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The Role of The Mosaic Covenant in Its Historical Context and its Relevance for Today

Nathan H Chiroma

Research Fellow, Department of Practical Theology, University of Stellenbosch,
South Africa

nhchiroma@sun.ac.za

Abstract

The transaction that God YHWH performs at Mount Sinai with Israel is profound and has a great impact on His people. One of the most difficult problems in understanding the teaching of the Bible is the question of the place of the Mosaic Law in the Bible and today. This paper attempts to unravel this phenomenal transaction – to understand what was involved, what the implications were, how it relates to the patriarchs and the promises made to them, and how it relates to God's covenant people today. This paper also seeks to explore how or whether the Mosaic Law has relevance for believers today. The paper finally offers some recommendations for the church/believers today.

Introduction

At the heart of ancient Israelite religion stands the concept of the covenant, and in particular the covenant made between Israel and its God at Mount Sinai. The term 'covenant' applied to various transactions between God and man, and man and his fellow man (Unger 1975: 224). The Oxford dictionary (1989: 788) defines a covenant as "[a] mutual agreement between two or more persons to do or to refrain from doing certain acts, a compact, contract, bargain; sometimes the undertaking, pledge or promise of one of the parties". In the post-Egypt journey, we see God entering into this form of contract with His people – the sovereign and creator God, at the same time being the relational God YHWH, entering into an agreement with mere mortals. The Old Testament word *berit* is the one used to denote this relationship. The word came to mean that which bound two parties together; the religious use was really a metaphor based on the common use, but with a deeper connotation (Advanced Bible Encyclopedia, 1979: 790). Although God enters into a contract with his people, the two parties are not on equal terms since God is still the one who takes the initiative, and we see this in the use of verbs such as "establish", "grant", "set down" and "command" (Advanced Bible Encyclopedia, 1979: 792). The idea of covenant was not unique to Israel. In the ancient Near East, the idea of establishing covenants was very common. For instance, Wright (1995: 8) has identified four different kinds of covenants common in the ancient Near East. These are the parity covenant, the patron covenant, the promissory covenant and the suzerainty covenant. This paper

focuses on only one of the aforementioned covenants, the suzerainty which "The Mosaic covenant" aptly falls under.

To understand the Mosaic Covenant, one must bear in mind a number of general concepts concerning biblical covenants. Firstly, all biblical covenants were promulgated by the divine Suzerain on behalf of His vassal people. The authority of the covenants resides in Him and Him alone – He is Lord. Secondly, the covenants appear to have been promulgated at times of crisis or change, when God's people were on the threshold of the unknown. The Abrahamic Covenant was established following Abram's departure from Ur while the Mosaic Covenant came on the heels of Israel's departure from Egypt. Immediately following the forty years of wandering in the wilderness, and just prior to Israel's entry into Canaan, the Priestly and Deuteronomic covenants were promulgated. The Mosaic Law is one of six covenants that God made with Israel, all six of which have five concepts in common: their authority resides in Him, they all came at a time of crisis, no covenant nullifies a previous one, salvation from sin is not obtained by keeping any covenant, and significant negative events followed the instigation of each (Barrick, 1999: 213-232). The theological context of the Mosaic Covenant is Israel's election by grace, and the redemptive context is God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt. The content of the covenant follows the pattern of the ancient suzerainty treaty. The covenant was the most conditional of all the covenants and, like all the covenants, it promised blessings for obedience and curses for disobedience. As we study God's covenant with His recently redeemed slaves from Egypt, and with Moses as mediator, we see a resemblance to similar contracts made between vassals and their subjects. Barrick (1999: 233) states that:

In most of Old Testament passages, elements of the near Eastern pattern can be observed. There are references to stipulations or commandments which include the act of swearing, the pronouncement of blessings and curse. There is naturally no mention of calling on the gods as witnesses since God is himself the witness; but external witnesses in the form of a pillar was seen and known and at times people themselves act as their own witnesses.

