Love and the Law

Dr. Peter G. Nelson

An important question for Christians today is whether 'love' replaces the Law or the Law still applies. Here 'the Law' is the law of Moses in the OT, and 'love' is *agapē*, the kind of love that seeks the good of another. It is the kind of love shown by the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) and by Jesus on the cross (John 15:13–14, 1 John 3:16–18). In this paper, I examine NT teaching on this question.[1]

Jesus' teaching

Matthew 22

When Jesus was in Jerusalem, a lawyer from the Pharisees asked him, 'Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?' (Mat. 22:34–40). Jesus replied:

> [37]"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." [38]This is the great and first commandment. [39]The second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." [40]On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.'

Here Jesus brings together two commandments (Deut. 6:5, Lev. 19:18) and says that 'all the Law and Prophets' (the OT) 'hang on' (*krematai en*) these two commandments. This phrase is metaphorical, and implies that the former are dependent on the latter.

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[1] Other authors have discussed this question, but not in the same way. See, e.g., Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972); Wolfgang Schrage, *The Ethics of the New Testament*, tr. David E. Green (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1988); In-Gyu Hong, *The Law in Galatians* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), Chap. 7.

For many commandments, this link is obvious. Take, for example, 'You shall not steal' (Exod. 20:15). It is obviously not loving to steal from one's neighbour, and it is therefore loving not to steal. For some commandments, however, the link is less clear.

Consider, for example, Leviticus 24:19–20:

> [19]And if a man injures his neighbour, as he has done, so it shall be done to him, [20]fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth; as he has injured a human being, so it shall be done to him.

On the face of it, this does not sound very loving. But the purpose of the commandment is to limit retaliation: an injured person *must not go further than* 'fracture for fracture, eye for eye, tooth for tooth'. To this extent, the commandment *is* loving.

In the Sermon on the Mount, however, Jesus raised the standard of this and other commandments (Mat. 6:21–47.[2] He told his disciples,

> [38]'You have heard that it was said, "Eye for eye and tooth for tooth." [39]But I say to you, not to resist evil …'

Here Jesus raises the standard of the commandment to, 'Do not retaliate at all.' This makes it significantly more loving. To this extent, his linking the commandment to 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself' points towards his elevation of it.

Consider as a second example the food laws in Leviticus 11. These laws prohibited Israelites from eating pork and shellfish. Again, on the face of it, they have nothing to do with love. But these laws were designed to provide a means by which the Israelites could show themselves to be God's people and

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[2] See my article, 'Christian morality: Jesus' teaching on the Law,' *Themelios* 32 (2006), 4–17.

distinguish themselves from other nations (Lev. 20:22–26). To this extent, therefore, they enabled Israelites to show love towards God.

The food laws were, however, only concerned with *outward* purity. When the Pharisees criticized Jesus for allowing his disciples to break 'the tradition of the elders' by eating without ceremonially washing their hands (Mark 7:1–23), Jesus told the crowd:

> [14]'Hear me, everyone, and understand. [15]There is nothing from outside a human being that, entering into him, can defile him; but the things that come out of a human being are what defile a human being.'

When the disciples asked him to explain this (v. 17), he said (with Mark's comment in brackets):

> [18]'Are you also without understanding? Do you not realize that whatever enters into a human being from outside cannot defile him, [19]because it does not enter into his heart but into his stomach, and goes out into the sewer (cleaning all foods)? [20]What comes out of a human being, this defiles a human being. For from inside, out of the heart of human beings, come evil thoughts, fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, [21]covetings, evil-doings, deceit, indecency, envy, evil-speaking, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from inside and defile a human being.'

Here Jesus raises the OT standard of purity to a requirement for *inward* purity. He evidently wanted disciples to show themselves to be God's people by what comes out of their *hearts*. To this extent again, his linking of the food laws to 'You shall love the Lord your God' points towards his elevation of them. Not eating pork or shellfish shows some love towards God, having a pure heart shows much more.

