

VERDICT

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“Law” and “Commandments” in the Gospel of John

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Although the term “the Law” and the word “commandment” are often used interchangeably in the Bible, the Gospel of John makes a distinction between them. The expression “the Law” appears fourteen times in the Gospel of John. The word “command” or “commandment” also appears about fourteen times.

It has long been noted that the Gospel of John is a book of controversy. The book depicts a great confrontation between Jesus and the Law, between Christ's or the Father's commandment and the Law, between Jesus and Judaism, and between the church and the synagogue. Gutbrod declares that John “has no particular interest in the Law as a possibility for regulating human or even Christian action.” ¹ He also says that in John “the Law is never used as the rule of Christian conduct for the community.” ² On the other hand, in the book of John, Jesus repeatedly urges his disciples to keep his commandments.

In all but one of the fourteen instances in which the term “the Law” appears in the Gospel of John, it is accompanied by the definite article. It is not any law that is referred to; it is always “the Law.” Thus:

For *the law* was given through Moses. – John 1:17.

Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in *the Law*, and about whom the prophets also wrote— Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” – John 1:45.

“The Law,” of course, refers to the Law of Moses. It is the body of teaching revealed to Moses, which constituted the foundation for the entire social and religious life and thought of Israel. It is the body of divine revelation given to Moses. In a broader context in the Gospel of John, however, “the Law” refers not only to the five books of Moses but also includes the Psalms and the prophetic books of the Old Testament and, indeed, the entire Old Testament itself. For example: “Jesus answered them, ‘Is it, not written in your Law, “I have said you are gods?”’” (John 10:34; cf. Ps. 82:6). And again: “But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’” (John 15:25; cf. Ps. 35:19; 69:4).

In some Johannine passages the expression “the Law” may refer to the Law of Moses, in the sense of a specific commandment. Thus:

“Has not Moses given you the law? Yet not one of you keeps the law. Why are you trying to kill me?”– John 7:19.

“Now if a child can be circumcised on the Sabbath so that the law of Moses may not be broken, why are you angry with me for healing the whole man on the Sabbath?”– John 7:23.

In still other situations the term “the Law” has the specific meaning of a legal ordinance:

Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing? – John 7:51.

But whenever the term “the Law” is used in the Gospel of John, it always refers to the Old Testament Law known as the Jewish Torah. John teaches that this Law of Moses points to Christ. It is a prophecy of Christ. When the Jews confronted Jesus and charged him with breaking the Law by healing on the Sabbath day, they pronounced him a sinner before the Law and then tried to kill him. In doing this, John points out that the Jews were unfaithful to the Law (see John 7:19). Furthermore, John shows that Moses, who was the Law personified, testified of Christ. If the Jews had been faithful to the Law, they would have embraced Jesus as their Messiah and Savior rather than attempting to kill him (John 7).

John also teaches that the Law not only points to Christ; it is not only a prophecy of Christ; but the Law is replaced or superseded by Jesus Christ. This thought is woven throughout the book of John but is especially presented in the prologue– John 1:1-18:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God; all things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life, was the light of men....

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. – John 1:1-4, 18, RSV.

Scholars have discovered that this Johannine prologue is derived from a pre-Christian hymn composed by rabbinic poets in praise of the Jewish Torah. The rabbis said that the Torah was the Law, wisdom, word. They said that the Torah was with God from the beginning and was the instrument by which God made the world. It was God's treasure, his firstborn. The Torah lay in God's bosom from the beginning. It was full of grace and truth. John deliberately takes this pre-Christian hymn in praise of the Torah and transfers the honor from the Law to Christ. Jesus Christ replaces the Torah; he supersedes it.

Elsewhere in the book of John expressions such as light of the world, water of life, bread of life, good shepherd, way, truth and life, which rabbinic teaching ascribed to the Jewish Law, are now transferred to Jesus Christ. Christ is the One to whom the Law points, the One who is the fulfillment of the Law, the One who now replaces the Law and supersedes the Law as the final revelation of the will of God. Because Christ has now come, the Law cannot have the same value, the same meaning to John or to the Christian community that it has to an unbelieving Jewish community. The revelation of God is no longer in Moses, but the supreme revelation of God has now been given in his Son. For this reason the supreme rule of life to the Christian community cannot be the old Torah; it must be the word that comes directly from God to his Son in the commandments of Jesus.

It is significant that the book of John presents the Law as the Law of the Jews. On the lips of Jesus in the Gospel of John, the Law invariably becomes *your Law, their Law*— namely, the Law of the Jews. Thus:

In your own Law it is written that the testimony of two men is valid. – John 8:17.

