

לְךָ אִשָּׁה מִיִּנְקַת מֶן הָעִבְרִיִּית וְתִינַק לְךָ אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד׃ וְתֹאמַר־  
 לָהּ בַת־פְּרֻעָה לְכִי וְתֵלְךְ הָעֵלְמָה וְתִקְרָא אֶת־אִם הַיֶּלֶד׃  
 • וְתֹאמַר לָהּ בַת־פְּרֻעָה הִילִיכִי אֶת־הַיֶּלֶד הַזֶּה וְהִינְקִינֶהוּ לִי

of the Hebrew women to nurse the child for you?” “Go,”<sup>8</sup> said Pharaoh’s daughter. So the girl went away and called the child’s mother. “Take this child,” Pharaoh’s daughter<sup>9</sup> told her; “nurse him for me, and I will pay you your wage.”



EGYPTOLOGY

2:9 Nurse maids for the wealthy

In pre-modern societies, breastfeeding was the only way women could feed their babies. If a mother was unable to produce milk, or if she was incapacitated or died during childbirth, a wet nurse was hired to feed the baby.

In ancient Egypt, wet nurses were hired not only by families who had no alternative, but also by royal families, families from the social elite, and even families of highly skilled workmen to ease the burden of early motherhood.

A woman who recently had given birth, and perhaps had lost her own baby, would become a wet nurse. She could also have been a woman whose baby was healthy, but who produced enough milk to feed two babies at once.

In some cases, an infant lived with the wet nurse and her family until being weaned. Ancient Egyptian texts tell us that usually a child was weaned at the age of three. Typically, the wet nurse was paid for her own food, and for the care of the baby.

If a wet nurse was hired by the royal household, she moved to the royal palace with her family. Her own children and the royal children grew up together. Due to this very close and almost familial relationship, the royal children and the children of the wet nurse had a sort of “milk brother-

hood” that at times led to their developing close relationships that were maintained throughout their lives. The husband and sons of the wet nurse benefited from this relationship when a little prince became the monarch, perhaps receiving an appointment to a high-ranking position by the new king.

A depiction from the tomb of King Tutankhamun (14th century BCE) shows the royal wet nurse Maia suckling the heir to the throne seated on her lap, dressed in full regalia. In this role, she was a source of pride for her sons and husband, who were grateful to her for the opportunities her position afforded them.

In the Exodus story, the daughter of Pharaoh discovers an abandoned baby and needs to hire a wet nurse. Waiting and watching, Miriam offers her mother’s services, allowing Yokheved unexpectedly to be able to nurse and raise her own son after she had sent him away in his “ark.” Only when he is weaned, probably at the age of three, does he join the household of the daughter of Pharaoh. ■ RSH



➤ Maia, wet nurse of King Tutankhamun

מִשָּׁה כֵּן תֹּאמֶר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם אֱלֹהֵי  
 אַבְרָהָם אֱלֹהֵי יִצְחָק וְאֱלֹהֵי יַעֲקֹב שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֵיכֶם זֶה־שְּׁמִי  
 לְעֹלָם וְזֶה זִכְרִי לְדֹר דָּר: לֵךְ וְאֶסְפַּתְּ אֶת־זִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וְאָמַרְתָּ  
 אֱלֹהִים יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵיכֶם נִרְאָה אֵלַי אֱלֹהֵי אַבְרָהָם  
 יִצְחָק וְיַעֲקֹב לֵאמֹר פְּקֹד פְּקֹדֹתַי אֶתְכֶם וְאֶת־הָעָשׂוּי לָכֶם  
 בְּמִצְרַיִם: וְאָמַר אֲעֲלֶה אֶתְכֶם מֵעַנְי מִצְרַיִם אֶל־אֶרֶץ הַכְּנַעֲנִי  
 וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַפְּרִזִּי וְהַחִוִּי וְהַיְבוּסִי אֶל־אֶרֶץ זְבַת חֶלֶב  
 וְדָבָשׁ: וְשָׁמְעוּ לְקוֹלְךָ וּבֵאתָ אֵתָּה וְזִקְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶל־מֶלֶךְ  
 מִצְרַיִם וְאָמַרְתֶּם אֵלָיו יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵי הָעִבְרִיִּים נִקְרָה עָלֵינוּ  
 וְעַתָּה גִלְגַּל־נָא דַרְךְ שְׁלֹשֶׁת יָמִים בְּמִדְבָר וְנִזְבְּחָה לַיהוָה

