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The Unity and The Goodness of The Law

Richard E. Averbeck

The issue of the OT law in the life of the NT believer and the church is one of the great problems of the church age — some think it is the greatest of them all!¹ The first church council was about this very topic: “Then some of the believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees stood up and said, ‘The Gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of Moses’” (Acts 15:5, NIV).² Essentially, the question was whether or not the Gentiles who trusted in Christ needed to become Jews? How do we navigate this issue and the biblical approach to handling it?

1 I first delivered the two essays published here as oral presentations in the Feinberg Lecture series March 10, 2022 at the Chosen People Ministries Feinberg Messianic Center in Brooklyn, New York.

2 Unless otherwise noted, this essay will cite biblical passages from the New International Version (NIV).



My work on this complex topic took a certain turn some twenty-five years ago, and is now, recently published, in a book on the OT law for the life of the church.³ It arose out of working on the so-called “ceremonial law” in Leviticus. I had been accustomed to hearing that Levitical law does not apply to the Christian life because Yeshua the Messiah has fulfilled it for us by dying for us on the cross as a sacrifice. As I studied and wrote articles on the sacrificial ritual terminology for a reference work, part of the assignment was to run this terminology into the NT to see how the writers of the NT understood and applied it.⁴

Along the way, it struck me that, in addition to applying the Levitical terminology to Yeshua, the NT writers were regularly applying it to the life of the church and the Christian. It eventually occurred to me that Yeshua fulfilled the *whole* law for me, so does that mean the so-called “moral” and “civil” law do not apply to me either? Moreover, the Levitical law is largely worship law. As believers in Yeshua, we are *worshippers* above all else! That is how the NT authors applied the “ceremonial law.” The question is not whether this or that regulation in the OT law applies to me, but *how* it applies. I have come to believe that the separation between moral, civil, and ceremonial law is neither a good way to read the OT law to begin with, nor a good way to think about how we apply the law to the NT church and believer.

3 Richard E. Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church: Reading the Torah in the Light of Christ* (Downers Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 2022).

4 See Willem A. VanGemeren, editor, *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, 5 volumes (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), abbrev. NIDOTTE. My articles on sacrificial and ritual terminology total about 275 printed pages in this set.

THREE MAIN THESES

All this eventually led me to an approach guided by three main theses: first, the OT law is good, second, the OT law is weak, and third, the OT law is one unified whole. The reader may notice that the first two theses draw directly from the Apostle Paul's discussion in Romans 7-8. Why not? Paul, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, crystallized the major issues so well in these chapters and in other places in his writings. My approach to the topic of the OT law for the church, however, arose initially from ongoing study of the OT law in its OT context. This is natural since my focus over the years has been on the OT, especially the Torah, but there is more to it than that.

In my reading of the scholarly literature on the OT law as it relates to the church I have found that it is common for scholars to discuss the law in the NT without giving due attention to the law itself. One needs to understand what it says, how it says it, why it says what it says, and how it worked in ancient Israel in OT times. This is essential background for reading what the NT says about it, and for this reason, the first two parts of my book are devoted to understanding the OT law to begin with in its covenantal context, and looking forward to the NT from there. The third part focuses on the NT and looks back at the OT from there.

Psalms 119 is the longest Psalm and the longest chapter in the Bible by far. It belabors the importance and goodness of the Mosaic Law from all different angles. The writers of the NT understood the law well and had a deep appreciation for it. This shows in their writings. They were preaching the Gospel from the OT before they wrote the NT. They expected the readers of the NT to have this background too. After all, the first Bible of the church was the OT, whether in Hebrew or in its Greek translation(s).



FIRST THESIS:
THE GOODNESS OF THE LAW

Returning now to the first main thesis, as Paul put it in Rom 7:12, 14a: “So then, the law *is* holy, and the commandment *is* holy, righteous and good. . . . We know that the law *is* spiritual . . .” (Rom 7:12, 14a), all present tense. It is not that the OT law was good in the past and not so anymore. It continues to be good for the church as it was in Paul’s day and today. The OT law was then and still today is not only “good” (Rom 7:12-14) but also *useful* for the Christian: “. . . from infancy you have known the holy Scriptures, All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for *teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training* in righteousness, so that the man of God may be *thoroughly equipped for every good work*.” (2 Tim 3:15-17).

What scriptures were they that Timothy had known since he was a little child? The dating of the NT books suggests that hardly any, if any, of the NT books could date that early. The focus is clearly on the well-known OT scriptures. Moreover, it is significant that Paul wrote 2 Timothy near the time of his death (2 Tim 2:9; 4:17-18), so he was still devoted to the OT scriptures even at the end of his life. He never let go of their ongoing importance for him and the church. We need to follow him in this. The point is that the OT law applies to the life of the Christian today in a New Covenant “written on the heart” sense (Jer 31:33), so that we live it from a *transformed “heart”* (or “spirit”) and, therefore, manifest it in the way we live life (Jer 31:31-34, Rom 8:4, 6, 2 Cor 3:3, 6-8).

