

SESSION TEN

THE COVENANT AT SINAI

Exodus 19:1—24:18

Exodus 19—24 represents one of the most crucial sections in the entire Bible. In the outworking of the Abrahamic covenant, this section marks a significant advance with the nation chosen by God. Now the nation is joined to YHWH by a constitution that obligates her in many ways to her King. Yet, the passage has opened the door to the realm of "law" and the relationship of man to God by this means.

I. INTRODUCTION TO THE COVENANT AT SINAI

The first remark that needs to be made about the Law is that it was never intended to be a means of salvation. The means for justification before God has already been established with Abraham in Gen 15:6: Abraham believed (i.e., he relied upon the Word and the promises of God) and righteousness was credited to him (cf. Rom 4; Gal 2). The basis for this justification in every age is the substitutionary atonement of Jesus Christ, although the conscious understanding of this facet was only being progressively clarified as more and more revelation was given.¹

Far from being a means of salvation, the Law was a further outworking of the divine program begun with Abraham. From Abraham, a nation had been promised which would mediate God's blessing to the world. Now we have the *people* to make up the nation, but they have no constitution and no land. The Law in Exodus 20—24 is the constitution for the subjects of the nation. By acceptance of the terms of the covenant, they are agreeing to bind themselves to YHWH that they might be the mediator of blessing to the rest of the world. The promise of blessing is certain, for it rests upon the Abrahamic covenant. Nevertheless, the realization of blessing is conditioned on obedience. If the nation obeys, they will reap blessing and be the channel of blessing to the world.

The relationship between YHWH and the nation is being cast in the form of an ancient Near Eastern suzerainty treaty, whereby a sovereign king (a suzerain) and a vassal nation mutually obligated themselves to the explicit terms of the treaty (see Section II below). The suzerain (YHWH) is offering privileges and benefits if the vassal (Israel) will agree to the terms. The terms will be spelled out in Ex 20:1—23:33; the benefits are set forth in Ex 19:5-6. In essence, it says, "If you agree to do this, I will provide these favors."

"Now then, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be my own possession among all the peoples, for all the earth is Mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation." (Ex 19:5-6)

In 19:8, Israel agrees to this proposal: "All that the LORD has spoken we will do!" (cf. 24:7). Unfortunately, some have taken this to mean that Israel was abandoning the principle of grace for law (cf. the *Scofield Ref. Bible*). But in light of God's commendation of their decision (see Deut 5:27,28)

¹For a more thorough discussion about salvation and the Law, see John S. Feinberg, "Salvation in the Old Testament," in *Tradition and Testament*, ed. John S. Feinberg and Paul D. Feinberg (Chicago: Moody Press, 1981): 39-77.

this is most unlikely. Rather, what is at stake here is the opportunity to be YHWH's mediator of blessing. Notice carefully the promises available to Israel in Ex 19:5-6:

1. "My own possession (נְחֻלָּה, *s^egullāh*) among all the peoples." That is, they could be a peculiar treasure. YHWH is saying in effect, "Although all the world is mine, you will be a unique and precious treasure to Me."
2. "a kingdom of priests." A priest is a liaison between man and God. Israel could have a priestly function to other nations, communicating the way to YHWH (cf. Isa 49:6 where God's *Servant* is viewed as a "light to the nations"). Merrill notes,

Their role thence forth would be to mediate or intercede as priests between the holy God and the wayward nations of the world, with the end in view not only of declaring his salvation, but providing the human channel in and through whom that salvation would be effected.²
3. "a holy nation." They could be set apart and distinguished, not enslaved to sin as the other nations.

This was the opportunity for privilege. Once agreed to, the Law remained a form of relationship between YHWH and the nation until Christ died on the cross.

As history wore on, it was evident that the nation would not remain faithful to this covenant relationship. In contrast to the unconditional Abrahamic covenant, the Mosaic covenant was conditional. Consequently, the covenant had to be renewed, and we can see several examples of the renewal of the covenant. The initial covenant is given and agreed to in Ex 19—24. The covenant is renewed in Ex 32—34, upon entering the land (Deut), and under Joshua (see Josh 24). This is what makes the work of the prophets so significant. They were calling the nation into account for breach of covenant and alerting the nation to the consequences of their disobedience (see Deut 28—30).

