

## LESSON 9

### THE COVENANT AT MOUNT SINAI

Exodus 19:3–24:18

#### Aim

To understand Israel's responsibility in the Covenant God made with her and the importance of the covenant relationship in the life of the nation.

#### Introduction

The six chapters of this lesson introduce a block of material which extends through the remainder of the Book of Exodus, embraces all of Leviticus, and includes the first ten chapters of Numbers. The plans for this course do not include a detailed study of the Law; however, the history of Israel cannot be understood fully apart from knowing something about the Law and the Covenant. These chapters, along with Genesis 3, are considered by many to be the most important section of the Old Testament. After man fell, God began planning to redeem him. In Exodus 19–24 God set forth the Covenant, and Israel accepted its promises and responsibilities. The covenant relation was established between God and His chosen people.

#### The Election of the People

Exodus 19:3-15

The Israelites had been selected as God's people to receive His blessings. They were not forced to become His people, but they were enticed by the blessings God had already bestowed upon them. They had been a slave people without a promising future. Yahweh delivered them from Egyptian bondage and promised to make them a great nation with their own land. In the process of developing into a nation, they must adopt a law. The Law received at Sinai was not separated into civil and sacred, but the nation was to be ruled by God and His will. As a people set apart to Yahweh, all of the national life would be related to the sacred. Before giving them His Law and proceeding to carry out His promises, God tested the people at the foot of Mount Sinai.

According to the Abrahamic Covenant, the descendants of Abraham were not only to receive blessings but also to be a blessing to the nations of the world. God's promises involved the people in responsibility. He desired to continue blessing them, but they had to be willing to keep His Covenant. As His own possession, they would be blessed and exalted above all the peoples of the earth, resulting in God's being recognized by other nations because of what He was doing for them. Since all the earth belongs to Yahweh, He is concerned with being honoured and worshipped by all men. Israel had been selected to bear witness to His greatness. She was to be a kingdom of priests: each person had the right of access to the divine presence and the responsibility of bringing other people to God. Israel was to be a holy nation. She belonged to God and would be used by Him in bringing the nations of the world into proper relationship with their Creator. God had redeemed Israel from Egyptian slavery

Circle the correct word or words. The Law received by Moses on Mount Sinai (was, was not) separated into political and religious aspects.

(Circle *was not*)

and promised to protect her and provide for her future needs, but Israel was to assume the responsibility of service. At Sinai her status needed to be defined and her relationship set forth. In the covenant relationship Israel would have responsibilities as well as receive blessings.

After journeying three months, Israel camped before Mount Sinai. Moses went up the mountain of God and received revelation from God. When he came down, he reported to the elders of the people the words which the Lord had commanded. The people enthusiastically agreed to enter into the Covenant. The significant event called for the consecration of the people in preparation for their formal encounter with Yahweh. The people were to prepare three days for the divine appearance. The presence of God was so awesome and overwhelming that the people were to avoid intimate familiarity which might be expressed by coming too near to the mountain.

### The Theophany<sup>1</sup>

Exodus 19:16-25

After three days of consecration, the presence of God was manifested through thunder, lightning, and a thick cloud upon the mountain. Moses led the people out of the camp to meet God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. The presence of the Lord is described in terms of fire and smoke. The sound of the trumpet signified the presence or advent of God and also was a summons calling the people to attention.

### The Establishment of the Covenant

Exodus 20:1-21

The reason for Israel's entering into the covenant relationship was to show the people's gratitude to God. God had shown them what He could and would do for them if they agreed to obey Him and keep His Covenant. After the preliminary agreement was made, God revealed man's covenant responsibility in the form of commandments.

