

Parashah Sixty-Two

Exodus 24:1–18; Isaiah 60:17–61:9; Matthew 26:27–28

notes by Tim Hegg

The Covenant at Sinai

The section before us on this Shabbat contains the wonderful and mysterious account of the actual enactment of the covenant made between God and Israel at Sinai. It is wonderful because it relates the dwelling of God with man in a tangible manner. God and man sit at table together and commune in the context of holiness. Here we see the goal of redemption, the very purpose for which Israel was redeemed from Egypt. Even as the exodus forever forged the paradigm for redemption, so this covenant ceremony establishes the paradigm for the very purpose of redemption, that is, the re-established fellowship of God with His image bearers. From the point of his banishment from the Garden of Eden, an estrangement existed between God and man. Granted, the covenants made with Noah and the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, strongly indicated that God's purpose was to repair the breach which sin had caused, and to restore fellowship with mankind. Yet it is here, in the enactment of the covenant with Israel, that the means of such restoration is revealed.

Obviously, God remains holy and unchanged by the sinfulness of man. How then can fellowship be restored, seeing that man had become unholy through willful disobedience and the sin that had pervaded the race? The answer is found in the cleansing of sin through the death of an innocent sacrifice on behalf of man, and through the mediation of this atonement by a mediator. All of this is dramatized in the awesome events of our *parashah*.

The events of our *parashah* clearly portray Mt. Sinai as the model after which the Tabernacle or *mishkan* (and eventually the Temple or *heikal*, *beit hamichdash* in rabbinic language) would be constructed. There are three distinct “zones” in our story: the foot of the mountain, an intermediate ascent upon the mountain, and the top of the mountain where the glory of God resided, covered by a thick cloud. The people remain at the foot of the mountain, while representatives of the people ascend to the intermediate area. Moses alone continues up to the top of the mountain where he alone speaks with God. These three “zones” correspond exactly to the courtyard of the Tabernacle, where the people came; the Holy Place, where the representatives of the people, the priests, served; and the Most Holy Place, where only the High Priest was allowed to enter once a year. It was in the Most Holy Place, like the top of the mountain, where the Glory of God dwelt over the cherubim of the Ark of the Covenant. Thus, the initial enactment of the covenant became the pattern for the Tabernacle, and thus the pattern that revealed the means by which God would effect atonement, which in turn resulted in the restoration of fellowship between Himself and His people.

This general picture of the Sinai events is very important in understanding the overall perspective of the covenant, embodied in the giving of the Torah. It is all intertwined with God's gracious intention to bring about atonement and the restoration of fellowship with sinners. Whereas the theology of the emerging Christian Church often pitted the giving of the “Law” as opposed to grace, we discover that just the opposite is the case. The Sinai covenant stands as the very paradigm for God's way of atonement, the very means for cleansing sinners and restoring them to His favor and communion.

This is precisely Paul's point in his often misunderstood words of Galatians 3:19 – “Why the Torah then? It was added because of transgressions, having been ordained through angels by the

agency of a mediator, until the seed would come to whom the promise had been made.” The words “because of transgressions” (τῶν παραβάσεων χάριν προσετέθη) have been misunderstood as meaning “to punish transgressions,” but this is not only short-sighted, but misses the thrust of Paul’s argument at this point. The Torah covenant was given “with regard to transgressions,” that is, as the revelation of God’s way of dealing with transgressions, all with a view to the ultimate sacrifice that would be made by Yeshua (“the Seed”) to Whom the promise (beginning with Gen 3:15) had been made. In the covenant at Sinai, we are given a fuller picture of how God would effect atonement, overcome the breach that transgressions had caused, and ultimately bring about eternal restoration through the sacrifice and mediation of His Messiah, Yeshua.

We may also note, by way of the general picture presented in our portion, that God brings man to Him. We are struck with the fact that our story contains a number of ascents and descents. His initial instruction to Moses is “come up to Adonai” (v. 1). The majestic summit of Sinai pictures the holy abode of the Almighty. He does not diminish His holiness in order to dwell with man. On the contrary, He elevates man to His own level of holiness in order to effect the fellowship for which his was created. In a very real sense, then, Moses’ ascent to the very presence of God foreshadows the final and ultimate dwelling of God in the world to come. Even as Yeshua’s ascension to the right hand of God means that there is a man in heaven today, so His ascension is a kind of “first fruits” that guarantees the ingathering of the complete harvest. If He dwells in the very presence of the God, then so will all those who are “in Him.”

