

The Higher and Lesser Laws

John A. Tvedtnes

Joseph Smith provided a wealth of information—particularly in the Joseph Smith Translation of the Bible—on the events that took place at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses, including the following details: (1) God originally intended to make the higher or Melchizedek Priesthood available to all Israel but instead gave a lesser priesthood to the tribe of Levi; (2) this resulted from the unwillingness of the Israelites to accept one of the responsibilities of the higher priesthood, which was to stand in the presence of God; (3) God cursed the Israelites with a carnal law, omitting from the second set of tablets elements of the higher law (including the covenant of priesthood) that had been on the first set of tablets; and (4) the higher law was to be restored through Christ at a later time.

While the Bible gives partial support to the last of these and barely hints at the first, it says nothing about the Israelites' rejection of the higher priesthood and the fact that the two sets of tablets differed in their content. But, as we shall see, some early Jewish and Christian traditions support Joseph Smith's teachings about these matters.

The Lord's Intentions at Sinai

When the Lord spoke to Moses out of the burning bush, he instructed, "When thou hast brought forth the people out of Egypt, ye shall serve God upon this mountain" (Exodus 3:12). This passage suggests that the Lord wanted all Israel to meet him on the mount. But when they arrived at the site, only Moses, Aaron and his two eldest sons, and the seventy elders of Israel were allowed to ascend the mountain, where they ate in the presence of the Lord (Exodus 24:9–11). This change of plans is best understood by examining the biblical text.

Before revealing the Ten Commandments, the Lord told Moses to inform the Israelites: "If ye will obey my voice indeed, and keep my covenant ... ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation" (Exodus 19:5–6). But when he uttered the Ten Commandments, "all the people saw the thunders, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking: and when the people saw it, they removed, and stood afar off. And they said unto Moses, Speak thou with us, and we will hear: but let not God speak with us, lest we die. And Moses said unto the people, Fear not: for God is come to prove you, and that his fear may be before your faces, that ye sin not. And the people stood afar off, and Moses drew near unto the thick darkness where God was" (Exodus 20:18–21; see Deuteronomy 5:23–27).

From this, it seems that the people were unwilling to communicate directly with God and wanted Moses to be their intermediary.¹ By so doing, they rejected the responsibility of being a "kingdom of priests," rejecting the higher priesthood that holds the keys of communing directly with God (D&C 107:18–20). Joseph Smith explained that "God cursed the children of Israel because they would not receive the last law from Moses. ... The Israelites prayed that God would speak to Moses and not to them; in consequence of which he cursed them with a carnal law."² The situation is also described in Doctrine and Covenants 84:19–26:

And this greater priesthood administereth the gospel and holdeth the key of the mysteries of the kingdom, even the key of the knowledge of God. Therefore, in the ordinances thereof, the power of godliness is manifest. And without the ordinances thereof, and the authority of the priesthood, the power of godliness is not manifest unto men in the flesh; For without this no man can see the face of God, even the Father, and live. Now this Moses plainly taught to the children of Israel in the wilderness, and sought diligently to sanctify his people that they might behold the face of God; But they hardened their hearts and could not endure his presence; therefore, the Lord in his wrath, for his anger was kindled against

them, swore that they should not enter into his rest while in the wilderness, which rest is the fulness of his glory. Therefore, he took Moses out of their midst, and the Holy Priesthood also; And the lesser priesthood continued, which priesthood holdeth the key of the ministering of angels and the preparatory gospel.

Some elements of this revelation are also found in the medieval Jewish text known as the *Zohar*.³ This is how *Zohar* Numbers 221a explains why Israel did not receive the great blessings of the law:

When Israel left Egypt, God desired to make them on earth like ministering angels above, and to build for them a holy house which was to be brought down from the heaven of the firmaments, and to plant Israel as a holy shoot after the pattern of the celestial prototype. ... But as they provoked God in the wilderness they died there and God brought their children into the land, and the house was built by human hands, and therefore it did not endure. In the days of Ezra also on account of their sins they were forced to build it themselves and therefore it did not endure. All this time the first building planned by God had not yet been set up. ... It is for this building that we are waiting, not a human structure which cannot endure. ... This work should have been completed when Israel first went forth from Egypt, but it has been deferred to the end of days in the last deliverance.⁴

The Lord's desire to make Israel like the "ministering angels" (also noted in *Zohar* Exodus 114a, which is discussed later in this article) is significant since, in Jewish tradition, the angels serve as priests in God's heavenly temple. As such, the story supports Joseph Smith's teachings on the subject.

