

THE LAW AND THE COVENANT AT SINAI

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The dominating note of Old Testament history is God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt, and the subsequent revelation of Himself and His will at Sinai. All Bible writers of the Old Testament are unstinted in their continual appeal to the Sinai Covenant. It was at Sinai that God made Israel a nation. It was the revelation and their election that occasioned their uniqueness above all other nations. It was at Sinai that God chose them above all others and instituted a covenant relation with them. "The Lord thy God hath chosen thee to be a special people unto himself, above all people that are upon the face of the earth."¹

The word "covenant" in the Old Testament occurs everywhere in the singular. The word is used almost 250 times; approximately 150 uses refer to the Sinai Covenant. The Sinai Covenant is none other than a renewal of the covenant given to Abraham.² Nowhere in the Old Testament is the Sinai Covenant abrogated. The lone cry, the diapason of all the leaders and prophets is that Israel had transgressed the Sinai Covenant; the constant refrain is: they had "not obeyed the voice of the Lord" heard at Sinai proclaiming "the ten words."

Jeremiah emphatically declared to Israel:

Thus saith the Lord God of Israel; Cursed be the man that obeyeth not the words of this covenant, which I commanded your fathers in the day that I brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, from the iron furnace, saying, Obey my voice, and do them, according to all which I command you: so shall ye be my people, and I will be your God: That I may perform the oath which I have sworn

¹ Dt. 7 : 6.

² Ex 2 : 24, 25; 6 : 1-8; 19 : 4-6.

unto your fathers, to give them a land flowing with milk and honey . . . Hear ye the words of this covenant, and do them. For I earnestly protested unto your fathers in the day that I brought them up out of the land of Egypt, even unto this day, rising early and protesting, saying, Obey my voice. Yet they obeyed not, nor inclined their ear, but walked every one in the imagination of their evil heart; therefore I will bring upon them all the words of this covenant, which I commanded them to do; but they did them not.³

Numerous times Israel was charged with willful rebellion against both law and covenant. The denunciation of Israel's failure to live up to the covenant agreement made at Sinai reaches its climax during the time of Christ and the apostles. Perversion and distortion had become so ingrained and dominant, that the whole Jewish period before Christ is declared by the Apostle Paul to be a "ministration of death."⁴

Consequently, when the New Testament looks back over the history of Israel and evaluates the Jewish system, the law and the covenant, the perspective is, for the most part, that of Israel's perversion and not that which God originally purposed. When we view the Sinai event within this perspective, both the law and the covenant in the New Testament appear at a disadvantage and are referred to in derogatory terms: "Sinai gendereth to bondage." "If that first covenant had been faultless."⁵

The dispensationalist has interpreted this historical situation and perspective in terms of divine dispensations, the dispensation of law from Sinai to Christ, and the dispensation of grace beginning with Christ and the Christian church. The specific implication is that God has had two methods of dealing with His people, one of law and the other of grace. At Sinai they rashly exchanged the covenant given to Abraham for the covenant of law, "and grace was given up for law."⁶ The Christian church has frequently accepted the

³ Jer 11 : 3-9; see also ch. 7 : 22-28; Dt 5 : 33-37; 7 : 6-12; 9 : 4-29.

⁴ 2 Cor 3 : 7.

⁵ Gal 4 : 24; Heb 8 : 7.

⁶ Cf. *Scofield Reference Bible* (London, 1917), p. 93.

implication of this type of interpretation and conclusions relative to law and covenant at Sinai.

This type of Biblical interpretation, however, raises certain questions: does the New Testament interpretation of Sinai flow from the perversion of law and covenant by Israel throughout their history, or did God actually give them at Sinai a covenant of works-righteousness, the law in its improper function, and therefore involve them in a system of legalism which dominated their entire history? The difference is vital. If the first is true, then the Jewish system as they taught and lived it was never part of God's program. It constituted a counterfeit and a perversion. If the second is true, then Israel lived up to the revelation and merited praise, not condemnation.

The Sinai covenant is simply an extension of the everlasting covenant of grace given to Abraham.⁷ God's method and purpose for the salvation of the race and the fulfillment of His will are the same in both Old and New Testaments. The issue is whether God gave Israel the truth of salvation by grace or whether the Jewish system of righteousness by works grew out of their being given a covenant of works in the first place.