This reality constitutes one of His purposes in His present intercession as High Priest for His people, as noted in His priestly prayer: John 17:24 “Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so that they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.” While the picture presented in our *parashah* only has Moses ascending to the very presence of God, the ultimate goal is that all of God’s people should be there as well. Yeshua’s work on our behalf assures us that this will be the case in the world to come, where mortal will be transformed to immortal, and where the “Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Rev 21:22). No more will there be a need for various “zones” (courtyard, Holy Place, Most Holy Place) but all will dwell in the very presence of the Holy One. The fellowship of Gan Eden will be the eternal reality.

The initial command for Moses, Aaron, Nadab and Abihu, and the seventy elders to ascend the mountain offers a threefold division: Moses is the mediator *par excellence*, Aaron and his sons are the second level of mediators, and the seventy elders represent the nation of Israel. In this regard, Moses acts as the High Priest, Aaron and his sons as the priests, and the seventy elders as the people. The symbolism of “seventy” is doubtless that of a complete representation (cf. Num 11:16, 24; Ezek 8:11): all the people of Israel (including those foreigners who had joined themselves to Israel in the exodus) were represented as covenant members. Moreover, Aaron and his sons, along with Joshua, the servant of Moses, represented the people in the covenant meal that was to take place upon the mountain. And ultimately, Moses represented the entire nation as he functioned in the capacity of mediator before God. Thus, the covenant had individual as well as corporate dimensions.

It is not certain how many times Moses ascends and descends the mountain. The opening verses of our *parashah* may be a general heading for the pericope, signalling the overall purpose, that is, the giving of the covenant to Moses through his ascension to the top of the mountain. Liberal scholarship has used this portion (and others) to suggest that various accounts of the Sinai covenant have been woven together in a tangled “mess,” so much so that one is now unable to decide

exactly what happened. It is more likely, however, that the narrative is simply compacted around the essential information, and all of the details regarding just when Moses ascended and descended are not given in their entirety.

Verse 3 says that “Moses came and recounted to the people . . .,” not giving us a clear indication of the chronology of these events. He relates “all the words and all the ordinances (מִשְׁפָּטִים)” of the covenant. This most likely included the Ten Words and their expanded meaning and application as we saw in the previous two *parashot*. It may be that “words” (הַדְּבָרִים) denote the apodictic (“you shall not”) commands represented in the Ten Words, while “ordinances” relate to those matters that would need to be determined on a case by case basis by the jurisdiction of the law courts, i.e., judges.

The people (perhaps represented by the seventy elders) respond in one accord (קוֹל אֶחָד): “All the words that Adonai has spoken we will do.” This should not be construed as a “rash” response of those who had not understood the immensity of the Torah, or who, in pride, considered their ability to obey God without reckoning with their weakness. On the contrary, this affirmation to obey construed the clear intent of the people. They fully accepted the covenant as it was given, which included means for restoration when one failed to obey.

Verse 4 indicates that Moses wrote down all the words of Adonai. This document is called the “book of the covenant” (סֵפֶר הַבְּרִית) in v. 7, which is generally understood to be the material we have in Ex 21:1–24:18. In so doing, Moses sets the template for all subsequent prophets who would hear the word of Adonai through revelation or vision, and then write it down to be delivered to the people. While the Ten Words, written by the finger of God, were directly from Him, the words written by Moses and subsequent prophets bore no less authority. Though God used human agents to give the full revelation of His word, He nonetheless superintended their work through the agency of the Ruach HaKodesh (Holy Spirit). Thus, “all the words of Adonai,” to which the people refer, include those written down by Moses as well.

Next, Moses arises early in morning and builds an altar at the foot of Mt. Sinai, which included twelve “pillars” (מִצְבֵּה) representing the twelve tribes of Israel. These “standing stones” were viewed as enduring witnesses to the covenant, not unlike boundary markers of the Ancient Near East. Note Josh 24:27 where a similar stone so functions: “Behold, this stone shall be for a witness against us, for it has heard all the words of Adonai which He spoke to us; thus it shall be for a witness against you, so that you do not deny your God.” These are to be distinguished from the “sacred pillars” erected by pagan peoples as representations of their gods (cf. Ex 23:24; 34:13).

