



EXODUS 19-21 MOUNT SINAI; THE WONDERFUL TEN COMMANDMENTS

We are about to begin a marvelous section of Scripture-- the giving of God's laws. It is important to note that God's laws had previously existed, for in Genesis, *all* of God's Ten Commandments are already in effect, including the food laws. The Sabbath command is the first commandment given, in Genesis 2:1-3. Then there follow laws against false gods, idolatry, murder, stealing, lying, dishonoring parents, coveting and even about clean and unclean animals (Gen. 7:2, 8).

God's laws codified not begun

In Exodus, these laws will now be codified, or put in written form, and adapted to a large community of people that did not have God's spirit in them. God would instruct them in a step-by-step process, according to how they progressed. The principle "to whom much is given, from him much will be required" (Lk. 12:48) is in effect. They certainly were not ready to receive the "spiritual" dimension of the law yet, but if they were obedient, in God's good time, these would be added. But if they were disobedient, they would limit their understanding to the elementary parts of the law (John 16:12). Yet, God is committed to them as Abraham's descendants, and children of the promises.

So in Exodus 19, the setting is established for the giving of God's commandments and laws.

The date of giving of the law

First, let's see the time setting: "In the third month after the children of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, *on the same day*, they came to the Wilderness of Sinai...So Israel camped before the mountain" (Ex. 19:1-2).

There are several possibilities on the precise date of their arrival. It could mean they arrived on *the same day* of the week that they left Egypt, a Thursday. But it is more probable that it means they arrived on *the first day* of the third month, as Jewish tradition holds. *The JFB Commentary* explains: "According to Jewish usage, the *first* day of that month—"same day"—it is added, to mark the time more explicitly, that is, forty-five days after Egypt...three days of preparation, making the whole time *fifty days* from the first [Sabbath] after Passover to the promulgation of the law. Hence the feast of Pentecost, that is, the fiftieth day, was the inauguration of the Old Testament church, and the divine wisdom is apparent in the selection of the same reason for the institution of the New Testament church (Jn 1:17; Ac 2:1)

The Bible Reading Program adds, "Indeed, there are clear Pentecost themes to be found here: the consecration of Israel as the chosen people, i.e. "firstfruits";

the beginning of the Old Testament "church in the wilderness" (Acts 7:38 KJV), as Pentecost would mark the beginning of the New Testament Church (see Acts 2); the giving of the law, as God's people would later be given the power to *keep* that law through the Holy Spirit on Pentecost (compare Luke 24:49; Romans 8:7); God descending on the mountain with great noise and trembling and 'in fire' (Exodus 19:18), as His presence would later descend upon Christ's disciples with great noise and in tongues of fire (Acts 2); the initiation of the Old Covenant, as Pentecost would later mark the giving of the 'better promises' of the New Covenant, particularly the gift of the Holy Spirit (compare Hebrews 8:6)...Though typical of the new relationship God wants with His people, the Old Covenant still involved separation from God, as the boundary markers so vividly picture...The contrast between the Old and New Covenants is vividly illustrated by comparing two scriptures. "You shall set bounds for the people all around" (Exodus 19:12) and "let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith" (Hebrews 10:22). Through Jesus Christ's sacrifice and intercession as our High Priest today, God has granted us liberty to come right before His very throne of grace (4:14-16)."

Where is Mount Sinai?

The next question is, where is this "mountain of God" (3:1) where His law would be given? Lately, there has been an alternative mountain proposed on the other side of the Gulf of Elat, saying the Israelites crossed this gulf, and not the traditional site (the Ron Wyatt group). But this is not possible according to the biblical narrative, for shortly after the Israelites left Egypt, Pharaoh began his hot pursuit in his speedy chariots (Ex. 14:5-9). The Israelites were traveling on foot, so there is no way they could have crossed the 180 miles through the entire Sinai Peninsula and then cross the Gulf of Elat or Aqabah in this time frame.

Yet, the traditional site for the last 1,500 years is Mt. Sinai, also called Jebel Musa (mountain of Moses) and does fit the time frame. (Mount Sinai is also called Mount Horeb in the Bible (Ex. 3:1; 33:6) and is in the most mountainous part of the Sinai peninsula.)

