

Interpreting Old Testament Law: Part 1

I. Introduction

Exod 34:26- "Bring the best firstfruits of your land to the house of the LORD your God. "You must not boil a young goat in its mother's milk."

Leviticus 19:19- "You are to keep my statutes. Do not crossbreed two different kinds of your livestock, sow your fields with two kinds of seed, or put on a garment made of two kinds of material.

Deut 22:12- Make tassels on the four corners of the outer garment you wear.

We violate OT laws consistently:

Lev 19:32- "You are to rise in the presence of the elderly and honor the old. Fear your God; I am the LORD.

Deut 14:8- and pigs, though they have hooves, they do not chew the cud-- they are unclean for you. Do not eat their meat or touch their carcasses.

We embrace others like the 10 commandments

Lev 19:18- Do not take revenge or bear a grudge against members of your community, but love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD.

Exod 20:13- Do not murder.

Deut 5:18- Do not commit adultery.

“Many Christians today make this decision based merely on whether a law seems to be relevant. Surely this haphazard and existentialist approach to interpreting the Old Testament Law is inadequate.” – J. Daniel Hays

II. Traditional Approach-The Tri-partite Law

-Many break the law into 3 parts: moral, civil, and ceremonial.

-Moral laws: “those that deal with timeless truths regarding God’s intention for human ethical behavior.”

-Civil laws deal with Israel’s legal or governmental system. Issues related to land, criminal justice, and economics are civil laws.

-Ceremonial laws deal with festivals, sacrifices, and priestly activities.

-This distinction is important because it is the only way to know if a law still applies or does not. Moral laws are universal and timeless and so apply today. Civil and ceremonial laws were only for the Israelites and don’t apply today.

There are many weaknesses with this approach.

1) The Distinctions are Arbitrary

- a. These categories are man-made and are imposed onto the text from outside; notice the combination of Lev 19:18-19.
- b. It is extremely difficult to decide which category a certain law should fit into.

-Lev 19:19: You are to keep my statutes. Do not crossbreed two different kinds of your livestock, sow your fields with two kinds of seed, or put on a garment made of two kinds of material.

- i. Leviticus has a central theme/motif of God's holiness. This chapter is prefaced with: "Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy".
- ii. What about Numbers 5:11-31? This is a passage about how to discover if a woman is truly a virgin.
- iii. Tithing: Is it moral, civil, or ceremonial?
 1. Some say that tithing is moral because Abraham tithed before the law. But several of the laws in the Mosaic Law existed before the Mosaic Law. Some say tithing is civil. Some passages that describe tithing seem to describe it like a tax.

2) Interpret the Legal Material within the Narrative

-One of the problems with the way we interpret the law is that we separate it, pick the laws out of the narrative they are found within.

-The book of Exodus is mostly narrative, but the main law section (legal material) is found in chapters 20-23. Don't isolate the legal material from the narrative.

- 1) Exod 1-19 – God is delivering the Israelites from bondage in Egypt through his powerful works
- 2) Exod 20 – Ten Commandments
- 3) Exod 21-23 – Legal material

-But that typical explanation misses it.

-Leviticus is also painted with a backdrop of narrative, though you have to pay close attention to see it (Lev 26:46; 27:34; see also 8:10, 14, 31; 9:1, 8; 10:2; 16:1)

3) Traditional Approach overlooks the law's theological context.

The Law is tightly tied to the Mosaic Covenant.

- 1) The Mosaic Covenant is closely associated with Israel's conquest and occupation of the Promised Land

Deut 4:1, 5, 14, 40; 5:16; 6:1, 18, 20-25; 8:1; 11:8; 12:1; 15:4-6; 26:1-2; 27:1-3; 30:5, 17-18; 31:13

- a. Two critical aspects of the covenant were possession of the land and the presence of the Lord in the temple.
- 2) The blessings from the Mosaic Covenant were conditional.
 - a. Obedience brings blessing; disobedience brings curses
 - b. Read Deut 28
 - c. Deut 30:15-18 mentions the conditional aspect of the land and covenant blessings
- 3) The Mosaic Covenant is no longer a functional covenant
 - Hebrews 8-9 makes this clear; Hebrews 8:13
 - Galatians 3:25
 - Matthew 5:17