II. THE FORM OF THE COVENANT

A very valuable service has been rendered by G. E. Mendenhall, Meredith Kline, and K. A. Kitchen regarding the parallel form of the Mosaic covenant to other Near Eastern covenants of the second millennium BC.³ This form is spoken of as a "suzerainty vassal treaty form." This was a commonly used international treaty form used in the Hittite world, in which a superior and more powerful suzerain entered into a treaty with an inferior vassal (attested most abundantly in the Hittite royal archives at Boghazkeui, Turkey). The vassal would bind himself by oath to the suzerain and obligate himself to certain duties. These treaties had a fairly well established form (although they were not absolutely rigid):⁴

1. Preamble - Identified the suzerain.

²Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 80. Cf. Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1961), 1:36-45, 481-85.

³George E. Mendenhall, *Law and Covenant in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (Pittsburgh: The Presbyterian Board of Colportage of Western Pennsylvania, 1955); Meredith Kline, *Treaty of the Great King* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1963); and K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and the Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1966).

⁴George E. Mendenhall, "Covenant Forms in Israelite Tradition," in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader*, ed. Edward F. Campbell, Jr., and David Noel Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 3:38-42; and Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary in Old Testament Jewish and Early Christian Writings* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1970).

2. Historical Prologue - This included a description of deeds done for the benefit of the vassal, such that the vassal is obligated to perpetual gratitude toward the great king because of the benevolence, consideration, and favor which he has already received.
3. Stipulations - The obligations imposed upon and accepted by the vassal (which included an expression of loyalty to the suzerain).
4. Provision for deposit in the temple and periodic public reading.
5. The invocation of the gods as witnesses to the covenant.
6. Curses and blessings pronounced.
7. The formal oath by which the vassal pledged his allegiance.
8. A solemn ceremony accompanying the oath.
9. A form for initiating procedure against a rebellious vassal.

Although modified in some respects, many of these particulars are found in the Mosaic covenant, especially the preamble, historical prologue and stipulations. Obviously, in God's covenant with Israel there was no invoking of other gods to witness the covenant. By understanding the suzerainty-vassal type of treaty, we can have a better idea of the significance that these chapters had upon the Israelites. Finally, we should summarize the activities at Sinai as a covenant, binding the people to YHWH as their king, and binding the tribes to one another as co-vassals of the king. With this covenant, we have the creation of a theocratic state (i.e., they are under the direct rule of God rather than under a human king).

III. COMMENTS REGARDING THE TEN COMMANDMENTS

The Ten Commandments certainly do not represent all the covenant stipulations. However, they do represent the basic code (note that these alone are placed in the ark). The Ten Commandments fall into two basic categories, with the first four pertaining to Israel's relation to YHWH and the last six pertaining to the relationship of the vassal members with one another.

One should observe the explanatory clauses in the first four commands (Do this for . . .). This structure ceases with the fifth command, and is thereby a peculiar feature of the unit related to YHWH (see vv 5,7,11; the "for" clause of vs 5 covers the first two commands). The reason for these explanatory clauses is due to the unique character of the first four commands. The final six commands were common place, found in other codes of the ancient Near East (e.g., the Code of Hammurabi), being necessary to preserve society. The first four were unique and thereby needing explanation (note especially the thought of having only one God).

The first command to have no other gods is not meant to imply a recognition of polytheism. The point is this: "You shall have no other gods in preference to Me." The moment a man went to any other god (even though this god was not real, i.e., it was a mere idol), he would be giving preference over YHWH. By implication they also had to reject all foreign relations as well, for to make alliance with a foreign nation would be tantamount to a recognition of its gods. The second command involving idolatry reflects back upon Gen 1 and the creation. YHWH is a jealous God, meaning that He has a zeal or passion for what rightfully belongs to Him. The third command forbidding the taking of the Lord's name in vain is much more than to curse His name. It means that you should not lift His name up to a worthless cause (e.g., the Crusades), doing evil in the name of YHWH. This probably also involved a prohibition on making false oaths that would dishonor His name (see Lev 19:12), though it was quite legitimate to truthfully swear an oath by YHWH's name (Deut 6:13).

