



EYE FOR AN EYE: ONE OF THE GREATEST IDEAS IN HISTORY

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Even atheists acknowledge that the book that is most responsible for creating Western civilization is the Bible.

Until very recently, that was considered quite an achievement.

After all, it was Western civilization that created societies rooted in individual liberty, rooted in democracy, that affirmed the equality of all people, and which gave the world the notion of universal human rights.

Of course, these unique moral ideals took centuries to be realized, and the ideals were often violated. But only the West formulated these ideals, let alone achieved them — and then spread them around the world.

In the last half century, however, many of the recipients of these gifts — especially the well-educated — no longer regarded Western civilization as morally superior to any other. And as reverence for Western civilization fell, so did reverence for the source of that civilization.

The Bible has not only been neglected, but reviled — as a foolish fairy tale at best, and as an immoral work at worst. This view springs not from intellectual rigor, but from intellectual laziness.

People throw out all sorts of objections to the Bible as if there are no rational and moral responses to those objections. But the fact is there are rational and moral responses to all those objections.

I give many of them in my book, *The Rational Bible*, but let me offer two here.

In the biblical book of Deuteronomy, it says if someone has a rebellious son who does not obey his father and mother, his parents can take him to the elders of the city for judgment. And if the son is found guilty, the citizens are to stone him to death.

Sounds pretty primitive, doesn't it?

In fact, however, it was an enormous moral leap forward. This law ended — forever — parental ownership of their children, and with it the right to kill them. The brilliance of this law was that it seemed to preserve the absolute authority of parents, but in fact ended it.

But, you will respond, the citizens of the city could still kill the child. Theoretically, that was true. But we have no instance of it ever happening in the history of the Jews — the people who brought the book into the world and lived by its rules.

Critics of Western religion also often cite the famous biblical law, “an eye for an eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand,” etc. as another example of an immoral biblical law.

But this law — known by its Latin name, *lex talionis*, the law of retaliation — was another great moral advance. It was not meant to be taken literally, and it never was — for the simple reason that it's impossible to exactly duplicate bodily harm. Only “a life for a life” was meant literally and taken literally: there is capital punishment for premeditated murder.

So, then, what did it mean?

For one thing, *lex talionis* is the ultimate statement of human equality. Every person's eye is as precious as anyone else's. The eye of a prince is worth no more than the eye of a peasant. This was completely new in history. The Babylonian Code of Hammurabi, for example, legislated that the eye of a noble was of much greater value than the eye of a commoner.

Second, the principle of “an eye for an eye” ensured only the guilty party was punished for his crime. In other law codes and in common practice, if you killed someone's daughter, your daughter would be killed. That was expressly prohibited in the Bible and by the “eye for an eye” code. Now the killer would be punished, not the killer's daughter.

Third, *lex talionis* prohibited unjust revenge. In the ancient world, if a man gouged out another man's eye, the victim, if he could, would gouge out both the attacker's eyes, or kill him, or hurt his children, and so on. In contrast, “eye for an eye” ensured the victim receive appropriate compensation for the damages he suffered, but the punishment had to fit the crime.

The next time you read or hear someone argue that the Bible is irrational or immoral, tell them how the stone-the-rebellious-son law ended parental killing of children and how the “eye for an eye” law struck a unique blow for human equality and justice.

If they're intellectually honest, they'll admit that they have learned something new.

I'm Dennis Prager.