

Are Weird Old Testmanet Laws for Today?

Let's face it. The Bible has some really strange laws. Let's check out just a few from Deuteronomy 22:5-19:

A woman must not wear men's clothing, nor a man wear women's clothing, for the Lord your God detests anyone who does this.

If you come across a bird's nest beside the road, either in a tree or on the ground, and the mother is sitting on the young or on the eggs, do not take the mother with the young. You may take the young, but be sure to let the mother go, so that it may go well with you and you may have a long life.

When you build a new house, make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof.

Do not plant two kinds of seed in your vineyard; if you do, not only the crops you plant, but also the fruit of the vineyard, will be defiled.

Do not plow with an ox and a donkey yoked together.

Do not wear clothes of wool and linen woven together.

Make tassels on the four corners of the cloak you wear.

If a man takes a wife and, after lying with her, dislikes her and slanders her and gives her a bad name, saying, "I married this woman, but when I approached her, I did not find proof of her virginity," then the girl's father and mother shall bring proof that she was a virgin to the town elders at the gate. The girl's father will say to the elders, "I gave my daughter in marriage to this man, but he dislikes her. Now he has slandered her and said, 'I did not find your daughter to be a virgin.' But here is the proof of my daughter's virginity." Then her parents shall display the cloth before the elders of

the town, and the elders shall take the man and punish him. They shall fine him a hundred shekels of silver and give them to the girl's father, because this man has given an Israelite virgin a bad name. She shall continue to be his wife; he must not divorce her as long as he lives.

Now let's look at Leviticus 11:1-19:

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron, "Say to the Israelites: 'Of all the animals that live on land, these are the ones you may eat: You may eat any animal that has a split hoof completely divided and that chews the cud.

"There are some that only chew the cud or only have a split hoof, but you must not eat them. The camel, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof; it is ceremonially unclean for you. The coney, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof; it is unclean for you. The rabbit, though it chews the cud, does not have a split hoof; it is unclean for you. And the pig, though it has a split hoof completely divided, does not chew the cud; it is unclean for you. You must not eat their meat or touch their carcasses; they are unclean for you.

"Of all the creatures living in the water of the seas and the streams, you may eat any that have fins and scales. But all creatures in the seas or streams that do not have

fins or scales—whether among all the swarming things or among all the other living creatures in the water—you are to detest. And since you are to detest them, you must not eat their meat and you must detest their carcasses. Anything living in the water that does not have fins and scales is to be detestable to you.

"These are the birds you are to detest and not eat because they are detestable: the eagle, the

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vulture, the black vulture, the red kite, any kind of black kite, any kind of raven, the horned owl, the screech owl, the gull, any kind of hawk, the little owl, the cormorant, the great owl, the white owl, the desert owl, the osprey, the stork, any kind of heron, the hoopoe and the bat.”

In Leviticus 19:26-36:

“Do not eat any meat with the blood still in it.

“Do not practice divination or sorcery.

“Do not cut the hair at the sides of your head or clip off the edges of your beard.

“Do not cut your bodies for the dead or put tattoo marks on yourselves. I am the Lord.

“Do not degrade your daughter by making her a prostitute, or the land will turn to prostitution and be filled with wickedness.

“Observe my Sabbaths and have reverence for my sanctuary. I am the Lord.

“Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God.

“Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.

“When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the Lord your God.

“Do not use dishonest standards when measuring length, weight or quantity. Use honest scales and honest weights, an honest ephah and an honest hin.”

And the list goes on. Leviticus 13 and 14 have regulations about mildew in your house and rashes on your skin. Leviticus 15 has laws regulating female menstruation and male emissions. Leviticus 18 has laws stating who not to have sex with. And Leviticus 7:22 tells us not to eat animal fat.

Maybe this doesn't sound strange to you, but it does sound strange to some people. It can actually be embarrassing for those who say that the Bible is God's word for modern times.

