



**“APPLICABLE” BUT NOT “OBEYABLE”!  
REVIEW ESSAY: THE LOST WORLD OF THE TORAH**

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*The Lost World of the Torah* is part of InterVarsity’s *Lost World* series and the second tome co-authored by the Waltons, a father and son duo.<sup>1</sup> The senior member is professor of Old Testament at Wheaton College and Graduate School (and author of several monographs in the same series); the junior Walton is a graduate student at St. Andrews. The book has five parts: methodology, function of Ancient Near East (ANE) legal collections, ritual and Torah, context of Torah, and the ongoing significance of Torah. Each part is composed of a number of “propositions,” one to a chapter (the consistent style of the *Lost World* series), for a total of twenty-three such assertions. While I esteem all the Waltons’ productions, I have not been much of a fan of this proposition-oriented structure. Far too many propositions are interconnected, necessitating as many, or more, “hyperlinking” notations that distract. I would much rather have seen each of these tomes organized more broadly.<sup>2</sup> Nonetheless, this work, like their others, is very readable, stimulating, and, needless to say, provocative.

I appreciate the authors’ respect for the field of pragmatics, particularly related to genre, their deference to original settings of inscriptions, and their concern for the proper use of the Torah: “We must ... seek understanding of how genre works, what the paragraphs of legal sayings meant in their context, and what the significance (if any) they should have for people today” (3).

## TORAH: NOT A LEGAL CODE

As do all of the *Lost World* undertakings, this one also emphasizes that “[the] Bible is written for us but it is not written to us (not in our language or in the context of our culture)” (13–14). How exactly this is the case for the *Torah* and what the ramifications are for the modern reader is the burden of this volume.

The Waltons assert that documents relating to law in the ANE were not “codified legislation”—“they were not *prescriptive* documents establishing law. Instead they *described* rulings (whether through actual verdicts or hypothetical examples)—reporting decisions” (19–20; emphases original). So, according to the authors, when discussing the *Torah* we should abandon “words like code, legislation, prescription, coercion, obedience, and obligation” and instead adopt “words like wisdom, illustration, circumscription, description, instruction, comprehension, and assimilation of ideas” (36; emphases removed). Now it is certainly true that most of the laws of the ANE were casuistic (the “if ..., then ...” model of case law, as opposed to the apodictic style, giving definitive injunctions/prohibitions) and therefore rightly “descriptive.” However, that does not change the fact those were, indeed, laws. As Westbrook noted, “The casuistic form ... was itself a process of editing, creating a *uniform body of rules* indifferent to their origins.”<sup>3</sup> The nature of the documents does not negate their being rules of some sort, promulgated by an appropriate authority that expected adherence to them by addressees.

The Waltons give three reasons for not viewing the *Torah* as a legal code: it is non-comprehensive; it is non-prescriptive; and it is non-reusable.<sup>4</sup>

*Non-comprehensive*

Firstly, they argue that the *Torah* cannot be legislation because it is not comprehensive enough. Most ANE legal collections, including Israel’s *Torah*, say the authors, “do not even try to be comprehensive; many important aspects of life and society are

left unaddressed. ... These documents could not possibly serve as codified legislation to regulate every aspect of society" (29–30). And again, "trying to construct a moral system from the teachings of the Torah (or even from the New Testament, which is not comprehensive either) is like trying to build a skyscraper out of seven two-by-fours and a pot of glue. It simply cannot be done" (214): the Torah "does not provide a full moral system" (206). But does lack of comprehensiveness mean absence of imperatival force? What if God chose to regulate some matters and not others, leaving the latter to be subsumed by broader, non-specific directives, even those generic ones enjoining love for God and neighbor? I would argue that whatever guidance God provides for the faith and praxis of his people is *moral*, and whatever he reveals is full enough for his purposes and sufficient to accomplish his goals for mankind. Indeed, adequacy is the key to any body of law, not comprehensiveness. New laws are constantly being added to the fifty-four Titles of the United States Code (as of this writing); legislative activity continues. Despite this non-comprehensive and seemingly inexhaustible nature of the US Code, it is a system of legislation that may not be disregarded by citizens and entities of this nation.

### *Non-Prescriptive*

Secondly, the Waltons declare that "the intention of the Torah is to produce knowledge, not obedience; it was not given because Yahweh wanted Israel specifically to do anything. What it offers is not an imperative but a choice" (162). But is not a call to make the right choice a call to obedience—choosing to do what God would have his people do? And if there are consequences for the choice one may make, there clearly is an imperatival force operating in the divine offer of alternatives. Choice does not diminish obedience in the least: Adam and Eve chose to disobey.<sup>5</sup> Noting that the Hebrew verbs "to obey" (שָׁמַע, *shama'*) and "to keep" (שָׁמַר, *shamar*) are linked to the voice of God, the Waltons observe that "obeying the voice of the Lord is always a good idea, but it should not be equated to obeying laws" (42). But divine

voice and divine law are often considered equivalent; even the giving of the law was by the “great voice” of Yahweh (Deut 5:22). And אִמְרָה, *imrah*, “utterance/word,” occurs nineteen times in Psalm 119, as one of the many synonyms for תּוֹרָה (*torah*, “law”). Besides, Isa 5:24 parallels “the תּוֹרָה of Yahweh Sabaoth” with “the utterance [אִמְרָה] of the Holy One of Israel”; likewise, Deut 33:9 parallels “covenant” with “utterance.” In fact, Lev 26:14 equates “obey [שָׁמַע] Me” and “carry out all these commandments” (see Deut 4:1; 5:1; 28:1; etc.). Likewise, for שָׁמַר; several texts make it clear that the “keeping” is of divine commandments (see Deut 4:2, 40; 5:10, 29; 6:2, 17).<sup>6</sup>

