

Chapter: 4

Ethical Framework of Early Jewish Texts

The Bible comprises of two major parts: Old Testament and New Testament. Old Testament books are traditionally categorized under four broad categories. The first category, known as 'Pentateuch', the early Jewish text, comprises of the first five books of Old Testament, which deals with the origin and development of Israel as nation. The Pentateuch also lays down ethical foundation for people of Israel. The next category is called as 'Historical Books' which comprise twelve books, and present the theological history of Israel nation. The third category, 'Poetic Books', comprises of five books. These books generally contain hymns, lyrics, and proverbs. The last category, 'The Prophets' contain seventeen prophetic books, which mainly deal with the life and teaching of prophets. This chapter delves on the ethical values presented in the legal codes of Pentateuch. At the outset, this chapter, surveys the brief history of people of Israel, which provides the context for development of legal codes of Pentateuch.

The origin and development of the people of Israel is presented as the theological history in Old Testament. As per the narratives presented in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, the ancestors of Israel came from Mesopotamia, and wandered in the region as semi-nomads. Abraham,

Jacob and Isaac are presented as patriarchs of Israel. Generally, the date of Patriarchs as presented in Genesis is considered between 20th century BCE to 6th century BCE. In this regard, John Bright, opines that:

“But if the evidence allows no precision, it argues strongly that the events of Genesis Chs 12 to 50, are to be placed between the twentieth and sixteenth centuries....Not only does the nomenclature, as we have said, have its closest parallels in the texts of the early second millennium, but the stories themselves fit there.”¹

The people of Israel are generally referred as *Hebrews*, because Abraham, one of their patriarchs was referred as *Hebrew*.² For John Bright, the term *Hebrew* refers to a class of people who were without any citizenship and were semi-nomads.³ This explanation seems to be right because, the patriarchs were presented as semi-nomads in the book of Genesis. According to the narratives presented in Genesis, the descendents of Patriarch Jacob were settled down in Egypt and their population grew in multitudes, consequently they were enslaved by Egyptians and were referred as *Hebrew* slaves, for they were made to work as forced labourers.

However, there is no extra-biblical evidence to prove the fact that, *Hebrews* labored in Egypt, but one link that provides a clue; Israel had

¹ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 76.

² *The Bible, Genesis*, 14:13 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

³ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 85.

Egyptian names like Hophni, Phinehas, and Merrari, which may lead for Egyptian connections of Israel.⁴ In addition, Exodus, the second book of the Bible, mentions that *Hebrews* labored to build Raamses.⁵ Raamses was Hyksos capital Avaris, and Bright mentions that, until 11th century BCE, Avaris was referred as ‘House of Raamses’ thereafter it is referred as Tanis.⁶

Exodus of *Hebrew* slaves from the clutches of Egyptian slavery is lucidly described in the book of Exodus. The dating of above-mentioned Exodus is widely debated; however, there is a wide consensus for the 13th century BCE.⁷ Deliverance of *Hebrew* slaves is ascribed to the mighty deeds of *Yahweh*, the God of Israel. Therefore, exodus became a key factor for Israel’s faith in *Yahweh*, as recorded in the poems of the Pentateuch.⁸

Mount Sinai, is one of the important milestone in the exodus history of Israel. The exact location of Mount Sinai is still unknown.⁹ Traditionally Mount Sinai is believed to at Jebel Musa near southern tip of Sinai Peninsula.¹⁰ As per the narratives presented in the book of Exodus, at Mount Sinai, *Yahweh* manifested to people of Israel, and they

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵ *The Bible, Exodus*, 1:11(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁶ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p.111.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

⁸ *The Bible, Deuteronomy*, 6:20-25, *Exodus*, 15:1-18 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁹ Werner H Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction*, p. 16.

¹⁰ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 114.

received the precepts of *Yahweh* as part of the covenant between people of Israel and *Yahweh*.¹¹ Prophet, Moses was the mediator between *Yahweh* and people of Israel. Thus, Moses is considered as the founder of *Yahwism* amidst the people of Israel. People of Israel entered into a covenant with *Yahweh*; the basis of covenant was their belief that, *Yahweh* delivered them from the Egyptian slavery. The Lordship of *Yahweh* was the cornerstone of the above said covenant. Therefore, The ethical and moral values presented in the Old Testament are believed to be based on the nature of *Yahweh*, the God of Israel. For Israelites, *Yahweh* is the creator of universe, and was never identified with any natural force, but *Yahweh* is considered as the controller of natural forces. *Yahweh* created the universe without any assistance or intermediaries.¹²

Conquest of Palestine is the next milestone after Sinai event, Old Testament records two accounts for above-mentioned conquest; The book of Joshua records first type of conquest which was dramatic and one time event. The second account of conquest as recorded in book of Judges was gradual over the period. The people of Israel did not belong to one race as descendents of the Abraham the patriarch of Israel. Nonetheless, the people of Israel who occupied the Palestine were from different ethnic group, for instance Jethro, was a Midianite, he was father-in-law of

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.115.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.138.

Moses.¹³ Caleb, who played important role in conquest of Palestine, belonged to Edomite ethnic group. When people of Israel settled in Palestine they were settled as confederation of twelve tribes known as Amphictyony. This Amphictyony was based on faith on covenant of *Yahweh* and not on race. Different ethnic groups were involved in forming above mentioned Amphictyony. In this regard Bright mentions that:

“Though tribal designations actually assumed a territorial character with the settlement and absorption of people already sedentary, Israel structure remained in theory tribal.”¹⁴

The power was decentralized in tribal amphictyony, as mentioned by Bright:

“She (Israel) had no statehood, no central government, no capital city, no administrative machinery. The various tribes enjoyed complete independence of central authority. The Tribal society was Patriarchal in organization, and without the stratification characteristic of the feudal pattern of the Canaan.”¹⁵

The elders of the clan played a leadership role in running an amphictyony, and shrine of *Yahweh* played was focal point of an amphictyony. An amphictyony, existed for two hundred years during which Israel’s traditions and institutions developed. In addition, during

¹³ *The Bible*, Exodus, 3:1 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

¹⁴ John Bright, *A History of Israel*, p. 143.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.143.

