

4. The Mosaic Covenant

Through the exodus from Egypt, God brought to birth the “great nation” promised to Abraham (Genesis 12.2). He redeemed them by the blood of the lamb and “bare” them on “eagles’ wings” to Himself (Exodus 6.7; 19.4). The events of Sinai and the giving of the Law was the registration of a newly born nation. The covenant was therefore given as a comprehensive, legal constitution to govern the life and conduct of Israel in the Promised Land. It spells out, in black and white, the kind of nation God intended Israel to be. As those in family and covenant relationship with God, they must reflect His character. Leviticus 19.2: “Ye shall be holy: for I the LORD your God am holy.”

Descriptions of the Covenant

- The Mosaic covenant is so called because “it was ordained (administered) by angels in the hand of a mediator (intermediary)”, namely Moses (Galatians 3.19). Angels were also involved in the giving of the covenant (cf. Acts 7.53; Hebrews 2.2), though the precise role they played is not explained.
- The generic term used to describe the *terms* of the covenant is “the Law”. Both the Lord Jesus and Paul referred to it as “the law of Moses” (John 7.23; Acts 13.39), a term used extensively in the OT. Others call this covenant the *Sinaitic Covenant*, referring to the location where it was given, and Hebrews calls it the “old” covenant (8.13).

The Details of the Covenant

Its Format

- The covenant was made between **God** and **Israel** (Exodus 34.27; Deuteronomy 4.8; Psalm 147.19-20). The *Gentiles* or the *church* were not involved – a point re-affirmed by Paul in the NT (Romans 2.14; 9.4).
- The Mosaic covenant was *conditional* and *bi-lateral*. This is evident from the conversation between God and all the people of Israel through the mediation of Moses. Exodus 19.5: “**If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people.**” The simple, united response of the elders and all the people was, “*All that the LORD hath spoken we will do.*” (Exodus 19.8).
- Being conditional, the covenant provided *blessings* for obedience, and *curses* for disobedience (Deuteronomy 28). The curses included exile from the land of Israel and scattering among the nations. Blessings included personal health (Exodus 15.26), abundant harvests and burgeoning flocks.
- But Israel did not keep the Law and were unable to fulfil its demands. God therefore promised He would eventually replace the *Old Covenant* with a *New Covenant* (Jeremiah 31.31-34; Hebrews 8.13) which would write God’s laws on the *heart* (internal) rather than on *stone* (external). New people would be created from the *inside* out!
- The Mosaic covenant follows the format of the common ancient “Suzerain-Vassal” treaty. ‘Suzerain’ was the name given to a super-king who had conquered many countries (empire). Such a king would often make a covenant with his vassals which guaranteed them peace or military support on *his* part, and some payment of tribute in the form of gold, cattle or grain on *their* part. This was a two-way agreement. If the vassal defaulted on the conditions of the treaty, then curses or punishment would follow.
- These treaties often began with a *preamble*, giving the king’s names and titles (Exodus 20.2), followed by a *rehearsal* of the historical basis of the treaty and the king’s benevolence towards them (Exodus 19.4; 20.2). The *terms* of the covenant would be stated (Exodus 20.3-17) before *identical* written copies were made for both parties (Exodus 24.4, 12; 32.15-16). This would be *publicly read* (once a year in the vassal state) and witnessed (Exodus 24.7).
- The less common “Royal Grant” was when a king desired to make a *gift* to a subject nation or servant that *pleased* him. This was a one-way gift, with no strings attached, and was the form of the Abrahamic and Davidic covenants.

Its Formalisation

- The giving of the Law was an occasion of great ceremony. There was *thunder* and *lightning*, a *heavy cloud* and the *sound* of a very loud *shofar* (19.16). The Lord descended in *fire*, the *smoke* of a great furnace and an *earthquake* (19.18-20). Remarkable sights and sounds therefore attested to the significance and solemnity of the event. There will be no celestial drama like this again until the coming of Christ (Luke 21.25-27; Hebrews 12.26).
- The formal ratification ceremony is recorded in Exodus 24.1-11 (with further details added in Hebrews 9.18-20). The Book of the Covenant was read (containing Exodus 20.22-23.33) and blood was sprinkled on the *altar* (representing God), the *people* and the *book*. This bound them together in covenant relationship and declared that **death** was the penalty of disobedience – either for the *people*, or a *sacrificial animal*.
- Finally, a covenant meal was eaten with 70 representative elders of Israel, plus Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu.

