

The Two Great Commandments in Their Old Testament Context

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Abstract: The two great commandments of Jesus in Matt 22:34–40 (with parallels in Mark 12:29–31 and Luke 10:25–37) are of central importance in the “law of Christ”, which is the way he mediates the law to the church as his kingdom today. A study of them in their Old Testament context lends depth to our understanding of why they were known and so important to Jesus and all faithful Jews. The first great commandment follows immediately upon the Great *Shema* in Deut 6:4 (Mark 12:29 includes the *shema* as part of the first great commandment), and begins to unpack the full significance of the fact that Israel had only one God and his name was Yahweh. Therefore, the addressees are required to focus all their love on him, no other god. The following verses apply this to all aspects of life. Jesus depended on this section of Deuteronomy for his three responses to the temptations of the devil (Matt 4:1–11). The second great command in its context tells us that personal holiness is all about loving others as one would want them to love her or him (Lev 19:18 with 19:2b; see the “good Samaritan” in Luke 10:30–37). Jesus was asked for one greatest commandment, but he refused to give just one because these two belong together. They supply the frame for the whole law, all of it and every part of it.

Keywords: Jesus, law, commandment, love, temptation, holy, holiness, neighbor

Introduction

It is a genuine delight to speak at this conference celebrating 200 years of evangelical Old Testament research in Denmark. My relationship with Carsten Vang, Nicolai Winther-Nielsen, and Jens Bruun Kofoed began in 2007 when they invited me to give lectures here in Copenhagen and in Aarhus on Old Testament priestly law and theology. Since then we have continued our friendship and cooperation in scholarly meetings and publications. My work on the Old Testament law has continued, of course, and in 2022 my book on The Old Testament Law for the Life of the Church saw the light of day in publication (Averbeck 2022). I thank the Lord for guiding me into and through this topic over the past forty years. When Jens Bruun Kofoed and I discussed my involvement in this conference he suggested, and we agreed, that I should focus on this biblically based and relatively pastoral topic.

The published title of my paper on the schedule for this conference is “The Goodness and the Weakness of the Law”. I have divided it into two parts. This first essay focuses on the goodness of the Old Testament law, and is entitled “The Two Great Commandments in Their Old Testament Context”. The second turns to the discussion of “How is the Old Testament Law ‘Weak’?” The law is both good and weak at the same time. These two truths are not in competition or contradictory, but complementary. I draw them directly from the Apostle Paul in Romans 7 and 8, which will be the main passage for my second paper, and therefore focused on the New Testament, but reflective of the original intent of the Old Testament law in its ancient Israelite context.

“Boil Down” Passages

Certain passages in the New Testament are what I refer to as “boil down” passages. They come down to a bottom line of God’s intentions for his people. I have been struck over the years by how many such passages come down to the same bottom line. Here are a few examples. Paul began his first epistle to Timothy with an exhortation to watch over the teaching of the Old Testament law in the church, the very same topic I am focusing on in my papers at this conference. The problem Paul was addressing was that there were those who would “want to be teachers of the law, but they do not know what they are talking about or what they so confidently affirm” (1 Tim 1:7).¹ They were teaching “false doctrines” and “myths and endless genealogies,” and they were “promoting controversial speculations” rather than God’s transformational work in the lives of his people (1 Tim 1:3–4). The positive point Paul made to Timothy is stated in 1 Tim 1:5: The aim of teaching the Old Testament law in the church is “love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.” Love from such an authentic believer is not easy to come by in our fallen condition, but this is exactly what God’s transformational work in our lives is all about. This is the goal of good teaching in the church. If we do not teach with this goal, we are misreading and misusing the Bible, starting with the Old Testament law.

