

HOW TO READ THE OLD TESTAMENT

Daniel Baker

Sovereign Grace Church – October, 2012

INTRODUCTION

In the 1983 movie *A Christmas Story* Ralphie drinks and drinks and drinks his Oveltime—something like chocolate milk powder—and saves the proofs-of-purchase to get his Little Orphan Annie Secret Decoder Pin. Well, he gets it. And in a moment of childhood ecstasy he attempts to decode the secret message from the radio show. He discovers, to his dismay, that the longtime mystery message is only another commercial from the show's sponsor. It says merely, "Drink More Oveltime."

After all that work and focus and saving and patience, the great message was nothing he didn't already know. Was it worth it? Absolutely not. Was it a complete sham? Yes! Would he have rather gotten all that time back and invested himself in something better? For sure.

Unfortunately, this is how some of us feel about reading our Old Testaments. First we think we need some Little Orphan Annie Decoder Pin to interpret all those oddities. Then we're afraid that when we've put in all that effort it won't really tell us much we don't already know. In other words, maybe in the end it's not even worth it.

If these are common feelings for you, I hope you track with me to the end of this article.

The truth is, while we don't need a decoder pin, we do need to put in some time to think through some things. But far from being a waste of our time, in the end we will find refreshment for our souls, wisdom for all situations, joy for our hearts, treasure that is "more to be desired...than gold, even much fine gold" (Ps. 19:7-11).

First, open up your Bible to its table of contents (it'll help if you actually do this). We want to point out a few things. Notice that the Old Testament has about twice as many books as the New Testament. Notice also that your Old Testament is likely over a thousand pages, and your New Testament is about a third of that. This is a good basic observation. If the Bible is God's word and two-thirds of the Bible is the Old Testament, then doesn't it seem like we should read it?

The next thing to see is the list of books in your Old Testament. Look for Genesis right at page one. All the books that follow up through Esther are called the "history books," though the first five are also separated as "the books of Moses" or "the Law of Moses." These history books tell the story from creation (Genesis 1-2) to the rise and fall of the nation of Israel, and then some about the nation after its Babylonian captivity. These books are historical narratives. They communicate the deepest truth, but they do it as they describe what people say and do at different times.

Then the books from Job to Song of Solomon. These are called the "wisdom books" because they emphasize "wisdom" so much. We love these books and likely have spent a good deal of time in Psalms and Proverbs. Poetry is the dominant style of these books.

The last major part of the Old Testament goes from Isaiah to Malachi. All of these are the prophetic books—the Major Prophets are Isaiah to Daniel, the Minor Prophets are Hosea to Malachi. These books are a mix between poetry and historical narrative.

These books date from the books of Moses in 1,500 B.C. or so to Esther which dates somewhere in the 400s B.C. In other words they are written over a span of time twice as long as from the Reformation to the present. That's a long time. Almost all of it was written in Hebrew with a little written in Aramaic.

Now the question for us is how to read the Old Testament. How do we read it in such a way that we get far more out of it than some silly or simplistic message like “Drink More Oveltime”?

We'll start with an answer to this question and then work out the implications of the answer.

I. SCRIPTURE INTERPRETS SCRIPTURE (OR, READ YOUR BIBLE BACKWARDS)

How do we interpret the Old Testament? To get at the answer to this we need to state a fundamental principle for interpreting God's Word. That is, let the Bible teach you how to interpret the Bible. Because the Bible is inspired and we are not, the Bible is inerrant and absolute and authoritative and we are not, it must also be our teacher and guide when it comes to interpreting what we read in it. The Reformers used the phrase *Scripture interprets Scripture* (or the much more opaque phrase, *the analogy of faith*) to describe this idea. If we are careful and patient readers of the Bible we will get the necessary insights from it to interpret it correctly.

Our question once again is, *how do we interpret the Old Testament?* The most important aspect of this is that the New Testament is our primary guide in how to read both the Old and the New Testaments. The way that Jesus and the apostles understand God's Word acts as our interpretive grid for all of God's Word.

In this sense, then, we must start by reading our Bibles *backwards*. The commands, history, and teaching of the Old Testament cannot be properly understood without the perspective of the New Testament. As an example, how would we know that Melchizedek is such an important type of Christ without Hebrews 5-7? The reference in Psalm 110:4 would not be enough for us to get this from our Old Testament. With the New Testament as our guide we learn several things about our Bibles.

