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How Christians Should Regard Moses (Martin Luther)

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“How Christians Should Regard Moses,” Excerpts

By Martin Luther

1525

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Dear friends, you have often heard that there has never been a public sermon from heaven except twice. . . .

Now the first sermon is in Exodus^[1] 19 and 20; by it God caused himself to be heard from heaven with great splendor and might. For the people of Israel heard the trumpets and the voice of God himself.

In the second place. God delivered a public sermon through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost [Acts 2:2–4]. On that occasion the Holy Spirit came with great splendor and visible impressiveness, such that there came from heaven the sudden rushing of a mighty wind, and it filled the entire house where the apostles were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire, distributed and resting on each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to preach and speak in other tongues. . . .

Now the first sermon, and doctrine, is the law of God. The second is the gospel. These two sermons are not the same. Therefore we must have a good grasp of the matter in order to know how to differentiate between them. We must know what the law is, and what the gospel is. The law commands and requires us to do certain things. The law is thus directed solely to our behavior and consists in making requirements. For God speaks through the law, saying, “Do this, avoid that, this is what I expect of you.” The gospel, however, does not preach what we are to do or to avoid. It sets up no requirements but reverses the approach of the law, does the very opposite, and says, “This is what God has done for you; he has let his Son be made flesh for you, has let him be put to death for your sake.” So, then, there are two kinds of doctrine and two lands of works, those of God and those of men. Just as we and God are separated from one another, so also these two doctrines are widely separated from one another. For the gospel teaches exclusively what has been given us by God, and not—as in the case of the law—what we are to do and give to God.

We now want to see how this first sermon sounded forth and with what splendor God gave the law on Mount Sinai. . . .

Now you will hear how God used this voice in order to arouse his people and make them brave. For he intended to institute the tangible [*eusserliche*] and spiritual government. It was previously stated how, on the advice of Jethro, his father-in-law, Moses had established the temporal government and appointed rulers and judges [Exod. 18:13–26]. Beyond that there is yet a spiritual kingdom in which Christ rules in the hearts of men; this kingdom we cannot see, because it consists only in faith and will continue until the Last Day.

These are two kingdoms:^[2] the temporal, which governs with the sword and is visible and the spiritual, which governs solely with grace and with the forgiveness of sins. Between these two kingdoms still another has been placed in the middle, half spiritual and half temporal. It is constituted by the Jews, with commandments and outward ceremonies which prescribe their conduct toward God and men.

The law of Moses binds only the Jews and not the Gentiles

Here the law of Moses has its place. It is no longer binding on us because it was given only to the people of Israel. And Israel accepted this law for itself and its descendants, while the Gentiles were excluded. To be sure, the Gentiles have certain laws in common with the Jews, such as these: there is one God, no one is to do wrong to another, no one is to commit adultery or murder or steal, and others like them. This is written by nature into their hearts; they did not hear it straight from heaven as the Jews did. This is why this entire text does not pertain to the Gentiles. I say this on account of the enthusiasts. For you see and hear how they read Moses, extol him, and bring up the way he ruled the people with commandments. They try to be clever, and think they know something more than is presented in the gospel; so they minimize faith, contrive something new, and boastfully claim that it comes from the Old Testament. They desire to govern people according to the letter of the law of Moses, as if no one had ever read it before.

But we will not have this sort of thing. We would rather not preach again for the rest of our life than to let Moses return and to let Christ be torn out of our hearts. We will not have Moses as ruler or lawgiver any longer. Indeed God himself will not have it either. Moses was an intermediary solely for the Jewish people. It was to them that he gave the law. We must therefore silence the mouths of those factious spirits who say, “Thus says Moses,” etc. Here you simply reply: Moses has nothing to do with us. If I were to accept Moses in one commandment, I would have to accept the entire Moses. Thus the consequence would be that if I accept Moses as master, then I must have myself circumcised,^[3] wash my clothes in the Jewish way, eat and drink and dress thus and so, and observe all that stuff. So, then, we will neither observe nor accept Moses. Moses is dead. His rule ended when Christ came. He is of no further service.

That Moses does not bind the Gentiles can be proved^[4] from Exodus 20[:1], where God himself speaks, “I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.” This text makes it clear that even the Ten Commandments do not pertain to us. For God never led us out of Egypt, but only the Jews. The sectarian spirits want to saddle us with Moses and all the commandments. We will just skip that. We will regard Moses as a teacher, but we will not regard him as our lawgiver—unless he agrees with both the New Testament and the natural law. Therefore it is clear enough that Moses is the lawgiver of the Jews and not of the Gentiles. He has given the Jews a sign whereby they should lay hold of God, when they call upon him as the God who brought them out of Egypt. The Christians have a different sign, whereby they conceive of God as the One who gave his Son, etc.

. . .

Question: Why then do you preach about Moses if he does not pertain to us?

Answer to the Question: Three things are to be noted in Moses.

I want to keep Moses and not sweep him under the rug,^[5] because I find three things in Moses.

In the first place I dismiss the commandments given to the people of Israel. They neither urge nor compel me. They are dead and gone, except insofar as I gladly and willingly accept something from Moses, as if I said, "This is how Moses ruled, and it seems fine to me, so I will follow him in this or that particular."

