

EXODUS FROM EGYPT

Covenant at Sinai

Exodus 19-24

INTRODUCTION

Where is the real Mount Sinai (Mount Horeb)?

We do not know. As mentioned during the last bible study, there are many theories. We looked at four proposals.

1. *Jabal Musa*, the traditional site in the Sinai Peninsula, from the fourth century.
2. *Jabal Al-Lawz*, which is in the northwestern part of Arabia.
3. *Gebel Et-Tarif (Jebel Hashem al-Taref)* located in the northeastern part of the Sinai Peninsula, at the edge of the Wilderness of Paran, close to the northern tip of Aquba, about 30 km west of Eilat.
4. *Jabal Sin Bishar*, on the western Sinai Peninsula (proposed in 1983).

When did the Exodus take place?

There are two main proposals as to when the Exodus took place.

The first theory proposes that the Exodus took place in the 15th century, in the year **1446 B.C.** or **1406 B.C.** According to Judges 11:26, Israel dwelt for more than “three hundred years” in the land of Canaan; and according to 1 Kings 6:1 (Hebrew Bible), the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem began approximately 480 years after the Exodus.

“In the four hundred and eightieth year after the sons of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon’s reign over Israel, in the month of Zin, which is the second month, he began to build the house of the Lord” (1 Kings 6:1).

Note, however, that according to the Septuagint [Greek Bible], the text reports that it was “440 years” after the Exodus, not “480 years.” Since the traditional date for King Solomon’s coronation is 970 B.C., the math is: $970 + 4 - 480 = 1446$ B.C. According to the Septuagint, the date would be: $970 + 4 - 480 = 1406$ B.C.

The second theory proposes that the Exodus took place in the 13th century, somewhere around the year **1250 B.C.**, during the reign of Pharaoh Raamses II (1279-1213 B.C.). The key piece of evidence for this theory is the reference to the Israelite slaves being forced to build the cities of “Pithom” and “Raamses” (Exodus 1:11). Both these cities are connected to the reign of Raamses II, and the city of Raamses became his capital.

So far, there is no conclusive evidence to support one theory over the other. Either theory could be true.

STUDY AND REFLECTION

The Theophany at Sinai (Exodus 19)

On the third new moon after the Exodus from Egypt (47 days or 77 days), Moses and the Israelites arrived at Mount Horeb (Mount Sinai) and encamped there. This was the place where God had appeared to Moses in the vision of the Burning Bush and revealed His Name. This is where God will now appear in the vision of the mountain overshadowed by a thick cloud, to establish a Covenant with His People.

Moses went up the mountain alone, and God called out to him, saying:

“You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how **I bore you on eagles’ wings** and **brought you to Myself**. Now, therefore, if you will obey My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me **a kingdom of priests and a holy nation**. These are the words which you shall speak to the children of Israel” (Exodus 19:4-6).

There are a few important things to note here.

First, the words “I bore you on eagles’ wings” and “brought you to Myself” indicates that by God’s Providence, Israel journeyed a long distance in a short period of time. It was God Who brought them safely out of Egypt and quickly to His Presence at Mount Sinai.

Second, at the time of the Exodus, it was *the first-born sons* who served as “kings” and “priests” over their family clans. This was the birthright of the first-born son, a tradition that went back to the patriarchs, to Noah, and Adam. After the Exodus, all the first-born sons of Israel were consecrated to God (Exodus 13:2). So, when God says, “you shall be to me a kingdom of priests,” the reference is specifically to the first-born sons of Israel, as the “royal priesthood” of Israel. After the apostasy, however, the priesthood will be taken away from the first-born sons of Israel and given to the sons of the tribe of Levi.

Third, when the Lord God says that Israel shall be a “holy nation”, “holy” does not mean “perfect,” but “set apart.” Israel is to be set apart from among the nations as God’s first-born. They will have a special role to play in God’s plan of salvation.

Finally, Moses set these words of the Lord before the people, they responded by saying, **“All that the Lord has spoken we will do”** (Ex 19:8).

Moses then went up the mountain a second time and “reported the words of the people to the Lord” (Ex 19:8). God then promises to appear to the children of Israel in the form of a thick cloud, which will veil His Majesty, so that they may hear Him speak to Moses and that they may believe that Moses is His prophet. He says to Moses, *“Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and may also believe you forever”* (Ex 19:9). This theophany (revelation or manifestation of God) is to take place in three days.

In preparation for this theophany, the people are to consecrate themselves (i.e. set themselves apart, dedicate themselves to God). They are to wash their garments as a sign of their inner purification and put on their best attire (this is implied by the text);

abstain from sexual relations; to be focused and ready to meet the Lord God who will appear to them on the third day.

