



LAW, TABOO AND MORAL ORDER: COMPARATIVE STUDY OF OLD TESTAMENT ETHICS, MOSAIC LAW AND AFRICAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

This study examines the relationship between law, Taboo, and moral order in Old Testament ethics, especially Mosaic Law and African religious experience. Mosaic Law signifies a covenant grounded in divine revelation to ancient Israel traditions, African religious moral system operates through taboo, common norms, and ancestral authority. Findings reveal that despite differences in textual versus oral transmission, Covenantal monotheism versus plural spiritual hierarchy. Both traditions function as a sacred aim at preserving community stability, community relations, spiritual harmony, and social justice. Mosaic Laws sustain respect, harmony, and divine sanction, while African ancestral taboos sustain cosmic balance through continual mediation and traditional enforcement. The study argues that taboo functions as sacred law, and Mosaic Legislation may be seen as a historically codified covenantal moral order. By bringing this with Old Testament theology into dialogue with African religious ethics, this research contributes to comparative moral theology, African hermeneutics, and postcolonial ethical discourse.

Keywords: Law, Taboo, Moral Order, Old Testament ethics, and African Religious Experience.

Introduction

The maintenance of moral order is essential to every religious tradition, as religion is believed to be a sacred structure of patterns that sustain communal life. In ancient Israel, moral order was fundamentally shaped by Torah, which signifies divine statutory regulation. Torah is embodied in Mosaic law, which provided Israel with covenantal directives that govern religious devotion, dignity, justice, and political identity. The Decalogue (Exodus 20; Deuteronomy 5) functioned as a moral nucleus, while the broader legal corpora in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy integrated ethical and civil prescription into a theological framework. As Otto (2021) asserts,



Mosaic legislation cannot be isolated from covenantal narratives that frame it; law in Israel and was relational before it was juridical. Similarly, Barton (2023) claims that Old Testament ethics has its root from Israel's story with Yahweh, meaning respect for law was an expression of loyalty rather than compliance with moral philosophy.

This covenantal structuring of morality reveals that ancient Israel did not separate theology from ethics. Justice (*mishpat*) and righteousness (*tsedeq*) were theological categories embedded within social practice. The mosaic law regulate inter-persona relationship e.g., adultery, false witness, and theft), economic equity (debt release), and ritual purity are all under divine authority. Schmid (2023) further notes that biblical law shaped Israel as a nation, meaning that moral order was inseparable from the community. This law functions as a sacred constitution, sustaining Israel's religious, political, and social cohesion.

In African indigenous religions (AIR), moral regulation sustains communal identity through different formal mechanisms. African morals are transmitted through taboos and proverbs. Taboos are prohibitions that preserve communal well-being among ethnic groups. In the Igbo tradition, *nso ani* (earth taboo) regulates disputes, land issues, and crime (Anizoba, 2025). In Yoruba tradition, Iwa means good character, and the concept of ase (vital spiritual force) structures ethical life through spiritual consequence (Olupona, 2022).

Recent research has challenged earlier colonial intervention interpretations that African taboo as superstitious. Cezula (2024) claims that African religious ethics is grounded in ontology and an integrated living where morality is inseparable from cosmology. Orobator (2022) emphasized that African moral is spiritually textured, reflecting a system of normativity. In this framework, taboo functions have unwritten sacred law, enforced through communal sanctions and spiritual repercussions. Moral violations are disruptions of harmony and cosmic order.

Mosaic Law and African taboo systems differ in form of textual codification versus oral transmission, centralized monotheism versus plural spiritual hierarchies, both function as mechanisms for regulating behavior and social cohesion. In both traditions, moral norms are grounded in transcendent authority; in ancient Israel, divine revelation mediates law, while in African traditional settings, ancestral



agencies mediate moral accountability. Both traditions integrate ethics and ritual impurity in Leviticus parallels taboo violation in Africa religion as a form of moral spiritual disruption.

Recent Old Testament scholarship helps to have a better understanding of biblical law. Barton (2023) claims ancient Israel was inseparable from theological stories, while Otto (2021) demonstrates that Deuteronomy's frames of covenantal blessing and curse are linked with morality. Schmid (2023) asserts that biblical legislation in Israel's literary and identity-forming processes. African scholarship (Cezula, 2024; Anizoba, 2025; Olupona, 2022) asserts that taboos are seen in moral cosmologies.

Mosaic law and African taboos can be understood as sacred structures of moral order because they regulate social conduct and interpret transgression within spiritual frameworks. While differing in theological articulation and historical settings, both traditions show that religion functions as a means for sustaining moral norms.

