

Biblically Defining the Law of Moses

by David Albert

In Acts 15 we find the loose string, which if pulled, unravels the whole garment of legalism. The terms and conditions for new believers is clearly set, and the debate over whether Christians must keep the law of Moses in order to be saved is settled once and for all. Looking back, it seems strange that as a minister and teacher who thought he knew his Bible I—we—never understood this pivotal chapter. It isn't as though we in the Worldwide Church of God ignored Acts 15 or avoided discussing the Jerusalem Council. We often used this passage to explain church government and to show how doctrinal issues should be settled in the church. We also understood that this first apostolic council decided the circumcision was not required of the Gentiles.

We knew the command, “unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses, you cannot be saved,” was abolished under the New Covenant, and neither Herbert Armstrong, nor any minister of the Worldwide Church of God ever required that of a new convert.

What we failed to understand was that circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses go hand-in-hand. Obedience to one *means* obedience to the other. It is as though we never carefully read Acts 15:5, “The Gentiles must be circumcised *and* required to obey the law of Moses.” Obedience was not an either-or proposition. It was circumcision *and* the law of Moses. As the Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary points out, “Circumcision was not the only requirement the Judaizers proposed to make of Christians. *It was only their entering wedge.*”

In the Worldwide Church of God prior to 1995, we rarely discussed the term “law of Moses” in relation to our theology or world view. We would never have admitted that any of our doctrines were based on “the law of Moses.” Rather, we used the term “Law of God,” or simply “Gods Law,” which meant almost everything we found required in the Bible—the commandments, statutes, judgements, and ordinances.

The principal exceptions to this were the animal sacrifices, which we knew were replaced by Christ's sacrifice and circumcision, as already mentioned. Most everything else, we, at one time or another, tried to keep in some form, including the law prohibition mixed fabrics and even the agricultural land sabbaths. Much was written and preached about the Law of God, little, if anything, about the law of Moses.

The reason for this curious omission is now, I see in retrospect, rather obvious: We simply could not examine the implications of a law, with a mere man, Moses, and call it by his name. That would make the law seem, somehow, “humanly” devised, and therefore less spiritual, less authoritative, less binding. So we appropriated other adjectives to describe the law, such as, “spiritual,” “eternal,” and “immutable from Creation.” Most, it seems, came to think of the law in absolute and universal terms.

We had no place in our paradigm for a law that was associated with a man, a time, a place, and a nation, or a law that was temporary or that could possibly be rescinded. The “Law of God” fit our paradigm. The “law of Moses” did not. Thus we couldn't see in Acts 15 what we didn't want to see, namely, **that within nearly two decades after the founding of the New Testament Church, God inspired the apostles at the Jerusalem Council to declare that obedience to the law of Moses was NOT required for new believers and thus was NOT a requirement for salvation, church membership or fellowship.**

Bible definitions of the Law of Moses

But just what *is* “the law of Moses?” My own understanding of the term as shaped by the Worldwide Church of God—and I’m sure it was the same for most of our members and ministers—was that it was principally the sacrifices and offerings, circumcision, and those things that were clearly ceremonial, such as wearing fringes on one’s garments. Based on this teaching, I would have rejected utterly the idea that the law of Moses included the Sabbath and the Holy Days, the land sabbaths, tithing—first, second, and third tithes!—and clean and unclean meats, what we call the kosher food laws. Some of these things, I realize, were relaxed somewhat over the years. But in the 1950’s and ‘60’s, we were taught that all true Christians were obligated to obey the “Law of God,” and as ministers we diligently taught the law and even required potential members to begin obeying it before they could be baptized into the church.

To understand exactly the parameters of the “law of Moses”—as well as the issues involved in the Jerusalem Council debate—we need to properly define the term according to its Biblical and historical usage, not according to a theological paradigm created nearly 2,000 years later.

How is the term used in the Scriptures? Did Jesus use it, and if so, how? In Acts 15, what were new converts loosed *from*, and what, if anything were they bound *to*? Were they loosed from sacrifices and circumcision, but bound to sabbaths, tithing, and kosher food laws? Just what *is* the law of Moses, according to the Bible?

It is actually quite easy to find answers in the Bible to these questions. Thankfully you don’t need to be a seminary-trained theologian with a graduate degree in biblical studies. With a Bible, an exhaustive concordance, an hour or two to devote to the study, and an open mind, you can discover “the plain truth,” if you will about the law of Moses.

There are approximately thirty verses or passages linking the “law” with “Moses” as in the “law of Moses,” “Moses’ law,” “Moses gave you the law,” “the law came through Moses,” etc. My own study located nineteen references in the Old Testament and eleven in the New—quite enough to provide a thorough and accurate picture of how the Bible uses the term “the law of Moses” and its variations.

Let me summarize these briefly for you and at the same time suggest that you study them later in greater detail. Let’s highlight the Old Testament verses first.

You’ll find the term “law of Moses” introduced and used at least four times in Deuteronomy; it describes the comprehensive legal code God gave to Israel (Deut. 1:5, 4:8, 31:9, 33:4). It also is linked specifically to Sinai, “The Lord came from Sinai and dawned over them from Seir...from His right hand came a fiery law for them... ‘Moses commanded a law for us, a heritage of the congregation of Jacob’” (Deut. 33:2-4 NKJV).