Remember that scene at the end of Luke's gospel. The two men are walking from Jerusalem to Emmaus and wrestling with all that had happened recently concerning Jesus. To top it all off they were hearing eyewitness reports that Jesus had been seen resurrected. Jesus begins to travel with them, though his identity is veiled. Eventually he asks, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?” But Jesus does not stop there: “And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27).

We can't miss the significance of this. Here are two men that we can assume are informed about Judaism and had real knowledge of Jesus and his ministry. They had "Moses and all the Prophets." The problem, however, was that they didn't understand it. The Old Testament remained closed to them. Their eyes were not open to its contents. They needed Jesus to interpret "to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself" (v. 27). In other words, without Jesus they would miss what "all the Scriptures" are saying. They were not simply blind to the resurrected Jesus standing next to them, they were "slow of heart to believe all that the prophets have spoken" (v. 25).

This scene captures for us that we need the New Testament to rightly see our Old Testament. Without the New Testament we might have "Moses and the Prophets," but we will miss what it's actually teaching.

With that in mind, what is it that the New Testament teaches about the Old Testament? We can express it this way, that it teaches six things.

II. THE OLD TESTAMENT IS THE WORD OF GOD (2 Tim. 3:16-17; Heb. 3:7; Matt. 19:4-5)

First, one obvious place to start is to see that the New Testament views the Old Testament as the Word of God which continues to speak—not just in the past, but in the present. Paul says that the Bible is "breathed out by God" and "profitable for teaching...that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). Its value is not merely in the history that it provides, but it is "breathed out by God" and it is necessary to equip us for "every good work."

Similarly, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 95:7-11 and strikingly calls it the Holy Spirit speaking to us right now these thousands of years later. The key is in the verb tense he uses: "Therefore, as the Holy Spirit *says* [present active indicative; not past tense, "said"], 'Today, if you hear his voice...'" (Heb. 3:7). In other words, that "today" rings out to us right now in our own day. As the writer tells us, then, the Old Testament is spoken by "the Holy Spirit," and God's Holy Spirit is speaking right now, directly to us.

As a third example we can see in the teaching of Jesus the way he refers to Genesis 1:27 (humanity made male and female) and 2:24 (a man to leave father and mother to join to his wife). This point is more subtle, but notice that Jesus speaks first of "he who created them," and this same person is also the one who "said" Genesis 2:24: "Have you not read that *he who created them* from the beginning made them male and female, *and said*, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife'" (Matthew 19:4-5, emphasis mine). In other words, the Creator is the one who spoke Genesis 2:24, not Moses.

In these three cases it is very clear that to Jesus and the writers of the New Testament, the Old Testament is indeed the God-breathed Word of God. It speaks authoritatively because it is *God* speaking to us. The Old Testament is no trite slogan from a corporate sponsor, but it is the Creator of the universe speaking to us directly and personally.

III. JESUS CHRIST THE CENTER OF IT ALL

Second, Jesus Christ is the centerpiece of all Scripture. He is not mentioned until Matthew 1:1, over a thousand pages into most Bibles, and yet he is the very centerpiece of the Bible's teaching (Luke 24:27; John 5:46; Rom. 1:1-4; etc.). He is the central Fact by which we interpret every page of the Bible. He is the Truth which we must understand if we are to understand any verse of the Scriptures. He is the great Promise that echoes throughout the Old Testament and which we see fulfilled in Christ.

Jesus says in Matthew 5:17, "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." The key to this verse is what Jesus means by the word "fulfill." What exactly did Jesus "fulfill"? Some believe that Jesus fulfilled the entire Old Testament and therefore its prophecies, commandments, and ceremonies all point to him and end with him and the Christian is therefore not obligated to obey the commandments. Yet, this is to push Jesus' words too far. It is much better to read the word "fulfill" in light of the many other appearances of the term in the gospels.

Jesus here is speaking in terms similar to the many references in the four gospels where the author points out something Jesus is or does as fulfilling an Old Testament prophecy. Jesus is born of a virgin "to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (Matt. 1:22; cf. Isa. 7:14). He was born in Bethlehem "to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet" (Matt. 2:15; cf. Micah 5:2). He healed the sick "to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: 'He took our illnesses and bore our diseases'" (Matt. 8:17; cf. Isa. 53:4). Lots were cast for his clothing while he was on the cross "to fulfill the Scripture" (John 19:24; cf. Ps. 22:18). In this way Jesus does not "abolish the Law or the Prophets," but he "fulfills them."

