

## **Delighting in the Good Law of Yahweh: An Old Testament Perspective**

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In the liturgy Lutherans pray: “Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways to the glory of your holy name.”<sup>1</sup> That prayer reflects good Old Testament theology. The Psalms are replete with similar prayers. They express the prayer of faith, the godly desire to love what Yahweh loves, to delight in God’s good commandments, to walk in God’s upright ways. Only faith in Yahweh, the God of Israel, can talk that way. Followers of Baal or Chemosh or the other gods and goddesses of the nations do not talk that way, for they desire to walk in other paths. But the psalmists want to be taught the true paths by the true God and to walk in those godly ways. Why? Because those paths taught by Yahweh are true, good, righteous, upright, holy, salutary, praiseworthy, and perfect. Those who fear, love, and trust in Yahweh above all things love his ways. Not the ways of the nations or the ways of the wicked but the ways of Yahweh deserve to be taught and extolled. As The Large Catechism puts it: “how highly these Ten Commandments are to be exalted and extolled above all orders, commands, and works that are taught and practiced apart from them.”<sup>2</sup>

### **The Torah Psalms**

The Hebrew word “Torah” means simply “instruction.” It is a *tau*-prefixed noun formation from the root *yarah*, “to instruct.” It is important to remember this basic meaning of the word “Torah” when reading the Old Testament’s laws, for they are first and foremost instruction and teaching from Yahweh. Unlike the law books of today,

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<sup>1</sup> Divine Service II in *Lutheran Worship* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1982):158, 178.

which are written in a cold, impersonal and objective style, the laws recorded in the Old Testament display a strong didactic character. They often take the form of direct address with second person verbs. In Deuteronomy the laws comprise part of Moses' sermons to the people; they are preached laws, filled with exhortations and motivational clauses.

The "instruction" or Torah of Yahweh is extolled in many places throughout the Old Testament. Here I draw your attention to the Psalms. Many of the Psalms praise the Torah. A common petition is that Yahweh "teach me" (*hip'il* of       ; *pi'el* of       ; *hip'il* of       ). The psalmists desire to be taught by God and to be taught the instructions of God. They do not want to follow the advice of the wicked and the godless. They want the God of truth to teach them, and they want to follow God's way wholeheartedly: "Teach me, O Yahweh, your way; I will walk in your truth; unite my heart to fear your name" (Psalm 86:11).<sup>3</sup> God "teaches" his people the ways to go, and his people respond by praising God and his ways. Consider some examples.

Psalm 32, a well-known penitential psalm, begins by proclaiming how blessed is the one "whose transgression is forgiven" (v. 1). The psalmist confessed his sin and God forgave him (v. 5). Then later in the psalm God speaks:

"I will make you wise and I will instruct you in the way in which you should walk; I will counsel you with my eye upon you. Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding . . ." (vv. 8-9).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "The Large Catechism: The Ten Commandments," par. 333. See *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>3</sup> All translations are by the author unless otherwise indicated in the notes.

<sup>4</sup> It remains unclear where the quotation of the divine speech ends, at the end of either v. 8 or v. 9. In any case, v. 8 should be taken as a divine speech set within the psalm. The clause "I will counsel you with my eye upon you" points toward this interpretation. The phrase "my eye upon you" refers to divine protection.

God teaches his people and urges that they be teachable. Notice how both the emphasis on God's forgiveness and the emphasis on God's instruction in the way to go belong together. Clearly we should not think of a works-righteous legalism here.

Psalm 143 provides a good example of the close connection between faith in God's steadfast love and the desire to walk in God's way. The psalmist prays: "And do not enter into judgment with your servant, for no one living is righteous before you" (v. 2). The psalmist does not claim to be without sin; he implores God's undeserved mercy and steadfast love. Yet, he also yearns to walk in God's ways. He prays:

"Let me hear your steadfast love in the morning; for in you I trust; make me know the way in which I should walk; for to you I lift up my soul" (v. 8);

"Teach me to do your will, for you are my God; let your good Spirit lead me on level ground" (v. 10).

The psalmist seeks God's steadfast love, God's teaching, and God's leading.

