

Introduction to the Bible

Week 3: The Law & the Prophets

Introduction

Briefly review the CHART – focus on the Old Testament covenants.

Tonight we will overview two more kinds of Old Testament literature – the Law and the Prophets¹. Before we consider them in more detail, we should note what two New Testament passages (among many) say about them:

Matt. 5:17 – Jesus affirms the divine authority of these two sections of the Old Testament, but He also says that He came to fulfill them – implying that their primary purpose was preparatory.

Rom. 3:21,22 – Paul says that the Law and the Prophets do not enable us to be righteous before God; they witness to (prefigure) the way that God justifies us through faith in Jesus.

The Old Testament Law

BOOKS INCLUDED (BOOKCASE): The Law includes large portions of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

TYPE OF LITERATURE: Because the Law is God’s covenant Israel as her King (the “Old Covenant” or the “Mosaic Covenant”), it is written like a contemporary treaty between a conquering king and his vassal state. It also reads like civil law (e.g., statutes, crimes, penalties, etc.).

TIME PERIOD: The Law was written ~1400 BC. Its treaty form (see above) is like 15th century BC Hittite treaties with conquered nations. See also the authorship (below).

HUMAN AUTHORSHIP: God gave the Law to Israel through Moses, who was a prophet (Deut. 18:15). Though critics have denied Mosaic authorship (e.g., JEDP Theory), the evidence against this is solid (e.g., internal claim; 15th century BC Hittite treaty structure; Jesus’ affirmation; etc.).

KEY THEMES:

The Law of Moses contains three kinds of legislation, usually interwoven (e.g., Lev. 19):

CIVIL: Pragmatic aspects of civil order for Israel - ” penal laws (murder, theft, etc.), “special” penal laws (witchcraft; idolatry), inheritance laws, sanitary codes.

CEREMONIAL: Israel's prescribed rituals for approaching God – animal sacrifices, Sabbath & annual festivals, “cleanliness” laws, circumcision, some health and dietary laws.

¹ NOTE: The New Testament often refers to the “Law and the Prophets” as the Pentateuch (“Law”) and everything else in the Old Testament (“Prophets”).

MORAL: Description of God's character and ethical will for humanity – centered around the two “great commandments” to love God and neighbor (Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). Nine of the Ten Commandments apply these two commandments.

WHY THE LAW IS IMPORTANT: The Old Testament Law, with its 600+ statutes, is important for several reasons:

The Law was very different from the Abrahamic Covenant in two ways:

The Abrahamic Covenant was ultimately about a spiritual blessing for all the nations (Gen. 12:3), whereas the Law was about a temporal blessing for the nation of Israel (see below).

The Abrahamic Covenant was stated as God’s promise (“I will”), to be accomplished by God unilaterally and received by the recipient through simple faith (see Gen. 15:6,7-21). The Law was stated as God’s command (“You must”), to be accomplished by God and Israel bilaterally which required Israel’s obedience to God’s statutes (see Ex. 24:3-8; Deut. 28:11-26). Israel’s ongoing and increasing disobedience explains why God subsequently removed His protection and prosperity and exiled them from His land.

It communicated the conditions for Israel’s use of the “land” portion of the Abrahamic Covenant. God (not Israel) owned the land. God promised to bless Israel in the land by protecting and prospering them contingent to their obedience to His commands (see Deut. 28:1-14). He also promised to curse Israel by removing their protection and prosperity, and to exile them if they disobeyed His commands (see Deut. 28:15-30:20).

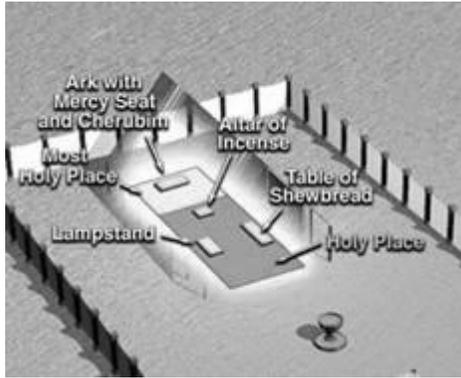
It provided Israel with a civil law and culture that was distinct from the surrounding nations (EXAMPLES: relationships > property [vs. Hammurabi’s code]; no tattoos, no removed beard corners; etc.). This provided a measure of external protection from assimilation into idolatry and depravity. These laws were temporary (see above) and imperfect (e.g., slavery laws – though they were more humane than the surrounding culture).

Central to the Law’s commands were that Israel must worship God only (Ex. 20:3-5a; vs. idolatry) and that they must worship Him properly (e.g., through God’s designated priests, rituals, sacrifices, etc.). The Law’s worship system emphasized God’s holiness, Israel’s sinfulness, and the necessity of blood sacrifice to draw near to Him.

