

SHOULD WE KEEP THE SABBATH? (Part 3)

THE SINAITIC COVENANT

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Over 400 long years after the LORD God and Abraham made an **everlasting covenant** together, and while Abraham's descendants were languishing in Egyptian oppression, we read;

And the sons of Israel sighed because of the bondage, and they cried out; and their cry for help because of their bondage rose up to God. So God heard their groaning; and God remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. And God saw the sons of Israel, and God took notice of them (Ex. 2:23-25).

So, God will now act in grace and mighty power to redeem Israel from her slavery, precisely because He **remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob**. This focuses our attention on the big picture of the entire Bible: God is working to bring the people of this planet back to His original **very good** harmony experienced by all things in His creation. God ultimately is working towards that future perfect Age when there will be no **evening and morning** --- when the Day of His perfect rest never sets!

In the shorter term, we now come to the Sinaitic Covenant under Moses. This new chapter of the ebb and flow of Israel's fortunes would depend on whether or not they would keep the covenant made at Sinai. Later, Israel's kings would be evaluated by their response to the Sinaitic covenant. For instance, God had these solemn words for Solomon;

Because you have done this, and you have not kept My covenant and My statutes, which I have commanded you, I will surely tear the kingdom from you, and will give it to your servant (I Kings 11:11).

Later, prophets would be sent to call Israel back to her covenant obligations which the nation overall despised, and the surrounding Gentile nations would often be dragged into this drama to discipline Israel;

The house of Israel and the house of Judah have broken My covenant which I made with their fathers. Therefore, thus says the LORD, 'Behold I am bringing disaster on them' (Jeremiah 11:10-11).

To understand the reason for their chequered history, we need a thorough comprehension of the covenant God made through Moses with the people at Mt Sinai. Understanding the terms of this covenant will directly help us to answer the question, [Should We Keep the Sabbath?](#) But first, some historical background.

THE PRACTICE OF COVENANTAL ARRANGEMENTS IN THE ANCIENT NEAR MIDDLE EAST

There has been a lot of study into covenant practice in the Ancient Near Middle East. ¹ We understand that a covenant was a legal and binding agreement or promise between two parties, whether between individuals, families, tribes or nations.

The superior party is the suzerain, which in our case is the LORD God of Israel. The inferior party (often a defeated enemy or state) is the vassal. At Mt Sinai the vassal of course is Israel, but not in the sense that they were a defeated nation. On the contrary, the LORD God had delivered them from their enemies with a mighty Hand and an outstretched Arm.

The challenge before the Israelite nation now was this; how might they express their allegiance to God? How might they become a people in whom the Spirit of God would dwell on earth? How might Abraham's covenantal agreement with the LORD be fulfilled, so that all the nations of the earth might be blessed? More was required than circumcision of the flesh. Israel must become a people with a circumcised heart. Hence, the relevance of the covenant under Moses and the vital part it will play in our Sabbath question.

¹ For example William J. Dumbrell, John H. Walton, Meredith G. Kline, *et al.*

In Ancient Near Eastern cultures, the suzerain dictated the terms of the covenant. Normally these terms were written in duplicate, so each party had an identical copy. These covenant documents contained the promise(s) of the suzerain to the vassal, and the obligations and duties of the vassal to the suzerain. There were lists of blessings for compliance and curses for failure by the vassal to abide by the covenant agreement.

It's important to also recognize that such covenants had a sign imposed by the suzerain which was placed in the very centre of the covenant document. The vassal was to display the sign of the covenant as a symbol of their obedience to the stipulations imposed by the suzerain. Failure to do so would be considered by the suzerain to be a sign of rebellion, with dire consequences to follow. ²

We already know that **the sign** of the Abrahamic Covenant was that all males were to be circumcised. Circumcision was the entrance sign into Israel's community. We are now going to learn that **the sign** of Israel's agreement with God at Sinai was the commandment to keep the sabbath day holy before the LORD God.

According to this standard practice of the day, it is no surprise that the Fourth Commandment for Israel to keep the sabbath, appears right in the very middle of the Decalogue. If we were to count the words of the Ten Commandments in the Hebrew Bible, the central phrase is **remember the sabbath day to keep it holy!** This is not by chance. The sign of Israel's covenant obligations to God was in the very centre of the document terms! We read,

So the sons of Israel shall observe the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath throughout their generations as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign between Me and the sons of Israel forever ... (Ex. 31: 16-17) For Israel, keeping the sabbath day was **the central sign** they were keeping up their end of their covenant with God! Of course, failure to keep any of the other obligations laid out in the covenant documents also carried severe consequences.