The Mosaic covenant was formed between God and the Israelites on Mount Sinai, with Moses as mediator after God had redeemed His people from Egypt. The Israelites arrived at Mount Sinai, where they remained throughout the events recorded in Exodus 19:1 and Numbers 10:10. It should be noted upfront that this covenant was not a distinct covenant, but a continuation of the Abrahamic covenant, only narrowed; this covenant in no sense superseded or cancelled the

earlier Abrahamic covenant of promise. It is the working-out of the covenant God made with Abraham.

The heart of the Mosaic covenant, which is unfolded in Ex. 19-24, is undergirded by God's deliverance of his people from Egyptian slavery (Ex. 19:4; 20:2), a connection that ultimately links it to the covenant with Abraham (Ex. 3:7-14; 6:2-5). Here, however, the emphasis falls on the responsibility of the people to 'keep' the covenant (19:5, cf. Gen. 17:9). The 'Decalogue' (20:2-27), supplemented by the laws of the so-called Book of the Covenant (Ex. 21-23), constitute its main stipulations, and it is ratified by a sacrificial ritual (24:3-8) and a covenantal meal (24:9-11). The erection of the tabernacle (Ex. 25-27; 35-40), the consecration of Aaron and his sons as priests (Ex. 28-29), and the ritual regulations of the book of Leviticus provide the fabric of worship within which the covenant may be sustained (McConville, 1977, p. 749). This was a conditional agreement, obedience to which resulted in blessings and disobedience in curses.

The Relationship Between God and the People in the Covenant King/vassal relationship

God had wonderfully saved the Israelites from bondage in Egypt (Ex. 13:3, 14; 20:2; Deut. 5:6), and the final aspect of the deliverance was the sprinkling of blood on their door posts (Ex. 12) and the crossing of the Red Sea. Now He brought them to Sinai, where He entered into a covenant with them. The nature of the covenant was similar to the suzerain covenant common in the Ancient Near East. In this kind of covenant, a superior party bound an inferior party to specific obligations. The superior party stipulated the obligations of the inferior party and took the responsibility to protect them.

Hannah (1982:137) describes the elements of this covenant form as (1) Preamble (Ex. 20:2a); (2) Historical prologue (20:26); (3) General stipulations (20:3-17; 20:22-23:33); (4) Deposit and periodic reading (25:16, 21); (5) Blessings and curses (Lev. 26); (6) Vassal's oath of allegiance (24:3); (7) Witnesses; and (8) Solemn ceremony (24:4-11).

With this covenant, God became Israel's Suzerain. He was the absolute sovereign and His people were the vassals and, for its preservation, the covenant relationship demanded a certain commitment from the people – obedience and the Lord reminded them of this obligation. The covenant therefore was a conditional one, and the people agreed to obey (Ex. 19:8). The law was the nation's constitution for their theocratic state under their great God, Yahweh. Israel was no longer in Egypt where, perhaps, their suzerain was Pharaoh because they were a different

community under their God/King, Yahweh. God was going to be a faithful and loving king.

Israel, however, was unfaithful to their covenant promise. They constantly broke the covenant, but God did not cancel His covenant with them because of His faithfulness to His promises and His grace. Fredricks (1982 :5) rightly observes: "The important thing to note in regard to covenant breaking, and which has a bearing on the role of the Mosaic Covenant ... is that covenant breaking did not mean covenant annulment." Yahweh alone, as founder of this covenant, could guarantee its continuance.

Father/Son – first born

God promised Abraham he would increase his offspring. By the time of exodus they had increased, but were in slavery in Egypt. Help came from God through Moses, and God told Moses to command Pharaoh, "Israel is my first born son ... let my son go" (Ex. 4:22-23). Yahweh was to be seen as their Father by what He did. He brought them out of Egypt and made them a nation; He nurtured and led the nation, and so in Deut. 32:6, Moses says, "Is he not your father? ...". Israel therefore was related to God and it was a familial relationship; a people who made up the family of God; a family that had been formed, saved and guarded by God its father. As true son, Israel should aspire to be like the father: "Be ye holy as I am holy" (Lev. 19:2). Israel should be obedient to his father and the father, in turn, will demonstrate His love and loyalty and care for him.