10th century BCE, Israel entered into period of monarchy ending two hundred years of tribal amphictyony. Along with the origin and development of Israel as nation, there developed a legal code and other institutions of Israel. The next sections delve into the status of human being in relation to God and society.

The various legal codes presented in the Pentateuch are based on the theological understanding of human being. Genesis, the first book of Pentateuch defines clearly the status of human being in the following verse:

“So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.”¹⁶

Image of God refers to sanctity of human life with significant value. Human beings created in image and likeness of God refers to the fact that, human beings are endowed with reason and freedom, and are responsible entity towards creation and God. Therefore, it can be inferred that a human being has a capacity to make self-critical decisions and be responsible for those decisions. In this regard, Bruce Milne mentions that:

“Man was created ‘in’ the image (*selem* in Hebrew) and likeness (*demiit* in Hebrew) of God.”¹⁷

¹⁶ *The Bible, Genesis, 1:27* (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

¹⁷ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth*, p.96.

The term 'Image' connotes status. But 'likeness' refers to the fact that human being reflects God. Similarly, reinforcing the value of human being, Lalfakzuala, recalls the ancient near east tradition, in which king was considered in the image of God and vested with divine dignity and authority.¹⁸ Stating the equality of all human beings, George Mathew Nalunnakkal writes that:

“...the assumption that God created humanity in God's image and likeness implies that every one is equal before God and therefore human law as well.”¹⁹

Therefore, the above-mentioned discussion implies that any discrimination of humanity or denial of dignity based on socio-economic and political criteria is an assault on God. Therefore, it can be inferred that, human being in 'Image of God' provides ethical framework for legal codes in Pentateuch. The ethical foundations are presented in the form of Ten Commandments known as Decalogue. The crux of Decalogue is further explained and supplemented in different laws presented in other books of Pentateuch. Therefore, the succeeding sections also delve into books of Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy. However, Genesis and Numbers are also referred when required.

¹⁸ Lalfakzuala, *Human Rights in Deuteronomy: A Sociological Approach*, p.24.

¹⁹ George Mathew Nalunnakkal, "Human Rights: A Biblical and Theological Perspective" in *Struggle for Human Rights towards a New Humanity: Theological and Ethical Perspectives*, Vol.2, p.3

Ten Commandments

The ‘Ten Commandments’ also commonly have come to known as Decalogue, a Greek term connoting ten words. The Decalogue, comprising of ten commandments, can be found in the book of Exodus and in the book of Deuteronomy. The Decalogue does not mention the details of legislation, but presents the summary of the law in very simple terms. Decalogue, held an important position in the ethical discourse of Old Testament, it is reflected in other books of the Old Testament.²⁰ Therefore, it can be implied that Decalogue played an important role in the history of Israel. In addition, the Old Testament tradition recorded in Deuteronomy states that the Decalogue was given through God’s revelation to people of Israel at the mount Sinai. Therefore, underlining the importance of Decalogue, Brevard S Child states that:

“... they (ten commandments) reflected the essential character of God...”²¹

The Decalogue went through lengthy time of processing before it reached its present form. In this regard, Brevard Childs states that:

“At the outset certain observations can be made on the basis of several generations of critical study. First, there is a wide consensus that the present form of Decalogue is the product of long historical development.”²²

²⁰ *The Bible, Hosea 4 :1* (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

²¹ Brevard S Childs, *The Book of Exodus*, p. 397.

²² *Ibid.*, p.391.

Therefore, dating of Decalogue will be a difficult task as it does not have any reference to specific historical period of Israel. The first three commandants of Decalogue are not focused in this research, as they are concerned with worship of *Yahweh*. Along with the first three commandments, fifth commandment is also not focused because it is concerned with parent-children relationship. The commandments, mainly dealing with the issues and moral values related to human transactions and social justice are discussed in the succeeding sections.

The Fourth Commandment of the Decalogue, underline the significance of *Sabbath* day. The noun *Sabbath* connotes to rest and cessation to work. The following verses depict the fourth commandment:

8 “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy.
9 Six days you shall labor, and do all your work
10 but the seventh day is a Sabbath to the
LORD your God; in it you shall not do any
work, you, or your son, or your daughter, your
manservant, or your maidservant, or your
cattle, or the sojourner who is within your
gates...”²³

The verb ‘remember’ in the above-mentioned verse refers to covenantal obligation of the people of Israel to observe the commandment without a lapse.²⁴ The Fourth commandment is the longest of all the Ten Commandments, because it explains the importance of *Sabbath* day, a day of rest dedicated to God, and stipulates cessation of

²³ *The Bible, Exodus, 20:8-10*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

²⁴ John I Durham, *Word Biblical Commentary: Exodus, Vol.3*, p.289.

all labor and work. The commandment forbids any kind of economic activity or labour, neither an Israelite nor his family members are allowed to work and labour, even the servants and cattle are prescribed to take rest. The *Sabbath* day provides a person with a personal time for his/her spiritual development, it provides a rest and leisure to rejuvenate oneself from the continuous labour for six days.

