

4. OLD TESTAMENT LAWS ARE NOT FOR CHRISTIANS

They were intended for ancient Israelites

Are all the books in the Bible of equal importance? No! The four Gospels are of utmost importance. The Old Testament books, though they have their place in the whole Bible, must be evaluated and understood for their comparatively limited importance for the Christian faith. We admire the faith of ancient Jews and their religious zeal as shown in the Old Testament Books, but we must also be aware of the irrelevance of many messages in these books and the obsolescence of their views. The fervent faith and zeal of ancient Jews do not guarantee that their theological and moral understandings are true and right. Those that are erroneous must be rejected. Reading the Bible, we always must recognise the centrality of the Gospels and evaluate the relative importance of other biblical books considering the inspiration of the Gospels.

The Bible is divided into two major sections, the Old Testament and the New Testament, each containing many books. All these books were written with the inspiration of God and are ascribed as the Word of God. So why distinguish their relative importance? Simply put, biblical revelation includes two aspects: God's inspiration and man's response. In other words, the Bible is not only God's word but also man's word. The Word of God is truth and cannot be wrong. However, man's words can be erroneous, due to man's deficiency in cognition and expression, and in this regard, some passages in the

Bible which reflect ancient knowledge can be erroneous and their mentality can be wrong. There were also limitations to the understanding and practice of ancient people concerning theology and morality. If the people of that era had inadequate knowledge and malpractice, then the biblical authors in that same society would likely share the same errors and these would have been reflected in their writings.

The Relative Importance of Various Biblical Books

The watershed moment of the Old and New Testament is the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Before the coming of Christ, people did not have a clear idea of the nature of God, and their ethical views were human attempts to please God and do good. Although prophets appeared to encourage them to stay faithful to God and practise mercy and justice to the people, they were still unable to transcend their ideological constraints. Only with the coming of the Jesus, the Son of God who came among man and lived the human conditions, did we receive right theology and adequate moral understanding.

When we read the Bible, we must first distinguish between the Old Testament and New Testament writings and realise the inadequacy of the Old Testament mentality. Secondly, among the various books of the New Testament, the four Gospels are to be valued most since they are the direct testimonies of the life of Christ. Through the Gospels, we get to know Jesus, who is “the Way, the Truth and the Life”, who has come to reveal God fully and completely.

The relevancy of the theology and moral teaching found in the other books of the Bible must be measured against the standard of Jesus. If they differ from Jesus' teachings, they must be evaluated. Following this broad principle, we found various theological and ethical concepts in the Old Testament unacceptable. In the previous chapter, "*The Bible can be Wrong*" we have given some examples. This chapter explores the Old Testament laws and finds them wanting compared to the Gospel values.

The Old Testament ethics emphasised on laws. Laws had their meaning and importance, but when people regarded them as absolute to the extent of ignoring the spirit of the law, they became irrelevant or even harmful. In this chapter, we first examine the limitations of the Old Testament laws and move on to discuss how Jesus has invited us to transcend the laws and live his Gospel.

The Old Testament Laws

After the Israelites departed Egypt, they wandered in the wilderness, and later arrived at the foot at Mount Sinai. When they reviewed their experiences over the past years, the Israelites felt deeply moved. They realised that God was always with them, protecting and guiding them faithfully. They experienced the privilege of being God's chosen people and having received His many blessings, they felt obligated to be obedient and submissive to God. Their leaders enacted various laws, including norms governing religious sacrifices, familial obligations, communal interactions, economic productions, food hygiene, and many other aspects of life. The "Five Books of Moses" in the Old Testament recorded 613 laws altogether. The people were commanded to comply with

these laws as specific ways of expressing their submission to God. Among the laws were the so-called “Ten Commandments” that were an important part of the Israelites’ laws.

The Israelites perceived God as the centre of their life and considered all their laws as established by God. Regardless of the actual sources of these laws, God was always attributed as the legislator and enforcer who would reward the law abiders and punish the law breakers. Some of these laws were enacted during the time of Moses and some were already in existence before him. However, they were all said to have been received from God. For example, the provision of the circumcision rite was already in place before Moses (Lev 12:3). This is apparent when Jesus said, “Moses ordered you to circumcise your sons, although it was not Moses but your ancestors who started it, and so you circumcise a boy on the Sabbath. If a boy is circumcised on the Sabbath so that Moses’ Law is not broken, why are you angry with me because I made a man completely well on the Sabbath?” (Jn 7:22-24). Some other laws were legislated after Moses’ death, but all were regarded as issued by God to Moses, thus their reference as the Law of Moses.

