th century B.C. The Ten Commandments, like the rest of the Pentateuch, should be viewed from the point of view of the covenant (the covenant is based on the redemptive history of Exodus). Other codes in the Pentateuch are basically the principles of the Ten Commandments expanded to fit various aspects of life. It is more plausible to see that the laws of the Pentateuch apply the Ten Commandments, as the various New Testament epistles apply the truths of the Gospels [3].

The first and second commandments that Judaism sees as one commandment speak of the great principles of the Old Testament Israeli faith. The Old Testament Israelites lived in the flood of "other gods", for example, Marduk of Babylon, Dagon of Philistine, Baal and Ashtoreth of Tyre, Chemosh of Moab, Milcom of Ammon, Rimmon of Aram etc. There was a guardian deity in each city, not to mention the sun god, moon god, storm god, mountain god, river god, disease god, etc. In this world full of "other gods", it was not easy for the Israelites to adhere to the monotheistic faith. They were constantly tempted by other gods, and even tempted. In addition, since ancient times, humans have created the image of many gods by imitating the form of animals or humans. In the time when all kinds of gods were overflowing and it was impossible to even think of a religion without an image, this command was indeed an amazing statement. The first and second commandments describe the Old Testament faith in Israel well. The God of Israel is the God of creation who created the whole universe. Everything that exists in this world is creation. Therefore, there is a fundamental distinction and difference between God the Creator and creatures. The human eye as a creature cannot see the glory of the Creator (Exod 33:20). Can this Creator God be represented in the image of creature? It is impossible. For the transcendent Creator who transcends creation cannot be represented in material form. Therefore, God cannot be made in any shape. If people make

the image of God, it is not God, but an idol that is merely “other god”. The God of Israel did not allow the creation of the image of God, the basic religious need. In addition, He emphasized the iconoclastic faith in the world at the time when the gods overflowed. Today, we do not commit the foolishness of making statues or making golden calves like the people of the Old Testament. If so, can we ignore the second commandment? Not like that. In the biblical faith, the only Creator God is the object of man's absolute loyalty and obedience, faith and praise. Any act of serving anything but one God becomes idolatry. It is idolatry to give the creatures the glory and praise [4].

The three commandments that do not call God's name in vain are the most difficult words to understand. The reason is because of the various meanings of the word ‘in vain’. The Hebrew word *shawe*, which is the equivalent of the word ‘in vain’, also has the meanings of ‘empty’, ‘valueless’, ‘false’ and ‘cheating’. The word “Do not call God's name in vain” means not to recklessly call on the name of God, and not to set it up falsely or for false purposes. In other words, it does not steal or abuse God's name in order to satisfy human greed, and does not curse others in the name of God. The name of the Creator God should be the object of glory and praise and cannot be used as a means for other human purposes [5]. It is the Word that reaffirms our duty to live for the glory of God in this age when faith and God are easy to be instrumentalized and the glory that must be returned to God is intercepted by man.

In the text of Exodus, ‘remember’ is used, but in the text of Deuteronomy, ‘observe’ is used instead, and “as the LORD your God commanded you” is added. It can be said that if Exodus is to recall the holy Sabbath in the mind, Deuteronomy is hoped to be revealed as an external and concrete act. And it is emphasized by adding the phrase of God's command. The animals at Exodus 20:10 were used only in the collective sense of ‘cattle’, but in Deut. 5:14 the addition of cows and donkeys shows that they occupied an important place in life so that they were mentioned separately.

For the four commandments to remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy, the book of Exodus refers to the origin of the creation narrative (Gen 1:1-2: 4a), and Deuteronomy states that it is motivated among Egyptian slave subjects. Exodus 20:11 puts the origin of the Sabbath in God's act of creation, while Deuteronomy 5:15 has the origin of the Exodus event. The creation narrative of Genesis 1 takes the tone of a priest proclaiming God's great work to the world. Also, the ten commandments of Exodus are within the overall framework that Moses proclaims to the Israelites with the commandments. Therefore, it seems that the origin of the Sabbath was linked to the creation narrative according to its characteristics. On the other hand, what is noted in the Exodus from Deuteronomy 5:15 is that Israel was the servant of Egypt. In Deuteronomy, social consideration of slavery may have been necessary, but one can see the preaching tone that is desired to be observed in the life of the Sabbath rooted in the Exodus.

