

THE COVENANT AT SINAI

(Exodus 19-24, 32-34)

Through the desert, Moses led the Israelites to Mt. Sinai, the mountain of God, where Yahweh originally appeared to Moses in the burning bush. Here, Yahweh established a perpetual relationship with the people by means of a suzerainty treaty or covenant, the heart of which was the Decalogue.

ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN SUZERAINTY TREATIES

Upon the discovery of other ancient Near Eastern covenant formularies, considerable light has been shed upon God's covenant with Israel. It seems apparent that God used the cultural institution of covenant already in place to define his relationship with his people. Similarities between the features of the covenant in the Torah and those of other vassal treaties are far too numerous to be coincidental. Covenant was a basic institution from antiquity in the ancient Near East, especially among tribal cultures and city-states where there was no international law. A covenant was a solemn promise between two parties made binding by oath, either a verbal formula or a symbolic action, and each party was obligated to fulfill the terms of the covenant. The oath invited judgment from God (or the gods) upon failure to keep the covenant promise. The covenant between God and Israel, however, was decidedly not a bilateral covenant between equal parties. Rather, it was a suzerainty treaty between an overlord and a subject, similar to the Hittite treaties of the 2nd millennium BC.

Hence, the concept of covenant is critical to any understanding of the Torah. Yahweh was the great Suzerain, who imposed his law upon his subjects. Israel was his vassal and was obliged to love and obey him. So long as Israel maintained covenant faithfulness, the nation would be protected and blessed. When and if the nation neglected the covenant, reprisals for disobedience are clearly in force, reprisals that would escalate if the disobedience continued.

his treasured possession, to serve as a kingdom of priests (19:3-6). Hence, the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt was not only an escape, but also a calling. The commission of the nation to be a kingdom of priests set apart for God's larger purpose theologically connects directly with God's promise to Abraham that in his seed all nations of the earth will be blessed (cf. Ge. 12:3). Priests, by definition, are mediators, and if the whole nation was to be a priesthood, this immediately implies that they were to be priests to the nations of the world.

The mountain of God was marked off into concentric areas of holy space. The people were confined to the foot of the mountain outside a barrier (19:10-25). The elders were allowed part way up (24:9-

The people camped at the foot of the holy mountain, where God informed them that he had chosen them to be



This 15th Century BC Hittite Suzerainty Treaty has striking similarities in both language and form to the covenant God made with Israel at Sinai.

British Museum, London

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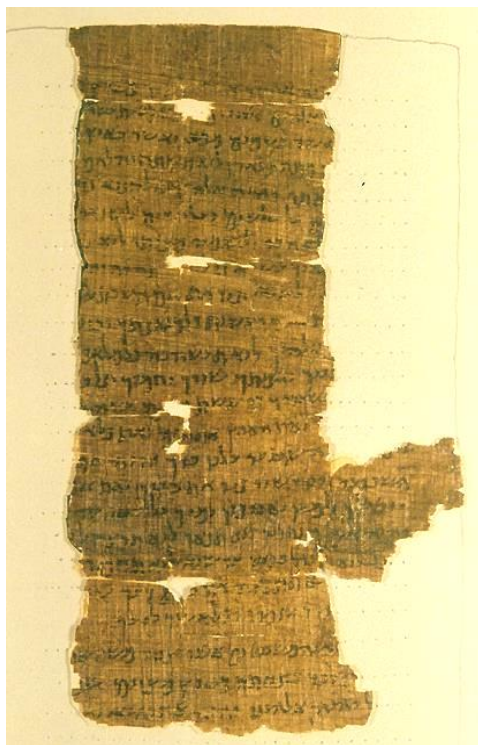
11). Moses, alone, was allowed to enter the cloud of Yahweh's presence at the top (24:15-18). These areas of holy space were for the protection of the people, so that they would not come too close to Almighty God, else they risked death.

The Decalogue

Here, God audibly spoke the Ten Commandments from the mountain that was belching fire and smoke.¹ Though the Ten Commandments are generally familiar, even to modern people, their orientation may be somewhat different than is sometimes assumed. The essence of these commandments in the context of the ancient Near East was:

1. *Exclusive loyalty to God alone*
2. *Preservation of God's mystery*
3. *Warning against presuming upon God's power*
4. *Reverence for sabbath rest*
5. *Preservation of family*
6. *Respect for human life*
7. *Sanctity of marriage*
8. *Respect for personal ownership*
9. *Warning against perjury*
10. *Warning against materialism*

The Decalogue gave concrete expression to the Israelites' relationship to Yahweh and their relationship with each other in a social context. As a free people, redeemed from the bondage of Egypt, it guaranteed their human rights, freedoms, and responsibilities. The first nine commandments deal with overt acts, while the final commandment addresses internal desires. As such, the final word was incapable of being enforced in a human court; it could only be adjudicated by the God who reads human hearts.



Nash Papyrus

Discovered in 1898, the four fragments of this text contain the Ten Commandments and date to the 2nd Century BC.