The prayer to be taught and led by God strikes a dominant note in Psalm 25:

"Your ways, O Yahweh, make me know; your paths teach me. Lead me in your truth and teach me, for you are the God of my salvation; for you I wait all the day" (vv. 4-5);

"Good and upright is Yahweh; therefore he instructs sinners in the way.

He leads the humble in justice, and he teaches the humble his way" (vv. 8-9);

"Who is the man who fears Yahweh? He [Yahweh] will instruct him in the way he should choose" (v. 12).

The God to whom the prayer is addressed is Yahweh, “the God of my salvation.” Because Yahweh is “good and upright,” he is the God who can be trusted to teach and lead in good ways. To be taught and led by Yahweh is a great gift and much to be desired. Again, closely associated with the petition for instruction is the petition for forgiveness:

“The sins of my youth and my acts of rebellion do not remember.” (v. 7);

“For your name’s sake, O Yahweh, forgive my iniquity, for it is great” (v. 11);

“and forgive all my sins” (v. 18).

Any legalistic works-righteous interpretation of these kinds of psalms would greatly distort their meaning.

Some of the psalms are so dominated by the praise of the Torah that they are labeled “Torah Psalms,” Psalms 1, 19, and 119.<sup>5</sup> Psalm 1 declares blessed the one who refuses the counsel of the wicked but meditates on Yahweh’s Torah. Like a tree planted by water he bears much fruit. The Torah is likened to water that nourishes and fructifies a tree. The psalm goes on to contrast the wicked: “Not so the wicked but like the chaff which the wind blows away.” The wicked vanish so quickly that they do not even get a verb. They have no roots and no water source. The message is clear: Don’t be chaff but be a tree by the water.<sup>6</sup>

Psalm 19 extols the Torah with six sentences, each of which uses a nominal clause followed by a participial phrase (except for the last colon which breaks the pattern by using a finite verb):

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<sup>5</sup> For stimulating comments on the significance of these psalms within the Psalter, see James Luther Mays, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 106 (1987): 3-12.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Jeremiah 17:5-8.

“The Torah of Yahweh is perfect,	restoring the soul.
The testimony of Yahweh is sure,	making the simple wise.
The precepts of Yahweh are upright,	making the heart glad.
The commandment of Yahweh is pure,	enlightening the eyes.
The fear of Yahweh is clean,	standing forever.
The judgments of Yahweh are true;	they are altogether righteous.”

The instruction of Yahweh gladdens the soul and heart, enlightens the eyes, and makes one wise. Those who love Yahweh find his Torah more desirable than gold and sweeter than honey (v. 10).<sup>7</sup>

The most famous Torah Psalm is Psalm 119. Psalm 119 is structured around eight key words functioning as near-synonyms for the law of Yahweh: “saying” ( ), “word” ( ), “statute” ( ), “commandment” ( ), “judgment” ( ), “testimonies” ( ), “precept” ( ), and “Torah” ( ). These key words occur 177 times in 176 verses, basically one Torah-word per verse. Four verses omit a key word and four verses compensate by using two key words; the psalm throws in an additional occurrence for extra measure so as to overflow with Torah-words.<sup>8</sup>

The psalm exalts Yahweh’s instruction. Repeatedly throughout the psalm one finds expressions of delight in the Torah, petitions to be taught by Yahweh, and declarations of the wish to keep the commandments. Because Yahweh is good and

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<sup>7</sup> For a good treatment of Psalm 19 that shows how the whole psalm makes coherent sense, see Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (Word Biblical Commentary 19; Waco: Word Books, 1983).

<sup>8</sup> On the complex patterns of Psalm 119, see David Noel Freedman, *Psalm 119: The Exaltation of Torah* (Biblical and Judaic Studies from UCSD 6; Winona Lake, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 1999).

righteous, his statutes are good and righteous: “You are good and you do good; teach me your statutes” (v. 68); “You are righteous, O Yahweh, and upright are your judgments” (v. 137). Love of Yahweh and love of his law go together. As the psalmist loves the ways of Yahweh, so he hates the ways of the wicked:

“Incline my heart to your testimonies and not to false gain;  
make my eyes turn away from looking at vanity; in your  
ways revive me” (vv. 36-37);

“Hot indignation seizes me because of the wicked, those who  
forsake your Torah” (v. 53);

“From your precepts I gain understanding; therefore I hate every  
false path” (v. 104);

“The double-minded I hate, but your Torah I love” (v. 113);

“Therefore all your precepts concerning everything I consider right;  
every false path I hate” (v. 128);

“Falsehood I hate and I abhor; your Torah I love” (v. 163).