Here, remembering the creation event and God the Creator, the redemption event of the Exodus and God the Redeemer, stops all our daily lives. It is to praise, thank, and worship the God who is forgotten after all the work to eat and live. A busy and difficult life makes us easily forget God. However, remembering God who is the Creator and Redeemer in the busyness is not only for the rest of me or one person, but also for finding the place of faith in all things that belong to me.

Often, when the Ten Commandments are divided into two, the 1st to 4th Commandments are regarded as religious areas related to God, and the 5th to the last 10 Commandments are classified according to the laws of the living area related to neighbors. However, the peculiar thing is that God or the pronoun that refers to God appears in the 1 to 5 commandments. The

5th commandment, like the preceding commandments, has 'God the Lord'. If so, the commandment to honor our parents can be interpreted as a law in the religious realm related to God. That is, it is said that the honor of parents is a big part of the Old Testament faith.

The Exodus 7,8,9 commandments read "You shall not ..." and Deuteronomy says "Neither shall you." This is to indicate that it is linked to 'and' (Hebrew *waw*) in the original text of Deuteronomy. The ten commandments of the exodus without *waw* seem to read the code, and the Deuteronomy connected to the *waw* conveys a feeling of soft narrative tone.

The very short and concise form of the 6-9 commandment is typical of apodictic law. Since 1934, when Albrecht Alt divided Israeli law found in the Pentateuch into case law (= casuistically formulated law) and apodictic law, research on this aspect has made remarkable results [6]. According to Alt, Israel's intrinsic form of law is the apodictive law, and the representative of the apodictive law are the Ten Commandments and Leviticus. This is not a law for a specific person, but a collection of things that every Israeli had taken for granted.

The necessity of this inevitable law in the Israeli community, which prohibits murder, adultery, stealing, and false testimony, presupposes a special situation in which Israel's ideal life is broken. It was an attempt to sustain Israel's spirit through the form of "law" when violations of what had previously been held without the provisions of the law were violated, that is, when customs could no longer serve as a binding custom. After all, the Old Testament law should be viewed as an interpretation and adaptation to maintain and strengthen the spirit of the past peoples, not to create new customs or to suggest morality. In the post-exilic period, the principles of life that Israel had to keep became legal provisions, national spirit, the word of God, and acted as a spirit of faith. All Israel's laws and customs were intended to keep Israel in the context of the covenant community by the Sinai and Moab tradition.

The 1-9th of the Ten Commandments appear throughout the Old Testament. However, the tenth commandment does not appear elsewhere. In Exodus 20:17, wife is considered a possession. After being told not to covet (Hebrew *hamad*) your neighbor's house, possessions appear in order from the most important belongings in the house (wife-male/female servant-donkey). It can be said that the good wife of Proverbs 31: 10-31 is also treated as a treasure, in line with the point of view of Exodus 20:17. However, in Deuteronomy 5:21, the verb 'desire' (Hebrew *awah*) is used to reflect the era in which a woman's position was not regarded as possession.

### 3. The covenant code

Immediately following the Ten Commandments is the Covenant Code (Exodus 20: 22-23: 33), a classic collection of laws and regulations in the Old Testament. Its name comes from the phrase 'the Book of Covenant' in Exodus 24: 7. This code clearly constitutes a single, unified whole, so it can be studied separately from the rest of the laws (the Pentateuch) without compromising context. The code appears not only to be promulgated when a contract was signed on Mount Sinai, but also appears to indicate the actual conditions of the covenant.

The contents of the covenant code do not represent the way of living in the wilderness, but reflect the social image that has already been settled and developed. It is a law given to Moses when signing a contract between God and Israel on Mount Sinai, but the content is set in an agrarian society and is considered retroactive to Moses. The fact that most of the elements expressed in the covenant code presupposes the situation of farmland in fact leads to the deduction that Israel was called after most of the code settled in Canaan. Therefore, the entire covenant code only occurred after Israel entered the settlement period. The basis for assuming that the issue of solidarity in one book is settled as an agricultural settlement is found in the

fact that many of the contents of the covenant code are closely related in the content and form of the laws and regulations of the ancient Near East. The tradition of these laws were undoubtedly refined and transmitted within the farming countries of the ancient Near East, and Israel would have known it only after it settled in Palestine.