### The Decalogue (20:1-17)

The Decalogue (Ten Words) was not the total code but a comprehensive epitome<sup>2</sup> setting forth the essence of the Covenant. There are several variations in the listing of the Ten Words: (1) The Jews regarded verse 2 as the First Commandment setting forth the requirement to believe in the existence of God, and verses 3 and 4 are combined as the Second Commandment. (2) The Roman Church and Luther followed Augustine in joining verses 3 and 4 as the First Commandment and dividing verse 17 (concerning covetousness) into two commandments. (3) The approach of Philo, Josephus, and the Greek Church was perpetuated by Calvin. They considered the prohibiting of the worship of other gods to be the First Commandment. The Second Commandment forbade the making and the worshipping of graven images.

Deuteronomy 4:13 and 10:4 state that the Ten Commandments were written on two tables of stone. Exodus 20:1 states that God spoke the words. Exodus 31:18 says that God wrote the commandments on two tables of stone with His finger. In Deuteronomy 5:4 (the Second Law), the Scripture states that

<sup>1</sup> Theophany means the appearance of God to man.

<sup>2</sup> An epitome is a condensed account of something.

The Israelites assembled before Mount Sinai to \_\_\_\_\_ for their encounter with \_\_\_\_\_.

(prepare, God)

God's presence on Mount Sinai was manifested through \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and a thick \_\_\_\_\_.

(thunder, lightning, cloud)

God's requirement of Israel in the covenant relationship was \_\_\_\_\_.

(obedience)

List the scripture references which state that God *spoke* the Ten Commandments: \_\_\_\_\_

Now list those which state that He *wrote* them: \_\_\_\_\_

(Compare your lists with the text.)

God spoke to the people. Deuteronomy 5:6-21 is a second recording of the Ten Commandments. Deuteronomy 5:22 states that the Lord first spoke the commandments to the people and then wrote them on two tablets of stone.

As Israel entered into covenant relationship with her God, the name of her God signified two things: deliverer (20:2) and law-giver. To be related to her God meant that Israel would receive His salvation and deliverance (blessings), and Israel would be responsible to keep His commandments (law).

**The First Commandment (v. 3).**—This commandment has been defined as setting forth practical monotheism. It does not deny the existence of other gods but prohibits Israel's worship of other gods in the place of Yahweh. Some scholars have described the concept of the First Commandment as monolatry instead of monotheism. Monolatry permits the worship of only one god although the existence of other gods is recognized. That Moses believed other gods existed cannot be proved. The fact that Yahweh Elohim was the Creator of the heavens and the earth and claimed all of the earth as His (Exod. 19:5) left no room for the recognition of other gods. Israel's God, who had created her and delivered her, was to be the supreme object of her love and worship.

**The Second Commandment (vv. 4-6).**—Israel was prohibited from making images of her God to use in worship. Neither His presence nor His power could be contained or controlled in an image. A graven image of wood or stone is always less than the person whom it symbolizes. The God who has created the heavens and the earth is not to be reduced to and represented by a fragment of His creation, regardless of how beautifully and skillfully engraven it is. According to Deuteronomy 4:15 Israel saw no form on the day that the Lord spoke from Horeb. He is spiritual, and nothing material can properly represent Him. The problem in using "helps" in worship is that the symbol usually becomes the object of worship.

**The Third Commandment (v. 7).**—The name represents the person; therefore, God's name is not to be taken lightly. It is not to be used for any unreal or frivolous purpose, for perjury and false oaths, or for private purposes of gain or magical control. To defame God's name degrades His character. Being and name go together; therefore, the misuse of the name is an offence against God's holiness.

**The Fourth Commandment (v. 8).**—God set the example for keeping the seventh (Sabbath) day by creating on six days and resting on the seventh. Sabbath is a Hebrew word meaning to cease; therefore, it is a period of rest. The day was to be reserved as a festival day when sacrifice was offered and the community ceased from labour. Very strict laws arose in the post-exilic period to protect the sanctity of the Sabbath.