Israel is not only a son to God, but most importantly is His first born – first born in pre-eminence and, as such, has special rights and honours of inheritance and favour bestowed on him. By this, the nation was dedicated to God.

Kingly priests, treasured people, holy nation

God's covenant with Israel would give Israel an exalted position among the nations in view of their acceptance of God's righteous standards. If they accepted and obeyed the covenant stipulations, God promised to make them His treasured possession, a kingdom of priests and a Holy nation. God gave Israel the position of priesthood, that is, each member of the nation with God as his king would know and have access to Him and mediate on behalf of each other as did the priests – a universal priesthood. McComisky (1985: 68) says: "The use of this word denotes that Israel was called to a position of special worth in the eyes of God ... As a royal body of priests, the nation was called to high privilege. They were to sustain a unique relationship to God as well as to the nations for whom they mediated divine redemption." However, they declined the privilege of being

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a national priesthood in preference to having Moses and Aaron represent them (Ex. 19:16-25; 20:18-21). For every first-born son in each Israelite family, a Levite was consecrated to God in line with the death of that first-born son.

A people, possession of God

This relationship of being a people of God is first seen in Ex. 3:7, where God told Moses in the burning bush, "I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt", and also in Ex. 7:14, 8:1-20, 10:3 and other passages, where God told Moses to tell Pharaoh, "Let my people go." Israel was God's choice or treasured possession (Ex. 19:5). They would be His own people, highly valued by and related to God. God was Israel's kinsman-redeemer. Israel's value came from God's love and affection, which he had set on Israel. They [Israel] were to be God's distinct treasure set aside for a marked purpose. They had become a treasured people out of all the people of the earth (Deut. 7:6; 14:2; 26:18).

A holy nation

Israel was to be a nation morally pure and dedicated entirely to the service of God (Ex. 19:6; 20:20). Israel was to be separate and holy; they were to be separate and as no other people on the face of the earth. This holiness was a status given by God because when they disobeyed, God forgave them and continued the relationship.

Many times Israel failed to be faithful to their covenantal responsibilities. Every time they sinned (broke a covenant stipulation), God disciplined them, but He would never cancel the covenant with Israel.

The Purposes for Making the Covenant

The covenant was meant to be a security and guarantee. God says, "I will be your God and you shall be my people." In Ex. 19:3-6 one reads, "I bore you on eagle's wings ...". The covenant was meant to link Israel to God in expectation and hope. It was to cause Israel to make God alone their portion and their strength. In Deut. 4:1, obedience to the law would ensure the successful conquest of the land of promise, and Deut. 7:12 states that obedience to the law would guarantee continued participation in the promised covenant. The law also established the conditions under which the terms of the promise could be maintained. It prescribed the terms of obedience for Israel under Moses. The law did not give the inheritance, but it was given to preserve and protect the people for the inheritance. Moses affirms that the people would be disinherited if they disobeyed the law, but when God blesses them as a result of obedience; it is on the basis of the promised covenant that He acted in such manner.

God established His covenant in order to reveal Himself and His purposes. This showed what God was willing to work in the lives of the Israelites so that their faith could be nourished. Hays (2001: 31) asserts, "A full summary of God's will was made explicit through the physical inscription of the law. This external – to man – formally ordered summation of God's will constitutes the distinctiveness of the Mosaic Covenant."

Since the Mosaic covenant was built upon the Abrahamic covenant yet to be fulfilled in Christ, God was maintaining that covenant with Abraham through his seed. Israel's responsibility was to maintain the working relationship with God through obedience. McComisky (1985: 68) observes, "It was God's solemn purpose to maintain Israel as a nation until the scion of David should come, bringing salvation to the Gentiles." The covenant was added as a temporary institution until Christ should come. "Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator" (Gal. 3:19).

