

Study 33: Exodus - Sinai –Covenant and Law

“Prayer is our humble response to the inconceivable surprise of living.” – Rabbi Abraham Heschel

In the *Book of Exodus*, beginning with chapter 15, we read of Israel’s initial response to the gift of its freedom from Egyptian slavery. For Israel it is the gift of life, a life that will continue through the centuries and ultimately lead to the Incarnation. In the *Letter to the Hebrews* we read that remarkable statement about Moses:

“He considered abuse suffered for the Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he looked to the reward” [Heb 11:26].

I have always considered this verse another clear reminder that the Creative Word of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, He who would be the Christ, didn’t hide from His creation, but made Himself known to those who carried out the Father’s plan in history.

Exodus continues with Israel’s arrival at Sinai, where God manifests His presence through theophany. It is there that God and Israel enter into a covenant in which Israel recognizes its unique relationship, its “kinship,” with the Lord God, and promises to obey the obligations of the covenant. At Sinai these obligations are presented to the people of Israel as Law. Israel is called to remember the purpose and goal of the Exodus: “*Let my people go so that they might serve me,*” a command repeated many times during Moses’ confrontations with Pharaoh. The Law presented to Israel clearly describes God’s expectations for them as they live their lives of service as God’s People.

Background. At about the time of the Exodus the ancient world surrounding the Mediterranean and beyond seemingly underwent almost cataclysmic change resulting in the destruction of several thriving cultures and the rapid decline of several others. While the cause of these near simultaneous societal crises is still debated among historians, in the first half of the twelfth-century B.C. the Minoans, Hittites, Trojans, and Babylonians all but disappeared while the Egyptians suffered a collapse from which they never fully recovered. I find it remarkable that it was at this time in human history that God chose to form His people, Israel, and lead them to the Promised Land. It was, perhaps, the only time when the major powers would be so occupied with their own survival that they would overlook the presence of this small tribe of pastoral hill people in Judea. But this is what the God of History does as He carries out the progressive manifestation of His divine plan for all of humanity.

But God not only paints on the large historical canvas; but His brush also touches the individual lives of those He has created, particularly the lives of those He has called to join Him in His work. We witnessed this in our study of *Genesis* and in the early chapters of *Exodus*. Israel, for example, had been on the receiving end of what, today, we would call miracles. But as we read in the Bible, the ancients preferred to call these events “signs and wonders.” For them a sign pointed to something greater than itself, and a wonder was something that drew their attention, something special. The signs and wonders that Israel witnessed were, therefore, filled with meaning. In the Bible the signs all pointed to God Himself, filling those who experienced them with awe. They were wonders. The manifestation of God in nature was both sign and wonder

demonstrating God's presence and closeness. In other words, God's actions in the world – for example, in the ten plagues inflicted on Egypt and Israel's escape through the sea – showed Israel that Yahweh was actively involved in His creation, and that He cared for them and loved them as His own.

God's People, Israel, had encountered many signs of God's presence as Moses led them out of Egypt into the wilderness. The description of their ultimate victory over Pharaoh and his army provides us with God's crowning triumph over the empty pantheon of Egypt's gods. As Egypt suffered under the ten plagues, one after another its gods were shown to be powerless, in truth non-existent, as each in turn was defeated by the presence of Yahweh, who is existence itself – "I am who am."

The final defeat of the Egyptians at the sea was aimed specifically at Pharaoh. It occurred "in the morning watch" [Ex 14:24] – or just before dawn – that moment for the Egyptians when Ra, the sun god, and the central god of the Egyptian pantheon, is believed to defeat darkness and rise in victory to the new day. It is at this moment when Pharaoh, the worldly embodiment of the sun god, should have been victorious. Instead, the God of Israel crushed his army, showing that Yahweh alone is God.

Interestingly, God's victory at the sea not only showed Israel the impotence of Egypt's gods, but also gave them a taste of God's universal power, that His reign extends throughout the world. The Canaanites, who inhabited Israel's destination, the Promised Land, worshipped Yam, their god of the sea. The Lord God's victory demonstrated that Yam, too, was powerless. For the Canaanites Yam was the god of primordial chaos, the god of the untamed tempestuous sea, and yet the God of Israel tames the sea using it as the means to destroy the Egyptian army. Indeed, Yahweh alone is God. As the Lord had told Pharaoh when He brought to Egypt the plague of devastating hail: "...that you may know that there is none like me in all the earth" [Ex 9:14].

