



Was God's Law Really Fair?

Exodus 19:7-8: (NASB) ⁷*So Moses came and called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words which the LORD had commanded him.* ⁸*All the people answered together and said, All that the LORD has spoken we will do! And Moses brought back the words of the people to the LORD.*



Guest Speaker: Jerry Monette

The Old Testament Law provided a way for Israel to function as an individual society as well as a society that interacted with the world around it. So, how did this Law treat the less fortunate, the sick, the indebted, the slaves, the aliens, and so on? What kind of "social programs" were available and how did they operate? Was there justice? Was there mercy? Did the Old Testament Law promote individual accomplishment at the expense of others? Did it promote a socialistic approach of spreading the wealth evenly to everyone? Stay with us as we take a fascinating walk through God's unique Old Testament model for society.

How should we deal with the inequities among us that are more or less a result of natural talents and abilities?

In our society, certain talents bring wealth and notoriety. For example, if you are really tall and can handle a basketball, you may have different opportunities than someone working with their hands for a living. How did the Law handle this?

Because we are Christians, let's first see how the New Testament handles this, and then we will see if there are differences in the Old Testament.

Galatians 6:1-5: (NASB) ¹*Brethren, even if anyone is caught in any trespass, you who are spiritual, restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness; each one looking to yourself, so that you too will not be tempted.* ²*Bear one another's burdens, and thereby fulfill the law of Christ.* ³*For if anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.* ⁴*But each one must examine his own work, and then he will have reason for boasting in regard to himself alone, and not in regard to another.* ⁵*For each one will bear his own load.*

We are to *bear one another's burdens*, meaning we are to help people when they are in need. Jesus gave us broad guidelines for living instead of the specific guidelines provided by the Old Testament.



Law is basic for all, The Code of Hammurabi, Karen Barnes, News 2

- *Imagine what it would be like if we didn't have any laws, if people did just as they pleased without any regard for others. Life would probably get pretty chaotic.*
- *Law is one of society's most basic institutions and one of the most necessary. It establishes a person's rights and obligations. It also sets penalties for those who violate these rules.*
- *"Equal justice under Law," reads this inscription on the Supreme Court building in Washington D.C. Although specific laws change over time, most people agree that justice is one of law's most abiding principles.*



The Law Covenant advocates for human equality.

Currently, falling into debt and losing your land (foreclosure) are just the hard knocks of life. No one will step forward to help you out. But it was different under the Law. You were obligated to help people who were hurting economically.

If they would follow the Law, the people would be blessed. The nation of Israel, if they were to keep the Law, would be *a blessing to all the families of the earth*.

Galatians 6:6-10: (NASB) ⁶The one who is taught the word is to share all good things with the one who teaches him. ⁷Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap. ⁸For the one who sows to his own flesh will from the flesh reap corruption, but the one who sows to the Spirit will from the Spirit reap eternal life. ⁹Let us not lose heart in doing good, for in due time we will reap if we do not grow weary. ¹⁰So then, while we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, and especially to those who are of the household of the faith.

**Regarding personal debt - Why did God's Law NOT allow interest on debts?
Was this really proclaiming equality or just charity?**

The Law tried to control, if not eliminate, the inequality of growing indebtedness in at least three ways: the forbidding of interest, the controlling of collateral, and the establishment of "remission."

Why were people forbidden to charge interest? God's intention was to protect His people, including the individual Israelite, that would keep them perpetually in a state where the person could never recover.



Deuteronomy 23:19: (NASB) *You shall not charge interest to your countrymen: interest on money, food, or anything that may be loaned at interest.*

This Law was for the nation of Israel only. It was their economic system that applied to fellow Israelites. They were allowed to charge interest to others because outside countries that were outside the Mosaic Law charged Israelites.

 **Since 1964 war on poverty has failed, Bill O'Reilly, FOX News**

- Right now, about one trillion dollars every year are spent on entitlements. Medicaid is the biggest situation, but there are 126 anti-poverty programs on the books. Back in 1964, President Lyndon Johnson declared an unconditional war on poverty; at that time the poverty rate was about 19%. Since then America has spent roughly 15 trillion dollars fighting poverty, yet right now the poverty rate is above 15%. So you can see, all the money has not done much to combat the problem.*

Israel had anti-poverty programs in place, but they were different.

