

The Law and Jesus

Jesus was a Jew, and a devout Jew. It is easy to forget that. As such he recognised that His father was the originator of the Law. Yet, he himself stated that in its present form it was incomplete:

‘Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish them but to complete them’ (Matthew ch.5).

He had frequent arguments with the Pharisees over the nature and authority of the Law:

‘The Sabbath was made for Man, not Man for the Sabbath?’ (Mark ch.2).

Yet the Law was necessary. Jesus was just enhancing it. In the Gospel of Matthew (ch.5), Jesus explained, in a series of detailed references to OT Law, how we must go beyond the basic requirements of the Commandments in order to enter Heaven.

Jesus sums up the Law in terms of Love. No longer is it to be understood in stale, sterile terms. Instead it must be dynamic and living:

‘Treat others as you would like them to treat you’ (Matthew ch.7).

It must be followed from the heart:

‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind’.

This is the greatest commandment, followed by the second greatest:

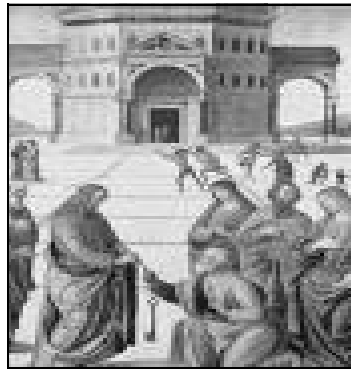
‘Love your neighbour as yourself’ (Matthew ch.22).

We should all ask ourselves honestly, do we really follow these commands?

The Law, the Early Church and St Paul

Later, the early Church would consider the Law in a more legalistic way, in terms of what part of the Jewish Law should Gentiles follow. It was the decision that they could forego circumcision, and the dietary and ritualistic aspects that makes those parts of the OT Laws inappropriate for Christians now (Acts ch.15).

In his letter to the Romans, Paul produced his exposition of the relationship of the Mosaic Law to the New Law of Christ. For Paul, the Mosaic Law was holy but imperfect, because it only revealed God’s Will, not the means to obey it (Romans ch.7 and 8). All it did was show what sin was (Romans ch.3), and *indirectly* point to Christ. To overcome sin people needed a gift from God, the gift of Christ, in order to create a new humanity. The Old Law had served its purpose and was now superseded by the grace of Christ (Romans ch.6).



Understanding The Bible and Our Faith

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What is God’s Law?

Recognising different types of Biblical Law



Questions for Reflection

1. Why are the Ten Commandments (The Decalogue) still valid and not all Old Testament Law?
2. Why are there two different versions of The Decalogue?
3. Why do a lot of people still follow the ‘an Eye for an Eye’ attitude to remedy a wrong?

Categories of OT Law

Israelite Law is divided in the OT into 6 groups:

- The Ten Commandments (Exodus ch.20/Deut. ch.5)
- The Code of the Covenant (Exodus ch.21-23)
- The Ritual Decalogue (Exod. ch.34)
- The Deuteronomic Code (Deut. ch.12-26)
- The Holiness Code (Leviticus ch.17-26)
- The Priestly Code (Leviticus ch.1-7, and ch.11-15, and Numbers ch.28-29)



The Ten Commandments, also known as the **Decalogue**, is the core of the Mosaic Law and is still valid under the new Law of Christ. The numbering of the commandments actually differs between Orthodox /Reformed Churches and the Catholic/Lutheran. The former is probably more accurate, with four commandments related to God (prohibition on false gods, on images, on improper use of the divine name, the command to honour the Sabbath) and six related to humans (parents, murder, adultery, stealing, slander, envy).

The different versions in Exodus and Deuteronomy are interesting. *Firstly*, in Exodus the command to observe the Sabbath is based on God resting on the 7th day after Creation, but in Deuteronomy the reason is related to the fact that the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt. Also, the command in Deuteronomy is applied to all people, not just the Hebrews. It appears that a different tradition is at work in Deuteronomy, one that places more significance on the importance of the flight from Egypt and the requirement to be kind to slaves. *Secondly*, in Exodus, the command about envy is applied to a neighbour's house first, then to the neighbour's wife etc. In Deuteronomy, it is applied to the neighbour's wife first, then the house etc. Again, this probably illustrates a later enumeration of the commandments in a more mature society, one that placed a higher value on the role of women.

The Code of the Covenant, although linked to the event on Sinai, is a later creation, based on the social and economic background it personifies. It does not really contain laws for a nomadic lifestyle, and the absence of commercial laws points to a pre-monarchic setting.

The Ritual Decalogue represents a set of laws concerning images and agricultural ritual. Its context implies a period soon after the entry into Canaan.

The Deuteronomic Code covers a vast range of law related to a complex compound of urban and agricultural society. The concern for worship at a single place, and the reference to Kings, indicates compilation or collection in the monarchical period, probably after the destruction of the northern kingdom in 721BC

The Holiness Code is entirely religious and cultic. It was probably compiled in the exilic period (post 586 BC) although containing ancient material.

The Priestly Code so described because it is generally associated with the priests of the 2nd Temple, after the exile, is found in several places in the Bible, but primarily in the book of Leviticus. The main collected portions concern sacrifice, the notion of what is clean and unclean, and festivals.

The Decalogue is understood to have a universal application. Although the other Codes contain much praiseworthy content, they have not been given the same acceptance because of their specific historical and/or ritualistic content.

An Eye for an Eye

The primitive nature of many of the individual laws must be understood in terms of the social, economic and political framework in which they were formulated. This will remove much that is sometimes seen as contentious about them. A prime example is the **'eye for an eye'** justification (Exodus ch.21) often still used to settle scores between people, often in a violent way. This justification of biblical Law is either the result of its serious misinterpretation or a deliberate attempt to abuse it for personal gain.

Very often a trend can be seen in the Law to move from a bad situation to a better, though still imperfect one, and on to a more generally accepted 'ideal'. An 'eye for an eye' is the initial attempt to moderate the law of the avenger, the vendetta type law still prevalent in some societies today. An example of this may be read in the terrible song of Lamech, in Genesis ch.4, where revenge is given 'seventy-sevenfold'.

Communities could not survive if, every time offence was given to one member by another, retribution would be out of all proportion to its magnitude and nature. So, **proportionality** was introduced. This principle is all that an 'eye for an eye' was seeking to ensure.

A similar development can be followed from the initial social acceptance of collective responsibility for a crime, where guilt could extend well beyond the individual or even the generation concerned (see the Decalogue Exodus ch.20 and Deuteronomy ch.5, and Exodus ch.34), to the recognition of individual responsibility (Deuteronomy ch.7 and 24, Jeremiah ch.31, and Ezekiel ch.18 and 33).

The Law and the Covenant

The term 'the Law' in the Bible is always associated with God. This is the crucial distinction between Hebrew Law and the laws of other contemporary societies. The Law is always presented as being created by God, not set down by Prophets, Judges or even Kings. For this reason it is inextricably linked to the Covenant and to the promises made by the people as part of their special relationship with God. A breach of the Covenant could only be because of a significant breach of the Law by the people as a whole. The Law was the standard against which all the chosen people would be judged. It is this preoccupation with the Law that can be seen in the Books of Samuel and Kings, Psalms and the Prophets.