In other words, what Jesus has in mind in Matthew 5:17 are the prophecies of the Old Testament. The Old Testament is far from abolished by Jesus, for he comes to fulfill its promises. Further, as he continues to teach in the Sermon on the Mount, far from abolishing the commandments, he will teach them as binding for the Christian as understood through Christ (more on that below).

To continue on Jesus being the Center, Jesus is also the gospel of God, the "good news" (the meaning of "gospel") that was "promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures" (Rom. 1:1-4), but which is accomplished through his life, death, resurrection, and ascension (Rom. 3:21-28; 5:1-8:39). All of this confirms what Jesus told the Pharisees, "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote of me" (John 5:46).

Thus, just as publishers divide our Bibles into the Old Testament and the New Testament at the moment Christ is born, and history is divided into B.C. and A.D. because Christ came, so Jesus is

the centerpiece of our Bible. It is through the teaching of the New Testament that this becomes unmistakable and clear.

IV. THE HISTORY OF REDEMPTION

Third, we learn that the Bible's history is better called "a history of redemption."¹ The Bible does not give us an exhaustive history of humanity from Adam to the new heavens and the new earth. An obvious example of this is that world powers come and go with only passing references to them—Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks, Romans. Each of these was dominant for hundreds of years and over vast regions, but they are mentioned only as they enter into the story of God's people.

Further, the Bible doesn't even give us an exhaustive history of God's own people. As an example, Moses and David are the subject of many books of the Old Testament, and they are referenced over a thousand times in our Bibles, being named in almost every book. But Seth the son of Adam is mentioned in only three places (Gen. 4:25-5:8; 1 Chron. 1:1; Luke 3:38) though he lived 800 years—a span of time roughly equivalent to that described in the thirteen books from Exodus to 2 Chronicles. The only real detail we have about him is that his father was Adam and his own son was Enosh.

Why such a difference between Seth and the key figures Moses and David? The answer is that Moses and David were central players in how God accomplished the redemption of his people. Seth was apparently important only in the propagation of the race of man, but that is all. This redemption means the glorified people of God enjoying life in the new heavens and new earth (Rev. 21-22).

How is it that God takes sinful Adam and Eve and turns them into a multitude of saints who spend eternity with their God without sin or any trace of the curse on creation? It is not by taking a pill or flipping a switch. He does it by a long, historical process of revealing parts of himself and his plan to particular people. To Abraham he speaks of a Son that will be a blessing to all nations (Gen. 22:18). To Moses he reveals the weight of our sin and the need for atonement (e.g., Lev. 16). To David he speaks of a Son that will rule eternally from the throne of David (2 Sam. 7:13). These men received parts of the message over centuries. Jesus incarnate comes hundreds of years later in fulfillment of the promises of God (Matt. 1:1). Pentecost begins a new era of the church (Acts 2:17ff.). The end of this incredible story is not until the new heavens and new earth replace this cursed creation (Rom. 8:19ff.).

Through *emphasis* the Old Testament highlights events and people in this story—David and Moses and not Seth, as we mentioned. But even more important than the Old Testament emphasis is the New Testament teaching on this history of redemption, for indeed the New Testament reinforces this idea. It highlights the same key figures as the Old Testament: Abraham (e.g., Matt. 1:1; Rom. 4), Moses (e.g., John 6; Acts 7; 2 Tim. 3), and David (e.g., Matt. 1:1; 9:27).

¹ Or "salvation history." Some authors have taken to using the phrase, "The Storyline of the Bible," and by this they mean that while the Bible contains 66 books, really there is a single, over-arching story that connects everything we find there. This story has a "storyline," which is the story of God accomplishing his redemption.

The New Testament also places emphasis on certain events of the Old Testament much more than others: Creation (Gen. 1:1-2; John 1:1-4), the Fall (Gen. 3:1ff.; Rom. 5:12-22), the Passover and the Exodus (Ex. 12-13; Matt. 26:2ff.; Acts 7; 13:16ff.; 1 Cor. 5:7), the new covenant (Jer. 31:31-34; Luke 22:20; Heb. 8:8ff.), the coming Messiah (Isa. 61:1-13; Luke 4:18), the coming final “day of the Lord” (Joel 2:28-32; Rev. 20:11-15), and the new heavens and the new earth (Isa. 65:17; Rev. 21:1). In places like Acts 7:1-53 and Acts 13:16-41, Stephen and Paul summarize the history of Israel in very similar ways. They hit the highpoints in God’s story of redemption, and these duplicate what we see in the Old Testament’s emphasis and the New Testament references.

