

Table Talk **27th January 2006**

Topics

1. To what degree is the OT “the word of God” or is it simply a collection of mans oral history/tradition handed down the generations, and then finally saved in written form.
2. My first topic suggestion is "To What Extent (if at all) are Christians Living Under the New Covenant with Jesus Christ Subject to the Law of the Old Testament." As a guide you might want to think about issues such as most Christians accept and seek to obey the Ten Commandments (which derive from OT law), but do not accept the need for circumcision or the need to obey OT dietary restrictions. There are also issues where current Christian practice is not so clear such as observance of the Sabbath.
3. My second topic suggestion is "Does the Old Testament have anything useful to tell us about our human condition today and the way we ought to live as Christians today.

Commentary

Topic 1

The way in which this topic is phrased implies that the OT underwent a long period of oral transmission before it was finally written down. This is not necessarily the case. It used to be thought that Moses could not have written the Pentateuch because writing had not been discovered in his time. We now know that writing existed at least two thousand years before Moses.

Even if there was a period of oral transmission, that does not necessarily mean that the accounts are unreliable. Indeed we now know from both archaeological discoveries and the discovery of confirmatory historical documents that the accuracy of the OT is extraordinary.

The accuracy of the spelling of the names of foreign kings, for example, is quite remarkable. R D Wilson says:

The Hebrew Scriptures contain the names of 26 or more foreign kings whose names have been found on [other] documents contemporary with the kings. The names of almost all of these kings are found to be spelled on their monuments or in documents from the time in which they reigned in the same manner as they are spelled in manuscripts of the Old Testament.

As Wilson adds this is not at all usual. For example Manetho’s record of the names of the Kings of Egypt made in around 280 BC gives some 140 names of kings of which 63 are so different from those recorded in other sources that they are completely unrecognisable – either due to errors in the transmission of Manetho’s text or original errors in copying by him.

Archaeology also supports the accuracy of the OT text, even down to the OT’s use of obsolete names for foreign kings only rediscovered by modern archaeologists. Archaeologist Nelson Glueck says, “It may be stated categorically that no archaeological discovery has ever

controverted a biblical reference. Scores of archaeological findings have been made which confirm in clear outline or exact detail historical statements in the Bible.”

Archaeology has done much to silence radical critics of the OT. To paraphrase the archaeologist Joseph Free: last century many critics argued that there never was a Sargon, that the Hittites either did not exist or were insignificant, that the accounts of the patriarchs had a late background, that the sevenfold lampstand of the tabernacle was a late concept, that the Davidic empire was never as large as the Bible implies and that Belshazzar never existed. Archaeological discoveries have shown that Sargon existed and lived in a palatial dwelling 12 miles north of Nineveh, that the Hittites existed and were a significant people, that the background of the patriarchs fits the time indicated in the Bible, that the concept of a sevenfold lampstand existed in the Iron Age, that a significant city given in the Bible record of David’s empire did exist in the far north, that Belshazzar existed and ruled over Babylon and that a host of other supposed errors and contradictions are not errors at all.

Thus the account of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah was thought to be spurious until evidence has revealed that all five cities mentioned in the biblical account were in fact centres of commerce in the area and were situated as the Bible describes. The account of the destruction also appears accurate. Evidence points to earthquake activity in which various layers of the earth were disrupted and flung high in the air and that in this process Brimstone (bituminous pitch) was hurled down on the cities. Evidence of such burning has been found on the top of Mount Sodom.

Upon King Saul’s death Samuel tells us that his armour was put in the temple of Ashteroth (a Canaanite fertility goddess) at Bet She’an, while Chronicles tells that his head was put in the temple of Dagon (the Philistine corn god). This was thought to be a contradiction because it seemed unlikely that enemy peoples would have temples in the same place and at the same time. However, excavations have revealed that there were two temples at this site separated by a hallway, one for Dagon and the other for Ashteroth. It seems that the Philistines had adopted the Canaanite goddess.

David captured Jerusalem. The Bible says that the Israelites entered Jerusalem by way of a tunnel that led to the pool of Siloam. Archaeologists had thought that was outside the city walls at the time, but excavations have shown that the wall did extend past the pool.

Excavations at Gezer in 1969 ran across a massive layer of ash that covered much of the mound. Within that ash were Hebrew, Egyptian and Philistine artefacts, so apparently all three cultures were there at the same time. This puzzled archaeologists until they realised that this fitted with the biblical account in 1 Kings which says Pharaoh king of Egypt had attacked and captured Gezer. He had set it on fire. He had killed its Canaanite inhabitants and then gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon’s wife.

Thus as Henry Morris states: “While many have doubted the accuracy of the Bible, time and continued research have consistently demonstrated that the Word of God is better informed than its critics.” And the great archaeologist Henry Albright asserts: “There can be no doubt that archaeology has confirmed the substantial historicity of Old Testament tradition.”