Jesus came to the same bottom line in the upper room discourse. At a certain turning point, he said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:34–35). Their love for one another would be the identifying feature of those who were his followers. Similarly, in the context of his teaching about the gifts of the Holy Spirit in the church, Paul said, “Now eagerly desire the greater gifts. And yet I will show you the most excellent way” (1 Cor 12:31). The most excellent way is love as Paul describes and lauds it in 1 Corinthians 13. He concludes with this: “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love” (1 Cor 13:13). No one would doubt the importance of faith and hope in the life of the church and the believer, but the most important of the three is love. The spiritual gifts about which Paul had been teaching are important in the body of Christ, of course, but they are not the bottom line of ministry. A gifted person can use their gifts for good or for evil. The Holy Spirit gives such gifts as tools for loving well. Without this primary focus, the spiritual gifts will get misused for personal power, influence, or other forms of self-advancement.

Many other such passages could be added to these, but the most important for our purposes here are the two great commandments in Matt 22:34–40 (with parallels in Mark 12:29–31 and Luke 10:25–37, to be included in the discussion that follows). As is well-known, in Matt 22:35–36 a teacher of the law was testing Jesus: “Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” Jesus answered in vv. 37–40: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments.”

¹ In this essay I will cite the English Bible in the NIV version, unless otherwise noted.

Two points are especially important here. First, the teacher of the law asked for only one great commandment, but Jesus refused to give just one. The first and second belong together and support one another. One cannot love God without also loving their neighbor. These two commandments comprise the basic ethos of the law. Second, according to v. 40 the whole law and the prophets hang on these two commandments like a door hangs on its hinges. It is unfortunate that so many talk about the law but few actually study it, especially not the way Jesus did. It is common to hear in the church that the Old Testament law is just a lifeless and oppressive set of pedantic rules. People who think that way are wrong, of course. Jesus says so. The whole law (and the prophets) is suspended on these two great commandments to love God and people. The other regulations in the law unpack how God wanted to see this love lived out in ancient Israel. The two great commandments constitute a boiled down package of the whole law.

The First Great Commandment

In its Old Testament context, the first great commandment in Deut 6:5 is the first step in unpacking the meaning and significance of the Great *Shema* that stands just before it in v. 4. Verse 5 leads to a connected sequence of verses (Deut 6:4–9) that explain how to live out the love of the Lord God day by day in their lives.

⁴ Hear (*shema*), O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. ⁶ These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. ⁷ Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. ⁸ Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. ⁹ Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.

The previous section ends with Deut 6:3, “Hear, Israel, and be careful to obey so that it may go well with you and that you may increase greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, just as the LORD, the God of your ancestors, promised you.” The mention of “your ancestors” here led to an extensive midrashic expansion several verses long in Targum Neophiti, binding v. 3 directly to v. 4 (McNamara 1986, 49–50). This expansion has the patriarch Jacob collecting the twelve tribes to him on his deathbed and exhorting them to commit to his God. It ends with this: “The twelve tribes of Jacob answered together with a perfect heart and said: ‘Listen to us, Israel our father: The Lord our God is one Lord; may his name be blessed for ever and ever. And you shall love the instruction of the Law of the Lord with all your heart and all your soul and all your wealth.’” This addition recalls the introduction to Joshua’s call to covenant faithfulness in Joshua 24 and imagines that the Great *Shema* was known far back into patriarchal days, long before Moses spoke it.

Deuteronomy 6:4

The Great *Shema* is well-known as the primary theme verse in Judaism, but the grammar is such that its precise rendering is uncertain. In my opinion, the NIV, ESV, and NASB reading is probably the most likely: “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one,” although this is much debated. Another common translation held by some major scholars is “Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God,

the LORD alone.”² This is the rendering in the Jewish Tanakh version and the NRSV, for example. There are two weighty objections against this reading. First, in all other occurrences of the combination “LORD” with “our God” both in Deuteronomy and in almost all other places in the Old Testament the meaning is “the LORD our God,” not “The LORD is our God.”³ Second, there is a common Hebrew word for “alone” (*lʾvad*), which could have been used if this reading was intended (see, e.g., Deut 4:35, 39), and this is exactly the term that appears in a number of passages referring to “Yahweh alone” (see, e.g., 2 Kgs 19:15, 19; Isa 2:11, 17; Ps 86:10). The meaning “alone” for the common cardinal number “one” is questionable (see, e.g., Zech 14:9 and NIV “alone” in contrast to ESV and NRSV “one”).⁴