Taken together, then, here is the basic plotline of what we are calling God’s history of redemption:

- (1) Creation (Gen. 1-2; very approx. 6,000 B.C.)
- (2) The Fall (Gen. 3)
- (3) Abraham and the covenant (Gen. 12-25; approx. 2,000 B.C.)
- (4) Moses, the Exodus, and the Law (Ex-Deut.; approx. 1,500 B.C.)
- (5) David and the monarchy (1-2 Samuel; 1-2 Chronicles; approx. 1,000 B.C.)
***We could add here the Assyrian captivity (722 B.C.) and the Babylonian captivity (586 B.C.), but little is made of these in our New Testaments.*
- (6) Jesus the Messiah and the new covenant (Matt-John; 4 B.C.–30 A.D.)
- (7) Pentecost and the church age (Acts-Rev.; 33 A.D. to the present)
- (8) The return of Christ and final judgment (Rev. 19)
- (9) New Heavens and New Earth (Rev. 21-22)

We could add three more events to this basic plotline, but they are ones that get little attention in the New Testament. These are the “promise of redemption” in Genesis 3:15, where the Lord promises that an “offspring” of the woman shall crush the head of the serpent (Rom. 16:20). A second is the flood of Noah and the covenant made with him (Gen. 6-9). A third is the captivities in Assyria (e.g., 2 Kings 17) and especially in Babylon (e.g., 2 Kings 25). In the history of God’s people these events are significant, but in terms of moving forward God’s plan of redemption they apparently contribute little. This is why the New Testament mentions them but makes little of them.

The principle of letting the Bible guide us in interpreting the Bible helps us to see this grand, over-arching storyline. It unites all sixty-six books that were written across a span of over a thousand years. It brings together Abraham the patriarch and nomad, and the apostles building the early church. It makes the author of Ruth a contributor to the same story as the anonymous author of Hebrews. This is no plastic unity where details are forced into a prescribed mold, but a vital, organic unity where only through the lens of the New Testament does it become clear and unmistakable. The history of redemption is part of the organic unity of the Bible.

V. THE OLD COVENANT VS. THE NEW COVENANT

Fourth, the New Testament makes clear the distinction between the “new covenant” and the “old covenant.” In fact the way that we label one part of our Bible the “Old Testament” is a reference to the “old covenant” that it contains, *testamentum* being the Latin word for “covenant.” Our “New Testament” is so named because of the “new covenant” it contains. In some ways this labeling is helpful, for it does highlight what is most distinctive about each part of our Bibles.

Where it can become less helpful is when equate the entire Old Testament with the “old covenant,” and the entire New Testament with the “new covenant.” They are no doubt related, but they are not synonymous. We will see below where this becomes a critical distinction.

The “old covenant” describes the covenant made at Mt. Sinai between the Lord and Israel (Ex. 19-24). It is a God-given way by which his people relate to him and it includes the Ten Commandments, the cleanliness code, the plans for the tabernacle, the annual festivals, and especially the elaborate system of sacrifices. Thus, God makes a way so that he might dwell among his people (Ex. 25:8), but only according to very specific regulations. This material is the focus of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The rest of the Old Testament is the story of Israel being blessed for obeying this covenant and cursed if they disobey it.

Yet, the New Testament tells us that in Jesus the promised “new covenant” has been inaugurated (Heb. 8:6-13; Luke 22:20). It was promised in Jeremiah 31:31-34 and was said to bring true forgiveness, true fellowship with God, and a true ability to obey God. The old covenant could never bring these. The author of Hebrews tells us about the old covenant that “according to this arrangement, gifts and sacrifices are offered that cannot perfect the conscience of the worshiper” (9:9). In fact, “in these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year” (10:3), but no ability to remove those sins.

Jesus, however, offers the sacrifice that “perfected for all time those who are being sanctified” (10:14), and “where there is forgiveness of these [sins], there is no longer any offering for sin” required (10:18). The result of the new covenant is that sinners like us can “have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus” (10:19). If the symbol of the old covenant is the curtain that separated the most holy place from the people of God (cf. Lev. 16), the symbol of the new covenant is that curtain being torn from top to bottom at the sacrifice of Jesus to allow free access to God (Matt. 27:51; Mark. 15:38; Luke 23:45).

