Looking Back on the Torah

# 1. Taking Stock: The Teaching of the Torah as a Whole

1. The one real God is Yahweh. He created the world, almost despaired of it when it went wrong, started over, made promises to Abraham about fulfilling his intention to bless it, started to fulfill those promises, rescued many of Abraham’s descendants from serfdom in Egypt, met with them at Sinai and re-sealed his covenant with them, told them what he expected of them, almost despaired of them when they went wrong, started over, and took them to the edge of the country he had promised to them. Yahweh is holy, which means being overwhelming, but also committed, faithful, and compassionate, yet not someone you can mess with forever.

2. Israel is a people chosen by God for no reason that issues from its own deserve or potential. Yahweh expects it to respond to his deliverance of it from Egypt by living in accordance with instructions he lays down. In its relationship with him, he expects total loyalty, worship in light of the way he has revealed himself, and a practical recognition of his ownership. In its internal relations, he expects mutual commitment and tolerance. Yet Yahweh knows that neither this submission nor this mutual commitment will be forthcoming, and his instructions are realistic about that fact.

# 2. Attitudes to the Torah: Insights from Church History

It has been said that Paul’s attitude to the “law” is the most complex question in his entire theology; Jesus’ attitude to it is also complex. In the early church and in the Reformation period one can also find different attitudes to this question, and see different theologians echoing different aspects of the way the NT speaks. So there is not one answer to the question of the significance of the instruction in the Torah, but different theologians help us see the insight but also the limitation in different views.

1. In the second-century church, Marcion’s emphasis was, “Be critical.” According to people who disagreed with him (his own writings have not survived), he viewed the teaching of Jesus as incompatible with the portrait of God in the OT and the teaching in the Torah. The God of the OT is a being of lower character, wrathful rather than loving. Marcion’s critical stance parallels but it takes further the one we have noted that Jesus takes when he sees the material in the Torah’s instructions as affected by human stubbornness. Unlike Marcion, Jesus does not imply that this material is to be dismissed, so that the danger to put alongside “be critical” is “don’t be dismissive.”
2. In the same century Origen’s emphasis was, “Be imaginative.” The Torah often deals with down-to-earth questions that seem of no significance for Christian readers, so Origen uses his creative imagination to see what the text might say in connection with questions that do concern Christian readers. Within the NT, Paul’s appeal to Deuteronomy 25:4 in 1 Corinthians 9:9 is an example. The danger of Origen’s approach is that of depriving the Torah of the capacity to speak to the concrete questions of everyday life. So alongside “be imaginative” needs to be put “Don’t spiritualize.”
3. From 200 years later, over against Origen one could set John Chrysostom’s emphasis, “Be literal.” His preaching shows a concern to deal with Scripture’s historical meaning. His concern might be compared with the way the Torah surfaces in Acts 15:19-21 (though not that chapters quotation from Amos\*\*). What disciplines or observances are to be required of Gentile believers? The debate is decided by an attempt at a literal exegesis of Genesis and Leviticus. The danger of is to require believers in Jesus to submit to the Torah’s instructions as part of their relationship with God, so that alongside “Be literal” has to be set “Don’t be legalistic.”
4. Reformation voices illustrate an overlapping range of views. Martin Luther in effect says, “Be historical.” The Torah was not addressed to Gentile Christians. It was part of God’s covenant with Israel which has in any case now been succeeded by the new covenant. In the NT, Christ is the law’s end or objective (Rom 10:4): the law’s time is passed. So why should Gentile Christians think of living by it? Luther’s insight is developed by dispensationalism, which in its most systematic form divides human history into seven epochs, innocence (Gen 1 – 2), conscience (Gen 3 – 8), government (Gen 9 – 11), patriarchal rule (Gen 12 – Exod 19), law (Exod 20 – Acts 1), grace (Acts 2 – Rev 20:3), and the millennium (Rev 20:4-6). In relation to such a view, one has to add “Don’t be vague”; if the material in the Torah doesn’t apply now, we are without guidance for many areas of our lives.
5. One might see John Calvin as saying, “Be practical.” Calvin wanted to know how a church should be governed and how a city like Geneva should be run. In the NT, one might note passages where it simply quotes from the Torah’s instructions on the assumption that they apply to the Christian congregation (e.g., Eph 6:1-3). The correlative warning might be, “Don’t compromise” in light of our desire to see what can realistically be said about God’s expectations concerning the world.
6. Menno Simons (the father figure of Mennonites) might urge, “Be bold.” Whereas dispensationalism suggests that the Sermon on the Mount is to apply only in the millennial age and is not expected to apply now, Menno would emphasize the radical way Jesus “fulfills” fills out or fill up the expectations of the Torah (Matt 5:17-20). The correlative warning in relation to this perspective might be, “Don’t be unrealistic.” After one has said that the only possible position one can imagine Jesus taking is pacifism, if one were President of the U.S.A., where does one go next?