חמישי

say this to the Israelites: The LORD God of your fathers, the God of Avraham, the God of Yitzhak, and the God of Yaakov, has sent me to you. This is My name forever, and this is how I will be remembered through the ages. “Go, gather the elders of Israel and tell them: The LORD God of your fathers appeared to me – the God of Avraham, Yitzhak, and Yaakov – saying: I have watched over you and I have seen what is being inflicted upon you in Egypt. And I promise to bring you out of the misery of Egypt to the land of the Canaanites and Hittites, the Amorites and Perizzites, the Hivites and Jebusites, to a land flowing with milk and honey. “They will listen to you. Then you and the elders of Israel shall go to the king of Egypt and tell him, “The LORD God of the Hebrews has revealed Himself to us. Send us forth now for a three-day journey into the wilderness to sacrifice



EGYPTOLOGY

3:18 Taking time off for worship

The modern site of Deir el-Medina is located on the west bank of the Nile in the region of ancient Thebes (modern-day Luxor), near the Valley of the Kings. The village of Deir el-Medina was a settlement of artisans, employed by the crown, who built the royal tombs in the Valley of the Kings between the Eighteenth and the Twentieth Dynasties (1550–1080 BCE).

The craftsmen were divided into two work gangs, each responsible for one side of the royal tomb, supervised by a foreman. They dug the tomb, plastered its walls, drew the scenes and the hieroglyphs, sculpted them, and finally painted the reliefs. This work required a high level of skill, which was difficult because light and fresh air were scarce.

The foremen had to keep a record of work attendance and reported absences to the scribe; ostraca and papyri found at Deir el-Medina document absences of the royal artisans. The most frequent reason for absence was illness. However, there were many other reasons for the workmen to have a day off: scorpion bites, mourning, drinking, a new baby, and fighting.

A workman could take a day off because he was “offering to his god” or participating in a religious ritual or holiday, often on weekends. The ancient Egyptian work week was ten days long. According to the Deir el-Medina records, the last two days of each week, and often the first day of the following week, were free. In this context, the Israelites’ request to go and worship their God for three days seems in perfect order with an Egyptian norm. ■ RSH

Deir el-Medina and the Temple of Irinufer, Luxor





— ARCHAEOLOGY —

13:16-19 Tefillin in archaeology

Among the thousands of written scroll fragments discovered in the Dead Sea area, archaeologists at Qumran found several scrolls that are actually tefillin, “phylacteries,” dating from the time of the Second Temple. Most of the parchments that were found were either separate fragments or were embedded in crushed phylacteries boxes.

Scholars extracted parchments from some of the boxes, which had not been opened by the archaeologists when they found them. These parchments were carefully

•• טו כִּלְפָטֶיךָ רַחֵם הַזְכָּרִים וְכֹל־בְּכוֹר בְּנֵי אִפְדָּה: וְהָיָה לְאוֹת עַל־יָדְךָה וּלְטוֹטְפֹת בֵּין עֵינֶיךָ בֵּי בְּתוֹק יָד הוֹצִיאָנוּ יְהוָה

firstborn animal to the LORD, and redeem all my firstborn

•• 16 sons.’“It shall be a sign on your arm and an emblem between your eyes – with a mighty hand the LORD rescued us from

unrolled by experts who had experience taking apart Egyptian papyri.