The Waltons’ declaration that “legislation carries a sense of ‘you ought’; instruction carries a sense of ‘you will know’” (45) is not sustainable. In the canon of Scripture, even narrative implicitly carries a “you ought.” In fact, this is true for any communication intended for application. When a wife tells her husband, “The trash is full,” though an indicative verb is employed, who could deny that the utterance functions as an imperative?<sup>7</sup> The Waltons, denying such authorial *doings*, assert that the verbal form of Lev 19:2 (“you *will* be holy”) is “indicative, not imperative” (54–55). According to them, this verse is asserting a fixed fact that the Israelites *will* become holy by divine fiat: “It is a status that he [God] gives and it cannot be gained or lost by the Israelites’ own efforts or failures” (55). While this may be true of positional holiness, the imperfect verb form תִּהְיֶיךָ, *tihyu*, has imperatival force and impacts practical holiness as, for example, in 2 Chr 30:7 and Zech 1:4: “You *will not be* [וְאַל-תִּהְיֶיךָ, *w'al-tihyu*] like your fathers.” That is not a prediction of the future, but a prescription for behavior. As with the English future tense, when such an imperfect verb form is used by a superior who has the power of imposition, it can carry the force of a decree (also in Ps 32:9).<sup>8</sup>

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*Non-reusable*

Thirdly, the Waltons claim that “the legal sayings are presented in the context of a covenant between Yahweh and Israel, in which case they serve as stipulations to that covenant agreement” (39). The covenantal context has changed, and therefore, apparently, those stipulations are non-reusable in a changed setting. It is, no doubt, true that the circumstances of the ancient provenance of OT documents and those of modern readership of Scripture are drastically different. But the OT period itself was not monolithic and uniform; contexts changed quite dramatically even within that era, from the immediate post-exodus age, to the amphictyony, and then to the monarchy, exile, and even to multiple post-exilic returns, followed by Roman rule over Palestine. In every such shift one would have to reinterpret the OT for one’s own time and space.<sup>9</sup> In fact, that transaction of reinterpretation also needs to be performed on the NT by modern readers, since the socio-cultural-anthropological milieu of this archaic corpus is also vastly different from that of today. So an absolute stance such as the Waltons take forces us to abandon not only the Torah, but all sixty-six books of Scripture, at least for the purposes of application.

In the Torah, law is embedded in narrative and so we have “stories ... poking out through the repeated patterns and linguistic formulas ..., despite the parsimonious language, the minimalist descriptions, and the paucity of detail.”<sup>10</sup> Thus the role of the original free-standing document (whatever it was) has undergone alteration; in its fresh setting in the canon of Scripture it functions as the author/redactor of the final form intended it to. Therefore, what must be respected and privileged in any era and hemisphere is the thrust/force/import of these final canonical forms that are now part of Scripture, not the function of putative progenitor documents and their creators’ intentions. If one follows this trajectory, then the fundamental issue is not whether the Torah, in its freestanding status, was legislation or not. Rather, it is: What is the function of this *final form* of the Torah in the canon of Scripture, construed and read as such by

the people of God? While the Waltons agree that “none of these [legal collections in the Torah] are in a literary context of legislation; they have been adopted for secondary (or even tertiary) use” (39), their argument throughout *The Lost World of the Torah* is that the role of these lists as free-standing ephemera was not to legislate or guide morality, but to serve as illustrations and examples of “order” and “wisdom.” And they work with the assumption that this character of the prototypical texts is carried over with those documents into their new residence in the canon (94). But the fact is that canonicity changes the role of its constituent books, both in the OT and the NT. All such texts, whatever their functions may have been in their independent existences without the canon, now take on a unique role within the canon as inspired and authoritative guides for the faith and praxis of God’s people—what I call an emergent property of canonicity.

So, on the one hand we have the fairly common understanding of the Torah that the Waltons rightly deplore: “Modern Bible readers are inclined to regard the Torah as universal because they have assumed that it is God’s law, that it is to be equated with a moral system, that it reflects God’s (unchanging) ideal, and that it is in the Bible—God’s revelation to all his people” (101). This extreme takes the law as something that needs to be obeyed as such, everywhere and in every age, though its advocates arbitrarily pick the laws they deem worthy of adherence. This polemical intention of *The Lost World of the Torah* I do appreciate; it is a much-needed corrective. But on the other hand, we have the Waltons asserting that the Torah has nothing to do with either legislation of life or morality of behavior. According to them, like other legal documents of the ANE, the Torah is simply a collection of model verdicts, legal declarations that, in a very general sense, guide “wisdom.” But the repetitive textual stress in this corpus on keeping and obeying divine commandments is not commensurate with such a hands-off approach to life and behavior as the Waltons attribute to the Torah. Is there an option that avoids these two extremes?