The *Sabbath* provides protection to weak and vulnerable persons like male and female servants and foreigners from exploitation to extract work without providing them a day of leisure. Therefore it can be implied that, Decalogue is not only concerned about the covenant members who own the property but the servants, foreigners who are economically dependent on covenant members of the society, since rest and leisure is a human need irrespective of one's ownership of property or social status.

In this regard Goran Larsson, rightly points out that:

“It (Sabbath) demonstrates and commands the total social equality and dignity of every human being...”²⁵

The Sixth Commandment of the Decalogue, underline the significance of human life. The following verses depict the sixth commandment:

“You shall not kill.”²⁶

²⁵ Goran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian traditions*, p. 148.

²⁶ *The Bible, Exodus*, 20:13(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

The term kill in sixth commandment translated from the root word ‘*rsh*’ in Hebrew language, appears thirty eight times in the Old Testament.²⁷ The word ‘*rsh*’ connotes ‘slay’ or ‘strike’ involving violence and physical force. In Old Testament, *rsh* is used to refer to intentional murders.²⁸ In this regard, T. Fretheim, states that:

“Any act of violence against an individual out of hatred, anger, malice, deceit, or for personal gain, in whatever circumstances and by whatever method, that might result in death(even if killing was not the intention) must be classified as murder.”²⁹

Murder is considered as a serious crime in almost all the civilizations. The sixth commandment of Decalogue prohibits murder, prominently because human beings are made in the image of God as categorically stated in the book of Genesis.³⁰ As mentioned earlier, ‘Image of God’ refers to the fact that, human beings have capability of close relationship with God, and possess precious and unique status in the sight of God. Therefore murdering a human being is considered as an assault on God, in this regard, Walter C Kaiser, states that:

“ To kill a person was tantamount to killing God in effigy.”³¹

²⁷ Mark F Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 123.

²⁸ *The Bible, I Kings*, 21:12-13, Numbers, 35:20-21(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

²⁹ Quoted in Mark F Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, p. 124.

³⁰ *The Bible, Genesis*, 1:27 (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

³¹ Walter C Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p.91.

Therefore, the crime of murder not just affects the victim and his family but primarily God. In contrast to most of the ancient Near Eastern Law, the legal blocks of Pentateuch did not allow monetary ransom or fine for the intentional murder.³² Pentateuch places human beings on high esteem and dignity, and human life cannot be traded for monetary benefits. The punishment for intentional murder is death.³³ Unlike Ancient Near Eastern civilization, in Old Testament human life and property were not traded, in this regard Walter Kaiser, states that:

“Ancient Near Eastern cuneiform law prescribes capital punishment for crimes against property, but in the Old Testament no crime against property warrants capital punishment.”³⁴

Therefore, it can be implied that, the above-mentioned commandment considers human life as sacred; no amount of money or property can be traded for life. The commandment ensures that security of every human being, whose life cannot be traded for anything else.

The Seventh Commandment of the Decalogue, underlines the significance of sexual fidelity, and consequently highlights the sanctity of ‘Marriage’. Following verses depict the seventh commandment:

“You shall not commit adultery.”³⁵

³² *The Bible, Numbers, 35:31 and Deuteronomy, 19:12*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

³³ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 19:11*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

³⁴ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p.92.

³⁵ *The Bible, Exodus, 20: 14*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

The Hebrew root *n’p*, connotes “to commit adultery”, which refers to sexual liaison outside marriage.³⁶ A person committing adultery violates the rights of their spouses and their families. Therefore committing adultery is an offence against the family members especially to one’s own spouse and spouse of the sexual partner. In this regard, Mark. F Rooker points out that:

“Similar to the ancient Near Eastern concept, biblical law considers the adulterous man to be committing an offense against the married woman’s husband. Thus the commandment calls men to respect the marriage of another man.”³⁷

From the above-mentioned discussions, it can be inferred that, the intent of above-mentioned commandment is to safeguard the institution of marriage and thus protect the family, which is a unit of society.

The Eighth Commandment of the Decalogue, underlines the seriousness of economic crime like theft, and intends to safeguard one’s property, the source of livelihood. The following verses depict the eighth commandment:

“You shall not steal.”³⁸

The Eighth commandment prohibits stealing which refers to acts of secretly seizing someone’s property without permission. Stealing comes

³⁶ Mark F Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, p.135.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.136.

³⁸ *The Bible, Exodus*, 21:15(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

from root *gnb* of Hebrew language. The verb *gnb* is also used to refer kidnapping of human beings as it is seen in the following verse:

“Whoever steals (*gnb*) a man, whether he sells him or is found in possession of him, shall be put to death.”³⁹

It can be implied that the Eighth commandment not only talks about stealing property but also refers to illegal seizure of human beings. However, in Jewish tradition of interpretation, stealing in Eighth commandment is only restricted to kidnapping of human beings.

For thieving livestock or goods, the thief has to pay back double the amount of items thieved.⁴⁰ Similarly, five or four fold restitution is demanded for slaughtering or selling someone’s oxen or sheep.⁴¹ The very existence of this command implies that people of the covenant have right to own the property and enjoy the property. Therefore, stealing is an assault on human dignity because one is robbed off his/her rights, what one person might have worked hard to earn his/her livelihood and suddenly deprived from enjoying his/her produce.

It is implicit that, the concern of the commandment is to safe guard the property and no one is deprived of property or produce of his/her labour. Therefore, an employer who does not pay wages, or who pays

³⁹ *The Bible, Exodus, 21:16*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁴⁰ *The Bible, Exodus, 22:9* (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁴¹ *The Bible, Exodus, 22:1*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

unjust wages is also the object of above-mentioned commandment. In this context, Mark F Rooker points out that:

“A worker who is not compensated for his labor or who receives inadequate wages and benefits is virtually the victim of theft. Any action that involves the manipulation of another human being for personal gain violates the spirit of this prohibition.”⁴²

Therefore, in the same line of thought, the other forms of stealing include; deception, trickery, oppression, false measures and balances in business transaction, selling of inferior quality of goods, and land grabbing.

