

Israel at Sinai

Exodus 19 - Leviticus 27

According to Jewish tradition, the whole of Israel's Law was given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Moses is remembered as Israel's law-giver and her whole Law is given in his name, rather like our own criminal law in which every case is brought in the Queen's name.

In fact, it is possible to see in the various books, material from a variety of different dates. This shows that the Law grew gradually as it was adapted to the conditions of later life. Every so often, it was collected and codified and the separate law-codes from different times have been inserted at various points in the story. The most famous example of these law-codes is the Ten Commandments (Exodus 20:1-17). Others are the code known as the "Book of the Covenant" (Exodus 20:22 - 23:end), the "ritual decalogue" of Exodus 34:10-26 and the instructions for the tabernacle (Exodus 25-31; 35-40). Much of this material, especially that in Leviticus, we will omit at this point and return to later.

Day 24. Psalm 99; Exodus 19:1 - 20:21; 24:1-end

God's Covenant with Israel

Psalm 99

The greatness of God, the King.

Exodus 19:1 - 20:21; 24:1-end

These chapters are some of the most important in the whole of the Old Testament, preserving the record of the "covenant" between God and Israel. A covenant is an agreement implying a special commitment between the partners. In this covenant, God took the initiative by rescuing Israel from Egypt. He chose them as his special people and gave them both the land previously promised to Abraham and the Law. In response Israel was expected to keep the Law. This was not simply a set of obligations; the Law was to teach Israel the principles of harmonious social life. By keeping it, they would learn to live together in social harmony and prosperity ("shalom") and enjoy God's blessing. They would also demonstrate God's righteousness to all other peoples.

Because of the importance of this material, it has clearly been passed down in many different versions and the compilers have had to try to piece these versions together. This may be the reason for the several ascents and descents and the different versions as to who exactly it was who went up the mountain.

Exodus 19

Out of all the nations, God chose Israel for a special purpose: to be holy, that is separated to God for special use; to be priestly, a worshipping people; and to be a kingdom, under his rule as King (19:4-6). This was to be accomplished through Israel keeping the Law, a divinely inspired way of life, a gift of grace by which they will secure his blessing. In this way God's Kingdom was to be established on earth in the life of one particular people.

"Theophany", cloud, darkness, fire, thunder and trumpet are traditionally associated with the appearance of God (19:16-19; see Psalm 18:7-15; 97:1-5).

The presence of God means both holiness and danger (19:21-24). To come too close to God is dangerous and can result in death. There is to be a separation between God and the people. Later this was worked out in the elaborate ritual of sacrificial laws.

Exodus 20:1-21

The first three of the Ten Commandments deal with the duty of Israel to God, the last six with social life. In between comes the rule of the sabbath, in which the link between love for God and the right ordering of society is made concrete. A day set aside for God is also the day for rest, relaxation and enjoyment, both for master and servant.

Exclusive worship and the prohibition of idolatry set Israel apart from the surrounding nations with their many gods, each represented by its characteristic idol. Israel was to learn from the start that God is degraded by representation. The only representation he has given of himself is the Person of Jesus Christ.

Social cohesion is underpinned by the obligation to honour one's parents and a promise is given with this command that it will ensure "length of days" or stability of social life.

While the other laws address inner attitudes indirectly, the prohibition of covetousness addresses these directly. But covetousness is not merely an inner attitude. The foundation of Israel's economic life was to be contentment with what one had and generosity to those in need, the complete opposite of modern western economic life.

Exodus 24

This is a very ancient text, and very much at odds with some of the later regulations which followed it. It is far less elaborate and the sacrifices of verse 5 are performed by "young men" rather than priests. It has been preserved because of its great importance, the record of the ratification of God's covenant with Israel. In its present context, the "Book of the Covenant" refers to the Laws of chapters 21 - 23, but these are a later addition. There is no clue to what the original "book" must have been.

From the first, blood is needed to set up the agreement. The blood of the sacrifice sets up partnership between God and the people. In the same way Jesus' death, symbolised by his blood, brings into effect the new covenant between God and all people (Matthew 26:27-28; Hebrews 7:18-end).

24:9-11 is a remarkable text and there is nothing quite like it anywhere else in the Old Testament. Normally, God remained hidden and the consequence of seeing him was death; but here 70 of the elders are brought up the mountain specifically to see him.

Day 25. Psalm 19; Exodus 20:22 - 23:end

"The Book of the Covenant"

Psalm 19

The glory of God seen in the skies compared with the perfection of the revelation of God found in the Law.