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## A FRESH LOOK AT INTERPRETATION FOR APPLICATION

Over the last decade, I have argued for an approach to textual interpretation from the vantage point and interests of a preacher expounding pericopes of Scripture for application to real life. The *media res* that I propose, primarily a preaching hermeneutic, provides a fresh option for interpreting for application not only the Torah, but all other texts of Scripture, both in the OT and the NT.

I suggest that a distinction—admittedly artificial but practically useful—be made between “obeyability” and “applicability” of texts. Every pericope of Scripture that carries a divine demand is “obeyable” if that demand can be put into practice straightaway, without any particular thought or concern for its relevance to the one “obeying” it.<sup>11</sup> Levirate marriage? Well, I need to marry my sister-in-law if my brother dies. Cultivate particular plants in particular seasons? Yes, get the fertilizer ready. Do things with ephods, altars, and Urim and Thummim? Sure, let’s engage in some fortune-telling. Stone that rebellious child? Right, hand out the rocks. And so on. On the other hand, “application” calls for more work, particularly in answering the question: How is the ancient text relevant to the modern “applier”?

The ancient laws of the Torah, as well as the rest of biblical literature, are, as the Waltons agree, uniquely and exquisitely contextual, documents addressed to particular peoples, billeted in a particular geographical location, sojourning in a particular era, maintaining a particular cultic organization, constrained by a particular culture, and supporting a particular political configuration. None of those laws or divine demands are, on the surface, relevant to a Christian living in Dallas, TX, in 2020. What can one do to overcome this “distanciation”?<sup>12</sup> The interpreter should first discern what the author is *doing* with what he is saying—the thrust of the text, or as I call it the theology of the pericope—and then “apply” that thrust to contemporary life. In other words, “obeyability” (direct and straightforward) is to be

distinguished from “applicability” (indirect, via discernment of pericopal theology). Allow me to explain.

### *Theological Hermeneutics*

I have argued elsewhere that every pericope of Scripture depicts a facet of an ideal world that God would have (its thrust/force/import: pericopal theology), the authorial *doing* in that pericope—the pragmatics of the text, as opposed to the authorial saying—the semantics of the text.<sup>13</sup> So, each pericope is God’s gracious invitation to mankind to live in his ideal world by abiding by the theology of that pericope—i.e., the requirement of God’s ideal world (the *world in front of the text*) as called for in that pericope. And as mankind accepts that divine invitation and applies the theology of the pericope, pericope by pericope God’s people are progressively and increasingly inhabiting this ideal world, adopting its values, and abiding by its requirements. Thus, interpretation for application has two moves: discerning theology and deriving application.



Since the only one to comprehensively and perfectly fulfill the requirement of every pericope in Scripture is Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, every pericope is, in essence, portraying what it means to be more like Christ, i.e., a facet of Christlikeness, a pixel of the *Christicon*. The whole canon thus projects the plenary image of Christ. Thus, pericope by pericope, through application, God’s people become increasingly more Christlike, as they align themselves to the image of Christ displayed in each pericope. After all, God’s ultimate goal is to conform his children into the “image” (εἰκόν, *eikōn*) of his Son, Christ (Rom 8:29). And so we have a *christiconic* hermeneutic.<sup>14</sup> In other words, pericopal theology tells us *what* Christ looks like, and application directs us



to *how* we can look more like him, in our own particular circumstances. Such applications of pericopal theology, being specific to the situation and circumstances of the particular audience, is the responsibility of leaders of congregations to derive and suggest to their flock, with pastoral love, wisdom, and authority: this is spiritual formation and discipleship from Scripture.<sup>15</sup>

*Legal Hermeneutics*

Such a theological hermeneutic has its analogy in legal hermeneutics of the modern day.<sup>16</sup> Valid application must be made of the text of canonical law in situations and circumstances distant from, and unforeseen at, the event of its original inscription. For instance, the U.S. Constitution empowers Congress “to raise and support armies,” “to provide and maintain a navy,” and “to make rules for the government and regulation of the land and naval forces” (Article I, ¶8, clauses 12 and 13). As written, this edict is silent about any support for an air force. However, despite the absence of any explicit reference in the Constitution to this branch of the armed forces, the U.S. government continues to raise and support, provide and maintain, govern and regulate an air force. Presumably, the terms *army* and *navy* in the aforementioned late eighteenth-century document projected a broader category—*all military undertakings*. The pragmatic thrust of the declaration<sup>17</sup> was to designate any conceivable military force as worthy of establishment and maintenance by Congress; such an intention would necessarily include an *air force* and, potentially, a *space force*, or even a *robot force*, as future applications.

| FACETS OF MEANING |                                  |                               |
|-------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Text              | Pragmatics                       | Application                   |
| army, navy        | <i>all military undertakings</i> | air/space/<br>robot force ... |

Of course, no canonical corpus can be expected to bear the burden of explicitly expressing all possible applications for all possible people in all possible future times. As U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Marshall observed:

A constitution, to contain an accurate detail of all the subdivisions of which its great powers will admit, and of all the means by which they may be carried into execution, would partake of the prolixity of a legal code, and could scarcely be embraced by the human mind. It would probably never be understood by the public. Its nature, therefore, requires, that only its great outlines should be marked, its important objects designated, and the minor ingredients which compose those objects be deduced from the nature of the objects themselves.<sup>18</sup>

