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Gane's "Old Testament law for Christians: Original context and enduring application" (critical book review)

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Critical Reviews



Gane, R. E. (2017). *Old Testament law for Christians: Original context and enduring application*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker. 464 pp. \$32.99. ISBN 9780801049040

Roy Gane is Professor of Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Languages at Seventh-day Adventist Theological Seminary, Andrews University in Michigan. His commentary on Leviticus/Numbers and numerous articles related to the Old Testament generally, and the Torah and Law particularly, make him well qualified to address the subject at hand.

This work is an attempt to provide a relatively comprehensive introduction to the Old Testament law (OTL) from a Christian perspective. More specifically:

This book shows Christians how OT laws are relevant, interesting accessible, and useful; how to navigate around them; how to uncover their wise values (cf. 2 Tim. 3:15, “to make you wise for salvation”); and how to arrive at answers to questions regarding their interpretation and application to modern life (p. xiv).

Before addressing some specifics, two basic issues should be noted. First, this work addresses the OTL from a Christian perspective. It does not therefore, seek to address how modern adherents of Judaism (or other faith traditions) might relate to the OTL. Second, it is written from a theologically conservative Christian viewpoint.

The volume is divided into four parts. In the first two portions, “Getting into Old Testament Law” and “Literature and Background of the Old Testament,” Gane begins by offering a brief argument for the continuing relevance of the OTL for Christians. This is followed by an introduction of the OTL generally.

In part 3, “Applying Old Testament Laws,” Gane examines the relevance of the law for Christians by looking at problems associated with direct application of OTL and various solutions to those problems. This is followed by an explanation and explication of Gane’s approach which he calls the “progressive moral wisdom” approach. Gane believes that this approach synthesizes the strengths and avoids the weaknesses of the other views (p. 195) and applies his approach to Exodus 23:4 as a test case (pp. 219–35).

Part 4, “Values in Old Testament Law,” seems to be an attempt to show how the OTL has value for the Christian. A number of different laws are addressed here and Gane emphasizes the relevance and importance of obedience to these laws.

This volume clearly reflects a lifetime of study on OTL, and Gane seems to have interacted with much of the relevant primary and secondary literature. While not exhaustive, this volume does seek to be comprehensive. Chapters 2 and 3 provide a helpful introduction to OTL.

Alongside these strengths, one can of course expect some differences of opinion. For example, Gane concludes that Christians should maintain the OTL dietary regulations, so those who feel free to consume pork and catfish would disagree.

More importantly, two aspects of the work make it less helpful and persuasive. First, the organization of the material is not always reader friendly and does not always flow logically or smoothly. The problem is exacerbated by the absence of an introductory paragraph in section 4 explaining what the author is attempting to do there and unless one recalls the brief statement in the book's introduction, there is little way of grounding this section's material. Even if one notes what is in the section, there is little if any explanation as to why this material matters and where it fits in the overall flow of the book. So, section 4 feels like a bit of an appendices. This is not bad, but it would help to inform the reader that this is what it is.

A second aspect that makes this work less helpful and persuasive involves Gane's approach to applying the OTL. It would be better to begin by stating clearly what Christians of various opinions tend to have in common. First, that most if not all, Christians view the OTL as Scripture. Second, no Christian tradition keeps the entirety of the OTL, at least not literally. Third, most if not all, conservative Christians believe that 2 Timothy 3:16–17 applies to the Old Testament which includes the OTL. The issue then for many Christians concerning the OTL is not so much *if* the OTL has any relevance for the Christian but *how* it is relevant. Finally, the way the author presents his favored approach tends to give the impression that his approach is uniquely sensitive to the interpretive concerns related to his approach. This may be, but it is hard to evaluate since Gane does not highlight the commonalties of his view with other approaches. Giving pride of place to the author's view is expected, but by first showing what that view has in common with other approaches will allow him to better distinguish his view. As it is, one is left wondering how his view is truly different from the others he finds wanting.

These criticisms and observations aside, any motivated reader interested in the OTL should consider this volume. It is probably too advanced for the casual reader. Technical terms and ideas are not always defined and there is a bit of Hebrew to wade through. But Bible college and seminary students should find it helpful. Larger libraries might consider adding this volume but theological libraries should certainly add this volume since Gane provides an important contribution to the topic of the OTL.

Reviewer

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