SECOND THESIS:
THE WEAKNESS OF THE LAW

The second main thesis is that the OT law is weak — it has limitations. Yes, on the one hand, the law is good and we need to hang on tightly to that point and never let it go, but, on the other hand, the law is weak as compared to the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. We need to reckon fully with the fact that “For what the law was **powerless** to do in that it was **weakened** by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man” (Rom 8:3).⁵ Although the law was and still is “good,” it was and still is also weak in that it has never had the power in itself to change a human heart and motivate godly living. No law can change a human heart, not even God’s law. That is just not what law does.

Law is not designed for this. As Rom 7:14 puts it, “We know that the law is spiritual; but I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin.” In other words, the problem is in me, my flesh, and the OT law cannot do anything about that even as good and spiritual as it is. Something needs to be done in me that the OT law could never do. That work requires the continuing practice of faith through the power of the work of the Holy Spirit in the human spirit (Ezek 36:26-27, Gal 3:1-7, Rom 8:16; also vv. 10 and 15? cf. 1 Cor 2:10-13, etc.).

5 Similarly, Heb 7:18-19 tells us that “¹⁸The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ¹⁹(for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” No one should argue that we go back to the OT tabernacle and temple system of priestly mediation. We have moved on to the Melchizedek priesthood of Jesus talked about in that context and developed further in Hebrews 9-10.



THIRD THESIS:
THE UNITY OF THE LAW

The third thesis is that the OT law is a unified law in the OT and is treated as such in the NT too. We need to work out the implications of the fact that it is the whole unified OT Mosaic Law that is to be (metaphorically) “written on the heart” of the New Covenant believer, not just one aspect of it or another, or some combination thereof. The so-called “moral” versus “civil” versus “ceremonial” system of dividing the law is unnecessary and misleading not only in the OT but also in applying it to the Christian life. The question is not what applies and what does not apply, but how the whole law applies to the church and the believer!

As the Lord says it in the primary OT New Covenant passage: “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts” (Jer 31:33; cf. also Ezek 36:25-27 with 2 Cor 3:3, 6, 14-16, discussed below). He does not pick out one part of the law and not the other. We cannot deal with every regulation in the OT law in these two essays, of course, and neither does the NT. The goal here is to explain and illustrate how all parts and kinds of law come into the NT for the Christian life.

For example, what about the so-called “ceremonial” ritual law? Virtually all scholars in the field agree it does not apply to the Christian life because Yeshua the Messiah fulfilled it in his death, burial, and resurrection. As noted above, working on the OT ritual sacrificial terminology convinced me that the NT writers not only applied it extensively to Christ, but also to the lives of his followers. This led me to reconsider the whole topic of the law in the NT, the church, and the Christian life.

THE UNITY OF THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

We will discuss the weakness (or limitations) of the law in more detail in the second essay. Before turning to a more full discussion of the goodness of the Mosaic Law in this essay, we need to look at some important points on the unity of the law. As noted above, scholars often teach that Jesus fulfilled the “ceremonial” law for us, so therefore it is not a requirement for how we should live the Christian life. The goal here is to show that the NT writers do not treat the so-called “ceremonial law” in this way. They take it very serious in their teaching of the Christian life — how we should think and how we should act.

THE CHURCH AS THE TEMPLE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

For example, Ephesians 2-3 explains that the believing community is now the “temple” of the Holy Spirit. The wall of partition between believing Jews and Gentiles has been broken down by their common faith in Yeshua. “. . . now in Christ Jesus you [Gentiles] who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. . . .¹⁸ For through him we both [Jew and Gentile together] have access to the Father by one Spirit” (Eph 2:13 and 18). We are now “. . . fellow citizens with God’s people and also members of his household,²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone” (vv. 19-20). The whole body is “. . . joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord.²² And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.” This passage refers



to the corporate body of believers as a temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. also, e.g., 1 Cor 3:16-17). Some other passages declare the individual believer to be the temple of the Holy Spirit (e.g., 1 Cor 6:18-20).

The argument for the church as the temple of the Holy Spirit continues in Ephesians 3, that is, after a digression about the mystery of the church in vv. 1-13. See the repetition of “For this reason” in v. 1 and then again “For this reason” in v. 14, coming back to pick up the argument from the end of Ephesians 2. Ephesians 3:14-21 puts it together this way: “¹⁴For this reason I kneel before the Father,” and “¹⁶I pray that out of his glorious riches he may strengthen you with power through his Spirit in your inner being.” This is “¹⁷so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, ¹⁸may have power, together with all the Lord’s holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ.” Note the allusion to Christ “dwelling” in our hearts as in a temple, creating a temple of the Holy Spirit (v. 17a). Thus, the temple is deeply rooted in love, which is its foundation (v. 17b). This empowers them to grasp the immense dimensions of the temple of Christ’s love (i.e., its width and length, height and depth), enabling them to know and show the love of Christ (v. 18).