After constructing the altar, young men are commissioned to offer bulls upon the altar. These were chosen, not only because the task was arduous, and required the energy of young men, but also perhaps because they represented the firstborn of the nation who had been spared in the exodus. Ultimately, the priests of the tribe of Levi would be symbolic of the firstborn of Israel (Num 3:12). They offered burnt offerings (עֹלָה) and peace offerings (שְׁלָמִים), two types of sacrifices that fit the awesome occasion. The burnt offering, consumed entirely upon the altar, represented the complete dedication of the people to God. The peace offerings, part of which was consumed on the altar, and part eaten by those offering the sacrifices, symbolized the covenant meal of communion between God and His people. In both cases, however, the blood is dashed upon the altar, for the life of the animal was viewed as contained in the blood (Lev 17:11), and this belonged entirely to the Life Giver.

Moses also takes half of the blood and sprinkles it upon the people, or perhaps, upon the twelve

standing stones (pillars) that represented the people. We are not told what this represented, but it is clearly a part of the covenant ritual. One cannot escape the parallel to the blood that was put on the doorposts of each Israelite house in the exodus. Like the blood that covered and thus protected the Israelites from the plague of death, so the blood sprinkled upon the people represented the taking of the life from the innocent sacrifice and applying it to the people as God's covenant partner. Their transgressions, though grievous, would be covered by the atonement afforded through sacrifice.

Having completed the sacrifices, Moses now reads what he had written in the book of the covenant, in the hearing of the people. Once again they respond by accepting the covenant upon themselves, but this time there is an added dimension: "All that Adonai has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient!" (כל אשר־דִּבֶּר יְהוָה נַעֲשֶׂה וְנִשְׁמָע). The additional "and we will be obedient (literally, we will hear)" most likely means that the people promised to continue to await God's instructions. They were willing to obey what God had said so far, and were also committing themselves to what He might reveal yet in the future. This has been a hallmark of Jewish response to the Torah: even before one knows what exactly the Torah may contain, they are willing to commit themselves to obedience because they know that the Law Giver is none other than the holy, benevolent Almighty. We say "yes" to God even before we understand what He wants us to do. The Talmud (b.*Shabbat* 88a-b) contains an interesting interchange between a Sadducee and a student of Torah (most likely a Gentile, for the Talmud has "Raba," but no Sadducees remained in the days of Raba, and this convention is often used to substitute for a Gentile) who was engrossed in his study:

'You rash people,' he [the Sadducee] exclaimed, 'who gave precedence to your mouth over your ears: you still persist in your rashness. First you should have listened, if within your powers, accept; if not, you should not have accepted.' Said he to him, 'We who walked in integrity, of us it is written, The integrity of the upright shall guide them. But of others, who walked in perversity, it is written, but the perverseness of the treacherous shall destroy them. (Prov 11:3)

I think it is interesting that the same argument is often heard in our day, that unless one is able fully to obey the Torah, one should simply reject it. But the ability to be *perfect* in obedience is not the prerequisite of a desire to be obedient. How foolish it would be if our children were to inform us that they really couldn't accept our authority and rules because they realized they could never perfectly obey us! What any father longs to hear is not a retort of ability or inability, but a genuine expression of desire to be obedient. We demonstrate our love for God in that we desire to obey Him, whatever He commands.

While sprinkling the blood upon the people, Moses says: "Behold the blood of the covenant, which the LORD has made with you in accordance with all these words." It is striking how parallel the words of our Master are to this text: "for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins" (Matt 26:28). His words here are connected to the whole Sinai event, where the covenant is ratified through the sprinkling (giving, pouring out) of blood. In Luke's account (Lk 22:20) we have: "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood." Here the covenant is specifically identified as the "new covenant" (cf. Jer 31:31-34), but this is not at odds with the covenant ratification at Sinai. For the new covenant envisions that time when the Sinai covenant (the Torah) will become the life of Israel, as they obey God from a heart of faith, having had their sins and transgressions removed forever.