Praise and Problems. When we turn to Ex 15 we encounter Israel's immediate response to its release from slavery. Redeemed by the Lord God Israel responded enthusiastically. Miriam, the sister of Aaron and Moses, initiated this event of praise and thanksgiving by leading the women of Israel in song and dance, tambourines in hand. The Song of Miriam (or Song of Moses) – the victory anthem -- [Ex 15:1-18] is considered by many scholars to be among the oldest passages in the Bible and might date as early as the 13th century B.C. Like a psalm, it could very well have been included in the early liturgy in which the people responded with the verse of Ex 21 after each stanza:

*"Sing to the Lord for He has triumphed gloriously;
the horse and his rider He has thrown into the sea."*

The Song of Miriam is primarily a song of praise and its focus is on the giver, the Lord God, and the gift, Israel's deliverance from the slavery of Egypt. To be released from slavery is to be given a new life, a gift worthy of praise and thanksgiving. The song addresses all three stages of Israel's deliverance:

- (1) Exodus: the wonder of their escape through the sea [Ex 15:4-10];
- (2) Wilderness: their triumphal pilgrimage in the desert [Ex 15:14-16]; and
- (3) Land: the taking possession of the Land of Canaan [Ex 15:17-18].

God had done all this for Israel because He had chosen them, His People, to be His own. Accordingly, He demanded they acknowledge Him to be God, the Lord of all.

Was the latter part of the hymn written after the conquest of Canaan? Perhaps, but it could also be the ancient writer's prophetic visualization of what would happen when Israel entered the Promised Land. After all, God had promised them possession of the land and they would have expected its realization to be accompanied by many signs and wonders.

Were these initial wanderings of Israel free from problems? Not at all. Indeed, despite the wonders with which God had blessed them, the people hardly missed an opportunity to complain, even suggesting they would have been better off had they remained enslaved in Egypt. Constantly encouraged by God, Moses consistently overcame these difficulties through obedience, perseverance and leadership.

The "wilderness" through which they traveled was not arid desert, lacking in vegetation. It was better suited as pastureland than farmland. During the rainy season the land provided pasture for their flocks and herds, but even though their animals would provide milk, butter, cheese and meat for food, this would have been insufficient to last throughout the dry period. Hunger and thirst are the great natural enemies of those who must survive in such country. And the Hebrews, even in their slavery, were not used to dealing with such privation. When water is in short supply, the people complain. When they are hungry, they complain. But in each instance Moses intercedes and God provides water, meat (quail), and bread (manna). And it is during this early time of crisis that God gives His people a taste of the Law to come:

"If you will diligently hearken to the voice of the Lord your God, and do that which is right in His eyes, and give heed to His commandments and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases upon you which I put upon the Egyptians; for I am the Lord, your healer" [Ex 15:26].

This, God's self-description as "your healer," foreshadows the earthly ministry of Jesus who, echoing the prophecy of Isaiah (Is 61:1-2; 58:6), declares His mission as one of healing and freedom:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord." [Lk 4:18-19]

Eventually Moses leads God's People to Sinai, to the very place where Moses had encountered God at the burning bush. As God had promised during that first meeting:

"...when you have brought forth the people out of Egypt, you shall serve God on this mountain" [Ex 3:12].

The Sinai Theophany. The events that take place at Sinai [Ex 19 – Num 10] form the very heart of the Pentateuch or Torah. It was at Sinai that Israel experienced God's presence through the wonder of theophany. (Note: a *theophany* is a manifestation of God to people through which His presence is revealed.) It was at Sinai that Israel entered into the Covenant with God. And it was at Sinai that Israel received the Law of the Covenant from God Himself.

Israel has already witnessed God's presence through many signs and wonders, both in Egypt and during their initial wanderings through the wilderness. But when Israel arrived at Sinai, God manifested Himself through darkness, clouds, smoke, fire, thunder, lightning, and earthquakes.

"On the morning of the third day there were thunders and lightnings, and a thick cloud upon the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast, so that all the people who were in the camp trembled....Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and the smoke of it went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain quaked greatly" [Ex 19:16,18].

God chose Sinai as the site of His most decisive intervention into human history, one exceeded only by the Incarnation itself. At Sinai God's activity was paramount, for here God extended a gratuitous gift, the gift of God Himself. In doing so He made Israel "a kingdom of priests, a holy nation" [Ex 19:6]. What God established at Sinai, therefore, was not primarily a new national community, but rather a new *religious* community.

