



Moses: A Covenant with a Nation

More than 3,000 years ago, the fledging nation of Israel stood at the foot of Mount Sinai, also known as Horeb, in the middle of the desert. Lighting flashed, thunder boomed, and God descended onto the mountain in a great ball of fire.

In an event that would forever change humanity, God spoke to the nation, giving them the Ten Commandments and the *Torah*, the first five books of the Bible. God charged the Israelites with transmitting His Word to the world, a covenant with Israel that exists to this day. That covenant, instituted under Moses, is known as the Mosaic Covenant.

For the first time in history, all humankind was given God's requirements for holy living. The Law revealed God's righteousness and holiness (Exodus 19:23), and established His standard of righteousness for His people (Deuteronomy 7:6; Isaiah 62:12).

Before God revealed His Word, the world was a different place. Paganism was the dominant theology, pitting one god against another, one nation against another, and one man against another.

When God gave His *Torah* to the nation of Israel, that changed. There was now an objective source, the one true God, Who dictated right and wrong, good and evil, and Who gave instructions on how to live a life of purpose and meaning. These laws for living were entrusted to Israel so that they might share them with the world.

This moment of revelation, thousands of years ago, reverberates in our society today. As we study the Mosaic Covenant, it is my hope and prayer that the ideas and teachings found in the Law of Moses continue to shape society and bring blessings to us all.



Photo: Jean-Léon Gérôme, 1893-1900

“The LORD our God made a covenant with us at Horeb.”

— DEUTERONOMY 5:2



A Chosen People

More than likely, you have heard the term the “chosen people” in reference to the Jewish people. But are the Jews, in fact, the chosen people? And, if so, why? For what purpose? The truth is that the people of Israel were chosen for one purpose only — to uphold and share the Word of God as revealed to them on Mount Sinai.

It was at Mount Sinai that the Israelites entered into a covenant with God, a partnership known as the “Mosaic Covenant,” a divine agreement established through the greatest Jewish leader of all time, Moses.

The simplest explanation for why the children of Israel were chosen is because God promised their forefathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, that their descendants were destined to become the chosen nation. In this way, the Mosaic Covenant is really a culmination of the Abrahamic Covenant, the fulfillment of God’s promises made to Abraham.

This new covenant revolutionized the world, and continues to greatly influence our world today. It was that covenant that brought us the Ten Commandments, the Law, and along with it, the Judeo-Christian values that have shaped our society.

Like their forefather Abraham, the Israelites are also credited with “choosing God” just as much as they were chosen by God. To start with, according to Jewish tradition, only a fraction of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt actually left to follow Moses into the wilderness. Many lacked the faith to leave behind everything they knew to follow God into the desert and the unknown. Those who did leave Egypt were a self-selecting group, ready and willing to follow the God of their forefathers with complete faith.

Jewish oral tradition teaches that God offered the *Torah*, the Bible, to other nations as well so that they could not complain that God only offered the Bible to the Israelites. As the teaching goes, each nation in turn asked what was inside God’s Bible, and then rejected it for one reason or another.

The Israelites declared that they would do whatever God asked of them even if they did not understand His ways. Above all, they would obey, and only then would they seek meaning and understanding of God and His laws.

Today the Jewish people continue to uphold their national mission. As “the People of the Book,” the Jewish people live by the Bible and share the wisdom of the Bible. And while the relationship between God and the Jews has certainly had its ups and downs, the covenant remains unbreakable and the unique bond continues to be unshakable.



“Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.”

— EXODUS 19:5-6

A Match Made in Heaven

More than 3,000 years ago, on the sixth day of the Hebrew month of *Sivan*, three million Israelites stood at the foot of Mount Sinai in excited anticipation. In an event unprecedented in history, God revealed Himself to them and entered into a sacred covenant with them. “Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’” This was the precise moment in time when Israel became God’s “treasured possession” (Exodus 19:5) and “holy nation” (Exodus 19:6).

The Sinai experience is often compared to a marriage. God as the groom entered into a sacred relationship with Israel, the bride. The *ketubah*, the marital contract, was represented by the Ten Commandments, appropriately referred to as “the tablets of the covenant law” (Exodus 25:16).

The idea of Israel being God’s bride is echoed in the words of the prophets. In Jeremiah 2:2, we read, “This is what the LORD says: ‘I remember the devotion of your youth, how as a bride you loved me and followed me through the wilderness, through a land not sown.’” God refers to Israel as His bride during the time spent in the desert, as the nation of Israel began its journey together with God. Certainly, we see this imagery expressed in the Christian Bible as well, with the church being described as the bride in the book of Revelation (Revelation 19:7; 21:9).

However, at times when Israel strayed from God, Israel was compared to an unfaithful wife, as we read in Jeremiah 3:20, “‘But like a woman unfaithful to her husband, so you, Israel, have been unfaithful to me,’ declares the LORD.” Yet, while the “marriage” between God and His people could be strained, it could never be broken.

However, the words “commandments” or “laws” are poor translations of the word *mitzvot*. In Judaism, the *mitzvot* are 613 ways to connect with God. Each ordinance is a prescription for closeness with the Lord. The *Torah*, related to the word *horaah*, which means “teaching” or “instructions,” is a book of instructions for living a godly life.

