

Law

In biblical contexts, law generally refers to the legal regulations connected to the Mosaic covenant and recorded in Genesis—Deuteronomy.

Concept Summary

The main Hebrew word for law is תּוֹרָה (*tôrâ*; e.g., [Josh 22:5](#)). Its common meaning in the OT is the Mosaic legislation as a whole, given by God to be obeyed by Israel, though at times *tôrâ* refers to individual commands or teachings. It includes what today are often called ceremonial, civil, and moral laws, but there is little indication in the Bible that these categories were recognized. Other words are employed for individual commands, especially מִצְוָה (*mišwâ*, “commandment”; e.g., [Lev 4:2](#)) and חֹק (*hōq*, “enactment”; e.g., [Deut 5:1](#)), and these terms are used largely interchangeably (e.g., [Deut 6:1–2](#); [2 Kgs 17:37](#); [1 Chr 16:14–18](#); [Neh 9:13–14](#)). In the Old Testament, both מִשְׁפָּט (*mišpāt*, “judgment”; e.g., [Exod 21:1](#)) and דְּבַר (*dābār*, “word”; e.g., [1 Sam 15:1](#)) can also mean “commandment” at times, but in these cases the terms do not differ much from *mišwâ*. In Greek, the primary word for “law” is νόμος (*nomos*; e.g., [Luke 2:22](#)), which has numerous derivatives that are used in the NT. The word *nomos* is similar to ἦθος (*ethos*, “custom”; e.g., [Acts 15:1](#)), but *ethos* is typically a descriptive word while *nomos* is prescriptive. For individual commandments, ἐντολή (*entolē*; e.g., [Matt 22:36](#)) is used. The various legal words can also denote human orders or

God's control over creation and time. They are all exceedingly frequent: *tôrâ*, *mišwâ*, *ḥōq*, and *nomos* all occur hundreds of times in the Bible.

Theological Overview

The law (תּוֹרָה, *tôrâ*), or torah, is arguably the centerpiece of Judaism. The delineation of the law dominates the Pentateuch (apart from Genesis), and for much of the Historical and Prophetic writings conformity to the law is the mark of righteousness, though different authors stress different commands. As is evident in the Ten Commandments ([Exod 20:2](#); [Deut 5:6](#)), Israel's orders to obey the law are grounded in God's prior covenantal action on their behalf, bringing them out of Egypt. By and large, it is assumed that the law can be kept ([Lev 18:5](#); [Deut 30:11–14](#)), with sacrifices provided as means of atonement; Jeremiah ([Jer 31:31–34](#)) and Ezekiel ([Ezek 36:25–29](#)) envision God's Spirit as necessary for this task. In [Psalm 1](#), the one who delights in the law (תּוֹרָה, *tôrâ*) is like a tree planted by water, and in [Psa 19](#), God revealed in creation ([Psa 19:1–6](#)) is complemented by God revealed in the commandments ([Psa 19:7–13](#)). In [Psalm 119](#), God's law is praised under various names (for 176 verses) as the most excellent law. In fact, Mosaic law is thought to be so wise as to make Israel the envy of the peoples of the world ([Deut 4:5–8](#)). A distinguishable meaning comes in Proverbs, where *tôrâ* and its synonyms usually mean “teaching” in the sense of wise maxims evident from daily life. In general, then, Israelites and Jews have accepted the law as both gift and obligation.

The law's place in Christianity is more complex. Even in the Gospels, [Jesus](#) did not come merely to “keep” the law

but to “fulfill” it ([Matt 5:17](#)), though this adamantly does not mean “dispense with” ([Matt 5:18–19](#)). Especially in relation to the Sabbath, [Jesus](#) blatantly disregards many of the standards of his fellow Jews, focusing instead on the essential intent of the law ([Mark 3:1–6](#))—the weightier matters of justice and mercy ([Matt 23:23](#)), with love of God and neighbor as the central commandments ([ἐντολή](#), *entolē*; [Mark 12:28–34](#)). The debate about the law in early Christianity is most acute in Paul’s writings. This much is clear: The law ([νόμος](#), *nomos*) is, per se, “holy, righteous, and good” ([Rom 7:12](#)) and retains some measure of revelatory and moral authority for Christians, but it is also weakened by flesh and thereby entangled with sin and death. Christ’s coming opens a new way of righteousness that is available to all, Jew and Gentile alike. [Romans 10:4](#) serves as a case in point. Christ is the “end” ([τέλος](#), *telos*) of the law for righteousness to all who believe, and *telos* can have the meaning of “goal,” “fulfillment,” or “termination.” The Christian’s relationship with the law has changed and is refocused on Christ ([Rom 10:5–8](#)) without the law wholly being scuttled (see Badenas, *Christ the End*). This leaves several points up for dispute, such as whether “works of the law (*nomos*)” are failed efforts to earn salvation or practices that divide Jews from other nations (Sabbath, kosher laws, circumcision), and whether Second-Temple Judaism can be called “legalistic” (and, if so, in what sense). The main two camps are traditional Protestants (e.g., Stephen Westerholm, Simon Gathercole) and the New Perspective on Paul (e.g., E. P. Sanders, James Dunn), but within these camps there is significant diversity. Similar questions about the law’s role can be seen elsewhere in the NT, as in [Jas 2:14–26](#), but the words of Paul and [Jesus](#) provide the most fuel for the debate.