Moses, knowing that Israel, this new religious community, must be sanctified so it can meet with God, proclaimed the need for the people's interior purification. They must wash their clothing, abstain from sexual relations, and remain within the boundaries of the mountain, on holy ground. More importantly, however, they must choose to accept what God has planned for them. Moses, therefore, gathered the elders and explained God's plan, the foundation of a new order, a holy kingdom. Having been informed of God's intention for them, the people declared themselves ready to accept His will:

"Everything the LORD has said, we will do" [Ex 19:8].

With this the way was open for God's intervention, and on the third day, we are told, He came down upon Mount Sinai in all His glory. This manifestation of His presence, this theophany, arrived under the appearance of a powerful storm moving from the Sinai desert to the mountain. It was accompanied by other signs, not normally associated with storms: fire, smoke and earthquakes. God, therefore, as He did in Egypt, uses the natural elements of His creation to make His presence known to His people.

The natural powers that God unleashed proclaimed His power over all creation. He cannot be resisted; everything is bound up in His protection. The omnipotent God, who will be Israel's covenant partner, requires unqualified obedience to His commandments.

The Sinai Covenant. The powerful theophany of God's presence at Sinai frightened the people and they asked that God speak to them through an intermediary. Moses, therefore, entered the cloud on Sinai, received the ordinances of the Lord, wrote them down, and proclaimed them to the people. Once again the people, speaking as one, promised their agreement:

"We will do everything that the LORD has told us" [Ex 24:3]

With this Moses proceeded to conclude the covenant. It was a covenant in blood. He read the law to the entire people and again, for the third time, they accepted the law and promised their obedience. Moses erected an altar surrounded by 12 memorial stones, and offered sacrifice. Half the blood he poured on the altar (which symbolizes God's presence), and sprinkled the other half on the book and the people with these words:

“Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” [Ex 24:8].

Moses, accompanied by Aaron, Nadab and Abihu (both priests of Aaron’s line), and 70 elders then went up the mountain. The priests represented Israel’s religious authority, while the elders represented the civil and legal authority. Together, in God’s presence, they ate a sacred, covenantal meal [Ex 24:11] and were awed by the brilliance and beauty of the divine presence. The meal, like a royal banquet, expressed the sharing of life in God’s family and *shalom* between the people and God. The leaders (Moses, priests and elders) and the people all took part in the rite, formally accepting the covenant. The reading of the Law, its acceptance by the people, and the sacrificial offering followed by the very core of the rite – the sprinkling of the blood on the altar and the people – are an assurance of the binding force of the covenant. Both parties – God and Israel -- are mutually responsible for the covenant sealed in their presence.

We moderns tend to belittle the importance of blood as a sign of the covenant. Perhaps it offends our sensibilities and seems too earthy, too primitive, even too savage for us, something we believe we have surpassed in our sophistication. And yet without blood this covenant loses its power. Blood stands for life and belongs to God alone (see Gen 4) and must only be poured on the altar or used to anoint those consecrated to God.

A word on ancient covenants: Relationships among ancient peoples needed a means to regulate social behavior and to ensure a degree of stability in social and political life. The covenant served this purpose. A covenant was an agreement between two parties (e.g., nations, cities, tribes, families, etc.) solemnly professed before witnesses and bound by an oath or other symbolic action.

Covenants always had a religious element because the gods of the involved parties were called on to witness the covenant and punish any future violations. The covenant also had a legal element since it obligated the parties to specific behavior. A covenant, therefore established a new relationship, usually expressed in the terminology of kinship. For the ancients, the goal of a covenant was *shalom* (peace) and wholeness of relationship.

In our study of *Genesis* we encountered several covenants between families and tribes. For example, Jacob and his father-in-law, Laban, established a family-kinship covenant [Gn 31:44-51] at Gilead where they swore an oath and shared a meal. We find another between Isaac and Abimelech [Gn 26:30-31] established to settle a dispute between tribes. It, too, included an oath and a covenant meal. The meal is an important element since it manifests community at table, presupposing peace and harmony. Enemies do not eat together.

The covenantal meal also prefigured the new and perfect sacrificial meal at the Last Supper through which Jesus Christ brought in the New Covenant in His Blood. He does this in the presence of the twelve apostles. Foreshadowed by the twelve tribes of Israel, the apostles represent the nascent Church, the People of the New Covenant. This, too, is a covenant in blood. As Jesus clearly states:

“And likewise [he took] the chalice after supper, saying, ‘This chalice which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood’” [Lk 22:20].