The fourth command regarding the Sabbath is the sign of the covenant. Appropriately, it images the pattern of God's creation, thereby proclaiming YHWH as the absolute sovereign creator. Consequently, He is sovereign over the nation as well.

The final six commands are manward, signifying that all the vassals are equal and protected by the King, and any hostility against a co-vassal is hostility against the King Himself (since it jeopardizes the interests of the King). To "honor" (vs 12) is from a root meaning "heavy," from which comes the idea "to count valuable." The sixth command regarding the taking of life is best translated "You shall not murder," meaning to take life criminally (in some manner not sanctioned by God's revealed will). It is interesting that Paul singles out the last command ("You shall not covet") in Romans 7. If all the other commands could be kept, the last one is sure to be everyone's downfall. We cannot get around the 10th commandment to not covet.

IV. RELATION OF THE LAW TO THE THEOCRATIC PROGRAM

A crucial observation to make is that the Law was given to a redeemed people (not just as individuals but as a nation). As a nation, they are redeemed and have an obligation to their redeemer. By binding themselves to YHWH, the nation was constituted a priesthood and was thereby responsible to represent God before men.

Simply put, God is appointing Israel to represent Him before the nations of the earth! Yet before they can function as priests, Israel has to know God (including His holiness). Israel has to be set apart by God to this ministry, and must have a message from God to communicate to the peoples. They had known God as a redeemer and had been introduced to Him as a provider, but there was much more to learn.

Even the lampstand in the Tabernacle was a perpetual reminder that they were to be a light to the nations. As a result of their failure to live up to this calling, God eventually sent another who declared, "I am the true light." In like manner, Christ was the "true vine" and the "true shepherd."

With the Law, Israel was appointed to fulfill a theocratic function in keeping with the original design to have man rule over creation. Israel was to be God's instrument in bringing the nations under the authority of God, by revealing the truth that was being revealed to them. Thus their positive response in Ex 19:8 was an act of submission by which they were consenting to do whatever God wanted. For this, they were commended (Deut 5:27-28), but as God lamented, "*Oh that they had such a heart in them*" (Deut 5:29). Nevertheless, they were willing to be the channel through which God worked (Gen 12:3).

The Abrahamic covenant was unconditional, yet the blessings were conditional. Israel knew they were responsible to obey, but they did not know how they were to live to please a holy righteous God. Consequently, the Law was directed at their spiritual infancy, telling them what to do and what not to do. Obviously, Israel's self-assessment is that they can fulfill the obligation. God's accurate knowledge is that they will be unable apart from a new heart (this will be provided through the New Covenant; cf. Jer 31). There will be a day of maturity for Israel when she will be given a new heart. In the process, God will send Jesus, one among the nation, who does obey and who does fulfill Israel's task to mediate blessing to the world.

V. BASIC PURPOSES OF THE LAW

There are a number of purposes that the Law would serve in the total outworking of God's program:

1. To reveal the holiness of God.

Like a mirror, the Law is not the reality but a reflection of the reality. God is at least as holy as the Law.

2. In revealing the holiness of God, the Law reveals the unholiness of man!
The Law reveals holiness, and man is measured by that holiness and consequently found not holy (cf. Rom 3:23; Gal 3:19,22). The Law demonstrates man as being a *sinner*.
3. The Law reveals the standard of holiness that God requires of those who would walk in fellowship with Himself.
4. The Law served as a child-trainer or a tutor (Gal 3:23ff) to safe-guard and supervise the people until the full revelation of Christ came.
5. The Law was given to be the unifying principle for the establishment of the nation, providing a way of submission to recognized authority.
6. The Law was designed to separate Israel from the nations so that she could perform the function of a kingdom of priests, thereby preserving the people.
7. The Law provided a means of worship, since the people could not follow the pattern of the temples in Egypt. It also provided a means of restoration to fellowship (cf. Lev 1—7).
8. The Law was a temporary measure until Christ. The permanent aspect is the Abrahamic covenant which will remain in force throughout the Bible. The Law was merely added alongside the Abrahamic covenant, to assist those who were under the Abrahamic covenant. The Abrahamic covenant was unconditional, but the blessings were conditional. The Law tells us the conditions which have to be met to get the conditional blessings out of the unconditional covenant.