Laws Enacted by Man

All the Old Testament laws was man-made, and not God-issued. We can be sure of this assertion by examining the contents of the laws, and considering the remarks made by Jesus in the Gospels about the laws. Let us first refer to the contents of some of these laws. Slavery was upheld in Old Testament era (Dt 15:17), and slaves were treated as the owners’ property. This system could not have been

commanded by God. Being a male chauvinistic society, they also treated their wives and children as their belongings. For this reason, they regarded “you shall not covet your neighbour’s wife” as equally offensive as “you shall not set your heart on his house, his field, his servant, his ox, his donkey or anything that is his”. Both “wife” and “other things” were considered man’s property (Dt 5:21). Such mentality could not be of God.

Moses and the other leaders developed laws to govern their community, which were later absorbed in the Pentateuch. These laws were relevant to them and not to us. For example, the law concerning cleanliness of food might have originated as a hygiene law and later evolved into a religious law. These laws were established in response to the environmental conditions then and are now no longer meaningful and applicable to us. Jesus retorted the Pharisees, “Don’t you understand? Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can really make him unclean, because it does not go into his heart but into his stomach and then goes on out of the body.” The Gospel of Mark remarks, “In saying this, Jesus declared that all foods are fit to be eaten” (Mark 7:18-19).

The enactment of the Old Testament laws had its historical, cultural, and political backgrounds. For example, to maintain the purity and competitiveness of their religion, the law was very harsh on apostasy: “You shall not bow down to them (carved images) or serve them. For I the Lord your God am a jealous God and I punish the father’s fault in the sons, the grandsons, and the great grandsons of those who hate me” (Ex 20:5). Such mentality came from the Israelites themselves but

was attributed to God. In addition, the punishment for those who committed adultery was cruel. It was mentioned that if a man had intercourse with another man's wife, both were to be put to death (Dt 22:22). Though adultery is morally wrong, to "stone the offender to death" is certainly not God's stipulation but man's.

Some scriptural passages clearly reference the Old Testament laws as human laws originating from Moses. Thus, we read in Ezra 3:2 that Ezra read aloud from the "law of Moses, the man of God." The Book of Deuteronomy begins with the claim that it is the "words of Moses spoken beyond the Jordan" (Dt 1:1, 3). The second book of Chronicles quotes a passage from Deuteronomy 24:16 as coming from the "book of Moses" (2 Ch 24:5).

When the four Gospels mention the Old Testament laws, they are always referred to as laws of Moses and not as laws issued by God. For example, when a group of Sadducees questioned Jesus about the marriage arrangement, they said, "Master, Moses said that if a man dies childless..." (Mt 22:24). And when Jesus discussed with the Pharisees about their traditions, he said, "For Moses say: do your duty to your father and your mother..." (Mark 7:10). Jesus clearly considered the Old Testament laws as Mosaic laws, merely human laws, not divine laws.

Beyond the Old Testament Laws

Although the Old Testament laws, including the Ten Commandments, had their moral constraints, the intention of enacting such laws was to uphold and preserve certain values that served the social situations

of their time. Jesus, having recognised both the values and the limitations of the Mosaic laws said, “Do not imagine that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets. I have come not to abolish but to complete them” (Mt 5:17). At the same time, he warned his disciples saying, “If your virtue goes no deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never get into the Kingdom of Heaven” (Matt 5: 20). Many scribes and Pharisees focused on the letters of the laws, but Jesus asked his disciples to uphold the ethical values that the laws intended to preserve, the spirit they intended to have, and avoid the wrongs they intended to prevent.

Some readers find a seemingly contradicting remark in Mt 5:18-19, which Jesus said, “till heaven and earth disappear, not one dot, not one little stroke, shall disappear from the Law until its purpose is achieved. Therefore the man who infringes even one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be considered the least in the kingdom of heaven; but the man who keeps them and teaches them will be considered great in the kingdom of heaven.”

The comment about the Law in verse 18 requires proper explanation. Superficially, this verse gives the impression that Jesus wanted his disciples to keep the minute details of all Old Testament Law, and by implication, Christians today must keep every single Mosaic law. If it were the case, then all male Christians would have to be physically circumcised. All Christians would have to offer temple sacrifices and travel to Jerusalem to keep the annual festivals. They would have to keep various purification rituals and food regulations. They must stone till death

anyone caught committing adultery, etc. There are many such laws that they must follow.