Both sacrifices – the Old Covenant’s sacrifice of animals and Christ’s sacrifice on the Cross – are blood sacrifices and directly related, the former foreshadowing the latter. This is made clear in the Letter to the Hebrews:

“For if the sprinkling of the defiled persons with the blood of goats and bulls and with the ashes of a heifer sanctifies for the purification of the flesh, how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify your conscience from dead works to serve the living God. Christ, therefore, is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant...Hence even the first covenant was not ratified without blood” [Heb 9:13-15,18].

The Sinai Law of the Covenant. As stated above, covenant means obligation, something that flows from its vary nature. This new covenantal relationship, therefore, demanded changes in behavior.

Israel had been gifted with life. Because God had freed them from their Egyptian slavery and adopted them into His own family, God now instructed them on how to live their new life. Their delivery from Egypt was, therefore, both a freedom *from* slavery and a freedom *for* life with God. This new covenantal relationship and the behavior it calls for is manifested in two areas of the life of God’s People:

- (1) Their vertical relationship with God, or right worship. They are called to be faithful to God, to seek to “be holy for I, the Lord, your God, am holy” [Lev 19:2]; and
- (2) Their horizontal relationship with others, especially their treatment of the poor, the oppressed, the alien, the weak, the helpless – those who are easy victims for exploitation – “because you were once strangers in the land of Egypt” [Ex 22:21].

The first step, then is to accept our *imagehood* [Gen 1:26-28], to accept our being as creatures who are completely dependent on the Creator God. Secondly, we are called to live our imagehood in and through our human relationships.

All of this is proclaimed to the people at Sinai, so Sinai becomes the purpose and goal of the Exodus. Moses stresses this fact again and again, reminding the people that Israel’s existence rests solely upon the divine will. God has revealed this from the beginning, when on many occasions He instructed Moses to demand of Pharaoh:

“Let my people go so that they might serve me” [Ex 4:23, et al.].

God, of course, teaches His People that these two aspects of their lives – the vertical and horizontal – cannot be separated. Right worship manifests itself in just social behavior and social injustice inevitably flows from idolatry. Both aspects reflect our call to live as we were created, in the image and likeness of God. We see this reflected too in the Ten Commandments given to Moses from God Himself on Sinai. The Commandments form a concise summary of covenantal life, with the first three referring to the exercise of right worship and the rest to just social behavior.

Scholars distinguish between the two types of law found in the Pentateuch as *apodictic* law and *casuistic* law. The Ten Commandments, because they reflect the divine imperative, fall into the first category. There are no ands, if, or buts, only simple obedience to the Word of God. It is actually unique in the ancient world and almost assuredly is contemporary with Moses himself.

Much of the other legislation in the Pentateuch, the casuistic law found in both Exodus and Leviticus, is likely a reformulation of existing ancient and Semitic laws that had governed people's lives and their relationships with each other for centuries. For example, we see different forms of these laws in ancient Sumerian legislation. In the "Book of the Covenant" which Moses read to the people, we find many examples of casuistic law, most often recognizable by the formula: *if this or that happens, then this must be the decision*.

The law found in the Pentateuch, however, is unique, characterized by a kind of humanistic gentleness. Babylonian law, for example, was harsh and draconian in its application and punishments. Like most ancient law it was written to protect the landowner and master. It was not written to achieve true justice, but instead aimed to preserve the rights of the propertied and freeborn. Most ancient law was similar and rarely gave any consideration to the oppressed and impoverished. The Book of the Covenant, however, places great emphasis on the condition of the poor and persecuted, those members of the society that need protection and assistance. Penalties are greatly reduced, especially those affecting slaves and aliens, a reminder of Israel's own history as an oppressed and enslaved people in Egypt. This emphasis on the people's recent history is further evidence of the extreme age of these laws, which are expanded in the Book of *Leviticus*.

As we will discover as we continue our journey through the Old Testament, Israel frequently fell into sinfulness by neglecting both the letter and the spirit of the Law of the Covenant, especially by committing sins of injustice. It did not take long for the people to forget that they were once poor and oppressed in Egypt. It is the prophets, God's messengers, who cry out in protest and call the people back to obedience.

But the Law was concerned with more than justice (the horizontal). Yes, the people were called to be just, but they were also called to right worship (the vertical). As stated above, the two cannot be separated, and they stand or fall together.