Israel's Disobedience Weakened Moses' Power

Rabbinic tradition holds that all Israel heard the first two of the Ten Commandments directly from God but that Moses delivered the other eight.⁵ This is reflected in *Zohar* Numbers 261a–b, which declares that all Israel heard the divine voice uttering these two commandments, but that

Israel were terrified and drew back, and therefore they said: Do thou [Moses] speak to us; we do not desire to be spoken to by the mighty Power from on high, but only from the place of the Female,⁶ not higher. Said Moses to them: Of a truth ye have weakened my power, and also another power. For had not Israel drawn back and had they listened to the remaining words as to the first, the world would never have been laid waste subsequently and they would have endured for generations upon generations. For at the first moment they did die, for so it had to be on account of the tree of death, but after they revived and stood up God desired to bring them up to the Tree of Life,⁷ which is above the tree of death, that they might endure for ever, but they drew back and were not willing; therefore was the power of Moses weakened and another power with him. Said the Holy One, blessed be He: I desired to stablish you in an exalted place that ye might cleave to life, but ye desired the place of the Female.⁸

The weakening of Moses' power by Israel's rejection of the privilege of communing with the Lord is also noted in *Zohar* Exodus 58a, where we read that when Moses met God on the mount, "the Holy One took hold of him and made him sit before Him and taught him the Torah, and spread over him the radiance of that 'pleasantness,' so that his countenance shone in all those firmaments and all the hosts of heaven trembled before him when he descended with the Torah. When the Israelites committed the sin of the Golden Calf below, the Holy One took away from Moses one thousand parts of that splendour."⁹

Like Doctrine and Covenants 84, the *Zohar* notes that when God removed Moses from the midst of Israel, they lost something. *Zohar* Deuteronomy 283b, speaking of the difference between the time of Moses and of Joshua, says, “One is from the higher source and the other from the lower. As long as Moses was alive the orb of the sun was in the ascendant and illumined the world, but as soon as Moses departed the orb of the sun was gathered in and the moon came forth. ... Then the orb of the sun shone forth and Moses became like the orb of the sun to Israel; and when Moses was gathered in the orb of the sun was gathered in and the moon shone and Joshua used the light of the moon. Alas for this degradation!”¹⁰

We read in *Zohar* Exodus 156a–b that “on the death of Moses, the sun in his splendour was darkened and the Written Torah was locked up, that light of the luminous mirror. The Moon withdrew her light when King David died, and the Oral Torah ceased to shine. Since that time the lights of the Torah have remained hidden, and controversy has increased over the Mishnah (i.e. the traditional Law), and the wise men dispute, and all the great thinkers are in confusion, so that to succeeding generations the joy of the Torah has been lost.”¹¹

Israel’s Disobedience Likened to the Fall of Adam

The *Zohar* frequently compares events at Mount Sinai with the fall of Adam and Eve and compares the original law revealed to Moses to the tree of life, making the tree that brought death into the world a lesser law (see the citation from *Zohar* Numbers 261a–b, above). The comparison makes sense when we consider that, at the time of the fall, our first parents were cut off from the presence of God (2 Nephi 9:6; Alma 42:7, 9, 11, 14; Helaman 14:16; D&C 29:41), while at Sinai the Israelites rejected the privilege of standing in God’s presence (D&C 84:19–26). *Zohar* Genesis 36b explains that, because of the fall of Adam and Eve, “the terrestrial world was cursed and dislodged from its estate on account of the defilement of the serpent, until Israel stood before Mount Sinai.”¹² In *Zohar* Genesis 63b Rabbi Jose elucidates that

The world was not properly settled, nor was the earth purged from the defilement of the serpent, until Israel stood before Mount Sinai, where they laid fast hold of the Tree of Life [Torah], and so established the world rmlly. Had not Israel backslided and sinned before the Holy One, blessed be He, they would never have died, since the scum of the serpent had been purged out of them.¹³ But as soon as they sinned, the first tablets of the Law were broken—those tablets which spelt complete freedom, freedom from the serpent who is the “end of all flesh.”¹⁴

The freedom mentioned here and in *Zohar* Exodus 113b–114a (discussed later) is expressed in the prophecy of the new covenant found in Jeremiah 31 (also discussed later). This freedom comes through the atonement of Christ, who liberates us from the death brought by Satan in the Garden of Eden. He brings us back into the presence of God (2 Nephi 2:8–10; Alma 42:23) and makes us kings and priests unto God (Revelation 1:6).

Another passage that compares the fall of Adam to the events in Sinai is found in *Zohar* Genesis 52a:

Until he sinned, man [Adam] was gifted with the wisdom of celestial illumination, and he did not for an instant quit the Tree of Life. But when he was seduced by his desire to know what was below, he weakly followed it until he became separated from the Tree of Life, and knew evil and forsook good. ... Before they sinned, the human pair used to hear a voice from above, and were endowed with the higher wisdom; they stood erect with heavenly radiance, and knew no fear. When they sinned, they were not able to stand up even before an earthly voice. A similar thing happened later with the Israelites. When Israel stood before Mount Sinai, the impurity of the serpent was removed from them, so that carnal passion was suppressed among them, and in consequence they were able to attach themselves to the Tree of Life, and their thoughts were turned to higher things and not to lower. Hence they were vouchsafed heavenly

illuminations and knowledge which filled them with joy and gladness. Further, God girt them with cinctures [belts or aprons] of the letters of the Holy Name, which prevented the serpent from gaining power over them or defiling them as before. When they sinned by worshipping the calf, they were degraded from their high estate and lost their illumination, they were deprived of the protective girdle of the Holy Name and became exposed to the attacks of the evil serpent as before, and so brought death into the world.¹⁵

In the cases of both Adam and Israel, the result of disobedience was that death was introduced into the world. “Assuredly, had Adam held fast to the tree of life, which is nothing else but the Torah [law], he would not have brought death upon himself and upon the rest of the world. ... And had Israel not sinned and forsaken the tree of life they would not have brought death anew into the world” (*Zohar* Genesis 131b).¹⁶ We can compare this with Nephi’s statement that “the wicked are rejected from the righteous, and [rejected] from that tree of life” (1 Nephi 15:36).