-Jesus himself fulfilled all the righteous demands of the Mosaic Law.
 However, the law changed by his fulfilling it
 Restated: Matthew 19:18-19
 Modified: Matthew 5:31-32
 Intensified: Matthew 5:21-22; 27-28
 Changed significantly: 5:33-37
 Abrogated: Mark 7:15-19

Interpreting Old Testament Law: Part 2

I. Suggested Approach

An appropriate approach will:

- View all the OT as God's inspired Word
- Does not rely upon non-textual categories
- Places the laws into their narrative contexts
- Maintains the theological context of the laws
- Corresponds to NT teaching

This is the "principlism" view of interpreting the Law.

There are 5 steps:

- 1) What did the Law mean to the original audience?
 - a. What is the historical and literary context of the law? Where were the Israelites when the Law was given? At Sinai? On the banks of the Jordan getting ready to enter the Promised Land? In the wilderness?
 - b. Was the law a response to a particular historical situation, a story, that had just been told? Was it command intended for after they entered the Holy Land?
 - c. Are there connections between this law and the laws around it?
 - d. Was the law related to their relationship with other people or with God?
 - e. How connected was it to the Land?
- 2) What are the differences between the initial audience and believers today?
 - a. What is the theological and situation differences between audiences? We are under a different covenant. We are not Israelites preparing to enter the Holy Land nor are we agreeing to the Mosaic Covenant. We don't approach God through animal sacrifices. We are not under a theocracy.
- 3) What is the universal principle underlying the text?
 - a. Dig deep for the universal principle. Each law has a timeless principle, which may be very specific or very general.
 - b. Some guidelines for this:
 - i. The principle should be reflected in the text; develop it from the text, not fantasy
 - ii. It needs to be timeless
 - iii. It needs to conform to the theology of the rest of Scripture

- iv. It cannot be bound by culture
- v. The principle should be able to be applied to Old and New covenant believers → Usually the principle will be related to: 1) the character of God (typically His holiness); 2) the nature of sin; 3) issues of obedience; 4) concern for other people
- vi. Example: Exodus 23:19

- Instead, a more likely interpretation pertains to the understanding we see in many laws in the Mosaic law that things that are the opposite must be kept separate.

-For example, something clean or pure needs to be separated from something unclean or impure. Something that is holy needs to be kept separate from something that is common or ordinary. To be specific, the Israelites, who are to be pure, must be kept separate from the surrounding nations.

-Life must be kept separate from death; they should not be mixed. Milk from a mother is a life-giving, life-sustaining force. It's what feeds and nourishes and gives life to a baby. Therefore, if this milk is intended to be used for giving life, it must never be used to bring flavor to the baby goat after it has died.

-So this law is a reminder that the Israelites have been sanctified, set apart, from the surrounding nations to be God's special possession.

-The underlying principle is: God's people are always to be set apart as God's special possession.

- 4) Find New Testament teaching that matches with the principle
 - a. The principle should be filtered through New Testament teaching.
 - b. Example: The Mosaic Law forbade adultery. Jesus expanded this to thoughts about adultery: lust. This law should be obeyed, not because it is in Exodus 20, but because Jesus restated and expanded upon it.
 - c. Applied to Exod 23:19: Note what it says in 1 Peter 2:9. This eternal principle from Exodus 23:19 is repeated and therefore validated in the New Testament.
- 5) Apply the new, modified principle, to life today
 - a. Deut 25:4 is quoted in 1 Cor 9:9
 - b. Paul uses this OT law, which wouldn't have been considered a "moral" law in the traditional approach, and utilized it for his teaching. He was using this law paradigmatically or analogically. If oxen shouldn't be muzzled while working, surely preachers of the gospel shouldn't be. The underlying principle was that workers deserve their pay.

II. Conclusion

-Every Old Testament law can be useful for Christians today. Even though the Mosaic Covenant is not binding for Christians, the underlying, eternal theological principle is, because they are manifestations of God's eternal character.