primarysourcedocument

Question 98 (Partial): The Old (Testament's) Law

Question 98 (Partial): The Old (Testament's) Law

Question 98: The Old Law

(The Law of the Old Testament)

By Thomas Aquinas

[Aquinas, Thomas. "The Old Law." *The Summa Theologica*. Translated by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. Second and Revised Edition. 1920. First Part of the Second Part, Question 98. http://www.newadvent.org/summa/2098.htm. Used with the permission of Kevin Knight and New Advent .]

The Old Law (The Law of the Old Testament)

1. Was the Old Law good?
2. [OMITTED] Was it from God?
3. [OMITTED] Did it come from Him through the angels?
4. [OMITTED] Was it given to all?
5. Was it binding on all?
6. Was it given at a suitable time?

Article 1. Whether the Old Law was good?

[Objections 1 and 2 omitted]

Objection 3. [It would seem that the Old Law was not good. For] it belongs to the goodness of the law that it should be possible to obey it, both according to nature, and according to human custom. But such the Old Law was not: since Peter said (Acts 15:10): "Why tempt you (God) to put a yoke on the necks of the disciples, which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear?" Therefore it seems that the Old Law was not good.

*[*On the contrary *omitted]*

I answer that, Without any doubt, the Old Law was good. For just as a doctrine is shown to be good by the fact that it accords with right reason, so is a law proved to be good if it accords with reason. Now the Old Law was in accordance with reason, because it repressed concupiscence which is in conflict with reason, as evidenced by the commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's goods" (Exodus 20:17). Moreover the same law forbade all kinds of sin; and these too are contrary to reason. Consequently it is evident that it was a good law. The Apostle [Paul] argues in the same way (Romans

7): “I am delighted,” says he (verse 22), “with the law of God, according to the inward man.” . . .

But it must be noted that the good has various degrees, as [Pseudo-]Dionysius [the Areopagite] states (*The Divine Names*, 4): for there is a perfect good, and an imperfect good. In things ordained to an end, there is perfect goodness when a thing is such that it is sufficient in itself to conduce to the end: while there is imperfect goodness when a thing is of some assistance in attaining the end, but is not sufficient for the realization thereof. Thus a medicine is perfectly good, if it gives health to a man; but it is imperfect, if it helps to cure him, without being able to bring him back to health. Again it must be observed that the end of human law is different from the end of Divine law. For the end of human law is the temporal tranquility of the state, which end law effects by directing external actions, as regards those evils which might disturb the peaceful condition of the state. On the other hand, the end of the Divine law is to bring man to that end which is everlasting happiness; which end is hindered by any sin, not only of external, but also of internal action. Consequently that which suffices for the perfection of human law, viz. the prohibition and punishment of sin, does not suffice for the perfection of the Divine law: but it is requisite that it should make man altogether fit to partake of everlasting happiness. Now this cannot be done save by the grace of the Holy Ghost, whereby “charity” which fulfilleth the law . . . “is spread abroad in our hearts” (Romans 5:5): since “the grace of God is life everlasting” (Romans 6:23). But the Old Law could not confer this grace, for this was reserved to Christ; because, as it is written (John 1:17), the law was given “by Moses, grace and truth came by Jesus Christ.” Consequently the Old Law was good indeed, but imperfect, according to Hebrews 7:19: “The law brought nothing to perfection.”

[Replies 1 and 2 omitted]

Reply to Objection 3. The yoke of the law could not be borne without the help of grace, which the law did not confer: for it is written (Romans 9:16): “It is not him that willeth, nor of him that runneth,” viz. that he wills and runs in the commandments of God, “but of God that showeth mercy.” Wherefore it is written (Psalm 118:32): “I have run the way of Thy commandments, when Thou didst enlarge my heart,” i.e. by giving me grace and charity.

Article 5. Whether all men were bound to observe the Old Law?

Objection 1. It would seem that all men were bound to observe the Old Law. Because whoever is subject to the king, must needs be subject to his law. But the Old Law was given by God, Who is “King of all the earth” (Psalm 46:8). Therefore all the inhabitants of the earth were bound to observe the Law.

Objection 2. Further, the Jews could not be saved without observing the Old Law: for it is written (Deuteronomy 27:26): “Cursed be he that abideth not in the words of this law, and fulfilleth them not in work.” If therefore other men could be saved without the observance of the Old Law, the Jews would be in a worse plight than other men.

