

11. Reading in the light of Christ



This last article may at first sight seem the simplest. Of course we read the Bible as people who know Jesus, and in the light of what we know of him. As Christians we could hardly do anything else! Yet, how we do it causes big arguments among us.

Those weird laws in Leviticus

Take the question of all those strange laws in Leviticus. It seems simple enough, people often say that the coming of Jesus has abolished the ritual and the civil laws of the Old Testament, while the ethical laws still apply to us. A closer look at the Bible (both OT and NT) shows this “simple” approach fails.

Firstly it involves arguing in a circle. In the Old Testament it is quite difficult to distinguish neatly between the three sorts of law. Take Leviticus 19, this chapter mixes the three sorts up together. It is clear that the “three sorts of law” was not a distinction the OT made. Or take one example, is Lev 19:19 ritual, civil or ethical law? Other laws that prohibit mixing things concern ritual, yet there is no ritual language here. Part of the verse concerns farming issues so perhaps we could classify it as civil law? It must be either civil or ritual law, because we don't refuse to wear poly-cotton clothes, so it can't be ethical law. (Notice the self-defeating circular argument!)

This approach to Jesus' abolishing some OT law seems even more wrong when we turn to the NT. In Matt 5:17-18 (cf. Luke 16:17; James 2:10) Jesus says clearly: “Do not think that I have come

to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil. For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished.”

We cannot claim that Jesus abolishes any of these laws, because he himself tells us that he did not!

Jesus “fulfils”

The word Jesus uses to describe what he does to the Old Testament (and especially its law) is “fulfil”. What does this mean? It seems to imply that what was once a prediction comes true in Jesus. When they are talking about OT prophecies, this can seem to be what NT writers mean. So, in Matt 12:17, the Pharisees conspire against Jesus and he tells those he has healed not to announce his identity – Matthew comments that this fulfils Isaiah 42:1-3 (Matt12:17-21).

There are however clues that Jesus’ fulfilling means more than this. In Matt 2:15 the evangelist uses similar wording to point to Hos 11, but this passage is not a prophecy that foretells Jesus. It reads:

¹“When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. ²But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me. They sacrificed to the Baals and they burned incense to images.

It is clearly speaking about Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, not Joseph being called back from Egypt, with Mary and Jesus. Matthew is pointing to a prediction but a parallel, and more to a filling out. Israel (thought of as God’s “son”) was “called” from Egypt by God, but was unfaithful. Jesus (the son of God) was called by God from Egypt, and was faithful. Jesus fills out fully (fulfils) the failed calling of Israel.

How Jesus fulfils the OT

Jesus fulfils all of the OT (see Luke 24:27), by filling out fully and making perfect what was imperfect there. This is what Jesus does with the OT laws in Matthew 5:17ff. After saying that he did not come to abolish them, Jesus goes on to talk about several OT laws. He talks about the 6th commandment in 5:21ff., he makes “do not kill” more perfect by telling his disciples not to be angry or insult! Likewise in 27ff. he fulfils the seventh commandment, speaking not merely of adultery, but of all sexual desire outside marriage.

If we understand “fulfil” like this we can see not only how Jesus fulfils all the laws, but also the stories. Take a “nasty” story like Jacob stealing his brother’s birthright (Gen 27). Jacob the ancestor of God’s people, Israel, was a liar and thief who claimed what was not his. Jesus by contrast:

“⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, ⁷ but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, ⁸ he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. ⁹ Therefore God also highly exalted him... (Phil 2:6-9)

The final step

They say even the longest journey begins with a single step. The last step of our year-long journey in reading the Bible faithfully is simply this, to recognise how Jesus fills out fully (fulfils) what we read in Scripture. Whatever is partial, incomplete, adapted to the needs of broken sinful humans (cf. Matt 19:8). Jesus makes perfect, full and complete. If your understanding of what you read in the Bible

does not match this fullness it has not been faithful to the Word of God revealed in Scripture.

This is the end of a journey, If you are interested in sharing this approach to Reading the Bible Faithfully with a group, and you would like Tim to help, you can contact him here or by email: tim@bigBible.org