The old covenant is a confusing part of the Bible’s teaching for most Christians. The mistake often made is to say that because *the old covenant* is “obsolete” and “ready to vanish away” (Heb. 8:13), the Old Testament is somehow less important and even “vanishing away.” Yet, the old covenant is only a part of the Old Testament, formally only a few chapters in Exodus (19-24), with elaboration in the rest of the books of Moses (Exodus-Deuteronomy).

Now, to be sure, the old covenant has indeed become “obsolete” to the Christian. Those in the New Testament who are seen to be going back to Moses and the economy that he taught are rebuked in the harshest terms. Paul’s rebuke to the Galatians is rooted in their failure to leave Moses behind and cling to Christ: “O foolish Galatians! Who has bewitched you? It was before your eyes that Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified” (3:1). To Peter in the same book Paul speaks of rebuking this formidable apostle because he separated himself from Gentiles at a meal. Paul accurately saw this as returning to the law that they had left by becoming Christians (2:11-16).

Thus, it is surely right to say that the old covenant is a false and inferior way for the Christian to live. In fact, it is to deny that the Messiah has come and that the new covenant has been inaugurated.

Now here's the difficulty. *The fact that the old covenant is "obsolete" to us does not mean that the Old Testament itself is to be seen as obsolete, vanishing, and therefore not a binding law for the Christian.* In fact, it's probably a safe rule that whenever the New Testament speaks of the "law" as being abrogated, or Christians no longer being "under law," it really means the old covenant. We are no longer under the system that Moses taught in Exodus-Deuteronomy. That system of priests, sacrifices, and the tabernacles has been replaced.

Yet, while this covenant has been replaced, there are things taught throughout the Old Testament that remain binding on the Christian. We do not say this because we are trapped in the law of Moses, or because we long for some old-fashioned, ritualistic type of Christianity. We say this because this is precisely what our New Testament teaches.

This brings us to the next critical truth that the New Testament teaches about our Old Testament.

VI. THE OLD TESTAMENT IS A RULE OF LIFE (TYPES OF OLD TESTAMENT LAWS)

The fifth critical truth that the New Testament teaches about the Old Testament is that it provides Christians with a "rule of life." The Westminster Confession of Faith uses this phrase to summarize the role of the Old Testament in the life of the believer. They call it a "rule of life," not "a covenant of works," which a person must obey in order to be saved. It is a "rule of life," which means that it reveals to us "the will of God" and our "duty" to him and others (Westminster Confession of Faith 19:6).

This way of approaching the Old Testament is exactly right, but not because these 17th century divines were revolutionary in their approach. They were right because they accurately captured what Jesus and the New Testament authors teach about our Old Testament. Here are some examples.

Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount that anyone who "relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:19). He then proceeds to apply what he says. In that sermon he begins by quoting six commandments from the Pentateuch, all with the familiar refrain, "You have heard that it was said" (e.g., 5:21). He cites commands against murder (v. 21) and adultery (v. 27), about divorce (v. 31), vows (v. 33), an "eye for an eye" (v. 38), and loving our neighbor (v. 43).² In no case does he tell us that these commandments have been done away with because they are part of the old covenant. Instead, he uses them as a "rule of life" and applies them to the Christian in an even stricter way than the Jews would have understood them in the time of Moses.

We might assume that this was the pre-cross Jesus and that the apostles did away with this approach to the Old Testament after Pentecost. This is not what we find.

² These commandments are originally found respectively in Exodus 20:13, 14; Deut. 24:13; Lev. 19:12; Ex. 21:24; and Lev. 19:18. Some are spoken in a couple different contexts of the Law, but these are the original ones.

One obvious place to start is with the faith of Abraham. Paul finds in the faith of Abraham the kind of saving faith that we must possess to be justified in the eyes of God. The statement in Genesis 15:6 that “Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness” (cited in Rom. 4:3; Gal. 3:6), becomes for Paul one of the key texts that shows salvation by faith is a thoroughly biblical idea, no new novelty in Christ.

In fact, we can’t understand our Old Testament apart from the faith of Abraham. It is this faith that makes sense of all the Old Testament texts that communicate, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hosea 6:6; e.g., Ps. 40:6-8; Isa. 66:3-4; Amos 5:22-24). This faith helps us to understand why an adulterer and murderer like David was not stoned to death, but was instead “blessed” with forgiveness (Ps. 32:1-2; cited Rom. 4:7-8). The faith that men like Abraham and David possessed is seen by the New Testament authors as a faith we must possess and model and maintain. In this way we find a “rule of life” in the faith of Old Testament saints (cf. Heb. 11).