The Ninth Commandment of the Decalogue, underline the significance of integrity in human transaction, especially in administration of justice. The following verses depict the ninth commandment:

“You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor.”⁴³

The word witness or testimony in the above-mentioned commandment is in the context of judicial proceedings. The noun ‘neighbor’ refers to any human being irrespective of social status. In Old Testament, the false testimony was considered as serious offence. The person who gives false testimony should be punished with the same

⁴² Mark F Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, p.152.

⁴³ *The Bible, Exodus, 20:16*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

punishment, as the innocent victim would have suffered because of false testimony.⁴⁴ The major concern of the Ninth commandment is to see that no one is unjustly punished by manipulation of legal proceedings especially by false testimony. Therefore, it can be implied that, the major concern of the Ninth commandment is justice in legal proceedings. Generally, in Biblical context, justice aims for total well being of a human being by fair and equal treatment, reflected in various human transactions especially in judiciary. The broader implication of this commandment can be impartial legal proceedings, equal access to legal system for justice, which is transparent and provides equal protection to all.

The Tenth Commandment of the Decalogue, censures covetousness, which may lead a person to steal or illegally possess someone's belongings.. The following verses depict the fourth commandment:

“You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or his manservant, or his maidservant, or his ox, or his ass, or anything that is your neighbor's.”⁴⁵

The verb ‘covet’ comes from the root word *hmd* in Hebrew language. The Tenth Commandment is unique because it prohibits very

⁴⁴ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 19:16-21* (Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁴⁵ *The Bible, Exodus, 20: 17*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

intention of the heart where as other commandments in the Decalogue prohibit overt actions. However, it is contended by Jewish scholars that, the verb ‘covet (*hmd*)’ not only connotes mere desire to possess neighbor’s property, but a physical attempt to possess what is desired.⁴⁶ The verb ‘covet’ can also be referred to obsessive desire, in this regard, John Durham, mentions that:

“The basic form of the tenth commandment thus prohibits an obsessive desire for any property belonging to any other person bound to the covenant with Yahweh.”⁴⁷

Therefore, it can be implied that coveting leads one to break all the norms of justice, especially by those who are in position of power and authority. In this regard George V Pixley writes that:

“Coveting connotes the act of superior who has the power to take overtly what is another’s”.⁴⁸

George V Pixley opines that, the last commandment is addressed to the powerful, who can use their resources to seize the property of the weak and vulnerable people. From the above-mentioned discussion, it is observed that, ‘Decalogue’ does not stipulate detail legal codes, instead Decalogue is concerned with ethical principles or policies at large, which

⁴⁶ Mark F Rooker, *The Ten Commandments: Ethics for the Twenty-First Century*, p.165.

⁴⁷ John I Durham, *Word Biblical Commenter: Exodus*, p. 299.

⁴⁸ George Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, p.139.

provide an broader framework for detailed legal codes of Pentateuch, which is the concerns of next section.

Legal Codes of Early Jewish Texts

Three legal codes have been identified in the Pentateuch; Covenant Code, is considered as oldest, and located in the Book of Exodus. Second legal code is called Levitical Code found in the book of Leviticus, and third legal code called Deuteronomy Code found in the book of Deuteronomy. The following section, deals with the selected portions of the above mentioned legal codes and other laws concerned with the social ethics.

Concern for slaves starts rights from the Decalogue were slaves are privileged to enjoy the *Sabbath* day rest along with their masters. In continuation with same concern, the book of Exodus lays significant emphasis on the well-being of slaves. Consequently, book of Exodus stipulates that, slave will be free after serving the master for six years without any kind of obligations. Moreover, a master has to set free the slave with enough resources as mentioned in the following verse:

“And when you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed; you shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your wine press; as the LORD your God has blessed you, you shall give to him.”⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 15:13-14*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

The people of Israel were mandated to treat slaves with dignity, and masters did not have any right over the life of a slave or right to cause any physical injury. If any master causes injury to a slave he would be penalized by setting the slave free without any obligations, this fact has been lucidly explained in the following verses from the book of Exodus:

"When a man strikes the eye of his slave, male or female, and destroys it, he shall let the slave go free for the eye's sake. If he knocks out the tooth of his slave, male or female, he shall let the slave go free for the tooth's sake."⁵⁰

In addition, in case, the slave dies by the physical violence by the master, consequently the master will be penalized, but may not be with death penalty. It may be argued that, the book of Exodus is only concerned about a *Hebrew*, who sells himself to be slave, and not about slaves who do not belong to people of Israel. The following verse is used for above-mentioned argument:

"When you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh, he shall go out free, for nothing."⁵¹

But, the above mentioned argument seems to be erroneous, when other legal codes of Pentateuch are consulted. For instance, the book of Leviticus stipulates that:

⁵⁰ *The Bible, Exodus, 21:26, 27*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁵¹ *The Bible, Exodus, 21:2*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

"When a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong. The stranger who sojourns with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the LORD your God."⁵²

The preceding verse mandates every Israel to treat the strangers and sojourners who do not belong to people of Israel as natives, which implies that these non-Israelites be given all the privileges and rights in par with the Israelites. In addition, the non-Israelites need to be accepted and loved by Israelites. Consequently, it can be deduced that, slaves who were not Israelites, were also entitled fair treatment by their masters, enjoying equal status and privileges in par with *Hebrew* slaves.

