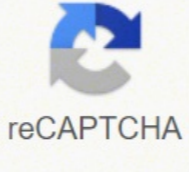




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How to interpret the old testament law

Let's be honest. Certain parts of the Old Testament can seem just plain weird, "recurringly odd and unaccommodating," as Mark Coleridge puts it. And no part of the Old Testament seems more foreign than those sections that detail God's laws for Israel. Whether we read that the Israelites were not to wear clothing with mixed fabrics, or eat shrimp, or make a bald spot on their heads on behalf of the dead, we struggle to see what this has to do with us. I simply haven't ever been tempted to "boil a baby goat in it's mother's milk" (Exod. 23:19; 34:26; Deut. 14:21)! Have you?Further, there are those in our culture who say, for instance, that we emphasize some laws from the Old Testament, like those prohibiting homosexuality (Lev. 18:22; 20:13), while ignoring others, like the laws against eating shellfish (Lev. 11:10). So are we being inconsistent?The question is, how might we as Christians in the modern world access this part of Scripture, value it, and read it appropriately? Here are 5 guidelines.1. Ask, "Where does this law fit in the developing Story?"The laws of the Old Testament were not given in a vacuum. They come on the scene at a very particular time in the Bible's developing story. God has raised up the Israelites to be his people, delivered them from Egypt, and is taking them to the Promised Land. So, one way to begin understanding the role of the laws, is to understand them as addressing particular needs at that point in history. For instance, laws about personal injury or theft, or personal property (Exod. 21:12-22:15) would be needed to govern the society in a way that justice was served. 2. Ask, "How does this law relate to God's covenant?"Second, we need to ask how a law relates to the "old" covenant that God made with Israel at Mt. Sinai. God as a holy God wanted to live among his people. But they were unholy. Various aspects of the law were intended to separate the people from unholy things, or provide cleansing once they had become unholy, so relationship with God could be maintained.For instance, the laws about not mixing of different types of seeds, or different types of fabrics, seem to have been symbolic reminders that the Israelites were not to mix with the pagan peoples of the land of Canaan. Some scholars believe that many of the food laws may have had some hygienic purposes, but others think that the distinctions between clean and unclean were a constant reminder that choices had to be made to stay separate religiously from people of the land.The sacrificial laws, on the other hand, were for restoration, the forgiveness of sin, once uncleanness occurred. So, the laws often serve to maintain a focus on holiness as central to being God's people.3. Ask, "Is this a direct command that is reiterated in the New Testament?"Only a handful of commands from the Old Testament law are emphasized in the New Testament as to be followed by Jesus's disciples: 9 of the 10 Commandments listed in Exod. 20 (the Law of Sabbath is the only one that is not—Hebrews 4 uses "sabbath" in a way that is not literally speaking about Saturday of each week); the Shema of Deut. 6:4-9, which was a command to love God supremely (e.g., Mark 12:29-30); and the command to love one's neighbor (Lev. 19:18; Mark 12:31). Beyond the command against adultery, the moral guidelines related to marriage and the prohibition against sexual relationships outside of marriage between a man and wife are also clear in the New Testament.4. Ask, "Has the New Testament demonstrated that this law is no longer applicable?"Some Old Testament laws have been clearly shown in the New Testament to no longer be applicable to a Christ-follower. For instance, that the food laws have been done away with is clear from both Mark 7:18-19 and Peter's vision in Acts 10:9-16. Hebrews is clear that the old covenant sacrifices have been done away with by the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ (Hebrews 10:18). This is because new covenant believers have been so decisively forgiven of every sin they ever have or ever will commit; there is no longer a need for sacrifice. These laws have not been "destroyed" but, rather, fulfilled in Christ (Matt. 5:17).In relation to guidelines 3 and 4, these are the reasons why Christians can eat seafood and are prohibited from sexual relationships outside of marriage between a husband and wife. The food laws have been done away with by God himself, and the laws on moral behavior have been underscored as vital for New Testament believers. We are not being inconsistent. We just take context seriously.5. Read the laws as God's Word for you, even though most of them are no longer law (commands) for you.Paul tells us that believers are no longer under the Mosaic law but experience righteousness as beneficiaries of the work of Christ (Rom 3:21-31). Yet, we still can hear God speak to us through the law sections of the Old Testament. Ask, "What does this law tell me about God, about living for God, or about living well with others?" Some laws speak of fairness or justice. Others remind us of the need to be separate from the culture around us. Still others remind us that God lives in our midst and we are to be his holy people. In short, the laws bear witness to things that God values. And the priestly and sacrificial laws give us very important backdrops for understanding the gospel work of Christ in establishing a new covenant people for God.ConclusionWell, that should get us started. If you would like to learn more, see chapter 6 in my book, Read the Bible for Life. While