John 14

Jesus linked love and the Law again when he spoke to his disciples after the Last Supper (John 14). He said to them,[3]

[15]'If you love me, you will keep my commandments.'

He further told them,

> [21]'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me.'

Jesus referred to his commandments again when he gave his disciples the Great Commission (Mat. 28:18–20):

> [19]'Go, then, and make disciples of all the nations, …
> [20]teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you …'

By 'my' commandments, therefore, Jesus evidently meant all that he had instructed his disciples to do (cf. 1 Thes. 4:2). As he explained to them in the Sermon on the Mount, this was based on the Law (Mat. 5:17–20), only the Law raised, as we have seen, to higher standards (vv. 21–48).[4] This includes the 'new commandment' (John 13:34), which is the commandment, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself,' with the standard raised, for disciples, from 'as yourself' to 'as I have loved you'.

Paul's teaching

Paul's teaching follows Jesus'. He links the commandments concerned with how one acts towards one's neighbour to 'you shall love you neighbour as yourself'. In Romans 13, he writes:

> [8]Owe no one anything except the [duty] to love one another; for he who loves another has fulfilled [the] law. [9]For the [commandments], 'You shall not commit adultery', 'You shall not murder', 'You shall not steal',

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[3] On the reading, see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (United Bible Societies, 1971).
[4] See 'Christian morality'.

> 'You shall not covet', and whatever other commandment [there is], are summed up in this word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'. [10]Love works no evil to a neighbour; love then [is] a fulfilment of [the] law.

Likewise in Galatians 5:

> [13]For you were called to freedom, brothers, only [use] not this freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but serve one another through love. [14]For the whole Law is fulfilled in one word: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' [15]But if you bite and devour one another, watch out lest you are destroyed by one another.

Here 'freedom' is from 'the curse of the Law', i.e. the need to keep the letter of the Law perfectly to be accepted by God (Gal. 3:10–14).

In these passages, Paul takes Jesus' teaching that all the Law and the Prophets 'hang on' love to mean that love 'sums up' (*anakephalaioō*) and 'fulfils' (*plēroō*) the Law.

Paul also follows Jesus in elevating laws designed to distinguish God's people from other people. Thus he insists that circumcision in the flesh is not what matters; it is circumcision of the heart (Rom. 2:28–29). He accordingly strongly opposed Judaizers who tried to insist that Gentile Christian be circumcised (see Acts 15:1, 5; Gal. 1:6–7, 3:1–3, 6:12).

In Romans 2, Paul distinguished between circumcision in the flesh and commandments like 'You shall not steal' and 'You shall not commit adultery', describing the latter as 'the righteous requirements' (*ta dikaiōmata*) of the Law (Rom. 2:17–29). He called on Christians to keep the latter with the help of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:1–4).

John's teaching

In his first letter, John calls on his readers to love God and one another, and links this love to the commandments (1 John 5:2–3):

> [2]By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and do his commandments. [3]For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments …

The link here is unmistakable. Christian love keeps to the Law as Jesus taught it.

Conclusion

Love does not replace the commandments in the Law. It points to their elevation but does not replace them.

Is Genesis 1–3 literal or figurative?

Dr. Peter G. Nelson

The question of whether Genesis 1–3 is literal or figurative is one that divides Evangelical Christians today. While some take the seven 'days' in Genesis 1, for example, as literally representing successive periods of 24 hours, others take them figuratively as representing long periods of time, or as 24-hour days with long periods of time between them.[5]

The issue has a long history. Josephus, for example, writing in the 1st century AD, took Genesis 2–3 literally, presenting it as an explanation of nature.[6] His contemporary, Philo, on the other hand, interpreted these chapters allegorically, with Adam symbolizing mind, Eve perception, the snake pleasure, and so on.[7]

In this article, I first consider the composition of Genesis 1–3 and how this might bear on whether it is literal or not. I then consider the different ways figurative language is used in the Bible, and the extent to which these could apply to Genesis 1–3. Finally, I draw some conclusions.