**The Fifth Commandment (v. 12).**—The Ten Commandments are divided into two groups. The first four set forth duties to God. The last five set forth duties to one's neighbour. The Fifth Commandment, which deals with relation to parents, places the importance of parents next to God and serves as a link between those relating one to God and to one's neighbour. The respect one has for his parents will likely be expressed in his relationship to God, and one's relation to God will determine his relation to his fellow-man. Family life is the environment in which the patterns of personal life are established. Wholesome family life leads to sincerity in relation to God and contributes to the strengthening of society. Duty to parents is the most binding responsibility after duty to God. Duty to God is learned from duty to parents. The responsibility to parents applies not only to youth but also to adults who are responsible to care for and respect their

Which commandment has been defined as setting forth practical monotheism? \_\_\_\_\_  
(the First)

State the meaning of practical monotheism.  
\_\_\_\_\_

(Compare your answer with the text.)

The use of "helps" in worship may create the problem of worship of a \_\_\_\_\_  
(symbol)

The misuse of God's name is an offence against His \_\_\_\_\_  
(holiness)

Read carefully Exodus 20:1-17.  
The first four commandments set forth duties to \_\_\_\_\_  
(God)

The last five set forth duties to one's \_\_\_\_\_  
(neighbour)

old and weak parents. The promise of length of days as a reward for keeping this commandment reveals that sound national life depends upon sound family life.

**The Sixth Commandment (v. 13).**—The sacredness of life, created by God, is recognized by this commandment which prohibits murder. Intentional killing, apart from capital punishment and defensive war, is forbidden. Other Scriptures permit capital punishment, defensive war, and accidental killing.

**The Seventh Commandment (v. 14).**—The sanctity of marriage is upheld in the prohibition to profane the marriage covenant. Husband and wife alike are warned against infidelity. This prohibition probably included the betrothed as well as the married. Death was the punishment for breaking this commandment (Lev. 18:20; 20:10; Deut. 22:22; Matt. 5:27).

**The Eighth Commandment (v. 15).**—The right to possess private property is upheld in this commandment. Other Scriptures condemn the hoarding of possessions, but this commandment recognizes the right of a person to benefit from the fruit of his labour. It probably includes the prohibition of dishonest gain by illegal acquisition, cheating, or embezzlement.

**The Ninth Commandment (v. 16).**—This commandment prohibits making false statements about others in court or otherwise. All forms of slander, defamation, and misrepresentation of individuals or groups are prohibited.

**The Tenth Commandment (v. 17).**—This commandment deals with the root of evil actions when it speaks against the greed and secret desires of the heart. It prohibits a man from being controlled by his desires. The Apostle knew this commandment was good, but he admitted that he did not find within himself the power to control his desires. He did find the needed power, however, in the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 7:8; 8:1-3).

#### **The response of the people (20:18-21)**

The revelation of the holy presence of God results in an awareness of the sinfulness of man. Man becomes uncomfortable and fearful in his sin when he realizes God is present.

### **The Book of the Covenant**

Exodus 20:22—23:33

The designation of this section comes from Exodus 24:7. The book includes laws relating to worship (20:22-26); communal and criminal laws (21:2-22:17); commands and prohibitions introduced by "You shall not" (22:18—23:19); and a conclusion concerned with the mode of the presence of God with Israel on the way to Canaan (23:20-33).

#### **Instructions concerning worship (20:22-26)**

The instructions give further emphasis to the prohibition of the use of idols in worshipping God. Perhaps the Canaanite idols representing deities were gold- or silver-plated. Verse 23 may have reference to the golden calf incident. The location of the altar was to be determined by God. Places of divine manifestation were selected as sites for altars. The altars were to be of simple construction, either of earth or unhewn stone. Altar means "place where you slay." The simple earthen altars would permit the blood of the sacrificial animals to drain into the ground. The offering of sacrifices was not yet restricted to the priesthood or to one central altar.