What do we do with statements in the Bible like Joshua 1:8 where we are told, “Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful”? Or 2 Timothy 3:16

where the New Testament accredits everything that is written in the Old Testament saying, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness”

Before we laugh too hard at weird laws in the Old Testament, let's take a look at some current on-the-books American laws. For example, in Virginia it is illegal to tickle a woman. In Blackwater, Kentucky, to tickle a woman under her chin with a feather duster while she's in church carries a penalty of a \$10 fine and one day in jail. In Leecreek, Arkansas, no citizen is allowed to attend church in a red-colored garment. In Arkansas it is against the law to mispronounce Arkansas. In Iowa, kisses may last as long as, but not more than, five minutes. A Massachusetts law states that snoring is prohibited unless bedroom windows are closed and locked. A Pennsylvania law states that no man may purchase alcohol without written consent from his wife. In Utah daylight must be visible between dancing couples. In Texas the entire Encyclopedia Britannica is banned because it contains the formula for making beer at home. In Washington State x-rays may not be used to fit shoes. And in Minnesota, it's illegal to eat a loon (although I'm not sure why anyone would want to!) And, speaking of weird laws, across the USA, a teenage girl can have an abortion without her parent's consent, but she needs permission to have her ears pierced.

So, what do we do with weird Old Testament laws? The first step is to remember that they are from a different language and culture. Just as we seek to understand and respect different modern cultures, so we should seek to understand and respect ancient Hebrew culture.

What may not make sense to us made a lot of sense to ancient Hebrews—and things that may make sense to us probably would seem rather weird and strange to them. For example, the 2004 Minnesota Fishing Regulations published by the Minnesota Department of Natural Resources for March 1, 2004 – February 28, 2005 would be challenging for someone from ancient Israel to understand. At the top of page 6 are Tips for Reducing Contaminants: 1. Eat smaller fish. 2. Eat more panfish. 3. Trim skin and fat, especially belly fat. The ancient Hebrews would have called this book and its regulations “weird” but we know there are dangers from PCBs and that's why we have these eating rules. We even have different consumption guidelines for children and women of child-bearing

ing age (only one panfish per week!) and all other adults (unlimited panfish per week).

Old Testament regulations that may not make sense to us made a lot of sense to them. For example, they had flat roofs on their homes and they spent a lot of time on their rooftops. They were dangerous places, so parapets or guard rails were built for safety. In Minnesota you need a guard rail on your deck, otherwise your deck is dangerous. In Old Testament times there was a risk of pig-borne diseases; they needed clear genetic boundaries for having children; they were healthier with a low-fat diet; they needed to know the boundaries for sexual behavior.

The old way was mostly about rules; the new way is mostly about grace.

Different cultures regulate public behavior in different ways. When I visited the state of Nagaland in India I asked how they dealt with serious felonies in their society and was told that in the old days someone convicted of a major crime was excluded from the community for seven years. That didn't make sense to me. We would put someone in prison for grand larceny, rape or murder. But in their close-knit society expulsion was a worse punishment—no job, no family, no home and 84 months of wandering alone in an area filled with headhunters. That would be a pretty serious punishment for committing a felony. Different culture; similar goals.

Many cultures insist that the left hand is for the bathroom and the right hand is for eating. They are deeply offended when you pass the rice with your left hand.

The second step to help understand Old Testament laws is to recognize that there are different types of laws. Not all laws are the same. Not all laws are of equal importance. There were at least four different categories of laws. Food and hygiene laws deal with how to take care of ourselves. Morality laws deal with how to take care of others. Sacrifice laws deal with how to take care of sin. And Sabbath and worship laws deal with how to fellowship with God. All of these laws teach how a redeemed people live.

Remember that the Hebrew people had spent 400 years in slavery in Egypt until they were rescued by God. Pagan Egyptian culture was most familiar to them. They didn't know what was right

and what was wrong. They barely had a culture of their own. Now they wanted to know how to live better—how to be healthy, happy and holy. The laws in the Old Testament teach how to live in right relationships. They are not given as a burden but as a blessing.

