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‘THAT IT MIGHT LEAD AND DIRECT
MEN UNTO CHRIST’:
JOHN OWEN’S VIEW OF THE MOSAIC COVENANT¹

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INTRODUCTION

In this essay, I will examine John Owen’s (1616-1683) thought on the Mosaic covenant, which is generally understood as a bilateral covenant between God and Israel at the time when Moses was the human leader of the Israelites, thus termed the Mosaic covenant. Sometimes it is called Sinaitic covenant because this covenant was given at Mount Sinai. Owen however calls this covenant the old covenant in contrast to the new or better covenant of Hebrews eight.² This sometimes confuses readers because Owen also uses the same term to refer to the covenant of works.³ Here, however, while the designations Mosaic, Sinaitic, and old covenants may be synonymous, I will employ the former.

In attempting to understand Owen’s view of the Mosaic covenant, readers should humbly realize the presence of a predicament: Owen’s writings are complicated to read and grasp. This is especially true for those who study him without proper knowledge of the historical background in which he penned his volumes. These people often end up with a wrong conclusion about Owen’s view of the Mosaic covenant. Hence, specialists of Owen strongly suggest scrutinizing Owen according to his historical context.⁴ Richard C. Barcellos, in his article ‘John Owen and New Covenant Theology’, states:

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was presented at the 54th Midwest Regional Meeting of the Evangelical Theological Society on March 20, 2009, at the Ashland Theological Seminary, Ashland, Ohio. The quote is taken from John Owen, *The Works of John Owen*, 23 vols (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1991), 22, p. 81. Hereafter, the format Owen, *Works*, 22, p. 81, will be used.

² Owen, *Works*, 22, pp. 49, 61.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

⁴ See Carl R. Trueman, *The Claims of Truth: John Owen’s Trinitarian Theology* (Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1998), pp. 1-44.

OWENS VIEW OF THE MOSAIC COVENANT

It must also be recognized that some things [Owen] said are difficult to understand. Some statements may even appear to contradict other statements if he is not followed carefully and understood in light of his comprehensive thought and the Reformation and Post-Reformation Protestant Scholastic world in which he wrote.

If one reads some of the difficult sections of Owen's writings, either without understanding his comprehensive thought and in light of the theological world in which he wrote, or in a superficial manner, some statements can easily be taken to mean things they do not. When this is done, the result is that authors are misunderstood and sometimes, subsequent theological movements are aligned with major historical figures without substantial and objective warrant.⁵

Then Barcellos cites John Reisinger as an example of one who has misinterpreted Owen's understanding of the old (i.e., Mosaic) covenant. Reisinger is an advocate of the new covenant theology and believes that Owen also held this same view, and this equation Barcellos sets out to disprove in his article. Indeed, many writers have misconstrued Owen's covenant theology. Mostly the misapprehension arises from the question whether Owen's Mosaic covenant falls under the covenant of works or under the covenant of grace, and in what respect Owen understands the Mosaic covenant in relation to the covenant of works and grace.

AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PURITAN UNDERSTANDING OF THE MOSAIC COVENANT

Before I present Owen's thought concerning the relationship of the Mosaic covenant to the covenants of works and grace, I will first briefly take an historical look at various views about this issue. As we shall see later, Puritans were divided on this matter. Listen to Edmund Calamy (1600-1666), a Puritan divine and active member of the Westminster Assembly, who wrote a book on the subject of covenants in which he dialogued with other Puritans:

There be severall opinions about the Covenant of Works, and the Covenant of grace, to the great disturbance of many Christians; some hold that there be foure Covenants, two of Works, and two of Grace; the two first, one with *Adam* before the fall, and the other with *Israel* at their returne out of *Ægypt*, and the Covenants of Grace the first to *Abraham*, and the other at the Incar-

⁵ Richard C. Barcellos, 'John Owen and New Covenant Theology: Owen on the Old and New Covenants and the Functions of the Decalogue in Redemptive History in Historical and Contemporary Perspective', in *Covenant Theology From Adam to Christ*, ed. by Roland D. Miller, et al. (Palmdale, CA: Reformed Baptist Academic Press, 2005), p. 1.