Jesus answered them, “Is it not written in your Law, ‘I have said you are gods?’” – John 10:34.

“But this is to fulfill what is written in their Law: ‘They hated me without reason.’” – John 15:25

John puts similar words in the mouth of Pilate, of Nicodemus and of the Jews:

Pilate said, “Take him yourselves and judge him by your own law.” – John 18:31.

“Does our law condemn a man without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?” – John 7:51.

The Jews insisted, “We have a law, and according to that law he must die.” – John 19:7.

From the evidence in the fourth Gospel, Pancaro has concluded that ‘the Law is quite consistently characterized as ‘the Law of the Jews.’”³ In commenting on this further, Pancaro says that John, writing near the close of the Christian dispensation, reflects the same view of the Law as did Jesus. As John takes the expressions, “your Law,” “their Law,” “our Law,” and places them in the mouth of Jesus, of Nicodemus, of Pilate and of the Jews, “One has the distinct impression of a certain distance – that

the Law is being looked upon as associated in some special way with the Jews, that it means more or at least something else to them than it does to Jesus and to the evangelist.” 4 Therefore, to consider the Law as the revelation of God and the way of life after Christ's coming means to have misunderstood it or never to have understood it at all.

In John the Law is not used as a rule of life for the Christian community, because Christ, to whom the Law pointed, has come. He has superseded the Law as a revelation of God. All the titles of honor that rabbinic Judaism gave to the Law, John ascribes to the very person of Christ, so that the Law has now become “your Law,” “their Law,” “the Law of Moses,” the Law of the Jews. While the Law is valuable because it has prophetically pointed to Christ, John can no longer value it as a Jew values it. To him devotion to the Law no longer characterizes the children of God. Rather, the Christian community is now characterized by devotion to the Christ.

Christian faith obligates us to do the will of God, not as revealed in the Law, but as revealed in the person of Christ. The revelation that came through Moses was a mediated revelation. It did not come directly from God, because even Moses could not see God. “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (John 1:18, RSV). Throughout his writings John claims that the revelation through Jesus Christ is superior to Moses because Christ is directly taught of God. He is indeed the Word of God incarnate. In the words of Jesus the will of God which we are obligated to do or to keep is not “the Law”; it is the “command” or the “commandment.”

First, it is the Father's own command to Jesus to lay down his life for the sheep and then to take it up again:

“No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down and authority to take it up again. This command I received from my Father.” John 10:18.

“For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life.” John 12:49, 50.

“But the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me.” John 14:31.

“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love.” John 15:10.

Thus, the commandment of the Father that Jesus keeps is not the Law of Moses; it is the commandment to lay down his life, to give his life a ransom for many and then to take it up again.

Second, the word “commandment” has the meaning not only of the Father's commandment to Jesus, but also of Jesus' commandment to his disciples:

“A new commandment I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another.” John 13:34.

“If you love me, you will obey what I command.” John 14:15.

“Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me.” John 14:21.

“If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love.” John 15:10.

“My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.” John 15:12.

“You are my friends if you do what I command.” John 15:14.

Jesus' command is that we “love each other as I have loved you.” The expression “I have loved you” is what the Father commanded, so that, for the disciples, keeping the commandment is to reflect the love of the Father's commandment in Christ.

Thus, in summary we recognize that John distinguishes the Law that came through Moses from the commandment that comes through Jesus Christ. John avoids using the term “law” or “new law” for the will of God that comes to us through Jesus Christ. Instead, he uses the word “command” or “commandment.” John does not use the expression “law” at all in his epistles or in the book of Revelation. It seems that he abandons the term “law” when trying to express our obligation to do the will of God because of its tendency to become depersonalized and legalistic. Such a connotation cannot do justice to the goal of love to God and neighbor which Jesus set forth as the center of God's will for his children. It therefore seems desirable to use some term other than “law” to describe God's will for the Christian life. In John Jesus does not define a new code of regulations for the Christian community. And unlike Paul, John amazingly does not give any detail on Christian ethics. His teaching is deeply spiritual. It is centered in the very person of Christ. John emphasizes that the believer lives out of him who kept the Father's commandment and that the believer keeps Christ's command, his commandment, his word by reflecting that same kind of sacrificial love in relation to others.

Notes and References

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the New International Version.

1. W. Gutbrod, art. “The Law in the New Testament,” *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, tr. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1967), 4:1082-83.

2. *Ibid.*, p. 1084.

3. Severino Pancaro, *The Law in the Fourth Gospel: The Torah and the Gospel, Moses and Jesus, Judaism and Christianity According to John* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975), p. 517.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 519.

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