

Deuteronomy

Lesson #11

The Deuteronomomic Code, Part 3

(19: 1 – 22: 8)

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Review

As we observed previously, the legal corpus contained in Deuteronomy 12-26 mirrors the sequence of the Ten Commandments. In Lesson #9 we covered Chapters 12-13, which reflected the first two commandments:

1. You shall have no other gods before me; and
2. You shall make no graven images of me.

As we moved into Lesson #10 we covered Deuteronomy 14-18, which mirrors the third through the fifth commandments:

3. You shall not take the Lord's name in vain;
4. You shall remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy; and
5. You shall honor your father and your mother.

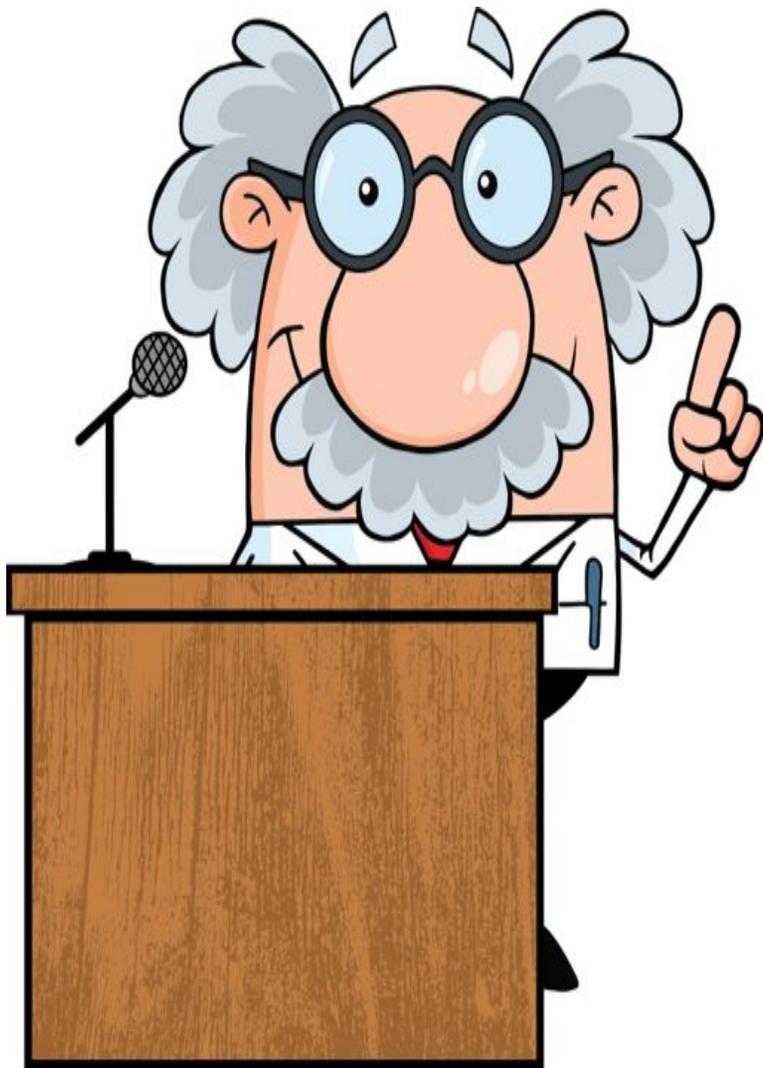
Preview

Now, as we move into Lesson #11, we encounter six individual sections on the sixth commandment:

6. You shall not murder.

Chapter 19 gives us the first three sections: 1) cities of refuge; 2) boundary markers; and 3) witnesses. Like Moses' discourse on the first five commandments, the sixth commandment provides the *principle*, and the specific laws, statutes and ordinances then branch out from that principle. The common theme is *protecting life*, and the rules are examples of how to apply the principle in specific cases.

Chapter 20 then addresses killing in warfare, while chapter 21 adds six additional laws in which life confronts death, and chapter 22: 1-8 addresses the obligation of protecting life, in all its forms.



“You shall not murder.”

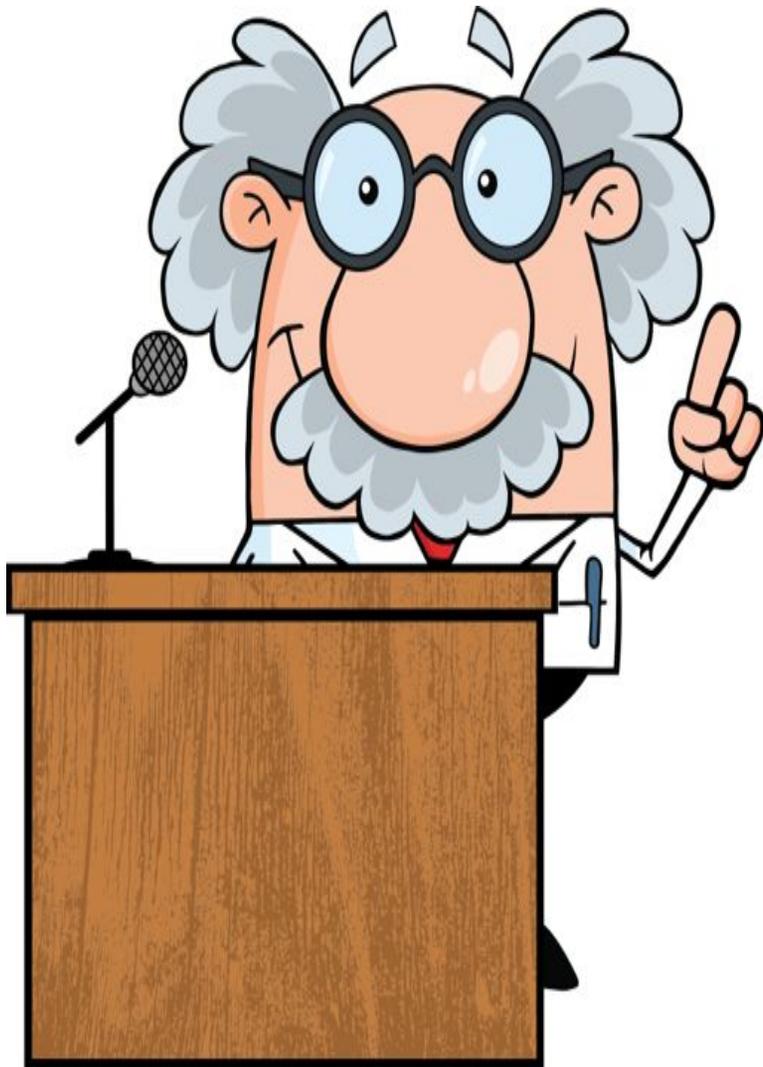
(Deuteronomy 5: 17).

Deuteronomy now turns its attention to human relationships in a just society, one that fosters human dignity in a broken and complex world.

No easy task!

As we have noted previously, the “Ten Commandments” are ten principles that must be applied in specific cases. To do so wisely, one must be open and flexible, recognizing the “spirit” of the law, as well as the “letter” of the law.

For Deuteronomy, *torah* is not about imposing restrictions on people, but about teaching them to live together in a healthy, vibrant, covenant community.



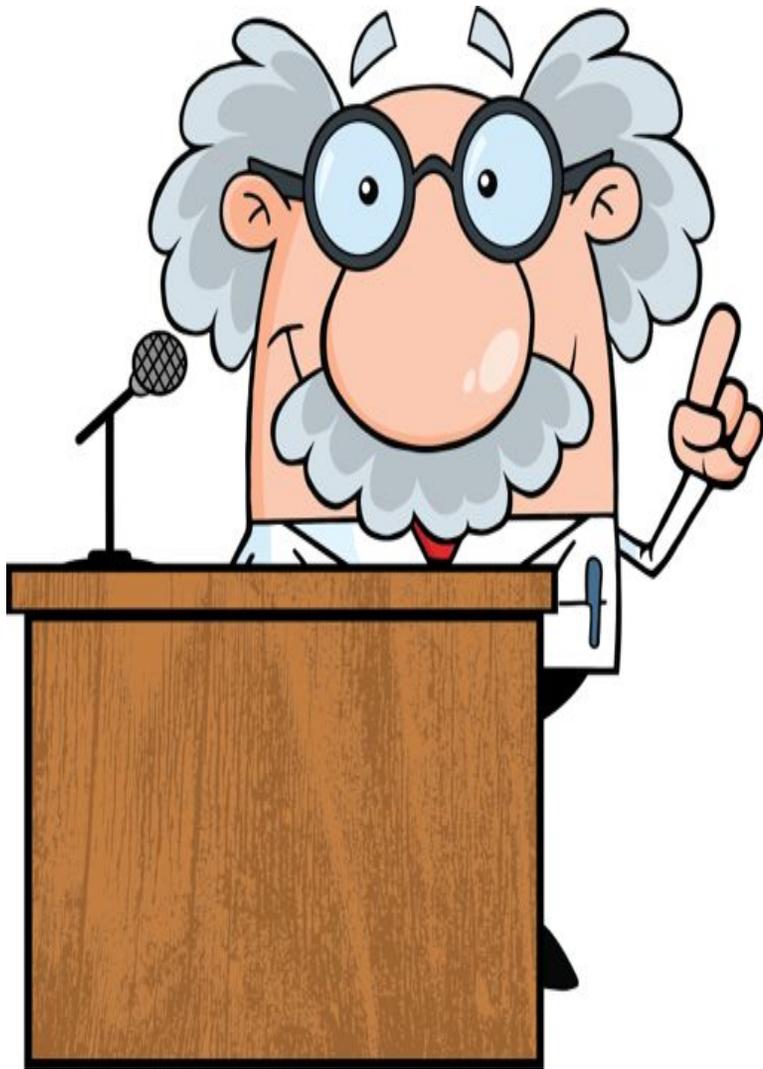
“You shall not murder.”

(Deuteronomy 5: 17).

Under the rubric “You shall not murder,” Deuteronomy addresses six individual issues:

- 1. Cities of refuge**
- 2. Boundary markers**
- 3. Witnesses**
- 4. Killing in warfare**
- 5. The collision of life and death**
- 6. The obligation to defend life**

As with the first five commandments, how some of these issues relate to “murder” may seem remote, at first glance.



