

# *Interpreting the Law*



From the very earliest days of the church Christians have struggled to understand how to interpret the Old Testament Law. The first church council was convened at Jerusalem in an attempt to settle just that issue. The decision made there was that Gentile Christians were not required to obey the Law, but were to avoid activities that would offend the conscience of their Jewish brothers and sisters (Acts 15:24-29). Even so, Paul still struggled with those who wished to force Gentiles to be circumcised and obey the Law (see Paul's argument in Galatians). Over the next few centuries increasing antipathy between Jews and Christians resulted in many Christians rejecting the Old Testament completely, or resorting to allegory to interpret it, so avoiding its literal meaning. One writer, for example, interpreted the food laws of Deuteronomy 14:7 in the following way. The clean animal symbolises a true Christian who is able to both chew the cud (=meditate on the Word) of God, the Bible) and be cloven-footed (=walk in the world while not being corrupted by it and in the Spirit at the same time).(1) Such interpretations are no doubt ingenious, but have nothing to do with the author's original intent, which should always be our guide when interpreting the Bible.

Even today there are certain groups around the world who consider themselves to be the New Israel. In America there are the so-called Christian Reconstructionists who seek to apply the Law of Moses to a modern state. There are many others who have a similar distorted understanding of the relevance of the Law of Moses.(2)

## *The Law is a Covenant*

The whole of the Old Testament is sometimes referred to as the Law (e.g. Rom. 3:19), but more usually it meant the five books of Moses; Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy (Rom. 3:12b; Gal. 4:21). For the purposes of this study I will be defining the Law as the commandments given to Moses for the people of Israel, which start in Exodus 19 until the end of Deuteronomy. These commandments form parts of a Covenant, which was an concept which was well understood in the ancient world. A Covenant is a formal agreement between two parties, specifying what each party should receive from the other and defining penalties for failure to live up to the terms of the agreement. There are several covenants in the Old Testament

(Gen. 9:1-17; 15:1-21; 17:1-14; 2 Sam. 7:12-16). Most were two sided, requiring both sides to live up to their obligations, but one (significantly, the Abrahamic covenant) was one-sided and so was not dependent on man living up to his side. Both the stronger (called the suzerain) and the weaker (the vassal) parties received a copy of the covenant. The Law is actually as two-sided covenant made between God and Israel. It contains the same elements as other biblical and secular covenants made during the same period of history. The similarities cannot be pressed too far, as there are some differences between the Biblical covenants and their extra-biblical counterparts.(3) In Israel’s case the two identical copies of the Ten Commandments were both kept in the ark, because it was simultaneously the dwelling place of God (the Suzerain) and the central point of Israel (the vassal).(4) Incidentally the ark of Covenant was the same size and shape as a king’s footstool, which reinforces the imagery of the Holy of Holies as God’s throne-room on earth.(5)

The details of the covenant in Exodus and Deuteronomy, the former governing a wandering life in the desert, while Deuteronomy represents a renewal of the Covenant gives specific instructions concerning life in the Promised Land.(6)

***Table 1: Common Elements of Ancient Covenants***

<b>Element</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Example</b>
Preamble	Identifies the parties to the Covenant: “I am the Lord your God”	Exod. 20:2; 34:6-7; Deut. 1:1-5
Prologue	Contains a brief history of the relationship of both parties: “...who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.”	Exod. 20:2; Deut. 1:6-4:49
Stipulations	Requirements of the covenant, the law themselves	Exod. 20:3-7; 34:11-26; Deut. 5:1-26:49
Witnesses	The gods are the witnesses to extra-biblical covenants, but in the Bible God Himself is the witness. There is one biblical example of heaven and earth serving as witnesses	Heb. 6:13-14; Deut. 31:28
Sanctions	A statement of blessings and cursings	Exod. 20:5-6, 7, 12; Deut. 11:26-32; 27:1 - 30:20
Document Clause	Provisions for reviewing the terms of the covenant. In extra-biblical covenants this clause required the covenant to be deposited in a temple and be read publicly	Exod. 25:16; Deut. 6:6-9; 17:18-20; 31:19-21, 24-27