Likewise, for the Bible to direct every possible twist and turn in the life of every individual Christian and of every community of God in every millennium in every land would be impossible. Instead a canonical *world in front of the text* is projected, with each pericope of the text portraying a slice of this plenary world, each with its own pericopal theology, i.e., God's intentions for how his ideal world should function (or, with regard to the *Christicon*, how each child of God may be conformed to the image of the Son of God). Such textual intentions are therefore necessarily generic, capable of being applied to a variety of situations/individuals in a variety of ways.<sup>19</sup> With regard to the Bible, this specification of application is the task of the preacher; with regard to the U.S. Constitution, it is the task of the judge. Both preacher and judge bring the pericopal theologies/transhistorical intentions of their respective texts to bear upon the particulars of the people they are responsible for, lives in the pews and lives before the bar.

Consider the example of Eph 5:18—"Be not drunk with wine." While this textual fragment is not a pericope or even a full sentence in the Greek, focusing on the word "wine" in this verse will be profitable for the purpose of illustration.<sup>20</sup> The imperative in this verse demands that one not be drunk with *wine*. The

transhistorical intention of the text—for biblical texts, this is pericopal theology—is clearly concerned with *all alcoholic drinks*, thus prohibiting drunkenness with *vodka, beer, Scotch*, or one’s libation *du jour* (even future alcoholic concoctions that are yet to be conceived, compounded, and consumed). What the author of Ephesians in this verse is *doing* is projecting a segment of God’s ideal *world in front of the text* in which the people of God refrain from intoxication with alcoholic beverages of any kind.

| FACETS OF MEANING |                             |                         |
|-------------------|-----------------------------|-------------------------|
| Text              | Pragmatics                  | Application             |
| wine              | <i>all alcoholic drinks</i> | vodka, beer, Scotch ... |

This is the difference between “obeyability” (not getting drunk on *wine*) and “applicability” (not getting drunk on *any alcoholic beverage*). Such confusion of “obeyability” with “applicability”—the way I am defining those terms—is widely prevalent in circles of biblical interpretation and pulpits of biblical preaching. So while the Waltons declare that “[God’s revelation] is written for us, but not to us” (103), I would nuance this further: Scripture is not *to* us—it is not “obeyable”; but it is *for* us—it is “applicable.”

### RAMIFICATIONS OF THE WALTONS’ THESIS

The argument made by *The Lost World of the Torah* has significant ramifications for the Christian and the church: for atoning sin, for life transformation, for valuing the OT and the NT, and for application by Gentiles.

#### *For Atoning Sin*

Of sin and guilt offerings involving blood rituals, the Waltons assert that these “rituals were not designed to take away the sin of the person. They were designed to restore equilibrium to the place of God’s presence” (76). What is this “disequilibrium” if it isn’t sin? The authors continue: “The ‘clearing’ antiseptic role of

the blood accomplishes *kipper*. *Kipper* rarely has a person or sin as its object. The verb's direct object is typically the part of the sanctuary ... being expunged from desecration" (76). But we have Lev 4:35 that explicitly states that "the priest shall make atonement [כִּפֶּר, *kipper*] for him for his sin which he has sinned, and it shall be forgiven him" (also see 4:26, 31; 5:6, 10, 13, 16, 18, 26; etc.). Besides, it is not at all inconceivable that any sin is ultimately against God and his holy place. So while I appreciate the Waltons hedging by saying that *kipper* "rarely" has a meaning relating to personal sin, it is certainly far more frequent than the authors are willing to grant.

In any case, they note that "the translation 'atonement' is quite unfortunate and misleading if we associate it with what Christ accomplished on the cross regarding our sin" (76). Well, of course: The Israelites in OT days would have had no knowledge of Christ, and the atoning work of the Savior is certainly not what is described in Leviticus. However, as one reads the Bible canonically, it is hard to deny that the sacrifices at the very least are an adumbration of Christ's ultimate sacrifice. But the Waltons disagree: the sacrifices "are not simply an anticipation of what Christ would do—they do not do anything like what Christ would do" (77). I would argue that they are, and that they do.<sup>21</sup> Otherwise, one would have to admit that the NT doctrine of sin and atonement, and therefore forgiveness and salvation, is entirely based on an erroneous reading of the intent of the Torah (more on this below).

### *For Life Transformation*

With regard to 1 Pet 1:15, that calls upon God's people to "be like the Holy One who called you," the Waltons write: "Peter is invoking a contemporary (first century) understanding of what holiness means (*hagios* [ἅγιος] means 'dedicated to God') and what Torah is for (divine legislation) to exhort the audience of his epistle to a particular kind of behavior" (205).<sup>22</sup> In other words, Peter was wrong about "what holiness means" and "what Torah is for," at least on the OT's own terms. But it is not only Peter

who seems to have made this unforced error: Jesus said “You are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Matt 5:48); and John talks about the Christian “purifying [ἀγνίζω, *hagnizō*] himself, just as He is pure [ἄγνός, *hagnos*]” (1 John 3:3). In fact, I would argue that the entirety of the NT assumes that God’s people will live lives of holiness, in which case, by the Waltons’ thesis, the bulk of the NT is wrong about “what holiness means” and “what Torah is for.”<sup>23</sup>

But all that is inconsequential for, according to the Waltons, “Yahweh is establishing a reputation for himself through his interaction with Israel. He does not tell them that they ought to reflect him in a certain way; his reputation will be established one way or another, regardless of what Israel does” (162). If God does not care what his people do, why does he go to the trouble of giving them any divine demand, whether in the Torah or in the rest of Scripture? According to the Waltons, “Yahweh wants them to be faithful vassals, and they need to do so if they expect to enjoy the blessings of the covenant relationship” (163). Of course, submission and obedience is what is required to remain in the flow of blessings, and that’s what “faithful vassals” are to be about.