nation of Jesus Christ; this M. *Sympson* affirmed before a Committee of the Assembly of Divines in my hearing. 2. Others hold that there is but three Covenants; the first with *Adam*, the second with *Israel* at their going out of *Ægypt*, and a third with Jesus Christ, the two first of Workes, and the last of Grace, and this M. *Burroughes* delivered in his Exposition Sermon in *Cornhill* in my hearing. 3. Others hold that there is but two Covenants, the one of Works, and the other of Grace; yet the first they hold was made with *Israel* at *Mount Sinai*, and no Covenant of workes before that, and now it is vanished away, and the other a Covenant of grace yet not made till the death of Christ the testator, and this is affirmed by *James Pope*, in a Book entituled, *the unveiling of Antichrist* [1646]. 4. Others hold that the Law at *Mount Sinai* was a Covenant of grace, implying that there is more then one Covenant of grace, and this is affirmed by Mr. *Anthony Burgess* in his Vindication of the Morall Law the 24. Lecture, text the 4. of *Deuteronomy*. 5. Others with my selfe hold that there is but two Covenants, the one a Covenant of Workes, and the tree of life, was a Sacrament or signe and token of it, this was made with *Adam* before his fall... But then there was a Covenant of grace which God the Father made with Jesus Christ from all eternity to save some of the posterity of *Adam*....⁶

Calamy's statement suggests that there are at least three views among the Puritans about the Mosaic covenant relating to the covenant of works and the covenant of grace. The first view is that the Mosaic covenant belongs to the covenant of works. Observe what he says in the quote: 'some hold that there be foure Covenants, two of Works, and two of Grace; the two first, one with *Adam* before the fall, and the other with *Israel* at their returne out of *Ægypt*.' Here he is telling his readers that those Puritans who believed that there were four covenants incorporated the Mosaic covenant to the covenant of works. This is also his appeal in his second and third points. Puritans who held to this first view were Symson (also spelled as Simpson),⁷ Jeremiah Burroughs (c. 1600-1646), and James Pope (b. 1621?). The second view that we find in Calamy's observation is that the Mosaic covenant is simply a covenant of grace. Notice what he mentions in his fourth point: 'Others hold that the Law at *Mount Sinai* was a Covenant of grace', which according to him was Anthony Burgess's (d. 1664) position. The third view is that of Calamy himself (in his fifth point) who argued that there are only two covenants, works and grace, and believed that the Mosaic covenant did not belong to either the covenant of works or to the covenant of grace. He said, 'Some object and say the Law at *Mount Sinai* was a covenant of grace, and others say it was a covenant of works, but I

⁶ Edmund Calamy, *Two Solemne Covenants Made between God and Man* (London: Printed for Thomas Banks, 1647), pp. 1-2 (italics his).

⁷ Probably Calamy has in mind Sidrach Simpson (c. 1600-1655), a regular participant of the Westminster Assembly's meetings.

shall prove that it was neither.⁸ To him the Mosaic covenant was 'only given to those that were in covenant as a rule of obedience'.⁹ By this he means that the Sinaitic law was given to the Israelites who were already in God's covenant, and was given to them as a rule of obedience. He explains it this way:

Thus they were in covenant before the rule of obedience was given, for the Law is not of faith, but the man that doth them shall live in them, *Gal. 3:12*. that is, he that obeyeth that rule being in the new covenant by faith in Christ shall live, yet not for his doing but for his believing, *Rev. 5:1, 2; Gal. 3:26*. it was given as a glasse to see their sin, *James 1:23, 24, 25*. by the Law is the knowledge of sin, see *Rom. 3:20; 7:7*. it was given them as a schoolmaster to drive them to Christ, *Gal. 3:24*. as the pursuer of blood drove the murderer to the City of refuge, *Joshua 20:3*. then the Law at *Sinai* cannot be a covenant of grace.¹⁰

