

THE MOSAIC LEGISLATION  
IN THE WRITING OF IRENAEUS OF LYONS

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by

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## **The Mosaic Legislation in the Writing of Irenaeus of Lyons**

Living and writing at the middle-to-late second century, Irenaeus, the bishop of Lyons, played a crucial role in the formation of Christian theology. In *Against Heresies* Irenaeus noted that he had been given the task of preserving “a very complete system of doctrine” (4.32.8) that had been handed down to him through the Church, preserved and guarded by the bishops, having been established in the apostolic preaching. Irenaeus argued that this system was formed from a careful exposition of the Scriptures, and continually recognized it as the canon, or rule, of orthodox Christian belief. It can be seen, then, that the preservation and careful handling of the apostolic teaching was the lifeblood of the early church, protecting the Church at a time when dissenting expositions of the Scriptures were threatening “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.” With the rule of faith taking on such an important role in the early church, modern exegetes and theologians ought to read their interpretations respectfully and carefully because the content of that tradition, handed down from the apostles themselves (according to Irenaeus), was nothing other than “what is written in the apostolic writings.”<sup>1</sup> It has rightly been said that if one tries to divide the apostolic writings and the canon of faith from their interrelation within the living community of the Church, then “each will die.”<sup>2</sup> Each was an attempt to preserve the proper interpretation of the Scriptures (the Old Testament) in light of the resurrection of Jesus

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<sup>1</sup> John Behr, *The Way To Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), 44.

<sup>2</sup> Philip Hefner, “Saint Irenaeus and the Hypothesis of Faith,” in *Dialog: A Journal of Theology* (Vol. 2, Fall 1963, 4), 304.

Christ. In other words, the content of the canon and of the apostolic writings was essentially the same; to deny one is to deny the other.

The aim of this paper is to analyze one part of that ‘very complete system’: the Mosaic legislation. Given the confusion and inability of modern theological systems to agree on how Christians should understand it, an evaluation of an early church interpretation of the Mosaic legislation seems beneficial. Throughout the analysis, answers to several key questions will be sought after: What is the purpose of the Mosaic legislation? What does it mean that Jesus Christ fulfills the Law? What is the new covenant and how does it differ from the old covenant? What role does the Decalogue play in the new covenant? And, what precepts are fundamental to the new covenant? Though there is an extensive body of documents available to analyze, the aim of this paper is to strictly seek after Irenaeus’ biblical theology.<sup>3</sup>

The two principal works of Irenaeus that addressed the Mosaic legislation were *The Proof of the Apostolic Teaching* and *Against Heresies*. These were written, as noted, during a time when non-apostolic exegesis threatened an already established orthodox interpretation of the Scriptures. This meant that Irenaeus and his contemporaries had two main ways to present the apostolic preaching. The first way was to put forward the apostolic preaching in a manner consistent with the Scriptures. In this way, the canon of faith was used, teaching the tradition of Christ according to the Scriptures – that is, presenting (describing) Jesus Christ exegetically from the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible). Irenaeus’ *Proof* remains the most complete example of how this was done in the early church, outside the New Testament documents. In the second way, the apostolic preaching was presented as a defense of the one gospel. The writings of the apostles

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<sup>3</sup> Justin Martyr’s *Dialogue*, Tertullian’s *Answer to the Jews*, the *Epistle of Barnabus*, and the *Epistle of Diognetus* are several examples of other early documents that contain an example of sub-apostolic interpretation of the Mosaic legislation.

were used much more extensively in this presentation (those documents now considered part of the New Testament canon), with the appeal to traditional Christian teaching finding its substance in those writings. Irenaeus' *Against Heresies* is one of many early church documents that presented the faith in the latter manner. In either way of presentation a consistent and coherent message is presented, one founded upon an already orthodox, 'very complete system.'