Further, in Romans twelve Paul says that we are not to “avenge” ourselves because the Old Testament strictly forbids it: “Never avenge yourselves...for it is written, ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’” (12:19). Do you see the importance of this verse? He does not merely quote from the Old Testament in a useful way to direct Christians in our behavior. He tells us to do something *precisely because it is commanded in the Old Testament*.

In fact, this phrase, “for it is written,” is one of the compelling reasons to see the Old Testament as a rule of life. Paul will use it again in 1 Corinthians 9:9 where he is calling the church to financially support its ministers. They are to do this, “for it is written in the Law of Moses, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain’” (citing Deut. 25:4).

The apostle Peter uses similar language in his first epistle. There he tells us, “as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct” (1 Peter 1:15). What is the reason we should be holy? “Since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1:16, citing Lev. 11:44). Again we are not given the Old Testament as a convenient example, but we are to do something *because it is commanded in the Old Testament*.

In places like Romans 13:8-10 we see that the Old Testament command to “love your neighbor as yourself” remains binding on the people of God. In fact, Paul tells us there that other Old Testament commands like “you shall not commit adultery, you shall not murder, you shall not steal, you shall not covet, and any other commandment, are summed up in this word” (v. 9). This means that both the great commandment to “love your neighbor” remains binding, but also that these other commandments (6th, 7th, 8th, 10th commandments from the Ten Commandments) remain binding.

Thus, it is not just Jesus that gives us this second “great commandment” (Matt. 22:39). Paul cites this command from Leviticus 19:18 as part of how a Christian obeys the will of God. He will again quote the command in Galatians 5:14, and James will cite it in 2:8.

Another point to make here is that Jesus and the apostles not only direct our behavior by looking at the Law of Moses. They look at all types of Old Testament writing. Paul cites Proverbs 25:21 in Romans 13:20. Jesus cites Hosea 6:6 in Matthew 9:13. Paul cites Psalm 37:8 in Ephesians 4:26. Peter cites Psalm 34:12-16 in 1 Peter 3:10-12.

In other words, the key issue is not *where* the law was originally found—the Ten Commandments or the books of Moses, etc. The key issue is *what kind of law* it is. All of these are what theologians have called “moral laws.” They relate to how we relate to the Lord and others. They speak to issues like worship (Matt. 15:8/Isa. 29:13), love (Rom. 13:8-10/Lev. 19:18), mercy (Matt. 9:13/Hos. 6:6), forgiveness (Heb. 8-10/Jer. 31:31-34), honesty (Eph. 4:26/Zech. 8:16), holiness (1 Peter 1:16/Lev. 11:44), and basic godliness (1 Peter 3:10-12/Ps. 34:12-16).

THE CEREMONIAL LAW

Yet, while moral laws remain binding for Christians, other laws of the Old Testament absolutely do not—binding in the sense that we *continue* to obey them. The most important type of law that is *not binding* is what we call “the ceremonial law.” This category includes the various feasts and festivals, the Levitical priesthood and office of high priest, and the tabernacle sacrifices offered in worship, thanksgiving, and atonement for sin.

Such laws are no longer binding for us because Jesus as the definitive high priest has offered himself as the final and ultimate sacrifice for all time:

He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. (Heb. 7:27)

He entered once for all into the holy places, not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption. (Heb. 9:12)

Not only does Jesus make additional sacrifices like these unnecessary, we should see them as forbidden. To offer the blood of a bull or a goat when the Son of God has offered his own blood is to blaspheme the cross of Christ and to say that God’s atonement is not enough. This is like choosing chocolate wrapped in gold foil instead of the treasure chest of real gold coins being offered to us. The sacrifices all point ahead to the final sacrifice of Jesus. This is why Jesus is introduced as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29). The Passover lamb was a powerful symbol of atonement to escape wrath, but it is Jesus who accomplishes this for real and forever for those in him.

Of course, we continue to offer the sacrifice of our lives (Rom. 12:1), service to others (Phil. 2:17), financial investment in God’s church (Phil. 4:18), and worship (Heb. 13:15). All of these are described in sacrificial language. The key is that none of these are making an offering to atone for our sin, and in none of these is the blood of an animal offered up. They are sacrifices made *precisely because our sins have been removed and God’s wrath is no longer upon us!*

The ceremonial laws do continue to teach us even though they do not bind our behavior per se. They remind us that God is holy and we are sinful. They remind us that God is the most precious being in the universe and thus worthy of all sacrifice. They point to God’s total ownership of us which includes our possessions, time, and resources. They vividly paint the picture that we approach God only on his terms. Thus, we can read these laws to great effect even while we do not obey them literally.