***Most of the Law Refers Only to Israel***

The Mosaic Covenant therefore represents God’s dealing with the nation of Israel. As such it is not directly applicable to us. Many commandments deal with situations only found in an

agricultural community, including what to do about dangerous animals (Exod. 21:28-32, 35-36), uncovered pits (21:33-34), and fires in fields (22:6). Others speak of the purity which God expects from His people, expressed even in their agricultural practices (Deut. 22:9, 11). Another good example of this are the food laws and regulations concerning uncleanness (Num. 19:11-19; Lev. 11:41-45). The Israelites were forbidden to eat certain animals and to avoid touching anything dead, but such rules were not binding on non-Israelites (Deut. 14:21).(7) In the New Testament Jesus declared that all foods were now to be considered ceremonially clean (Mark 7:19), and His words were later echoed by Paul (Col. 2:20-23; 1 Tim. 4:3-5).(8)

The commandments can be divided into two types:

1. Those that give general principles based on specific examples. This obviously makes the Law more workable as there was no need for an encyclopaedic set of rules when a general one would do. Leviticus 19:9-14 is a good example of these types of commandments.(9)
2. Those that deal with individual cases. Sometimes Laws refer only to one particular case, such as how to treat your Hebrew servant (Deut. 15:12-17), or those concerning the remarriage of a divorced woman (Deut. 24:1-2).(10)

Some commandments that seem to be very strange to us because we do not understand their original context. Why did God forbid the trimming of beards (Lev. 19:27-28; 21:5) or the cooking of a young goat in its mother's milk (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21)? The cutting of beards and hair in this manner (and the closely related disfigurement - Deut. 14:1) was common among the Canaanites. Cutting of the body was practised by the prophets of Baal (1 Kings 18:28). The worship of Yahweh was in no way to be confused with pagan practices. Most commentators point out that the Canaanites practised a fertility rite that required the cooking of a kid in milk, so this commandment seems to have been intended to outlaw such a practice.(11) Another plausible explanation is that it was considered wrong for a kid to be cooked in the very medium by which it was previously sustained and nourished.(12)

## *The Law is Applicable Only When Renewed in the New Testament*

Jesus said that He had not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfil it (Matt. 5:17-18). Fulfilment was a major preoccupation in Matthew's Gospel (1:22; 2:15, 17, 23, 4:14). In saying this Jesus was not saying that the Law was no longer the Word of God, but that the true purpose of the Law was to point beyond itself to His teaching, person and work.(13) Traditionally it has been common practice to divide the Law into two parts, the moral and the ceremonial. While the ceremonial was fulfilled in Christ, it is argued that the moral Law is universally applicable. However the Bible itself does not make such a differentiation and both moral and ceremonial commandments are often found mixed together (see Exod. 23; Lev. 19; Deut. 22-23). Both "parts" of the Law equally point forward to Christ.

With this in mind it is fair to conclude that the commands of the Old Testament are not binding on Christians, except where they are specifically renewed under the New Covenant. It would seem to be a simple matter to locate New Testament renewals of many of the commandments, but care must be taken to understand the context in which an Old Testament commandment is mentioned in the New. References in the Gospels or Acts are sometimes made to a certain Law simply because it was Jewish practice, and not because it was being renewed by Jesus or the apostles. Jesus' discussion of the practices of the Pharisees is a good example of this (see Matt. 23:23; Luke 11:42). Jesus mentioned tithing in passing as something that the Pharisees did, but there is no evidence elsewhere in the New Testament so suggest that tithing was practised by the early church or that it was a requirement for Christians.(14)

***Table 2: The Renewal of Commandments in the New Testament***

<b>OT Reference</b>	<b>Commandment</b>	<b>New Testament Reference</b>
Exod. 20:3	You shall have no other gods before me	Matt. 4:10
Exod. 20:4	You shall not make any idols	Eph. 5:5; 1 John 5:21
Exod. 20:7	You shall not misuse the name of the Lord	James 5:12
Exod. 20:8-11	Remember the Sabbath	Col. 2:16-17 ( <b>not renewed in NT</b> )
Exod. 20:12	Honour your father and mother	Matt. 19:17-19; Eph. 6:1-3
Exod. 20:13	You shall not murder	Matt. 5:21-22; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:9-10
Exod. 20:14	You shall not commit adultery	Matt. 5:27-28; 19:17-19
Exod. 20:15	You shall not steal	Matt. 15:16; 19:17-19; Rom. 13:9-10
Exod. 20:16	You shall not give false testimony	Matt. 15:16; 19:17-19
Exod. 20:17	You shall not covet	Luke 12:15; Rom. 13:9-10; Gal. 5:21

Table 2 traces the continuation of nine of the ten commandments, but even with these (the heart of the so-called moral Law) the references are often not as clear-cut as some might like. Even the Ten Commandments require careful contextualisation in order to make their details relevant to our culture and situation, e.g. how many of us are likely to covet their neighbours donkey today? The point is that we should look below the surface at what the underlying meaning of the

commandments is. Jesus Himself did this when asked which was the greatest commandment (Matt. 22:34-40). He replied that it was “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Deut. 6:5), and added that the second was “Love your neighbour as yourself” (Lev. 19:18). He concluded that these too summed up the whole of the Old Testament (Matt. 22:40; cf. Rom. 13:9-10).

