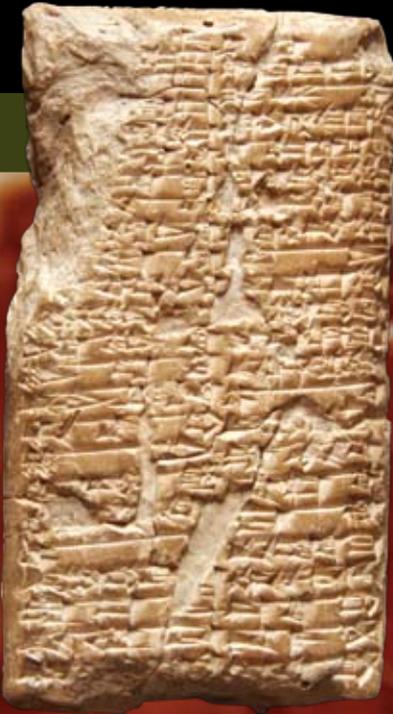


The LAW

GOD'S GIFT TO HIS PEOPLE

BY TERRY J. BETTS



Above:
Prologue of the
Mesopotamian
Law Code of
Lipit-Ishtar of Isin;
dated to about
1870 B.C. Written
in Sumerian, this
was a forerunner
to the Code of
Hammurabi.

THE LAW OF THE LORD IS PERFECT,
converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is
sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the
LORD are right, rejoicing the heart . . . More to be
desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold:
SWEETER ALSO THAN HONEY
AND THE HONEYCOMB.

Psalm 19:7,8a,10, KJV



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL / LOUVRE MUSEUM (B5/13/74)

WAS THE LAW a blessing or a burden to God's people when God handed it down to the Israelites through Moses at Mount Sinai? Some might think it was a burden since a number of passages in the New Testament appear to support such a notion. For instance, Paul wrote, "you are not under law but under grace" (Rom. 6:14); "but now we are released from the law, having died to that which kept us captive, so that we serve... not in the old way of the written code" (7:6); "all who rely on works of the law are under a curse" (Gal. 3:10); and "the law is not of faith" (v. 12).¹

However, when reading these passages one must recognize Paul was speaking to specific situations where certain Jews were attempting to mix works with faith for salvation. Such an understanding of the gospel is foreign to the writings of both the New and Old Testaments as demonstrated in the life of Abraham (Rom. 4; Gal. 3:1-9). Moreover, one needs to consider all of Paul's discussion of the law such as: "Do we then overthrow the law by this faith? By no means! On the contrary, we uphold the law" (Rom. 3:31); "So the law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good" (7:12); "we know that the law is spiritual"



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BRENT BRUCE

Upper left: Mesopotamian tablet dating to Iron Age II (about 1000 B.C.), records astrological observations, phases of the moon, and horoscope interpretations based

on the zodiac and movements of the planets

Right: Burial chambers at Tyre. God instructed His people not to be involved in necromancy.

(v. 14); "I agree with the law, that it is good" (v. 16); "I delight in the law of God, in my inner being" (v. 22); and "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Other New Testament passages convey a positive view of the law as well.

Further, the Old Testament writers used only the most positive words and expressions to describe God's law. We see for example, David's words in



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (26/31/1)

Left: Jewish men prepare for prayers and worship at the Western Wall in Jerusalem by tying on phylacteries.

Right: Sunrise as seen from Jebel Musa (Mount Sinai).

Below: Replica of the Code of Hammurabi. The Hammurabi code, discovered near ancient Susa, (biblical Shushan) dates from 1750 B.C. and contains 282 laws. This was the most extensive legal document prior to classical times.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (18/2/18)



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Psalm 19:7-11, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb. Moreover, by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.”

The longest psalm and chapter in the Bible, Psalm 119, is a declaration of David’s desire to keep God’s law and a testimony of the joy and blessings one experiences when one obeys God’s law. Additionally, Moses’ last words to the children of Israel as they were about to enter into the promised land recorded in the Book of Deuteronomy centered on God’s goodness demonstrated through His giving the law and the promise of a blessed life to those who would obey it.