there are multitudes of passages in the OT that reflect an awareness that people are too sinful to be rightly related to God on the basis of the law, there is a strand that runs throughout the OT that depicts Yahweh as "law-oriented." This label is warranted, I believe, in light of the fact that the OT seems to assume that an individual's and group's relationship with God is rooted in, and dependent upon, their compliance with the law. This law-orientation is evident in the sheer number of laws as well as the remarkable specificity of the laws Yahweh is portrayed as giving his people. There are, in fact, 613 distinct laws in the OT. Of course, many of these laws reflect wise and humane principles about how we should honor God, treat other humans and care for animals and the land. Other laws, however, are not so easily understood. For example, in Leviticus 19:19 the Lord "decrees" prohibitions against crossbreeding animals, growing different kinds of crops in the same field and wearing clothing made from different kinds of fabrics! Some sense can be made of this prohibition when we consider the obsession with distinctions and boundaries that characterizes the priestly code. Yet, from a theological perspective, it's not altogether clear why the Creator would care about such matters. Even more puzzling, and undoubtedly more offensive today, is the portrait of Yahweh telling Aaron that "[f]or generations to come" no one with a "a defect" is permitted to make an offering in the temple." Among those excluded by this law was anyone "who is blind or lame, disfigured or deformed," anyone "with a crippled foot or hand or who is a hunchback or a dwarf," as well as anyone "who has any eye defect, or who has festering or running sores or damaged testicles" (Lev. 21:17-20). The passage concludes by depicting the Lord as declaring that allowing such people to "go near the curtain or approach the altar" would "desecrate my sanctuary" (Lev. 21:23). The text offers no explanation as to why the presence of physically imperfect people "desecrates" the Lord's sanctuary. What is clear, however, is that this is a portrait of a God who does not want to be associated with imperfections and who is very concerned with very specific laws. In this light, it does not seem unfair to describe portraits of God like this to be "law-oriented." In addition, the law prescribes many shockingly harsh consequences for those who violate these laws. For example, a couple that had sexual relations with one another while the wife was menstruating were to be forever banished from Israel (Lev. 20:18). Understood in its context where individuals were defined by their belonging to a particular community, this punishment is almost equivalent to a death sentence. On top of this, capital punishment was prescribed for a variety of infractions, some of which seem relatively minor, such as cursing or striking one's parents (Ex. 21:15, 17; Lev. 20:9), or being a "stubborn" or "rebellious" son (Deut. 21:18-21). It's my contention that this law-oriented portrait of God in the OT does not reflect what God is really like. This portrait rather reflects a fallen, culturally conditioned framework that God, as a heavenly missionary, humbly embodied himself within as a means of staying in a redemptive relationship with his rebellious people while continuing to further his redemptive plans for the world through them. It was, in short, a mask that God put on. There are a multitude of indications in the biblical narrative that point toward the conciliatory nature of this strand of the OT. Most importantly, the law-oriented portrait of God scarcely resembles the portrait of God revealed in Christ. While Jesus certainly believed the law was divinely inspired, and while his life generally complied with the law, it's also clear that Jesus didn't submit to the law in a rigid manner. For example, Jesus had the audacity to replace the OT's lex talionis with his radical teaching about loving enemies and about nonviolence (Mt 5:41ff). Since Jesus reveals the true character and will of God, this alteration of a foundational aspect of the OT should itself be enough to demonstrate that God was stooping to accommodate the sinful condition of his people when he appropriated the "eye for an eye" and "tooth for a tooth" command as his own. On top of this, consider the remarkable contrast between Jesus' attitude toward people with defects and the attitude expressed in the above mentioned OT law declaring that such people "desecrate" God's temple. The One in whom God actually "tabernacled" among humans (Jn 1:14) regularly fellowshiped with and ministered to people who were defective by OT standards. He seems to have had no trouble violating OT laws and breaking social taboos by touching lepers. And he took no offense when a woman who suffered from a chronic bleeding disorder blatantly violated OT protocol by touching him. While such people could not approach God in the OT, in Jesus, God approaches them. Indeed, it's significant that while Jesus gravitated toward people judged to be defective and "unclean" by the law, he reserves his harshest words toward those "righteous" people who tried most earnestly to live by it. Since Jesus reveals what God is truly like, we must, I submit, conclude that the OT portrait of a law-oriented deity who pronounced certain people defective and "unclean" does not reflect who God truly is. What it reveals, rather, is how low God was willing to stoop to remain in a redemptive relationship with his people and to continue to further his sovereign purposes through them. Image by Alice Hampson

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