The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia mentions, "Dt. 1:2 records the the journey from Horeb to Kadesh-barnea by way of Mt. Seir took eleven days. This distance has been confirmed independently by modern scholarship...This area is much like a small plain...It would have been the only natural area for the encampment of Israel before the sacred mountain."

A kingdom of priests and a holy nation

Once there, “Moses went up to God, and the Lord called to him from the mountain saying, ‘Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob... 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 indeed obey My voice and keep My covenant, then you shall be a special treasure to Me above all people; 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. So Moses came and called for the elders of the people, and laid before them all these words which the Lord commanded him. Then all the people answered together and said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do. So Moses brought back the words of the people to the Lord. And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Behold, I come to you in the thick cloud, that the people may hear when I speak with you, and believe you forever’” (19:3-9).

God gave the israelites the opportunity to represent Him to the rest of the world. If they were obedient, God would bless them and other nations would then want to copy God’s ways, but it all depended on their obedience.

God then tells Moses in three days, they are to present themselves consecrated before Him. “Then it came to pass on the third day, in the morning, that there were thunderings and lightnings, and a thick cloud on the mountain; and the sound of the trumpet was very loud, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled. And Moses brought the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Now Mount Sinai was completely in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire. Its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked greatly. And when the blast of the trumpet sounded long and became louder and louder, Moses spoke, and God answered him by voice... And the Lord called Moses to the top of the mountain, and Moses went up... Then the Lord said to him, ‘Away! Get down and then come up, you and Aaron with you. But do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord, lest He break out against them.’ So Moses went down to the people and spoke to them: ‘And God spoke all these words...’” (Ex. 19:16-20:1).

Here God would give His Ten Commandments, all based on the principle of true, outgoing love (1 John 5:3-4). The first four define love toward God and the last six, love toward others. As Jesus summarized the Ten Commandments into two great principles, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. And the second is like it, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself. *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets*” (Mt. 22:37-40). From these two great principles spring the

Ten Commandments as ten great branches of God’s laws, with the rest of the Bible filling in all the twigs and smaller branches of these laws.

Those Ten Commandments given directly by God, and later written on two tablets by God Himself, are based on eternal principles. They will later be written into our very inner natures, since they define true, spiritual love (Rom. 7:14; 13:10; Hebrews 8:10).

When Jesus Christ returns, His kingdom will be based on these laws, the letter and the spirit of them, and nations will learn to truly respect them. It will lead to lasting peace and happiness (Is. 2:1-4). Of course, God’s laws are progressive, meaning the letter of the law has to be learned first, just as a student needs to learn arithmetic before algebra. Both fields are based on mathematics, but the basics have to be learned first. So it is with God’s laws. For instance, you will never get anywhere if you are physically committing adultery and yet trying not to lust. No, first you have to avoid committing the physical act, and then you can proceed to avoid the mental act of lusting after someone else.

That is what Christ meant when He said, “Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfill... For I say to you, that unless your righteousness exceeds the righteousness of the scribes and the Pharisees, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven” (Mt. 5:17-20).

Once the Ten Commandments were given, the people pleaded with Moses that God stop speaking directly to them. “Then they said to Moses, ‘You speak with us, and we will hear; but let not God speak with us, lest we die’” (20:19).

Much later, Moses added to the account, “These words the Lord spoke to all your assembly... and He added no more. And He wrote them on two tablets of stone and gave them to me... Then the Lord said to me; ‘I have heard the words of this people which they have spoken to you. They are right in all that they have spoken. Oh, that they had such a heart in them that they would fear Me and always keep all My commandments, that it might be well with them and with their children forever! (Dt. 5:22, 29).

It is sad that the Israelites in general did not obey God, and as Stephen said, “This is he who was in the congregation in the wilderness with the Angel who spoke to him on Mount Sinai, and with our fathers, the one who received *the living oracles* to give to us, whom our fathers *would not obey*, but rejected. And in their hearts *they turned back to Egypt*” (Acts 7:38-39).

God then speaks directly to Moses, and tells him he should write these other laws in a book (Ex. 24:4, 7). He is the first person mentioned as writing God’s words, and this is done six times (Ex. 17:14; 24:4; 34:27, 28; Num. 33:2; Dt. 31:9, 24; 32:1-43). Jesus Christ mentions

Moses wrote the first five books of the Bible, the section called the Law of Moses (Lk. 24:44).