In addition to the phylacteries scrolls found in Qumran, two sets of phylacteries from the time of Bar Kokhba (132–135 CE) were discovered in caves in the Judean Desert. Each of the two represents a different tradition, regarding the order of the texts in the phylacteries – known as the



— HALAKHA —

13:16-19 Tefillin in halakha

The commandment to wear tefillin – or in English, “phylacteries,” from an ancient Greek word meaning “amulet” – is based on verses 16 and 19 here, and on verses 6:8 and 11:18 in Deuteronomy. The commandment is observed by means of two small boxes containing Torah passages written on pieces of parchment; leather bands connect the boxes to the wearer’s body. One box is worn on the forehead, between the eyes; and one is tied to the arm, on the inside of the upper arm muscle – opposite the wearer’s heart. Although early sages wore tefillin all day, the modern practice is to wear them only during the morning prayer service. • Ed.



➤ Tefillin discovered at Qumran

traditions of Rashi and Rabbenu Tam. Both of the phylacteries that were found included texts from Exodus 12:43-13:16, but one has an additional verse – the verse about honoring parents from the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:11).

The phylacteries found in Qumran are the earliest examples we have of ritual objects used in daily prayer. In fact, the Qumran scrolls are two thousand years old. A Jewish community – thought to be the Essenes – existed in Qumran from the 2nd century BCE until the 1st century CE. This is the community believed to have used the scrolls found in the area. The settlement was destroyed during the Great Revolt of 66–70 CE against the Romans. • Ed.



➤ Modern-day tefillin



NEAR EAST

16:36 *Omer* and *ephah* – measurements

The term *omer* as a unit of dry measurement appears just once in the Tanakh. In contrast, the term *ephah* – which is slightly less than 25 liters (about 6.5 gallons) – is mentioned in several places. But beyond this passage, the tenth part of an ephah is not called an *omer* but rather an *issaron*, literally meaning a tenth (Ex. 29:40; Lev. 5:11, 14:12; Num. 15:4).

The Hebrew word *omer* appears elsewhere in Tanakh to mean sheaves – a different context entirely. It seems to have fallen into disuse as a unit of measurement. Even the *ephah* itself – despite its multiple mentions in the Torah as a dry unit of measurement – seems to have become less common in later times. *Ephah* is explicitly described in Ezekiel 45:11, which defines it as the equivalent of a *bath*, the Hebrew term for a unit of measurement of volume. Were it a common measurement, this explanation would have been unnecessary.

A possible reason for the lack of clarity surrounding measurements is the Israelites' transition from the ancient Egyptian system of weights and measurements to the Babylonian system. The Egyptian system used units based on multiples of 1, 10, 20, 40, 80, and 160 as the basic unit. The Babylonian system used units founded on multiples of 6, with the basic units being 1, 12, 24, 60, and 72. ■ MT



➤ Ancient Egyptian gold rings being weighed, wall painting from tomb, Thebes, 14th century BCE



➤ Canopic jars of Neskhons, wife of Pinedjem II, calcite with wood, Deirel-Bahri royal cache, 10th century BCE



NEAR EAST

16:33 *Tzintzenet*

The word *tzintzenet* appears only once in the entire Tanakh. It refers to the jar used to preserve the manna – so that future generations would see the sustenance provided to the Israelites at the time of the Exodus.

The word *tzintzenet* is clearly distinguished from the common term for an all-purpose jar, *kad*. While the exact details of this particular *tzintzenet* are not provided here, the long-term preservation of organic matter in sealed jars was well-known throughout the ancient Near East, particularly in funerary rites. The most famous example is the canopic jars of ancient Egypt – four jars used to preserve the major internal organs of an individual for use in the afterlife.

Throughout the ancient Near East, earthenware vessels sealed in wax were a common method of storing valued items. In fact, some of the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in the Qumran caves had been preserved in this manner and, likewise, Jeremiah 32:14 mentions putting legal documents in an “earthenware vessel” to ensure that the documents would be preserved. ■ MT





GEOGRAPHY

17:6 Mount Sinai

Where is Mount Sinai? Jewish tradition correlates Mount Sinai with Mount Horev, which is mentioned in various passages. But the biblical text provides few clues – aside from Deuteronomy 1:2, which states that Mount Sinai is an eleven-day journey from Kadesh Barnea via Mount Seir. A second hint is that the date in Exodus 19:1 suggests it took six weeks for the Israelites to travel to Mount Sinai after leaving Egypt.

