

CHRIST THE COVENANTER
4. CHRIST IN THE COVENANT WITH MOSES
EXODUS 19

INTRODUCTION

The *Covenant of Grace* was arranged in eternity before time and the world began. Insights into the gracious and saving nature of this covenant were given through the covenants with (post-fall) Adam, Noah and Abraham. They were “administrations” or “revelations” of the *Covenant of Grace*.

We may illustrate this as follows. The well-watered paradise of Eden depicted the refreshing spiritual relationship Adam and Eve enjoyed with the Lord. Their sin “dried up” their relationship with God into a desert. They needed mercy and grace if they were ever to enjoy a relationship with God again. God’s grace was like a vast heavenly reservoir. In Genesis 3:14-15 God opened a small sluice in the dam wall and allowed a trickle of grace to flow into this sin-dried world. In the covenants with Noah and Abram God continued to open this sluice further and further. The trickle of grace became a stream, and the stream became a river. God’s grace was flowing faster, deeper and wider as He progressively revealed His *Covenant of Grace* to lost sinners. The question we must ask is this: “What happened to this river of grace at Sinai?” Did God slam shut the sluice gate and dam up grace until the New Testament? Did God allow the stream of grace to be polluted with the law at Sinai? Or was the *Covenant with Moses* a further opening of the sluice? As we study the scriptures we shall discover that it is the latter that is true. In the *Covenant with Moses*, God further opened the reservoir of grace in order to make the river of grace wider, deeper and faster flowing. This progressive release of grace continued throughout the Old Testament until the river eventually flooded its Jewish banks and poured out into Gentile lands, in the *New Covenant* (or New Testament era). Before we turn to look at the *Covenant with Moses* in detail, we shall take a brief look at ancient Near Eastern covenants.

Ancient Near Eastern Covenants

Many insights have been gained into the biblical covenants by the discovery of covenant documents from biblical times and cultures. These covenants have been called “Suzerain/vassal Treaties”. In these Treaties, a vastly superior king (the Suzerain) would address an inferior king (the vassal). The Suzerain would first of all give a historical narrative highlighting all that He had done for the vassal king and nation. After this, the Suzerain would then lay specific obligations upon the vassal king and nation, encouraging them with promises of reward, and also threats for disobedience. As we shall see, this type of “Suzerain/vassal” treaty is clearly paralleled in the *Covenant with Moses*. It is also seen to greater or lesser degrees in the covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham, David and also in the New Covenant. In His covenant dealings with humanity God never consults men and women. He designs and dictates the terms. It is not a mutual agreement but a sovereign imposition, which humanity rejects at its peril. The vital point to notice is that it is God who initiates and not man. The Divine benevolence is stated before stipulating what God expects in response. God does not demand before He has given.

In the light of this, we would expect the *Covenant with Moses* to begin with God's mighty acts. That is exactly what we find. God emphasised His redemption of Israel, a redemption that brought the nation into a special relationship with him, which, in turn, required a special response on the part of Israel. The covenant initiation concluded with a promise of reward and a Divine revelation which reminded the people of the difficulties and dangers of disobedience.

I. REDEMPTION

Exodus 19 opens with Moses and Israel encamped at the base of Sinai, part of the Horeb mountain range. Three months earlier they had been delivered from Egypt, then through the Red Sea, and now they had arrived at the destination promised by God (Ex.3:12).

1. Divine Deeds: I did this

God's opening words in this portion indicate the nature of this covenant – whether it be of works or of grace: “Ye have seen what I did...” (19:4). Moses is confronted with God's sovereign initiative and success before any words of law are heard. This should indicate to us that the *Covenant with Moses* does not begin with Exodus 20 but Exodus 12, not with the law on Sinai but with Passover night in Egypt, not with the law, but with the lamb, not with the human response but with the Divine provision, not with what Israel should do but with what God has done, not with rules but with redemption.

