

## **Responding to the New Atheists' attacks on the God of the Old Testament-35: The Mosaic Law-8 The Superiority of the Mosaic Law Over Ancient Ethics of Roman Empire**

Before moving into the various Mosaic laws that may seem harsh by today's standards, I wish to provide a bit of historical perspective. It is very easy for us to look back and think that some of these laws were too harsh, but we live in a totally different age. The age in which we live, in spite of its evils, owes a great deal of its moral enlightenment to Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ influenced Western Civilization for the good more than any other single person. While it is true that there are morally "enlightened" unbelievers, they too have been influenced by the ethics of Jesus Christ whether they realize it or not.

The world before the advent of Christ was much different. Christ was born within a pagan culture. Instead of the prevailing polydemonism, Christ taught monotheism: "I and my Father are one" (John 10:30). Instead of the sinful and limited gods of paganism, Christ revealed the holy and transcendent God, creator of Heaven and Earth, ruler of all things. Instead of pagan gods whose primary pastimes were violence, sexual immorality, and indolence, Christ taught a rational God who plans and works: "My Father works even until now, and I work" (John 5:17).

Against the totalitarianism of the pagan world empires, Christ taught the limitation of State power and the separation of church and state: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matt. 22:21). He explicitly denied the political theory and practice of the pagans: "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them. Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant" (Matt. 20:25-26). Christ demanded that rulers—both civil and ecclesiastical—serve, not control, the people. He outlined a limited role for civil government, not as the shaper of souls, as in pagan religions and philosophies, but simply as the punisher of criminals. He taught representative principles which inspired the American Founders for a new Republic.

I say all of this so that we can make sure that we check our chronological snobbery regarding today's ethics and the ethics of the ancient Near East in which the Old Testament laws were written. So if we are going to compare the Mosaic laws, let's be fair and compare it to laws written before the coming of Christ and His influences throughout Western Civilization.

With that in mind, let's examine the ethics of the ancient world *before Christ* regarding life and death in the family. In the Roman Empire, abortion, the exposure of infants, infanticide, and suicide were common and legal. We all know the incident of Herod the Great, in an attempt to murder Jesus, ordered that all the male infants in Bethlehem and the surrounding region, from two years old and younger, be put to death (Matt. 2:16-18).

The head of the Roman family has the power of life and death—*patria potestas*—over his children and slaves. At birth, the midwife would place the newborn on the ground, where he

would remain unless the father took the child and raised him from the earth. If the father did not like the child, he—or more likely—was left to die in some public place.

The pagans exposed their children for many reasons: poverty, ambition, or concern about their “quality of life”: “so as not to see them corrupted by a mediocre education that would leave them unfit for rank and quality” (Plutarch). The early Christians rescued thousands of children discarded by the pagans. While it is true that pagans also rescued thousands, they would rear them to be slaves and prostitutes. If infants were born with defects in the Roman Empire, they were frequently murdered, rather than exposed to the elements.

According to Roman law, the power of the father over his children remained as long as he lived. An adult Roman man could do nothing without his father’s consent; his father could even sentence him to death. It is likely that the Mafia inherited its focus on the “family” from its Roman ancestors. There was no sense that man had value because he was made in the image of God. Furthermore, suicide was accepted, even admired as a courageous thing to do in ancient paganism.

What a contrast to the ethos of the Old Testament which celebrated the dignity of man made in the image of God and love of children as a heritage from the Lord! “Behold, children are a gift of the LORD; The fruit of the womb is a reward,” Psa. 127:3. Instead of brutality and death on the most vulnerable, there was love and provision by God with laws to protect life and family and basic morality. If some of these laws we will examine seem harsh, let’s remember that the laws were to protect and to guide the people of God and keep them from degenerating into the wickedness of other nations.



In Him,

*Pastor Don*