The Mosaic covenant was an administrative covenant. Its purpose was to govern the obedience of God's people. It was to protect the people as they moved into the hostile environment of Canaan. It defined sin and encouraged holiness, so that Israel would not be contaminated. It provided the basis of a strong social structure and contributed to the health and welfare of the nation. Talking about the regulations and instructions and content of the covenant, Grudem (1994: 52) captures it well when he says the covenant "... foreshadowed the bearing of sin by Christ, the perfect highpoint who was also the perfect sacrifice". He says the laws were given to restrain the sins of the people and to be a custodian to point to Christ.

How the Mosaic Covenant Relates to the Abrahamic Covenant

The Scripture makes it clear that the Mosaic covenant did not abolish the Abrahamic covenant and that it is related to the promises. At Horeb, for example, the Lord reminded the people of the covenant with Abraham (Deut. 1:8) and, when the Lord threatened to destroy the people after they had made the golden calf, Moses based his plea for them on that covenant (Ex. 32:13). The Mosaic covenant relates to the Abrahamic covenant in the following ways: conditionally and unconditionally.

Promise of offspring

While the Abrahamic covenant had personal, national and universal blessings, the Mosaic on the other hand was related more to the national blessing. God promised

Abraham in Gen. 12:2 and Gen. 17 that He would multiply his seed and make him a great nation. In Exodus 19:5-6 is the promise that Israel would become a nation in a special relationship to God. In Deut. 7:7-8, this promise is restated and it is seen here that the choice of Israel in Ex. 19:5-6 was based on the Lord's loving faithfulness to his promise to the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. God indeed established Israel as a nation and they were given pre-eminence in rank and position in order to mediate God's blessings to other nations.

Both covenants required faith – from Abraham and Israel. Kaiser (1983, p. 268) notes that "...the Sinaitic covenant or Mosaic covenant was ... an outgrowth of the Abrahamic. Both covenants have faith as the requisite for the covenant".

Divine presence

In Gen. 17:7-8, God promised to be God to Abraham and his descendants. This divine presence also was echoed during the Mosaic times (Ex. 29:45-46; Lev. 11:45; 22:33; Num. 15:41; Deut. 26:17-18). God promised His active presence. He would be their God, providing them with the protection and benefits expected in such an intimate relationship. In Ex. 4:22, Israel is referred to as "My first born son". The pillar of fire, the tabernacle and the ark were all visible symbols of the dwelling of Yahweh among his people.

The land

In Gen. 15 and 17, God promised to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan as a possession. Although the promise was not realised under Moses, in Ex. 3:16-17; 32:1ff and Lev. 26:42, 45, that promise of the land was singled out as the basis for God's new act of redemption in the exodus. In Ex. 23:22ff, 33:2 and 34:11-12, mention is made of the conquest and expulsion of those living in Canaan. In Deut. 4, the land is a gift "... so that you may live and may go in and take possession of the land that the Lord, the God of your fathers is giving you". So, as God promised Abraham, God gave the land to Israel.

The promise of divine blessing for Gentiles is not given prominence in the Mosaic covenant, perhaps because the Mosaic covenant focuses on the formation of Israel as a nation and so emphasises those aspects of the promise that applied directly to the Israelites.

The Mosaic covenant therefore is related to the promise as it defines and amplifies that promise for a new generation.

How Personal Salvation was experienced by those Living Under the Mosaic Covenant

As part of the covenant, God gave his laws to the people – both caustic and apodictic law. These were to facilitate their fellowship with him and how they were to be organised under him, their regent. This is an integral part of the covenant. God then proceeds to prescribe the way of access to Him, through sacrifice, and the way of fellowship with him, by separation (Vreeland, 2000: 32).

