

Nathan Daily

THE CHRISTIAN AND
OLD TESTAMENT
LAW

Exodus 19:3-6

One Main Thing

Old Testament law is not simply a list of rules, but rather it reveals—in concert with the story of God—the gracious character of God and incites God’s people toward examining priorities in hope of displaying a life of gratitude for God’s gifts.

Introduction

Old Testament law consistently retains the status of one of the most difficult and underappreciated portions of Scripture for the Christian.

Readers are often more likely to turn toward the remainder of the Old Testament when contemplating

God, discussing faith, and reflecting upon the practice of Christian life.

- The explorations upon the meaning of a life filled with happiness and contentment as well as with suffering and death in wisdom literature like Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes present readers with a posture for speech and action toward world and God even when God appears absent from the realities of the moment.
- The interplay between the stories of the past and the defense of God's goodness present in narrative books like Joshua, Judges, Samuel, and Kings offers readers an opportunity to reflect upon promise and covenant as guiding momentum within any crisis of the present.
- The hope for a future where God is king and divine presence is abundantly clear among a holy people in prophetic books like Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zephaniah encourages readers to look for God's presence in the present even when anticipating the clarity of the future.
- The prayers of lament and praise addressing a powerful God of justice in poetic books like Psalms and Lamentations provide readers who undergo a loss for words when addressing the divine with the traditional language of the community of faith—a language that in candidness does not skirt sincerity or fear honesty, a language that assumes God is righteous, capable of action, and is even willing to hear human thoughts whether it be a time of anxiety, doubt, praise, or thanksgiving.

But for many believers, Old Testament law is an entirely different matter.

Going Deeper

Two questions can provide impetus for beginning to consider how Old Testament law might inform Christian practice: (1) Why do Christians sometimes avoid reading Old Testament law? and (2) What exactly is Old Testament law? The first question addresses common assumptions about Old Testament law and the second reframes expectations through observing the biblical presentation of law.

Confusion over how to read Old Testament law as Christian Scripture arises from a number of angles and might tempt readers to ignore rather than engage the books that contain law.

1. The material is simply difficult. Not only are the customs recounted in biblical law ancient and unfamiliar to modern Christian readers, the sacrifices that are a central aspect of the text are difficult to visualize for those who have never seen or participated in such a ritual. Nevertheless, the New Testament, particularly the book of Hebrews, demands engagement with the sacrificial system within Old Testament law for a proper understanding of an event of utmost importance to the Christian faith, the nature and ongoing

- significance of the death of Jesus Christ.¹
2. Some readers uncritically view the ritualistic nature of law as negative. An aversion to ritual (sacrifices, ceremonies, holy days, laws) causes many to speak derogatorily about Old Testament law as old, boring, joyless, and, even worse, absent of heart or theologically empty—in spite of many biblical statements to the contrary.² In fact, we could argue ritual is the opposite of boring and heartless insofar as rituals are the repeated expressions of what move us the most (e.g., the Lord’s Supper).
 3. Several New Testament texts expound upon the obsolete nature of the ceremonial and sacrificial laws of Israel for Gentile Christians.³ Even as these texts, written in a variety of polemical contexts, limit the use of Old Testament law for Christian practice, the very same texts appeal to Old Testament law to make their argument.⁴ Thus, Christian readers do not ignore the law but hold together the limitations stated in the New Testament with the New Testament claim that *all* Scripture is the word of God and beneficial for theological reflection—“for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness.”⁵

1. Heb 7–10; Matt 20:28; John 19:36; Acts 8:32–35; Rom 8:3, 32; 1 Cor 5:7; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 1:7; 2:2.

2. Deut 4:1; 10:10–15; Ps 1:1–2; 119:1–176; Rom 7:12–14; 1 Tim 1:8.

3. Mk 7; Rom 7:1–7; 2 Cor 3; Gal 3–4; Heb 7–10; cf. Titus 3:9.

4. Esp. Gal 3–4 and Heb 7–10.

5. 2 Tim 3:16; cf. Rom 7:12–14; 1 Tim 1:8.