Its Features

- *Sanctuary*. The divine King of this new nation (1 Samuel 8.7) would be pleased to dwell among His people (Exodus 25.8). Thus, a temporary palace (for the wilderness) was constructed in the form of the tabernacle. God's throne and dwelling place would be within the veil, in the central room (Psalm 80.1).
- *Stones*. A new nation would require a new constitution to govern the relationship between the divine King and His people. This was summarised and duplicated on two tables of stone – signifying what was unyielding and unchanging. It was the principal covenant document (Exodus 24.12).
- *Scroll*. The stones would give the *general* standard of behaviour, but all the *detail* was contained within the “book of the covenant” (Exodus 24.7).
- *Sacrifice*. Graciously, God made provision for those who broke any of the terms of the covenant, whether *corporately* (on the Day of Atonement) or *individually* (sacrificial system). The only way God could continue to dwell and live with them was on the basis of atoning blood sacrifice.
- *Servants*. Both the sanctuary and the sacrificial system would be attended by a Levitical priesthood. They acted to represent the people before God and maintain their fellowship with Him by offering gifts and sacrifices on their behalf.
- *Sign*. The sign of the Mosaic covenant was the Sabbath day. It must be kept holy (Exodus 20.8; 31.13; Ezekiel 20.12).

The Duties of the Covenant

- The Law included **commandments** in the form of the Decalogue written on tablets of stone (Exodus 20.1-17). These were mostly related to the *moral* issues of the Law. It also contained “**judgments**” which concerned *civil* issues (Exodus 21.1-24.11). Finally, there were “**ordinances**” which covered *religious* or *ceremonial* matters (Exodus 24.12-31.18).
- The Law was comprehensive, governing *every* aspect of life. It addressed philosophy, psychology, science, economics, ecology, theology, culture, politics, military relations, international and domestic relations, family life, religion, business, criminal and civil law.
- Many laws governed *relationships*. For example, it was not permissible to maliciously raise *false reports* (rumours) about others (Exodus 23.1), *slander* others by *telling tales* (Leviticus 19.16) or *bear a grudge* (Leviticus 19.18).
- There was a requirement to be *considerate* (when digging a pit, Exodus 21.33-35) and *kind* to others, even enemies or those who ‘hate you’ (Exodus 23.4-5)!
- Many laws concerned *worship*. For example, *three* times a year the males were to “appear before the Lord” with something to give. Each was to ‘fill their hands’ in proportion to the measure God had given (Deuteronomy 16.16-17).
- According to the extensive study, research and writings of many ancient rabbis, the Law contains **613** regulations.
- 248 are *positive* commands (“thou shalt”), 365 are *negative* commands (“thou shalt not”). The 365 negative precepts apparently correspond to the number of solar days in the year, whereas the 248 positive precepts correspond to the number of members in a man's body (including joints and bones).
- According to many Jews, only approximately 40% of the regulations apply today as over 200 require a temple (which the Jews do not presently have), over 40 pertain to slaves and kings (not applicable today) and many require special circumstances like making a vow.
- The rabbis also taught that the 613 regulations were summarised in various parts of Scripture:
 - David reduced them to **eleven** principles in Psalm 15. “*He that walketh uprightly...*”
 - Isaiah to **six** principles (33.15-16) and **two** principles (56.1). “*Promote justice! Do what is right!*” [NET]
 - Micah summarised them in **three** (6.8). “*To do justly, and to love mercy, And to walk humbly with thy God?*”
 - Amos (5.4), “*Seek ye me, and ye shall live,*” and Habakkuk (2.4) in **one**, “*The just shall live by his faith*”.
 - They seem to have conveniently avoided the words of the Lord Jesus who declared the **two** commandments on which “*all the law and the prophets*” hang (Matthew 22.36-40).
- All in all, God's people were to have high moral standards and good relationships. Then Israel would be a family of people so like God, other peoples of the earth would sit-up and take notice.

The Design of the Covenant

Salvation

- The Mosaic covenant was never designed as a means of salvation! Salvation cannot be *achieved* or earned by works, it is always *received* by grace through faith. Down through the ages, though the *object* of faith has changed from God (OT) to the Son of God (NT), the *means* of salvation has never changed. The Law was given to a people *already* redeemed from Egypt. See Romans 3.20, 28; Galatians 2.16; 3.11, 21.
- However, the futility of seeking to achieve righteousness by law-keeping should have driven a person to faith in the Messiah (Romans 7.14-25).

