

The Statutes of Righteous Judgment

An Analytical Narrative of Exodus 21 and 22 and Their Contemporary Application

Introduction

After delivering Israel from Egyptian bondage, God established a community grounded in divine justice and righteousness. Following the Ten Commandments at Mount Sinai, He gave the judgments of Exodus 21 and 22—often called the Book of the Covenant—to apply the Decalogue’s moral principles to everyday life.

Although references to oxen, open pits, servitude, and restitution may feel remote, they express enduring principles of human dignity, personal responsibility, property rights, and social equity. This narrative explains those judgments and their continuing relevance.

The Divine Judgments Explained

1. The Rights and Dignity of Servants (Exodus 21:1-11)

“1 Now these are the judgments which thou shalt set before them. 2 If thou buy an Hebrew servant, six years he shall serve: and in the seventh he shall go out free for nothing. 3 If he came in by himself, he shall go out by himself: if he were married, then his wife shall go out with him. 4 If his master have given him a wife, and she have born him sons or daughters; the wife and her children shall be her master's, and he shall go out by himself. 5 And if the servant shall plainly say, I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free: 6 Then his master shall bring him unto the judges; he shall also bring him to the door, or unto the door post; and his master shall bore his ear through with an aul; and he shall serve him for ever. 7 And if a man sell his daughter to be a maidservant, she shall not go out as the menservants do. 8 If she please not her master, who hath betrothed her to himself, then shall he let her be redeemed: to sell her unto a strange nation he shall have no power, seeing he hath dealt deceitfully with her. 9 And if he have betrothed her unto his son, he shall deal with her after the manner of daughters. 10 If he take him another wife; her food, her raiment, and her duty of marriage, shall he not diminish. 11 And if he do not these three unto her, then shall she go out free without money.” (Exodus 21:1-11, KJV)

Exodus 21 begins with Hebrew servitude, often entered because of poverty or debt. God limited the arrangement to six years and required release in the seventh without a redemption payment.

God's View and Modern Application: A servant could voluntarily choose lifelong service through a public ceremony, while female servants received protections for marital rights and basic dignity. Together, these statutes present freedom as the norm and restrain exploitation. Their principle applies today to fair wages, ethical employment, responsible lending, and opposition to human trafficking: people must be treated with dignity rather than as disposable assets.

2. Personal Injury and Capital Offenses (Exodus 21:12-27)

“12 He that smiteth a man, so that he die, shall be surely put to death. 13 And if a man lie not in wait, but God deliver him into his hand; then I will appoint thee a place whither he shall flee. 14 But if a man come presumptuously upon his neighbour, to slay him with guile; thou shalt take him from mine altar, that he may die. 15 And he that smiteth his father, or his mother, shall be surely put to death. 16 And he that stealeth a man, and selleth him, or if he be found in his hand, he shall surely be put to death. 17 And he that curseth his father, or his mother, shall be surely put to death. 18 And if men strive together, and one smite another with a stone, or with his fist, and he die not, but keepeth his bed: 19 If he rise again, and walk abroad upon his staff, then shall he that smote him be quit: only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall cause him to be thoroughly healed. 20 And if a man smite his servant, or his maid, with a rod, and he die under his hand; he shall be surely punished. 21 Notwithstanding, if he continue a day or two, he shall not be punished: for he is his money. 22 If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. 23 And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, 24 Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, 25 Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe. 26 And if a man smite the eye of his servant, or the eye of his maid, that it perish; he shall let him go free for his eye's sake. 27 And if he smite out his manservant's tooth, or his maidservant's tooth; he shall let him go free for his tooth's sake.” (Exodus 21:12-27, KJV)

These laws distinguish premeditated murder from accidental killing, imposing the severest penalty on deliberate violence while providing refuge in cases without intent. They also condemn kidnapping and serious offenses against parents, underscoring the sanctity of life, liberty, and family order.

God's View and Modern Application: The *lex talionis* established proportionate judgment, not personal vengeance, and prevented excessive punishment. Requiring freedom as compensation for permanent injury to a servant further restrained abuse of authority. These principles support a fair legal system that balances justice and mercy and holds leaders accountable for those under their care.

3. Property Damage and Negligence (Exodus 21:28-36)

“28 If an ox gore a man or a woman, that they die: then the ox shall be surely stoned, and his flesh shall not be eaten; but the owner of the ox shall be quit. 29 But if the ox were wont to push with his horn in time past, and it hath been testified to his owner, and he hath not kept him in, but that he hath killed a man or a woman; the ox shall be stoned, and his owner also shall be put to death. 30 If there be laid on him a sum of money, then he shall give for the ransom of his life whatsoever is laid upon him. 31 Whether he have gored a son, or have gored a daughter, according to this judgment shall it be done unto him. 32 If the ox shall push a manservant or a maidservant; he shall give unto their master thirty shekels of silver, and the ox shall be stoned. 33 And if a man shall open a pit, or if a man shall dig a pit, and not cover it, and an ox or an ass fall therein; 34 The owner of the pit shall make it good, and give money unto the owner of them; and the dead beast shall be his. 35 And if one man's ox hurt another's, that he die; then they shall sell the live ox, and divide the money of it; and the dead ox also they shall divide. 36 Or if

it be known that the ox hath used to push in time past, and his owner hath not kept him in; he shall surely pay ox for ox; and the dead shall be his own.” (Exodus 21:28-36, KJV)

The civil-liability laws make responsibility depend partly on prior knowledge. An unforeseen accident carried different consequences from harm caused by a known danger left unsecured. Owners also had to compensate losses caused by hazards such as uncovered pits.