How did people get into debt back in those days? People were very dependent upon rain but there was drought, family problems where people could not work, etc., so people would need to borrow money. It wasn't out of wanting "stuff," rather it was from various levels of hardship. Today we get into debt because we want new and faster and better stuff. In the Old Testament society, everyone was to pull their own weight, but the Law made allowances for when times were difficult. That's why there was no interest.

Exodus 22:25-27: (NASB) ²⁵*If you lend money to My people, to the poor among you, you are not to act as a creditor to him; you shall not charge him interest.* ²⁶*If you ever take your neighbor's cloak as a pledge, you are to return it to him before the sun sets,* ²⁷*for that is his only covering; it is his cloak for his body. What else shall he sleep in? And it shall come about that when he cries out to Me, I will hear him, for I am gracious.*

An equivalent today might be similar to a pawn shop. Here this individual is probably very poor. Perhaps they were a day laborer and likely did not own land. An individual is obligated to give them a short-term loan. In this case they took a cloak. But because the person was so poor, he needed his cloak presumably after work was through, so the collateral was returned. You could not make him suffer more.

Under God's law, the lender had to give back the collateral before the loan was paid off if it was necessary to the poor person's health and well-being. In this way, the poor had a friend in the Law that allowed him to at least keep his head above water and keep the loan sharks at bay until he could get back on his feet. There was great compassion in the Law.



Behind the velvet curtain, the Torah scrolls are locked until the service begins.



The Law really encouraged people to pull their own weight. How different that is from where we are now!

Deuteronomy 24:6: (NASB) *No one shall take a handmill or an upper millstone in pledge, for he would be taking a life in pledge.*

This is how grain was ground. It was clearly forbidden to take in pledge the very thing that allowed the person to make a living - he would need this in order to pay back the loan and get out of debt. It is as if a mechanic owed money but the collateral was his tools. He would be unable to pay back his loan.

Deuteronomy 24:10-11: (NASB) ¹⁰*When you make your neighbor a loan of any sort, you shall not enter his house to take his pledge. ¹¹You shall remain outside, and the man to whom you make the loan shall bring the pledge out to you.*

The lender was forbidden by the Law to enter into the home of the person after he took a pledge for a loan. The Law protected the borrower from shady lenders who might have demanded even more if he saw what was inside the house. It is just another layer of protection in the Law against the tendency of inequalities to build up due to debt. People were protected from the inherent greed of man.

Reasons why the war on poverty has failed, Bill O'Reilly, FOX News

- Poor education and poor parenting are driving destitution. High school dropouts are almost four times more likely to end up in poverty than those who graduate. Children growing up in single parent families are four times more likely to be poor than those living with both parents. As long as Americans refuse to educate themselves and family units remain chaotic, you will have a 15 percent poverty rate no matter how much money you throw at it.*

Old Testament times were quite different. It was a community problem and not an individual one. It was designed to make the nation of Israel different from the nations around them. If cycles of debt were allowed to be continued, eventually there would be a two-class society. One class will own just about everything and the other will work for the rich class without any opportunity. God's economic system was to be different from the surrounding nations. Israel's society was built around everyone taking care of themselves. People worked and supported their own. If you broke your leg while you were working, society was obligated to help you until you could go back to work.

The establishment of remission - the cancelling of a debt.

Deuteronomy 15:1-2: (NASB) ¹*At the end of every seven years you shall grant a remission of debts. ²This is the manner of remission: every creditor shall release what he has loaned to his neighbor; he shall not exact it of his neighbor and his brother, because the LORD'S remission has been proclaimed.*

Jesus said, *The poor will be with you always.* The Old Testament tells us that *the poor will never cease to be in the land.* Poverty just won't stop all by itself. It's going to take human action. God wanted to implement that human action that would help people avoid poverty and staying poor.



Slavery is part of this discussion as well. Slavery in the Old Testament is not what slavery is in modern times. Slavery then was more what we would think of as indentured servitude. It allowed people to be servants in order to pay off debt. God's Law was designed to help people move forward and have better lives.