Writing to Timothy, the apostle Paul is adamant that all of Scripture is inspired and is useful (2 Tim 3:16), including the Law. Two contemporary uses of the Law will make up the remainder of this study: **(A)** The Law as a reflection of the character of the Lawgiver, and **(B)** the Law as a prefigurement of Christ and His work.

### *A) The Law Teaches Us About the Character of the Lawgiver*

God’s character does not change (Malachi 3:6), as so whatever the Law teaches us about the nature of God will be useful to us wherever and whenever we live. The design of the Tabernacle speaks clearly of God’s holiness and separation from sin. Everything in the Tabernacle required cleansing with blood, and the nearer the presence of God one came, the fewer people were allowed to enter there. The Holy of Holies could only be entered once a year by the high priest on the day of Atonement (Lev. 16:1-34). Because of His Holiness, the Lord requires perfection, no blemish was allowed on anything presented at the Tabernacle (Deut. 15:21; 17:1). The Lord also expected His people be pure (Deut. 18:9-13) if they wished Him to dwell amongst them. The Tabernacle and sacrificial system do not just speak of God’s separation from man, they also speak eloquently of His desire to dwell amongst His people and to have fellowship with them. Even if in only a limited way they did provide a means of fellowship with God. Ultimately they both point to Christ Himself as we shall see below. Table 3 lists some of the major concerns of the covenant, reflecting those areas which are close to God’s heart and reflections of His character. The underlying meaning of many are reflected in the New Testament.

*Table 3: Major Social Concerns in the Covenant & current;*

Concern	Explanation	OT References	NT Parallel
Personhood	Everyone’s person is to be secure	Exod. 20:13; 21:16-21, 26-31; Lev. 19:14; Deut. 24:7; 27:18	
False accusation	Everyone is to be secure against slander and false accusation	Exod. 20:16; Exod. 23:1-3; Lev. 19:16; Deut. 19:15-21	1 Tim. 5:19
Woman	No woman is to be taken advantage of within her subordinate status in society	Exod. 21:7-11, 20, 26-32; 22:16-17; Deut. 21:10-14; 22:13-30; 24:1-5	Eph. 5:25-33

Punishment	Punishment for wrongdoing shall not be excessive so that the culprit is dehumanised	Deut. 25:1-4	2 Cor. 2:5-11
Dignity	Every Israelite's dignity and right to be God's freedman and servant are to be honoured and safeguarded	Exod. 21:2, 5-6; Lev. 25; Deut. 15:12-18	Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1
Inheritance	Every Israelite's inheritance in the promised land is to be secure	Lev. 25; Num. 27:5-7; 36:1-9; Deut. 25:5-10	Eph. 1:13-14, 18; Heb. 9:15; 1 Pet. 1:4
Property	Everyone's property is to be secure	Exod. 20:15; 21:33-36; 22:1-15; 23:4-5; Lev. 19:35-36; Deut. 22:1-4; 25:13-15	Matt. 6:19-21
Fruit of Labour	Everyone is to receive the fruit of his labours	Lev. 19:13; Deut. 24:14; 25:4	1 Cor. 9:1-12; 1 Tim. 5:17-18
Fruit of the ground	Everyone is to share the fruit of the ground	Exod. 23:10-11; Lev. 19:9-10; 23:22; 25:3-55; Deut. 14:28-29; 24:19-21	2 Cor. 8:13-15
Rest on Sabbath	Everyone, down to the humblest servant and the resident alien, is to share in the weekly rest of God's Sabbath	Exod. 20:8-11; 23:12	Heb. 4:1-11
Marriage	The marriage relationship is to be kept inviolate	Exod. 20:14; see also Lev. 18:6-23; 20:10-21; Deut. 22:13-30	1 Cor. 6:13-20; 1 Thess. 4:3-5; Heb. 13:4
Exploitation	No one, however disabled, impoverished or powerless, is to be oppressed or exploited	Exod. 22:21-27; Lev. 19:14, 33-34; 25:35-36; Deut. 23:19; 24:6, 12-15, 17-18; 16:18-20; 17:8-13; 19:15-21	1 Thess. 4:3-6; James 1:27 - 2:7
Fair trial	Everyone is to have free access to the courts and is to be afforded a fair trial	Exod. 23:6,8; Lev. 19:15; Deut. 1:17; 10:17-18; 16:18-20; 17:8-13; 19:15-21	1 Cor. 6:1-6
Social Order	Every person's God-given place in the social order is to be honoured	Exod. 20:20:12; 21:15, 17; 22:28; Lev. 19:3,32; 20:9; Deut. 17:8-13; 21:15-21; 27:16	Rom. 13:7; 1 Tim. 2:1-4
Law	No one shall be above the law, not even the king	Deut. 17:18-20	
Animals	Concern for the welfare of other creatures is to be extended to the animal	Exod. 23:5, 11; Lev. 25:7; Deut.	