# 3. Responses to Questions I Have Been Asked About the Torah

*Should we try to use JEDP to enlighten our understanding of the Torah, and if so how would a Christian go about this?*

\*\*Yes. Two examples would be the way it helps us to see the different significance of the two creation stories, and the different significances of the regulations in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.

*In Paul, does nomos refer to the whole Torah, or to something specific in the Torah, such as Sabbath regulations, food laws, etc.?*

\*\*I think it depends on the context, as is the case with “the Law” for us.

*How do we accept the JEDP while maintaining the authority of Scripture?*

\*\*Why is there a question? Tradition says that God inspired authoritative scripture through Moses; critical theory suggests God inspired it through JEDP…. It’s still God inspiring it.

*Are there other religions that have similar regulations (e.g., observing the Sabbath, the tithe, emphasis on the worship of one God, regulations on what is clean and unclean, etc.), or did Israel have a unique faith with unique regulations and ideals?*

\*\*Weekly sabbath is unique; worship of one God is more or less unique; tithe is similar; clean/unclean is similar. What the Torah does is bring these practices into the context of belief in Yahweh and into relationship with the things Yahweh has done, and thus reinterpret their significance.

*I’d love to hear more about the successive covenants – Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses. To what extent does Dr G feel that the previous covenants have been abrogated? Do the earlier covenants provide a means of being in relationship with God for people who are not Jews or Christians? What does Dr G make of the status of the Mosaic covenant in light of the new covenant? Still in effect for Jews who do not recognize Jesus but are faithful to rabbinic Judaism?*

*How do we understand the various covenants in the OT? How valid is the covenantal system of Reformed theology (covenant of works/grace)? Is there covenantal language between God and Adam (covenant of works) as Reformed theologians assert? Moreover, is the Mosaic covenant a reduplication of the covenant of works made between God and Adam?*

\*\* All humanity is in the form of covenant relationship initiated with Noah, but Genesis doesn’t describe God and Adam as in covenant; I think it implies that you don’t need a covenant until there is sin, and/or that natural relationships or family relationships aren’t based on covenants. Covenant comes in to govern the relationships between peoples who aren’t the same family. The relation between God and the first human beings is not of works, because God has already reached out to them in grace. The Noah covenant was simply an expression of God’s grace but it didn’t establish a personal relationship between God and people. The Abraham covenant is also an expression of God’s grace, but of course it applies only to Abraham’s people. The Mosaic covenant is a renegotiated version of the Abraham covenant, adding works to the covenant on the basis of what God has done for his people. But it is also not a covenant of works, because it depends on the way God has already reached out to the people in grace. So I’d say the structure of relationship between God and Israel corresponds to and reaffirms the structure of the relationship between God and the first human couple. (Referring to the relationship between God and the first human beings as a covenant is okay as long as we recognize that the meaning of the word “covenant” as used in our theology is different from its meaning in scripture—but using words in a different way from the way scripture uses them tends obscure Scripture.)