#### **The decrees concerning Hebrew slaves (21:1-11)**

"Hebrew" may have meant a particular depressed social class. An Israelite could become a slave by his father's selling him, by selling himself because of poverty, or by having committed theft. His servitude would be limited to six years. The year of

The Fifth Commandment deals with \_\_\_\_\_  
to \_\_\_\_\_.

(relationship, parents)

The Fifth Commandment serves as a link between  
the commandments which relate one to \_\_\_\_\_  
and to his \_\_\_\_\_.

(God, neighbour)

Obedience to the commandments which engender  
wholesome family life in turn \_\_\_\_\_ society.

(strengthens)

What is the root of evil actions which is condemned in  
the Tenth Commandment?

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Compare your answer with the text.)

Jubilee (each fiftieth year) could further shorten the period of servitude if it came before the sixth year. If he was already married when he became a slave, his wife would be set free with him. If he took a wife while enslaved, his wife and children would remain the property of the master. The slave could choose voluntary servitude in order to gain economic security or to maintain family unity with his enslaved wife and children. A voluntary slave received a mark on his ear and became a slave for life. The ceremony of piercing his ear at the door-post indicated a close relationship with the family of the master. A girl sold unconditionally as a slave could not be freed (v. 7). A conditional sale of a girl included the intention of the purchaser to marry her or adopt her into the family. Under these conditions, she could be redeemed or given as a wife to one of his sons with the full status of a daughter-in-law.

#### **Rules for capital offences (21:12-17)**

A distinction was made between intentional and unintentional homicide. The right of asylum in a sanctuary was provided for the protection of the man who accidentally killed another. He who deliberately took the life of another man would be put to death, possibly by a relative of the victim. Exodus 21:17 stipulates that he who cursed his father or mother should be put to death.

#### **Rules concerning non-capital offences (21:18-36)**

Injuries by men or by animals and those due to negligence which did not result in death were punished according to the sex of the injured and the degree of injury. Compensation included lost pay and other costs during the time of recuperation. If a man struck his slave and killed him, apparently he was not to be put to death but was to be punished. The compensation for an injury which caused a miscarriage was to be determined by the husband and approved by the judges. The payment of "an eye for an eye" was a step forward in the history of punishment since it limited the punishment to the exact equivalent of the crime. In the case of slaves, the loss of an eye or a tooth resulted in his freedom. The death of a man or a woman by an animal resulted in the stoning of the animal, but the owner could be ransomed if the relatives of the one gored to death agreed. The price of a slave was set at thirty shekels.

#### **Theft and damage (22:1-6)**

Since oxen as work animals were more valuable than sheep, fivefold restitution was to be made for stolen oxen and only fourfold for stolen sheep. If the stolen animal was returned, the thief was to pay double. A man who killed a thief who was breaking in at night was not held guilty. If a man caused his neighbour's field to be burned, he was to make restitution with the best from his own field.

#### **Rules concerning goods or animals deposited with a neighbour (22:7-13)**

If a neighbour was asked to take care of goods during a temporary absence and the goods or animals were stolen, the caretaker was responsible. However, the responsible neighbour could take an oath before the Lord that he had not deceived the owner, and thus he would not be guilty. If the caretaker was negligent, he was partly responsible for the loss and must make restitution.

#### **Borrowing (22:14-15)**

The borrower must compensate for the loss of an animal unless the owner was present or the animal was hired.

#### **Laws protecting unbetrothed virgins (22:16-17)**

A man who seduced an unbetrothed virgin must marry the girl and pay the marriage dowry to her father. If the father did not

A Hebrew slave was to be set free after serving \_\_\_\_\_ years.

(six years)

Punishment to the exact equivalent of the crime is described in Exodus 21:24 as

“ \_\_\_\_\_ ”  
(an eye for an eye)

approve of the marriage, the marriage price would serve as compensation for damage to his property.

