

THE PRE-MOSAIC CONCEPT OF ETHICS

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INTRODUCTION

The Mosaic Law was not given until human history had continued for a considerable period of time since the creation. However, the book of Genesis says concerning Abraham that he had “obeyed my voice, and kept my charge, my commandments, my statutes and my laws” (Gen 26:5). What is God referring to when He said “my voice,” “my charge,” “my commandments,” “my statutes” and “my laws” when there was no written law of Moses yet? Louis S. Chafer is of the opinion that these may not refer to the Mosaic system which was not announced until 430 years later.² He, however, suggests that these were meant to refer to the inherent law within him. Thus, he states,

It is probable that the divine authority over men before Moses was of the nature of *inherent law*, which calls for a recognition on man’s part-however-revealed-of the inherent responsibility which the creation sustains to his creator.³

This paper is designed to determine the nature and extent of the “inherent law.” How much did the Pre-Mosaic people know without the written revelation regarding their human obligation in life? What did they think that they ought to or ought not to do in regard to God and man? How was their conduct? How could their unwritten law that was inherent be compared with the Mosaic Law? These are some of the questions that will be answered in this study.

The present pages will deal with three areas of ethics basically: (1) Theoretical Ethics; (2) Normative Ethics; and (3) Descriptive Ethics.⁴ The first deals with the question of good and evil as to their nature. The second concerns itself with the question of norms as to

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²Louise S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 4 (Dallas, Texas: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1948), 158.

³Ibid.

⁴R. M. Hare, “Ethics,” *Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, ed. John Macquarrie (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 114-16.

what they are, and the third discusses the question of their practices as to their actual conduct.

The investigation of the writer reveals, to his dismay, the lack of literature that has been written on this subject.⁵ Thus, the writer was left with no choice but to proceed to look directly into the biblical materials. Therefore, the current paper is basically an inductive study of the Book of Genesis concerning the subject.

In 1970 Breward S. Child bemoaned, “. . . there is no outstanding modern work written in English that even attempts to deal adequately with the Biblical material as it relates to ethics.”⁶

PRESUPPOSITIONS

The Existence of the Holy God

The Old Testament opens its first chapter with God who is assumed to exist. No effort is made to argue for His existence. God created the universe and all things in it including man in orderly fashion—He is God of Order. It would not be surprising to learn that the God who had established an orderly structure in the physical world, would require an equally orderly manner in the ethical life of man. It is natural for the God who had given certain systems and laws to operate in the universe, to have His ethical or spiritual systems and laws engraved in the hearts of men.

This God appeared to Abraham one day and gave him a solemn command, in which He said, “I am the Almighty God; walk before me, and be thou perfect” (17:1). The Almighty God demanded that Abraham live a life of perfection before Him in his daily walk. In light of such a demand as the background, the present study will proceed.

The Depravity Of Man

Man was created in *Imago Dei*. He was given freedom, not absolute freedom but the freedom that required self-discipline (2:16), the discipline that also required maturity.

Man was given an opportunity to demonstrate to God and to

⁵John Peter Lange, *Genesis*, trans. Phillip Schaff (New York: Charles Scribner & Co., 1868), 176.

⁶Breward S. Child, *Biblical Theology in Crisis* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 124.

himself his maturity to be translated into perfect freedom. The tree of the knowledge of good and evil was a challenge, since it was the one tree that was forbidden among many required of them. But the human ancestors could not attain maturity. They failed before this challenge. Thus, they fell.

Therefore, since the Fall man has been characterized by his fallen nature. The Book of Genesis is full of the testimonies that point to human depravity. Genesis testifies of man saying that the imagination of man's heart was "only evil continually" (6:5), and another declares that it was "evil from his youth" so much as not to withhold anything against God (11:6). Therefore, ultimately the Law of Moses was given to the people of the Old Testament when an appointed time had come under the leadership of Moses in order to regulate their life toward God and toward man.

The discussion on the Pre-Mosaic concept of Ethics will center around the interaction between the fallen nature of man and his inner awareness of the laws of God among the people who had lived before the time of the full disclosure of His written law.

Thus, the holy God, who demands order and perfection in the walk of man before God, and the fallen man with the divine principles for his walk engraved in his heart, will be the background for the discussion of the present subject.

Good and Evil

What is good or evil? There is a tension between man and God in an effort to answer the above question during the period under consideration. However, in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis, God Himself employs several terms to describe the state of His creation. He uses the word "good" sometimes (1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25), "good exceedingly" at another time (1:31), "not good" (2:18), and "good and evil" (2:9) at other times. Not all of the terms refer to the moral condition or state. However, from these expressions an inference can be easily drawn that there were certain conditions which God would call "good" or "good exceedingly" or "not good" or even "evil." That means that one condition is better than others, or vice versa.