	world	22:4, 6-7; 25:4	
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&current; Table based on *NIV Study Bible*, 271.

The blank boxes in some of the categories in Table 3 do not mean that the Old Testament principles are no longer valid; it is simply that the New Testament, does not mention them specifically.

## ***B) The Law Prefigures the Person and Work of Christ***

There are two extremes to avoid in interpreting the Law as a type of what was achieved by Jesus Christ. The first is to see only the historical application of the Law and ignore the way that it is appropriated in the New Testament. The second extreme is more common. This occurs when the Old Testament is not read as prefiguring the New, it is read as if it *were* the New!(15) According to this view Moses did not see a Tabernacle on the mountain (Hebrews 8:5) - he saw Jesus Christ Himself - and so understood *exactly* what each item of the Tabernacle signified. Such interpretation often leads to a very forced and fanciful eisogesis(16) in which every single verse describing the Tabernacle is made to speak of Christ in some way. The original context is completely ignored and the short-comings of the Old Testament covenant swept under the carpet. Nothing new is learnt from such interpretation other than what is read in from the New Testament revelation of the person and work of Christ. The table below outlines some of the types that can be found in the Law. In constructing it I have limited myself to those types which have good New Testament support. It is far from exhaustive and is meant to spur you on to search the Scriptures for yourselves.

***Table 4: Biblical Types and Antitypes in the Law of Moses***

<b>OT Type</b>	<b>OT Reference</b>	<b>NT Antitype</b>	<b>NT Reference</b>
The people of Israel	Exod. 19:6	Believers	1 Peter 2:5
The Prophet like Moses	Deut. 18:17-19	The Messiah	John 5:46; 6:14; 7:40; Acts 3:22-26; 7:37
Animal sacrifices	Lev. 1-7	The cross	Heb. 7:27; 10:1-4; 1 Peter 2:24
God's presence with His people	Exod. 40:34-38; Num. 9:15-23	The incarnation of Jesus	Matt. 1:23; John 1:14; Acts 2:2-4; 1 Cor. 3:10-17; 6:19
Bread of the presence	Exod. 25:23-30	Jesus the bread of life	John 6:32-33, 35

(made from manna)			
Altar of incense	Exod. 30:1-10	The prayers of the saints	Rev. 5:8; 8:3
Washing basin / laver	Exod. 30:17-21; 38:8	Washing from sin in baptism / satisfying spiritual thirst / the Holy Spirit	Acts 2:38 / John 4:13-14 / John 7:37-39; Acts 1:5; 10:47
The grain offering	Lev. 2	Jesus offered us His flesh to eat	John 6:54-58
The high priesthood	Lev. 8	A mediator between God and men	1 Tim. 2:5; Heb. 7:26-28
The Passover lamb	Exod. 12:1-28, 43-49	Jesus Christ	Acts 8:32; 1 Cor. 5:7; 1 Peter 1:15-19; 2:21-23.
Feast of firstfruits	Lev. 23:11; Deut. 16:9-12	Christ's resurrection	1 Cor. 15:20, 23
The day of atonement	Lev. 16	The cross	Rom. 3:25; Heb. 9:7-8, 23-28; 13:11-13
The bronze serpent	Num. 21:5-9	The cross	John 3:14-16
The smitten Rock	Exod. 17:5-7	Christ	1 Cor. 10:4

## *Two Examples of the Interpretation of the Law*

Many Christians believe that they can receive a satanic curse down the family line on the basis of Exodus 20:6 and Deuteronomy 28:15-66. First of all, note that it God Himself that does the cursing - neither the devil or demons are mentioned anywhere. These verses refer to God's covenant with Israel and not to Christians. There is therefore no biblical basis for hereditary curses upon Christians. Indeed there is good biblical evidence to refute such a belief, for Jeremiah states that under the New Covenant no one will be punished for someone else's sin (Jer. 31:29-30). There is no support for this view in Galatians 3:13 which speaks about Christ freeing us from the curse of the Law. The curse here is not part of the covenantal curses, but the curse of relying on obeying the Law for salvation (Gal. 3:10-12).