Given contemporary interest in African biblical hermeneutics, situating biblical law alongside African Moral governance enriches religious ethics. It challenges reductive legislative reading of the Old Testament and dismissive portrayal of Africa taboo system. It opens space for dialogue between covenant law and common ontology, highlighting how it operate cross culture to prevent moral order.

Conceptual Clarifications

Law (*Torah*) in Old Testament Ethics

The term Torah has its root in the Hebrew word *yrh*, meaning to instruct, to direct, and to guide. Thus, Torah should not be reduced to an understanding of law but should also be interpreted as divine instruction that shapes life. Within the Bible, Torah includes legal prescriptions, ritual instructions, and wisdom traditions that help to regulate human conduct while shaping Israel's theological identity. The Torah combines law and narrative to shape Israel's religious life and identity, Levinson, B. M. (2020).

According to Otto (2021), Mosaic Law is understood within the broader context of divine covenant. The giving of the law at Sinai (Exodus 19-24) happened after Israel's



deliverance from Egypt, demonstrating that law is a response to divine grace. This covenantal sequence has significance. Law is rational instruction grounded in Yahweh's sovereignty.

The Decalogue (Exodus 20:1–17; Deuteronomy 5:6–21) functions as the core legislation because its structure is theological loyalty with social responsibility. (prohibitions against murder, adultery, and false witness). The Decalogue shows the vertical and horizontal dimensions of morality. As Barton (2023) observes, Old Testament ethics does not separate religious devotion from social justice.

Beyond the Decalogue, Deuteronomy 12–26—often referred to as the Deuteronomic codes applied to social and political realities. These chapters regulate worship, integrity, and care for vulnerable positions. (Widows, orphans, and the less privileged). According to Otto (2021), Deuteronomy frames laws within a theological blessing and curse.

Barton (2023) identifies four ethical pillars in Old Testament theology:

- Covenant loyalty (*berith*) – moral obligation.
- Justice (*mishpat*) – care of the vulnerable.
- Righteousness (*tsedeq*) – right relational order within community.
- Covenant love (*hesed*) – steadfast loyalty reflecting divine character.

These categories demonstrate that moral order in ancient Israel is moral reasoning. It is theologically grounded, covenantally oriented. (Schmid 2023) argues that biblical law helps to form Israel moral community within the ancient world.

Mosaic Law merges ritual and ethical dimensions without differences. (Leviticus 11–15), The interconnection between social prohibitions and the sacrificial system suggests that holiness comprises both spiritual devotion and moral conduct.

Taboo in African Religious Ontology

In African religions, taboo functions as a sacred restriction within cosmology and ontology. Unlike Western interpretations that portray taboo as prohibition,



contemporary scholarship sees it as a mechanism grounded in the metaphysical understanding of life.

Cezula (2024) claims that African ethics integrates ontology, epidemiology, and morality into a defined system. In this context, Moral norms are not external rules for the individual but an expression of order. Ethics flows from ontology; one acts rightly because one's self is rational, spiritually textured.

Yoruba moral order is linked to the concept of *ase*, the dynamic force that animates existence. Good conduct preserves the harmonious flow of *ase*, while moral violations disrupt it. The idea of good (*Iwa*) and the social ethic of (*Omoluabubi*) emphasize integrity, commitment, respect, and common responsibility (Olupono, 2022). Those moral categories are used to express spiritual alignment.

Among the Igbo tradition, the concept of *nso ani*, meaning earth taboo, regulates the conduct of land, kinship, and sacred places. Violations such as incest of sites are understood to offend both the earth deity. Anizoba (2025). Moral transgression is simultaneously social, spiritual, and ecological.

Taboo functions as an unwritten law that is transmitted orally through

- Proverbs
- Ritual practices
- Initiation rites
- Elders' instruction

Unlike the Mosaic law. African taboos are link morality with consequences. Otto (2021) highlights the covenant blessing and curse framework in Deuteronomy. Similarly, African traditions associate taboo violation with pressure illness and infertility. In both systems, morality important system; morality is embedded with causality. African religious ontology does not conceive morality as autonomy but responsibility within the universe.



Moral Order

According to Émile Durkheim, religion functions as a mechanism of regulation; both the Mosaic law in the New Testament and the system of taboo in African religion can be interpreted as sacred instruments designed to preserve solidarity and order within the community. Durkheim further argues that religion not only responds to spiritual concerns but also establishes social regulation and human behavior. Through the sacred laws, ritual, and prohibition, religion defines acceptable conduct and sets moral boundaries. Through sacred laws, rituals, and prohibitions, religion provides moral guidance for acceptable behavior within society (Molefe & Maraganedzha, 2022).