VI. NEW ORDER OF MEDIATORS ARISING FROM THE MOSAIC COVENANT

Under the original creation, man was in communion with God, mediating His rule over the earth. This original plan was thwarted by anti-theocratic forces, however. Consequently, God established a principle of executing His purpose through mediators. Up until Moses, God carried out the exercise of His rule through a single theocratic mediator (e.g., Abraham, Isaac, etc.). With the giving of the Law at Sinai, the mediatorial responsibilities were divided among four offices: prophet, priest, political leader, and wise man. Moses was the last of the individual theocratic mediators. Through this new order of four mediating offices, the original purpose of restoring communion and rule was to be accomplished. The theocratic purpose was advanced as each of these mediators of covenant fulfilled the responsibilities of his domain. However, the purpose was thwarted as each one failed. Nevertheless, the Mosaic covenant was a means of advancement of God's purpose. The covenant, with its provision for a priestly mediator, offered the opportunity for communion with God. The political mediators offered the opportunity for participation in the rule of God. In this light, the Law was a temporary provision, awaiting the coming of Christ who would fulfill the role of all four offices.

A few comments will be offered on these four offices:

A. The King

The political leader had the domain over the secular law and leadership of the nation, so as to lead the theocratic nation in extending its righteous rule over the earth.

B. The Priest

The priestly mediator was obviously given the domain over the priesthood (the *cultus*) with the purpose of restoring communion between God and man.

C. The Prophet

The prophetic mediator was the giver of new authoritative revelation and the guardian of the covenant against anti-theocratic forces. In regard to God's purpose, he guarded the covenant and became God's spokesman for warning, as well as alerting the nation to the role of the Messiah.

D. Wise Man

The wise man offered political advice and wisdom in conformity to Torah with respect to nearly every area of life. Through his counsel, the man under covenant was aided in skillful living and the fulfillment of covenant responsibilities.

Through these mediators, the covenant nation was to extend God's rule and blessing over the earth. The rest of the Old Testament will trace how well they did in achieving this purpose.

VII. THE RELATION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT BELIEVER TO THE LAW

Space does not permit a full discussion of this topic, although a few comments are appropriate.⁵ An essential point to make is that there was nothing wrong with the Law. "*So then, the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good*" (Rom 7:12). Nevertheless, because man has a depraved nature, the Law arouses the sinful passions within man which work in the members of our body bearing fruit for death rather than fruit for God (Rom 7:5). Therefore, by faith in Christ, we die to the Law and are released from it, so that we may serve in newness of the Spirit. Consequently, we are no longer under the Law and are not obligated to it (Rom 7:1-7; 1 Cor 9:20-21; and 2 Cor 3; cf. Paul's comments on the Sabbath in Col 2:16-17). Many of these same commands, however, are reiterated in the New Testament (e.g., the command not to steal). It is just as morally wrong to steal today as it was during the time Israel was under the Law. Yet we refrain from stealing, not so that we can keep the Law but because we want to obey the Spirit of God.

⁵ For further study, see Greg L. Bahnsen, Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., Douglas J. Moo, Wayne G. Strickland, and Willem A. VanGemeren, *The Law, the Gospel, and the Modern Christian: Five Views* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Pub. House, 1993). Cf. J. Daniel Hays, "Applying the Old Testament Law Today," *BibSac* 158:629 (Jan-Mar 2001): 21-35; and Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation; A New Theology of Assurance* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995). Eaton has some very good discussion about the relationship of the believer today to the Old Testament Law, and correctly concludes that we are not under the Law today. But following the Spirit of God is meant to yield a higher morality, not a lesser one (as Jesus reveals in the Sermon on the Mount).