We have already explained extensively in the previous passages that Mosaic laws were promulgated for ancient Jews at specific historical, social and cultural situations and were meant only for them. Therefore, Mt 5:18 does not mean that every Old Testament law must eternally be observed. The Early Christians did not interpret it that way. They discerned and came to an enlightenment about the teaching of Jesus. After some serious reflection and discussion, the apostles decided and instructed the believers that circumcision was not necessary for them. (Acts 15) In fact, as the church grew, the food regulations, the entire sacrificial rituals, temple worship and Levitical priesthood were renounced.

The Mosaic Law had its historical significance, but with the coming of Christ, it came to its completion. With the coming of Christ, the Old Testament Law must now stand aside. Jesus took centre-stage, his words will remain forever even if heaven and earth will pass away. (Mt 24:35).

Verse 20 states that “your virtue must go deeper than that of the scribes and Pharisees.” And that statement is immediately followed by six concrete examples of how the enrichment should be achieved. Each of the six sections is introduced by the phrase, “You have heard that it was said... But I say to you” (Mt 5:21-48). Jesus mentioned how the Jews taught and applied certain Old Testament law. Then He gave his teaching on how his disciples should transcend the legalistic application of the laws. Jesus introduced a new mentality by his Gospel

teaching, and in this light the relevancy of Old Testament laws must be examined.

In verse 19 Jesus also said that if anyone broke “one of the least of these commandments” and taught others to do so, that person would be called “least” in the kingdom. Those who practiced and taught these commandments of which he spoke would be called “great” in that kingdom. How do these words fit into the discussion? Take note that “these commandments” do not refer to the Old Testament laws, they refer rather to the teaching of Jesus in Matthew chapter 5-7, commonly known as the Sermon on the Mount, which are the new laws given by the new Moses.

Jesus’ Act of transcending the Laws

Jesus went into the synagogue one day, and there was a man whose hand was withered. The Pharisees were watching him to see if he would cure the man on the Sabbath, hoping for something to charge him with. Jesus nonetheless proceeded to heal that man. He also reminded the murmuring Pharisees by saying, “Is it permitted on the Sabbath day to do good, or to do evil; to save life, or to kill?” (Mk 3:1-4). With this, Jesus revealed the false righteousness of the Pharisees. The Jews had the Sabbath law of not working. Its purpose was to prevent anybody from over-working, to have enough rest, to maintain good health, and to preserve the quality of life. Yet, the Pharisees, keeping to the letters of the Sabbath law wanted to justify themselves and rebuked Jesus for healing the sick on Sabbath Day.

In fact, they fully understood the importance of “saving life” because if it had happened to themselves, they would have a way to reason their action. And Jesus rightly said to them, “If any one of you had a son or an ox that happened to fall in a well on the Sabbath, would you not pull him out at once on the Sabbath itself?” (Luke 14:5). His words hit the nail on the head and revealed the truth.

As Jesus’ disciples, we belong to the generation of the “New Testament”, and we must transcend the thinking and practice of the Old Testament. We live by the Gospel of Jesus Christ and need not be troubled by the Old Testament laws. Jesus said, “No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old cloak; if he does, the patch pulls away from it, the new from the old, and the tear gets worse. And nobody puts new wine into old wineskins; if he does, the wine will burst the skins, and the wine is lost and the skins too. No! New wine, fresh skins!” (Mark 2:21-22). The “old cloak” and “old wineskins” refer to the Old Testament mentality, and the new cloak and fresh wineskins refer to the New Testament mentality or the Gospel of Christ. Those who accept the teachings of the Gospel will surpass the concerns of the Old Testament; confidently moving forward and not lingering on the Old Testament mentality.

Conclusion

Christians today should begin reading the Bible with the four Gospels to familiarise themselves with Jesus. It is only when they acquire adequate understanding of Jesus and his teachings, can they use his standard to evaluate the significance of other biblical writings. When they read the Old Testament books, they should always be mindful

of their historical and cultural contexts. Examining the Old Testament laws, they must know that these laws were aids for ancient Israelites to live their religious and moral lives. These laws had their historical and cultural settings that were drastically different from us, and most of them are no longer applicable to us. The Gospel of Jesus requires us to go beyond the letters of the laws to grasp the true spirit of the laws and achieve the ultimate ethical objectives of honouring God and loving people. The teaching of Jesus invites us to become good trees because good trees bear good fruits. By cultivating our hearts, we can become the person that God wants us to be and bear good fruits in our lives. So, Jesus proclaimed, "A good man draws good things from his store of goodness; a bad man draws bad things from his store of badness" (Mt 12:35).