Who is your teacher and what do you desire? Either the wicked teach you or the God of Israel teaches you, either you learn the ways of the wicked or you learn the ways of God, either you delight in and meditate on the instruction of falsehood or you delight in and meditate on the instruction of truth. Those are the two radically different roads possible, and this psalm and others like it encourage the hearers to set their hearts on God’s road. That is the framework needed for understanding these psalms.<sup>9</sup> They do not intend to promote legalistic works-righteousness or pharisaical pride but to shape our

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<sup>9</sup> The Torah Psalms exhibit a “Newtonian” perspective as it were. See James W. Voelz, “Reading Scripture as Lutherans in the Post-Modern Era,” *Lutheran Quarterly* 14 (2000):309-34.

loves and our hates, what we admire and what we despise. They are designed to form and inform God-pleasing prayer and praise.

### **The Narrative Framework for Israel's Laws**

The laws given to ancient Israel appear in three major places: Exodus 20-23; Leviticus; and Deuteronomy 5 and 12-26. It is important to understand these laws within their narrative context. The biblical narrative begins with creation, the fall, the first promise, and the spread of sin and death throughout the world. Then the narrative narrows down to Abraham and his descendents. The maker of the heavens and earth calls Abraham and promises him offspring, the land of Canaan, blessing, and that through him and his seed all the families of the earth will be blessed.

Now fast-forward 400-plus years. Abraham does have many descendents but they do not live in the land of Canaan. Instead they find themselves in bondage in Egypt. It is a theological bondage, not merely economic or political. They are not free to serve and worship Yahweh, at least not openly and publicly; they are forced to serve only Pharaoh. They do not deliver themselves and they can not deliver themselves; they are helplessly and hopelessly “stuck” in bondage. Nevertheless, their God looks upon them in his abounding steadfast love; he remembers his covenant with Abraham and “comes down” to deliver them (Exodus 3:8). Yahweh defeats Pharaoh with a strong hand and an outstretched arm and brings Israel out of Egypt. Only God and God alone redeems Israel from bondage.

Yahweh does not only deliver Israel *from* bondage to Pharaoh. He also delivers Israel *for* a different future and a different life. The creator of the heavens and earth brings them to himself at Sinai and makes himself their God and makes them his own

people.<sup>10</sup> Yahweh renews the covenant he previously made with Abraham and now he makes it with Israel as a whole nation.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, Yahweh promises to bring Israel into the land of Canaan, just as he promised Abraham. The narrative is nicely summarized by God's speech to Moses in Exodus 6:2-8:

“I am Yahweh. And I appeared to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, as El Shadday, but with respect to my name Yahweh, I did not make myself known to them. And I also established my covenant with them, to give to them the land of Canaan, the land of their sojourning-places in which they sojourned. And moreover I have heard the groaning of the Israelites whom the Egyptians are enslaving, and I have remembered my covenant. Therefore, say to the Israelites, ‘I am Yahweh, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from their bondage. And I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment. And I will take you to myself for a people, and I will be your God; and you will know that I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians. And I will bring you to the land which I swore to give to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, and I will give it to you for a possession. I am Yahweh.’”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> On the covenant formula, “I will be their God and they will be my people,” see Rolf Rendtorff, *The Covenant Formula: An Exegetical and Theological Investigation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Old Testament Studies series; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998[original 1995]).

<sup>11</sup> For good theological treatments of the relationship between the Abrahamic covenant and the Sinaitic covenant, see John P. Milton, *God's Covenant of Blessing* (Rock Island, Illinois: Augustana Press, 1961); Walter R. Roehrs, “Divine Covenants: Their Structure and Function,” *Concordia Journal* 14 (1988):7-27.