Deuteronomy 15:7-11: (NASB) ⁷*If there is a poor man with you, one of your brothers, in any of your towns in your land which the LORD your God is giving you, you shall not harden your heart, nor close your hand from your poor brother; ⁸but you shall freely open your hand to him, and shall generously lend him sufficient for his need in whatever he lacks. ⁹Beware that there is no base thought in your heart, saying, The seventh year, the year of remission, is near, and your eye is hostile toward your poor brother, and you give him nothing; then he may cry to the LORD against you, and it will be a sin in you. ¹⁰You shall generously give to him, and your heart shall not be grieved when you give to him, because for this thing the LORD your God will bless you in all your work and in all your undertakings. ¹¹For the poor will never cease to be in the land; therefore I command you, saying, You shall freely open your hand to your brother, to your needy and poor in your land.*

It is interesting that God commanded that debts be forgiven in the seventh year, so obviously the closer the lender got to that seventh year, the less likely he would want to lend money! But God promised that if he did this, the lender would be blessed. There is mercy upon those who are merciful.

It was God's land anyway!

Regarding enslavement or servitude - how was it different than what we understand slavery to be today?

Individuals or families could sell themselves into slavery or could be enslaved by their creditors when their debt became too much. We are still really talking about indebtedness, but now it is at an extreme. It has reached the ultimate crisis. Like freedom from other debt, freedom of slaves was ordained in the law code of Israel on the seventh year.

Deuteronomy 15:12-15: (NASB) ¹²*If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. ¹³When you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed. ¹⁴You shall furnish him liberally from your flock and from your threshing floor and from your wine vat; you shall give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; therefore I command you this today.*

Notice here that the Law required not only the release of the slave in the seventh year but also a generous severance payment with a stern warning against being stingy in giving it. This makes sense only if the intent of the law is understood to promote equality and prevent inequality among God's people. By setting up the freed slave with the means of being at least somewhat self-sufficient, it prevented him from immediately falling back among the ranks of the permanent poor. This provision was to break the cycle of debt and allow a person to get back on his feet.

God reminded them that they were slaves in Egypt and He was merciful towards them.



In the nation of Israel, individuals could get wealthy, but not at the personal expense of others - especially not fellow countrymen. For example, they were not supposed to get wealthy by charging exorbitant interest that would keep someone in a perpetual cycle of paying interest, taking other peoples' lands forever, etc. One had to trust that God would bless you. That blessing came after you were generous to others.

How was justice and equality maintained when one was in line to lose their land?

(Source: Wikipedia) *Billy Budd*, a novel by Herman Melville, was made into a movie in 1962. Billy, an orphaned illegitimate child suffused with innocence, openness and natural charisma, is adored by the crew, but for unexplained reasons arouses the antagonism of the ship's Master-at-arms, John Claggart, who falsely accuses Billy of conspiracy to mutiny. When Claggart brings his charges to the Captain, the Hon. Edward Fairfax "Starry" Vere, Vere summons both Claggart and Billy to his cabin for a private confrontation. When, in Billy's and Vere's presence, Claggart makes his false charges, Billy is unable to find the words to respond owing to a speech impediment. Unable to express himself verbally, he strikes and accidentally kills Claggart. He must be convicted even though the prosecutor and sole witness believe Billy is innocent.

 Save him and save us all, *Billy Budd* (1962 movie)

- *We do not deal with justice here, but with the law... Can't you see you must first strip off the uniform you wear and even your flesh before you can escape the case at issue here. Decide you must or show us how to save the boy without setting aside our function...we could save the boy if we could find a way consistent with our duty...save him and you save us all.*

The Hebrews were enslaved in Egypt. God brought them into the land of Israel and gave tribes individual portions of land. Every family had a portion of land that was intended to be theirs forever. The land was not just a piece of real estate to be bought or sold at a fair price or to be gobbled up by those with a natural talent to acquire. Land was life, and it was not to be taken lightly.

If you fell on hard times, you might have to sell all or a part of your land. There was a period of time - every 50 years - the land ownership would revert back. The whole design was to get people back on their feet. Those that were savvy could create wealth through the use of this land, and God was not against that as long as the family land was returned accordingly. The Jubilee wasn't a redistribution of wealth, just of the land.

Leviticus 25:8-13: (NASB) ⁸You are also to count off seven sabbaths of years for yourself, seven times seven years, so that you have the time of the seven sabbaths of years, namely, forty-nine years. ⁹You shall then sound a ram's horn abroad on the tenth day of the seventh month; on the day of atonement you shall sound a horn all through your land. ¹⁰You shall thus consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim a release through the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you, and each of you shall return to his own property, and each of you shall return to his family. ¹¹You shall have the fiftieth year as a jubilee; you shall not sow, nor reap its aftergrowth, nor gather in from its untrimmed vines. ¹²For it is a jubilee; it shall be holy to you. You shall eat its crops out of the field. ¹³On this year of jubilee each of you shall return to his own property.

