

Exegetical Notes, Exodus 22:16-31 **“Social Obligations”**

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Exodus 22:16-31

(Beginning with Exodus 21 we enter a difficult section of the book of Exodus which deals with the working out of the 10 commandments practically and the ceremonial expectations of the law. Often, these passages are skipped over by Christians as having little to do with our modern, New Testament life. However, 2 Timothy 3:16 says that all Scripture is inspired and profitable for our instruction. Therefore, we will study these sections of the Bible over the next several weeks to allow the Holy Spirit to lead us to the truth they contain.)

Verse 16-17

“If a man seduces a virgin who is not pledged to be married and sleeps with her, he must pay the bride-price, and she shall be his wife. If her father absolutely refuses to give her to him, he must still pay the bride-price for virgins.”

- The situation described here requires some discussion. A man “seduces,” literally rapes a “virgin.” The term, “virgin,” means a woman who has previously had no sexual experience. This woman is also not engaged to be married. Were she engaged, the situation would be different and more complicated since a marriage contract would be in place but broken by the rape. The situation involves the sexual violation of a girl who has had no previous sexual experience.
- The “bride-price” (in Hebrew the “mohar”) which is mentioned is the fee that a man would pay to the woman’s father for the privilege of marrying her. In the case of a woman who was a virgin this fee would have been substantial.
- The man who so treats a woman is required to pay her father the bride-price and the father gets to decide if the marriage may take place. The decision belongs entirely to the father. He alone will decide if this man may marry his daughter. This is because the father is to act as the woman’s protector. The assumption is that he will make the right decision in her best interest.

- No matter what decision the father makes in regard to the marriage, the man is still required to pay the bride-price as the penalty for his action.

Verse 18

“Do not allow a sorceress to live.”

- A sorceress is a woman who claims to exercise superhuman powers through spells, magic, or knowledge that comes from evil spirits. We would call such a woman a witch.
- Such a person is to be executed.

Verse 19

“Anyone who has sexual relations with an animal must be put to death.”

- Bestiality is forbidden. The offender must be executed.

Verse 20

“Whoever sacrifices to any god other than YHWH must be destroyed.”

- Israel was surrounded by people who sacrificed to gods of many kinds. These gods were often felt to have power over various areas of life. So, if a man was concerned about some specific aspect of his life, he might be tempted to offer sacrifice to the god said to have control over that particular thing.
- Such behavior is entirely offensive to YHWH. It is a violation of the first of the Ten Commandments. Therefore, no such behavior was to be tolerated among the Hebrews. Anyone who offered sacrifice to any other god except YHWH was to be executed.

Verse 21

“Do not mistreat an alien or oppress him, for you were aliens in Egypt.”

- The word “alien” means a stranger, someone who is not a Hebrew. The Hebrews are required to remember that they were strangers in Egypt for 400 years. Therefore, they will not mistreat a stranger.

Verse 22-24

“Do not take advantage of a widow or an orphan. If you do and they cry out to me, I will certainly hear their cry. My anger will be aroused, and I will kill you with the sword; your wives will become widows and your children fatherless.”

- Widows and orphans represent the portion of the population which is unable to protect or care for itself. They represent the helpless people who have no clout or power.
- The message is that God, himself, becomes the special protector of such people. To take advantage of them invokes his wrath and brings his curse upon those who take advantage.

Verse 25-27

“If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not be like a moneylender; charge him no interest. If you take your neighbor’s cloak as a pledge, return it to him by sunset, because his cloak is the only covering he has for his body. What else will he sleep in? When he cries out to me, I will hear him, for I am compassionate.”

- This rule concerns lending money to other people who are members of the community of faith. If a Hebrew lends money to another Hebrew, he must lend it interest free.
- If a Hebrew takes another Hebrew’s coat to secure a loan, he must return the coat to its owner before dark. The reason is that a poor man would have only one coat and would use that coat as his blanket at night. The man lending the money would already have his own coat to keep him warm. He would not need another. However, the poor man would be cold without his coat. Such senseless actions anger God who is compassionate.

Verse 28

“Do not blaspheme God or curse the ruler of your people.”

- The Hebrew words translated “blaspheme” and “curse” mean to speak words that are derogatory, delegitimizing, or damaging to their object. This kind of speech undermines the authority of those to whom it is aimed and undermines their authority.

Verse 29a

“Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats.”

- The actual Hebrew words say, “Your fullness and your flow you shall not deny.” The implication is that the Hebrew people must acknowledge that all good things come from God. There is no literal mention of offerings. However, the implication is that if we are truly thankful to God for what he has given we will be generous in giving back to him.

Verse 29b-30

“You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.”

- Since the time of the Passover, all of the firstborn in Israel were considered sacred to God. Israel was required to give her firstborn sons to the service of God and first-born animals were to be given to him as sacrifice.
- In the case of sons, the law allowed for the father to redeem his son from this obligation with a cash gift.

Verse 31

“You are to be my holy people. So do not eat the meat of an animal torn by wild beasts; throw it to the dogs.”

- Israel was to be “holy.” It means they were to be set apart from all other nations to do God’s will, to serve his purpose.
- The rule concerning meat torn by wild animals was for their protection. Such kill might be days old and not good for consumption. Therefore, God was protecting his holy people by telling them to keep away from such a find.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *Social Obligations*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)