The above-mentioned privileges bestowed on slaves by the book of Exodus and other legal codes in the Pentateuch, demonstrate that, though Old Testament allowed one to buy a slave, but at the same time, tended to protect the interests of the slaves, with different restrictions on the masters. Consequently, a slave enjoys certain rights and status, and foresees the freedom after six years without any monetary obligations. Therefore, the slaves under the legal protection of the book of Exodus will be like a worker under contract agreement in contemporary understanding.

⁵² *The Bible, Leviticus, 19:33-34*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

The book of Exodus attempts to provide security to slaves from unhindered physical violence as it prescribes penalty for injuring or murdering a slave. Moreover, the book of Leviticus mandates a *Hebrew*, to love a stranger as oneself, giving him/her all the privileges of natives. The book of Exodus goes one-step further in protecting the rights of female slaves who are concubines, entitled to the privileges of wife and daughter, consequently, their economic security and marital rights were safeguarded.

From the above-mentioned discourse, it can be implied that Pentateuch allowed one to be sold as slave because of debt, but not to promote slavery per se. However, it is seen that human dignity, security of life, economic rights of a slave are safeguarded with forthcoming freedom after six years of service without any monetary obligations. Bible provided ethical norms for the system of slavery which was already existed in ancient near eastern society, and Bible tends to move towards abolishing slavery, by mandating slave should be released on seventh year.

Sanctity of Life

Sanctity of life is expressed in sixth commandment of Decalogue, which prohibits murder. The book of Exodus further explains the concern for sanctity of life and stipulate the laws with various punishments based

on nature of violation. As discussed in the earlier section dealing with the sixth commandment of Decalogue, human life is too precious to damage, as it is seen that, every human being is made in the image of God irrespective of social status or economic status. This fact is clearly stated in Genesis:

“Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image.”⁵³

From the preceding verse, it can be inferred that, any assault on human life and dignity disgraces God. Therefore, the book of Exodus prescribes death penalty for intentional murder as we read in the following verse:

"Whoever strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death. But if he did not lie in wait for him, but God let him fall into his hand, then I will appoint for you a place to which he may flee.”⁵⁴

The Book of Deuteronomy recognizes the ancient practice of family revenge where the nearest relative of the victim, had a right to kill the murderer. Nevertheless, this right was restricted by the provision for the accused to run into the cities of asylum, and appeal for an investigation. If the crime of an intentional murder was proved, the murderer would be handed over to the nearest relative for the execution

⁵³ *The Bible, Genesis, 9:6*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁵⁴ *The Bible, Exodus, 21: 12-13*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

of death penalty. However, if the crime of intentional murder was not proved, the accused would be provided with permanent domicile in the asylum city, where the nearest relative of the victim could not touch the accused. Therefore, it can be inferred that, book of Deuteronomy, does not give free hand to the practice of family revenge and instead, subject it to proper judicial procedures.

Moreover, the book of Exodus not only addresses the issue of intentional murder but also loss of life caused by negligence as mentioned in the following verses:

“But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or a woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death. If a ransom is laid on him, then he shall give for the redemption of his life whatever is laid upon him.”⁵⁵

From the above-mentioned verse it is clear that, if any one loses life by the carelessness or negligence of another person, the culprit is worthy of death penalty or ransom fixed by the judges. Because irresponsible actions leading to physical harm and loss of life attracts a severe penalty as human life is considered as precious and sacred. In addition, Numbers, the fourth book of Pentateuch, mandates that, no amount of material or monetary ransom can be accepted to trade off the

⁵⁵ *The Bible, Exodus, 21:29-30*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

death penalty for the culprit of intentional murder, the following verse makes this fact clear:

“Moreover you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death; but he shall be put to death.”⁵⁶

Sanctity of human life does not vary based on the social or economic status of the person, in this regard, book of Leviticus, stipulates that, human life is precious and valuable, irrespective of ethnic origin. This reality is stated in the book of Leviticus:

“You shall have one law for the sojourner and for the native; for I am the LORD your God.”⁵⁷

The Book of Deuteronomy moves one step ahead in protecting the sanctity of life, because it mandates capital punishment for the person who kidnaps other person as seen in the following verse:

“If a man is found stealing one of his brethren, the people of Israel, and if he treats him as a slave or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from the midst of you.”⁵⁸

The above-mentioned verse clearly prohibits stealing human for selling or for forced labour, which is equivalent to modern day human trafficking for oppressive commercial practices. The issue of physical

⁵⁶ *The Bible, Numbers, 35: 31*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁵⁷ *The Bible, Leviticus, 24: 22*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁵⁸ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 24:7*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

violence is dealt in the book of Exodus, the following verses; depict the laws on physical violence:

“When men quarrel and one strikes the other with a stone or with his fist and the man does not die but keeps his bed, then if the man rises again and walks abroad with his staff, he that struck him shall be clear; only he shall pay for the loss of his time, and shall have him thoroughly healed.”⁵⁹

The above-mentioned verses stipulate that, the perpetrator need to compensate the economic loss incurred by the victim due to physical injuries, making the victim economically unproductive. In addition, the book of Exodus mandates that, it is the responsibility of the perpetrator to bear expenses of medical care to restore the health of the victim. Therefore, it can be implied that, it is the responsibility of the person, who caused the physical damage, should take the care of the victim and the dependents of victim, until the victim's health is restored. Apart from the economic compensation, there is no other penalty imposed on the perpetrator of the physical injury because both the persons were quarrelling, and not with lethal weapons to cause serious physical injury, but in fits of rage one injures other with stone or fist. In this regard, George Pixley states that:

