

Dear David

Thanks for the email your sent back in January about your thinking on Old Testament matters.

The historical overview sounds very helpful and I don't foresee any difficulties there. I'm sure you'll find a way of making clear *which* destruction of the Temple you are referring to (i.e. by the Romans and not by the Babylonians).

I also think the day you suggest on "the God-Particle" sounds fascinating and topical, and I imagine people would want to come and hear you on it.

We spent quite a long time on Thursday discussing the relationship between the New Covenant and its precursors, but I offered to summarise my thinking on it. So if that's of any interest, here it is.

I am of course largely in agreement with you, but I would have a number of serious concerns.

I am completely agreed with you that the concept of Covenant is crucial to our understanding of God's dealing with mankind, and our status with God as Christians. I also delight to be under the new Covenant rather than the Mosaic one, and wouldn't swap my blessings and privileges under the new Covenant for anything, neither do I want to draw anyone under the curse of legalism. The new Covenant is, of course, far superior in every way.

But I would be uneasy with the way you separate God's dealings under the old and new covenants.

I. God's Covenants are never completely unilateral

You make a distinction between one-sided and bilateral covenants: citing the Noahic and Abrahamic covenants as examples of the former. I'm not sure how sustainable that distinction is. *All* of the Old Testament Covenants require sacrifice, and obedience from God's human counterparts. So, of course, does the new Covenant in Christ.

I.a. The Noahic covenant appears at first sight not to be dependent on human response, in that we cannot even initiate the covenant sign (the rainbow). But for a covenant to be inaugurated, a sacrifice is necessary: it's Noah who offers this sacrifice (GENESIS 8.20). And God absolutely requires his human counterparts to fulfil their covenant duties (to do everything as the Lord had commanded: 6.22; to observe certain food-laws: 9.3-4; to administer justice: 9.5-6). This is far from unilateral.

I.b. The covenant(s) with Abram certainly has an unexpectedly one-sided aspect to it: only the smoking firepot (presumably representing God) passes between the sacrificial pieces (GENESIS 15.17). But the covenant was only inaugurated when Abram offered a substantial and complex blood-sacrifice.

The Hebrew expression for to "make" a covenant is in fact to "cut" a covenant. As with Noah, it is Abram who cuts up the animals.

Unlike Noah's rainbow, the covenant sign of the Abrahamic covenant (circumcision) *has* to be performed by human beings.

You rightly "regard circumcision as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant rather than as a

condition of it". One of Paul's greatest insights is that Abraham was justified **before** circumcision.

Nevertheless circumcision was an essential part of the deal: "*Any uncircumcised male, who has not been circumcised in the flesh, will be cut off from his people; he has broken my covenant.*" (GENESIS 17.14) According to God, human non-compliance over circumcision breaks the covenant.

Similarly, subsequent *moral* disobedience by Abraham's descendants would also jeopardise the covenant promise: "*I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.*" (GENESIS 18.19)

I hope this makes it clear that supposedly "unilateral" covenants are in fact bilateral.

I.c. God can revoke his promises. If I understand you correctly, one of the main distinctions you make between the "unilateral" and "bilateral" covenants is that the former are irrevocable: "The other covenants as unilateral promises of God could never be broken or terminated..." I'm not sure I agree with the "uni-/bi-" distinction, but I am generally happy and reassured by your assertion. However, it might not be quite as simple as that ...

I Samuel 2.30 is a salutary reminder that our disobedience can "break" God's promises: "*Therefore the LORD, the God of Israel, declares: 'I promised that your house and your father's house would minister before me forever.' But now the LORD declares: 'Far be it from me! Those who honour me I will honour, but those who despise me will be disdained.'*" Thereupon God details how he is about to revoke this "everlasting" promise, as a result of the disobedience of Eli and his family. There's a similar case in God's "unbreakable covenant" in Judges 2.1-3.

I.d. Jesus's new covenant carries duties and stipulations for us to follow. Jesus, too, requires us to keep his commandments under the New Covenant. The writer to the Hebrews seems to warn that our disobedience will jeopardise our salvation under the new covenant.

2. What is the "Old Covenant"?

We now need to examine what the New Testament means by the "Old Covenant". In Paul's demolition of a "works-righteousness legalism" in favour of the "faith/grace righteousness" in Christ, he consistently links the issue of circumcision-and-Abraham's-faith with the Mosaic Law.

Paul doesn't acknowledge a split between so-called "unilateral" covenants and "bilateral" ones.