Zohar Genesis 37b speaks of “Moses, through whose agency the Law was given and who thus bestowed life on men from the tree of life. And in truth had Israel not sinned, they would have been proof against death, since the tree of life had been brought down to them.”¹⁷ Here, as in other *Zohar* passages, the tree of life is said to represent the Torah or law of Moses.

The *Zohar* has some rather interesting things to say about Psalm 82:6–7, in which God declares, “Ye are gods; and all of you are children of the most High. But ye shall die like men, and fall like one of the princes.” According to *Zohar* Numbers 162a, the early rabbis explained this passage in terms of the events at Mount Sinai: “‘This,’ they said, ‘is what God said when Israel at Mount Sinai said “we will do” before “we will hear” [Exodus 24:7], but when they followed their evil imagination He said, “Verily like Adam ye shall die”; like Adam, that is, whose death drew him down to the dust in order that the evil imagination in him might be wiped out.’”¹⁸ To this, Rabbi Ilai added that the Israelites “stood at Mount Sinai, with bodies free from all taint; but when they drew upon themselves the evil imagination, they were changed into other bodies,”¹⁹ just as the bodies of Adam and Eve became mortal when they ate the fruit of the tree. *Zohar* Exodus 236b, referring to the worship of the golden calf, notes, “And so, whereas Israel standing at Mount Sinai were purged of the primitive venom that the evil spirit injected into the world, thereby bringing death to all mankind, now the same evil spirit defiled them anew, took hold of them and brought again death to them and to all mankind and for all their generations to follow.” The passage then cites Psalm 82:6–7 regarding the fall of heavenly beings.²⁰

The idea that both Adam and Israel brought death into the world through disobedience ties to the concept of their being cut off from the presence of God, mentioned above. The Book of Mormon (Alma 42:9; Helaman 14:16, 18) and Doctrine and Covenants 29:41 define spiritual death as being cut off from the presence of God. *Zohar* Exodus 113b–114a explains the situation as follows:

As to the words “graven upon the tables” (*ḥarut ‘al ha-luḥoth*), it has already been pointed out that this phrase contains an allusion to *ḥeruth*—that is, freedom. Freedom from what? From the angel of death, from subjection to the kingdoms of this world, from all things earthly and from all things evil. And what is freedom? It is the seal of the world to come, in which is every kind of freedom.”²¹

The angel of death is Satan who, as the serpent, is called the “end of all flesh” in *Zohar* Genesis 63b, cited earlier. We are reminded of the Book of Mormon teaching that Christ rescues us from “that monster, death and hell ... the

death of the body, and also the death of the spirit” (2 Nephi 9:10; see 9:19, 26). But before we discuss Christ’s role in restoring the higher law that was on the first set of tablets, we must turn to a discussion of the lesser law.

The Lesser Law

The Bible confirms that the law given to Israel through Moses was a lesser law, though it does not speak of the higher law written on the first set of tablets. Referring to the time of the Egyptian exodus, the Lord told Ezekiel:

I lifted up mine hand unto them also in the wilderness, that I would scatter them among the heathen, and disperse them through the countries;²² because they had not executed my judgments, but had despised my statutes, and had polluted my sabbaths, and their eyes were after their fathers’ idols. Wherefore I gave them also statutes that were not good, and judgments whereby they should not live. (Ezekiel 20:23–24; see Psalm 81:8–13; Acts 7:38–42)

The Lord did not say that the statutes were bad, but that they were “not good,” suggesting that he could have given Israel something better. But that better or higher law, as Joseph Smith taught, was replaced by a lesser law of carnal commandments. This is also suggested in the Lord’s word to Jeremiah:

For I spake not unto your fathers, nor commanded them in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, concerning burnt offerings or sacrifices: but this thing commanded I them, saying, Obey my voice, and I will be your God, and ye shall be my people: and walk ye in all the ways that I have commanded you, that it may be well unto you. But they hearkened not, nor inclined their ear, but walked in the counsels and in the imagination of their evil heart, and went backward, and not forward. (Jeremiah 7:22–24)

This passage cites Exodus 19:5, in which the Lord commanded the Israelites assembled at the foot of Mount Sinai to obey him. It was only after they disobeyed that he imposed the law of complex offerings and sacrifices.