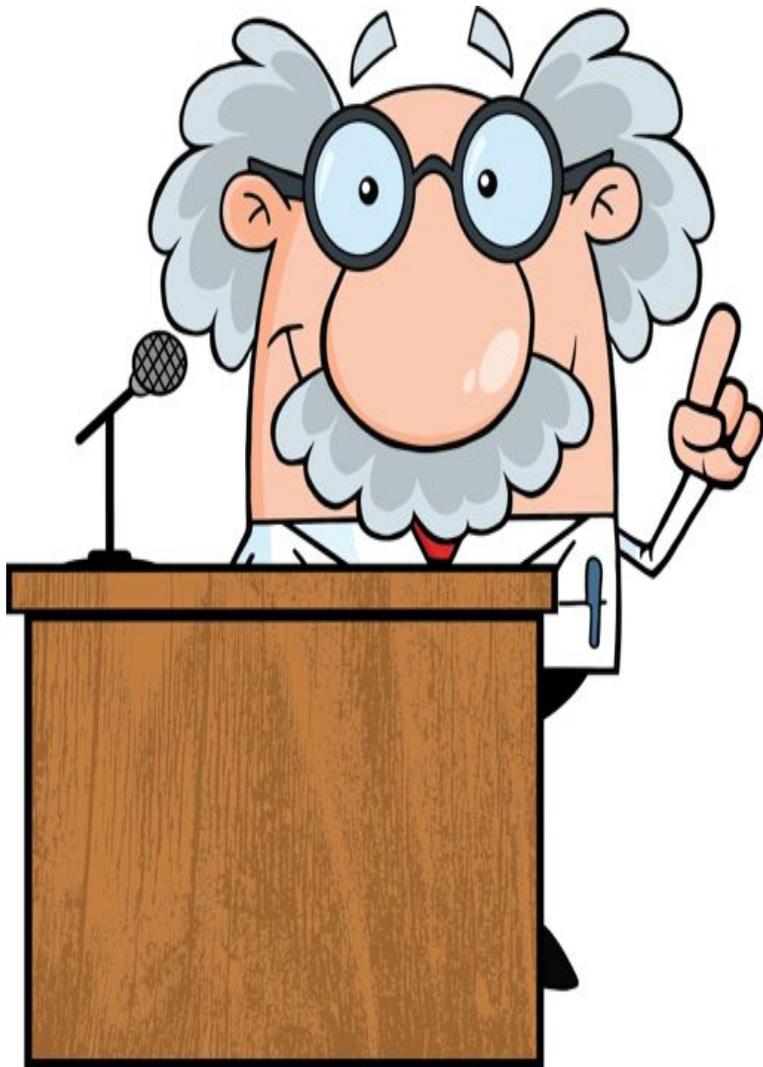
The Hebrew word for “murder” in Deuteronomy 5: 17 (as well as Exodus 20: 13) is *ratsakh* [rah-tsakh’], and it means specifically “the premeditated, unlawful taking of another person’s life.”

For example:

“If someone strikes another with an iron instrument and causes death that person is a murderer [ratsakh], and the murderer [ratsakh] must be put to death.”

(Numbers 35: 16)

Other Hebrew words for killing include *harag* [hah-rag’], as in Cain slaying Abel (Genesis 4: 8), a killing that was perhaps accidental and certainly not premeditated; and *muwth* [mooth], as in God killing the people of Sodom as an act of righteous judgment (Genesis 18: 25).



***Ratsakh* [rah-tsakh'] applies as well to "blood vengeance," killing in retaliation.**

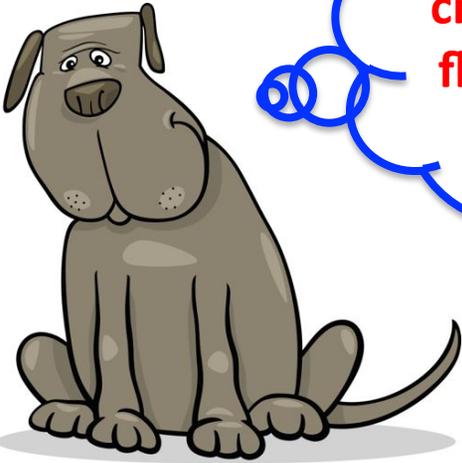
In a tribal, patriarchal culture whose value system is rooted in honor/shame, blood vengeance is common. If left unchecked, acts of reprisal provoke acts of reprisal in return and lead to a vicious, escalating cycle of murder, drawing an entire society into its gravitational field.

Deuteronomy 19 addresses this issue:

“When the Lord, your God, cuts down the nations whose land the Lord, your God, is giving you, and you have dispossessed them and settled in their cities and houses, you shall set apart three cities in the land the Lord, your God, is giving you to possess. You shall measure the distances and divide into three regions the land of which the Lord, your God, is giving you possession, so that every homicide will be able to find a refuge. This is the case of a homicide who may take refuge there and live: when someone strikes down a neighbor **unintentionally** and not out of previous hatred. For example, if someone goes with a neighbor to a forest to cut wood, wielding an ax to cut down a tree, and its head flies off the handle and hits the neighbor a mortal blow, such a person may take refuge in one of these cities and live.” (19: 1-5)



I understand. We saw these cities of refuge established in Numbers 35: 9-15, three on the east side of the Jordan River and three on the west, six cities *“where a homicide who has killed someone inadvertently may flee”* to escape an *“avenger of blood”* (35: 11-12). A city of refuge is a place to ensure justice, not to escape it.



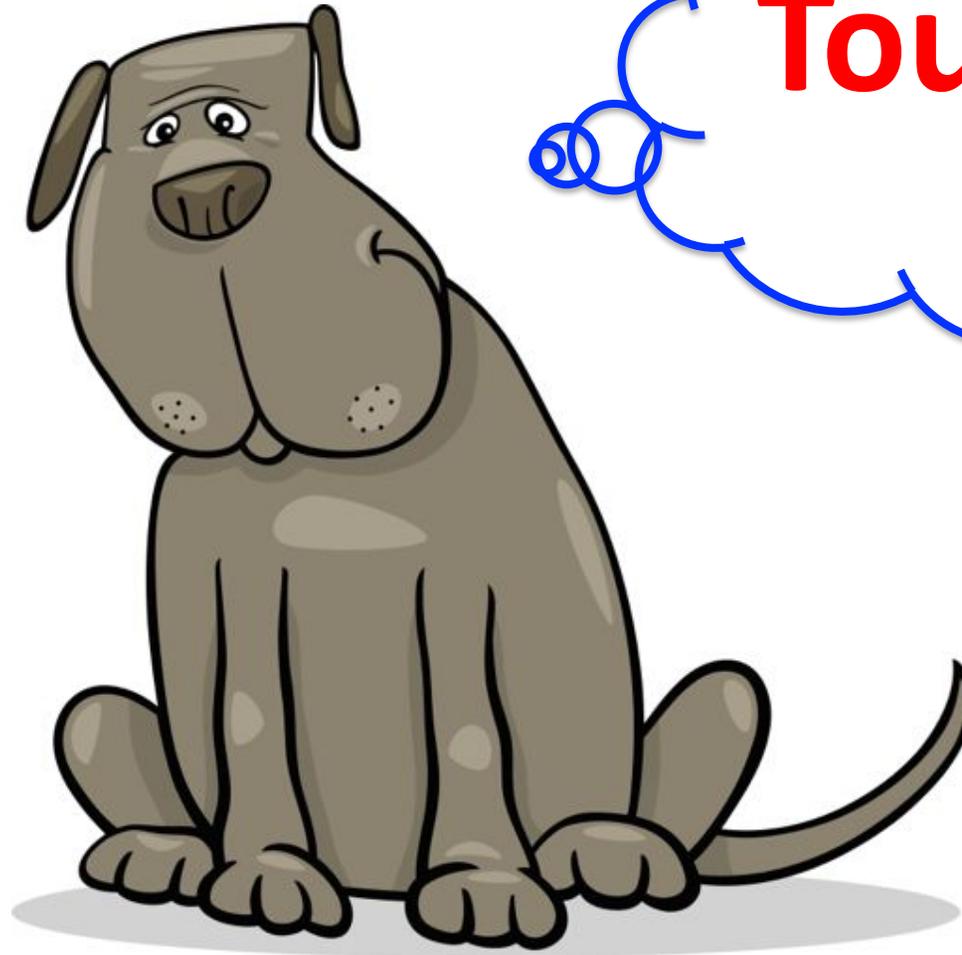
Yeah, but what's the chance of an ax head flying off its handle?

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“The guild prophets once said to Elisha: ‘This place where we live with you is too cramped for us. Let us go to the Jordan, where by getting one beam apiece we can build ourselves a place to live.’ Elisha said, ‘Go.’ One of them requested, ‘Please agree to accompany your servants.’ He replied, ‘Yes, I will come.’ So he went with them, and when they arrived at the Jordan they began to cut down trees. While one of them was felling a tree trunk, the iron ax blade slipped into the water. He cried out, ‘Oh, no, master! It was borrowed!’ ‘Where did it fall?’ asked the man of God. When he pointed out the spot, Elisha cut off a stick, threw it into the water, and brought the iron to the surface. He said, ‘Pick it up.’ And the man stretched out his hand and grasped it.”