We see, then, that there are five main parts of each covenant: (1) the promise from the suzerain to the ruled party, (2) the requirements of the ruled party to the suzerain and (3) the sign of the covenant. (4) A list of the blessings that would occur if they were obedient to the covenant and (5) a list of the cursings that would come upon them for disobedience to the covenant stipulations. All of these were detailed in two *identical* covenant documents; one for the suzerain and one for the ruled party. ³

In our previous studies we noted that the sabbath day as such is mentioned for the first time in **Exodus 16: 23**. Moses told the children of Israel in the wilderness,

Tomorrow is a sabbath observance, a holy sabbath to the LORD. Up till this moment, there is no indication that the weekly sabbath rest had ever been kept ... whether by a single individual or by a group.

Indeed, we may go even further. **Nehemiah 9: 13-14** specifically informs us that the origin of the weekly sabbath observance began only after God revealed it to Moses and Israel at Sinai,

Then You came down on Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven; You gave them just ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments. So You made known to them Your holy sabbath, and laid down for them commandments, statutes and law, through Your servant Moses.

In other words, the whole system of sabbatical observances was not revealed until the Sinaitic covenant was offered to Israel at Sinai. By accepting the terms of agreement at Sinai, Israel bound herself willingly to the whole system of sabbath and holy days, to specifically recall that their God was both the God of all creation and the God Who had redeemed them from slavery for His special possession.

In addition, we have also seen that *this whole covenant law was a new revelation* not previously known or shown to the patriarchal fathers, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. **Deuteronomy 5: 3** specifically teaches that, **The LORD did not make this covenant with our fathers.** So the sign of the sabbath was given specifically to Israel to indicate her special relationship with God.

² For a fuller explanation see Meredith G. Kline, *Treaty of the Great King*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, MI, 1963, pp 13-19.

³ Dale Ratzlaff, *Sabbath in Christ, Op. Cit.* p42 I freely acknowledge my indebtedness to this author for this section.

Let us firmly fix this truth in our hearts and minds then: The sabbath observances were given to Israel as being the special sign for her being God's covenant nation. Rabbi Joseph Telushkin fairly represents Jewish consensus on this point when he says, [the Sabbath's importance is suggested by it being the only ritual law in the Ten Commandments.](#) ⁴

Thus, sabbath keeping was never universally mandated for all mankind. It was uniquely given to Israel! And it was placed in the very centre of the Ten Commandments, as [the only ritual law in the Ten Commandments!](#)

THE DOCUMENTS OF THE COVENANT

If we are ever to understand the covenant made at Sinai, we must know what documents tied it all together. When we read the following verses, note the interplay between the words **testament**, **tablets**, **commandments** and **covenant**. Don't skip over this!

And when He had finished speaking with him upon Mount Sinai, He gave Moses the two **tablets of the testimony**, the tablets of stone, written by the finger of God ... And he wrote on **the tablets the words of the covenant, the Ten Commandments** ... So He declared to you **His covenant** which he commanded you to perform, **that is, The Ten Commandments**; and He wrote them on **two tablets of stone** ... when I went up to the mountain to receive **the tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant** which the LORD had made with you ... And it came about ... that the LORD gave me **the two tablets of stone, the tablets of the covenant** ... So I turned and came down from the mountain while the mountain was burning with fire, and **the two tablets of the covenant** were in my two hands ... (Ex. 31:18; 34:28; Deut. 4:13; 9:9,11, 15).

It is absolutely critical to see that **the covenant made at Mt Sinai was the Ten Commandments**:- Observe that **the tablets [of stone] are the words of the covenant**. Another way of saying this is that, the Ten Commandments are the terms [words] of the Sinaitic Covenant as dictated by Israel's Suzerain, God Himself!

THE ARK OF THE TESTIMONY INSIDE THE TABERNACLE

You will recall that, later on, Moses took these **tablets of the testimony** and placed them inside **ark of the testimony**,

Then I turned and came down from the mountain, and put the **tablets in the ark** which I had made ... At that time the LORD set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the **ark of the covenant** of the LORD.(Deut. 10:5, 8).

So, the ark (or the box/chest) containing the Ten Commandments, was called **the ark of the covenant**. And remember, in the very centre of those commandments of the covenant, was **the ritual sign of that covenant** --- sabbath observance by Israel. Repeat: We will never understand the place the Fourth commandment to keep the sign of the sabbath day held, if we fail to see that **the Ten Commandments are the words of the covenant**.

However, whilst the Ten Commandments were the core testimony of the Sinaitic Covenant, they were *not the only* covenant documents. The Covenant needed to be applied to the nitty-gritty of Israel's daily life. How were the various societal, ceremonial and moral applications of the covenant to be lived out?