This love of Christ surpasses all knowledge, so that the church “is filled to the measure of all the fullness of God” (v. 19), like the glory cloud in the OT filled up the tabernacle and the temple at their dedication (see Exod 40:34 and 1 Kgs 8:10). The ongoing work of God within us, which is beyond measure (Eph 3:20), abounds so that “to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen” (v. 21). We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables us to shine forth the glory of God in the world:

“let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matt 5:16).

Thus, the principles and patterns of OT tabernacle and temple theology come into the NT. Church buildings are not temples, and we do not have a tabernacle tent out in the church parking lot. The people of the church are the temple; that is, the temple of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles apply the OT tabernacle and temple background to the people of God in the NT. They use it to teach us who we are in Christ and how we should therefore live. It is significant that Paul applies this teaching to the concern for the unity of believers in Christ. We are one temple together and need to function as a unified people. This was also the major concern of Jesus in his high priestly prayer to the Father just before he went to the cross (John 17:20-23).

THE LAWS OF HOLINESS AND PURITY

The temple in Jerusalem no longer exists, but the OT patterns of temple, ritual, and purity come through into the church in ways that correspond to the nature of the New Covenant church. Even within the OT law itself, there are changes in law. One clear example is the difference between the sacrificial regulations in Lev 17:1-9 and those in Deut 12:15-25. Leviticus 17 regulates the sacrifice for their travel through the wilderness as a community surrounding the tabernacle. Whenever they wanted to eat meat from their herds or flocks, they must slaughter the animal at the tabernacle and pour the blood out on the tabernacle altar. They must not slaughter an animal for meat in any other place. The law changes in Deut 12 because there the regulation for “profane slaughter” anticipates them spread out in the land after



the conquest. If they wanted to eat meat in this new situation, they may not be close enough to the tabernacle (or later the temple) to take it there for slaughter. In that case, they would not have to travel to the central sanctuary to slaughter the animal they wanted to eat at dinner that evening. Instead, they could slaughter it as if it were wild game and just pour the blood out on the ground. The envisioned circumstances changed between Lev 17 and Deut 12, so the regulations changed accordingly.

The move from the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant was a more substantial shift, of course, but it did not leave the Mosaic Law behind. On the contrary, the New Covenant has the OT law written on the hearts of the people of the covenant (Jer 31:33, see more on this below). The reality is that the church arose out of Yeshua's inauguration of the New Covenant (see, e.g., Luke 22:20). It started as an exclusively Jewish movement (Acts 2), but later came to include Gentiles. The Jewish believers, even the Apostles, had not anticipated this, which led to Peter's vision of a sheet that came down out of heaven containing "all kinds of four-footed animals, as well as reptiles and birds," including unclean animals and birds (Acts 10:12). As a good Jew, of course, the command to kill and eat them was repulsive to him (v. 13). This happened three times in the vision.

It was not until later that he understood what this vision meant. While he was still preaching the Gospel to the Gentile Cornelius and the people with him, "the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message" (v. 44, cf. vv. 27-29), like it came on the Jews at Pentecost (Acts 2). Peter, therefore, had them baptized and accepted their invitation "to stay with them for a few days" (v. 48). Of course, this brought criticism from the Jewish believers in Jerusalem: ". . . when Peter went up to Jerusalem, the circumcised believers criticized him ³ and said, 'You went into the house of uncircumcised men and ate with

them” (Acts 11:2-3). Peter then explained what the Lord had done, and they all praised God for the Gentile acceptance of the Gospel (vv. 4-18).

The Mosaic Covenant was a national covenant for the people God delivered from slavery in Egypt. The church is not a nation, but consists of communities of faith spread out among all the nations. This affects how certain OT regulations do or do not come through into the church. Adjustments were necessary, as in the shift Leviticus 17 to Deuteronomy 12 treated above. Perhaps the best example of this is one given a good deal of attention in the NT; namely, the dietary meat stipulations in Leviticus 11 (cf. also Deuteronomy 14 and the remarks on Acts 10 above).

We are not able to consider here all the details about clean and unclean animals.⁶ The important point for our present discussion is the function of these regulations in separating the Jews from the corrupt Gentile peoples around them. Leviticus 20 shows special concern for this problem. Near the end of the chapter the Lord declared: “²² Keep all my decrees and laws and follow them, . . . ²³ You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you. Because they did all these things, I abhorred them” (Lev 20:22-23). A few verses later, the Lord brings the clean and unclean animal regulations forward as a primary way to keep the Israelites separate from these corrupting peoples: “²⁵ You must therefore make a distinction between clean and unclean animals and between unclean and clean birds” (v. 25a). If they could not eat what the surrounding nations would eat because of these diet regulations, they could not have binding relationships with them.

The point here is that the shift in the NT to a unified church made up of both Jewish and Gentile believers meant that they

⁶ For more details on this, see Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church*, 210-214 and the literature cited there.



could not practice purity and holiness in a way that would separate them. God has broken down the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile in Christ (Eph 2:14-15), so the food laws could no longer have the function of separating Jews from Gentiles in the church. In fact, when God began to bring them together in Acts 10-11, he used the clean and unclean animal regulations to communicate that (see the remarks on the sheet and eating together above). It took time to work this important teaching into the view of the Jewish church in the early days. Paul confronted Peter about this in Gal 2:11-14, when Peter stopped eating with the Gentile believers because he was afraid of the reaction of the Jewish believers who arrived from Jerusalem.