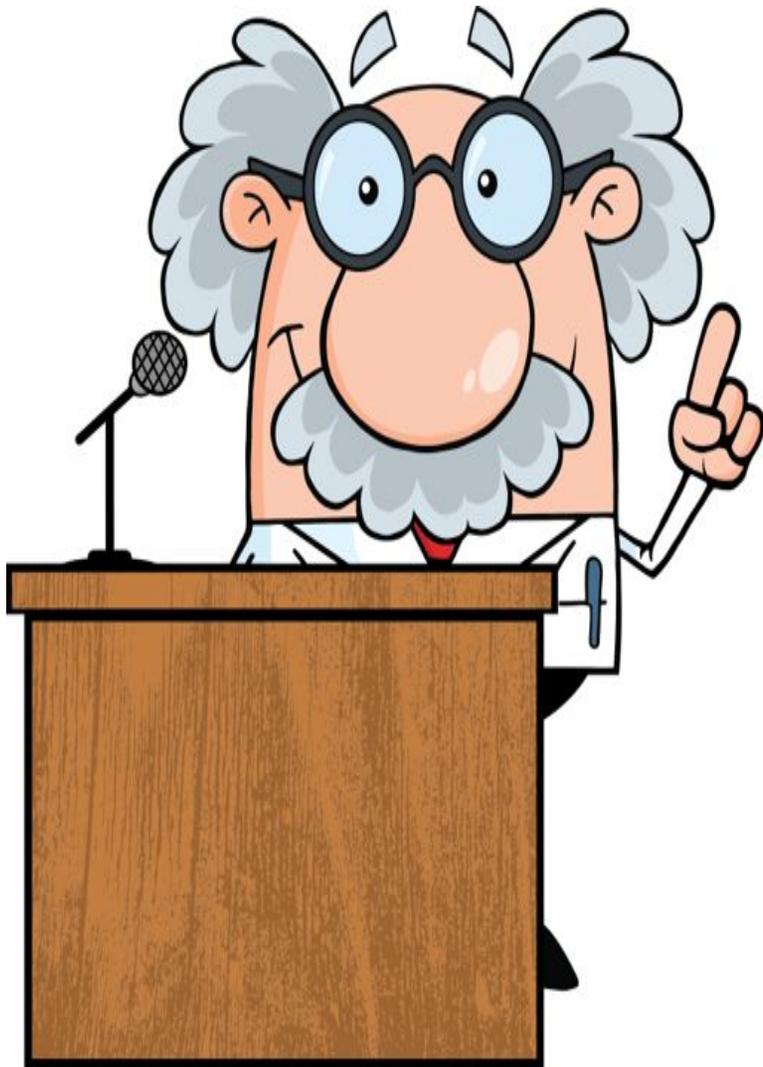
(2 Kings 6: 1-7)

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Touché!

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Next, we turn to boundary markers, but you may well ask, “What do *boundary markers* have to do with ‘You shall not murder?’”

1. Cities of refuge
2. **Boundary markers**
3. Witnesses
4. Killing in warfare
5. The collision of life and death
6. The obligation to defend life



God's covenant with Israel involves progeny and property, people and land. As murder breaks down the human structure of society, so moving boundary markers breaks down the agrarian structure of society.

Recall that God commanded that each family, clan and tribe be given contiguous land in Canaan, land that they would farm in perpetuity. Even if a family suffered catastrophic financial difficulties and lost their land, at the Jubilee year it would return to them.

Thus, treacherously moving boundary markers, undermines the very fabric of the covenant community. Deuteronomy 27: 17 cries out in a loud voice: *"Cursed be anyone who moves a neighbor's boundary markers!"* And for the prophet Hosea, moving boundary markers is emblematic of a totally corrupt society:

“Blow the ram’s horn in Gibeah,
the trumpet in Ramah!
Sound the alarm in Beth-aven:
‘Look behind you, Benjamin!’
Ephraim shall become a wasteland
on the day of punishment:
Among the tribes of Israel
I announce what is sure to be.
The princes of Judah have become
like those who move a boundary line;
Upon them I will pour out
my wrath like water.

(Hosea 5: 8-10)



Now, on to witnesses:

1. Cities of refuge
2. Boundary markers
- 3. Witnesses**
4. Killing in warfare
5. The collision of life and death
6. The obligation to defend life

“One witness alone shall not stand against someone in regard to any crime or any offense that may have been committed; a charge shall stand only on the testimony of two or three witnesses . . .”

(19: 15)

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The opening statement in this section on “witnesses” is an interesting one: for a testimony to be valid, one witness is not enough; no matter the person’s rank or status, you need two or three.

That is why Jesus sent his disciples out in pairs, for they were to witness about him:

“After this the Lord appointed seventy [-two] others whom he sent ahead of him in pairs to every town and place he intended to visit.”

(Luke 10: 1)

It is significant that this statute falls under “murder,” for bearing false witness not only “kills” a person’s reputation, but it wounds his or her spirit, perverts justice and frays the very fabric of a tightly-knit community.



It is also why both Moses and Elijah appear as witnesses to Jesus' Transfiguration, as the voice of God proclaims: *"This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased: listen to him"* (Matthew 17: 5).

Here, God the Father validates Peter's confession of faith, only 12 verses earlier: *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"* (Matthew 16: 16). In this scene, Moses represents the Law, while Elijah represents the Prophets, both witnessing to the truth of Peter's confession.



**Bellini. *Transfiguration of Christ* (oil on panel), c. 1487.
National Museum of Capodimonte, Naples.**

“. . . If a hostile witness rises against someone to accuse that person of wrongdoing, the two parties in the dispute shall appear in the presence of the Lord, in the presence of the priests and judges in office at that time, and the judges must investigate it thoroughly. If the witness is a false witness and has falsely accused the other, you shall do to the false witness just as that false witness planned to do to the other. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst. The rest shall hear and be afraid, and never again do such an evil thing as this in your midst. Do not show pity. Life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot!”

(2 Kings 6: 1-7)

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If a witness is found to have lied, then he or she suffers a just consequence: the punishment that the accused would have suffered is conferred upon the accuser!

Deuteronomy 17: 6-7 has already required multiple witnesses in a capital case; here Deuteronomy applies the same standard universally, for any case.

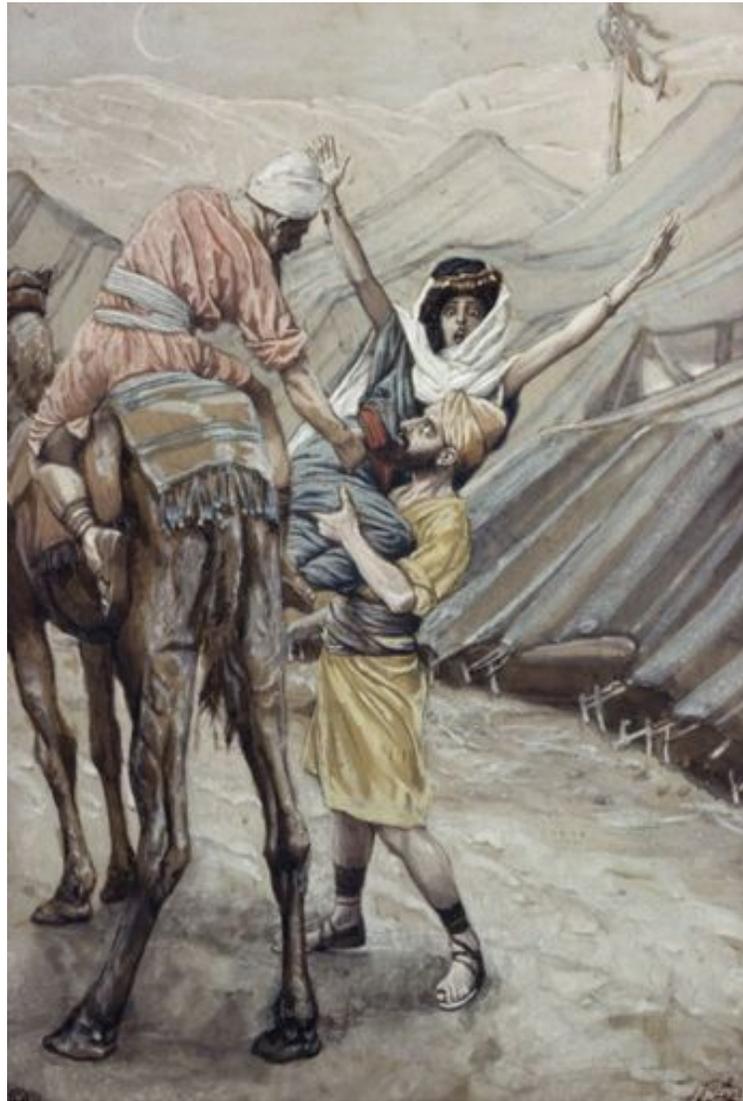


Finally we turn to the concluding verse in this section on witnesses: *lex talionis*, or the “law of retaliation” (from the Latin *talio*, “punishment equal to the injury sustained”).

Given human nature, when someone hits us, we want to hit them back twice as hard!

Scripture has plenty of examples. Here’s one of them:

“Dinah, the daughter whom Leah had borne to Jacob, went out to visit some of the women of the land. When Shechem, son of Hamor the Hivite, the leader of the region, saw her, he seized her and lay with her by force. He was strongly attracted to Dinah, daughter of Jacob, and was in love with the young woman. So he spoke affectionately to her. Shechem said to his father Hamor. ‘Get me this young woman for a wife.’ Meanwhile, Jacob heard that Shechem had defiled his daughter Dinah; but since his sons were out in the field with his livestock, Jacob kept quiet until they came home. Now Hamor, the father of Shechem, went out to discuss the matter with Jacob, just as Jacob’s sons were coming in from the field. When they heard the news the men were indignant and extremely angry . . .



**James Tissot. *Seduction of Dinah, Daughter of Leah* (watercolor), c. 1896-1902.
Jewish Museum, New York.**

“. . . Shechem had committed an outrage in Israel by lying with Jacob’s daughter; such a thing is not done. Hamor appealed to them, saying: “My son Shechem has his heart set on your daughter. Please give her to him as a wife . . . Jacob’s sons replied to Shechem and his father Hamor with guile, speaking as they did because he had defiled their sister Dinah. They said to them, ‘We are not able to do this thing: to give our sister to an uncircumcised man. For that would disgrace us. Only on this condition will we agree to that: that you become like us by having every male among you circumcised . . .

(Exodus 34: 1-15)



“. . . On the third day, while they were still in pain, two of Jacob’s sons, Simeon and Levi, brothers of Dinah, each took his sword, advanced against the unsuspecting city and massacred all the males. After they had killed Hamor and his son Shechem with the sword, they took Dinah from Shechem’s house and left. Then the other sons of Jacob followed up the slaughter and sacked the city because their sister had been defiled. They took their sheep, cattle and donkeys, whatever was in the city and in the surrounding country. They carried off all their wealth, their children, and their women, and looted whatever was in the houses.”

(Exodus 34: 1-29)

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First and foremost, *lex talionis* puts the brakes on such vengeance: eye for eye, tooth for tooth . . . and no more! Imposing such strict proportionality halts an escalating cycle of violence.