Leviticus 25:23: (NASB) *The land, moreover, shall not be sold permanently, for the land is Mine; for you are but aliens and sojourners with Me.*

Comparatively, our society today is very broken!



God was definitely on the side of the individual. A caller suggested Lamentations 3:36: *To subvert a man in his cause, the Lord approveth not.*

Isaiah 5:8: (NASB) *Woe to those who add house to house and join field to field, until there is no more room, so that you have to live alone in the midst of the land!*

The spirit of the law of Jubilee was intended to "defeat you who join house to house, who add field to field, until there is room for no one but you, and you are left to live alone in the midst of the land."

Why was there a mandatory day of rest?

The idea that every seventh day must be set aside as sacred rest is distinctly and uniquely Jewish. But why should rest be so important?

Deuteronomy 5:12-15: (NASB) ¹²*Observe the sabbath day to keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you. ¹³Six days you shall labor and do all your work, ¹⁴but the seventh day is a sabbath of the LORD your God; in it you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter or your male servant or your female servant or your ox or your donkey or any of your cattle or your sojourner who stays with you, so that your male servant and your female servant may rest as well as you. ¹⁵You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God brought you out of there by a mighty hand and by an outstretched arm; therefore the LORD your God commanded you to observe the sabbath day.*

Rest from what? Rest for what purpose? And what does rest have to do with equality? One day a week, everybody is on an equal footing. It is a constant reminder that one day a week, God looks for equality in his people, represented by this one day of rest. This was just another way the poor and indebted could be put on the same level - *or your male servant or your female servant*. It was fair that everyone have a chance to rejuvenate.

So how well did Israel do with all of this? We imagine it was hit or miss. If you did not give land back at Jubilee, there was no penalty. What would stop them from keeping it? Some would, some wouldn't. God gave it as a requirement but asked them to do it just because they should. Do we want to follow God's way or our own way?

Israel also had the Sabbath year when, not the people, but the land itself got a rest. This represents yet another temporary postponement against inequality.

Exodus 23:10-11: (NASB) ¹⁰*You shall sow your land for six years and gather in its yield, ¹¹but on the seventh year you shall let it rest and lie fallow, so that the needy of your people may eat; and whatever they leave the beast of the field may eat. You are to do the same with your vineyard and your olive grove.*

In particular, the Sabbath year makes clear that the poor have rights - not just to charity and handouts - but an equal right to work the land and to share in its wealth.

Leviticus 19:9-10: (NASB) ⁹*Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest. ¹⁰Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.*

The untouched corner, the dropped produce, and the seventh year yield belong to the poor, not out of sympathy, but by right. God owns the land, and all his



covenanted people have a right to an equal share in it and none can be denied that right. Even though that ideal could not be realized due to human imperfection, it is nonetheless God's will and these Scriptures constantly reminded Israel of that. Wasn't God's way compassionate?

So, what's the point of all this?

God is an advocate for equality. Is there justice in equality? Yes, it was to prevent the system from being so skewed that a very few owned everything. Everyone was personally responsible to provide equality for the community. The vast majority of people could pull themselves out of the hard time with a little help.

Let's switch to the New Testament.

James 2:1-5: (NASB) ¹My brethren, do not hold your faith in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ with an attitude of personal favoritism. ²For if a man comes into your assembly with a gold ring and dressed in fine clothes, and there also comes in a poor man in dirty clothes, ³and you pay special attention to the one who is wearing the fine clothes, and say, You sit here in a good place, and you say to the poor man, You stand over there, or sit down by my footstool, ⁴have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil motives? ⁵Listen, my beloved brethren: did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?

If you were a very talented individual living in Israel, you could become quite wealthy. The problem was when you wanted to hold onto that wealth forever and didn't want to follow the Law. The Law provided that at some point you would have to give back to the community and help those who perhaps allowed you to gain your wealth.

Equality was important in the New Testament as well. The New Testament does not give specific laws, but people weren't to be treated differently and all were given the opportunity to be rich in faith. The most important thing is what is in your heart, not where you live or what you wear.