Lexical Information

Old Testament

תּוֹרָה (*tôrâ*). n. fem. **law, statute, teaching; custom.** *In most of the OT, indicates the Mosaic law as a whole, but at other times means an individual commandment or teaching.*

In Genesis through Numbers, *tôrâ* generally refers to specific statutes, mostly ritual ([Lev 13:59](#); [Num 6:13](#)). In [Exod 24:12](#), God refers to the tablets of the Ten Commandments as “the tablets of stone and the law (*tôrâ*) and the commandment (מִצְוָה, *mišwâ*),” thus associating *tôrâ* and *mišwâ*. In [Leviticus 26:46](#), the whole Mosaic legislation is summed up as rules (חֻק, *ḥōq*) and regulations (מִשְׁפָּט, *mišpāṭ*). In Deuteronomy, *tôrâ* begins to take precedence over other terms (e.g., [Deut 1:5](#); [4:44–45](#)) and refers to the written law ([Deut 28:61](#); [31:26](#)). This sense predominates the rest of the OT, with *tôrâ* becoming the default name for the Sinaitic covenant ([Josh 1:7–8](#); [2 Kgs 22:8](#); [Neh 8:1–18](#)), including its elements of narrative and wisdom. The prophets are keenly aware of transgressions against God’s law (*tôrâ*; [Jer 44:10](#); [Dan 9:11](#); [Amos 2:4](#)). Sometimes *tôrâ* still designates an individual rule ([2 Chr 19:10](#); [Job 22:22](#)) or ruling ([Hag 2:11](#)); on occasion *tôrâ* can mean “custom” ([2 Sam 7:19](#)). In Wisdom literature, *tôrâ* is usually a moral teaching ([Psa 78:1](#); [Prov 1:8](#); [3:1](#); [13:14](#)). The Israelite *tôrâ* is celebrated as the greatest law ([Deut 4:8](#)), desired by the nations ([Isa 42:4](#); [Mic 4:2](#)) and perfect ([Psa 19:7](#)), repaying study and devotion ([Pss 1:2](#); [119:1, 18, 29](#), etc.). Thus, the loss of the law (*tôrâ*) spells utter desolation ([Lam 2:9](#); [Ezek 7:26](#)).

צִוָּה (*šāwâ*). vb. **to command, charge; to ordain.** *The gen-*

eral word for commanding, typically used of divine orders but also used to indicate any form of “ordering” or “arranging.”

The verb *šāwâ* is extremely common in legal and narrative material to describe issuing specific commands. People can give commands (*šāwâ*), such as David’s final charge to Solomon (1 Kgs 2:1). More frequently, the ordering is God’s: He commands (*šāwâ*) Adam not to eat of the tree (Gen 2:16), Noah to build an ark (Gen 6:22), and Abraham to circumcise Isaac (Gen 21:4). God is described as commanding (*šāwâ*) many particular laws in Exodus through Deuteronomy; most of the time the act of commanding simply presumes God’s absolute authority, but sometimes a rationale is given (Deut 15:15; 28:1). At times the whole body of Mosaic law (1 Kgs 8:58; 2 Kgs 17:13; Pss 78:5) or covenants (1 Chr 16:15–18; Jer 7:23) are described as what God commanded (*šāwâ*). Orders are given not only to individuals, such as prophets (1 Kgs 13:9; Jer 1:7; Ezek 37:7), but also to nations (Isa 10:6), angels (Psa 91:11; Ezek 9:11), animals (1 Kgs 17:4; 2 Chr 7:13), inanimate matter (Job 38:12; Psa 78:23; Isa 45:12), and historical events (2 Sam 17:14; Lam 3:37; Amos 9:3–4). Here the meaning of *šāwâ* shades into “to ordain” and can also signify “to appoint” (1 Sam 25:30) or “to set in order” (2 Sam 17:23; 2 Kgs 20:1).