2. Divine Defeat: I defeated your enemies

“Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians...” (19:4). God brought plagues of increasing severity upon the Egyptians, culminating in the plague of the firstborn and the sweeping away of the Egyptian army in the Red Sea (Ex.14).

3. Divine Deliverance: I delivered you

“How I bare you on eagles' wings...” (19:4). When young eagles are learning to fly, the mother eagle flies under them with her wings spread out to catch them, lest they fall on the rocks and be injured or killed. In this way the mother eagle also acts as a shield of the young eagles, so protecting them from hunters and predators. If the first phrase (I defeated your enemies) covered the whole Exodus experience, this phrase describes God's loving care of Israel during their subsequent wilderness journey until now (cf: Deut.32:10-12). The image is one of the utter dependency of Israel and of the tender and protective care of God.

II. RELATIONSHIP

Divine Destiny: To myself

“I...brought you unto myself” (19:4). The ultimate aim of this defeat and deliverance was not to bring them to Sinai, nor to constitute them as a nation. It was to bring them to God, into relationship with Him. The aim was: “I will be your God and you will be my people.” By this covenant, Israel were placed in a unique relationship with God. This “covenant relationship” language should lead us to see the continuity between the covenants with Abraham and Moses (Ex.2:24; Gal.3:17).

The defeat of Egypt, the deliverance of Abraham's descendents, and their destiny of a special national (though not saving) relationship with God, was not only the fruit of the *Covenant with Abraham* and the foundation of the *Covenant with Moses*; it also signified

the spiritual blessings of the *Covenant of Grace* in which God promised to defeat all His people's enemies, deliver them from bondage and bring them into a special spiritual relationship with Himself.

III. RESPONSE

Having established His relationship with Israel on the basis of redemptive power and grace, God then introduced the requirement of a human response to His grace with the words "Now therefore..." (19:5). He was saying to Israel, "In the light of all I have done for you, should you wish to make a response expressing thankfulness, here is the way to do it."

1. Obey my voice (v5)

To put it simply we might say it is "relationship then rules" rather than "rules then relationship". Put another way, it is "faith then works" rather than "works then faith". This distinction is also made by O P Robertson:

The law in Exodus 20-24 is not the basis of the divine-human relationship even during the Old Testament period but rather the guide for its maintenance. It is not the key to the establishment of relationship with God, but rather to its continuance and well-being. In fact the giving of the law is historically and canonically surrounded by God's gracious acts as it looks back to the Exodus and as it looks forward to the conquest and settlement of the Promised Land.¹

The *Covenant with Moses* was a further step in the developing and progressive revelation of the one *Covenant of Grace*. It began with Adam and was progressed with Noah and Abraham, each stage having its own distinctive signs and tokens. So what is the distinctive mark or sign of the *Covenant with Moses*? Although, like the previous covenants, the Divine and gracious promise of a saving relationship is at its heart and core (signified by the Passover lamb), there is unquestionably a greater emphasis on the appropriate human response to this Divine initiative than we find in the previous covenants. In the *Covenant with Moses*, God clarified the Divine requirements of those who had experienced the Divine redemption.

The Divine requirement is often divided into three types of law. Firstly, there is the moral law. In the Ten Commandments we are given a comprehensive written summary of God's ethical requirements. Secondly, there is the judicial law. The descendants of Abraham multiplied so much that they had outgrown the "family state" and needed temporal institutions to organise them into a successful nation. These God-given laws were graciously given to constitute Israel with the best possible administration and so make them the envy of all other nations. Thirdly, there is the ceremonial law which expanded and systematised the laws of worship, washing, sacrifice, etc.