Exodus 20:22 - 23:end

This is one of the oldest of Israel's collections of Laws. It is often known as the "Book of the Covenant" from the reference in 24:8, but it was almost certainly not the book read by Moses at the ceremony described in chapter 24. It is an ancient collection, probably dating from the early days of settlement in Canaan, when judges ruled (21:6; 22:8-9) and the Canaanites were still present in numbers (23:28-30). This means it is probably older than the Ten Commandments and there are early versions of the commandments scattered through it. It is also older than most of the ritual laws which follow. The altar of earth or undressed stones of 20:24-26 is much simpler than the elaborate altar of 27:1-8.

In a "burnt offering" (20:24) the whole animal was burned on the altar. This kind of sacrifice was seen as a kind of tribute or gift acknowledging God's sovereignty. In a "peace offering" or "sacrifice of well-being" part of the animal was burned, part went to the priest and the rest was eaten by the worshipper. In early times, this kind of sacrifice was a community celebration in which God was a participant.

Many of the laws are "case law", the kind of law which is built up over time on the basis of experience. The communal wisdom by which the laws were passed down was held by the elders of Israel's town and villages, who met in the town gate to decide disputes. Some of the laws require witnesses, such as those who testify about whether an ox has been in the habit of attacking people (21:29). Some cases required an oath, which might be made before the elders, or perhaps at the local shrine. The word translated "judges" by the N.I.V. in 21:6 and 22:8-9 is the Hebrew *elohim*, which means "God" or "the gods". R.S.V. translates "God" and G.N.B. "the place of worship." The judges to whom the people had to go to settle their disputes were based at the local shrines, so that to go to the judge *was* to go to God or the place of worship.

People are more important than property. The punishments for murder and related offences are greater than those for theft. In addition, extra emphasis

placed on the respect due to parents (21:15,17). Just as in most early agrarian societies, slavery was common. "Slaves" were mostly those who had had to sell themselves to pay their debts or whose parents had sold them (21:2,7). They did not have the same rights as free people, but they did enjoy protection under the law (21:2-11, 23:12).

The formula, "eye for eye, tooth for tooth," etc. is designed to *limit* the taking of revenge to no more than the original injury. This prevents a perpetual feud developing between families whose members are bound to avenge one another. The same reasoning lies behind the provision of a place of refuge in the case of accidental homicide (21:13). Whenever someone was killed family members were bound to avenge the death. This meant that some way was needed of protecting the innocent. This is further developed in the cities of refuge of Numbers 35, Deuteronomy 19 and Joshua 20.

The laws were to be understood within the framework of God's covenant with Israel. The covenant clearly implies the spirit in which they are to be kept: a spirit of compassion and generosity (22:26-27, 23:2-5). To be God's chosen people requires of Israel a distinctive way of ordering their common life. If they live in this way, God promises to bless them and make them prosperous (23:20-end).

Day 26. Psalm 78:32-39; Exodus 32 - 34

The Golden Calf

Psalm 78:32-39

The people of Israel remember their unfaithfulness in the desert.

Exodus 32 - 34

There are clear indications that in an earlier version of Exodus chapter 32 followed immediately after chapter 24. 31.28 is a linking verse, explaining the origin of the tablets of stone that Moses breaks in 32:19. He also comes down the mountain with Joshua, who had gone up with him in 24:13. These important chapters explore the theme of Israel's unfaithfulness and tackle the question of how a holy God was able to be "present" to a sinful people.

Exodus 32

Despite their miraculous deliverance from Egypt and the spectacular appearance of God on Mount Sinai, the Israelites are quick to shrug off the responsibility of God's chosen people and choose other gods which suit them better. This passage shows us how seriously God sees it when we turn away from him. It declares in the steepest terms that the call to give him our exclusive loyalty and worship is more important than life or death (see Daniel 3:16-18; Matthew 10:28,34-39).

Part of the role of God's servants is to intercede for those who turn away from him (see Genesis 18). Here Moses intercedes for the people to the extent of offering his life in exchange for theirs (32:31-32). The anger he feels when he sees the rebellion of Israel with his own eyes is a reflection of God's anger (32:19-20). But does he really change God's mind (32:14)? It is part of the mystery of prayer that God accomplishes his purpose through human will and intercession. If there had been no Moses to intercede, we can be sure that Israel would not have made it to the promised land.