A Christian tradition established in the 4th century CE indicates that the location of Mount Sinai is Jebel Musa, in the southern Sinai Peninsula. Biblical scholar Edward Robinson proposed that the mountain is nearby, on the peak of Ras Safsafah.

But others offer alternative locations. Major C.S. Jarvis, a British officer in the early 20th century, opposed locating Mount Sinai in the southern part of the Sinai

וַיִּסְעוּ כָּל-עֵדֻת בְּנֵי-יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּדְבַּר-סִין לְמִסְעֵיהֶם עַל-פִּי יְהוָה « ז  
 וַיַּחֲנוּ בְּרִפְדִּים וַאֲיֵן מֵיִם לְשִׁתּוֹת הָעָם: וַיִּרֶב הָעָם עִם-מֹשֶׁה ב  
 וַיֹּאמְרוּ תִּנּוּלְנוּ מֵיִם וְנִשְׁתֶּה וַיֹּאמֶר לָהֶם מֹשֶׁה מִה־תִּרְיֹבֶן  
 עִמָּדִי מִה־תִּנְסֹן אֶת-יְהוָה: וַיַּעֲמָא שֵׁם הָעָם לַמַּיִם וַיִּלֶן הָעָם  
 עַל-מֹשֶׁה וַיֹּאמֶר לָמָּה זֶה הָעֲלִיתֶנּוּ מִמִּצְרַיִם לְהַמִּית אֹתִי

- 17 1 All the community of Israel moved on after that from the desert of Sin, traveling from place to place as the LORD guided them, and they camped at Refidim, but there was  
 2 no water there for the people to drink. The people started to wrangle with Moshe. “Give us water to drink,” they raged. “Why do you wrangle with me?” asked Moshe. “Why are you  
 3 testing the LORD?” But the people were thirsty for water. They railed against Moshe, “Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Was it to kill me, my children and all my livestock

Peninsula – pointing out its inhospitable, rugged terrain. He believed the site was Jebel Helal, a 2,920-foot mountain in the northern Sinai that stands alone on an otherwise flat plain; it is a potential candidate because of it can be said to be an eleven-day journey to Kadesh Barnea.

Other scholars suggested the site is in northern Arabia (ancient Midian) – possibly one of the region’s active volcanoes, or a peak on the eastern shore of the Gulf of Aqaba near Jebel el-Lawz. However, this latter area is not an eleven-day journey from Kadesh Barnea. • IBZ



➤ Saint Catherine’s monastery, built by order of Emperor Justinian I in the 6th century CE, at the foot of a potential site for Mount Sinai



◀ The goddess Ishtar holding her symbol. terracotta relief, early 2nd millennium BCE, Eshnunna

and served. The divine presence entered the image through a well-known ancient Near East magical “mouth washing” ritual, which included a purification ceremony that the polytheists believed “opened the mouth” and enabled the statue to eat, drink, speak, hear and smell.

Statues were a major focus of worship throughout the ancient Near East, beginning in Mesopotamia and Egypt around the 3rd millennium BCE. Often, a statue was carved from wood or stone and encased in gold and silver, with precious jewels representing eyes and ears. The primary role of the priests was to care for and feed these idols, and to maintain the temple and its grounds.

When a city was defeated in war, conquerors often carried away its statues to show the power of their own gods over those of the conquered city. Sometimes victors would destroy these images – the only situation in which divine images were deliberately demolished was outside of Israel.