What I want to point out here is that the Puritans were not united in their understanding of the Mosaic covenant. We have seen three different positions so far: (1) the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works; (2) the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of grace; and (3) the Mosaic covenant as neither a covenant of works, nor a covenant of grace. This I call a 'neither-nor position'. Ferguson calls this third view a 'mediating position', which according to him is what Owen adopted.¹¹ To quote Sinclair Ferguson: 'In company with a number of others, he [Owen] adopted a third, mediating position.'¹² Ferguson's statement suggests that there were other Puritans who adopted the same position that Owen did. But the problem in this statement is that it assumes that these 'other Puritans' had exactly the same view as Owen, which may not be precisely true.¹³ It appears that not all Puritans who held the mediating position had exactly the same perception concerning the Mosaic covenant. There were diversities of opinions even among those who favoured the mediating position. Thus, this mediating position should be further classified. Ernest F. Kevan comments: 'It

⁸ Calamy, *Two Solemne Covenants Made between God and Man*, p. 8 (italics his).

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1987), p. 28.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ferguson gives one Puritan example, Samuel Bolton (1606-1654), who had the same basic view as Owen. But strictly speaking, the two differ in their understanding of the covenant of grace and its relationship to the Mosaic covenant (see footnotes 20 and 27, below). Nevertheless, Ferguson's statement would have been stronger if he had given more than one example.

is not possible to make an accurate classification of the Puritans on the basis of their views about the Mosaic Covenant, because many of them held several of the different views in varying combinations.¹⁴ In fact, in the writings of Anthony Burgess, there seems to be another view, that is, the Mosaic covenant is a ‘mixt covenant of works and grace’, which for Burgess, ‘is hardly to be understood as possible, much lesse as true.’¹⁵ But this mixed view¹⁶ may simply be another way of stating the ‘neither-nor position’ because even those who said that the Mosaic covenant was neither a covenant of works, nor a covenant of grace, found elements of truth from both the covenants of works and grace in the Mosaic covenant. In this sense, the Mosaic covenant is a mixed covenant of both works and grace.

I will not go further in elaborating the different views held by the Puritans, but rather address my main concern in this paper—how did Owen understand the Mosaic covenant in relationship to the covenants of work and grace?

AN EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF OWEN’S MAJOR WRITING ON THE MOSAIC COVENANT

There is no better way to determine Owen’s thought on the Mosaic covenant than to peruse his writings themselves. Such a task requires great diligence, considering that Owen’s writings are voluminous. However, since this essay is intended to be brief, I will focus on Owen’s exposition of the epistle of Hebrews, particularly his exposition of Hebrews eight where he extensively elucidates the Mosaic covenant.

Owen is convinced that the old covenant, which the author of Hebrews had in mind, refers to the Mosaic covenant: ‘The other covenant or testament here [i.e., in Hebrews 8:6] supposed, whereunto that whereof the Lord Jesus Christ was the mediator is preferred, is none other but that which God made with the people of Israel on mount Sinai.’¹⁷ Previously, he has mentioned that this other covenant cannot be the covenant of

¹⁴ Ernest F. Kevan, *The Grace of Law: A Study in Puritan Theology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1965), p. 113.

¹⁵ Cited in *ibid.*, 113.

¹⁶ Samuel Bolton also mentions the mixed view: ‘For the clearing of these difficulties, let it be said that divines have distinguished between various kinds of covenants. Some of them have set down these three: a covenant of nature [i.e., works], a covenant of grace, a mixed kind of covenant consisting of nature and grace.’ Samuel Bolton, *The True Bonds of Christian Freedom* (1645; reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 2001), p. 89.

¹⁷ Owen, *Works*, 22, p. 63.

works: 'This is the covenant of works, absolutely the old, or first covenant that God made with men. But this is not the covenant here intended [i.e., in Hebrews 8].'¹⁸ And to him, the new or better covenant in Hebrews eight belongs generally to the covenant of grace: 'This [the better covenant] can be no other in general but that which we call '*the covenant of grace*' And it is so called in opposition unto that of 'works,' which was made with us in Adam; for these two, *grace and works*, do divide the ways of our relation unto God, being diametrically opposite, and every way inconsistent.'¹⁹