If this is the correct rendering, what could “the LORD is one” mean? One suggestion is that it means positively, there is only one Yahweh, and negatively, do not look for any other Yahwehs. There just aren’t any others. Ancient Near Eastern gods and goddesses (e.g., Ishtar) could have a number of different manifestations in various places.⁵ This could be seen as one of the reasons for the concern about cultic centralization in Deuteronomy 12. Another possibility would be that there is only one particular Yahweh who is Israel’s covenant God. Do not be looking for other covenant gods. In any case, if we adopt the translation “the LORD is one,” the clause would still carry the implication that Yahweh alone was their God without coming right out and saying it that way. It is indeed true that Yahweh alone was to be their God, but the question addressed here is whether the lexicography, grammar, and syntax of the verse supports such a rendering. The objections cited above suggest that such a translation would be awkward and unwarranted in Hebrew. However, once again, I emphasize here that a firm objective decision is difficult to attain in this instance.

It is interesting and significant that, according to Mark’s Gospel, Jesus included the *shema* in the first great commandment. In response to the questioner, Jesus responded: “The most important one ... is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one’” (Mark 12:29). With that said, he added Deut 6:5: “‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength’” (Mark 12:30). Jesus reads the last phrase of Deut 6:4 as “the Lord is one,” not “the Lord alone,” and this appears to be the common understanding in Second Temple Judaism.⁶

The verb *shema* is a call to pay special attention to what Moses was about to say, something like when a preacher says in a sermon, “Now pay special attention to this point!” Deuteronomy 1:5 tells us that the Book of Deuteronomy recounts how “East of the Jordan in the territory of Moab, Moses began to

² See the discussion and support for this reading in Tigay (1996, 76, 438–441). See also Lundbom (2013, 309–310) for a list and brief discussion of the various renderings; Block (2012, 181–182 n. 5); and his full treatment in Block (2004, 193–212). Tigay argues that the translation “Yahweh our God, Yahweh is one” makes the second “YHWH superfluous; ‘YHWH our God is one’ would have sufficed” (p. 439). The repeated reference to Yahweh, recouping the emphasis on the name Yahweh in the second clause, however, makes for a fine rhetorical device.

³ The exception is 2 Chr 13:10.

⁴ The same is true of all the other references cited for the number one meaning “alone” in Block (2012, 182 n. 5). Either the grammar is substantially different from Deut 6:4 or the Hebrew numeral could just as easily be rendered “one.” See also the question marks on related passages in HALOT p. 30.

⁵ Tigay (1996, 440) minimizes the importance of this ancient Near Eastern data in his discussion of Deut 6:4.

⁶ Tigay (1996, 440) suggests that later Judaism rendered this word as “one,” not “alone,” probably because it was more suitable for defending monotheism.

expound this law..." If one wants to know how to preach the law, Deuteronomy is a good place to start, especially chapters 5–11. The introduction to this whole section is Deut 5:1a, "Moses summoned all Israel and said." This is followed by three subsections, all of which start with "Hear, O Israel" (5:1; 6:4; and 9:1).⁷ These are three subsections of a speech or sermon, preaching the law to that generation of Israelites.

The second *shema* section begins with the Great *Shema* in Deut 6:4 and ends with chapter 8 verse 20. Deuteronomy 6:4–9 and this whole section is a passage on which Jesus would have meditated a great deal since it was the key passage for the daily life of Jews in the Second Temple period. This is still true up to the present day.⁸ According to Matthew 4, after fasting in the wilderness forty days and nights, the devil came and tempted him three times. All three times Jesus responded from this three-chapter section of Deut 6:4–8:20. This is not a coincidence. First, since he was hungry, the tempter challenged him saying, "If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread" (Matt 4:3). Jesus responded, "It is written: 'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God'" (Matt 4:8). Jesus was drawing from Deut 8:3, where Moses had recalled the Israelites' hunger in the wilderness forty years (cf. Jesus' forty days and nights) by which God tested them to see if they would keep his commands: "He humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding you with manna, which neither you nor your ancestors had known, to teach you that *man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD.*" We know that Jesus was hungry and tired. The last verse of the temptation narrative tells us, "Then the devil left him, and angels came and attended him" (Matt 4:11). The tempter orchestrated his first temptation to take advantage of his hunger. It seems that this is what drew the attention of Jesus to Deuteronomy 6–8 to begin with, so he responded to all three temptations from this key passage of Scripture.

