

courtesy of God's Images

The Majesty of the Law

Melodie Moench Charles

Many Christians today, Latter-day Saint Christians included, are quite content to know almost nothing about the Law in the Old Testament. Vague memories of "thou shalt not's" and nit-picky regulations make the whole law appear to be excessively restrictive and even silly. We think it is sufficient to know that Jesus fulfilled it, focusing our attention on the new gospel that he taught.

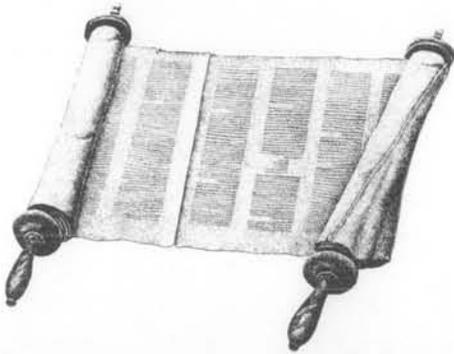
We adopted some of these negative ideas about the Law from the New Testament. When Paul said in his letter to the Romans that the Law brought knowledge of sin (3:20), revived sin (7:8-9), and increased sin (5:20), he made the Law seem worthless and even hazardous to spiritual health. When Jesus condemned the scribes, lawyers, and Pharisees, he seemed to be saying that the Law that they zealously fulfilled was superficial. Because of it they concerned themselves with clean utensils rather than clean thoughts (Luke 11:40), and with what they ate rather than what came from their hearts (Matt. 15:11, 17-20). He appeared to be saying that the Law was not a very good way for people to regulate their lives.

However, the Christian should realize that Jesus and Paul were not commenting on the Old Testament Law so much as on the Law as it was interpreted and distorted by

Jews of their time. The Law, seen in its own context, can yield some surprisingly valuable information about what God has always wanted his people to do. It bears close examination because it originated with God, and in many ways is still vital today.

The Law was important to the Israelites because it was a part of their relationship with God. In the book of Exodus, God offered to enter into a special relationship with the Israelites, promising them that they would be *his* people if they would obey him. The people remembered that God had just miraculously delivered them from bondage in Egypt, and without even knowing what commands God wanted them to obey, "all the people answered together, and said, All that the Lord has spoken we will do" (Ex. 19:8). This covenant between God and Israel formed the basis of Israelite society; in return for special consideration from God, Israel would act as God wanted her to, following his law, or better his "teaching."¹ The Law, or God's teaching in the Old Testament, included codes and rules, but these were in a context of a theology which gave these rules meaning.

There are two important aspects of the Law, the ritual and the ethical. The first prescribed the rules for Israel's worship. Because these were easier to obey, ritual laws



We think it is sufficient to know that Jesus fulfilled the Law, focusing our attention on the new gospel that he taught.

gradually received a disproportionate amount of attention. This distorted situation apparently prevailed in the time of Jesus. However, the ritual law in proper perspective served a number of very important functions if the worshiper looked behind the motions and found their intent.

If the significance of the rituals went no further than their outward signs, these rituals would be as meaningless as Jesus told the Pharisees they were. But they were not meaningless to the ancient Israelites, nor to that branch of the house of Israel that were Nephites, who were also expected to obey the ritual law.² While modern readers of the instructions of sacrifice in Leviticus might find little to uplift the soul, the Israelites would have found there a way to make atonement for their sins and to re-establish their good standing, their covenant relationship with the Lord. Each feast or fast commemorated specific acts of God in nature or in history, and observing them would have reminded the Israelites of what God had done, giving them an opportunity to thank the Lord. Their obedience to the ritual demands of the Law would have set them apart from others as being different, as God's special people whose pattern for worship was created by God himself.³ There was meaning behind each ritual demand, though the significance of some laws still eludes modern readers.

These Israelites, who realized that by performing their ritual they kept their covenant with God alive, would not have found the ritual law burdensome. Similarly, Latter-day Saints can see the ritual of paying tithing, which is comparable to the law of sacrifice, as a privilege, a way to acknowledge that all they have comes from God who asks very little in return. The rituals of the sacrament and baptism give us the opportunity to ask and receive forgiveness for our sins, just as the sin, guilt, and atonement offerings provided the Israelites with such occasions.⁴ Like obedience to the dietary restrictions of the Old Testament Law, ritual obedience to our Word of Wisdom distinguishes us from other people, giving us a way to demonstrate our loyalty to the group and to God.

Ethical commands accompanied these ritual stipulations in the Law. The Ten Commandments made it clear that the Israelites owed their loyalty to God, who would hold them responsible for what they did. God warned that if they exploited people less fortunate than themselves, he would punish them for their ruthlessness (Ex. 22:23, 24, 27). Each person would be held accountable for whatever sins he had personally committed; the blame was not to be shifted to another (Deut. 24:16).

