

The relationship of Old Testament law and New Testament grace is a thorny one among western believers. It is not uncommon to sit at table with someone who will express confusion or even despair at any attempt to make sense of “the God of the Old Testament.” Can this even be the same God?

In part the blame for this confusion lies with current leaders and interpreters. In part it lies with theological systems like Dispensationalism. In part the problem lies with much older interpreters such as Luther, who in reacting against Catholicism built much of his theological system around a particular framework of “righteousness by faith,” and who was quite prepared to discard certain epistles like that of James because of the echoes of the Old Testament framework.

Our contemporary failure to adequately understand the relationship of the old and new covenants contributes to the lack of clarity. But this lack is reinforced by culturally and contextually insensitive readings of the New Testament. When Paul insists that “a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ” (Gal. 2:16), and that, “we are not under law but under grace” (Rom. 6:15), how do we respond? These phrases are critical pieces in the apostle’s argument against Judaizers who wished to make Gentile converts to Christianity keep the Old Testament law. Paul attacks the Judaizers and insists that men are saved only by the grace of God, his unmerited forgiveness in Christ. Paul points out that *as far as earning salvation is concerned*, the Old Testament law is irrelevant. Paul is pointing to a particular *function* of the law: it reveals humankind’s weakness and sinfulness. The law can never be fully observed, and it is useless in making a person acceptable (righteous) before God.

That particular context is thus critical in understanding Paul. He was dealing with false teachers who held that keeping the law was the path to salvation. If the interpreter assumes that this was actual teaching of the Old Testament, he will oppose grace and law. So here is our question: was a person saved by the law in Old Testament times or by the grace of God?

Grace, Law¹ and Covenant

The first thing we need to do in order to address this question in a short essay is to add another layer of complexity. Grace and law are part of a larger framework of understanding that has in itself to do with the way God chooses to relate to humankind. Salvation history takes shape around a series of covenants. After the fall God's saving intervention is sealed in a covenant with Noah (Gen. 9). Not long afterward, God calls Abraham and the history of Israel unfolds. The history of Israel revolves around three covenants: the Abrahamic, the Sinaitic and the Davidic. Each of these covenants become turning points in the history of Israel, and form the frameworks for understanding that history.

The first point we can make about these covenantal acts is that they are acts of divine grace: they are understandings, interventions and commitments structured by God out of his deep mercy, not because of any merit on the part of humanity, or any constraint outside of Himself. This is more obvious with the first covenants - the Abrahamic and Davidic – since they consist essentially of divine promises. The Sinaitic covenant is different since the obligations are more prominent (typical of the suzerainty form), but even then the laws are set in a context of God's gracious initiative.

The second point we can make about covenant is its relationship to law. Nearly all the laws in the Pentateuch appear within a covenant framework. Law is integral to God's saving plan, which is worked out through covenants. Gordon Wenham makes the following points in relation to this context:

- 1) *First*, these laws are more than an abstract system of morality. They are the *personal demands* of the sovereign, personal God on his subject people. This is
- 2) *Secondly*, the covenant setting of the law emphasizes that *salvation is not based on works*. The covenant was made with those who had already been saved from Egypt: 'You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself' (Ex. 19:4). The Decalogue itself is preceded by a reminder about the exodus: 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage' (Ex. 20:2).
- 3) A *third* feature of the Old Testament collections of law distinguishes them from extrabiblical collections. The latter consist almost entirely of case law... The primary command of the covenant is to 'love the Lord your God with all your heart', or to put it negatively to 'have no other gods before me'. And as in the

¹ The word we usually translate as "law" is actually Torah, and its semantic range is the same as *didache*... It is not best translated LAW but rather INSTRUCTION. There really isn't much "law" even in the Pentateuch. It is mostly narrative. And Deuteronomy was poorly named. It is really a second "instruction" about a way of life. Starting from this point it's much easier to see the continuity of the two testaments.