 **What hope is there for any of us, *Billy Budd* (1962 movie)**

- *Don't think me pitiless in thus demanding sentence on a luckless boy. I feel as you do for him. As for myself, I feel revulsion, shame and rage.*
- *Is there hope for me, Captain?*
- *Billy, what hope is there for any of us?*

They end up hanging him. This shows the struggle we all have with justice and mercy. How do we find the balance in dealing with people around us?

Lamentations 3:22-25: (NASB) ²²The LORD'S lovingkindnesses indeed never cease, for His compassions never fail. ²³They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. ²⁴The LORD is my portion, says my soul, Therefore I have hope in Him. ²⁵The LORD is good to those who wait for Him, to the person who seeks Him.

God's compassions never ceases. As Christians, we have faith that everything is overruled for our best spiritual welfare. That doesn't necessarily mean that everything will always come up roses; there will be times when the Lord may feel He needs to allow suffering. God allows it but puts a limit on it.



Is there a prophetic view for the future? Everyone's life now is not fair and millions of people start out okay and end up in utter misery. How does God's mercy attach to them? For us, we look at the world around us and can see this was not what God intended. We know He intended on having an earthly kingdom with the nation of Israel. We can look forward to a similar arrangement for God's kingdom. We believe there will be a time when there will be true equality and God's mercy will be applied to all mankind.

Psalms 86:15-16: (NASB) ¹⁵*But You, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abundant in lovingkindness and truth. ¹⁶Turn to me, and be gracious to me; Oh grant Your strength to Your servant, and save the son of Your handmaid.*

1 Corinthians 12:18-26: (NASB) ¹⁸*But now God has placed the members, each one of them, in the body, just as He desired. ¹⁹If they were all one member, where would the body be? ²⁰But now there are many members, but one body. ²¹And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you; or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you. ²²On the contrary, it is much truer that the members of the body which seem to be weaker are necessary; ²³and those members of the body which we deem less honorable, on these we bestow more abundant honor, and our less presentable members become much more presentable, ²⁴whereas our more presentable members have no need of it. But God has so composed the body, giving more abundant honor to that member which lacked, ²⁵so that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. ²⁶And if one member suffers, all the members suffer with it; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice with it.*

The body of Christ in relation to one another - we can be a mutual help to each other. It takes all of these parts helping each other and not fighting each other to make a healthy body. The Old Testament provided more of an economic element to function as a healthy society and here it is a spiritual application. It is important to be a part of the whole.

God's plan for His people, by Law, legislated that you had to have an open hand for those who fell on hard times. It was a wonderful way for God to take care of His people. God's Law was fair, equitable, just and merciful!

Go apply this information right now! Have an open hand and look at how you can help those less fortunate than you. It provides great spiritual blessing.

*So was God's Law really fair?
For Jonathan and Rick and Christian Questions,
Think about it...!*

*And now even more to think about...
only in the **Full Edition** of CQ Rewind!*





More background regarding Israel's Law and the treatment of human beings in general:

Here are the guidelines to keep in mind as we look into the treatment of slaves and slavery within the ancient nation of Israel. All of the following "laws" were part of the blossoming culture of Israel. Many of these texts are general sweeping statements that would obviously apply as background in the application of specific laws:

Exodus 21:16: (NASB) *He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death.*

This is a very general application and focused on the individual rights of each man.

Exodus 21:26-27: (NASB) ²⁶*If a man strikes the eye of his male or female slave, and destroys it, he shall let him go free on account of his eye.* ²⁷*And if he knocks out a tooth of his male or female slave, he shall let him go free on account of his tooth.*

Inherently contains the warning against all abuse.

Leviticus 19:9-10: (NASB) ⁹*Now when you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very corners of your field, nor shall you gather the gleanings of your harvest.* ¹⁰*Nor shall you glean your vineyard, nor shall you gather the fallen fruit of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the needy and for the stranger. I am the LORD your God.*

A blanket command of compassion upon the less fortunate.

Leviticus 19:33-34: (NASB) ³³*When a stranger resides with you in your land, you shall not do him wrong.* ³⁴*The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt; I am the LORD your God.*

Common respect for all men.

Deuteronomy 5:14: (NRSV) *But the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God; you shall not do any work--you, or your son or your daughter, or your male or female slave, or your ox or your donkey, or any of your livestock, or the resident alien in your towns, so that your male and female slave may rest as well as you.* - Slaves mentioned twice to make the point of compassion!