Here we observe the following: first, Owen calls the covenant at Mount Sinai 'the other covenant or testament'. This may imply that besides the two covenants (works and grace) that he has touched on, there is yet another covenant, the Mosaic covenant. We find also from his writings that he believed in the idea of a covenant of redemption. In reference to the covenant of grace, he asserts: 'it was virtually administered from the foundation of the world, in the way of a promise.'²⁰ This is basically the notion of a covenant of redemption. Thus, Ferguson's analysis that Owen has four covenants (redemption, works, Mosaic covenant, and grace) is right.²¹

Second, this Mosaic covenant cannot be a covenant of works, nor can it be a covenant of grace, since what Owen considers the covenant of grace²² is the better or new covenant. Hence, Owen falls under the 'neither-nor position' category. But this idea should be explained more fully. Third,

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 61.

¹⁹ Ibid. (italics his).

²⁰ Ibid., p. 64.

²¹ Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 22. I am aware that I have not really proven that Owen believes in the covenants of redemption, works and grace. I have intentionally refrained from discussing this matter, since this is not my main purpose in this treatise. For a helpful discussion of this issue, see Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, pp. 22-5; and Carl R. Trueman, *John Owen: Reformed Catholic, Renaissance Man* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 67-98.

²² Owen further regards this better covenant 'not as absolutely the covenant of grace, but as actually established in the death of Christ, with all the worship that belongs unto it' (*Works*, 22, p. 69). Owen then makes a distinction between the covenant of grace and the better or new covenant. He asserts: 'When we speak of the "new covenant," we do not intend *the covenant of grace absolutely*, as though that were not before in being and efficacy, before the introduction of that which is promised in this place' (*Works*, 22, p. 74; italics his). Ferguson explains this: '[Owen] argues for a *distinction* to be made between the covenant of grace and the new covenant, in terms of salvation in Christ as a principle and a promise, and salvation in Christ established in historical redemption' (Ferguson, *John Owen on the Christian Life*, p. 30; italics his).

as I have already mentioned in my introduction, Owen uses the term 'old covenant' for the covenant of works. This is somewhat perplexing, since in other pages he employs that same term for the Mosaic covenant.²³ However, we should not conclude that the Mosaic covenant is the old covenant of works, for Owen is very clear that it is not. How then does he understand the Mosaic covenant?

Owen notes that 'the way of *reconciliation with God*, of justification and salvation, was always one and the same; and that from the giving of the first promise none was ever justified or saved but by the new covenant, and Jesus Christ, the mediator thereof'.²⁴ He adds: 'the writings of the Old Testament, namely, the *Law, Psalms, and Prophets*, do contain and declare the doctrine of justification and salvation by Christ'.²⁵ To Owen then the Mosaic covenant cannot be a covenant of works, simply because in the Mosaic covenant salvation was through the work of the Lord Jesus Christ and not through the work of obedience of man as in the 'do this and live' principle of the covenant of works. The Mosaic covenant was not given for saving purposes. Owen asserts: 'by the covenant of Sinai, as properly so called, separated from its figurative relation unto the covenant of grace, none was ever eternally saved'.²⁶ He further explains: 'This covenant thus made, with these ends and promises, did never save nor condemn any man eternally'.²⁷ In this way, Owen disagrees with other divines who regarded the Mosaic covenant as a covenant of works.

Owen also states that 'the use of all the institutions whereby the old covenant [i.e., Mosaic covenant] was administered was to present and direct [people] unto Jesus Christ, and his mediation'.²⁸ Thus for Owen the Mosaic covenant was given to point sinners to Christ through all its institutions. He goes on to say: 'That this other covenant [i.e., the Mosaic covenant], with all the worship contained in it or required by it, did not divert from, but direct and lead unto, the *future establishment of the promise* in the solemnity of a covenant, by the ways mentioned'.²⁹ To put it this

²³ Owen, *Works*, 22, pp. 49, 64, 70. Owen, however, clarifies in the context of Hebrews 8 that he does not use the term old covenant to mean the covenant of works. He says: 'When we speak of the 'old covenant,' we intend not the *covenant of works made with Adam*, and his whole posterity in him' (*Works*, 22, p. 74; italics his).

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 71 (italics his).

²⁵ *Ibid.*, (italics his).