<sup>12</sup> On the passage and its significance for biblical theology, see Elmer A. Martens, *God's Design: A Focus on Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1981).

Israel has been redeemed from bondage and has been brought to God and made God's own special possession. It was all by God's undeserved grace and mercy and abundant steadfast love. They have been delivered from one way of life, called "bondage," and for a different way of life marked by service to Yahweh. They were purchased and won from death, as it were, so that they may be God's own and "live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness."<sup>13</sup> Now at Sinai Yahweh reveals to the nation of Israel the new way of life they are to follow in the land of Canaan. God did not free them from bondage only to put them back under bondage again. God freed them from bondage for a life of freedom in service to God. That life of freedom in service to God has a definite, describable shape to it, and that shape is given in the Pentateuchal laws.

### **The Ways of Yahweh or the Ways of the Nations**

In Deuteronomy 4:6-8 Moses says to the people:

"Keep and do [the statutes and judgments], for that is your wisdom and your understanding in the eyes of the peoples who will hear all these statutes and say, 'Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people.' For what great nation is there that has a god as near to it as is Yahweh our God whenever we call to him? And what great nation is there that has statutes and judgments as righteous as all this Torah which I am placing before you today?"

The logic of this kind of passage and others like it can be unpacked in this way. The nations grope in the darkness as they follow the dictates of their own confused minds. They don't know which way is up. Israel is to live among the nations but Israel is not to

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. Luther's Small Catechism under the Second Article of the Apostle's Creed.

emulate the nations. Israel is to keep Yahweh's statutes and thereby gain the respect of the nations and even attract the nations to Yahweh and to Yahweh's Torah (cf. Deut 26:19).

The laws given by Yahweh describe the shape of Israel's future life in the Promised Land. They envision Israel living in the land of Canaan, yet they call Israel to a life quite unlike that of the Canaanites. Throughout the Pentateuch the reader frequently comes upon warnings for Israel to avoid imitating the other nations. For example, Leviticus 18:3-4 states:

“According to the deeds of the land of Egypt, where you used to dwell, you shall not do, and according to the deeds of the land of Canaan, to which I am bringing you, you shall not do, and in their statutes you shall not walk. My judgments you shall do, and my statutes you shall keep by walking in them. I am Yahweh your God.”

Don't walk in *their* benighted statutes, Yahweh says; walk in *my* enlightening statutes.

The conduct of Israel in the land is to be distinctly different from that of the surrounding nations in several ways. Israel is not to worship the gods of the surrounding nations or to follow their practices (Exodus 23:23-24). Israel is prohibited from worshiping Yahweh by following the worship practices of the other nations (Deuteronomy 12:2-4, 29-31). According to Deuteronomy 18:9-14, Israel should not follow the abominable practices of the nations by engaging in child sacrifice or by attempting to communicate with the supernatural world through divination, soothsaying, augury, sorcery, casting spells, and necromancy.<sup>14</sup> Leviticus 18 prohibits Israel from

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<sup>14</sup> On these practices among the Canaanites, see Jeffrey H. Tigay, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Deuteronomy* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1996), 172-5.

emulating the nations in terms of incest, adultery, human-sacrifice to Molech, homosexuality, and bestiality.<sup>15</sup>

Israel is commanded to annihilate the Hittites, Amorites, Canaanites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites precisely “in order that they may not teach you to do according to all their abhorrent things which they do for their gods, and you sin against Yahweh your God” (Deuteronomy 20:18; cf. Exodus 23:33). Yahweh is to be their teacher, not the idolatrous nations. What will happen if Israel does imitate the nations? Then Israel will experience the same judgment as the nations. Just as God drives the nations out of the land because of their great wickedness, so he will drive a *goy*-like Israel out of the land as well (Deuteronomy 8:20; 9:4-5; Leviticus 18:24-30; 20:22-23).