God’s demands (in the pericopes of every book of Scripture) are for those in relationship with him. That is to say, relationship with God precedes responsibility to God; and relationship to him mandates responsibility on part of those who are in that relationship. Even the Ten Commandments (responsibility) was prefaced by an announcement of relationship: “I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery” (Exod 20:2). A loving relationship with God (relationship comes first) should result in the keeping of his commandments (responsibility follows), as the NT points out often, particularly in Johannine literature: John 14:15, 21; 15:10, 12; 1 John 2:3–5; 3:22–24; 4:21; 5:2–3; and 2 John 6. And it is the role of each pericope of Scripture to portray what the will of God is (the theology of the pericope, what happens in God’s ideal *world in front of the text*, in his kingdom), so that we, God’s children, might be aligned to it in

the power of the Spirit to become holy, as God, our Father, is holy.<sup>24</sup> Their obedience would then be the discharging of their responsibility to reflect their relationship with God. And through this obedience, God is glorified as his people express his holiness to the world—the manifestation of the *imago Dei*, specifically of the *Christicon*.

### *For Valuing the OT and the NT*

Anticipating their critics, the Waltons observe: “Some will respond that by contending that the Torah is not establishing morality or legislation for us today, we are diminishing the Old Testament and negating its relevance. Nothing can be further from the truth. Trying to identify the precise function of the Torah makes it more significant to us, not less important and relevant” (208). But as to how the Torah becomes significant, important, and relevant the Waltons fail to explain adequately. According to them, the role of the Torah is to help us “make sense of the New Testament” (216) and to comprehend “the way God has worked in the past to unfold his plans and purposes for the world” (221). If the value of the OT is only as a historical appendage and prelude to the NT, then it does not appear to have any direct transformative value for the Christian. So much so, according to the authors, “it is possible to have moral knowledge, even moral knowledge that has its source in God, without needing to get it from the Torah, or even from special revelation of any kind, including the New Testament” (213).

The Waltons also extend their speculations into the NT. According to them, Paul, like Peter, was mistaken about the Torah: “He is not interacting with Torah as it was understood and used in the Old Testament” (213). Indeed, all the NT authors are culpable: “The New Testament understands the Torah differently from the way the Old Testament does” (198). If the Waltons are right, then Christians are left with the unavoidable situation of the two Testaments essentially going in different directions. The Torah, as proposed by the Waltons, simply gives “illustrations” for the maintenance of “order.” The NT reading of

the Torah, as traditionally understood, sees it as divine demand, the breakage of which is sin (1 John 3:4). I suggest that the only way to reconcile this seeming disparity is by acknowledging the “applicability” (but not “obeyability”) of all biblical texts to all people in all times, an emergent property of the incorporation of time-bound texts into the timeless canon, rendering every part of it always “applicable” for the development of Christlikeness.<sup>25</sup> It is impossible to get away from the fact that the diktats of the OT were considered by Jesus as worthy of being applied (see Mark 10:18–19; 12:28–33; etc.). If Jesus affirmed it, it must be true.

Acknowledging the value of the Torah, Paul affirms that “the law is good” (1 Tim 1:8). And elsewhere in Romans, he asserts that “the Law is holy and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (7:12), and “spiritual” (7:14). In fact, Paul “establishes” the law (3:31), and he “delights” in it (7:22; also see 7:16). And it is through obedience powered by the Holy Spirit that the “righteous requirement of the law is fulfilled” (8:4).<sup>26</sup> The apostle refers to the Mosaic Law often in his writings (e.g., Eph 6:2–3) and even cites it approvingly, drawing application from that older text (1 Cor 9:9; 1 Tim 5:17). Indeed, “*all* Scripture is inspired and profitable ...” (2 Tim 3:16).<sup>27</sup> So the OT (and, indeed, all of Scripture), pericope by pericope, directs the chosen people of God on how they are to live, now that they are in relationship to God: relationship mandates responsibility (not by “obeyability,” but by “applicability” of divine demand). And how they are to undertake that responsibility is explicated pericope by pericope, via pericopal theology, the thrust of the text. It is the role of the preacher to discern this thrust from the text and facilitate listeners catching it, and then to derive specific application for that specific audience living in that specific age.

On the other hand, the Waltons’ take manifests a rather anemic use of both OT and NT. They assert, “it is what Christ has done that brings order to the world, not what Christians do (or fail to do). Human efforts do not bring order to the human world” (228). In that case, why do we need the Torah as “illustrations” of order, or even the NT, and why do we need to know what Christ has done? If there is no moral law that calls for

the people of God to live responsibly in relationship to him, then there can be no sin. If there is no sin, there can be no punishment. Would we then need a Savior?