Composition

Scholars are agreed that Genesis 1–3 is prose rather than poetry. Hebrew poetry is characterized by couplets in which the second line repeats the thought of the first (cf. Gen. 49:2–27). Genesis 1–3 does not have this structure.

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[5] For details, see my book, *Big Bang, Small Voice*, 2nd edn. (Hull: Botanic Christian Books, 2014), 41–2, 145.

[6] Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 1:34–51.

[7] Philo, *Allegorical Interpretation of Genesis* 2–3.

However, some scholars have argued that Genesis 1 does have a literary structure.[8] They point out that, in this chapter:

(1)   there is a repetition in the way events are described (typically 'And God said, "Let there be …" And it was so. And God saw that [it was] good');

(2)   there is a pattern in the number of times the phrase 'And God said, "Let there be …" is used:

day 1	once	day 4	once
day 2	once	day 5	once
day 3	twice	day 6	twice

(3)   there is a correspondence between what is made on days 1–3 and 4–6:

day 1	light	day 4	luminaries
day 2	sea and sky	day 5	fish and birds
day 3	land and plants	day 6	animals and humans

(4)   there is a chiastic structure to verses 14–18, with verse 18 repeating verse 14 and verse 17 repeating verse 15.

Scholars argue from this that the days in Genesis 1 are themselves part of the literary construction, and are not to be taken literally. However, this does not necessarily follow. The main elements of Genesis 1, including the six days and items (2) and (3), could have been determined by what happened, with

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[8] See Henri Blocher, *In the Beginning* (tr. David G. Preston, Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984); Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco: Word Books, 1987).

the author employing literary devices like (1) and (4) to bring what happened out.

Use of figurative language in the Bible

Figurative language is used in the Bible for at least four purposes:

- to express truths that would be impossible to express literally;

- to express truths more vividly than they can be expressed literally;

- to express truths more simply than they can be expressed literally; and

- to express truths more obscurely than they can be expressed literally.

I shall discuss these in turn in relation to Genesis 1–3.

Expressing the inexpressible

The authors of the Bible had to write about many things that cannot be seen, and which cannot therefore be described literally. In particular, they had to write about God, Satan, heaven, and hell. To do this they had to use figurative language. So, for example, Jesus spoke of the Holy Spirit as the 'finger of God' (compare Luke 11:20 with Mat. 12:28).

Genesis 1–3 contains figurative language used for this purpose (e.g.in 3:8 God is described as 'walking in the garden'). However, this does not mean that the whole of Genesis 1–3 is written in this style. Figurative language is only needed to describe the spiritual aspects of creation and of the beginning of the world. If the author of Genesis used figurative language to describe the physical aspects, he must have had some other reason for doing so.

Enhancement

The authors of the Bible frequently use figurative language for the purposes of enhancement. For example, on one occasion, Jesus declared, 'I am the light of the world; the [one] who follows me shall never walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life' (John 8:12). This evokes a picture of walking in the country on a dark night. Without a light one can easily stumble or get lost (cf. John 11:9–10, 12:35–36; 1 John 2:9–11). Jesus could have said, 'I can help people through life. Those who put their trust in me and follow my teaching will know how to live and avoid making mistakes.' This still has force, but is not as graphic as what he did say.

In the story of Adam and Eve (2:4–3:24) there are a number of words and phrases that could come into this category. For example, the 'tree of life' (2:9, 3:22) could symbolize God's provision for Adam of eternal life, and 'the Snake' (3:1–5, 14–15) could symbolize the Devil. However, these expressions could equally well be taken literally. There could have been a tree whose fruit conferred eternal life, if only miraculously (cf. Num. 21:8–9, etc.); and there could have been a creature with the faculty of speech and reason that lived on after the death of its body and became the Devil (Rev. 12:9, 20:2).[9] Moreover, parts of the story seem very much as if they are intended to be taken literally (e.g. the geography of Eden, 2:10–14). Thus the narrative could be in an elevated style, but this is by no means certain.

