

Research paper on historical cultural context of exodus 21- 24

[Religion](#), [Bible](#)



Interpretation of Exodus 21-24

The book of Exodus is often thought of as the story of the Hebrews and their escape from Egypt; however, there are multiple stories contained within the book of Exodus. The chapters 21 through 24 are a list of rules for the behavior of the Hebrews; these chapters also deal with the Covenant that God made with the Hebrews, through Moses. This portion of the book of Exodus does not read like a story until the very end; most of chapters 21-23 are lists of rules and regulations regarding behavior. Historically, Exodus as a Bible story tells the founding story of Israel; everything in the text reflects the building of a nation, including the laws delivered by God to Moses and the Israelites.

When Exodus 21: 1 begins, Moses has already brought the Ten Commandments to the people. Exodus 21 deals exclusively with the laws contained within the Commandments, extrapolating the words that God set forth for rules for the Hebrews. These rules are designed to set forth the standards of behavior for the people of the day, and there are cultural differences that make it impossible for the people of today to follow these rules exactly-- Exodus 21 deals extensively with the ownership of slaves, for instance-- but the undercurrents of these laws are still applicable to modern times, according to many Old Testament scholars (Childs). On the topic of slavery and servitude in Exodus 21, Childs writes, " The servant, in the state of servitude, was an emblem of that state of bondage to sin, Satan, and the law, which man is brought into by robbing God of his glory, by the transgression of his precepts. Likewise in being made free, he was an emblem of that liberty wherewith Christ, the Son of God, makes free from

bondage his people, who are free indeed; and made so freely, without money and without price, of free grace" (Childs). Exodus 22 contains much of the same form of Scripture-- it is concerned with the existence of judicial laws in the Hebrew society. The existence of these laws give context to the Ten Commandments; there are subtle cultural meanings in the laws that would not have been visible purely by examining the Ten Commandments themselves (Childs).

This section of Exodus-- an enumeration and elaboration on the laws of Moses-- demonstrates how important giving proper glory to God was for the Hebrews. Everything in these laws is designed to give glory to God; in Exodus 23, for instance, the laws elaborated upon emphasize the importance of upholding truthfulness in the eyes of God. God's divine judgment is far more important than any earthly pleasure or action (Gowan). This builds upon the idea that the Israelites are building a nation, not merely setting out a series of laws to be followed.

Exodus 21-23 discuss the finer points of Hebrew law extensively, but Exodus 24 changes subject quite suddenly. Perhaps the most interesting discussion here is the discussion of the Covenant in Exodus 24; Childs writes, " The blood of the sacrifice was sprinkled on the altar, on the book, and on the people. Neither their persons, their moral obedience, nor religious services, would meet with acceptance from a holy God, except through the shedding and sprinkling' of blood [] Also the blessings granted unto them were all of mercy; and the Lord would deal with them in kindness" (Childs). This is an unbreakable connection that God has made between the Hebrew people and himself; God's word is that He will continue to take care of his chosen people

throughout their trials and tribulations so long as they uphold the laws that He has set forth for them. This is why it is so fundamentally important that the previous chapters lay out the laws in detail; God puts forth His rules for His people, and then it is the responsibility of the chosen people to uphold His laws.

Word Study of Exodus 21-24

Because much of Exodus 21-24 deals with the rules and laws that governed Hebrew society, much of the diction in the passages deal heavily with what one must do or what one should not do. For instance, Exodus 21: 2-3 states, “ If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him. If the sun be risen upon him, there shall be blood shed for him; for he should make full restitution; if he have nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft” (Biblegateway. com). The use of prescriptive and restrictive diction is common throughout these passages; much of these chapters deals with the ways in which one “ shall” or “ shall not” act. These commands are ostensibly from God Himself; they are the rules for behavior and the Hebrew way of life.

Perhaps one of the more interesting series of word choices in this portion of Exodus is the series of restrictions on behavior, and then the commentary that God makes as a result of these restrictions. God says to His people, “ If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless” (Biblegateway. com). This is a very different God than the God of the New Testament; this is

a wrathful, vengeful God, and one that is very concerned with divine justice. This is, perhaps, one of the most striking aspects of Exodus, particularly this section-- God is worried about justice and balance, and asks His people to follow His word precisely. If His people do not follow His word, His justice will be swift and heartless. This is reflected all throughout these passages; God spends most of this section of the text telling the people what they can and cannot do, and then explaining the consequences if they do not respect His word.

In short, this part of Exodus is about divine judgment, and the responsibility of the Hebrew people in their Covenant with God. On a more personal note, I gleaned much from studying these passages. The God of the New Testament and the God of the Old Testament are very different Gods, but it is easy to trace God's concern for man, even when He is being harsher than other times. Even in the New Testament, God is concerned with justice and judgment; his judgments in the Old Testament may be harsher and more unforgiving, but they are still His judgment, laid out for the people within the cultural context of their time. I found that reading these passages with the cultural context of the writing in mind helped me see the meaning in the passages more clearly; although I cannot own slaves, for instance, I was able to see God's concern for equality and justice in these passages, as well as His concern for mercy.

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