*For Application by Gentiles*

The Waltons belabor their assertion of the uniqueness of the Torah: “Only the Israelites were in a covenant relationship with Yahweh” (100).<sup>28</sup> And so, “non-Jews can neither accept nor reject the Torah because it was never offered to them” (155). But the audience of the Torah (the free-standing corpus)—Israelites—is very different from the audience of the canon of Scripture (of which the Torah is part)—all the people of God of all times and all places. Indeed, Leviticus 18 puts the Waltons’ thesis in doubt. At first, uncleanness appears to have been a possibility only for Israelites and sojourners (Lev 18:6–23). But then in 18:24–25 we are told that the nations had *already* become unclean because of “all these things.” So you have the “abominable” activities of Israel (Lev 18:22, 26, 29) and their “defiling” of themselves and the land (18:20, 23, 28, 30); *as well as* the “abominable” activities of the nations (Lev 18:27, 30) and their “defiling” of themselves and the land (18:24, 25, 27). The warning is clear: if Israel did what the nations had done earlier, they, too, would suffer the same fate as the latter—“spewed out” of the defiled land (18:28, of the Israelites; and 18:25, 28, of the nations). This suggests that God judges Israelites and Gentiles with a single standard (Lev 20:23; and as the NT oft affirms), making the Waltons’ argument that the canonical Torah is restricted to Israel and its covenant untenable.

In like fashion, the Prophets and the Writings assert Israel’s covenantal status and responsibilities (1 Kgs 8:9, 21, 57–58) as a light to the nations (1 Kgs 4:34; 10:1–13). Failure to be who God wanted them to be and do what God wanted them to do would bring about punishment (2 Kgs 17:7–22, focusing on Leviticus 18 and 20). Unfortunately, that is exactly what happened: Israel was expelled from the land (2 Kgs 17:23). Subsequently, Gentiles were resettled in Samaria (17:24), with



not much better results. They, too, were judged and removed (17:25–26). Again, one sees a pattern: the judgment of the Israelites for breaking God’s divine demand in the Torah is repeated upon Gentiles. The fact that even non-Israelites were held responsible for disobedience to divine law, even when they were not governed by any Israelite covenant or treaty, falsifies the Waltons’ claim and establishes that the NT writers were right in maintaining that the standards of the divine Lawgiver were applicable to all, and have been broken by all, and that “all have sinned” (Rom 3:23).

The Waltons fail to see the synergism that is an emergent property of the biblical canon: the integral whole is greater than the sum of its free-standing parts. And therefore, every pericope of Scripture is “profitable for doctrine, reproof, correction, and training in righteousness” (2 Tim 3:16)—for all of God’s people, of all time, and in all places. While direct “obeyability” is impossible both for Israelites in a different space and time, as well as for all Gentiles living anywhere in any time, the “applicability” of Scripture (all parts of it) is universal and omnitemporal. The thrust of each pericope of Scripture, bearing a divine demand, has potent theological value (as pericopal theology), for it portrays God’s ideal *world in front of the text* is and how it should be instantiated and actualized in life. Such a hermeneutic has immense value in cohering both the OT and the NT understanding of law into a consistent singularity.

## CONCLUSION

In sum, I appreciate the Waltons’ firm reaction to the view of the Torah, held in some quarters of Christendom, as a tract of universally “obeyable” laws from which items are idiosyncratically culled for “obedience.” Such a facile reading of the Torah, indeed of all of Scripture, is to be deprecated. However, the remedy for this malady is not to see the Torah as containing merely examples or illustrations of wisdom or order that say nothing about morality, do nothing for holiness, and are unintended for transformative purposes. There is, I have argued,

“a still more excellent way.” Yes, the Torah (and all of Scripture) is universal, but not in the sense of being universally “obeyable.” Rather, it is universally “applicable”—and for this, one must discern the thrusts of the text, pericope by pericope (pericopal theology), and align oneself to their particular demands, in order to be Christlike. Scripture is not *to* us—it is not “obeyable”; but it is *for* us—it is “applicable,” that we may create microcosms of divine rule amongst us, that will one day become the macrocosm of the Kingdom of God and of his Christ.

## NOTES

1. John H. Walton and J. Harvey Walton, *The Lost World of the Torah: Law as Covenant and Wisdom in Ancient Context* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2019).

2. Following my own recommendation, I shall structure this review essay topically, integrating ideas rather than tackling the work proposition by proposition or even part by part. References to *The Lost World of the Torah* will be indicated in the main text by page number(s) in parentheses.

3. Raymond Westbrook, “What is the Covenant Code?” in *Theory and Method in Biblical and Cuneiform Law: Revision, Interpolation and Development* (ed. Bernard M. Levinson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 30 (emphasis added).

4. This is my organization of their arguments.

5. Choice is explicit in Gen 6:2, that has the first instance of בָּחַר, *bakhar*, “choose,” in the OT, describing the action of the sinful “sons of God.” And there is Deut 30:19: “And choose life, in order that you may live—you and your descendants”—undoubtedly a command to be obeyed (by choice). (All translations of Scripture are my own.)

