

Book of Exodus, Session 6
Sinai
Exodus 19–20, 24

From the sea, the Israelites proceed to Mt. Sinai. We have already seen that the location of this mountain is quite uncertain. Traditionally, it has been located in the south of the Sinai Peninsula, but some passages seem to locate it east of the Gulf of Aqaba, in Midian. Several old poetic passages speak of Yahweh as a divine warrior who marches from Sinai, or somewhere to the south of Israel, without reference to the exodus from Egypt. So, for example, we read in Deuteronomy 33:

The Lord came from Sinai and dawned from Seir on us

Or again in Judges 5:

Lord when you went out from Seir

when you marched from the region of Edom . . .

The mountains quaked before the Lord, the One of Sinai,

Before the Lord, the God of Israel.

It is likely that the tradition of the revelation at Sinai was originally independent of the story of the Exodus. As the book of Exodus stands, however, the two are integrally related, and culminate in the giving of the law. The complex of exodus, revelation at Sinai and the law are key ingredients in the covenant between Yahweh and Israel that is one of the central concepts in the Hebrew Bible.

Covenant

In the last half century or so, it has been widely accepted that the covenant between God and Israel was modeled on the treaties that ancient empires made with their vassals,

or subject peoples. We have such treaties from the Hittites, who lived in modern Turkey, from the late second millennium BCE, and from the Assyrians in the 8th-7th centuries. At the heart of these treaties were stipulations, or laws. If the subject peoples abided by these stipulations all would be well. If not, dire consequences would follow. The consequences of the treaties were spelled out in curses and blessings. Curses were especially prominent in Assyrian treaties. The Hittite treaties typically had historical prologues that recounted the course of events that led up to the making of the treaty. This historical retrospective might inspire fear of the might demonstrated by the Hittite armies, or gratitude for their willingness to make a treaty at all. Most of the elements of the treaty form can be found in the Bible, especially in the book of Deuteronomy. While the biblical covenant resembles the Hittite treaties in its recollection of history, most scholars agree that the closest parallels are between the Assyrian treaties and Deuteronomy. The relevance of the treaty model to Exodus is less clear, in part because different sources are woven together in the account of the revelation on Mt. Sinai. The Yahwist source does not involve the giving of laws at Sinai at all. There are no curses or blessings attendant on the covenant. The recollection of history is minimal, specifying only that God brought Israel up from the land of Egypt. In the composite text of Exodus, the scene for the giving of the law is set, not by historical recollection, but by the revelation of Yahweh in cloud and thunder on the mountain.

Exodus 19 is clearly composite. Even a cursory reading of the text shows that Moses spends an undue amount of time going up and down the mountain. It begins with the announcement of a covenant (19:5), but then proceeds to have a notably cultic character. Much of what follows has to do with setting limits for the people. They are not to touch

the mountain or go near a woman. Moses assumes the role of mediator, but at the end he is invited to bring up his brother Aaron, the priest. This is no eyewitness account of events at Sinai, but a narrative about how people should behave in the presence of the divine that is constructed on the basis of cultic experience.

The most salient difference between the various sources in the Sinai narrative has to do with the rationale and purpose for the revelation (the fact of a revelation at a mountain being about the only aspect that they all agree on). In P, no laws are given to Moses atop Sinai; God descends in the partially obscured view of the people, Moses goes up, and what he receives is nothing more than the blueprint for Yahweh's new earthly dwelling, the Tabernacle (the construction of which is described in excruciating detail in Exodus 25-31 and 35-40). In the view of the priestly authors, all law-giving took place from the Tabernacle, not from the mountain.

For J, the theophany is (as it was in Exodus 3 as well) a visual one: the people are to witness the descent of Yahweh onto the mountain. But that is the extent of it: "On the third day, the Lord will come down in the sight of all the people on Mount Sinai" (19:11). This theophany is in response to the repeated doubts of the Israelites regarding Yahweh's protective presence, which culminate in the last J passage before Exodus 19, where the people ask outright, "Is Yahweh in our midst or not?" (17:7). The revelation at Sinai is the answer to that question.

The intention of the E revelation is stated clearly: "I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you, and so trust you forever" (19:9). The reason for God's appearance to the people is not so that they can see him, as in J, but so that they can hear him. When the Israelites hear God speaking to Moses, they will

believe, forever thereafter, when Moses reports God's words to them (which is precisely what happens: see 20:18–19). This is a moment of prophetic authorization first and foremost, and it paves the way for the laws that are delivered in chapters 21–23, the Covenant Code. It is these laws that are alluded to in the mention of covenant in 19:5, and it is these laws that are sealed by a second covenantal passage in Exodus 24.