Two Sets of Tablets, Two Sets of Laws

When Moses came down from Mount Sinai and found the people worshipping the golden calf, he cast the tablets containing the law to the ground, shattering them (Exodus 32:19–20; Deuteronomy 9:15–17). Having taken measures to punish the evildoers, he returned to the mountaintop, where the Lord instructed him to prepare a second set of tablets (Exodus 34:1; Deuteronomy 10:1–5). This much is found in the standard biblical account. But the Joseph Smith Translation adds valuable information:

And the Lord said unto Moses, Hew thee two other tables of stone, like unto the first, and I will write upon them also, the words of the law, according as they were written at the first on the tables which thou brakest; but it shall not be according to the first, for I will take away the priesthood out of their midst; therefore my holy order, and the ordinances thereof, shall not go before them; for my presence shall not go up in their midst, lest I destroy them. But I will give unto them the law as at the first, but it shall be after the law of a carnal commandment; for I have sworn in my wrath, that they shall not enter into my presence, into my rest, in the days of their pilgrimage. Therefore do as I have commanded thee, and be ready in the morning, and come up in the morning unto mount Sinai, and present thyself there to me, in the top of the mount. (Exodus 34:1–2 JST)

According to this passage, several elements found on the first set of tablets were missing from the second set. These are “the priesthood ... my holy order, and the ordinances thereof ... my presence.” We have also noted that the Israelites, by refusing to commune directly with God, rejected the opportunity to receive the higher

priesthood, which meant that they would not be able to “endure his presence” (D&C 84:24). The story of the second set of tablets is also found in the Joseph Smith Translation of Deuteronomy 10:1-2:

At that time the Lord said unto me, Hew thee two other tables of stone like unto the first, and come up unto me upon the mount, and make thee an ark of wood. And I will write on the tables the words that were on the first tables, which thou breakest, save the words of the everlasting covenant of the holy priesthood, and thou shalt put them in the ark.

From the writings of the apostle Paul, it is clear that salvation did not come by means of the law of Moses.²³ But neither Paul nor any of the other New Testament writers suggested, as did Joseph Smith, that the law contained on the first set of tablets was superior to or different from the law on the second set of tablets. And while New Testament writers taught that the law brought by Christ was higher than that taught by Moses, they did not suggest, as did Joseph Smith, that the higher law or covenant had already been offered to Israel but was removed when Moses destroyed the first set of tablets on which it was written. But this information is confirmed in extracanonical sources. One of these is the *Epistle of Barnabas*, which was already widely circulated and respected in the Christian community by the second century A.D.²⁴ Chapter 4 clearly supports Joseph Smith’s understanding of the matter:

I further beg of you ... not to be like some, adding largely to your sins, and saying, “The covenant is both theirs [the Jews’] and ours.” But they thus finally lost it, after Moses had already received it. For the Scripture saith, “And Moses was fasting in the mount forty days and forty nights, and received the covenant from the Lord, tables of stone written with the finger of the hand of the Lord,” but turning away to idols, they lost it. For the Lord speaks thus to Moses: “Moses, go down quickly; for the people whom thou hast brought out of the land of Egypt have transgressed.” And Moses understood [the meaning of God], and cast the two tables out of his hands; and their covenant was broken, in order that the covenant of the beloved Jesus might be sealed upon our heart, in the hope which flows from believing in Him.²⁵

This passage suggests that the first set of tablets contained a covenant that was broken and that this was the same covenant Jesus later brought back to the earth. That this is the meaning of the passage is confirmed by *Epistle of Barnabas* 14, which gives a similar account, adding that while Moses received the law, the rest of the Israelites were unworthy of it:

But let us inquire if the Lord has really given that testament which He swore to the fathers that He would give to the people. He did give it; but they were not worthy to receive it, on account of their sins. ... Moses ... received from the Lord two tables, written in the spirit by the finger of the hand of the Lord. And Moses having received them, carried them down to give to the people. ... And Moses understood that they had again made molten images; and he threw the tables out of his hands, and the tables of the testament of the Lord were broken. Moses then received it, but they [the Israelites] proved themselves unworthy. Learn now how we [Christians] have received it. Moses, as a servant, received it; but the Lord himself, having suffered in our behalf, hath given it to us, that we should be the people of inheritance.²⁶

The *Book of the Rolls*, attributed to the first-century A.D. Christian writer, Clement of Rome, cites Noah’s instructions to Shem regarding the burial of Adam, then adds, “Thus it was written in the tables which Moses received from the hand of the Lord and broke at the time of his anger against his people” (*Book of the Rolls* f.115).²⁷

Since the words attributed to Noah are not found in the Old Testament books attributed to Moses, this clearly implies that the first set of tablets given to Moses contained information omitted from the second set.

Another pseudepigraphic text, *4 Ezra*, thought to have been written late in the first century A.D., has God declaring, “I revealed myself in a bush and spoke to Moses when my people were in bondage in Egypt; and I sent him and led my people out of Egypt; and I led him up on Mount Sinai, where I kept him with me many days; and I told him many wondrous things, and showed him the secrets of the times and declared to him the end of the times. Then I commanded him, saying, ‘These words you shall publish openly, and these you shall keep secret’” (*4 Ezra* 14:3–6).²⁸ The idea that Moses did not reveal to the people everything he had learned is also found in *Zohar* Exodus 174a, where we read, “All the treasures of the Supernal King are disclosed by means of one key, which reveals in secret chambers supernal tracings. Who can comprehend what is hidden in the spring of wisdom? Moses revealed it not on the day whereon he made known other deep mysteries, although all things were revealed through him.”²⁹