In his second temptation, the tempter took Jesus to the highest point in the temple and quoted Scripture back at Jesus from Ps 91:11–12, "If you are the Son of God, ... throw yourself down. For it is written: 'He will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.'" Jesus responded, "It is also written: 'Do not put the Lord your God to the test,'" drawing from Deut 6:16, "Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah." The next verse in Deut 6:17 adds: "Be sure to keep the commands of the LORD your God and the stipulations and decrees he has given you." Moses was referring back to Exod 17:1–2, where the people quarreled with him because they had no water to drink and Moses responded, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you put the LORD to the test?"

Finally, the tempter raised the stakes again, by taking Jesus up to the top of a very high mountain and offering him all the kingdoms of the whole world: "All this I will give you, ... if you will bow down and worship me" (Matt 4:9). Jesus responded, "Away from me, Satan! For it is written: 'Worship the

⁷ Perhaps we should also count the *shema* in Deut 4:1 and take it to be the first of four *shemas*: "Now, Israel, hear (*shema*) the decrees and laws I am about to teach you." However, Deuteronomy 4 seems to be a continuation of the historical prologue in Deuteronomy 1–3, and the introduction to the *shema* in Deut 5:1 suggests that the unit starts in 5:1 and runs through Deuteronomy 11: "Moses called unto all Israel and said: 'Hear (*shema*) O Israel..." (Deut 5:1).

⁸ See Tigay (1996, 440–441) for a helpful explanation.

Lord your God, and serve him only,” drawing from Deut 6:13, “Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.”

Humanly, in his vulnerable condition, Jesus relied on the Great *Shema* section of Deuteronomy to fight off the great tempter. In fact, his response to the last temptation brings us back to the same basic point as the Great *Shema* and the first great commandment. Jesus responded to the tempter: “Worship the Lord your God, and serve him only” (Matt 4:10). According to the Great *Shema* in Deut 6:4, the only God they should worship was none other than Yahweh. It does not explicitly teach monotheism, but it resisted the practice of polytheism in ancient Israel. Deuteronomy 4:35, for example, is more clearly monotheistic: “You were shown these things so that you might know that Yahweh is God; besides him there is no other” (cf. v. 39). Deuteronomy 6:4–5 teaches what some refer to as henotheism or monolatry. Even if they believed there are other gods, Yahweh is the one God they should worship, and there is only one of him.

Deuteronomy 6:5

The most natural implication of this exclusively Yahwistic worship is what Jesus cited from Deut 6:5 as the first great commandment: “So you shall love Yahweh your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your everything.” Since Yahweh is our God, we should have no divided loyalties – no devotion to any other god or gods. The last phrase, which I have rendered “with all your everything,” is translated variously in the Old Testament versions as “might” or “strength,” and in the New Testament Gospel citations: “with all your mind” in Matt 22:37; “with all your mind and with all your strength” in Mark 12:30; and “with all your strength and with all your mind” in Luke 10:27.

The Hebrew text has the common adverb *mē‘od* here (cf. also 2 Kgs 23:25), which regularly means “very” or “exceedingly”. The most natural literal meaning of the phrase, therefore, would be “with all your exceedingly.” The Septuagint reads “with all your power” (Greek *dunamis*). Targum Onqelos is especially interesting and worthy of serious consideration (see Grossfeld 1986, 33–34). Like the Targum Neophiti cited above, it renders the phrase with the word *ma‘amon*, the Aramaic word transliterated into the Greek text in Matt 6:24, where Jesus says, “You cannot serve both God and money,” literally in Greek, “You cannot serve God and *mamona*.” In other words, the Targums take the last phrase in Deut 6:5 to mean “with all your wealth” or “material goods.”

