

The Mosaic Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant was the fourth covenant of Yahweh. Unlike the previous covenants that had a few requirements for both parties, the Mosaic covenant is a much larger and complicated covenant with laws, rituals, and a tabernacle that allowed humans to enter Yahweh's presence. Because of its complexity and the confusion over its purpose and how it relates to the Abrahamic Covenant, it is also the most misunderstood covenant. Though this paper will not deal with all the aspects of the covenant, which are discussed in the Exodus commentary, it will deal with the nature and purpose of the covenant.

The Nature of the Covenant

The Mosaic Covenant was an outgrowth of the Abrahamic Covenant made with the descendants of Abraham. The Abrahamic Covenant was an unconditional covenant into which one entered merely by placing their faith and trust in Yahweh, the covenant bearer, thus entering also into a relationship with Yahweh. The Mosaic Covenant, on the other hand, was a conditional covenant that determined what blessings the one who belonged to the Abrahamic Covenant would receive, based on their obedience. It is similar to one's receiving salvation by placing their faith and trust in Jesus (Abrahamic Covenant), but the depth of relationship with Him and whether they receive discipline or blessing is based on their obedience to Him (Mosaic Covenant). One cannot enter the Mosaic Covenant without entering first the Abrahamic Covenant.

“In contrast to the other covenants, the Mosaic covenant, though it had provisions for grace and forgiveness, nevertheless builds on the idea that obedience to God is necessary for blessing. While this to some extent is true in every dispensation, the Mosaic covenant was basically a works covenant rather than a grace covenant. The works principle, however, was limited to the matter of blessing in this life and was not related at all to the question of salvation for eternity.”¹

The Mosaic Covenant was like the vassal treaties of the ancient Near East, where a more powerful king entered into a relationship with a lesser king. This type of treaty laid laws that the sovereign king imposes on the vassal (lesser king) and the blessings and curses for the vassal for keeping or breaking the covenant law. This covenant relationship with Yahweh as sovereign king demanded obedience from Israel, His vassal, in order to maintain and receive the blessings of a relationship with Him. Because He had redeemed them and bought them, they were now indebted to Him.

The requirements and blessings for the Mosaic covenant are found in Ex. 19:3-6. The if-then statement in these verses reveals that the Mosaic Covenant that Yahweh was making with Israel was conditional, based on their obedience to His requirements in order to receive blessings. If Israel was obedient, Yahweh promised them three blessings. First, they would be a “special possession/treasure” belonging to Yahweh (Ex. 19:5). This means that Israel would enjoy a unique relationship with Yahweh compared with all other nations, due to the unconditional promises of the Abrahamic Covenant. Second, they would be a “kingdom of priests,” representing Yahweh before the nations (Ex. 19:6). A priest mediates between Yahweh and humankind. Israel would be a holy people who enjoyed access to Yahweh, and they would go to

¹ John F. Walvoord. “The New Covenant” in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, pp. 191-92.

the nations, revealing Yahweh to them and bringing them into the nation of Israel (Deut. 33:9, 10). Israel would not be a kingdom known for its politicians, government, and military but for its faith, righteousness, witness, and God. Third, they would be a “holy nation,” separate and unique from all the other nations (Ex. 19:6). The word “holy” means “separate from all others.” In order to be a kingdom of priests, Israel could not be like all the other nations in the way that they lived and worshiped.

Lev. 18:1-5 gives three more reasons for why Israel must obey Yahweh’s commands. First, they were to obey because He was their God; second, so that they do not become like the surrounding cultures; and third, so that they may live. The idea of “live” in Lev. 18:5 means to have physical life, as well as Yahweh’s covenant blessings of eternal life as defined in Ezek. 20:11. Ezekiel describes the rebellion of the Israelites in the wilderness, after which Yahweh judged them and destroyed them. Because they failed to obey Yahweh, they did not receive His covenant blessings of life. Faithfulness to Yahweh’s Law (Mosaic Covenant) would result in a full and prosperous life in the Promised Land, along with the ever-abundant blessings of Yahweh. However, a disobedient life would result in suffering, death, and exile from the land.

“God pledges to bring punishment against those who “hate” [reject] Him in their disobedience while promising blessing upon those who “love” Him and keep His commandments (Deut. 5:9,10). Because obedience to the Law led to a long life of blessing (Deut. 4:1; 5:33; 6:24; 8:1-3; 16:20), the Law itself was regarded as a source of life (Deut. 32:47). Similarly, wise sayings and wisdom itself came to be viewed as the pathway to life. If you love me keep my commandments.”²

The essence of the Mosaic Law and what it meant to obey Yahweh’s commands is stated in Deut. 6:5: “You must love Yahweh your God with your whole mind, your whole being, and all your strength.” This is repeated later in Deut. 11:13-14 in a conditional statement concerning Israel’s obedience and blessing.

“Now, if you pay close attention to my commandments that I am giving you today and love Yahweh your God and serve him with all your mind and being, then He promises, ‘I will send rain for your land in its season, the autumn and the spring rains, so that you may gather in your grain, new wine, and olive oil. I will provide pasture for your livestock and you will eat your fill.’” (See also Deut. 11:1, 22; 19:9; 30:16, 20; Josh. 22:5; 23:11.)

The second great command is in Lev. 19:18, which states, “...you must love your neighbor as yourself.” Jesus later stated that these were the two greatest commands (Matt. 22:36-40).