6. After equating the Torah with depictions of wisdom, the Waltons beg the question by arguing that שָׁמַר in wisdom literature is “clearly not a matter of obedience,” but “a response to the Wisdom instruction being given” (43); hence the verb in the Torah does not indicate obedience. They cite Prov 2:20 and

4:21 but fail to note that 4:4 explicitly asks readers to “keep [שָׁמַר] My commandments and live” (also see Prov 6:23–24; 7:1, 2; 19:16; all reflect injunctions in the Torah, such as Lev 18:4, 5; Deut 4:40; 30:16). And Prov 28:4 and 29:18 explicitly refer to “keeping [שָׁמַר]” the תּוֹרָה. But with regard to these two verses, the Waltons resort to special pleading: תּוֹרָה here, according to them, is simply indicating “order”—“a wise person perceives what brings order, pursues that sort of life, and puts it into practice” (43). All this starts to look suspiciously circular.

7. Which also means that grammar is not the final arbiter of meaning!

8. Throughout the work, the Waltons make insufficient distinction between conferred positional holiness and acquired practical holiness, even denying the latter: “Holiness is a status that is conferred; it cannot be earned, acquired, or lost by behavior” (57). But there is Num 15:40 that exhorts the Israelites to “do all My commandments and be holy to your God.”

9. See the references in Ezra 9–10 to the stipulations of Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 7 regarding the taking of foreign wives.

10. Assnat Bartor, *Reading Law as Narrative: A Study in the Casuistic Laws of the Pentateuch* (Ancient Israel and Its Literature 5; Atlanta: SBL, 2010), 1.

11. The issue of a text’s authority over the Christian, I shall take for granted; it, too, is an emergent property of the canon that the church considers normative for God’s people. I am also arguing that every pericope of Scripture, by virtue of incorporation into the canon, bears a divine demand and carries an inherent imperative, regardless of genre.

12. Paul Ricoeur, “The Hermeneutical Function of Distanciation,” 131–44 in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation*, by Paul Ricoeur (ed. and trans. John B. Thompson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

13. See a series of my articles: “Pericopal Theology,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 173 (2016): 3–17; “Christiconic Interpretation,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 173 (2016): 131–46; “Theological Exegesis,” *Bibliotheca sacra*

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173 (2016): 259–72; and “Applicational Preaching,” *Bibliotheca sacra* 173 (2016): 387–400. As well, see *A Vision for Preaching: Understanding the Heart of Pastoral Ministry* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2015), 71–148; and *A Manual for Preaching: The Journey from Text to Sermon* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2019), 27–86. For worked out examples discerning pericopal theology, pericope by pericope through a particular biblical book, see my commentaries on Genesis, Judges, Mark, Ephesians, and 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus.

14. See Abraham Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text! A Theological Hermeneutic for Preaching* (Chicago: Moody, 2013), 211–69.

15. See my *A Vision for Preaching*, 31–50. I agree with the Waltons that “the biblical text never points to a method of interpretation and then instructs us to go and do likewise” (132). But neither can we discern grammar and syntax from the Bible—it is silent about those elements of language. And yet we do employ grammatical and syntactical rubrics to interpret biblical writings. I would argue that pragmatics, discerning authorial *doings*, is as fundamental to language as is grammar and syntax. Therefore employing those norms to Scripture is entirely warranted, and indeed mandated, so that we can make sense of this inspired work that is intended to be applied far from its originary circumstances.

16. See my *Privilege the Text!* 143–45, from which much of the following discussion is adapted.

17. Or its “transhistorical intention.” See the series of articles by E. D. Hirsch: “Past Intentions and Present Meanings,” *Essays in Criticism* 33 (1983): 79–98; “Meaning and Significance Reinterpreted,” *Critical Inquiry* 11 (1984): 202–25; and “Transhistorical Intentions and the Persistence of Allegory,” *New Literary History* 25 (1994): 549–67.

18. *McCulloch v. Maryland*, U.S. 17 (4 Wheaton) (1819): 407.

19. This also counters the Waltons’ predication that the Torah (and the rest of Scripture) is non-comprehensive in its depiction of morality.

20. Neither does the pericope that this five-word slice is extracted from deal primarily with drunkenness.

21. Even if one were to concede that the OT sacrifices referred exclusively to the cleansing of the sanctuary, Heb 9:23 hints at that very event being accomplished once and for all by Christ. The Waltons make a common mistake in assuming that if an interpretation does not encompass what could have been intended by the author, then that interpretation is invalid. Referring back to the earlier example, if one were to ask the apostle: “Hey, Paul, did you mean Scotch when you wrote ‘wine’ in Eph 5:18?” I have no doubt he would reply—after being enlightened on what that modern potent fluid is—with an emphatic “Yes!” Because what he was *doing* with what he was saying in Eph 5:18 was implicitly creating the category, “all alcoholic drinks.” Into this slot, Scotch would fit, as would any other alcoholic libation, and they would all be verboten means of getting besotted—that would be sin. This sort of interpretive broadening to encompass even elements not explicitly intended by the original author is valid and necessary for the transhistorical interpretation of any canonical text intended for application, whether theological or legal.