When the New Testament sets the "New Covenant" over against the "Old", the Abrahamic circumcision requirement is repeatedly adduced as a key part of the "Old Covenant". In fact, it was THE primary issue in most of Paul's discussion of the matter. He considers the Abrahamic Covenant to be "bundled in" with the Mosaic Covenant.

So it would be wrong to assume that the "unilateral" Abrahamic Covenant as such has not been superseded. The entire New Testament controversy over circumcision establishes that it has been. Colossians 2.11-12, and probably Acts 2.39, set up baptism as the New Covenant counterpart to circumcision.

This is quite in tune with the Torah. The first place in which mere circumcision is cast into doubt is, of course, the Mosaic "law". In Deuteronomy, God indicates the inadequacy of mere outward circumcision, and says that it also has to happen on the inside, a spiritual renewal equivalent to "new birth". Moses insists "*The LORD your God will circumcise your hearts and the hearts of your descendants, so that you may love him with all your heart and with all your soul, and live.*" (DEUTERONOMY 30.6 etc)

Of course our thinking on this matter is of huge significance in the modern world. If the “unilateral covenant” with Abraham still applies, do ethnic Jews still have an inalienable right to the entire “promised land” right up to the Euphrates? If not, do *Christians* have an inalienable right to it?? The answer to both questions is “No”!

The way the New Testament melds the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants should give pause for thought before setting up a “Mosaic: Bad” – “Abrahamic: Good” dichotomy. The “Old Covenant” is a catch-all phrase for God’s dealings with the Hebrews/Israelites in the “Old Testament”. Of course, our phrase the “Old Testament” *means* the “Old Covenant”.

3. There are not two Gospels: God always saves by grace through faith

If I understand your notes correctly, you seem to suggest that the “bilateral covenants” depend on the Israelites obeying legal requirements and obligations without which the covenant would be nullified. You say this is not a covenant of works approach, but it does seem opposed to a covenant of *grace*. I think this is to misunderstand the Sinaitic covenant quite seriously.

3.a. The Old Testament “Gospel” was salvation by grace through faith. God didn’t say to the Exodus generation, “Keep the 10 Commandments (etc), and *then* I will redeem you.” He redeemed them on his own sovereign initiative, despite the fact that they were uncircumcised, largely recalcitrant, and had certainly never complied with the Torah. The process of redemption from Egypt was activated when the Israelite elders “believed” (EXODUS 4.31). In other words, their redemption/salvation was purely a matter of *grace*, not *works*. Deuteronomy stresses that the Israelites’ election and inheritance of the land were not due to their righteousness or numerical significance, but (a) an expression of God’s love, and (b) a fulfilment of his covenant promises to the patriarchs (e.g. DEUTERONOMY 7.6-9; 9.4-5). It was for these *redeemed* people that the Torah was given (to quote your email) to “illustrate the way in which God wants us to live and they give our basic obligations towards God.”

The 10 Commandments are careful to stress that liberation and redemption *precede* commandment: the first phrase reminds the Israelites that “*I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery.*” (EXODUS 20.2; DEUTERONOMY 5.6) “*Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.*” (DEUTERONOMY 24.18)

Failure to see the Torah in its historical context all too easily leads to a “legalistic-righteousness” approach.

3.b. The New Testament “Gospel” is salvation by grace through faith. Jesus, Stephen, Paul, James and the writer to the Hebrews would all insist that a legalistic understanding of Torah misses the whole point, and that the Christian Gospel is in fact *the correct understanding of the Torah*.

Salvation was only ever by God’s grace, in response to repentance and faith. This was just as true under the “Old Covenant” as it is under the “New”.

3.a. This Gospel is made clearer and complete in Christ. The new factor in Christ is principally that his death on the Cross provided the means of applying this salvation AND resolving the justice issue.

(We would need to add quite a lot more than this, of course: e.g. the release of the Holy Spirit to enable us to live under the terms of the New Covenant. You rightly add the opening up of the Gospel to Gentiles).

The New Testament draws out and makes explicit what was hard to grasp in the Old. It

doesn't contradict the Old Testament. There's only one Gospel, and that truth must underpin our proclamation.

4. God doesn't make mistakes

One danger of dismissing "bilateral" covenants is that our hearers will be confirmed in their unbiblical prejudice that the Old Testament is of very little interest to them, and that the Torah is a bad thing. This is a view which Christ and the Apostles emphatically deny. Another danger of making too rigid a distinction between (say) the Mosaic Covenant and the New Covenant in Christ, is that we end up with two systems of salvation: one of which is effective, and one of which never could be.

And if the Mosaic Covenant is indeed fatally futile — and therefore ultimately evil — we have to ask "Who instituted it?" And we'd have to answer either "Moses and not God" (in which case the Torah's claims to divine authorship will have to be ditched); or else we answer "God" (in which case he made a huge mistake, which he only remedied about 1500 years later, with the loss of countless souls in the meantime).