Some Christians feel that it is wrong to eat black pudding because of the commandments regarding the eating of blood (Lev. 7:22-27; 17:13-14). Such objections could be dismissed on the grounds that the original readers would not be thinking of anything like black pudding when they read these commandments, which were intended to forbid the eating of meat with the blood



still in it and the drinking of blood linked with pagan ceremonies. Further support for the argument against black pudding found by appealing to Acts 15:20, 29 which was the decision of the Jerusalem Council concerning Jewish/Gentile relations. As Dr. David Petts explains these verses cannot be used in this way:

The passage in Acts 15 must be interpreted in its context - the decision at that time to tell the Gentiles to abstain from meats offered to idols etc., was only considered 'necessary'... because of evident difficulties that had arisen between Jewish and Gentile Christians. To keep the peace the Council agreed that the Gentiles need not be circumcised but that they should abstain from certain meats offered to idols, blood, thing strangled, and fornication, all of which were intimately connected with the pagan worship of the time. Interpreted this way the decision of the Council need not be understood to be binding on all Christians for all time (although course the prohibition against fornication is backed up elsewhere). That this interpretation is basically correct is confirmed by the fact that in 1 Corinthians 8-10 (written some five years after the Council of Jerusalem) Paul makes it clear that in principle one may eat meat offered to idols and need only abstain if one is likely to cause a brother to stumble.(17)

## *Summary*

1. The Old Testament Law represents God's covenant with the nation of Israel. It's commandments do not apply directly to Christians except when specifically renewed.
2. All Scripture is useful and inspired by God (2 Tim. 3:16). The underlying principles contained in the commandments are relevant for us today.
3. The Law reveals God's character and standards. These never change.
4. The Law ultimately points to Jesus Christ, the One who fulfilled it by His teaching, sinless life and sacrificial death. Avoid reading the Old Testament as if it were the New.

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## *Recommended Further Reading*

Vern Sheridan Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991.

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## *References*

(1) The Epistle of Barnabas, 10; Alexander Roberts & James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Vol. 1 (Grand Rapids; Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993 reprint), 143-144.

(2) Many Christians from Kerala, claiming descent from St. Thomas, see themselves as inheritors of a Hebrew culture. They therefore apply large parts of the OT Law in a way that seems strange to Western Christians, such as the forbidding of the wearing of earrings.

(3) Vern Sheridan Poythress, *The Shadow of Christ in the Law of Moses*. (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, Publishers, Inc., 1991), 63-68.

(4) Poythress, 76.

(5) Poythress, 76-77.

(6) Poythress, 66.

(7) The reasons for these prohibitions seem to have been more than simple good hygiene. In all cases there is some link between the animal and the curse of Genesis 3, which included the final punishment of death. Creeping things move across the ground like the serpent, carrion-feeders are closely associated with death. For a more detailed analysis see Poythress, 83-85.

(8) Poythress, 85.

(9) Gordon D. Fee & Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd Edition. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993), 154-156.

(10) Fee & Stuart, 156-158.

(11) J.A. Thompson, "Deuteronomy," *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Leicester: IVP, 1974), 179.

(12) Calum M. Carmichael, "On Separating Life and Death: An Explanation of Some Biblical Laws," *Harvard Theological Review*, 69 (1976): 1-7, cited by Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Exodus," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 445.

(13) Donald A. Carson, "Matthew," F.E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 8. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 143-145; R.T. France, "Matthew," *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. (Leicester: IVP, 1985), 114, 117.

(14) See further discipleship series: *The Biblical View of Giving*.

(15) Paul K. Jewett, *Infant Baptism & The Covenant of Grace*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 93: "All Christians, of course, read the Old Testament in the *light* of the New; but it is another matter to read the Old Testament as though it *were* the New, as though the terms "old" and "new" had no theological significance." [Emphasis in original.]

(16) *Eisogesis* means reading a meaning into a text, as opposed to *exegesis* - reading a meaning out of a text.

(17) David Petts, *Redemption* (December 1991): 35. So also, Richard N. Longenecker, "Acts," *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 448; John R.W. Stott, "The Message of Acts," *The Bible Speaks Today*. (Leicester: IVP, 1990), 250.