Simplification

Figurative language is used in secular writing to make complicated ideas intelligible to an ordinary reader. For example, the atom is often described as being like a tiny solar system, with the nucleus at the centre, and electrons orbiting

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[9] Some commentators take 'death' in the story to be figurative ('spiritual death'), but it is better taken as literal. See my discussion in *God and the Universe* (Hayesville: AJBT, 2020), Chap. 3.

round it like planets round the sun. This gives the reader some idea of what scientists believe an atom is like, even though the picture is, in certain respects, a gross over-simplification (e.g. electrons are not in well-defined orbits in the way that planets are).

The question is, does Genesis give a simplified account of origins, written to make what would be intelligible to early readers understandable to them? Were the stories in it devised, not to communicate the scientific truth about what happened, but the theological truth (e.g. that God, the God of Israel, created the universe)?

Now in part the answer to these questions must be 'Yes'. The ancient Hebrews did not have the scientific knowledge we have today. If Genesis had been written in modern scientific terms, they would not have been able to understand it. That God should inspire the author to describe creation in a way the ancient Hebrews could understand is entirely reasonable.

If God did do this, the question is, how far did this accommodation extend? Some of the descriptions in the narrative, if taken literally, reflect a primitive conception of the universe. For example:

> ● The sky is described as a *rāqîa'* (1:6–8).[10] This term is derived from the verb *rāqa'*, meaning to beat, stamp, or spread, used of the working of metals. The noun thus implies expansiveness,[11] but may also imply rigidity (cf. Job 37:18, 'Can you, with him, spread out the skies, strong as a cast [metal] mirror?'). Hence LXX's *stereōma* (from *stereos*, 'hard', 'firm', 'solid'), Vulgate's *firmamentum*, and AV's 'firmament'.

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[10] See Derek Kidner, *Genesis* (London: Tyndale, 1967), 47.
[11] A one centimetre cube of gold can be beaten into a leaf over three metres square.

● The sun, moon, and stars are described as being 'set in' the *rāqîaʻ* (1:14–19). If they were thought of as being suspended from it, and the *rāqîaʻ* as resting on the earth, this would explain the order of creation in 1:1–19 – first the earth, then the *rāqîaʻ*, and then the sun, moon, and stars.

● The *rāqîaʻ* is described as having water above it (1:6–7), and trap doors through which this water can rain on to the earth (7:11–12).

These descriptions could indicate that there is considerable accommodation to ancient thought in Genesis.[12] On the other hand, the descriptions could be pictorial, like our word 'cloudburst'. We do not imagine that clouds are literally balloons of water, but we use this expression because it vividly describes a heavy downpour of rain. We similarly use 'sunrise'. The apparently primitive descriptions in Genesis could have the same status.

Accommodation to ancient thought cannot explain all the differences between the Genesis account of origins and the modern scientific one. Early readers would surely have been capable of conceiving a longer period of creation than six days, and would have expected the sun to have been created before day and night.

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[12] Cf. Denis O. Lamoureux, 'The Bible and ancient science,' *Science and Christian Belief* 31 (2019), 168–93.

Mystification

Figurative language is sometimes used in the Bible to express truths less clearly than they could be expressed literally. For example, after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba, the prophet Nathan told him about a rich man who, to entertain a visitor, did not slaughter one of his own animals, but killed the only one belonging to a poor man (2 Sam. 12:1–4). David immediately condemned the rich man (vv. 5–6), only to find that he had condemned himself ('You [are] the man!', v. 7).

A second example is Jesus's use of parables. Although it is commonly supposed that Jesus taught in parables in order to make spiritual truths easier to grasp, the reason he himself gave was the opposite of this: it was to make spiritual truths *harder* to grasp, so that only those who really wanted to understand them would be able to do so. This comes out in Luke 8:4–15p. After Jesus had told the crowds a parable (vv. 4–8), his disciples questioned him about it (v. 9). His reply was: 'To you it has been given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to the rest in parables, *that seeing they may not see, and hearing they may not understand*' (v. 10). He then explained the parable to them (vv. 11–15).