The great question is this: "Is the Law to be viewed positively or negatively?" The answer is: "Both!" The Law may be viewed positively from three angles, and negatively from two other angles.

a. Three positive angles

The Mosaic Law is portrayed as a great blessing for three reasons. Firstly, the law is good because it shows us our need of a Redeemer. It convicts us of our sin and shows us the vital necessity of a Saviour (Rom.3:20; 4:15). Secondly, the law is good because it shows us not only the Divine demands but the Divine provision of a Redeemer to meet the Divine

¹ O P Robertson, *Christ of the Covenants* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1980).

demands. The epistle to the Hebrews especially demonstrates that the ceremonial law was specially designed by God to show forth Christ in its “types and symbols” and especially in the sacrifices. In this sense, also, the believing Israelite could say that the law was our “schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith” (Gal.3:25). Christ now having come, the believer no longer needs to observe the ceremonial law (Gal.3:26). Thirdly, the law is good because it shows us how the redeemed should live to the glory of their beloved Redeemer (Ps.119:97, 127; Jn.14:15).

We may use the illustration of marriage to further explain the latter point. When a couple marry, they have a rough idea of what the other like or dislikes. However, it is only when they begin living together under the same roof that personal likes and dislikes become clearer. A husband may unthinkingly bring a bad habit into his marriage. He may leave all his dirty clothes on the bedroom floor, and he may leave his used coffee cups and biscuit papers in the living room. Before his marriage, he was used to his mother picking everything up for him. However, his new wife gets really annoyed. He notices that she is quiet and, after a few enquiries as to what the matter is, she eventually makes known her frustration with his behaviour and says, “Please stop doing this!” How does he respond? Does he say, “But that’s legalism!” Or does he say, “I’m so sorry dear. If I had known this behaviour offended you I would never have done it. Thanks for making known your mind to me. I will now change because I love you.”

Later on in the marriage both are very busy at work. They are off to work very early in the day, returning home late after hours of overtime. Eventually they realise that they are not seeing enough of one another and that their relationship is suffering. They both agree to take every Saturday as a day off together in order to re-kindle their relationship. When Saturday comes they wake up and spend a leisurely first hour over breakfast and then sit together talking. However, after just one hour, the wife looks at her watch and says, “Right. I’m now off to the gym, then I’m going to do some shopping, then visit some friends, have a meal out, watch a movie, and I’ll be home quite late.” Her husband is shocked and says, “But I thought we were going to spend the day together and try to revive and re-ignite our marriage.” How does she respond? Does she say, “But, that’s legalism!” Or does she say, “I’m so sorry dear. Thank you for showing me how I was jeopardising our relationship. Thank you for loving me and making known to me how our love can thrive and prosper.”

In summary, it is a token of God’s love that He makes known what pleases Him and what offends Him. It is a mark of the believer’s love that he or she wants to comply with this revelation of His mind and will. This is not legalism but love.

The Mosaic Law, therefore, is not to be despised or demolished. From these three angles it is presented as a blessing in both the Old and New Testaments (Ps.19:9, 11; 147:19-20; Mat.5:19; Jn.14:23; Rom.3:31; Rom. 7:7, 12, 14, 22).

b. Two negative angles

The Mosaic Law may also be viewed negatively. Firstly, the multiplicity and complexity of the various ceremonial laws were a great burden upon the people. This was the case even for true believers who saw through the ceremonies to the Christ they symbolised and signified. This is why the Mosaic era is sometimes represented as a time of bondage and slavery, and why the coming of Christ which rendered these ceremonies unnecessary is represented as a time of freedom and sonship (Gal.4:1-7). Secondly, the use of the law as a way of being saved condemned multitudes to hell. This was the great mistake of many in Old Testament Israel and many New Testament Jews. They regarded the *Covenant with Moses* ever increasingly, but mistakenly, as a covenant of works, and saw in the symbols and types a mere appendage to this. As a result, instead of the external administration of the

Covenant with Moses being a means of grace, they rested their salvation in the means. This was like a thirsty man being told that he could quench his thirst at the tap, but instead of turning it on and drinking freely, he spent his time polishing the tap.