מִצְוָה (*miṣwâ*). n. fem. **commandment, stipulation; teaching.** *Refers to something that has been commanded.*

The noun *miṣwâ* is related to the verb **צִוָּה** (*šāwâ*, “to command”). In many places, *miṣwâ* is almost a synonym of **תּוֹרָה** (*tôrâ*, “law”): together “the law (*tôrâ*) and the commandment (*miṣwâ*)” can refer to the whole law (Exod 24:12; 2 Chr 14:4). Like the law (*tôrâ*), the commandment (*miṣwâ*) garners praise (Psa 119:6, 10, 19, etc.), can indicate a moral

guideline (Prov 2:1; 7:1–2; Eccl 8:5), and is used of human commands (2 Chr 8:15; Isa 29:13) or stipulations (Jer 32:11; Neh 10:32); Israel often violates God’s commands (*mišwâ*; Isa 48:18; Dan 9:5) as they do his law (*tôrâ*). But whereas *tôrâ* comes to mean the whole law, *mišwâ* is generally reserved for individual injunctions; hence the typical phrasing of “law (*tôrâ*)” in the singular and “commandments (*mišwâ*)” in the plural (1 Kgs 2:3; 2 Kgs 17:13; Neh 9:14; but compare Neh 9:13, where both are plural). Later, this is more pronounced: “Torah” becomes the collective title for the books of Genesis through Deuteronomy, and there are traditionally said to be 613 מִצְוֹת (*mišwōt*, “commandments”) recorded therein. After *tôrâ*, *mišwâ* is the most important word for God’s legislation; hence the later Jewish coming-of-age celebration is called bar or bat mitzvah, “son or daughter of the commandment (*mišwâ*).” The Old Testament assumes that the commandments (*mišwâ*) can and should be kept (Lev 22:31; Deut 27:1; 30:11; Eccl 12:13), meriting God’s “abounding favor” (חֶסֶד, *ḥēsēd*) for those who do (Exod 20:6; Deut 5:10).

חֻק (ḥōq). n. masc. **enactment, statute, decision; allotment, boundary.** *In its underlying meaning, indicates something prescribed, whether a rule or otherwise.*

The word *ḥōq* overlaps most with other legal terminology when it indicates a divine enactment (Exod 12:24; Num 30:16; Psalms 99:7), occasionally as a stand-in for the whole law (Lev 10:11) or covenant (Psalms 50:16) or when it indicates a human mandate (Genesis 47:26; Psalms 94:20) or human provisions (Jer 32:11). God’s rules (*ḥōq*) are celebrated (e.g., Deut 4:6, 8; Psalms 119:5, 8, 12), and when Israel breaks them, it is subject to judgment (Isa 24:5; Ezek 11:12; Amos 2:4). Often

ḥōq more broadly signifies something prescribed, not necessarily a rule. So it can mean “allotment” (Prov 30:8), whether given by humans (Gen 47:22) or by God (Lev 10:13–15), or “boundary,” be it of time (Job 14:5, 13), number (Job 28:26), or extension (Job 38:10; Prov 8:29; Mic 7:11). In several instances, it is a prescribed custom (Judg 11:39; 2 Chr 35:25) or norm (1 Sam 30:25). It can mean God’s decisive work within history (Psa 2:4), the cosmos (Psa 148:6), or redemption (Jer 31:26). The related feminine noun *ḥuqqâ* (חֻקָּה) (“statute”) is also common; there is no substantive difference in meaning.

pe (פֶּה). n. masc. **mouth, edge; pronouncement.** When *pe* indicates that which is spoken by the mouth, it often takes on the nuance of “command.”