Through this partnership, Israel would serve as a “light unto the nations.” As God spoke through the prophet Isaiah, “I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles” (42:6). Likewise, in the Christian Bible, Jesus taught his followers, “In the same way, let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16).

If the nation of Israel is indeed the “chosen” nation, then they were chosen to serve, to point the nations of the world on their journey toward God. Ultimately, God desires an intimate relationship with all humanity. Through His relationship with one nation, His glory will spread to all nations. Through the Mosaic Covenant with Israel, the sacred partnership with the nation of Israel, God would achieve His ultimate purpose for the entire world.



Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, “This is the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

— EXODUS 24:8

An Everlasting Sign

After God established a covenant with Noah, He gave him an eternal *oht*, a “sign,” the rainbow. With God’s covenant with Abraham there was an eternal *oht* as well, the sign of circumcision. Yet, when we read the account of God establishing His covenant with the nation of Israel in Exodus 19–20, we do not see any mention of an *oht* associated with the Mosaic Covenant... or so it seems.

The fourth commandment reads, “Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the LORD your God. On it you shall not do any work...For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy” (Exodus 20:8-11). In Exodus 31, we come across the commandment to observe the Sabbath, again; however, the language is significantly different. Scripture reads: “Say to the Israelites, ‘You must observe my Sabbaths. This will be a sign between me and you for the generations to come, so you may know that I am the LORD, who makes you holy’” (Exodus 31:13). This verse makes it clear that the Sabbath serves as the eternal *oht* reminding us that God made Israel holy.

When did God make Israel holy? At Mount Sinai when He established the Mosaic Covenant, as we read in Exodus 19:5-6, “Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession . . . you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” In Ezekiel 20:12, the prophet echoes this: “Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.”

The Sabbath is a sign of the sacred relationship between God and Israel. In the closing words of Isaiah, the prophet wrote that the Sabbath endures, as does God’s relationship with His people: “‘As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me,’ declares the LORD, ‘so will your name and descendants endure. From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me’” (66:22-23). In the Christian Bible, we read in the book of Hebrews, “There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God’s rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his” (4:9-10).

But why the Sabbath? Out of all of God’s precepts, why was the Sabbath chosen as the sign?

The Sabbath is often the defining element of the relationship a Jew has with God. Moreover, Jewish tradition teaches that observance of the Sabbath is equivalent to the observance of all of God’s commandments.

These two concepts—that God created the world and that He is intimately involved in the world—are the foundation of the Jewish faith. As long as Jews cling to the Sabbath, they reaffirm these two basic ideals, and thus retain their identity and the core of the mission of Israel—to live these truths and share them.

As the sign of the Mosaic Covenant, the Sabbath reminds Israel of the sacred relationship with God and the obligations that come with being a holy nation charged with a divine mission. And when Israel keeps the Sabbath, it “reminds” God that we are still committed to that mission, that we join with our ancestors at the foot of Mount Sinai, in declaring, “We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey” (Exodus 24:7).



“Also I gave them my Sabbaths as a sign between us, so they would know that I the LORD made them holy.”

— EZEKIEL 20:12

Think About It

1. **The impact of God’s Word, the Bible, can be seen in so many places.** For example, Moses as lawgiver is depicted in one of two marble friezes in the U.S. Supreme Court. Where do you see evidence of its influence on Western governments, public institutions, and society in general?
2. **The Bible is “ownerless” and belongs to everyone, but that doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t take “ownership” of it.** How do you make it your own and incorporate it passionately into your life?
3. **The nation of Israel was chosen to uphold and share the Word of God at the foot of Mount Sinai.** How might you share God’s Word and serve as a reflection of biblical values?
4. **God’s relationship with Israel is often described as a marriage.** In what ways do you see your relationship with God as a marriage? Like a marriage, what might you need to work on to keep that relationship fresh?
5. **The Jewish people are frequently referred to as “people of The Book.”** How would you describe yourself in your relationship with God’s Word? What might you do to be considered a person of “The Book”?



Apply It

1. **Choose God.** The Israelites, like Abraham before them, chose God as much as God chose them. Every day, make the decision to choose God as your Guide and King. (Joshua 24:15; Matthew 6:24)
2. **Study God's Word.** One of God’s greatest gifts to humanity is the Bible. It is our instruction manual for living. Study it, cherish it, and live it. (Deuteronomy 8:3; 2 Timothy 3:16-17)
3. **Mark the Sabbath.** Taking one day, or one hour, a week to remember that God is the Creator and Sustainer of our world is an extremely effective way to refresh our relationship with God on a consistent basis. (Isaiah 56:2; Hebrews 4:9-10)
4. **Surrender.** Just as the Israelites were willing to accept God’s Word unconditionally, so must we be willing to accept God’s will for our lives unconditionally. Trust and surrender to God. (Exodus 24:7; Luke 11:28)
5. **Be a “Light to the Nations”.** As representatives of God and the Bible, we must be especially mindful of our words and actions. How people see us will influence how they see all people of God. (Isaiah 42:6; Matthew 5:14-16)

