



About the Old Testament

by Ronald L. Dart

What did the first Christians believe about the Old Testament? You know, I might as well have asked what they believe about the Bible because, as the faith developed, the Old Testament was *all* the written word the first Christians had. Jesus himself laid the groundwork for a uniquely Christian understanding of the scriptures. Consider, for example, one fundamental difference at the time he came on the scene between the Pharisees and the Sadducees. The Pharisees believed that God gave the Law to Moses in two media: oral and written. In other words, Moses got the Written Law—the Ten Commandments, written with the finger of God, and some other stuff that he wrote down—then he got the Oral Law to go with it (which explained all kinds of stuff, apparently, about the Written Law). Well, the Oral Law, theoretically, was passed on to Joshua, who received it and passed it on to the next generation, who in turn received it and passed it on. Thus they believed that what they received from the earlier generation of rabbis was what God told Moses on Sinai. The record of the Oral Law today is found in the Talmud.

Now, the Sadducees believed no such thing. They believed that the Written Law was the *only* law that carried divine authority. I think Moses comes down on that side of the issue because he said plainly that he wrote down everything God told him [Exodus 24:4]. So I don't see in Scripture any indication of an Oral Law being handed down.

Now, you may wonder where this expression “Oral Law” came from, for it's not found in the New Testament—nor the Old for that matter. The New Testament writers *knew* about it, but they never used the term that way. Rather they called it “the traditions of the elders”. Now, because Jesus was parting company with that tradition, he needed to make himself perfectly clear on the issue. And he did, quite early, in that message we call the Sermon on the Mount. You probably remember it from the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven”, and so forth. He began that seminal message with the blessings that would come to his disciples who followed him. He went on with the importance of *their* example in the world—they're the light of the world and the salt of the earth. And then he offered a caution concerning what he was about to say, because the remainder of this message is going to be an argument—a strenuous argument—against the Pharisaic doctrine. But first he has to say this. It's in Matthew 5, verse 17:

Matthew 5

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¹⁷ Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; [...]

“Just don't think that.” I'm amazed that, in the 20th century, there are people who think *precisely* what he said “don't think”...but, anyway. He said:

Matthew 5

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¹⁷ [...] I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.

Now, failing to understand where Jesus is going has led some to think that in *fulfilling* the Law, Jesus made it essentially null and void. But did he? Listen to what he goes on to say:

Matthew 5

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¹⁸ I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.

Now, notice that well. He offers two criteria, not one. “Everything” was not accomplished at his death and resurrection because heaven and earth were *still there*. And I can pause for a moment while you go to the window and look out and check to be sure they’re still there. If they are, then not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, has passed from that until everything is going to be accomplished. Okay, Jesus *pointedly* endorsed the permanence of the Written Law. His choice of words makes that clear. He goes on to say:

Matthew 5

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¹⁹ Anyone who breaks one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever practices and teaches these commands will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

²⁰ For I tell you that unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven.

Well, he said you have to do better than the Pharisees. How do you do that? These guys were about as strict as it comes. What was he driving at? Matthew 15, verse 1:

Matthew 15

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¹ Then came to Jesus scribes and Pharisees, who were from Jerusalem, saying,

² Why do your disciples transgress the tradition of the elders? for they wash not their hands when they eat bread.

³ But he answered and said unto them, Why do you also transgress the commandment of God by your tradition?

⁴ For God commanded, saying, Honor your father and mother: and, He that curses father or mother, let him die the death.

⁵ But you say, Whosoever shall say to his father or his mother, It is a gift devoted to God, whatsoever you might have received from me [*This is a gift to God; I can't give this to you.*];

⁶ And honors not his father or his mother, he shall be free [*from that oath*]. [...]

Now, this is *really* something when you think about it, because the Bible, in saying “honor your father and mother”...the language actually is talking about *taking care* of your father and your mother in their old age—with money, if necessary. Here these guys are coming along and saying, “Oh, oh, you don’t have to do that. You can give the money to God.” (Which basically means, “You can put it under *our* control.”) And if you do that, you don’t *have to* take care of your father and your mother in their old age. Small wonder Jesus said:

Matthew 15

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⁶ [...] Thus have you made the commandment of God void by your tradition.

⁷ You hypocrites, well did Isaiah prophesy of you [*Isaiah 29*], saying,

⁸ These people draw near unto me with their mouth, and honor me with their lips; but their heart is far from me [*way off down the road*].

⁹ But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men.