THE CIVIL LAW

There is a third category of Old Testament commands that is slightly more difficult to apply as post-Pentecost Christians. This is the civil law, those laws that relate to Israel as it functioned as a society, a nation, a people under a single civil government. An example of this is the numerous laws that relate to the exact punishments for thievery (Ex. 22:1ff.) or what to do when we have intentionally or unintentionally harmed someone (Ex. 21:18ff.). Remember that the Law of Moses for Israel was not simply a religious document that describes obedience and worship. It was also their national constitution that gave detail about how they were to function as a nation of several million people.

Now the great change that took place with the new covenant is that what defines the people of God is no longer race and a geo-political identity. Now what defines us is our union with Christ by faith, our corporate identity as “the body of Christ” (Eph. 4:1-6; 1 Cor. 12:27). We are “the church”—empowered by the Spirit and begun (formally) on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:41-47). We can be the church and inhabit any number of governments. We can be the church and be spread across all nations, races, and languages on the globe. Instead of being a nation led by judges or kings, we are a church that is led by elders.

This impacts how we understand the civil laws of the Old Testament. For instance, where the New Testament forbids stealing and calls us to generosity (Eph. 4:28), the Old Testament prescribes the exact restitution a man is to make to another. In the Old Testament when we steal an ox and get caught, we are to return “five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep” (Ex. 22:1). Where the New Testament calls us to love our neighbor as ourselves (Rom. 13:8-10), the Old Testament prescribes the exact restitution for harm we do to others because of either our negligence or our malice (Ex. 21).

Along these lines we note that capital punishment is a civil matter, not a religious one. In the Old Testament this right rests with the nation of Israel (Lev. 20:2; etc.). Yet, Paul says to new covenant Christians that the government of the land (and not equated to the church) bears “the sword” (Rom. 13:4), meaning that capital punishment is in the hands of the state and not the church. That is why the church responds to sins like idolatry with excommunication and not stoning (1 Cor. 5:9-13; cp. Lev. 20:2).

However, the fact that the people of God are now “the church” and not a nation under a civil government does not mean that all civil laws are irrelevant for us. Paul in 1 Timothy 5:18, for instance, quotes the command from Deuteronomy 25:4 that says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when he is treading out the grain.” Paul does not use it to speak of farming, however, but to say that a minister of the gospel should be paid for his services. He is applying Deuteronomy 25:4 in a wise and insightful manner in a context different than the original setting. This seems a good approach for many of the civil laws. The fact we cannot in a literal sense say that God owns “the land” does not mean that the property laws have no relevance for us (e.g., Leviticus 25).

It would appear from the above examples that the *moral* component of the civil laws is to be maintained, but that the *civil* aspect of them is not. As the church we do not set laws about how many oxen are to be returned when an ox is stolen, but we do command our people not to steal. As the church we do not prescribe civil punishments for adultery and idolatry, but we command our people not to do these and practice church discipline when it is required in such situations.

Dividing the Old Testament commands into these three types is so consistent in the New Testament that we are surely right to adopt this approach to our Old Testament. We are not imposing arbitrary categories. The terms we give to the three types of law might be our own, but this is no different than coining the term “Trinity” to capture a clear biblical teaching. Finding this three-part distinction in Old Testament commands is consistent with how Jesus and the apostles approach their Bible, and it gives us a guide for approaching those commands not cited in the New Testament.

VII. EXAMPLES FOR US

A sixth truth the New Testament teaches about the Old Testament is that the events of the Old Testament “took place as examples for us, that we might not desire evil as they did” (1 Cor. 10:6). Paul says this as he looks at the Israelites crossing the Red Sea and then traveling in the wilderness. He warns us from committing idolatry like they did (v. 7), committing sexual immorality as they did when “twenty-three thousand fell in a single day” (v. 8), or grumbling like they did when many were killed because of it (vv. 8-9). In other words, Paul says that we are to look at the Old Testament histories as having “examples for us,” sometimes good ones and sometimes bad ones.