Sir Frederick Kenyon writes “It is therefore legitimate to say that, in respect of that part of the Old Testament against which the disintegrating criticism of the last half of the nineteenth

century was chiefly directed, the evidence of archaeology has been able to re-establish its authority..”

Thus, on the basis of this huge volume of evidence, I conclude that the OT which we have in our Bibles is a textually reliable rendition of the Hebrew scriptures and that it is an historically reliable account of the history of the Israelites. Finally I would point out that Jesus himself recognised the authority of the OT (John 5:39)

Of course, all this does not prove that the OT is the inspired word of God. In general the books of the OT do themselves make this claim. Eighteen out of twenty four books claim that they are God’s words to men and most of the remainder are parts of sections for which this claim is made. Furthermore the writers of the books, Moses, Solomon and the prophets were men accredited by God and frequently claim to be the bearers of God’s word.

Also I would contend that the contents of parts of the OT speak for themselves. The extent and accuracy of the prophecy in general is extraordinary and that related to the coming of Jesus particularly so. There are many books covering this subject, so here I am only going to quote two examples of fulfilled prophecy, that of the destruction of Tyre in Ezekiel 26 and that of the coming, suffering and death of Jesus in Isaiah.

Ezekiel predicted that:

1. Nebuchadnezzar would destroy Tyre (Ezekiel 26:8)
2. Many nations would take part (Ezekiel 26:3)
3. Tyre would be made flat like the top of a bare rock (Ezekiel 26:4)
4. Fishermen would spread nets over the site (Ezekiel 26:5)
5. The debris from the destruction would be thrown into the water (Ezekiel 26:12)
6. Tyre would never be rebuilt (Ezekiel 26:14)

All these prophecies were fulfilled in the conquest of Nebuchadnezzar and the subsequent throwing of the debris into the water by Alexander the Great to make a causeway to conquer an island off the coast. It is now an anchoring site for small fishing vessels which spread their nets. When we remember that this was written 100-200 years before the events the detail and accuracy of the prophecy is quite astonishing.

The prophecies concerning Jesus contained in the so-called servant songs of Isaiah 53 are quite remarkable. I suggest that you read these for yourselves. However, other OT prophecies in Zechariah, Malachi, the Psalms and other books are also remarkable.

I submit that prophecies of this accuracy and detail would not have been possible unless the writers were inspired by God. If the claims of these authors to divine inspiration are upheld, then why should we not accept the claims of the other authors as well?

Topic 2

The traditional approach to this problem put forward by the Westminster Confession and indeed many evangelical scholars is to interpret the Mosaic Law by emphasising the distinction between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws. They define moral laws as those that deal with timeless truths regarding God’s intention for human ethical behaviour. "Love your neighbour as yourself" is a good example of a moral law. Civil laws are those that deal with Israel’s legal system, including the issues of land, economics, and criminal justice. An example of a civil law is Deuteronomy 15:1 , "At the end of every seven years you must

cancel debts." Ceremonial laws deal with sacrifices, festivals, and priestly activities. An example is in Deuteronomy 16:13, which instructed the Israelites to "celebrate the Feast of Tabernacles for seven days after you have gathered the produce of your threshing floor and your winepress."

In this traditional approach the distinctions between moral, civil, and ceremonial laws are critically important because this identification allows believers to know whether a particular law applies to them. Moral laws, according to this system of interpretation, are universal and timeless. They still apply as law to Christian believers today. Civil and ceremonial laws, on the other hand, applied only to ancient Israel. They do not apply at all to believers today.

However, the traditional approach has numerous critical weaknesses, and does not reflect sound hermeneutical methodology. This approach is inadequate because the distinctions it seeks to make are in fact arbitrary and there is no evidence that the OT text itself in any way supports such distinctions. For example "love your neighbour as yourself" (Leviticus 19:18) is followed in the very next verse by the law "do not wear clothing woven of two kinds of material" (Leviticus 19:19). Should verse 18 be applied as binding, while verse 19 is dismissed as entirely inapplicable? The text gives no indication that any kind of hermeneutical shift has taken place between the two verses.

Even the Ten Commandments, the clearest examples of so-called moral laws, present problems for the moral, civil, and ceremonial distinctions. For example is the Sabbath law moral or ceremonial? If content is the criterion, then the Sabbath law, which was clearly part of Israel's worship system, is a ceremonial law and not a moral one. However, if content is not the criterion for distinctions, then what is? If location within the Ten Commandments becomes the litmus test for moral law, then there exists a simple system with only two categories: (a) the Ten Commandments, which are universal and timeless and which apply to Christians as moral law, and (b) all the rest of the Law, which is not applicable today. Of course this is also unacceptable for it does not allow us to claim Leviticus 19:18, "love your neighbour as yourself," - which Jesus identified as the second greatest commandment. To pull Leviticus 19:18 away from the verses that surround it and to identify it as a moral law requires that content plays the major role in the distinction. If content becomes the criterion, then the Sabbath law ought to be classified as ceremonial.