The result of sin is death, and plague breaks out in the camp. On the other hand, in this moment of crisis, the Levites respond by giving God their highest loyalty, even at the cost of the lives of their own families. By this sacrifice they set themselves apart for God's service (32:29).

Exodus 33

In the aftermath of the golden calf, this chapter emphasises the danger of God's presence. Because of the sin of Israel, God cannot travel among his

people (33:3-5). Yet if God is not with his people, they have no protection and there is nothing special about them. The remainder of the chapter wrestles with this problem.

33:7-11 introduces the "tent of meeting", where God meets with Moses. This is outside the camp, emphasising the distance God now has to keep. The much later "tabernacle" tradition, which begins in chapter 25, places the tent in the centre of the camp, but there the people are protected from God's presence by the elaborate sacrificial ritual.

In 33:14, God promises not himself but his "Presence". This is to be understood not as the being of God himself, but an aspect of him; or perhaps as an angelic representation of him. He can be with Israel only at one remove.

Moses himself cannot see God's "face" but only his "glory". These are two more representations of God, of which one is more direct than the other. In this elusive use of words, the writers are trying to convey the essential mystery of God. To see the "face" of God is taboo (Genesis 32:29-30). Yet in Jesus his face is revealed (2 Corinthians 4:6).

Genesis 34

Finally, the covenant is remade. As in the days of Noah, when God promised to overlook the sin of mankind and gave them ordinances to live by, here God overlooks his people's sin and gives them the Law. God is both righteous and merciful, so although human sin deserves punishment, his will is to have mercy (33:19; 34:6-7). These aspects of his character are both reflected and resolved in the death of Jesus on the cross, which explains how "overlooking" human sin is ultimately made possible by "forgiveness" (Romans 3:24-26).

34:10-28 include ten commandments, but all about festivals and sacrificial worship. They are known as the "ritual decalogue". These are what are referred to in 34:28.

Again, Moses stands between God and Israel as spokesman for God and intercessor for the people. Paul makes use of this story, and the elaborate theological ideas of chapters 33 and 34 in 2 Corinthians 3:7 - 4:6.

The Tabernacle

Exodus 25 - 31, 35 - 40

On their journey through the desert, the Israelites' place of worship was a tent called the "tent of meeting". This was a simple structure pitched outside the camp, where people went to "enquire of the Lord" and where Moses met with God (Exodus 33:7-11; 34:34). It was carried into the promised land and pitched at Shiloh (Joshua 18:1).

The "tabernacle" which is described in chapters 25 to 28 is a much more elaborate structure. This description was probably written in the 6th or 5th century B.C. by the priests of the Second Temple, the one which was rebuilt after the return of Israel from exile in Babylon. The writers based their account on their knowledge of the "tent of meeting" and of Solomon's Temple. The tabernacle is half the size of Solomon's Temple. The tabernacle, the altar, the vestments and the rituals of consecration of the priests anticipate the much more fully developed system of worship of those later times. They do not match the descriptions of the earlier worship we will find in the books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings.

The priestly writers place the tabernacle not outside but in the centre of the camp (see Numbers 2:2), as an expression of God dwelling among his people (Exodus 25:8). The tabernacle must be made strictly according to the pattern shown to Moses on Sinai (25:9). The priests thought of the ritual Law as the revelation of the perfect system of worship. The arrangement of the tent and the requirements for worship within it are taken as a perfect expression of the holiness of God, hence the importance of minute observation of every detail of the ritual.

Day 27. Psalm 100; Exodus 25 - 27

The Plan of the Tabernacle

Psalm 100

A communal thanksgiving in which God's people approach to worship him.

Exodus 25

The description of the tabernacle proceeds from the centre outwards. It begins with the objects within the tabernacle itself, then describes the tent of the tabernacle and goes on to the outer court which surrounded the tent, in which stood the altar of burnt offering, immediately in front of the door of the tabernacle itself.

Numbers 10:33-36 tells us that the "ark" accompanied Israel on their travels in the desert. It contained the tablets of the Law or "Testimony" given to Moses on Mount Sinai (25:16). The placing of the Law within the ark at the centre of Israel's worship emphasises its holiness and perfection.