It appears impossible to believe that the Judaism condemned by the prophets, the monstrous legalistic system developed by the Jews and fully dominant in Christ's time, represented the divine plan given at Sinai. Both Old and New Testament are emphatic in charging Israel with a perversion of God's plan and purpose, that the Jews had assigned an utterly wrong place to the law, had utterly perverted the meaning and purpose of the revelation at Sinai, making out of it a system of works-righteousness. It is incredible to believe that God could be held responsible for laying the groundwork at Sinai for what followed in Jewish history. It is equally monstrous to believe that God would stoop at Sinai to betray the people He had delivered from Egypt into a hopeless

⁷ Gn 17.

covenant of works, that He had freed them from one bondage in Egypt only to lead them into another bondage of the spirit that finally deprived them of the last vestiges of freedom and brought about their destruction as a nation.

How is the God of Israel to be understood who would impose upon His own people for 1500 years a covenant "which gendereth to bondage"?

Moses, speaking with prophetic foresight and warning relative to the failure of Israel, sought to make clear what would be the tragic result if Israel departed from the Sinai Covenant:

And the Lord shall blot out his name from under heaven . . . when they see the plagues of that land . . . even all nations shall say, Wherefore hath the Lord done this unto the land? what meaneth the heat of this great anger? Then men shall say, Because they have forsaken the covenant of the Lord God of their fathers, which he made with them when he brought them forth out of the land of Egypt.⁸

Interpretation of Israel's Failure

The great perversion of law in the Scriptures goes by the name of legalism. Legalism is the belief and practice that salvation by and acceptance with God are attained by conformity to law as distinguished from salvation by grace through faith.

Moses, in his final address to Israel in the book of Deuteronomy, warned Israel against the seeking of righteousness by works of law:

Speak not thou in thine heart, after that the Lord thy God hath cast them out from before thee, saying, For my righteousness the Lord hath brought me in to possess this land . . . Understand therefore, that the Lord thy God giveth thee not this good land to possess it for thy righteousness; for thou art a stiffnecked people.⁹

Furthermore, he specifically instructed them in righteousness by faith.¹⁰ How then, could Moses be a party to a system

⁸ Dt 29 : 20, 21, 24, 25.

⁹ Dt 9 : 4, 6.

¹⁰ Dt 30.

of works-righteousness that was diametrically opposed to his final instructions to Israel prior to his death? Moses could not have done more to ensure a right understanding of the law and the covenant and to make the right response at the same time. Moses approved the threefold response of Israel when they said: "All that the Lord hath spoken we will do."¹¹

And the Lord heard the voice of your words, when ye spake unto me; and the Lord said unto me; I have heard the voice of the words of this people, which they have spoken unto thee; they have well said all that they have spoken. O that there were such an heart in them, that they would fear me, and keep my commandments always, that it might be well with them, and with their children forever.¹²

Likewise, Joshua, following the pattern laid down by Moses, called all Israel together prior to his death and sought to renew the Sinai Covenant. Joshua, being just as careful and emphatic in his final counsel, led Israel three times to make an almost identical response: "And the people said unto Joshua, The Lord our God will we serve, and his voice will we obey."¹³

The historical record is that "Israel served the Lord all the days of Joshua and all the days of the elders that outlived Joshua."¹⁴ If Israel under Joshua could obey the voice of God, then why not Israel under Moses? If the covenant and the law are valid for Israel a generation later, why not for their fathers?

Christ repudiated the merit system of righteousness by works. In the Sermon on the Mount, He set these two systems of seeking righteousness over against each other.¹⁵ He did not hesitate to appeal to Moses to support Himself and His teachings:

¹¹ Ex 19 : 8; 24 : 3, 7.

¹² Dt 5 : 28, 29.

¹³ Jos 24 : 24; cf. vs. 16-26.

¹⁴ Jos 24 : 31.

¹⁵ Mt 5 : 21-48.

Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me.¹⁶

In Rom. 9-11, Paul sets forth the reason for Israel's failure:

What shall we say then? that the Gentiles, which followed not after righteousness, have attained to righteousness, even the righteousness which is of faith. But Israel, which followed after the law of righteousness, hath not attained to the law of righteousness. Wherefore? Because they sought it not by faith, but as it were by the works of the law . . . For they being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God.¹⁷

Hebrews 11 is a testimony to the fact that all the saints of the Old Testament experienced righteousness by faith, and all the patriarchs and prophets were saved on the principle of salvation by grace.

The method of salvation by works of law has always been the mortal enemy of the Gospel. Salvation by works and salvation by faith are never complementary. They are mutually exclusive. This is clearly stated in Scripture:

Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace. For if they which are of the law be heirs, faith is made void, and the promise made of none effect.¹⁸

A system of righteousness by works of law is said here to make of none effect four things: Christ, grace, faith, and the promise. How, therefore, could any system which negates these four basic facts of the gospel, ever be complementary to the Gospel? Would not a negation of these four make impossible God's method of righteousness by faith?