### **The Proof of the Apostolic Preaching**

In his *Proof*, Irenaeus surveyed the entirety of Scripture, predominantly looking forward from the perspective of the Old Testament canon, to show how the apostles exegetically proved the rule of faith. In other words, he wanted to show his audience that the apostles were rooting their theology and their interpretation of Jesus Christ according to the Scriptures – the Law (Torah), the Prophets, and the Writings. Again, they were exegeting Christ from the Old Testament. He did this in what can be divided into three sections. The first section (§1-2) primarily addressed the rule of faith, and outlined the faith handed down by the apostles through the elders. After addressing the rule, Irenaeus turned to two more interrelated sections. In the first of these sections (§3-42a ) he recounted the scriptural history of God's work of salvation which culminated in Christ. In the second, he demonstrated that what the apostles proclaimed as fulfilled in Christ, shaped as it was by Scripture, was indeed foretold in Scripture (§42b-97).<sup>4</sup>

Throughout these sections, Irenaeus' *rule* called for an understanding of Christ according to the Scriptures. For him, without the prophetic witness of Scripture belief in Jesus Christ is unjustified and the tradition of the apostles is without support. For salvation to exist, Jesus Christ must be interpreted according to the Old Testament. He stated this on the grounds that a non-interpreted, historical Jesus is of no theological value for salvation, for a non-interpreted

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<sup>4</sup> Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 112.

Jesus is only a carpenter from Galilee who was put to death along with thousands of other criminals on Roman crosses in Palestine during the first century. In other words, the Jesus according to history alone cannot be “Messiah” (or, Christ). The Jesus who is interpreted according to the Old Testament, however, is not only the historical Jesus, but the Christ who suffered in human flesh for the forgiveness of sins and who was raised from the dead and has ascended to the right hand of God, who gives men his Spirit on the basis of faith in him, as he waits to return in the clouds to consummate his kingdom.<sup>5</sup> That being the case, Irenaeus was not concerned primarily with the historicity of the gospel, but with theologically identifying Jesus of Nazareth with the prophetic Messiah of the Hebrew Bible. To read the Scriptures in any other manner is to deny the grounding for the gospel and to not “have a true perception of reality.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, proper exegesis of what is now called the Old Testament was of highest importance to Irenaeus. He rarely referred to the apostolic writings in this work, but presented a summary of their message from the perspective of the Old Testament. John Behr summed up this point well, saying,

“Irenaeus gives a clear, coherent and concise exposition of the apostolic preaching, without, however, making extensive use of their writings. Rather, Irenaeus demonstrates that their preaching is ‘according to the Scriptures’ by deriving the whole content of the apostolic preaching from Scripture, the medium through which the apostles had understood and proclaimed Christ.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The “theologically-interpreted” Jesus is a historical figure, but history alone is not able to reveal all that Jesus is; only by understanding his life in the light of the Hebrew Bible are men able to grasp the full weight of his character. In this respect, one must be able to argue convincingly that Jesus was who he claimed to be without *de facto* using the New Testament. This is possible, contra many scholars today, for Jesus and all the authors of New Testament books repeatedly did so (cf. Paul in the book of Acts).

<sup>6</sup> Irenaeus, *Proof*, §3 (from this point forward, paragraph numbers will be included in parentheses after quotations or a summary of ideas). From this statement, it would seem Irenaeus would reject a historical-critical reading of the Old Testament, or anything resembling a *peshat* reading of the text. See John H. Sailhamer, *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 134ff, for a discussion on the implications of *peshat* in modern hermeneutics.

<sup>7</sup> Behr, *The Way to Nicaea*, 112.

It is within this offering of a complete, coherently arranged presentation of the apostolic faith that Irenaeus addressed the relationship between the Sinai covenant and the new covenant.

He began his explanation by looking into how men have been saved in every generation. He wrote, “Men were to be saved not according to the wordiness of the law, but according to the brevity of faith and charity” (§87). By this he meant, “He who loves the Lord has fulfilled the law” (§87). Stated differently, the Law (Torah) is fulfilled by “our faith in Him, our love towards God and our neighbor” (§87). For Irenaeus, this is an idea that encompasses the whole breadth of Scripture, from Abraham to Peter, and is not just a new idea found only in the New Testament starting with Jesus. He demonstrated this in his treatment of Abraham, who was found righteous before God “when God saw the faith and resolution of his spirit” (§24, c.f. §93). By looking back at Abraham, who lived 400 years prior to the Sinai covenant, Irenaeus established the point that man is found righteous not by obeying a law, but by faith and love for God.