In general, *pe* means “mouth” or “edge.” It can also refer by extension to what is spoken by mouth; this can be more specifically “testimony” (Deut 17:6), “vow” (Judg 11:35–36), or “speech” broadly (Psa 55:21; Eccl 5:2), but very often it is “command.” It can refer to both human (Gen 41:10; 45:21; Eccl 8:2) and divine (Lev 24:12; Num 3:39) commands; often the commandment comes from Yahweh through Moses (Num 9:23; Josh 22:9). For the most part, these injunctions apply to specific situations, but sometimes “the commandment (*pe*) of Yahweh” indicates the whole law (1 Sam 12:14–15). Even when *pe* refers to a specific and limited commandment of God, transgressing it can be harmful (Num 14:41; 20:24). In a few instances, *pe* has the sense of “control,” such as God’s control over history (2 Kgs 24:3) and nature (Prov 8:29) or soldiers being under another’s command (1 Chr 12:32).

piqqûd (פִּקּוּד). n. masc. **precept.** Derives from the action of

overseeing but is used in line with other legal words.

This word, also spelled פִּקּוּד (piqqud), is found exclusively in the Psalter, mostly in [Psa 119](#) (e.g., [Psa 119:4](#)). In every case it means “precept” ([Pss 19:8; 103:18; 111:7](#)). It is rare enough that it is difficult to distinguish its nuances from those of other legal words.

[דָּת](#) (dāt); Aram. [דָּת](#) (dāt). n. fem. **decree, law.** *Usually describes political rather than religious laws, and generally for newly issued royal edicts rather than long-standing laws.*

This is a loanword from Old Persian (*dāta*, “law”) and thus naturally occurs only in texts from the Persian period. It appears with the same form in both Hebrew and Aramaic. In Hebrew, it is used once in [Ezra](#) and elsewhere only in [Esther](#), where it drives the plot. Most of the time, it indicates a royal decree ([Ezra 8:36](#)), such as finding a wife to replace Vashti ([Esth 2:8](#)), the order to kill the Jews ([Esth 3:14–15](#)), the rule of death for one approaching the king unbidden ([Esth 4:11](#)), and the order that saves the Jews ([Esth 8:13–14](#)). It can also mean law in the abstract ([Esth 1:13](#)) or the Jewish laws (as seen from the point of view of the Persians; [Esth 3:8](#)). In Aramaic, it often refers to the Jewish law from the point of view of the Persians (e.g., [Ezra 7:12; Dan 6:4](#)), as well as to royal laws (e.g., [Ezra 7:26; Dan 6:15](#)) and decrees (e.g., [Dan 2:13](#)).

New Testament

[νόμος](#) (nomos). n. masc. **law, principle, custom.** *Can refer to the law of Moses as a text or as a system.*

The word *nomos* is the usual Septuagint translation of [תּוֹרָה](#) (*tôrâ*, “law”) as well as of the much less frequent [דָּת](#) (*dāt*; both Hebrew and Aramaic). In the NT, it sometimes

clearly refers to a set of writings (typically consisting of the books attributed to Moses) that stands alongside “the Prophets” ([Matt 11:13](#); [John 1:45](#); [Acts 13:15](#); [Rom 3:21](#)) or “the Prophets and Psalms” ([Luke 24:44](#)); occasionally, the law (*nomos*) appears to refer to the whole OT, as in [John 15:25](#), where a quotation from a psalm is attributed to the law (*nomos*). More often, the sense seems to be the legal system set up by the Mosaic covenant. In the Gospels, Mary and Joseph raise [Jesus](#) according to the law (*nomos*; [Luke 2:22–24](#), [27](#), [39](#)), and [Jesus](#) presents himself as fulfilling the law (*nomos*), not negating it ([Matt 5:17–18](#)). In the NT, *nomos* rarely, if ever, refers to a specific regulation.

[ἐντολή](#) (*entolē*). n. fem. **commandment**. *Unlike nomos, entolē indicates a specific commandment, whether in the law or outside of it.*

In the Septuagint, *entolē* is the usual translation of [מצוה](#) (*miṣwâ*, “commandment”), as well as of the much less frequent [פיקוד](#) (*piqqûd*, “precept”). In the NT, *nomos* and *entolē* are sometimes roughly synonymous ([Rom 7:12](#)), but while *nomos*, like the Hebrew [תורה](#) (*tôrâ*), is typically the “law” as a whole, *entolē*, like the Hebrew *miṣwâ*, indicates a specific commandment ([Matt 5:18–19](#); [Heb 9:19](#)). In some cases the Ten Commandments are in view ([Mark 10:19](#); [Rom 13:9](#); [Eph 6:2](#)). [Jesus](#) declares loving God and loving neighbor to be the greatest commandments (*entolē*; [Mark 12:28–31](#)), and the writings attributed to the Apostle John frequently identify [Jesus](#)’ commandment (*entolē*) to his followers as the command to love one another ([John 13:34](#); [15:10–13](#); [1 John 3:22–24](#); [2 John 4–6](#)). Outside the Synoptic Gospels, *entolē* is not necessarily tied to Mosaic law but can indicate injunctions of all types ([John 11:57](#); [Acts 17:15](#); [Col 4:10](#)).