Since readers often get lost in the details of various laws, an initial step toward building an appreciation for reading Old Testament law as Scripture comes from defining the term “law” and recognizing how the Bible itself presents law. Christians traditionally label the first five books of the Bible as the books of Law. The Hebrew term *torah*, often translated as “law,” is actually a broader term that means “teaching” or “instruction.” These five books do contain many laws: the laws at Sinai,⁶ the laws in the Wilderness,⁷ and the laws presented by Moses to the generation entering the land.⁸ Since the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, also contains narrative and poetry in addition to commandments, the terms “teaching” and “instruction” as translations of *torah* are helpful in that they point not only to the specific laws found within these books but also to the didactic nature of the narratives and poems of Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

This point is very important for understanding the character of the material. The Torah presents itself as story, and readers must not approach specific laws in isolation but as components of the Torah story. The specific laws receive meaning from the story that encapsulates them and the character of the God depicted within that story. The story of a God who speaks the

6. Exod 19:1–Num 10:10.

7. Num 10:11–36:13.

8. Deut 4:44–28.

cosmos into existence.⁹ The story of a God who offers promise toward a family who will be a blessing for all families of the earth.¹⁰ The story of a God who delivers from bondage and hopelessness.¹¹ The story of a God who appears, instructs, and is a holy presence among a people.¹² The story of a God who emphasizes love, relationship, and covenant for ongoing generations.¹³ The story of a God who gives law because law promotes life and purpose for God's people¹⁴ and reveals the character of the God who dwells among them.¹⁵

Application

Reading Old Testament law within the story of God provides a variety of avenues for theological reflection. Of many possibilities, three examples may serve as a starting point:

Salvation and the Story of Exodus: Exodus 19:3–6 grounds Old Testament law within the story of a gracious God who rescues and commissions a unique people for an expansive mission. Before God gives law, God rescues Israel and labels them a special people. When Israel arrives at Sinai, God's first statement recounts the Exodus from Egypt as an act of grace in response to desperate

9. Gen 1:1–11:26.

10. Gen 11:27–50:26.

11. Exod 1:1–18:27.

12. Exod 19:1–Num 36:13.

13. Deut 1:1–34:12

14. Exod 19:4–6; Deut 4:1–8; 5:33; 32:46–47.

15. Exod 34:4–7; 40:33b–38; Lev 19:2, 18, 34; Deut 10:17–18.

need.¹⁶ Similarly, the Ten Commandments begin with a reminder of past salvation.¹⁷ God's initial act of rescuing Israel is foundational for understanding the law at Sinai—grace precedes law. The story contextualizes the law in such a way that Israel's obedience is responsive thanksgiving to a gracious gift of salvation from the bondage of Egypt.¹⁸ Further, adherence to the law is a purposeful response by this special people to contribute toward God's mission, the realization by all that the whole earth belongs to God.¹⁹ The exchange between divine initiative and human response modeled in the Torah story remains a distinctive feature of the story of God as 1 Peter 2:9 shapes Christian identity and mission through allusion to Exodus 19:3–6—"But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light"—or as 1 John plainly and profoundly affirms—"We love because he first loved us" (4:18).

Holiness and the Story of Leviticus: The Torah places Old Testament law within the story of a holy God whose presence impacts all spheres of life. Following the episode with the golden calf, uncertainty surrounds God's ongoing relationship with the people as they are in danger of losing access to the presence of

16. Cf. Exod 2:23; 3:7–9.

17. Exod 20:2.

18. Deut 26:4–11.

19. Exod 19:5–6; cf. Deut 26:16–19; Exod 6:7; 14:18; 16:6; Isa 49:6.

God.²⁰ Once Moses intercedes for the people, the book of Exodus ends dramatically with the holy God inhabiting the tabernacle to dwell in the midst of Israel.²¹ Throughout the following story, inattentiveness to the holiness of God as expressed in the Wilderness Wanderings is dangerous and may result in disaster.²² Conversely, attention to God's holiness, as envisioned in Leviticus through sacrifice, purity, and order, results in a community that may be, just as the deity is, holy themselves.²³ In the Bible, holiness amounts to that which makes God "different" or "other" from all else (i.e., holy is ultimately "what God is"). Thus, the people of God derive a distinct (= holy) status from association with the presence of God. Following the injunction to be holy in Leviticus 19:2, the laws in 19:3–37 seemingly focus on almost every aspect of life: family relationships, idolatry, worship, compassion toward people with disabilities, fairness, charity, justice, and honesty. The list of such a wide variety of ethical commands interspersed regularly with the phrase "I am the LORD"²⁴ encourages those who are "to be holy" to recognize adherence to the commands in 19:3–37 as a mode for reflecting the holy character of God. Thus, when read with the Torah story's focus upon the presence of God, the laws enjoin practical behaviors that manifest mission—exhibiting Israel's identity as holy like the God they serve. As the