Enter the additional applications of the law of the covenant, which we read from the book of Exodus through to Deuteronomy. These are called, "the book of the law", or the Torah. (Torah means instruction or teaching.) This expanded version of the Ten Commandments is called "Deuteronomy", which literally means, the "Second Law". But we must not make the mistake of thinking Deuteronomy's regulations and laws are separate from the Covenant, for there really was only one Law. The stone tablets of testimony and the written "book of the law" belonged to the one moral and ceremonial law of the covenant which bound Israel to God.

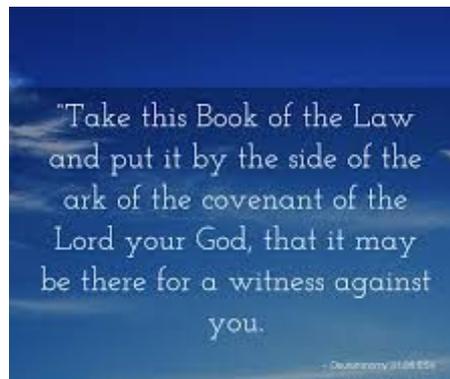
⁴ *Biblical Literacy*, p 429

To keep this idea very simple, we just need to remember that the Ten Commandments were placed inside the Ark of the Covenant, and the Deuteronomic “book of the covenant” with its additional 613 expanded laws was placed by the side of the Ark. ⁵

It was standard Ancient Near Eastern practice to place treaty documents in the sanctuary of the vassal, and to place a duplicate copy of the terms in the sanctuary of the ruling suzerain.



The Ark of the Covenant contained “the words of the covenant” written on stone --- we know these as the Ten Commandments. *The sign* of this covenant is the Sabbath. So the sons of Israel shall observe **the sabbath, to celebrate the sabbath** throughout their generations **as a perpetual covenant**. It is **a sign** between Me and the sons of Israel forever ... (Ex. 31: 16-17)



Deuteronomy, or the “Second Law”, was “the book of the covenant”, and placed **beside** the Ark in order to explain how to apply the covenant in daily matters.

Both documents comprised one Law for Israel.

Deuteronomy 31: 26

For Israel, keeping the sabbath day holy was **the central sign** to indicate they were keeping up their end of their covenant with God! To play fast and loose with the sabbath observance was in effect to break the seal and the sign of the whole Sinaitic covenant.

THE OLD COVENANT FOUNDED IN GOD'S REDEEMING LOVE AND GRACE!

That said, we are sadly mistaken if we go on to think that the covenant Israel entered into at Sinai was a harsh, legalistic agreement based on a grim response of obedience to God's requirements. In fact, the ethic of the Decalogue (the “Ten Commandments”) is the response of Israel's gratitude to God's gift of freedom. When God introduced the ‘Ten Words’ to Israel He said;

“I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of Egypt, out of the house of slavery ...” (Ex. 20: 2). And, When your sons ask you in time to come, saying, ‘What do the testimonies and the statutes and the judgments mean which the LORD commanded you?’ Then you shall say to your son, ‘We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt; the LORD brought us from Egypt with a mighty hand.’ (Deut. 6: 20-21).

Thus the backdrop to the Sinaitic covenant is the exodus from Egypt and slavery. God brought Israel out of Egypt by mighty works and a “strong arm”. His love and faithfulness to the Abrahamic covenant form the basis of Sinai's agreement. Israel's worship was supposed to be a spontaneously joyful remembrance and celebration of God's redeeming love;

I will sing to the LORD, for He is highly exalted; the horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea. The LORD is my strength and song, and He has become my Salvation; He is my God and I will praise Him; my father's God and I will extol Him (Ex. 15: 1-2). Israel's joy was in knowing that the God of their redemption was the God of all creation (eg. Ps. 95: 1-5).

⁵ It was the rabbis who had counted and calculated this number of 613 commandments..

Thus the Decalogue is given to explain the dimensions of a grace already received, to explain the significance for personal living of the great redemption from slavery given ... So, biblical law comes in a framework of grace ... The concept of gospel precedes the law, then law follows the gospel as the guide for covenant conduct. The Decalogue is addressed to those who have just become a kingdom of God society by a great redemption. The commandments then set forth the basic understanding of how life is to be lived to bring blessing and covenant continuation. ⁶

In other words, the Ten Commandments showed what was to constitute ongoing and thankful fellowship with God within the bounds of the Sinaitic covenant --- keep this Law and you will be righteous before God! And,

Though framed negatively, the commandments have a striking positive protective social function to preserve the blessings of freedom granted by redemption and liberation from Egypt. Liberation is of no advantage unless consolidated into social structures that maintain its objectives for the whole community. ⁷

The significance of the book of the law --- Deuteronomy --- was to put a system of instruction in place for future generations. When a child comes later to ask a parent what is the significance and relevance of the Ten Commandments, the parent is to answer that the covenant at Sinai expresses Israel's transition from slavery to freedom, from bondage in Egypt to their life in the land God had sworn to their patriarchs. The commandments were intended to express that true freedom is to be found in perfect service to the God who had redeemed them. ⁸

In other words, the point being constantly made in Deuteronomy is that,

The law has significance only within the framework of a relationship already established by covenant ... Torah is covenantal law, the divinely authorized social order of Israel attesting its election. ⁹ (Why not read that quote again? It's worth digesting!)