Here again there are manifold signs of different hands; witness how often Moses is said to ascend the mountain. The description of the glory (Hebrew *kabod*) of YHWH in vv. 16-18a is usually assigned to the P source. Verses 9-11, however, which say that seventy elders, as well as Moses, Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, went up on the mountain and saw the God of Israel, is an old tradition. It is remarkable for its blunt statement that "they saw the God of Israel" and yet lived. The usual biblical position is that humans cannot see God and live, but there are several notable exceptions in the prophetic literature (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1; the story of Micaiah ben Imlah in 1 Kings 22). All these texts, including Exodus 24, are important for the later development of Jewish mysticism.

The central text of the chapter is vv. 3-8, where the covenant was sealed with a sacrifice. The blood of the covenant, splashed on the people and on the altar, signifies that the people are joined to God in a solemn agreement. The idea of the blood of the covenant becomes important in the New Testament in connection with the interpretation of the death of Jesus as a sacrifice.

The Decalogue

The Ten Commandments as found in Exodus 20 are usually attributed to the E source of the Pentateuch. The closest parallel to Exodus 20 is found in Deut 5:6-21 (which is dependent on Exodus 20). Other lists of commandments that partially overlap the Decalogue are found in Lev 19:1-18 and Deut 27:15-26. The requirements of the covenant are said to be “ten words” in Exod 34:27-28; Deut 4:13; 10:4. In fact, there is some variation in the way that the commandments are counted. Jewish tradition distinguishes five positive commandments (down to honoring parents) and five negative. Christian tradition generally distinguishes between obligations to God and obligations to one’s neighbor. In some Christian traditions (Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran) the obligations to God are counted as three. (The prohibition of idolatry is subsumed under the first commandment). A distinction is made between coveting one’s neighbor’s wife and coveting other property. The Reformed tradition groups the commandments as four and six, distinguishing the prohibition of idolatry and regarding the prohibition of coveting as a single commandment. This division of the commandments seems to be most in line with the text of Exodus.

The first four commandments, then, deal with Israel's obligations to Yahweh. The first forbids the worship of any other gods. This is not yet monotheism: the existence of other gods is not denied. (The biblical demand that only one god be worshiped is sometimes called henotheism.) Around the time of the Babylonian exile we shall find stronger assertions that YHWH is the only true God, in the prophet we call Second Isaiah, but strict monotheism is developed only in the Hellenistic period, under the influence of Greek philosophy. The prohibition is directly analogous to the requirement in the treaty

texts that the vassals serve no other overlord. The restriction of worship to one god was exceptional in the ancient world.

The rejection of all gods except YHWH was a revolutionary move, all the more so because it forbade the worship of any goddess in Israel. Historically, it served to distinguish Israel most immediately from its Canaanite neighbors. It is clear from the Bible that this distinction was not easy to maintain. Other deities besides YHWH were in fact worshiped in ancient Israel. The prophets and Deuteronomistic History repeatedly condemn the Israelites for worshiping Baal, the Canaanite god of fertility. The biblical texts usually imply that there was a clear choice between Baal and Yahweh, but in fact many people may have seen no problem in worshiping both. Moreover, we now know from inscriptions that the well-known Canaanite goddess Asherah was worshiped in Judah in connection with YHWH. The word “asherah” is used some 40 times in the Bible in reference to a wooden image of some kind, a pole or tree. The wooden image was a symbol of the goddess Asherah. We also know that a goddess called Anat-Yahu (YHWH's Anat) was venerated by a Jewish community in Elephantine in southern Egypt in the fifth century B.C.E. There can be little doubt that these Jews preserved a cult that they had already practiced in the land of Israel before they migrated to Egypt.

In light of this evidence, there is some doubt as to whether the demand that Israel worship only Yahweh really goes back to the beginning of Israel in the time of Moses. The prophets in the ninth and eighth centuries who demanded the worship of YHWH alone seem to have been a minority.