The mountain limits

God also commanded the people is to respect the limits of the mountain, since the He will occupy it. He says to Moses: “You shall set bounds for the people round about, saying, ‘Take heed that you do not go up into the mountain or touch the border of it’” (Ex 19:12).

As God commanded, Moses marks out the limits of the mountain, for the mountain is sacred ground. Barriers are set up to make the limits clearly visible. No one is to go past these barriers.

The appearance of God on the third day

On the morning of the third day (possibly the 50th day after Passover and the Exodus) there was thundering, lighting, and a **thick cloud** came down upon the mountain. Suddenly, there was a very loud trumpet blast, which made all the people in the camp tremble with fear.

Moses then led the people out of the camp to the foot of the mountain, close to the barriers. He told them to stand there. The whole mountain was veiled in cloud for the Lord God had descended upon it (Ex 19:19). The whole mountain quaked, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder. Then the Lord God called Moses to go up the mountain.

Moses crossed the barrier onto the sacred ground and began to climb the mountain. This time, Aaron is permitted to go up with him.

The Ten Commandments and the Covenant Code (Exodus 20-23)

Standing at the foot of the mountain, the people could hear God speaking to Moses and to them directly, in the form of thunder. However, they could not see God, for His Presence was veiled by the cloud. Moses also did not see God, but only heard His voice proclaiming the “Ten Words” or the Ten Commandments.

Something similar (but much less dramatic) happens in the New Testament, as reported in the Gospel of John. While Jesus is foretelling his death and subsequent glorification, He ends by saying, “*Father, glorify Your Name!*” To this, a voice responds from heaven saying, “*I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again*” (Jn 12:28). People standing by, who heard this, said it was a clap of thunder; others said, “*It was an angel speaking to Him.*” Jesus then answered, “*It was not for my sake that this voice came, but for yours*” (Jn 12:29-30).

Having heard God directly proclaiming the Ten Commandments, the people at the foot of the mountain are overcome with fear. They cry out to Moses: “You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die” (Exodus 20:19).

Then Moses continued further up the mountain and “drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (Exodus 20:21).

Now, only Moses hears the voice of God speaking. The Lord first tells Moses how an altar is to be made. It is to be simple, and different from other pagan altars.

“An altar of the earth you shall make for me and sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings, your sheep and your oxen; in every place where I cause my name to be remembered I will come to you and bless you. And if you make me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stones; for if you wield your tool upon it you profane it. And you shall not go up by steps to my altar, that your nakedness be not exposed” (Exodus 20:24-26).

Then the Lord gives to Moses His “ordinances” (Exodus 21:1), also referred to as the **Covenant Code**. The Covenant Code is a list of approximately forty different laws that are to govern the life of Israel, in addition to the Ten Commandments.

Moses then came down the mountain and told the people all the words of the Lord (the Ten Commandments) and all the ordinances (the Covenant Code). Having heard everything that God had commanded, the people answered with one voice, saying: “All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do” (Exodus 24:3).

And Moses wrote down all the words that the Lord had spoken (Exodus 24:4).

The Decalogue

Although we are accustomed to referring to the first part of God’s revelation on Mount Sinai as the “Ten Commandments,” the Greek Fathers of the Church preferred the Greek term *Decalogue*, which literally means “Ten Words.” If they are “Words,” then they are meant to be more descriptive rather than legalistic, as implied by the term “Commandments.”

The Ten Commandments stand on their own, in a unique class. As direct commands spoken by God to the people of Israel, the Ten Commandments have no other known parallels in the ancient Near East.¹

The Ten Words spoken by God on the holy mountain were meant to describe a new *path of life* that leads to authentic love of God and neighbor.

The Ten Words also represent a ‘spiritual exodus,’ an exodus out from the slavery of sin to the freedom of a new life with God. Just as God had led them out from the slavery in Egypt to freedom (physical exodus), so He now wants to free them from the slavery of sin to the freedom of a new life as God’s first-born (spiritual exodus).

Finally, the Ten Words are also meant to be a description of God’s people as a holy nation, set apart from other nations, consecrated to God. They mark the boundary of what it means to be a People of God: Are you in, or are you out? Are you a part of God’s people or are you not? They continue to be the foundation of spiritual and moral life in the New Testament, and they continue to define the boundary of what it means to be a member of the Church, the New Israel.

¹ Dr. Ian Barnes, *The Historical Atlas of the Bible*, 73.

Two Versions

Note that version of the Decalogue in Exodus 20:1-17 is slightly different than the version found in Deuteronomy 5:6-21. In the Exodus version, four commandments deal with the love of God and six with the love of neighbor. In the Deuteronomy version, three commandments deal with the love of God and seven with the love of neighbor.