The "atonement cover" or "mercy seat" indicates the other function of the ark, as a throne of judgement where God met with his people. Both Isaiah and Ezekiel, in their visions of heaven, saw "cherubim" or winged figures, half animal half angel, surrounding God's throne (Isaiah 6:2; Ezekiel 1:5). In the ritual of the Day of Atonement, described in Leviticus 16, the high priest "made atonement" for the people by sprinkling the blood of the sacrificial offering on the mercy seat. By purifying it with blood, he ensured that God and his people remained "at one" and their sacrifices effective.

The "bread of the presence" (25:30) was placed before God and renewed each day.

The "menorah" or seven-branched candlestick (25:31) has become one of the principle symbols of the Jewish faith. Its function in the tabernacle is simply to give light inside the tent.

Exodus 26

The tent is divided into two parts, the "holy place" and the "most holy place." There is a "gradient" of increasing holiness toward the centre of the tabernacle. God dwells in the midst of his people but in perpetual darkness and may not be approached. Only the priests are allowed to enter the holy place; the rest of the people may only come into the court of the tabernacle.

Exodus 27

Inside the tent the objects are made or covered with gold; outside they are made or covered with bronze. The altar described here is a simplified version of that of the second Temple, but big enough for an ox to be burned whole upon it. Early altars were made of earth or stones (see Exodus 20:24-26).

Day 28. Psalm 15; Exodus 28 - 30

The Priests

Psalm 15

Real worship requires holiness of life, which springs from integrity of heart.

Exodus 28

The garments of the high priest were worn for "dignity and honour" (28:2, R.S.V.: "glory and beauty"). Those of the other priests are listed in 28:39-end

The word "ephod" is a Hebrew word left untranslated because it is not certain exactly what this garment was. 1 Samuel 2:18 has Samuel wearing a linen ephod as a boy. In Judges 17:5 and 18:14 an ephod seems to be needed if there is to be a priest at the shrine. In 1 Samuel 22:18 the priests who are killed are described as those "who wore the linen ephod" but there is also a particular ephod, brought to David by Abiathar (1 Samuel 23:6) which is used for finding the Lord's will by means of the sacred lots, "Urim and Thummim" (see 1 Samuel 14:3,18-19,36-42; 23:6-12; 30:7-8). These may have been two stones attached to the ephod in some way. By the time Exodus 28 was written, and probably long before, the way these lots were used had been forgotten. The two onyx stones engraved with the names of Israelite tribes (28:9-12) may be a memory of them.

The priestly writer places the "Urim and Thummim" on the high priest's breastplate, along with twelve other precious stones bearing the names of the tribes. In this way the high priest bears the names of the tribes continually before the Lord as a kind of perpetual intercession (28:12,29).

The "plate" or "rosette" (28:36) is engraved with the words, "Holy to the Lord". Holiness here does not mean "good". The plate is a channel through which God takes up and removes human guilt. It is holy because it has been accepted by God and set apart to him. The same is true of the altar (29:36-37).

By bearing the names of the tribes of Israel engraved on the precious stones on his breastplate, the high priest makes continual intercession for them each time he appears before God. Intercession for all God's people is part of the ministry of Jesus as our high priest in heaven (Hebrews 4:14-16; 6:19-20; 10:19-22; Romans 8:34; 1 John 2:1)

Exodus 29

The procedure for the consecration of the priests is also described in Leviticus 8 and 9. First Aaron offers a bull for his own sins and that of his sons (29:10-14). Next, he offers one of the rams as a tribute gift to God (29:15-18). The second ram is for his consecration as high priest (29:19-21) Following his consecration, Aaron offers God his portion of the ram (29:22-25). Last, by eating his own portion of the ram, he creates relationship between God and himself (29:31-34).

The regular duty of the priests is to offer the continual burnt offering (29:38-45). It is through the sacrificial worship that God is present in the midst of his people.

Exodus 30

This chapter continues with the other duties of the priests. Although it is to be placed inside the tabernacle, the incense altar (30:1-10) was not previously described.

Voluntary sacrifices, such as those described in Leviticus 1 - 3, would depend on the wealth of the person offering them. But the atonement money is the same for everyone. The ransom of a person's life, before God, is the same for all (see Genesis 9:4-6; Psalm 49:7-9; Mark 10:45)

Everything used in worship was to be consecrated with the special anointing oil, which was kept exclusively for this use. In Christian worship, the oil stands for the Holy Spirit, through whom alone we offer acceptable worship (John 4:23-24).

The holiness of God is reflected in the beauty and costliness of the materials used and regularity and precision of the rituals. Because Israel belonged to the Lord, they were in constant danger of death because of his holiness. These rituals kept the channels of communication open, enabling their sin to be forgiven.

