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MOSES' LAW AND CHRIST'S LAW

People were on earth a long time before God ever gave them a code of laws. To begin with He spoke to certain people individually, primarily to heads of families. For example, He spoke with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob.

When Abraham died, he did not leave behind a system of laws for his descendants. Not until the children of Israel were assembled at Mt Sinai did God give them a formal law. That law came to be known as the "Law of Moses," the "Law of God," or simply as "the Law." These expressions are used interchangeably in the Bible.

The Law was called the "Law of Moses" because Moses was the agent through whom God gave it. It was called the "Law of God" because God was the author of it (Exodus 20:1-2); and it was referred to simply as "the Law" because the children of Israel had only one law even though it was composed of several parts.

God spoke with Moses from a burning bush on Mt Sinai and He wrote the Ten Commandments on two tablets of stone. The Ten Commandments form the core of the Law of Moses. The Ten Commandments also form the core of the covenant that God made with the children of Israel at Mt Sinai (Exodus 19:5; and Exodus 20:1-17).

God gave additional laws to Moses from time to time, and Moses wrote them down as God gave them to him. The Laws are contained in the books of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

The Law of Moses was, for its day, an advanced law and it had many humane features to it. For example, it did not permit the children of Israel to discriminate against any foreigners that may have been living among them (Leviticus 24:22). It also told the children of Israel to love their neighbors as themselves (Leviticus 19:18).

Yet the Law of Moses also had certain harsh features. For example, it instructed the children of Israel to put to death anyone who cursed his father or mother (Exodus 21:17). It also instructed the children of Israel to put to death anyone who worked on the Sabbath (Exodus 31:15).

In connection with the Law of Moses, God promised to bless the children of Israel if they obeyed His laws (Deuteronomy 28:1-14) and to curse them if they did not (Deuteronomy 28:15-68). The book of Judges tells the story of how God carried out His blessings and curses. God blessed them when they obeyed Him and He cursed them when they fell away and starting worshipping other gods. Indeed, the fate of the children of Israel, as narrated in Old Testament, was determined by whether or not they clung to the Law of Moses.

In spite of its harsh features, however, the Law of Moses is called “holy,” “just,” and “good” (Romans 7:12); and if any law could have been written that could bring life, then righteousness would have come through the Law of Moses (Galatians 3:21), but the Law was inadequate. It was written for only one particular people (Deuteronomy 4:7-8), and it supplied no forgiveness of sins.

A NEW COVENANT

Jeremiah, who lived and prophesied in Old Testament times, saw that the Law of Moses would need to be replaced. Jeremiah said,

““The time is coming,
declares the LORD,
‘when I will make a new covenant
with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah.’”

Jeremiah 31:31 NIV

Jeremiah foretold that the new covenant would be different from the covenant God made with the children of Israel at Mt Sinai. He said,

“It will not be like the covenant
I made with their forefathers
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they broke my covenant,
though I was a husband to them,
declares the LORD.”

Jeremiah 31:32 NIV

In the book of Malachi, which is the very last book in the Old Testament, the Lord spoke of a day that was coming, which He described as the “day of the Lord.” It would not be a pleasant day. The Lord Almighty said,

“Surely the day is coming;
it will burn like a furnace.
All the arrogant and every evildoer
will be stubble,
and that day that is coming
will set them on fire.”

Then the Lord added,

“Not a root or a branch will be left to them.”
Malachi 4:1 NIV

Before the day of the Lord would arrive, however, God promised to send a “messenger” (Malachi 3:1), who would be like Elijah (long dead). God said,

“See,

I will send you the prophet Elijah
before that great and dreadful
day of the LORD comes.”

Malachi 4:5 NIV

The Old Testament closed with a promise of the coming of “Elijah” and of the “day of the Lord.” Then, there was a pause of about 400 years, during which God gave no new laws.

JOHN THE BAPTIST

A new epoch began with John the Baptist. Jesus identified John the Baptist as being the “Elijah” that was to come (Matthew 17:11-13). No longer were the Law and the prophets the final authority in religious matters. Jesus said,

“For all the Prophets and the Law
prophesied until John.”

Matthew 11:13 NIV

John the Baptist came preaching the good news that the kingdom of God was approaching. Jesus also said,

“The Law and the Prophets
were proclaimed until John.
Since that time,
the good news of the kingdom of God
is being preached,
and everyone is forcing his way into it.”

Luke 16:16 NIV

The focus of many religious people of Jesus' day was no longer on the Law of Moses and on the prophetic books of the Old Testament but on the approaching kingdom of God.

JESUS' ATTITUDE TOWARD THE LAW OF MOSES

Some of the staunch supporters of the Law and the Prophets feared that Jesus might be trying to tear down the Law and the Prophets, but Jesus was not attempting to tear them down. He had too much respect for the Law and the Prophets to do that. He had more respect for the Law and the Prophets than the people of His day, who defended the Law and the Prophets but who did not live up to what they said. In fact, Jesus was so devoted to the Law and the Prophets that He was willing to fulfill them (to His great cost in pain and suffering). Jesus said,

“Do not think that I have come
to abolish the Law or the Prophets;
I have not come to abolish them
but to fulfill them.”

Matthew 5:17 NIV

The Law and the Prophets would stay in force until Jesus finished His work. Jesus said,

“I tell you the truth,
until heaven and earth disappear,
not the smallest letter,
not the least stroke of a pen,
will by any means disappear from the Law
until everything is accomplished.”

Matthew 5:18 NIV

Jesus was not opposed to the children of Israel of His day keeping the Law of Moses. He told a man whom He had healed to go and show himself to the priests and make the offering that Moses had prescribed in the Law (Matthew 8:4).