There are other conditions, however, that God considered "wicked" (6:5), "corrupt" (6:11), "wicked exceedingly" (13:13), or "grievous sin" (18:20). Certain other conditions are also called by God

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“just,” “perfect,” “upright,” or “righteous” (7:1). It should be noted that the latter four adjectives are mentioned in the context of “walking with God or before God,” that is, in the context of the personal relationship of a man with God rather than of individual deeds or actions of a man.

On the other hand, there are some things or conditions which are considered by man as “pleasant,” “good,” “desirable,” or “wise” (3:6).

Then, there appear two standards: one is that of God and the other that of man. Which standard is going to be the one which man should follow? Man has a tendency to make an ethical decision according to his own standard. He is apt to act as it seems “good in your eyes” (19:8). He tends to “listen to the voice of your wife” (3:17). In Egypt the standard is not even a written precept, but the king himself. If one offends the Pharaoh, he will be punished; if he pleases him, he will be rewarded.

However, the Book of Genesis makes it quite clear that what man has to follow is neither that which seems “good in your eyes,” or “the voice of your wife,” nor what might be considered by any man “pleasant,” “good,” “desirable,” or even “wise,” but what God considers “good” which is known as “the voice of God,” “my commandment,” “my statutes,” or “my laws.” When a man obeys the way of the Lord, it is considered “good,” while when he departs from it and walks in his own way, it is considered “evil.” Therefore, the ultimate criterion of good and evil is the Lord God Himself and His standard, not any man or his judgment. Obedience to His voice is good and disobedience to His way is evil.

NORMANS NORMATA

What were the norms that had been considered to be normative by the Pre-Mosaic people? What was the extent of their knowledge of the norms that were inherent without the Torah? Since the normative ethics and the descriptive ethics in the present study are so closely tied together, both will be observed at the same time. The discussion will follow very closely, if possible, the order of the Mosaic system, i.e., the Decalogue.

The Awareness of the True God

The original knowledge of God that was in man was directly derived from the actual experience of Adam and Eve with God in the Garden of Eden. The two human ancestors were supernaturally created by God Himself after His own image and likeness. The God-consciousness was not a result of the projection of human mind, but a result of the original God-experiences which He himself had brought upon humanity. Since then, even after the Fall, God remained as a part of human consciousness. Eve attributed the birth of her first son to God. Cain and Abel both knew that they were to offer sacrifices unto God. Enoch and men of his generation were said to have begun to call upon the name of the Lord (4:26). Enoch was the first human, who was taken up to heaven without the physical death experience. He was reported to have “walked with God” (5:22). Thus, God-consciousness was a part of human experience from the beginning.

When God spoke to a man, He was immediately recognized. Such was the case when He spoke to Abraham. Nowhere is it recorded that Abraham searched for God and found Him; but, rather, God spoke to him and Abraham obeyed the voice. He called upon the name of the Lord (12:8). He built altars to Him (13:4,8). His knowledge of God included that Yahweh was “the everlasting God” (21:33). Isaac and Jacob both also possessed the same knowledge (25:25; 28:21). The fact that Melchizedek, the king of Salem, was called the priest of the Most High God indicates the awareness of the people of God. Even Abimelek the king of Gerar and the Pharaoh of Egypt recognized who the Lord God was and obeyed Him and His command without raising any question concerning His authority.

However, such God-consciousness does not mean that they all worshipped Him. On the contrary, Cain walked outside of God’s will, the people in Noah’s day turned away from God, and the people turned to idolatry at the Tower of Babel (11:4). Laban and his daughters owned the images of the idols (31:19; 35:2).

Yet, Jacob reveals his awareness of the inner voice that tells him to remove all the foreign gods out of his house. So he rightly ordered his household to “put away the foreign gods” (35:2). Consequently, the Scripture records that “they gave unto Jacob all the foreign gods which were in their hands” (35:2). Without the explicit law written down for them, Jacob felt obliged to have no other gods beside the One True God. His son Joseph expressed his own inner law

that shows his remarkable understanding of the second commandment before the existence of the actual law, when his brother knelt down before him to say, "Behold, we are your servants." He answered to them, "Fear not; am I in the place of God?" (50:19). Neither man nor things can take the place of God. He knew that there should be no other gods but the Lord God.