Israel under Moses experienced salvation by faith through grace and not by works or the law. The law was not given for their salvation, because they had been saved in their exodus from Egypt. The law was given to people who already were redeemed so that they would become a very distinctive type of society in their historical and cultural context. As Kaiser (1991: 22) puts it:

The Sinaitic relationship antedated the transactions on Mt. Sinai, for the giving of the law only fixed and settled outwardly a relationship which had already been initiated in the plagues on Israel's behalf and their exodus ... The promise of deliverance and the announcement that Yahweh is their lord came in Ex. 6:2-9; therefore a relationship already exists with the nation of Israel even apart from any agreement.

The people had to exercise faith and obedience just like Christians today. The basis of forgiveness of sin and redemption is the grace of God. The law was not given so that one can achieve a relationship with God. It assumes an established relationship. It commands one to obey in order to maintain that relationship. Lev. 18 makes it clear that disobedience will break one's relationship with the promise, but the relationship is presumed to have been established – a relationship solely on the basis of grace. The relationship was established by a gracious oath on the part of God. It would be realised regardless of human success or failure. Kaiser (1991, p. 22) says

It was Yahweh's love, mercy and grace that initiated even the Sinaitic covenant and not the people's obedience (Deut. 4:37; 7:7-9; 10:15). When Israel broke the law they did not forfeit their relationship to the lord God rather that very law made provision for the forgiveness and removal of all sins (Lev. 16).

The Israelites did not do anything unique to deserve being selected by God as his own possession. The Mosaic covenant therefore was an act of God's grace and mercy, just as the covenant between God and Abraham and the New Testament Christians (Kaiser, 1978: 114).

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Grudem (1994: 22) says we should not assume that there was no grace available from the time of Moses until Christ, because the promise of salvation by faith that God had made with Abraham remained in force. Israel's keeping the law was not a means of salvation, but a response to the Lord who redeemed Israel. Israel was saved by faith through grace, and they were to love God and obey. Kaiser (1978: 115) added that "Even Christ did not expect obedience to be an optional feature of the Christian life, but he repeated this same 'if you love me, keep my commandments'".

As individuals and as a nation, faith was the requirement for their salvation. The law was given to protect the people for the promise, to aid them to acquire what God had promised and to provide legal standards for order within the nation. The law did not usurp the role of faith. Faith is manifested by obedience.

How the Law Relates to the Christian Today

The enormous challenge for the Christian is knowing which aspects of the law apply to him and which ones do not apply to him today. There are some who say that everything in the New Testament has not changed in principle and still remains in force for Christians. Others believe that the Old Testament has been set aside through Christ and is no longer binding on the Christian. Martin Luther, on the one hand, suggests that "[e]verything that the NT does not repeat from the OT is outmoded for the Christian". "The OT has been set aside through Christ and is no longer binding" (Fredricks, 1999: 3). Theissen, (1949: 241), sharing the same view, observes that:

The scriptures teach that in the death of Christ the believer is delivered, not only from the curse of the law ... but from the law itself. ... That this includes the moral law as well as the ceremonial law is evident from 2 Cor. 3:7-11. ... This surely refers to the 10 commandments.

Calvin, on the other hand, disagrees with both Luther and Theissen when he articulates that "[t]he law has lost none of its authority, but always receive from us the same respect and obedience" (Fredricks, 1999: 5). Erickson (1983: 977) emphasises that, "[a]lthough Christians do not acquire and maintain righteousness by fulfilling the specific requirements of the law, they are nonetheless to regard the biblically revealed law as an expression of God's will for their lives".

It is important to note first that the Christian's salvation, like that of those people of Mosaic times, is by faith through grace. The Christian is not saved by 'dos and don'ts', but by 'done'. He is not saved by keeping of laws, but by the finished work of Christ on the cross. However, this does not mean that the law has been

disannulled. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus says that He did not come to abolish the law but to fulfil it, but that, like in the people of Moses' time, obedience to the law is vital for the Christian to keep his relationship with Christ. According to (Wenham, 1979: 245) Christ is the "fulfilment of the law" and He alone enables the Christian to obey the law through the power of the Holy Spirit. The law therefore is relevant to the Christian today, although not in a meritorious way. Accordingly, the purpose of the law is to point to Christ. "The law has Christ for its goal and meaning and bears witness to him" (Cranfield, 1978: 846). However, which of the Mosaic laws relate to the Christian today?

