

Exodus Chapters 18-20: The Meaning of The Law in Exodus

From the Theology of Work Bible Commentary on Exodus

At Mount Sinai, Moses received the Ten Commandments from the Lord. As the NIV Study Bible puts it, “The Ten Commandments are the central stipulations of God’s covenant with Israel made at Sinai. It is almost impossible to exaggerate their effect on subsequent history. They constitute the basis of the moral principles found throughout the Western world and summarize what the one true God expects of his people in terms of faith, worship and conduct.”

Exodus is an integral part of the whole of Scripture, not a stand-alone legal statute. Christopher Wright has written:

“The common opinion that the Bible is a moral code book for Christians falls far short, of course, of the full reality of what the Bible is and does. The Bible is essentially the story of God, the earth and humanity; it is the story of what has gone wrong, what God has done to put it right, and what the future holds under the sovereign plan of God. Nevertheless, within that grand narrative, moral teaching does have a vital place.”

The English word law is a traditional yet inaccurate rendering of the key Hebrew word Torah. The word Torah appears once in Genesis in the sense

of instructions from God that Abraham followed. It can refer to instructions from one human to another. But as something from God, the word Torah designates a standard of conduct for God's people. This concept is far from our modern ideas of law as a body of codes crafted and enacted by legislators.

In Exodus, it is clear that Torah – in the sense of a set of specific instructions – is part of the covenant and not the other way around. The covenant as a whole describes the relationship that God has established between himself and his people by virtue of his act of deliverance on their behalf. As the people's covenantal king, God then specifies how he desires Israel to behave. Israel's pledge to obey is a response to God's gift of the covenant. This is significant for our understanding of the theology of work. The way we discern God's will for our behavior at work and the way we put that into practice in the workplace are enveloped by the relationship that God has established with us. In Christian terms, we love God because he first loved us and we demonstrate that love in how we treat others. The categorical nature of God's command for us to love our neighbors means that God intends for us to apply it everywhere, regardless of whether we find ourselves in a church, civic venue, or place of work.