The Name of the Lord in Vain

The use of the name of the Lord in vain was not explicitly forbidden as such, but an incident in the life of Jacob already anticipated such law to appear. Jacob may be perhaps the first to use the name of the Lord in vain. Under the conspiracy directed by his mother, Jacob has just deceived his old and half-blind father Isaac in the name of the Lord and stolen the blessings that were to be given to Esau his brother. Isaac asked him, "How it is that you have brought it so quickly, my son?" Jacob replied unashamedly to his suspecting father, "Because the Lord your God brought it to me!" (27:20). Thus, he did use the name of the Lord in vain to steal the blessings. However, he was aware that he should not deceive his own father. The fear of being cursed, which he had expressed to his mother, is a good testimony of a voice that told him that he was doing something he ought not to have done (27:12).

Keep The Sabbath Holy

It is generally agreed that there is nothing known of any observation of the Sabbath before the time of Moses. However, it is strange that no one was aware of the Sabbath which the Lord blessed and set apart, and that no one had kept it until the time of Moses. Although during this period of time the requirements of keeping the Sabbath had not been fully known, there are sufficient indications that they had understood the need for worship of God. Except for the occasion of the command of the Lord to Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, no one was recorded to have been specifically ordered to worship God in a prescribed manner. Yet, it is discovered that Cain and Abel had worshiped Him with their sacrifices, Enoch and men of his generation had called upon the name of the Lord; and Noah, Abraham, and Isaac had built altars unto the Lord. Jacob set up an altar with the stone

which he had used for a pillar at Bethel. Thus, although it is not known whether any one had observed one particular day as the Sabbath day, they had a definite understanding of the act of worship that is included in the fourth commandment.

There is another aspect to this commandment. Man is to labor for six days. Work was an integral part of the human activities in the plan of God's creation. It is not a result of the curse that was brought upon man through the Fall. So Adam was told to "subdue the earth" and to "have dominion" over all the living beings on the earth. This requires work on the part of Adam (Gen.1:28). The Lord had placed Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden "to till it and to keep it" (2:15). Such requirement of work was given to Adam before the Fall.

Laborious work was recognized and rewarded among men, though not always so. Jacob once told his wives how hard he had worked for their father Laban "with all my power" (31:6). Joseph's conscientious and hard work made him the overseer of the house of Potiphar (39:4) and again over the prisoners when he was cast into a prison (39:22). These are some of the indications that they were aware of the principles that are included in the second part of the fourth commandment.

The work ethic which Joseph had followed as the prime minister of Egypt during the famine is instructive. The Egyptians had the understanding that they should not ask something for nothing. This understanding was assumed in their business transactions. They knew that no one owed them a living but themselves. People came to Joseph and bought food from him at the beginning. Soon the money was exhausted. They still needed food. They pleaded with Joseph, "Why should we die in thy presence, for the money faileth?" However, no one demanded food for nothing. They brought their cattle, horses, asses, and flocks to exchange for food (47:15). No more of these was left with them. However, still no one demanded food from Joseph for nothing. They had their land to sell to Joseph. So long as they had some ability to earn their food, they had used their own ability to the last ounce.

Joseph, as a ruler, was also aware of the same work ethic that people should work with their hands to make a living for themselves. When all means of earning bread were exhausted, Joseph did not believe that the people ought to be placed on the welfare program, but that they should be given work to do to help themselves. The seeds were distributed among the people so that they could sow and raise

crops with their labor, and that they were to bring one-fifth of their harvest to the Pharaoh and keep the rest for their own food. Again nothing was handed out to them. They were to work for a living. All understood this principle of work ethics.

Honor Thy Father and Mother

There has always been consciousness of one's duty to pay proper honor to one's parents. This has been true before the Mosaic Law as well as after. There has also been an awareness that the failure to do so should invoke punishment.

An illustration may be found in the incident of Noah's drunkenness that resulted in the exposure of his nakedness. Whatever the act of Canaan might have been, his act of dishonor and the manner in which Ham's father had handled the situation were considered to be unacceptable by Noah, and, consequently, brought a curse upon him for Ham's failure.

However, the attitude of Shem and Japheth toward their father shows that they had a more honorable manner in handling the situation of their father's embarrassment. This was immediately recognized by Noah; and, subsequently, they were rewarded with the blessings (9:20-29).

Even during the conspiracy among the sons of Jacob against Joseph, Reuben's concern for his father was shown. He was sensitive to the inner voice that told him that he should not do anything to bring sorrow and grief to his father. Thus, he attempted to rescue the boy so as to get him back to his father, although without success. Such an attempt on the part of Reuben reflects the inherent awareness of the forthcoming fifth commandment.

However, there have been many incidents when people had acted contrary to the inherent precept, not so much because they had not known their proper duty, but in spite of their awareness, because their hearts were wicked.