As a result of teaching in this way, Jesus was quite often misunderstood, his hearers taking literally what he intended figuratively. For example, early in his ministry, the Jews asked him for a sign (John 2:13–22). His answer was, 'Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up' (v. 19). The Jews took this literally, and missed the point (vv. 20–22). Nicodemus made a similar mistake when Jesus told him, 'You must be born again/from above' (John 3:1–8), and the disciples when he said, 'Lazarus has fallen asleep' (John 11:11–14) and 'beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees' (Mat. 16:5–12). The disciples expressed great relief when Jesus stopped speaking figuratively (John 16:25–30).

There is an important principle here. God calls us to live by faith (2 Cor. 5:7 etc.). For this he both reveals himself to us in order that faith might be possible, and also hides himself from us (Isa. 45:15) in order that faith might not become sight. There is thus both clarity and obscurity in the Bible.

This principle is particularly evident in the case of the prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the Messiah. To the eyes of faith, these point unmistakably to Jesus of Nazareth. To many of his contemporaries, however, they did not. They are not sufficiently clear as to force everyone – even the most hardened scribe or Pharisee – to accept Jesus as Lord, but they are sufficiently clear as to assure believers that he is the one of whom the prophets spoke. It is as if God took great care to ensure that the prophecies concerning his son were such that, even when they were being fulfilled, faith was still required to accept him. Jesus himself was certainly very careful not to declare who he was other than in response to faith (Mat. 16:13–20, John 10:22–30, etc.).

The prophecies concerning the last days in the book of Revelation are similar. Most Christians find these very difficult. The wide variety of interpretations of them[13] is a testimony to this. Why are they difficult? Is it because the events being foretold are so far beyond our imagination that they have to be put in a symbolic way? Or is the same principle at work? Are they deliberately obscure, so that, as the events they describe begin to take place, it still requires faith to recognize that what has been foretold is being fulfilled?

One further thought along this line. Daniel was a man who had remarkable visions. These visions were so full of symbolism, and were so difficult to understand, that even Daniel himself was unable to interpret them. However, when Daniel asked for an interpretation of a vision, God gave it to him (see, e.g., Dan.

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[13] See, e.g., J. Daniel Hays, J. Scott Duvall, and C. Marvin Pate, *Dictionary of Biblical Prophecy and End Times* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

7). The question arises, therefore, why was Daniel not given the interpretation in the first place? The answer comes in Daniel 10:12, where he is commended for having 'set his heart to understand'. The visions were a test of how much he really did want to know what God was saying to him.

In the light of these considerations, the literalness of Genesis 1–3 cannot be pressed too far. In the wisdom of God, there might be more to these chapters than meets the eye. What if God created the universe in the way modern science describes, and wanted to reveal this to human beings in such a manner that it would always remain a matter of faith that 'the worlds were framed by a pronouncement of God' (Heb. 11:3)? He could not then give a completely literal account, otherwise scientists would be able to verify it, and make faith easier. He would be bound to give a more guarded description, couched at least partly in figurative language. To insist on taking the Genesis account completely literally may therefore be going further than God has purposed.

If, on the other hand, God created the universe as literally described in Genesis 1–3, he did not need to express this figuratively. This is because Genesis 1 describes the universe in a mature state. On day 7, trees had rings, pebbles were smooth, stars shone (despite the length of time it takes for light from them to reach the earth), and so on. Then after the Fall in Genesis 3, the natural order was changed. God cursed the ground and brought death on human beings. Scientists are incapable of retracing this history from observations on the universe today, and thereby confirming it. God therefore had no need to mystify Genesis 1–3. These chapters can be taken literally, and it remains a matter of faith that 'the worlds were framed by a pronouncement of God'.

Conclusion

Genesis 1–3 can be largely literal or largely figurative depending on how God created the universe. This may seem an

unsatisfactory conclusion, but it has the merit of keeping us humble. As Paul said, 'O [the] depth of [the] riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable [are] his judgments and untraceable his ways!' (Rom. 11:33).