

DEALING WITH THE LAW IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament of the Bible contains a lot of rules. Some of them seem obscure and random: Don't cook a young goat in its mother's milk, don't eat Lobster. Others seem brutal, particularly those which demand capital punishment when broken. People sometimes ask why Christians don't keep the rules of the Old Testament if they're part of the Bible. Following on from this, if Christians don't keep some parts of the Bible, how do they decide which bits to keep and which bits to ignore. Fortunately the Bible itself offers clear answers to these questions.

The Bible is not primarily a book of moral regulations or of "spiritual truths" although it contain many of both of these things. The Bible is firstly a story. To grasp how the story works it can be helpful to break it down into sections, or acts. One way of doing that would be as follows:

Act 1: Creation	God creates a wonderful world
Act 2: Fall	Humanity embraces evil, creation is ruined and the consequence is death
Act 3: Old Covenant	God entrusts promises of rescue to the nation of Israel for the whole world
Act 4: Messiah	Jesus comes to make good on the promises entrusted to Israel
Act 5: New Covenant	Those who follow Jesus take his offer of rescue and new life to the world
Act 6: Judgement	Jesus returns to finally throw sin, evil and death out of the world
Act 7: New Creation	God's wonderful world becomes all God intended it to be

In this outline we live in Act 5. The laws in the Old Testament belong in Act 3. The New Testament is explicit that the laws of the Old Testament were given to a specific nation (Israel) for a specific time (until the messiah) and are not to be applied to the church. The law was given to Israel (consisting both Jews who believed in God and sought to be faithful to him and those who did not believe or follow God), in light of their unique vocation (to carry God's promises to the world), as laws to govern that nation. It wasn't given to order life in the church (theoretically the community of those who profess to trust and obey God). It was given for Israel's legal system, not for those leading the community of faith, nor for final judgement by God.

Hopefully this should make it clear why the church feels no obligation to apply the Old Testament laws to it's dealings with each other or to the surrounding culture and society. Act 3 is necessary to make sense of Act 5, but the story has moved on since Act 3 and the circumstances and context are completely different. This still leaves the question as to whether much of the Old Testament law is a bit harsh. In response to this we could consider several things.

Firstly, the Old Testament law established a clear understanding of God's justice. Apart from that foundation there could be no consistent basis for addressing evil. Once that foundation was established, the Bible could offer mercy (not getting what we deserve) and grace (getting what we don't deserve). However, if mercy and grace are offered apart from a clear foundation of justice then that would compromise with evil. For example, it's important that we are clear that stealing is wrong before we consider forgiving someone who stole our laptop.

Secondly, the Old Testament was seeking to bring about radical cultural change in Israel. Given the starting point (the Jews had been slaves of an increasingly tyrannical regime in Egypt for 400 years) it would be unrealistic to make such a huge transition in one go. There needed to be intermediate steps to bring about cultural transformation. Some of the regulations which seem harsh or retrogressive to us don't represent God's final intention for people, but a step towards what he would want from an even less palatable starting point. For example, Jesus himself, quoting Moses, said "You have heard that it was said, 'Do not commit adultery.' But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart." (Matthew 5:27-28 NIV). The law against adultery was a step in the right direction but the deeper need was a changed heart.

Thirdly, the Old Testament was written into particular cultural contexts, and we read it from a different cultural context. Any moral system must establish a balance between rights and responsibilities within society. Some cultures place a greater emphasis on rights, others a greater emphasis on responsibilities. Underneath that lies a set of values about the sanctity of life, the significance of human choices and the relationship between the individual and society. This is far too complex to fully analyse here, suffice to say that contemporary Western culture tends to emphasise rights over responsibilities and consequently has a fairly weak view of the sanctity of life and values the individual over the community as a whole. This view, as all views, has strengths and weaknesses, but shapes how we interpret other cultures. When we interpret other cultures we tend to compare the strengths of our culture with the weaknesses of the culture we're viewing. This is simply to say that before we too quickly judge another culture, we should first seek to understand the values which shape both that culture and our own. For example, the severity of punishment for a crime is a statement about that culture's view of the seriousness of the crime and the suffering of the victim. These are deep waters but this is simply a plea not to judge too quickly.