Canaan and Ham, his father, acted with a lack of due respect to Ham's father (9:22). Lot also behaved selfishly without adequate consideration of his uncle Abraham. When he was given a choice, he took "all the plain of Jordan" (13:10-11), leaving only the barren land to his uncle. Lot, later in his life, experienced a similar lack of respect that is due to parents from his own sons-in-law, who had regarded their

father-in-law as “mocking” them (19:14). Esau also acted quite contrary to the wishes of his father and mother and brought “grief to Isaac and Rebekah” by marrying the two Hittite girls (26:34-35). He was aware that he had brought grief to his parents. He tried to amend the broken hearts of his parents by later marrying another girl from the daughters of Ishmael, the son of Abraham (28:9). What a way to honor the parents! The human depravity sees no end of falling short.

The honor was not confined to the immediate parents alone (43:27), but should be extended to the elders in the families (31:6, 38-39), as well as to the rulers of the land (42:10; 44:18).

Further, the same honor was to be paid by the servants to their masters, and to the householder by all in the house. When Hagar, the handmaid of Sarai, had shown disrespect to their mistress, it is recorded that she was “harshly dealt with” and that she had to “flee from her face” (16:6). In the end, Hagar was sent away with her son. God approved of such a decision (21:9ff.).

By contrast, the unnamed servant of Abraham, who was sent to Laban to find a bride for Isaac, was a perfect model, who knew exactly how to serve his master with honor. This servant manifested the true spirit of the fifth commandment in the following way:

(1) He does not run unsent (24:2-9); (2) he goes exactly where he is sent (24:4-10); (3) he does nothing else; (4) prayerful and thankful for his task (24:12-14, 26-27); (5) wise to win people (24:17-18); (6) speaks not of himself but of his master's richness and Isaac's heirship (24:22, 34-36); and (7) presents the true issue and requires clear decision (24: 49).⁷

Thus, during the Pre-Mosaic period there was already a definite understanding of the spirit of the fifth commandment.

Thou Shalt Not Kill

Perhaps this may be one moral principle which does not require any lengthy discussion to establish for the Pre-Mosaic time. God spoke to Noah in no uncertain terms on this issue: “Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed, for the image of God made he

⁷*Holy Bible*, New Scofield Reference Edition, ed. E. Schuyler English (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 36.

man” (9:6). It cannot be stated any more clearly than the way it was stated in this passage.

Cain committed the first murder, but it was before this commandment was given. Yet, no sooner had he killed his own brother than he knew he had done something he should not have done. His attitude became defensive. God asked him, “Where is thy brother, Abel?” He told a lie to cover up what he had done: “I know not,” he answered, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (4:8-15). Why would Cain have to come up with a lie if he knew not that the murder was wrong? No one had to tell him that he had done wrong. He knew it all by himself. Something within him informed him of his wrong. His answer was only a feeble attempt to avoid the reality of his act.

The Heidelberg Catechism provides a further implication that is contained in the commandment under consideration.

In forbidding murder, God teaches us that he abhors the causes thereof; such as envy, hatred, anger, and desire of revenge; and that he accounts all these as murder (1 John 3:15).⁸

Envy was the cause of the first murder in human history. The punishment of Cain imposed by God is His revelation against murder. The murder of a man, who carries *Imago Dei*, is considered as an attack against God Himself. The Song of Hatred and Revenge sung by Lamech before his two wives also reveals his understanding of the principle behind this commandment that no man should wound or hurt another man. Lamech sang, “I have slain a man who wounded me and a young man for hurting me” (4:23-24). It is not easy to determine whether he had actually slain a man and a young man or he was expressing his revengeful spirit of hatred in a poetic form. Whatever the reality of the song might have been, Lamech gives the reasons why he has slain a man and a young man, that is, that a man wounded him and a young man hurt him. He believed that neither of them should have done so in the first place. No man ought to wound or hurt another. However, if any one does, he deserves punishment. What he says is that he has acted in self-defense somewhat excessively because of being wounded and hurt by these men who initiated the action. Such an unprovoked attack deserved proper retaliation. That is his message in

⁸Heidelberg Catechism (Tiffin, Ohio: E. R. Good and Bro., 1896), 68.

part.

Hatred or anger is likely to lead to murder. Esau hated Jacob. His anger was full against the treacherous deception of his brother. So he vows that, when his father dies, he would slay his brother Jacob (27:41).

Simeon and Levi killed all the males of the city Shechem on the third day after they were circumcised. The two brothers believed that they had a valid ground for their revenge, for Shechem had defiled their sister Dinah; but Jacob rebuked them harshly for their wrath and anger. Jacob's curse is instructive as to his understanding of the issue under discussion: "Cursed be their anger, for it was fierce. Cursed be their wrath, for it was cruel" (49:7). Thus, the intention of God to curb the anger and the wrath of man is eternally revealed through the words of Jacob.