Day 29. Psalm 84; Exodus 31, 35 - 38

Building the Tabernacle

Psalm 84

A song for a pilgrimage expressing the yearning of the worshippers to know the presence of God at his place of worship. The valley of Baca (84:6-7) also means the "vale of weeping." Those whose hearts are set to worship God can also derive strength from sorrow. Verses 8 and 9 are a prayer for the king.

Exodus 31; 35:1 - 36:7

The tabernacle is to be better and more beautifully made than unaided human skill could achieve. It requires the special gifts of the Spirit of God on Bezalel and Oholiab, who are equipped both to make things themselves and to teach others (31:1-6; 35:34).

Natural skills are also offered and these are used under the direction of those specially gifted (36:2,8 etc.).

The work is to be done under the discipline of rest. No work on the tabernacle is to be carried out on the Sabbath. Otherwise its holiness in being set apart for God would be compromised. In fact, the Sabbath is to be the sign of the Sinai covenant (31:12-17; 35:1-3).

The costly materials and human skills needed for the tabernacle are given as free-will offerings, from those whose hearts are willing; there is no compulsion (35:5,21-22,29) and they are given so abundantly that the offering overflows and a halt has to be called (36:2-7).

Exodus 36:8 - 38:end

The detailed repetition of the plans for how the tabernacle was to be constructed implies that all God's instructions had been carried out in minute detail.

The quantities of precious metals listed in 38:24-end are 1,000 kg. of gold, 3,430 kg. of silver and 2,425 kg. of bronze. The number of the Israelites mentioned in 38:26 (603,550) is taken from the census, whose details are recorded in Numbers 1.

The whole passage offers a vision of worship "in Spirit and in truth" which is beautiful and acceptable. It is a response of obedience to God made according to his direction and inspired by the Holy Spirit. It uses both special divine

gifts and natural gifts. It is offered from willing hearts and it overflows so that in the end more is given by individuals than can be included in the corporate offering.

Day 30. Psalm 134; Exodus 39 - 40; Numbers 7:1 - 8:4; Leviticus 8 - 10; Numbers 6:22-end

The Completion of the Tabernacle

It is assumed that much of today's passage will be read at speed, because of the large amount which is repeated from earlier chapters.

Psalm 134

The last of the "Songs of Ascents" or pilgrimage psalms, in which the worshippers arrive in Jerusalem and call on the priests to praise the Lord.

Exodus 39 - 40

The emphasis is on everything done in obedience to the detail of the Lord's command. Everything is exactly right, nothing is missing. God is to be worshipped in the way *he* chooses, not as we might choose. In response, the cloud of God's glory settles and remains over the tabernacle, the guarantee of his presence and his guidance during Israel's wilderness wanderings.

Numbers 7:1 - 8:4

The leaders of the people set an example of generosity for all future generations. The gifts from each tribe are exactly the same.

Leviticus 8

After the tabernacle is set up, the priests are anointed and consecrated. This chapter records in detail how the Lord's instructions in Exodus 28 were carried out. First, the priests are clothed and anointed (8:1-13). Then the altar is consecrated (8:14-17). Next, the Lord's tribute gift is offered (8:18-21), the ram is offered for Aaron's ordination (8:22-30) and Aaron and his sons eat their portion (8:31-end).

Leviticus 9

After their consecration, Aaron and his sons make the offerings for the people. First, the sin offering for the priests to cleanse them and qualify them for the task (9:8-11); then, the whole burnt offering for the priests as worship to God (9:12-14); then the sin offering for the people (9:15), followed by the whole burnt offering for the people (9:16-17). Only when the people are cleansed from sin and have offered their tribute sacrifice can they offer the fellowship offering or sacrifice of well-being (9:18-21), which was shared between God and the people and established partnership.

The fire from the Lord (9:24) signifies his acceptance and approval (see also 1 Chronicles 21:26; 2 Chronicles 7:1).

Leviticus 10

In the excitement of the occasion, Nadab and Abihu forgot the holiness of God and met their deaths. The rest of the chapter emphasises the danger and responsibility of the priest's contact with God's holiness. Yet even here, it is not simply the letter, but the heart which governs acceptability to God. Although forbidden the rites of mourning, Aaron's heart is in mourning and he and his sons did not eat their allotted portion (10:16-end).

Numbers 6:22-end

The traditional high priestly blessing.