“...the perpetrator will be responsible for the time lost in convalescence as well for the expenses of the treatment. No damages are

⁵⁹ *The Bible, Exodus, 21: 18-19*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

imposed for the permanent effects, perhaps because the victim is presumed to have been fighting as well, and thus share in the guilt.”⁶⁰

The widely misunderstood law in the book of Exodus is called ‘law of revenge’, which is mentioned below:

"When men strive together, and hurt a woman with child, so that there is a miscarriage, and yet no harm follows, the one who hurt her shall be fined, according as the woman's husband shall lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, and foot for foot. Burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”⁶¹

Careful observation of the above mentioned verses make it clear that the principle of ‘eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth’ is actually meant for payment of appropriate compensation to be decided by judges and not to authorize victim or relative of victim to take revenge. In this regard, Goran Larsson, mentions that:

“In Jewish tradition” eye for eye, tooth for tooth” exclusively dealt with monetary compensation and nothing else.”⁶²

In addition, book of Numbers states that:

“Moreover you shall accept no ransom for the life of a murderer, who is guilty of death; but he shall be put to death.”⁶³

⁶⁰ George Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, p.172.

⁶¹ *The Bible, Exodus*, 21: 22-25(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁶² Goran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian traditions*, p.165.

The above-mentioned verse makes it clear that there can be ransom for all other cases, except murder. Therefore, it can be inferred that the so-called law of revenge, widely misunderstood, speaks about appropriate compensation.

Economic Security and Social Justice

The Ten Commandments expressed the concern to safe guard one's property by prohibiting thieving, as observed in Eighth Commandment of Decalogue. Similarly, Book of Exodus stipulates the laws to safeguard the property, especially by imposing stringent penalty to the culprit who thieves or damages the property belonging to others. In this regard, Book of Exodus prescribes heavy restitution to the culprit who thieves or damages property of others as observed in the following verses:

“If a man steals an ox or a sheep, and kills it or sells it, he shall pay five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep. He shall make restitution; if he has nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If the stolen beast is found alive in his possession, whether it is an ox or an ass or a sheep, he shall pay double.”⁶⁴

The high restitution mentioned in the above-mentioned verse aims at guaranteeing the security of property from external encroachment. However, Pentateuch never values human life and dignity more than materialistic property. Consequently, the book of Exodus restricts the

⁶³ *The Bible, Numbers, 35: 31*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁶⁴ *The Bible, Exodus, 22:1-2*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

penalty for property theft or damage in economic restitution, but not the punishments like mutilation of limbs or death penalty, as in other ancient Near Eastern law codes.

The book of Exodus also stipulate penalty for careless actions of person, which damages property of others. In this regard, book of Exodus uses two examples, which are mentioned in the following verses:

“When a man causes a field or vineyard to be grazed over, or lets his beast loose and it feeds in another man's field, he shall make restitution from the best in his own field and in his own vineyard. When fire breaks out and catches in thorns so that the stacked grain, the standing grain, or the field is consumed, he that kindled the fire shall make full restitution.”⁶⁵

As it can be observed in the above-mentioned verses that, a person has to pay penalty for consequences of one's actions, which has indirectly damaged someone's property. For instance, as observed in above mentioned verse, destruction of property caused by cattle, which is not controlled and left to be grazed over someone's field, or a fire, which is kindled but unregulated leading to destruction of property, attracts the full restitution from the culprit. The above-mentioned casuistic laws aim to protect the property on which the livelihood of the person is involved. Therefore, it can be inferred that, book of Exodus is concerned about the

⁶⁵*The Bible, Exodus, 22: 5-6*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

economic security and livelihood. Book of Deuteronomy further reinforcing the protection of property and livelihood stipulates that:

“ In the inheritance which you will hold in the land that the LORD your God gives you to possess, you shall not remove your neighbor's landmark, which the men of old have set.”⁶⁶

The above mentioned verse stipulates that, landmark not to be removed, as landmarks are the parameters for the ownership of land, and generally it is the powerful person who is tempted to grab the land of the weak by manipulating the land marks thus endangering livelihood and life of the weak and defenceless. In this regard, Lalfakzuala, states that:

“To remove a man’s landmark meant more than stealing a few feet of his ground. By imperiling his means of livelihood it threatened his life.”⁶⁷

Protection of the weak and vulnerable sections of the society is one of the significant concerns of the book of Exodus, which provides a special instruction to protect the interest of orphans, widows and foreigners who are domiciled in the land of Israel. The following scripture portion highlights the above-mentioned concern:

“You shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you do afflict them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry; and my

⁶⁶ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 19: 14*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁶⁷ Lalfakzuala, *Human Rights in Deuteronomy: A Sociological Approach*, p.113.

wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.”⁶⁸

It is implicit that, the above-mentioned sections of the society are socio-economically and politically powerless and voiceless with no one to defend their case. Consequently, these sections of the society are vulnerable to different kind of exploitations like physical and sexual violence, forced labor, unjust wages, unjust prosecution and convictions. In this context, as seen in the above mentioned verse, book of Exodus presents, *Yahweh*, the God of Israel, speaking in second person singular, addressing directly to every member of the covenant, to uphold the concerns of above mentioned vulnerable group. Similarly, the book of Deuteronomy places significant concern in protecting the justice of vulnerable sections of the society, as seen in the following verses:

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge; but you shall remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this.”⁶⁹

The preceding verse present *Yahweh* speaking in second person singular, addressing the judges, thus signifying the importance of protecting the justice which is due to above mentioned group of people. Book of Deuteronomy is not only concerned about protecting justice due

⁶⁸ *The Bible, Exodus, 22: 21-24*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁶⁹ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 24: 17-18*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

to the weaker sections of the society, but it intends to guarantee their basic needs as stated in the following verses.