Looking back to Abraham also raises questions about the purpose of the giving of the Law at Sinai. In this writing Irenaeus did not explicitly treat that question, as he did in *Against Heresies*, although several statements help to warrant an implicit answer. He wrote in one place, “We have no need of the law as pedagogue” (§96); and, in another place, “He does not wish those who are to be redeemed to be brought again under the Mosaic legislation – for the law has been fulfilled in Christ” (§89). Given these two statements, the Law (legislation) is seen as a temporary pedagogue, one which was only in place until its fulfillment in Christ. Presumably Irenaeus held the same position as Paul – the teaching of the Law was to lead one to faith in Christ.<sup>8</sup> If such is the case, then the redeemed should not be subject to the Mosaic legislation, for

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<sup>8</sup> C.f. Galatians 3:24-26

Christ has fulfilled the Law. But what does it mean that Christ has fulfilled the Law? By “Christ fulfilling the law,” Irenaeus simply meant that Christ has come. The fulfilling of the Law by Christ was not seen as a legal idea in Irenaeus’ theological system, but a prophetic one. He wrote, “We should no more turn back...to the former legislation [Sinai]. For we have received the Lord of the Law, the Son of God; and through faith in Him we learn to love God with our whole heart, and our neighbor as ourselves” (§95). This helps the reader to see more clearly that Irenaeus did not treat the Law merely as legal writing, but also as prophecy. Now that the very Lord of the Law has come, and the redeemed have placed their faith in Him, they are no longer subject to the old legislation, but are “to go free in newness by the Word, through faith and love towards the Son of God” (§89). It is not that the Law was unbeneficial, but that its use was only temporary, until Christ had come.<sup>9</sup>

This temporary use of the Mosaic legislation, including the Decalogue in the Sinai context,<sup>10</sup> was for Irenaeus the unambiguous teaching of the prophets. This was especially his attitude as he addressed the new covenant. Specifically thinking about Jeremiah 31:31 and Isaiah 17:7, he wrote, “These promises were to be inherited by the calling from the Gentiles, in whom also the new [covenant] was opened” (§91). Not stopping there, though, he showed that the Gentiles were “to become a holy people” by connecting Hosea 2:23 with Ezekiel 11:19 (§93). All of these ideas taken together give one the picture of a covenant different than the

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<sup>9</sup> This simple presentation of what it means that Christ fulfilled the law is treated more thoroughly in *Against Heresies*, which will be treated below.

<sup>10</sup> Irenaeus repeatedly notes in *Against Heresies* that the Decalogue was never abrogated in Christ, but still remains, though now extended, as the foundation of all moral conduct. A distinction seems to be made in Irenaeus’ thought between the use of the Decalogue in the new covenant and its use in the old covenant. In the old covenant, it was used as a prohibitive warning to keep men from idolatry and to teach them to love God and their neighbor. In Christ, however, the Decalogue is fulfilled because it is completed in Him. Rather than being abrogated, though, the Decalogue is extended to bring out the righteousness which Jesus Christ himself had when He loved God and his neighbor. Irenaeus notes in *Against Heresies* how righteous men did what the Decalogue required from their heart before the giving of the Decalogue at Sinai, and that in Christ men are to return to this type of willful obedience with the law written on their hearts.

covenant made with the Jewish nation at Sinai. In this new covenant a new heart would be given to the people (including the Gentiles) so that they would walk in His ways and obey His commands.<sup>11</sup> The new covenant itself was to be established through newness of heart at the advent of Christ and the pouring out of his Spirit: “Through the new calling a change of heart comes about in the Gentiles, through the Word of God, when He became incarnate and tabernacled with men” (§94).

