

*Exodus 19:1–9a (NRSV)*

On the third new moon after the Israelites had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that very day, they came into the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup>They had journeyed from Rephidim, entered the wilderness of Sinai, and camped in the wilderness; Israel camped there in front of the mountain. <sup>3</sup>Then Moses went up to God; the LORD called to him from the mountain, saying, “Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the Israelites: <sup>4</sup>You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles’ wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup>Now therefore, if you obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession out of all the peoples. Indeed, the whole earth is mine, <sup>6</sup>but you shall be for me a priestly kingdom and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the Israelites.”

<sup>7</sup>So Moses came, summoned the elders of the people, and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him. <sup>8</sup>The people all answered as one: “Everything that the LORD has spoken we will do.” Moses reported the words of the people to the LORD.

*Exodus 24:1–8 (NRSV)*

Then he said to Moses, “Come up to the LORD, you and Aaron, Nadab, and Abihu, and seventy of the elders of Israel, and worship at a distance. <sup>2</sup>Moses alone shall come near the LORD; but the others shall not come near, and the people shall not come up with him.”

<sup>3</sup>Moses came and told the people all the words of the LORD and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, “All the words that the LORD has spoken we will do.” <sup>4</sup>And Moses wrote down all the words of the LORD. He rose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain, and set up twelve pillars, corresponding to the twelve tribes of Israel. <sup>5</sup>He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. <sup>6</sup>Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. <sup>7</sup>Then he took the book of the covenant, and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, “All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.” <sup>8</sup>Moses took the blood and dashed it on the people, and said, “See the blood of the covenant that the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words.”

*God creates a people, his people.*

God creates. I’m sure that when we hear those two words, our minds turn to Genesis 1 and 2; I know mine does. But even the creation of this world was a means to an end. As Simon Chan once put it, “God made the world to make the church.” Rocks and trees and mountains are a means to create a people whom God loves and who loves God. This creation story of a people is the story of the book of Exodus.

Yes, God had come to Abraham and made big promises to him and Sarah about all the families of the earth being blessed through them. But God had asked little of them and, by the time of the Exodus, the Israelites had forgotten much and were not a people through whom God could rescue humanity. So God took them to Mt. Sinai, promising them that if they obeyed God and kept covenant with God, they would be God’s treasured possession, a holy nation (19:5-6). Terence Fretheim helps us get deeper into these central phrases of obedience and covenant:

*“Obey my voice and keep my covenant.”* [19:5] First to be noted is that the matter is presented in personalistic terms: I did; I bore you; brought you to myself, giving heed to my voice, keeping my covenant, being my own possession, being to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. That which is called for on Israel’s part

is couched in language that speaks more of personal commitment to God himself than to particular commandments. There is as yet no specified content to the voice to be obeyed.

Second, obeying the voice of God is a concern already expressed in Exodus (see at 15:26). We have seen that issues of obedience are not simply associated with the law revealed at Sinai but also emerge in connection with various situations in Israel's life. Hence, when combined with the lack of specificity, there is an openness here regarding the shape of Israel's obedience, a recognition that *to obey the voice of God entails more than obeying the laws given at Sinai*.

Third, much the same point can be made regarding the phrase "keeping my covenant." This is not new language either, being an integral part of the covenant with Abraham (Gen. 17:9–10). In that context it refers to circumcision, but later passages make clear that it finally entails obedience to other divine commands that emerge along the way. Abraham's "obeying my voice" (Gen. 22:18; 26:5) and "keeping my charge, my commandments, my statutes, and my laws" (26:5; see 18:19), tied as they are to the divine promise, are testimony to Abraham's keeping covenant. Also to be noted are the references to "keeping" statutes and laws in Exod. 15:26 and 16:28 (cf. 18:16, 20; 13:10). In 19:5, then, keeping covenant is essentially equivalent to obeying God's voice, but with the specific reference back to Abraham. Israel as a *community* for the first time responds as Abraham did. Keeping covenant has as broad a reference as obeying the voice of God. In the widest sense, it is doing justice to, being faithful to, the relationship with God in which the people stand, *a responsibility that is more extensive than obedience to Sinai law*.<sup>1</sup>

Thus, though the plagues in the Exodus story capture people's imagination, the heart of the story is the encounter between God and his people at Mount Sinai. There, Moses climbs the mountain to appear before God, who reminds the people of what God has done for them and then proposes a covenant with the Israelites: "If you will obey me and keep my covenant, you will be my special treasure" (see Exodus 19:1-6). When Moses returns from the mountain, the leaders of the people meet and agree to accept the covenant, "to do everything Yahweh asks of us." Nonetheless, it is very important to realize that the Israelites agree to the covenant, they sign on for the project. They will obey God, not just in law-keeping but in all that God asks of them. Yes, they will love

### Covenants

The notion of covenant is one of the central themes of the Bible. It isn't a word we use much anymore, but it expresses the making and keeping of commitments and promises. An excellent example today is a marriage covenant.

Though there are several types of covenants in the Bible, they fall into two broad categories, (1) the covenant between God and his people and (2) the covenants among humans.