THE TABERNACLE

As we have noted, Moses placed the words of the covenant inside the ark of the covenant, which was then placed inside the tabernacle --- the tent of meeting. The tabernacle anticipated God as King in His Temple in Jerusalem. He is surrounded by the tribes of Israel. The tabernacle with its outer court for the people, the inner court for the priests, and finally the holy of holies containing the covenant terms in the Ark of the Covenant, all pictured God reigning in the midst of His kingdom people for their blessing and His glory.

Thus, the worship of the assembly before their heavenly King expressed the protocol by which Israel was to enter and enjoy the Royal Presence,

The tabernacle was to facilitate what should be done on the Sabbath day as a reminder of God's completion of creation and the human dominion thereafter to be exercised under the sovereignty of God. Worship in Israel was thus a political activity as well as recognition of the entire submission of human creation to the Giver of all things ... Israel's movement from slavery to worship, the book of Exodus offers to Israel and their world a tapestry of the great redemption which was Israel's and which they were to offer to the world. ¹⁰

Thus, tabernacle and sabbath were inseparably linked as pointing to God's reign and redemption-rest for Israel. Few of us today fully appreciate how much we owe to Israel keeping the Sabbath as the sign of their covenant with God. How grateful we should be that the Jews kept Sabbath as a testimony to the one and only true God of Creation. It was their tenacity in keeping this covenantal sign, that preserved Biblical monotheism. As has been said, **it is not so much that Israel kept the Sabbath, but that the Sabbath kept Israel!**

Certainly foreigners and Gentiles were welcome to become a part of the covenant community --- provided they entered via circumcision and perpetually kept the weekly sabbath as well as the other seasonal sabbaths and

⁶ William Dumbrell, *Covenant and Creation: An Old Testament Covenant Theology*, Paternoster, UK, 2013, p164

⁷ *Ibid* p 172

⁸ See for instance **Deuteronomy 6: 20-25**.

⁹ *Op Cit.*, p 156.

¹⁰ Dumbrell, *Ibid.* p137

convocations, and obeyed the moral and ceremonial precepts of the Torah. Anyone in Israel who intentionally broke this law was put to death. There is no escaping this: the Sinaitic Covenant was a minutely detailed law covenant.

Oh, if only Jews had kept **all these statutes** it would have been **righteousness for Israel (Deut. 6: 24-25)!** This blessed state was fully intended to be **perpetual, forever, everlasting and throughout your generations (Numbers 18:19; Ex. 30:8; Lev. 3:17, etc.)**. The sad truth of Israel's history however, is their failure to enter God's rest as occupants of the Promised Land.

Israel's failure to keep the Sinaitic covenant is the basic failure of the Old Testament.

It was not until Israel had regularly broken the terms of the Sinaitic covenant and went into captivity that we get mention of a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31). The prophet said that Israel's failure anticipates a **better covenant based on better promises (Heb. 8:6)**. And the new covenant means this first covenant has become **obsolete, old and disappears (Hebrews 8:13)**.

LASTLY

I am painfully aware that we have only partially answered the question we posed at the end of our second study: Was the Fourth commandment to keep the Sabbath holy, a part of God's *moral law* for all time, or was it only *ceremonial and ritual law*?

We will specifically turn our minds to this weighty question in the next installment ... I promise!

What we have learned in the meantime is that the Sabbath was specifically revealed to Israel at Mt Sinai for the first time.

We have learned that the covenant made with Israel was a response to the redeeming love and power of God and was to be Israel's witness to herself and the world that the God of creation and redemption is the one true and living God.

We have learned that the sign of the Sinaitic covenant is that Israel keep the Sabbath, and all the other convocations tied with it in the Torah, as the sign of her covenant obligations before God.

We have learned that Israel's subsequent failure to keep the terms of the covenant meant that God did not give up on working towards the redemption of Israel and the world. The Sinaitic covenant is to be replaced by a better covenant, and to this we will turn in our next instalment.

But the big question to be yet answered, is this: Is the Sabbath mandated in the New Testament?

(To be continued ...)