Reuben also confessed that hatred and envy do not pay in the long run. The Scriptures say, "They hated him [Joseph]" (37:4), and "they envied him" (37:11). So they were aroused to "conspire to kill him" (37:20). Hatred and envy led them to murder their brother. When Reuben was taken hostage by Joseph years later in Egypt, he lamented saying, "His blood is required" (42:22).

However, war activities were not somehow considered to be in the same category as murder. Melchizedek, the king of Salem, the priest of the Most High God, appeared to Abraham, who just had come back from fighting to rescue Lot and others from the hands of the four confederate kings. He spoke to Abraham, "Blessed be the Most High God, who hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand" (14:20). Thus, the priest of the Most High God attributed the victory achieved by Abraham to God Himself and therefore blessed Abraham in the name of God. Just prior to his death, Jacob said to Joseph, "I have given thee one portion above thy brethren, which I took out of the hand of the Amorites with *my sword* and with *my bow*" (47:22, emphasis mine). The latter expression appears to refer to his war activities. In this passage no implication of regret or of an unworthy act can be detected.

Therefore, one may conclude from the above discussion that the men of the Pre-Mosaic period had possessed a clear understanding that any act of "wounding," "hurting," or "murder" and all the causes for such acts should not be condoned, and that these unworthy acts deserved a proper punishment.

Thou Shalt Not Commit Adultery

It would hardly be an overstatement to say that the greatest of all the human problems during the time under consideration is the matter of sexual immorality. The present discussion will deal with three related subjects separately, though they are not mutually exclusive: (1) Sex in general, (2) Marriage, (3) Polygamy.

SEX IN GENERAL

It is taken for granted that the marital relation between a husband and a wife is a legitimate activity, since God had created a male and a female and established the bond of marriage (4:1,17). People of the Pre-Mosaic time possessed a considerable amount of knowledge concerning the standard related to sex so as to know whether they ought to or ought not to act in certain manners.

They knew that sex is a private matter and that it should be preserved in its privacy. When Shem and Japheth were told about their father's nakedness, they approached him backward with a coat upon their shoulders, and "saw not their father's nakedness" (9:23). They were aware that they ought not see their father's nakedness under the circumstance. However, Ham did not act the way he should have; and he and his son Canaan received a curse from Noah. On the contrary, Shem and Japheth were given the blessings.

They also knew that homosexual activity or other sexual perversion was improper. This awareness was manifested in the attitude of Lot to protect his angelic guests and in the judgment of God upon the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. The men of Sodom, both old and young, all the people from every quarter were said to have come to the house of Lot, and demanded of him, "Bring them out unto us that we may know them" (19:4). They threatened Lot also who had pleaded with them not to harm his guests, and said, "We will deal worse with you than with them" (19:9). "Know" and "deal" both refer to sexually knowing and sexually dealing. Lot knew that they ought not act the way they did. He, therefore, attempted to prevent it. The subsequent annihilation of Sodom and Gomorrah was a direct and powerful demonstration of God's displeasure with such wickedness. The direct and supernatural judgment of the two evil cities is more convincing in this matter than the written "thou shalt not" on a stone tablet.

They knew further that adultery was a sin against God and was

punishable by death. Abimelech had just taken Sarai into his harem. God informed him saying, “You are but a dead man, for the woman whom you have taken, for she is a man’s wife,” and further gave him a stern warning, “Know you that you shall surely die if you restore her not” (20:3,7). God left no doubt with the king of Gerar that taking a man’s wife was punishable by death. God also made it plain that such sin was not merely a sin against the wife or the husband, but “against me,” God Himself. Therefore, he told Abimelech that He would not allow him to touch her (20:6). This was five hundred years before the time of Moses.

Joseph was another man, who had a clear understanding of the will of God in this regard. He told the seductive wife of Potiphar, “Thou art his wife. How can I do this great wickedness, and sin against God?” (39:9). He calls it “great wickedness” and “sin against God.”

The Egyptian Pharaoh rebuked Abraham over Sarai who had been taken into his harem, and said, “What is this that you have done unto us? Why did you not tell me that she was your wife?” (12:18). The implication is that, if he had known that she was the wife of another man, he would not have taken her. His words give an inference that he also understood the proper manner on this matter. This testimony of an Egyptian king is significant. There was another incident similar to the preceding one in which Rebekah was identified as the sister of Isaac. After Abimelech discovers that she was his wife, he rebuked Isaac, “What is this thou hast done unto us? One of the people might have lightly lain with thy wife. Thou shouldst have brought guiltiness upon us” (26:10). If Abimelech here is the same king of Gerar, who had once learned his lesson through the embarrassing situation with Abraham and his wife, his rebuke is an indication that he now knows how he ought to behave under a similar situation. Then, this attitude may be considered as compliance with the revelation of God which was given earlier to him.