Notice how the law of Moses is used in Joshua, especially Josh. 8:31-32. “A copy of the law of Moses” was written on large stones when Israel entered the promised land. The people reviewed the blessings they would receive for keeping it and the cursings they would suffer for breaking it. Nothing there suggests the law of Moses is only “sacrificial and ceremonial.” Or worse yet, as one “under-the-law” minister tried to explain recently, “sacerdotal,” or pertaining only to the priesthood! Joshua had Israel reiterate the *whole* law of Moses.

1 Kings 2:3 gives us one of the best indications of the comprehensive nature of the law. “And keep the charge of the Lord your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, *as it is written in the law of Moses....*” How clear that the law of Moses includes the commandments, statutes and judgements, and not just sacrifices, ceremonies, and circumcision.

In II Chronicles we find the law of Moses used to prescribe burnt offerings and to describe

Levitical duties (II Chron. 23:18, 30:16). Those, too, are *part* of the law of Moses. The prophet Ezra preached the law of Moses to Judah after the Babylonian Captivity, which prompted Judah once again to keep the Feast of Tabernacles (Neh. 8). This indicates that *the authority for the annual festivals derives from what the Scriptures calls the law of Moses.*

The final Old Testament reference links the law of Moses to Sinai and to the statutes and judgments; there is no mention of sacrifices or circumcision. (Mal. 4:4).

Even a brief tour of these Old Testament references acquaints us with the fact that the law of Moses is used in a comprehensive way to describe or refer to *the whole legal package God gave to Moses*. Because the Bible does not contradict itself, we should expect the New Testament to parallel this view. And as we shall see, it does.

How the New Testament Defines the Law of Moses.

As we examine the New Testament references to the law of Moses, let's keep in mind why a proper definition of this term is so important. If the sabbath, holy days, food laws, and tithing were never a part of this narrowly defined sacrificial/ceremonial code called the law of Moses, then perhaps, it should be argued, they are binding on Christians after all. They are certainly described as "laws" in the Scriptures, and if they are not part of the law of Moses, which was clearly done away, then they still must be in force! This was the doctrinal position maintained by the Worldwide Church of God prior to 1995.

However, if it can be proven, that the law of Moses is broad, general and inclusive, and refers to *all* of the laws given to the children of Israel through Moses, then we must reconcile how individual laws subsumed in that larger body of law—which we all agree has been revoked—could be pulled out and arbitrarily declared "binding."

As we have seen, the law of Moses *is* used in the broadest possible sense in the Old Testament, and this pattern changes not at all in the New Testament.

In Luke 2:22, we are told Christ underwent the rites of "purification according to the law of Moses." That is, He was circumcised and also consecrated, being a firstborn Jewish male. Such rites are clearly ceremonial and are always accepted as part of the law of Moses.

By comparison, Jesus' use of the term "law of Moses" in Luke 24:44 could hardly be more sweeping. There, after His resurrection, he expounds to the disciples all the things that were written of Him "in the law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms." This phrase has always been understood to mean the three-fold division of the Old Testament. The Law of Moses refers to the Pentateuch or first five books of the Bible, all of which Moses had a hand in writing, editing and/or preserving.

John uses the term prophetically when Philip announced to Nathaniel, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the law" (John 1:45). In John 7:21-23 Jesus Himself uses the term, referring to circumcision as a requirement of the Mosaic law. And in John 8:5, the scribes and Pharisees call on the law of Moses to justify their intentions to stone the woman taken in adultery.

Paul states, "It is written in the law of Moses: 'Do not muzzle an ox, while it is treading out the grain'" (I Cor. 9:9). Is this referring to a sacrifice or ceremony? No, it's a law given by God through Moses concerning the proper care of one's animals from which Paul draws a spiritual analogy about caring for the laborers in God's harvest.

The final New Testament reference is in Hebrews 10:28, which refers to those who rejected the law of Moses and died without mercy for their violations thereof.

Reflecting on the ways in which the New Testament passages define the law of Moses, it is untenable to insist that it refers merely to sacrificial and ceremonial laws.

Nowhere in God's Word is it limited to that meaning. Nor is it the sacrificial/ceremonial

system that the Jewish Christians were trying to enjoin upon the Gentiles in Acts 15. These believing Jews, who had accepted Jesus as the Christ, were not demanding animal sacrifices of the Antiochan Gentile converts! The key issue presented in Acts, which we shall examine in some detail, focused specifically on food and dietary requirements, what Worldwide Church of God members have always called “clean and unclean meats.” As we have seen from this brief overview, the law of Moses includes commandments, statutes, judgments, offerings, priestly instructions, purification rites and laws concerning animal husbandry. It was *an entire legal package*, a comprehensive code, and the basis of the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai (Ex. 34:27). That is what all the Bible authors and persons quoted in the Bible, including Jesus Christ Himself, meant when they used the term. Given the abundance of Bible definitions, there's really no need for confusion on this point, but let me now show how Herbert Armstrong managed to obscure the clear meaning of these verses, thereby keeping a key feature of the law of Moses in place.