

What Do You Mean, “the Law of Moses”?

Just what is meant by the expression, “the law of Moses”? Is that a law that Moses brought or originated? Is that just the sacrificial, ceremonial part of God’s Law given to ancient Israel? Why was Ezra called a “scribe of the law of Moses”?

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There is much misunderstanding regarding the term “the law of Moses” as it is used in the Bible, leading to a great deal of confusion, ignorance, incorrect and false teaching, and potentially loss of salvation for those deceived on this fundamental, pivotal issue. It’s time we get this straight, and understand it once and for all!

In the first five books of the Bible, called the Torah, the expression “law of Moses” is never used. These five books were compiled and written by Moses, the great teacher of Israel. But the laws announced in these books were not called “the law of Moses” at all. They were all called “the law of God”!

The first time the word “law” is used, it refers to all Israel and the foreigners dwelling among them. God said, “One law shall be for the native born and for the stranger who dwells among you” (Exo.12:49). In the next instance, God says to Moses concerning the feast of unleavened bread, “it shall be as a sign to you . . . that the Lord’s law may be in your mouth. . . You shall therefore keep this ordinance in its season from year to year” (Exo.13:9-10).

The Book of Exodus

In the book of Exodus, where the law of God is first mentioned, it involves the weekly Sabbath day. God says to Moses that He is going to rain down bread from heaven for the people, a certain quota every day, “that I may test them, whether they will walk in my law or not” (Exo.16:4). Some of the people failed the test by going out on the Sabbath day to gather manna, causing God to exclaim, “How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My laws?” (Exo.16:28). Notice! They are called God’s commandments and God’s laws – not Moses’ law!

This is what we find throughout the Pentateuch. The laws God gives Israel – all of them – are called God’s Laws and are never referred to as “Moses’ law”!

God gives His laws to Israel. They are His laws – all of them. They did not originate with Moses. Moses was merely the “go between” – the mediator – but the laws were all given by God Himself. He was the Originator – the Law-giver!

The Words of Deuteronomy

Moses explained this relationship to Israel when he said to them, “Therefore know this day and consider it in your heart, that the LORD Himself is God in heaven above and on the earth beneath; there is no other. You shall therefore keep His statutes and His commandments *which I command you today*, that it may go well with you” (Deut.4:39-40). The law came from God; Moses was merely the messenger who conveyed God’s words and law to Israel.

“So it was when Moses had completed writing the words of the law in a book, when they were finished, that Moses commanded the Levites, who bore the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, ‘Take this Book of the Law, and put it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD, that it may be there as a witness against you; for I know your rebellion and your stiff neck’” (Deut.31:24-27). This was a reference to the book of Deuteronomy, the final book of the law which Moses wrote.

Moses himself wrote, “The LORD came to them from Sinai, and dawned on them from Seir; He shone forth from Mount Paran, and He came with ten thousands of saints; from His right hand came a fiery law for them” (Deut.33:2).

The law came from God. It was all His law. None of it came by the mind of Moses. When then did the law of God begin to be called “the law of Moses”?

The Book of Joshua

The first time the expression “law of Moses” is used in Scripture is in the book of Joshua, written by Moses’ successor, who led Israel into the Promised Land. Joshua built an altar to the Lord, at Mount Ebal, “as Moses the servant of the LORD had commanded the children of Israel, as it is written in the Book of the Law of Moses” (Joshua 8:31). There “he wrote on the stones a copy of the law of Moses, which he had written” (v.32).

Before his death, Joshua commanded all Israel, “Therefore be very courageous to keep and to do all that is written in the Book of the Law of Moses, lest you turn aside from it to the right hand or to the left” (Josh.23:6).

David’s Charge to Solomon

The next time the law of Moses is mentioned as such in Scripture is when king David charged his son Solomon, “And keep the charge of the LORD your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, as it is *written in the law of Moses*, that you may prosper in all that you do and wherever you turn” (I Kings 2:3). Notice! David declared that God’s statutes,

commandments, judgments and testimonies were written “in the *law of Moses*” – so again, it was GOD’s law – but transcribed through Moses.

Technically, Moses was not the Law-giver, God was – but He used Moses as His instrument and intermediary.

In the Days of Josiah

King Josiah of Judah was a righteous king in whose day the priests found a copy of the “Book of the Law in the house of the LORD” (II Kings 22:8). They read it to the king. “Now it happened, when the king heard the words of the Book of the Law, that he tore his clothes” (v.11). This was probably a copy of the book of Deuteronomy, which lists the punishments which would come upon Israel for idolatry and disobedience.