James however insists, "*There is only one Lawgiver and Judge, the one who is able to save and destroy.*" (JAMES 4.12)

Paul puts it like this: "*you have in the law the embodiment of knowledge and truth*" (ROMANS 2.20).

These considerations ought to be enough to make us think again:

- either God slipped up in giving the Israelites a dud religious system which consigned them all to hell ...
- or else we've got **a wrong conception of the old covenants**.

The second option has to be the more likely!

5. Torah is more than "law"

This brings me to the concept of "Torah". Part of my difficulty with your thinking relates to the way you use the word "Law" (with a capital "L").

Firstly, "law" is not an entirely happy translation for *Torah*.

Because the Septuagint and New Testament Greek translate "torah" by "*nomos*", we shall have to stick with the well-established translation: "law".

[We used a "law" word for *torah* in Kinyarwanda – *amategeko* – but with some hesitation and regret!]

The Hebrew word is formed from a root "*yarah*", which (in the "*Hiphil*" form) *tends* to mean "to point, indicate." In itself, it's not a particularly "legal" word: in Genesis 46.28, Joseph "points" his chariot towards Goshen; in Exodus 15.25, God "shows" Moses a piece of wood; in Exodus 35.34, Bezaleel and Oholiab "teach" others their crafts and skills.

So it's safer to think of "the Torah" as **directions** as to how God wants us to live, and what are our basic obligations towards God.

5.a. Torah contains "law". It's certainly true that the Torah contains **a large body of legal material**: instructions for judges, legal penalties, laws about property and succession, even health and safety regulations (parapets on flat roofs), etc.

We must note in passing that many of these laws were permissive rather than obligatory (you were *allowed* to give your wife a bill of divorce, but not legally *required* to).

But law is a gift from God, going back to the Noahic covenant, which requires us to administer justice. I've lived in a society where law and order broke down, and I assure you law is not necessarily a curse, rather a blessing.

5.b. Torah contains “ceremonial requirements”. The Torah also contains a very large amount of **“liturgical” instruction**, though this is more of the nature of a users’ manual for priests than a matter for lawyers and judges. But even this is of huge importance for our understanding of the Torah: it enables us to comprehend the atonement, and points forward to the sacrifice of the Cross. The Torah spells out in massive detail that *keeping commandments* can never be enough. There has to be a blood sacrifice to take away sin. Hebrews 10 expounds this aspect of the “ceremonial law”. All this is blatantly spelled out in the Mosaic Torah.

5.c. Torah contains “ethical demands”. There is much which, as you say, is broadly a matter of **moral conduct** for everyday life. Moreover, the point of these commands and guidelines is to bring happiness: *“And now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God ask of you but to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to observe the LORD’s commands and decrees that I am giving you today for your own good?”* (DEUTERONOMY 10.12-13) Or as Paul says, *“the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good.”* (ROMANS 7.12)

5.d. Torah contains “narrative”. But even that positive reassessment of the Torah misses a very obvious but vital point: the Torah contains **far more narrative than statute**. For instance, it tells us that God took the initiative in saving the Israelites: *only then* did they believe and worship (EXODUS 4.30-31); he rescued and redeemed them, and *only then* were they given the Torah as a way of life. We shouldn’t narrow down the meaning of “the Law” to exclude the very things it contains which resonate most closely with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. It’s the Exodus narrative that precludes a “law-righteousness” understanding of the commandments.

5.e. Torah contains the older covenants. The Noahic and Abrahamic Covenants are, of course, part of the Torah: ditch “the Law”, and you have to ditch them. Likewise it is Deuteronomy (18.15) that instructed the Israelites to look forward to a Prophet like Moses: the implication was that this Moses-like Prophet might bring in a new “Law” and a new Covenant. This prophecy (about Christ) also is “Torah”.

5.f. Torah expresses the character of God. Perhaps the most fundamental statement we can make about the Torah is that it expresses the mind and character of God. Leviticus 19 contains an astonishing assortment of rules and regulations, but the repeated refrain is *“I am the LORD.”* Compare *“I am the LORD who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.”* (LEVITICUS 11.45) God claims the Torah is an expression of his love and all of a piece with the covenant promises made to the patriarchs: *“Because you hearken to these ordinances, and keep and do them, the LORD your God will keep with you the covenant and the steadfast love which he swore to your fathers to keep.”* (DEUTERONOMY 7.12) We should obey, because the Torah reveals the values, the love and the nature of God himself.