A question also emerges from this discussion involving the means, in the new covenant, to walk in God’s ways and obey His commands. Irenaeus directly answered this question:

“Behold, we speak with the Father and stand face to face with Him, become infants in malice, and made strong in all justice and propriety. For no more shall the law say: *Thou shall not commit adultery*, to him who has not even conceived the desire of another’s wife; or *thou shall not kill*, to him who has put away from himself all anger and enmity; *thou shall not covet you neighbor’s field, or his ox, or his ass*, to those who make no account whatever of earthly things, but heap up profit in heaven. Nor *an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth*, to him who counts no man his enemy, but all his neighbors, and therefore cannot even put forth his hand to revenge. Nor will it demand tithes of him who has vowed to God all his possessions, and who leaves father and mother and all his kindred, and follows the Word of God. Nor will he be commanded to leave idle one day of rest, who is constantly keeping Sabbath, that is, giving homage to God in the temple of God, which is man’s body, and at all times doing works of justice” (§96).

Fundamentally, the Law (including commands from the Decalogue) is no longer necessary as a teacher towards good works, though it still seems to remain valid as a teacher of wise living in Irenaeus’ system. Yet, the Law (the Sinai covenant, not the Pentateuch) is unnecessary to the new covenant because a life yielded to the indwelling Spirit will be characterized by an innate ability to do works in accordance with it. As mentioned earlier, the life of Abraham is to be the life of those under the new covenant, who do not obey out of compulsion, but out of a willing

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<sup>11</sup> This is also the prophetic hope and expectation of Moses in the Law (Pentateuch), where he desires to see the Spirit of God descend on the whole nation of Israel (Num. 11:29), while prophetically speaking of the Exile (Dt. 29:22-28) and of the new covenant mentioned in Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 (Dt. 30).

love for God. A life motivated by love for God will yield such moral quality that the Law (legislation) is of no more use as a teacher.

Any modern reader of Irenaeus should notice his holistic view of the Law. He did not seem the least bit concerned to divide the so-called moral laws from the civil or ceremonial laws. For Irenaeus, when Christ came to fulfill the Law, he fulfilled it entirely.<sup>12</sup> In his view – a holistic and prophetic view of the Law – obedience is not something primarily connected with what man does (works), but with who man loves and trusts (faith). In other words, man fulfills the Law by putting his hope and trust in the One who fulfilled the Law, and by responding willingly to God’s love for him by loving God and loving His neighbor.

One last comment about Irenaeus’ view from his *Proof* is that he did not advocate any kind of antinomian Christianity. Being far from that he wrote,

“This, beloved, is the preaching of the truth, and this is the manner of our salvation, and this is the way of life, announced by the prophets and ratified by Christ and handed over by the apostles and handed down by the Church and kept in all security, with good will, and by being well-pleasing to God through good works and sound moral character” (§98).

The pursuit of salvation, beginning and ending with faith, must still be one that seeks to obey God’s commands and do good works with all tenacity, courage, and determination. “The way of all those who see is a single, upward path, lit by heavenly light; but the ways of those who see not are many and dark and divergent. The former road leads to the kingdom of heaven by uniting man with God, but the others bring down to death by severing man from God” (§1).

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<sup>12</sup> One might be able to argue a two-fold distinction of the Law in Irenaeus’ reading of the Pentateuch. He does seem to set apart the Decalogue from the rest of the Sinai covenant, viewing the golden calf event as a turning point. Even here, though, what should be noticed is Irenaeus’ clear desire to let the Pentateuch speak for itself. In this respect, Irenaeus sees, as does Paul (c.f. Gal 3:19), that new commands were added as new stipulations in the covenant because of the golden calf incident, to the end that the people would forsake idolatry and learn to love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. A more thorough treatment of the Decalogue is in *Against Heresies*.