Now, is it clear that Jesus is absolutely, forcefully, at odds with the Pharisaic tradition of the Oral Law, the traditions of the elders, the things handed down from previous rabbis that are explanatory and really add a whole bunch of rules to the simplicity of the Written Law? He's against it, all the way. Later on, the apostle Paul will demonstrate the same sort of approach in Colossians 2, verse 6. He said:

Colossians 2

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⁶ As you have therefore received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk you in him:

⁷ Rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, as you have been taught, abounding therein with thanksgiving. [*But look out!*]

⁸ Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the rudiments of the world, and not after Christ.

I think what Paul is referring to is Jewish tradition—the Oral Law—as the existing world order. Now, “rudiments” here means “orderly arrangement”. In other words, the Oral Law of the Jews. Peter actually makes into an indirect reference to it when he writes one of his letters. First Peter 1, verse 17:

1 Peter 1

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¹⁷ Since you call on a Father who judges each man's work impartially, live your lives as strangers here in reverent fear.

¹⁸ For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from [...]

And listen to what you were redeemed from.

1 Peter 1

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¹⁸ [...] the empty way of life handed down to you from your forefathers,

It doesn't save you. There's no redemption in, well, what can be called Jewish law. Now, Jewish law, of course, I don't think they necessarily think of it in terms of redemption. For them, it's a way of living your life here and now that they think is better than living it without any kind of law or direction. But he calls it “the empty way of life handed down from your forefathers.” It doesn't redeem you. You were redeemed by:

1 Peter 1

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¹⁹ [...] the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.

So, while the first Christians considered the books we call “the Old Testament” authoritative, it is clear they did not hold the same reverence for the Oral Law. Mark recalls (and he actually records) what Jesus had to say about this in no uncertain terms. Mark 7, verse 6, in the New International Version:

Mark 7

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- ⁶ He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:
‘These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.
⁷ They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men.’
⁸ You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to the traditions of men.”

This is what Jesus had to say about this issue—about following traditions, following the Oral Law: “No, no. Stick to the commandments of God.” And by that he obviously means the *written record*. So, the *written* testimony of the Old Testament is *honored* by the first Christians, while Jewish tradition is discarded.

I have an old Bible my wife gave me years and years ago. It was an Oxford Sunday school teachers edition. It's so old I have to hold it together with a couple rubber bands. But it has an encyclopedic concordance in the back that I find often useful; and it lists, by books, the New Testament quotations of Old Testament scriptures. And it's *really* surprising when you start paying attention and noticing them. Now, you can find various tables of these on the internet if you care to compare them. (If you look at the notes I have on this program on my website, I'll have footnotes which will give you a couple of links to them.) I know I was shocked to learn, for example, there are more than forty-five direct quotations—now, not just allusions to it, but quotations—from the Old Testament in the Book of Romans alone. That's sixteen chapters with forty-five direct quotations. Now, Paul's arguments in Romans are developed using the Old Testament as a prime authority. Listen to how he begins the letter:

Romans 1

AKJV

- ¹ Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God,
² (Which he had promised before by his prophets in the holy scriptures,)

This is the term that the New Testament writers will use for what we call the Old Testament. To them, they were “the holy scriptures”.

Romans 1

AKJV

- ³ Concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, which was made of the seed of David according to the flesh;
⁴ And declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead[.]

Old Paul...he is windy and does go on for a while, but his point was, “Hey, all this stuff started with the prophets telling us all about it in the Old Testament.” And he goes on in the book of Romans *again and again* to cite scriptures specifically from the Old Testament to make his point. He wrote to Timothy late in life (this is the *last* letter of Paul's life). It's Second Timothy, chapter three. He wrote to the young man and he said:

2 Timothy 3

AKJV

- ¹⁴ But continue you in the things which you have learned and have been assured of, knowing of whom you have learned them;
¹⁵ And that from a child [...]

How old is this guy by now? He was certainly in his 30s, possibly in his 40s—still, to Paul, a young man. And what does that mean about his association with the holy scriptures from his childhood? Well, it was what we call the Old Testament. He says:

2 Timothy 3

AKJV

¹⁵ [...] from a child you have known the holy scriptures, which are able to make you wise to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus.

Which scriptures? The holy scriptures—the Old Testament. What are they going to do? They’re going to make you wise unto salvation. Through which faith? Faith in Jesus Christ. From the *Old Testament*? Yes. Then he goes on to say this:

2 Timothy 3

AKJV

¹⁶ All scripture [*And what’s he talking about? The Old Testament.*] is given by inspiration of God, [*I think the Greek says “God-breathed”.*] and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness:

¹⁷ That the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished to all good works.