The term “soul” (*nepheš*) in Hebrew is notoriously difficult to translate. It can refer to the body of a person, dead (e.g., Num 6:11) or alive, and when alive the person is a “living being” (Gen 2:7, *nepheš hayyāh*). The heart (*lēbāb*) refers to all thinking, attitudes, perspectives, and such of the inner person – what gives a person their personhood and personality. It seems that the combination of the three phrases introduced by the preposition “with” in Deut 6:5 brings together the whole person, their personality, and everything they have in life. Here in Deut 6:5, as is regularly the case, the Septuagint renders *‘āhab*, the Hebrew verb “love”, by the Greek verb *agapaō*. These are both words for the kind of love that arises out of esteem and goodwill for the one loved. The first great commandment commands this kind of love toward God, the second commands it toward one’s neighbor (see below).

I have rendered the *waw*-consecutive at the beginning of Deut 6:5 as consequential “so” rather than just sequential “and” because the command to love arises out of the *shema* in v. 4. Since they are to worship only one God, Yahweh, they owe him all their love. The next several verses detail how they should exhibit that love in their daily lives. Each begins with another *waw*-consecutive, and each of them underlines the core importance of God’s word permeating all parts of their lives on every level, every day: their own hearts (v. 6), their relationships with their children (v. 7), their own bodies (v. 8), and in their houses as well as in the gates of their cities, which was the public square (v. 9).

Deuteronomy 6:6–7

In this passage, therefore, each verse leads to the next as a natural consequence of the previous. What stands out is that all of vv. 6–9 are about loving the Lord by taking the revelation of his word given through Moses seriously in every part of their daily life. First, given that the Israelites were commanded to love the Lord with all they are and have in v. 5, the next verse commands them, “these words which I am commanding you today shall be on your *heart*” (v. 6). They should love the Lord with all their *heart*, and they could show that primarily by having his word on their *heart*. They were to take his word personally, in their personal private world. The expression “on your heart” suggests something like “preoccupation”. Since the Lord is the God they love with all their heart and soul and everything they have, his word should be what preoccupies their thoughts day by day. If one could empty their mind of their thoughts, holding them off for a moment or two, and then let their mind loose, what would be the first thought to come back into their mind? That is what a person is preoccupied with.

How would it affect you if another person or group took what you have said so seriously that they think and meditate on it all day long, even all day and night, as in Josh 1:8 and Ps 1:2?! What if they would treasure your word that way? What if they got so impressed that they turn it this way and that to see all the facets of its meaning and significance for their lives and relationships? My guess is that, among other things, you would feel they are taking you seriously. You would see it as a sign of their esteem for you. You would feel “loved” like Deut 6:5 calls us to love the Lord with all our heart, soul, and all. The point is that one of the best and most important ways to show that you love the Lord God is to value and attend to his word as called for in these verses.

The next verse takes this one step further. If one is so preoccupied with God’s word, it would be most natural to talk about it with their children: “And you shall teach them repeatedly to your children, speaking about them when you are sitting in your house and walking on the way, when you lie down and when you rise up” (v. 7). The verb rendered “teach repeatedly” means essentially to “train” one’s children; that is, to inculcate God’s word into the way they think and live by constant attention to it in all situations of life. This verb appears only here in the Hebrew Bible. The parallel passage in Deut 11:19 employs the regular word for teaching. It is no wonder that Jewish halakhic exegesis made Deut 6:4–9 “the centerpiece of Jewish daily worship, the *Keri’at Shema*’ (‘Recitation of the Shema’), named for the first word” (Tigay 1996, 76; see also pp. 440–441).

Deuteronomy 6:8–9

As noted above, the sequence of Deut 6:4–9 is based on the foundation of the Great *Shema*. Since the Lord is one, there should be no divided loyalties; that is, they must love him with all their heart, soul, and everything else (v. 5). This first great commandment is given first in the following verses. It starts with having the Lord's words given through Moses in the Torah as their constant preoccupation all through the day and into the night (v. 6) and, therefore, talking about it all the time in all situations with their children so that it takes strong root in their lives (v. 7).

