

Law of Moses

- Date** ■ Unknown, written between 900 and 500 B.C. depicting events about 1200 B.C.
- Place** ■ Uncertain, probably in Israel, Judah, and Babylon
- Type of Source** ■ Religious text/law code (original in ancient Hebrew)
- Author** ■ Compiled from earlier sources, attributed to Moses
- Historical Context** ■ Around the time of Kings David and Solomon, the Hebrews began to write down their early traditions into formal laws. This work would continue and be added to until after the Babylonian Exile, when the final form of the Torah (Hebrew for "Instruction," later called the Pentateuch) was completed. The Torah was attributed to Moses who may have formed the earliest Hebrew community. The Torah would become the basis of Judaic law as well as influencing Christian and Muslim ideas of law and morality.
- Internal Context** ■ In the Hebrew Bible, three months after their miraculous escape from Egypt, Moses leads the Israelites (Hebrews) to the Wilderness of Sinai. God then orders Moses to return to the mountain where Moses first encountered God.

Exodus 20:1–23

And God spoke all these words saying:

"I the **LORD** am your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods besides Me.

"You shall not make for yourself a sculptured image, or any likeness of what is in heaven above, or on the earth below, or in the waters under the earth; you shall not bow down unto them or serve them. For I the LORD your God am an impassioned God, visiting the guilt of the parents upon the children, upon the third and upon the fourth generations of those who reject Me, but showing kindness to the thousandth generation of those who love Me and keep My commandments.

"You shall not swear falsely by the name of the LORD your God; for the LORD will not clear one swears falsely by His name.

"Remember the **sabbath day** and keep it holy. Six days you shall labor, and do all your work; but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God: you shall not do any work—you, your son or daughter, your male or female slaves, or your cattle, or the stranger who is within your settlements; For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth and sea, and all that is in them, and He rested on the seventh day; therefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

"Honor your father and your mother, that you may long endure on the land that the LORD your God is assigning you.

"You shall not murder.

"You shall not commit adultery.

"You shall not steal.

"You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.

This translation of Exodus is the New Jewish Publication Services edition, the principal English translation used by modern Jews. Other translations vary somewhat from this translation.

Exodus 20:2–14 are often called the Ten Commandments.

LORD

"LORD" is the standard English translation for the sacred name of God known only by the Hebrew letters "YHWH." No one knows how it was meant to be pronounced though "Yahweh" and "Jehovah" are sometimes used.

sabbath

the day of rest. "Sabbath" is derived from the Hebrew word for "rest."

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"You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his male or female slave, or his ox, or his [donkey], or anything that is your neighbor's."

All the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the blare of the horn and the mountain smoking; and when the people saw it, they fell back and stood at a distance. "You speak to us," they said to Moses, "and we will obey; but let not God speak to us, lest we die." Moses answered the people, "Be not afraid; for God has come only in order to test you, and in order that the fear of Him may be ever with you, so that you do not go astray." So the people remained at a distance, while Moses approached the thick cloud where God was.

The LORD said to Moses:

"Thus you shall say to the Israelites: 'You yourselves saw that I spoke to you from the very heavens: With Me, therefore, you shall not make any gods of silver, nor shall you make for yourselves any gods of gold. Make for Me an altar of earth and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices of well-being, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause My name to be mentioned I will come to you and bless you. And if you make for Me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for by wielding your tool upon them, you have profaned them. Do not ascend My altar by steps, that your nakedness may not be exposed upon it.

Exodus 21:1-37

"These are the rules that you shall set before them:

"If you acquire a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years; in the seventh he shall go free, without payment. If he came single, he shall leave single; if he had a wife, his wife shall leave with him. If his master gave him a wife, and she has borne him children; the wife and her children shall belong to the master, and he [the slave] shall leave alone. But if the slave declares, "I love my master, and my wife and children: I do not wish to go free; his master shall take him before God. He shall be brought to the door or the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall then remain his slave for life.

"When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not be freed as the male slaves are. If she proves to be displeasing to her master, who designated her for himself, then he must let her be **redeemed**; he shall not have the right to sell her to outsiders, seeing he broke faith with her. And if he designated for his son, he shall deal with her as is the practice with free maidens. If he marries another, he must not withhold from this one her food, her clothing, and her conjugal rights. If he fails her in these three ways, she shall go free, without payment.

"He who fatally strikes a man shall be put to death. And if he did not do it by design, but it came about by an act of God, I will assign you **a place** to which he may flee.

redeemed
bought back

a place
Other sections of the Torah describe sanctuary cities where accidental killers would be safe from vengeful relatives. It is unclear if those laws were ever put into practice.

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“When a man schemes against another and kills him treacherously, you shall take him from **My very altar** to be put to death.

“He who strikes his father or mother shall be put to death.

“He who kidnaps a man—whether he has sold him or is still holding him—shall be put to death.

“He who insults his father or his mother shall be put to death.

“When men quarrel, and one strikes the other with stone or fist, and he does not die but has to take to his bed— if he the gets up and walks outdoors upon his staff, the assailant shall go unpunished, except that he must pay for his idleness and his cure.

“When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod, and he [the slave] dies there and then, he must be **avenged**. But if he survives a day or two, he is not to be avenged, since he is the other’s property.

“When men fight, and one of them pushes a pregnant woman and a miscarriage results, but no other damage ensues, the one responsible shall be fined according as the woman’s husband may exact from him, the payment to be based on reckoning. But if other damage ensues, the penalty shall be life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, bruise for bruise.

“When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.

“When an ox gores a man or a woman to death, the ox shall be stoned and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox is not to be punished. If, however, that ox has been in the habit of goring, and its owner, though warned, has failed to guard it, and it kills a man or a woman—the ox shall be stoned and its owner too shall be put to death. If **ransom** is laid upon him, he must pay whatever is laid upon him to redeem his life. So, too, if it gores a minor, male or female, [the owner] shall be dealt with according to the same rule. If the ox gores a slave, male or female, he shall pay thirty **shekels** of silver to the master, and the ox shall be stoned.

“When a man opens a pit, or digs a pit and does not cover it, and an ox or a [donkey] falls in to it, the one responsible for the pit must make restitution; he shall pay the price to the owner, but he shall keep the dead animal.

“When one man’s ox injures his neighbor’s ox and it dies; they shall sell the live ox and divide its price; they shall also divide the dead animal. If, however, it is known that the ox was in a habit of goring, and its owner has failed to guard it, he must restore ox for ox, but shall keep the dead animal.

“When a man steals an ox, or a sheep, and slaughters it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.”

My very altar

Criminals usually could not be arrested or killed as long as they held onto an altar. In the case of deliberate murderers, God is declaring that there is absolutely no sanctuary at all.

avenged

In this case the slave owner would be killed.

ransom

payment for his life

shekels

a small weight, about 10 grams or 0.4 ounces

Source: Exodus 20–21, *Tanakh* (New York: Jewish Publication Society, 1985).