Although space prohibits any extended discussion of the specific laws themselves, permit me to make a few general observations. The laws are addressed to each individual Israelite and to Israel as a whole. Ancient Israel was a theocracy, both a nation and a worshiping community at the same time. Therefore the laws address a wide array of concerns, from worship to warfare, from parents to property, from disputes to disease. The traditional threefold division of the laws into moral, ceremonial, and civil soon breaks down when one studies the laws. Ceremonial considerations inform some “moral” laws, moral considerations inform some “ceremonial” laws, and so on. While the laws address a host of issues, they should not be understood as so many irrational, *ad-*

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<sup>15</sup> On these practices among the nations, see Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus* (New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 251-60. On Molech, see George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series 43; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985); John Day, *Molech: A god of human sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989). Leviticus 18 also prohibits sexual relations with a woman during menstrual impurity (v. 19), a prohibition that is part of Israel’s unique system of ritual purity.

*hoc* do's and don't's. Certain theological, social, and economic considerations inform them. The laws make sense when studied contextually.

The first commandment is always first and foremost. Deuteronomy repeatedly accents that the commandments are to be kept with joy from a whole-hearted “fear” and “love” of God. The commandments do not call for action done to merit God’s favor or for slavish and reluctant action but for glad-hearted action that flows from faith.

The God whom one is to fear and love is always the specific God named Yahweh, the God who mercifully brought Israel out of bondage and made them his own people. It is of paramount significance for understanding the laws to see them in connection with the opening statement: “I am Yahweh your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exodus 20:2; Deuteronomy 5:6). The identity of the One giving the laws is not some malevolent deity or some abstract philosophers’ god but the revealed God who not only created but also redeemed Israel, who showed himself to be “gracious and compassionate and abounding in steadfast love.”<sup>16</sup> To disobey this God is to disobey the loving Savior. There are also frequent warnings that disobedience eventually provokes God to wrath.<sup>17</sup> God takes his commandments seriously and punishes the transgressors. But we should not think of the God giving the laws as an angry and malicious God desiring to punish. The legal material repeatedly reminds Israel that the one speaking is the one who saved them.

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<sup>16</sup> This frequently recurring phrase is virtually a creedal statement in the Old Testament.

<sup>17</sup> On the wrath of God in the Old Testament, see Bruce E. Baloiian, *Anger in the Old Testament* (American University Studies Series 7, Theology and Religion 99; New York: Peter Lang, 1992); H. G. L. Peels, *The Vengeance of God: The Meaning of the Root NQM and the Function of the NQM-Texts in the Context of Divine Revelation in the Old Testament* (Oudtestamentische Studiën 31; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1995).

### **The Law Always Accuses Sinners**

Those who trust in Yahweh and in his steadfast love extol his law and commandments. They desire to walk in God's ways. But if we look at the picture from a different angle and ask if sinners measure up to God's commandments, then the Old Testament uniformly answers with a strong "No." Sinners transgress God's good law. The law always accuses sinners. This is what happens when the good, holy, and righteous law of God meets transgressors and lawbreakers. The accusing and condemning function of God's law manifests itself throughout the Old Testament. Already with the giving of the law at Sinai provision was made for atonement and forgiveness of sins through the sacrificial system. The entire sacrificial system presupposes that the Israelites would disobey and break commandments. Why else would they need atonement and forgiveness?

God's law accused and condemned both individual Israelites and Israel as a whole. The main reason given for their exile is that they continually broke the first commandment. By their continual idolatry and apostasy they provoked Yahweh to anger and brought down upon themselves the curses of the Mosaic covenant. This is how the biblical historians and prophets explain the destruction of Samaria and Jerusalem and the exiles of the north and the south. The Old Testament historians narrate the history of Israel as one of continual rebellion against Yahweh on the part of Israel, to which Yahweh responded with acts of judgment. There is only one exception to this narrative of sin and judgment, and that is the time of Joshua, when according to Judges 2, the people faithfully served Yahweh. After that generation died, every succeeding generation rebelled until the axe of judgment came down and Israel as an independent

nation ceased to exist. According to the usual chronology, the North was exiled ca. 732, Samaria was destroyed in 722, most of Judah was exiled already in 701, and Jerusalem was destroyed in 587/6.

### **A New and Different Future**

Throughout the entire Old Testament one reads of Yahweh desiring an obedient Israel. Although the history of Israel turned out to be marked by disobedience, God still desired an obedient people. It is not as if God gave up on that idea and turned to plan B. On the contrary, God announced through the prophets that in the future there would be an obedient Israel. God himself would see to it. The prophets repeatedly announce a future for Israel and the nations that would be radically different from the sorry past.