Apart from anything else, this makes me hesitate about your assertion that “any moral principles we find” [in the Law] “will be God’s principles.” The whole Torah is God’s principles.

Now of course, all this still leaves a great deal of work to be done. There are certain sections of the Torah which seem at best bewildering, and at worst abhorrent, to us as Gentile Christians. It would be foolish to deny this, and it’s uncomfortable to claim that such passages are beneficial and express the mind of God. Many problems remain, though it has to be said that they are *relatively few*.

And whatever the solutions, it is important to understand Torah as more than “law”. If it were simply “legal covenant obligations”, it would be very easy, and quite right, to dismiss

“the Law” as largely irrelevant to modern Christians. But that is to misrepresent what the Torah actually is.

6. Torah as a system of “legalism” and “works-righteousness”?

Human nature being what it is, we instinctively want to do deals with God: and that instinct easily turns the Torah, or indeed the moral teaching of Christ and the Apostles, into a “works-righteousness” religion. Pharisaism is alive and well in Christian circles, and “doing-your-best-within-reason” is the theological position expressed to me by several people in Holy Trinity, Cannes! They are, of course, wrong, and I know you agree with me. But the problem isn’t primarily with the Torah — or indeed with the ethical teaching of the New Testament. It’s a misunderstanding of both. And this misunderstanding is sadly to be expected if we detach the “laws” or “pointers” from the salvation story in which they are found.

Many read the Sermon on the Mount, for example, as a “boy-scout religion”, utterly detached from the Cross. “Try to behave like this, and hopefully God will accept you.” We need the narrative of redemption to interpret its ethical demands appropriately.

In the case of the Gospel *and* the Mosaic covenants, the ethical requirements are **guidelines for redeemed people to live by ... not means by which to attain redemption.**

It was along these lines that the conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees, and Paul and the Judaizers, arose. If we fail to understand the theological battles the New Testament writers were fighting, we will misinterpret their “problem” with the “Law” or with “the Old Covenant.”

7. Jesus and the Law

When Jesus clashes with the scribes, Pharisees and Sadducees, he *never* contradicts the Torah (even when pushed to do so with the woman caught in adultery).

But he frequently chides the religious teachers precisely because *they* contradict the Torah, and fail to read, understand or practise the Old Testament. “*Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law.*” (JOHN 7.19)

Jesus insists that he *didn’t* come to overturn “the Law”. Jesus overthrows *a distortion* of the Torah, but not the Torah itself.

So in Mark 7, he rejects the rule about hand-washing on two counts: (a) it’s tradition and *not* Torah – Jesus insists that the Torah is indeed *the commandment of God*; (b) such connection as the rule has with the Torah is wrenched out of context (ritual washing was for priests about to offer sacrifices) – so the tradition distorted the *intention* of the Torah.

It’s their *interpretation* which is faulty, not the Torah itself:

“*Woe to you experts in the law, because you have taken away the key to knowledge.*” (LUKE 11.52)

The missing key to understanding the law is of course grace, faith and the atonement.

Jesus quotes the Pentateuch 29 times in Matthew’s Gospel alone, and stresses its importance.

“*Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.*” (MATTHEW 5.17)

“*whoever disobeys even the least important of the commandments and teaches others to do the same, will be least in the Kingdom of heaven.*” (MATTHEW 5.19)

“*The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses’ seat. So you must obey them and do everything they tell you...*” (MATTHEW 23.2-3)

“*You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!*” (MARK 7.9)

"It is easier for heaven and earth to disappear than for the least stroke of a pen to drop out of the Law." (LUKE 16.17)

"beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself." (LUKE 24.27)

It's impossible to understand Jesus' mission rightly without the Torah.

So we cannot be satisfied with an interpretive theory (or tradition) that dismisses Jesus' own sayings about the Torah.

8. Paul and the Law

8.a. The "Law" is good and compatible with the Gospel. Likewise, in the Apostle Paul's conflicts with the Judaizers, his appearances before the Sanhedrin and in Romans and Galatians, he repeatedly insists that what he teaches is in perfect accord with the Old Testament and the "Torah". Here's a brief selection:

"I believe everything that agrees with the Law and that is written in the Prophets." (ACTS 24.14)

"I have done nothing wrong against the law of the Jews..." (ACTS 25.8)

Paul *"tried to convince them about Jesus from the Law of Moses and from the Prophets."* (ACTS 28.23)

"Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." (ROMANS 3.31)

"in my inner being I delight in God's law" (ROMANS 7.22)

"Is the law, therefore, opposed to the promises of God? Absolutely not!" (GALATIANS 3.21)

And crucially: *"We know that the law is good if one uses it properly."* (1 TIMOTHY 1.8)

8.b The "Law" is useless as a means of justification. So how should we "use the law properly"?