Objection 3. Further, the Gentiles were admitted to the Jewish ritual and to the observances of the Law: for it is written (Exodus 12:48): “If any stranger be willing to dwell among you, and to keep the Phase of the Lord, all his males shall first be circumcised, and then shall he celebrate it according to the manner; and he shall be as he that is born in the land.” But it would have been useless to admit strangers to the legal observances according to Divine ordinance, if they could have been saved without the observance of the Law. Therefore none could be saved without observing the Law.

On the contrary, [Pseudo-]Dionysius [the Areopagite] says (*The Celestial Hierarchy*, 9) that many of the Gentiles were brought back to God by the angels. But it is clear that the Gentiles did not observe the Law. Therefore some could be saved without observing the Law.

I answer that, The Old Law showed forth the precepts of the natural law, and added certain precepts

of its own. Accordingly, as to those precepts of the natural law contained in the Old Law, all were bound to observe the Old Law; not because they belonged to the Old Law, but because they belonged to the natural law. But as to those precepts which were added by the Old Law, they were not binding on save the Jewish people alone.

The reason of this is because the Old Law, as stated above (Article 4), was given to the Jewish people, that it might receive a prerogative of holiness, in reverence for Christ Who was to be born of that people. Now whatever laws are enacted for the special sanctification of certain ones, are binding on them alone. . . . In like manner this people was bound to certain special observances, to which other peoples were not bound. . . .

Reply to Objection 1. Whoever are subject to a king, are bound to observe his law which he makes for all in general. But if he orders certain things to be observed by the servants of his household, others are not bound thereto.

Reply to Objection 2. The more a man is united to God, the better his state becomes: wherefore the more the Jewish people were bound to the worship of God, the greater their excellence over other peoples. Hence it is written (Deuteronomy 4:8): “What other nation is there so renowned that hath ceremonies and just judgments, and all the law?” In like manner, from this point of view, the state of clerics is better than that of the laity, and the state of religious than that of folk living in the world.

Reply to Objection 3. The Gentiles obtained salvation more perfectly and more securely under the observances of the Law than under the mere natural law: and for this reason they were admitted to them. . . .

Article 6. Whether the Old Law was suitably given at the time of Moses?

Objection 1. It would seem that the Old Law was not suitably given at the time of Moses. Because the Old Law disposed man for the salvation which was to come through Christ, as stated above (Articles 2 and 3). But man needed this salutary remedy immediately after he had sinned. Therefore the Law should have been given immediately after sin.

[Objections 2 and 3 and On the contrary *omitted]*

I answer that, It was most fitting for the Law to be given at the time of Moses. The reason for this may be taken from two things in respect of which every law is imposed on two kinds of men. Because it is imposed on some men who are hard-hearted and proud, whom the law restrains and tames: and it is imposed on good men, who, through being instructed by the law, are helped to fulfill what they desire to do. Hence it was fitting that the Law should be given at such a time as would be appropriate for the overcoming of man’s pride. For man was proud of two things, viz. of knowledge and of power. He was proud of his knowledge, as though his natural reason could suffice him for salvation: and accordingly, in order that his pride might be overcome in this matter, man was left to the guidance of his reason without the help of a written law: and man was able to learn from experience that his reason was deficient, since about the time of Abraham man had fallen headlong into idolatry and the most shameful vices. Wherefore, after those times, it was necessary for a written law to be given as a remedy for human ignorance: because “by the Law is the knowledge of sin” (Romans 3:20). But, after man had been instructed by the Law, his pride was convinced of his weakness, through his being unable to fulfill what he knew. Hence, as the Apostle concludes (Romans 8:3-4), “what the Law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God sent [Vulgate: ‘sending’] His own Son . . . that the justification of the Law might be fulfilled in us.”

With regard to good men, the Law was given to them as a help; which was most needed by the people, at the time when the natural law began to be obscured on account of the exuberance of sin: for it was

fitting that this help should be bestowed on men in an orderly manner, so that they might be led from imperfection to perfection; wherefore it was becoming that the Old Law should be given between the law of nature and the law of grace.

Reply to Objection 1. It was not fitting for the Old Law to be given at once after the sin of the first man: both because man was so confident in his own reason, that he did not acknowledge his need of the Old Law; because as yet the dictate of the natural law was not darkened by habitual sinning.

[Replies 2 and 3 omitted]
Original Author Sort: Aquinas, Thomas
Publication Date: 11265.00.00.09
Topic: Classical & Medieval Sources of Natural Law
Subtopic: Thomas Aquinas
Publication Date Range: 1265-1274

Source URL: https://nlnrac.org/node/228