The idea of higher and lesser laws is also found in *Zohar* Exodus 200a, which speaks of the “supernal book and the lower book, [which] constitute together the Law (Torah), the one the written Law, it being undisclosed and only to be revealed in the world to come, the other the oral Law. Of the written Law the writing is made, as it were, into a Palace of the central point, wherein the Law is concealed. The lower Law, on the other hand, is not embodied in writing, and hence is not constructed into a Palace for the central point beneath as is the superior Law for the supernal point.”³⁰ That the law on the first tablets differed from that on the second set of tablets is confirmed by the early rabbis cited in the fourth- or fifth-century A.D. *Rabbah* (Exodus 46:1; 47:7).³¹ In this tradition, the second set of tablets contained information not on the first set—a point to which we shall return later.

Zohar Exodus 114a declares: “Had not the tablets been broken, the world would not have suffered as it subsequently did, and the Israelites would have been in the likeness of the supernal angels above.”³² In the second-century A.D. Jewish text *’Abot de Rabbi Nathan 2*, we read that the first set of tablets broken by Moses had been inscribed and hidden away since the creation.³³ When Moses saw the Israelites sinning with the golden calf, he declared, “How can I give them the tables of the commandments? I shall be obligating them to major commandments and condemning them to death at the hands of Heaven; for thus it is written in the Commandments, Thou shalt have no other gods before Me.” As he started back, the seventy elders came and grabbed one end of the tablets, but Moses was able to retain them. But when he looked at the tablets, he saw that the writing thereon had disappeared;³⁴ since they appeared useless, he broke them. The text then quotes Rabbi Yose the Galilean as saying that the reason Moses broke the tablets before the eyes of Israel (Deuteronomy 9:17) was so they would not later ask him where the first tablets were. Several other rabbis then replied that Moses broke the tablets only because God told him to do so.³⁵

The Commandments, Statutes, and Judgments

To the Galatians Paul wrote, “Wherefore then serveth the law [of Moses]? It was added because of transgressions, till the seed [Christ] should come to whom the promise was made” (Galatians 3:19; cf. Mosiah 3:14). This suggests that the carnal law with which Joseph Smith said the Israelites were cursed was superimposed atop something else they had received from God—presumably something that was part of the higher law.³⁶ Because the Ten Commandments are authoritatively cited as the word of God in the Old and New Testaments, as well as the Book of Mormon and the Doctrine and Covenants, they must be part of the higher law that remained even under the covenant made at Sinai. They would therefore not be part of the lesser “handwriting of ordinances” of which Paul said that Christ “took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross” (Colossians 2:14).

Christ told the Nephites, “in me is the law of Moses fulfilled” (3 Nephi 9:17; see 3 Nephi 12:18–19, 46; 15:4–5, 8). But he seems to have suggested that only the lesser portion of that law had been fulfilled when he said, “Behold, ye have the commandments before you, and the law is fulfilled” (3 Nephi 12:19). The prophet Abinadi, while noting that salvation does not come by the law of Moses, indicated that it was nonetheless important to keep the Ten Commandments that were part of that law (Mosiah 12:31–33; 13:27–30; see Alma 25:16).

In order to understand this subject, we must note that the law of Moses was comprised of three divisions, the commandments (sometimes called “law” or “testimonies”), the statutes (sometimes called “ordinances”), and the judgments.³⁷ These same three divisions of the law are listed in the Book of Mormon,³⁸ where the word *performances* sometimes is substituted for *judgments*.³⁹ From some of the Book of Mormon passages (Alma 30:3; 2 Nephi 25:24–25, 30; 4 Nephi 1:12), we learn that it was the statutes and judgments (or ordinances and performances) that would be done away in Christ, while the commandments would remain as part of the higher law that Christ revealed during his ministry.

The Messiah Restores the Law

The loss of the higher law is suggested by the tradition in the *Zohar* that the law (Torah) will be made fully known only when the Messiah comes. *Zohar* Leviticus 23a has Rabbi Judah saying that “God will one day reveal the hidden mysteries of the Torah, namely, at the time of the Messiah,” in support of which he cites Isaiah 11:9 and Jeremiah 31:34,⁴⁰ the latter of which we shall discuss shortly. Compare the statement in *Zohar* Leviticus 22b: “as long as Moses was alive, he used to check Israel from sinning against God. And because Moses was among them, there shall not be a generation like that one till the Messiah comes, when they shall see the glory of God like him.”⁴¹

In *Zohar* Genesis 117b–118a, Rabbi Jose and Rabbi Judah examine a book they found hidden in a cave; the book “had been given to Adam the first man, and by means of which he knew all the wisdom of the supernal holy beings.” Suddenly, a wind swept the book from their hands and out of sight. When they later asked Rabbi Simeon about it, “he said to them: ‘Were you, perhaps, scrutinising those letters which deal with the coming of the Messiah? ... The Holy One, blessed be He, does not desire that so much should be revealed to the world, but when the days of the Messiah will be near at hand, even children will discover the secrets of wisdom.’”⁴² *Zohar* Exodus 147a has Rabbi Simeon saying, “Blessed is this generation! There will be none other like unto it until King Messiah shall appear, when the Torah shall be restored to her ancient pride of place.”⁴³

Another Jewish tradition is found in the Babylonian Talmud, where we read that when the Israelites accepted the covenant at Sinai and were made a kingdom of priests, they received two crowns. But when they removed the crowns, destroying angels snatched them away. It is believed that the faithful will receive those crowns during the Messianic age (TB *Shabbat* 88a).