Covenants are used in the Bible to bind two persons legally and personally, as when Jonathan makes a covenant with David (1 Samuel 18:3-4), wherein their loving bond diminishes the legal aspects of the covenant. In other cases, such as the covenant between Laban and Jacob (Genesis 31:43-54), the legal power of the covenant is much more important because Laban and Jacob don't trust each other. In most biblical covenants between humans, God is called on as the witness and guarantor.

When God is a participant in the covenant, such as God's covenants with Noah (Genesis 9:8-17) or Abraham (12:1-3) or Moses (in Exodus and Deuteronomy) or David (see 2 Samuel 7), the covenant takes on all the theological significance of a commitment between God the creator and his creation, between God the king and his people.

<sup>1</sup> Terence E. Fretheim, *Exodus*, Interpretation, a Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching, (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1991), 210–211.

God and love others! After everything God had done for them, the Israelites' willingness to accept God's covenant shouldn't surprise us. Sadly, neither will their failure to keep it.

After the people accept the covenant with God, the most amazing thing happens. God tells Moses that he will come to the people in a cloud of smoke so they can hear the audible voice of God! God is going to spell out clearly the terms of the covenant Israel has accepted so that all can hear. Thus, Moses assembles the people at the base of the mountain where God, in smoke and fire and announced by the blowing of a ram's horn, addresses his people.

#### *Instruction in the covenant*

In God's address, YHWH lays out a series of ten terse commandments. In these commandments, God begins to shape a people who will be holy, who will reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin God's instruction on how to live in right relationship with God and with one another. This entire passage (Exodus 20-31) is foundational to the biblical narrative, and there are several keys to understanding why this is so.

First, God's choosing and saving of Israel was never simply for their own sake but for the sake of the whole world. Looking back from Mount Sinai, the Israelites can remember God's promise to Abraham that all nations would be blessed through him (Genesis 12:3). More than a thousand years later, Jesus would remind his disciples that they were to be the light to the world and not hide their light under a bushel basket (Matthew 5:14-16). But to be the light to the world, to be the ones through whom God would restore all creation, God's people had to grow in holiness. Their character had to reflect God's own character. The Ten Commandments begin to show the Israelites what it means to love God and to love neighbor. The abstract commandment to love is made concrete by the commandments.

Second, God is going to dwell with his people. But just how does a holy God live with an unholy people who remain very much the children of the rebellious and disobedient Adam?<sup>2</sup> So, beginning in Exodus 25, God gives them instructions for building a tabernacle<sup>3</sup>, a moveable shrine in which God will dwell. The Israelites didn't imagine that God could be contained in a tent, but they knew that God's presence would be with them in a way that he was not with other peoples. God would dwell with *them*! Imagine that God came to you and told you that he would live upstairs in your home. What a privilege; what a responsibility.

Third, God sets up a system of rituals, priests, sacrifices, and festivals so that the people can begin to learn that some things are holy and some are not. They must learn that the two do not mix. The priestly system teaches the people that God cannot be approached by a sinful and unholy people. Thus, the priests and sacrifices accomplish, only after a fashion, the reconciliation of God and his people. But still, all the rituals, priests, and sacrifices are only signposts to the real thing; they could never be the "real thing" itself. That will await the arrival of God's own son (Act 4).

Finally, the Law was not given to the world, but to the Israelites, the family of Abraham. They were the ones who worshipped YHWH and he gave these teachings to his people. God would dwell with them in a way that he did not dwell with others. Thus, in a way, the Law can be seen as a manual on what it means to live with God. None of us would be surprised to be handed a list of house rules if God moved in

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<sup>2</sup>We are all children of Adam in the sense that we are all sinful, failing to love fully God and our neighbor. It is the separation and estrangement created by "sin" that must be fixed.

<sup>3</sup>The tabernacle was a moveable tent, suitable for a nomadic people. Inside was a place set apart from the rest that was called the Holy of Holies. In it was kept the Ark of the Covenant containing the stone tablets brought down the mountain by Moses. Centuries later, when the people were settled in the Promised Land, they would build a permanent temple in Jerusalem. It was patterned on the tabernacle described in the book of Exodus.

upstairs. All of this is to say it is foolish to try to separate the two tablets, to strive to live by the ethic of the second tablet while ignoring first.

*What does God want from his people above all else?*

Jesus summed up all of the Law, God's Instruction, in two teachings: love God (Deuteronomy 6:5) and love others (Leviticus 19:18). The first tablet speaks to our relationship with God. We are to have no other gods or take God's name in vain and so on. The second tablet speaks to how we are to live with others. We are not to steal or give false testimony. We are to honor our parents and our marriages. We are to forsake murder and so on. All of it seeking to answer the question, "What would love do?"

If you took all of God's teachings set forth in the Law of Moses, mixed them up in a pot, and boiled them down to their essence, love of God and others would be what is left. Think again of the two tablets – the first one focused on what it means to love God, the second on what it means to love others. If you will let this sink deep into your mind and heart, your understanding of Scripture will be revolutionized.

God created a people to live in love and fellowship and through whom God would rescue humanity. And when the community failed to love as they promised, God provided one faithful Jew who would and did. His name was Jesus.

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