The *Covenant with Moses* did not contradict the *Covenant with Abraham* (Gal.3:17, 21). Both contained Divine redemption and Divine requirements, though the *Covenant of Moses* had more of the latter than the *Covenant with Abraham*. The basic note of the Old Testament covenants is that of promise, but additional features of covenant relationship to God are progressively revealed. Thus the response of faith is evident in the *Covenant with Abraham*, and the ethical demands of covenant relationship to God would explain the prominence of law in the *Covenant with Moses*.

The fact that Israel perverted the circumcision in the *Covenant of Abraham* into a covenant of works, did not invalidate the gracious nature of that covenant. Similarly, the fact that Israel perverted the law in *Covenant of Moses* into a covenant of works, and so a ministration of death and condemnation (2 Cor.3:6-18), did not invalidate the gracious nature of this covenant. Just because some misunderstand or misuse something does not make it bad.

2. Keep my covenant (v5)

It is not “obey in order to **enter** into my covenant”. Rather it is “obey in order to **keep** my covenant”. These are quite different. “Keeping” the covenant presumes an existing covenant bond, and obedience is linked to the maintenance, administration, enjoyment and profitability of that existing bond. Keeping the Mosaic law would not only bring glory to God but cause their relationship to thrive and prosper. We must remember that the words “obey my voice” and “keep my covenant” are addressed to Israel already in a redemptive and covenant relationship with God. This is paralleled in the New Testament: “If you love me, keep my commandments” (Jn.14:15)

IV. REWARD

The rewarding nature of this gracious relationship is then expounded. “Now therefore, if ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant, then ye shall be a peculiar treasure unto me above all people: for all the earth is mine: and ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation” (19:5-6).

1. Precious: Peculiar treasure

The Hebrew suggests a unique and exclusive possession. This image is further developed by the addition of “for to me belongs the whole earth”. This would suggest that Israel were to God the “crown jewel” of a large collection, the masterwork, the one-of-a-kind piece. Matthew Henry vividly stated this point:

He looked upon the rest of the world but as trash and lumber in comparison with them. By giving them divine revelation, instituted ordinances, and promises inclusive of eternal life, by sending his prophets among them, and pouring out his Spirit upon them, he distinguished them from, and dignified them above, all people. And this honour have all the saints; they are unto God a peculiar people (Tit.2:14), his when he makes up his jewels.²

² M Henry, Commentary on the Whole Bible (Hendriksen-Peabody, Electronic Edition).

2. Priestly: A kingdom of priests

The expression *a kingdom of priests* can also be translated 'priestly kings', suggesting that the Israelites were to enjoy the privilege of being both priests and kings in relation to other peoples. Just as a priest mediated between God and man, so Israel was to mediate the knowledge, salvation and rule of God to the nations.

3. Pure: A holy nation

God redeemed Israel so that she might be separated from evil, and be separated unto Himself. Israel was to be a people set apart, different from all other people; a display-people, a showcase to the world of how being in covenant with Jehovah changes a people. As long as Israel and the individuals in it obeyed God's voice, God would reward them. However, disobedience would cut them off from the nation and the church.

The idea of God graciously rewarding His people's obedient response to His grace is not unique to the Old Testament. In the Gospel of John we read:

If ye love me, keep my commandments: and I will pray the Father, and He shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever....He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me; and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him" (Jn.14:14-15, 21).

So, God's New Testament promise to reveal Himself to those who are obedient to Him is paralleled in the inauguration of the *Covenant with Moses* as we shall now see.

V. REVELATION

Since his call, Moses' aim was to get Israel to Sinai in order to experience the Presence he had previously known there (Ex.3). Israel had been prepared for this Divine encounter by God's deliverance of them from Egypt, and His provision and protection on the way to Sinai. They were further readied by the erection of boundaries and extensive ritual purification. The purpose of this whole narrative is to present an atmosphere electric with God's holy presence in order to energise Israel's relationship with God and to elevate Moses as their vital covenant mediator.