Midrash Alpha Beta di R. Akiba says that “In the future the Holy One, blessed be He, will sit in the Garden of Eden and expound [the Tora]. And all the pious will sit before Him, and all the Supernal Family will stand on its feet. ... And the Holy One, blessed be He, will expound to them the meanings of a new Tora which He will give them through the Messiah.”⁴⁴

The New Covenant

The epistle to the Hebrews identifies Jesus as “the mediator of the new covenant” (Hebrews 12:24; see Galatians 3:20 JST; D&C 76:69; 107:19). The term *new covenant* was drawn from Jeremiah’s prophecy.

Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, that I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah: Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day that I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt; which my covenant they brake, although I was an husband unto them, saith the Lord: But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; After those days, saith the Lord, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people. And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for they shall all know me, from the least of them unto the greatest of them, saith the Lord: for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

(Jeremiah 31:31–34)

The new covenant would replace the covenant made with Israel at the time of the exodus from Egypt and would include forgiveness of sins. The law of this covenant would be written in the hearts of the people rather than on tablets of stone, meaning that it would be taught by the Spirit, so that all who sought him could come to know the Lord.

Hebrews 8:7–13; 10:16–20 cites the Jeremiah 31 passage as evidence that the covenant of Moses was to be replaced by a higher covenant under Christ. For this reason, the early Christians saw themselves as the chosen of God in the place of Israel. This led Peter to paraphrase the Lord’s original promise at Sinai (Exodus 19:6), saying, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Peter 2:9). The writing of the law in the hearts of men, rather than on tablets of stone, is found not only in Jeremiah 31:33, but is expressed in other parts of the Bible as well (Isaiah 51:7; Proverbs 3:3; Ezekiel 11:19–20; 2Corinthians 3:3). It evidently refers to the fact that once the higher priesthood would be made available through Christ, God would speak directly to the hearts of his people.

The Law of Moses and the Sermon on the Mount

Jesus spoke of the law of Moses in his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), which he also delivered to the Nephites in the New World following his resurrection (3 Nephi 12–14). He declared, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfil” (Matthew 5:17). He emphasized that it was important to keep the commandments found in the law (Matthew 5:19), but added, “For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5:20). He then went on to illustrate what he meant.

Rather than simply prohibit murder, the Savior commanded his disciples to avoid anger (Matthew 5:21–22). He taught that the way to avoid committing sexual sins was to banish lustful thoughts from one’s mind (Matthew 5:27–28). Honesty of speech, he said, was superior to having to swear oaths to establish one’s truthfulness (Matthew 5:33–37). Love is superior to revenge (Matthew 5:38–48). Christ’s message can be summed up by saying that in order to avoid sinful acts, we must begin by having pure thoughts. By emphasizing the internalization of God’s commandments, Jesus was fulfilling the prophecy of Jeremiah 31:33 that, under the new covenant, the law would be written on the heart.

This brings us back to Joseph Smith’s statement that “God cursed the children of Israel because they would not receive the last law from Moses.”⁴⁵ Does the “last law” refer to the last of the Ten Commandments, which commands us not to covet? That commandment differs from all the others in that it could not be enforced under the law of Moses. This is because the law required the testimony of two or three witnesses to condemn the guilty party (Deuteronomy 17:6; 19:15; Hebrews 10:28). A witness might testify that a man was guilty of blasphemy,

idolatry, breaking the sabbath, stealing, murdering, and so forth, but no one could read the heart of an individual to know if he was covetous.

Obedience to the Law

Under the law of Moses, obedience was enforced by fear of punishment, sometimes by stoning or some other method of execution, because the law of justice required punishment for sins. Under Christ, who brought the law of mercy, we are free from the punishment of sin, if we repent (Mosiah 15:7–9; 2Nephi 2:5–10). This is what Paul meant by being “free from the law” (Romans 6:14–15, 22–23), not that one was free to commit sin, but that one could repent in Christ and avoid the penalties for sin required by the law. The law of Moses was written on tablets of stone, while the law of Christ is written in the heart, or the thoughts of his followers (Jeremiah 31:31–34; Ezekiel 11:19; 36:26–27; 2Corinthians 3:2–3).

Our motivation for obedience to the law of God should not be fear of punishment or hope of reward. Rather, we should be motivated by a love of God and by our desire to do right (John 14:15; 1John 5:2–3; D&C 42:29;

124:87).⁴⁶ On this issue, Latter-day Saints and modern Jews are agreed, despite the fact that the law of Moses in ancient times was often enforced by fear of punishment. This is the attitude of which Jesus spoke when he said, “Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness” (Matthew 5:6). When we desire to do good as much as we desire to eat and drink and breathe, then and only then are we doing it for the right reason. Hence, “not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. ... Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works?” (Matthew 7:21–23).