“When you read your harvest in your field, and have forgotten a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands. When you beat your olive trees, you shall not go over the boughs again; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. When you gather the grapes of your vineyard, you shall not glean it afterward; it shall be for the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt; therefore, I command you to do this.”⁷⁰

The above-mentioned verse stipulates that aliens, orphans and widows have the gleaning rights, to glean all the agricultural products for their survival, because the above mentioned group of people does not own land and may not have adequate economic resources for their survival. This law is further reinforced in the book of Leviticus, which mentions the concerns of above-mentioned verse.⁷¹ The motivational clause for people of Israel to care for the vulnerable sections of the society is to remember their days of slavery in Egypt and how they were delivered by *Yahweh*. Therefore as mentioned in earlier sections, the

⁷⁰ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 24: 19-22*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁷¹ *The Bible, Leviticus, 19: 9-10*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

belief that, *Yahweh* delivered Israelites from the Egyptian slavery is the foundation for Israel's commitment and obedience to *Yahweh*.

Moreover, the book of Deuteronomy specifies that, at every third year, all the people of Israel need to offer their tithe, generally one tenth of their income in the form of agriculture produce and animals to vulnerable sections of the society, this fact has been clearly mentioned in the following verse:

“At the end of every three years you shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year, and lay it up within your towns; and the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled; that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.”⁷²

Similarly, book of Deuteronomy aims at integrating vulnerable sections of the society in the riches and Celebrations of the land, the following verses makes it clear:

“Then you shall keep the feast of weeks to the LORD your God with the tribute of a freewill offering from your hand, which you shall give as the LORD your God blesses you; and you shall rejoice before the LORD your God, you and your son and your daughter, your manservant and your maidservant, the Levite who is within your towns, the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow who are among you, at the place

⁷² *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 14: 28-29*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

which the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there.”⁷³

The cursory glance of above-mentioned verses mandates that every Israelite integrates the vulnerable sections including aliens in their celebration of feasts. This clearly brings out the fact that, the law of *Yahweh* aims at provisioning the vulnerable sections irrespective of the socio-economic and political status, to enjoy the produce and participate in the religious and cultural celebrations, entitling them the dignity and honor.

For people of Israel, agriculture and livestock were the major economic activities, and source of livelihood. Therefore, people were vulnerable to become poor and economically helpless due to crop failure or draught, consequently survival becomes a challenge. Along with the above-mentioned risks, people were prone to economic debacle due to illness or fire, in such context; economically helpless people become prone to exploitation by greedy moneylenders, and struggle to survive due to lack of basic needs. In order to address above mentioned economic helplessness and poverty of people, the book of Exodus stipulates the laws mentioned in the following verses:

“If you lend money to any of my people with you who is poor, you shall not be to him as a creditor, and you shall not exact interest from him. If ever you take your neighbor's garment

⁷³ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 16: 10-11*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

in pledge, you shall restore it to him before the sun goes down; for that is his only covering, it is his mantle for his body; in what else shall he sleep? And if he cries to me, I will hear, for I am compassionate.”⁷⁴

The above-mentioned verse reveals that, book of Exodus prohibits someone to take advantage of someone’s misery, by exacting interest. In addition, the pledged objects should not be kept back from the debtor, if those objects are source of survival. Consequently, it can be inferred that, sanctity of human life and survival precede all the commercial interests.

In this regard, George Pixley writes that:

“Property rights have a place when they are needed to guarantee the maintenance of resources a person must have in order to live. But they cannot be preferred to the fundamental right of all human beings to have access to the goods necessary to sustain life”⁷⁵

Book of Exodus has stringent laws to protect property, but at the same time, it recommends that property should be used to protect poor when their life and human dignity is endangered. Similarly, the book of Leviticus mentions that:

“And if your brother becomes poor, and cannot maintain himself with you, you shall maintain him; as a stranger and a sojourner he shall live with you. Take no interest from him or increase, but fear your God; that your brother may live beside you. You shall not

⁷⁴ *The Bible, Exodus, 22: 25-27*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁷⁵ George Pixley, *On Exodus: A Liberation Perspective*, p.179.

lend him your money at interest, nor give him your food for profit.”⁷⁶

The above-mentioned verses explicitly prohibit profiting by supplying the basic needs of someone whose survival has been endangered by economic loss. Concern for one’s livelihood and economic security is explicitly reinforced in the book of Leviticus, as stated in the following verse:

“You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired servant shall not remain with you all night until the morning.”⁷⁷

The preceding verse clearly takes the cases of vulnerable sections of the society, who are exploited because they are hard pressed for work, they are hired for work but not paid their wages in due time, or underpaid. Therefore, the above-mentioned verse instructs the employers to pay wages on the same day of labor, so that the laborer is not denied of livelihood and consequent basic needs. The above-mentioned verse also concerned about the oppression by fraudulent means and robbery often by violence. In this regard, Walter C Kaiser, mentions that, the phrase ‘do not rob’ in the above mentioned verse, in Hebrew language refers to using violence to oppress the vulnerable sections of the society.⁷⁸ Therefore, it can be inferred that, the preceding verse assumes that poor

⁷⁶ *The Bible, Leviticus, 25: 35-37*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁷⁷ *The Bible, Leviticus, 19: 13*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁷⁸ Walter C. Kaiser Jr., *Toward Old Testament Ethics*, p. 120.

are exploited and robbed by violence and consequently under paid or their wages are withheld. A similar concern is expressed in the following verses from the book of Deuteronomy:

“When the sun goes down, you shall restore to him the pledge that he may sleep in his cloak and bless you; and it shall be righteousness to you before the LORD your God. You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether he is one of your brethren or one of the sojourners who are in your land within your towns.”⁷⁹

The above-mentioned verse not only prohibits oppression of fellow Israelite who is poor and vulnerable but also the aliens who are domiciled in the land. Moreover, the verses emphasize that fair treatment of poor and vulnerable is demand of righteousness before God.