God emphasized that He is holy (Lev. 11:44,45 and ongoing.; i.e., different/morally perfect). He also communicated His holiness by forbidding graven images, by His *shekinah* glory which separated from the people by the various veils of the Tabernacle (INCLUDING SMOKE IN THE HOH AS YET ANOTHER “VEIL”), and the increasingly elaborate cleansing rituals for those who come closer to Him.

God emphasized Israel’s sinfulness by stating that civil crimes were crimes against Him (“I am the Lord your God”), and by “cleanliness” laws that barred those who are “unclean” from the Tabernacle (REF).

God emphasized through the sacrificial system that Israel's cleansing and right to draw near to Him depended on His provision of a substitute whose death paid for the guilt of their sins (substitutionary atonement; EXAMPLE: TABERNACLE AS A SLAUGHTERHOUSE – 1273 OFFICIAL SACRIFICES PER YEAR (NUM. 28,29; 2+ MILLION FROM MOSES TO JESUS), NOT COUNTING ALL OF THE PRIVATE OFFERINGS.



Thus, the Law was God's "pedagogue" in that it explained Israel's need for God's forgiveness and pointed her to His ultimate atonement through Jesus' death (Gal. 3:24; 1 Cor. 5 – Jesus as our Passover Lamb, etc.).

This entire system was a temporary arrangement for Israel until Messiah came to accomplish forgiveness and inaugurate a better way of drawing near to God (Jer. 31 – New Covenant).

Since the Law was grounded in God's character, it provided Israel and all humanity with a basis for absolute morality, including both ethical behaviors (e.g., theft, lying, sexual immorality) and heart attitudes (e.g., Deuteronomy's constant emphasis on the heart – see Deut. 6:5; Lev. 19:18). See how the New Testament repeats the ethical content of the Law.

TIPS FOR READING:

Don't feel obliged to wade through all of this material this as a new or young Christian. Older Christians often urge new or young Christians to read through the whole Bible, starting with Genesis. Most who try to do this get bogged down quickly – if not by the genealogies of Genesis, then almost certainly by the laws in Exodus through Deuteronomy. It is better to start with the New Testament – especially gospels and the letters. After all, this is the stage of God's plan in which we live (Week 1), so this is the part that more directly applies to us. This is also the part that summarizes key points about the Law and instructs us how to properly relate to it. It is usually best to get solidly grounded in the New Testament first, and then grow in your understanding and appreciation of the Law.

The Law prefigures Jesus and His atoning sacrifice. Passages like Hebrews 7-10 tell us some of the specific ways the Law does this (EXAMPLES). Undoubtedly, there were other details in the Law that prefigured Christ – but unless the Bible tells us what the details prefigure, we should be careful not to speak where God has not spoken (EXAMPLE).

Be careful not apply these laws to the Church or to Christians. Remember that the Law was given to Israel before Christ – not to the Church.

Its civil laws are not binding to other nations (ABUSE EXAMPLES).

Its worship regulations laws are not binding for Christians (Col. 2:16,17), because we have a new and better way to worship God (Heb. 7:18,19; ABUSE EXAMPLES).

Even its moral laws should not to be approached in the same way Old Testament Israelites had to approach them. The ethical content and values of the Law are valid because they reflect God’s character.² But we should not focus on the moral laws; or seek by moral will-power to fulfill them. Rather, we should focus on Christ and what He has provided for us (Col. 3:1-4).³ As we live with this focus, the Holy Spirit gradually fulfills the requirement of the moral law in us (Rom. 8:4; see also 2 Cor. 3:18; recommend “CHRISTIAN GROWTH”).

The Prophets

BOOKS INCLUDED: Isaiah – Malachi. The Major Prophets (Isaiah, Ezekiel, Jeremiah, and Daniel) come first in our Old Testament, and are followed by the Minor Prophets (Hosea through Malachi).

TYPE OF LITERATURE: Most prophetic material is in the form of an “oracle” – a direct utterance from God through the prophet (e.g., “Thus says the Lord . . .”). Prophets sometimes describe the visions in which they received their oracles (e.g., Ezek. 1), and relay angelic interpretations of these visions (e.g., Dan. 7,8,9-12). Sometimes, prophetic books also include historical narrative sections (e.g., Jonah; Isa. 36-39; Dan. 1,3-6).

TIME PERIOD: Although there were earlier non-writing prophets, these prophets wrote from about 800 – 450 BC. Most of them wrote to Judah, since Israel was exiled in 722 BC.

HUMAN AUTHORSHIP: The prophets come from very different socio-economic backgrounds. But they were all chosen and inspired by God, and they passed the prophetic tests of Deut. 13,18.