New Testament, love is not conceived of as mere feeling but as faithfully obeying all that God commanded. 'You shall therefore love the Lord your God, and keep his charge, his statutes, his ordinances, and his commandments always' (Dt. 11:1).²

This third element is of particular interest because of the way that Jesus quotation of this famous passage is commonly used in churches. The only word we hear when this passage is quoted "love," due to the influence of the romantic movement, the psychologizing of all life and behavior, and the influence of contemporary sensibility translated via Hollywood. We interpret the passage as a call to romantic feeling, or personal inward experience, or working up an inward state during a worship event. Instead, we should hear "keeping covenant" and inner transformation that results in outward behavior. We should hear "give up your good Christian life and come, follow Jesus" (Garrison Keillor). In effect, we should frame Jesus words within the ongoing story of God's mighty acts, and His gracious mercy in initiating a covenant relationship.

Covenant in the New Testament

This raises a very simple question, but one that has puzzled me. Why is there so little mention of covenant in the New Testament? Only the book of Hebrews develops the idea at all. The question has practical relevance for me, because I am very interested in the relationship between covenant community and renewal in our time. I observe that the fragmenting forces of a consumer culture and individualistic ethos pervade the church, and I see covenant as found in alternative communities and the new monastic movement as a hopeful development.³ The rarity of occurrence of the word "covenant" in the New Testament would seem to add fuel to the fire of those who assert the irrelevance of law or covenant for the life of the believer. However, that would be a hasty conclusion!

It would be hasty, first of all, because it is clear in the gospels of Luke and John that Jesus is "the prophet like Moses," to whom all must listen or die. It would be hasty because it is evident in the new perspectives on Paul that "righteousness" had a different meaning than that assumed by Martin Luther. When Paul uses this word he has a

² Gordon Wenham, "Law and Grace in the Old Testament," in *Law, Morality and the Bible*, edited by Bruce Kaye and Gordon Wenham with a preface by J.I. Packer (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, Ill., 1978.) 5.

³ See in particular groups like ALLELON, the writings of the new communities of Hilda and Aidan, and the rise of interest in Celtic spirituality.

covenantal framework in mind.⁴ But apart from a covenantal perspective and disconnected from the exodus event, many passages of Paul make no sense. Why does Paul talk about baptism in chapter six of Romans? Paul understood baptism in terms of a new exodus. He had already made this link in 1 Cor. 10:2, speaking of the wilderness generation being “baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.” Paul brings out the parallel between their experience and that of Christians, the new exodus people, and then stresses the obligations as a result. The discussion of slavery, starting in verse 6 and being picked up strongly in verse 16ff, echoes the exodus story. There “slavery is abandoned and freedom gained by passing through the water, reenacting the death of Jesus which was already interpreted in terms of Passover imagery.”⁵

While it is an argument from silence, could it be that the reason covenantal language is so rare in Paul and the New Testament writers is because it was so fundamental to their thought? Could it have been the very air they breathe? (I am thinking of Santayana’s statement, “We don’t know who discovered water, but we know it wasn’t fish.”)

In the gospels, Jesus’ only recorded reference to the covenant occurs in the context of the last supper. Jesus said, ‘This is my blood of the covenant’ (Mk. 14:24). It’s interesting to reflect that Mark does not supply an interpretation. Instead, he clearly assumes that the disciples – and we later readers - would understand Jesus’ meaning.

Similarly, many aspects of Jesus’ teaching recall aspects of covenant thinking. The parables are all about the kingdom –or reign -- of God. (Every Old Testament covenant presupposes that God is the king of Israel.) He presents his teaching as a new law which at once fulfils and surpasses the law of Moses (Mt. 5). Those who obey his teaching and follow his example will be called blessed at judgment day, and those who do not will be accursed (Mt. 25:31f.).

Jesus’ teaching offers a fresh interpretation to the covenantal scheme. The differences as well as the continuity are illuminating. The kingdom of God comes not on another mountain – not on tablets of stone -- but with His own Person. He is the king of Israel. His teaching, not Moses’, is the final authority for men. His death, not that of a

⁴ NT Wright, *Romans and the Theology of Paul*. In *Pauline Theology*, Volume III, ed. David M. Hay and E. Elizabeth Johnson. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995) 30-67.