Now, how can you miss what Paul’s talking about here? He’s talking about what we call the Old Testament. And it’s profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, instruction, and righteousness. So *why on earth* would people seem to think that the first Christians didn’t look to, appreciate, and depend on the Old Testament? But one of the most *striking* examples of appealing to the Old Testament comes from none other than the apostle Paul, who many people think said the Old Testament was done away with. Someone in Corinth was beating up on Paul. In fact, they were attributing to Paul motives that he had long-since disproven by the way he lived his life and the way he conducted his affairs. But in First Corinthians 9 he decides, “Look, I’ve got to explain this to you folks.” He says:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

¹ Am I not an apostle? am I not free? have I not seen Jesus Christ our Lord? are not you my work in the Lord?

“I may not be an apostle to other people but, good grief folks, I *have to be to you.*”

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

² If I be not an apostle to others, yet doubtless I am to you: for the seal of my apostleship are you in the Lord.

In other words, “The very fact that you are *in* the faith demonstrates my apostleship.”

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

³ My answer to them that do examine me is this,

Now, it’s fascinating to me reading Paul’s Epistles (and I’ve taught them in college for many years) and it’s always a strange thing when you come to these examples of where people are trying to cut off Paul’s legs. He was *such* a strong influence that the only way would-be leaders can get any traction at

all was by destroying the confidence people had in Paul. So, they accused him of trying to make a gain of the Corinthians—one of the most common complaints people make about preachers down through the generations. “He’s after your money.” That’s what they said about Paul. So, having made his point, Paul says:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

⁴ Have we not power to eat and to drink?

And he doesn’t mean “do we have the power to eat and drink”; he means “at your expense. Don’t we have the authority to do that?”

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

⁵ Have we not power to lead about a sister, a wife, as well as other apostles, and as the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?

⁶ Or I only and Barnabas, have not we power to forbear working?

“Are we the only ones that have the power to stop working at an ordinary job and live off the Gospel? No, they all do it.” Now, by this he means: “Don’t I have the power to eat and drink at your expense? Must I get a job and serve the church as part-time?” Now, in fairness to Paul, that is exactly, precisely what he had done and *everyone knew it*. But he goes on to develop this. He says:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

⁷ Who goes a warfare any time at his own charges? [*What soldier pays himself?*] who plants a vineyard, and eats not of the fruit thereof? or who feeds a flock, and eats not of the milk of the flock?

Now, logic, he says, is saying there is nothing wrong with the church supporting a man like Paul while he works. But Paul, having given them the logic of the whole thing and then reason with them on it, he appeals to an *authority* recognized by the church. What was that authority? Well, verse 8:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

⁸ Say I these things as a man? or said not the law the same also?

⁹ For it is written in the law of Moses, [...]

What? Paul is appealing to the Law of Moses? Yup. Now here’s what the Law of Moses [Deuteronomy 25:4] says:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

⁹ [...] You shall not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treads out the corn. Does God take care for oxen?

¹⁰ Or said he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: [*Why?*] that he that plows should plow in hope; and that he that threshes in hope should be partaker of his hope.

Now, this is really an astonishing example. First, that Paul appeals to the Law of Moses as a definer of right and wrong. Second, that the law *isn't even about* oxen. Think about it. How many people actually owned an ox they used for threshing? He's writing this to the church in the *city* of Corinth. These were big-city people; they didn't have oxen. And yet he is citing a law of Moses and said, "Hey, it's for us." And third, well...what's wrong with feeding the animal *before* you start to work, then you wouldn't need to muzzle him, would you? I mean, what's the big deal here? Well, finally we have the apostle Paul telling a *Gentile* church in Corinth that the Law of Moses was written *for them*. And in this he agrees *entirely* with Jesus: Not one stroke of a pen shall pass from the Law or the Prophets while heaven and earth stand. Now, what's Paul's point; what's he driving at here? He says this, verse 11, beginning to tie it up:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

¹¹ If we have sown to you spiritual things, is it a great thing if we shall reap your carnal things?

¹² If others be partakers of this power over you, are not we rather? Nevertheless we have not used this power; but suffer all things, lest we should hinder the gospel of Christ.

When Paul came to Corinth the first time, he was very sensitive to this sort of thing, so he stayed with Aquila and Priscilla and worked with them in their business. They were tent-makers. That was Paul's craft.

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

¹³ Do you not know that they which minister about holy things live of the things of the temple? [*He cites the example of the priesthood.*] and they which wait at the altar are partakers with the altar? [*They eat meat that comes off that altar.*]

¹⁴ Even so has the Lord ordained that they which preach the gospel should live of the gospel.