The two final verses of the unit command that they should not only be preoccupied with the law and speak about it all day long in their family, but also display God's word in their lives personally and publically in other ways. According to v. 8, "You shall bind them as signs upon your fore arm and they shall become phylacteries between your eyes." As is well known, based on this and other passages, the Talmudic tradition has taken this literally. They physically bind small capsules called *tefillin* on the upper arm and forehead. Inside the capsule there is a small scroll with Deut 6:5–9 written on it along with the parallel passage in Deut 11:13–21 as well as Exod 13:1–10 and 11–16.

We cannot go into all the details here, but the earliest evidence for the origin of this practice comes from the discovery of *tefillin* in some of the Qumran caves.⁹ In Talmudic times, all Jewish men from age thirteen up wore them all day on week days, but since the middle ages they wear them only for week day morning prayers. The fact of the matter, however, is that not all Jews through the ages have agreed with this literal reading, partially because of the way some of the same terminology is used in Exod 13:1–10 and 11–16. Verses 1–10 refers to the annual commemoration of the Passover and Unleavened Bread festival. According to v. 9, "This observance will be for you like a sign on your hand and a reminder on your forehead that this law of the LORD is to be on your lips. For the LORD brought you out of Egypt with his mighty hand." Verses 11–16 use the same terminology in reference to the practice of sacrificing first born animals to the Lord and redeeming first sons: "... it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the LORD brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand" (v. 16).

In Exodus 13, therefore, the terminology for binding the law on the head and hand (i.e., upper arm) refers to the instruction of children by commemorating God's mighty work in delivering Israel from Egyptian slavery. Some also refer to certain passages from Proverbs for this reading of Deut 6:8; for example, Prov 6:20–21, "My son, keep your father's command and do not forsake your mother's teaching. Bind them always on your heart; fasten them around your neck" (cf. also, e.g., Prov 1:8–9; 3:3; 7:1–3). The Karaites supported the metaphorical interpretation against the Rabbis, suggesting that it refers to the need to keep the word of God on their mind like they would bind *tefillin* to the body. According to pictures from the ancient Near East, the ancients did wear such things on their bodies, including protective amulets. This tells us that such binding of *tefillin* to the body would not

⁹ See the very helpful data and discussions in Tigay (1996, 441–444) and Lundbom (2013, 313–315).

be out of the ordinary. Amulets, however, were thought to be magically protective unlike these *tefillin*, which would have been worn to remind them to be faithful to the Lord, not for magical reasons, at least officially.¹⁰

Finally, Deut 6:9 commands that they should also “write them [i.e., the Lord’s words] upon the doorposts of your houses and in your gates.” Unlike v. 8, where there are passages that suggest a metaphorical interpretation, there are no such parallel passages for v. 9. This would be akin to Bible verses on plaques hung on the walls of homes today. The ancient Egyptians did something like this when they wrote regulations for entry on the doors of their temples. Again, this practice is attested at Qumran, and even the Samaritans adopted it. The term for “doorposts” is Hebrew *mezuzot*. Later, this word in its singular form became the term for the *tefillin* capsules attached to the doorposts at the entrances to houses, at the entrance to every living room in their houses, and on the city gates. Again, Deut 6:4–9 and 11:13–21 would be written on the scrolls inside these *tefillin*, but some also included other passages of Scripture; for example, the Decalogue, Deut 10:12–11:12, parts of Exodus 13, and Num 10:35–36. Again, there was a problem with sometimes treating these *mezuzot* as magical protective amulets instead of reminders of the Lord (see Tigay 1996, 444).

As noted above, the Great *Shema* section extends all the way through the end of chapter 8. The following paragraphs in Deuteronomy 6 urge them to be sure to maintain their exclusive worship and service to the Lord who brought them out of Egypt after they enter the land. Verse 13 underlines this: “Fear the LORD your God, serve him only and take your oaths in his name.” Verse 16 reinforces it with a historic reference: “Do not put the LORD your God to the test as you did at Massah.” These are the two verses from which Jesus responded to the second and third temptations of Satan in the wilderness (see the discussion of Matthew 4 above).