This does not mean that God is no longer concerned about purity and holiness in the church. On the contrary, this is one of his primary concerns. Peter, for example, highlights this in 1 Peter 1:13-25. He writes: “¹⁴As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. ¹⁵But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; ¹⁶for it is written: ‘Be holy, because I am holy’” (vv. 14-15). The first occurrence of this holiness motto in the Bible is in the chapter on clean and unclean animal regulations (Lev 11:44). Peter uses it to urge believers to conform to holiness by not giving in to their evil desires in their way of life. He goes on to expound on our redemption through the precious blood of Jesus Christ our savior (vv. 17-21), and then comes to this: “Now that you have purified yourselves [lit. ‘your souls’] by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for each other, love one another deeply, from the heart” (v. 22). The reason we purify our souls is so that we can love each other well. That is the real goal of purity. One cannot love others well if their soul is impure. Their evil desires will get in the way. Thus, the holiness and purity concerns of the OT law come through into the church in ways

that correspond to the New Covenant nature of the church. The OT law is “written on the heart” (Jer 31:33).

THE LAWS OF PRIESTHOOD AND SACRIFICE

The regulations regarding sacrifice and priesthood in the OT law likewise come through in ways that correspond to the nature of the New Covenant. Peter unpacks this in an overall comprehensive manner in his next chapter. He likens believers to “living stones” that are “being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 2:5). This recalls Paul’s explanation of the church as a temple of the Holy Spirit (see the discussion of Ephesians 2-3 above). Yeshua is the living stone, rejected by men, but chosen by God (1 Pet 2:4, see also vv. 6-8). As believers, we are living stones built into a spiritual house that is a holy priesthood. As priests, we offer up sacrifices that are spiritual and acceptable to God. In other words, we are the stones of the temple and the priests who offer sacrifices there, and these sacrifices are acceptable to God because we are in Yeshua.

Another related and very famous passage unpacks this analogy from another perspective and in further detail: “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Rom 12:1). In this verse, the Apostle Paul urges believers to present their whole body as the sacrifice they offer, a living sacrifice, not a dead one. Paul is drawing here primarily from the whole burnt offering regulations in Leviticus 1. In making this kind



of offering, the ancient Israelites placed the whole body of the burnt offering animal piece by piece on the fire on the altar so that it would rise up to God in smoke as a holy gift that would produce “an aroma pleasing to the Lord” (Lev 1:9, 13, 17). In order to qualify for the altar, the animal must be without blemish so that the Lord would accept it to make atonement for the one who offered it (Lev 1:3-4). Romans 12:1 echoes these regulations, using terminology from Leviticus 1.

The temple is the people of the church. The people of the church are also the priests who serve in the temple, making sacrifices. The people themselves are also the sacrifices, and they are acceptable to God in the temple of the Holy Spirit. These are not just illustrations from which to teach. The analogies themselves are the teachings. These are some of the ways Peter and Paul use the OT priesthood and sacrificial terms and patterns to teach Christians how to live their life in Christ. We apply them by seeing ourselves as the temple, the priests, and the sacrifices.

Paul, for example, extends this in application to his ministry as the Apostle to the Gentiles: “He (God) gave me the priestly duty of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering acceptable to God, sanctified by the Holy Spirit” (Rom 15:16). Similarly, whatever acceptable ministry anyone does for God is a sacrifice that the believer offers to God. The Holy Spirit sanctifies it. The writer of Hebrews urges us to “continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name” (Heb 13:15). He adds to this that we must “not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased” (v. 16).

THE GOODNESS OF
THE OLD TESTAMENT LAW

The so-called “ceremonial law” is, at its core, worship law. Our calling as Christians is first-of-all, above all, and throughout to be worshippers and servants of God, so the NT does not leave OT worship regulations behind. Yeshua gave himself as a sacrifice for us. If we are going to become like him, we need to present our own lives as sacrifices too. This brings us back to the first thesis: the goodness of the law. This begins with a fundamental understanding of how it fit into God’s program for ancient Israel in the OT. How was it “good” for them? What made it good in their walk with God as those whom he delivered from slavery in Egypt?

THE EXODUS
AND THE LAW

The law was given in the context of the already accomplished deliverance from slavery out of Egypt. The Lord God had already redeemed them out of Egypt. The whole law is imbedded within this deliverance. There would be no Mosaic Law without the deliverance from Egypt. They were not commanded to do the law to be delivered, but to do it in response to already having been delivered by God’s grace.⁷ This is very much like the Gospel pattern in the NT, where deliverance is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Yeshua alone: “⁸For it is by grace you have been

7 On this point see esp. Richard E. Averbeck, “The Mosaic Law and the Gospel in Jewish Evangelism,” in *Upholding God’s Word, Reaching God’s Chosen: A Festschrift in Honor of Dr. Mitchell L. Glaser*, ed. Jim Melnick, Zhava Glaser, Gregory Hagg, Alan shore, and Robert Walters (New York: KFIM Publications, 2022), 23-29.



saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—⁹not by works, so that no one can boast.” The next verse goes on to say that “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (v. 10). Yes, God wants his people in the OT and the NT to do good works, but our relationship with him is based on what he has done for us, not what we do for him. This is as clear in the OT as it is in the NT. In fact, it is a key feature of the law from beginning to end — it “frames” the law.