Paul's argument is that the legalistic Judaizers are misapplying the Torah, as if it were **a means of justification**. As is well-known, he rejects such a view.

For example, *"a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ. So we, too, have put our faith in Christ Jesus that we may be justified by faith in Christ and not by observing the law, because by observing the law no one will be justified."* (GALATIANS 2.16)

Here he mirrors Jesus' conflicts with the scribes, etc.

Rather, we are saved by grace, through faith because of the cross.

"I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!" (GALATIANS 2.21)

As a means of legalistic righteousness, the Law is indeed useless.

8.c. The "Law" is essential to a correct understanding of the Gospel. But "works righteousness" is not how we should "properly" understand the Law. In fact, if only the Judaizers had the eyes to see it, they would have to agree that the Torah is full of the message of grace through faith, made available through sacrifice.

The fact that Paul so often cites the Old Testament (and especially the Torah) to explain the Gospel must make us reassess a negative reading of the Old Covenants. Rather, he insists that in the Old Testament, Jews *"have been entrusted with the very word of God."* (ROMANS 3.2) Like Jesus on Easter evening, Paul proves — from the Torah — that Jesus is the Christ, and that the Gospel is the correct successor and interpreter of the Old Testament covenants.

9. Acts, Hebrews, James and the Law

Like Jesus, Stephen clashed with the Jewish authorities because they didn't take the law seriously: *"you ... have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it."* (ACTS 7.53)

The early church in Jerusalem insisted: *"You see, brother, how many thousands of Jews have*

believed, and all of them are zealous for the law." (ACTS 21.20) We may feel rather uneasy about this, but Luke doesn't suggest that Paul argued with them on this point; he didn't express a view that the Jewish Christians were wrong to be zealous for the Law. Rather he complied with the request of the Jerusalem Church.

The writer to the Hebrews is arguing a rather different point from Paul (more about *priesthood* than *justification*). But Hebrews insists that Christ, his message and his Church are the true successors of the old Covenant.

Echoing the sort of things his half-brother Jesus used to say, James states, "*Anyone who speaks against his brother or judges him speaks against the law and judges it. When you judge the law, you are not keeping it, but sitting in judgment on it.*" (JAMES 4.11) James plainly sees practical love and grace as the key to the law, but that is why he wants his readers to keep the law.

10. The relationship between the New Covenant and the Old

10.1. A complex relationship. You refer to a comment by John Wesley about the difficulties in getting the relationship between the Testaments right: "*few subjects were as little understood.*" I don't know where the quote comes from, but since he was an Arminian it might be interesting to see where he's leading with it! He didn't believe that salvation under the new Covenant was irrevocable in the lives of individual believers.

But he's surely right in saying that the relationship between the Testaments is very tricky, and hard to get right. I certainly wouldn't claim to have got it taped. You will rightly want to add other scriptures and considerations which I haven't included in this (relatively) brief summary.

But we mustn't allow a neat theory to ride rough-shod over what Jesus and Paul actually say. **Their** argument is NEVER with the Torah, but with a legalistic abuse of it.

10.2. The New Covenant doesn't mean disregard for the Torah. When Jeremiah and Ezekiel (and Joel) long for a new covenant, they look forward to the **changed heart** and the broad application of the Torah. This merely expresses God's position already made explicit in the Mosaic deposit: "*Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!*" (DEUTERONOMY 5.29)

The later prophets don't imagine *new* commands, but the inner strength to obey existing ones. They promise a new covenant, but never a replacement for the Torah.

"When his people could not rise to the height of his standards, the Lord does not lower his standards to match their abilities; he transforms his people. This is the meaning of 'my law within them', written on their heart (JEREMIAH 31.33)." (J A Motyer, *Look to the Rock* p.59)

10.3. The New Covenant enables the aspirations of the Old. Spiritual life under the new covenant will no longer be an external obligation but an inner conviction; no longer the domain of the professional few, but the experience of all; no longer an obsession with ritual matters, but of ethical behaviour and personal relationship with God. Most of that was the expressed ideal of the Torah anyway, but in practice it was desperately lacking in much Israelite religion.

10.4. Saving faith was perfectly possible under the Old Covenant. But as the writer to the Hebrews insists, countless saints of the Old Testament did indeed have saving faith, and they show us the correct way of relating to God. Nearly everyone in the list of faithful saints in Hebrews 11 was operating under the Mosaic covenant.