One of the most famous Old Testament scriptures, which to many people sums up the Law, has been mis-

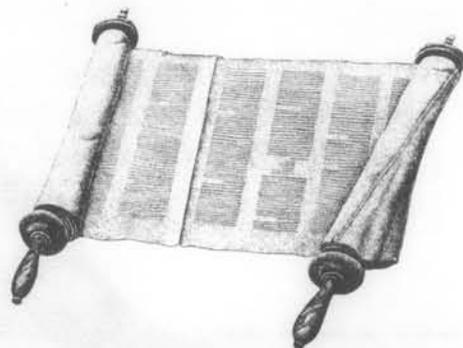
understood for centuries. It is often assumed that "an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth"⁵ was proof that the Law was harsh and merciless. The opposite is true. Rather than stipulating that a harmful action *had* to be followed by an equally harmful action, it insured that punishment could not be greater than the crime committed. This law was similar to laws in Hammurabi's code but surpassed them by its democratic spirit. In the Old Testament Law, unlike Hammurabi's Code, a slave's eye was as valuable as a noble's eye. Extent of retaliation was not determined by the social status of the injured; all were equal before this law.⁶ This law was far more just than some laws in force much later in Christian countries.⁷ Here the injured was not required to inflict the maximum punishment but was prevented from taking vengeance out of proportion to the injury inflicted upon him.⁸

Israelites had a duty to act responsibly toward other people, to watch out for the interests of those unable to take care of themselves. Very practical requirements bound people whose wealth would otherwise have given them power. A creditor was forbidden to keep a debtor's coat overnight if the debtor was so poor that the coat was all he had in which to keep warm (Ex. 22:26-27; Deut. 24:12). An employer was to pay a laborer at the end of the working day rather than force him to wait for what he earned (Lev. 19:13). A creditor could not take as a pledge the machines by which a man made his living (Deut. 24:12). The responsibility to be fair was not limited to those requirements outlined in the Law; they were only specific examples for a general pattern of living charitably.

God commanded that Israelites treat foreigners (sojourners, strangers) in their land well; the foreigner was not to be taken advantage of, nor oppressed (Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:33). The same laws were to apply to the foreigner as to the native (Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:15-16). The Israelite was even directed to *love* the foreigner (Lev. 19:34). When God commanded these things he reminded the Israelites that they had been a foreign minority in the land of Egypt and knew the pain of being oppressed.⁹

The farmer was directed not to reap all of his harvest but to leave some of it for the poor to glean (Deut. 24:20-21). Israelites were to insure that widows, orphans, and the fatherless, having no one to defend or protect them, were treated justly, and not exploited or afflicted (Ex. 22:22-23; Deut. 27:19). These laws protected the unfortunate and demanded that the Israelite act so that no one was hurt by his actions. But the Law went even further and decreed that the Israelite had to extend help when it was needed. If an Israelite became too poor to support himself, his brother was to support him, charg-

The injured was not required to inflict maximum punishment but was prevented from taking vengeance out of proportion to the injury inflicted.



ing him no interest and making no profit on anything sold to him (Ex. 23:25; Lev. 25:35-38).

The profusion of ethical directives in the Law established a standard of generous, charitable behavior as the expected life style. Job's friend Elipaz told Job that his suffering was deserved because he had abused the defenseless (Job 22:5-9). Job later defended himself against his friends' attacks asserting his guiltlessness and his righteousness: "I delivered the poor that cried and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him. The blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon me: and I caused the widow's heart to sing for joy" (Job 29:12-13).

As seen in the messages of the prophets, this kind of behavior was expected as a necessary aspect of obedience to God. Isaiah reminded Israelites of their responsibility, encouraging them to "cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression, defend the fatherless, plead for the widow."¹⁰ Clearly righteousness was measured by living the ethical law and particularly by treating the down trodden well.

Many of the prophets delivering the word of God emphasized this message by contrasting obedience to the ritual law with obedience to the ethical law. Amos delivered a sobering threat to those who mechanically obeyed the ritual law, all the while scheming to "buy the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of shoes" (Amos 8:4-10). Certainly this people's avarice perverted their observance of the law and made their worship valueless.

Again through Amos, God gave his most vehement condemnation of those who misused the Law, in this case those trying to manipulate God: "I hate, I despise your feast days. Though ye offer me burnt offerings and your meat offerings, I will not accept them: neither will I regard the peace offerings of your fat beasts. Take thou away from me the noise of thy songs; for I will not hear the melody of thy viols. But let judgment run down as waters, and righteousness as a mighty stream" (Amos 5:21-24).¹¹

In both of these examples, perversions of the law were condemned. Misinterpretation which was not malicious, but only unwitting, could not go uncorrected; if people did not understand that the purpose of the ritual law was to aid them in understanding God and in cementing their relationship with him, they too had to be taught. God's correction through Hosea said, "I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings" (Hosea 6:6). The offering of sacrifices was not an end in itself but was supposed to teach something far more significant than mere mechanical action.

