

## D. The Mosaic Covenant

The next covenant in the sequence of biblical covenants is the Mosaic (Israelite) Covenant. It is the covenant God made with Israel at Mount Sinai after He delivered the nation from its long captivity in Egypt. This covenant (the “Law of Moses”) is the primary Old Testament covenant in the sense that it overarched Israel’s history with God. From its inauguration shortly after the Exodus, the Mosaic Covenant governed Israel’s relationship with God until the coming of the Messiah. Indeed, Jesus was Himself born under it and was subject to it (cf. Galatians 3:19-4:4 with Luke 2:21-39; also Matthew 5:17-18, 8:1-4, 12:9-12, 22:36-40; Mark 7:1-13, 10:1-9; Luke 10:25-28; John 2:13, 10:34-36; etc.). The primacy of the Mosaic Covenant is also evident in the Pentateuch’s treatment of it; the Sinai episode takes up a full third of the total narrative space of the five books of Moses (Exodus 19-Numbers 10). Sinai is the apex of the Pentateuch, with the preceding content anticipating it and the subsequent content grounded in it.

The prominent place of the Mosaic Covenant in the Old Testament scriptures has led many to view it as the primary covenantal arrangement in God’s interaction with men. This has especially been the case where covenants are categorized in terms of “law” and “grace.” In this scheme, the Mosaic Covenant is typically treated as a “law covenant” that prescribes the universal human obligation of moral and ethical “righteousness.” It is the standard by which God judges every person, so that all are obligated to comply with it, whether personally or substitutionally. (Reformed and dispensational Christians conceive this scheme somewhat differently, but both uphold its fundamental premise.) Thus the “New Covenant” is regarded as the answer to the primacy of the “Old Covenant.” Sinai (at least in terms of the Decalogue) is ultimate and determinative; the only question is how a human being satisfies its demand.

1. This way of understanding the Mosaic Covenant has tended to obscure its true nature and role in the salvation history. In particular, it is often distinguished from the Abrahamic Covenant, especially by dispensationalists who regard these two covenants as governing two different “dispensations”: *promise* (Abrahamic) and *law* (Mosaic). Yet the Scriptures show that the Abrahamic Covenant is the primary context, premise and substance of the covenant at Sinai such that the latter can only be understood within that relationship. To separate Sinai from Abraham is to lose it altogether (ref. Deuteronomy 7:1-9, 29:1-13).

God established this relation at the time He made His covenant with Abraham and He explicitly affirmed it in connection with Moses’ commission (cf. Genesis 15:12-21; Exodus 3:1-15, 6:1-8). Specifically, the Mosaic Covenant reaffirmed and renewed the covenant relationship God established with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. The covenant with Abraham and his individual “seed” was now being extended to the whole Abrahamic community. God transformed Jacob into *Israel* (“he prevails with the God who prevails”; ref. Genesis 32:22-30) with an eye toward His covenant and its purpose, subsequently extending the *man* Israel in the *twelve tribes* of Israel through his twelve sons.

The covenant at Sinai reaffirmed the Abrahamic Covenant, but the latter – with its core promise of universal blessing (Genesis 12:3, 22:15-18, 26:1-4, 28:10-14) – had its premise in God’s oath to Eve. It follows, then, that the Mosaic Covenant shared the same premise and same goal; it governed Abraham’s “seed” in view of their calling in him.

Another critical contextual issue is the fact that the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants were connected by the redemptive episode of the *Exodus*. God pledged to Abraham to be the God of his descendants, but He was going to ratify this relationship as the climax of a great work of deliverance from exile and subjugation. He would become their God, but as their *Redeemer*. So the preamble to the covenant (Exodus 20:1) and the ordinance of Passover (Exodus 12:1-17). And as *Torah*, this redemption/covenant renewal episode prophesied of another to come, this time bringing forgiveness of sin (Isaiah 51:1-52:10).

The above considerations all play into another contextual matter, namely God's giving of His *covenant name* to Israel. This came in response to Moses' question, and the Lord explained that this name ("I am") is his "memorial name" by which Israel was to know Him throughout their generations (Exodus 3:13-15). God's later word to Moses in Egypt (6:2-3) suggests that this name wasn't known to the patriarchs, but the Genesis account indicates otherwise (cf. 13:1-4, 14:22-23, 15:1-7, 16:1-5, 18:13-14, 24:1-12, 28:10-14; etc.). It seems, then, that God was providing new *insight* into His name (i.e., His person) that He hadn't granted before. The patriarchs had known Him as *Yahweh*, but hadn't known Him the way their descendants would, as their mighty *Redeemer*. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob knew God's power (*El Shaddai* – "God Almighty"; cf. Genesis 17:1), but their offspring experienced that power – wielded on behalf of His enduring faithfulness – in a way their fathers couldn't have imagined (cf. Genesis 15:13-14; Deuteronomy 4:32-39).