Secondly, though frowned upon today, *lex talionis* recognizes the inherent value of each human person. A fine or a few years in prison simply does not suffice for grave bodily injury or death. Such weak “justice” does not reflect mercy; rather, it flaunts contempt for the person injured or killed, and it undermines a society’s understanding of justice.



I wonder what ever happened to Simeon and Levi, Dinah's brothers who slaughtered all the men of Shechem? Were they ever punished for their excesses?

I'm pretty sure they didn't get away with it.

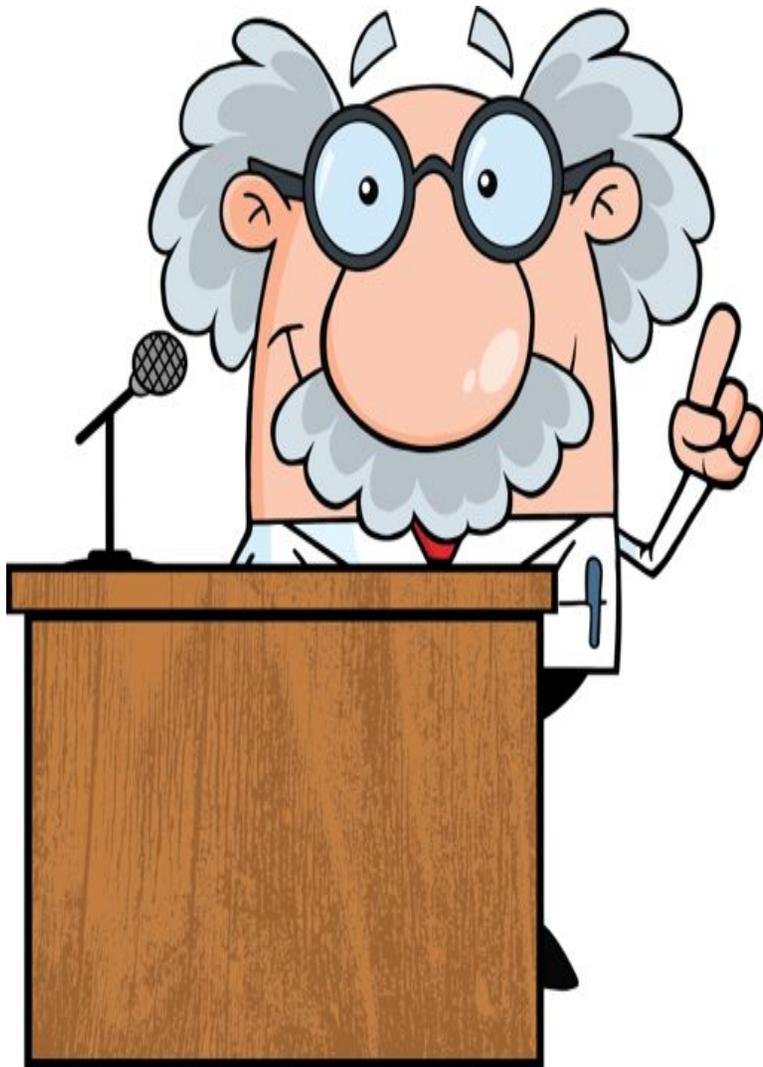


No, they didn't. On his deathbed Jacob blesses each of his sons, revealing secrets he had kept to himself all his life. Of Reuben, his firstborn, Jacob says: *"Turbulent as water, you shall no longer excel, for you mounted your father's bed and defiled my couch, to my sorrow"* (Genesis 49: 4). We knew that Reuben had sex with his father's concubine, Bilhah (in Genesis 35: 22), but we never knew that Jacob knew!

Of Simeon and Levi, Jacob says:

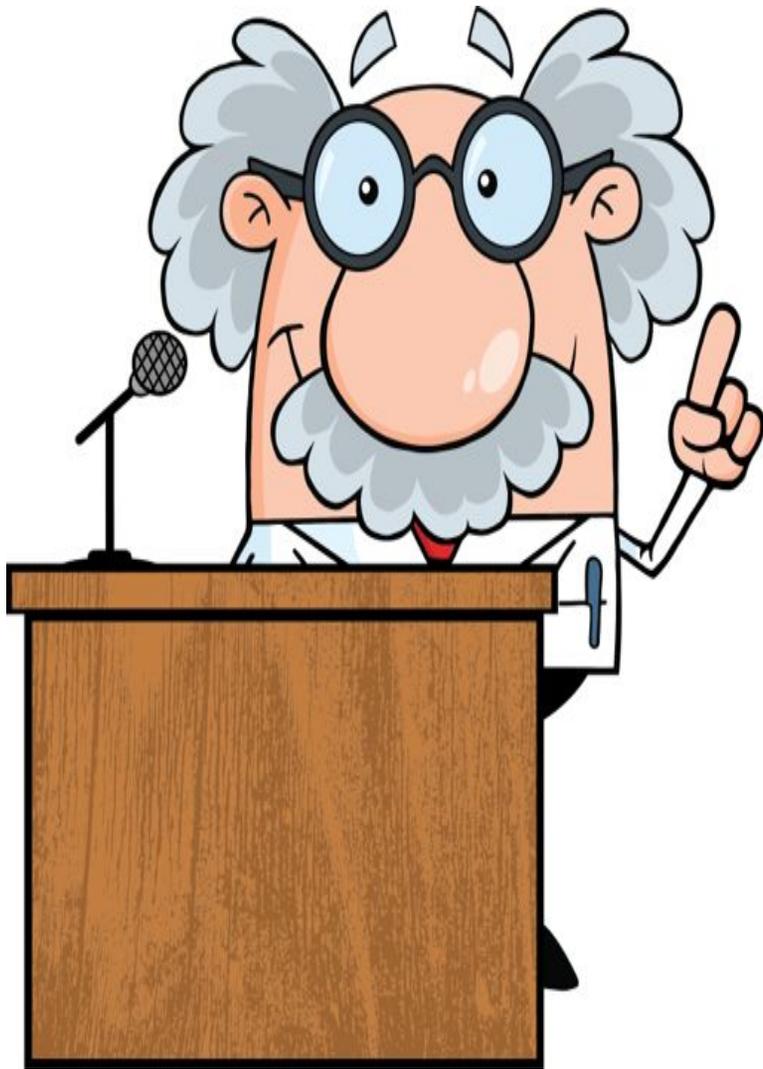
*Simeon and Levi, brothers indeed,
weapons of violence are their knives.
Let not my person enter their council,
or my honor be joined with their company;
For in their fury they killed men,
at their whim they maimed oxen.
Cursed be their fury so fierce,
and their rage so cruel!
I will scatter them in Jacob,
disperse them throughout Israel.*

(Genesis 49: 5-7)



Now, we turn to killing in warfare:

1. Cities of refuge
2. Boundary markers
3. Witnesses
- 4. Killing in warfare**
5. The collision of life and death
6. The obligation to defend life



Ancient warfare was a brutal business, as it is today. Today, however, we wage war from a distance, raining violence upon our enemies half a world away, with hunter-killer drones firing laser-guided bombs and Hellfire missiles, their pilots sitting in air-conditioned comfort at Creech Air Force Base near Las Vegas, Nevada, sipping ice-cold lattes.

Conversely, ancient warfare was up close and personal. Here's Achilles, in the *Iliad's* climactic scene when he bests Hector, prince of Troy, driving his spear through Hector's throat. Hector begs for his life, and Achilles replies:

“Beg no more, you fawning dog—begging me by my parents!
Would to god my rage, my fury would drive me now
to hack your flesh away and eat you raw—
such agonies you have caused me! Ransom?
No man alive could keep the dog-packs off you,
not if they haul in ten, twenty times that ransom
and pile it here before me and promise fortunes more—
no, not even if Dardan Priam should offer to weigh out
your bulk in gold! . . .
The dogs and birds will rend you—blood and bone!”

(Iliad, Book 22, 407-417)



. . . at which, Achilles drives a stake through Hector's ankles, straps him to his chariot and drags Hector's bloodied body around the walls of Troy as Hector's father, mother and wife look on in horror.

Reading the *Iliad*, we recall Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, as Caesar's ghost, rising from the grave, "*come hot from hell . . . [and] with a monarch's voice cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war!*"

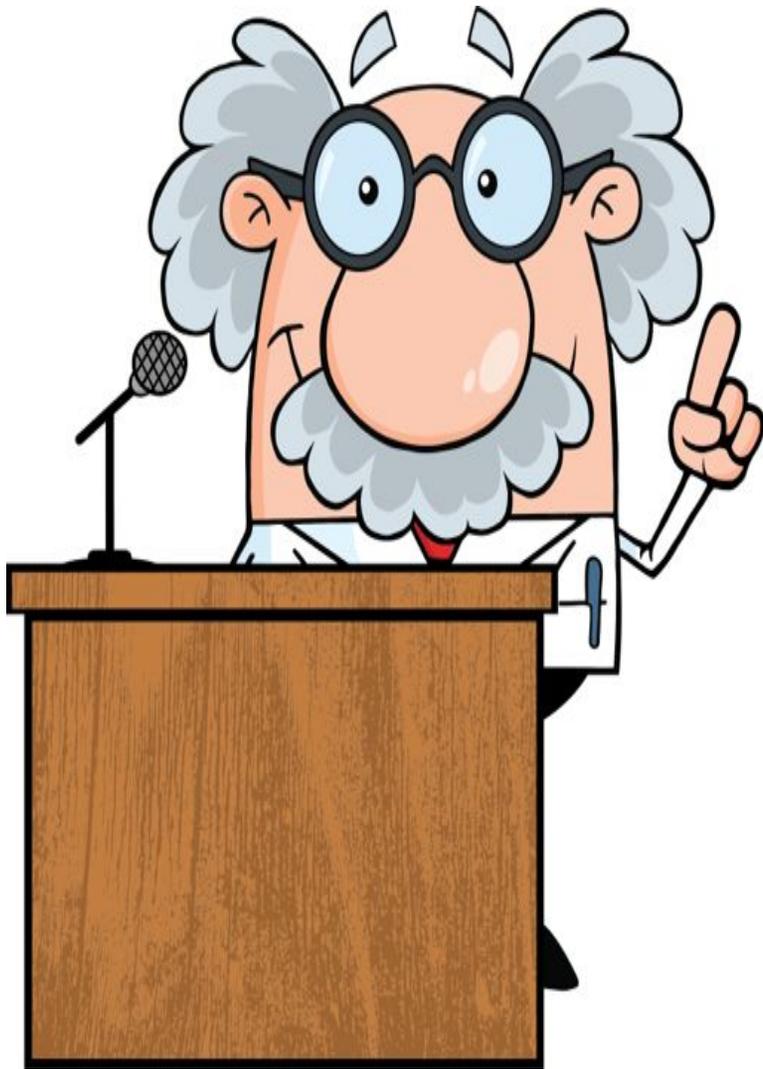
(Act 3, Scene 1, lines 287-288).