Josiah even banished those who consulted mediums and spiritists, and all the idols and abominations in the land of Judah, “that he might perform the words of the law which were written in the book” found in the house of God. The chronicler says, “Now before him there was no king like him, who turned to the LORD with all his heart, with all his soul,, and with all his might, according to *all the Law of Moses*” (II Kings 23:25).

Ezra the Scribe

Because Israel did turn from God, the disasters prophesied in the Law came upon them. All Judah was led into captivity by king Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon. But after suffering for seventy years, God began to restore them to their homeland, in the days of king Cyrus of Persia. Some fifty years later, in the reign of king Artaxerxes, Ezra came up from Babylon – “and he was a skilled scribe in the law of Moses, which the LORD God of Israel had given” (Ezra 7:6).

A skilled scribe does not mean just a ready writer or excellent penman. It is one who is eminently skillful in expounding the Law. In this sense, the word “scribe” is repeatedly used in the New Testament. The Syriac gives the sense of the word by translating it as “a wise scribe” or “expounder.”

Ezra was a doctor, a rabbi, “learned in the Mosaic Law and in all that related to the civil and ecclesiastical polity and customs of the Hebrew people. Scribes of this description possessed great authority and influence (Matthew 23:25; Mark 12:28” (Jamieson, Fausset and Brown, *Critical, Experimental and Practical Commentary on Ezra 7:6*).

This was an amazing time in Israel and the world. At the end of Ezra chapter six, the rebuilt Temple is finished and put into operation, in 515 B.C. Chapter seven opens with the story of Ezra who returned to Jerusalem in 457 B.C. – some fifty years later.

Much was happening in the world during this time. Between the dedication of the Temple and the journey of Ezra, a number of stirring events occurred on the world scene.

The expeditions of Xerxes into Greece, the battles of Marathon, Thermopylae, and Salamis occurred, with the deeds of Miltiades, and Leonidas and Cimon, which brought such humiliating disasters upon the Persian Empire. After Xerxes' humiliating return from Greece, there was the episode of Esther, the plot of Haman to eradicate the Jews from the Empire, and the deliverance of celebrated by Purim and the exaltation of Mordecai, Esther's uncle, to Prime Minister of Persia.

The Jewish historian Flavius Josephus says of Ezra, "Moreover there was in Babylon a righteous man, and one that enjoyed a great reputation among the multitude; he was the principal priest of the people, and his name was Ezra (Esdras). He was very skillful in the law of Moses, and was well acquainted with king Xerxes" (*Antiquities of the Jews*, 11 5, 1).

Notice that Ezra was skilled in the law of Moses, "which the LORD God of Israel had given" (Ezra 7:6). Ezra had "prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD and do it" (v.10).

"The Law of Moses" Revealed

Did you get that? Here we read plainly that "the law of Moses" was the same Law as the "Law of the LORD" – the whole Law God gave to Israel through Moses! This was not really the "Law of Moses," as if originating from him, but it was GIVEN BY THE GOD OF ISRAEL! Ezra was an expert in the ENTIRE MOSAIC LEGISLATION – the laws, statutes, and judgments of God! Thus "the law of Moses" is not a separate law, but it is part and parcel of *God's* Law – not some secondary law given by Moses, in addition to the laws of GOD!

The account continues, "for Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel" (Ezra 7:10). Thus Ezra became known as "Ezra the priest, the scribe, expert in the words of the commandments of the LORD, and of His statutes to Israel" v.11).

What was Ezra expert in? All the laws of God, also known as "the law of Moses" the man of God, and all the statutes and commandments of the LORD given through Moses to Israel!

Let's understand this!

Unger's Bible Dictionary points out that "the law of Moses" is a term that simply "signifies the whole body of Mosaic legislation (I Kings 2:3; II Kings 23:25; Ezra 3:2); called with reference to its divine origin *the law of Jehovah* (Psalm 19:8; 37:31; Isa.5:24; 39:9). In the latter sense it is called by way of eminence, *the Law* (Heb. *Hatorah*, Deut.1:5; 4:8, 44; 17:18, 19; 27:3, 8). The law is especially embodied in the last four books of the Pentateuch." ("Law of Moses," p.647).

Some think that the “law of Moses” is just that part of the law which was “added because of transgressions.” They think that the New Testament expression “the works of the law” refers to this “added” law of sacrifices, rituals, and offerings – the laws involving the Temple and the Levitical priesthood. Nothing could be further from the truth!

The “law of Moses” IS the “Law of God”!

In I Kings 2:3 David said to his son Solomon, “Keep the charge of the LORD your God: to walk in His ways, to keep His statutes, His commandments, His judgments, and His testimonies, AS IT IS WRITTEN IN THE LAW OF MOSES.” Clearly, the laws of God are all incorporated in THE LAW OF MOSES, as this verse shows!