*What are the implications for the significance of the Torah that Jesus is the “mediator of a better covenant” and that “in speaking of ‘a new covenant’ he has made the first one obsolete” (Hebrews 8:6, 13)?*

\*\*Hebrews 8:10 suggests the major implication in its quotation from Jeremiah 31: Yahweh’s Torah is now inscribed in people’s minds, so that they now obey it, as they did not before. So Hebrews 13 goes on to urge people to do some of the things the Torah says—love one another, show hospitality to strangers, honor marriage and avoid adultery, avoid love of money and be content with what they have, and so on. (Of course the fact that it needs to give such exhortations stands in tension with its statement that Jeremiah’s promise has been fulfilled.)

*If we are not “under the law” as Paul says in Romans and Galatians, in what sense do we fulfill/uphold the law? Shouldn’t Christians look at Christ and his disciples’ teachings (where, of course, there is significant overlap with the Decalogue) for sanctification and holy living, not the Torah?*

\*\*When we do that, don’t we find that Christ and his disciples direct us to the Torah a well as giving their own teaching? Further, there are so many areas that Jesus and his disciples don’t cover. And (e.g.) we would leave people in slavery (as the NT does) rather than releasing them after seven years….

*How does the Pentateuch point to Jesus? In what ways can we use the Torah to enlighten our understanding of Christ?*

\*\*Maybe I should say “Not at all.” What it shows us is how God has acted and how God does act and how we should live in light of what God has done for us in the events that came to a climax with Christ.

*How does the Torah relate to the NT?*

(a) It is the first part of the story that continues in the NT, as Matthew, Luke, and John suggest.

(b) It helps the NT understand who Jesus is (e.g., Gen 22; Passover; sacrifice).

(c) It makes up for the fact that there are lots of matters the NT doesn’t cover, such as God’s involvement with everyday life, with families, with society, and with the nations.

*How is God in the Torah same as God in the NT? Has the understanding of God changed from the OT to NT or has God accommodated?*

\*\*The NT doesn’t think that the understanding of God has changed, does it? See e.g., Hebrews 1:1: the revelation is now embodied in Jesus, but it’s the same revelation.

*I find it illuminating to see God as a God of love and compassion in the OT, rather than the God of wrath that He has always been depicted as. However, now having seen the God of compassion in the Pentateuch, it’s difficult for me to put it together with the NT and the significance of the gospel or the cross. In Hebrews 12:18-24, it seems to suggest that we can now approach God differently in the new covenant. If God is not the God of wrath in the OT as opposed to the God of love in the NT, then what is the difference between pre-Christ and post-Christ times?*

\*\*The one new thing in the NT is that Jesus’ death and resurrection means there is to be resurrection and eternal life instead of just boring Sheol. Isn’t that the idea in Hebrews 12?

*My in-laws keep hounding me about the need to preach against “replacement theology” – what’s that?*

\*\*I like your in-laws. It is the idea that the church has replaced Israel as God’s people, that it is the new Israel. Rather, God made a commitment to Israel that God is still committed to, as Romans 9 – 11 suggests. It means that one day the Jewish people will come to recognize Jesus. The NT doesn’t describe the church as the new Israel. You could say that the Jewish-Gentile church is a reconstituted version of Israel.

*How much of the Torah is human ideas rather than God’s inspiration?*

\*\*As far as I can see, Jesus sees the whole of it as having divine authority, but I don’t like the antithesis. It may all be human ideas, too. And Jesus makes clear that it includes ideas of God that make allowance for human willfulness.

*In my tradition, the church is dogmatic about the tithe going to the church and not elsewhere. Obviously they use scripture to support their position as well. Also, it’s stated in the membership covenant (so basically, you can’t be a member of the church if you don’t tithe to the church). Moreover, I’ve seen a person removed from leadership because that person did not tithe to the church. Your suggestion that we need to rethink what God wants to do through tithing today both resonates within me and creates an uneasy tension (obedience to God; obedience to leadership; both positions seem valid).*

\*\*What scriptural text do they use to support the view that the tithe should go to your church and not elsewhere? And to support the view that we should obey church leaders? (Sounds abusive to me.) But in any church, there are things that are unscriptural. You have to decide what you can live with.