The teaching, death and resurrection of Christ, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, made it a whole lot clearer how we are supposed to relate to God. But this is only what we were *always* intended to do and experience under the Old Covenant ... as countless Old Testament saints *did*.

12. Prioritising the commandments: sifting of the moral from the cultic, etc

You flag up the problems of “attempting to distinguish between moral, ceremonial and civil sections of the Law”. This does indeed pose a serious problem.

12.1. We need to be aware of the dangers of inconsistency. Jesus’ “second commandment” comes from Leviticus 19.17, which is immediately followed by the prohibition on clothing made of mixed fabrics. Why does one command apply, whilst Christians happily disregard the other? Or staying in Leviticus, if conservative Christians insist that gay sex is *detestable* (18.22), why do we allow ourselves to eat shellfish (also *detestable* according to 11.12)?

There are no simple answers, but I think we have to have a better solution than attempting to distinguish between “bilateral covenants” and “unilateral” ones. Apart from anything else, this presents the gay lobby with a huge gift: they will gladly agree that the moral laws in “bilateral” Leviticus no longer apply.

Ironically, this “two-types-of-covenant” approach seems to be another version of the sort of “sifting” you wanted to avoid. It keeps or rejects Old Testament Scriptures according to how they fit in with a “contingent”/“permanent” grid.

12.2. The Old Testament itself maintains a hierarchy of laws or values. We’ve already noted that the Torah views ‘circumcision of the heart’ as more important than physical circumcision. The laboured instructions about cities of refuge, which come up on numerous occasions in the Torah, stress that mercy is a higher good than retribution.

Likewise, the Old Testament repeatedly asserts that God requires mercy rather than sacrifice. The one is more important than the other. For example:

“Bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.” (ISAIAH 1.13)

“I want your constant love, not your animal sacrifices. I would rather have my people know me than burn offerings to me.” (HOSEA 6.6 GNB)

All the laws mattered, but the ceremonial ones mattered less than the moral or spiritual ones. There’s substantial evidence that the Israelites saw things this way, especially in the prophets, but also in the Torah, the psalms and in wisdom literature:

“The LORD detests the sacrifice of the wicked, but the prayer of the upright pleases him.”
(PROVERBS 15.8)

One of the major themes in Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel is that the ritual worship of the Solomonic temple will be superseded. Some things will continue to matter, but the ritual of temple-worship (and a failing priesthood) will come to an end. The experience of Exile taught the Jews that genuine faith survives without temple ritual.

Unlike the *moral* requirements of the Torah, the *ritual* ones are often said to be expendable.

12.3. Jesus separates lesser and weightier laws. Christ makes distinctions between the details and “the weightier matters of the Law”, which he identifies as “*justice, mercy and faithfulness.*” (MATTHEW 23.23). Jesus is quite happy to pick out two great commandments which are more important than others.

When challenged with an obsessive and petty application of the Sabbath law (MARK 2.23-28), Jesus counters by asserting (a) what the Torah actually says, and (b) the underlying purpose

of the Sabbath laws (God's grace, not human legalism).

In his clashes over *ritual* cleanness, he insists that *moral* purity is far more important.

In the "antitheses" in Matthew 5, Jesus homes in on "ethical" and "devotional" laws, ignoring "cultic" and "ethnic" ones. And he stresses how the *moral principles* beneath these laws need to be stressed above – and taken further than – the actual wording. Of course, some of the traditional sayings weren't in the Torah anyway, but some were.

In each of these cases, Jesus appeals to *underlying principles* of grace and mercy, which trump "the letter of the law".

So to say that "there is absolutely no evidence that the Jews saw things this way", is to neglect much Old Testament teaching, and to overlook one rather important Jew, Jesus himself. And it wasn't just him.

12.3. So does Paul. The distinction between "*the letter of the law*" and "*the spirit of the law*" of course derives from Paul (2 CORINTHIANS 3.6). Paul insists that *the spirit of the Torah* is still incumbent upon us.

In other words he is sifting through the Torah to establish what *does* apply from what *doesn't*.

12.4. The "Council of Jerusalem" sets aside some laws, but retains others. In Acts 15 the so-called "Council of Jerusalem" does a similar thing. It insists that Gentile converts should obey *religious and moral aspects of the law* (to do with *idolatry* and *sexual immorality*), whilst *not* requiring *circumcision*.

The rationale isn't given, but I think it is fair to say that circumcision is a matter of Hebrew national identity, and therefore not transferable to Gentile believers. In Acts 21.21 the Jerusalem Christians wish to scotch the rumour that Paul teaches "*all the Jews who live among the Gentiles to turn away from Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children or live according to our customs.*" We should assume that the rumour was false, and that Paul *didn't* tell Christian Jews to abandon circumcision or national customs.