Standard

- Israel did not know how to behave in relationship with their God. They were contaminated by years of Egyptian culture and society. This gracious covenant was therefore for their guidance and protection.
- The Law itself is “holy”, “just” [righteous] and “good” (Romans 7.12). It reveals the holiness of God and the standard (rule) of conduct expected of a people in relationship with Him (cf. Psalm 119.77, 97, 103, 159).

Sanctification

- The Law made Israel a *distinct* people (Leviticus 11.44-45; Deuteronomy 14.2) in matters such as *worship* (Leviticus 23), *diet* (Leviticus 11), *sexual behaviour* (Leviticus 12), and even *appearance* (Leviticus 19.19, 28).
- According to Exodus 19.5, God’s design for Israel was that they might be:
 - *Peculiar treasure* [majestic]. Or a “special people” (Deuteronomy 7.6) and “my jewels” (Malachi 3.17) reflecting the splendour, glory and favour of God.
 - *Kingdom of priests* [missionary]. Israel would act as a ‘middleman’ between men and God, having the privilege of mediating divine truth and knowledge to others. This will be realised in the millennium when Israel will bring the nations to God (Zechariah 8.23).
 - *Holy nation* [model]. Israel would be unique (different), set apart to God and *imitating* Him.
- Very similar language is used by Peter to describe believers today (1 Peter 2.9). It is our responsibility to proclaim the *virtues* of the God who has so blessed us. Are we good reflections of the character of God?

Sin

- The Law was given to provide the “knowledge of sin” (Romans 3.20) – a clear and exact definition of sin (cf. Romans 7.7; Galatians 3.19), as well as revealing sin as a power that enslaves. *MacDonald: “The law is like a straight line. When men test themselves by it, they see how crooked they are.”* The Law brought the blaze of divine holiness into this world in concentrated form. Such a searchlight exposed the heart of man as “exceeding sinful” (Romans 7.13).
- Romans 5.20 says “*the law entered [suggesting a limited and temporary role], that the offence [transgression] might abound [increase].*” Transgression is the violation of a specific commandment – and the revelation of the Law caused this to increase and pronounced condemnation on all those who failed to meet its demands. Praise God, where sin abounded, grace superabounded! *Coulson: “For every sin exposed by the law, there was divine grace ready to deal with it righteously. Though billions of sins might engulf a wretched world of guilty rebels at enmity with God, there was a superabundance of divine grace to deal with it all.”*

Schoolmaster

- *Galatians 3.24: “Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster until Christ [came]...”* The word “schoolmaster” (tutor) means ‘guardian’ or ‘guide’. This person was often a household slave whose duty was to supervise the development of a child (physically, intellectually, and spiritually) from infancy to adulthood.
- He was a moral caretaker responsible to train the child’s public behaviour. So, the Law supervised and controlled every aspect of Israel’s life – it was a preparatory constraint until the *liberty* of the gospel was revealed – then the “schoolmaster” became redundant. Now, through faith in Christ Jesus, all believers are “sons of God”.

Shadow

- See Hebrews 10. The types and *shadows* associated with the Law (not least the sacrificial system) were designed to prepare the nation for the coming of the *Substance*, the Redeemer Himself. The sacrifices pointed forward to the coming of the ultimate sacrifice (Christ) which rent the veil in the temple in twain.

The Deficiency of the Covenant

Disobedience

- No sooner had God finished speaking with Moses on Mount Sinai, and the tablets of stone were written by the finger of God, Israel had broken the Law in the incident of the golden calf (Exodus 32). “*It was the prototype of a long recital of failure, disobedience, and sheer rebellion that blighted Israel’s history.*” (Jack Hay).
- Israel’s persistent disobedience is summarised in *Psalms 78.10: “They kept not the covenant of God, And refused to walk in his law,”* and *Jeremiah 31.32: “Which my covenant they brake.”*
- Such failure gave rise to several occasions in scripture when the Mosaic covenant was renewed. The book of Deuteronomy is essentially an invitation to the next generation to renew the covenant (cf. Deuteronomy 26.16-19).
- Subsequent renewals also took place after Israel had entered the Promised Land (Joshua 8.30-35) and, later, at Shechem (Joshua 24). There were others during the reigns of *Asa* (2 Chronicles 14-15; 2 Kings 11.17-18) and *Josiah* (2 Kings 23.1-3), and two early in the post-exilic era involving *Ezra* (Ezra 10.1-5; Nehemiah 8.1-10.39).