#### **4. Deuteronomic code**

The Code of Deuteronomy appears in chapters 12-26 of Deuteronomy, and this also has unity as a whole. While the Israelites lived in the wilderness after the exodus, God Himself taught Israel the way to live as God's people through Moses twice. The first is Tora on Mt. Sinai. This is recorded from Exodus 19 to Numbers 10:10. The ten commandments and the covenant code are also in this category. The second teaching, which God gave to Israel, is said to have been given once again in the plains of Moab just before entering the Promised Land. This is recorded in Deuteronomy 12-26. There is no doubt that this code is a separate code. Even the most extreme critics usually admit that Deuteronomic code is a single, independent document. It is, on the one hand, a 'summary of the whole of Israel's early laws and history', and on the other hand, not only reinterpreting the old ones as a 'supplement' of the earlier ones, especially the covenant code, but it also covers the first missing. Therefore, the location of Deuteronomy is likened to the location of the Gospel of John in the New Testament. Most of Deuteronomy is a kind of "memoir" expressed in sermons of Moses. Deuteronomy is full of love. This love constantly motivates to keep the laws (Deut. 25:3), and even humanly applies it to the wild animals (Deut. 22:6). As such, "the contract of love" flows throughout Deuteronomy, so Deuteronomic code can also be called another covenant code [7].

Obviously, the Deuteronomic code is not a new one. The contents have much in common with the contents of the covenant code. However, it is not a copy of the covenant code. The provisions of the covenant code have been changed by about half in the Deuteronomic code. The Deuteronomic code can be said to be 'amendments or extensions to the covenant code' to adapt to the needs of the new era in response to changes in the social, economic, political and religious context of Israel in the 7th century BC. In other words, the 'modernization of covenant code' was achieved. According to the circumstances of the times, the author of the Deuteronomic code emphasized the slogans of single people, single god, and single sanctuary, centrality, humanitarianism, based on the legal interpretation of 'God's love' (Deut. 12: 11-14; 15:11).

Von Rad said that Deuteronomy forms a unified and theological outline. The outline is one God, one Israel, one promised land, and one location of worship. He saw the commandments of the Deuteronomic code as a great interpretation of the commandment to love YHWH and rely on YHWH, and this love in return for YHWH's promise to Israel. The intention of the Deuteronomy Code can be found in the fact that Israel was still on its way to Canaan. Israel had to wait longer to receive a huge gift of salvation. "Because so far you have not yet reached rest and inheritance" (Deut. 12: 9) [8].

#### **5. Conclusions**

The laws of the Old Testament, the laws of God, are never fixed. Depending on the age, they may be different to treat God's people according to circumstances. How God leads them in the place of Israel's continuing life is represented by the law, the Torah. Therefore, von Rad said that the context of Torah's life is not a fixed offering, but a human mind. Essentially, God's laws should be understood only in the covenant relationship with Israel. Although

Israel was unfaithful and failed to fulfill God's laws, God did not first break the covenant, but was always with them. Thus, through Jesus Christ, God again reached out to His people Israel a loving hand. Therefore, the church of Christ sees the new interpretation of God's law of the Old Testament as the starting point of new salvation through Jesus Christ. Because we can see that Jesus Christ fulfilled this God's law.

The Hebrew root of the Old Testament law, Torah, means the teaching of God for Israel. The content of the teaching is how Israel will live as God's people. Since God taught Israel the way to live, Israel must live according to the teachings of God, "Torah". Living according to the Torah, this is the life of Israel! God chose Israel as the chosen people and taught them how to live as the chosen people. And the laws weren't just for the era in which they were written. In Deuteronomy before Moses taught the people the Ten Commandments and the Law, he said, "The covenants God made with our ancestors are what we have lived here today, with us"(Deuteronomy 5:2-3). His teaching was that it was for a new Israelite who entered the land of Canaan through the Moab wilderness. This shows the "contemporaneity of the laws". This contemporaneity still applies to us as we read the Old Testament laws, teaching given by God. It is obviously difficult and not desirable to apply all the teachings of the Old Testament to us who live in this age. However, the reason why the law's contemporaneity applies in the Old and New Testament times and now is simple. It is because the love that is the fundamental spirit flowing in the teaching is still unchanging at that time and now as the God who gave the teaching is unchangingly faithful.

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