

4. The Mosaic Covenant

Only a few months out of Egypt, God's "son" had already been subjected to several tests of faith that openly demonstrated Israel's unbelief and rebellion against Him. They lamented their thirst and hunger and grumbled against their Redeemer, crying out for the meat pots of Egypt. And when Yahweh condescended to be merciful to them – providing for their need in a supernatural way even while they grumbled against Him, they lapsed again into unbelief at the very next opportunity. Yahweh delivered them in battle, symbolically pouring forth His power through the conduit of Moses' upraised arms, and yet they disputed among themselves, threatening to do what the Amalekites had been unable to do, namely destroy the covenant people, and thereby also the covenant promise.

a. Israel's Arrival at Sinai (19:1-25)

Yahweh had tested His chosen son Israel and proven his unfaithfulness while, at the same time, demonstrating His own unfailing commitment to His word of promise. Just as He had sworn to the patriarchs and reiterated to Moses, Yahweh had brought Abraham's seed to the foot of His holy mountain to be joined to Him in covenant union. Jacob's descendents were to be formally constituted as God's covenant people and, toward that end, He issued two preliminary charges to them. Sinai and its covenant were the goal of all that had transpired thus far, and it was necessary that Israel be prepared to meet its Redeemer-God.

- 1) God's first charge addressed the purpose for the covenant in that it showed Israel its new identity under the covenant (19:1-6). The Sinai covenant would formally establish Israel as God's uniquely elect son: His "*unique possession*" as a "*kingdom of priests and a holy nation.*"

These parallel ideas are mutually referential and mutually interpreting. Together they indicate that Israel's identity as Yahweh's "son" implied its foundational obligation of singular devotion: *Israel was to be wholly consecrated to its covenant Lord and Father, evidenced by a life of authentic and perpetual worship.*

Through its faithful devotion to Yahweh, the nation of Israel would fulfill its ordained role as "image-son," reflecting in itself and in its practice the glory of its divine Father. In this way Israel would also fulfill the Abrahamic mandate of mediating God's blessing to all the earth's families. By obeying His covenant, Abraham's seed would convey the knowledge of their covenant God to all those observing them.

"The entire nation was to live in the midst of God's presence, and were all to become like priests standing in the presence of God in his temple and reflecting his glorious light, being intermediaries for the nations living in darkness and apart from God."

(G. K. Beale, The Temple and the Church's Mission)

This first charge is also noteworthy in that it reveals the nature of the covenant as Israel's *law* (the Law of Moses). A common misconception is that the Law was essentially a collection of individual and impersonal rules and commandments that the sons of Israel were to comply with much as a citizen is obligated to obey the laws of his community. This perspective, in turn, leads to an erroneous understanding of the biblical instruction regarding obedience to the Law of Moses and the way it implicated an individual's (and the nation's) righteousness before God.

The Mosaic Law was the **covenant** that bound Israel to God. Like all covenants, it defined the covenanting parties to each other and established the nature and bounds of their mutual relationship. The Law of Moses defined, established, and administered the father-son relationship that was to exist between Yahweh and Abraham's descendants. This being the case, *righteousness for Israel amounted to relational faithfulness as defined by the covenant, not compliance with a list of rules*. This is precisely the reason that God treated Israel's later disobedience under the covenant as a son's waywardness (Hosea 11:1ff) and a wife's adultery (Ezekiel 16, 23).

The first thing God did when Israel arrived at Sinai was to inform them of who they would be under the forthcoming covenant. In that way they would understand what obedience to the covenant entailed. Moses relayed God's charge to the sons of Israel and they immediately responded by committing themselves to faithfully adhere to all God required of them. With that, Moses returned to notify God of Israel's intention (19:7-8).

- 2) The fledgling nation had committed itself in advance to Yahweh's design, and on that basis He set the terms for their encounter with Him on the holy mountain (19:9-25). Indicative of their appointed status as a *holy* people, the sons of Israel were to consecrate themselves for three days by washing their clothing and abstaining from sexual contact. They were to appear before Yahweh as a clean and undefiled people.