Leviticus 25:39: (NASB) *If a countryman of yours becomes so poor with regard to you that he sells himself to you, you shall not subject him to a slave's service.*

A slave's service, meaning the lifetime assignment of slavery.

Job 31:13-15: (NASB) ¹³*If I have despised the claim of my male or female slaves when they filed a complaint against me,* ¹⁴*What then could I do when God arises? And when He calls me to account, what will I answer Him?* ¹⁵*Did not He who made me in the womb make him, and the same one fashion us in the womb?*

Again a reflection of the common respect for all men.

Proverbs 30:10: (NASB) *Do not slander a slave to his master, or he will curse you and you will be found guilty.*

This shows that the slaves had a right to be heard.



A more detailed rendering regarding the manner in which a slave is to be released:

Deuteronomy 15:12-18: (NRSV) ¹²*If a member of your community, whether a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you and works for you six years, in the seventh year you shall set that person free. ¹³And when you send a male slave out from you a free person, you shall not send him out empty-handed. ¹⁴Provide liberally out of your flock, your threshing floor, and your wine press, thus giving to him some of the bounty with which the LORD your God has blessed you. ¹⁵Remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the LORD your God redeemed you; for this reason I lay this command upon you today. ¹⁶But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, ¹⁷then you shall take an awl and thrust it through his earlobe into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. You shall do the same with regard to your female slave. ¹⁸Do not consider it a hardship when you send them out from you free persons, because for six years they have given you services worth the wages of hired laborers; and the LORD your God will bless you in all that you do.*

Notice the just treatment, the reminders of their own mistreatment and the promise of God's blessing if they follow God's way.

Now, a bit of history regarding the "Billy Budd" sound bytes from Wikipedia:

The plot follows Billy Budd, a seaman impressed into service aboard HMS *Bellipotent* in the year 1797, when the Royal Navy was reeling from two major mutinies and was threatened by the Revolutionary French Republic's military ambitions. He is impressed from another ship, *The Rights of Man* (named after the very topical book by Thomas Paine of that period, leading Budd to shout as it leaves "good-by to you too, old *Rights-of-Man*" clearly intended to have a double meaning, and considered so by the crew who hear it).

Billy, an orphaned illegitimate child suffused with innocence, openness and natural charisma, is adored by the crew, but for unexplained reasons arouses the antagonism of the ship's Master-at-arms, John Claggart, who falsely accuses Billy of conspiracy to mutiny. When Claggart brings his charges to the Captain, the Hon. Edward Fairfax "Starry" Vere, Vere summons both Claggart and Billy to his cabin for a private confrontation. When, in Billy's and Vere's presence, Claggart makes his false charges, Billy is unable to find the words to respond owing to a speech impediment. Unable to express himself verbally, he strikes and accidentally kills Claggart.

Vere, an eminently thoughtful man whose name recalls the Latin words "veritas" (truth) and "vir" (man) as well as the English word "veer," then convenes a drumhead court-martial. He acts as convening authority, prosecutor, defense counsel and sole witness (except for Billy himself). He then intervenes in the deliberations of the court-martial panel to argue them into convicting Billy, despite their and his belief in Billy's innocence before God. (As Vere says in the moments following Claggart's death, "Struck dead by an angel of God! Yet the angel must hang!") Vere claims to be following the letter of the Mutiny Act and the Articles of War.

Having started the process, Vere and the other officers find that their own opinion matters little. "We are not talking about justice, we are talking about the law", that is, the law dictates what must ensue, whether or not it is just. The law states that an enlisted man killing an officer during wartime (accidentally or not) must hang. Vere spells out the awful truth and explains their inability to mete out leniency.

At his insistence, the court-martial convicts Billy; Vere argues that any appearance of weakness in the officers and failure to enforce discipline could stir the already turbulent waters of mutiny throughout the British fleet. Condemned to be hanged from the ship's yardarm at dawn the morning after the killing, Billy's final words are, "God bless Captain Vere!", which is then repeated by the gathered crew in a "resonant and sympathetic echo." The story may have been based on events onboard USS *Somers*, an American naval vessel; one of the defendants in the later investigation was a first cousin of Melville, Lt. Guert Gansevoort.