After arriving at Sinai, the Lord proclaimed through Moses, Exodus 19:4, “‘You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself.’” The Lord starts with his deliverance from Egypt. Based on that deliverance already accomplished he calls them to covenant commitment and faithfulness to himself. The proclamation of the covenant law begins with the same theme as the starting point for the covenant regulations—the Ten Commandments: “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery” (Exod 20:2). Based on this deliverance, he says, “You shall have no other gods before me” (v. 3). There are several traditions about how to enumerate the Ten Commandments, which are literally in Hebrew “the ten words” (Exod 34:28, lit. “the ten words”; cf. also Deut 4:13 and 10:4). There is no imperative in v. 2, but it is a “word,” and is commonly treated as the first “Word” in Judaism. Even the Masoretic text reflects this in its double accent system of these verses.⁸ The point is that the deliverance from slavery in Egypt is fundamental to the basic ethos of the Mosaic Law.

Similarly, the regulations in the Book of the Covenant begin with “debt slavery” regulations: “These are the laws you

8 For more on this see Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church*, 117-121 and the literature cited there.

are to set before them: 2 ‘If you buy a Hebrew servant, he is to serve you for six years. But in the seventh year, he shall go free, without paying anything’” (Exod 21:1-2). No other code of law in the Ancient Near East begins with slave law. This was placed first here because they had been delivered from slavery, so they must not re-enslave each other. Debt slavery regulations for native Israelites also conclude the giving of the law at Sinai (Lev 25:39-55). The last two verses read: 54 “Even if someone is not redeemed in any of these ways, they and their children are to be released in the Year of Jubilee,⁵⁵ for the Israelites belong to **me** as servants. They are **my** servants, whom **I** brought out of Egypt. **I** am the Lord your God” (Lev 25:54-55). This is the last section of legal regulations before the blessings and curses of the covenant in Leviticus 26, which ends with a colophon: “These are the decrees, the laws and the regulations that the Lord established at Mount Sinai between himself and the Israelites through Moses” (Lev 26:46). The repeated first person pronouns in Lev 26:55 emphasize the fact that Israel belonged to God and no one else. No one could take them as their own (permanent) slave because he had brought them out of Egypt. God alone was their deliverer, so they were his servants.

The same theme appears prominently in the last chapter of legal regulations in Pentateuch: “7 . . . we cried out to the Lord, the God of our ancestors, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression. 8 So the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm, with great terror and with signs and wonders. . .” (Deut 26:7-8). Furthermore, the same theme permeates the law through and through. See, for example, Exod 22:21; 23:9, 15; 29:46; 32:7, 11; Lev 11:45; 19:34, 36; 22:31-33; 23:43; 25:38, 42, 55; 26:13, 45; Num 15:41; 20:15-16; Deut 4:20, 34, 37; 5:6, 15; 6:12, 21-22; 7:8; 8:14; 9:26; 10:19; 11:3-4; 13:5; 15:15; 16:12. The



deliverance from slavery in Egypt is the historical basis of the Sinaitic covenant and undergirds the Mosaic Law.⁹

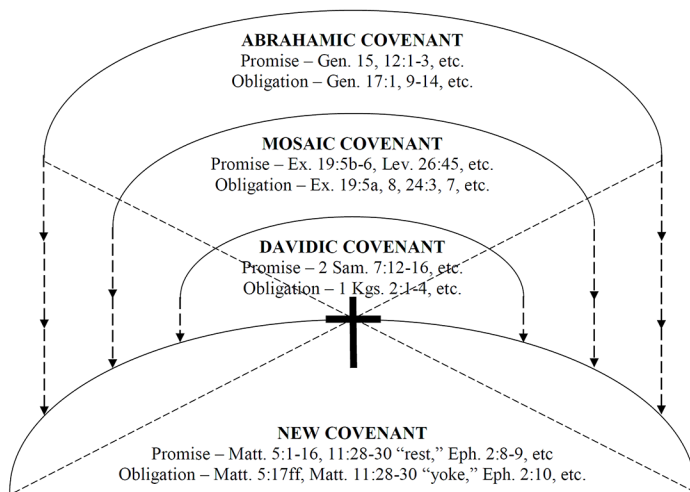
The point of all this is that God gave the law as guidance for a people that he had already redeemed. The law worked out the details of the covenant relationship between the Lord and his people, and between one another, as they walked with the Lord. It would also keep the Israelites separate from the peoples around them and their corrupting influences. This brings us to the relationship between the law and the covenants.