Moreover, rape was considered definitely wrong. The case in point is Dinah, the sister of Simeon and Levi, who was violated by Shechem. The two brothers protested such an act, “Should he deal with our sister as with a harlot?” (34:31). It implies the thought that a girl should not be violated the way Dinah had been. Such a violent act, Simeon and Levi believed, must be punished, because they considered it unacceptable.

Judah held a similar belief even if his life was inconsistent in

view of his own belief. When he found that Tamar had played a harlot and thus conceived a child, he was extremely disturbed and ordered, "Bring her forth, and let her be burned!" (38:24). He knew in his heart that harlotry was so evil that the girl should be put to death by burning. Yet, ironically he was the one who was responsible for the child. Even earlier he admitted to his friend, the Adullamite, that he might be "ashamed" for his involvement with an harlot, which indicates that he had done what he did knowing that it was wrong.

Finally, Jacob severely scolded Reuben for his immoral deed which he had committed with Bilhah, the concubine of his father and mother of his own half-brothers, Dan and Naphtali. His father told him just prior to his death, "Thou shalt not excel because thou went up to thy father's bed! Thou defiled it then" (49:4). Thus, he condemned Reuben. If the other sons of Jacob had not known such a deed was unacceptable, they should have learned once they heard the words of their father to Reuben.

These illustrations are sufficient to demonstrate that the seventh commandment was understood among the people of the Pre-Mosaic period before the existence of the written laws.

MARRIAGE

God performed the first marriage between Adam and Eve (2:22). People knew how to take women as their wives. As to how many wives, not every one agreed in their practices. From the available information, observations will be made.

There is some indication that virgins were preferred to non-virgins. Lot, when he was confronted with the wicked mob of Sodom, attempted to attract their attention away from the angelic guests in his house, offering them an alternative with his own daughters, whom he called "two daughters who have not known man" (19:8). Why would he use the qualifying clause to describe his daughters, unless virgins were considered more attractive than non-virgins? A similar description is found in reference to Rebekah, who was described as "the damsel who was very fair to look upon, a virgin, neither had any man known her" (24:16). The expression used to describe the damsel reflects an implicit preference for virgins among the people.

One interesting observation comes from the belief of Laban about marriage. He told Jacob that they had a custom that, within a family, the younger should not marry before the older. This was the

reason that he could not have given Rachel first to Jacob. Laban believed that this custom was so firmly established that it could not be broken. So he would not make any concession to it. Though this principle cannot be violated, he believed that it was acceptable for a man to have two wives in his house. What an irony!

Onan's refusal to raise up the seed to his brother Er through his marriage to his brother's wife resulted in his death. This request of Judah to Onan was incorporated into the Mosaic Law later (Deut 25:5-6). The cause of his death may be twofold: (1) His refusal to comply with the command of Judah which the Lord had apparently approved of; (2) His spilling on the ground which is said to have displeased the Lord.

POLYGAMY

One of the more difficult problems on the ethical question is polygamy, which was very prominent during the Pre-Mosaic period. The first polygamist in human history is known to be Lamech, who had two wives, Adah and Zillah (4:23). Abraham had Sarai, but Hagar was given to him by his wife in order to obtain a child (16:1-3). Esau apparently had four wives: Judith, Basemath, Mahalath, and Oholiamah (26:34; 28:9; 36:2-3). The first two were Hittite girls. The third was from the daughters of Ishmael whom he married to please his disappointed parents. Concerning the fourth, nothing is known except her name.

Jacob was another polygamist. He was cheated into marriage with Leah, not because he wanted to, but because of her father's strange belief. He married Rachel, because she was the one whom he wanted (29:18-27). Then, Leah and Rachel competed with each other to give their handmaids to Jacob for the purpose of obtaining more children. Zilpah, Leah's handmaid, and Bilhah, Rachel's handmaid, were given out of jealousy (30:8). When Gad was born of Zilpah, Leah said, "Good fortune!" (30:9); when Asher arrived again from her, she rejoiced saying, "Happy am I!" Leah believed that she had done a favor by giving her handmaid to her husband. When she had her fifth son Isaachar, she believed that God had given her the son, "because I have given my maiden to my husband" (30:18), as if she had performed an act of virtue to Jacob. Such a low view of polygamy definitely reflects her own background, which reveals a similar weakness as that of her father Laban and of her time.