When the Israelites cross the Jordan River and begin the conquest of Canaan, we have read repeatedly that they are to spare no one. Here, in Deuteronomy 20 we hear it again:

“[I]n the cities of these peoples that the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage, you shall not leave a single soul alive. You must put them all under the ban—the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites—just as the Lord, your God, has commanded you, so that they do not teach you to do all the abominations that they do for their gods, and you thus sin against the Lord, your God.”

(20: 16-18)



By now, this is standard fare when it comes to conquering the “Promised Land.”

But when we turn to cities *“at a considerable distance from you, which [do] not belong to these nations here”* (20: 15), Deuteronomy offers shockingly different rules of engagement, rules that are surprisingly enlightened in the Old Testament biblical world:

“When you draw near a city to attack it, offer it terms of peace. If it agrees to your terms of peace and lets you in, all the people to be found in it shall serve you in forced labor. But if it refuses to make peace with you and instead joins battle with you, lay siege to it, and when the Lord, your God, delivers it into your power, put every male in it to the sword; but the women and children and livestock and anything else in the city—all its spoil—you may take as plunder for yourselves, and you may enjoy this spoil of your enemies, which the Lord, your God has given you.”

(20: 10-14)

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Offering terms of peace is rather civilized, given the time, place and culture of Deuteronomy.

Recall the context.

Deuteronomy emerges at the time of King Josiah, after the “book of the law” was discovered by Josiah’s priest, Hilkiah, in 622 B.C. Assyria had destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel one hundred years earlier in 722 B.C., and taken the survivors captive.

Babylon would then defeat Assyria at the Battle of Nineveh in 612 B.C., shortly before Josiah’s death in 609 B.C., and attack Jerusalem in 605, 597 and 588 B.C., resulting in a two-year siege and the fall of Jerusalem on August 14, 586 B.C. The survivors would be taken captive to Babylon.



Josiah was caught up in the equivalent of a “World War,” and Israel was but a minor player in the drama. In Josiah’s day, empires clashed—with world dominance as the prize.

And yet, Deuteronomy shows great restraint in fighting foreign wars, even showing concern to the enemy’s trees!

“When you are at war with a city and have to lay siege to it for a long time before you capture it, you shall not destroy its trees by putting an ax to them. You may eat of them, but you must not cut them down. Are the trees of the field human beings, that they should be included in your siege? However, those trees which you know are not fruit trees you may destroy. You may cut them down to build siegeworks against the city that is waging war with you, until it falls.”

(20: 19-20)

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In laying siege to a city, it was common practice to burn the city's grain crops, depriving the population of food, as well as to cut down trees to build siegeworks.

In the Mediterranean world, however, cutting down fruit trees—especially olive trees—was an act of pure spite. Olive trees live for hundreds of years, and olive oil was a staple of the Mediterranean economy. Cutting down and burning olive groves caused economic catastrophe that spanned generations.¹

¹ Victor Davis Hanson observes that *“no one can read Herodotus, Thucydides, Xenophon, or any other writer of Greek history without noticing the constant references to invading troops who seek to destroy the olive orchards of their enemies.”* See *Warfare and Agriculture in Classical Greece* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).



Equally surprising to Deuteronomy's rather civilized "rules of engagement," are the exemptions allowed for military service at a time of grave existential threat.

Deuteronomy begins with a "pep talk" to the troops:

“When you go out to war against your enemies and you see horses and chariots and an army greater than you, you shall not be afraid of them, for the Lord, your God, who brought you up from the land of Egypt, will be with you. When you are drawing near to battle, the priest shall come forward and speak to the army, and say to them, ‘Hear, O Israel! Today you are drawing near for battle against your enemies. Do not be weakhearted or afraid, alarmed or frightened by them. For it is the Lord, your God, who goes with you to fight for you against your enemies and give you victory.’”

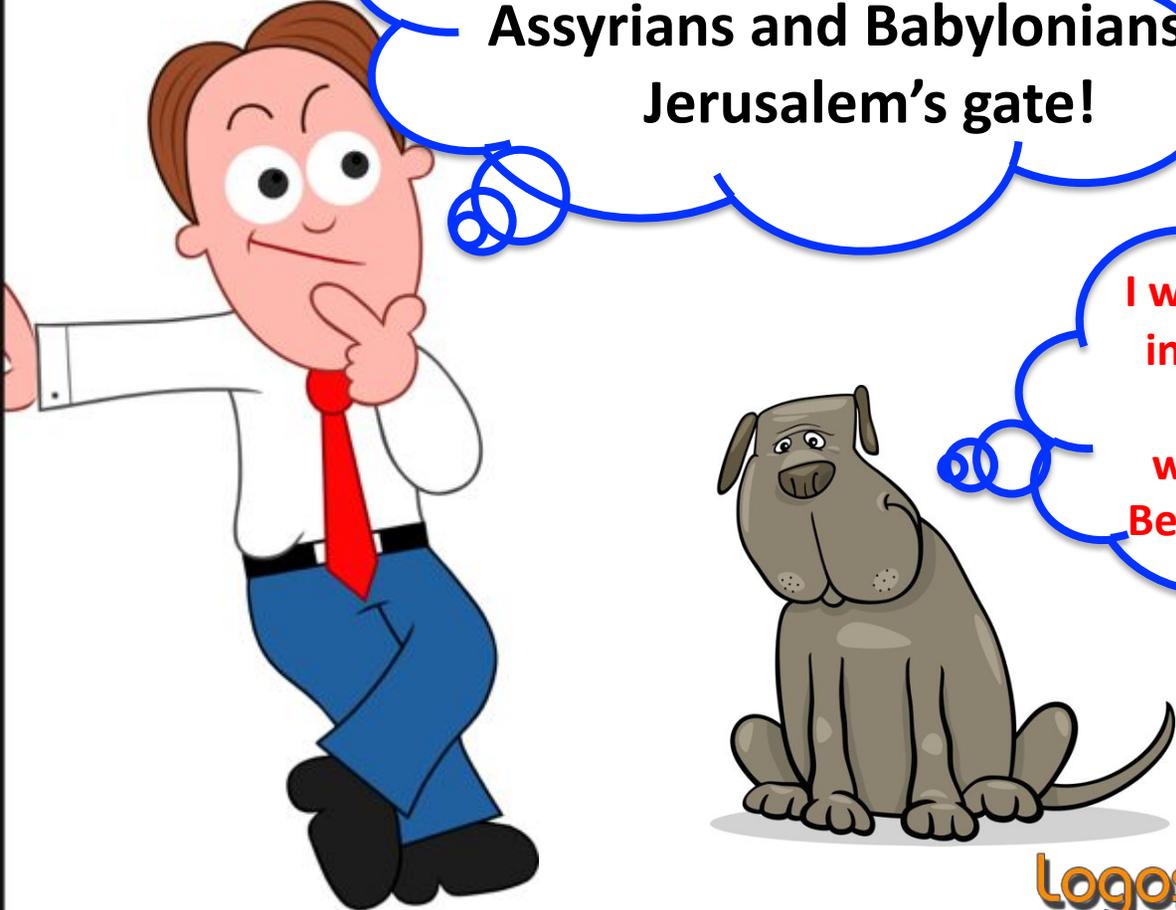
(20: 1-4)



And then Deuteronomy offers four exemptions to military service, four opportunities to walk away from battle:

“Then the officials shall speak to the army: ‘Is there anyone who has built a new house and not yet dedicated it? Let him return home, lest he die in battle and another dedicate it. Is there anyone who has planted a vineyard and not yet plucked its fruit? Let him return home, lest he die in battle and another pluck its fruit. Is there anyone who has betrothed a woman and not yet married her? Let him return home, lest he die in battle and another marry her.’ The officials shall continue to speak to the army: ‘Is there anyone who is afraid and weakhearted? Let him return home, or else he might make the hearts of his fellows melt as his does.’”

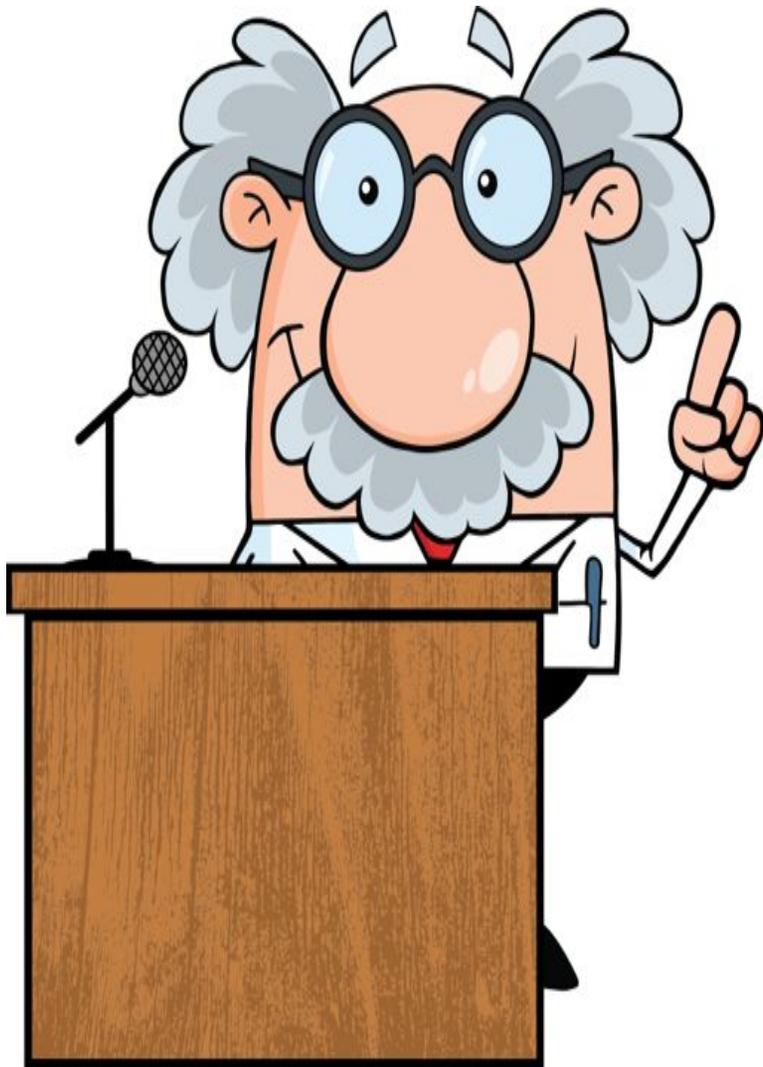
(20: 5-8)