The entire Sermon on the Mount can be summed up in Christ’s commandment, “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect” (Matthew 5:48). So important is the commandment to be holy and righteous like God that it has often been repeated, before the law (Genesis 17:1), in the law itself (Exodus 22:31; Numbers 15:40; Leviticus 19:2; 20:7–8, 26; 21:8; Deuteronomy 18:13), and after the coming of Christ (2 Corinthians 13:9). In our day, God has repeated the commandment (D&C 38:42; 43:11, 16; 88:68, 74; 101:4–5; 112:28, 33; 133:4–5, 62).

If there is one thing for which Jesus found his fellow Jews at fault, it is that some of them did not keep the law of Moses (John 7:19). The Book of Mormon teaches us that salvation cannot be obtained without obedience to the Ten Commandments (Mosiah 12:31–37). Yet it also teaches that the law by itself, without the atonement of Christ, was not sufficient for salvation, lacking the principle of mercy (Mosiah 13:27–33; 16:14–15; see all of Mosiah 14–15).

The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ (John 1:17). Christ, then, did not destroy the law but fulfilled it, in that he returned the portion that Israel had rejected in Moses’ day and retained the Ten Commandments. Indeed, the law looked forward to Christ (2 Nephi 25:24–30; Jacob 4:5; Mosiah 3:14–16; Alma 13:16; 25:15–16; 30:3; 34:13–14; 3Nephi 1:24–25; 9:17–20; 12:17–19; 15:2–10). The law and the prophets, according to Jesus, were in effect until the coming of John the Baptist, after which came the doctrines of the kingdom of God (Luke 16:16–17; see Matthew 11:12–13). As Latter-day Saints, we see in the teachings of Jesus the fulfillment of the law of Moses (D&C 22). This does not mean that the law was not valid, only that the reasons for obedience to its precepts are based on different premises. Obedience to the law of Moses was anciently ensured through a strict set of rules, the breaking of which could bring severe punishments. Jesus taught us obedience based on agency and a desire to do good. In order to assist us to follow this plan, he has given us the Holy Ghost to guide us in our decisions.

Summary

The prophecy in Jeremiah 31:31–34 promised that the new covenant would bring forgiveness of sins and the spirit of God to place the law in the hearts of men. Because these elements had been lost to Israel at Sinai, they later become highly dependent on the written law and developed a series of written rabbinic explanations of the law of Moses. Christ condemned this “tradition of the elders” (Matthew 15:1–6). The early rabbis justified its existence by saying that it constituted an “oral law” revealed to Moses atop the mountain at the same time as the “written law” and passed down from Moses to Joshua, to the elders, to the prophets, and to the rabbis (Mishnah *’Abot* 1:1). In one tradition, it was even held that the two tablets of the law contained laws, *midrash* (explanation), and *haggadot* (traditions).⁴⁵

But other rabbinic traditions, as we have seen, support Joseph Smith’s teaching that the higher law had been presented to Israel, who rejected it, making it necessary for God to give a lesser law that withheld many of the blessings he wanted to give them. Those blessings were to be restored in the time of the Messiah. While all Christians believe that Christ brought a higher law, Latter-day Saints believe that this law had been known to earlier generations as well. The early Jewish and Christian texts that tell the same story were unavailable to Joseph Smith and have only come to our attention in later years.

Notes

1. Brigham Young explained the situation thus: “If they had been sanctified and holy, the children of Israel would not have travelled one year with Moses before they would have received their endowments and the Melchizedec [*sic*] Priesthood. But they could not receive them, and never did. Moses left them, and they did not receive the fulness of that Priesthood. After they came to the land of Canaan, they never would have desired a king, had they been holy. The Lord told Moses that he would show himself to the people; but they begged Moses to plead with the Lord not to do so.” *Journal of Discourses*, 6:100.

2. Joseph Smith, *History of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, 2nd ed. (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1950), 5:555.

3. Though this kabbalistic text was composed in its present form in Spain in the thirteenth century A.D., the *Zohar* reflects a number of early traditions, many of them known from more ancient texts, attributing them to rabbis of the first centuries A.D.

4. *The Zohar* (New York: Bennet, 1958), 5:330–31. The version of the *Zohar* that I cite herein has various translators for the five volumes: vol. 1, Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon; vols. 2 and 3, Harry Sperling, Maurice Simon, and Paul P. Levertoff; vol. 4, Maurice Simon and Paul P. Levertoff; and vol. 5, Maurice Simon and Harry Sperling. They were all published by Bennet in New York.

5. *Midrash Rabbah* Exodus 42:8.

6. In Kabbalah, the heaven is compared to a man and earth to a woman, as in several ancient Near Eastern cosmologies.

7. The tree of life in the *Zohar* usually refers to the Torah or law of Moses—a point that will become important for a later discussion in this essay. See *Zohar* Genesis 131b, 193a, 199a, 202b; Exodus 17b; Leviticus 53b; Numbers 148b; Deuteronomy 260a, 261a.

8. *The Zohar*, 5:345–46.