And yet, even in their ritual purity, the Israelites were to keep their distance from God. No person or animal was to touch even the base of Mount Sinai while Yahweh was present upon it. Any creature that violated this restriction would be immediately put to death. In profound irony, *Yahweh's beloved "son" – whom He had taken to Himself – was forbidden from entering into His presence*. The seriousness of God's demand is seen in the fact that He heralded His appearance on the mountain with another warning to Moses to keep Israel back from it.

Taken together, these two charges highlight the important truth that Israel's presence at Mount Sinai spoke to the core biblical theme of the recovery of sacred space. Sinai was the "mountain of God" – the place where Yahweh's son would meet with and worship his Creator-Father (cf. again 3:1-6, 10-12, 15:17).

And yet, in parallel with the patriarchal altars in Canaan, this encounter merely portrayed the restoration of what had been lost in Eden. Like their covenant fathers, Israel's worship of God was to be a matter of *mediated distance*. The true recovery of sacred space – intimated in the protoevangelium and promised in the Abrahamic Covenant – awaited a future fulfillment, for it presupposed the end of estrangement between God and men. The intimacy of Eden would not be recovered until man was restored as image-son.

b. The Making of the Covenant (20:1-23:33)

Having instructed Israel to keep its distance, the Lord descended onto Mount Sinai in the presence of Moses. But He did not speak to the people until He had sent Moses down to them to warn them again about the dire consequence of “breaking through” to Him. When Moses had done so, the Lord began to address His chosen “son.” While the people stood trembling at the foot of the mountain, Yahweh's voice thundered from its summit as He began to set forth His covenant, first in the *Ten Words* (20:1-17), then in a series of *general ordinances* (20:22-23:19), and finally in summary *promises and sanctions* (23:20-33).

- 1) Consistent with covenant structures in general and near-eastern suzerain treaties in particular, Yahweh introduced His covenant with a preamble identifying the parties to the covenant. And fundamental to that preamble was Yahweh's self-identification as Israel's *Redeemer*. Israel wasn't simply being joined to the Creator-God; throughout its generations Israel was to know Yahweh as the God who had delivered them from their cruel bondage in accordance with His promise to Abraham.

Yahweh identified Himself as Israel's Redeemer-Father (19:4; cf. 4:22-23; Hosea 11:1-4), and the implication was that Israel's identity under the covenant was that of *redeemed son*. Being the seed of Abraham and elect son of God, Israel was to live as a royal, priestly, and consecrated nation.

- 2) God's self-identification laid the foundation for His demands upon His covenant people. As Israel's redeemer, Yahweh had exclusive claim on His redeemed “son.” He had purchased Abraham's descendents and gathered them to Himself, and Israel was to respond in kind by devoting itself wholly to Him. This obligation – summarized in the “Ten Words” – was the rightful response of a redeemed son to a sovereignly gracious Redeemer-Father. Thus William Dumbrell notes:

“The Ten Commandments spell out the boundaries of the relationship established by grace and heard by all Israel. In keeping with this understanding, we note that the later, general word for ‘law’ (torah) carries the sense of instruction or guidance. In these terms the Ten Commandments offer a mirror image of how Israel's national life in the land should look, reflecting the relationship of grace.”

Looking further to the ultimate salvation-historical significance of Sinai and Israel's life in covenant with God, Dumbrell makes this important observation: "*The Ten Words objectified on Sinai seem merely to have codified the divine will for humankind.*" (The Faith of Israel)

As the Sinai covenant (the Law of Moses) showed Israel what it meant to be *Israel* – the “image-son” who reflects and expresses to the creation the likeness of his Father-God, so it ultimately revealed what it is for man to be truly *man*. This is the primary sense in which the Law prophesied of Christ, who is both the Last Adam and the “covenant of the people” (cf. Matthew 11:13; Luke 24:25-27, 44-45; also Isaiah 42:1-6 and 49:1-8).