According to the prophets, the status quo was completely unacceptable, characterized as it was by lack of faith in Yahweh, by going after other gods, by injustice and wicked behavior, by the total inability to do what is right and the constant inclination to do what is wrong. So the prophets announced the coming judgment against Israel and all the nations. But that would not be the end of the story. Out of the ashes God would create a new and different reality.

The prophets promise the Messianic King who will rule in perfect righteousness, unlike the kings of the past. Isaiah's servant songs announce an obedient servant, the servant of Yahweh who suffers not for his own sins but for the sins of others. The prophets also declare that God will build a new Israel out of the remnant, and this new Israel will be different.

According to Jeremiah's well-known promise of a new covenant, Yahweh will write his Torah on Israel's heart; Yahweh will be their God and they will be Yahweh's

people; and they will all perfectly know Yahweh. This new reality will be grounded on the gift of divine forgiveness, “for I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:31-34). Ezekiel has a similar promise: “I will give to you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and I will give to you a heart of flesh. And my Spirit I will put within you and I will cause you to walk in my statutes, and my judgments you will keep and you will do” (Ezekiel 36:26-27). The people were supposed to make for themselves a new heart and a new spirit (Ezekiel 18:31), but because they failed, now God promises that he himself will give them a new heart and a new spirit and that his own Spirit will enable them to be his obedient Israel.

The prophets depict the future not as a mere repetition of the past but as something radically different. Part of that difference is a different Israel. In place of the old faithless and disobedient Israel there will be a new Israel, a faithful and obedient Israel enabled by the Spirit to walk in Yahweh’s ways.

The future will be different not only for Israel but also for the nations. Isaiah chapter 2 announces the future time when the nations will stream to the exalted Zion:

“And many peoples will come and say,  
‘Come, let us go up to the mountain of Yahweh,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
so that he may teach us from his ways,  
and so that we may walk in his paths.’  
For from Zion will go forth the Torah,  
and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem” (v. 3).

Instead of teaching themselves their own constructed and false ideas, instead of walking in their own wicked ways, the nations will be taught by Yahweh and will walk in Yahweh's ways. The future life and conduct of the Gentiles will be different, and that difference is characterized as walking in the ways of the Torah given by the God of Jacob. According to the prophets, one of the gifts that Yahweh will give Israel and the nations is a new and different life, a life with Yahweh and a life of walking in Yahweh's ways. That is the way the Old Testament ends, with a promise of a future marked by obedience.

### **Reflections in the Light of the New Testament**

So far I have limited myself to describing Old Testament theology from within the Old Testament itself. To hear the Old Testament witness from within the Old Testament itself is a legitimate and necessary task, an essential part of the exercise of doing biblical theology. But limiting oneself to the Old Testament is not the entire theological task from a Christian point of view. So now I will extend the scope to include the New Testament and offer some brief reflections on the significance of the material for Christian theology and life.

The Old Testament's prophetic hope of a new and different future, a future marked by obedience, has great significance for Christology. The church confesses that Jesus of Nazareth is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. He is the righteous and faithful Messiah, the innocent suffering Servant. And this also means that Jesus of Nazareth is the promised Israel, "Israel condensed into one,"<sup>18</sup> the obedient and faithful Israel. Matthew provides a good illustration of this point. Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is to

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<sup>18</sup> I owe this phrase to my colleagues Horace Hummel and James Voelz.

be seen as Israel.<sup>19</sup> Jesus recapitulates and fulfills Israel's history, as, for example, he is called out of Egypt and tested for a period of 40 in the wilderness. He fulfills the promises given by God to ancient Israel. Therefore it is not surprising that Matthew also stresses the obedience of Jesus toward God his Father. God desires an obedient Israel and Jesus Christ is first and foremost that obedient Israel. Only on the basis of Christ's perfect obedience are those baptized into Christ reckoned before God as his obedient Israel.