Cambridge University Library

The Book of the Covenant

The expression "Book of the Covenant" derives specifically from Exodus 24:7. It is the oldest extant codification of Hebrew law. It speaks of the earliest days of Israelite society before the rise of urban

centers, addressing Israel's farmers who kept sheep, oxen, and donkeys (but not horses and camels). The monetary system was primitive, based on weighing out silver rather than the exchange of minted coins (coins would not be invented for several centuries). No mention is made of a king or a court. Most scholars recognize the Book of the Covenant as consisting of Exodus 20:22–23:33, a section of the Torah which is self-contained and internally consistent in its treatment of bronze-age agrarian society problems.

These laws are corollaries to the Ten Commandments and contain three basic types of law: those commanding piety,

¹ While the Bible clearly indicates that altogether there were "ten words" (34:28), it does not enumerate them. Hence, there are differing traditions about how to count them, the Anglican/Reformed/Orthodox enumeration being quite similar to the Jewish one, but the Roman Catholic/Lutheran enumeration being somewhat different.

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those commanding justice, and those commanding charity. They address such things as slavery, personal injury, the protection of property, social responsibility, the exercise of justice and mercy, and religious calendar observances. Indeed, these are some of the very kinds of things addressed in other law codes of the ancient Near East, such as, the famous Code of Hammurabi.² In a blood ceremony, Moses sprinkled the altar (representing God) and then sprinkled blood on the people, binding them together with Yahweh (24:6-8). Moses then ascended Mt. Sinai where he remained for forty days and nights, conversing with God (24:18).



THE CODE OF HAMMURABI (18th Century BC)

contains case laws similar to those in the Book of the Covenant. Examples include:

HAMMURABI

If a man destroys the eye of another man, they shall destroy his eye. If he breaks another man's bone, they shall break his bone. If a man knocks out a tooth of a man of his own rank, they shall knock out his tooth (#196-197, 200).

MOSES

But if there is harm, you shall pay life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe (21:23-25).

HAMMURABI

If a man's ox be a gorer, and has revealed its evil propensity as a gorer, and he has not blunted its horn, or shut up the ox, and then that ox has gored a free man, and caused his death, the owner shall pay half a mina of silver (#251).

MOSES

But if the ox has been accustomed to gore in the past, and its owner has been warned but has not kept it in, and it kills a man or woman, the ox shall be stoned, and its owner also shall be put to death (21:29).

Moses on Mt. Sinai

Altogether, the Ten Commandments would be given three times, once orally by the voice of God from the midst of the fire and smoke of the mountain (19:9; 20:1, 18-19), once inscribed on stone tablets by the finger of God and delivered to Moses at the top of the mountain (24:12; 31:18; 32:15-

² While the Decalogue consists of **apodictic laws**, that is, absolute laws framed as “you shall” or “you shall not,” most ancient Near Eastern law codes are **case laws** framed with an “if” statement, i.e., “If such and such is the situation, then this is how it is to be adjudicated.” Apodictic law is rare in the ancient Near East, but case law is very common.

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16), and yet a third time after Moses had shattered the original tablets (34:1, 4, 28). While he was at the top of Sinai, God also gave instructions to Moses for building the Tabernacle, the worship center for the faith of Israel.

Unfortunately, the moral constitution of the people was weak. It was one thing to take Israel out of Egypt and quite another to take Egypt out of the people after centuries of inculturation. While Moses was atop the holy mountain, the people lapsed into idolatry by reverting to the worship of a golden calf (32). The worship of the golden bull calf was probably a reversion to the Ba'al cult, which was known in the Egyptian delta but would be universally practiced in the Land of Canaan. Ba'al was the Canaanite god of storm and rain, and he was depicted as riding on the back of a bull. When Ba'al mated with his female consort, Asherah, their union was believed to cause fertility in the land, animals, and people. A fundamental part of Ba'al worship was sacred prostitution, where worshippers mated with priests and/or priestesses in a ritual of imitative magic. The worship of the golden calf was



Jebel Musa, the traditional Mt. Sinai



a reversion to polytheism as well, for Ba'al was only one of the seventy gods and goddesses in the Canaanite pantheon. This is why at the making of the calf it was said, "These are the gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of Egypt." (32:8).

Moses was so angry when he descended the mountain that he smashed the newly made tablets of stone upon which were inscribed the Ten Commandments (32:19). His rash action necessitated a return to the top of Sinai so another set could be obtained from God (33-34).

While on the holy mountain for a second stay of forty days and nights, Moses was privileged to see a theophany of God and his glory (33:18-23).³ When he descended the second time, his face was changed, because he had spoken with Yahweh (34:29-35).⁴

³ While mortals are unable to survive a full vision of God (cf. 19:21; 33:20), various degrees of partial vision were granted. These varying degrees of visibility correspond to the religious hierarchy of the nation. The people see God from a distance (19:21-25), the leaders see God from below but closer than the people (24:1-2, 9), and Moses, at the summit of the mountain, is granted the closest vision of all (34:29-36). Still, even Moses could only behold God's glory while being shielded (33:18-23).

⁴ There is some question as to how Moses' face was changed. The Hebrew word (קַרְנֵי) normally refers to horns; hence, the Latin Vulgate says that Moses' face was "horned." Based upon St. Paul's understanding from the New Testament (2 Co. 3:7ff.) along with the LXX rendering, most English Versions indicate that his face was radiant.