In the Old Testament, the book of Exodus presents the Ten Commandments as a foundational ethical code given by God to guide the people of Israel. These commandment reviews a clear moral directive that structured religious and social relationships. For example, in the book of Exodus 20:3 states that “*you shall have no other gods before me*” and “*honor your father and your mother*”. This verse establishes the principle of loyalty to God and respect within the family. Also, Exodus 20:13-15 states that “*you shall not murder, you shall not commit adultery, you shall not steal*”. This provides moral regulation that protect life and property of the people. These law obligations are meant to sustain covenant order between God and the people of Israel.

Similarly, African societies maintain moral order through a system of taboos, customs that guide human conduct. Taboos often prohibit actions considered dangerous to the morals of society, such as disrespect towards elders, social immorality, and violation of sacred places. These prohibitions are believed to be sanctioned by spiritual powers, making them morally binding for members of the society. In the Yoruba traditional belief system, for example, some action may be regarded as *eewo* (Taboo). Violating such restrictions is believed to invite special consequences to the individual and to the entire community.

The similarities between biblical law and African taboo lie in their role of mechanism. Both a system defines what constitutes priority, righteousness, obedience, and transgression. They also prescribe consequences of violations by enforcing dignity.



The old testament reflect this principle warns that communal disobedience brings collective consequences.

Furthermore, Traditional emphasize the nature of morality. Biblical ethics consistently stresses that moral conduct sustains social justice and communal well-being according to the scriptures. (Deuteronomy 16:20) “*Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue.*” Likewise, in African ethical thought, morality is based on the well-being of society rather than individual choice. Ethical violations disrupt social harmony and must be corrected through sections, reconciliation, and rituals. African traditional societies are believed to disturb moral order; therefore, corrective measures such as sanctions and rituals are used to restore balance between individuals, the community, and the spiritual world (Nwolise, O. B. C., 2005)

In contemporary scholarship, scholars continue to highlight the function of religion in maintaining moral for example, John S. Mbiti emphasizes that in African society, religion permeates all aspects of life and serves as the foundation of moral values that guide community behavior Mbiti, (2019). Similarly, Jacob K. Olupona argues that African religion employs taboos as a mechanism for preserving society and ethical discipline. According to Olupona (2020). Recent studies in religious ethics affirm that sacred law systems continue to shape moral consciousness and dignity in society. (Omenyo & Arthur, 2022).

Mosaic law and African taboos function as moral frameworks that guide human behavior and communal identity. Through divine commandments, religion establishes the boundaries of acceptable conduct for the collective well-being of society.

Theoretical Framework

This research employs an intermediary theoretical approach designed to facilitate comparative dialogue without hierarchical evaluation.

1. Covenantal Ethics (Old Testament Theology) Covenant ethics interprets Mosaic law as instruction grounded in divine election. Moral rules flow from covenant belonging to sustain common identity, through theological narrative (Barton, 2023; Otto, 2021).



2. Communal Ontological Ethics (African Moral Philosophy)

African moral systems are grounded in ontology, and morality preserve comic balance. Ethical norms arise from metaphysical rather than codified textual authority. (Cezula, 2024; Olupona, 2022).

African Religious Experience

African religious experience is embedded in day-to-day life activities, culture, and the worldview of African society. Unlike the Western tendency to separate religion from social and cultural life, African spirituality integrates religion into every aspect of life, including politics, morality, and community relationships. Religion in Africa is a life experience that shapes how human beings understand the world and interact with spiritual realities. Religion in Africa is understood as a lived experience that shapes and influences how people interpret the spiritual realm and everyday life (Mthethwa & Bhagwan, 2025).

One of the characteristics of religious experience is the belief in a supreme being who is known as a sustainer of the universe and the creator. In many African societies, the supreme being is known by a different name and reflects divine attributes. Among the Yoruba people, the supreme being is referred to as Olódùmarè or Olórun. While other African cultures also acknowledge the supreme deity who rules the cosmos. The supreme being is considered transcendent, and African religious experience maintains that God is involved in human affairs through intermediaries such as divinity, ancestors, and spirits. These intermediaries serve as a connection between the supreme being and the human being.

Another dimension of African religious experience is the belief in the spiritual world. African cosmology recognize reality of visible and invisible realms that interact continuously. The invisible world includes spirits, divinities who are believed to influence morality and human destiny. The ancestors play an important role in African spirituality because they are regarded as forefathers and guardians of family tradition. Through sacrifices, prayers, and rituals, the living maintain a relationship with the ancestors to ensure protection and social stability.