2. Moses' words and God's actions provided the children of Israel with the context for the covenant at Sinai. Their time in Egypt had darkened their memories and altered their sense of identity. They'd become idolaters like the Egyptians who enslaved them, so that they cried out to a God whom they no longer knew (cf. Joshua 24:14; Ezekiel 20:1-8). They'd forgotten the God of their fathers, but He hadn't forgotten them. Now the time had come for Him to restore the covenant relationship and make Israel His people and Sinai was the place where that was to occur (cf. Exodus 3:1-12, 4:19-23, 6:1-8).

The Mosaic Covenant reaffirmed the covenant with Abraham, but also advanced it. God promised Abraham a *vast progeny* – first in a "great nation" descended from him, and then in a multitude of nations sharing in his fatherhood as recipients of the Lord's blessing mediated through him. The covenant at Sinai had the former in view (Israel as a great nation) but unto the goal of the latter (Abraham becoming the father of many nations). In Paul's words, the Law served the Abrahamic promise as a *pedagogue*, all centered in Abraham's singular Seed (Galatians 3:16-29).

And advancing the Abrahamic Covenant meant advancing God's ultimate goal first revealed in Eden: *reversing the curse* and *restoring Adam's race*. The Protoevangelium hinted at creational renewal, but the Noahic episode made it explicit. In turn, the events surrounding the Mosaic Covenant added a new dimension to this renewal – namely, a mighty redemptive work by which God regathered His people to dwell with Him in His holy habitation (Exodus 15:16-18, 19:3-6, 25:1-8). The fulfillment of the Edenic promise would see the end of the creation's exile and the return of the prodigal image-son to at last take up the mantle of his regal and priestly vocation in the "rest" of the Father's renewed Eden (cf. Genesis 2:1-3, 5:29 with Leviticus 26:1-12; Deuteronomy 5:12-15).

3. These ideas are fundamental elements of the backstory framing the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Genesis 1:26-28; Exodus 4:22-23, 19:1-6) and they provide the lens through which the covenant must be interpreted. The covenant defined and prescribed Israel's *sonship* – what it meant for Israel to live out its identity as Yahweh's elect "son" in truth and righteousness, but sonship conceived in terms of Abrahamic covenant heritage and vocation (Deuteronomy 4:1-8). Israel was Yahweh's "only-begotten son," but in the sense that He'd chosen them in their father Abraham to be His instrument of renewal and reconciliation on behalf of the human world and the entire cursed creation.

Thus Israel's duty under the covenant was the obligation of authentic sonship, not compliance with a moral and ethical standard embodied in a list of directives. This is key to understanding what "law-keeping" entailed and the true nature of Israel's disobedience. Israel's "lawlessness" was *relational infidelity*: lack of love for her covenant God. Zion had shown herself to be a harlot who bore harlotrous children for her faithful Husband (ref. Isaiah 1:1-4, 63:7-10; Jeremiah 3:1-9; Ezekiel 16, 23; Hosea 1:1-2:13). Whatever their commitment and compliance, Yahweh's sons were undone by divided hearts (cf. Exodus 19:3-8, 24:1-8 with Deuteronomy 29:1-9 and 30:1-20).

Jesus confronted His seemingly-pious generation with this truth (cf. Isaiah 29:13 with Matthew 15:7-9; also Matthew 23:23-28) and they, in turn, indicted Him as "lawless" because they lacked the ability to recognize authentic sonship and true obedience in Him. *In the greatest of ironies, Israel, the covenant son, couldn't recognize its true self in the One who embodied Israel in truth.* Yahweh's "holy ones" stumbled over Jesus because He fulfilled the Law of Moses, not as they sought to by meticulous observance, but by embodying and living out the authentic sonship the Law disclosed (cf. John 9:24-29; Philippians 3:1-6 with Matthew 3:13-17, 5:17; also John 5:1-20, 8:31-59).

4. These considerations highlight how the Law of Moses itself (and not merely the wider Pentateuch) was *christocentric* in its prophetic dimension as Torah (Matthew 11:1-15; note also Luke 24:27). It defined and prescribed Israel's existence as Yahweh's son, servant, disciple and witness and so highlighted the nature and scope of Israel's failure. But in doing so, it also pointed toward the One in whom Israel would become Israel in truth and fulfill its Abrahamic identity and calling on behalf of the world. This is the heart of the message of Isaiah's *Servant Songs* recorded in chapters 42-53.

This dynamic of Israel's failed sonship pointing toward another faithful "Israel" is also fundamental to Moses' mediatorial and prophetic role. God chose him to mediate His relationship with Israel, highlighting the reality of the nation's estrangement even in the context of its covenant sonship. So the covenant fellowship meal (Exodus 24:9-11) was followed by Yahweh's provision of a mediatorial and atoning sacrificial system (24:12-30:38), even as the covenant children were already betraying the covenant (32:1-6). Moses stood between covenant Father and wayward son, representing each on behalf of the other (cf. Exodus 4:10-16, 19:1-20:21, 32:1-34:35; also Deuteronomy 5:22-31), and it was in this capacity that he prefigured another mediator/prophet to come (ref. Deuteronomy 18:15-19; cf. also Acts 3:1-23 and Exodus 34:29-35 with 2 Corinthians 3). This One would bring Father and children together, not in principle, but in truth.