Jesus also advised a crowd of people to obey what the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees were saying to them but not

to do as they did, because they did not practice what they preached (Matthew 23:2-3).

For the most part Jesus seems to have left the Law to one side. He seemed more interested in getting people to act in faith and do what is right rather than in getting them to submit to the authority of the Law. He seemed to have had something higher, brighter in mind than the keeping of the ritualistic commands of the Law of Moses. He even felt free to criticize the Law of Moses. He referred to the fact that Moses allowed a man to divorce his wife if he gave her a certificate of divorce (Deuteronomy 24:1-4), but, Jesus said, "It was not this way from the beginning" (Matthew 19:8).

When Jesus was asked which of the commandments He esteemed to be the greatest, He replied,

“Love the Lord your God
with all your heart
and with all your soul
and with all your mind.”

Matthew 22:37 NIV

Then Jesus added,

“This is the first and greatest commandment.
And the second is like it:
‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Matthew 22:38-39 NIV

Jesus said further,

“All the Law and the Prophets
hang on these two commandments.”

Matthew 22:40 NIV

Jesus also said,

“So in everything, do to others
what you would have them do to you,

for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.”
Matthew 7:12 NIV

Jesus seems to have envisioned a time in which people's actions would be controlled not by laws but by love.

SHOULD GENTILES KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES?

When Jesus disciples gathered in Jerusalem several years after Jesus' resurrection, they discussed whether or not the Gentile converts to Christ were obligated to keep the Law of Moses. They decided that the Gentiles were not obligated to keep it. The apostle Peter chided the brethren at this gathering by saying,

“Now then, why do you try to test God
by putting on the necks of the disciples
a yoke that neither we
nor our fathers have been able to bear?”

Acts 15:10 NIV

Gentiles, of course, had never been under the Law of Moses and their becoming followers of Christ did not obligate them to start serving under that Law.

SHOULD BELIEVING CHILDREN OF ISRAEL KEEP THE LAW OF MOSES?

The apostle Paul was present at the conference in Jerusalem and he approved of the decision that was made there. He taught that the Law of Moses had a specific purpose. Its purpose was to prepare people to be able to accept Jesus. Paul said,

“Wherefore the law was our schoolmaster
to bring us unto Christ,

that we might be justified by faith.”

Galatians 3:24 KJV

The apostle Paul taught that now that Christ had come and that faith in Him was possible, the children of Israel were no longer obligated to keep the Law of Moses, which was their “schoolmaster.” The apostle Paul said,

“But after that faith is come,
we are no longer under a schoolmaster.”

Galatians 3:25 KJV

It was difficult for many of the children of Israel to accept the fact that they were no longer under the Law of Moses, because it had been drilled into their minds from childhood that they should keep it. Again and again the writers of the New Testament tried to ease the consciences of those children of Israel who believed in Jesus by showing them that they were no longer obligated to keep the Law of Moses. This is one of the main topics of the letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the Romans.

The apostle Paul pointed out in his letter to the Romans that the Law of Moses brought no forgiveness of sins. It brought only a consciousness of sin (Romans 3:20, 7:7). Paul explained that those who had died with Christ in baptism (Romans 6:3) were dead to the Law of Moses (Romans 6:14). Just as death releases people from their marriage obligations, so those who had died with Christ were released from the Law of Moses (Romans 7:6). As a result they could be married to another (Romans 7:4). This being the case, Paul reasoned that Christ is the end of the Law of Moses for those who follow Jesus. He said,

“Christ is the end of the law
so that there may be righteousness
for everyone who believes.”

Romans 10:4 NIV

Many passages from the New Testament could be cited to show that followers of Christ are free from the Law of Moses. The book of Hebrews, especially, deals with this subject, the reading of which book would be very helpful to the reader.

THE LAW OF CHRIST

It remains to be pointed out that those people who follow Jesus and who are not dependant upon the Law of Moses are not left without guidelines for their lives. They also have a law. It is the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2). His law is called "a royal law" (James 2:8), because it requires its adherents to conduct their lives in a royal manner. They should live as privileged children of a king are supposed to live. Christ's law is based on the principle of love that is embodied in the statement,

"Love your neighbor as yourself."

James 2:8 NIV

THOUGHT QUESTIONS:

1. What do you think Jesus meant when He said, "No one sews a patch of unshrunk cloth on an old garment, for the patch will pull away from the garment, making the tear worse. Neither do men pour new wine into old wineskins. If they do, the skins will burst, the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, they pour new wine into new wineskins, and both are preserved" (Matthew 9:16-17 NIV)?
2. What do you think Jesus meant when He said, "Therefore every teacher of the law who has been instructed about the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his storeroom new treasures as well as old" (Matthew 13:52 NIV)?

3. Do the Ten Commandments form an inherent part of the Law of Moses? See Romans 7:7. Is the commandment "Do not covet" one of the Ten Commandments? See Deuteronomy 5:21.
4. Hebrews 7:12 says that the Law (of Moses) was changed. If it has been changed, were the Ten Commandments also changed?
5. All of the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17) except one have been repeated in the New Testament as being a part of the Law of Christ. Which of the ten was not repeated in the New Testament? See Colossians 2:16.
6. Would you, personally, rather be under the Law of Moses or under grace?
7. Why is it, do you suppose, that some people would rather be under the Law of Moses than under grace? Do they receive some comfort from it?
8. If you are under grace, does that mean that you do not have to read the New Testament and try to learn from it? If not, why not?