If the writers of the Old Testament declare the law was a blessing to God’s people, then it raises the question, “How was the law a blessing to the people of God?” The law proved to be a blessing to Israel in at least three ways. First, the law provided Israel with God’s will and expectations for His covenant people. Unlike Israel, other peoples in Israel’s day had difficulty discerning the will of their gods. As a result, they resorted to divination, the activity of reading signs and omens as a means of discerning the will of their gods and foretelling the future. Divination involved several practices such as the analysis of the liver spots of a sacrificed animal (hepatoscopy), the communication with the dead (necromancy), the study of the heavenly bodies (astrology), the mystic reading of water (hydromancy), and the use of a rod, staff, stick, or arrow in order to gain some direction or information (rhabdomancy).² The biblical writers clearly instruct the Israelites that they were to refrain from using such methods. They did not need these methods since God had given them

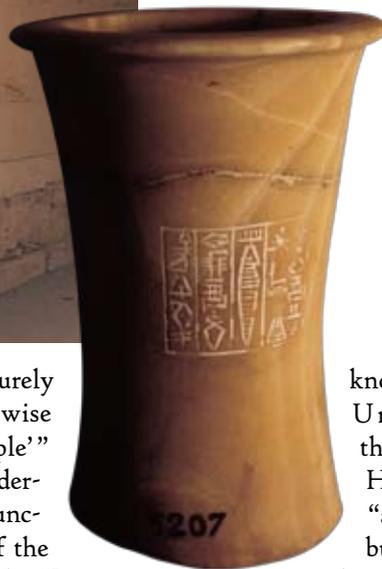


ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ (2/19/18)

Left: Law Code of Gortyn is the earliest European law code. Written in the first half of the 5th cent. B.C., it discusses the social and legal arrangements of the society and also refers to and discusses earlier

laws. The text is written in boustrophedon text meaning the person reads, alternating direction at the end of every line.

Lower left: In His law, God revealed Himself as the one true God. This theology was unique in the ancient Near East, as evidenced in this inscribed vase belonging to King Naram-Sin, who ruled Akkad (northern Babylon) 2254-2218 B.C. Naram-Sin was the first king in recorded history in Babylonia to become "god" of his city.



VASE: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/BOB SCHATZ 1994/MUSEUM OF THE ANCIENT ORIENT, ISTANBUL (12/23/24)

His law. Regarding the statutes of the law Moses said, "Keep them and do them, for that will be your wisdom and understanding" (Deut. 4:6a) and "The LORD commanded us to do all these statutes, to fear the LORD our God, for our good always" (6:24a). With the law, the Israelites never had to wonder what was God's will for His people.

Second, the law was a blessing to God's people because it provided a way for them to make the Lord's name known among the nations. Just before the Lord gave Israel the Ten Commandments, He stated His purpose for Israel (Ex. 19:1-6). Through Israel's obedience to God's voice and faithfulness to His covenant Israel would be God's treasured possession from among the nations, serving the Lord as a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Through faithful obedience to God's law, as a kingdom of priests Israel was to be a go-between for God and the nations. Moses spoke to this purpose when later he said, "Keep them [God's laws] and do them, for that will be your wisdom and your understanding in the sight of the peoples, who, when they hear all

these statutes, will say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people'" (Deut. 4:6). Solomon understood Israel's priestly function. At the dedication of the temple he urged the people: "Let these words of mine, with which I have pleaded before the LORD, be near to the LORD our God day and night, and may he maintain the cause of his servant and the cause of his people Israel, as each day requires, that all the peoples of the earth may know that the LORD is God; there is no other. Let your heart therefore be wholly true to the LORD our God, walking in his statutes and keeping his commandments, as at this day" (1 Kings 8:59-61).

Third, the law was a blessing to Israel because it revealed God's character to them. He is the one true God, and there is no other. Any image made to depict Him would detract from His glory and majesty. God's people should be faithful because He is faithful; be trustworthy because He is trustworthy; care for the weak because He cares for the weak; and be holy because God is holy. God's law was God's revelation of Himself, resulting in the people's

knowledge of Him. Understandably, therefore, Jesus said He did not come to "abolish" the law but to "fulfill" it, that is, to show forth its true meaning, confirm it, and bring it to complete expression (Matt 5:17-20).

Rather than a burden to Israel, the law was God's gift to His people and a source of blessing. God did not deliver Israel out of Egyptian bondage only to lead them into spiritual bondage. God's law provided His redeemed people with instruction for life, with a means to bring Him glory among the nations, and with another glimpse of the God who had saved them and made them His treasured possession. **B**

1. All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV).
2. D.A. Aune, "Divination" in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, gen. ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 971-74.

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