In contrast to the pervasive ancient Near Eastern belief in polytheism and practice of idolatry, the Ten Commandments determine that God is One, that He is supernatural, eternal, and not subject to magic, and that His presence cannot be reduced to any object. They also define the exclusive loyalty of Israel to God – a loyalty that was an inherent component of the Sinai Covenant (see “Covenant in the form of Hittite suzerainty treaty” on page 105). ▪ JU



NEAR EAST

20:3–5 Prohibitions against images and gods

The broad prohibitions against polytheism and idolatry, which are expressed in these verses, were unique in the ancient world.

All peoples in the ancient Near East were polytheistic. Mesopotamia had thousands of minor gods, with about twenty major deities in Babylon and forty or so others in Egypt. Each city had its own patron deity and temples abounded, each dedicated to a deity.

The concept of idolatry refers to a belief that the living presence of a god is found in a statue or image – that physical representations of deities must be worshipped





NEAR EAST

20:7–10 A week is a Tanakh innovation

The concept of the Sabbath, as defined in this verse, is primarily an expression of social-religious justice throughout society: the fact that nobody can work – or make anyone else work – for one day each week grants rights to the lower classes that they did not enjoy in other societies in the ancient Near East.

The seven-day week was first introduced by the Torah, and it reflects the biblical story of the seven days of creation. In contrast, the religious and civil calendar



וְעָשָׂה חֶסֶד לְאֲלֹפִים לְאֹהֲבֵי וּלְשֹׂמְרֵי מִצְוֹתַי: לֹא תִשָּׂא אֶת־שֵׁם־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְשׂוּא כִּי לֹא יִנְקָה יְהוָה אֶת־אִשְׁרֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲתֵּם שֹׂמֵי לְשׂוּא:

זְכוֹר אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת לְקַדְּשׁוֹ: שֵׁשֶׁת יָמִים תַּעֲבֹד וְעָשִׂיתָ כָּל־מְלֶאכֶתְךָ: וְיוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי שַׁבָּת לַיהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לֹא־תַעֲשֶׂה כָּל־מְלֶאכֶה אַתָּה וּבִנְךָ וּבִתֶּךָ עַבְדְּךָ וְאִמָּתְךָ וּבְהֵמָתְךָ וְגֵרְךָ אִשְׁרֵי בְשַׁעֲרֶיךָ: כִּי שֵׁשֶׁת־יָמִים עָשָׂה יְהוָה אֶת־הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת־הָאָרֶץ

- 6 fathers to the third and fourth generation, but to those who love Me and keep My commands – I shall act with faithful love for thousands. Do not speak the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold guiltless those who speak His name in vain.
- 7 Remember the Sabbath to keep it holy. Six days you shall work, and carry out all your labors, but the seventh is a Sabbath to the Lord your God. On it, do no work – neither you, nor your son or daughter, your male or female servant, your livestock, or the stranger within your gates. For in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, the sea, and all

of ancient Mesopotamia was tied exclusively to the phases of the moon and to moon worship.

The ancient Egyptians recognized the chief phases of the moon in their naming of the calendar days of each month but did not subdivide each lunar cycle into distinct weeks.

The only rough approximate to the biblical week occurs in the Neo-Babylonian lunar sacrifices mentioned in Achaemenid texts (550–330 BCE) from Uruk. The sacrifices fall on the 7th, 14th, 21st, and 28th days of the month, though sometimes they would take place a day or two earlier.

In a similar vein, the 15th day of the lunar month – when the moon is full – is marked in the Akkadian epic *Atrahasis* as *shapattu*. Assyriologists theorize that this term may be related to the Sabbath defined by the Torah.

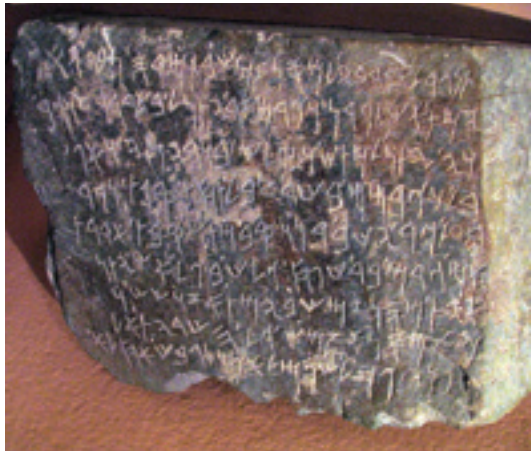
In terms of a day of rest, there is evidence in the Third Ur Dynasty (Sumer, 22nd to 21st century BCE) that certain groups were given days of rest and holidays. But those, too, were tied to the lunar calendar.