### Sundry prohibitions and commandments (22:18–23:19)

The previously discussed laws have been classified as casuistic—questions of right or wrong conduct stated in the form of conditions and results. The casuistic statement has a conditional or “if” clause and an apodosis (consequent clause). The structure of the laws in this section is apodictic (clearly established). The laws actually are not conditional but are statements of necessary or absolute truth. The apodictic form is “you shall not.”

Those involved in sorcery, bestiality, and idolatry were punished by death. Resident aliens, widows, orphans, and poor in general were protected by threat of punishment by the sword for those who harmed them. Special protection was granted strangers because of Israel’s experience in the land of Egypt. Lending money was for the purpose of helping the poor instead of gaining wealth; therefore, interest was not to be charged. A neighbour’s cloak, accepted as a pledge, was to be returned before sunset to protect the borrower from the cold of the night.

God nor the ruler was to be reviled. The first-born of men and animals were to be given to God on the eighth day after birth. This did not mean that the sons were to be sacrificed. Provisions for redeeming the first-born were made. Israelites were not to eat flesh of animals which were torn to pieces in the fields, lest they should eat the blood with the flesh.

Laws protecting the poor are stated in Exodus 23:1-9. Justice was not to be perverted by false witnesses. God took the side of the poor in disputes, and He would not tolerate discrimination against them. Bribery and neglecting to help enemies were prohibited.

In Exodus 23:10-19 additional laws are stated concerning worship. The fact of God’s ownership of the soil was reason enough to allow the land to lie fallow every seventh year. Israel’s poor could gather what grew voluntarily during that year. The rich could lay up provisions ahead of time for the Sabbath year, but the poor would need a source of provisions. The Sabbath day was to provide a day of rest for the slaves and the animals. Three feasts were to be observed each year: the Feast of Unleavened Bread; the Feast of Harvest; and the Feast of In-Gathering at the end of the year. Sacrifices and offerings were to be made to the Lord periodically. Leavened bread and sacrificial blood were not to be offered together lest the leaven ferment and contaminate the blood. The Israelite law prohibited the Canaanites from boiling a kid in its mother’s milk, which was supposed to insure fertility.

### Blessings for keeping the Covenant (23:20-33).

Scholars suggest that the original time of this passage was the departure from Sinai on the way to Canaan. An angel was promised to guard the Israelites and guide them along the way. He was Yahweh’s ambassador; therefore, the Israelites were to “obey his voice, and do all that I speak” (v. 22).

Yahweh promised to help His people to conquer the land of Canaan provided they would worship no other god. As long as they worshipped Yahweh, He would bless them by providing food and deliverance from sickness. He would give them victory in battle by sending terror and perhaps a plague (hornets) into the midst of their enemies. Verse 29 notes that the Canaanites would not be driven from the land immediately, but Israel’s occupation would be a gradual process. Her eventual boundaries would extend from the Red Sea to the Euphrates. Israel was instructed not to enter into covenant with the Canaanites or their gods. Verse 33

Read Exodus 22:16-17. The worth of a woman in relation to marriage was expressed in \_\_\_\_\_ value.

(monetary)

God gave laws especially to protect the \_\_\_\_\_

(poor)

The three feasts of which God commanded observance each year were:

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

(Compare your answer with the text.)

warned that the continuation of the Canaanites in the land might lead eventually to Israel's worship of other gods. For Israel to become involved in idolatry would mean that Yahweh would forsake her.

### The Ratification of the Covenant

Exodus 24:1-18

Moses, Aaron, two of Aaron's sons, and seventy of the elders of Israel were commanded to approach the mountain of the Lord; however, Moses alone was to ascend the mountain. Three graduated positions of worship were demonstrated, with Moses nearest to the Presence. After the words of the Lord had been given to Moses, he returned and recounted them to the people. With one accord the people agreed to the requirements of the Lord. The Scripture specifically mentions the fact that "Moses wrote all the words of the Lord" (24:4). An altar with twelve pillars representing the twelve tribes was built the next morning at the foot of the mountain. Young men assisted Moses in a sacrificial service. Half of the blood of the sacrifices was placed on the altar and the other half in basins. After reading the Book of the Covenant and giving the people the opportunity to submit to the word of God, Moses sprinkled the blood in the basins on the people. This act showed the relation of the people to God in the sealing of the Covenant. Half of the blood covered the altar, which represented God, and the other half covered the people. The ritual symbolized the organic relationship of the people and their God.