The Sinai Covenant – epitomized in the Decalogue – expressed to Israel the meaning of its identity as God's image-son and how the nation was to live out that identity. *But Israel's national status as formalized at Sinai was grounded in its historical identity as the seed of Abraham.* Yahweh's election of Israel and His taking them to Himself in covenant union was His honoring His prior promise to Abraham to be his God and the God of his descendents (ref. Genesis 17:7-8). In turn, God's promise to Abraham was grounded in His archetypal oath in Eden to bring forth a descendent from Eve in whom the cosmic calamity of man's fall would be rectified.

The Sinai Covenant had its origin in the Protoevangelium, and this fact explains the centrality of the *sabbath principle* in the covenant.

- The original creation centered in Eden had been defined by “shabbat.” Having finished His work of creating, ordering, and filling, God rested and inaugurated the perpetual seventh day to mark His creation – under the dominion of His image-son – as a sabbath reality (Genesis 2:1-3).
- The creation account emphasizes the sabbatical nature of sacred space, and Israel's future residence in Canaan represented its presence in Yahweh's sanctuary. *What God was promising Israel amounted to a symbolic restoration of sacred space*, and for this reason Israel's life in Canaan was to be a sabbatical life with the Sabbath serving as the very sign of the covenant (ref. 31:12-18).

The centrality of the Sabbath to Israel's existence in Canaan is evident first in God's introduction of the sabbath concept prior to their arrival at Sinai (ref. again 16:22-30). Once there, the Lord exalted the weekly Sabbath by incorporating it within the Ten Words. And beyond that, God would soon reveal that the entirety of Israel's life in relationship with Him was to be ordered around the principle of “shabbat” as He appointed sabbath observances connected to the full scope of Israel's theocratic and religious existence in His sanctuary land (cf. Leviticus 23:1-38, 25:1-8).

- 3) Yahweh spoke the words of the Decalogue in the hearing of all Israel, but His presence overwhelmed and terrified them and they cried out to Moses to act as the mediator between them and God (20:18-21). The brevity of this passage leads many to miss its immense significance, but Moses would later remind the sons of Israel of their petition and the Lord's response to it (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Their cry for a mediator met with divine approval: *Israel's relationship with God was properly to be a matter of appointed mediation*, and that dynamic would one day find its own fulfillment in another prophet-mediator like Moses who would stand before the God of the covenant on behalf of His covenant children.

Though set apart to Him as His uniquely chosen son, Israel's relationship with Yahweh was to be characterized by mediated distance. This is clear from Moses' appointment, and is further highlighted by God's instruction regarding the use of *altars* in His worship (20:22-26). Just as with the patriarchs, Israel's access to God would be through the mediating instruments of sacraments and symbols. Most importantly, the sons of Israel could construct their own altars (for the present time), *but they could not contribute to their material design*. As would soon become clear with the tabernacle, Yahweh alone determined the basis and means of men's approach to Him, and any human contribution to that endeavor or determination regarding it constituted an act of blasphemous arrogance.

- 4) The foundation of the covenant was the Ten *Words*, and upon that foundation the Lord provided a series of general *ordinances* pertaining to Israel's corporate existence (21:1-23:19). The collective nation was the covenant "son of God," but the nation was comprised of countless individuals. If Israel were to fulfill its corporate role, its individual members would have to live in a certain way in relation to one another.

It is notable that, whereas God spoke the words of the Decalogue in the hearing of the people, these subsequent ordinances were given to Moses to communicate to them. According to their petition, God would now speak His words to Moses and he would deliver them to Israel (ref. again 20:19).

- 5) Finally, Yahweh rounded out the covenant with a series of personal promises and sanctions. The covenant established responsibilities for *both* parties, and these were summarized in its concluding section (23:20-33).

For His part, God would fulfill His oath to bring Israel safely through the wilderness and into the sanctuary land (v. 20). There, in His presence, they would realize the fullness of "Edenic" blessings in dominion, fruitfulness, prosperity and well-being, just as the Lord had promised to Abraham centuries earlier (note esp. 23:31). But Israel had its own responsibility under the covenant: Yahweh would be a protective and providing Father if Israel would be a devoted son (vv. 21-22, 24-25, 32-33).