

# how to read the Bible for all its worth

*Rob Radcliffe helps us to apply the Law*



## the Law(s): covenant stipulations for Israel

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It is difficult for us to grasp the enormity of what God did for the Israelites at the foot of Mount Sinai. Here were a people that had known only slavery in Egypt for hundreds of years. Not only had God delivered them from this slavery in the exodus and his presence was with them – distinguishing them from all other nations – but God was also forming them into a community that he would lead victoriously into the land he was giving them. So the people needed direction as to how they were to be God's people. It was in this context that the Law was given to Israel.

### what is the law?

Here we will consider the law in terms of the specific commands given to the Israelites in the first five books of the Bible. Some also use the term to mean the whole of

the Old Testament (OT) religious system, whilst in the New Testament (NT) the 'law' sometimes refers to the interpretation of OT law given by rabbis.

### christians and the OT law

Do the OT laws apply to us as Christians? If so how? There is no longer a temple, nor an altar on which to offer the sacrifices. So what does Jesus mean by 'I tell you the truth, 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'?<sup>1</sup> Four guidelines help us answer the question of how the OT law functions for us as Christians:

1. *The OT law is a covenant*

between God and his people Israel. In return for benefits and protection, Israel was expected to keep the many commandments contained in the law. But it's not our covenant. We are not necessarily required to keep these laws,<sup>2</sup> however, it is important for understanding God's relationship with Israel.

2. *Part of the old covenant is explicitly not renewed in the new covenant.* Many parts of the law dealt with Israel's civil law. As none of us are citizens of ancient Israel, they don't apply directly to us. Other parts of the law refer to the rituals that the Israelites were required to carry out as part of their worship. Jesus' one-time sacrifice for our sin means that the old sacrificial system and the laws regarding its practice are obsolete too.
3. *Part of the old covenant is explicitly renewed in the new covenant.* Some parts of the OT law are restated in the NT and are applicable to us as Christians; they support the two basic laws of the new covenant.<sup>3</sup> For instance, the Ten Commandments are cited in various ways in the New Testament as still relevant to us today.<sup>4</sup> This is not to say that we are still bound by the

OT law. Paul says ‘But now righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe.’<sup>5</sup>

4. *The OT law is still God’s word even though it isn’t God’s command to us.* God still wants us to know about it, and speaks to us through it. ‘Do not cook a young goat in its mother’s milk’<sup>6</sup> seems like a strange commandment, but when we understand that this was one of the practices of the Canaanite fertility cult, then we see that God was concerned that his people didn’t become like the other nations around them. If you want to cook a goat in its mother’s milk, then the OT law doesn’t forbid you from it – but God forbidding it to Israel tells us something about what he’s like.

**the role of the law**

Even though the OT law is not our law, it is still an important part of the Bible. Paul tells us that the law leads us to Christ (Galatians 3:24) and helps us to understand Israel’s relationship with God. Nowhere in the OT is it said that people are saved by keeping the Law, rather in the Law, God set his people

The authors of the book provide a reminder of principles for understanding the law:

Do...	Don’t...
...see the Old Testament law as God’s fully inspired word for you.	...see the Old Testament law as God’s direct command to you.
...see the Old Testament law as the basis for the old covenant, and therefore for Israel’s history.	...see the Old Testament law as binding on Christians in the new covenant except where specifically renewed.
...see God’s justice, love, and high standards revealed in the Old Testament law.	...forget to see that God’s mercy is made equal to the severity of the standards.
...see the Old Testament law as a paradigm – providing examples for the full range of expected behaviour.	...see the Old Testament law as complete. It is not technically comprehensive.
...remember that the essence of the law (the Ten Commandments and two chief laws) is repeated in the prophets and renewed in the New Testament.	...expect the Old Testament law to be cited frequently by the prophets or the New Testament.
...see the Old Testament law as a generous gift to Israel, bringing much blessing when obeyed.	...see the Old Testament law as a grouping of arbitrary, annoying regulations limiting people’s freedom.

apart, and showed them how they were to love him and their neighbours. Israel’s problem was not their inability to follow the law, but rather their choosing not to. They chose to reject God and entertain other ‘gods’.

Praise God that we are not bound by the OT law, that ‘it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God’<sup>7</sup>. Praise him

also, that we can learn from the way we see God relating with his covenant people through the OT.

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**REFERENCES**

1. Matthew 5:18
2. Romans 6:14
3. Matthew 22:37-40
4. Matthew 5:21-37
5. Romans 3:21-22
6. Deuteronomy 14:21
7. Ephesians 2:8