Why Don't Christians Keep the Old Testament Laws? **[1]**

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A common attack on Christianity is that Christians do not keep (all) of the Old Testament laws. Examples are that certain foods may not be eaten (Leviticus 11, Deuteronomy 14), there are prohibitions on how clothes can be made (Leviticus 19:19) and there are a bunch of rules and laws regarding skin diseases and mold (Leviticus 13–14). Yet virtually no-one who calls him or herself a Christian keeps—or even tries to—these laws. Yet they will readily admit that these were divine commandments given by God. So what is the deal with Christians and the Old Testament laws?

Complaints

Jews may object that the fact that Christians reject many of the Old Testament laws is a clear indication that Christians do not worship the same God as they do. Muslims object that this is but one example of how Christians read the Bible selectively and therefore follow a corrupted religion1. Atheists also point to the Old Testament laws, but usually with the motive of showing that the God which Christians claim to follow gave silly or cruel laws which Christians do not follow anyway, so why bother at all.

Context of the Laws

In Judaism, what Christians know as the Old Testament is called the Tanakh. The Tanakh is divided into several sections. The first five books of the Old Testament (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy) is called the Torah, which means "the Law". It is technically history: it describes primarily how the Israelite nation came to be and how they came to settle in the geographic region known as Palestine (the Promised Land). A large part of this narrative is about how the Israelites are moving out of Egypt and into the Promised Land. The Torah stops right before the Israelites actually enter into the Promised Land (this event takes place in the next book, which starts off the history section of the Tanakh and which includes the books of Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1 & 2 Samuel, 1 & 2 Kings, and 1 & 2 Chronicles). However, for a significant part of this journey, God speaks to the Israelites and gives them a number of laws by which to live2. In fact, the vast majority of 34 chapters of Deuteronomy (the last book of the Torah) relates one speech given by Moses to the Israelites before he died.

Explanations

A Precedent

The very first thing to realise when thinking about this issue is that Christians *cannot* hold to all of the laws stipulated in the Old Testament[3]. If Christians do, it would destroy the very foundation of the Christian faith: the atoning death of Jesus the Messiah on the cross. Many of the Old Testament laws deal with sacrifices. The entire book of Hebrews (which is in the New Testament) contrasts the "old order" to the "new" one. It explains how the old sacrificial system worked and why it is incompatible with Jesus' death and resurrection[4]. This point is very well established and hardly anyone disputes. So immediately we have an important, clear and logical precedent, found in the Bible itself, about why Christians, in fact, *should not* keep the whole law.

Dividing up the Laws

In reality, over the centuries, both Jewish and Christian scholars have divided up the Old Testament laws into different *categories*, usually three. These are usually of the form

1. National
2. Cultural
3. Moral

National laws were laws by which the *nation* of ancient Israel were to be governed as a theological-political entity. Those laws included laws regarding political asylum (Numbers 35:6–33, Deuteronomy 19:1–14), the establishment of jurisdiction (Deuteronomy 21:1–9), investigations of crimes (Deuteronomy 19:15–21), inheritance (Deuteronomy 21:15—17), and punishment for crimes.

Cultural laws pertained to establishing Israel as a people *distinct* from the nations around them. This is because God had set them apart for Himself, and that the Israelites would be enticed to apostasy if they were to mix with the other nations. Such laws would have been the dietary laws and the laws regarding clothing and adornment.

Finally, *moral* laws are recognised as being universal. They would include the Ten Commandments. They are as valid back in ancient Israel as they are today. Those laws include prohibitions of murder, theft and incest.

Shifty Agendas?

One confession which needs to be made is that, as I have already alluded to, there is no universal consensus (whether amongst Jewish or Christian scholars) which laws fall into which categories, or even what all the categories are.

This can lead to the objection: what if Christians move specific laws into the "moral" category to suit their needs? A common complaint is the Christian categorisation of homosexuality as "immoral", while other laws (such as the dietary ones) conveniently escape this categorisation. I have two responses to this. The first is that one must always be aware of the *context*. One will very rarely find laws dangling "on their own" in the Torah. They are usually clustered. And you need to consider that cluster. Let us look at the example of homosexuality. This prohibition is found in Leviticus 18:22. Taken on its own, this verse may seem arbitrary. But if you look at the context, you quickly realise that it is found in a chapter of the Bible *dedicated* to laws around sexual practices. Verse 22 is flanked by verses prohibiting child sacrifice (which, in the context of native Canaanite religions had sexual connotations) and beastiality. Most of the chapter deals with prohibitions of incest. Leviticus 18 is, without question, moral law.

My second response is that Christians usually back up their categorisations with what is said in the New Testament. Jesus made it clear in Matthew 15:10–20 that food does not ultimately defile

someone. This means that Christians are not bound by the dietary laws. But the point was further strengthened in Acts 15:22–35 where the distinction between gentile and cultural Jewish Christians is recognised. This effectively established the differences between the "cultural" and "moral" categorisations of the Law5. In short, Christians interpret the Old Testament through the lens of the New Testament.

Why Bother?

So why do Christians still bother with the Old Testament laws? Well, many do not and find reading through it rather boring. However, as point out above, the moral law is still relevant [2] today. But it is also important to read the Law to understand its part in salvation history. The term "salvation history" refers to the ways in which God has worked in history in various ways leading up to the coming of Jesus. The Law shows us specifically

- That we are all Law breakers.
- That God's standard is higher than any person can attain.
- That nothing which we can do out of ourselves can earn us righteousness6.
- That the breaking of the Law leads to punishment.
- The Jews systematically broke all of the laws throughout their national history. This led to the eventual exile of the Israelites and Jews.

Conclusion

In this article I outlined how Christians approach the Old Testament laws. It is not through haphazard cherry-picking, but through careful study of context of both Old and New Testaments. Not all disputes amongst Christians have been resolved over every single law, but there is a general consensus which is sufficient to guide everyday Christian life and doctrine.

- 1. Muslims do believe that the Old and New Testaments, like the Qur'an, was given by God to humanity. However, unlike with the Qur'an, Jews and Christians respectively corrupted the words of God. Therefore, while there are bits of truth in Judaism and Christianity (Surah 2:136, 29:46), only Islam obediently holds to God's divine commandments. However, there is the slight problem that, according to the Qur'an, God's word cannot be corrupted (Surah 6:34, 6:115, 10:64)...
- 2. A summary of these laws can be found here [3].
- 3. In a link [3] which I had earlier provided, the author (a Jew) admits that even Jews cannot hold to the Law exactly for various reasons. His reasons are partly the same as the ones which I give.
- 4. Note, however, that this is not a *contradiction*, but a *fulfilment* of what was outstanding.
- 5. The "national" category was already not relevant in the first century, as the Jews were under Roman occupation.
- 6. The Law, like any law really, only points out the "minimum" which needs to be done or not done. It does not commend. No-one gets praised for keeping the law, because it is *expected* that the law should be kept. To excel in God's eyes, people need to go beyond the Law. But people did not realise this and kept focusing on only keeping the Law, which was one of the complaints which Jesus brought against the Jews of His days on Earth.

Categories:

- Bible Study [4]
- Terminology & Concepts [5]

Tags:

- old testament [6]

- new testament [7]
- torah [8]
- law [9]
- moral [10]
- morality [11]
- jewish nationality [12]
- jewish culture [13]
- criticism of christianity [14]

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Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1030
[2] https://siyach.org/140
[3] http://www.jewfaq.org/613.htm
[4] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/5
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/36
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/66
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/152
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/68
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/124
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/153
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/154
[12] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/155
[13] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/156
[14] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/157