

Mosaic Covenant

The Major Covenants · Biblical Covenants

Approximately 430 years after the Abrahamic covenant (Galatians 3:17), God established the Mosaic covenant at Mount Sinai, constituting Israel as His covenant people through the giving of the Law. This bilateral, conditional covenant differed fundamentally from the unilateral Abrahamic covenant: whereas Abraham's covenant depended entirely upon God's faithfulness and promised blessing through faith, the Mosaic covenant tied national blessings to Israel's obedience. Three months after the Exodus, Israel arrived at Sinai where God proposed the covenant: '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' (Exodus 19:5-6). The conditional 'if' marked this covenant's character.

Israel responded with confident commitment: 'All that the LORD hath spoken we will do' (Exodus 19:8). This verbal assent preceded their hearing the covenant terms—a rash promise they would repeatedly break. God then descended on Sinai in fire, smoke, earthquake, and trumpet blast, speaking the Ten Commandments directly to the assembled people (Exodus 20:1-17). Terrified by the theophany, Israel begged Moses to mediate: 'Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die' (Exodus 20:19). Moses ascended the mountain to receive additional laws—civil ordinances (Exodus 21-23), ceremonial regulations (Exodus 25-31, Leviticus), and detailed worship instructions.

Note: The Mosaic covenant functioned as Israel's national constitution, containing three categories of law: (1) moral law (Ten Commandments and ethical principles), reflecting God's unchanging character and binding on all humanity; (2) civil law (judgments regulating community life), applicable specifically

to Israel's theocratic governance; (3) ceremonial law (sacrificial system, dietary restrictions, festivals), foreshadowing Christ and fulfilled in Him. While salvation in all eras comes by grace through faith, Israel's national blessing depended upon covenant obedience—a principle demonstrated repeatedly in Judges' cycles and the Deuteronomic history. The covenant established a works-principle for temporal blessing even while maintaining grace for eternal salvation.

The covenant was ratified through blood sacrifice (Exodus 24:3-8). Moses built an altar with twelve pillars representing Israel's tribes, offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, read the book of the covenant to the people (who again pledged obedience), and sprinkled half the sacrificial blood on the altar (representing God) and half on the people, declaring, 'Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words' (Exodus 24:8). This ceremony prefigured Christ's better covenant, ratified with His own blood. Moses, Aaron, Nadab, Abihu, and seventy elders then ascended Sinai where 'they saw the God of Israel' (Exodus 24:10)—a theophany granting covenant confirmation through visual encounter with the divine glory.

Deuteronomy 28 details the covenant's blessings and curses: obedience would bring agricultural abundance, military victory, national prosperity, and international prominence; disobedience would result in famine, disease, military defeat, and ultimately exile. Israel's subsequent history vindicated these covenant terms: periods of faithfulness (under Joshua, David, Hezekiah, Josiah) brought blessing; periods of apostasy (during the Judges, under wicked kings) brought oppression; persistent covenant-breaking culminated in Assyrian and Babylonian exiles. The prophets repeatedly appealed to Mosaic covenant terms when pronouncing judgment or promising restoration.

The Law's ultimate purpose was not to provide salvation by works—'by the

deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight' (Romans 3:20)—but to reveal sin's character, restrain evil, and point to Christ. Paul declares, 'The law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith' (Galatians 3:24). The ceremonial system, particularly the sacrificial regulations, typologically presented gospel truth: substitutionary atonement through blood sacrifice, priestly mediation, purification from defilement. Hebrews demonstrates that Christ fulfilled the Law's shadows, offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice, serving as the great High Priest, establishing a better covenant on better promises (Hebrews 8:6). Believers are no longer 'under the law, but under grace' (Romans 6:14), freed from the Law's condemnation and curse (Galatians 3:13) through Christ who perfectly fulfilled its demands and bore its penalty. Yet the moral principles embedded in the Law—supremely the commands to love God and neighbor—remain binding as the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2), now written on hearts by the Holy Spirit rather than on stone tablets.

Key Verses

Exodus 19:5-8

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. These are the words which thou shalt speak unto the children of Israel. And Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before their faces all these words which the LORD commanded him. And all the people answered together, and said, All that the LORD hath spoken we will do. And Moses returned the words of the people unto the LORD.

Exodus 24:7-8

And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words.

Deuteronomy 28:1-2

And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the LORD thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the LORD thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth: and all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the LORD thy God:

Romans 3:20

Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin.

Galatians 3:24

Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster to bring us unto Christ, that we might be justified by faith.

Hebrews 8:6

But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises.

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