*If God were God of Love to Israel, why do we need Jesus?*

(a) We aren’t Israel (at least, most of us aren’t). (b) John 1:17 suggests that God didn’t manage actually to get love through to Israel. (c) Hebrews 1:1 suggests that Jesus is the most coherent embodiment or expression of that love.

*How do we reconcile the Pentateuch and its statutes with the NT freedoms? Should it be reconciled?*

\*\*Well, the NT expects us to live as God’s slaves, so I don’t think it’s so different…

*Is the Pentateuch meant to be a history book?*

\*\*It’s history in the sense that it’s referring to things that happened, but we have to avoid expecting it to be the kind of history that people have tried to write since the nineteenth century. In other cultures such history can include all sorts of other things.

*Is God's purpose in providing such detailed laws to reveal that keeping the law is not possible without him in us, thus setting the stage for Jesus as the final sacrificial lamb? It seems that the intricacy of the laws, and the severity of consequence for breaking them, would naturally lead to legalism. If legalism falls short of God's intention behind the law, what is His overarching intention and how was providing the law the best means to that end?*

\*\*I don’t think the Pentateuch says that the purpose of the law is to reveal that keeping it is impossible. The detailed laws aren’t so difficult to keep. It’s the big ones that are difficult (e.g., the first four commandments). The purpose of the law was to tell Israel what obedience looks like, the same as the Sermon on the Mount.

*What do the laws have to teach us?*

\*\*Some thoughts that occur to me are

1. The importance of the law protecting the weak (without being unrealistic)
2. The need of a safety net for people to get into an economic mess
3. Worship is offered to glorify God and to commemorate God’s great acts not just to make us feel good
4. It involves great festivals/pilgrimage/holiday events not just an hour one morning

*I can’t find a pattern ­I can synthesize so as to say that Exodus’s teachings are such-and-such whereas the ones in Leviticus are such-and-such. They seem to move back and forth between themes.*

\*\*No, there isn't a difference between them of that kind; they do repeat themes. It's one of the indications that they are originally separate collections of teaching. It's a bit like there being four gospels going over the same material, but taking different angles. So Exodus 20—24 is simple and unadorned, like Mark. Leviticus focuses more at looking at things from a priestly angle and stresses holiness. Deuteronomy is almost the opposite—it looks at things from a more everyday perspective. As with the gospels, this will reflect different authors and different audiences (before the material was included in the Torah), though it's a matter of speculation who the authors and audiences were. I find it illuminating to look at the way the different books look at particular issues (e.g., servants or worship).

*Is there somewhere a resource that lays out all the laws on different subjects in parallel?*

\*\*Calvin’s *Commentaries on the Last Four Books of Moses* treats them in that way.

*We like to talk about "individual relationships with God," but the Torah does not talk about that as much as Evangelicals do. How do we conceptualize an individual's relationship to God according to the Torah's consistent reference to communities/chosen people or individuals?*

\*\*Maybe the Torah is the wrong place to look. The Psalms and Proverbs give us more of an idea. We have to let the Torah teach us to think more corporately.

*Does the Torah assume that all Israelites were forever under the covenant? What of those who broke it and suffered God’s wrath (the rebels in Numbers, for example)? What was their ultimate fate? What does the Pentateuch believe about the eternal destiny of God’s people? What role does eschatology or “salvation” play in the Torah?*

*\*\**When people died, they went to be with their family in Sheol, where it was one long doze. Jesus then went to Sheol to tell them about his death and coming resurrection. We don’t know the ultimate fate of individual Israelites, as we do not know the ultimate fate of anyone. If they were people who put their trust in God, they will be with God forever and will have part in the resurrection.