THE LAW AND THE COVENANTS

There are four major “redemptive” covenants in the Bible: the Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic, and New Covenants (see the chart below). What I mean by “redemptive” here is that they help us follow the progressive development of God’s redemptive program for his people from Genesis to Revelation. I have not included the Noahic Covenant here because God made that one with all flesh, not just humans (Gen 9:8-11), and the purpose was to stabilize the creation before moving forward into his redemptive program, beginning with Abraham (Gen 12:1-3). I have treated this more fully elsewhere and cannot develop all the details here.¹⁰

⁹ See the more detailed discussion in Richard E. Averbeck, “The Egyptian Sojourn and Deliverance from Slavery in the Framing and Shaping of the Mosaic Law,” in “*Did I Not Bring Israel Out of Egypt?*” *Biblical, Archaeological, and Egyptological Perspectives on the Exodus Narratives*, Bulletin of Biblical Research Monograph Series, ed. James Hoffmeier, Alan Millard, and Gary Rendsburg (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2016), 143-175.

¹⁰ For more detailed treatments of the four covenants and relationships between them, see Richard E. Averbeck, “Israel, the Jewish People, and God’s Covenants,” in *Israel the Church and the Middle East: A Biblical Response to the Current Conflict*, ed. Darrell L. Bock and Mitch Glaser (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 2018), 21-37, and especially Averbeck, *The Old Testament*



NOTE: Both “promise” (yielding peace) and “obligation” (yielding purpose) are built into the very organic nature of God’s redemptive program. One makes no sense and will not work without the other. Our “rest” depends upon the combination of the two.

THE REDEMPTIVE COVENANTS

The goal here is to use the chart to provide biblical and theological context for the Mosaic Law as it fits within the covenant program of God revealed in the Bible. Of course, the Mosaic Law is embedded within the Mosaic Covenant and is part of it, but the Mosaic Covenant is based on the previous Abrahamic Covenant. On the one hand, there would be no Mosaic Covenant without the Abrahamic Covenant. God’s grace to ancient Israel in delivering them out of slavery in Egypt was based on his previous covenant commitment to the patriarchs: “²⁴God heard their groaning and he remembered his covenant with Abraham, with Isaac and with Jacob. ²⁵So God looked on the Israelites and was concerned about them” (Exod 2:24-25). On the other hand, the Mosaic Covenant does

Law for the Life of the Church, 27-78.



not replace the Abrahamic Covenant: “The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise” (Gal 3:17).

The chart above illustrates this by inserting the Mosaic Covenant umbrella under the Abrahamic Covenant, and then the Davidic Covenant under the Mosaic and Abrahamic Covenants. The New Covenant is the goal toward which these OT covenants progress. God built permanent promise and ongoing obligation in each of these covenant commitments (see, e.g., the passages listed under each umbrella), so each of them still bears weight for God’s covenant commitment to his people today. The dashed lines with arrows down the sides capture this reality. The diagonal dashed lines that run through the chart meet at the peak of the New Covenant umbrella, at the cross of Christ. Thus, the previous covenants come through into the New Covenant through the lens of what Yeshua did for us through his life, death, burial, resurrection, and ascension.

Around 2,000 BC, God made his covenant with Abraham, calling and commissioning him as the one through whom he would bless the whole world (Gen 12:1-3; cf. Genesis 15 and 17). This would culminate in the New Covenant some two thousand years later. In the meantime, he maintained his commitments to Abraham by giving him a son through whom he would build a family over the next two generations. The covenant with Abraham was a family level covenant. Eventually, this family grew into a nation, so God made a covenant with them that was suitable for guiding a nation of Abrahamic descendants, not just a family or clan; namely, the Mosaic Covenant with its regulations for how they should live as God’s covenant people (ca. 1400 BC). God was the theocratic king of ancient Israel, but there would come a time

when the nation would need a human king, which brings us to the Davidic Covenant (ca. 1000 BC). The Davidic king was called to live under the authority of the theocratic king even to the point of writing his own copy of the Mosaic Law so that he could read it regularly so that he could live and rule according to it (Deut 17:18-20; James 2:23).

The Lord, therefore, gave the Mosaic Law as a means of covenantal guidance for the descendants of Abraham, who he intended would have Abrahamic faith (Gen 15:6, “Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness”; cf. Ps 106:31; Rom 4:3, 20-24; Gal 3:6;). The king would likewise have Abrahamic faith and rule over them according to the Mosaic Covenant law. This same covenant law comes through into the New Covenant: “‘This is the covenant I will make with the people of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. **I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.** I will be their God, and they will be my people” (Jer 31:33).

The New Covenant is not like the Mosaic Covenant, which the Israelites had violated leading to the Babylonian exile (see Jer 31:31-32). Nevertheless, the New Covenant does not leave the Mosaic Law behind. It has the law written on the heart of the New Covenant believer. Paul brings Jer 31:33 together with Ezek 36:26-27 in 2 Cor 3:3-6: “. . . (3) You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, ***written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God***, not on tablets of stone but ***on tablets of human hearts***. . . . (6) . . . ministers of ***a new covenant***—not ***of the letter*** but of the Spirit; for ***the letter kills***, but ***the Spirit gives life***.” The “Spirit” is the Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:27), who writes the law “on tablets of human hearts” (Jer 31:33). In the New Covenant (Jer 31:33), the Spirit “gives life” to “the letter” of the law, which kills without the Spirit: “. . . I



will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws” (Ezek 36:27).