The terms “book” and “Bible”

Now the term “book,” from the Hebrew *sepher*, means “to write.” Our term “Bible” comes from *biblos*, a scroll made of papyrus reeds. Egyptians had invented this writing paper at least 1000 years before Moses. It was, along with leather, the material from which the Old Testament was originally written. It’s unfortunate that the Phoenicians, which included the Canaanite tribes, copied the Egyptian paper-making process so successfully that their city of Byblos in Syria became a chief producer and coined the term for the scroll. But the term surely should have been “papyrus,” for that is the name of the true material. Hence, the only honor the Egyptians have of their invention is our word ‘paper’ derived from papyrus and not for a scroll.

So Moses would have the two tables written by God with the Ten Commandments, and a book, or a scroll made of papyrus, with the rest of God’s laws written in them, called “the book of the covenant” (24:7). In this book of the covenant were the rest of the laws derived from the Ten Commandments.

God’s laws can be divided in the following sections:

1) **The Ten Commandments** – these should govern a person’s conduct and society in general. They contain a spiritual as well as a physical element.

2) **The Statutes** – these mention the specific applications derived from the Ten Commandments. They cover the areas of religion, government, economy, education, justice, labor, health and defense.

3) **The Judgments** – they are the decisions made by God and later administered by judges, based on the Ten Commandments and the Statutes (Ex. 18:24-26; 21:1; Num. 15:32-36; Mat. 16:19).

4) **The Rituals or Ordinances** – these were laws focused on sacrifices and rites, most added after the giving of the law. These were temporary laws, largely fulfilled by Jesus Christ’s sacrifice (Gal. 3:19; Heb. 9:9-10). Yet we still keep some ceremonies such as the Passover and the rite of baptism. In the Millennium, Christ will reinstitute the sacrificial system to look back as a symbol for His sacrifice (Ez. 40-44).

The first law placed in the Book of the Covenant had to do with idolatry and sacrifices. “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Thus you shall say to the children of Israel: ‘You have seen that I have talked with you from heaven. You shall not make anything to be with Me—gods of silver or gods of gold you shall not make for yourselves. An altar of earth you shall make for Me, and you shall sacrifice on it your burnt offerings and your peace offerings...And if you make Me an altar of stone, you shall not build it of hewn stone; for if you use your tool on it, you have profaned it’ (20:22-25).

God prohibits the making of any images to Him, and doesn’t want to “glorify” the sacrificial system. The principle is that we should worship God in spirit and truth, not in elaborately man-made religious structures that can distract people from having a direct relationship with Him.

Labor laws

Next, come the *labor laws* based on the Ten Commandments. How do you love your neighbor as yourself when he is your servant? God gives the answer based on the commandment not to steal—a man’s rights, labor, or things. Remember that it is the spiritual principles behind these laws given at Sinai that are eternal.

“Now these are the judgments which you shall set before them: If you buy a Hebrew servant, he shall serve six years, and in the seventh he shall go out free and pay nothing. If he comes in by himself, he shall go out by himself; if he comes in married, then his wife shall go out with him” (21:1-3).

These are very modern labor laws for their days, that consisted of a slave becoming bound for life to the owner, unless sold to another. Here, instead of an oppressive slavery, the person became an indentured servant, with rights to dignity and a correct treatment. After six years, the person was free from his commitment. Most would become an indentured servant because of debts, and God said after six years, the debt was totally paid off. Also the debt could be paid off before the time. If a female was made into an indentured servant, she still retained her rights. “If he takes another wife, he shall not diminish her food, her clothing, and her marriage rights. And if he does not do these three for her, then she shall go out free, without paying money” (21:11). Yes, the Bible teaches women’s rights way before the modern movement.

If the servant did not want to leave the household after six years, and felt his freedom would lead to worse things, then he could commit himself to the family, and the family to him. “But if the servant plainly said, ‘I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out free, then his master shall bring him to the judges. He shall also bring him to the door, or to the doorpost, and his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him forever’ (21:6). There are people that recognize they are better off working for someone else than going off on their own. But there had to be love, not force, involved in the decision on both parts. We thus see how humane these laws truly are.