20. Exod 33:12–23; cf. 29:42–46.

21. Exod 40:34–38.

22. Exod 16–18; 32–34; Num 10–25.

23. Lev 11:45; 19:2.

24. Lev 19:3, 10, 12, etc.

holy God continually offers avenue for divine presence in the life of the believer,²⁵ Old Testament law challenges believers to imagine current ethical circumstances in light of ancient Israel's holiness guidelines in an attempt to conform action to the character of the divine one, that is, in the words of 1 Peter — “as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; for it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1:15–16).

Love and the Story of Deuteronomy: Too often overlooked, the dynamic influence of love initiates and sustains relationship for generations in Old Testament law. God's love for Israel's ancestors provides a foundational ingredient for Israel's rescue from Egypt and the subsequent gift of law.²⁶ Israel's reciprocation of love toward God is among the base requirements within the covenantal relationship.²⁷ Maintenance of the relationship is exhibited vertically through ongoing love of and from God²⁸ as well as horizontally toward the orphan, widow, and stranger.²⁹ As God's love for Israel goes back to the time of Abraham and Sarah, love is also an ongoing expectation for coming generations of God's people.³⁰ The Torah story does not present law as a mechanism for earning God's favor.³¹ Instead, God's love for Israel predates law, and Israel's love for God is

25. John 1:14; 1 Cor 3:16–17.

26. Deut 4:37; 7:7–9; 23:5.

27. Deut 10:12; 11:1, 13; 19:9.

28. Deut 6:5; 7:13; 10:18.

29. Deut 10:18–19; cf. 29:17.

30. Deut 7:9, 13; 30:6.

31. Deut 9:4.

an avenue leading toward obedience to the entirety of the commandments.³² The language of love in the Torah accentuates the relational and personalized dimension of Old Testament law. The New Testament retains the sense of the connection between love and action—"For the love of God is this, that we obey his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome."³³ Love from God,³⁴ love for God,³⁵ and love of neighbor³⁶ remain at the core of the language of faith with their clarity and simplicity and, paradoxically, their demanding profundity when contemplating the multitude of options for practice each day (1 Jn 4:12, 20–21).

Conclusion

Christians who want to read and understand Old Testament law are not attempting to become ancient Israelites or follow stipulations meant for another time and place. Rather, a goal for Christians who approach the Torah as Scripture (2 Tim 3:16) is to better understand the character of God and humanity's relationship to that God. Though many specific laws will remain difficult to understand, the hope is to read the Torah, both story and command together, in such a way that the prevalent themes of presence, holiness, justice, giving, family, leadership, sin, righteousness, love, wisdom, and many

32. Deut 30:11–16; cf. 19:9; 11:13.

33. 1 John 5:3; cf. Deut 30:11, 16.

34. Rom 5:8; 8:28; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:4; 1 Jn 4:10–11.

35. 1 Cor 2:9; 8:3; 1 Jn 5:2–3.

36. Rom 13:8, 10; Gal 5:14; Jas 2:8; 1 Thess 4:9.

others emerge in all their complexity as stimuli for introspection and practice in Christian life.

Discussion

1. Why do many Christians find Old Testament law more difficult to read than other parts of the Old Testament?
2. Define the word "ritual." What are some rituals in your personal life? In your religious life? Why do you repeat these actions? How do they add meaning and joy to your life?
3. Choose one or more of the following verses and discuss how a knowledge of Old Testament law is helpful for understanding the Christian faith: Heb 7–10; Matt 20:28; John 19:36; Acts 8:32–35; Rom 8:3, 32; 1 Cor 5:7; 2 Cor 5:21; 1 Pet 2:22; 1 John 1:7; 2:2.
4. What is "all Scripture" in 2 Tim 3:16? What is all Scripture "for" according to this verse?
5. What is the meaning of the Hebrew word *torah*? Why is it important to recognize Old Testament law occurs within the context of a story?
6. Consider the application themes (grace before command, divine presence and holiness, love for generations). How does the emphasis on each theme in the Old Testament help us think about who God is, our relationship to God, and our own mission within the story of God? How are or how could these themes be visible in your own life?