9. *Ibid.*, 3:181.

10. *Ibid.*, 5:369–70.

11. Ibid., 4:47–48.

12. Ibid., 1:136.

13. Ibid., 1:207. According to *Zohar* Exodus 17b, God sent serpents among the Israelites “to punish Israel should she separate herself from the Tree of Life, which is the Torah” (ibid., 3:55). Similarly, *Zohar* Exodus 184a declares that “had the Israelites not sinned, the Holy One would have resolved to remove him [the devil] altogether from the world. Therefore He led them through his very dominion and territory. But when they sinned the serpent stung them many a time” (ibid., 4:124). Compare this with the statement in *Zohar* Exodus 227a: “When the sacrifices brought by Noah were offered up, a fragrance was diffused in the world; but not so sweet as when, later on, Israel stood at Mount Sinai. Then the world was truly filled with a fragrance, and thus the Destroyer was no more to be seen. Indeed, the Holy One, blessed be He, was about to remove altogether the Destroyer from the world, when Israel, after the lapse of only a few days, committed a sin in making the Golden Calf. ... The Destroyer thus regained power over the world, inflicting punishment over it, as before” (ibid., 4:274–75).

14. Ibid., 1:207.

15. Ibid., 1:165.

16. Ibid., 2:25.

17. Ibid., 1:140.

18. Ibid., 5:233

19. *Zohar* Numbers 162b, in ibid., 5:234.

20. *The Zohar*, 4:306.

21. Ibid., 3:339.

22. The passage evidently alludes to the wording of Deuteronomy 4:26–27.

23. Romans 7:4; 8:2–4; Galatians 2:16, 21; 3:12–13, 24–26. Hebrews 7:11 notes that perfection did not come by the Levitical Priesthood.

24. A number of early church fathers cited the *Epistle of Barnabas* in their own writings to illustrate principles of doctrine.

25. *Epistle of Barnabas* 4, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1885; reprint, Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:138–39.

26. *Epistle of Barnabas* 14, in ibid., 146.

27. Margaret D. Wilson, *Apocrypha Arabica* (London: Clay, 1901), 31.

28. Bruce M. Metzger, trans., in James H. Charlesworth, ed., *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), 1:553. In 4 Ezra 14:37–48, we read that Ezra and a group of five men rewrote the lost scriptures in ninety-four books, of which twenty-four were to be made public, while seventy were to be held back for the wise only; see *ibid.*, 1:554–55.

29. *The Zohar*, 4:102–3.

30. *Ibid.*, 4:178.

31. The rabbis did not always agree with one another on issues of scriptural interpretation. Consequently, one passage (*Midrash Rabbah* Exodus 47:6) says that the second set of tablets was a duplicate of the first set.

32. *The Zohar*, 3:339.

33. For a discussion, see John A. Tvedtnes, *The Book of Mormon and Other Hidden Books: “Out of Darkness unto Light”* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000), 129–32.

34. That the writing on the tablets disappeared when Moses saw the golden calf is affirmed in other early rabbinic sources. For example, see *Pseudo-Philo* 12:5.

35. Judah Goldin, trans., *The Fathers According to Rabbi Nathan* (New York City: Schocken, 1974), 20–22.

36. Bruce R. McConkie appears to have been the first person to make this suggestion, in the entry “Law of Moses” in his *Mormon Doctrine* (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1958).

37. Deuteronomy 4:1–2, 13–14; 5:31; 6:20; 11:32; 26:17; 28:45; 2Kings 17:34, 37; 1Chronicles 29:19; 2Chronicles 19:10; 33:8; 34:31; Nehemiah 9:13–14; 10:29. There are many more passages in which just two of the three divisions are mentioned together.

38. It was Avraham Gileadi who first noted this phenomenon and shared the information with me in Jerusalem in 1972. It has since been discussed by Douglas H. Parker and Ze’ev W. Falk in their article on “Law of Moses” in *Encyclopedia of Mormonism*, 2:810–12.

39. First Nephi 17:22; 2Nephi 5:10; 25:25, 30; Mosiah 6:6; Alma 8:17; 25:14–15; 31:9–10; 58:40; Helaman 3:20; 15:5; 4Nephi 1:12. In several more passages two of the three divisions are mentioned together (2 Nephi 1:16; Omni 1:2; Mosiah 13:30; Alma 30:3, 23; Helaman 6:34; 3Nephi 25:4).

40. *The Zohar*, 4:372.

41. *Ibid.*

42. *Ibid.*, 1:366–67.

43. *Ibid.*, 4:16–17.

44. The Hebrew text was published in volume 3 of Adolph Jellinek, *Bet ha-Midrash* (1854; reprint, Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1967). The English translation used here is from Raphael Patai, *The Messiah Texts: Jewish Legends of*

Three Thousand Years (Detroit: Wayne State University, 1988), 252.

45. *History of the Church*, 5:555.

46. This is why Satan's plan to take away men's agency had to be rejected in the premortal heavenly council.

47. *Midrash Rabbah* Exodus 46:1; 47:7; this is contradicted in 47:6, which says that the second set of tables was identical to the first, containing only the Ten Commandments.