The prophets taught that obedience to ritual law alone would not be acceptable to God. It had to be accompanied by ethical behavior to have value. Their message is not obsolete. Compliance with the rituals of our religion cannot bring us salvation if ethical behavior is lacking. No amount of temple attendance, fasting, or paying the ward budget will secure our place in the celestial kingdom if we haven't helped our neighbor who needed us. Micah's beautiful message should govern our actions still: "Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, or with ten-thousands of rivers of oil? . . . He hath shewed thee, O man, what is good; and *what doth the Lord require of thee but to do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with thy God?*" (Micah 6:7-8 italics added.)

Micah's statement advocates behavior that today would be labeled "Christian." Most of Jesus' teachings emphasized ethical action, and very few of these ethical ideas were new. Many of them had their basis in the Old Testament Law. His coming, which fulfilled the law, did not invalidate all of Old Testament Law; he himself observed some of the Old Testament ritual, such as the passover, and he encouraged others to join him in his observance.

But while supporting the ritual law, Jesus taught that the ethical element of the law was more important: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe . . . and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others." (Matt. 23:23 Revised Standard Version)

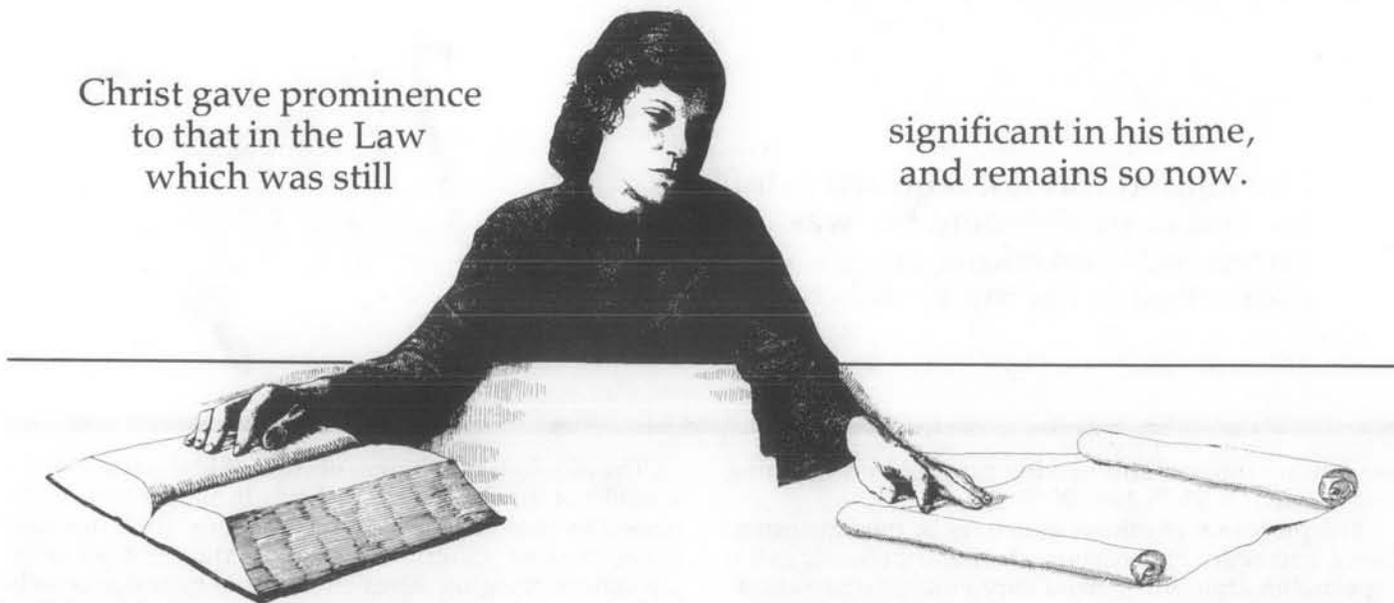
He taught the ethical law of the Old Testament which eventually came to be associated with Christianity rather than with Judaism. He did not negate any of the Ten Commandments for his contemporary followers or for us today; instead, his teachings explained them in new ways. For example, his admonition to not lust after a woman (Matt. 5:27) elaborated on the tenth commandment to not covet someone else's wife. The original law and Jesus' explanation of it dealt with attitude, not just with action.