Verses 9–11 contain a remarkable scene: Moses, Aaron and his sons, and the seventy elders

ascend the mountain and “see the God of Israel.” We should also include Joshua in this group, as the plural of v. 14 indicates. Ex 32:17 also relates that Joshua was on the mountain, and high enough so that though he could not see the people, he could hear them. The idea that the chosen entourage “saw the God of Israel” has been variously explained. Generally, the rabbis suggest that they saw the glory of God (the *Shekinah*), or some vision of God, like that which the prophets saw in their visions. Others suggest that by “see” we should understand “gain a revelation of” or “come to understand,” much like our English word “see” is sometimes used. The Lxx felt the tension of the text, which plainly suggests that the invisible God is somehow corporeal, and translates “and they saw the place where the God of Israel stood.” The Targum has “and they saw the Glory of the God of Israel, and under the throne of His glory was the work of a precious stone.” The Samaritan Targum reads ירא (to fear) rather than ראה (to see) and renders the phrase: “And they feared the God of Israel, and there, where they met him, the ground was like a Sapphire.” All of these are attempts at explaining the unexplainable: God is a spirit, and “no one has seen God at any time” (John 1:18, cf. Col 1:15; 1Tim 1:17).

Yet the Hebrew seems straightforward. Not only does it say that they “saw the God Israel” (וַיִּרְאוּ אֶת אֱלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל), it says further in v. 11 that they “saw God” (וַיַּחֲזוּ אֶת־הָאֱלֹהִים), utilizing a heightened verb (חָזָה) describing not only visions, but also used for seeing with one’s eyes (Ps 11:7; 17:15; 58:9, 11; Prov 22:9; 29:20; Is 33:20; 57:8; Jb 19:26, 27). Moreover, the text indicates that they saw His feet under which were tiles of blue (lapis lazuli) forming a clear (טָהוֹר) pavement. And like other instances were people came into the presence of God, and were amazed that they remained alive, so v. 11 emphasizes that “He did not stretch out His hand against the nobles of the sons of Israel.” They came into the very presence of the Almighty and remained alive. Furthermore, “they ate and drank.” They participated in a covenant meal with the God of Israel.

But it does not seem far fetched at all to be reminded that the mediator of the covenant was none other than Yeshua, for He is consistently the agent of God’s enactments with mankind. Here, like the often repeated scenes in which the Angel of the Lord appears in the history of Israel, and is reckoned as one with יהוה, both in attributes and actions, Moses and his company see the Divine One in His pre-incarnate manifestation. Ultimately, it is the glory of Yeshua that shines in the face of Moses as he descends the mountain.

Our *parashah* ends with the ascent of Moses into the cloud, and the actual writing of the Ten Words upon the two stone tablets that had been prepared by Moses. He instructs the rest to remain at their intermediate location, and that given any matters of judgement, Aaron and Hur were “in charge” (v. 14). The plural “we will go” must include Joshua, though it is clear that only Moses eventually enters the thick cloud that encompassed the glory of God. Like the Ruach, Who aided Yeshua in His work upon the earth, so Joshua accompanies the “mediator of Israel” as he ascends to the top of the mountain.

The motif of the six days followed by the seventh is once again encountered at this pivotal juncture. Apparently Moses awaits a specific invitation from the Almighty before entering the cloud. This he does for six days, and the voice of God bids him enter on the seventh. We can imagine that Moses used the six days for preparation of heart and mind as he contemplated the awesome or even dreadful task he was about to undertake. Who could imagine entering into such close proximity with the Creator, seen as a “consuming fire” (cf. Heb 12:29) and remaining alive? Yet, like the creation week, the seventh day brought the anticipated invitation, and ultimately the rest that would come from hearing the very words of God.

Moses remained there for forty days and forty nights, meaning that he was sustained by God's power, not by common food. And ultimately, he would return to Israel with the very words of God, which would be spiritual food for them as well. God has spoken to man, and in His words are the way of life. In this regard we remember the words of Peter when asked by Yeshua if he and the disciples would abandon Him as the others had: "Master, to whom shall we go? You have words of eternal life" (John 6:68).