ἐντέλλομαι (*entellomai*). vb. **to command, enjoin**. *This verb refers to commanding someone to do something and is used in the NT mostly to indicate the issuing of divine commands.*

This verb is related to the noun ἐντολή (*entolē*, “commandment”) and means “to command.” It is the usual Septuagint translation of Hebrew צִוָּה (*šāwâ*, “to command”). In the NT, it is sometimes used in reference to the issuing of OT commandments: God ([Heb 9:20](#)) and Moses ([Matt 19:7](#); [Mark 10:3](#); [John 8:5](#)) commanded (*entellomai*) specific things in the law of Moses, while Acts describes Isaiah’s prophecy that Jews be a light to Gentiles as something “the Lord has commanded (*entellomai*) us” ([Acts 13:47](#)). The verb is often used to indicate Jesus commanding (*entellomai*) his disciples ([Matt 17:9](#); [28:20](#); [Acts 1:2](#)), and in the temptation narrative Satan quotes [Psa 91:11](#) [[Psa 90:11](#) LXX], where God commands (*entellomai*) his angels ([Matt 4:6](#); [Luke 4:10](#)). In John’s Gospel, God commands (*entellomai*) Jesus ([John 14:31](#)), and Jesus in turn commands (*entellomai*) his disciples to love ([John 15:14, 17](#)). Only twice in the NT does *entellomai* take a subject other than God, Jesus, or Moses. It is used of a master commanding (*entellomai*) a doorkeeper ([Mark 13:34](#)) and of Joseph giving direction (*entellomai*) about his bones ([Heb 11:22](#)).

δικαίωμα (*dikaiōma*). n. neut. **regulation, requirement, righteous deed**. *This word can refer either to legal requirements or to righteous deeds.*

In the Septuagint, *dikaiōma* is sometimes used to translate several Hebrew words for commandments or regulations, including חֹק (*hōq*, “statute”) and both מִשְׁפָּט (*mišpāṭ*, “judgment”). In the NT, it sometimes refers to the regulations of the law of Moses (e.g., [Luke 1:6](#); [Rom 2:26](#); [Heb 9:1](#)), while at other times it refers to righteous deeds

(e.g., [Rom 5:8](#); [Rev 19:8](#)).

[νομικός](#) (*nomikos*). adj. **relating to or learned in the law.**

Although an adjective in form, the term mostly is used as a substantive meaning “lawyer,” particularly an expert in the Jewish law.

This word is related to *nomos*. In general *nomikos* is a term Luke uses to refer to the Jewish party specializing in the law ([Luke 7:30](#); [10:25](#); [14:3](#)); Matthew also uses it once in this sense ([Matt 22:35](#)). This group was also called “teachers of the law” ([νομοδιδάσκαλος](#), *nomodidaskalos*; [Luke 5:17](#); [Acts 5:34](#)), similar to Pharisees and scribes but not identical with them ([Luke 11:37–54](#)). The adjectival sense occurs in [Titus 3:9](#), which directs Titus to avoid legal (*nomikos*) disputes, and a few verses later Zenas is called a lawyer (*nomikos*; [Titus 3:13](#)) with apparently no negative connotation.

[νομιμῶς](#) (*nomimōs*). adv. **according to the law, lawfully.**

Describes an action as being done in proper accord with the law.

This word is related to (*nomos*). It is used with positive connotations to indicate “lawfully” or “in the proper way” ([1 Tim 1:8](#); [2 Tim 2:5](#)).

[ἐννομος](#) (*ennomos*). adj. **legal, customary; within the law.**

In the NT, the sense is of a “regular” or “lawful” assembly and the jurisdiction of Mosaic Torah.

This word is related to *nomos*. It is used only twice in the NT. In [Acts 19:39](#), it probably describes a “regular” or “customary” assembly, in contrast to one that is specially called. It is possible that *ennomos* means “lawful,” though, as opposed to a mob-like gathering. In [1 Corinthians 9:21](#) it has the sense of being “under the jurisdiction” (*ennomos*) of Christ, which is contrasted with being under the Mosaic law and with being lawless.