⁵ N.T. Wright, *The New Interpreter’s Bible, The Letter to the Romans* (Nashville, Tenn: Abingdon Press, 2002) 534.

literal lamb, is the ransom for the sins of humankind. He personally is the judge who will pronounce the blessing and the curse on the last day.

In this way both the continuity and discontinuity of covenant and God's kingly rule are demonstrated. Suddenly the sacrificial system and priesthood come tumbling down in the presence of the Messiah. The lamb who was slain is exalted as Lord and Christ. This incredible outcome must have been very jarring indeed to those who had come to rely on the law as a system in itself.

Final Details

There are a few more details to which we need to attend in order to complete this summation of a New Testament perspective on OT law. First, we need to consider the response of the Jerusalem council in Acts 15:1-21 to the spread of the gospel among the Gentiles. The council made two points: that conformity to the ritual laws was not to be a precondition to salvation, but also that some of the OT laws were relevant for Gentile believers. The recommendation that Gentiles "abstain from things polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, and from blood" (V.20) assumes a certain framework of understanding. Is this verse actually shorthand for "allegiance to Yahweh, ethical purity and the respect for sanctity of all life, including animals?"⁶ It seems a reasonable assertion to make, and Block offers six suggestions in view of the passage. These are my own summation:

- 1) 2 Timothy 3:15-17 is our starting point. This passage affirms not only the reliability of the OT as inspired but that it is ethically relevant
- 2) the sacrifice of Christ has abrogated the OT system, but the theological unity of the two testament remains, entwined by concepts like sacrifice and covenant, love and compassion, divine grace etc. This unity could be summarized in Jesus affirmation of the great commandment and its echo of Deut. 10:12 and following
- 3) without the background of OT law, Paul's call for obedience to the "law of Christ" is vague and meaningless
- 4) while we assert the theological and ethical unity of the testaments, we must respect the distinctions among categories of law
- 5) we must investigate not only the features of OT law but also their social and theological underpinnings
- 6) we must seize the underlying principles of the laws that are culturally and contextually specific and apply those principles to our own contexts⁷

⁶ Daniel Block, *Preaching OT law to NT Christians*, Part 3. Ministry Magazine, September, 2006. 17. Block notes that all life is sacred to God, and the Jerusalem council is passing on to the Gentiles a new understanding in this prohibition of blood. At some level all death involves sacrifice.

⁷ Ibid., 17-18

Much of the content of the New Testament letters is ethical prescription. "Now that we know God, this is the way we should live." Isn't that essentially the content of much of what we describe as law in the Old Testament?⁸

In closing this essay I'm particularly interested in the second point above. I recall an analogy offered by a preacher in years gone by that links law and love. The law, he said, is like the banks of the river: it gives shape and form to the flow of the water. The water, the essence of the life of the river, is love.

The monastic writers of the 11th and 12th centuries affirmed powerfully the love of God flowing in and through all things. They would have understood intuitively what we spend much effort attempting to spell out theologically. God is not known if he is not loved. As our lives are formed in His ways, increasingly we find that obedience is not a burden, but the response of a transformed heart; a heart confident in His goodness and faithfulness, knowing that all the paths of the Lord are faithfulness and truth. We learn to delight in the law in our inward being. It becomes, like all His words to us, sweeter than honey. We become letters, read by all people, written not on tablets of stone, but written on hearts by the Spirit of God. And we all, with unveiled face, beholding as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed from one glory to another, by the Spirit of the Lord (2 Cor. 3:18).

Oh, how I love your Torah!
It is my meditation all the day.
You, through Your commandments,
Make me wiser than my enemies,
For they are ever with me....

Ps. 119: 97,98

⁸ Daniel Block points out that we generally translate "Torah" as law, where we should translate "instruction." Most of the Pentateuch is narrative or rules for specific projects like the Tabernacle, and not universal law. The ethical instruction of the NT similarly answers "how we should live."