We will come back to the weakness of the Mosaic Law as opposed to the power of the Spirit in the next essay, but it is important here to explain that the law is not left behind even in the focus on the Spirit in Romans 8. We walk by the Spirit rather than our flesh, “in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met in us” (Rom 8:4). Again, in Rom 8:7-8, “7 The mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God; it does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. 8 Those who are in the realm of the flesh cannot please God.” Pleasing God, still today, depends on submitting to God’s law, but only the Spirit can empower that.¹¹

As explained earlier in this essay, this does not mean that the NT always applies the Mosaic Law to the church in the same way as the OT applied it to ancient Israel. Even in the OT the law sometimes changed according to the situation or circumstances of God’s people (see, e.g., the remarks above on Lev 17 and Deut 12). The law was designed and given with this flexibility built into it. The shift to the NT does not leave the law behind, but the church is not a nation, Jesus had come and made atonement, the Holy Spirit had come powerfully on the church at Pentecost, and so on. The NT brings the law into the life of the church in accordance with this progress of redemption. As noted above, for example, the OT diet regulations could no longer serve as a means separating Jews from Gentiles in the church. Nevertheless, New Covenant believers have the OT law written on their heart. The law is a good, holy, and spiritual for us too. The NT works out how this true in many various ways. This brings us to Jesus and the law.

¹¹ See the remarks on the interpretation of these verses in Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church*, 296-97 and the literature cited there.

JESUS
AND THE PERMANENT
GOODNESS OF THE LAW

Jesus Himself sets forth the basic principles of the relationship between the “kingdom of heaven” and the law in Matthew 5. Of course, this is before Jesus had accomplished His work on the cross, but v. 18b tells us that we must take this teaching seriously “until everything is accomplished”: that is, the law does not pass away until all things have come to their conclusion, which is still in the future. The main points in Jesus’ line of argument in Matt 5:17-19 are especially important here:

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore anyone who sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others accordingly will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

First, Jesus did not come to “abolish” the OT law and prophets (v. 17a). This verb occurs only three other times in Matthew’s Gospel: Matt. 24:2 (every stone of the temple will be “thrown down”), and in 26:61 and 27:40 (they accuse Jesus of saying he is able to “destroy” the temple and rebuild it in three days). This Gospel is written to Jewish Christians who would be rightly concerned that turning to Yeshua as the Messiah would not contradict what God had already revealed in the law or the prophets. He wanted to make sure they understood that turning to him would not violate scripture.

In fact, the second clause affirms that he did not come to



abolish but to “fulfill” the law and the prophets. There have been several different interpretations of this. I will briefly summarize the views and some of their variations here based on a survey of over twenty commentaries on Matthew. Some say it refers to Yeshua fulfilling the requirements of the law for us like he has fulfilled prophecies that predicted and patterns that foreshadowed him and his work as our redeemer. The major problem with this way of reading it is that the verb “fulfill” is in the active voice. When it appears in the fulfillment formula elsewhere in Matthew it is in the passive voice. See, for example, Matt 1:22, “All this took place to fulfill (lit. ‘that it might be fulfilled’) what the Lord had said through the prophet, . . .” (cf. Matt 2:15, 17, etc.).

Matthew uses the active voice of this verb only two other times in his Gospel. When John the Baptist resisted baptizing Jesus because of who he was, Jesus replied, “Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness” (Matt 3:15). He had John baptize him because this was a righteous act to do. This is not the fulfillment of a prophetic prediction. The other active voice passage is part of a woe against the teachers of the law and Pharisees, who were the descendants of those who had killed the OT prophets. Jesus said, “Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!” (Matt 23:32). Finish doing the evil deeds of you fathers. Aside from this grammatical issue, the following verses suggest a different reading of “fulfill” in this passage (see more on this below).

Other scholars, therefore, read the passage not as fulfilled prophecy, but as a way of saying that in his life and ministry Jesus (1) established or upheld the law, (2) added to and, therefore, completed the law, or (3) brought out the intended meaning of the law in the first place. Still others say it refers to Yeshua’s own fulfillment of the provisions of the law in

the way that He lived and taught the law during his life and ministry, as displayed in the Gospel narratives. The following lines reinforce this way of reading v. 17.

According to v. 18, absolutely no part of the OT law (or the prophets) has “passed away,” not even today, since “heaven and earth” have not passed away. It all stays in place “until everything is accomplished.” The law as understood, lived, and taught by Jesus remains valid even today, since heaven and earth have not disappeared and not everything is yet accomplished. Moreover, v. 19 tells us that one’s status in the “kingdom of heaven” depends on whether one “sets aside one of the least of these commands and teaches others” to do so. This person “will be called least in the kingdom of heaven.” Conversely, “whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.”