According to Hopkins (1972: 41), the law that God delivered to Moses was of three kinds: ceremonial, judicial and moral. The ceremonial laws deal with sacrifices, offerings and various methods of purification. Christ fulfilled all these and abolished them on the cross; therefore the Christian does not have to observe these. The judicial laws were also given to Israel, specifically for civil and political government. Other nations and Christians are not mandated to observe them. "The moral law is a body of precepts which carry a universal and natural equity in them, being so conformable to the light of reason and indicates every man's conscience" (Wenham 1979 :234). Hopkins (1972: 42) adds that these laws are to be obeyed by the Christian because they still direct us to what we ought to do, affect the conscience, and bring guilt if we transgress them and freedom of conscience if we obey them while disobedience to them brings consequences. These laws, which concern the regulating of our lives and actions, are to be observed by Christians. However, God wants believers to obey them from the principle of love – love for God and for our neighbour – and grace, and not because of a fear of His wrath. However, the greatest challenge posed by Hopkin's division of the law could be that of drawing the lines between the ceremonial, judicial and moral laws. All the laws are expressions of a moral motivation and principle.

Fortunately, Fredricks (1999: 5) proposed a solution to this question that is appropriate at this juncture: "How does the law relate to the Christian today?" One begins by asking the question: Has the specific law been fulfilled by Christ or set aside by the epistles? If the answer is 'yes', then the law is not to be followed today but one must look for the principles behind the law and apply them. If the answer is 'no', the next question is: Does it pertain only to the national/historical Israel? If the answer is 'yes', then one must look for the principle behind it and apply it. If the answer is 'no', the next question to be asked is, can/should it be obeyed directly today? If the answer is 'yes', it must be obeyed, for example the

Ten Commandments. If 'no', then one should look for the principle behind this law and apply it.

Christians can look to the law in the Old Testament and find out how we can continue to find sanctification and blessing in obedience. The application to the commandments will not bring salvation, but it can impart wisdom and happiness. There is deep satisfaction in life when the principles of the law are applied to marriage, interpersonal relationships, the rearing of children, etc.

The new covenant in the New Testament is not really absolutely different from the Mosaic covenant. Although certain aspects of the law are not carried over into the new covenant, the spirit of obedience that the Mosaic Law tried to foster is good for Christians.

Conclusion

This paper has focused on the Mosaic covenant in its historical context and its relevance for today and has discovered that this covenant was not new. It did not abolish the Abrahamic covenant, but is linked and related to the Abrahamic promises as a working out of the promises. We have also seen that the covenant and law were not given as a means of salvation, as the law was given to a redeemed people. The seal of the Mosaic covenant was the Sabbath, but circumcision, which was the seal of the Abrahamic covenant, was also observed.

Christ did not abolish the law, but fulfilled it. Therefore, although some of these laws, for example ceremonial laws, are not to be observed by Christians, there are principles that could be drawn from each of these laws to be applied by Christians. The moral laws are to be observed by Christians today because they relate directly to our attitude towards God and our fellow men. When God confirmed the Sinai covenant with ancient Israel, He summarised how He wanted the people to respond: "And now, Israel, what does the Lord your God require of you, but to fear the Lord your God, to walk in all His ways and to love Him, to serve the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the Lord and His statutes which I command you today for your good?" (Deut. 10:12-13). That vital priority has never changed.

Recommendations

This paper suggests the following recommendations for the church and for theological educators, especially in Africa.

Theological educators must endeavour to teach in its totality the role of the Mosaic law and bring out its implications for various cultures and contexts in Africa.

Second, the church must not approach the Mosaic law from a legalistic point of view, but rather using a proper, hermeneutical exegetical process.

Third, believers must be taught the relevance of the Mosaic covenants today and know that the Old Testament is still relevant for their beliefs and practices.

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