## **Against Heresies, Book IV**

In this massive five-book treatise Irenaeus was not primarily interested in expounding the nature of the Mosaic legislation and its fulfillment in Christ Jesus. Rather, his main concern was to argue the true interpretation of Scripture against men like Marcion and Valentinus. His goal, then, was to show their errors in interpretation, while at the same time demonstrating the correct interpretation of Scripture. In doing so, Irenaeus devoted most of the fourth book of this treatise to handle the proper exegesis of the Law.

When he commented about the Law, Irenaeus almost always returned to a fundamental part of his theology, the aseity of God. Thinking of man's creation, he said, "In the beginning, therefore, did God form Adam, not as if He stood in need of man, but that He might have someone upon whom to confer His benefits."<sup>13</sup> This idea is fundamental for Irenaeus' view of the Law. The reason for which man was created underlies all of God's dealings with man. This relates to the Law in that God did not "stand in need our service when He ordered us to follow Him" (§4.14.1). Instead, to follow after God is to partake in salvation, to be granted "life and incorruption and eternal glory" (§4.14.1). From the very outset of creation, starting with Adam and Eve, mankind was to love and serve God. This was man's glory, to continue and remain permanently in God's service.

The problem was that mankind did not remain in God's service, but rebelled against Him. God's attitude toward man did not change, though. Instead, He granted "communion with Himself to those who stood in need of it, and sketched out, like an architect, the plan of salvation to those who pleased Him" (§4.14.2). In all His planning, God was adjusting the human race for salvation. Part of that adjusting included the Mosaic Law, which, for Irenaeus, was given to the

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<sup>13</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, §4.14.1 From here on, quotes and ideas from Irenaeus will be referenced using the following format: §(book.chapter.paragraph).

unruly in the desert; it was a law very suitable to their condition. Again, it was not as if God stood in need of any of the services of the Law, or even desired them, but gave them the services to instruct them. To quote Irenaeus:

“He instructed the people, who were prone to turn to idols, instructing them by repeated appeals to persevere and to serve God, calling them to things of primary importance by means of those which were secondary; that is, to things that are real, by means of those that are typical; and by things temporal, to eternal; and by the carnal to the spiritual; and by the earthly to the heavenly” (§4.14.3).

Irenaeus understood the purposeful patterning of the Tabernacle, as it figured the Garden of Eden and prefigured the heavenly city, to apply to all areas of the Law. He even appealed to Paul’s exhortation in 1 Corinthians 10:11, adding that “by means of types they learned to fear God, and to continue devoted to His service” (§4.14.3).

For him, this is a very important distinction in the Law. It allowed Irenaeus to see two functions for the Law: as a course of discipline, and as a prophecy of future things. As a course of discipline, Irenaeus primarily focused on the Decalogue. His exegesis of the Exodus narrative is important to note at this point, as He drew his theology not by restating the narrative, but by careful consideration and reflection on the relationship between the different aspects of the Pentateuch. First, he noticed that the Decalogue was given as a warning to the Jewish people. These laws were written on men’s hearts prior to Sinai, but were then revealed, to help the people overcome their tendency towards idolatry. At first, God required nothing more of the people at Sinai than to obey the Decalogue. When, however, “they turned themselves to make a calf, and had gone back in their minds to Egypt, desiring to be slaves instead of freemen, they were placed for the future in a state of servitude suited for their wish, which did not indeed cut them off from God, but subjected them to the yoke of bondage” (§4.15.1). Mentioned in an earlier footnote, this is where some might see a two-fold division in Irenaeus’ view of the Sinai

covenant. There was the Decalogue, which served as a course of discipline (though the Sabbath command was a figure), and then there were extra laws (such as the Tabernacle, the Levites, sacrifices, etc.) which either served as a figure of future things or helped to discipline the Jews more in their proneness to wander from the fear and worship of God. In all these laws, the goal was for man “to learn to love God with the whole heart” (§4.15.2).