In the following verse, however, Yeshua pushed back against the insufficient righteousness of the Pharisees and teachers of the law in his own day (v. 20). The people hearing Yeshua’s sermon would have been shocked by this. They thought of their teachers as the most righteous among them. Jesus explained what he meant by this in the following antitheses (vv. 21-48). They teach you not to murder. I teach you not to hate. They teach you not to commit adultery. I teach you not to commit adultery even in your heart. And so on.¹² Yeshua is teaching the Mosaic Law as it would be written on the heart of his kingdom people (see the remarks on Jer 31:33 above). They would have circumcised hearts (see, e.g., Deut 10:12-13, 16; Jer 4:4; 9:25-26 with Rom 2:25-29).

12 For a careful review of Yeshua’s antitheses about the teaching of the law and prophets in Matt 5:21-48, see Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church*, 234-41 and the literature cited there.



JESUS
AND THE PERVASIVE
GOODNESS OF THE LAW

Another important Gospel passage for the goodness of the Mosaic Law arises out of a question put to Yeshua in a test by a legal expert: “which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (Matt 22:36). Yeshua famously replied, “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (vv. 37-39). It is interesting and important that the expert asked for only one commandment, but Yeshua gave two.

The same two commandments appear also in Mark 12:29-31 and Luke 10:25-28, but with contextual and rhetorical variation. They do not appear in John’s Gospel, but in 1 John 4:7-21 the youngest of the twelve belabored the unbreakable relationship between loving God and people, concluding, “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister” (vv. 20-21).

Finally, in Matt 22:40, Yeshua added, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (cf. Mark 10:31b). It reads literally, “On these two commandments the whole law hangs, and the prophets” too. It can be compared to a door hanging on its hinges. A door will not work without hinges, and so all the law, and this goes for the prophets too. Evidently, he was not satisfied with the question as the expert had asked it, or perhaps this was part of the expert’s trap. In either case, Yeshua went beyond the expert in his answer as well as in its application

to not only the law but also the prophets. As Mark 12:34b puts it, “And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions” (cf. Matt 22:46). Our Lord knew what he was talking about. They could not survive a dispute with him on what the law and the prophets were all about. Yeshua himself was the real “expert.”

The Bible never specifically tells us exactly what “the law of Christ” is (see Gal 6:2 and 1 Cor 9:21; cf. James 2:8).¹³ Paul’s highlighting of the second great commandment in Gal 5:13-14 suggests that this is at the core of it: “13 You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. 14 For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (see also James 2:8 and cf. more remotely Matt 5:43 and Rom 13:8-10). Most would agree that the two great commandments are part of the law of Christ. 1 Corinthians 9:20-21 distinguishes it from conformity to the OT law as a Jew who does not know Yeshua as their savior: “To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews. To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law” (v. 20).

In my view, the best understanding of the “law of Christ” is that it includes Yeshua’s teachings about adherence to the Mosaic Law as he himself taught and lived it. This would include his references to the teachings of the law in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt 5-7) and elsewhere in the Gospels, especially the two great commandments (Matt 22:34-40, see the remarks above). It also includes the priority of the most important matters of the law (Matt 23:23-24), and other such passages.¹⁴ To put

13 See the helpful review of the various views and the discussion in T. R. Schreiner, “Law of Christ,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 542-44.

14 See the details in Richard E. Averbeck, “Chapter 25: The Law and the Gospels, with Attention to the Relationship Between the Decalogue and the



it another way, the “law of Christ” is the way Yeshua mediates the OT law to his followers. It is all about the New Covenant writing of the law on the heart (Jer 31:33). There are shifts in the application of the OT Law to the church because of the shift from the Mosaic Covenant to the New Covenant, as discussed above. Nevertheless, it is the whole unified Mosaic Law that the Holy Spirit writes on the heart of the New Covenant believer, whether Jew or Gentile.

Finally, what does Paul mean when he says that he and other believers in Yeshua are “not under the law” (see, e.g., 1 Cor 9:20-21; Gal 3:23, 25; 4:4-5, 21; 5:18). He means two things. First, he means that we are no longer under the curse of the law if we are in Christ (Gal 3:13; Rom 8:1; etc.). This is true for both Gentiles and Jews. Second, he means that the one who trusts in Yeshua is not under the law in the sense that she or he does not depend on the law as the force that enables them to live the Christian life. The power for the transformed life comes through the power of the Holy Spirit working in my human spirit, the spirit of adoption (Rom 7-8, esp. 8:15-16).¹⁵

CONCLUSION

The Lord God gave the Mosaic Law as a guide for those who lived as Abrahamic Covenant believers under the Mosaic Covenant. It was and still is good, holy, righteous, and spiritual. The Apostle Paul depends on this truth in Rom 7-8, but at the same time he picks up on the “weakness” of the law — its limitations. This is the subject of the next essay. How do we hang on tightly to both

Sermon on the Mount/Plain.” in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Law*, edited by Pamela Barmash (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2019), 409-23.

¹⁵ See the more detailed explanation in Averbeck, *The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church*, 290-93.

the goodness and the weakness of the Mosaic Law? And what does this mean about how the law fits into the life of the church and the believer?