I would even be glad if [today's] lords ruled according to the example of Moses. If I were emperor, I would take from Moses a model for [my] statutes; not that Moses should be binding on me, but that I should be free to follow him in ruling as he ruled. . . .

When these factious spirits come, however, and say, "Moses has commanded it," then simply drop Moses and reply, "I am not concerned about what Moses commands." "Yes," they say, "he has commanded that we should have one God, that we should trust and believe in him, that we should not swear by his name; that we should honor father and mother; not kill, steal, commit adultery; not bear false witness, and not covet [Exod. 20:3-17]; should we not keep these commandments?" You reply: Nature also has these laws. Nature provides that we should call upon God. The Gentiles attest to this fact. For there never was a Gentile who did not call upon his idols, even though these were not the true God. This also happened among the Jews, for they had their idols as did the Gentiles; only the Jews have received the law. The Gentiles have it written in their heart, and there is no distinction [Rom. 3:22]. As St. Paul also shows in Romans 2[:14-15], the Gentiles, who have no law, have the law written in their heart.

But just as the Jews fail, so also do the Gentiles. Therefore it is natural to honor God, not steal, not commit adultery, not bear false witness, not murder; and what Moses commands is nothing new. For what God has given the Jews from heaven, he has also written in the hearts of all men. Thus I keep the commandments which Moses has given, not because Moses gave commandment, but because they have been implanted in me by nature, and Moses agrees exactly with nature, etc.

But the other commandments of Moses, which are not [implanted in all men] by nature, the Gentiles do not hold. Nor do these pertain to the Gentiles, such as the tithe and others equally fine which I wish we had too. Now this is the first thing that I ought to see in Moses, namely, the commandments to which I am not bound except insofar as they are [implanted in everyone] by nature [and written in everyone's heart].^[6]

The second thing to notice in Moses

In the second place I find something in Moses that I do not have from nature: the promises and pledges of God, about Christ. This is the best thing. It is something that is not written naturally into the heart, but comes from heaven. God has promised, for example, that his Son should be born in the flesh. This is what the gospel proclaims. It is not commandments. And it is the most important thing in Moses which pertains to us. The first thing, namely, the commandments, does not pertain to us. I read Moses because such excellent and comforting promises are there recorded, by which I can find strength for my weak faith. For things take place in the kingdom of Christ just as I read in Moses that they will; therein I find also my sure foundation.

In this manner, therefore, I should accept Moses, and not sweep him under the rug: first because he provides fine examples of laws, from which excerpts may be taken. Second, in Moses there are the promises of God which sustain faith. . . .

Therefore tell this to Moses: Leave Moses and his people together; they have had their day and do not pertain to me. I listen to that word which applies to me. We have the gospel. Christ says, "Go and

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preach the gospel," not only to the Jews as Moses did, but to "all nations," to "all creatures" [Mark 16:15]. To me it is said, "He who believes and is baptized will be saved" [Mark 16:16]. Again, "Go and do to your neighbor as has been done to you." [7] These words strike me too, for I am one of the "all creatures." If Christ had not added, "preach to all creatures," then I would not listen, would not be baptized, just as I now will not listen to Moses because he is given not to me but only to the Jews. However because Christ says: not to one people, nor in this or in that place in the world, but to "all creatures," therefore no one is exempt. Rather all are thereby included; no one should doubt that to him too the gospel is to be preached. And so I believe that word; it does pertain also to me. I too belong under the gospel, in the new covenant. Therefore I put my trust in that word, even if it should cost a hundred thousand lives.

This distinction should be noticed, grasped, and taken to heart by those preachers who would teach others; indeed by all Christians, for everything depends entirely upon it. If the peasants had understood it this way, they would have salvaged much and would not have been so pitifully misled and ruined.[8] And where we understand it differently, there we make sects and factions, slaving among the rabble and into the raving and uncomprehending people without any distinction, saying, "God's word, God's word." But my dear fellow, the question is whether it was said to you. God indeed speaks also to angels, wood, fish, birds, animals, and all creatures, but this does not make it pertain to me. I should pay attention to that which applies to me, that which is said to me, in which God admonishes, drives, and requires something of me.

...

[1] Where Luther refers to a specific book of the Pentateuch by number (e.g., "The Second Book of Moses") we have given the corresponding English title.

[2] On the two kingdoms cf. pp. 289–290.

[3] In a letter to Chancellor Brück of Saxony dated January 13, 1524, Luther wrote that the people of Orlamünde, Karlstadt's parish, would probably circumcise themselves and be wholly Mosaic. MA³ 4, 402, n. 182.

[4] *Zwingen* probably means *zwingend beweisen* as MA³ 4, 402, n. 183, 4 suggests.

[5] *Unter den banck stecken* (literally, "put under the bench" [in Luther's early sixteenth-century German dialect; in modern German this would be *Unter die Bank stecken*. –Site Editor]) is a proverbial expression meaning to put aside, hide, or forget some despicable thing. WA 51, 661 and 724, No. 468. Wander (ed.), *Sprichwörter-Lexikon* I, 229, "Bank," No. 40. Cf. p. 253, n. 53.

[6] The bracketed phrases in this paragraph are from the version given in the 1528 Exposition of the Ten Commandments. WA 16, 380, ll. 26, 31. See the Introduction, p. 159.

[7] Cf. Matt. 7:12.

[8] Site Editor: Luther refers here to the so-called Peasant Revolt.

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