In addition to their wives, some had concubines as well. Nahor, the brother of Abraham had one whose name is known to be Renmah (22:24). Abraham appeared to have had more than one concubine, whom he sent away with their sons later in his life (25:5). The fact that Abraham had sent them away later, though not because he recognized the absurdity of the system, but mostly because of the family problems, at least is indicative of his realization that such a system was not ideal.

Perhaps, a faint voice of protest against such a system may be heard from the words of Sarai and Leah who had contributed themselves to the practice of polygamy. When Hagar discovered that she had conceived, Sarai sensed that she was despised in the eyes of her handmaid. She confronted Abraham saying, “The wrong done me be upon thee. I have given my maid into thy bosom; and when she saw that she had conceived, I was despised in her eyes: the Lord judge between me and thee” (16:3). Polygamy became a source of a family dispute and of grief in the house of Abraham. It grew unbearable. Hagar had to be sent away with her son. Abraham had to bear further grief that stemmed from the Ishmael and Isaac relationship (21:11).

A similar dispute was observed in the house of Jacob. Leah and Rachel turned into rivals. Leah the older sister had an opportunity to express her anger to her younger sister, now a rival. She said, “Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband?” (30:15). These are the words of agony that pierced the absurdity of the system.

The silence of God on the question of polygamy during this period of the patriarchs disturbs people today. God did neither approve nor disapprove polygamy explicitly. God chose to work with Abraham who had a wife, a handmaid of his wife, and several concubines. God told Abraham to comply with the wishes of his wife in sending the handmaid away with her son. He encouraged the bewildered Abraham to let Hagar go. Later, Abraham sent away the rest of his concubines with their sons also. God had taken Abraham in his own time and out of his background. He put Abraham through a purifying process, sometimes with a direct word and at other times through the providential incidents of his life.

At the same time the clear record of the original marriage between one man and one woman united by God Himself is an eternal truth that stands against any other form of family system at any time.

Thou Shalt Not Steal

This commandment forbids theft or robbery on one hand, while encouraging the lawful procuring and furthering of wealth on the other hand.⁹ All men at all times have understood the meaning of “thou shalt not steal,” even without the Mosaic Law. There may be some people on the earth who have not understood the first, the second, the third, or the fourth commandment of the Decalogue; but there was hardly any people who have not understood the eighth commandment.

Abimeleck came to Abraham to make a covenant with him. Abraham rebuked him without an apology for a well which was taken violently away from him by the servants of Abimeleck (21:25). Abimeleck took the rebuke, yet pleading innocent of the fact because he did not have any prior knowledge regarding the well until that day. Both Abraham and Abimeleck recognized the problem. Both knew that taking something from someone else by force was improper. They made there a covenant with each other so that they might not violate each other's rights.

Possibly the worst offender of all before the time of Moses was Jacob. He was a shrewd bargainer. He might have persuaded himself that he had bought the birthright from Esau through a legitimate transaction. Yet, the opinions of the countless readers of this narrative down through the generations have been definitely against his method and unfavorable to him. He had stolen the blessings of his father by means of an unjustifiable scheme. He was well aware that he was not procuring the blessings in a legitimate channel, for he said, “I shall seem to him a deceiver” (27:12). What an understatement it is! He not merely seems to him a deceiver, but he was a deceiver. He harbored a fear in his heart that he might incur a curse if he were caught (27:12), because he knew that he was doing something which he should not be doing. His mother also had full knowledge that she was encouraging Jacob to do that which deserved a curse if it was discovered. So she says, “Upon me be thy curse, my son!” (27:13).

When Jacob obtained great wealth at the house of Laban, he was accused of stealing by Laban's sons. They knew that there was a generally recognized rule that a man should not procure wealth in an improper manner (31:1). Rachel stole her father's idols. Laban considered it unacceptable. She knew it as well, and hid them under the

⁹*A Harmony of The Westminster Presbyterian Standard*, ed. James Benjamin Green (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1965), 141.

camel's saddle. She had to lie to her father to cover up her stealing (31:19, 34-35). All parties involved recognized that stealing was wrong. Years later, in Egypt, the brothers of Joseph expressed their view on the impropriety of stealing: "How then shall we steal out of thy Lord's house?" (44:8). It was not acceptable to them, either. Thus, people did not need to have the Law of Moses to know that stealing is wrong. They all knew without the written law. That same law was already known.