The remainder of Deuteronomy 6 keeps the focus on the Lord’s deliverance from slavery in Egypt and its implications. Chapter 7 shifts to what it would look like to maintain holiness to the Lord after they enter the land: no treaties with the people of the land, no intermarrying, and destroying all their idols, altars, sacred stones, and Asherah poles. Finally, chapter 8 recalls how the Lord tested them in the wilderness “in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands” (v. 2). One of the ways he did this was by making them dependent on manna “to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD” (v. 3). Jesus resisted the tempter with this verse in his first temptation: “If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread” (Matt 4:3).

The Second Great Commandment

The Old Testament context of the second great commandment is very different from that of the first. The most immediate context is Lev 19:17–18, “Do not hate a fellow Israelite in your heart. Rebuke your neighbor frankly so you will not share in their guilt. Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but *love your neighbor as yourself*. I am the LORD.” There is a common misunderstanding of the second commandment that says one must learn to love their own self before

¹⁰ See the data and explanations in Tigay (1996, 441) and Lundbom (2013, 316).

they can love their neighbor. This is not the point of the passage. Note that the command to love one's neighbor is in the immediate context of not hating, seeking revenge, or bearing a grudge against them. One does not want their neighbor to hate, seek revenge, or bear a grudge against them, so he must not hold such animosity toward his neighbor. It means essentially the same as the "golden rule" in Matt 7:12, "... in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets" (lit., "this is the law and the prophets"). Interestingly, this command "sums up" the law and the prophets, similar to the two great commandments being the hinges on which the whole law and prophets hang.

The same concern appears elsewhere in the Old Testament law too: "If you come across your enemy's ox or donkey wandering off, be sure to return it. If you see the donkey of someone who hates you fallen down under its load, do not leave it there; be sure you help them with it" (Exod 23:4–5). Jesus also put special emphasis on it in the last antithesis in Matthew 5:43–48:

⁴³ You have heard that it was said, "Love your neighbor and hate your enemy."

⁴⁴ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.

⁴⁶ If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? ⁴⁷ And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?

⁴⁸ Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

The great commandments passage in Luke 10 pays special attention to the second great commandment. Even the scene is different from Matthew and Mark. The lawyer asked Jesus what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answered his question with a question, "What is written in the Law? ... How do you read it?" (Luke 10:26). The lawyer responded with the two great commandments, and Jesus affirmed his answer.¹¹ As the passage continues, however, the lawyer wanted to justify himself; so he asked, "who is my neighbor?" (v. 29). Again, in due time, Jesus turned the question around back to him: Who is the one who *shows himself* to be a neighbor? The point of the story is that it was neither the Jewish priest nor the Levite, but the "despised" Samaritan who showed himself to be a neighbor to the injured man. Similarly, but in a different way, later in Leviticus 19, the same commandment comes back around: "When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. *Love them as yourself*, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" (vv. 33–34). You did not like being mistreated as foreigners in Egypt, so do not mistreat foreigners in Israel.

The larger context of the second great commandment is the so-called "Holiness Code" in Leviticus 17–27. This section of Scripture focuses on how the Israelites should live as a nation in the presence of God, surrounding the tabernacle. Chapter 19 begins with the main theme of this section of the

¹¹ By the way, this helps us to see that the Jewish teachers of the day knew the core importance of these two commandments. This was not new to them when Jesus taught it.

Torah: “The LORD said to Moses, ‘Speak to the entire assembly of Israel and say to them: *‘Be holy because I, the LORD your God, am holy’*” (Lev 19:1–2). Variations of an abbreviated form of this all important watchword appears fifteen times throughout the chapter: “I am the LORD your God,” including right after the second great commandment in v. 18 (cf. vv. 3, 4, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 25, 28, 30, 31, 32, 34, 36, 37). In other words, this theme saturates the passage.