The *whole point* here in citing the Law of Moses was to demonstrate to this church that it was okay to compensate their pastors. Now, in the process... (and this is an aside I talk about in the book *Law and Covenant*) but some of the laws are aphorisms. They actually give us a homely illustration like muzzling an ox when he's treading out the corn, which is not the *point* of the law. The point of the law is that people who work should get paid, and Paul uses it to say even the people who work in the Gospel. But he said:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

¹⁵ But I have used none of these things: neither have I written these things, that it should be so done to me: for it were better for me to die, than that any man should make my glorying void.

¹⁶ For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of: for necessity is laid on me; yes, woe is to me, if I preach not the gospel!

¹⁷ For if I do this thing willingly, I have a reward: but if against my will, a dispensation of the gospel is committed to me.

¹⁸ What is my reward then? Truly that, when I preach the gospel, I may make the gospel of Christ without charge, that I abuse not my power in the gospel.

Then he says something that took me a long time to come to understand. This is verse 19:

1 Corinthians 9

AKJV

¹⁹ For though I be free from all men, yet have I made myself servant to all, that I might gain the more.

As I said, that's striking because I didn't really understand it for the longest time. It took getting away from a denominational ministry—to striking out as a non-denominational service ministry—before I personally got the point. One of the easiest things in the world is for a minister or teacher of the Bible to get stuck in a church or an organization and lose his freedom, in various ways, great and small. Paul had the blessing of knowing this right from the start. And every pastor knows what I'm talking about, for in accepting that role in a church he is somewhat bound to that service and to the doctrinal structure of that church.

Someone should do a survey of pastors someday and ask if there is some point of belief they hold that they don't feel free to preach. In most cases, the pastor will decide it's not that important. The value of doing the job makes it worth leaving small issues on the table. But that makes it all the more important that there be, somewhere somehow, independent voices who call on us to *think*—voices with no temporal authority, but with the *moral* authority of an independent itinerant preacher. People whose power is threatened hate preachers like Paul, but that is a measure of their own *small-mindedness*. And while they strive to gain control of this or that flock, they don't even realize they are forging their own chains. But God will not be silent.

There's one more thing we need to nail down about what the first Christians believed about the Law of Moses. When Paul went out on his first missionary journey—everywhere he went—he went to the synagogue, he was rejected by the Jews, and accepted by Gentiles. So they got back and they announced to the church that God had opened the door of faith to Gentiles in their hundreds. Man, that caused great joy in the church at Antioch. *But* (and the story begins in Acts 15, verse 1):

Acts 15

AKJV

¹ And certain men which came down from Judaea taught the brothers, and said, Except you be circumcised after the manner of Moses, you cannot be saved.

Where they get that, I have no idea. But, nevertheless, it all created a big problem. They went down to Jerusalem before the Jerusalem Conference (all the elders, the church, got together) and they rehearsed this whole thing before them.

Acts 15

AKJV

⁵ But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses.

Now, here's what I didn't understand for a long time. It took reading a book on *Judaism When Christianity Began* [by Jacob Neusner] for me to really understand it. For the Pharisees, the Law of Moses included both the written and the Oral Law. They wanted to require circumcision of all Gentile converts. Mind you, the issue was not the circumcision of Jewish children. That was taken for granted, no problem. It was adult circumcision of Gentiles that posed the problem. Neither Jesus nor Paul nor this conference had *any problem at all* with the Written Law, and they weren't discussing the Law of Moses at all (that is, what *they* would consider the Law of Moses). They were dealing with what these guys would have called "Jewish law". The Pharisees wanted to apply their own rules to the Gentile converts. It's no surprise that these guys were there. They had baptized 3,000 people on the day of Pentecost; a lot of them were Pharisees. And just because they were baptized Christians, they did not

walk away from all their old beliefs at that time. When Jesus did not even agree with their rules as applied to *Jews*, they still wanted to apply these rules to *Gentiles*.

Now, Peter spoke at this conference and told them what had happened with Cornelius [Acts 10]. And Paul spoke and told them what had happened to him. Then James spoke and said something very important. After all of this he cited, “Simon has said, ‘Here’s what God did.’ We know that. What Paul did? We know that.” And then he said something *really* important. He said:

Acts 15

AKJV

¹⁵ And to this agree the words of the prophets; as it is written,

¹⁶ After this I will return, and will build again the tabernacle of David, which is fallen down; and I will build again the ruins thereof, and I will set it up:

¹⁷ That the residue of men might seek after the Lord, and all the Gentiles, on whom my name is called, said the Lord, who does all these things.

It was one thing to declare their experience, but it didn’t mean a thing if it wasn’t supported by Scripture.

Until next time, I’m Ronald Dart.

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