In contrast to the common practice throughout the ancient Near East, the Sabbath observance defined by the Torah was an innovation. It established both the seven-day week and represented the first universal labor law in the ancient Near East. ■ IBZ, JU

◀ Atrahasis clay tablet, Babylonian story of the flood, Sippar, 17th century BCE

אֶת־הַיָּם וְאֶת־כָּל־אֲשֶׁר־בָּם וַיִּנַּח בַּיּוֹם הַשְּׁבִיעִי עַל־כֵּן בְּרַךְ  
 יְהוָה אֶת־יוֹם הַשַּׁבָּת וַיְקַדְּשֶׁהוּ: כב  
 כִּבֵּד אֶת־אָבִיךָ  
 וְאֶת־אִמְךָ לְמַעַן יָאָרְכוּן יָמֶיךָ עַל הָאָדָמָה אֲשֶׁר־יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ  
 יג נְתַן לְךָ: לֹא תִרְצַח לֹא  
 תִנְאָף לֹא תִגְנֹב לֹא  
 יד • תַּעֲנֶנָּה בְרַעַךְ עַד שִׁקָּר: לֹא  
 תִחַמֵּד בֵּית רֵעֶךָ לֹא  
 תִחַמֵּד אִשְׁתֵּךְ רֵעֶךָ וְעַבְדֹּךָ וְאִמְתֹּךָ וְשׂוֹרְךָ וְחַמֹּרְךָ וְכֹל אֲשֶׁר  
 לְרֵעֶךָ: לֹא  
 טו וְכָל־הָעַם רָאִים אֶת־הַקּוֹלֹת וְאֶת־הַלְפִידִם וְאֵת קוֹל הַשֹּׁפָר שְׁבִיעִי  
 טז וְאֶת־הַהָר עָשָׂן וַיֵּרָא הָעַם וַיִּנְעוּ וַיַּעֲמְדוּ מֵרָחֹק: וַיֹּאמְרוּ אֶל־  
 מֹשֶׁה דַּבֵּר־אַתָּה עִמָּנוּ וְנִשְׁמָעָה וְאַל־יְדַבֵּר עִמָּנוּ אֱלֹהִים פֶּן־

that they contain, and He rested on the seventh day. And so the Lord blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy. Honor your father and mother. Then you 12 will live long in the land that the Lord your God is giving you. Do not murder. Do not 13 commit adultery. Do not steal. Do not bear false witness against your neighbor. Do not 14 • crave your neighbor's house. Do not crave your neighbor's wife, his male or female servant, his ox, his donkey, or anything else that is your neighbor's." Every one of the people witnessed the thunder and lightning 15 and the sound of the ram's horn and the smoke-covered mountain; they saw and they shook – and they stood at a distance, and said to Moshe, "Speak to us yourself and we 16 will listen, but let not God say any more to us, or we will



20:14 Covet in its literary context

The Hebrew root *h m d*, meaning covet, indicates not just an emotional desire but a craving for a specific object with intent to acquire it, as in Micah's accusation (Mic. 2:2), "They coveted fields and seized them." This Semitic root and meaning are not unique to Hebrew; it is also found in the Amarna letters and in Phoenician texts, as well as in two Ugaritic myths in which the god Baal is said to covet a bull and a field. However, in the ancient milieu, the Torah's use of this root is different in that it not only points out an element of criminal psychology, but preemptively legislates against it.