Irenaeus gave two examples of how the Law functioned as a prophecy of future things: circumcision and Sabbaths. These also helped him show why man is not justified by the Law, because prior to Abraham men were justified without them. So, in §4.16, he went into great detail about how circumcision and a Sabbath day served as signs to the Jewish people. He noted that circumcision was a sign in that the circumcision of the flesh pointed towards the circumcision of the heart. Sabbaths are signs in that a day of Sabbath pointed toward the eternal Sabbath which men will experience in the future kingdom, which was also the rest experienced by man prior to the Fall. This is also why men are not justified by keeping a Sabbath or by circumcision, because they are only signs. Abraham was justified by faith before Sabbaths and circumcision, as were all who went before him, who were counted righteous without the signs and without the Law. So, then, if such were justified without the signs and the Law, why was the Law given?

Irenaeus’ answer to this question exhibited the height of this insightful exegetical skill. He began by quoting Deuteronomy 5:2-3, which says, “The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive today.” He then told his readers why:

“Why, then, did the Lord not form the covenant for the fathers? Because ‘the law was not established for righteous men.’ But the righteous fathers had the meaning of the Decalogue written in their hearts and souls, that is, they loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbor. There was therefore no occasion that they should be

cautioned by prohibitory mandates, because they had the righteousness of the law in themselves. But when this righteousness and love to God had passed into oblivion, and became extinct in Egypt, God did necessarily, because of His great goodwill to men, reveal Himself by a voice, and led the people with power out of Egypt, in order that man might again become the disciple and follower of God; and He afflicted those who were disobedient, that they should not contemn their Creator; and He fed them with manna, that they might receive food for their souls; as also Moses says in Deuteronomy: ‘And fed you with manna, which your fathers did not know, that you might know that man does not live by bread alone; but by every word of God proceeding out of His mouth does man live.’ And it enjoined love to God, and taught just dealing towards our neighbor, that we should neither be unjust nor unworthy of God, who prepares man for His friendship through the medium of the Decalogue, and likewise for agreement with his neighbor, – matters which did certainly profit man himself; God, however, standing in no need of anything from man” (§4.16).

According to Irenaeus, then, the whole point of the Law was to enjoin the Jewish people to love God and their neighbor, and to prepare them for friendship with God through the medium of the Decalogue. Again, this was not because God was in need of anything, but because this profited man, who stood in need of the friendship of God.

There are a number of important theological points established in this passage as well. First, Irenaeus wanted his readers to be sure to recognize that the Law was not established for righteous men, but for the unrighteous. He was quoting the apostle Paul at this point (1 Tim. 1:9), and no doubt also had Galatians 3:19 in his mind, which states that the Law was added because of transgressions. But also notice what Irenaeus wrote next: that *the meaning of the Decalogue* was written on the hearts of the patriarchs. The natural law that was implanted in man in creation was not the Decalogue itself, but *the meaning* of it. For Irenaeus, this meant that they “loved the God who made them, and did no injury to their neighbor.” This point is crucial for Irenaeus’ understanding of the new covenant. For him, the new covenant is a return back to God’s relationship with the patriarchs, who loved God not out of compulsion, but willingly and freely. This is what God wanted to do with the Mosaic covenant, as Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 10:12, “And now, Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you, but to fear

the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul?”

Having established the purpose of the Mosaic Law, what did Irenaeus write concerning the new covenant? It seems proper to begin with Irenaeus' explanation of how Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law. He began his explanation in §4.8.2 by noting that Christ did not make void the Law, but fulfilled it. To make void the Law would have been to do away with it, but Christ did the exact opposite: he performed “the offices of the high priest, propitiated God for men, and cleansed the lepers, healed the sick, and Himself suffered death that exiled man might go forth from condemnation, and might return without fear to his own inheritance.” By living in a manner consistent with the prophetic view of the Messiah in the Law, Jesus upheld the Law and established it, standing fast in it and describing himself with its terms. Beginning here, with Jesus' own approval of the Scriptures, Irenaeus moved into his discussion of the two covenants.