The rich Old Testament theology of the law of God also has great significance for understanding the Christian life.<sup>20</sup> One of the gifts from God is a new way of life. Just as the Torah depicting Israel's alternative life was a gift and received by the faithful with joy, so also the alternative life God gives Christians is a gift. Not only "justification" but also "sanctification," the new obedience, the new way of godliness and holiness, is to be received with thankfulness. The Holy Spirit has converted the baptized, has regenerated them, has liberated their will, and has given them new impulses and a new orientation. The Spirit so transforms them that now it can be said of them that they "fulfill the law" by serving the neighbor in love, although it must also be said of them that they keep it imperfectly because of sin (Romans 13:8-10; cf. Galatians 5:13-14; 6:2).<sup>21</sup> As St. Paul

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<sup>19</sup> For a good treatment of Jesus as Israel in Matthew, see David E. Holwerda, *Jesus and Israel: One Covenant or Two?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 27-58.

<sup>20</sup> For a classic treatment of the Christian life of new obedience, see Adolf Köberle, *The Quest For Holiness* (reprinted by Evansville, Indiana: Ballast Press, 1997[original 1936]).

<sup>21</sup> Werner Elert asserts that the "law" throughout the Scriptures is always the law of retribution [*Das christliche Ethos* (Tübingen: Furche-Verlag, 1949), 90]. This assertion is patently false. When Paul states in Romans 13:8-10, for example, that Christians "fulfill the law," he does not mean that they fulfill the law of retribution or the law that threatens with the wrath of God. By the term "law" (*nomos*) in this passage Paul means simply the content of God's will for human conduct as expressed in the Ten Commandments. We must reckon with the polysemy of the term "law," even in Pauline usage. See Paul R. Raabe, "The Law and Christian Sanctification: A Look at Romans," *Concordia Journal* 22 (1996): 178-185. This view is also reflected in Lutheran theology, as can be demonstrated by numerous texts in the Lutheran Confessions. Apology IV maintains that "the keeping of the law must begin in us and then increase more and more" (par. 136). Apology XII, 82 states in the German version that the regenerate

states in 1 Cor 9:20-21, the Christian is neither “under the law” (*hypo nomon*) nor “without the law” (*anomos*) but “in the law of Christ” (*ennomos christou*). “In the law of Christ” is the third alternative to legalistic bondage under the law on the one hand and antinomian libertinism on the other hand.

What should receive more stress in catechesis, sermons, and Bible classes, in my opinion, are both the goodness of the law and the joy of obedience. The law of God should not be demonized.<sup>22</sup> It is not sin, as St. Paul reminds the Romans (Romans 7:7). Just as God is good, so his law is good. “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12), and even “of the Spirit” (*pneumatikos*; Romans 7:14). That is why one must say more than only “Christ frees from the law.” Because the law is God’s law and therefore good, righteous, holy, and of the Spirit, Christians delight in it. Furthermore, “obedience” is not a dirty word. Sinners do not have all the fun. Actually, sin is quite boring and tiresome. Where the fun is, where the excitement is, where the real action is, is in the daily adventure of obedience and service to Christ. To live under the end-time rule of God inaugurated by Christ is to live in an alternative universe, where what is “right” is good and delightful and what is “wrong” is bad and boring.

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receive the Holy Spirit and “therefore they begin to become friendly to the law and to obey the same” (“Darum fangen sie an, dem Gesetz hold zu werden und demselbigen zu gehorchen”). The Large Catechism introduces the creed by stating that the creed “is given in order to help us do what the Ten Commandments require of us” (The Creed, par. 2). Furthermore, the Large Catechism introduces the Lord’s Prayer by saying that “nothing is so necessary as to call upon God incessantly and to drum into his ears our prayer that he may give, preserve, and increase in us faith and the fulfillment of the Ten Commandments and remove all that stands in our way and hinders us in this regard” (The Lord’s Prayer, par. 2). See *The Book of Concord*, eds. Robert Kolb and Timothy J. Wengert (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).

<sup>22</sup> Sometimes at least in Lutheran circles the law is spoken of only in negative terms. For a discussion of 20<sup>th</sup> century debates over the role of the law, see Scott Murray, *Law, Life, and the Living God: The Third Use of the Law* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, forthcoming).