That God gave Israel the law at Sinai only in its proper function is clear:

And this I say, that the covenant, that was confirmed before of God in Christ [at the time of Abraham], the law, which was four

¹⁶ Jn 5 : 45, 46.

¹⁷ Rom 9 : 30-32; 10 : 3.

¹⁸ Gal 5 : 4; Rom 4 : 14.

hundred and thirty years after [i.e., at Sinai] cannot disannul, that it should make the promise of none effect.¹⁹

Paul states that the giving of the law at Sinai did not make the promise of none effect. But in Rom 4 : 14 he declares that salvation by works does make the promise of none effect. Therefore, God could not have given them a system of works-righteousness. It was to the Abrahamic covenant, the everlasting covenant, that the law was added at Sinai. Paul says that this did not disannul that covenant made with Abraham, or make the promise of none effect.

It is characteristic of dispensationalism and even of Churches more generally, to fail to distinguish between the proper and improper function of law. That opposition to law is manifest in the New Testament is clear; but the opposition is against the improper function of law.²⁰ The proper function of law has always been to convince of sin, of the personal need of a Saviour and Redeemer.²¹ Christ and the apostles all upheld the proper function of law and maintained its integrity as the standard of righteousness.²² In failing to distinguish between the proper and improper function of law, the Christian church, through the centuries, has been tempted to negate law altogether, and thereby become guilty of antinomianism.

To criticize the Ten Commandments on account of its perversion by the Jews, comes ill from those who claim that law restricts and hampers Christian liberty and is opposed to the Gospel. Only the improper function of law is contrary to the Gospel, and to God's method of salvation by grace.

If God uses law in an improper way, then He becomes responsible for sin, because such a method invalidates grace, faith, Christ, and the promise—the only effective means for dealing with sin. If the natural tendency of man due to his egoism

¹⁹ Gal 3 : 17.

²⁰ Gal 2 : 21; 3 : 21; Rom 3 : 20, 28; 8 : 3.

²¹ Rom 7 : 7-13; Gal 3 : 19-25.

²² Mt 5 : 17-29; Rom 3 : 31; 7 : 22, 25; 8 : 3.

is to use the law improperly, would God appeal to more egoism through self-effort to gain merit?

Israel, likewise, perverted the rite of circumcision. Originally, God ordained circumcision as a "seal of the righteousness of . . . faith."²³ In Paul's time, it had become the hallmark of legalism.²⁴ Israel negated their divine calling and destiny for the world by a particularism which raised "the middle wall of partition" and shut out the Gentiles from the saving gospel of Christ. Worst of all, this perversion misrepresented God's character and person to the world until the name of God was "blasphemed among the Gentiles";²⁵ yet it had been God's purpose that through Abraham and through the children of Israel all nations should be blessed and hear the Gospel.²⁶

Most of the people whom God had chosen to bring the Gospel to the world became emissaries of falsehood and distortion. By taking a course of misrepresentation, they caused the world to look upon God as a tyrant. True religion was lost sight of. A narrow externalism and tyrannical legalism led to a form of religion that no longer communicated the Gospel in love and in saving righteousness.

What is revealed by God in the New Testament is not a new law or a new Gospel. In speaking of the new covenant in Heb 8 : 8, the Greek word for "new" is *kainos*. The meaning is not "new" in point of time; that is, "new for the first time," but "new" in reference to quality, renewed and restored to its original condition. The same word is used in 2 Cor 5 : 17: "If any man be in Christ, he is a new creature"; that is, the same man renewed in the image of God. And again in Rev 21 : 1: "I saw a new heaven and a new earth"—obviously not new in point of time, but a restoration to its original Edenic condition.

What God desires is a return to the original purpose and

²³ Rom 4 : 11.

²⁴ Gal 5 : 2-4.

²⁵ Rom 2 : 24.

²⁶ Gal 3 : 8.

will of God. Obedience to the law of God is the same in every age. The revelation of law does not and cannot hold God responsible for the sinful egoism of men who believe that saving righteousness can be achieved by works of law. The more clearly the proper function of law and covenant is understood, the more one is driven to seek salvation by grace alone.

It is through righteousness by faith that God writes His law in the heart and fulfills God's original purpose declared at Sinai: "I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people."²⁷

²⁷ Heb 8 : 10; cf. Ex 19 : 5.