Thou Shalt Not Bear False Witness

Satan was the instigator of lying. He deceived Eve with a lie: "You shall not surely die" (3:4). Cain, the first murderer, responded to the questioning God with a lie: "I know not" (4:9). Abraham told Pharaoh and Abimelech a half-truth with an intent to mislead them: "She is my sister" (12:13; 20:2). He considered the exposure of his wife to the sin of adultery was a lesser evil than the loss of his own life. Sarah herself was caught once in the middle of a lie, when she said, "I laughed not" (18:15).

Lot also once attempted to save his angelic guests from the Sodomite mob by way of a lie. The intent was commendable, but the means was not. He spoke to the mob, "I have two daughters who have not known men; let me, I pray you, bring them out unto you, and do ye to them as is good in your eyes" (19:8). Only six verses later his words are contradicted by a fact that they were both married (19:14). His older daughter used a lie to induce her younger sister into an immoral act with their father: "Our father is old, there is *not a man* in the earth to come in unto us after the manner of all the earth" (19:31). This was certainly a gross exaggeration and untrue.

Isaac was not better than his father when it came to telling the truth. He lied to the men of Gerar about his wife exactly in the same way as his father Abraham did before.

When Jacob deceived his father, he even dared to use the name of the Lord, as it was pointed out earlier, and thus attributed his lie to the Lord. One lie led to another. Jacob answered, "Yes, I am," to Isaac's question, "Art thou my very son Esau?" (27:27ff).

Laban and Jacob deceived each other (29:23). The latter appealed to his "honesty" in the decision of his wage when Laban asked him, "What shall I give thee?" (30:1). Yet, he acted contrary to

his supposed honesty in procuring his cattle (30:40) and made gain for himself through a deceptive manner (30:42). The act of his dishonesty did not come from a law either written in the heart or on the stone tablet. There was a definite understanding in the heart of man; but, in spite of the understanding of this issue, he still went ahead to carry on his dishonest approaches.

Judah, the fourth son of Jacob, went through a humiliating experience when Joseph identified himself to him as his own brother. In fact, Judah had just finished telling Joseph, who stood before him as the prime minister of Egypt, that his brother Joseph was dead (44:20).

This matter of unethical practices in the Pre-Mosaic period was quite serious. Practically every one was guilty of violation. Yet, it was unquestionable that they all had a clear understanding that they should not bear false witness.

Thou Shalt Not Covet

Envy or covetousness was in fact the source of many other sins. In the case of Cain, the violation of this rule led him to commit the murder of his own brother. In the case of Jacob, covetousness drove him to lie and deceive his father. In the case of Rachel, the same sin caused her to steal the unworthy images of her father's gods. In the case of Leah and Rachel, envy bound them to hate each other. In the case of the wife of Potiphar, the breach of this commandment placed an innocent young man in prison. In the case of the brothers of Joseph, uncontrollable envy captured their hearts and caused them to sell Joseph into slavery. Thus, this sin was a definite problem during this period, just as it is today.

All have suffered the consequences of the sins that had been caused by this ethical disease.

CONCLUSION

Since it is recorded in the Scripture that the Law was supernaturally given to Moses, written on the two stone tablets with the fingers of God, a myth has developed in the minds of many and has been widely accepted. The myth is that the Decalogue was not known to the people until the time of Moses and that the people had not understood the laws of God until Moses gave them. Such a myth has

never been adequately explained. Therefore, the subject was chosen and this study was launched to investigate the truthfulness of this myth.

A careful study of the Pre-Mosaic information that is contained mainly in the Book of Genesis reveals, when it is compared with the contents of the Decalogue, that the myth has no merit. The people of the Pre-Mosaic period possessed sufficient knowledge concerning their duty toward God and man without the written laws of Moses. Perhaps the one area in which they were not fully informed was the fourth commandment, although the act of worship which is an integral part of the commandment had continued all along. However, the concept of the Sabbath day as a special day for rest and worship had not been properly practiced.

They understood the seventh commandment fairly well, but polygamy was not totally eliminated.

Therefore, the majority of the Decalogue was known to the people, and the various problems that existed among the people persisted, not because they did not understand how they should behave, but mostly in spite of their understanding. They knew better, but acted contrary to what they knew.

God's view of "just" or "perfect" or "righteousness" does not seem to depend so much on the individual deeds as such, but more upon the personal relationship between God and man. God said concerning Abraham, "I know him that he will command his children and his household after him, and they shall keep the way of the Lord, to do righteousness and justice" (18:19). However, when his children and his household after him are carefully investigated concerning their righteousness and justice, there was nothing much to be praised. The answer must be found in the statement of Genesis 15:6, which says, "And he believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness."

We can reasonably conclude that the inherent law written in the hearts and lives of the people prior to the time of Moses was as extensive and elaborate as the written Mosaic Law, except for a small area of detail. Thus, the Mosaic Law was anticipated.

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