This holiness theme occurs for the first time in the Bible in the regulations concerning clean and unclean animals in Lev 11:44–45, “*I am the LORD your God; consecrate yourselves and be holy, because I am holy. Do not make yourselves unclean by any creature that moves along the ground. I am the LORD, who brought you up out of Egypt to be your God; therefore be holy, because I am holy.*” There are no detailed regulations about clean and unclean animals in Leviticus 19–20, but Leviticus 20 applies the principle of the distinction between clean and unclean animals as such to the importance of Israel’s separation from the corruption of the people in the land when they conquered and settled in it. The chapter forbids such things as Molekh worship, consultation of mediums and spiritists, cursing father and mother, adultery, and other forms of sexual and marital perversions, including homosexuality and bestiality (vv. 1–21). The Lord then commanded them (Lev 20:23–26):

²³ You must not live according to the customs of the nations I am going to drive out before you ... ²⁴ You will possess their land; I will give it to you as an inheritance, a land flowing with milk and honey. *I am the LORD your God*, who has set you apart from the nations. ²⁵ You must therefore make a distinction between *clean and unclean animals* and between unclean and clean birds. Do not defile yourselves by any animal or bird or anything that moves along the ground – those that I have *set apart* as unclean for you. ²⁶ *You are to be holy to me because I, the LORD, am holy*, and *I have set you apart* from the nations to be my own.

This passage tells us that one of the main reasons for the clean and unclean animal food regulations given in Leviticus 11 was to separate the Israelites from the people of the land and their corruptions. If they could not eat with them, they could not practice regularized relationships with them.

The Apostle Peter brings this holiness motto into his remarks on the way we live the Christian life in 1 Pet 1:14–16, “As obedient children, do not conform to the evil desires you had when you lived in ignorance. But just as he who called you is holy, so be holy in all you do; for it is written: *‘Be holy, because I am holy.’*” He goes on to talk about our salvation through “the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect” (v. 19). In light of this, a few verses later he exhorts his readers: “Now that you have *purified* yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have *sincere love* for each other, *love one another deeply, from the heart*” (v. 22). In other words, the reason we purify ourselves by obeying the truth is “so that” we can “love one another deeply from the heart.” Love is at the core of holiness. It takes holiness and purity of heart and life to love well. There is no other path to “sincere love.” We have to root out self-seeking motives, compromised loyalties, and half-hearted faith. As Paul put it to Timothy, “the goal” of teaching God’s law in the church is “love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith” (1 Tim 1:5, see the discussion of this passage above).

The first eighteen verses of Leviticus 19 elaborate in a variety of ways on the Decalogue and other parts of the law, beginning with vv. 3–4, “Each of you must respect your mother and father, and you must observe my Sabbaths. I am the LORD your God. Do not turn to idols or make metal gods for yourselves. I am the LORD your God.” The ethics of how one treats other people is the focus of vv. 11–18, starting with v. 11, “Do not steal. Do not lie. Do not deceive one another,” and culminating in “love your neighbor or as yourself” in v. 18.

Conclusion

As Jesus put it, “All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments” (Matt 22:40), everything from the Decalogue, to the tabernacle worship regulations, and even the regulations concerning clean and unclean animals. The question is not *whether* this or that (set of) regulation(s) apply to the life of the believer today, but *how* they apply.

The Old Testament regulations concerning clean and unclean animals, for example, cannot come through into the New Testament church because, in the church, the wall of partition between Jew and Gentile has been broken down by our shared faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord and savior of us all, Jew and Gentile (Ephesians 2). The situation and circumstances of God’s people changed, so the regulations changed accordingly. This does *not* mean God is no longer concerned about his people separating from the corruption of the world, which was one of the main reasons for the regulations concerning clean and unclean animals to begin with. The holiness of God’s people is just as important to him today as ever. Holiness is all about loving well. God calls us to love him with all we are and have, and to love one another deeply from a purified heart: “Be holy for I am holy.” This is what the regulations concerning clean and unclean animals were all about, and there is no end to the importance of using them to teach and train Christians and the church to be holy, what that means, and how important it is to God.

The two great commandments are at the core of the “Law of Christ”, which is the way Jesus mediated the Old Testament law to us in the New Testament church. Looking at the two great commandments in their Old Testament context helps us understand more fully what he was getting at for our lives. We need to read the whole Old Testament law *his* way! All of it. Our understanding and application of the Old Testament law to the church and the believer really does hang on these two commandments.

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