The Decalogue is the Ten Commandments to the people of Israel and illustrates loving Yahweh and loving your neighbor. The first four commands deal with man’s relationship with Yahweh, and the last six deal with man’s relationship with other people. The rest of the Law found in Exodus and Leviticus deals with examples of how the nation of Israel is to live out the Ten Commandments.

Circumcision was the sign the Abrahamic Covenant, and the Sabbath was the sign of the Mosaic covenant (Ex. 31:12-18). Because the Abrahamic Covenant is built into the Mosaic Covenant, circumcision became an individual sign of participation in the Mosaic Covenant, while keeping the Sabbath was the corporate sign.

² Robert A. Pyne. *Soteriology*, p. 31.

“The covenant regarding the land (Abrahamic) was related to the people by circumcision, and the covenant regarding the people (Mosaic) was related to the land by the Sabbaths. Thus these two covenantal elements (the land and the people) were bound together. The land was for the people, and the people for the land. The Sabbath was ordained for those who were delivered out of Egypt and who inhabited the land of promise.”³

The Mosaic Law consisted of three classes. The first were those governing the *moral* life, which would be the Ten Commandments. This instructed one on how to live righteously in relation to Yahweh and their neighbor. The second were those governing the *religious* life, which would be the Tabernacle, the sacrificial system, and the priesthood. This instructed one on how to enter the presence of a righteous and holy God and what was necessary to atone for sin, having broken the moral code. The third included those governing the *civil* life, which were the laws that dealt with civil law and the punishments given when one violated these laws. It is important to remember that Yahweh gave the whole Law specifically for the nation of Israel and that to violate one law from any of the classes was to violate the whole Law.

The Purpose of the Covenant

As noted above, the purpose of the Law was not to grant salvation, for one can never earn salvation through their own works (Gal. 2:16; 3:2). However, the Law was given in order to pave the way for salvation. The purpose of the Law was to reveal the plan and the need for Christ.

First, the Law was given to reveal the righteousness and holiness of Yahweh (Ex. 19:23; Rom. 7:12; 1 Pet. 1:15) and His standard of righteousness for His people (Ex. 19:6; 22:31; 31:13; Ps. 24:3-5). For the first time ever, humanity was officially given the requirements of what Yahweh expected of them. As they looked at and studied the Law, they would see the righteousness of Yahweh, but they would also learn what it meant for themselves to be righteous as well. As Israel pursued His Law and became righteous then it would make them Holy nation, separate from all the other nations (Ex. 19:5-6). If Israel lived in obedience to the Law, then they would look a lot different from the pagan nations surrounding them. As a result of their obedience, they would not only be avoiding the ways of the pagans, but their lives would be a lot more righteous, thus bringing greater blessings into their lives. The pagans might then see their lives and blessings, be attracted to them, and want to know the God that the Israelites knew and followed, who was greater in power and love than their gods. But this is the problem Israel, no one, could do this.

Second, this righteous standard of Yahweh would reveal the sinfulness of man (Matt. 5:20; Rom. 7:7-11; Gal. 3:19). As one tried to meet the requirements of the Law, they would find time after time that they could not meet the expectations of the Law. Not only this, but one would find that now that they knew what is expected of them, they would want to do the opposite, even if there had been no desire before they knew what was right. This instinct to rebel is like the desire to ride your bike through someone's grass when you see the sign telling you not to, knowing that you would have not even thought about it if the sign had not been there. As one continually falls short of the expectations of the Law (Rom. 3:23) and even rebels against it, they are forced to face their own sinfulness. Thus they bring judgment upon themselves for they know the Law but do not obey the Law (Gal. 3:9-10).

³ William D. Barrick. “The Mosaic Covenant.” *The Masters Seminary Journal*, p. 230.

Third, this failure would reveal the need for a savior (Matt. 5:17; Rom. 8:2-4). When one was faced with the reality that they could not live out the requirements of the Law, then they realized that they needed help to do so and that they needed a savior from the judgment of the Law. So, Jesus Himself was hidden within the Law, the sacrificial system, and the tabernacle, ready to be revealed in His coming (Lk. 24:26-27). For those who were willing to study and see the Law for what it truly was, they would see Jesus, and when He came they would recognize Him and run to Him as their Savior.

Thus Jesus became the incarnation of Israel and did what Israel could not do—meet the righteous expectations of the Law (Rom. 8:1-4; Gal. 3:13-14). But he also took upon Himself Israel's judgment for violation of the Law. Therefore, He fulfilled the Law in both its demand for righteousness and for judgment for sin. The believer is now able to fulfill the requirements of the Law through the justification of Jesus' blood and the fact that He lives within them (Rom. 8:1-4).

In this way, the Law was never meant to last (Jer. 31:31-34; Rom. 10:4; Gal. 3:23-26; Heb. 8:6-13). Yet it was not a failed plan of Yahweh, where He had to come in with Plan B to save humanity (Gal. 3:21-22). The Law was much like the rocket boosters of a space shuttle. The rocket boosters are necessary for getting the space shuttle into space, but once they have fulfilled their purpose, they are jettisoned into space, never to be used again. Even so, they were very necessary for the flight plan of the space shuttle, and the space shuttle could not have gotten into space without them. So the Law was necessary to carry Israel to the coming of Jesus Christ, and Israel would not have been ready for Jesus Christ without the Law. Yet once Jesus Christ came, the Law had fulfilled its purpose and was no longer necessary.