God's View and Modern Application: God requires people to anticipate preventable harm and make restitution when negligence injures others or damages their livelihood. The same principle underlies workplace-safety rules, building codes, liability law, and insurance: responsibility should be accepted rather than avoided through loopholes or deception.

4. Theft, Property Rights, and Restitution (Exodus 22:1-15)

“1 If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. 2 If a thief be found breaking up, and be smitten that he die, there shall no blood be shed for him. 3 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. 4 If the theft be certainly found in his hand alive, whether it be ox, or ass, or sheep; he shall restore double. 5 If a man shall cause a field or vineyard to be eaten, and shall put in his beast, and shall feed in another man's field; of the best of his own field, and of the best of his own vineyard, shall he make restitution. 6 If fire break out, and catch in thorns, so that the stacks of corn, or the standing corn, or the field, be consumed therewith; he that kindled the fire shall surely make restitution. 7 If a man shall deliver unto his neighbour money or stuff to keep, and it be stolen out of the man's house; if the thief be found, let him pay double. 8 If the thief be not found, then the master of the house shall be brought unto the judges, to see whether he have put his hand unto his neighbour's goods. 9 For all manner of trespass, whether it be for ox, for ass, for sheep, for raiment, or for any manner of lost thing which another challengeth to be his, the cause of both parties shall come before the judges; and whom the judges shall condemn, he shall pay double unto his neighbour. 10 If a man deliver unto his neighbour an ass, or an ox, or a sheep, or any beast, to keep; and it die, or be hurt, or driven away, no man seeing it: 11 Then shall an oath of the LORD be between them both, that he hath not put his hand unto his neighbour's goods; and the owner of it shall accept thereof, and he shall not make it good. 12 And if it be stolen from him, he shall make restitution unto the owner thereof. 13 If it be torn in pieces, then let him bring it for witness, and he shall not make good that which was torn. 14 And if a man borrow ought of his neighbour, and it be hurt, or die, the owner thereof being not with it, he shall surely make it good. 15 But if the owner thereof be with it, he shall not make it good: if it be an hired thing, it came for his hire.” (Exodus 22:1-15, KJV)

Exodus 22 turns to theft and property loss. Rather than relying only on punishment, the law requires restitution scaled to the offense so that the victim is repaid and the offender confronts the cost of wrongdoing.

The same restorative principle governs damage caused by grazing livestock or spreading fire, as well as goods entrusted for safekeeping or borrowing. Liability depends on responsibility and circumstances, but avoidable loss must be made good.

God's View and Modern Application: God protects ownership while emphasizing restorative justice. Applied today, this means caring responsibly for borrowed, rented, corporate, or digital property and fully repairing losses we cause.

5. Social and Humanitarian Laws (Exodus 22:16-31)

“16 And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife. 17 If her father utterly refuse to give her unto him, he shall pay money according to the dowry of virgins. 18 Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live. 19 Whosoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death. 20 He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the LORD only, he shall be utterly destroyed. 21 Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. 22 Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. 23 If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; 24 And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless. 25 If thou lend money to any of my people that is poor by thee, thou shalt not be to him as an usurer, neither shalt thou lay upon him usury. 26 If thou at all take thy neighbour's raiment to pledge, thou shalt deliver it unto him by that the sun goeth down: 27 For that is his covering only, it is his raiment for his skin: wherein shall he sleep? and it shall come to pass, when he crieth unto me, that I will hear; for I am gracious. 28 Thou shalt not revile the gods, nor curse the ruler of thy people. 29 Thou shalt not delay to offer the first of thy ripe fruits, and of thy liquors: the firstborn of thy sons shalt thou give unto me. 30 Likewise shalt thou do with thine oxen, and with thy sheep: seven days it shall be with his dam; on the eighth day thou shalt give it me. 31 And ye shall be holy men unto me: neither shall ye eat any flesh that is torn of beasts in the field; ye shall cast it to the dogs.” (Exodus 22:16-31, KJV)

The closing section joins moral and spiritual faithfulness with care for vulnerable people. Its prohibitions against sorcery, bestiality, and idolatry accompany commands protecting strangers, widows, and fatherless children.

God promises to hear the afflicted and forbids exploiting the poor through interest or essential property held as collateral. Justice therefore includes both restraint from harm and active regard for a neighbor's basic needs.

God's View and Modern Application: God defends those with little social power and opposes greed that turns hardship into profit. These commands challenge predatory lending and housing practices while calling for ethical finance, charity, and humane treatment of immigrants, orphans, widows, and single parents.

Conclusion

Though written for ancient Israel, Exodus 21 and 22 reveal enduring aspects of God's character: He values human life, demands personal accountability, requires restorative justice, and defends the vulnerable.

Viewed today, these statutes call for practical love of neighbor: honoring agreements, accepting responsibility for negligence, respecting property, and protecting those at risk of exploitation. Their enduring message is that true justice begins with reverence for God and respect for human dignity.