The nature of African religion also plays an important role in shaping religious experience. In African societies, religion is not practiced in isolation; it is a collective engagement through festivals and community gatherings. Religious festivals often celebrate historical events and divine intervention in the life of the community. For example, among Yoruba people festival associated with certain divinities, enforcing community identity, and spiritual renewal. These celebrations provide opportunities for moral instruction and social cohesion. Religious festivals in African traditions invoke ancestral spirits while preserving indigenous identity. Festivals among the Yoruba, such as those dedicated to Ifa, Ogun, Sango, and Osun, demonstrate the reinforcement of communal unity and shared moral values (Onuorah, E., & Eze, C., 2024).

Ritual practices illustrate how African religious experience functions as a dynamic interaction between humans and the spiritual world. Rituals such as sacrifice. Divination, for example, serves as a means of understanding the spiritual causes behind illness or misfortune. Among the Yoruba tradition, the divination is associated with *Òrúnmìlà* plays a vital role in providing spiritual insights and guidance. Through the consultation of the diviners, individuals receive instruction on how to resolve moral and spiritual problems.

Although religious experience is connected with strong moral values and ethical conduct. Religion in Africa establishes morals that guide individual behavior and preserve harmony. Concepts, such as respect, hospitality, and communal responsibility, are rooted in religious beliefs to reinforce traditional customs and taboos. Violation of moral conducts are considered a spiritual transgression that may attract supernatural consequences.

In addition, African religious experience emphasizes the understanding of life physical, spiritual, and social dimensions of life are inseparable. Illness, for example, may be interpreted as a disruption in special relationships or moral balance. Healing often involves both spiritual intervention and physical treatment, through sacrifice and prayers. This perspective explains why religion continues to influence healthcare practices and conflict resolution in African society.



Contemporary scholars of African religion emphasize that African religious experience remains vibrant and adaptable despite the influence of modernization, Christianity and Islam. According to Jacob K. Olupona, African religions continue to shape identity and ethics across the continent, even within societies that have adopted other global religions. Similarly, John S. Mbiti famously observed that Africans are “notoriously religious,” highlighting how religion permeates everyday life. Recent research also suggests that African traditional religious experiences have influenced Christianity and Islamic practices in Africa, especially in areas such as prophecy, spirituality, and healing.

In conclusion, African religious experience reflects a worldview in which spiritual values and social relationships are interconnected. The belief in a supreme being, reverence for ancestors, participation in communal rituals, and moral tradition contribute to a religious life that shapes African identity and culture. Despite religious transformations, Africa experience continue to provide moral guidance and communal cohesion for many African communities.

Findings and Comparative Analysis

1. Sacred Authority and Moral Foundation

Old Testament scholars emphasized the covenant with Yahweh as the ultimate moral source. Law derives authority from divine revelation (2023). African religious leaders identified ancestors, divinities, and cosmic forces as custodians of moral equilibrium (Olupona, 2022). Authority is ontological and relational rather than textual.

2 Codification vs Oral Transmission

Mosaic law is maintained in writing and canonized scripture, particularly in the Torah, including the books of Exodus and Deuteronomy. These laws were formally recorded as authoritative text that guide Israel religious and social life. (Eckart Otto 2021), The written version of Mosaic law showed consistency and the preservation of Israel’s covenant ethics

In contrast, the African moral system is transmitted through oral traditions. Ethical teachings are passed from one generation to another through ritual practice and oral



instruction by elders. These methods serve as a channel for preserving common wisdom and values. Despite the difference, both systems exhibit normativity, providing a moral framework that guides behavior and sustains social order (Jacob K. Olupona, 2020).

3 Sanction and Consequence

In Deuteronomy 28, curses and blessings are consequences of disobedience and obedience (Otto, 2021). Similarly, taboo violation in African cultures results in misfortune and crisis (Anizoba, 2025). Both traditions integrate spiritual and social consequences.

4 Law and Taboo as Instruments of Social Cohesion

Religion serves as a moral architect. Mosaic law formed Israel as a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). Taboos safeguard lineage continuity and sacred land (Cezula, 2024). Thus, taboo may be seen as a functional equivalent of sacred law.

Implications for African Biblical Ethics

The study suggests that religious ethics provide lenses for reading Old Testament law within African contexts (Ukpong, 2022). Instead of dismissing taboo as primitive, it should be recognized as a coherent regulatory system. For scholars engaged in religious ethics in Nigeria, this comparative model strengthens dialogue between biblical theology and indigenous moral governance.

Conclusion

Mosaic law and African taboos represent a structural system of sacred moral order. While differing in form, both regulate behaviour through divine or ancestral authority. The study affirms that African indigenous religion possesses a morally coherent system compared to Old Testament covenantal ethics.

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