

The Law and the Prophets

[ecclesiasticalresearche](#)

Christian theology is interested in the Law as a stage in the dispensation of God's purpose of grace. As such it is acknowledged by our Lord, who, though He came to supersede the Law, did so only by fulfilling it, or, more accurately, by filling it up, and supplying in actual substance the good things of which the Law presented only a shadow and unsubstantial form. The Law, according to the Epistle to the Hebrews, was weak and unprofitable; it carried nothing to its goal, and must give way to a better hope, by which we draw near to God (Heb. vii. 18, 19). The Law on this view never actually supplied the religious needs of Israel; it served only to direct the religious attitude of the people, to prevent them from turning aside into devious paths and looking for God's help in ways that might tempt them to forget His spiritual nature and fall back into heathenism.

For this purpose the Law presents an artificial system of sanctity, radiating from the sanctuary and extending to all parts of Israel's life. The type of religion maintained by such a system is certainly inferior to the religion of the prophets, which is a thing not a form but of spirit. But the religion of the prophets could not become the type of national religion until Jehovah's spirit rested on all His people, and the knowledge of Him dwelt in every heart. This was not the case under the old dispensation. The time to which Jeremiah and Isaiah xl.-lxvi., look forward, when the prophetic word shall be as it were incarnate in a regenerate nation, did not succeed the restoration from Babylon. On the contrary, the old prophetic converse of Jehovah with His people flagged and soon died out, and the word of Jehovah, which in old days had been a present reality, became a memory of the past and a hope for the future.

It was under these circumstances that the dispensation of the Law became a practical power in Israel. It did not bring Israel into such direct converse with Jehovah as prophecy had done. But for the mass of the people it nevertheless formed a distinct step in advance; for it put an end to the anomalous state of things in which practical heathenism had filled the state, and the prophets preached to deaf ears. The legal ritual did not satisfy the highest spiritual needs, but it practically extinguished idolatry. It gave palpable expression to the spiritual nature of Jehovah, and, around and within the ritual, prophetic truths gained a hold of Israel such as they had never had before. The Book of Psalms is the proof how much of the highest religious truth, derived not from the Law but from the Prophets, dwelt in the heart of the nation, and gave spiritual substance to the barren forms of the ritual.

(The Old Testament in the Jewish Church: A Course of Lectures on Biblical Criticism, 2nd. ed., rev., by W. Robertson Smith, London and Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1892, 315-316, Paragraph Structure Modified)