**Now, that is remarkable,
especially at a time of
existential threat, with the
Assyrians and Babylonians at
Jerusalem's gate!**

**I wouldn't want to go
into battle with the
"weakhearted"
watching my back!
Better they go home.**

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Now, we move to the “collision of life and death”:

1. Cities of refuge
2. Boundary markers
3. Witnesses
4. Killing in warfare
- 5. The collision of life and death**
6. The obligation to defend life



Chapter 21, the “collision of life and death,” seems like a random arrangement of individual statutes, but Steven L. Cook rightly sees the individual units arranged chiastically:

- A** Dead “John Doe” (1-9)
- B** Marriage to a woman captive (10-13)
- C** Divorced captive (14)
- C'** Unloved wife (15-17)
- B'** Parents of a rebellious son (18-21)
- A'** Dead criminal (22-23)

Mirroring the sixth commandment, “You shall not murder,” chapter 21 examines six instances where life collides with death, either literally or symbolically.

“If the corpse of someone who has been slain is found lying in the open, in the land the Lord, your God, is giving you to possess, and it is not known who killed the person, your elders and judges shall go out and measure the distances to the cities that are in the neighborhood of the corpse. When it is established which city is nearest the corpse, the elders of that city shall take a heifer that has never been put to work or worn a yoke; the elders of that city shall bring the heifer down to a wadi with an everflowing stream at a place that has not been plowed or sown, and shall break the heifer’s neck in the wadi . . . [they shall wash their hands and] declare, ‘Our hands did not shed this blood, and our eyes did not see the deed’ . . .”

(21: 1-9)

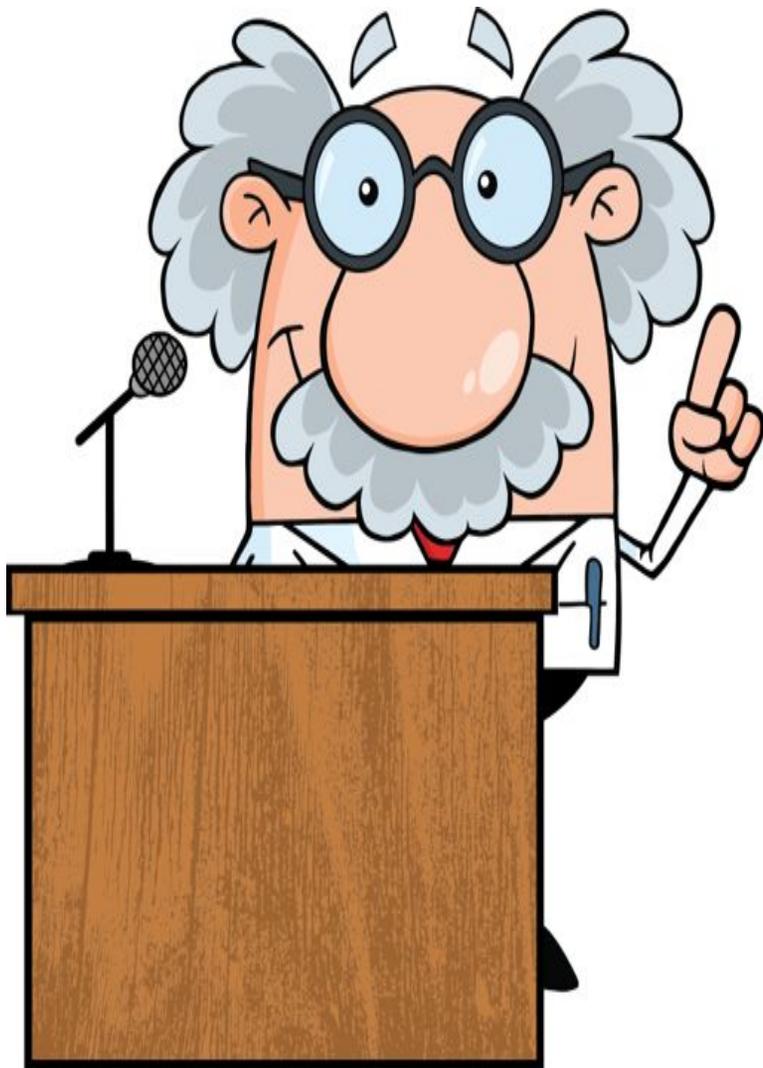
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Fittingly, this murder of a “John Doe” on the “land of the Lord” follows Deuteronomy’s discussion of violent conflict with external enemies.

The word “land” is *‘adamah [ad-ah-mah’]*, with the primary meaning of “soil.” Blood shed violently soaks into the soil and it cries out for vengeance, much as Abel’s blood cries out to God from the soil after Cain killed him (Genesis 4: 10). Blood shed violently pollutes the land, and atonement must be made for it.

Here, atonement takes the form of a heifer whose neck is broken at a wadi with fast-moving water and uncultivated banks. The symbolism is profound: the heifer whose neck is broken suggests the “John Doe” who was killed; the wadi’s fast-moving water, suggests “washing away” the bloodguilt; and the uncultivated banks contrast sharply with the cultivated fields and towns of civilized society.



Chapter 21

- A Dead “John Doe” (1-9)
- B Marriage to a woman captive (10-13)**
- C Divorced captive (14)
- C’ Unloved wife (15-17)
- B’ Parents of a rebellious son (18-21)
- A’ Dead criminal (22-23)

“When you go out to war against your enemies and the Lord, your God, delivers them into your power, so that you take captives, if you see a beautiful woman among the captives and become so enamored of her that you wish to have her as a wife, and so you take her home to your house, she must shave her head, cut her nails, lay aside her captive’s garb, and stay in your house, mourning her father and mother for a full month. After that, you may come to her, and you shall be her husband and she shall be your wife.”

(21: 10-13)

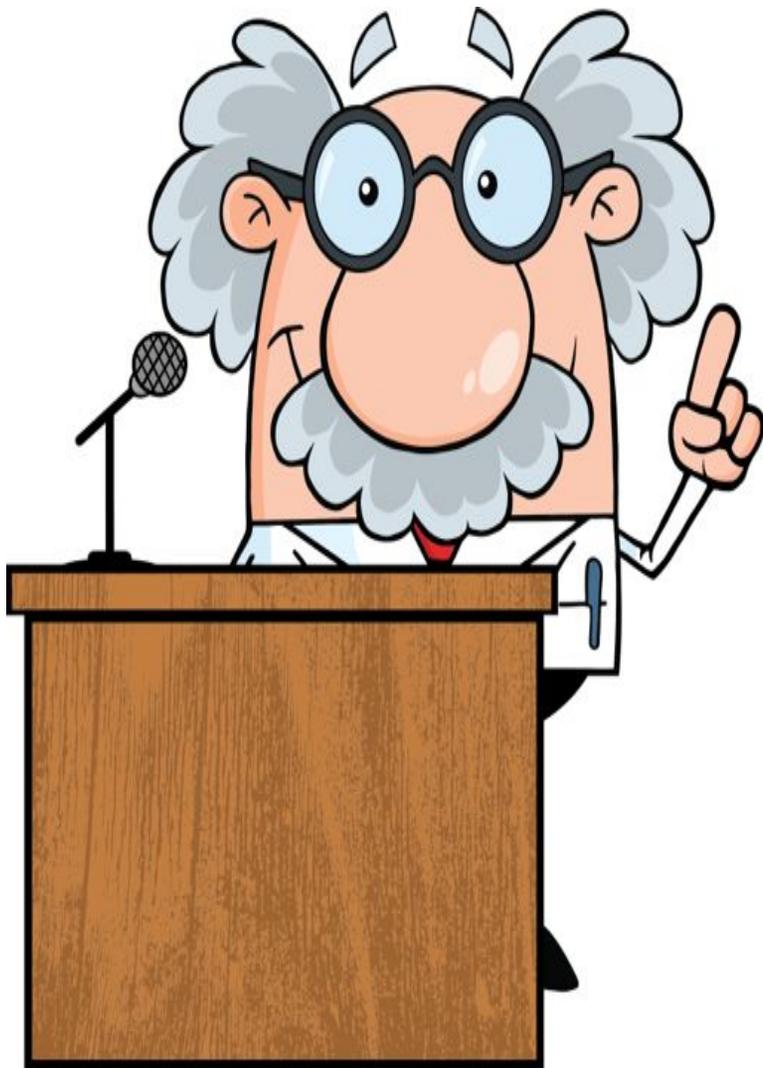
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Recall that Deuteronomy 14 forbade gashing yourself or shaving your head as acts of mourning. God is the “god of the living, not the God of the dead,” and such permanent (or long-lasting) signs are not permitted.

But here, a woman taken captive whom an Israelite wants to marry, must put aside her captive’s garb (what she was wearing when captured), shave her head and cut her nails.

She is to die to her old life and grow into her new one. It is a rite of passage from death to life.