The traditional approach also overlooks the fact that the OT law was introduced in the context of the Mosaic Covenant – which is no longer in force.

Paul stated repeatedly that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law. For example, in Galatians 2:15–16, he wrote, "A man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." In Romans 7:4 Paul stated, "You also died to the law through the body of Christ." In Galatians 3:25 he declared, "Now that faith has come, we are no longer under the supervision of the law." Paul argued vigorously against Christians returning to the Old Testament Law. If there was a distinction between civil, ceremonial, and moral laws, it was unusual that Paul ignored it. Furthermore, if the moral laws were to be understood as universally applicable, one would expect Paul at least to use them as the basis for Christian moral behaviour. However, as Goldingay points out, Paul "does not generally base his moral teaching on this foundation but on the nature of the gospel, the guidance of the Spirit, and the practice of the churches."

In that case how should we understand Jesus' words in Matthew 5:17 be understood? He said "Do not think I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfil them." I believe we must differentiate between 'observe' and 'abolish'. Jesus was not saying that he was there to observe the Law or that it was eternally binding on Christians. Jesus was saying that He did not come to sweep away the righteous demands of the Law, but that He came to fulfil its righteous demands. In addition Jesus was the final Interpreter of and Authority over the Law and its meaning, as other passages in Mathew indicate. Jesus restated some of the Old Testament laws (Matthew 19:18–19), but some He modified (Matthew 5:31–32). Some He intensified (Matthew 5:21–22, 27–28), and others He changed significantly (Matthew 5:33–37, 38–42, 43–47). Some laws He abrogated entirely (Mark 7:15–19). Jesus was not advocating the continuation of the traditional Jewish approach of adherence to the Law. Nor was He advocating that the Law be dismissed altogether. He was proclaiming that the meaning of the Law must be interpreted in light of His coming and in light of the profound changes introduced by the New Covenant.

Thus I conclude that the Law of the OT is no longer valid **as law** over believers today. However, that is **not** the same as saying that it should be completely ignored. I believe that the best approach is that which is usually referred to as principlism. The advantage of this approach is that it enables Christians to be consistent when interpreting Old Testament passages. There is no need to classify the laws arbitrarily into applicable and inapplicable categories. Principlism uses five simple steps:

1. Identify what a particular law meant to the initial audience.
2. Determine the situational differences between the initial audience and believers today.
3. Develop universal principles from the text.
4. Correlate the principles developed with the teachings of the NT.
5. Apply the final modified universal principle to our current situation.

Jesus' citation of 1 Samuel 21 to rebut the Pharisees follows this kind of pattern. In 1 Corinthians 9:9 Paul cited Deuteronomy 25:4 ("Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain") in defending his right to receive material support from the Corinthians (1 Corinthians 9:4, 11–12). In the traditional approach this Deuteronomic law would probably not be classified as a "moral" command, yet Paul cited it as applicable. Since Paul clearly emphasised elsewhere that Christians are not under the Old Testament Law (Romans 6:14–15; 7:1–6; 1 Corinthians 9:20; Galatians 2:15–16; 5:18; Ephesians 2:15), he was not citing Deuteronomy 25:4 as a law that was binding on the Corinthian church. Instead he used this law analogically. Paul cited a command whose principle can be applied to situations other than that of the initial, historical incident. This is what I believe Christians must continue to do today.

Topic 3

You will deduce from my lengthy treatment of Topic 2 above that I firmly believe that the answer to this question is **yes**. The following merely touches on some major issues. There are many more and much more to say about the ones which are mentioned.

Thus we are taught that God has given us charge over creation (Genesis 1:26-28), but it is also clear that such authority is to be exercised in accordance with God's justice and righteousness and subject to God's ultimate authority (Micah 6:8).

We are taught that humanity the peak of God's creation on earth, the only creature made in His image (Genesis 1:27). This tells us that human life has significant value and justifies the commandment that we should not murder (Exodus 20:13). It also underpins our concern for human dignity and freedom and for human rights.

We are taught that woman was created as the perfect mate and companion for Adam, who was to become "one flesh" with him (Genesis 2:22-24). Which I think underpins the notion that marriage is to be between one man and one woman.

We are taught that it was God's intention for man to work (Genesis 2:8,15). After the fall this work became labour. Nevertheless the writer of Ecclesiastes (pessimistic as he usually was) said that there was nothing better for a man but to enjoy his work (Ecclesiastes 2:24; 3:22).

The OT tells us that poverty and the poor will always be with us (Deuteronomy 15:11) and yet exhorts us to such generosity towards them that poverty might be eliminated (Deuteronomy 15:4).