I do not intend to address the chapters relating to the tabernacle and the priesthood since these were covered in some detail in our 2017 summer course: *Temple and the Presence of God*. Briefly, in Exodus 25-27 Moses is given some very specific instructions on right worship. God provides him with the equivalent of a blueprint for the tabernacle and its contents. In Exodus 28-29 he instructed Moses on the institution of the Aaronitic priesthood, including its consecration and vestments. Most ceremonial law can be found in the Book of Leviticus: (1) sacrificial law [Lev 1-7]; (2) dietary and purification laws [Lev 11-15]; laws of ritual holiness [Lev 17-26]; blessings and curses [Lev 26]; and vows and tithes [Lev 27].

The Revolt of the People. When Moses went back up the mountain, he remained there for 40 days (to the ancients, a kind of codeword for a very long time). The people, apprehensive and leaderless, persuaded Aaron by demanding:

“Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for that man Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.” Aaron replied, “Take off the golden earrings that your wives, your sons, and your daughters are wearing, and bring them to me.” So all the people took off their earrings and brought them to Aaron. He received their offering, and fashioning it with a tool, made a molten calf. Then they cried out, “These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.” On seeing this, Aaron built an altar in front of the calf and proclaimed, “Tomorrow is a feast of the LORD.” Early the next day the people sacrificed burnt offerings and brought communion sacrifices. Then they sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to revel [Ex 32:1-6].

What exactly happened here? Was this actually a revolt, a defection from Yahweh, the Lord God? Actually, according to the text, it wasn't, for Aaron proclaimed that the festival was in honor of Yahweh [Ex 32:5]. And yet, as we soon discover, the entire event angered God [Ex 32:7-10] and so infuriated Moses that he shattered the tables of the Law he had brought down from Sinai. He then went on to eliminate this cult of the bull with fire and sword.

Aaron's response to the anger of Moses is a remarkable evasion reminiscent of the evasions of Adam and Eve in the garden [Gen 3:12-13]:

“Do not let my lord be angry. You know how the people are prone to evil. They said to me, ‘Make us a god to go before us; as for this man Moses who brought us out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has happened to him.’ So I told them, ‘Whoever is wearing gold, take it off.’ They gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and this calf came out” [Ex 32:22-24].

Yes, indeed, it wasn't Aaron; it was those evil people. Aaron was just trying to quiet them down. In went the gold and out popped the calf.

In truth the cult of the bull was a common one throughout the ancient world. Among many people at the time the image of the bull was served as a religious symbol of general significance, representing a number of different gods. The bull, incorporating strength, power, and sexual fertility, was worshipped as the source of these gifts. Among the Akkadians and Arameans the bull was the image of the thunder god, Hadad, while to the Canaanites it was the image of Baal. It had no doubt made its way into Egypt via the many Semitic tribes who sojourned there.

The bull image was not meant to represent the divinity in a real or proper sense, but was really only considered a symbolic indication of the deity's presence. Israel had no image for Yahweh so the bull (or golden calf) was likely intended to suggest the presence of Yahweh. But such an animal symbol would be a gross distortion of the reality of the Lord God, and Moses could not tolerate it. His reform was aimed at cleansing the people's concept of the divinity from any naturalistic or animal references. The must come to an understanding of who God is: “I am Who am.” Yahweh was not like other gods, false gods who could be depicted with images.

In any event, with the rupture repaired, it is replaced by renewal. And in the course of this we encounter one of the most important passages of Old Testament theology:

The LORD came down in a cloud and stood with him there and proclaimed the name, "LORD." So the LORD passed before him and proclaimed: The LORD, the LORD, a God gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in love and fidelity, continuing his love for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion, and sin; yet not declaring the guilty guiltless, but bringing punishment for their parents' wickedness on children and children's children to the third and fourth generation! Moses at once knelt and bowed down to the ground. Then he said, "If I find favor with you, Lord, please, Lord, come along in our company. This is indeed a stiff-necked people; yet pardon our wickedness and sins, and claim us as your own" [Ex 34:5-9].

Moses then writes down the Law, for as God instructs him, "with them I have made a covenant with you and with Israel" [Ex 34:27]. Again Moses remains in God's presence, fasting for forty days and nights. The Ark, the Tent, and the Tabernacle can be built. And the Book of Exodus ends with Yahweh's presence settled in the Tent, in the midst of His People [Ex 40:34-38]