Our verse also contains an example of a common ancient Near Eastern literary technique, the numerical pattern of three-four (that is, three elements plus a fourth). Prof. Yair Zakovitch, one of the foremost scholars of biblical literary analysis, has shown that this pattern is ubiquitous in both epic and legal sources in the ancient Near East, specifically, in Ugarit and Mesopotamia. Therefore, it is not surprising that it is found throughout the Tanakh. It appears earlier in the Ten Commandments in verse 5, which refers to "the third and the fourth generations." One of the literary developments of this pattern is its expansion to three pairs followed by a fourth element, thereby creating a six-seven pattern – as occurs in our verse: (1–2) "Do not crave your neighbor's house/wife"; (3–4) "his male/female slave"; (5–6) "his ox/donkey"; (7) "or anything that is your neighbor's." - JU

Phoenician inscription, Alanya Archaeological Museum, Turkey





NEAR EAST

20:21 Altars from unworked stones

With the commandment to construct simple altars, the Torah sets itself apart from religions in the ancient Near East of the time, in which elaborate hewn stone or crafted metal altars were common.

By and large, sacrificial practices defined by the Torah shared many commonalities with rituals throughout the ancient Near East including libations, the use of domesticated animals, the use of grain, the role of the priesthood, and the placement of the altar in an outdoor space before a central place of worship.

Despite this commandment to make altars of rough stones and earth, altars have been discovered made of hewn stone. Apparently, these were built both by the Israelites and by the Canaanites.

Small four-horned incense altars fashioned of stone or pottery have been found at sites throughout Israel, from Jerusalem and Tel Arad in the south to Hazor in the north. The absence of humble earth altars in archaeological contexts may be because of their inherently impermanent nature. ■ IBZ

נְמוֹת: וַיֹּאמֶר מֹשֶׁה אֶל־הָעָם אֱלֹהֵי אֲלֹהֵי אֲנִי לְבַעֲבוֹר נְסוֹת י  
 אֶתְכֶם בָּא הָאֱלֹהִים וּבַעֲבוֹר תִּהְיֶה יְרֵאתוֹ עַל־פְּנֵיכֶם לְבִלְתִּי  
 תַחֲטְאוּ: וַיַּעֲמֵד הָעָם מֵרָחֵק וּמֹשֶׁה נִגַּשׁ אֶל־הָעַרְפֶּל אֲשֶׁר־  
 שָׁם הָאֱלֹהִים: וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה אֶל־מֹשֶׁה כֹּה י  
 תֹאמַר אֶל־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם בִּי מִן־הַשָּׁמַיִם דְּבַרְתִּי  
 עִמָּכֶם: לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אֵתִי אֱלֹהִי כֶסֶף וְאֱלֹהִי זָהָב לֹא תַעֲשׂוּ  
 לָכֶם: מִזְבֵּחַ אֲדָמָה תַעֲשׂוּה־לִּי וְזָבַחַת עָלָיו אֶת־עֹלֹתֶיךָ  
 וְאֶת־שְׁלָמֶיךָ אֶת־צֹאנֶךָ וְאֶת־בְּקָרְךָ בְּכָל־הַמָּקוֹם אֲשֶׁר

מפטיד

17 die.” “Do not be afraid,” said Moshe to the people, “God has  
 18 come to lift you up, so that the awe of Him will be with you  
 19 always, keeping you from sin.” But the people remained at a  
 20 distance while Moshe approached the thick darkness where  
 21 God was. Then the Lord said to Moshe,  
 “This is what you shall tell the Israelites: You yourselves have  
 seen that I, from the heavens, have spoken to you. Have  
 no others alongside Me; make yourselves no silver gods,  
 no golden gods. Make for Me an altar of earth and on that  
 sacrifice your burnt offerings and peace offerings, your sheep  
 and your cattle. Wherever I cause My name to be invoked,



Altar at Karnak,  
Hellenistic Egypt



NEAR EAST

23:4 Return of lost animals

The Torah states that a person who finds a lost domestic animal of *his enemy* is legally obliged to bring it back to its owner. If an enemy's animal must be returned, then it would seem that the lost animal of anyone else must be returned. This latter concept appears in ancient Near Eastern law collections as well.