Though the two covenants are different from each other, both require a similar manner life (exemplified by the meaning of the Decalogue written on the heart). It was important for Irenaeus to start here because he went on to write that the old covenant, “given in order to bondage” (§4.9.2), is the lesser of the two covenants. Unlike the old covenant, the new covenant was established not only in one nation, but “over the whole world” (§4.9.2). It is an all-inclusive covenant, designed for the participation of all nations. At the same time, the new covenant also brought with it liberty to those who have been justified by faith in the Messiah. The old covenant was given with an eye towards slavery in order to teach faith in God, whereas the new covenant was given with an eye towards liberty and the assumption of the faith of its participants. Though contrasting them, Irenaeus connected the two covenants with one single

notion: Christ's fulfillment of the Law. In doing so, he spent a great deal of time explaining how Christ fulfilled the Law (§4.12-13) and how the Scriptures teach that fulfillment (§4.14-18).

For Irenaeus, Christ fulfilled the Law in two ways: by coming in the flesh (§4.12), and by upholding and extending the precepts of the Law (§4.13). Though both of these ways were addressed in the *Proof*, he more thoroughly explained them here.

To show how Christ fulfilled the Law by coming in the flesh, Irenaeus first looked toward the Jewish elders in the Gospels. He noticed that the traditions of the elders were spurious law against the Law, and that by not submitting to the Law the elders were not able to have been prepared for the advent of the Christ. To see Christ properly, one must exegete him properly from the Old Testament. In this way, Jesus did not fulfill the spurious law of the elders, but only the Law as it was written by Moses (c.f. Jn. 5:46). So, by forsaking the true intention of the Law, Irenaeus argued that the elders were also forsaking true love for God (§4.12.1). In their indifference to love God in the way God desired to be loved, they could not attain the righteousness which the Law required, which was Christ's righteousness imputed by faith. He justified such a statement by quoting Romans 10:3-4, which says, "For, being ignorant of the righteousness of God, and seeking to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to everyone who believes" (ESV). To receive the righteousness of the Law, one had to trust and follow the Messiah, whom Paul said was the object to which the law of righteousness was pointed. Now that Christ has come, the Law is fulfilled.

In Irenaeus' system, Jesus Christ also fulfilled the Law by upholding and extending the precepts of the Law. Interestingly, he began this argument by showing that Jesus did not simply uphold and extend *the* Law, but also "the meaning of the law" which existed in men's hearts

before Sinai. His point was simple: when Jesus gave his new law (in the Sermon on the Mount) he did not oppose any law or precept given by God, before or after Sinai; rather, Jesus upheld extended the laws.

Irenaeus concentrated his discussion on what Jesus meant when he said, “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:20). For Irenaeus, new covenant righteousness exceeds old covenant righteousness in three ways. First, it assumes a belief and a trust in the Son come in the flesh, who leads men into fellowship with God. Since the old covenant “was laid down for those in bondage” (§4.13.2), its primary goal was to teach men to serve God. It was a tutor to faith in the Messiah; new covenant participation requires this belief and trust in the Messiah. Second, the new covenant requires its participants to not only say, but do. The old covenant was marked by men who required much, but did little. Third, the new covenant required one to “not only abstain from evil deeds, but even from the desires after them” (§4.13.1). This marked difference from the old covenant was due to what Irenaeus called, “implanting in us the varied righteousness of the law” (§4.13.1). This was the work of the Holy Spirit as foretold in Ezekiel 36. As mentioned earlier, Irenaeus saw the Sinai covenant as teaching men by means of secondary things, so that the soul might learn to serve God in all matters. In the new covenant, however, the Word had set free the soul. The bonds of slavery were removed and man was to now serve God without fetters. At this point, Irenaeus referred to John 15:15, which says, “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.” In this verse Irenaeus saw two types of Christ followers. There were those who lived under the old covenant, whom Christ drew to himself as slaves. And there were also those who live under the new

covenant, whom Christ has set free and now calls friends. Irenaeus understood a purposeful connection in Jesus' words to Abraham, who was also called the friend of God. In fact, before the disciples, only Abraham and Moses were called friends of God. Thus, there was for Irenaeus a real connection between the new covenant and the relationship of God with Abraham, a relationship which Moses at one time enjoyed and called Israel to in the Pentateuch.