The sealing of the Covenant initiated the history of the covenant community of Israel. It included the election of Israel as the people of God, the promised blessings to Israel from Yahweh, and the responsibility of Israel to worship and serve only Yahweh. The Covenant was a combination of blessings and obedience. The Israelites became the people of God at Sinai.

After sprinkling the blood over the people and sealing the Covenant with the blood, Moses, Aaron, Aaron's sons, and seventy elders ascended the mountain and saw the glory of the God of Israel. Because of His glory, they were able apparently to look only on His feet. The special explanation is given that they beheld God but were not harmed (v. 11). Moses was summoned by the Lord to come up and receive the tablets with the commandments. Joshua accompanied him. Aaron and Hur were to be in charge of legal matters during Moses' forty-day absence. The glory of the appearance of the Lord was overwhelming to the Israelites and was described by them in terms of "a consuming fire."

The Israelites were warned that becoming involved in idolatry would mean God's \_\_\_\_\_ them.

(forsaking)

The Covenant was sealed by half the blood of sacrifices being placed on the \_\_\_\_\_ and the other half being sprinkled on the \_\_\_\_\_.

(altar, people)

The ritual of the sealing of the Covenant symbolized the organic relationship of the \_\_\_\_\_ and their \_\_\_\_\_.

(people, God)

## Home Study Exercise

**Basic activity** (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading Exodus 19:3–24:18 and the studymanual, answer the following questions.

1. Did Israel distinguish between political and religious law? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. What was the purpose of Israel's assembly before Mount Sinai? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. In what manner did God manifest Himself on Mount Sinai? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What were the responsibilities required of Israel in the covenant relationship?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Did God give the Ten Commandments by speaking or by writing? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What is practical monotheism? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What is the significance of the position of the Fifth Commandment in the order of the Ten Commandments?  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. What effect does the Fifth Commandment have on society? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
9. How does the Tenth Commandment differ from those preceding it? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
10. What was the general rule which protected Hebrews from perpetual slavery?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
11. How was an "eye for an eye" a step forward in justice? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
12. With regard to marriage laws, how valuable was the woman in comparison to the man? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
13. Name the three feasts that were to be observed each year. \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

14. Explain how the Covenant was sealed. \_\_\_\_\_

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**Supplementary activity** (Levels 2 and 3). Read pages 81–86 in *A Nation in the Making* and do the following.

1. Explain why the Covenant which God offered Israel was truly a covenant of grace.
2. Give five elements or steps involved in covenant-making.

**Advanced activity** (Level 3). Read pages 153–197 in *Davies'* book and do the following.

1. Explain the meaning of “a kingdom of priests” and “a holy nation.”
  2. Name the different ways in which the Scripture tells of the giving of the Ten Commandments.
  3. What is the meaning of the First Commandment?
  4. Define “the Book of the Covenant,” summarize its contents, and describe the types of law appearing in it.
  5. Explain the symbolism in the ritual of sealing the Covenant.
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#### **Seminar Discussion**

1. Evaluate the Hebrew laws with reference to justice for various classes of society and degrees of crime.
2. How did God include all of the nations in His redemptive plan when He selected Israel as His peculiar people?
3. What is the relation of the Ten Commandments to the Book of the Covenant and the rest of the Old Testament Laws?
4. What is a covenant, and what were the conditions of the Covenant established at Mount Sinai?
5. How did God reveal Himself at Mount Sinai?
6. What is the relation of the Ten Commandments to the Covenant?