For example, the laws of Eshnunna determined that an official who seized a stray ox or donkey was required to bring it back to its owner; otherwise, this was regarded as

לְהַטֹּת: וְדָל לֹא תִהְדָּר בְּרִיבוֹ: כִּי תִפְגַּע שׂוֹר הַ  
 אֵיבֶיךָ אוֹ חֲמֹרוֹ תַעֲיָה הַשֶּׁב תְּשִׁיבֵנּוּ לוֹ: הַ  
 תְּרֹאֶה חֲמֹר שְׂנֵאֲךָ רֹבֵץ תַּחַת מִשְׁאוֹ וְחִדַּלְתָּ מֵעֲזֹב לוֹ עֲזֹב  
 לֹא תִטֶּה מִשְׁפָּט אֲבִינֶךָ בְּרִיבוֹ: 1 חֲמִישִׁי

- 3 siding with the crowd. Do not show favoritism even to
- 4 a poor man in a dispute. “If you come across your enemy’s ox or donkey going astray – bring it back to him. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you, fallen under its load, resist the impulse to leave it there. Help him to release it. “Do not subvert the rights of the needy when they come to court.

a crime of theft. Similarly, the Hittite laws demanded that a stray domestic animal be returned to its rightful owner; otherwise, the finder was considered to be a thief. Other statutes in this collection ordered that if anyone found a lost domestic animal and gelded it, the animal’s owner must be compensated.

While these ancient Near Eastern law collections provide the specifics of each situation, the Torah stipulates the directive alone, without delving into the details. The Torah’s directive to return an animal belonging to an enemy is unique in the ancient Near East, as is the law in verse 5 about helping an enemy’s animal with its burden. ■ IP



➤ Farmer with ox plow, wooden sculpture, burial object, Middle Kingdom of Egypt, ca 2000 BCE



7 מְדַבֵּר-שֶׁקֶר תִּדְחֹק וְנָקִי וְצַדִּיק אַל-תִּהְיֶהָּ כִּי לֹא-אֲצַדִּיק  
 8 רָשָׁע: וְשָׁחַד לֹא תִקַּח כִּי הַשָּׁחַד יְעוֹרֵר פְּקוּחִים וַיְסַלֵּף דְּבָרֵי  
 9 צַדִּיקִים: וְגַר לֹא תִלְחָץ וְאַתֶּם יַדְעֶתֶם אֶת-נַפְשׁ הַגֵּר כִּי-  
 10 גֵרִים הָיִיתֶם בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם: וְשֵׁשׁ שָׁנִים תִּזְרַע אֶת-אֲדָמְךָ  
 11 וְאַסְפֹּת אֶת-תְּבוּאָתָהּ: וְהַשְּׁבִיעֵת תִּשְׁמְטָנָהּ וְנִטְשָׁתָהּ וְאָכְלוּ

7 Keep far from a false charge. Do not bring death on the  
 innocent and righteous, for I will not acquit the wrongdoer.  
 8 Take no bribe, for bribes blind the sighted and subvert the  
 cause of the just. "Do not oppress a stranger. You know  
 9 what it is to be a stranger, for you were strangers in the  
 land of Egypt." For six years, sow your land and gather its  
 10 crops, but in the seventh let it rest and lie fallow. Let the  
 11 needy of your people eat from it, and what they leave, let



NEAR EAST

23:8 Bribery

In modern legal systems, judges are prohibited by law from taking bribes. In the ancient Near East, this was not the case; judges and other officials worked for pay, and their fees were often paid by the people who submitted cases. In Assyria, in the 14th to 12th century BCE, there was a special term for such payments, *shulmanu*, related to the biblical *shalmonim*, meaning "gifts" (Is. 123). The size of the payments was not limited, which inevitably allowed affluent individuals to receive better treatment in the courts and with state authorities. • YB

Life in an ancient Egyptian bazaar or marketplace, drawn by Faucher-Gudin, 1903