The theological structure is the same for both Testaments. Just as God freed ancient Israel from bondage for a new and different life of service to God, so in a far greater way in the eschatological fulfillment the Good News of Jesus Christ frees all sinners from their old ways to a new and different way. The New Testament often presents a contrast between the old pre-baptismal way of life and the new baptismal way of life, a theology of “before and after” you might say.

Consider, for example, First Peter. In First Peter 1:14-19 the appeal is made to the readers that they leave behind their former lives and dedicate themselves to a different life of holiness:

“As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct; since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy.’ . . . You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.”<sup>23</sup>

In chapter 4 the contrast between “before” and “after” is again evident. The readers are exhorted to live by the will of God, for they have spent enough time acting like the Gentiles. As the readers live by the will of God they receive abuse from the Gentiles, who “are surprised that you do not run with them into the same excess of dissipation, and they blaspheme” (4:3-4). Because the readers no longer join the “Gentile” crowd, their

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<sup>23</sup> RSV.

former, pagan friends are surprised and upset by this change of behavior, so upset in fact that they “blaspheme” (*blasphemeo*).<sup>24</sup>

Ephesians 2 picks up on the same theme by setting forth two pairs of contrast: 1) Whereas the readers used to be “dead” in their sins, now God made them “alive” with Christ; and 2) whereas they formerly “walked according to the age of this world” (v. 2), now God created them in Christ “for good works, which God prepared beforehand that in them we should walk” (v. 10). What do these “good works” and this alternative way of life look like? Ephesians goes on in chapters 4-6 to specify with quite a bit of description and instruction. For example, Ephesians 4:28 urges: “Let him who steals steal no longer; but rather let him labor, performing with his own hands what is good, in order that he may have something to share with him who has need.”<sup>25</sup> Notice the contrast being stressed between the one *ethos* and the other *ethos*: “Stop robbing people and instead get an honest job so that you may give generously to the poor.”

It seems to me that today more than ever the baptized need to be taught how radically different the ways of the Lord are from the ways of the world. Ancient Israel was called to live *among* the nations but *unlike* the nations. In the language of the Fourth Gospel, the church is to live *in* the world but not *of* the world. Lest the ideologies of the day become the pattern for the church to follow, lest the church find herself uncritically and unwittingly marching to the imperatives of the cultural Zeitgeist, the baptized need to be taught the distinction between the patterns of life advocated by the world and the very different pattern of life set forth by God.

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<sup>24</sup> The verb can denote “to malign, defame” the readers but in this context it more likely means “to blaspheme” God. See Paul J. Achtemeier, *1 Peter* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1996), 284.

<sup>25</sup> NASB.

I am not encouraging legalism. The law always accuses sinners, and Christians continue to be sinners. Our justification is always “apart from works” even after baptism and even at the final judgment. Christ remains the mediator after one’s baptism. What I am stressing is the simple observation that both Testaments devote a great deal of space to describing the life and conduct of God’s people. Not only external actions matter but also internal movements of the heart. And conversely, not only internal movements of the heart but also external actions matter. This is true not only for individuals but also for the church. What does the church look like, how does she conduct herself, and how does her behavior differ from that of other groups? These questions deserve serious attention, lest the church actually behave as if she were just another religious organization on a smorgasbord of religious organizations, trying to sell her religious commodities to religious consumers.

Finally, the Old Testament’s promise of an obedient Israel relates to eschatology. The Christian life of new obedience remains inchoate and imperfect since we continue to be sinners. We still live in a “not-yet” condition as we wait for the day when the Old Testament promise of an obedient Israel reaches its eschatological consummation. Only then at the Parousia will we have no original sin, only then at the Parousia will our thoughts, words, and deeds become perfectly holy and pure, perfectly obedient to the will of our creator. Only then will the words of Jeremiah’s promise reach their consummation, when it can be said of us that we “know the Lord” perfectly without the need of a teacher and that we live as God’s people with the Torah written on our hearts in perfect obedience. That is a day to long for with eager anticipation, for with the psalmists

of old we delight in God's good law and we desire to walk in his good ways to the glory of his holy name.