Disappointment

- The Law offered life (Leviticus 18.5) and could attest to a person's righteousness – *if* every demand was perfectly, completely, and continually met (Galatians 3.10). **But** the human material on which the Law worked (inherently sinful man) was not capable of such obedience. The Law was “weak through the flesh,” (Romans 8.3).
- The Law could therefore not justify (Romans 3.19-20; Galatians 2.16) nor *perfect* a person in their standing before God, or permanently *cleanse* the conscience of sin (Hebrews 10.1-4).

Disannulment

- The insufficiency of the Mosaic law to provide and produce righteousness led God to make the promise of a new, second covenant (Hebrews 8.6-13). The first, old covenant is no longer in effect. Note these Scriptures:
- *Romans 7.5-6*. The word “discharged” means ‘to render inoperative’. Believers are ‘delivered’ from the claims and slavery of the Law in their lives having “died” to it (cf. v.4).
- *Romans 10.4*. Christ is the “end” of the Law as a means of justification *and* sanctification (Romans 7). The word “end” [*telos*] primarily means ‘termination’ which is the best meaning here.
- *Galatians 3.19*. The Law was never meant to be a permanent administration but was merely ‘added’ temporarily “until the Seed should come”, the Messiah in whom the promises to Abraham have been fulfilled.
- *Hebrews 7.18*. There has been a disannulling of the previous administration that incorporated the Levitical priesthood. As long as the Law was in effect, only the Levitical priesthood was valid. The order of Aaron could never provide ‘perfection’ in one’s standing before God, and subsequent full and free access to His presence. But now there is a *new* order of priesthood. Christ is High Priest after the order of Melchizedek and provides eternal *access* to God.
- *2 Corinthians 3.2-11*. The focus of this passage is the ten commandments for these were “written *and* engraven in stones” (v.7). This was a Law that produced “death” (v.7) and “condemnation” (v.9) rather than “righteousness” (v.9). But this Law has been “done away”, i.e. ‘discontinued’ or ‘deactivated’ (v.11).
- *Matthew 5.17-19*. The Lord Jesus did not come to “destroy” or ‘abolish’ (overthrow) the Law or the prophets; instead He had come to “fulfil” (satisfy). This He did in *two* ways. First, Christ ‘filled-out’ (amplified) the Law by His teaching (cf. 5.21-22, 27-28). The Law was an *external* code of rules that dealt with actions. The Sermon on the Mount concerned the higher thought of *internal* motives of the heart. Second, Christ fulfilled the Law as He was the Person to whom it all pointed (cf. Matthew 1.22). Christ *satisfied* the shadows, types, and prophecies of the OT.
- **Note**. Because the Mosaic Law was ‘done away’ in the *death* of Christ, in His *life* He was subject to the commands of the Law – this did not apply to the human traditions and reinterpretations of the Law by the rabbis!

The Danger of the Covenant

- Some Christians (including Reformers) teach that believers today are still bound to obey the Law, in particular, the *moral* law of Moses as a rule of life (John Calvin). Whilst God’s moral standards never change (for He is immutable), and the Law stands as a permanent declaration of those standards (so use them in the preaching of the gospel!), the scriptures quoted above clearly teach the Law has been disannulled.
- Furthermore, the Law is a *single* entity or unit. To break one law is to shatter the whole. *James 2.10*: “*Whosoever shall keep the whole law, and yet offend in one point, he is guilty of all.*” Furthermore, to put oneself under obligation to a *part* of the Law (e.g. circumcision) is to become debtor to do the *whole* law (Galatians 5.3)! It is therefore a misnomer to suggest obedience to the *moral* requirements of the Law, but not the *ceremonial* requirements.
- In summary, believers are not under the law of Moses in any shape or form. The *ceremonial* law has found its answer in the *death* of Christ, and the *moral* law has been absorbed in the *doctrine* of Christ. Christ took the principles of the *moral* law and raised them far higher. Paul describes this as the “law of Christ” (Galatians 6.2).
- Paul also speaks of “the law of the Spirit of life” (Romans 8.2-4). The Holy Spirit is the controlling power resident within each believer that helps them obey the word of God. The Law could not produce holiness, but a believer living in the energy of the Holy Spirit can live a life of practical righteousness that even surpasses that which the Law required.

*“Run, John, run, the law commands,
But gives us neither feet nor hands,
Far better news the gospel brings:
It bids us fly and gives us wings.”*