1. We can do everything (v8)

The people are confident about their ability to perform their duties. "All that the LORD hath spoken we will do" (Ex.19:8). When Moses reports this to the Lord He instructs Moses to prepare them for the revelation of an awesome theophany.

2. Without me you can do nothing (v9-25)

The preparatory washings and warnings all combined to impress upon the people the immensity of the Mosaic covenant inauguration. The preacher was God, the pulpit was Sinai, the congregation was assembled Israel, the church bells were trumpets, and the choir was the thunders and lightnings. The trumpet increased in volume (v16,19) as Jehovah drew near and summoned them to assemble. All this achieved the desired result as the self-confidence of Israel evaporated (19:16). As Leon Morris highlights, the purpose was to emphasise the priority and importance of God's grace:

There is nothing to indicate that the reason for God's choice of the people was their agreement to carry out His commands. Rather the picture we get is of God in His free grace choosing Israel to be His people, and having chosen them, imposing upon them His commands. But the choice is first and fundamental and in it we detect the element of grace...The covenant does not represent the people's endeavours to earn God's favour by performing meritorious works, but the people's acceptance of God's proffered grace, with all that that implies.³

3. I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me (v9)

From verse 9 onwards the people are forced to focus on their sinfulness and their need of Moses to act as their covenant mediator (19:9). However, the Divine purpose was not that the people depend upon Moses for salvation (which many sadly did and many still do). His mediatorship was necessary to bring blessing to the nation. However, it could not save anyone. The purpose of Moses' mediatorship, then, was to point Israel to their need of a spiritual and perfect mediator between themselves and God, in order to bring saving blessings to them: "For *there is* one God, and one **mediator** between God and men, the man Christ Jesus" (1 Tim.2:5).

The covenant inauguration was concluded in Exodus 24 where Israel's public commitment to covenant obedience was followed by Moses sprinkling them with the blood of the covenant (24:8) – reminding them of how this all began: with the sprinkling of the shed blood of the Passover lamb.

SUMMARY

The revelation of the *Covenant of Grace* is advanced further in the *Covenant with Moses*. The external physical signs in the Covenants with Adam, Noah, Abraham and Moses revealed inward spiritual realities in the *Covenant of Grace*. In the *Covenant with Adam*, the defeated serpent revealed victory over the Devil. In the *Covenant with Noah*, the rainbow revealed peace with God. In the *Covenant with Abraham*, the two-edged knife revealed God's solemn pledge to fulfil His promises upon pain of death, but also humanity's responsibility to cut off sin upon pain of death. It also pointed to the Promised Seed. In the *Covenant with Moses*, the lamb and the law revealed God's gracious pattern of redemption, then relationship, then response.

Our cathedral is getting brighter. Sin-darkened humanity is benefiting from light shining through three windows shaped like a snake, a rainbow and a knife. God now cuts two more. One is in the shape of a Lamb, and the other in the shape of a scroll, representing the Law. The light that shines through them is confined to the nation of Israel. All in Israel reap national and physical benefits from God's redemption of the nation from Egypt, His special relationship with that nation and His promised blessings upon their obedience. Again, some just take the benefits of the natural light and some just admire the lamb and scroll-shaped windows. Others, however, look through the windows by faith and see a more wonderful spiritual reality shining brightly through it. They see the grace of God not only in redeeming them but bringing them into a well-defined and regulated relationship. They see the grace of God in giving them laws which will help them conduct their relationship with Him in a way that will please Him and bring blessings to them. They see the grace of God in the types and symbols of sacrificial system, symbolising God's gracious

³ L Morris, *The Apostolic Preaching of the Cross* (London: Tyndale Press, 1955), 73.

provision for their sin. The law in the *Covenant with Moses* revealed sufficient of the *Covenant of Grace* to enable Moses to put His faith in the Christ of the Covenant, God's Lamb and Law-keeper.

Have you followed Moses' faith? Have you used the covenant signs of the Lamb and the Law to bring you to the Lamb of God and the Law-keeper of God?