22. The Waltons admit that “in the LXX *hagios* translates *qdš* [קדש], but that decision represents an interpretive choice of translators. ... *Qdš* means ‘divine’; a closer semantic equivalent would be *theios* ([θεῖος] Acts 17:29; 2 Pet 1:3–4)” (205n11). One then would have to wonder why the translators of the Septuagint failed to use θεῖος for קדש, since they were undoubtedly familiar with the former term (see LXX Exod 31:3; 35:31; Prov 2:17; Job 27:3; 33:4; etc.).

23. But the Waltons assert: “In the ANE, people did not aspire to imitate the gods, and the gods did not expect their worshipers to imitate them. ... Israel would have conceived of Yahweh in the same way” (58). *Pace* Waltons, John Barton declares: “This might thus be one of the implications or meanings of being made ‘in the image of God’: that God and humankind share a common ethical perception, so that God is not only the commander but also the paradigm of all moral conduct” (“Imitation of God in the Old Testament,” in *The God of Israel* [ed. R. P. Gordon; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007], 38). Indeed, exhortations to

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imitate God/Christ are numerous in the NT (Matt 5:44–48; Luke 6:36; John 17:11, 21; Eph 5:1; Phil 2:4–11; Col 3:13; Rom 15:1–3, 5; 1 Cor 10:32–11:1; 1 Thess 1:6; 1 Pet 1:15; 1 John 2:6; 3:16; etc.), and all were likely rooted in the OT notion of “following Yahweh” (Num 14:24; 32:11–12; Deut 1:36; Josh 14:8–9, 14; 1 Sam 12:14; 1 Kgs 11:6; 14:8; 2 Kgs 23:3; also see Sir 46:10) and “walking in his ways” (Deut 8:6; 10:12; 11:22; 19:9; 26:17; 28:9; 30:16; etc.). Perhaps reflecting this OT emphasis, in the Gospels, rather than calling for an imitation of Jesus, the command, quite frequently, is to *follow* him (as in Matt 8:22; 9:9; 10:38; 19:21; etc.). Mark develops the notion of following Jesus “on the way” (8:3, 27; 9:33, 34; 10:32, 52); Jesus calls himself the “way” (John 14:6); Christians are said to be those of “The Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 22:4; 24:14, 22); and “walking” (περιπατέω, *peripateō*) in the NT is a synonym for godly life (Rom 6:4; 13:13; 14:15; Gal 5:16; Phil 3:17; 1 Thess 2:12; etc.). So much so, imitating/following /walking with Jesus becomes a biblical idiom for discipleship. For an example, see the unique cameo in Mark 14:51–52 that exemplifies the notion of discipleship as “following” (Abraham Kuruvilla, “The Naked Runaway and the Enrobed Reporter of Mark 14 and 16: What is the Author *Doing* with What He Is Saying? *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 54 [2011]: 527–45).

24. This will of God expressed in each pericope is a gracious invitation extended by God to his children, offering them the possibility of living in his way in his ideal world. Yet it should not be forgotten that although it is an invitation that can be refused, repudiation of that gracious call comes with grave consequences. Hence, the gracious invitation is also a divine demand—not peremptory, not capricious, not tyrannical, but loving, tender, merciful.

25. This is a synchronic view of Scripture for application purposes: all of Scripture is equally valid for all people for all time (2 Tim 3:16–17). That is not to deny a diachronic reading of Scripture to descry timelines of history and describe theological truths about God and his creation—the operations traditionally linked to biblical and systematic theology. They have value, no doubt, but the primary function of Scripture is the

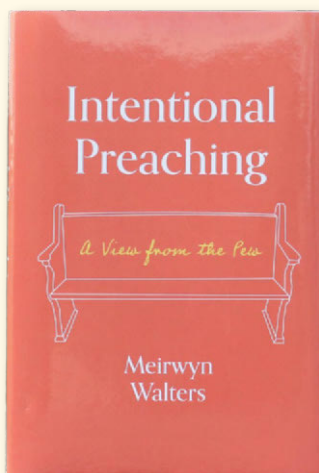
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transformation of the lives of the people of God to the image of the Son of God for the glory of God, via pericopal theology.

26. This is the “obedience of faith,” a God-glorifying, Spirit-driven, merit-rejecting, grace-accepting, faith-exercising endeavor (see Kuruvilla, *Privilege the Text!* 195–210).

27. One might point to Eph 2:14–18 where Paul is seemingly derogating the law. I submit that in texts such as this, he is actually talking about the *condemnation* of the law—the sentence pronounced in/by divine law upon sin and sinners. The limited jurisdiction of the law, restricted to the ones upon which it passes condemnation, is what is described in Rom 7:1–4; release from the law (i.e., from its condemnation) is found in 7:6 (also see Gal 2:19). It is the condemnation of sin by God’s law anywhere in Scripture (divine demand) that has been removed by Christ’s atoning work (Rom 8:1), not that God’s law/demand has been removed *en masse*: they are still “applicable,” though not “obeyable.” Paul’s declaration of believers as no longer under the condemnation of the law (Rom 6:14)—the law having come to bring about wrath, increase transgression, and arouse sinful passions (4:15; 5:20; 7:5)—is consistent with this view. Divine demand/law, in its theological sense, is always valid for “application” (but not “obedience”) by all humanity—it directs the behavior of those who (already) are the people of God. See my *Ephesians: A Theological Commentary for Preachers* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2015), 66–83.

28. And again: “Those who are not participants are not under obligation” (104).



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