Moreover, book of Deuteronomy mandates that all debts need to be cancelled in every seventh year, called *sabbatical* year, as explained in the following verses:

“At the end of every seven years you shall grant a release. And this is the manner of the release: every creditor shall release what he has lent to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor, his brother, because the LORD's release has been proclaimed. Of a foreigner you may exact it; but whatever of yours is with your brother your hand shall release. But there will be no poor among you (for the LORD will bless you in the land

⁷⁹ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 24: 13-4*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

which the LORD your God gives you for an inheritance to possess).”⁸⁰

As mentioned in the preceding verse all the creditors are mandated to write off the debts. Therefore, during *sabbatical* year all the pledged things will be returned back to the debtor, leading to freedom from all the obligations of the loans. The motivating phrase for the creditor is God’s blessings in the land, which is given as inheritance from God. Therefore, the rationale for creditor to release the debtor is God’s promised blessing. The term foreigner refers to a person temporarily domiciled in the land, is the only exception for creditor to exact the debt.

The above-mentioned verse also mandates that, there should not be any poor amidst people of Israel, In other words, no one should live in hunger and poverty deprived of the necessities of life. Therefore, it can be inferred that all the resources of the land need` to be shared and no one should be deprived of the produce of the natural resources and land. Though the book of Deuteronomy stipulates property rights, at the same time those rights could not be used to oppress the landless or vulnerable sections of the society. Thus, the book of Deuteronomy aims at achieving social justice.

⁸⁰ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 15: 1-4*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

Judiciary Process

The Book of Exodus lays a significant emphasize in administration of Justice through proper and fair judicial process. Therefore, book of Exodus places the concerned verses as words of *Yahweh*, addressed in second person singular to all the people of Israel, as stated in the following verses:

“You shall not utter a false report. You shall not join hands with a wicked man, to be a malicious witness. You shall not follow a multitude to do evil; nor shall you bear witness in a suit, turning aside after a multitude, so as to pervert justice; nor shall you be partial to a poor man in his suit.”⁸¹

The above-mentioned verses address the issue of false witness, which maligns the name of innocent person, leading to unjust condemnation. Evidences often acquired through the false witnesses tilt the case against the innocent in question, and let the culprit go scot-free. It is often noticed that false witnesses act on behalf of rich and powerful persons out of greed for money or in pressure by the powerful. Therefore, it can be observed that rich and politically powerful people attempt to manipulate justice for their stakes. In this context above mentioned verses warn against taking unjust side along with the majority of the people or the person represented by the majority of the people. This verse is a warning even to judges so that they will not be influenced by the

⁸¹ *The Bible, Exodus, 23: 1-3*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

powerful or multitudes of people and tilt the justice condemning the innocent. Therefore, to ensure the fair administration of justice book of Deuteronomy mandates for multiple witnesses as seen in the following verse:

“A single witness shall not prevail against a man for any crime or for any wrong in connection with any offense that he has committed; only on the evidence of two witnesses, or of three witnesses, shall a charge be sustained.”⁸²

Moreover, the book of Exodus also warns judges against taking bribes, consequently condemn the poor who is innocent and righteous as mentioned in the following verses:

“You shall not pervert the justice due to your poor in his suit. Keep far from a false charge, and do not slay the innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wicked. And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the officials, and subverts the cause of those who are in the right. You shall not oppress a stranger; you know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt.”⁸³

Politically strong and economically powerful, tend to have more influence and power over judiciary. Generally, in judicial process, bribe plays a major role in framing a false cases leading to perversion of justice, consequently poor people are often victims of injustice. Along with the poor people, the preceding sections takes up the cause of aliens,

⁸² *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 19: 15*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁸³ *The Bible, Exodus, 23: 6-9*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

who are also vulnerable sections of the society often deprived of justice due to them. The above-mentioned verses recall the Egyptian slavery of Israel and present it as motivating factor to do justice to aliens and poor. As mentioned in earlier sections, the belief that *Yahweh* delivered Israel from the Egyptian slavery is the corner stone of the covenant between the people of Israel and *Yahweh*, consequently mandating people of Israelites to be faithful and obedient to *Yahweh*.

Along with the Book of Exodus, the book of Leviticus presents a strong injunction against the impartial judgments favoring either poor or rich, as mentioned in the following verse:

“You shall do no injustice in judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great, but in righteousness shall you judge your neighbor.”⁸⁴

The above-mentioned verse mandates the fair and transparent judgments irrespective of the socio-economic background of the accused or the accuser. The book of Deuteronomy underlines the above-mentioned concern with emphasis on vulnerable sections of the society, as stated in the following verse:

“You shall not pervert the justice due to the sojourner or to the fatherless, or take a widow's garment in pledge.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ *The Bible, Leviticus, 19: 15*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

⁸⁵ *The Bible, Deuteronomy, 24:17*(Translation: Revised Standard Version).

The preceding verse widens scope of justice to aliens in par with fellow Israelites, underlining the fact that all human beings are worthy of justice irrespective of ethnic background or political status. In addition, the verse also aims at ensuring justice for vulnerable sections of society, who are often orphans without male members to protect them in male dominated society.