### **Summary of Irenaeus' Theology**

The original purpose of the Law given to national Israel from Sinai was primarily temporary and pedagogical. It was given with the assumption of the disobedience of the people and was to lead them towards faith in God. The Law was temporary in two ways. First, it prophetically looked forward to its own fulfillment in the advent of Jesus Christ. His coming ended the pedagogical use of Law, which was intended to only lead one to have faith in the Messiah. In this way, the Law (in its canonical and biblical context in the Torah) looked toward the Messiah and ended with his coming. Second, it had a disciplinary function, which was primarily directed to helping Israel stop committing idolatry. The Decalogue served this purpose well. The *meaning* of the Decalogue (not the Decalogue itself) was implanted in man's heart, that is, to love God and love one's neighbor, in the beginning, but by the time Israel had come to the wilderness of Sinai, they had forsaken that which was written on their hearts and needed a verbal warning from God. For Irenaeus, the Decalogue seems to be temporary, though the meaning of the Decalogue, to love God and neighbor, is a permanent aspect of the Law. It will remain the foundational ethic of the new covenant as well.

The Prophets, while commenting on the failure of the Israelites to uphold the Mosaic legislation, also foretold a new covenant that God would make with the whole world, which would be different than the covenant made with Israel at Sinai. This covenant included a

pouring out of the Spirit of God, the law written on the hearts of the redeemed, a greater knowledge of God, and an assumed obedience of the people to God's commandments. This new covenant, like the covenant established with Abraham, was established on Jesus Christ and requires an obedience of faith, which yields the fruit of good works. The Mosaic legislation, then, as given to Moses on Sinai, is of no use to those who participate in the new covenant because it pointed toward Christ.

Participants in the new covenant are to live in simplicity of faith, marked especially by one's love toward God and one's love towards neighbor. This desire is implanted in them through the work of the Spirit, written on their hearts. The two great commands, loving God and neighbor, are done not out of compulsion, but willingly. Out of these two great commands stems a law that has extended and fulfilled the Law, enjoining a child and friend of God to love God more fully than a slave of God might. This liberty, as compared to the old covenant bondage, marks the believer in Christ as a friend of God and returns him to the kind of relationship Abraham had enjoyed with God.

### **Concluding Remarks**

John H. Sailhamer noted in his *Introduction to Old Testament Theology* that "the question of the place of the law in the Sinai covenant has been the source of much debate, particularly among covenant theologians."<sup>14</sup> Mentioning Justin Martyr and Irenaeus specifically, he went on to explain how the Pentateuch itself teaches that the golden calf incident marked a fundamental shift in the nature of the Sinai covenant. Thus, from an exegetical standpoint, at least one prominent modern scholar has written positively in support of Irenaeus' underlying conclusion: that the Law functioned as warning to the Jewish people at Sinai, and that it was to teach them to

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<sup>14</sup> John Sailhamer, "Introduction to Old Testament Theology," (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 272.

love God and their neighbor and to bring them back into the friendship of God. As mentioned in the introduction, the confusion and inability of most modern theological systems to consistently explain the nature of the Sinai covenant given the establishment of the new covenant in Christ has left a void in the theology of many Bible interpreters. How can such a vital and foundational element of Christianity be the most confusing part of Christian theology? For Irenaeus, as highlighted by Sailhamer, theology concerning the Sinai covenant must be an exegetical issue that begins in the Old Testament itself. When Irenaeus appealed to the apostolic writings and the rule of faith, he did so upon exegetical grounds, in an attempt to explain what the Old Testament itself was teaching. Using the apostolic writings and the rule, then, as a guide to the proper exegesis of the Old Testament, he argued persuasively and profoundly how Jesus Christ fulfilled the Law and restored friendship with God for all those who follow Him. Though one might not agree at all points with Irenaeus, as a whole his ‘very complete system’ offers a legitimate and useful explanation of the meaning of Scripture.

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