The Good Samaritan parable of Jesus (Luke 10:29-36) seemed to sum up his "Christian" or ethical teachings. It made the point that the neighbor who deserved help was the person who needed it. He made no allowance for rank, family ties, wealth, or natural inclination or repugnance. According to this the Christian was responsible to care for anyone who needed care.

But so as the ancient Israelite. The commandments to take home the stray animal of *an enemy* and to help the struggling animal of *someone who hated you*¹² taught the Israelite that he had to give help when help was needed,

Christ gave prominence
to that in the Law
which was still

significant in his time,
and remains so now.



Courtesy: God's Images

not when it was convenient or consistent with emotional biases. These laws deserve to be applied as broadly as the parable of The Good Samaritan; each gives a specific example of a general pattern of action. These Old Testament laws and Jesus' parable teach the same lesson—that the person who obeys God treats other people as they need to be treated. This is a step beyond treating people fairly. It was no less the duty of the Israelite than the Christian to walk the second mile.

When Jesus was asked what were the greatest commandments of the Law (Matt. 22:36-40), he didn't say that the Law wasn't important anymore, or that he was teaching commandments greater than any laws known previously. Rather, he separated out the two Old Testament laws he felt were most essential and elevated them above the rest. The first he got from Deuteronomy 6:5, "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart and with all thy soul and with all thy might." The second originated in Leviticus 19:18, "thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Jesus affirmed rather than improved these two fundamental laws.

"Essentially . . . what Jesus taught was the ethics of the Old Testament, with some shift of emphasis, but with no change of substance."¹³ Jesus used his and his listeners' religious tradition; he built on a foundation of Judaism. He created part of his new gospel by refocusing commonly known material and de-emphasizing laws which had lost their usefulness or had been carried to extremes. He gave prominence to that in the Law which was still significant in his time, and remains so now.

The prevalence of Old Testament thought in the New Testament teachings does not reduce the worth of New Testament teachings but rather proves their worth and shows that God has always required certain behavior from his people. God's ritual expectations for us are not the same as those outlined for the ancient Israelites; they have changed with our knowledge and our needs. However, we Latter-day Saints, like our distant ancestors, must understand the purpose behind our religious rituals if they are to benefit us and if we hope to please God by obedience to them.

By knowing something about the Old Testament Law we can come to understand our common ethical heritage with our modern Jewish brothers and sisters. We can see

more clearly the cultural background of the Jewish community of Jesus' time, which helps us understand why he taught as he did. By learning what God expected of our Israelite ancestors, we can grow in understanding of him and his current expectations of us.

Notes

1. *torah*, translated as "law" in English, means "direction, instruction, law." (Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*/Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977/, p. 435.)
2. See Mosiah 2:3; Alma 25:15; 30:3.
3. If the Jewish people had not been so concerned to obey these laws, even those which very early lost their real significance, they doubtlessly would have been assimilated into the cultures of their neighbors and lost their identity. But they doggedly clung to their teachings, which have survived with them, to teach us today.
4. Leviticus chapters 4, 5, 6 and 16 set forth these laws.
5. Ex. 22:23-25, Lev. 24:19-20, and Deut. 19:21.
6. See laws 198-214 in "The Code of Hammurabi," *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), p. 175.
7. For example, in Florence Italy in the Fourteenth Century, "workers could be flogged and imprisoned or have a hand cut off for resistance to employers." (Barbara Tuchman, *A Distant Mirror: The Calamitous Fourteenth Century*/New York: Ballantine Books, 1968, p. 366.)
8. In practice, this law "had been almost completely outgrown quite early" and was modified by reducing the punishment to fines corresponding to the loss suffered rather than actual maiming. (Retaliation, Law of, *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isaac Landman, vol. 9/New York: Universal Jewish Encyclopedia Co., 1948/, p. 144. See also J. W. Erlich, *The Holy Bible and the Law*/New York: Oceana Pubs. Inc., 1962/, p. 189.)
9. Ex. 22:21; Lev. 19:34; Deut. 10:19.
10. This is the Revised Standard Version translation of Isaiah 1:16-17 which is more clear than the KJV.
11. See also Isaiah 58 and 66:3-4 for prophetic condemnation of people who rely on obedience to ritual to put them in favor with God.
12. Ex. 23:4-5. The version of these laws in Deuteronomy 22:1-4 is a little less demanding, specifying that these services must be performed for a brother.
13. Millar Burrows, "Old Testament Ethics and the Ethics of Jesus," *Essays in Old Testament Ethics*, eds. James L. Crenshaw and John T. Willis (New York: KTAV Pub. House Inc., 1974), p. 242.

MELODIE MOENCH CHARLES has a B.A. and an M.A. in English from the University of Utah. She received her TMS from Harvard Divinity School and is living in Salt Lake City with her husband.