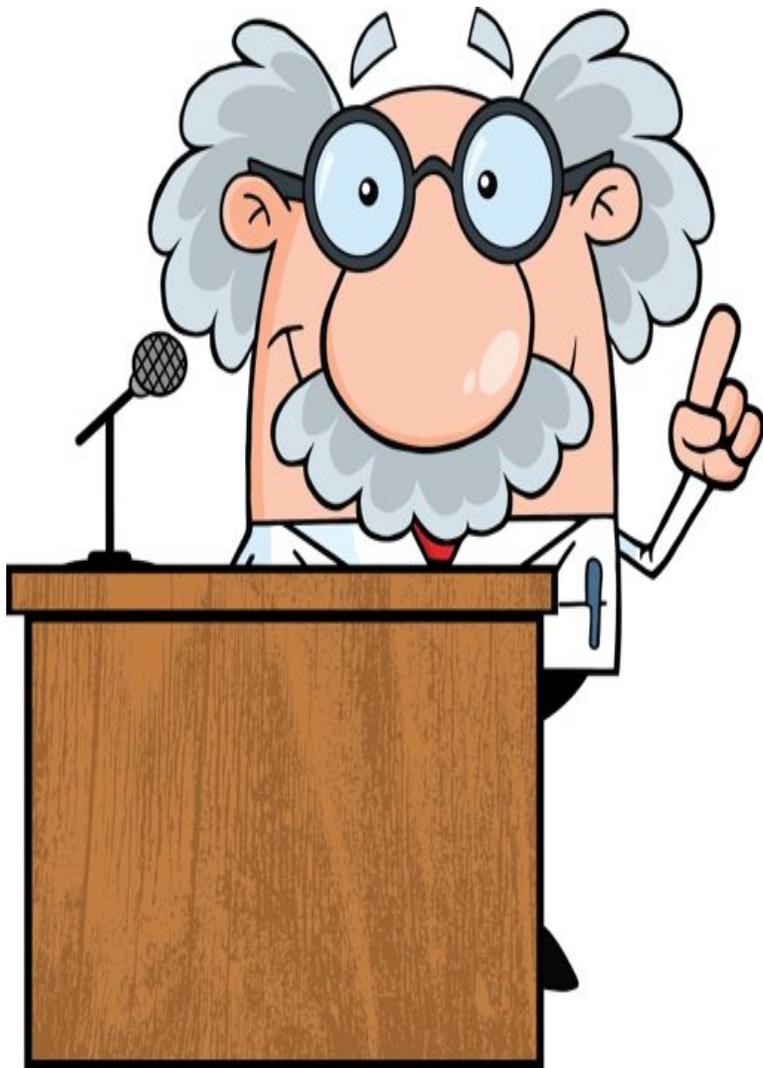


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“If later on you lose your liking for her, you shall give her her freedom, if she wishes it; you must not sell her for money. Do not enslave her, since you have violated her.”

(21: 14)



Chapter 21

- A Dead “John Doe” (1-9)
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- B’ Parents of a rebellious son (18-21)
- A’ Dead criminal (22-23)

“If a man has two wives, one loved and the other unloved, and if both the loved and the unloved bear him sons, but the firstborn is the son of the unloved wife: when he comes to bequeath his property to his sons he may not consider as his firstborn the son of the wife he loves in preference to the son of the wife he does not love, the firstborn. On the contrary, he shall recognize as his firstborn the son of the unloved wife, giving him a double share of whatever he happens to own, since he is the first fruits of his manhood, and to him belong the rights of the firstborn.”

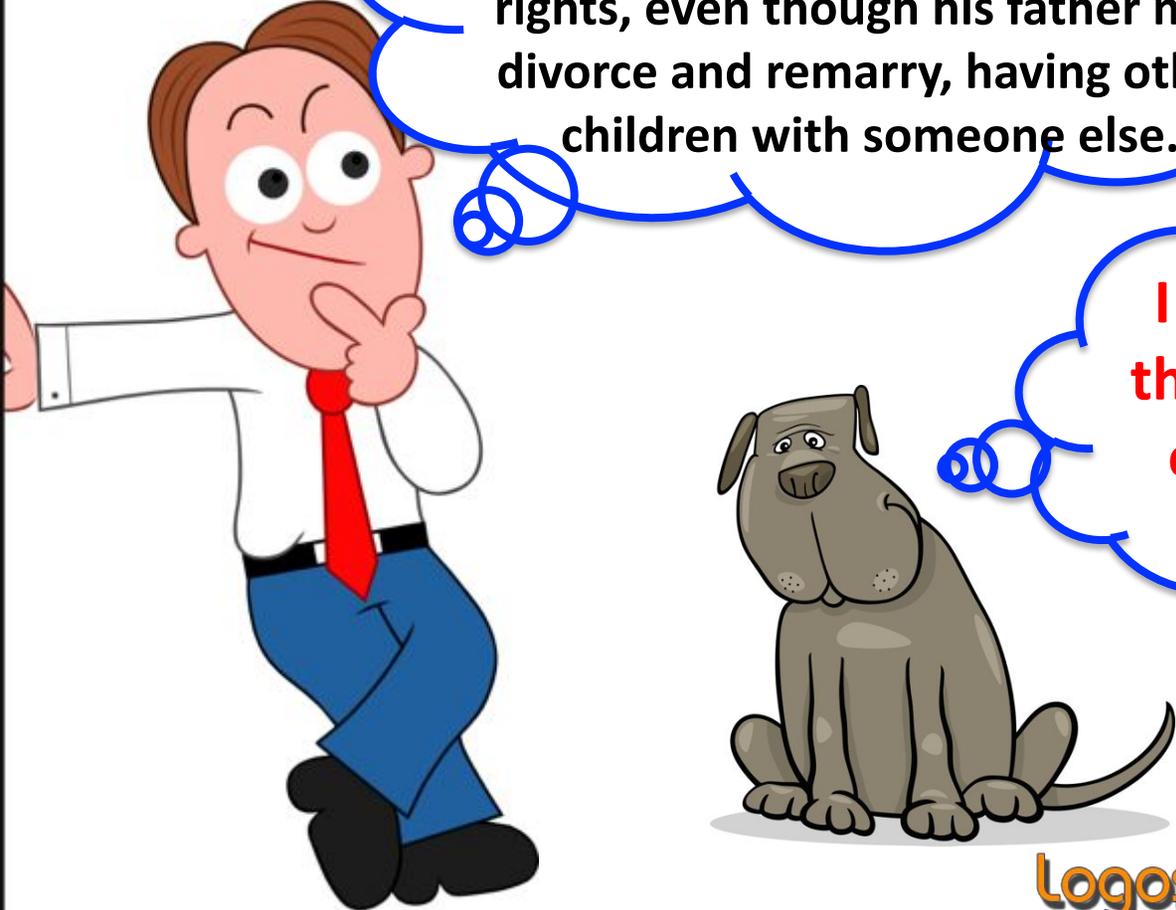
(21: 15-17)

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The divorced female captive of the “C” unit (v. 14) and the firstborn son of the unloved wife in the “C” unit (vv. 15-17) obviously pair together, as both have inherent family rights: the divorced female slave transitioned to the wife of an Israelite, and that is forever her position; she cannot revert back to a slave.

Likewise, the firstborn son of an unloved wife is forever in that position, with all the legal rights of a firstborn son, regardless of whether his mother is loved or not.



Humm. That has implications today for “blended” families. A man’s firstborn son should retain his rights, even though his father may divorce and remarry, having other children with someone else.

I wonder how that would play out in court?

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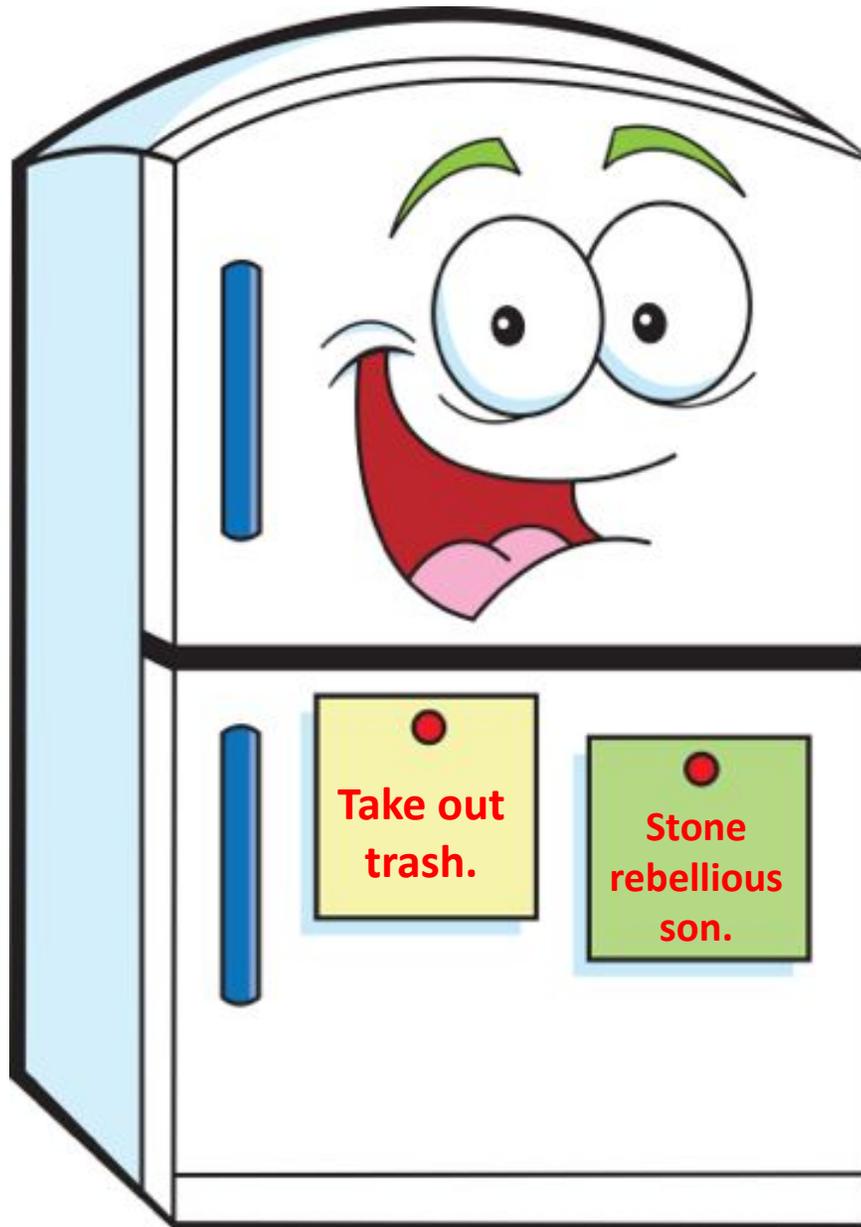
Chapter 21

- A Dead “John Doe” (1-9)
- B Marriage to a woman captive (10-13)
- C Divorced captive (14)
- C’ Unloved wife (15-17)
- B’ Parents of a rebellious son (18-21)**
- A’ Dead criminal (22-23)

“If someone has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not listen to his father or mother, and will not listen to them even though they discipline him, his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders at the gate of his home city, where they shall say to the elders of the city, ‘This son of ours is a stubborn and rebellious fellow who will not listen to us; he is a glutton and a drunkard.’ Then all his fellow citizens shall stone him to death. Thus shall you purge the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear and be afraid.”