WHY THE PROPHETS ARE IMPORTANT:

They served as a “check” on corruption and/or apostasy in the other two major Old Testament offices – the kings and priests. Corruption and/or apostasy were more likely in these offices because they inherited their positions by birth descent. The prophets functioned as “reformers” in the sense that they called the kings, priests and nation back to God (see Samuel with Hophni and Phineas in 1 Sam. 3,4; see

² For example, Jesus notes that the Old Testament Law emphasizes that loving God (Deut. 6:5) and other people (Lev. 19:18) are its foundational ethical principles (Matt. 22:35-40).

³ Even passages like Ps. 1,19,119, which speak of meditating, loving and focusing on the Law and the commandments, are not referring exclusively to the Old Testament Law. They refer to the Old Testament up to that point, and include the promises and provisions God made as well as His commands.

Elijah in 1 Kings 17-22). (Of course, there were also false prophets – but the prophets exposed and rebuked them also!)

We usually associate the term “prophet” exclusively with predictions about the future. But the Old Testament prophets functioned both as “forth-tellers” and “fore-tellers.”

FORTH-TELLING: Speaking for the God who is Israel’s King, they reminded Israel of its obligation to obey the Law, rebuked them for their disobedience, and pronounced present disciplines and future judgments (in accordance with Deut. 28-32) for this disobedience. Two key themes of this disobedience:

Idolatry (see Jer. 2:11-13; Ezek. 16; Hos. 6) – What are contemporary forms of idolatry? How would you know if you are involved in idolatry? (See Col. 3:5 – greed/materialism is idolatry!)

Materialism & social injustice (see Isa. 1:10-17) – What are contemporary forms of materialism? How would you know if you were enmeshed in materialism?

FORE-TELLING: Speaking for the God who is sovereign over human history, they made a variety of predictions about future events.

Near-term and future disciplinary judgments on Israel for disobedience to the Law (e.g., Amos 2:4-8)

Near-term and future judgments on other nations (see Ezek. 26 on Tyre). Most of these judgments fell on them because of their mistreatment of Israel (in fulfillment of Gen. 12:3 – “the one who curses you I will curse”).

Future blessings upon Israel (see Isa. 61:1-9) and the nations (see Isa. 66:18-23; in fulfillment of Gen. 12:3 [“in you all the nations will be blessed”]). Most of these predictions concern the reign of Messiah.

Predictions of the coming Messiah, both as King (read Dan. 7:13,14) and as Suffering Servant (read & briefly explain Dan. 9:25,26).

Predictions of the New Covenant (Jer. 31; Ezek. 37), presumably to be inaugurated by the Messiah.

Fulfilled prophecy is one of the ways God confirmed to them (and us) that He alone is God (see Isa. 46:8-11). Since so many of these predictions have already been fulfilled (at least the majority of them), we have a solid basis for believing that the unfulfilled prophecies will also be fulfilled.

TIPS FOR READING:

Remember that this material is primarily for Israel, not for the Church or for America. For example, American Christians sometimes quote 2 Chron. 7:14 as a prophetic promise of healing for America if it turns to God. But “My people, who are called by My name” are Israelites, not Americans. Unless the prophetic promises indicate that they have a wider application, we should not apply them thusly. (Of course, the ethical teaching of the prophets applies to the ethics of the Church, which is why the New Testament repeats this material to the Church.)

While God still judges nations and cultures for rebellion against Him (see for example Rom. 1:18-32; Rev. 6-18), we should be careful about interpreting current national catastrophes as God's judgment. Jesus said that many catastrophes are not God's temporal judgment (Lk. 13:1-5). Since we do not have inspired prophets (in this sense) today, we may speculate about such matters, but we should not claim to speak for God. (e.g., the Civil War as punishment for slavery; Islamic extremism as a punishment for W. European colonial exploitation; etc.)

The prophets strongly emphasize God's sovereignty (e.g., Isa. 40-48) and mercy (e.g., Hosea 2:6,7; 6:1-3; 14:1-4). Look for these themes – they will help to deliver you from fear (e.g., Isa. 8:12-14; 41:9b-16) and encourage you when you fail.

Look for the descriptions of the coming Messianic Kingdom. They will provide content for an eternal perspective and build hope in your soul (e.g., Dan. 2:44; 7:13,14; Isa. 60).

- The prophetic visions in Daniel provide the framework for all other biblical predictions about the end of the age, including Matt. 24 and Revelation. For a solid treatment of these visions, see John Walvoord, *Daniel: The Key to Prophetic Revelation*.
- Many Messianic predictions have a “double reference” – that is, they speak of two events widely separated by time (often the Messiah's first and second comings) as one event. This is because the prophet's perspective is like when we look at a mountain range and “see” widely separated peaks as one mountain. Only later biblical revelation makes this clear (e.g., Isa. 61:1,2 >> Lk. 4:16-21).