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 75 (italics his). The 'promise' Owen has in mind is the one 'given unto our first parents immediately after the entrance of sin' (*ibid.*, p. 78).

way, Owen understands the Mosaic covenant as a subservient covenant to the covenant of grace.³⁰ As such, he is with Samuel Bolton, who concludes 'that there was no end or use for which the law was given, but such as was consistent with grace and serviceable to the advancement of the covenant of grace'.³¹

Owen also does not favour the view of other divines that the Mosaic covenant was just a different administration of the covenant of grace. He argues: 'But this [i.e., the Mosaic covenant] was so different from that which is established in the gospel after the coming of Christ, that it hath the appearance and name of another covenant'.³² Then he concludes: 'Wherefore we must grant *two distinct covenants*, rather than a twofold administration of the same covenant merely, to be intended'.³³ Owen therefore sees the Mosaic covenant as a separate covenant, 'made with a particular design, and with respect unto particular ends'.³⁴ This Mosaic covenant is particular³⁵ because it 'was never intended to be of itself the absolute rule and law of life and salvation unto the church'.³⁶ It is another covenant, with a particular design, which is to guide sinners to the new or gospel covenant, as Owen writes: '[it] was given of God for this very end, that it might lead and direct men unto Christ'.³⁷

Concerning the Mosaic covenant's relation to the covenant of works, Owen notes that 'this covenant at Sinai did not abrogate or disannul that covenant [i.e., of works], nor any way fulfil it'.³⁸ However, he believes that the Mosaic covenant 're-enforced, established, and confirmed that covenant [of works]'.³⁹ He explains it in three ways:

³⁰ But one needs to remember that when Owen speaks of the covenant of grace in the context of Hebrews 8, he means not the covenant of grace absolutely, but that which was established in the death of Christ, which he also calls the gospel covenant (*ibid.*, p. 76). In this sense, Owen differs from Bolton, who makes no distinction between the covenant of grace and the new or better covenant in connection to the Mosaic covenant. See footnote 21.

³¹ Bolton, *The True Bonds of Christian Freedom*, p. 109.

³² Owen, *Works*, 22, p. 71.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 76 (italics his).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁵ Owen employs the word 'particular' to mean that the Mosaic covenant was not given as a general rule to the church (*ibid.*, p. 77).

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

1. It revived, declared, and expressed *all the commands of that covenant* [of works] *in the decalogue*; for that is nothing but a divine summary of the law in the heart of man at his creation.
2. It revived the *sanction of the first covenant*, in the curse or sentence of death which it denounced against all transgressors. *Death* was the penalty of the transgression of the first covenant: "In the day that thou eatest, thou shalt die the death." And this sentence was revived and represented anew in the curse wherewith this covenant was ratified, "Curse be he that confirmeth not all the words of this law to do them," Deut. Xxvii. 26; Gal. iii. 10.
3. It revived the promise of that covenant,—*that of eternal life upon perfect obedience*.⁴⁰

Hence, later Owen speaks that in the Mosaic covenant there is a 'revival and representation of the covenant of works, with its sanction and curse,'⁴¹ and that in connection to the covenant of grace, there is a 'direction of the church unto the accomplishment of the promise'.⁴²

CONCLUSION

Owen has a unique understanding of the Mosaic covenant. He calls it old covenant, in contrast to the new or better covenant, and that these two 'differ in their *substance and end*'.⁴³ 'The old covenant was typical, shadowy.... The new covenant is substantial and permanent, as containing the body, which is Christ.'⁴⁴ However, Owen sees a connection between these two covenants, that the old covenant (Mosaic covenant) functions as a subservient covenant to the new covenant, which is the covenant of grace. Yet, one must understand that when Owen speaks of the Mosaic covenant as a serviceable covenant to the covenant of grace, what he means is not the covenant of grace *promised* after the fall, but the covenant of grace *established* in the death of Christ, which he sometimes calls the gospel covenant.⁴⁵ Therefore, to John Owen, the Mosaic covenant is subservient to the gospel covenant; that is, this Mosaic covenant is another covenant whose ultimate end is to guide sinners to the gospel of Christ.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 77-8 (italics his).

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 80.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 96.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ See footnotes 21 and 29, above.