Neither is there any hard evidence for the date of the second commandment, which forbids the making of idols or images. This commandment complements the previous

one, since images played an essential part in the worship of pagan deities. Worshipers in the ancient world did not think that the image was actually a god or goddess, although biblical writers often caricature them in this way (see especially Isa 44:9-20). Rather, as was usual in the ancient Near East, the statue was where the god manifested his presence. In the cult in Jerusalem in the period of the kingdoms there were statues of cherubim, the mythical creatures of Near Eastern art, part human, part animal, part bird. Yahweh was thought to be enthroned above the cherubim. Neither Israelite nor Judahite religion completely renounced the making of images. At some point, the making of images of other deities was forbidden, and we have no evidence that Yahweh was ever represented by images or statues. Later, the commandment is even extended metaphorically to exclude overly specific interpretations of the divine being.

Exod 20: 5-6 reinforces the prohibition of images: "for I the Lord am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments." The jealousy of Yahweh is a recurring motif in the Hebrew Bible. The idea that God might punish children for the sins of their parents would later be called into question by the prophet Ezekiel (Ezekiel 18).

The third commandment, prohibiting wrongful use of YHWH's name, refers especially to false or frivolous oaths, considered as an affront to the Deity. It did not originally intend to outlaw any non-liturgical mention of God's name.

The fourth commandment requires observance of the Sabbath day. The name is derived from a Hebrew verb meaning "to rest." The weekly day of rest would become a distinctive characteristic of Judaism, and a subject of mockery among some pagans in

antiquity, who thought it a sign of laziness. The origin of the custom is unknown. In ancient Babylon, the Akkadian word *shappatu* designated the middle day of the month, the festival of the full moon. The Sabbath is associated with the festival of the new moon in Amos 8:5 and Isa 1:13. It may be that the Sabbath was originally linked to the waxing and waning of the moon, but in the Bible it is independent of the lunar calendar. The rationale given for the observance of the Sabbath in Exodus 20 is a later insertion into the Decalogue in light of the Priestly source and links it to the account of creation in Genesis 1.

The remaining commandments concern relations in human society. All societies have laws governing such matters as these. The Bible is distinctive only in the solemnity with which they are proclaimed.

The command to honor father and mother is a staple element of Near Eastern wisdom literature, as can be seen in Proverbs and Ben Sira.

The sixth commandment is usually translated "you shall not kill," but it is clear from the following chapters that a blanket prohibition on all forms of killing is not intended. The Hebrew verb *ratsach* is often used for murder, but also sometimes for unintentional killing. The effect of this law is not to prevent all killing, but to regulate the taking of life and to make it subject to community control.

The prohibition of adultery is concerned with violations of marriage; it does not encompass other kinds of fornication, and is distinguished from them elsewhere in biblical law. One should keep in mind that polygamy was permitted in ancient Israel (Solomon was the most famous practitioner). Either men or women could be guilty of

adultery, but the man offended against the husband of his partner in sin, while the woman offended against her own husband.

The commandment against stealing does not offer any specification of what is stolen. Some scholars have argued that it was originally concerned with stealing persons (kidnapping), but the commandment as it stands is more general.

The importance of truth in witnessing is illustrated by those cases where someone is put to death on the basis of false witness (e.g., the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21). Later laws warn that no one should be put to death on the word of just one witness (Num 35:30; Deut 19:15).

Finally, the tenth commandment supplements the injunctions against adultery and stealing by forbidding even the coveting of another's goods. The most notable aspect of this commandment is surely the inclusion of the neighbor's wife along with his slaves and his ox and donkey. We need not conclude from this that adultery was considered only a property offense. It was also regarded as shameful, and an offense against God. But there is no doubt that it was also regarded as a property offense.

Questions for reflection

1. How do the Israelites encounter God on Mount Sinai?
2. Do the people receive the revelation directly from God, or is it always mediated by human interpreters?
3. Is Exodus clearly monotheistic?
4. Does the Bible forbid the taking of human life?

Basic Reading

Brueggemann, "The Book of Exodus," 830-53.

Childs, *Exodus*, 339-439.

Further Reading

T. B. Dozeman, *God on the Mountain* (SBLMS 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

J. D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (Minneapolis: Winston, 1985) 15–86.

W. Harrelson, *The Ten Commandments and Human Rights* (Macon, Ga.: Macon Univ. Press, 1997).

B. D. Sommer, *Revelation and Authority: Sinai in Jewish Scripture and Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 2014).

P. D. Miller, *The Ten Commandments* (Louisville: Westminster, 2009)