The “Added” Law

The “law of Moses” was not an “added law.” It was the WHOLE LAW OF GOD! Of course, there was an “added law” – the law of the Temple, rituals, sacrifices and priesthood – but it was merely PART OF THE LAW of Moses!

It was added, the apostle Paul says, “because of transgressions” – because the people disobeyed God’s commandments and statutes (Gal.3:19). It was added till Christ should come, as a guard, guideline, and tutor or teacher (Gal.3:23-25). Now that Christ has come, we no longer need the tutor of the sacrifices, and Temple rituals. They are all fulfilled in Christ.

Paul speaks of this added law when he writes of the Temple service, “the priests always went into the first part of the tabernacle, performing the services. But into the second part the high priest went alone once a year, not without blood, which he offered for himself and for the people’s sins committed in ignorance; the Holy Spirit indicating this, that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing. It was symbolic for the present time in which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience—concerned only with food and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances imposed on them *until the time of reformation*” (Heb.9:6-10).

The sacrificial, ritualistic part of the law of Moses is not obligatory upon Christians. However, do not make the mistake that the sacrificial law was the “law of Moses” and not the law of God – it was ALL the Law of God, which He imposed on Israel according to His own will and purpose.

The expression “the law of Moses” then refers to ALL GOD’S LAW revealed in the Scriptures that came through Moses – through the five books of the Torah – Genesis through Deuteronomy. This includes the moral law, the civil law, the Ten Commandments, the judgments, statutes, holy days, law of clean and unclean meats and the whole corpus of law revealed and explained in the first five books of Moses.

Christians and the “Law of Moses”

The Law of Moses, then, is completely relevant for Christians, today. All the statutes, judgments, penalties for disobedience, and violation of the law, are IN FORCE and OPERATING in the cosmos, today, for they are ETERNAL PRINCIPLES of righteous conduct.

In the book of Nehemiah we read that the people told Ezra the scribe to bring “the book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding . . . Then he read from it . . . from morning until midday, before the men and women and those who could understand; and the ears of all the people were attentive to the Book of the Law” (Nehemiah 8:1-3).

“The Levites helped the people to understand the law . . . So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading” (verses 7-8).

“And they stood up in their place and read from the Book of the Law of the LORD their God for one fourth of the day; and for another fourth they confessed and worshipped the LORD their God” (Nehemiah 9:3).

It is a very dangerous thing to suppose that the Law of Moses – including the punishments and curses for disobedience and rebellion – are not relevant or operative, today. It would be a mistake of the greatest magnitude! Disaster came upon ancient Israel and Judah because they forsook and violated the “Law of Moses.” Daniel the prophet declared, “As it is written in the Law of Moses, *all this disaster has come upon us*; yet we have not made our prayer before the LORD our God, that we might TURN FROM OUR INIQUITIES and understand Your truth” (Dan.9:13).

There are SERIOUS PENALTIES for disobedience (see Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28, for example).

Those penalties are just as applicable and relevant today as they ever were! For the Law of God, the Law of Moses, apart from the “added” law of Temple rituals and sacrifices, applies to ALL MANKIND, Jews and Gentiles alike!

David’s Attitude toward the Law

As David wrote, “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul; the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple; the statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes; the fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether” (Psalm 19:7-9).

David also declared, “The works of His hands are verity and justice; all His precepts are sure, THEY STAND FAST FOREVER AND EVER, and are done in truth and uprightness” (Psalm 111:7-8).

May God help us to have the attitude of David toward God’s Law – the Law called “the Law of Moses.”

David said of this Law, “Oh, how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day” (Psalm 119:97).

“Open my eyes that I may see wondrous things from Your law” (119:18). “Indignation has taken hold of me because of the wicked who forsake Your law” (119:53).

“I made haste and did not delay to keep Your commandments” (119:60). “I delight in Your law” (119:70).

“I hate the double-minded, but I love Your law” (119:113).

“Rivers of water run down from my eyes, because men do not keep Your law” (119:136).

“I hate and abhor lying but I love Your law” (119:163).

“Great peace have those who love Your law, and nothing causes them to stumble” (119:165).

God’s Final Warning

God’s final word of warning to us of this end-time age and generation is spelled out by the prophecy of Malachi, in the final book of the Old Testament. God declares to His people:

“Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, with the statutes and judgments.

Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse [that is, marginal reading, with utter destruction]” (Malachi 4:4-6).

Will we get the message? Will we understand it? Will we fear God, and return to His commandments, His Torah, and the Law of Moses?

The stakes are very high. Remember the Law – or face utter destruction!