(21: 18-21)

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This seems rather harsh! Indeed, it is so harsh that the Babylonian Talmud says that such a son never existed, and that this law serves purely for didactic purposes.

Obviously, this law is not meant for punishing children who misbehave; rather, it speaks to an adult son in a profoundly patriarchal culture whose behavior and attitude make him egregiously unfit to take over the patrimony of the extended family and of their lands.

Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son immediately springs to mind. The younger son was a glutton and a drunkard, as well as a disrespectful ass who shamed himself, his father and his entire family. His father had every right to invoke Deuteronomy 21: 18-21.

But he did not.



**Rembrandt. *Return of the Prodigal Son* (oil on canvas), c. 1668.
Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia.**

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If we understand Jesus' parable of the Prodigal Son, we might see in it a portrait of Israel.

In Exodus 4: 22 God says: *"Israel is my son, my firstborn."* Psalm 78: 8 proclaims Israel to be *"rebellious and defiant"*; Hosea 4: 14, 16 calls Israel *"a people without understanding," "a stubborn cow"*; and in Hosea 11: 1-11, God's anguish about his "son" is on full display:

“When Israel was a child I loved him,
out of Egypt I called my son.
The more I called them,
the farther they went from me,
Sacrificing to the Baals
and burning incense to idols.
Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk,
who took them in my arms,
but they did not know that I cared for them.
I drew them with human cords,
with bands of love . . .
How could I give you up, Ephraim
or deliver you up, Israel . . .



Israel's behavior was so egregious, so often, that more than once, God threatened to destroy them utterly. Recall when God tells Moses at Mount Sinai that the Israelites are worshiping a golden calf at the base of the mountain.

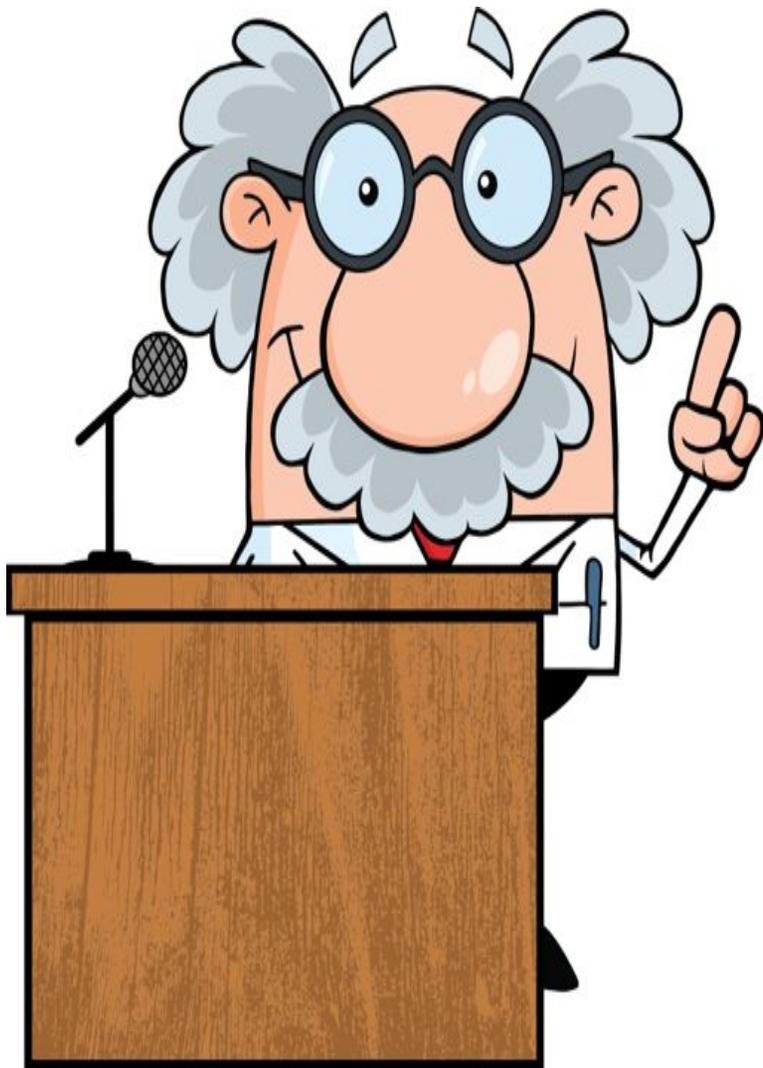
God thunders:

"I have seen this people, how stiff necked they are . . . let me alone, then, that my anger may burn against them to consume them . . ."

(Exodus 32: 10)

Throughout much of the Hebrew Scriptures, Israel is every parent's nightmare!

And yet, like the father of the Prodigal Son, God perseveres, his mercy and love knowing no limits.



Chapter 21

- A Dead “John Doe” (1-9)
- B Marriage to a woman captive (10-13)
- C Divorced captive (14)
- C’ Unloved wife (15-17)
- B’ Parents of a rebellious son (18-21)
- A’ Dead criminal (22-23)**

“If a man guilty of a capital offense is put to death and you hang him on a tree, his corpse shall not remain on the tree overnight. You must bury it the same day; anyone who is hanged is a curse of God. You shall not defile the land which the Lord, your God, is giving you as a heritage.”

(21: 22-23)



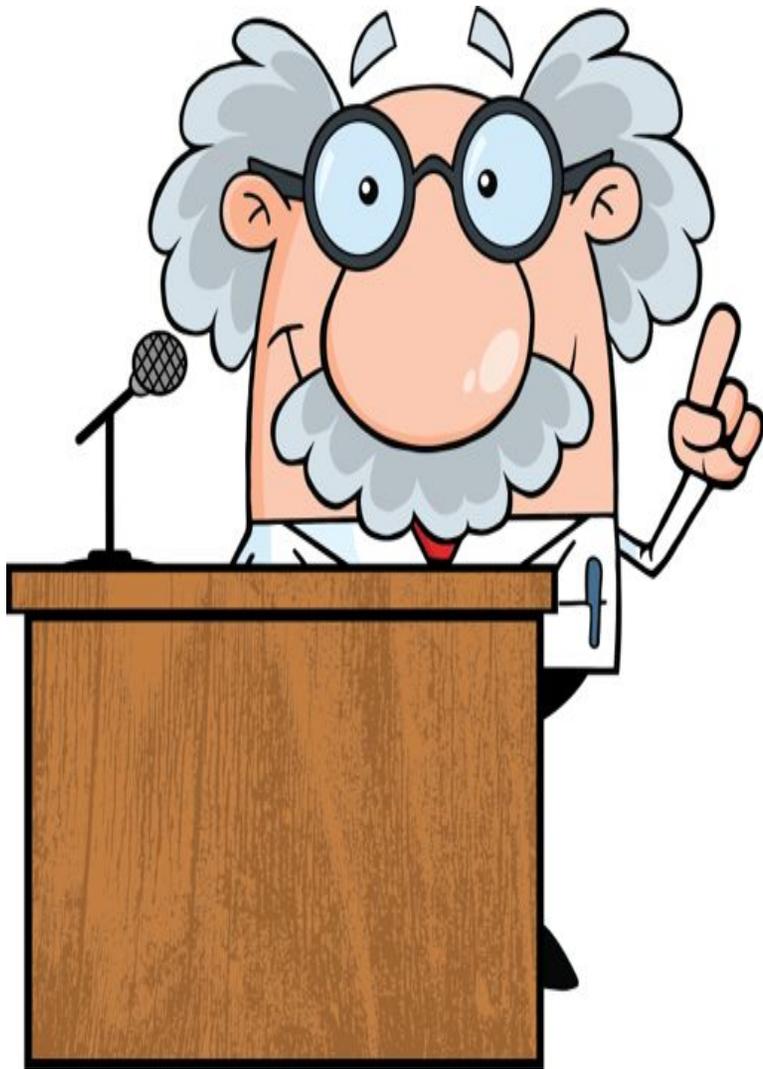
Obviously, this A' unit pairs with the A unit of the dead "John Doe."

As we have seen, Israel is to be a land of life, not death, and having corpses littering the landscape or hanging from trees pollutes the land and is antithetical to the very essence of who the Israelites are to be.

For Christians, of course, these verses also point to Jesus' crucifixion and to St. Paul's words:

"Christ ransomed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, 'Cursed be everyone who hangs on a tree.'"

(Galatians 3: 13)



We move now from six statutes in which life collides with death to the final set of five statutes that stress the obligation to defend life, in all its forms.

1. You shall not see your neighbor's ox or sheep going astray and ignore it; you must bring it back.
2. You shall not see your neighbor's donkey or ox fallen on the road and ignore it; you must help in lifting it up.
3. A woman shall not wear a man's garment, nor shall a man put on a woman's clothing.
4. You shall not take a bird's eggs from her nest along with the mother bird.
5. You shall put a parapet around the roof of your house.

(21: 22-23)

Questions for discussion and thought

1. All the items in this section relate to the commandment: “You shall not murder.” How do you define “murder”?
2. How is moving a landmark a form of “murder”?
3. How does war in the land of Canaan differ from war in outside territories?
4. If an Israelite marries a female taken captive in war, and then he is displeased with her, what must he do?
5. What might be done with a stubborn and rebellious son?

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