Jews, Orthodox and most Protestants follow the Exodus version. Catholic and Lutherans follow the Deuteronomy version.

First Version (Jewish, Orthodox, Protestant)
Exodus 20:1-17

- 1) You shall have no other gods...
- 2) You shall not make graven images...
- 3) You shall not take the name of the Lord in vain...
in
- 4) Remember the Sabbath day...
- 5) Honour (glorify) your father and your mother...
mother...
- 6) You shall not murder (slay).
- 7) You shall not commit adultery.
- 8) You shall not steal.
- 9) You shall not bear false witness...
- 10) You shall not covet your neighbour's...
wife.

goods.

Second Version (Catholic, Lutheran)
Deuteronomy 5:6-21

- 1) You shall have no other gods...
- 2) You shall not take the name of the Lord
vain...
- 3) Remember the Sabbath day...
- 4) Honour (glorify) your father and
mother...
- 5) You shall not murder (slay).
- 6) You shall not commit adultery.
- 7) You shall not steal.
- 8) You shall not bear false witness...
- 9) You shall not covet your neighbour's
- 10) You shall not covet your neighbour's

Although God pronounced the "Ten Words" directly on the holy mountain, they are not really something new. God is only making clear that which is already written on human hearts (Rom 2:15) but has been clouded by sin. These laws (ten words) are an intrinsic part of human nature.

How does the Decalogue sum up the lessons of Israel's delivery from Egypt?

The whole story of the Exodus can be summed up in the first four commandments, as given to us in Exodus version. Israel was saved from the Egyptian culture that was steeped in polytheism. It was a culture that did not know or recognize the true God; and kept Israel bound as slaves to Pharaoh. In liberating Israel, God revealed His Name and demonstrated His supremacy over creation and all other gods.

Not surprisingly, *the first commandment* directs the people to worship to true God alone, to the exclusion of all other gods. They are to put Him first.

The second commandment forbids the making and worshiping of graven images. God is not to be reduced to an image or representation of a created thing. These first two commandments were meant to protect the people from falling back into the patterns of idol worship they had learned in Egypt.

The third commandment is a reminder that the true God is completely different. He does not have a name like gods of the Egyptians. His name “I AM WHO I AM” reveals that He is indescribable, ineffable, and incomprehensible. His Name should be used only with great reverence and only to bless.

The fourth commandment is a reminder that Israel has been freed from the slavery of Egypt, i.e. slavery to work and the worship of Pharaoh as their Master. The seventh day is a day of rest from physical work, a day reserved for spiritual work – the worship of the true God as their Lord and Master.

The first four commandments (Exodus version) have to do with establishing a right relationship with God. The remaining six commandments have to do with establishing a right relationship with others. They are rules describing the way the “REDEEMED” people must live, so as not to fall back into bondage and slavery.

If observed, the Ten Commandments provide stability, sanctity of life, and a proper balance between work, rest, and worship. If broken, a person becomes a slave of other false gods of this world: self, possessions, work, gluttony, lust, avarice, greed, pride, and vainglory.

What is the difference between the Decalogue and the Covenant Code (see Ex 20:22-23:33)? What is the purpose of the “Ordinances”?

The Decalogue is the positive will of God. They are set in stone by the finger of God (Exodus 34:28), which means that they are unchangeable moral laws. They have been written into the human heart, encoded into human nature, from the moment the first human pair was created.

The Ten Commandments are the foundation for the God’s Ordinances (Covenant) that follows. The Decalogue is set in stone by the finger of God, but the Covenant Law is written into a Book by Moses. The ordinances apply the Ten Commandments to specific life situations in the ancient world.

In the Covenant Code (forty laws), we see both the positive and negative will of God. An example of God’s negative will would be the laws concerning slaves. God did not create human beings to be slaves. Slavery was a human invention, opposed to human nature and dignity. At the time of the Exodus, however, slavery was an unquestioned reality and a part of life. The positive will of God is that slavery be eradicated and that all men and women be free. However, due to the reality of the times, slavery is permitted to continue for the time being, but only under a new and radically higher standard of human respect and dignity. (According to the culture of the day, slaves were treated as animals who could speak, and a master could do whatever he wanted with his slaves).

Another example would be the case of marriage. The positive will of God is the indissolubility of marriage. “A man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his

wife, and they become one flesh” (Gen 2:24). But under the Law of Moses, divorce was permitted, contrary to God’s positive will. Jesus himself gives the explanation for this. He said:

“Moses, because of the hardness of your hearts, permitted you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. And I say to you, whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery; and whoever marries her who is divorced commits adultery” (Luke 19:8-9).