However that may be, the "Council of Jerusalem" *did* make "Mosaic" requirements of the Gentile converts (such as the prohibition of strangled meat and "blood"). Personally I find those stipulations hard to reconcile with the Gospel, but there they are, and we can't ignore them.

It's simply wrong to state that the Council gave its guidance independently of the Mosaic law. Why else would they have come up with Mosaic requirements? It's the *Abrahamic* ones that they were more willing to ditch.

12.5 Hebrews writes off some parts of the Torah, but keeps others. The writer to the Hebrews also filters out the ritual requirements of the Mosaic sacrificial system from its moral requirements and theological insights. He goes so far as to call the "first" covenant *obsolete* (8.13).

Of course this needs careful unpacking: what is "*the first covenant*"? The one with Noah, for instance? Was there no covenant with Adam and Eve??

One way round the problem is to assume the "first covenant" is the Torah as a whole (as elsewhere in the New Testament). But this is unlikely to be the intention of the writer to the Hebrews. He doesn't specify, but you would probably agree that he means something more specific still: for example, the Mosaic Covenant rather than other parts of the Torah. But even that may not narrow it down enough: from the context, he may well mean the sacrificial and priestly system rather than, say, the moral or devotional parts of the Mosaic Covenant.

The writer bases his doctrine of the spiritual "sabbath-rest" on GENESIS 2.2 (HEBREWS 4.4); he bases his concept of the heavenly tabernacle (8.5) on the Sinaitic covenant (EXODUS 25.40); the teaching on God's vengeance and judgment (10.30) on Deuteronomy, as with the command to

Christians to worship God with awe (12.28-29); his command against loving money (13.5) derives from DEUTERONOMY 31. These arguments would fall flat if the Pentateuch has been rendered obsolete for the Christian: they depend on the authority and validity of the Torah. So while Hebrews insists that the Levitical priestly system is now obsolete, the moral demands and theological teaching of the Torah are still basic for Christians. The Letter to the Hebrews would make no sense at all if the Torah as a whole were now obsolete. Again, there is clear evidence of filtering between the ceremonial parts of the Torah and the moral and spiritual parts.

12.6. James distinguishes between different aspects of the “law.” The Epistle of James has a rather ambivalent attitude to the “law”, saying that breaches of moral behaviour (failure to love our neighbour, or breaking the 10 commandments) make a Christian a “law-breaker” (JAMES 2.8-11). This is certainly of interest for the current discussion. But even James follows this up by insisting that “*mercy triumphs over judgment*” (2.13). In other words, some aspects of the “Law” matter more than others.

12.7. The Book of Revelation maintains both continuity and discontinuity with the Law. The Apocalypse is emphatic that being Jewish may do no more than land you in the *synagogue of Satan* (3.9), and insists that salvation can only be earned by the Lamb who was worthy, etc. The clear implication is that *his sacrifice was sufficient*, while the old levitical system was deficient. We no longer need the old rituals and ceremonial laws. Nevertheless, the book promises blessings on “*those who obey God’s commandments and hold to the testimony of Jesus*” (12.17; 14.12) This indicates that Christians should obey the **commandments** (presumably a reference to the Torah), though it doesn’t say clearly what is in view. It certainly isn’t advocating an antinomian position; and given the book’s constant reference to the Old Testament, a Marcionite view is inconceivable.

12.8. A Christian view of the Old Testament will therefore espouse a positive approach to the Old Covenants (including the Sinaitic covenant). And this **requires** us to filter out the ritual, ethnic and ceremonial aspects of the Torah, in order to fix upon the devotional and spiritual, the moral requirements, and the underlying principles which still apply to Christians.

A helpful approach is to say that the coming of the “promised Seed” to which the Torah pointed (GALATIANS 3.19), affected every aspect of the Law. But it affected different *types* of law in different ways. Some will be maintained, some will be viewed as having served their purpose but no longer applicable, some will be explored for underlying principles rather than verbal application.

12.9. Why civil and judicial aspects of the Torah can be overruled. You ask why the *civil and judicial aspects* of the Torah should not still apply. I think there are at least two answers to that:

(a) **We are not Jews.** Many of the civil regulations in the Torah (including things like the food laws or the prohibition on mixed-fibre cloths) were intended to mark out the ethnic identity of the Israelite race. If I were a Jewish Christian I would seriously consider observing such regulations (see ACTS 21.21). Since I’m a Gentile Christian, they are of very little direct relevance to me: instead I will seek the *underlying principles*, such as the importance of being observably Christian in my living. This is precariously open to variant opinion and interpretations, of course, but it’s what Jesus taught us to do.