Some of the laws were temporary and others are permanent. Some laws were just for Jews and other laws are for all of us. Some laws continue and others have expired. Some are more important and some are less important.

I know this raises an objection. Some will ask how we can tell which is which. The answer is that the distinctions are usually not difficult to figure out. God gives us common sense and the New Testa-

ment. With these we can figure out about 99.9% pretty quickly.

We make the same distinctions in our laws. We have laws prohibiting driving on the left side of the road. We have laws prohibiting murder. Both laws are matters of life and death. The driving law is local and cultural (in Australia they drive on the left side of the road). The murder law is moral (it's immoral to murder in Australia and in America).

We have different laws in different places. In Minnesota it is legal to drive a motorcycle without wearing a helmet. In California it is illegal to drive a motorcycle without wearing a helmet. In New Zealand it is required to wear a helmet when driving a bicycle. Helmet laws may have moral implications but they are not basic to moral law.

Whenever we read the Old Testament laws we need to ask if we are reading a local regulation like our traffic and fishing laws or if we are reading a moral law that applies to everyone everywhere. Laws about oxen and donkey don't apply to us. The Ten Commandments apply to everyone.

The third step to understand Old Testament laws is the New Testament. That's because the New Testament replaced the Old Testament as our primary guide to faith and practice. Hebrews 8:13 explains that the Old Testament is obsolete now that we have the New Testament. This specifically refers to the laws of sacrifice and worship. The old way was Sabbath rules; the new way is Sunday celebra-

tion. The old way to talk to God was through a priest; the new way to talk to God is directly in the name of Jesus. The old way was mostly about rules; the new way is mostly about grace.

Many of the Old Testament laws were preparation for Jesus and the church. Jesus said in Matthew 5:17, *“Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them.”* Think of it this way. Just as your learner’s permit prepares you for your driver’s license, the Old Testament laws prepared for Jesus. The license is bigger and better with greater freedom but it doesn’t negate the value of the learner’s permit.

St. Peter faced a tough transition from the Old Testament laws to New Testament freedom. You can read his story in Acts 10. He was a devout Jew. He had never eaten a pork chop, a bacon, lettuce and tomato sandwich, a slice of ham or a bratwurst in his life because his Jewish Old Testament had a law against eating pig meat. Then God sent a dream and told him it was okay to eat because that law had expired. It was a good law. Some still keep it. But it was no longer required by God. The New Testament had replaced the Old Testament.

Does all this mean that the Old Testament is now worthless? Of course not! The Bible clearly teaches in 2 Timothy 3:16 that the Old Testament *“is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”* What we need to do is read the Old Testament and decide which laws are for today and which ones aren’t. When we make that decision we should always seek to live by the principle behind the law. The principle behind the sexual behavior laws is to have sexual boundaries that honor God. The principle behind the food laws is to eat a healthy diet. The principle behind the Sabbath law is to always have one day of rest each week.

What if you are in doubt? You are not sure if it is a weird law or an enduring moral law. If you are in doubt, live by the old law. Just be cautious about judging other people who don’t interpret the Old Testament law with your compliance or with your freedom.

A lawyer once asked Jesus which law was the most important. Jesus had a great answer in Matthew 22:37-40:

“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.”

Jesus was quoting from Deuteronomy 6:5, one of those Old Testament books with weird laws. Obviously Jesus considered the law of love for God and neighbor as never becoming obsolete. It is the greatest principle. The law of love is our way to test which of the Old Testament laws are for us today and which ones are for another time and culture.

When I was in high school there were no personal computers with connected printers. I learned to type on a typewriter. It is a skill I still use almost everyday although it has been years since I touched an actual typewriter. Now I spend a lot of hours typing on my laptop faster than I can write or talk. The old is gone but appreciated. The old has shaped my life for good but I am so glad to have computers instead of typewriters.

It’s the same with the Old Testament. The benefits are wonderful. The laws of the Old Testament shape our lives today. But I am forever grateful that we have the New Testament of the grace of God and salvation through Jesus Christ.

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