We can look at David fighting Goliath (1 Sam. 17) or Abraham offering what was most precious to him to the Lord (Gen. 22) and see a positive example we are to emulate. We can look at Cain’s jealousy of Abel (Gen. 4) or Israel’s golden calf (Ex. 32-33) as negative ones we should avoid.

The biblical narrative will typically give us clues in the text that tell us whether a man is choosing rightly and being blessed by the Lord or choosing sinfully and being punished. The intent is to either imitate or avoid their example accordingly. In other words, in almost every story of the Old Testament there is a clear good guy we are to emulate and a clear bad guy that we are not to imitate. It doesn’t play in ambiguities like some modern fiction, but lets us see clearly that turning away from the Lord results in disaster and turning to him results in great blessing.

This way of reading our Bibles isn’t meant to stand alone, however. We should see far more in the story of David and Goliath than an example of ‘trusting God in the face of obstacles’—though we do need to see this. We also need to see God’s chosen deliverer saving God’s people by faith and obedience. In this way David foreshadows the ultimate deliverer Jesus Christ. Yet, once we’ve been careful to identify this element of David’s heroism, we should indeed see how he strengthened himself in the Lord, trusted God’s promises, and saw past the size of Goliath to the size of his God. These are things we should imitate and teach our children to do the same.

VIII. CONCLUSION: NOT MERELY ACADEMIC

This way of reading our Bibles has been generally associated with those who call themselves “Reformed” or “covenantal.”³ For us it provides the most thorough, complete, accurate, and insightful approach to reading our Bibles.

³ This approach to the Old Testament is advocated in various ways by John Calvin, Martin Luther, John Frame, Sinclair Ferguson, Ligon Duncan, R.C. Sproul, Herman Ridderbos, Herman Bavinck, the Westminster Confession and Catechisms, Hughes Oliphant Old, and others. The alternative approach is sometimes called New Covenant Theology and is represented by D.A. Carson, Douglas Moo, David

One thing to say in closing is that it is not merely academic. As a brief example, the Psalms are filled with commands, exhortations, and examples for us, and many of these have no New Testament echo or restatement. When it tells me to “sing a new song,” am I obligated to do it? (Ps. 33:3). When it says to “delight yourself in the Lord,” does a new covenant Christian need to obey this? (Ps. 37:4). A man like John Piper has exhorted us much to heed this command in Psalm 37:4, but on what basis can he do that? Are we morally bound to obey this command or not? If so, why? If not, why not?

We believe that we are indeed to obey these as moral commandments binding on the people of God in both covenants. Surely we can admit that reading the book of Psalms is no mere academic pursuit. Those prayers are too important to us to dismiss them so easily.

Now where do you start? If you haven't read the Old Testament where should you begin?

One approach is to read books that give you the basic storyline of God's people. Read Genesis, Exodus, 1-2 Chronicles, and Ezra-Nehemiah. That will give you a good grasp on the rise and fall and rise of Israel. Then read Daniel, Jonah, and Micah to get a sense of the prophets. Keep the story going by reading Luke-Acts and Revelation.

Now you've gotten the big picture view of God's message. After that search around online to find a good Bible plan for you—or you can check out *Seeking God Daily* and the accompanying journal.⁴ A good basic plan is simply to read two chapters of the New Testament and one of the Old (or one of each, depending on your time). Maybe add a Psalm or Proverb for the day as well.

I hope you feel more empowered to read your Old Testament well. It will indeed pay back huge dividends. In fact, it will deliver on these precious promises from Psalm 19:7-11. I will cite these to let the Bible itself have the last word to us:

*The law of the LORD is perfect,
reviving the soul;
the testimony of the LORD is sure,
making wise the simple;
⁸ the precepts of the LORD are right,
rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the LORD is pure,
enlightening the eyes;
⁹ the fear of the LORD is clean,
enduring forever;
the rules of the LORD are true, and righteous altogether.
¹⁰ More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold;
sweeter also than honey and drippings of the honeycomb.
¹¹ Moreover, by them is your servant warned;*

Peterson, John Piper, and many others. For a good introduction to the Law from a Reformed perspective, see Sinclair Ferguson's *Kingdom Life in a Fallen World: Living Out the Sermon on the Mount*, especially his chapter on Matthew 5:17-20 (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 1986).

⁴ At Amazon: http://www.amazon.com/Daniel-J.-Baker/e/B0048S7SU0/ref=ntt_athr_dp_pel_1.

in keeping them there is great reward.
(Ps. 19:7-11)