(b) **We do not live in a theocracy.** The temple ritual, and many civil and judicial aspects of the Torah, were necessarily abandoned during the Babylonian exile: they could no longer apply in that geographical and political context. We see the same issues in the New Testament: the temple tax was not levied in sanctuary shekels (EXODUS 30.13), but in Tyrian staters, as those were the closest practical equivalent available in the first century.

Despite the prescriptions of the Torah, the Sanhedrin were unable to carry out the death sentence on Jesus because they were operating under Roman law.

How much more so with us, living 2000 years later in an entirely different society and legal system?

A somewhat analogous situation applies to us at Holy Trinity, as we attempt to follow the *Church Representation Rules* under a legal system which doesn't recognise the CRR, and imposes its own norms upon us.

But once again, if we are in any position to do so, we should encourage our legislators to make laws which maintain the *underlying principles* of the Torah.

12.10. The Thirty-Nine Articles summarise most Reformation thinking on this matter:

VII. *Of the Old Testament.*

THE Old Testament is not contrary to the New; for both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to mankind by Christ, who is the only Mediator between God and man, being both God and man. Wherefore they are not to be heard which feign that the old fathers did look only for transitory promises. Although the law given from God by Moses, as touching ceremonies and rites, do not bind Christian men, nor the civil precepts thereof ought of necessity to be received in any commonwealth; yet, notwithstanding, no Christian man whatsoever is free from the obedience of the commandments which are called moral.

The *Westminster Confession* says much the same thing, but rather less succinctly.

12.11 In some respects, we have to insist on a “blanket” approach to the “Law”.

Admittedly, Article VII is oversimplified: we need more subtlety than this, as Luther saw.

On the one hand, Jesus *maintains* the whole “Law”, every jot and tittle (ethnic and ceremonial, “unilateral” and “bilateral”, etc).

On the other hand, Christians are *dead* to the whole “Law” (ethnic *and* ethical, “unilateral” and “bilateral”, or whatever). We have “died” to the “moral laws”, just as much as to the “ceremonial” ones. In Romans 7, Paul takes as an example the 10th Commandment, on covetousness (a *moral* rather than a *legal* matter): we have “died” to this, too. In Christ we are set free from *all* the “Law” (moral, cultic or cultural) — and have “died” to the deadly stranglehold of a legalistic approach to justification, in *whatever category* of “law”. The writer to the Hebrews would add that we are also perfectly fine without any continuing priesthood and sacrificial system. That's all over now.

The coming of Christ doesn't merely affect a few bits of the Torah: every aspect of the Old Covenant is affected in some way or another.

So Paul insists that we are now dead to the whole “Law”.

But we have to see this in the context of Paul's controversy over justification (and Hebrews' presumed contention with ritual Judaizers). The stipulations of law and old covenants no longer *define* our relationship with God, and obeying them could never *earn* it. They are irrelevant to our justification.

But as Paul constantly insists, that *doesn't* mean that Christians are free to disobey the Law. He repeatedly denies that this was what he taught, and we should take his denials seriously. Rather, the coming of Christ (into the world, into our lives) transforms *how* the Law applies to us. But it means we will also see biblical holiness as “*the law that gives freedom*” — to use James' phrase (2.12).

13. A minefield we have to find a way through.

The sifting of *what does apply* to us from *what doesn't* (and *in what ways*) is of course vulnerable to a great degree of speculation and subjectivity — except where the New

Testament has clearly come down in judgment on some issue (like circumcision, for instance).

But a “unilateral/bilateral covenant” approach requires us to do exactly the same thing.

You are doing this when you say, “Jesus Christ and his certified apostles represent the filter through which the principles behind the law in their unity transmit to Christians under the new covenant – because they illustrate the way in which God wants us to live and they give our basic obligations towards God.”

How do we unearth those “principles”? Only by sifting “the law” through an interpretive grid. Whichever interpretive model we use, we will *have* to engage in filtering between the ritual and the moral, etc. Otherwise we will fall into one of three errors:

- (a) lose interest in the Old Testament except for the parts referenced by Christ and the Apostles (the Marcionite heresy, which you plainly disavow);
- (b) become antinomians, thinking we’re free from all law; or
- (c) submit to a christianized Judaism.

None of these three is an acceptable position for a Christian.

Even if a “unilateral covenantal” approach were valid, it wouldn’t avoid this filtering, so I don’t see how it is more *consistent* than a “one Gospel” approach.

But compared with a “one Gospel” approach, it is seriously *less* consistent in delivering an integrated biblical theology.

Giles