The Covenant Code raised the standard of moral life, but it does not yet fully reveal the perfect will of God. Thus, the full meaning of the Law will be revealed only in time, with the coming of the Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said:

“Think not that I have come to abolish the Law and the Prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. Whoever then relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but he who does them and teaches them shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 5:17-19).

Jesus fulfilled the Ten Commandments and the Covenant Code with His Beatitudes and His Sermon on the Mount (read Matthew 5-7). *A new standard is revealed, even higher than the old one.*

In Exodus chapter 18, it says that at first, Moses acted as the sole judge for the people after they had left Egypt. He would take his seat, and from morning to evening he would administer justice for the people who brought their cases to him. This was too much for one person to handle. On the advice of his father-in-law, Jethro, Moses appointed leaders over the people to help him administer justice. Moses would continue to deal with difficult cases, but smaller cases were to be handled by the leaders who also acted as judges. From the moment of the Exodus to the moment of the Theophany at Sinai, there was no written Law for Israel to follow. Now, the new Covenant Code would provide leaders and judges with a guide, a legal system upon which they could fairly judge cases.

The Decalogue and the Covenant Code are a gift from God. Both will become the condition for God’s Covenant with Israel. Like all ancient covenants, this Covenant will be sealed by the blood of a sacrifice.

God Establishes His Covenant with Israel (Exodus 24)

On Mount Sinai, God renewed the promise He had made to Abraham. In His Covenant relationship with the children of Israel, He promises to make them a great and holy nation, a kingdom of priests, by which all the nations of the earth shall be blessed; and He promises to lead them into the Promised Land. He will be their God and their King. He will provide for them, protect them from their enemies. He will go before them and guide them. He will dwell among them.

Israel is to respond to God's promises with faith, trust, and obedience. What is required of them to fulfill their part in the Covenant is that they observe the Decalogue and the Covenant Code.

The Covenant is Ratified (Sealed)

As commanded by God, Moses built an altar built at the base of the holy mountain, with twelve pillars (standing stones) for the twelve tribes of Israel. He ordered certain young Israelites to offer holocausts and to immolate young bulls to the Lord God as communion sacrifices (the people will partake of the meat of these sacrificed animals). After this was done, Moses poured half of the blood into basins and sprinkled the other half on the altar. Then taking the Book of the Covenant (the Ten Commandments and the Ordinances), he read them out loud to the people. Having heard it again, they said: *"All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient"* (Ex 24:7).

Then Moses took the remainder of the blood and sprinkled it on the people, saying: *"Behold, the blood of the Covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words"* (Ex 24:8).

Thus, the Covenant between God and Israel was ratified by the blood of the sacrifice which was sprinkled on the altar and on the people after they had given their *AMEN*, i.e. their final "yes, let it be so."

The altar represented the Lord God. Both God and the people identify themselves with the sacrifice offered upon the altar.

First, the blood of the sacrificial animal is a symbol of life. It now represents the life of God and the life of Israel, and their life together. The people are sprinkled by the blood, as a sign that God has offered His life to them as a gift, the altar is sprinkled by the blood, as a sign that Israel offers its life to God as a gift. The sprinkling of the altar and the peoples signifies that God and Israel are now joined as one, to live together as one community, one family. They are now permanently committed to one another.

Second, the sacrifice itself signifies death, the just punishment for breaking the Covenant. To identify with the covenant sacrifice is to say: "May this happen to me if I break the Covenant."

The sacrifice that sealed or ratified the Covenant was a "communion sacrifice," which means that the people partook of the meat from the animal sacrificed. The meal is the assurance that Israel has become one family with God.

What does Moses do after the Covenant has been established?

Moses then returns to the mountain accompanied by Joshua, where God will inscribe His Commandments upon tablets of stone. During that time, God also gives instruction to Moses about the building of the Tabernacle (the Sanctuary) and its furnishings and further instructions about the ministers that will serve as priests. Moses will remain with the Lord on the mountain for forty days and forty nights.

One you begin reading Exodus 25-31, you will notice that God is specific how about how things are to be constructed and arranged. Everything must be done according to God's plan, as shown to Moses on the mountain.

"You must follow exactly the pattern I shall show you" (Ex 25:9). "See that you make them according to the pattern shown you on the mountain" (Ex 25:40). "This is how you are to erect the tabernacle according to the model shown to you on the mountain" (27:30). "You will make it in the way that was shown to you on the mountain" (Ex 27:8). "... They are to do exactly as I have directed you" (Ex 31:11).

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